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Glass ceiling, concrete ceiling

After 12 years of a 'new' South Africa, for many senior women journalists in the country's newsrooms it's still a matter of 'same old', writes Lizette Rabe.

What are the realities facing women journalists, specifically senior women, in South African newsrooms? What do they identify as obstacles, and which strategies can be implemented to redress the situation?

This was the gist of the questions asked in a study to establish the realities, obstacles and challenges facing senior women journalists in South African newsrooms across all media.

What were the answers?

As was almost to be expected, a confirmation of what was recorded in other such surveys, both nationally and internationally, was found. In a male-dominated society, women are still on the receiving end of discrimination.

After 12 years of a "new South Africa", it was more or less still a matter of "same old" for South African women journalists. With a Constitution built on human rights such as anti-racism and anti-sexism, the latter is still something that exists on paper, not in practice.

As a brief background, the survey was conducted as a follow-up of the "en-gendered" AGM of the South African National Editors' Forum of 2003. It is significant that no funding could be found for this specific study, and that the Sanef (all-women) sub-committee on diversity in the end had to do it without any dedicated resources whatsoever.

Nevertheless, the women got it going. A questionnaire was sent to (at the time) all 149 Sanef members. In total 40 respondents completed it – in other words a sample of 27% of the population. It is also significant that the total membership of Sanef consists of one-third female and two-thirds male,

yet the respondents represented the opposite: two-thirds female and one-third male. Another indication of what the priorities are?

The circumstances under which such important research had to be done – decided upon three years ago, with no funding, in the end done by the specific members of the all-women diversity committee who already have over-extended diaries – was indeed a confirmation of the attitudes, realities and obstacles women in South African media face.

The qualitative questions were, as was to be expected, the most revealing (or, maybe, confirming). One can safely conclude from the data that discriminatory practices, structural inequalities, cultural factors, prejudices, patriarchy and sexism are still alive and well in our South African newsrooms.

The intrinsic "maleness" of the newsroom and journalism practice, as result of a male hegemonic society, is a major cause for women not to be found in senior positions.

In general, it seems there is improvement regarding acceptance of women managers, although many prejudices still prevail. One might conclude that there is a will on the part of (still overwhelmingly) male management, but that no way has been found (yet) to address the situation.

From the data it can be concluded that it seems women journalists are more gender-sensitive in dealing with day to day news events. Therefore, one can say that a critical mass of women in these positions will lead to a change in news practice and representations. Although, as has been established in numerous studies, women often perpetuate the existing male constructs of the newsroom environment. One respondent said: "Because women jour-

nalists usually join male-dominated newsrooms, over time they unwittingly embrace the perceptions of their male colleagues over what makes news and they begin to report news from this perspective."

It is telling that the term "old boys' club" was mentioned no less than nine times by respondents (not counting similar phrases such as "old boys' network").

The fact that women's empowerment meant that they have more disposable income, and that more women in the newsroom, also on senior levels, would lead to higher "women content" would actually be to the benefit of the bottom-line, was also identified. As one respondent said: "This is not about activism alone: it makes good sense to be relevant to women readers as they are becoming a global majority with increasing economic oomph."

Sadly, the commercial imperative, if nothing else, could provide the impetus for male decision-makers in the media world to implement change. (As one respondent said: "It's about the money, honey.")

An audit to get statistics of how many women are on which levels, was also requested by one respondent. For another, the issue of sexual harassment is another topic that requires research.

The following issues were identified as needing urgent attention:

Sexism

Non-sexism, is, as non-racism, a constitutional right. Yet, women still experience that they are regarded as lesser citizens in almost every aspect of their work. One respondent: "I do think senior men think they are gender-sensitive when in fact they are not."

And the fact that they do not know that they do not know, is even worse than to argue/debate with those who are outright discriminating.”

Another: “I do hear phrases like ‘is he man enough?’ when discussing a youngster’s ambitions. I have read an evaluation of a cadet... ‘x is surprisingly reticent for such an attractive young woman...’ – written, of course, by a man.”

And another: “There’s a sense that many men do often still feel they are superior to women. No amount of workshops is going to change this ingrained sense of entitlement. As women I think we need to get on with things while being aware of the realities.”

Racism

Responses included that “preferences and privileges enjoyed by white men” still prevail, but also, that the “white, old boys’ club” seems to have been replaced by a “black, old boys’ club”.

Prejudice

Male prejudice, experienced from all levels, both in age and in race, was another obstacle. One respondent said employers tend to appoint “in their own image” and do not realise the characteristics that women bring into the equation as important or valid. Another response: “Prejudice is still a factor, especially the higher you go – overt and covert.”

Another: “They are simply not seen as equals by the vast majority of men, who still hold the reins of power in all news organisations. Examples: Women are patronised and their opinions do not appear to be taken as seriously as those of men. This can be subtle, like jokes made at their expense when they give their opinions, or teasing. It seems friendly and even affectionate, but it is actually demeaning.”

Newsroom culture

The “macho” newsroom culture/newsroom discourse also stops women from contributing. The “distinct maleness” and “culture of maledom” of newsrooms are perceived as major obstacles. One respondent: “Old boys’ clubs where assignments, policies etc, are discussed at golf clubs, in bars etc, virtually forcing women to adopt a male-defined social life to be ‘one of the boys’ – or be left out. (Linked to which, look at the distressing amount of alcohol abuse among young women reporters – go to any media function to see it).”

Another: “Existing networking structures – a male network still exists to a large degree; general sense of isolation – that you have to play a ‘male game’.”

And: “Women managers are accused of being emotional and incompetent if they are not perceived as tough (and vindictive and bitchy if they are). They are also vulnerable to rumour and innuendo about their sexual activity or history to a degree

that men simply are not. In general, it is clear that men prefer being managed by other men and I think most men would agree with that. They often unconsciously subvert women managers without even being aware of it.”

“Men still feel able to rip off the feminine gender, but newsrooms are irreverent at the best of times. At [title], as a woman in management I felt supported by my peers but found that some of the black men in the office would not listen to me – only to another man (of any race).”

Knowledge of equity laws

The findings in terms of the knowledge of equity laws and policies, and how they are applied, were shocking.

Employment conditions

The “intrinsic nature of the job” – which at its best can be described as human unfriendly – was identified as another obstacle.

Institutionalised discrimination

It seems this is still a reality, both in terms of pay and promotion practices. One respondent: “Testosterone-dominated organisations do not take women seriously at higher levels. Interesting that these are the levels where skills are not the only requirement, but also the ability to fit in and perpetuate that establishment. In newspapers, women are rarely accepted at the upper levels of the organisation.”

Family responsibilities

Not only is there a lack of infrastructural support such as crèches, but women find they are “treated with distrust” when having to tend to children. “I also found that ‘maternity leave’ meant taking time off ‘to a mental institution’ because upon my return all my decisions were questioned twice as much as before.”

Lack of professional bodies

The lack of a professional body such as a journalism union was also mentioned. It was argued that such a body would, for example, fight for facilities.

News and news practices

The hegemonic male constructs of newsrooms should be challenged, leading to new definitions of news and news production. A need to re-invent, redefine, renew and re-imagine news is seen as a necessity for our (post-colonial), post-apartheid society. One respondent: “Broader, deeper, constant debate as to what constitutes news, and what sort of social reality affects/underpins news events, news production and the social responsibility of news purveyors – as monitors/watchdogs/reporters.”

Career paths and mentors

Workshops to address inherent sexism and to build capacity in terms of gender awareness and gender correct ways of reporting were identified. One respondent said it should not be experienced as a them versus us: “I don’t want them (men) to feel alienated and marginalised because the struggle is for equality and empowerment, not for reverse discrimination.”

Workshops for women in which they can be empowered to believe in themselves and free themselves from the social construct that “men do it better” were also recommended. Career planning and opportunities to expose women to all kinds of experiences, to prepare them for leadership is also a huge need.

Women as role models to mentor younger women are also needed. “Women are not empowered and mentored to believe in themselves, that they can fill a senior position, because women also buy into the perception that they cannot ‘compete’ with men, cannot be ‘as good as men’, etc, when they in fact can do things better than men.”

Two more reactions: “Consciousness-raising for everyone. Courses [to address sexism, racism, elitism, cronyism] should be devised or bought if they exist, so that people can learn how to avoid them because these attitudes are often unconscious.” And: “Women also need to be trained in how to manage sometimes hostile men. I know from experience that it is not easy. Women need to be trained to accept their own worth and learn how to act in a senior position and how to handle authority.”

Lack of political will

Respondents referred to the fact that there seemingly is no will to redress the inequalities. One indicated that “fines for non-adherence to equity laws” is not enough. Another respondent: “Thirty years ago my fate and that of others was decided by a clique of men in power, often while they networked in the pub! Nothing has changed. Cliques of white males still look after one another’s interests and appoint one another at the expense of women and people of colour.”

Another: “A majority of senior men think ‘political correctness’ (as they call it) is a joke – and this is much truer of white men than black men who have, in most cases, at least an understanding of why certain clauses of the Bill of Rights exist. (That doesn’t necessarily reflect how they behave in one-on-one interactions with female individuals, but at least they talk the Talk!) I regularly see relatively junior women staffers asked (half-jokingly, maybe..?) to get tea; referred to as ‘girls’ and if not exactly sexually harassed, then certainly expected to participate in banter that many might find undermining. Some senior editors still automatically try to date attractive younger female colleagues, but that’s thankfully getting rarer.”

Another respondent: “There needs to be a willingness and openness to give women the same opportunities. While there might be no guarantees that all women – black or white – might succeed in leadership positions, there is nothing that says they won’t.”

What to do?

It is clear that some senior women journalists not only experience a glass ceiling, but indeed one made of concrete. Sanef resolved at its AGM that it would “pay attention to the challenges faced by senior female journalists in the South African media”, as the study found “that many women in the industry still face serious obstacles in achieving senior leadership positions”.

Indeed, as one respondent said: “Just do it”. ■

The Sanef study – some details

The study was completed by:

- 6 editors
- 29 senior news journalists (various senior executive levels)
- 5 educators/trainers

Responses:

- 40 respondents out of 149 members
- 65% female; 35% male

Experience of 40 respondents:

- 45% had more than 20 years
- 45% had 10-20 years
- 10% had less than 10 years

Reasons for leaving (If you were a senior woman editor)

- retrenchment
- harassment
- pressure
- a “sense of isolation”
- no support base
- undermining
- not being taken seriously, and
- no space for flexibility

“One can safely extrapolate from the data that discriminatory practices, structural inequalities, cultural factors, prejudices, patriarchy and sexism are still alive and well in South African newsrooms. These are clearly prohibiting South Africa’s women journalists from realising their potential.”