

Africa: Women Demand Access to New Technologies and Decision-Making

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BANGKOK, Thailand, DECEMBER 10, 2013 (Gender Links) — Smart phones, iPads, tablets and cameras are the 'must have' gadgets at the Global Forum on Media and Gender (GFMG), currently underway in Bangkok. These powerful devices allow for instantaneous communication and dissemination at the mere tap of a finger. But to what degree do these New Information Communication Technologies (NICTs) empower women?

Speaking at the opening of the GFMG, Dr Eun- Ju Kim of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) counted some of the gains made toward gender equality using these new technologies. She noted that the ITU is at the forefront of helping women, girls and the disabled in accessing ICTs. The Union is also taking the lead in coordinating international efforts for improving cyber security and curbing cyber violence.

Acting as another powerful agent of change is the International Women in Media Foundation (IWMF), which is rolling out a programme to support digital media entrepreneurs. The foundation trains and empowers ordinary women to use and access these technologies. "What better way to help women become owners of their own industries," says Executive Director, Elisa Lees Munoz. Despite all these positive initiatives, research shows that women's access and use of these technologies still lags behind and the information gap between men and women continues to be stark.

On its opening day, the Global Forum on Media and Gender (GFMG) also observed that the absence of women in decision-making and active participation in the media is one of the greatest challenges of our time. This includes the ownership and control of the industry where women remain under represented. Having women in key positions will be essential in drawing media attention to the rights and needs of women.

Kim noted that having women in decision-making is not just about social justice but smart economies in this new era. This is especially true in the digital media space where there is a link between broadband and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Kim links women's active participation

in media to more resilient economies.

Martin Hadlow, Secretary General of the Asia-Pacific Media Information centre says gender gaps in ownership are not limited to commercial media but extend to community media. This means that the majority of women in remote areas cannot participate fully in shaping the agenda.

Kalpana Sharma a journalist from India says media have become business entities with no regard for the principles of journalism. As such ownership of media is now in the hands of those that have money to set up media. The absence of funding opportunities for women to start own business therefore contributes to their absence in ownership, decision-making and ultimately in media content.

The absence of women in media decision-making is a global phenomenon. Men continue to be the shapers of the media agenda with women relegated to junior positions. This is largely because of the absence of deliberate strategies to ensure equal participation by women and men. Emily Brown, Head of Media Technology department at the Polytechnic of Namibia says the problem starts at recruiting stage where panels in media houses do not reflect diversity. Brown says if women were adequately represented in these panels they would look out for candidates who would serve both the interests of women and men.

The IWMMF says that although a critical mass of women is important for gender equality, it is only when women have the skills and knowledge to challenge existing norms that change can happen.

Arthur Okwemba of the Africa Woman and Child (AWC) Feature Service says it is disturbing to hear of instances where women have risen into decision-making and content has remained unchanged. An enlightened critical mass can correct the damage created by years of patriarchal norms and attitudes. Okwemba feels the discourse about women's representation in decision-making should go beyond numbers and focus on the qualitative changes that women bring to the media.

Lambert Mender, Minister of Media, Relations with the Parliament and Citizens in the Democratic Republic of Congo, (DRC) echoes the sentiment that women in media decision

making should ensure good practice and recognise the significant role that women play in society. Mende says if governments in the world address the gender gaps in access to education, it will contribute to women's ability to engage in discourse on gender equality.

Per Lundgren, Senior Adviser for Culture and Media at the Nordic Council of Ministers (Europe) feels that newsroom culture contributes to the absence of women in decision-making. The Sweden National Film Institute has opened a website for media managers to bring female producers to be profiled and inspire younger female film-makers to rise to positions of authority and overcome the “glass ceiling” effect.

High levels of illiteracy, low levels of education among women and girls as well as gendered economic disparities perpetuate the information gap. This together with inadequate internet connectivity and basic infrastructure hinders the opportunities that NICTs could contribute to women's empowerment. Furthermore, women and girls are at a greater risk of cyber violence and this regrettably threatens the possibilities that new technologies provide for women's advancement.

NICTs provide an alternative and powerful platform for discussion, education and mobilisation for people who are excluded from mainstream media platforms, empowering people become the producers and disseminators of information. In addition, they allow people from across the globe to communicate and mobilise. However, to truly harness NICTs potential for change and empowerment, there needs to be sustained efforts in improving women's access to and use of these technologies.

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