

Working toward Systemic Change for Gender Equality in Media

Accelerate Event, Sofia Foundation, Brussels, October 26 2016

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Watch a film. Read a newspaper. Surf the net. And it is obvious that media are not a level playing field for women.

But we see signs that things are starting to change—for the better.

Let's look at a few recent examples.

Billy Bush, co-host of one of the most popular morning shows on American TV just lost his job.

He didn't think twice when egging on Donald Trump to share a series of extraordinarily vulgar statements about women. Fortunately, the incident ignited a firestorm of protest.

NBC's Today show took the right step in asking Bush to leave.

On social media, the Bush-Trump debacle led author Kelly Oxford to call on women to tweet about sexual harassment and assault experiences.

She started by posting her own and did not expect much of a reply to this highly personal question.

But the responses flooded in.

Over a single weekend, 27 million women shared often explicit stories of harassment and molestation.

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Social media are often a forum for women to make their voices heard.

It is here that they are not restricted by editorial decision-makers who are still predominantly male.

Sexist media coverage of women's events in the Rio Olympics, for instance, sparked a social media firestorm calling for equal treatment of female athletes. People denounced, for example, the commentator who gave credit to the husband of swimmer Katinka Hosszu when she smashed a world record. And they called out the BBC for describing a women's judo event as a "catfight." And the news media quickly changed their tune.

Other encouraging moves are happening in the film industry. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has been formally investigating discrimination against women film- and TV directors.

This follows a series of powerful Hollywood women speaking out against bias.

Jennifer Lawrence and UN Women's own Goodwill Ambassadors Emma Watson and Nicole Kidman have joined this chorus of protest against practices that limit women's roles.

Watson tells the story by pointing out she has been directed 17 times by men but only twice by women.

Kidman has similarly called for more opportunities for women in film.

These are all signs of growing momentum for progress.

But let's not fool ourselves. We still have a long road ahead.

Twenty-one years ago, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 189 countries agreed on the fundamentals to achieve gender equality.

Media was an important component, and one of 12 so-called Critical Areas of Concern identified as pivotal for gender equality in the outcome document of the conference, the Beijing Platform for Action.

The platform recognized how influential the media are in shaping how we think and live.

It noted: "Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women."

Section J on Women and the Media called for media outlets to increase the number of women in decision-making, aiming at equality.

It urged all media to present balanced, non-stereotypical portrayals.
It called for them to do more to present women as leaders and role models.
It encouraged more training for women journalists.
And it proposed developing professional guidelines to reduce discrimination and stereotyping.

So let's have a look at where we are today:

Since 1995 – the year of Beijing – the Global Media Monitoring Project has tracked gender in news media.

Every five years, on a random, unannounced date, the project surveys media in 130 countries in the most extensive research survey of its kind.

UN Women has been a long supporter, including of the latest round in 2015.

What did the 2015 survey find? Largely discouraging news:

- Less than one quarter of people seen, heard or written about in the news are women.
- And nearly half of all stories uphold gender stereotypes.

We also know from another study by the International Women's Media Foundation that men still hold 73 percent of media management jobs.

This begs the question: is the overrepresentation of men in decision-making linked to the presentation of women in the news?

Does one beget the other?

We know it does: the Global Media Monitoring Project also showed, for instance, that women reporters are more likely to challenge gender stereotypes in their reporting.

But we still need more hard data on the correlation between an increase of women in the news room and the shift in news content that this creates.

Some of the same tendencies we see in the news business also apply in entertainment media.

Do you know the Bechdel test, devised by the cartoonist Allison Bechdel?

A film passes the test when it has two women who talk, and the conversation is

about something other than men.

One would think that surely we've passed that test by now!

But sadly, out of 4,500 films examined in 2013, close to 50 percent did not pass.

In 2014, UN Women partnered with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media to get some hard data on stereotypes in film.

We presented the first-ever global study on female characters in popular movies, called "Gender Bias Without Borders". Commissioned by the Geena Davis Institute, it was conducted by a research team at the University of Southern California.

The study found, for example, that when you go to the cinema, only about a third of all speaking characters will be women.

For lead or co-leading roles, that number drops to less than a quarter.

Most commonly, women appear as nurses and teachers.

They are sales associates and, of course, assistants to male bosses.

The only area where women score higher than men is when it comes to nudity or sexually revealing clothing.

Then, there are twice as many female as male characters.

But here is another finding: with a female director, there is a 7 percent increase of female roles.

This is important.

As Geena often says: when you can see it, you can be it.

For children in particular, the presence of non-stereotypical women characters has important role model functions which shape gender relations.

Something Beijing conference participants could not foresee has been the extraordinary spread of social media.

It has transformed the global media landscape within less than a decade.

Women have reached parity there—around half of social media users are women and they drive many of the debates playing out online.

This was so clearly demonstrated by the flood of posts after the emergence of the Trump video two weeks ago, or the outcry against the portrayal of women

Olympians.

At UN Women, we have seen firsthand the remarkable power of digital media. They have enabled us to engage vast new audiences to mobilize around gender equality.

Our campaign on the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Conference reached 360 million social media users, and the hashtag for International Women's Day of this year spread to a whopping 1.2 billion people.

At the same time, a digital gender divide remains.

On average, girls are 14 ½ when they first use a computer, but boys are 12. In the developing world, 16 per cent fewer women than men go online.

And there are new risks arising from digital platforms, such as bullying, cyber-stalking and harassment.

One breakthrough in this area was the campaign that led Facebook to revise its policy to ban rape jokes and images that portray violence against women.

This commitment to do no harm is a step in the right direction. But we need to do much more.

Many media organizations do not yet fully understand this—but they should.

Women are 50 per cent of the talent pool.

They bring in a broader range of perspectives and sources and make coverage richer and more inclusive.

And they constitute half of media audiences, and that means consumers.

In a highly competitive business, who can say no to that?

Here's a brief vision of what some of the most essential elements of change would look like:

Gender equality must come to the editorial board meeting.

To the corporate policy process.

To calculations of audience.

To reporting and the cultivation of sources.

Media houses would have gender parity in staffing at all levels, including the top ones.

Human resources policies should deliberately raise the share of women in

editorial decision-making, with requirements for a minimum level of diversity among candidates.

These should be accompanied by parental leave and flexible work policies, as well as mentorship programmes for women as editors and reporters.

Gender-sensitive codes of conduct for reporting should be in place, along with training for journalists so that they are upheld.

They would provide for coverage that tells women's stories and communicates their perspectives, on an equal footing with those of men.

And practices grounded in discriminatory norms -- such as blatant sexist stereotyping that is still so widespread -- would end.

Making this vision a reality requires systemic change.

Only when change becomes part of the DNA of an organization, it is no longer dependent on individual leaders.

This is the direction we must push for.

And it must come from within. We need to get the media on board.

This means that, as feminists and advocates of gender equality, we must talk with the media instead of about them.

We have to understand what will initiate change.

And we can offer support. Many are interested, but they do not always know how to begin.

I would like to share the groundbreaking example of Bloomberg News that shows how change can unfold.

Bloomberg is a pioneer in the world of business journalism; the majority of their readers are men.

It might be easy to think that this would be the last place for women to claim their place.

And yet, that is what happened.

About 10 years ago, Matthew Winkler, one of the co-founders of Bloomberg News and then Editor-in-Chief, launched a far-reaching overhaul of business practices to address gender disparities in staff and news content.

Winkler is a visionary. He understood that this would improve the quality of content. He saw it as a competitive edge.

Winkler established hiring targets to bring in more women leaders.

He found coaches to support them in overcoming barriers, while additional coaching helped educate men on gender issues.

He made it clear that people who resisted change would face obstacles to promotion.

Having women as news sources became a requirement. Women were pegged as authors for op-eds.

Stories were tagged based on their focus on women.

Today, well over 30 percent of Bloomberg editorial leads are women. In one three-year stretch, the number of female news bureau chiefs around the world doubled.

The number of stories coded for reference to women has jumped exponentially.

Matt is the first to say that the quality of reporting has gone up. Bloomberg has won more awards and achieved more firsts on agenda-setting reporting.

The new focus on women business leaders has provided for a number of breaking news stories, giving Bloomberg an advantage over its competitors.

There is now a corporate understanding that women are good for the bottom line.

In short, it is understood that gender quality is a business imperative.

The importance of working with the media so that it can change from within is underscored by an experience that UN Women had.

In Moldova in 2008, our office began to monitor national media for gender-sensitivity.

But media houses did not embrace this external approach.

They rejected suggestions to improve coverage.

One year later, we therefore joined with the country's Association of Independent Press to devise indicators capturing how women were portrayed in sports, the economy and social fields.

This was extremely successful. Participating media began to understand what it meant to be gender blind and went on to address this.

Over the next couple of years, almost 30 media organizations signed a pledge to regularly review their coverage and correct disparities.

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Training for aspiring journalists is another way to instill new awareness.

UN Women has backed a gender-focused journalism programme at the University of the South Pacific.

In other countries, UN Women has brought journalists together to learn how to better cover specific gender equality issues.

In Albania, an Advisory Media Forum on trafficking of girls and women has been established with journalists from major media outlets.

Another UN Women facilitated Media Network focusing on migration involves journalists and experts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia to counter xenophobia and encourage expanded coverage on issues such as safe migration and decent work for women migrants.

Globally, UN Women is aiming to advance gender equality in media through our Step It Up for Gender Equality Media Compact.

A coalition of the willing, it now includes some 50 outlets from all regions of the world, including heavyweights such as Thomson-Reuters, Deutsche Welle or France 24.

Taking our cue from the Beijing Platform for Action, we see this Compact as direct contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Agenda.

This visionary blueprint for people and planet, adopted by world leaders in 2015, clearly stipulates that progress will not be possible without gender equality.

We want to get the media on board to help drive of this agenda.

The concept of the Media Compact is simple: All partners who sign it agree to champion gender equality in the news room and in news content.

In return, they receive preferred access to our editorial content and an extensive network of gender experts and women's advocates in 90 countries.

Global recognition of signatories to the Compact comes through UN Women's website and social media channels.

But we are aiming still higher, because we want to get to the systemic change that we know is needed.

In our latest, and potentially very exciting initiative, we convened a group of leading experts on the issue last month -- journalists, researchers, media regulators and others.

They lent their passion and drive to a two-day exploration of a globally applicable assessment standard for media.

At that September meeting, we agreed to pursue the option of a self- assessment process, underlining the importance of working in partnership with the media.

In doing so, we will build on work currently undertaken by UN Women and the UN Global Compact on a similar tool for the private sector in general.

So watch out for the assessment standard on gender and media!

Where does all of this leave us?

I think it is fair to say that we are approaching a tipping point where public opinion, enlightened self-interest on the part of the media, advocacy and support from external actors could converge.

Now it is time to step up action and make sure that we take advantage of the growing momentum.

Again: The goal is systemic change.

It defines how media operate and is the only way to make sure that a real transformation takes place and that it lasts over time.

Women are half the human story. Media houses that forget this deliver a poorer product, fall short on their public duty and will eventually lose out on our business.

I think that we can safely assume that the media will do far better with us – for us.

Let's make it happen!

Thank you!