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The Female Image in the Mass Media: The Reality and Possible Remedies

by Nancy Mwendamseke*

Abstract

This article highlights some structures of social relations which influence the formation of images of women in society in general, and in the mass media in particular. Drawing from examples in Tanzania, it adopts a neo-Marxist analysis of society and suggests that both traditional structures and attitudes and modern socio-economic relations, buttressed by prejudices in dominant religions, subjugate women to subsidiary roles in development. Hence their negative portrayal in the mass media. It suggests major reforms in the socialization of the youth within the family and the wider society as a means of fighting the negative images of women which justify their exploitation by patriarchal and capitalist social systems.

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L'image des femmes dans les masses médias: Réalités et solutions possibles

Résumé

Cet article met en évidence quelques-unes des structures de relations sociales qui influence la conception des images des femmes dans la société en général, et dans les masses médias en particulier. Prenant pour exemple le cas de la tanzanie, l'article s'embarque sur une analyse de la classe néo-marxiste de la société et propose que les structures et attitudes traditionnelles, et les relations socio-économiques modernes aggravées par les préjugés des religions dominantes, relèguent les femmes à des rôles accessoires dans le développement, et partant leur représentation dans les masses médias. L'article propose des réformes substantielles dans l'éducation sociale de la jeunesse au sein de la famille et à des niveaux plus élevés de la société, comme des moyens de combattre l'image négatives des femmes qui justifie leur exploitation par des systèmes sociaux, capitalistes et patriarcaux.

Introduction

The study of images of women in mass media can be approached from two different angles. The first approach is from the women's perspective of themselves, how they view themselves in the societies in which they are. The second is from other people's point of view, which would look at women's portrayal in the mass media and how the media view women and relate them to their society.

In both approaches the central influence is the structural relations that exist in society. Most of the images people have of women is a reflection of the existing social structures.

The Dominant Class

Structural relationships in any society is determined by class relations. Those who dominate economically, politically and socially in a society tend to control not only the economic production in the society but even the social relations of the people. These relations in turn tend to influence the views expressed in the mass media.

For example, during Victorian age, men wanted to see a certain type of woman in their society. Hence certain images of women (ladies) were perpetuated and expressed in the mass media. Particular behaviours, whether in a party or at home, were expected of women. Such perceptions were not of the women themselves, but those of men.

During the colonial period in Tanzania, such images were perpetuated. The concept of 'mamsehib' (madam) and the lady figure among civil servants was common in Tanganyika, when wives of civil servants, whether white or black, were supposed to behave in certain ways. Even the idea that wives of civil servants should go to seminars where they would learn good manners and practices originated from this point of view.

In traditional African society images of women were influenced and based on the existing norms and values, most of which were based on the existing division of labour based on sex and age. Traditional roles of motherhood, parenthood and the producer were fostered through mass media and strengthened through songs, proverbs and dances.

Gallagher (not dated), analysing the roles of women in modern society in relation to the New World Information and Communication Order, has shown how the socio-economic system influences the formation of women's images in the mass media. Women's roles are restricted to the welfare activities which are traditionally associated with them. Images presented do not reflect women's self understanding but as others see them, or as others would like to see them.

While in patriarchal societies women's images reflect men-to-women

relations, in capitalist societies, they reflect the economic mode of production. Advertisements in the mass media are a reflection of the images of economic relations. Women are used to advertize multinational products and are used as cheap labour (Omari 1986). Women are the majority in advertising images.

Owners of the products which are intended to be sold dictate how the advertisements should appear. For them, it does not matter what kind of image has been presented as long as their products sell. But for women, it matters because it is their images which are portrayed negatively in the advertisements. They are negative not because they reflect reality but because their aim is to portray women as a group of inferior human beings who cannot stand on their own.

Women's Images and Social Structures

In the Tanzanian situation, there are various structures which play a great role in helping and influencing the formation of women's images in the mass media. We have seen how in traditional and patriarchal societies men's domination over women is reflected in the images of women portrayed in society. We highlight some of the social structures which tend to influence and foster negative images of women in the society.

Economic Structures

In Tanzania, women play a great role in economic activities. In rural areas, between 70-80% of the labour force is women. They are the ones who work in family farms and make families survive. They take care of food production, food preparation and the general health of family members. Yet they are not recognized in the mass media. Only very rarely would one hear women praised for their contribution to the economy. Even when new cultivation methods are introduced by extension workers, women are not the target group although they play the major role in production. Many of the extension workers aim at reaching the male peasants who dominate cash crop production.

Swantz (1985) has analysed women's role in development and has concluded that they are a forgotten factor. In spite of their great contribution, they do not feature prominently in the mass media and development. Instead they are exploited and used for fund raising purposes.

In urban areas, women constitute between 15-20% of the active labour force. The low percentage of women in urban labour force is attributed to the historical and cultural factors which have played a great role in women's development process. Many job opportunities in urban areas need special skills and educational qualifications. Women have generally

been neglected in these areas. Traditionally, women were not given equal opportunity in education and skill training in Tanzania. From colonial times up to post-colonial era, educational facilities and skills training have favoured men. As a result, where vertical mobility requires paper qualifications, women are normally left out.

At the same time, in the social services sector, women are the dominant employees. Women play a great role in professions such as nursing, secretarial work, teaching and unskilled jobs.

Besides being actively engaged in economic activities, women are the reproducers and enhance the family tree. Currently women's reproduction status stands at more than 7 children. Thus, women have double roles to play as producers (active labour force) and reproducers of the potential labour force, i.e. children. The combination of motherhood role and being active labour force makes women a very important group in Tanzanian society.

Realizing the above, traditional societies in Africa recruited many women into their families through marriages. Polygamous marriages, besides serving as agents of reproduction (to have large families), were a labour force base. A husband with many wives did not only look prestigious but expected to reap from his wives much economic benefits through exploitation of their cheap labour.

Political Structures

The Tanzanian political system allows all people to participate in political affairs regardless of sex, religion or colour. This is on paper. In practice, however, there are certain obstacles which hinder women's full participation in politics. Most of the problems arise from the structural relations that exist in society. Women's domain is seen mainly to be the kitchen and household affairs. Public life is for men.

When the Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania (UWT) organization was started as a mobilizing force among the women, it had also a negative image among some people. Those who were actively engaged in the organization were either prominent people's wives or single women. As a result, ordinary women did not see their role in it or how they could actively be engaged in political life. It was an organization of those who had abandoned domestic roles.

Furthermore, UWT leadership was associated with leaders' wives. Hence there was no innovation from other groups of women, for example, educated elites. Recently, however, some changes have started with the coming in of elites and one hopes that this will continue in the future.

Women's role in politics is still hindered by certain inbuilt attitudes among men which hold that women cannot hold public offices. If they

do, they must have some godfathers around them. It is as if they cannot stand on their own.

The other problem related to women's participation in politics is related to the various activities sponsored by UWT itself. For example, courses, seminars and skill training courses conducted by UWT are related to the traditional roles of the housewife and motherhood. Even recently introduced seminars for the wives of ministers and other officials put much emphasis on traditional roles like how to arrange parties, and how to behave at parties and official functions. This reminds us of the Victorian age and the way the women's roles in society were conceived.

At the national level, the few women who have made it are in principle looked at as equal partners in politics. But in practice, most male partners look at them as less equal. They look at them as people who have been incorporated into the political system as window dressing and as a means to quieten the masses from making noise about women's rights in politics.

Such attitudes are a result of wider issues in women's development not just politics. They reflect social structures which exist in society from home to the national level.

With regard to women's positions in government, the picture is not that bright although some efforts are being made to intergrate women. Currently we have women cabinet ministers and several District Party Secretaries. At local level we have very few women in the decision making mechanism. As a whole, women's participation in politics is still below the desired level according to the national policy of equality. It is still a man's world.

Social Process and Women's Images

Family structures influence the formation of women's images in the mass media. It is at the family level where children learn their social relations within and outside the family. It is noted that, for example, people who grew in polygamous families have certain images about women as properties of men and objects for men's satisfaction. Inequality among the sexes is fostered more in polygamous families than in monogamous ones although even in the later such a situation may prevail.

Very important for our discussion in this regard is how images on women are shaped at the family level through social process. Children develop attitudes and learn who women are from what they see and learn at the family level. Such experiences last for a long time and are very much reflected in their day-to-day life in society when they grow up.

The following examples help us to understand how socialization processes influence image formation on women among children:

(i) Division of labour. In African societies, division of labour is generally

based on sex and age. While age as a basis of division of labour is beginning to diminish, sex is still strong among the societies.

Both at the family and national levels, we have a clear picture of division of labour based on sex. There are duties which are specifically earmarked for women and there are those which are intended for men. For example, cooking is still regarded as women's work.

At the family level we have beliefs and teachings which strengthen such division of labour. For example, in some societies it is believed that if a boy gets into the kitchen and begins to cook, he will grow breasts like girls (*Usipike utaota maziwa kama msichana.*) The boys hearing such a saying will not cook. They will look at their mothers and sisters as the cooks of the family.

This image is further strengthened in schools through courses which are taught. For example, domestic subjects are for girls while technical courses are for boys. It has been a tradition to train manpower along this line of division of labour up to the university level. It is only in very recent years that we have had women students at university level taking technical courses like engineering and medicine. Domestic chores are assigned to children according to the existing division of labour. After school, for example, girls are supposed to help their mothers to work in the kitchen while boys are told to finish their homework.

Sometimes girls at home are supposed to wash their brother's clothes besides theirs. If you raise a question on why boys do not wash their own clothes you are told that girls must start learning household management from their parents' homes before they establish their own.

(ii) Inequality — inferior vs superior. There are sayings at the family level which portray women as inferior. For example, the myth that men do not cry and if they cry they are looked at like women does more harm than good to women. You hear a boy told 'Do not cry like a woman' (*usilie kama mwanamke*). When there is a problem facing a person you hear: (Be strong/brave like a man,' or 'Act like a man' (*jikaze kiume.*)

In some societies after the boys have gone through initiation rites, they are supposed to manage and control the household in the absence of their fathers. They are not supposed to fear anything. Such examples show women as inferior and weak creatures who cannot survive without man's support. They are, however, elements which have helped in forming negative images about women in the societies.

Religious Structures and Images of Women

The existing three main religions in Tanzania, namely, traditional religions, Christianity and Islam, have inbuilt structures which tend to strengthen negative images of women. For example, Christianity, the

champion of equality of all people and the vanguard of human rights, has a problem in allowing women to become priests.

Furthermore, none of us has come across a woman Sheikh.

Practically, religious teachings tend to strengthen traditional roles of women: motherhood and social service roles. Even with the modernization of religions thoughts and practices which seem to come with secularization, the tendency of religions in forstering conservatism continues. Along with other social structures, the negative images of women in mass media will continue unless radical changes are made from the family to wider society levels.

Conclusion

This article has described some of the social structures which influence the formation of negative images of women in society. In patriarchal and chauvinist societies, negative images will be those of the dominant social class — in this case male chauvinism. In a country like Tanzania where semi-capitalist mode of production operates, a combination of modern and traditional attitudes towards women based on division of labour according to sex and age persists.

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