Recognise the female majority

When all the human rights rhetoric just doesn't wash, talk bottom line, says MISHA SCHUBERT, an Australian gender and media consultant brought to South African by the Gender Commission. When it comes to the media bosses' entrenched stereotypes about women, Schubert said, research can be an effective tool to change attitudes.

Women are the missing stories from the front pages. We are the glamour girls, the perfumed steamrollers, the lingerie-clad dollybirds, the political liabilities and the victims. Seldom are South African women portrayed as experts, leaders, visionaries and opinion-shapers.

Women have been selectively denied their place within the employment ranks, as well as the pages and broadcast hours, of the media industries.

Social change brings with it an imprimatur for institutional change. Media organisations are among those institutions which must come under public scrutiny for their role in creating and reflecting the societies in which we live. Consistent with the principles of a free and open media, we must also recognise the social and political role which falls to our press and our broadcasters. Just as South Africa has finally recognised its black majority, it must also recognise its female majority.

Media owners in this country are by and large the same as they were 15 years ago, and their sense of audiences can be the strongest barrier to change. Newsrooms may try to cover gender issues in greater depth but are often stymied at more senior levels when competing against "hard news", a concept determined by male news values. This intransigence bespeaks the need for community pressure on editors and owners to recognise changing consumer demands.

In Australia, community pressure has been fuelled by a decade of research about the portrayal and place of women in the media.

Women as consumers

The report of the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media summarised the business proposal for more accurate portrayals of women by recognising women's role as consumers. This conceptual shift from recognising women as subjects and objects to seeing us as marketplace players, was a vital one. It allowed reformers to engage with the industry in meaningful discussion, beyond the "feelgood" rhetoric of liberation, which salved consciences, but did little to deliver real gains for women.

The media business is precisely that: a business. While the industry retains its role as a supplier of information and a watchdog on public institutions and human rights, it is also an investment prospect. Media ownership is governed by commercial imperatives, alongside those for cultural and political power. It is these commercial drivers which traditionally proved the most difficult barriers for feminist reformers. The prevailing wisdom held that men's news values and media consumption patterns were universal, or might as well be for the purpose of editorial and advertising content judgements. Audience research demonstrated the mythical proportions of these assumptions.

The National Working Party research showed that in Australia:

- Women are the principal household shoppers in 90% of cases;
- In partnerships, 70% of women initiate financial discussions and manage household finances;
- Less than 20% of women had partners who had total financial control;
- Women use their position as credit controllers to manage how money is spent; and
- Women are heavily involved in the final decisions for major household purchases such as a home or holidays.

As the principle household shoppers in 90% of homes, women form the primary target group for the majority of advertisers. Women were revealed to make, or have a strong hand in, decisions on purchases in the top six categories of national advertising expenditure in 1991: food and household goods; motor vehicles; insurance/finance; banks; travel/tours and household equipment/appliances.

Australian research demonstrated to both advertisers and the media that women were key to their commercial imperatives.

Women as an audience

Additional research showed that while women's power as consumers was beginning to be acknowledged, neither our underexplored status as audiences, or our express programming preferences were being translated into content changes.

The Gender Commission held a one-day seminar with journalists in Johannesburg to talk about their relationship. Head of the commission Thenjiwe Mthintso, opened the day by saying: "We want a consistent, critical engagement with the media. We are both watchdogs for society and over each other. We monitor the country's transformation agenda on gender and that includes what's going on inside the media. The commission needs the media, but the media needs to be on the right side of the commission. We want to debate the role of the media in this forum and to what extent the media are reponsible for entrenching the stereotypes about gender in our society."

In television, women's preferences were for drama (38% interest, compared to 19% for men). Men meanwhile rated their sport interest at 29% interest, compared to 10% of women (according to Australian Broadcasting Tribunal statistics, 1991). But the programming guides of the nation's television channels in 1990 reflected dramatically different priorities. Just 10% of transmission time went to drama and a whopping 24% to sports between 6am and midnight. While appealing to the personal interests of many of the middle-aged male editors and producers, over-programming for a male, sports-mad audience does not make business sense. Australia's Media Insight report in 1993 estimated the financial gain from building more gender-balanced programming into the peak evening timeslot at around R350 000 per viewing day.

Under research scrutiny, print media proved itself to be a stranger to the lives and concerns of women. Women were mentioned in 14% of print articles, only rating as high as 37% in human interest stories. Only 27% of bylines and pictures included women. Perhaps as a direct consequence of the lack of relevant content women are abandoning newspapers just when their buying power is burgeoning. In 1992 daily newspapers were read by 57% of women, compared with 64% of men. The figure had shown a steady decline in the four previous years to the study with women moving to the glossy magazine market for their print consumption.

Women as journalists

In 1996, 45% of journalists were women, although in news organisations they were disproportionately clustered at the lower end of the authority, status and wage scales. It is

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telling that a stronger representation of women in the reporting front lines has not translated into greater coverage of women's issues and interests. Where women reporters overcome culturally prescribed self-censorship to cover women's news, their stories are often downgraded or subbed to make room for "hard news".

So what?

So what has changed for women in the Australian media as a result of establishing a set of research facts about our portrayal? Independent research has provided the basis for shock value in our media institutions. Firstly, it galvanised women activists to renew their pressure tactics. In 1994 Helen Leonard founded the National Women's Media Centre – a co-ordination point and clearing house for women and media issues. This organisation continues to keep the heat turned up on media organisations, government and regulatory bodies.

Secondly, the research has provided a greater public sense of the inequities perpetrated. There is now significant public consciousness about the issue. Also regulatory authorities have been forced to acknowledge the dramatic patterns of absence, misrepresentation or stereotype which characterise the content of media and advertising.

We now have a basis for ongoing monitoring and challenge. Detailed comparative research has allowed for continuous dialogue with regulatory authorities. While I cannot report in glowing terms about the enthusiasm of these bodies for their task, some progress is visible in the advertising and broadcast arenas.

In South Africa

It is my objective that regulatory bodies (see in South Africa will see the social and economic sense of media evolution. Ask them for their commitment to truth, objectivity and accuracy in reporting. Then through the Commission on Gender Equality establish an ongoing mechanism for review of progress to chart the effectiveness of that commitment.

In addition, we need to pressure the media to report on the lives and interests of women more accurately and comprehensively. The rhetoric of truth and objectivity in reporting has been a traditional defence against proactive responsibility.

Media organisations must commit themselves to recognising, researching and reflecting the changing lives and aspirations of South African women with a conscious commitment to building women into the picture. The onus for this task lies with editors and the most senior staff in media organisations to establish work cultures which will facilitate this type of social change.