



The Voices that Count

By Margaret Gallagher

"Making Every Voice Count", the theme of the first Southern African Gender and Media Summit, is a call for equal access and equal voice for women and men in the media of the region. On the face of it, the call seems uncontroversial. Of course free and democratic media systems should strive for gender balance in the sources, opinions and perspectives through which they reflect the world. It seems self-evident. Why then does it remain such an elusive goal, universally?

This question is at the heart of a groundswell of media monitoring and advocacy that has gathered pace internationally over the past ten years. In 1995 the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing highlighted the media as a "critical area of concern" in the struggle for equality and gender justice. In that same year, the first Global Media Monitoring Project - carried out in 71 countries - showed that just 17 percent of people in the world's news were women. A second global monitoring study covering 70 countries in 2000 found that women were 18 percent of news subjects. Across the different regions there was little variation. Everywhere the similarities are

striking. Across the 12 countries monitored in the 2002 Southern African Gender Media Baseline Study, 17 percent of news sources were female.

These patterns are not simply a reflection of the way in which news is defined and structured. They are a reflection of much more fundamental socio-cultural ideas and values. The 2000 Global Media Monitoring Project revealed an astonishing absence of female voices in news items that concerned women in very specific ways. Stories that covered the establishment of a family court in Jamaica, the high teenage abortion rate in Scotland, women's right to divorce in Egypt, maternity plans in Northern Ireland, the punishment of women for marital infidelity in Turkey - in these and many other cases not a single women's point of view was included.

How does this happen? The easy answer is that professional constraints and deadlines limit the scope for diversity. Journalists often claim that there is no time to seek out a range of sources, that no woman can be persuaded to speak, that no suitable female expert can be found, and so on. But research in many domains, from linguistics to psychology, shows that the tendency to ignore women - or at best to talk about, rather than to women - is deeply embedded throughout cultural practice, not just in newsgathering and media production routines. As a result, these practices and routines are extremely difficult, though not impossible, to change.

A fundamental tenet of media advocacy is that nothing will change by aimlessly complaining about the media. What is needed is professional, constructive dialogue with the media. To get their ideas across, media advocates need to be able to talk to media practitioners in terms that strike a chord with the professional priorities of media organisations, and that connect with the routines and practices of media industries. For their part, media people have to grasp the complex problems and limitations in typical media output and images, and the part that they themselves play in

constructing representations of reality. One of the ways this dialogue can begin is through joint undertakings - involving both advocates and media professionals. This belief has underpinned some of the most successful monitoring and advocacy initiatives in countries as disparate as Japan, Canada, Jamaica and many more. It is fundamental to the goals of the Gender and Media Summit.

Journalists and programme-makers exercise many individual choices that have an impact on the representations of reality they produce - from the selection of interviewees, to the questions they choose to ask, to interview locations and settings, to image selection and camera movement, to commentary and voice-over. Yes there are professional constraints, but there is often considerable scope for those who want to break away from the standard, conventional way of doing things.

However one of the problems is that in the media, as in every professional sector, the accepted way of doing things is usually also the easiest. The challenge is for media advocates and media professionals to work together to demonstrate that the easiest way is not necessarily the best way - in terms of creativity, the quality of content, or its appeal to audiences.

It is a daunting enterprise to ensure that diversity - in voices, in issues, in the points of view expressed - becomes accepted as one of the criteria against which

standards and quality are measured in media output. It is what monitoring and advocacy aims for, and what the Southern African Gender and Media Summit is all about. In 2005, a third Global Media Monitoring Project will take place. It will coincide with an international appraisal of progress in the ten years following the Beijing Conference, which identified the media as a critical area of concern for women. Will there be measurable change? Who would hazard a guess? But at least the process is underway.

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