

# GENDER AWARENESS FOR JOURNALISTS

BY CHIZOM EKEH

**W**omen's marginalisation in the African media must be urgently addressed, according to academics from leading institutions offering journalism education in Africa. A survey carried out by the Global Media Monitoring Project in 2010, showed that in the region, women make up 19% of news sources and write 30% of all stories.

At a Unesco conference organised to build networks between media educators in Africa and the UK, delegates evaluated current strategies in place to tackle gender inequality.

Aaron Mushengyezi, from Makerere University, said that while gender had been mainstreamed in departmental functions, success had been limited in redressing gender imbalances within the education curriculum. Mushengyezi highlighted that of 44 courses in journalism and communications at undergraduate level, only seven contained gender components. At post-graduate level this figure rose to 50%, but wide course content allowed little room for analysis in-depth. However due to the implementation of affirmative action since 1990, female enrolment at the university is high. A Gender Equality Unit has been established and female staff participate in decision-making at all levels.

In contrast, Feliciano Micavo from the School of Journalism of Maputo, said that while women constitute over half Mozambique's population, they are under-represented at public institutions offering courses in media and communications. Despite a slight increase in female student enrolment in 2011, overall women represented just 34%. Micavo also noted that the majority of faculty members are men and cultural factors play a significant role in defining educational and career aspirations for women.

Delegates from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia referred to the 2008 Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development, which commits signatory states to achieving gender parity in the media and media education by 2015. There was a consensus that there is much work to be done and that action should be taken to hold governments to account.

Sibongile Mpofu from the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe, said that while gender parity at enrolment was not an issue at NUST, a study carried out by the NGO, Gender Links, found that only 16% of news sources were women, compared to the African regional average of 19%. In addition, the Gender in Media Education study carried out between 2009 and 2010 revealed that: "Very few institutions have policies or special measures to achieve gender equality. Only one: Midlands State University has a sexual harassment policy in Zimbabwe." The findings also outlined that gender is not incorporated into course content or into staff and student assessments. However

Mpofu stressed that since the GIME study, there was increased awareness and commitment to mainstream gender across the department. Yet while the new curriculum had been approved, progress on its implementation has been hampered, as the university lacks a gender policy and adequate resources. Mpofu added that there was a critical shortage of staff with an understanding of how to integrate gender into the curriculum. In addition, she underlined the importance of addressing the gap between the transfer of knowledge and skills, and effecting a change in attitudes among trainees. Although students were fully trained in the "procedures of doing journalism", she said "they are lacking in awareness of why it is important to undertake gender sensitive reporting."

Echoing this position in her analysis of how women are reported in conflict, Barbara O'Shea from the Dublin Institute of Technology, criticised the media's failure to grasp the gendered aspects of war. As a result women are portrayed as powerless victims rather than as activists, experts or mediators. According to O'Shea the lack of visibility of the roles played by women, was due to the media's desire for "frontline" events that are "episodic and dramatic". Such coverage she argued, undermined women's contributions to development or ignored the community or grassroots peace initiatives that they are often involved with. In this way the media does not consider women to be newsworthy, preferring instead to focus its attention on the typically male political elite. O'Shea did not conclusively state that the solution would lie in dispatching more women correspondents to the field, but questioned whether this would lead to a greater focus on human stories rather than just on the "hardware" of war.

Emily Brown of Namibia Polytechnic observed that "when gender is mainstreamed, media content becomes richer and of a higher quality." In her review of the findings of the Gender in Media Education Audit which covered 13 African countries, Brown called for the "disaggregation of data along gender lines". Part of the solution, she concluded, would lie in "training journalists to do journalism that is gender aware".

Overall delegates agreed that action must focus on "engendering" the curriculum and implementing departmental policies that promote diversity. However, Phil Schneider from Walter Sisulu University, provided a compelling account of why media schools should go further.

In his analysis of the sex for marks scandal that hit the university in 2011, Schneider demonstrated that despite the institution's commitments to equality and human rights, it had failed to prevent

sexual abuse by staff. The lecturer accused was immediately suspended and an investigation launched into the affair. However in the ensuing months following the crisis, DU was criticised for its slow response.

Schneider observed that the situation revealed that "the university did not have sufficient instruments to deal with gender rights violations and advocacy". He emphasised that "gender rights and equality within media schools is a dimension as important as gender education and research."

To resolve the crisis the university eventually opted for a three-fold approach. This included initiating a faculty-wide awareness programme; developing and committing to a pledge to uphold human rights; and the implementation of an ongoing communications strategy publicising these activities.

Additionally, in consultation with the South African Human Rights Council and Commission for Gender Equality, victim support and counselling services were established. While ensuring that students were able to continue their education after reporting misconduct, such measures included the visible enforcement of the law and the prosecution of perpetrators. Looking ahead, Schneider ended by questioning the extent to which media schools should concern themselves with issues of gender abuse and inequality within the wider society.

However in her presentation Verica Rupar from Cardiff university, went further and advocated an "inclusive journalism" that is "ready to critically engage with the problems of social exclusion". Furthermore she said, it should "challenge the status quo in order to prevent the media from spreading prejudice, intolerance and hatred". She concluded that this "idea is rooted in and un-separable from the political notions of inclusive democracy and inclusive society."



**Chizom Ekeh** is studying for an MA in political journalism at City University, London. She holds an MSc in development studies from the London School of Economics. [chi@riseup.net](mailto:chi@riseup.net)

