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Women documentary filmmakers as transnational “advocate change agents”

Mujeres documentalistas y su rol como agentes de cambio transnacionales

Abstract | This article examines the role female documentary filmmakers have played as “change agents” who have provided significant advocacy for social, cultural, political and legal change. They have created global opportunities for women’s voices and experiences to be witnessed and heard. Documentary production is a site of media empowerment for women because the form promotes knowledge that supports gender equality and equity in both local and global contexts. Documentary productions are both a site of struggle and of women’s media activism.

Keywords | Change agents, documentary film, women, media activism.

Resumen | Este artículo examina el papel que las cineastas documentales han desempeñado como “agentes de cambio” brindando una importante defensa del cambio social, cultural, político y legal. Han creado oportunidades globales para que las voces y experiencias de las mujeres sean atestiguadas y escuchadas. La producción documental es un sitio de empoderamiento de los medios para las mujeres porque la forma promueve el conocimiento que respalda la igualdad y equidad de género tanto en contextos locales como globales. Las producciones documentales son, a la vez, un sitio de lucha y del activismo de las mujeres en los medios.

Palabras clave | Agentes de cambio, documental, mujeres, activismo mediático.

Introduction

THIS ARTICLE examines the significant role female documentary filmmakers have played in globally advocating and mobilizing social, cultural, political and legal change. It delineates some thematic and representational interests and participation of women documentary filmmakers as change agents. It examines the ways

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in which female documentarians have undertaken advocacy for political or legal change. Consideration is given to barriers female documentarians encounter in relation to achieving access, both to technology and self-representation (regarded here as an important factor to counter patriarchal ideology). Whilst women have been marginalized in many international film and television industries, the field of documentary production has been one where they have been able to achieve relatively high numerical participation in comparison to other areas of film and television production (French 2014a, 661). It is therefore an important genre for female creative expression, and a site of access for women. Documentaries by women include powerful examples of the dissemination of knowledge about violence against women (in order to end it). In ways unique to their contexts and individual concerns, their films have uncovered knowledge about the relations of power in the world, communicated the need for women's rights and values to be respected, and revealed significant representational and ideological issues. Female documentarians have used their practice to lobby for women's access to social, political, cultural, creative and economic spheres whilst advocating for positive change in women's social and economic conditions.

The approach for selecting the female filmmakers considered here was that the selected films were those that advocated and mobilized social, cultural, political and legal change. The second part of the design for selection of filmmakers was to include a global sample (films made about or by women from a variety of regions). This was done to achieve cross-cultural perspectives informed by a variety of cultures, races, and nationalities with an aim to achieve a global snapshot of women documentary directors as change agents (representative films or filmmakers are from Africa, America, Canada, India, Iran, Liberia, Nigeria, and the UK). Thirdly, the films selected for inclusion here are interested in examining women's issues, rights and empowerment, and also proposed strategies for change (or embodied activism). The discussion of the various films and filmmakers offers a flavour of the kinds of issues preoccupying women documentarians, and their roles as agents for change. This is undertaken with the acknowledgement that there is no homogeneity in the work of women documentary filmmakers, who make every kind of film, across all cultures and according to their own interests, aesthetic approaches, individual life situations and cultural contexts.

The methodology deployed here is a mixture of feminist critical discourse analysis (utilised to examine the relations of gender, power and ideology in maintaining gendered social order or gender-based discrimination), content analysis, and consideration of the aims expressed by the filmmakers themselves. There are three central ways in which the analysis is carried out; the first is the degree to which the women documentary filmmakers can be understood

as “advocate change agents”. Documentary filmmaking frequently possesses an activist orientation and there are many female documentarians that could be described as “advocate change agents”. This idea of being an advocate change agent is understood here as describing filmmakers that open “channels for women’s voices to be heard both in mainstream and alternative media”, that effect policy change to “make the media more egalitarian” (Byerly and Ross 2008, 185-186). Women have acted as “advocate change agents” through their documentary practice.

A key approach in this article is an understanding that each filmmaker, or her subject is contingently located (e.g. multiple factors, such as culture, class, sexuality or race are interacting and are as influential as gender). This locates the perspective here as an intersectional feminist approach.¹ Female documentarians have made a particular contribution to understanding women’s contingent circumstances; for example, representing the discourses and ideological constructions that describe and contain women in individual cultures, and in revealing their oppression. In reference to feminist strategy, Luce Irigaray observed that (for her), the most important agenda is to:

expose the exploitation common to all women and to find the struggles that are appropriate for each woman, right where she is, depending upon her nationality, her job, her social class, her sexual experience, that is, upon the form of oppression that is for her the most immediately unbearable. (Irigaray 1985, 164).

Documentary filmmaking is particularly well suited to this aspiration but it also is able to connect these individual struggles through global circuits of filmmaking. This is important because, as Gallagher has observed, the quest for change must, in order to be successful, “link particular local experiences and struggles to the pursuit of global norms and ethics that promise social and gender justice” (Gallagher 2014, 13).

Transnational feminists have focused on global intersections, and the continuing effects of imperialism and colonialism, and more specifically, located kinds of feminisms have emerged (e.g. Islamic feminism). This has resulted in films where women portray their experience, histories and contexts as informed by intersections between different aspects of identity. Through this they have represented that strategies for change are not universal, and it is necessary to understand individual social and cultural contexts.

1 Intersectional feminists have seen gender as only *one* element amongst many intersections between different aspects of identity (race, nationality, sexuality, etcetera) with social, political and economic conditions, hegemonies or colonial influence.

Speaking out: advocates for social and political change

There are many films by women filmmakers about women who advocate for social justice, and through that alter the cultures in which they live. For example, British filmmaker, photographer and author Joanna Lipper (who has experience in teaching a course in ‘using film for social change’ at Harvard University and currently heads Vertumnus Productions in the UK) says she is interested in “films about complex, multifaceted women who defy expectations and create their own destiny rather than surrender to circumstances” (Fredrick 2014). This led her to make a film about Nigerian woman Hafsat Abiola, who founded an organisation with the goal of increasing women’s participation in politics and “inspiring them to pursue leadership roles” (Link 2016). Lipper’s film *The Supreme Price* (2014) follows Hafsat Abiola, who took up the work of her parents after their deaths: her mother was assassinated by the military dictatorship and her father died in custody. Abiola aims to oppose Nigeria’s position on women and Lipper, whilst not Nigerian herself, offers her viewpoint visibility and expression through the production via a strategy of Abiola’s first person voice-over. The film observes that the government is 98% male and does not recognize the rights of women, or the fact that a woman dies of pregnancy-related complications every ten minutes. Abiola says, “if women do not come out and speak and demand that their lives be valued, it will continue, nothing will change. I want to empower the strongest voices”; consequently, Abiola formed an organisation called KIND, to help create a “better world for the girls of Nigeria”.² The film itself promotes Abiola’s project through screenings at documentary film festivals in Africa and internationally. It won several awards, and achieved public prominence in Africa with a nomination for “Best Documentary” at the African Movie Academy Awards (AMAA). This kind of visibility of documentaries by women is one powerful and important way they are able to make an impact, create awareness of female oppression in specific cultural contexts, and promote change and women’s empowerment globally.

Another example can be seen in the work of British filmmaker Kim Longinot to whose films are centered on women, generally in cultures other than her own, and her work, which is transnational is focused on examining the experience, histories and contexts of her subjects as informed by intersections between different aspects of identity (including lesbian and transvestite/transsexual culture). A 2009 retrospective of 14 of her documentaries at the Museum of Modern Art in New York featured her work as Longinotto’s “cinéma vérité portraits” that seek out and observe “difficult aspects of women’s realities around the world” (MOMA 2009). Through Longinotto’s work across a number of countries, it is

² The link for KIND is: <http://www.kind.org>

clear that strategies for change are not universal, and it is necessary to understand individual social and cultural contexts. In her film *Pink Saris* (2010), Longinotto follows four young women who sought the help of Indian activist Sampat Pal Devi. As a twelve-year-old, Devi was a child bride. She has now escaped that life and is famous for advocating for women through founding the organisation “Gulapi Gang”, a group of activists in distinctive pink saris. Their activities include opposing domestic abuse, violence against women, child marriage, and caste oppression in rural India. Longinotto has stated of this film:

my dream is that this film will get to places, and be seen by other girls and be part of a change of consciousness [...] it's not going to change overnight, they are very deep rooted. They are problems to do with how people are thinking. What we want is for a girl to be born and not to be murdered as Niranjana's baby was [...] and for her to be able to choose not to have a baby [...]. (Longinotto 2010).

In the film, Sampat says that if girls spoke up “the world would change”. She calls for the girls to speak up, because “if you're shy, you'll die”.

In another of Longinotto's films, *Sisters in Law* (with Florence Ayisi 2005), the filmmaker examines rape, adultery and abuse cases considered by a female judge in Kumba, Southwest Cameroon (Africa). Longinotto has described how the main character (Vera Ngassa) says to Reverend Cole: “You're living in the wrong century. You know the twenty-first century is one where women have equal rights to men”, and Longinotto says “I love the way she put it like that. She didn't attack Islam; she attacked his kind of backward thinking” (Smaill 2007). This is an effective strategy to advocate for change and also reveals the intersectional nature of her thinking (both patriarchy and religion coming into focus). Like Lipper, Longinotto also offers a narrative in this early film that in order for change to occur, women and girls must speak up—and they give them a platform to do that (an important role for the documentarist). Smaill has noted that Longinotto's “camera usually focuses on women who are the agents of change” (Smaill 2012). Moreover, Longinotto has said she wants her films to “reaffirm in a small way what the powerful are often trying to crush” (Macdonald and Cousin 1996, 379). Both Longinotto and Lipper are interested in representing exceptional women, and whilst I am cautious of generalizing, it is apparent from the body of films by women filmmakers discussed here that women documentarians are likely to be interested in championing the achievements and issues of female subjects. Lipper and Longinotto show where the oppression exists in the individual lives of their subjects. They also focus on activism, what women can achieve collectively and on how female subjugation is directly related to political power. These representations potentially provide role models, inspiration and strategies for change.

Thematic preoccupations and ‘joining together’ for political change

Another tendency observed as more common in the work of women documentary filmmakers is an inclination to uncover social problems; for example, Iranian scholar Hamid Naificy has pinpointed thematic concerns that recur in the work of female documentarians. He identified an interest by women in topics such as: marriage, divorce, runaway children, spousal and children’s abuse, murder, violence against women, gender-based discriminatory laws, policies and institutions as “among important familial and social issues that surfaced because of oppressive Islamicate values and gender-based discriminatory laws policies, and institutions”. (Naificy 2011, 148). An example is Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s 1998 documentary *Divorce Iranian Style*. In Iran, divorce is difficult for women and the law favours men (it is fundamentally patriarchal), and this film exposes the different standards or barriers for women in the Iranian court system. The film takes an intersectional view in emphasizing through its title, *Divorce Iranian Style*, that there are “national and cultural differences in women’s access to basic rights” (White 2006, 120-121).

Therefore, the film can be understood as picking up on the idea framed by Chandra Mohanty that “what binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression”—that is, their shared oppression because of patriarchy (White 2006, 120-121), but at the same time, individual contextual circumstances vary enormously.

Whilst there are some things that women share as women, women globally are subject to specific oppressions in their individual lives. Iranian filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad has made documentaries about the devastating effects of war on women, familial and gender issues in the particular context of Iran and the politics of her country. Bani-Etemad is one of the most prominent female writer directors in Iran, working across both fiction and non-fiction genres and she is well-known for her focus of female characters and social issues in her country. Her film *We Are Half of Iran’s Population* (2009) was made (we are told in the film), so that “women’s voices might be heard by presidential candidates, that their concerns would be addressed”. Although the film was not given permission for release before the 2009 election, it was screened to three of the presidential candidates. However, the epigraph to the film notes that not only were the subjects’ questions not answered, but also, they are now imprisoned.³ It offers the viewpoints of Iranian women’s rights activists (both secular and religious), and aims to give space to the problems more specifically of concern for

3 This film can be viewed at the page: Cynthia Fuchs. ‘Bridge to Iran We Are Half of Iran’s Population’ on Link TV 2/28’. PopMatters (28 February, 2012). <http://www.popmatters.com/post/155273-bridge-to-iran-we-are-half-of-irans-population-on-link-tv-228>

women in Iran. The film is structured to give voice to women's demands in the form of questions that highlight breaches in human rights, and it makes arguments for gender justice. As stated in the film: "The outlook of society on men and women has to change. Education is needed for different levels of society...". The two pivotal demands women made to the presidential candidates were: that Iran join the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and that efforts be made to eliminate discriminating laws against women (including adding gender equality).⁴ The film underlines specific issues of injustice for women, for example, some female university students could not undertake the courses their grades warranted because of gender quotas that discriminate against Iranian women and therefore, the places are awarded to lower scoring Iranian men. It also promotes a message of the importance of joining together, of the power of the solidarity of women. In order to meet its specific political, social and cultural change agenda, the film was widely distributed with an unusual copyright notice: 'copy and distribute'.

Another example can be seen in the work of Canadian documentarian and writer/researcher Audrey Huntley. She is of Indigenous (Anishnawbe) ancestry and has been undertaking community based research in Canada since 1998. Whilst working for CBC Television in 2004, she undertook a trip across Canada and commenced interviews with communities, relatives and activists that were broadcast as an on-going series called *Traces of Missing Women*. These interviews reveal the hundreds of Indigenous women and girls who have gone missing or have been found murdered in Canada. Huntley's film is intersectional in that it examines a gendered issue through the lens of the "colonialist patterns that infuse *all* Canadian social relations" in interviews with 45 family members of missing women (D'Arcangelis and Huntley 2012, 41). Subsequently she made her film *Go Home Baby Girl* (2006), the story of Norma George, who is one of hundreds of native women missing or murdered over the past three decades. The film tells the audience that Amnesty International has called these disappearances "a human rights tragedy" and that "government policies have made native women especially vulnerable". Her productions revealed the unequal power relations of Canadian women and led to public awareness and shifts in policy. This work was influential in the establishment of a "National Inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls" in Canada. Huntley also co-founded the organisation "No More Silence" and in 2015 spoke at The Hague at the Nobel women's conference on the Defence of Women Human Rights De-

⁴ Gender equality is understood here as meaning that women and men have equal conditions to realizing their full human rights. This is distinguished from gender equity, which is the process of being fair to women and men. Equity leads to, or promotes, equality.

fenders, calling global attention to murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada and advocating for cultural, economic and political self-termination of Canadian First Nations (Huntley 2015).

Breaches of human rights and the issue of violence against women has been of particular interest to women filmmakers; for example, Nishtha Jain also made a film about the Gulabi Gang (*Gulabi Gang* 2012). Jain is an Indian filmmaker who has observed that “it is not just how women look at women but where you’re located, the filmmaker: what class, what country you are coming from and whom you are looking at” (Jain quoted in French 2014c). Her intersectional view is informed by her own location within the Indian class system where she has a position of privilege due to her class and economic position. It is therefore significant that this film is made by a filmmaker from that culture who understands its nuances, its language and who describes herself as interested in “humanist filmmaking” (which is a strong tendency in documentary, including in the work of women). According to Jain, the mission of the Gulabi Gang is to “spread awareness and fight against violence against women” (Jain quoted in French 2014c), in representing this, Jain is an ‘advocate change agent’. Jain’s film, like Longinottos, also follows activist Sampat Pal Devi, the leader of the group. In one village, Devi discovers the murder of a sixteen-year-old who, married off at only 11, has been quietly disposed of (murdered) by her husband. He no longer wants her and so burns her to death, calling it a cooking accident. The society and her family, both of which are ideologically deeply patriarchal, conspire to accept it. Devi does not, and she uncovers the terrible violence that has been done, revealing the context of such atrocities as commonplace across rural India. Jain has claimed that as a documentary filmmaker she is “wanting to transform, wanting to engage, and not just to show” (French 2014c). This transformative agenda enables change through challenging the social systems and structures and by demanding new ways of thinking about entrenched social practices. Through representing women who stand up for change, the transformation that Jain and her subject (Devi) wants to enact is modelled and advocated. In collaboration, the subject and the filmmakers promote a hope and a vision, potentially mobilizing change through stories of women’s oppression, which provides the information or facts of women’s lives as evidence of the need for change.

Another filmmaker interested in breaches of human rights is Turkish born British academic Dr Eylem Atakav, who looked at child marriage in the film *Growing Up Married* (2016). While set in Turkey, this film has transnational implications because forced and child marriage is a global issue; there are 39,000 child brides each day (Kent 2016). Atakav’s film reveals the impact of child marriage on four women who live in her parent’s Turkish neighbourhood. They were married as children and in all cases this has had a devastating effect on their lives. Atakav began the project as part of her research work as an academic in developing an in-

tersectional course (Women, Islam and the Media) for the University of East Anglia, Norwich UK. A number of academics are using films to express their research findings, as such they are what would be called ‘prac-academics’ (academics whose work includes creative practice) rather than filmmakers, although they are still credited for their filmmaking roles of director, etcetera. Atakav’s works is having impact. She has now presented the film several times to the UK parliament, influencing policy for a bill to be introduced in 2018 on forced and child marriage.

Access

Political change is also dependent on access to information and communication technologies, which is an important factor in economic power and central to supporting women’s economic progress or change to achieve it. Whilst the spread and global interconnectedness of media, information and communications technology “has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies” (UN 2015, declaration 15), access to the media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) continues to be an issue for women and girls, and there is an uneven distribution and use of them (UN Women 2017). Global gender equality is affected by access to the means to express one’s self creatively, to political spheres, technology, education, and media and information literacy. There is evidence that these things are connected, and it is a question of access rather than competency. For example, in her article in the *Harvard Business Review*, business woman Julie Sweet (CEO of Accenture in North America) observed that:

when men and women have the same level of digital fluency—defined as the extent to which they embrace and use digital technologies to become more knowledgeable, connected, and effective—women are better at using those digital skills to gain more education and to find work. (Sweet 2016).

Advances in technology have assisted all filmmakers, including female documentarians, who have been increasingly able to gain access to documentary film production because of cheaper, smaller and more portable equipment. In providing access, these technological innovations have reduced the impact of the digital divide, reducing social inequity in terms of access and use of communication technologies for expression, and enabling greater numbers of people to achieve media literacies. This has empowered females, increased media literacies and reduced gender inequalities (French 2015). This includes women from cultures that have traditionally had less access to technology. For example, in Africa “the ‘digital revolution’ is of particular significance as it has en-

abled access to filmmaking that was unthinkable and unprecedented a decade or so ago when filmmaking was still a perilous career choice” (Bisscholff 2014, 100). Women documentarians have embraced the opportunities that these new technologies have afforded.

The digital turn has had many negative effects, as noted by Keating and Murphy (2015), including those that impact the most on women (e.g. a growing culture of over-sexualisation and the accessibility of pornography). However, according to Karen Hua from *Forbes Magazine*, “digital culture has [also] had a huge influence on the push for global gender equality” (Hua quoted in Keating and Murphy 2015). This has resulted from an increased understanding of the power of the media. It is also due to gender imbalances in participation, production and representation being highlighted globally through the internet, which has enabled global movements such as “Women & Girls Lead Global”,⁵ an organisation that uses documentary film and television, new media and engagement activities to reveal the plight of women in various countries.

“Women & Girls Lead Global” deploys storytelling to promote social inclusion (a society that is inclusive in the sense all people are valued and respected) and social change (used here to describe the way in which the women documentary filmmakers in this article work to promote gender equality in social values and norms). The website showcases documentaries on issues that affect women and girls (including child marriage, gender-based violence, girls’ education, reproductive health, and women’s leadership). One of these films is Gini Reticker’s *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (2008). Reticker, an American producer and director has made scores of documentaries about women’s struggles, issues and influence (including several related to women and war in other countries). Her film *The Trails of Spring* (2015) chronicles the journey of a rural Egyptian woman (Hend Nafea), who becomes a human rights activist. Her film, featured on “Women & Girls Lead Global”, is set in the West African Republic of Liberia, and recounts the ordinary Liberian women who came together as “Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace” to end decades of civil war. As observed in the United Nations resolution 1325 (2000), women’s experiences of war are different to those of men, and women are a powerful and yet untapped force for peace (Ban Ki-Moon 2012). In *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* the women were armed only with their unity and white T-shirts that signified peace. The film promotes the idea that grass-roots activism can promote change:

The film comprised archival images of mayhem and misery — bloodied bodies being carried through the streets, drugged child soldiers turning glazed eyes to the camera —

⁵ <http://www.womenandgirlslead.org/lead-with-us>

and interviews with key figures in the peace movement. It was the story of a growing number of women finding a way to speak truth to power by directing an essentially maternal force [...]. (Mangan 2009).

“Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace” were instrumental in the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the 24th President of Liberia (2006-2018) and the first woman president of an African nation. Sirleaf, who won a Noble Peace Prize, was renowned for her work to ensure the safety of women and participation in peace-building.

New technology and democratized access to digital media powerfully impact strategies aiming to heighten global awareness of local issues and are integral to efforts seeking to inspire empathy, political engagement, social activism and charitable giving. (Lipper 2015) Documentaries such as *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* are significant for creating momentum for political change, and organisations like “Women & Girls Lead Global”, in gathering, promoting and distributing documentaries form a powerful force for change (others include the US based “Women Make Movies” and in Australia the Documentary Australia Foundation which helps raise money for documentaries on social change).

Cultural change – representation and ideology

Representation is a key controller of women’s access to power, leadership and self-determination and this is the subject of American filmmaker, writer and actor Jennifer Siebel Newsom’s 2011 documentary *Miss Representation*. Newsom has an academic and business background. The film considers the question of what it means when women are under-represented in positions of power, and how the media has contributed to this. Newsom is particularly well placed to examine this issue because she has high level access due to her participation in political circles through her marriage to former San Francisco Mayor, Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom. Newsom structured the documentary through her own familial frame, describing her fears for her own daughter in the context of her struggle with self-worth, something impaired by the media. (She laments the damage our culture does to women and girls through media representations that have, for example, encouraged widespread self-objectification.) Newsom makes the argument that the media does not adequately represent what it might mean to be a powerful woman (through the viewpoints of some of America’s most powerful women, such as Condoleezza Rice, Gloria Steinem and Geena Davis). Framing the discussion around the political economy of the media in Western capitalist society, the film scrutinises the sexism, language, and values propagated in the media (for example, the lack of representation of women’s capacity as leaders and the tendency to reduce them to their bodily attractive-

ness). It also takes up the question of participation, of access to creating the media. It effectively achieves this through the viewpoints of women in the media, such as news anchor Katie Couric (CBS *Evening News*), who observes in the film that “the media can be an instrument of change and can awaken people and change minds, it depends on who is piloting the plane”. Also in the film, actress Jane Fonda comments that the “media creates consciousness ... if what gets put out there is determined by men, we’re not going to make any progress” (both Fonda and Couric’s comments provide a reinforcement of rationale for why there is a need to have women participating equally in creating media). *Miss Representation* received wide exposure through the Oprah Winfrey Network in 2011. Her journey did not end with the film; after its success, Newsom launched a project called ‘The Miss Representation’, a non-profit organisation seeking to use film and media as a catalyst for cultural transformation which states on its website that its mission is to inspire:

individuals and communities to challenge and overcome limiting stereotypes so that everyone — regardless of gender, race, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or circumstance — can fulfill their human potential.⁶

Conclusion

Women share with each other the experience of being less powerful than men and of living in the world as women. However, every woman is subject to the material conditions (the life she lives, in the location and time she lives in), and the deeply entrenched patterns of power that she is subjected to. It is understandable that female documentarians are interested in stories about female experience, success and empowerment, as well as those of how women suffer discrimination and violence, and struggle for female rights and values to achieve change in the social and economic conditions of women. As this article has illustrated, there are many examples of the ways women have, through the documentary form, been successful change agents globally and provided significant advocacy for social, cultural, political and legal change. Whilst some of their productions may not reach global audiences through festivals and extensive publicity internationally, they non the less can, and have, achieved impact and variously mobilise social, cultural, political and legal change. Documentary production is therefore a site of empowerment through the media because it promotes knowledge that supports gender equality. It is both a site of struggle, and of women’s media activism both locally and globally. ■

⁶ <http://therepresentationproject.org/about/>

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