

Women and gender in the African media

In basic journalism classes one learns that the 'so what graf' generally appears four or five paragraphs into the story and answers for the reader: Why is this story important, why should I keep reading, why should I care?

When talking about women and gender the question can be asked: What is the 'so what' for the media around these issues?

The question can be answered from a number of different perspectives. There's the 'journalism mission' viewpoint. If the purpose of journalism is to report the news and if news is defined as that which is current, significant and of interest, then women and gender issues have to be on the media agenda because they clearly meet those criteria. Women and gender issues are being widely discussed, by governments and non-governmental organisations, by men and women.

This discussion has been fueled in large part by the spillover from the momentum gained during the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995. Section J of the conference's final document, the Beijing Platform for Action, addressed the representation of women in and by the media. Post-Beijing there have been various studies and gatherings around the world focusing on issues relating to women. In Africa, debate about women and their role and representation in the media is alive and well. From a strictly news perspective 'women and gender'

is clearly a 'hot' topic.

Then there is the business side of journalism. We journalists may exist to tell stories that cast light into the darkness and make the world a better place for all living kind, but our media organisations exist mainly to make money. This is done primarily by selling things – namely the news product and the advertisements the stories are wrapped around. Marketing specialists have begun to note not just the purchasing power of women, but also the influence they wield, particularly in household purchasing decisions. Producing a product to attract this influential consumer-customer makes good business sense.

There is also the sociological point of view which acknowledges the existence of women and addresses their status in society. Women account for at least half of the human population. So how can that which concerns half of society continue to be dismissed, ignored or so stereotypically and generally negatively represented?

These changes in consciousness and coverage must take place inside and outside the industry. From the outside by media monitoring and talking back to media outlets about the various types of coverage. From the inside by those who make the news – the journalists, photographers and artists – and



PHOTO: SASHA KOUJI/AFRICA

Whether protesting in the name of PAGAD in Cape Town (left) or working the fields in Rwanda (below), women deserve more of a presence in African media.

those who decide what is news – lobbying for and enforcing changes.

To the surprise of many, African women have long been media activists. They continue to be. Current statistics estimate that women hold about 25 per-

cent of all media jobs in Africa. Yet most of these are low- to mid-level posts. The higher one goes up the management chain, the fewer women are to be found.

Female journalists continue to face certain issues and challenges in the workplace that their male colleagues do not. Among them are access to jobs and training; equitable wages; discrimination and sexual harassment; and balancing work and family. As do many other professional African women, women journalists also face family and societal pressures stemming from long-held beliefs about the roles and images of women in their cultures and societies.

These interpersonal and professional matters are issues that media organisations must address. I've often been asked whether I believe that having more women in decision-making posts in the media will guarantee improved – more equitable and balanced – coverage of women's issues in the media.

Will it guarantee improved workplace climates for women journalists? I'm tempted to say confidently, "of course." But a more realistic response is, "Let's get a critical mass in place and find out." The other reality is that any change for the better will be the result of the work of both genders, male and female.

Since its launch in December 1997 the African Women's Media Centre (AWMC) in Dakar has been working to establish an information and training programme for women journalists across the continent. The centre works collaboratively with various media organisations and associations to promote the training and professional development of women in the media.

Perhaps as we go hurling forward into the next millennium what we need is a rephrasing of this discussion, this concept. What if instead of 'women and gender' (the latter having become a code-word for 'women') we begin to talk about 'covering societal issues', with women factored in more consciously as part of the social equation. Perhaps then the importance of addressing this sector of society will be more easily grasped and acted upon.

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so what?



Wilma J.E. Randle
argues why journalists
should care...

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