

## CODESRIA 2011 Gender Symposium on Media in Africa

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As part of its scientific activities and in line with its mandate, CODESRIA held the 2011 edition of its Gender Symposium on 1 – 3 November, 2011 at Hotel

Safir Doukki, Cairo, Egypt. The edition, which focused on the issue of **Gender and the Media in Africa**, was organised in partnership with the Arab and African Research Centre in Cairo. The symposium was attended by 30 researchers (participants and invitees) of both sexes from different disciplines, and from 9 countries in Africa, the United States and France. The aim of the meeting was to critically examine the relationship between gender and the media in Africa.

It is important to recall that owing to the concerted efforts of CODESRIA and the Arab and African Research Centre, the Gender Symposium has become a major annual event for discussing gender issues in Africa. Thus, the themes selected over the years (citizenship, sports, migration, the media, etc) speak more strongly to African social science researchers, because of the still critical status of African women in relation to these issues.

### Summary Note

In terms of diversity, the speakers at the three-day symposium came from 9 African countries (Senegal, South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire, etc), France and the United States; and from a range of disciplines (Sociology, Literature, Economics, Management Science, Information Science, Political Science, History, etc). This diversity was reflected in the selection of the themes developed. The presentations focused on very diverse but innovative topics like: Gender in the Public Policies of the Media; The Image of African Women in the Media; Social Networks as a New Space of Interactions between Men and Women; Women in African Cinema; Women Activists in the Media; Women Entrepreneurs in the Media; Gender Relations in the Media, etc.

**Brahim El Morchid**  
University Cadi Ayyad, Marrakech

Also, out of the 22 presentations, 17 of the panelists adopted a qualitative approach (a participant observation, a mono-site case study, 12 multi-site case studies and 3 summaries associated with non-participant observation). The remaining presentations used a quantitative approach. Furthermore, primary data were used in 4 presentations, while the others used secondary data or literature review, often in the form of records.

Most presenters did narrative analysis and in a limited number of presentations (5 papers), statistical analysis was used. In addition, it was obvious that most of them were guided by the functionalist method, because they aimed at grasping the reality of gender in the media in terms of its usefulness and role. This diversity of approaches did not fail to positively influence the orientation and quality of debates.

In terms of commitment, after three days of debate, it was obvious that the panelists can be categorised, to varying degrees, as engaged researchers. This can be confirmed from the nature of the work presented, which had necessitated very close relationship (between the researcher and the field) and the determination expressed by the panelists, sometimes aggressively, that things must change. Yet Africa, more than ever before, needs this type of researchers who are able, not only to produce, but also to advocate for fair economic, political and social causes.

With regard to complexity, through the presentations and, above all, the debates that followed, it seems that the theme "Gender and the Media in Africa" is not as easy to deal with as one might think. The complexity of the theme is due to both its multidimensional nature and the attendant epistemological and methodological challenges.

Most of the papers presented were of good quality. They were well researched and well written. In the end, the 22 presentations

## CODESRIA Reports

make up a total of 497 pages, or an average of 22.5 pages per paper, with 613 bibliographic references. The presentations and debates were also very analytical. However, some of them sparked up constructive debate among the participants, with criticism in relation to research protocols, in particular the lack of critical analysis and weakness of the conceptual framework. Furthermore, the sometimes excessive use of certain key terms reflects the authors' commitment to the theme of the symposium. A short lexical analysis found that "woman (men)" is the term most often used in the 22 presentations (2,079 times). It is followed by the terms "media" and "gender" mentioned 1,046 and 855 times respectively. By contrast, the term "man" (with or without capital letter) was mentioned only 324 times. This last figure shows that there is still some confusion over the meaning conveyed by the term 'gender' as, for some panelists, gender still refers (wrongly) to the role of women in a given society and not to the social relations between men and women.

The quality of the presentations, and mainly of the debates, enabled us to identify eight main outcomes of this symposium:

- Despite the will expressed by public authorities, the image of African women in the media still remains globally negative. There is yet a wide gap between the official discourse and the field reality.
- Apart from the community radios, the media in Africa are often elitist in nature.
- The image of African women in the media, both physical and symbolic, is strongly correlated with the domination of the traditionalist and globalist trends.
- The stereotyped representations of women in the media mainly affect the most vulnerable segments (poor women in rural and pre-urban areas).
- Gender discrimination in the media cannot be dissociated from the general climate in African society, characterised by other forms of discrimination.
- Some negative images of women conveyed by the media are indicative of both the refusal by, and inability of the state to play its role fully in a context of neo-colonial hegemony.
- The weak position of women in decision-making bodies in Africa has made the deconstruction of stereotypes in the media difficult.
- The new media provide new prospects in the construction of gender relations in Africa.

In terms of openness, while some of the presentations received positive responses within the existing theoretical framework, others probably require further conceptualisation efforts. Aspects of the unification of the theme of the Symposium (Gender and the Media in Africa) that still need further examination by the African research community include:

- Gender Issues in Social Media;
- Impact of the Liberalisation of the Media Sector on Gender Issues;
- Media Coverage of the Public Denudation of the Body by Women in some African Countries;
- The Arab Spring Women in the Media.

## Opening Session

The first speaker at the Opening Session, Professor Helmi Sharawy, Vice-President of the Arab and African Research Centre, Cairo, recalled the objectives that have been guiding the Gender Symposium since 2002. According to him, the 2011 symposium was taking place in a particular context, characterised by revolutions in North Africa. Women had played a decisive role there. The intellectuals were therefore encouraged to take this new development into account. Professor Aminata Diaw, CODESRIA's Training, Grants and Fellowships Programme Officer, who represented Dr Ebrima Sall (Executive Secretary of CODESRIA) who could not attend the Cairo meeting, due to his deep involvement in the preparations for the Council's 13<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, acknowledged the role played by the Arab and African Research Centre in organising the symposium. According to her, the symposium was organised at a time when the wind of democracy and freedom started blowing over North Africa. Yet, this change was made possible, among others, by the strong mobilisation of women and the massive use of social networks.

For Professor Fikeni Senkoro, member of the CODESRIA Executive Committee, the media are synonymous with power and strength. They are no longer viewed as simple instruments of representation, but as drivers of change. In education for example, the media tend to substitute for the role of parents. But despite the evolution of society, the media still continue to convey stereotyped images of women.

Shahida El Baz, Director of the Afro-Arab Research Center, stressed the progressive and irreversible nature of women's fight for equality. She also emphasised the indivisible link between gender inequalities and other forms of inequality (income inequality, employment inequality, etc). The social structures, according to her, are responsible for the production of inequalities; hence the need to change these structures in order to free societies. She further stressed that despite the official discourse of gender equality, women's status had not improved. On the contrary, it had even regressed sometimes, as women who showed interest in change had often been ignored or excluded. She however submitted that the gender paradigm had played a vital role in women's capacity building and empowerment.

Another speaker, Dr Nadia El-Kholy of the Supreme Council of Culture in Egypt, paid a glowing tribute to CODESRIA as a forum for reflection and exchange of ideas in Africa. She stressed the marginalization of women in Africa, despite their active participation in the different economic, political and social struggles (in particular the last revolutions in North Africa). However, their participation in the reform process remains very low. The main obstacle that accounts for this reality, she said, is the persistence of the sociocultural stereotypes and the patriarchal patterns. Under these circumstances, the media have a great role to play, that of conveying a positive image of women. But this should not overshadow the role of education which remains the best way to achieve a culture of equality and tolerance.

The keynote speaker at this opening session of the symposium, Dr Awatef Abdul Rahman of the University of Cairo, discussed the relationship between the media and African women. After recalling the history of gender-based discrimination, she cited five facts that are characteristic of the situation of African women today:

- Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the situation of African women has really improved, following the efforts

made at the national, regional and international level (Mexico, Nairobi and Beijing conferences).

- The African society is characterised by great diversity (modes of production, religions, ethnic groups, governance system, value systems, civil wars, etc) and this has an impact on the situation of the most vulnerable populations, particularly women.
- Over 70 per cent of African girls of school age have never attended school. Likewise, the textbooks, the regulations and the interpretation of religious texts continue to convey the idea of inferiority of women and confirm gender inequality.
- In spite of their strategic place in the labour market (they account for 35 to 55% of the labour force) African women are the first victims of unemployment and precariousness.
- African women are still the object of all sorts of violence, physical and symbolic, in the household as well as in society.

Based on these observations, Dr Abdul Rahman tried to identify the trends of thought that control and guide African media in relation to gender. In total, four trends were identified:

- the traditionalist trend, which supports the idea of women's subordination within the patriarchal structures inherited from the past;
- the social-liberal trend which arose under the nationalist movements and the liberation movement, and which advocates a gradual and balanced approach in changing women's status. According to this trend, 'changing the mindsets will change society'.
- the feminist trend imported from the West, and whose corollary is the revolt against men. It considers gender as women's issue, not society's;
- the globalist trend, inspired by the traditionalist trend's philosophy and which is mainly interested in women as an object for advertising and consumption.

The contributions of these trends have greatly influenced the positions of the African media towards women. And it is mainly the traditionalist trend and the globalist trend that, according to the speaker, mostly govern the relationship between women and the media in Africa. This observation is confirmed, she said, by the content of the few studies on this issue. Such studies attach much importance to women champions, citizens, presenters, spouses or even objects capturing viewers' attention, while fundamental issues like the situation of poor women, rural women, senior women and young girls are often relegated to the background. Furthermore, Dr Abdul Rahman stressed that gender equality is a prerequisite for a coherent and sustainable development of Africa. To that end, she proposed the creation of an enabling environment for change in the socioeconomic status of women, and this, through two main public actions: the revision of the regulatory framework, in particular the Code of Personal Status, and the launch of sensitisation programmes in education, religion, culture and the media. Discriminatory discourses should give way to a single discourse addressed to everybody and interested in real issues that affect women.

### **First Working Session**

Chaired by Dr Eugénie Rokhaya Aw of the University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar (Senegal), this first session covered the sub-theme "Gender and Media: Feminist Approaches and Emerging

Issues". The four papers presented showed the different approaches and some aspects of the issue of the media in Africa that can emerge across the gender spectrum.

The first speaker, Lyn Ossome of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa focused on the possibilities for the diversification of gender representation in African media. She went above the traditional thesis of stereotyped and reductionist representation of women in the media, to include a non-stereotyped representation. She held the view that it is possible to widen our understanding of gender representations. This widening is increasingly visible not only in public media, but also in feminist media and new media. The feminism conveyed by these African media rather plays an educational role. Therefore, African women's representations in the media are far from being neutral reflections vis-à-vis society. They are the result of power relations within society. Henceforth, the media are a social space for the fight against marginalization and the production of alternative gender representations.

The second speaker, Brahim ElMorchid of Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech, sought to analyse the place of gender in the public policies of the media in Morocco. After recalling the wealth of public programmes aimed at reducing gender inequality in the media, he presented a rather mixed picture of the gendering of the public policies of the media in Morocco. Four realities were put forward to confirm this observation: the low representation of women in audiovisual broadcasts, the persistence of a negative image of women in the media, the low representation of women in media-related jobs, and the low access of women journalists to leadership positions. Public decision-makers therefore did not win the bet of sustainability of their gender equality policy in the media. Despite the efforts made since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the mechanism put in place remains ineffective and inefficient. ElMorchid concluded on the note that the promotion of gender equality in the media cannot be reduced to simple plans and strategies. It is a problem of society that requires a genuine change in practices and an evolution of mindsets.

The third speaker, Dr Williams Nwagwu of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, presented the outcome of an empirical study on the use of SMS messages for educational purposes in Nigerian universities. He started by recalling the theoretical bases of learning, in particular the uses and gratifications approach, the informal teaching approach, and the constructive learning approach. He then presented the results of a survey conducted with 1,290 students of both sexes. Students, he said, massively use SMSs to convey, exchange and communicate information likely to help them meet their educational needs. In addition to its use for knowing the schedules and sending questions in advance to teachers, this technology presents a tremendous opportunity for girls in knowledge acquisition. Moreover, despite the fact that boys send more SMSs than girls, the latter seem to better appreciate the use of this technology. Finally, Dr Nwagwu suggested the establishment of collaboration mechanisms between universities and telecommunication operators to promote the educational role of SMSs, and this, by formalising the use of this technology as a learning tool and reducing its cost, borne mainly by students.

The fourth speaker, Abdoulaye Sounaye of Northwestern University (USA) presented an analytical exercise in form of

## CODESRIA Reports

case study on Gendered Media and Gendered Religion. More precisely, he analysed the intervention of women preachers in the media in Niger. According to him, owing to the wind of democracy that started blowing through the country from the early 1990s, the media sector in Niger has been liberalised. Taking advantage of the situation, women started conquering the religious sphere, through the exploitation of media outlets, in particular radio and television stations. Thanks to various programmes focusing on Islam, women preachers' presence is becoming increasingly visible in the Niger media landscape. As illustrations, Sounaye presented the experience of two Nigerien women involved in preaching: Mallama Huda and Mallama Zahra. Bolstered by their origins, the two women found, in the media, platforms for expressing their opinions as Muslims engaged in the promotion of good gender relations. They also took advantage of the media, in particular the radio, to contribute to the social construction of their communities through programmes that command, progressively, a large audience.

### **Second Working Session**

The second working session was chaired by Dr Shahida El Baz, Director of the Arab and African Research Centre, Cairo. Four presentations were made on the sub-theme "Gender and Media: Between Stereotypes and Empowerment". Charles E. Nwadijwe of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria, discussed the study of gender and commercials relationship. Based on primary data collected from 14 groups of products in Nigeria, he tried to critically question the representations of men and women in radio and TV broadcast commercials. The main outcome of this study is that traditional values still play a key role in the social organisation of the populations, and these values are reflected in the broadcast commercials. According to him, a significant imbalance persists between men and women in the construction and broadcast of commercials in Nigeria. While men embody power, authority and domination, women are rather confined to a passive role, lacking authority, and often seen as unproductive, sex symbols, proud, materialist and assigned to the domestic sphere.

In the same vein, and based on secondary data, Sanae Sochi of University Mohamed V-Adel, Rabat, Morocco, described the image of the Moroccan women in the media from the results of two institutional surveys. The first one was conducted with the Francophone Moroccan press during the years 2009-2011 and is focused on the place of women in the main press genre. *As for the second one, it was carried out in 2010 by the HACA (Haute Autorité de la Communication et de l'Audiovisuel – High Authority for Audiovisual Communication) and relates to the representativeness and the expectations of the Moroccan woman about her image in the audiovisual media. From the first study, it appears that the print media devote little space to women. And even if women are visible in some newspapers, they are generally represented as victims who need protection and tutelage. By highlighting the tragic aspect of the situation of women, the media obscure their fight for equality and the leading role they play in the society. In the second survey, the perception of the image of women in the audiovisual media is different, depending upon whether it is about information and animation, or advertisement and fictions. On the one hand, the information and animation programmes convey an image of women who are elegant, modern, involved in their job, committed, skilled*

and equal to their male colleagues. On the other hand, advertisement and fictions spread an image of women who are victims, not well respected, depressed, bullied, weak and mentally retarded.

The third speaker, Azza Abdul Aziz Abdullah of Sohag University, Egypt, analysed the factors that shape the stereotyped representations of the Arab Muslim woman in Western media, from the point of view of the Arab university elite, using the outcomes of a survey conducted with 100 teacher-researchers in three Saudi universities. The results obtained show that religion is the main factor responsible for the stereotyped representation of Arab women in Western media. This is due, among others, to the Westerners' lack of information on Islam, the lack of a balanced and modern pattern that could represent the Muslim woman on the international stage, and the lack of understanding of some aspects of Islam (polygamy, inheritance, the veil, etc). In addition, there are political factors (feeling of Western supremacy, bad political governance in the Arab world, etc) and media-related factors (traditional role of the Arab woman, fundamentalist nature of the Arab society conveyed by Western media, etc). For the sake of improving the image of the Arab Muslim woman in Western media, Abdullah suggested several actions, in particular building a balanced and non-provocative discourse, setting priorities and adopting a religious philosophy of argument.

The last speaker, Khawla Mattar, Director of the UN Information Center, in Cairo, gave an analysis on the image of Arab women in the media during and after the revolution. Although women had always been present during the last Arab revolutions, the media have not been kind and supportive to them. At the end of each revolution, they have completely vanished from the media agenda. According to him, this marginalisation cannot be dissociated from the general climate prevailing in the Arab society. Such a climate is characterised, among others, by conservatism and appropriation of the media by social groups that are hostile to changes (military, businessmen, etc). At the end of her presentation, Khawla Mattar stressed the need for a genuine social revolution to change the mindsets which are a factor of resistance to change.

During the debates that followed the presentations, three fundamental issues emerged; a) the media are a non-auto-nomous and non-innocent factor; b) the media are only a reflection of society; and c) gender is not just about women's rights and the feminist movement. It mainly refers to equality and the recognition of differences.

### **Third Working Session**

The third working session continued the debate on the sub-theme "Gender and Media: Between Stereotypes and Empowerment", and it was chaired by Professor Fikeni Senkoro, CODESRIA Executive Committee member, with three presentations featuring.

Rasel Madaha of the University of New York presented a paper on Gender and Advocacy in the Media in Tanzania, using the Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA) as example. Madaha demonstrated that Tanzanian NGOs have contributed to laying the foundations for gender equity in the country and they continue to monitor the established gendered policies. The conclusive results in gender equality in Tanzania would never have been achieved without the involvement of NGOs, the most popular of which is the Tanzania Media Women Association

(TAMWA). Since its inception in 1987, the association has two major objectives: act for positive representation of women in the media and improve the intellectual and professional level of women journalists. Today, TAMWA is well known for its work in the fight against gender inequalities and gender-based violence. Such advocacy actions open the way for women to access, not only decision-making bodies, but also information and the resources that are essential for the success of their missions.

The second presenter, Amani El Taweel from Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, analysed the representation of women in leadership positions in the Egyptian print media. Although the contribution of Egyptian women in the work force is high (20-25% in the formal sector and 71% in the informal sector), their representation in leadership positions remains marginal. In the media for instance, the system merely reproduces the dysfunctional relationships between men and women that are based on a rationale of inequality and devaluation of women, both in the news and in commercials. However, women's position differs depending on whether it is in the print media or the audiovisual. Whereas women's access to leadership positions in the audiovisual sector is deemed suitable, the print media remains mostly a male preserve (12 women editors out of a total of 54). In addition to the resistance of structures, this discrimination has been explained by the very nature of the media concerned. In the print media, women journalists do not enjoy the same recognition, because they are not visible. By contrast, on television, women take advantage of the legitimacy conferred by the image.

The last speaker during this session was Dr Hind Hourmat Allah of University Cadi Ayyad, Marrakech. She spoke on the role of the media in promoting female entrepreneurship in Africa. For her, the strong gender inequality harms not only women, but also (and above all) African economies, at a time when Africa needs more entrepreneurs to create the enabling conditions for innovation, growth and competitiveness. After presenting a rather mixed review of female entrepreneurship in Africa, Dr Allah identified and analysed the benefits of media products for entrepreneurial activities in general, and those conducted by women in particular. According to her, the media are in a better position to disseminate an entrepreneurial culture in a spirit of equality, and they can contribute to giving a positive image of the skills and potential of women and men in modern African society. They also contribute to promoting the visibility of women entrepreneurs, in particular the dissemination of "success stories". Also, the rapid growth of social media is supposed to value and revive women's initiative, in particular young women, to engage in business creation. Thanks to the wide possibilities offered by the information technologies, they can now make themselves known rapidly and at lower cost. Tools like emails, Websites, "crowdsourcings" (large-scale outsourcing), blogs, fora, newsletters, etc. provide opportunities that are as efficient as endless for women entrepreneurs.

#### Fourth Working Session

Chaired by Dr Maréma Touré (UNESCO-BREDA), the session focused on "Gender, Media and Public Space". Three papers were presented, beginning with a contribution to the debate on 'Engendering the Media' by Sharon Groenmeyer of the University of Johannesburg. She indicated that, despite the efforts made at the international level, sexism and stereotypes still exist. Then, building on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, she

reflected on the way women and men are represented in the southern Africa media. Despite the wealth of institutional and regulatory measures put in place, the southern Africa media is still influenced by patriarchy. The speaker explained the dynamics of transformation in the media through an analysis of the representation of gender relations in the South African society. According to her, though racial discrimination has been the most obvious manifestation of Apartheid in South Africa, another discrimination, namely gender discrimination, has continued to dominate the political and socioeconomic architecture of the country. Even after the abolition of Apartheid and the adoption of a progressive constitution, the situation has not changed much.

The paper of the second speaker, Muna Wilson Kamau of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, was a mono-site case study of the life of the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Wangari Maathai. Through the study of the biography of the Kenyan activist, Kamau examined her representation in the media as an advocate for change in Africa and observed that, in a usually male-dominated political environment, women like Wangari Maathai distinguished themselves by their courage and their actions of intimidation and harassment of the male-dominated state structures. Wangari Maathai was a strong visionary and an embodiment of audacity and change. She was a fierce advocate for the cause of women, not only in Kenya, but also outside the borders of her native land. *She was also an ecological activist strongly involved with the Green Belt Movement to combat deforestation in Kenya.* The scope of her actions has much contributed to improving the representation of African women in the media.

The last speaker, Parfait Akana of the Université de Yaoundé II, tried to understand, through a gender lens, the media coverage of the phenomenon of public denudation of the body by young girls in Cameroon. Through ethnography of some media discourses (newspaper articles and discussion fora) on this phenomenon, the author came out with two main results. First, the media coverage suggests sectarian manifestations resulting from transgressive enrichment. Then it considers those women either as the victims of this movement, or as guilty in the sense that their acts entail a voluntary approach of occult transaction. In addition, there is the fact that the phenomenon of public denudation of the body provides access to a grammar of representations on the occult uses of women's bodies in Africa.

The discussions following the three presentations further corroborated the idea that gender discrimination is a societal problem, and that it stems from the evolution of social structures. Despite the quantitative presence of women as media subject, their representations are not valued, which poses a problem of "gender awareness". Questions were also raised about the denudation of the body by women. The participants believe that this phenomenon is, among others, the symbol of the rejection of the neoliberal hegemony. Finally, the "superwomen" syndrome conveyed by certain media deserves more reflection using the 'political economy of the media' approach.

#### Fifth Working Session

This session, chaired by Professor Aminata Diaw of CODESRIA, was on the sub-theme "Between Nollywood and Tollywood: The Image of Gender". The three presentations focused on the image of African women in cinema. The first speaker, Kayode

## CODESRIA Reports

Animasau of Osun State University in Nigeria, studied the films produced by Nollywood. According to him, Nigerian films have achieved great success. They have invaded other West African countries and have contributed to the rapid expansion of film genres across the region. Through a content analysis of some Nigerian films, Animasau came up with an alarming but obvious result. Nigerian films contributed to increasing gender inequality by crystallising more the stereotyped images of women. The films have been shown mainly from a male perspective. And in order to redress this inequality, it is necessary to take into account key variables such as censorship, public, producer, culture, media, etc., when imagining and interpreting female roles in films.

Along the same line, Fikeni Senkoro of University of Dar es Salam, studied the representation of women's body in Tollywood (Tanzania film industry) and on Facebook. Using film extracts and comments on Face book, the author gave an alarming review of the social use of women's body. Whether on the image or the expression, women are often reduced to an object of seduction. Tollywood and Face book were considered as a conver-gence of very different interests and methods determined by time and space. Despite the damages caused to women by Face book, this tool can become a cons-truective space for society, or a revolution space against peoples' oppression as was the case in Tunisia and Egypt.

The last speaker, Nabiha Lotfy, an Egyptian filmmaker, gave an interesting analysis of the place of women in documentary films. Although women are not always represented in valuing roles and have been increasingly presented as sex objects, the author thinks that the greatest realism with which they were portrayed is a positive element. For her, the issue of stereotyped representation of women in documentary films should be analysed in view of the evolution and reconstruction of societies. Mrs Lotfy concluded by stressing the need for documentary films to be made, not only on, but also by African women.

Three issues came up after the presen-tations; a) Africa is not only governed by a rationale of conservatism, but also by a rationale of commodification and neo-liberal domination; b) Talking about women's suffering should be avoided as much as possible. Rather, their empo-werment should be emphasised; and c) Although social networks, in particular Facebook, have negative aspects, they equally offer huge opportunities for Africa.

### **Sixth Working Session**

This last working session was chaired by Sharon Groenmeyer. Five presentations were made under the sub-theme "Gender and ICT: New Spaces, New Powers".

The first speaker, Mona Badran of Cairo University presented the results of an empirical study on the ICTs and women's empowerment in Egypt. Using the econometric tool, Badran constructed two models, one explaining the use of new information technologies and the other discussing women's empowerment. The result of the first model suggests that the ICT appropriation index is largely influenced by education and sex. By contrast, wage, socio-professional status and geographic area (rural area or urban area) have no statistically significant impact on the said index. The second model shows a statistically significant impact of the ICT appropriation index on the empowerment of women in Egypt. However, the introduction of

other individual characteristics like women's occupation and the economic activity makes the impact of the ICT appropriation index statistically insignificant.

In order to stimulate the role of ICTs in women's empowerment in Egypt, the speaker recommended the establishment of actions aimed at building a knowledge society: Internet on a free basis, a computer for each household, reduced tariff for high-speed Internet, etc. The role of ICTs, in particular equipment appropriation and more generally access to the new technology, are goals that must feature on the agenda of policy-makers.

The second speaker, Ezra Chitando of the University of Zimbabwe discussed the role of women journalists in the fight against AIDS in Zimbabwe, based on the actions carried out by two women journalists: Béatrice Tonhodzayi and Catherine Murombedzi. Through their writings, the two journalists have broken the silence and exclusion of women in relation to the fight against AIDS. They not only challenged the images of women as passive victims of AIDS but also courageously advocated that the fight against this epidemic should be a priority on the agenda of politicians.

The third speaker, Admire Mare of Rhodes University examined the voices of women in discussion fora on Facebook. To show the importance of social networks as spaces where identities are imagined, created and contested, the speaker chose a single forum, namely the Facebook page "*Let's Talk about it all with Tandi*". This cyber-ethnographic study showed that the stereotyped images of masculinity and femininity characterizing traditional media are equally present in social media. However, the latter, in particular Facebook, offer a new public space for women who wish to convey messages and have their voices heard. Contrary to the traditional public space where relationships are usually determined by considerations such as subject, locality, age, sex and kinship, the virtual space is characterised by bold and uncontrollable behaviours. Daring topics like gay marriages, sexual infidelity or still, sexual dissatisfaction are now freely debated, which might create a fertile ground for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In the same vein, Akin Iwilade of Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria presented an analysis of the implications of social networks for gender relations in Africa. Building on targeted survey in Nigeria and Ghana, he tried to understand the impact of social networks, not only on gender relations, but also on the political sphere in Africa. Two main results were put forward by Iwilade. First, social networks do not necessarily lead to new types of gender interactions. And even if the existence of a gender gap is undeniable, a more comprehensive review is necessary for grasping these manifestations. Next, the author questions the political potential of these new media as powerful tool for mobilizing protest movements against those in power. He concluded his intervention by calling attention to the great opportunities offered by the new media in creating gender-blind societies.

The last speaker, Joelle Palmieri of Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Bordeaux, France demonstrated that ICTs, and more particularly Web 2.0, are harmful to gender. Based on the results of a study conducted in Senegal and South Africa, the author reached the conclusion that ICTs are a new model of domination, and that women's organisations in Africa are living a paradox. On the one hand, they use the Internet and Web 2.0 as a marketing toolkit in the service of their visibility and sometimes in response to donor request. On the other hand, they devise



modes for politically taking charge of information for social transformation in Africa. Finally, Palmieri emphasised the fact that the gender digital gap in Africa corresponds more to economic injunctions than to a political will of knowledge transmission.

During the discussions that follow, most of the participants agreed that ICT has contributed much to reduce distances, which gave it more value compared to classic tools; and contrary to a wide-spread belief, ICTs are not the consequence of globalisation, but rather one of its causes.

### **Closing Session**

The closing session featured the remarks of Prof. Helmi Sharawy who warmly thanked the delegates who travelled to Cairo to

participate in the symposium, which he reiterated was being held at a critical moment in the history of Egypt, that of revolution. He also seized the opportunity to present his own account of the events that determined this revolution, with the aid of a documentary on the participation of Egyptian women in the revolution was shown. The documentary reveals the presence, the enthusiasm and the commitment of Egyptian women during the protests at Tahrir Square in Cairo. After a brief debate on the content and the messages conveyed by the film, the rapporteur of the symposium, Dr Brahim ElMorchid presented a summary of the deliberations of the symposium. He summed them up in five key words: diversity, commitment, depth, complexity and openness.