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‘Women’s pages’ in Kenya’s newspapers: implications for the country’s development

Nancy W. Gakahu and Lynette Lusike Mukhongo

Newspapers in Kenya are written for men, and about the affairs of men, whereas women remain invisible in relation to the serious issues of the day. But there have been efforts to cover women’s issues, and to sell newspapers to Kenyan women. These have taken the form of having separate and detached ‘women’s pages’ slotted into the main newspapers. The supplements are filled with stereotyped roles of domesticity, beauty, and fantasy, thus denying women’s productive role in society. This article analyses the negative and stereotyped portrayal of women in the Kenyan print media, and considers what implications this has for the country’s development.

Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of the twenty-first century is the increased reach of the world’s communication systems. Never before in history has so much been communicated so rapidly to so many people (Fortner 1993). The electronic media industry, in particular, has become increasingly sophisticated and influential, thanks to electronic devices like the television, the radio, the Internet, and other wireless services. However, in Kenya the newspaper has maintained the upper hand, both in terms of the dissemination of news, and in shaping the attitudes of the Kenyan population. This phenomenon may be attributed to the fact that, unlike electronic media, which require users to have access to infrastructure like electricity, printed newspapers in Kenya can be read by people who do not have electricity in their homes, particularly those in rural areas, where over 75 per cent of Kenyans live. In addition, newspapers remain affordable to the average Kenyan, in comparison with other forms of media.

Currently, there are two mainstream daily newspapers in Kenya, the *Standard* and the *Daily Nation*. These newspapers have high circulation figures. The *Daily Nation*, for instance, is east Africa’s largest newspaper, with a daily circulation of 200,000 readers and an online hit of more than three million readers¹. The *Standard*, which is the *Daily Nation*’s main rival, is Kenya’s second biggest daily newspaper, with a circulation of 54,000 readers². With such a wide audience, one would think that these newspapers would be a venue for women, who make up over 50 per cent of the country’s

population, to strengthen their cause. How wrong! On the contrary, the print media in Kenya present a masculinised world. These two Kenyan newspapers are overwhelmingly male: they are written by men, for men, and about the affairs of men. Women are conspicuously absent from the main sections of these newspapers. Instead, issues regarding women are limited to dedicated 'women's pages', included with the weekend editions of the papers (the *Saturday Nation* and the *Sunday Standard*). These serve as vehicles for promoting negative gender stereotypes, and for limiting women to traditional roles.

This article provides a systematic analysis of the way women are portrayed in Kenya's two mainstream newspapers, both visually and through content. The article also pays close attention to the roles ascribed to women through the themes chosen for their consumption in the women's pages. It is noted that the representation of women, by either their presence or their absence in these newspapers, has significant implications for the country's development.

The representation of women in Kenya's newspapers

Women: the silenced and invisible group

According to Isanović (2006), the media produce both 'presences' and 'absences', 'visible and invisible'. The absence of a group of individuals is as significant as their presence. The absence is a representation of the unimportant. It is one way of telling the world that this person, or group, has nothing to offer, and hence that it is not worth being represented.

The representation of women in Kenya's two mainstream newspapers is that of an absent group. Women have been silenced, making it impossible for their voices to be heard and valued. In sports for example, Kenya has the best women's volleyball team in Africa. However, because of the notion that the field of sports is a male domain, the team's successes are rarely highlighted in the media. What dominates the sports column is a men's soccer team, who consistently under-perform, and who are, in our opinion, a wreck. Such coverage of women in sport reflects newspapers' efforts to undermine and trivialise women's success, and as a result the best of our sportswomen remain invisible and unknown to the public. Their achievements are occasionally highlighted in monthly glossy women's magazines, but these cost about seven times more than a daily newspaper, and are thus unaffordable to the average citizen.

Visual representation

It is interesting to observe how women are visually represented in Kenya's newspapers. The female image is portrayed in a way that depicts subordination, submissiveness, lack of intellect, and obsession with beauty. In one feature entitled 'What makes a woman happy?' (*Saturday Nation*, 2006b, 16), the answer provided by

the editor is love, money, and a happy marriage. But there is a photograph accompanying the feature. In the photo, there is a pretty lady seated in a boutique. She is making a phone call with a sophisticated mobile phone. In the background are handbags, and high heeled shoes. And, of course, seated next to her is a man with purchases (of the gifts he has bought her), which include sunglasses, handbags, and shoes. This graphic speaks volumes; that women live in a materialistic world where beauty, entertainment, gifts, and men rule. Such graphics are repeated over and over again in Kenya's newspapers, and more often than not are presented as the defining characteristics of women. Their intention, supposedly, is to remind women that they cannot escape or live without such fantasy.

What is true, however, is that images of women in Kenya's newspapers do not reflect with accuracy the changes that society has undergone, or the experience of women from different social backgrounds. The editors insist on sticking to traditional expectations about women without regard to new roles that have arisen in modern society. The reality is that there is a generation of middle-class women in Kenya who are not confined to housewifely and household activities. These women are educated (just like their male counterparts), formally employed, ambitious, self reliant, and they will stop at nothing to make it in the corporate world. Odhiambo (2006) underscores the changes that women in Kenya have undergone. He observes that there is a kind of womanhood in contemporary Kenya that projects her own social identity. The emerging contemporary Kenyan woman is independent, educated, ambitious, and a trained professional. This identity is different from the traditional Kenyan woman who was totally dependent on her husband for financial, social, and emotional security. This woman lagged behind in education, was formally unemployed and feared ambition. The newspapers themselves recognise this, despite presenting stereotypical images of women and their place in society. According to the *Saturday Nation* (2007, 16), the days when women were by and large stay-at-home mothers are gone. Middle-class women are moving up the career ladder. This has translated into corresponding economic progress, and such women are now in a position to influence factors that have determined their subordinate place in society for generations. They are moving away from culturally designated roles to tackle the issue of resource ownership and control. They have gained financial security and are in a position of liberating themselves.

The representation of women in Kenya's main newspapers is paradoxical. On the one hand, these newspapers ignore the change in status of the modern Kenyan middle-class woman by insisting that she is still confined to the home. But on the other, they alienate women from other social classes. The glamorous lifestyles depicted in the women's pages are unrealistic and unattainable to the average Kenyan woman. Writers in the women's pages concentrate on designer wear, ultra modern homes, expensive shopping places, and luxurious gyms. The truth, however, is that the

average Kenyan woman shops in the local market, has never enrolled in a gym, cannot afford designer outfits, and lives in a humble home.

Women's careers

In Kenya's newspapers, women's professional achievements are often downplayed. This is in line with Londo's (2006) observations that in print media, the social achievements of women and their careers are portrayed as an option, rather than a necessity for women to know themselves, and realise their potential. Van Dijk (1995, 31) observes that when profiling women's careers, newspapers give women standards of beauty to meet in order to be considered worthy: 'It is difficult to find an article that doesn't refer to a woman's look, be it her body, hair, make-up or dress.'

The observations of Londo and Van Dijk are highly relevant in the context of Kenyan print media. A profile in the *Sunday Standard* of Annabel Waititu, a renowned gender and environmental activist in Kenya, began as follows: 'At first glance, the dark-skinned, slim woman looks like your average plain Jane. But her stock of natural hair combed in an Afro style attests her deep-seated passion for the simple and the natural' (*Sunday Standard*, 2007, 14). After detailing her physical appearance, the article moves on to her professional life. But before the reader grasps the environmentalist's achievements, the author breaks off to give details of Waititu's personal life. 'Waititu, who is separated from her husband, has two children aged fourteen and nine.' Such is the nature of articles that attempt to describe women and their careers in Kenya. Of more concern to the authors of these articles is the personal life of women, their appearance, and their motherhood.

Woman: the villain

When they are not silent, beautiful, mothers, or sexual objects, women in Kenya's newspapers are represented as 'bad' and villainous to the core. Either they are stealing their friend's lovers, or they are stabbing them in the back, betraying them, gossiping about them, or being jealous. At other times, they are being unfaithful to their lovers. Kenya's newspapers are filled with such stereotypical portrayals. Themes picked from the women's pages include: *Women predators*, *Women friends who can't keep secrets*, *Foe or friend*, *Women who stab you in the back*, and *Women will do anything for money*, among others.

The women's pages

As the examples above illustrate, the editors of Kenya's two mainstream newspapers have achieved the exclusion of women by confining coverage of 'women's issues' to the dedicated women's pages, shutting them off completely from the rest of the paper. In these pages, women's talent, skill, and intelligence are downplayed or completely ignored. The stereotypes restrict the potential of women, and prohibit them from going

beyond defined limits. These pages also attempt to compel women to look at life in a certain, unrealistic, way. Gallagher (1995) likens such pages to fantasy shop windows, that show individuals how their life can be.

Themes dominating women's pages

The women's pages in the *Saturday Nation* cover the following themes: style, career, beauty, soul and culture, cosy home, your body, cooking, fashion, travel, man talk and female speak. The *Standard's* weekend magazine, *Sunday Standard*, has the following sections: fashion and beauty, sister to sister, health, parenting and family, looks and apparel, and in the kitchen, among others. It is worth noting that the cover page always features a picture of a woman aged between 21 and 30. This alone dictates the audience to whom the content of the magazine is directed.

The above themes reflect the attitude of editors about what women are, and what they want to read. The themes are domesticated and stereotyped towards leisure, fashion, fantasy, and beauty, attempting to confine women to traditional roles of homemakers, mothers, and beauty objects. They do not contain serious issues, and they reflect total ignorance of, or contempt for, the intellect of women readers. But perhaps more worrying than the themes themselves is the content of these thematic sections, and the negative stereotypes that permeate the text.

'Man talk' for example, is a column in the *Saturday Nation* written by a man who, presumably, claims to speak on behalf of other men on their perception of women. The content of this column is usually chauvinistic and unpalatable to the female reader. In one of the articles entitled 'What's with those ill fitting jeans?' (*Saturday Nation*, 2006b, 8), the columnist narrates his experience in one of Nairobi's ultra modern shopping malls. He observes that most of the women under thirty were dressed in jeans. He has issues with women in jeans: 'Like high heels, jeans are about show for women, not for comfort. Hips and bums are still a major female asset, but underneath those trousers is a whole load of disappointment (for men). Women have become lazy and rely entirely on looks to hold a man's attention, but men will suddenly drop enthusiasm soon after achieving the goal of sex.'

This man, like many others, still regards women as sexual objects, there to provide sport for men's pleasure. He lacks respect for women, defines them on the basis of their sexual attractiveness to men, and paints a horrific picture of their bodies. In another article, (*Saturday Nation*, 2004, 8), the same writer reflects on 'What do women want?': 'She wants to stay awake all night on the pleasurable receiving end. The average local female isn't getting any fulfillment between the sheets at home. These sisters are becoming a bit more demanding'. Coupled with such negative portrayal, he objectifies women and their bodies as men's possessions. It is as if women have nothing else to do apart from dressing up and trying to attract male attention, only to be dumped at the end of the day by men who have achieved the goal of sex. Apart from looking at women from a sexual angle, this writer is still stuck in the past, where

women were synonymous with the kitchen. He expresses sentiments such as 'A woman who cannot cook is an unfit member of society and an embarrassment to her partner' (*Saturday Nation* 2005, 8).

The content of women's pages in Kenya's two main newspapers places more emphasis on women's superficial appearance, and associates them with their bodies, rather than their minds. Women's intellect is compared with their style of dress and their fashion tastes. In a column on 'Fashion', the writer says: 'If you are a guy and the woman in question is someone you are thinking of dating, skip the coffee dates. Look at her feet, because the way to peep into a woman's soul is through her shoes: it is a reflection of her psyche' (*Saturday Nation* 2006b, 10).

Themes dominating women's pages in Kenya's newspapers are a reflection of very rigid and resilient attitudes by the Kenyan media regarding issues to do with femininity. In these pages, women's roles are specifically categorised and assigned to the private domain. When women try to break through the walls of stereotypes, they are castigated by newspaper editors, and reminded that their place is in the home. In fact, they are accused of invading the male domain. In one of the articles for example, a writer says, 'Meet the emerging urban married woman who has turned into a party animal. The women flush affluence ... these women have literarily invaded the male domain ... so why the change? Is the society sinking into disorder, where the woman, erstwhile viewed as the pillar of the home, has run riot? Are women craving more freedom and entertainment? Who takes care of their children when they are away?' (*East African Standard* 2006, 12)³.

Reading through such articles, the reader becomes frustrated, and wonders how these supplements can be called women's pages when they contain material that insults women to their faces! But they are, nevertheless. The print media is initiating women into conventional social norms, and keeping them there by making them believe that this representation is natural, inevitable, and unlikely to change. Women have been convinced that they are part of this distorted image, and they have accepted the lie. What is worrying is that women writers even join their male counterparts in denigrating themselves. In one of the articles, a female writer writes, 'A woman has always been and will remain forever under man's spell, no matter how liberated and independent she claims to be' (*Saturday Nation* 2006a, 6).

Implications for development

In the economic transformation of any country, the place of women is crucial (Isanovic 2006). In Africa, for example, Karim (1995) observes that there is a close link between the status of women and development in the continent. It is important, therefore, that women are enabled to participate in the development process by all agents of socialisation, especially the media. Through their agenda-setting role, the media influence people's ways of thinking, behaving and interpreting reality. People

assimilate information from the media even unconsciously, thus influencing the way they perceive the world around them. Kirby *et al.* (2000) term this as a form of ideological control (see also Kayoka 2001). This being the case, the way media represent women is crucial for their participation in development projects; it can either impede or foster their integration in such projects.

In Kenya, it is common for newspapers to represent women as homebound. By convincing them that their place is in the kitchen, their role in serious decision-making is undermined. This is because stereotypes that portray women as homebound militate against women's advancement, progress, and participation in the political and corporate worlds. Chilimampungu (1999) notes that degrading articles help to shape and reinforce women's negative views of themselves and their place in society: women develop low expectations of themselves, are left with little sense of their own value, and are consequently unable to realise their full potential. Take, for example, a Kenyan woman who has been bombarded with stereotypical images of the ideal woman as one who is very slim. In her article entitled 'How to pick a swimsuit', this woman writer is convinced that a woman's success is determined by her body size. The fact that she cannot find a swimsuit that fits her leaves her feeling inadequate. This leads her to lament that 'My feelings of inadequacy are reinforced [because of my big body] and my self esteem demolished, making me feel not worthy of being the head of World Bank' (*Saturday Nation* 2006b, 13), clearly making the link between low self esteem and the lack of African women in positions of leadership.

It is evident that Kenya's newspapers (mis)represent women by making them absent, invisible, or silent in 'serious' news coverage. Johnson (1986) reflects that the media subtly persuade us that the image they present reflects ideas of how the world ought to be. As such, absencing women from the media can be seen as a way of telling women that they rarely make meaningful contributions to the nation, and that they therefore do not warrant representation in the main sections of the newspapers. By silencing them, the media make it impossible for the voices of women to be heard, thus preventing them from participating in debates around democratic issues and development.

Another way in which individuals participate in nation building is through their careers and professions. However, women's careers are the last priority in Kenya's newspapers. Even when women have successful careers, they are still depicted by their looks, and their appearance is emphasised in place of their achievements.

Reversing the trend: giving women readers what they want

According to Rupp (2004), women want the same things from the media as men. They want to be treated as intelligent beings, not victims of fiction, fun, and fantasy. Rupp asserts that women want timely, well-written stories, not misguided attempts at women's pages. Women want their issues to be given serious coverage in the main

sections of newspapers. To pretend that they want something different reinforces existing stereotypes.

How much ink do women get? Kenya's newspapers have often left women out of news coverage altogether. But women want to be respected as both sources of news and newsmakers. They would like to be given more space and a relevant female perspective on the news of the day. As Webber (1992, 186) says, 'The main thing that women want from the media is to be in it.'

When women are represented the print media, they are often portrayed from a traditional point of view where they are confined within the four walls of the home. Women would like to see representations of women that go beyond this stereotype. Webber (1992, 186) asserts, 'We just don't want to be firsts, bests and onlys, sex symbols, wives, mothers or victims. We want to be recognised in both our complexity and diversity.' Women want newspapers to understand and reflect their needs, wants, and values in respect to a changing society.

In Kenya, newspaper editors' attempts to fit all women into the stereotype box are unacceptable, as is their inability to represent women's views and opinions. Women in Kenya refuse to accept the masculinised world that the media industry extols at the expense of women. Rather, women readers would like to see newspapers making the effort to reflect the fact that women make different choices and have different world-views. Women would like to be represented as individuals who are in control of their lives, and feel that they should not have to prove anything to be represented as such. Women want to be given a chance to question, reflect on, and act on the conditions of their lives (Gakahu 2006).

Conclusion and recommendations

The media are a mirror of society. For them to accurately play this role, it is important that they produce coverage that is well rounded, reflecting the world of women as well as that of men (Rupp 2004). Women are an indispensable force that agents of socialisation like the media cannot continue to ignore. No progress can come to a nation that ignores over half of its population in major nation-building activities. It is time that women were portrayed as productive members of society, and regarded as capable of making intelligent choices. Portraying women as secondary, in stereotypical roles of domesticity, and denying their contribution to economic growth, is detrimental to nation building.

In view of this conclusion, we recommend that more women be recruited into the media as editors and writers on daily newspapers. This is because the larger problem of the way women are represented in the media stems in part from a lack of women's involvement in the production of news and information. Encouraging more women to work in the media would enable women to tell their stories through their own words and images, promote positive reflection, and determine their own forms of

representation. Editors and writers should also make a conscious attempt to project stories about women in a truthful manner by appreciating the advancement of women in the modern world, and elevate the voices of women in the news. We also recommend that policy makers and news editors give careful consideration to the way women are represented in the media. Positive portrayals of women's achievements are crucial for women's self esteem, and a sure way of fostering women's participation in development.

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Notes

- 1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Daily_Nation (last accessed May 2007).
- 2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenya_Television_Network (last accessed May 2007).
- 3 Until recently, the *Standard* was known as the *East African Standard*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenya_Television_Network (last accessed May 2007).

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