

If you have more women in media, do representations of women improve? Report from UN Media & Gender Forum

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One of the assumptions we have made in media and development in the past is that you will get better treatment of women by the media if there are more women working in the industry. Yet as LSE student [Emily LeRoux-Rutledge](#) reports from the UN Global Forum on Media and Gender in Bangkok, it's not that straightforward.

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It's the first day of the [UN Global Forum on Media and Gender](#), and when I walk into the Grand Hall of the Imperial Queen's Park Hotel in Bangkok, I sit down next to two distinguished-looking Indian women and strike up a conversation.

It turns out one of them is the forum's keynote speaker, [Kalpana Sharma](#), and the other is her colleague, [Ammu Joseph](#). Both are journalists.

We chat congenially in between the opening statements, and at the end of the session Ammu Joseph leans over to me and says, "You know, the media component was a last-minute addition in Beijing."

I love this; it's the kind of insider information you only get from people who have been working in the field of media and gender for over 20 years.

Origins of the Global Forum on Media and Gender

What Ammu Joseph is referring to is the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), a global agenda for women's empowerment that came out of the [Fourth World Conference on Women](#) in 1995. The conference was attended by over 50,000 delegates from more than 180 countries, and was the largest conference in UN history.

It was also the origin of the present conference. In Beijing, 'Women and the media' was identified as one of twelve critical areas of concern, and for the next three days in Bangkok we are going to talk about it.

Two strategic objectives from Beijing

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had two strategic objectives related to women and the media:

1. Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies of communication
2. Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

This boils down to two things: get more women into media production, and represent women better in media content.

A debatable connection?

I'm convinced that both of these strategic objectives are justifiable in and of themselves, but what strikes me during the first day of the conference is the assumption that the two objectives are linked. Everyone seems to assume that achieving the first objective will lead to achievement of the second.

At first I think this assumption is implicit, until it's actually stated by the Executive Director of UN Women, Phumsville

Mlambo-Ngcuka. “We need women as decision makers in the media organisations, and more content that is free from gender stereotypes,” she says, “and we know one leads to the other.”

But does it?

Breaking down the assumption

People used to think that increasing women’s representation in politics (particularly in developing countries) would transform women’s lives at all levels, but this hasn’t happened. In fact, in 2004, an article in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Bulletin debunked the myth that when women gain access to political power, they necessarily opt for politics and policies that promote gender equality.

“We clearly underestimated the power of existing modes of power and politics to corrupt, co-opt, or marginalise women...” the article states, “And we failed to address the possibility that women would be proponents of reactionary, sexist, racist, elitist or fundamentalist ideologies.”

Isn’t it possible that our assumptions about the impact of women’s participation in media production are equally flawed? After all, they are operating in a male-dominated environment.

Per Lundgren, Senior Advisor for Culture & Media at the Nordic Council of Ministers, said in his speech this afternoon that the ‘journalism’ culture is stronger than the ‘women’ culture. And the Nordic countries are considered a model for gender equality!

When I raise this with another delegate, she says she has been thinking the same thing, but it may also be that change is slow. What’s more, we many not have enough women in either politics or media production to accurately gauge the effect that a ‘critical mass’ will have on policies or media content.

Still, assumptions like this should not go unquestioned. It’s one of the many things I look forward to discussing in the days to come.

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Blog author Emily Leroux-Rutledge with keynote speaker Kalpana Sharma