

Advancing Gender Equality through Media Market Dynamics

A FOJO-CIMA Project

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Focus of this abstract:

- How media market dynamics can incentivize, promote, or hinder gender equality in news media

Main questions:

- How can media be incentivized to pursue female audiences?
- What policies or market conditions facilitate the integration of gender equality concerns in media businesses?
- What is the role of the international assistance community in promoting gender equality for media sustainability?
- How do marketing policies, corporate social responsibility, and financial sustainability initiatives affect gender equality in news media businesses?

The Business Case for Gender-Equal Media

At a time when independent news outlets around the world are struggling for their continued financial survival, changing the way newsrooms work can be a hard sell. Journalists are already overwhelmed with the pressures of a demanding and often dangerous profession. Examining the gender breakdown of their content and organizational structures may not seem like an especially urgent need. However, it is exactly because news organizations are struggling that they need to start taking gender parity seriously. For any struggling news media business, reaching new audiences and attracting more advertisers should be a priority.

As Luba Kassova, author of the *Missing Perspectives* series of reports and co-founder and director of international audience strategy consultancy AKAS, said: “In the 21st century, news is produced mainly by men, featuring more men, and is consumed by more men.”¹ Women are an underserved audience segment—exploring how to cater to and attract women as news consumers can provide important opportunities for growth for media outlets. The latest *Missing Perspectives* report, *From Outrage to Opportunity*, also stresses the importance of an intersectional lens to ensure that different groups of women (in terms of race and age, for example) are represented in content and in newsrooms.²

And, while a direct link has never been established between gender equity in news organizations’ leadership and increased revenue, there is evidence from other sectors that provides clear links between more women on executive teams and in board positions and increased revenue.³ Similarly, studies have found that companies that invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion and have more diverse teams—with regard to not only gender, but also ethnicity—tend to be more profitable and save costs due to reduced attrition and faster recruiting.⁴

Improving diversity and gender balance in news content can draw more paying subscribers and increase audience engagement, particularly among women.⁵ Shared values, such as respect for human rights,

and, in particular, women's rights, can also be used to attract new readers and draw in new digital subscribers. For membership- or subscription-based business models, gender can be a foundational aspect of audience segmentation. As Michelle Foster, executive director of News Consulting Group, noted, gender is universally the most stable demographic, with a near 50/50 split in most populations. For a local news outlet that truly reflects its community, its audience profile should also be gender balanced.⁶

As Foster observed, a local news outlet seeking to build consumer revenue needs to actively market to female audiences with a well-tailored content and conversion strategy. For those with an advertising-based business model, the same applies. Building female audiences should be a top priority. Throughout both the Global South and Global North, women are typically responsible for a large percentage of household purchases,⁷ and thus are a high-value segment for advertisers. Recognizing this, one news outlet in Ukraine, Rubryka, developed a content strategy that put women at the center of its reporting, launching a series focused on women in business and women working to effect social change. That year, as a result of this new strategy, as well as improvements to its website and use of search engine optimization, Rubryka saw a 48 percent increase in its average daily audience and a 433 percent increase in online ad sales.⁸

At the same time, however, Foster said that it would be naïve to assume that cultivating those audiences is as simple as putting out more women-centric content. To develop female audiences, news outlets need to develop marketing strategies targeting different market segments, a process that involves the use of analytics and biographic data. Strategies will differ based on, for instance, the age groups the target audiences fall into.

Gender can also play an important role in building institutional revenue. Content aimed at women is often a priority for donors and advertisers, providing an opportunity for news outlets seeking to draw in funding through project-based grants or sponsored content. For example, GK Studio, the branded content arm of Ecuadorian news outlet GK, created a multimedia project about women and climate change in an Ecuadorian desert sponsored by SDG Fund in Latin America and produced content for the United Nations Population Fund's campaign on sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities in Ecuador.⁹

Sponsored and branded content is becoming an important revenue stream for many media businesses, which often work with advertisers seeking to market products to women or to highlight a social cause in their marketing, such as issues relating to diversity and inclusion.

Rappler's experience with its branded content arm, BrandRap, is one such example. Glenda Gloria, executive director and co-founder of Rappler, noted that advertisers have told the outlet that women are a more sustainable customer base, implicitly asking it to produce content aimed at women.¹⁰ One campaign that generated a lot of international attention was one it developed for the hair care company Pantene. #WhipIt highlighted the double standards women face at work and went viral after being shared by then-Facebook Chief Operations Officer Sheryl Sandberg. In conjunction with the campaign, Rappler covered a survey that showed persistent biases and stereotypical gender stereotypes even in progressive regions in the Philippines and hosted weekly conversations with women who challenge these stereotypes and double standards.¹¹

Beyond branded content, Rappler's journalism has also seen a change in audience demographics over time. According to Gloria, when the outlet first started, its audience skewed largely male. It did not, she said, concern itself at the time with trying to achieve gender parity, trusting that it would come in time. Now, Rappler's audience is closer to achieving gender parity, typically skewing around 60 percent male. This evolution, Gloria said, comes down to content.

For the first few years, Rappler's content focused on politics and conflict, topics that men typically over-index on. Since the political arena in the Philippines is largely male-dominated, it was only natural that its coverage drew more interest from men. Similarly, another big subject area for Rappler at the time was terrorism, which drew security sector actors to its work—again, a mostly male audience. Finally, its third main issue area was technology, yet another male-dominated sector.

The turning point came during the Rodrigo Duterte years, when Rappler came under attack. Historically, Gloria noted, women in the Philippines have played a leading role in human rights movements. Duterte's misogyny and attacks on female reporters also meant that coverage of him drew attention from female audiences. In one notable instance, Duterte catcalled a reporter during a live press conference. Rappler covered the incident, noting that Duterte's action violated an anti-harassment law he himself had passed as mayor.¹² Throughout the Duterte years, Rappler's female audience grew.

It is worth noting, though, that Rappler had several "advantages," so to speak, that many other outlets do not have when it comes to attracting female audiences. The outlet was founded by women and has been led by women since the start. Fourteen out of 22 managers are women and women comprise about 60 percent of the outlet's nearly 110 employees. Its marketing and sales team is dominated by women—which, in some regions, including Asia, is a rarity.¹³ The Philippines has several other women-led news outlets and companies and there are national laws in place to protect the rights of women in the workplace, such as a law guaranteeing certain protections for single mothers.

These factors likely contributed to Rappler's growing female audience, in conjunction with its increase in content covering a less male-dominated field. As various studies show, however, many of these structural conditions do not exist in most media outlets around the world. One study found that women make up 36 percent of all reporters and 27 percent of top management at news organizations.¹⁴ Another found that women constitute 23 percent of top editors across 10 markets studied.¹⁵ Additionally, a global study of gender and media regulation found that, though several countries have policies to promote gender equality in society, policies specific to the media sector rarely address gender equality in a meaningful way.¹⁶

Changing Norms and the Importance of Policy

In the early 2000s, few media houses in Africa recognized the need to have a gender policy within their editorial guidelines. A couple of notable exceptions are the Nation Media Group in Kenya and the *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa. Since the Nation Media Group mentions the inclusion of gender in its editorial policies, it provides an opportunity for the advertising section to target female audiences.

However, there is still a policy vacuum in many media houses globally. Where they exist, media codes and guidelines are generally framed around questions of indecency, obscenity, and morality, rather than issues of gender equality. In many countries, a strong ethos of freedom of expression means that

addressing ineffective compliance is left to media enterprises acting voluntarily or complaints authorities, which often lack monitoring capacity and whose policy frameworks rarely consider gender.

Addressing this vacuum has long been a priority for communications scholars, given the media's power to shape public perceptions and attitudes. Implementing gender-sensitive media policies could affect how women are portrayed in editorial content, and alleviate harmful gender stereotyping in marketing and advertising.

The strength of gender-sensitive media policy as a driver for change is particularly apparent in public media. Since these news organizations are explicitly meant to serve the public, they can also be held accountable for failing to live up to their own policies and provide balanced, adequate representation of gender in their content. In Kenya and Southern Africa, for instance, public broadcasters have a constitutional responsibility to reflect gender equality in their programming. If they fail to uphold those standards to citizens' satisfaction, they can be held accountable in court.

While policy may still be in short supply, there is growing awareness within newsrooms around the world of a need for structural change. Vanina Berghella, regional director for Latin America at the International Fund for Public Interest Media, noted that there is a growing debate around gender equality in newsrooms across Latin America.¹⁷ This is especially pronounced in digital media, more of which tend to be owned or led by women compared with legacy media in their markets.¹⁸

According to Berghella, for many such news outlets, a commitment to diversity is based in their founding principles. This may be in part, she notes, out of frustration with the limited opportunities for advancement for women in legacy media outlets, which have made little progress in this regard over the years.

That digital media provide a space for women to own and lead news organizations is a cause for optimism; however, it also highlights the difficulty of promoting gender equality in the legacy media market. Whether this influx of digital media helmed by entrepreneurial women and minority journalists will encourage a market shift toward newsroom diversity has yet to be seen.

For both digital and legacy media, there is room for growth, not only in terms of news content aimed at women and other minorities, but in terms of newsroom structures. Building a diverse newsroom is key to media sustainability, Berghella said. It enables news outlets to pursue new business strategies; gain a better, more comprehensive view of their audiences; and then effectively tailor their content to serve these audiences, which, in turn, will improve traffic, revenue, and advertising.

Berghella was also director of Velocidad, a media accelerator that worked with 10 outlets across Latin America to help them develop new sources of income and become financially sustainable. Having diverse points of view represented in a newsroom leads to increased revenue because it can attract more advertising and traffic, Berghella said. Many of the news outlets Velocidad worked with already had women at the highest levels, she noted, and thus understood the importance of having a strategic point of view regarding gender in newsroom content and processes.

As part of Velocidad's work, the program organized trainings for its media outlets with a gender and inclusion specialist. These sessions covered a range of topics, including coverage of diversity and gender perspectives; how media can create protocols inside the newsroom regarding issues like sexual harassment; and context on relevant legislation and policies in Latin America and internationally.

This focus on policymaking is significant. Supporting female journalists through training and capacity building might not be enough to retain their talents and foster their career growth without internal policies in place to support them.

As Prue Clarke, executive director of New Narratives, a media development nongovernmental organization that works with news organizations and journalists across the Global South, noted, female journalists in Liberia are often expected to shoulder a double burden: taking care of all the household work and then doing their jobs. While some managers can offer their female employees flexibility, most newsrooms do not have systems or policies in place to support women who, due to living in a deeply patriarchal society, are expected to deal with additional responsibilities that men are not.¹⁹

For media owners committed to promoting gender equality within their organizations, one way of incentivizing meaningful change is to tie executive bonuses to their performance on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. Foster noted that this was a priority for the chief executive officer of Gannett when she was vice president of market development there. Every time Gannett acquired a news outlet, it examined the staff layout. If the team did not reflect the community in which they worked, adjustments would need to be made. This applied not only to reporters and other newsroom staff, but to leadership as well.

Larger market conditions also shape the news media's ability and willingness to take gender equality considerations into account in their content and organizational structures.

In Rappler's case, Gloria said, growing interest in the Filipino private sector in supporting gender equality as part of corporate social responsibility has meant more advertisers are willing to work with BrandRap to produce content aimed at women, particularly working mothers.

Gloria also noted that the #MeToo movement and similar social media campaigns have raised awareness of the need to address gender equality within the private sector broadly, and within newsrooms.

Berghella echoed a similar sentiment, noting that younger generations of up-and-coming professionals are leading the charge when it comes to building awareness of these issues in their workplaces. Ten years ago, she said, gender was something to tick off a checklist because it was of interest to donors. Now, media outlets are beginning to recognize that gender is critical to audience management.

At the same time, however, awareness is not always enough to instigate lasting change.

Structural Change and Donor Interventions

For media in lower-income countries, for instance, the incentive structures for news media are warped by a market that does not allow them to support themselves or compete without accepting money from corrupt political or business interests, or that leaves them heavily reliant on media development donors.

According to Clarke, the core problem in many countries is that the business model is broken. In many African countries, she said, media are not beholden to their audiences, but to the people who pay journalists to write about them—most of whom, in patriarchal societies, are men.

“If they make all their money from brown envelopes . . . they don’t need to listen to their audiences,” Clarke said. “[Donors] don’t recognize this problem and keep throwing money at gender sensitive reporting.”²⁰

Without addressing these underlying issues of media capture, the market will not provide incentives for media organizations to cater to the audiences they are meant to serve. In these environments, a potential avenue for catalyzing change is donor intervention.

Clarke warned, however, that while funding female journalists to report on issues that affect women is necessary and important, overemphasizing gender dimensions in certain stories can lead to them being siloed as women’s issues, which men in patriarchal societies often dismiss. Male journalists also need to be able to report on issues from a gender perspective, and that perspective needs to be applied across a variety of topics. To make true societal change, you need to open men’s eyes to these issues as well, she said.

To that end, Clarke recommends that donors channel financial support to standard setters within these markets so they can improve their capacities and sustain themselves in an environment that might not otherwise support independent media.

As the advertising model falters and media all over the world struggle to survive, there are several new initiatives seeking to support news outlets as they work toward financial sustainability. Though these initiatives are only just getting off the ground, they consider gender equality an important dimension of their work.

The International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) tracks gender equality indicators for the media outlets it funds, according to Berghella. IFPIM considers its gender and diversity strategy key, especially since the fund is interested in outlets seeking to bring in younger audiences, for whom gender inclusivity is a priority. Of the four outlets IFPIM currently supports in Latin America, three have strong women leadership.

As part of its monitoring, learning, and evaluation work, the fund analyzes the content, newsroom structure, and leadership of outlets it supports from a gender perspective. IFPIM seeks to support organizations whose operational strategies include improving their performance on those indicators.

Similarly, as Internews and its media development partners develop the US Agency for International Development–driven Media Viability Accelerator (MVA), finding ways to integrate gender equality in the analysis and solutions parts of the project has been an ongoing discussion. Paula Orlando, gender advisor at Internews, said that the plan is for the MVA platform to gather data from participating news outlets through website analytics and a set of questions to determine indicators such as the gender breakdowns of an outlet’s audience, newsroom workforce, and leadership, in particular; whether there are opportunities for advancement for women on staff; and whether the organization has a gender policy.²¹ The MVA will also use a scraper to automatically “read” users’ websites and compare their output against lexicons on a number of key topics, including gender. This will reflect how much attention MVA users dedicate to coverage of gender-related issues. The accelerator will make aggregated data available for participating outlets, and allow them to see how other media outlets in similar contexts have performed on those indicators. As part of the solutions component of the project, MVA will also provide recommendations on how to bridge the gaps based on media research, experience, and the

best practices of media development organizations, implementers, funders, and news outlets themselves. The MVA's technology partner, Microsoft, has committed to embedding artificial intelligence into the system to improve its data aggregation and visualization over time.²² With adoption by a wide spectrum of media and support organizations, the MVA will generate a sector-level evidence base linking performance on gender dimensions to financial viability.

Although many of the details have yet to be determined, Internews plans to develop a pilot project related to gender as part of its Ads for News program, which curates and compiles inclusion lists of trusted news outlets for advertisers that seek to support news media but are concerned about potentially damaging their brands through association with outlets that peddle poor-quality or intentionally misleading information. According to Orlando, advertisers have expressed interest in a similar approach for news outlets cultivating women audiences and displaying sensitivity to gender and other social inclusion aspects. The challenge, she said, was hitting the right balance with the standards for inclusion of outlets in the list. At present, many news outlets perform dismally on this front. Setting the standards too high would risk excluding a vast majority of outlets. At the same time, they should be set high enough to encourage outlets to take steps to improve and meet a higher bar.

Conclusion and Discussion Questions

Although experiences may vary depending on the context, one thing is clear: Women are crucial to the growth and financial health of any media outlet. The incentive structures may differ depending on the context and whether an outlet is commercial, nonprofit, or publicly funded, but at the end of the day, the conclusion is the same. Media that rely on advertisers have a clear interest in improving their content from a gender perspective—which cannot be achieved without hiring and retaining more female reporters and editors. Gender equality and diversity are key areas for donors, which means it should be of interest to donor-dependent outlets. And public media can be held accountable by regulators or, in some cases, courts for their failure to include a balanced gender perspective.

What is also clear, however, is that viable strategies to achieve change in this area can vary depending on the state of the media market and the presence or absence of cultural movements for gender equality locally. Newsroom leadership is still a male-dominated space and convincing men to prioritize gender mainstreaming in their content and organizational structures can be difficult, especially in patriarchal societies. In such cases, advertisers and donors have a role to play in incentivizing news outlets to make a change. Media are lagging other sectors in terms of gender equality,²³ but that also means that, in some contexts, the private sector is in a position to act as a driver of change for the media sector by pushing for content that would appeal to female audiences. In contexts where the private sector may fear government retaliation for supporting critical news outlets or the market is captured, donor support is indispensable to news outlets. That being the case, donors should consider strategies for fostering gender equality in the outlets they support.

It is also worth noting that many of these strategies come with double-edged swords. Reporting on more “women’s issues” without making the effort to hire women as reporters and editors could lead to content of questionable quality. Social media can be an excellent tool for raising awareness of the need for a societal reckoning with issues like sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination, but it is also often a hostile space for female journalists. Similarly, courting more women-oriented advertising can come with its own issues. In many contexts, advertising can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. While there is a role for news outlets to work with advertisers to craft more empowering campaigns, as

Rappler’s experiences with BrandRap demonstrate, smaller media houses are unlikely to be able to do much more than run ads with questionable portrayals of women (they may not be able to recognize the problem in the first place, if they are largely staffed by men). There is also an inherent risk that the fragmentation of the market and audience-centrism might result in more gendered media products, such as women’s supplements or editions, focusing on what are considered “women’s issues,” like fashion, beauty, and health, which would cement, rather than challenge, gender stereotypes.

This means that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for success. Context is key and a holistic approach is necessary. To build female audiences, news outlets need to create more content that highlights women’s perspectives and reflects their lived realities. To do so, news outlets need to hire more women as reporters and editors. Their ability to hire, retain, and promote those women hinges on surrounding cultural attitudes, the existence of policies protecting women in the workforce, and whether there is pressure from partners to improve their performance when it comes to gender equality. Understanding the levers of change and identifying opportunities for cross-sectoral cooperation are imperative for taking full advantage of market dynamics to push for gender-equal media.

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² According to an estimate in the latest version of *Missing Perspectives, From Outrage to Opportunity*, closing the gender gap in news consumption could generate \$11 billion in additional cumulative revenue for news outlets by 2027—and \$38 billion by 2032. See Luba Kassova, *From Outrage to Opportunity: How to Include the Missing Perspectives of Women of All Colors in News Leadership and Coverage* (Internews, November 2022), <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Outrage-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

³ Melanie Walker, “Women Still Missing from the Top Table in Media—Fixing This Could Change Your Prospects,” WAN-IFRA, December 2, 2022, <https://wan-ifra.org/2022/12/women-still-missing-from-the-top-table-in-media-fixing-this-could-change-your-prospects/>.

⁴ Anne Loehr, “Diversity as a Revenue Engine: What 16+ Studies Reveal,” LinkedIn, August 16, 2021, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/diversity-revenue-engine-what-16-studies-reveal-loehr-she-her-hers--1f/?trk=read_related_article-card_title.

⁵ Magdalena Skrzypek, “Gender and Media Viability: Making a Business Case for Diversity,” Media Development Investment Fund, March 7, 2022, <https://www.mdif.org/gender-and-media-viability/>.

⁶ Michelle Foster, in an interview with Malak Monir, March 3, 2023.

⁷ “Women’s Earnings: The Pay Gap (Quick Take),” Catalyst, March 11, 2022, <https://www.catalyst.org/research/womens-earnings-the-pay-gap/>.

⁸ Michelle Foster, Chris Hajecki, Jason Lambert, and Natalie White, *Media Sustainability Essentials: Building Resilience in a Time of Disruption* (Internews, December 2021), <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MediaSustainGuide-Final-20220103.pdf>.

⁹ Faisal Kalim, “Gender and Media Viability: Making a Business Case for Diversity (Part Two),” Media Makers Meet, August 7, 2020, <https://whatsnewinpublishing.com/gender-and-media-viability-making-a-business-case-for-diversity-part-two/>.

¹⁰ Glenda Gloria, in an interview with Malak Monir, March 12, 2023.

¹¹ “#WHIPIT: A Filipino Campaign Goes Global and Viral,” Rappler, December 18, 2013, <https://www.rappler.com/brandrap/profiles-and-advocacies/46129-whipit-gets-international-mileage/>.

¹² Paterno Esmaque II, “Catcalling: Duterte Broke the Law in Own City,” Rappler, June 2, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/135111-duterte-catcalling-mariz-umali-ordinance-davao/>.

¹³ See Carolyn Byerly, *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* (Washington, DC: International Women's Media Foundation, 2018), <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf>.

¹⁴ Byerly, *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media*.

¹⁵ Simge Andi, Meera Selva, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, "Women and Leadership in the News Media 2020: Evidence from Ten Markets," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, March 8, 2020, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2020-evidence-ten-markets>.

¹⁶ Sarah Macharia and Joan Barata Mir, *Global Study: Gender Equality and Media Regulation* (Kalmar, Sweden: Fojo Media Institute, 2022), https://fojo.se/genderandmedia/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/03/Gender_Equality_and_Media_Regulation-lowres.pdf.

¹⁷ Vanina Berghella, in an interview with Malak Monir, March 9, 2023.

¹⁸ Janine Warner, Jessica Best, Mijal Iastrebnier, and Felicitas Carrique, eds., *Inflection Point International: A Study of the Impact, Innovation, Threats, and Sustainability of Digital Media Entrepreneurs in Latin America* (SembraMedia, November 2021), <https://data2021.sembramedia.org/reportes/executive-summary/>.

¹⁹ Prue Clarke, in an interview with Malak Monir, March 2, 2023.

²⁰ Prue Clarke, in an interview with Malak Monir, March 2, 2023.

²¹ Paula Orlando, in an interview with Malak Monir, March 24, 2023.

²² "Internews, Microsoft, USAID to Develop Media Viability Accelerator," Microsoft, March 27, 2023, <https://news.microsoft.com/2023/03/27/internews-microsoft-usaid-to-develop-media-viability-accelerator/>.

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