

The fringe issue

THE RECENT TRC hearings provided us with vivid, contemporary proof of how gender issues have been, and still are, "fringe" issues in our country's mass media.

For me, there is no question that our media have a role to play in transforming gender relations. They have an obligation to apply the joint benchmarks of equality and dignity when they cover the South African story – whether it concerns issues of race, class or gender.

What concerns me more, and what I believe needs to be debated as a matter of urgency, is the media's ability – and their desire – to play that role.

There's a lot of talk about transformation in the mass media. At the TRC, and within our own newsrooms, we're debating issues such as racism, ownership, relationships with the state and the transformation of our news values. But gender issues remain peripheral – both internally, in our newsrooms and boardrooms, and externally, in the newspapers we produce.

Let's take one of Independent's own newspapers, *The Star*. The Thursday after the TRC hearings *The Star* gave front-page coverage to the media hearings, and the coverage spilled over to two inside pages. The coverage was broad, well-written and quite extensive. It was so extensive, in fact, that only one submission from the previous day was not covered. It was the only submission on gender issues in the media, made by the only woman journalist to testify on that day: Business Day's Nomavenda Mathiane.

Why wasn't it covered? Was it not newsworthy? Was her harrowing account of the treatment of black women journalists not worth conveying to readers? Was it not as important as the nostalgia about the "glory days" of the Rand Daily Mail and liberal journalism?

Is it not newsworthy when one of the country's few senior black women journalists declares: "For years, editors and news editors have relegated black women journalists to fill the women's pages. Women were kept down. Men were earmarked for promotion and [women's] work was hardly recognised. Even if a woman had written a good story, she was not given credit for it."

Or how about this quote: "[On the Rand Daily Mail, black women journalists] were the only ones who did not have typewriters or desks. [They] had to wait until the male reporters had finished using the typewriters. Only then could [they] write their story."

Maybe it's not newsworthy if you're a man. And that's part of the problem – if you look at most of our newsrooms today, testosterone is by far the dominant hormone.

We recently did an audit of the gender balance on our 14 newspapers and found:

- Only 36% of our editorial staff (that's journalists, photographers, production staff, etc.) are women.
- At newsroom management level (news editor,

production editor and above), only 24% of newsroom decision-makers are women.

- If you look at the most senior levels: we have 14 editors overseeing our newspapers. Not one of them is a woman, although we do have a woman heading our parliamentary team.

I haven't researched the other media companies, but I would be surprised if the situation were any different there. And that's why there's a desperate need for us to transform the make-up of our newsrooms, to deal urgently with issues of representivity and imbalance. We need to empower and promote women as a matter of urgency.

But is it enough that we employ more women? I think not. There's also a desperate need to transform the way the men employed on our newspapers approach gender issues. We need to challenge men's construct of gender, critique men's approach to power relationships, and put gender on the same agenda as issues of race and class.

Here's another anecdote: Some of you may have seen the front-page article in *The Star* referring to the new head of the CMAX prison in Pretoria. Correctional officer Doreen Krause, *The Star* informed us on its front page, is not your "stereotypical butch woman [prison] warden". Krause "shyly admitted" to *The Star* that "a man has dared to tread into her life".

And this from one of the few newspapers with a woman news editor, with a woman night news editor – who was on duty at the time – and a woman chief sub editor – all of whom passed the story before its publication.

How did this happen? The explanation perhaps says more about gender relations in the newsroom than anything else. According to the women who processed the story, the author (a man) was very insistent about his right to write what he chose, and the story appeared as he wrote it in the first edition of *The Star*. The same women asserted themselves on later editions of the newspaper, however, and the sexist comment was dropped.

This anecdote is not intended to embarrass the journalists involved, and if it does I apologise to them. But the challenges facing women in the journalistic workplace are the same as those affecting women elsewhere. It is a daily struggle against a male-dominated agenda.

I have another anecdote. One of South Africa's leading journalism educators, the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, has developed a course on "Reporting Gender Issues".

Three courses have been run this year, covering topics such as women in the media, violence against women, and stereotypes. Thirty-three people have attended these courses this year. According to the IAJ, not one of them was a male.

We have to change how we cover issues of gender and power relations between men and women. Our coverage has to be gender-sensitive. We have a responsibility, a compulsion, to

use our influence to change society's perceptions. And that means no more references to "butch prison warders", for a start.

We have a responsibility as journalists to transform our editorial products so that they reflect issues in a gender-sensitive way. We have to use our power and influence to challenge stereotypes. We need to make a concerted effort to seek out female voices. We need to ensure we reflect the aspirations, beliefs and feelings of all South Africans – not just those who have balls.

By now you're probably asking: so what are you doing about this? Independent Newspapers' editorial training project is just over six months old, and we're using it to scratch away at the edifice by:

- Ensuring at least half the participants in all our media skills training courses are women;
- Encouraging all our staff – not just women – to attend courses on gender and the media;
- Developing gender training courses for our editorial staff, to heighten their awareness of gender issues; and
- Hosting a new series of media awareness programmes which will bring together journalists and gender activists to explore each other's realities and improve working relationships.

There's a long way to go. Yes, we can fight it on the inside. But we need an assertive gender-sensitive civil society to put pressure on the mass media from the outside. We need bodies like the Commission for Gender Equality to interact with our editors and journalists, both formally and informally.

We also need pressure on our product. We need constant gender-sensitive monitoring of our newspapers, to highlight our shortcomings and keep the pressure on our journalists – while at the same time supporting, and even rewarding, journalists who advance the gender cause.

The road is long, and no different from what we're experiencing in the rest of our society – a society which is still (despite our new Constitution) male-dominated and generally hostile to gender issues. Because as author Susan Faludi – herself a former journalist – has pointed out, the media haven't necessarily declared war against women. To quote from her book *Backlash*: "Like any large institution, (the media's) movements aren't premeditated or programmatic. They're just grossly susceptible to prevailing political currents."

If I may paraphrase Faludi: As long as we live in a patriarchal society, where gender issues do not get the recognition they deserve, the mass media we're likely to have will be patriarchal, sexist and hostile to issues of gender. What better reason to work together to ensure we all see life through gender-sensitive glasses, rather than through testosterone-coloured ones?

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