

Gender equality? Eish!



Chris Kirchoff

by Ferial Haffajee

At the *Mail&Guardian*, we exist in a cocoon. Always have done, in fact. The reason the newspaper took so easily to a woman editor is that female leadership is in its DNA.

It's also a PC newspaper, so it's always valued gender equity and practised it, though some of my sisters at the newspaper may not always agree.

So, I was shocked at the recent Sanef (South African National Editors' Forum) AGM by the results of our research into a glass ceiling in the media industry. It paints a picture of an industry stuck in the dark ages – which in South Africa is pre-1994. Cosy boys' clubs; frustrated senior female journalists for whom the promise of freedom is not arriving.

The Glass Ceiling Study was done among Sanef members. Out of a universe of about 150 members, about 40 responded, most of them women – which is probably an indication of interest. As Prof Lizette Rabe who co-ordinated the study acerbically noted, it has taken Sanef three years to get the study done.

It presents a scary picture of the intrinsic maleness of newsrooms and ingrained sense of entitlement and that men don't see the issue as important.

At our Sanef meeting, as this research was presented, an esteemed colleague blustered: "Never mind about that, when are we going to tackle female domination of the magazine industry?" Another said: "Do we really have to give women four months maternity leave? It's ridiculous. Why do I have to pay a premium for female skills."

Eish!

In the report, women complained that senior female journalists took on the perceptions and prejudices of their male colleagues in order to win acceptance. They complained that there is no emotional commitment to equity; it's viewed as another box to tick. And they reported a backlash: men affirming each other – in the ribald and irreverent atmosphere that is the newsroom, it's become a topic of jibe and cynicism.

The golf course and the pub remain the main sites of doing business and making contacts. To play the game, you've got to imbibe this culture. So, women are frustrated because the workplace is still not delivering an atmosphere of empowerment.

What shall we do?

I work in a happy empowering space, so my next comments may be coloured by that. With a constitution and laws to back us up, there is no need to feel the victim. Sanef needs to lead by popularising this research to our industry. We must take it into newsrooms, talk about it and show that non-sexism is a right of equal value to non-racialism.

Our research is qualitative and based on the Sanef membership lists. We need an industry-wide audit so we really know what's happening.

What are our owners going to do? We must develop a national plan, conscientise and then monitor. This is hard work but it must be done. Talk to them in their own language – the language of the bottom line. Women readers are keeping newspapers alive now, and they are the managers of household budgets.

Also, accept that we are on the cusp of a wave: Phyllicia Oppelt (editor *Daily Dispatch*); Debra Patta (executive editor e.tv news); Portia Kobue (head of news Kaya-FM); Robyn Chalmers (deputy editor *Business Day*); Rehana Roussouw (deputy editor *Weekender Review*), Alide Dasnois (newly-appointed as editor of the *Pretoria News*).

But... why is Paula Fray (ex-editor *Saturday Star*) not running the SABC news and current affairs programmes? Why has Lakela Kaunda (ex-editor *Evening Post*) gone back to government? And Pippa Green (ex-head SABC Radio News) back to university?

Years ago, we did not accept that it could be business as usual in the media when the impetus for racial transformation started. So, what we need to do now is:

- build bridges and alliances between women;
- build gender equity into our business plans;
- run training and development programmes for women;
- create the facilities and flexi-hours for women with families;
- put in place supportive and enabling working environments. ■

2006 Women in the Media awards

- Overall winner: Ferial Haffajee (*Mail&Guardian* editor)
- Finalists: Ruda Landman (*Carte Blanche* presenter), Neo Ntsoma (*The Star* photographer) and Sue Valentine (radio journalist and Aids journalism pioneer)
- Lifetime Achiever: Barbara Cooke (media researcher)
- Rising Star: Nikiwe Bikitsa (SABC radio and TV presenter)

(hosted by *The Media* magazine and MTN)