

Black female journalists relegated

When Business Day journalist NOMAVENDA MATHIANE told other black women journalists she was going to make a submission to the Truth and Reconciliation media hearings, they said: "What use is there in going to the TRC?" Mathiane pointed out to the commissioners: "I am the same generation as Thami Mazwai and Jon Qwelane (both of whom are senior editors and publishers today), but I'm not bitter even though my rights have been violated and my growth stunted. South African newspapers are the poorer for not having developed black women."

Although I am representing myself as a working journalist, my submission is based on interviews I conducted with a number of women who have since left the profession as well as with some who are still practising journalists.

There are those who want to make out that black female journalists suffered the same fate as their male counterparts. But the truth of the matter is that, while we were together with the black male reporters in the "struggle" in the newsroom, in the union movements, paying the same dues, we were treated differently by both white editors and newseditors. And when black men were promoted to senior positions such as editor, nothing changed.

It is important to state from the outset that black women journalists entered the profession sometimes having the same qualifications as black male journalists. However, for years, editors and newseditors relegated black female journalists to fill up women's pages. In spite of the network of contacts that a woman might have had, and her high standard of education, she would be hired to report on domestic affairs such as cookery pages, fashion, horoscopes, Dear Dolly columns and church business.

Interesting enough though, when major stories in these beats broke, who would be sent to cover them? Male journalists.

A woman who was elbowed out of the profession said she was sent to cover a weekend conference on family planning in Pretoria even when her newspaper had male reporters living in Pretoria. The irony of this incident was that they both turned up at the conference and the Pretoria-based male journalist was able to send his story through on a Sunday night while the female journalist was only able to do so on Monday. And guess what! The news editor had the temerity to say to the woman journalist that she had been scooped by her Pretoria colleague.

Women journalists in the newsroom 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. And yet one often found mediocre stories written by male journalists on the notice-board with congratulatory remarks from editors.

Overseas study trips were offered only to black male journalists. Women who travelled abroad on trips which they had negotiated and organised had to take paid leave.

When journalist Sophie Tema and photographer Sam Nzima covered the 1976 Soweto students' uprisings and took young Hector Pietersen to hospital, Tema was not credited for the role she played on that fateful day. I suspect that had her news editor been aware that a major national story was about to break that morning, he would have sent a male journalist to Soweto instead.

Nzima got an award for the photograph but of Tema, who undoubtedly played a very important role recording the historic event, her newspaper said nothing.

It did not matter to her newspaper that she was sought out by leading international newspapers and that in later years, based on her views and knowledge of what Africans go through in the townships, Tema was asked to make submissions to the Wiehahn Commission on Labour Reforms.

Had she been a male reporter, her newspaper would have developed her and groomed her for editorship. It would have recognised her strengths – which are: her large network of contacts, not only in Soweto but all over South Africa; that she speaks and writes both English and Afrikaans, as well as other major African languages (which is more than I can say for some of the editors I know).

Women journalists say they still find themselves working on an article, starting off with nothing, and when the story becomes big, a male journalist will be assigned to it and the woman will be told the story is too big for her to handle.

As part of my research I spoke to Joyce Siwani who told me that while she worked at the Rand Daily Mail, together with Joyce Sikhakhani, that they were the only ones who

did not have typewriters or desks. All the black male reporters, even the stringers, had typewriters.

"I had to wait until the male reporters had finished using the typewriters and only then could I write my story." She was forced to leave the profession. Fortunately, she is doing much more worthwhile work in some NGO.

What is the situation today?

There are a few black women who hold important positions in newsrooms.

The boys' club does not only exist among black journalists, it extends to politicians who treat women journalists differently from the way they treat white male and female journalists, as well as black male journalists.

If some politicians are hostile to black male journalists, they tend to be worse when they deal with black woman journalists.

And when we complain about them to our newseditors we are told to be assertive, and when we try to be assertive we are accused of being aggressive.

There are times when I feel that getting information from our politicians is like trying to get water from a stone. And yet I am shocked at how easily available the same politicians are to speaking and volunteering information to male journalists. Unlike our male counterparts, who get stories from them at golf courses and drinking holes, we are not exposed to such venues.

There are no black women subs at the Sunday Times, Business Day or The Star newspapers. I mention these newspapers because they have had, and still do have, black women in their employ. However, I must hasten to add, there are white female subs at the above newspapers. Just as there are white females who occupy senior positions such as newseditors.

Like our male counterparts we want recognition for the work we do, for ourselves and for the women who will come after us. It is not enough that the community regards us as role models and pioneers, while in the newsroom we are treated with disdain.

