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Event Review: African Women in Media Conference 2018

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“I didn’t know it was significant that I am the only female crime reporter, out of a team of 13, in my newsroom”. This statement encapsulates the theme that recurred from many delegates at the conference having been awakened to the realities they experience. That awareness also encapsulates the impact of the conference. With 300 media content producers and scholars – both female and male, the second edition of the African Women in the Media 2018 Conference (AWiM18) held in Ibadan, Nigeria, on 21-22 June, dwarfed the 55 delegates and speakers present at the inaugural conference in Birmingham, UK in July 2017. Over those two days, the rich interaction between delegates from different sectors and across age divides was evident in the panel discussions, workshops, networking sessions and even from keynote sessions held. Our theme for AWiM18 was Visibility. Its tagline: Be Visible to Inspire, has become the call to action for the group.

There are three pillars on which AWiM conferences are built. The first is knowledge transfer between academia and industry, so research done on gender and media can be guided by the realities in the field and vice versa. This is as expected at conferences. The second pillar is the economic empowerment of women; it is important that these events do not merely talk about the issues. They are to create opportunities. At AWiM18, this was achieved through the workshops facilitated by

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organisations like Code for Africa, DigiClan, and through the AWiM Pitch Zone where delegates pitched ideas to commissioning editors from the BBC, CNN and Natural Resource Governance Institute. The AWiM Production Award gave two grants of \$1,000 each to two female journalists with gender and natural resources story ideas.

The final pillar is visibility, our theme. Why visibility? Here is how (as convener) I explained it at the start of the conference:

“Because in 2018 we are still dealing with issues like the lack of equal representation of women in leadership positions in media, though in the blogging space, we note the successes of women like Linda Ikeji, BellaNaija and Sisi Yemmie who have utilised digital media in very entrepreneurial ways. My colleagues in the media of various African countries share stories . . . of the challenges they face: for example the lack of supportive structures; systems and policies that fail to consider specific needs of female journalist and filmmakers. Besides, we still hear stories of sexual harassment in the workplace - I was surprised that our contributions to the #MeToo movement has not been as strong as we would have expected, knowing that sexual harassment in the workplace in Nigeria is so rife. And when we look at media content both within and outside the continent, we see that there is a clear need for better representation of African women.”

The day started with FlashTalks. Using the hashtag *#BeingFemaleinNigeria* I illustrated the transformative potentials of social media platforms in voicing counter narratives, stories that reflect opposition to the established structures that subordinate women in society. These can be used even by those who do not plan to take further action offline or using mainstream media. These counter narratives are important, and should be made visible. The audience was challenged to consider how as gatekeepers, we can help demystify debates around gender equality, women’s rights and African feminism for those who feel threatened by voices of change to the status quo. It is fascinating that this was a concern shared by academics and media professionals for example Funke Treasure Durodola, assistant director of programmes for FRCN Lagos who asked: How are women setting the agenda and controlling the conversations around feminism? The concern was expressed in various forms throughout the conference. Perhaps the more urgent form to note is the question around the agency of female media producers in agenda setting.

This resonated in Ijeoma Onyeator's consideration of challenges facing female journalists when covering elections. Drawing on experience, the news anchor at Nigeria's Channels TV, raised and questioned the extent to which the conditions of the structures and processes in society are in themselves conducive enough for gender equality. To this end, she considered spaces in which election coverage happens: the election office for example. It is often dark and overcrowded with men whose tempers are getting frayed as they anticipate results. Consequently, female journalists prefer to monitor from election booths, and they note that even then "we are outnumbered" by male campaigners and observers. Yet bodies responsible for the political process including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) seem oblivious of the need to set up such spaces in a way that is less intimidating for women. Onyeator asked a most poignant question: "even if we [in the newsroom] want to say 'Let's have five women [reporting] on politics and just two [in] entertainment - let's show that we are serious [about gender equality]' will the environment allow us to participate?" Thus we identify electoral spatial security – a term I use to refer to physical safety in spaces associated with political elections - as an issue during elections, but note that it may be relevant in sectors other than politics and elections. Structures and processes guarding such are in need of urgent attention if gender equality and participation in women's rights debates will be attained.

Asha Mwilu of Kenya's Citizen TV, approached women's agency in agenda setting from the perspective of relationships between the media and female political candidates. "One of the reasons why [female candidates] were not visible in the elections is because [they] had to put up with so many insults. It wasn't just society, it was their families, their children, and it's never that way for the men" (Mwilu, 2018). Consequently, it becomes a challenge to get female candidates to speak to the media on the record. She described her three-month pursuit of a popular Kenyan female candidate for an interview. She also described the twofold concern often harboured by Kenyan female candidates whom she interviewed. These are how their husbands might be portrayed; and what society might think of their family life. One was concerned that society would condemn her for not having children. Mwilu described another candidate who opened up to her saying, while she is strong outside, in the parliament and at home she still has to humble herself to the men, therefore holding an interview at her home disempowered her.

Such notions were echoed by Professor Abigail Ogwezy-Ndisika who recognised the culture that insists on women getting their husband's permission before granting interviews as one of the issues impacting the agency of women in politics. Again through this we see spatial security emerging as an obstacle. In this instance the concern is less to do with physical security, rather the insecurity is of a cultural nature, reflecting prevalent perceptions about the position of women in society.

This problem goes beyond the status of the women as noted by Mwilu, who despite being the main editor in the gallery on the day election results were declared, had inadvertently relinquished her authority to the men in the room. Having recognised the disempowering traits of patriarchy even in her own professional space, Mwilu's conclusion on this matter is resounding. She asks and declares: "How do we shift society's perception on African women? We need to solve this question first before we can solve the issue of visibility in the media." This is a challenge to be taken away from this event.

Empirical data from research conducted by Professor Ayobami Ojebode, of University of Ibadan, supports the notion that insecurity is the biggest concern for both female candidates and female journalists. Female journalists, he found, were concerned about their physical security, while female candidates had emotional insecurities and fear of being insulted in public. The 'othering' of female candidates as considered by Ogwezy-Ndisika, is evidence of the clear and present danger of not producing gender conscious media producers. "Media is very critical if we must change the narrative concerning women and politics" (Ogwezy-Ndisika, 2018).

Kenya's constitution provides that at least one-third of any gender should be represented in any elective/nominated seats. Although 29 per cent more women ran for offices in the 2017 elections, only 187 of the 1,883 candidates elected into office were women. This is just about 10 per cent; it exemplifies the occurrence in many African countries where legislation is in place to protect gender equality, but the implementation is left wanting. Professor Ojebode in his paper tasks us to differentiate between equality and equity when we think about women empowerment. "It's not just about increasing the quota of women represented in power, but increasing the power in that quota".

Another matter which received attention was the case of women as expert sources. Ogwezy-Ndisika raised this and questioned media's understanding of the value of women as sources – in particular, women who reside in places other than customary spaces that news reporters consult. She argued that women in rural areas and local communities, custodians of what she described as Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK), know more about the issues indigenous to their areas than "educated voices in the cities". Yet these may be structurally excluded from media reports unless there is a conscious determination to redress the imbalance in the pattern of news sources. This was not to advocate the exclusion of men, since some men are experts on gender issues. They too can be sought after; "Men are also feminists" she said.

Male-centric questioning was identified as an issue. Ojebode argued that there are likely to be consequences if majority of journalists covering elections are male. The

line of questioning in such a situation will be from the male perspective. For female candidates, this could mean they are asked questions relating to their looks, or how well they can manage their family life while in public office. Indeed, a recent article by Nigeria's Punch newspaper announcing the presidential aspirations of Eunice Atuejide exemplified this gender bias with a story headlined: 'Mother of Five Declares for Presidential Bid, says Nepotism Hindering Nigeria' [sic] (Punch online, 21 July, 2018). Though, following outcry on social media, Punch later changed the headline to: 'Nepotism hindering Nigeria, says presidential aspirant Atuejide'. This was an example of why media education needs to be reassessed in order to increase the number of gender sensitive media producers; thus Ojebode called for mandatory gender training for journalists.

To explain visibility which was the conference theme, Durodola took a social theory and gratification approach, considering ways in which visibility through social media can be empowering as women have opportunities to express themselves. Several feminist scholars have pointed to the potential of online platforms in breaking down the structures of power and hierarchy, as well as breaking away from restrictions imposed on marginalized voices offline (Mann, 2014; Radloff, 2013). Mann argues that participation of black media makers, particularly black women, on social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, outweighs their participation on other media channels which historically, have "excluded, silenced, or heavily mediated/edited" the voices of those on the "wrong side of hegemonic power" (Mann, 2014; 294). Social media takes the power out of the hands of the usual mass media gatekeepers in deciding which messages are being passed, the shaping of said messages, and when they can be spread.

Submissions at the conference provoked critical reflection on established positions in literature, especially on divergent points. For instance, Radloff highlights the importance of ICTs, digital tools and social media, as means to alternative communication strategy that feminist movements can employ to promote social justice, by "creating new discourses and challenging patriarchal and imperialist legacies". (Radloff, 2013; 3). As noted elsewhere, the internet is an avenue through "which women have the freedom and capacity to actively tell their stories, participate in social, political and economic life, and claim their rights to be empowered, equal citizens of the world who can live free from discrimination and the fear of violence" (Huizing & Esterhuysen, 2013: 6). Yet as Durodola noted, visibility could also be disempowering since women were more likely to encounter discouraging comments. This was echoed by Ojebode, who provided empirical evidence from his research which found that 41.8 per cent of female candidates were of the view that people are more likely to speak ill of them on social media. Only 25 per cent expected to be spoken of negatively in traditional media spaces. Their observations are consistent with Mann's (2014) who noted that visibility, whether voluntary or otherwise, does not

necessarily translate to liberation. He discussed the harms that being visible can cause, particularly the commodification, objectification, the insults that visible participants receive and a demeaning of their experiences.

This notion of negative visibility was a concern raised on several occasions during audience questioning. In response to these veteran broadcaster - former NTA news anchor and Director of Programmes, Eugenia Abu said: "There is always something about a woman who knows what she is doing that frightens everybody!" So rather than dwell on this negative prospects, Abu admonished delegates to be prepared for when opportunities come, and not to allow *impostor syndrome* to cloud their judgement. Coined by Clance and Imes (1978) *impostor syndrome* speaks to a state in which one feels undeserving of an achievement like a promotion. This feeling of self-doubt and fear of being found to be "intellectual phonies" (Clances and Imes 1978:1) has been found to be more prevalent among women, and subject of many management and leadership research (see for example Pedler and Aspinwall, 2010). Publisher of *The Luxury Reporter*, Funke Osa-Brown's antidote to the African Women in Media was this: "[Have a] can do attitude, and be on your toes".

The story of the Keynote Speaker, Nima Elbagir - CNN's Senior International Correspondent, how she leapt from being a Sudan-based freelance reporter, to becoming one of the finest in international news perfectly exemplified the importance of our tagline - Be Visible to Inspire. She had been inspired by Christiane Amanpour as she recalled: "I saw on TV one day that there was a woman with a funny last name and a British accent and I thought maybe someone with my last name and a darker skin tone could aspire to do that". Thus she brought out the racial dimension in the obstacles to visibility for those in the African diaspora.

As an African woman in the diaspora, I am aware that it is important that we do not separate discussions of gender and race as this conceals intersectional experiences, and limits our discussion about economic equality of women. So black women in media, in the diaspora, need to challenge narratives othering successful black women. The treatment of the UK's first and best known black female MP Diane Abbott in sections of the British press is an example worth studying. Television also offers opportunities to learn from, so the patterns of visibility in that medium matters much. Women like Shonda Rhimes, the American producer and screenwriter whose portrayal of black women in leading positions in the drama series *Scandal* (starring Kerry Washington), and *How to Get Away with Murder* (starring Oscar winner Viola Davis), demonstrate this by countering the narrative of the drug peddling, domestic-abuse victim, angry black woman whose only objective is to find a good man who provides for herself and her babies. Similarly the US film industry has, in recent times, released films with black female leads: *Girl Trip* and *Hidden Figures* being some key examples, but I cannot say the same of the British and other European film industries.

African woman in the Diaspora have an additional role as women in media, to ensure that women of colour are better represented, and to challenge the Eurocentric editing of successful black women like Beyonce and Lupita Nyong'o. Eurocentric editing refers to Westernized graphical editing in order to make black women look racially obscure. Beyonce's skin is often lightened, and Lupita Nyong'o in 2016 called out Grazia magazine for editing the frizz out of her afro hair.

We turn now to the much loved audience questions, and it is from these that we identify the issues delegates are most concerned with:

Firstly, there were conversations around maternity leave and the lack of organisational support for women with young children;
Secondly, a recognition of the need for those in a positions of leadership to mentor others coming behind them; and,
Finally, the consensus was we should all be doing more to report on women's issues.

When Nima Elbagir travelled to Libya to investigate slave trading of sub-Saharan Africans, she had just returned from maternity leave. She was away from her son for two weeks. When she covered the court case of Noura Hussein, the teenage girl who killed her rapist husband, in Sudan, her family took turns in caring for him. Unfortunately for many women in the field, this supportive system is not available, and sometimes defines the level these women can attain in their career.

Shared parental leave is a new system introduced in various European countries in recognition of the challenges facing the modern family. It allows both parents, if they choose, to share what would have been maternity leave - for example, the new mother might take three months off work, followed by another three months period taken off by the father. This is an attempt to give the family more choice.

Iceland leads the way in this and currently tops the rankings for the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap 2017, a position it has held for nine years. Rwanda ranks 4th, the only African country to make it to the top 10, with Namibia (13) and South Africa (19) following closely behind.

In contrast in the US (ranked 49 just above Zimbabwe at 50) only 12% of private sector employees have access to paid family leave according to the Department of Labour (2015).

How far are we in Nigeria (ranked 122) and other African countries in reconsidering notions of whose role it is to look after children? How far are we to considering that shared parental leave empowers both the woman and the man (and the children I

might add), because some men do want to stay at home with the children but societal perceptions of this disenfranchises such thinking. How far are we from understanding the business case for such a rethink, the contribution it would make to our economies in Africa?

While I am unable to do justice to this important discussion within the parameters of this conference review, issues related to maternity rights and childcare, constituted the most popular line of audience questions at the African Women in the Media 2018 Conference. It was satisfying to see three female journalists attend the conference with their babies.

What next?

While this review by no means covers debates featured in all the panels (6), workshops (10), and project/idea presentations (9) at AWiM18, it does allow us a taste of the energy brought by speakers and delegates alike. The discussions I have attempted to explore above hopefully ignites the desire to consider some pertinent questions in relation to challenges facing women in media, among are: Who is speaking? Who has the agency to speak? Through what means are they empowered to exercise that agency? What role does spatial security have in this ability to speak? In doing this and contributing to the discourse that seeks to distinguish African feminism from its Western incarnations, we might also consider the differing characteristics of the "glass-ceiling" a concept attributed to Loden, (1978) or if we go back a century to Sand and the - "*une voûte de cristal impénétrable*" (Sand, 1839) How this manifests in media workplaces across Africa should remain a concern.

The power dynamics in attempts to speak, or in speaking for others, or even in spaces where women feel empowered to speak, brings to mind the work of postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) when she asked: 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak's work was concerned with literature and language, and the ability of former colonies to 'speak' in their adopted language has been adapted to the context of African women - their ability to speak both as media producers and as subjects of media content. Spivak's premise, that there is a difference between the subaltern speaking and an appearance of them speaking. The papers synthesised above and others presented at the conference, call our attention to opportunities for further research into the agency of African women in media - their ability to speak, how their speaking can increase that agency, and the impact of spatial security (whether that is physical or cultural in nature) on their speaking. What are the consequences of women being visible? What are the obstacles in the various intersections of experiences that may cast shadows on the visibility of the women, as for example, the racial shade experienced by African women in Diaspora? Can women's visibility be equated to them having a voice?

African Women in the Media is for all women of African descent or nationality (irrespective of race) within any media industry anywhere in the world. Our challenges, grievances, opportunities and strengths may differ in certain instances, but through the adoption of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1988), the AWiM umbrella permits us the opportunity to work together in the reconstruction of our realities, and impact positively the way in which media functions in relation to African women. One thing is certain, the voice of this subalterns will not be quashed. AWiM19 Conference and Festival beckons in Nairobi, Kenya, 20-22 June 2019.

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