

The future is female or not at all

Conferences ... I am embarrassed that I find it so hard to be inspired by these events. It's the same with workshops, seminars and meetings. Perhaps I'm a closet despot.

So, I always overprepare. Clothes fly out of the suitcase as I stuff my stressed luggage with papers pulled off the Internet, copied from the archives, snipped out of newspapers – a frantic gathering of hard copy to fill the uncomfortable void and assuage the guilt brought on by spending other people's money to go to exotic destinations, eat wonderful foreign food and reiterate the problems of the world.

But this time it was different. Perhaps it was the steamy sensuality of Africa's West Coast or perhaps it was the thrill of going to Dakar for the first time. But once I forgot the obstacle course that is Air Afrique, the African Women's Media Centre's (AWMC) inaugural conference in Senegal filled me with passion.

As I look at my notes, it is hard to mould it all into a tidy lump of useful info. The pages are scribbled with quotes:

"African media cannot go into the 21st century hopping on one leg – women must be partners in the future of Africa," Janet Karim, *The Independent*, Malawi.

"The future is female or not at all," Clara Olsen, *The Botswana Gazette*.

"Women entering male space are constantly hounded in the media," Mary Okurut, *Action for Development*, Uganda.

"There will be equality between men and women when incompetence in a woman is compensated," Mademba Ndiaye, Senegalese journalist.

Somewhere in the middle of all of this somebody said: "If you only have one tooth it's easier to keep it white."

I have gratefully forgotten the context.

But what has remained is the energy with which the women went about their work at this conference:

"Women in the African media: breaking gender barriers."

Sometimes the women flung the agenda out the window and put unexpected issues on the table. On the second day of the conference I was moderator for a discussion titled: Strengthening women's voices in the debate on freedom of the press." With Nigerian, Beninise and Ethiopian panelists we set the scene for the discussion. But at question time it was clear that most women wanted to talk about the problems they had as journalists with dress codes, especially in the Islamic countries.

Some of us objected that this was not the topic under discussion and hinted that perhaps it was too trivial a matter for it to command so much time. A delegate reminded us that people had fought a war in Chad about whether or not Muslim women should wear veils. A Senegalese journalist spoke about the fighting that broke out in her family because she would not wear a headdress on TV.

I felt tired and dispirited for a while as I thought about the long, hard road towards "strengthening women's voices" in Africa when we had to spend so much time and energy fighting the basics. But I cheered up when I reflected on the role the first African Women's Media Centre could play.

The 44 delegates from 24 sub-Saharan countries – representing print, radio and television – made their way through a rigorous agenda that included panel discussions on the employment status of African women in the media; debated harassment in the workplace; tackled the problems surrounding press freedom and highlighted the role of women's media organisations in Africa.

The liveliest session came at the end of the conference when women were asked what they expected from the AWMC. The 1998 agenda of the centre reflects the ideas and needs outlined by the participants for training



By Sylvia Vollenhoven

and skills-building in such areas as computers and specialised reporting; for building and supporting women's media institutions; helping women journalists in crisis and researching and publicising the status of women in the media in Africa.

In addition to this ambitious list of goals the participants agreed that if women were to become a more powerful voice within the African news media they would have to work to formulate strategies around which the AWMC and other organisations could mobilise.

Some of the strategies discussed for changing the image of women in the news media, included:

- Increasing women's visibility
- Encouraging women to tell their stories and letting them know their stories have value.
- Facilitating networking

Women on the web

Womensnet.org.za is South Africa's first Internet training, support and information programme designed by and for women. WomensNet is the online home of an initiative where women can network in more ways than one.

A project of SANGONeT and the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE), WomensNet aims to get more women using the information superhighway in meaningful ways. For the commission, this innovation offers a new way for women to get involved with gender policy-making and monitoring.

The WomensNet launch in Durban on March 5 coincided with a Southern Africa Development Community conference on preventing violence against women. With contributions from organisations across the country, WomensNet has put together an online information centre on violence against women, the only one of its kind in the region. It will be a clearing-house of policy initiatives, resources and statistics, as well as a place for women to lobby for better legislation and safer communities.

It has taken less than a year-and-a-half for

- Rejecting degrading cultural norms that keep women's voices out of the media or that present caricatures of women.

The idea for the AWMC grew out of an exciting process started by the Washington-based International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) in July 1993 in Harare – with the "African voices: strengthening the media" conference.

The clear message from this conference was that women were unable to reach decision-making levels in the media in Africa due to lack of support systems and training opportunities.

The AWMC will eventually be independent of the IWMF – a non-profit organisation founded in 1990 with the mission to strengthen the role of women in the media based on the belief that no press is truly free unless women share an equal voice.

At the opening of the Women's Media Centre in Dakar, IWMF Board Member Carole Simpson – senior correspondent and anchor for America's ABC News – made a financial donation that established an annual leadership training seminar for African women journalists.

The Carole Simpson Leadership Institute for African Women in the Media was created out of an awareness that the media would not change until there was a critical mass of women in leadership positions. The Leadership Institute programmes will help them understand the subtle and overt techniques for becoming a leader, the expectations of leadership, and the rewards of using their positions to help others. Starting this year, the institute will hold annual seminars in different regions of Africa.

There is a saying in seTswana: "The woman holds the knife on the sharp side."

Thank heavens this was one of the conferences where the delegates displayed a rare dexterity in coming to grips with some tough issues.

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WomensNet to move from idea to reality. With two full-time staff, training, outreach and information development will move into high gear.

SANGONeT, which for the past 10 years has been supplying electronic communication services to the country's NGO community, is providing technical assistance.

Critical to the WomensNet mission is increasing the number of women with web access. And while not many women have access to computers and even fewer to the web, this could change in the future. WomensNet plans to work with the Universal Service Agency, the statutory body mandated to provide telecommunications access to all South Africans, to make sure that women are centrally involved in the planning of telecentres – multi-purpose communication centres being built in areas with limited telecommunications. But WomensNet is not only meant for women in front of keyboards. The project managers are quite happy for the material available on WomensNet to be circulated on community radio and via newsletters, and will work with those that are connected to reach out to those that aren't.

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