

CONSUMERS air their views

By Pearl Nocuze

The first Gender and Media Audience Research shows that both women and men would find the news much more interesting if there was greater diversity in the representation of women and men. More women than men - 42 percent versus 35 percent - said that sexual images of women in the news made them feel uncomfortable.

The preliminary findings, presented at the first Southern African Gender and Media Summit currently taking place in Johannesburg, was conducted in September 2003 in six countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC): Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zambia. The researchers interviewed some 1200 people, half men, half women.

Seventy-six percent of the women and 56 percent of the men surveyed believe that news would be more interesting if stories portrayed women in non-traditional roles, for example as professionals and public figures. They also want to see men as caregivers and parents and shown participating in what are traditionally thought to be women's roles. Respondents also said they want more positive, human-interest stories and not just the usual fare of violence and wars.

While women are the majority in most of the region's populations, their views and voices are markedly underrepresented in the media. They constitute only 17 percent of the news sources, according to the Gender and Media Baseline Study (GMBS). The study, conducted in 2002, monitored the media, focusing on sources and the portrayal of gender in editorial content, in 12 southern African countries. It showed that women are more likely to be identified by their private roles than men, that is as a wife, daughter, mother. Women media practitioners predominate in the "soft



Tuning in to a programme of her choice.

beat", but there is not a single beat in which they achieve parity with men. Their absence is marked in economic, political, sport, mining and agricultural news reporting.

While men are often portrayed as powerful and successful, women are portrayed as vulnerable victims, as pregnant housewives chained to the kitchen sink, or as skinny sex creatures.

"The impact of the media in creating gender stereotypes is very dangerous because some people believe everything they are bombarded with by the media. The media tells the audience what should be viewed as beauty. They show a skinny woman and make people to believe that being thin is beautiful and having a bit of flesh is ugly," says Colleen Lowe Morna, executive director of Gender Links, the organisers of the audience research.

The audience research shifts the focus from content to the consumers of media. The new research reveals that men and women are equally interested in all news genres, challenging the stereotype that hard news is the preserve of men and soft news the main interest of women.

The research shows that media producers need to understand that women and men are making their own decisions about the media and programming they consume. They need to grasp that women are exercising both economic and individual power in their choice of media and that previously held notions about what men and women want to read in the newspaper or see on television no longer hold true.

The following table provides a summary of the key data from the regional quantitative analysis of the Gender and Media Audience Research.

KEY DATA	% WOMEN	% MEN
1. Most important source of news?		
Radio	45	46
Television	38	31
Newspapers	15	21
Internet	2	2
2. News preferences (genres)		
Short news reports	52	49
In depth features	29	33
News that asks for feedback e.g. Letters to the editor	14	12
Opinion and Commentary	5	6
3. New stories reflect the interests of both men and women equally.		
Agree	40	39
Unsure	20	17
Disagree	40	44
4. How often are women used as sources in news stories?		
Very often	19	23
Often	36	39
Seldom	41	35
Never	4	3
5. If the ideas and views of women were reported more often, you would find the news ...		
More interesting	69	45
No different	22	38
Less interesting	9	17
6. I would find the news more interesting if there were stories about women doing a wider range of things.		
Agree	76	56
Unsure	13	23
Disagree	11	21
7. The news sometimes shows very sexual images of women. When you see something like this in the news how do you respond?		
I find these stories and images entertaining and/or interesting	4	13
I don't really notice them	8	9
I feel uncomfortable when I see them	42	35
I feel they are insulting to women	43	33
They encourage me to buy the newspaper or watch the news	4	9