



Freedom of Expression and Women in Media

at the

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“Empowering Women in and through the Media - Providing a Voice for
Gender Equality”
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“She believed she could, so she did”. It’s not my quote, but it struck a chord with me because it’s short and sweet and to the point. And this is really what lies at the heart of my message today to all young and aspiring women journalists.

It also has resonance when it comes to the important topic of freedom of expression and gender equality in the media.

We are all aware that equal enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression is easier said than done. We also know this goal remains elusive, especially when it comes to historically disadvantaged groups, in particular women, but also others like refugees and indigenous and sexual minorities.

In the course of this workshop you’ll be hearing, and talking about topics such as the place of women in media vis-à-vis the glass ceiling, the issue of gender policies in newsrooms, and whether justice is being done to women’s voices in the media through reporting, among others. All of these are important challenges in the search for answers as to how to attain the ideal of gender equality in relation to freedom of expression for women, in particular in the media.

But speaking from my experience as a journalist over four decades – a veteran as some would call me - I’d like to focus more specifically on the need for women journalists to make a difference their communities by holding power to account, leading by example, giving voice to marginalized groups and thereby bringing more equality to unequal societies.

An issue that we need to keep in mind as we explore this subject, is that while some countries like Namibia and Botswana have high press freedom rankings, which is of course, positive, research by the African Platform on Access to Information working group a few years ago showed that both countries have relatively low scores for access to information. And this remains a matter of great concern. Hopefully an Access to Information law, currently in draft stages, will make a difference to this deficit. If the political will exists to make it a good law, then it will facilitate not only the work of journalists, especially as they dig deeper, but will also help realize the right to information, without which people cannot make knowledgeable decisions about their life choices.

Informing people – primarily with the goal to “promote citizen empowered to scrutinize, monitor and hold their governments to account” - lies at the heart of what journalists do. And people in turn have the right to expect the highest standards of their media in this regard. The question is whether we are doing a good enough job.

It is not possible for media, or the public, in our discussion today, more pertinently, women in both spheres, to exercise their rights to free expression without an enabling environment which embraces a culture of openness. In Namibia, to a large extent, these conditions exist, so the onus lies on us to practice journalistic excellence, keeping professionalism, ethics and compassion at the heart of what we do.

Women, not only those who are journalists, have voice, and increasingly so. Social media platforms for example - and I'm sure all of you are online in one forum or another - have amplified the voices of women from all walks, which if used properly, can open up huge networking, learning and activism opportunities. But we cannot forget there are many women have no access and therefore no voice.

And while all research will tell you that women have a long way to go in attaining parity with their male colleagues in the media, this should not be a deterrent to us doing the right thing, even as minority voices. I've always been inspired by the words of Margaret Meade who said “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens (and I would replace ‘citizens’ with ‘women’) can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has”.

Given that journalism remains a significant avenue through which to empower people through information and to bring about change, the question we need to ask ourselves is whether we as women, even in small numbers, are the drivers for societal change in exercising our right to free expression through our work? Are we being exceptional purveyors of information in all major areas of communication, whether in traditional or online media? Are we putting our hearts and souls into what we do, or are we simply going through the motions?

So let me get back to the basics, and ask the question as to what constitutes journalism? Is it a profession? They say not because we don't need degrees

to practice it. Is it a trade? No, because with trades you work with your hands, and while we do that too, we also need a wide range of attributes, such as good character, a vast general knowledge, honest and ethical behaviour, bravery, curiosity, truth-seeking, intuition, and skills such as the ability to write well, to research, to be fast and accurate and work to a deadline, to mention just a few.

Most say journalism is a craft, but I say it's an art if done properly. To reach the heights requires passion, dedication and learning on a consistent and continual basis. This is no popularity contest. Good journalists are often viewed as threats and put themselves at risk because they strive to reveal the truth, and their work can come at a cost. And may I be blunt and say that you will not become a good journalist if you do not read. In the course of mentoring and training women reporters, I have come across many who don't. I like to use the 'sponge' analogy. We need to soak up all the information we can, 24/7.

We can spend our time bemoaning our still unequal place in journalism, but I prefer to focus on the positives. We need to take encouragement from the fact that the glass ceiling for women has been cracked even if it has not been broken completely. More and more women are going into what could be described as the hard news aspects of journalism compared to in the past being assigned, or choosing, softer areas such as entertainment and the arts etc. Today women excel in hitherto inaccessible beats such as political and investigative and war reporting for example, and continue to make their mark in these fields.

Many have made huge personal sacrifice in the course of their work and for the cause of press freedom in general. Examples abound of role models like Anabel Hernandez of Mexico, who investigates the drug cartels at great risk to her life and her family; Reeyot Alemu of Ethiopia, who was jailed for a number of years for simply doing her job; and Khadija Ismayilova of Azerbaijan, who also paid the price of imprisonment for her investigative reporting.

It is not the case in all countries, but another positive is that circumstances for women journalists are easier now than they were back when I started as a reporter in the 70s. Those of us with decades in journalism can testify how very difficult it was to compete in what was then predominantly a man's world. Those of us who went into then taboo areas such as political reporting endured the toughest of conditions. We were badly paid, treated with disrespect by male editors, and added to that, it often came with sacrifice on the home front, and partners who are and were not always supportive. Back in my day, benefits were non-existent. Salaries were meagre, with no medical aid or maternity leave. Things that many take for granted today. I couldn't have done it if I hadn't believed that what I was doing could make a difference in peoples' lives.

You will find very few women from my era were handed their positions by men. We either had to fight all the way or create them ourselves. In my own case I had to work under a male editor who put me through a baptism of fire, hoping that I would turn tail and run just so that he could say 'I told you so.'

Women haven't got what it takes'. Against all odds I survived in the job and years later he acknowledged publicly that I had proved him wrong and that I could work as well and as hard as any man, perhaps even better. Ask women journalists like Jean Sutherland of The Namibian, just what it took over the years to be the best she could be, in her case, as a standout, dedicated and long-serving news editor.

And while I wouldn't want any of you to go through what many of us did, I hope I am right in saying that most self-respecting women don't want to be 'given' a job to fill a quota or because men have decided or been told it's the right thing to do. In terms of a strong sense of self-respect and pride, most working women, journalists or otherwise, would prefer to know they earned their careers. I know I do.

To get returns from journalism - which I consider a public service - you have to give it your all, and to excel, you need to love what you do. It is not always easy, sometimes even in cultural terms, for women to dedicate long hours to work in what is not the best paid job in the world, and keep at it over the years to make their mark. For women journalists to be at the top of their game has usually come at a cost. And that won't change. This is not just a job. It is a way of life. But it is important to know too, and I speak from experience, that it brings its own rewards, including a huge sense of personal fulfillment.

Most of the pioneering women journalists were self-taught. In my case, I didn't study journalism, and never, to this day, benefitted from the kind of workshops and training that is now available. It was all up to us. What we learned or didn't learn. And it was not enough that we did our daily work in a man's world, but we also had to fight for media freedom in societies in which the rights that we in Namibia enjoy today did not exist. This too, required great sacrifice, and still does, in those countries where oppression is the norm.

For me, and I guess for most of you, it is easy to tell just by reading newspapers or listening to radio or television broadcasts, even monitoring social media, who the good journalists are. And the public is not naïve either. They too can tell whether a news story or feature or any journalistic work is simply a regurgitated press release or a report without any depth and therefore of scant public benefit. We cannot build a knowledge-based society with superficial journalism, with reporters who take their readers, viewers and listeners for granted, and in so doing, dent the credibility of our craft in the eyes of the people.

Conscious of the need to empower and mentor women journalists and develop more role models among us, Zoe Titus and I are hard at work to set up an NMT Women in Leadership Programme which will target young to mid-career journalists. This will include a writing workshop as well as a multi-media production, as well as a book and short film, to launch on International Women's Day next year. Vital to the success of young women in media is the importance of a commitment to press freedom, without which none of us can do our work to the best of our ability. It is also key for woman journalists of Namibia to show solidarity with our colleagues under fire in unfree societies in Africa and further afield.

To conclude, I return to where I started. “She believed she could, so she did”. I can say I followed that advice and wouldn’t have done it any differently. So my message today is for all young women journalists to take these words to heart. In order to be leaders at all levels of media – and you don’t just lead from the top - women must take the reins and the responsibility, and everything that comes with it. What better way to fight the battle for equality in the newsroom than with the weapon of self-belief that comes with knowledge and empowerment?

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