

# Towards a women's

by Jane Duncan

In March 2003, Genderlinks and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Misa) conducted a global Gender and Media Baseline Study. The study covered a total of 25 110 news items in September 2002, across all Southern African Development Community countries. It was found that women constituted only 17% of news sources, 1% less than the global average of 18%. In South Africa the figure was 19%. The race and gender breakdown is particularly disturbing, with only 7% of sources being black women, in spite of the fact that black women constitute 45% of the total population.

There was a general paucity of female voices in relation to economic and political stories, as well as sports. Women speak the most on gender equality and gender violence. The economics statistics are especially interesting: while women generate 20% of stories, only 10% of sources are women. While women generate 16% of stories on politics, only 9% cited female sources. This implies that journalists have not found ways to engender political and economic stories.

More recently, the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) has detected ongoing discrimination in newsrooms. According to Sanef: "...discriminatory practices, structural inequalities, cultural factors, prejudices, patriarchy and sexism are still alive and well in our South African newsrooms..."

These are deeply worrying statistics, and point to the fact that newsrooms are hostile terrains for women, both as journalists and as sources. Clearly, some inventive solutions must be found. The authors of the Gender and Media Baseline study argue that journalists should strive for:

- equal number of men and women as news sources;
- equal number of male and female journalists;
- stories that have no gender stereotypes;
- acknowledgement that every story is a potential gender story;
- self assessment of gender bias.

My opinion is that the laudible targets set in the Baseline study will not be met using the current strategies, because they are based on conscientising key decision-makers in newsrooms, possibly backed up by quotas.

Competitions celebrating women's achievements in the media are becoming increasingly popular, as are features on so-called women leaders, in a bid to popularise women's voices. As valuable as they may be in building women's confidence and self-image, such competitions pit women against women and individualise the struggle against gender oppression.

In fact, there is a general poverty of strategy when it comes to achieving gender balance in the media.

## Deep structural reasons

There are deep structural reasons why women are so under-represented. A women's media movement would need to address the underlying reasons, and move gendered media activism beyond the tried and tested approaches of seeking greater representation or addressing the problem as one of simply a lack of consciousness or appreciation of the role of women, or the lack of knowledge of audiences in how to engage media.

A "commonsense" approach to addressing gender imbalances in the media has taken root, built on an often-undeclared set of theoretical assumptions. I would argue that these assumptions are built on the liberal feminist tradition, which emphasises the attainment of equal rights while remaining blind to the structural reasons why such rights are allocated unequally.

Feminism itself is a contested terrain. An emancipatory feminist vision needs to embrace and build on, but move beyond, a liberal rights-based discourse, which may make



marginal differences, and have some successes, but will not fundamentally alter the picture painted by these surveys.

Currently the movement that does exist tends to be depoliticised, tame, safe, timid. It does not grapple sufficiently with the fact that media both construct and are constructed by social relations: a women's media movement needs to recognise this and commit itself not only to changing the media, but to changing social relations.

The two projects are so interdependent that they cannot be separated. A women's media movement must have politics: politics of society and politics of media. It needs to take positions on optimum working conditions for media workers, and fight for these. It needs to take positions on the key media policy questions of the day, such as tabloidisation, consolidation, foreign ownership, commercialisation, public broadcasting and regulation. It needs to take positions on black economic empowerment, privatisation, globalisation, it needs to be anti-neoliberal.

## Women, globalisation

Globalisation of the economy has exacerbated women's marginalisation from the productive economy, and has greatly increased the amount of unwaged work they undertake. Computerisation coupled with capital intensity of production has fuelled structural unemployment and has also led to the rise of atypical forms of employment. Casualisation and informalisation of work have become the order of the day. Women especially have been forced into unemployment, underemployment or precarious, unstable and highly

exploitative forms of work. Women have also been made to compensate for many of the cutbacks to basic services fuelled by globalisation. In the process, their unwaged work in the home has increased: caring for ill family members owing to cutbacks to health services; fetching water and fuel to compensate for water and electricity cutoffs.

## Women, media, globalisation

According to a Gender and Media 2002 audience survey, television is the most important source of news for women (49% of whom rely on television as a source of news), followed by radio. There is also a marked gender gap in newspaper readership, 21% of men rely on newspapers as their main source of news compared to 15% of women. Women with primary level education relied on radio for news.

Income deprivation has much to do with this; a woman who cannot afford to buy a pre-paid water token for R20 will be highly unlikely to afford newspapers on a regular basis.

## Media consolidation

A women's media movement needs to also engage with the gendered nature of media ownership, control and funding. The consolidation in the economy generally and the media specifically has benefited men. In a recent *Sunday Times* "rich list" nearly all of the rich are men, and although their representation is relatively low, there are an increasing number of black people on the list. The only media-related executive on the list is Neil Jacobson of Johnnic Communications, who earned a 549% increase in salary since 2004.



# media movement



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In May 2003 it was reported that salary settlement levels in the media were far below the then inflation level of 11.6%. Contrast these settlement levels with Jacobson's 549% increase in salary a year later. These disparities highlight the need for strong media unions to represent the interests of journalists.

The media industry has also been especially vulnerable to the forms of workplace restructuring typically associated with globalisation. Journalists are being expected to multi-task, leading to a blurring of boundaries between formerly distinct roles. Atypical forms of employment, including freelancing, is becoming more apparent, and more women are being employed on these bases in the industry, not necessarily because of a firm commitment to gender equity, but because women are more vulnerable to exploitation given their precarious position in the world of work. It will not be possible to address these problems without a comprehensive campaign against forms of media consolidation that promote atypical employment, multi-tasking, dismantling of benefits for women (such as maternity leave), and a generalised upward redistribution of income from media workers to media managers and owners.

## Poor women's voices

A women's media movement would need to ensure that poor women's voices are heard, even (or perhaps especially), when women's voices are raised in opposition to the anti-poor and anti-female aspects of government policy, such as cost-recovery in electricity and water. Certainly women activists

engaged in social movement struggles rarely find their way into the lists of celebrated women; they tend to be too hot to handle.

No woman of the year award is likely to be handed out to unemployed Phiri Concerned Residents' Committee member Jennifer Makoatsane, who has with other residents waged a bitter struggle against the imposition of pre-paid water meters in Soweto. Community radio station Jozi FM has been fighting advertisements placed by Johannesburg Water extolling the virtues of pre-paid meters. When they were approached by residents wanting to put their side of the story, they were told that they could do so if they bought the airtime, just like Johannesburg Water. A women's media movement should take a position on the commodification of a community radio service in a manner that crowds out poor women's voices.

## Both, and

What should a women's media movement address? Stereotypes in media content, or the growing burden of unpaid work on women? Gender quotas in newsrooms or a free basic water supply of 50 litres per person per day? Increasing knowledge about how audiences can complain about stories, or full employment? The choice should not be either, or, but both. If the problems outlined by Sanef, Misa and Genderlinks are to be addressed, then a comprehensive approach is called for.

Focusing on increasing the representations of women in the media is important, but it is not enough. Women's

marginalisation in the media is not simply a result of a lack of sensitivity in media circles; it has a highly complex political economy, and we need to craft tools to address the problem in all its complexity. This will imply building strategic alliances with other social movements engaged in emancipatory struggles, with media possibly becoming a movement-of-movements.

Fifty years ago, women rose up to protest against the gendered nature of apartheid laws. National apartheid has been defeated, and the historic role of women in achieving this defeat must be celebrated. But a new form of apartheid – which is global – will require new forms of struggle by women, in instances where the enemy is much more difficult to identify.

In order to defeat global apartheid, we will need more rather than less debate on economic and political issues; and we will also need more gendered debate.

We should not just aim for sexual equality in the family, society and the media, but an end to the sexual division of labour, manual and intellectual. ■

## References

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