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EXAMINING MEDIA RESPONSE TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE GAMBIA – THE CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Purpose: Communication support for any development idea utilizing all levels of communication (interpersonal, group and mass) is very vital. The mass media industry has an important role to play in eliminating undesirable practices from society. Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of such practices. This study set out to examine the role of the media in tackling the menace of GBV in The Gambia, the challenges faced and how the challenges could be addressed.

Methodology : research methods of focus group and key informant interviews were adopted to determine the level to which the media had been proactive, the challenges they face and strategies for surmounting the challenges.

Findings : Findings show that the years of authoritarian rule have instilled the attitude of complacency and into many media practitioners in The Gambia and they have not been able to develop their investigative skills. Even though the current regime is largely liberal, the media needs to cultivate a new culture of undaunted dynamism. Apart from giving coverage to the programmes of development agencies on GBV, the media does not give adequate attention to sensitising and educating the public on gender-based violence and is also wanting in the area of following up cases of GBV while cases of online GBV are not given the required attention

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy(recommendation): It was recommended that all available strategies be employed for the sensitisation and education of the public on GBV and media practitioners be empowered to adequately tackle GBV. Furthermore, media organizations must be encouraged to monitor online content so that they can respond to instances of GBV directed at people in The Gambia.

Keywords : *Media Response, Gender-Based Violence, The Challenges, The Way Forward, Gambia*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The media, referred to as the fourth estate of the realm, has a very important role to play in the fight against undesirable practices in society. The media, in any society, is expected to be a watchdog, not only in monitoring the government and its various agencies, but also the citizens to ensure that everyone operates within the ambit of the law. The media is at a vantage point because it can reach a wide, socio-culturally and economically diverse audience (Okunna, 1999). The media, however may be limited by certain factors, part of which is identified by the normative theories of the press. Under the authoritarian press theory, state control may not give the press the degree of freedom required to adequately perform its role. While this control may not have a direct effect, the outcome may be seen in form of attitudes developed over time towards reporting on issues pertaining to politically influential people and since determining the degree of people's political influence may not always be possible, an attitude of complacency, treading a safe path, may be adopted by media practitioners. Another important issue to consider is the cultural context within which the media is operating in a society where relationships are usually influenced by kinship ties.

Media ownership and the structure of media organisations are also important determinants of media outputs, so this study sets out to examine the performance of the media in The Gambia in relation to tackling the problem of Gender-based violence.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) How effective is the media in The Gambia in tackling the problem of GBV?
- 2) What are the challenges encountered by media practitioners in addressing the problem of GBV in the Gambia?
- 3) How can these challenges be surmounted?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 What is Gender-Based Violence?

According to UNHCR, 'Gender-Based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms.' They can be sexual, physical, mental and economic harm inflicted in public or in private, threats of violence, coercion and manipulation. This can take many forms such as intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called 'honour crimes'. Gender-based violence (GBV) which is a serious violation of human rights is a life-threatening health and protection issue.

2.2 Forms of GBV

The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention identified the following types of gender-based violence: psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, forced marriages, sexual violence, including rape female genital mutilation forced abortion and forced sterilisation, sexual harassment, aiding or abetting and attempt, and unacceptable justifications for crimes, including crimes committed in the name of so-called honour.

All these were broadly categorised into five: physical violence, verbal violence (including hate speech), psychological violence, sexual violence and socio-economic violence

Physical violence includes beating, burning, kicking, punching, biting, maiming or killing, or the use of objects or weapons. Verbal violence can include issues that are specific to a person. such as putdowns (in private or in front of others), ridiculing, the use of swear-words that are especially uncomfortable for the other, saying bad things about the other's loved ones,

Psychological violence, in the private sphere, includes threatening conduct which lacks physical violence or verbal elements while in the public sphere, it includes isolation of young women or men who do not conform to traditional gender roles by excluding them from group activities.

Sexual violence is any non-consensual oral, anal or vaginal sex with the use of any body part or object; engaging in other non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a person; or causing someone else to engage in non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a third person; marital rape and attempted rape, being forced to watch a sexual act and abuse related to reproduction such as forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilisation and female genital mutilation.

Socio-economic violence: This includes taking away the earnings of the victim, not allowing the victim to have a separate income or making them work in a family business without a salary, or rendering the victim unfit for work through targeted physical abuse.

Online violence is another form which has been described as an umbrella term for all sorts of illegal or harmful behaviours against women on the internet. They can be illegal threats, stalking offensive or sexually explicit emails or messages and sharing of private images or videos without consent.

UNHCR describes it as including cyber harassment, revenge porn and threats of rape, sexual assault or murder. Perpetrators can be partners or ex-partners, colleagues, schoolmates or, as is often the case, anonymous individuals (Council of Europe Portal)

Gender-based violence can have lifelong repercussions on survivors. It is estimated that one in three women will experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime. (UNHCR)

The term 'gender-based violence' until recently, was used to imply male violence against women, but currently, it now encompasses all forms of violence that are related to social expectations and social positions based on gender and non-conformity to a socially accepted gender role. In this way, according to the European Youth Centre Budapest (EYCB)

GBV can be perpetrated by anyone: a current or former spouse/partner, family member, work colleague, schoolmate, friend, complete stranger, or people acting on behalf of cultural, religious, state, or intra-state institutions. Gender-based violence, like other types of violence, is an offshoot of power relations where the party that perceives itself as superior in the family, work, school, community or society as a whole tries to assert the superiority of their power (UNHCR).

2.3 Gender-Based Violence in The Gambia

Like most African nations, The Gambia is a patriarchal society with strong religious values. Some perpetrators of GBV offer religious and cultural values as justification for some forms of

GBV like FGM, marital rape, forced/early marriage, sexual harassment and violations of women's reproductive health rights. Currently there is no legislation against marital rape.

Demographic and Health Survey (2019-2020) records that 9% of women between ages 15 to 49 in The Gambia have ever experience sexual violence, while almost 40% of ever-married women have been subjected to either physical, sexual or emotional violence by their current or most recent partners.

About 51% of women and 35% of men in The Gambia agree that wife battering is acceptable if a wife: burns the food; argues with her husband; goes out without telling her husband; neglects the children; or refuses to have sexual relations with her husband.

With regards to child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) respectively, 30% of women aged 20 to 24 years were first married or in a union before age 18 (UNICEF, 2018), while 75% of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (UNICEF, 2017).

According to The Gambia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2018 cited by Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA), '75 percent of girls between the ages of 15 to 19 have undergone FGM. 34.4 percent of girls between the ages of 15-19 think the practice should continue, while 49 percent think it should stop. 46.7 percent of girls at the age of 18-19 believe that a man should beat his wife.

During the pandemic, GBV cases rose astronomically. In the year 2020, the Network against Gender-Based Violence (NGBV) in The Gambia recorded 1,068 cases of sexual violence reported at the organization's "One-Stop Centers". This figure is almost equal to a four-year national data on SGBV that indicates more than 2000 cases from 2015 to 2019. 941 of the cases recorded in the four years were rape cases. (NGBV, 2021)

In a survey conducted in 2020, the IHRDA, documented the ordeal of some survivors of GBV who were victims of child sex abuse and were intimidated into silence by the assailants

Moreover, in 2019, Fatou Toufah Jallow made revelations alleging rape by the former president. This triggered allegations of similar experiences by several other women in the hands of the same predator drawing scrutiny to this long-standing menace in The Gambia. (Humanism, 2019)

2.4 Legal Prohibition of GBV in The Gambia

As a member of The United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which all have strong policy documents against GBV, The Gambia also has its own legal documents that the media and other agencies can evoke to combat the reprehensible practice of GBV. These include the constitution in its Sections 28(1) and 222(3), The Gambia Criminal Code in its Section 126(3) and the Women's Act (2010) in Part 11, 6(1) which are all prohibitive of gender/based violence. Moreover, FGM was outlawed in the Gambia in 2015 and Section 32A and 32B of Amendment to the Women's Act reflects this.

Section 3.2 of The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education established ‘Policy Guidelines and Regulations on Sexual Misconduct and Harassment in Gambian Educational Institutions, The Gambia Civil Service’s General Principles of Conduct number 6 and

The Gambia’s Domestic Violence Act are all policy documents which prohibit one aspect or the other of GBV.

2.5 The Media and Development in The Gambia.

The role of a vibrant media in a nation has been described as giving people free flowing access to information, enabling dialogue, encouraging people to express their views, facilitating greater political participation and encouraging accountability.

According to the Queensland Parliament, ‘Advances in communication, largely through the internet, have improved community access to information. Therefore the media play an important role in society as a source of information, but also as a “watchdog” or scrutiniser.’

In The Gambia, like in many other parts of the world, media plays a very significant role. Since the first newspaper in The Gambia, the Bathurst Times, debuted in 1871 during the colonial era, the media has been influencing national life. Radical newspapers that were critical of the colonial government were sanctioned with the publishers sometimes incarcerated. After independence in 1965, The Gambia media under the regime of Daoda Jawara enjoyed some degree of freedom of expression which was to be eroded after the 1994 coup d’état that ushered in a 22 year authoritarian regime during which journalists were incarcerated and even murdered (The point, Press Reference).

In 2016, the authoritarian government was voted out of power, once again, creating a freer atmosphere for the media to operate. Sad to say, the 22 years of repression has taken its toll on the media. Investigative journalism could not develop sufficiently in depth and scope. The socio-political climate of those years fostered a tradition of reluctance to release information while media practitioners on their part have not been able to adequately hone their investigation skills.

However, the media has been giving support to government and development organisation, giving good coverage their programmes,

At present, The Gambia has four dailies, a tri-weekly, 33 radio stations, six TV channels and many new websites. It ranks 87th out of 180 countries and regions in RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

Key Informant interviews were conducted on 9 veteran journalists in The Gambia and one focus group discussion was conducted. A key informant interview guide and an FGD guide respectively were used to engage the respondents in discussion. In addition, desktop researcher was undertaken in order to find answers to the research questions raised.

4.0 FINDINGS

Research question one: How effective is the media in The Gambia in tackling the problem of GBV?

In key informant interviews with 9 veteran journalists in The Gambia. The respondents expressed the opinion that media organisations in The Gambia have not met the problem of GBV with the degree of attention required. Apart from giving coverage to the programmes of development agencies on GBV, the media does not give adequate attention to sensitising and educating the public on gender-based violence. The media is also wanting in the area of following up cases of GBV. As a participant in the FGD said,

‘Once cases of violation are reported, reporters don’t feel any need to follow up until perpetrators are brought to justice.’

A key informant also observed that the media is not doing anything about online gender-based violence

‘The media doesn’t monitor online content for refutation. A lot of gender-based violence is being perpetrated online.’

Research Question 2: What are the challenges encountered by media practitioners in addressing the problem of GBV in the Gambia?

Participants at the FGD pointed to lack of capacity as a major problem confronting media practitioners in reporting cases of GBV. This problem is twofold, capacity to carry out thorough investigation and capacity to report in a sensitive manner that would take the integrity of victims and legal implications into consideration

According to them, professional capacity for investigative journalism is low due to media owner’s preference for under-qualified staff requiring low pay. Worse still, the high attrition rate has not allowed media organisations to benefit maximally from capacity building programmes offered by international agencies, local NGOs and The Gambia Press Union.

Media organization’s staff members who have benefited from such training programmes move on to greener pastures.

Owners of private media organisations are not usually targeted by the advocacy initiatives of development organisations. This results in more focus on profit making to the detriment of the promotion of development ideas.

As a key informant said,

‘Private Media owners need to be sensitized about development issues that are paramount in the society. Some of them are pure business entrepreneurs, they focus on profit making.’

Moreover, journalists are impeded by bureaucratic bottleneck from following up cases of GBV reported in the police stations to ensure the dispensation of justice in court. The police in other stations would ask journalists to secure information on cases from the headquarters in Banjul when the cases might not have been transferred to the headquarters yet. When cases are transferred to the courts from the police stations, they may take months to come up for hearing, making journalists lose track of such cases.

Moreover, most of the incidents of GBV occur in the provinces, this places a heavier financial burden on media houses as more would be expended on logistics in covering the cases.

The socio- cultural milieu within which the media practitioners are operating poses another challenge. Traditional culture in The Gambia tends towards resolving disputes informally and shielding culprits from the wrath of the law; this drives the practice of non-disclosure of information to reporters on GBV cases. As one of the key informants remarked:

‘The culture of silence in relation to GBV cases has placed great limitations on coverage by the media. A woman was asked that if a family member violates her daughter, would she take such a family member to court? Her response was, ‘No, when we come back from court, are we going to stop being family? We should settle the problem among ourselves.’ This kind of attitude hinders the investigation by journalists’

The internal structure of the media organisations was also cited as impacting negatively on the degree of commitment to combating the GBV phenomenon. As a key informant opined:

The problem of the media organisations lies partly in their internal composition as the structures of the media organisations do not reflect diversity, you can see that there is gender disparity in leadership. Can you see a female chief editor of any newspaper in The Gambia?

Research Question 3: How can these challenges be surmounted?

Participants in FGD when asked how, in their view, the challenges encountered by media organisations in tackling the problem of GBV could be tackled propose that media organisation owners be adequately sensitised and reminded regularly of the social responsibility of the media. The capacity of media practitioners must be developed on a continual basis given the high attrition rate among the practitioners.

A key informant remarked:

‘Changing the attitude of our people to disclosing their experience of GBV is not an easy task. We need to employ all strategies at our disposal, mass sensitisation and even community education.’

It was also suggested that media organisations be encouraged to monitor online content so that they can tackle instances of GBV directed at people in The Gambia.

5.0 DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Discussion

The structure of a media organization must reflect equality and pluralism for it to be well-positioned to represent the marginalised in the society. Quite unfortunately, media organisations, more often than not, replicate the patriarchal structure of the society with no or limited number of women in leadership positions. More women in media leadership positions will translate to greater sensitivity and attention to gender issues. The media’s response to GBV in The Gambia has been more in the form of giving good coverage to the activities of agencies who are involved in advocacy, there is the need for the media to get their capacity developed so that, through their

reporting, they could facilitate justice dispensation which would serve as deterrent to would-be aggressors.

5.2 Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings show that the years of authoritarian rule have instilled the attitude of complacency and into many media practitioners in The Gambia and they have not been able to develop their investigative skills. Even though the current regime is largely liberal, the media needs to cultivate a new culture of undaunted dynamism. Apart from giving coverage to the programmes of development agencies on GBV, the media does not give adequate attention to sensitising and educating the public on gender-based violence and is also wanting in the area of following up cases of GBV while cases of online GBV are not given the required attention

The challenges facing the media were identified. One of it is lack of capacity in reporting cases of GBV. This problem is twofold, capacity to carry out thorough investigation and capacity to report in a sensitive manner that takes legal implications into consideration and does not undermine the integrity of victims.

Secondly, owners of private media organisations focus on profit making to the detriment of the promotion of development ideas; this is so because they are not usually targeted for advocacy by development organisations. Moreover, journalists are impeded by bureaucratic bottleneck from following up cases of GBV reported in the police stations to ensure the dispensation of justice in court. In addition, most of the incidents of GBV occur in the provinces, this places a heavier financial burden on media houses as more funds would be deployed to logistics in covering the cases.

Also, socio-cultural milieu within which the media practitioners are operating poses another challenge. Traditional culture in The Gambia tends towards resolving disputes informally and shielding culprits from the wrath of the law; this drives the practice of non-disclosure of information to reporters on GBV cases. Also, the internal structure of media organisations in The Gambia lacks pluralism as women are not usually found in leadership positions which has implications for the degree of attention given to gender issues.

The socio-cultural terrain is challenging for investigating cases of GBV while the bureaucratic bottleneck constitutes a great impediment to adequate follow up on cases.

Attitudinal changes to age-long cultural practices are not easily achieved, the Gambia media must utilise all available means to advocate against GBV, share survivor's experiences and engage civil society activists, relevant government officials and gender-focused males regularly for public education on GBV. GBV cases must also be tenaciously followed up to ensure prompt dispensation of justice. All these necessitate building the capacity of media practitioners to be quick in identifying and responding to cases of GBV while not neglecting targeting media organisation owners for advocacy.

Acronyms

EYCB-European Youth Centre Budapest

FGD- Focus Group Discussion

GBV- Gender-based violence

UNFPA-United Nation's Population Fund

UNESCO-United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

IHRDA-Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa

RSF-Reporters without Borders

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