

## **Echoes Polytechnic Student News Service: Elections Special Edition (August – November 2009)**

By Anne Marlen Suess

### **How it all started...**

*The Echoes Polytechnic Student News Service: Elections Special Edition* project was introduced as a pilot initiative in 2004. In that year, the project already aimed to involve students of the Polytechnic of Namibia in the mainstream media by covering stories and perspectives around the Namibian national elections. Launched shortly before the local, regional and national elections in 2004/05, students gathered critical information with the help of accomplished media practitioners, and wrote and submitted news stories in the process. An evaluation of the project was firstly conducted in December 2004 and found that the undertaking had achieved what was envisaged in the beginning. Newsworthy events and issues had not only been covered, but created an understanding of the distribution of political power in Namibia, as well as having shed light on personal experiences of individual members of various communities.

The aim of the implementation of *Echoes* was to tell specific community-related stories through the voices of Namibians, subsequently weigh up reasons for past occurrences of events and eventually estimate possible measures that could be put in place in the future. Equally, men and women from the communities were approached for this particular project and managed to raise their voices in different media with balanced significance.

### **Voting for women's voices to be heard during elections**

*Echoes Polytechnic Student News Service: Elections Special Edition* continued their work on community issues during the time of the elections in 2009, while the acquired news content was, once again, sent out via the Namibia Press Agency (NAMPA). The PoN students also provided *The Namibian* and *New Era* English dailies with stories that focused on 'ordinary voices' during the course of September, October and November 2009.

This time around, the approach to the coverage differed slightly though, as the *Echoes* Student News Service collaborated and worked closely together with the Gender Links local government project, led by Sarry Xoagus- Eises. The collaboration with her, Pat Made and Gender Links in general, granted additional aspects, considering that focal points were extending the topic of ballot votes to views and expectations of community members dealing with issues such as HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence, economic issues, good governance and service-delivery. A three-day workshop was held in August 2009 and presented by Pat Made, which was intended to prepare the second group of students for the task of writing stories that would evoke discussions prior to the elections. Journalistic practice-oriented activities and Gender Links workshops took place simultaneously, when student journalists accompanied Gender Links local government facilitators and PON staff member Jaco Bekker on their trips to ten Local Councils across Namibia. These included:

- Bethanie
- Keetmanshoop
- Koes
- Karasburg
- Berseba
- Arandis
- Swakopmund

- Walvis Baai

### **Gathering expertise in issue based reporting**

In 2009, the main objectives focused on enabling students to offer their news services to the print media, but also provide radio, television and online content prior to, during and past the Namibian elections. Analysis's, features and news stories were excerpted from the narratives and encounters of women and men in different types of communities. In dedication to all stories, an immense effort was made to ensure that the importance of gender imbalances and balances was accurately portrayed.

Also, the students were provided with a new platform to obtain practical journalistic skills whilst working in the field. The development of critical and analytical skills for election coverage for senior student journalists and Non-Governmental Organisations played a significant role and contributed to the sustainability of the *Echoes News Service* in the future.

On the other hand, a unique opportunity was offered to citizens to finally have their say on essential matters regarding the election process and social issues in several regions of Namibia. The student journalists were encouraged to get away from events-driven coverage and to strive towards issue-based reporting.

Bearing in mind that the number of women sources in the media was at a rather low level during previous elections, *Echoes* and Gender Links also attempted to increase the number of female voices in the process. Whilst mainstreaming gender in election coverage was one of the main concerns, the young journalists also set their sights on the empowerment of women politicians to work together with the media in order to create constructive means of mutually beneficial ways.

In order to keep up with the success of the previous reporting from 2004, the above-mentioned objectives had to be implemented in diverse phases, which were adjunct to a range of activities that were designed to broaden the spectrum of gender, elections and the media agenda as a collective entity.

### **Gender perspectives and views from the community**

Between August and October 2009, a team of 15 student journalists and their lecturers were trained under the supervision of an editor and gathered intriguing stories from the field. A total of ten visits to different locations was initiated. To ensure ahead of time that the students were able to share their stories and engage with women politicians; a workshop with female political leaders was held, training women politicians on how to effectively collaborate with the media. The activities also meant to include newsroom training, which was mainly aimed at creating a rather thorough awareness of gender coverage during elections. This, amongst many other benefits, gave the students a chance to market the *Echoes Polytechnic Student News Service* to the Namibian media, employers and companies.

During the course of the election reporting, three dates were set to evaluate the entire project. These evaluations then included a mid-way debriefing based on findings and a content analysis of stories, which were already produced. Individual impact on community members and students was calculated, as well as the effect of above on media staff at the Polytechnic and

Gender Links facilitators. It was also examined whether the monitoring exercise provided sufficient data on the extent and depth of gender issues throughout the span of elections.

### **Outcome and replication**

Basic outcomes of the *Echoes* project comprised gender perspectives, an increase in the use of women's voices in the media during elections, and the expression of views by ordinary community members, which facilitated public discourse and attention on the process of voting and appraised performances of those who, in the end, were elected. In addition, the students got engaged with the multitude of gender prospects and female intonation in all news stories, gained an understanding of job execution in the journalistic world and acquired a more defined view on the professional role of a journalist.

Taking into consideration that the *Echoes Polytechnic Student News Service: Elections Special Edition* has proven itself to be successful during two national elections in Namibia over the past six years, a replication of the initiative is not only possible, but very likely to be further defined. Having drawn gender issues nearer and, therefore, served not only the community but the student journalists' ability to provide a diversity of sources and to give voice to the voiceless, the *Echoes' Elections Coverage Project* would most likely continue to collaborate with Gender Links in 2015, because then the call to vote would again confront Namibians.

For a third time, staff and students will not spare any effort to provide the country with a fair and accurate coverage of the elections, the people in power and those who vote for them. Gender perspectives would essentially be considered and imbalances in communities shall be uncovered to keep the good work alive. Sound journalism comes from providing readers, listeners and viewers with a diversity of sources – isn't this the approach that would ensure that balance exists in the media?