



Gender-based Censorship and the News Media¹ *Dr. Agnès Callamard, Executive Director, ARTICLE 19*

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ARTICLE 19 is a freedom of expression organisation that defends wholeheartedly *media freedom* as being a critical underpinning of human rights, development and democracy. Well-established in international law, *media freedom* requires that states refrain from interfering with this right unless the interference is necessary in a democratic society to protect a legitimate interest, and is provided by law.

But ARTICLE 19 also believes that the media has a crucial role to play in promoting tolerance and preventing and counter-acting discrimination. We believe that independent media organisations, media enterprises and media workers have a moral and social obligation to ensure open public debate about matters of public concern and to make a positive contribution to the fight against racism, and sexism and other forms of discrimination, to combat intolerance.

However, the 2005 GMMP results demonstrate that currently this crucial role is not being performed to its full. In particular, the media is failing, globally, to meet its responsibilities for and to women. ARTICLE 19 therefore is keen to contribute to the global campaign to strengthen women's voices and the position of women within the media globally and particularly proud to be associated with the launch of '*Who Makes the News?*'² and the three weeks of Global Action on Gender and the media.

Freedom of expression, including access to information is a fundamental human right. The full enjoyment of this right is the most potent force for the strengthening of peace and the preemption of conflict. It is central to achieving individual freedoms and to developing democracy and it plays a critical role in tackling the underlying causes of poverty. Once freedom of expression is lost, all other freedoms fall.

Freedom of expression means that every individual has the right to hold opinions and to express them without fear. It includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, through any medium of choice, regardless of national frontiers or state boundaries.

¹ ARTICLE 19 was one of four expert witness organisations invited to the launch of the 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) report, coordinated by WAAC, on February 15. This article is based on the statement ARTICLE 19 delivered on this occasion.

² The "*Who Makes the News?*" campaign is based on the findings of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2005 which brought together hundreds of gender and media groups in 76 countries who watched television, read the papers, listened to the radio and monitored 12,893 stories on one random day - 16 February 2005. Endorsed by both UNIFEM and UNESCO, the "Who Makes the News?" campaign aims to promote gender equality in the media by challenging the news media to take substantial and immediate action to ensure that they represent women and men in a fair and balanced way.

Censorship encompasses all interferences with these basic rights. Such interferences may be overt, blatant and brutal, but this is not always the case. The objective of control over an individual's right to speak and their access to information can be pursued through a range of means, both direct and indirect and making censorship particularly complex and difficult to confront and defeat³.

The media is an important focus of attention for freedom of expression activists: it is *the* first medium that governments and other political and economic forces attempt to control, including through seeking their complete and forced silencing. As key vehicles of communication and expression, the ability of the media to function independently is vital to freedom of expression.

Yet, ARTICLE 19 and media organisations have found, throughout the world, that censorship *of* the media is exercised most effectively through censorship *by* the media itself. Those who are intent on censoring others will not always seek to silence. They may also aim at dominating and containing what is being conveyed to the public, seeking control over media ownership, imposing particular editorial lines, deciding who can have access to the airwaves and for how long, determining what gets published and what does not etc.

Thus, we see censorship to be a multi-faceted phenomenon which is "*the handmaiden of power, without which it is inconceivable. It is an instrument to assist in the attainment, preservation or continuance of somebody's power, whether exercised by an individual, an institution or a state. It is the extension of physical power into the realm of the mind and the spirit....*"⁴

In particular, the results of the GMMP 2005 show and ARTICLE 19's own work confirms that censorship can be the handmaiden of gender-based power, discrimination and inequality and further, that this type of censorship may be exercised via and by the media.

This gender-based censorship is comprised of dynamics that are both systematic and selective in nature, explicit and implicit by expression, intentional and unintentional in outcome and both deliberate and thoughtless in impact. It expresses itself in many shapes, colours, and voices. But ultimately, like all other forms of censorship, it alters reality, dis-empowers, controls, renders invisible, and silences. Its key elements include:

(i) Silencing women simply because they are women

Of course, it is the case that women may be censored, alongside men, because of their political views, their writings, their artistic work, their union participation etc. However, in addition, women may be censored including through the media, simply because of their gender⁵. For instance, according to GMMP 2005, women constitute only 21% of people featured in the news. While New Zealand has 32% female politician and a female Prime Minister, only 18% of political news subjects in the local media were women. In Rwanda, which has the highest proportion of female politicians in the world (49%), only 13% of politicians reported on in the news were women⁶. It appears that the media under representation of women's experiences and voice becomes a powerful actor in the censorship of women, not just an indirect or reluctant messenger nor merely a passive mirror reflecting surrounding society's values and norms.

In ARTICLE 19's experience, this silencing is particularly acute where the women's voices are deemed to be radical, feminist or generally from the non-mainstream. Our partners in Malaysia (AWAM and Sisters in Islam), for instance, report that gender-based censorship takes place alongside other "traditional" forms of censorship. It can take the form of broadcasters not interviewing women or not publishing statements made by women's organisations e.g. not publishing a letter on the

³ ARTICLE 19 1988 World Report, Information, Freedom and Censorship, introduction by Kevin Boyle, 1988.

⁴ Michael Scammell, "Censorship and its History – A personal View" in 1988 ARTICLE 19 World Report., p5

⁵ See the work by *Women's World*: <http://www.wworld.org/publications/powerword1/7cases.htm>

⁶ GMMP 2005, p. 36-37

headscarf being made mandatory as part of the dress code for women at the International Islamic University. This exclusion or omission is justified by the preferences of the editor and the perceived reception by the readers. Another ARTICLE 19 partner has been told that the management of one particular TV station simply issued a directive to its staff not to interview them.

According to Loga Virahsawmy, the President of Media Watch Organisation in Mauritius, a local chapter of the Southern Africa Gender and the Media Network, the country's media exacerbated the male-dominated presentation of the country's national budget. She found that when seeking the people's views on the budget, the electronic media aired the views of men only, while in the print media less than five percent of those giving their views on expenditure of the country's resources in the coming fiscal period were women. *"Now we understand why progress towards gender equality is so slow in Mauritius. There seems to be a conspiracy by both politicians and the media to continue to perpetuate gender biases."* A significant voice silenced by the Mauritian media was that of Patricia Day-Hookoomsing, who had been asked to prepare a plan for engendering the budget. *"Perhaps if the media had interviewed Day-Hookoomsing, we would even be more enlightened on whether her findings were presented during the preparation of the budget, and whether or not the government takes gender budgeting seriously."* Loga Virahsawmy continued by saying: *"We cannot continue to ignore over 50 percent of the population. The impact of national policies, like the budget, on women is equally important to note. Silencing or ignoring the voices of the poor, and/or the oppressed, does not make oppression or injustice disappear⁷."*

(ii) Defaming or vilifying women because they are women

Rather than "only" benignly censoring an issue or person that they find unpalatable, the media may also take the opposite track: directly or implicitly vilifying the women or organisations involved. The GMMP 2005 and other regional studies, such as those conducted by Genderlink, highlight this unsavoury feature of news reporting. ARTICLE 19's own monitoring of the media often reveals this phenomenon. While women are not the only victims of such practices, they can be targeted through a focus on their sex.

For example, when the Vagina Monologues was staged in Kuala Lumpur, AWAM was subjected to a lot of criticism by the Malay-language press. This came on top of the Kuala Lumpur City Hall's refusal to grant a permit for a public performance. Eventually the Vagina Monologues was staged as a "private" event. More typical instances of media vilification of women can be found on their style of reporting on rape cases and other crimes perpetrated against women. In many of these circumstances the media reports needlessly on the victim's alleged sexual behavior.

(iii) Denying the validity of women's leadership, authority and expertise

Gender-based censorship may also involve the belittling of women's legitimate authority and leadership including of their technical expertise thereby removing them from public conversation and political discourse. A failure to proportionately and fairly represent women as social, economic and political agents, as official decision-makers, and as legitimate leaders constitutes censorship of their social value and contribution.

According to GMPP 2005, 86% of all people featured in new stories as spokespersons are men and 83% of all experts featured are men. Women appear most often in a personal capacity: as eyewitnesses (30 per cent), giving personal views (31 per cent) or representing popular opinion (34 per cent).

According to Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), in the months following 9/11, women wrote only 8 percent of the op-ed articles in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*.

⁷ http://www.genderlinks.org.za/article.php?a_id=191

Another study showed that in 2001, US sources interviewed on the three major networks were 92 percent white and 85 percent male. Women constituted only 15 percent of all sources and in the categories of professional and political sources, a mere nine percent⁸.

The media monitoring project conducted during the 2004 elections in Ukraine by ARTICLE 19 and our partners the Kyiv-based Institute for Mass Information and the Kharkiv Group for Human Rights Protection⁹ showed that women were clearly underrepresented among the voices used in all media monitored for this study. Female voices accounted for only 9 per cent of sources used in all the media monitored, which was less than the share of 'unidentified' voices, including unidentified sources or sources without gender (e.g. reports, documents). The lion's share of female voices by group comes from such groups as 'ordinary people' (28 per cent, a significant proportion of whom featured in political advertisements), presidential candidate Natalia Vitrenko (18 per cent), the Central Electoral Commission (9 per cent), the Yanukovych camp (6 per cent) and Yulia Tymoshenko (5 per cent).

This situation is exacerbated (adding insult to injury) by the disproportionate representation of women as other than authoritative. When women do make the news, they more often do so not as figures of authority but as symbols of glamour or beauty (stars or royalty) or as victims. As the GMPP results emphasise, women make the news not as figures of authority but as celebrities (42%), royalty (33%), or homemakers (75 per cent) or students (51 per cent). ARTICLE 19 review of Russian broadcasting indicates that in programmes other than news (TV shows, advertisements) they are often shown merely as sex objects.

This **censorship by omission** includes stigmatising and marginalising some types of experiences, perspectives or expertise as being unrepresentative, as being of "special interest." Women's points of view are rarely heard in the topics that dominate the news agenda – in stories on politics and governments, only 14% of news subject are women. This can amount to the denial of diversity and a simplification that stereotypes whole societies or communities.

(iv) An absence of gender-specific news or misrepresentation of news of specific relevance to women

The media has a duty of public interest: an obligation created by virtue of the privilege of its reach into public consciousness. This duty obliges it to generate access to information essential to a citizen's enjoyment of their fundamental human rights whether that is information about the operations of government, about health matters, about a citizen's rights or their obligations under law. A failure to ensure, consciously, due attention to the specific public interest of women – to the extent that these are at variance with men's – is tantamount to gender based censorship.

According to a survey of eleven radio talk shows in four Southern African countries conducted by Gender Links in partnership with country chapters of the Gender and Media Southern Africa (GEMSA) Network from June-July 2005¹⁰, women make up only 25 percent of callers to radio talk shows. Only a small proportion, 9%, of the 55 shows monitored focused specifically on gender-related issues.

According to GMMP 2005, just 10% of all stories focused specifically on women; only 4% of stories highlighted equality issues: indeed, stories with a gender equality angle are almost completely absent from the major news topics. Furthermore, news stories are twice as likely to reinforce (6%) as to challenge (3%) gender stereotypes. The consequences can be dramatic:

- (i) It may amount to withholding information that could preserve dignity.

⁸ <http://www.fair.org>

⁹ ARTICLE 19, *The Politics of Media : Freedom of expression and the 2004 Ukraine election*, London: ARTICLE 19, 2005.

¹⁰ "Mirror on the Media: Who talks on talk shows?" see: <http://www.genderlinks.org.za>

- (ii) It limits women's participation in the creation of knowledge, and denies them the power to utilise knowledge.
- (iii) It reinforces rather than challenge gender stereotypes

ARTICLE 19's work on access to information on sexual and reproductive health has highlighted the shortcomings of the media as a key conduit of information for girls and women. For instance, the main examples of media providing useful information on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Peru are the result of NGO campaigns (i.e. radio spots on local radio stations). Few mainstream national media would consider it their duty to disseminate such information, with possibly the exception of the long-running debate about the provision of emergency contraception in State health services. During this long process NGOs' and women's groups' statements and calls for action were published through the press, but only in "sympathetic" newspapers. There have been some positive changes however: one of the newest papers, Peru21 is reporting frequently on Sexual and Reproductive health issues and often quotes or invites articles from women's and feminist organisation, such as ARTICLE 19 partner Flora Tristan.

The way forward

The goal of the *Who Makes the News?* Campaign is to **promote gender equality in the media**. We are challenging leaders of the news media, editors, media owners and journalists worldwide to take substantial and immediate action to ensure that the news media represents women and men in a fair and balanced way.

On the occasion of International Women's Day, March 8, ARTICLE 19 is supporting UNESCO challenge to all media producing daily news to give editorial responsibility to women editors and journalists to direct the news on 8th March 2006. Along with all those involved in this action, ARTICLE 19 is fully aware that this is only one first step towards promoting gender equality in and through the media. Far more sustainable and long-term commitment and actions is required to put an end to gender-based censorship.

Throughout the year, ARTICLE 19 will review critically the effective promotion and protection of women's right to freedom of opinion and expression with the view to develop a gender-sensitive approach to freedom of expression. Our reflections will include a focus on gender-based censorship in the media.

ARTICLE 19 believes that the media has a crucial role to play in preventing and counter-acting discrimination, including gender-based discrimination. Public service broadcasters should be obliged under law to make a positive contribution to the fight against discrimination and intolerance, including gender-based, while other media organisations, media enterprises and media workers have a moral and social obligation to do so. There are many ways in which these bodies and individuals can make such a contribution. Preliminary recommendations include:

Preliminary Recommendations To Governments:

- Adopt policies aiming at improving women's access to all forms of media (mainstream, alternative, ICT, etc.).
- Ensure media legislations, including ICT legislation, include guarantees of equal access for women

Preliminary Recommendations to the media and media regulatory and self-regulatory bodies:

- Ensure that effective ethical and self-regulatory codes of conduct are in place, which includes a gender-sensitive approach to media work, and prohibits the use of prejudicial or derogatory stereotypes of women,
- Design and deliver media training programmes which promote a better understanding of issues relating to sexism and discrimination; in particular, develop gender-sensitive methodology for the media, insisting on the adoption of a gender-sensitive approach to:

story angle, choice of interviewees, gender-sensitive language, images, etc. and emphasising the centrality of women-produced knowledge, including more radical and feminist knowledge.

- Encourage media regulatory bodies to adopt a gender-sensitive approach.
- Promote and assist with community broadcasting or programming for women¹¹.
- Encourage a more inclusive understanding of the notion of *public interest* – one that recognises that half of the world population is women, and therefore that issues of public interest must include those that are of *specific* concern to women.
- Encourage the creation of women’s journalist associations that could raise awareness about gender-based discrimination and censorship within the media and advocate for ways to address and end it¹².
- Ensure equal opportunities for female and male media professionals.
- Address existing discrimination against female representation in the profession (e.g. under-representation of women within staff and management, unequal pay, limitations within what topics women journalists are ‘allowed’ to cover...) through targeted action and measures (equal opportunities policies, positive discrimination, staff and management training etc.)

Preliminary Recommendations to Women’s and Media Rights Organisations:

- Continue to raise awareness and combat sexism and gender-based censorship: in India, the Bombay-based Women and Media Group has initiated actions against trivialising women’s image in the media, which have resulted in gender-sensitive legislations.
- Strengthen dialogues and debates between women’s and feminist organisations and broadcasters.¹³
- Encourage the development of women and feminist press globally, as well as of women-focused Internet and desktop publishing.
- Recognise that the crucial issue is freedom of speech not only for women but also more significantly, for women-based knowledge and expertise, be it “mainstream” or more “radical”.
- Encourage the development of women-specific programming in mainstream media

¹¹ For instance, Women’s Media Centre in Cambodia has a radio programme to promote women rights and raise awareness on women issues.

¹² See for instance the work of the Network of Women in Media in India:

http://www.nwmindia.org/About_us/who_we_are.htm, or the Association des Femmes Journalistes in France.

¹³ For instance, in Indonesia, Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan had an interactive discussion programme in cooperation with Radio 68H Utan Kayu on the bill on anti-pornography bill.