

Chapter 18

The Role of Community Radio in Promoting Gender Equality in Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Rwanda has become a role model for the progress it has made on gender equality and women empowerment. The credit of this transformation goes to the media such as community radio stations which have been constantly promoting gender equality through their programming by bringing out the gender issues, educating people on gender-based violence (GBV), leading dialogues, and coming up with solutions to promote gender equality. Drawing from the feminist theory and participatory communication concept, the results reflect that empowering community on issues related to gender and GBV is directly linked to understanding the audience perception and involving local audiences in community radio programming. This encourages people and helps to understand power relations existing in the community and promote gender equality. The results showed that community radio plays an important role in creating awareness to rural populations in Rwanda about gender issues including GBV and that it helps in empowering the rural population thereby contributing to promote gender equality in Rwanda.

INTRODUCTION

Radio is one of the powerful community media that gives life to the knowledge, wisdom and skills to be transferred from one generation to another (Brecht, 1979; Girard, 2001; Howley, 2005). Radio has been described by Brecht (1932) as the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. It is usually considered an ideal medium for social change as it is relatively cost-efficient, can be reached by illiterate populations and those who are geographically remote; and its content can be

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adapted to local cultures and broadcast in local languages. Radio has thus been the most appealing tool for participatory communication and development projects around the world, especially in developing countries (McKay, 2009).

Community radio has bypassed the technological limitations in the medium and found ways to create feedback channels through ownership, community surveying and in other ways pursuing involvement from the community. Despite a lack of ability to directly respond to broadcasts, community radio has involved its listeners through listening clubs, surveys and direct feedback to shape the content of broadcasts (Jallov, 2012). Consequently, the radio has become an important medium for development and social change, giving communities a platform for communicating about local issues, news and challenges that directly affect their daily lives. Mtimde (2000), Myers (2011) and Oline (2013) in their studies have demonstrated many positive attributes of radio explaining the benefit of radio in preserving local culture, giving voices to the community, capacity to express their identity, and empowering the community with direct positive effects on democracy.

Myers (2008) points out that the rise and spread of local radio in Africa is a striking contemporary phenomenon. Over the last ten years the numbers of small radio stations have increased due to the widespread liberalisation of the airwaves, the falling costs of the necessary technology and a thirst for alternatives to government-controlled media. In a study of media in sub-Saharan Africa (BBC World Service Trust, 2006), it was found that local commercial radio grew by an average of 360 percent between 2000 and 2006 and those community radio stations have grown on average by a striking 1,386 percent over the same period. For example, in Tanzania, whereas there were only eight independent local radio stations in 2000, there were 32 in 2006 and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) there are now over 150 community radio stations when there were only ten in the year 2000.

Community radio stations play a critical role of providing vital information to citizens and contributing to development and peace reconciliation efforts in Rwanda. Local radio stations promote equal justice in a post genocide society; sensitize the local population on the importance of free speech and on the dangers of hate speech (Population and Housing Census, 2012). Most community radio stations in Rwanda are wholly or partially funded by aid money. This aid is mostly from developmental NGO either international or local. Sometimes they get sponsorship through public service announcements from different public institutions and charitable bodies. More often than not, it will be a shoestring operation and will be run by a handful of young, semi-professional and/or volunteer staff (Myers, 2008).

Historically, Betz (2004) wrote that radio was most often used as a propaganda instrument to secure loyalty and support of the colonies during World War II. In 1994, radio in the Great Lakes region of Africa was again in the headlines due to the Rwandan RTLM (Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines). In Rwanda, radio has been used to incite violence that led to the Genocide that claimed lives of almost 800,000 and many of whom were discovered from where they were hiding using the radio (RTLM). This country had made use of the media in different ways, believing that radio having negatively served as a Genocide propaganda tool can now be used as one of the means to spread its visions. Rwanda aims to become an upper middle-income country by 2035 and a high-income country by 2050 and both these visions highlight Gender and Family Promotion as one of its cross-cutting areas. Gender equality in Rwanda is among the fundamental priorities to achieve good governance and promote human rights. Aligning with the government's vision, the media have played an important role to promote gender equality (World Bank Group Report, 2020).

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