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PANEL 1. GENDER REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA CONTENT

Progress, stagnation, regression: Review of the preliminary findings of the 2015 Global Media Monitoring Project

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Twenty years ago the first Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP)\(^1\) developed a baseline on gender bias in news media content and established benchmarks for measuring change. The project revealed that at the time, women made up only 17% of the people heard, read about or spoken of in the news, a statistic aggregated from media monitoring results on 49,152 print and broadcast stories from 71 countries\(^2\). Women were least present in stories on politics and government, at 7%, and most visible in celebrity news, at 24%. The news presented a skewed picture of the world, one in which women were barely present.

Women reported 28% of the stories globally, with significant gender gaps in South Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Western Europe. What at the time were referred to as “women’s issues” such as women’s changing roles, violence against women, women’s wages, birth control and child-care were found to be present in 11% of the stories.

A decade later in 2005, women’s presence in the news had risen to 21% in global aggregate terms from research in 76 countries. Political reporting had remained the most impervious to women: In spite of women’s active participation in formal and informal political processes, at 14% of news subjects, women were least likely to be interviewed or read about in stories under this topic. Further, women reported 37% of the stories, with the largest gender gaps recorded in Africa, Europe, Middle East and North America.

The fifth research in the series GMMP 2015 presents an opportunity to take stock of the trajectory of change across the twenty-year span. Much has changed at the same time as much has remained the same. Knowledge about how media work has grown, women’s organising to confront media sexism has intensified and efforts have been made to build alliances with others who share similar politics even from within the media industry. Globalisation and neoliberal capitalist expansion have led to greater awareness of the structural, economic and political pressures facing news media practice and the consequences for women. New tools for struggle have emerged, such as the turn to gender-ethical journalism\(^3\) or arguments for the indispensability of a gender lens for operationalizing media professional ethics. Increasing attention has been directed to freedom of expression provisions in regional and international policy frameworks\(^4\) and in particular, the right to fair and balanced media representation of women, minorities and marginalized groups.

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\(^1\) The Global Media Monitoring Project is an advocacy and longitudinal research initiative on gender in the news media. The research dimension takes stock of change in selected indicators of gender in the news in 5-year spurts since 1995. [www.whomakesthenews.org](http://www.whomakesthenews.org)

\(^2\) MediaWatch, 1995

\(^3\) Macharia & Morinière, 2012; White, 2008.

\(^4\) Article19 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948; Maputo Declaration, 2008.
In its nature as longitudinal research, the GMMP has retained key indicators studied in 1995, over time collapsing some and integrating others to respond to changes in the global media landscape. In 2010 notably, the research inched into the digital world to monitor national news websites while in 2015, the 140-character TwitterNewsSphere came under GMMP scrutiny.

March 25, 2015 was the day randomly selected for the Fifth GMMP monitoring day. A Germanwings plane crash in the French Alps in which 150 people perished the day prior made the news across European and North American media particularly, nevertheless the overall mix of stories was typical of an ordinary news day. Preliminary findings computed from a sample of 35% of the countries expected to be in the final dataset show cause for concern and urgency to sharpen our strategies if the elusive significant change towards gender-just media is to become attainable within the current lifetime. The findings are expected to be confirmed, with insignificant variations if any, on most of the indicators.

It should be noted that statistics convey only part of the picture and in isolation are insufficient for understanding the nature and complexity of gender in the news. The qualitative dimensions are discussed to an extent in the global report and in greater detail in the contextualized country and regional reports. Further, as a global study the GMMP’s boundaries are drawn around globally comparable indicators; as such, variables important for shedding light on context-specific differences in media treatment of groups of women differentiated by class, race, caste, ethnicity, ability, sexuality and other identities are excluded for practical reasons. Locale-specific indicators are brought into smaller-scale studies springing forth from the GMMP in between the monitoring years.5

GMMP 2015 preliminary results: An overview

*Women in the news, by story topic:* Of the persons heard, spoken of and written about in the news, the GMMP uncovers the breakdown, by sex, in the 6 broad topics under which the stories are grouped. In 2015, women make up 37% of persons in social and legal news stories, 36% in political news, 34% in stories on crime and violence, 29% in celebrity as in economic news, and are least present in political news stories at 20%. Over the 20 year period since 1995, the largest gains for women are in economic and in social news stories. The narrowest change is in celebrity news in which women’s presence has remained at comparable levels with a five percentage point increase. Over the past five years however, the lowest gains are in the presence of women in political news stories where an insignificant one percentage point change is noted. Stories about politics and government dominate the news agenda, and the insignificant change appears to have impacted performance on the indicator of women’s overall news media presence.

*Women’s functions in the news:* The GMMP is concerned about gender disparities in voice in the news, specifically, gender gaps in the roles or functions of the people in news stories. In 2015, 38% of the persons interviewed on the basis of their personal experience are women, 37% of persons providing popular opinion, 31% of persons giving eye-witness account, 26% of news subjects or people who the news are about, and 21% of experts and spokespersons. The highest increase over the ten-year period since 2005 is in the percentage of spokespersons who are women, and of persons providing commentary based on personal experience, both tied at seven percentage points rises. Over the past five years, the increases range from one percentage point in women interviewed as experts to three percentage points in women as persons who the news are about. The preliminary findings show a sharp seven percentage point decrease over the past 5 years in women as popular opinion providers.

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5 Colectivo Cabildeo, 2014; Vieira & Duarte de Souza, 2015
The big picture: In 2015, only 25% of the persons heard, spoken of, seen or read about in the news are women. The negligible change in women’s presence in stories about politics and government that form the bulk of the news agenda, and the deceleration of the evident albeit slow pace of change noted in the two preceding periods, appear to be closely linked. The preliminary results indicate that patterns of women’s underrepresentation are replicated in digital spaces, with women comprising 25% and 26% of the people heard or written about in news delivered on Twitter and on online news sites respectively. A linear trend line suggests that all things remaining equal, it will take another half century to reach numerical parity.

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The journalists: The GMMP seeks to understand some characteristics of the journalists behind the stories when they are named or seen. The number of journalists in the 50-country sample for the preliminary analysis is low thus the statistics discussed here are likely to change perhaps more than on the indicators discussed previously as the data volume expands with the integration of more countries. In 2015, 56% of science and health stories are reported by women, 50% of economic news stories and 41% of stories on politics and government. Overall, the stagnation detected between 2005 and 2010 in the percentage of stories reported by women appears to have been overcome however, it remains to be seen whether this picture bears out in the final results.
News content: The preliminary results show some gains and some losses over the past five years on three indicators: A reduction in the proportion of stories that clearly challenge gender stereotypes from 6% to 4%; a larger reduction in those that mention gender equality, women’s rights or human rights instruments from 10% to 4%, and; some gain in the percentage of stories that highlight gender inequality or equality issues, from 6% to 8%.

Drivers of sustained significant change

The GMMP 2015 preliminary results trigger questions on the drivers of sustainable significant change in media, an institution that is seeped within a larger system of structures in symbiotic relationship with each other where underpinning patriarchal capitalist values are mutually informed and reinforced. If we were to draw inspiration from the current Progress of the World’s Women report, we may conclude that some of the elements necessary to realize sustained progress towards qualitative and quantitative gender equality in media may be at hand. Solidarity and collective action are demonstrated by the volunteer, vibrant, GMMP network spanning over 100 countries. The potential to expand solidarity and open access to actors in power positions is presented by the Global Alliance for Media and Gender. The planned establishment of a collective financing system would help support media policy processes as well as the work of severely under-resourced civil society groups.

Way forward

Understanding the data that the GMMP produces as indicative of the status of gender (in)equality in communication rights as these rights play out in news media content, it is necessary to institutionalize a rights approach in media practice, which arguably is in line with standards set in industry ethics and practice codes.

Reflecting on the changes over the years, a thorough comparative analysis of the time periods during which larger shifts were documented would be instructive, as would a comparative study of countries performing higher on the GMMP indicators. Such analyses would be useful for shedding light on the drivers of significant change towards gender-just media, including the conditions necessary to accelerate the pace of change within a reality of unabated media expansion, media in-house and external politics, economic and other interests within the broader political economy in which media are embedded.

Finally, further intersectional analyses are necessary to uncover how the patterns change when various axes of difference are introduced, such as the study by the Bolivian women’s collective Colectivo Cabildo which found severe underrepresentation, misrepresentation and romanticization of Ayamara indigenous women in national print, broadcast and digital news, in a country in which communication rights are constitutional and the highest political office holder is an indigenous person.

The preliminary results make clear that 20 years after Beijing, there have been gains but the road to substantive media gender equality remains arduously long. A strategic post-2015 gender and media action agenda will be one that directs energies to that constellation of actions that are more likely to drive sustained, accelerated, positive change.
Bibliography

Article19 in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948.


Maputo Declaration, 2008. *Fostering freedom of expression, access to information and empowerment of people*.


