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Women making headlines: influences of women editors on newsroom socialisation and the news agenda

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Appendix B

How does a woman editor influence the publication on gender issues such as women's representation in news selection, if she does?
It's quite subtle, and I think what [the editor] has been able to do … is to subtlely free us up from some of the stereotypes that are more common with a male editor. I think influence is subtle and not something that is overtly declared. …**But I think you probably have more young women more African women being presented in a more positive light…they are less likely perhaps to be presented as victims, or …in less stereotypical roles… like victim or mother,… whatever… but… I think its… more likely to represent women as achievers as successes … as being relevant ….. as sort of valid counterparts to the male expert voice.**

How does it influence your work?
I edit one section and I am in charge of training in the newsroom…
So… for me … I used to work in training and I … and gender is my thing and so I'm specialised in that and I'm not the most neutral person about it. So I am very conscious of it obviously and …because the section I edit is the development section, obviously … gender and development are very closely linked. I don't know that my politics is because I am a woman… I could possibly have the same politics if I was a man… I do know male feminists… I am quite open about it… I am a …And I make a conscious effort to put female voices, poor female voices and poor black female voices, workers voices. … I am very open about that…so…

Newsrooms have a culture that influences how you work as a journalist, What specific examples can you tell me of times where the expectations of the newsroom were in conflict with your identity as a woman? How does this affect your work?
Are you talking about stories, when stories were assigned? …

either or …things embedded in the process.

… I think there are two things there. There is personal interactions, and the culture of the newsroom, and me doing my job as a woman …

I have personally been on the receiving end of some comments within the newsroom that I never expected to hear in a place like this, very sexist stuff…But you know…for every… you know … there is a handful of them. …a few who are like that and for every **… and to be fair for every one deconstructed, masoginist' ..there is one very constructed and evolved new man.** So it doesn't mean that it is not hurtful, but I try to keep a balanced view …**I need to remind myself that that is not all the men. More with the older men**, I find. … who are difficult. Comments about my sexual orientation, comments about… my femininity… Comments about…I want to say that it is a few individuals**, I don't want to make it sound like it is a wide spread thing… but I think if you present …yourself as a woman in a way that is not necessarily conventional… I mean I am six foot two and not like … like meek and mild… you do get a lot of push back from people who have their own issues**, I've had comments about why I adopted a child instead of having my own, …… I've had my sexual orientation challenged because I'm 38 and single,… you know. That sort of thing.
Certain individuals. And then I say, there are other men in this newsroom who are wonderful and whom I adore. And those do tend to be the younger ones.

Those are very personal comments, what about the newsroom environment?
We have had arguments around stories that make me surprised that I have to have those arguments about how women are represented. …you know, when you challenge something sometimes…these people will say things like … or you're just being PC…… why do we have to do that…Well you have an option…**And you are PC when you refer to Black people …. Why can't you be PC when you refer to things about woman.** In terms of the power dynamics sometimes we have a lot of conflict about that sort of thing … I think that people… or the men … obviously feel … being here … you get that a lot. The men… and that sort of older, upper bunch … … and when they challenge each other they listen … or whatever and when you speak… they kind of dismiss you… When I first started here, [the current editor] worked here, there was the editor's conference and I was the only woman who came here and I had a very, very rough ride and I … and I can't see that it is unrelated to gender. Also because the subject matter that I work with, development … being not as valid compared to …not news or politics and therefore … not by everyone, but by certain people… therefore are woman…… …. You know what I mean. ….a whole lot of stuff. I've basically have to …fight very hard against that culture and to shout… to say this is my job. I do it seriously, I take it seriously and I won't have it undermined by you…
You can see [the editor] has an impact because when she is not around, there is an upswing in stereotypical male behaviour and upon her return that behaviour is noticeably less.

How do you think your management style is influenced by your gender, if at all?
Well I think that … I think that women tend to be a lot less authoritarian, a lot less, because …you know… I say so. And more this is why I want you to do it. I think it's a lot more apparent… it just… I think… I don't know…It don't know if it is necessarily influenced by my gender or if it is a personality issue… I tend to … I think personally that I am a lot … I like to hear what people are saying. I will say what I need to say and than I what to hear what you are saying. I don't just want you to say yes because I'm the boss. I want to be clear that we understand each other. But at the same time, I don't think that my management style is necessarily a typically female one either because …what I have experience and heard from a lot of people managed by women … have experienced woman not necessarily coming at things straight on, I'm a very straight forward person. I'm … If I have a problem with you I will tell you, I want this done and I want it now, but at the same time I don't think… or I think I'm quite open to someone coming to me and saying you know what… I really didn't like that and you are out of line… and I must be able to say,… you know what,… I was wrong. Or no, I am right and I am sticking to it. But you can have that dialogue.

There are very few women who hold leadership positions in the newsroom, why have you been one of the few who have succeeded?
I don't know. I think …I think its experience. I have always worked in male-dominated fields. I work part-time doing labour disputes, and have worked in a union as a labour official. … almost entirely male so I have that experience. Again, personality. I just … you know… But I think also …What I find is important is to keep the big picture in mind. And what I find every time something happens … just sit back and say… with me, when you talk about gender, at work there is a certain level of our society, within the home, within the government,… this stuff is at work and we are not exempt from it. And you must just have a picture of what you want to achieve. I guess for me, I'm quite a process oriented person, so I sort of… I guess I am clear that if I am unhappy with something I lay a complaint, I will lay a grievance …I will take action… I will take you to the CCMA, or take you to the labour court if I have to…I mean I have never done it, but at the back of my mind I feel perhaps

empowered by the fact that I have rights under the constitution, under the labour relations act, under the employment equity act. … and I think that influences part of the …I guess.. I am not sure that if we didn't have that I don't think it would make me feel empowered.

How has your concept of news developed? How does it influence the process of news production? News selection?

I used to go to journalism school and they tell you about what is news. The five W's and the H or whatever. And when you start out you sort of have this idea that news is something that happens to the great and the good. And you know, all of that. But I think, you know … in time, when you have sort of worked in a couple of different places. You realise that there are different… aspects of news. and that news needs to be made more personal and that news needs to be made more immediate and have real people in it. …And then … I worked in a training organisation, where we,… spend a lot of time deconstructing news values, so you know… looking at issues around power and perspectives … and what makes news and what is news. Well I don't think it has changed that dramatically over the years but, I think it also depends on the kind of publication you're at… so news for example what is news at the M&G is not the same as what is news at the Daily Sun.

Give some examples of when in your career gender was an issue in the workplace? Positive or negative.

Like I said I have had very derogatory comments said to me about …you must be a lesbian because you never got married,… about … my being a feminist and a single mother, that kind of thing. You know. That is pretty gender specific if you ask me. … But it is never cast in that way, its often stated as a joke, and if you don't laugh at the joke, you're not funny, and I don't laugh at the joke and I turn the joke around, I'm not really if you have got issues. You know you need to work on those issues, and your stuff about women. You know, that kind of thing. And its pretty much the thing I was talking about earlier, the way men defer to each other, and the way that when you challenge them, they will respond differently than when a man challenges them. I had an altercation with someone, not very long ago, where I said to them but, … And they responded, well, I am the what a whata, and you shall listen to me. And I said, well but wait a minute, so and so challenged you,… and just because he happened to have a penis, you didn't react the way you are now. Well, if I say something he does like, he'll just tell me to fuck off and that will be the end. Well the fact that I don't get the opportunity to tell him to fuck off, oh that doesn't exist. … oh he's says, well that's how I operate. But I don't want to operate like that. But the point is, if that man told you to fuck off you would except it…. yet when at the same time, I challenge you, I am doing it is a civilised way, Not a soft way, but a polite and professional and you …… so I think, just the way they deal with challenges from women. Definitely differs from the way they deal with challenges from men. And they tend listen to men more. …classic textbook stuff, men interrupt, women take turns, you know that kind of thing. And you know, that is something that I had to learn, when I first got into this business, when I was talking and a man would interrupt, I would stop because that is what women do. And now I just keep talking, and I keep talking, and I keep talking louder and louder until I am finished. But they don't interrupt each other. You know, and that sort of thing.

What restrictions are there on you, as an editor, when you implement changes you think are necessary within the newsroom in regards to gender bias?

… I don't think there was much policy stuff that had to change around gender, …its about producing stories on what is relevant,… and also because the of nature of the business we are in a lot of the stuff is quite subjective so if I write a story… and say, there's a story that I

want to do, say on gender issues… its quite easy… for someone to say, well, that is boring, … and its difficult to challenge, that's boring, because it is very subjective. …it is not really about making changes, I just find that sometimes its about the subject matter of the stories… and in the way women are represented, but I think, its not like its so difficult, its just sometimes you need to have conversations about how you represent women, or why we shouldn't make assumptions about if a women looks like this or … things like that.

What have been the common expectations of newsroom environments during your progression as a journalist within the different newsrooms you have worked in?
…I don't think there is really a shift in expectations, I think that everyone expects you to come to work and do your job, on time, meet deadlines and get on with it. I don't think that has necessarily changed. … you know it is difficult to compare publications because they are kind of like apples and pears … this is a weekly paper, and has a weekly deadline… I have worked in TV and radio and have had an hourly deadline. But it is also just you know,… different places expect you to do different things. Where here we have the time to do analytical in depth stuff where as … especially the way *The Star* is going now, … even that publication has changed. *The Star* is now, is not as it was then. But… yeah…

What is your understanding of objectivity?
It's a myth. I mean… what I say in training is that there is no such thing, we all come to jobs with baggage. We are all products of our …environment, our experiences, and our history and … and its quite arrogant as well. You know. I'm a journalist and I'm objective. How fascinating, nobody else in society is, and why should you be special? …I think the… what I like to say is that baggage is like a backpack, you only see it when you take the time to turn around and look in the mirror, so people come to expect, don't expect to come … I think you say to yourself… well… I am kind of black and grew up in a kind of Christian environment, and have…
Examine myself and have an awareness of myself and my own assumptions, and where I am coming from … or whatever,… I think self-awareness is more important than objectivity.

How does this concept influence the everyday functioning of the newsroom?
I think we strive for objectivity, don't get me wrong, I just don't think that … yes we strive for objectivity, but every step along the way, check yourself. … and so…you know its more about being balanced and fair… you know… for me, ethical decision making is more important than objectivity. Are we not just getting both sides of the story but all sides of the story because obviously there can be more than two. Are we balanced? Are we giving everyone a chance to say what they have to say. That sort of thing… Are we harming people? Are we breaking the law?…Are we unnecessarily exposing people… that sort of thing. … also just the sense that … I don't know the sort of idea you get in some newsrooms and in some countries or whatever,… not to think that we are too special as journalists. To remind ourselves that we are a part of society, we have quite a few special privileges… like the ones we have left, not revealing our sources … but… we need to … and if we want those little special privileges that we have… if we to talk about everyone else, we need to be accountable. Sometimes a problem with some publications, not necessarily this one, that we are not accountable to our readership. I mean … when we are wrong, we need to admit and we do apologise.

What other factors can you identify as influencing the production of news outside of the newsroom?

I don't know if there are really that. Obviously there are things that make news… and the political process and whatever, but I am not sure if they make news or if they influence news. I am not entirely sure. I think that with the news, … I think that within the M&G… we are quite lucky in the sense that we don't have pressures from publishers to take a certain line … and that no matter how competitive it can be … that the decisions taken are our decisions… I personally don't ever feel that we are under pressure to take a line or not take a line or whatever.

I mean I know it does happen, in America for example from conversations I have had with colleagues there. Pressure from huge conglomerates to push a story but … I think that is an advantage for writing for an independent newspaper, and we are not part of one of the media groups so that changes the dynamics…

There is a theory that the process of news selection in an organisation is influenced by advertisers and stakeholders, what has been your experience balancing the expectations of being a business-minded women and a journalist given your position as editor?
I think also again in this newsroom we advertise … or have a big tradition of a Chinese wall between advertising and editorial. Which is defended very vigorously… and … I have had once or twice had someone from advertising phone me and say … can't you write a story about my client who …is maybe doing good work… or whatever… And I will just say… I'm sorry but I am not having this conversation. Good bye. … and I was backed up by the editor on that. We do sometimes advertise … But that culture is very entrenched. And you have to sort of push back. I don't know, on my level, maybe at higher levels its different, I don't know but, I don't feel, I don't know if we sat in conference, had a discussion and said Toyota, we have a big expose on Toyota, Oh dear they advertise with us, we … Everyone would set you back.. But yeah.

Name some stories that highlighted gender-related issues in news coverage during your time as editor of the *Mail & Guardian*?
… The woman that had her abusive husband killed. That .. me and a couple of other woman, were saying you know you need to look at it in the context of what was happening, there is a woman who is being battered and abused and the police are not helping her, and the police are actually helping her husband who is buying dockets from corrupt cops, and she just isn't getting help so she gets some blokes to kill her husband, and you know,… you need to see that in context. She not just like a common a murderer. You need to understand the context. … And some of these men were very upset with it, and were basically arguing, we are encouraging women to kill their husbands. …and the woman was white and the two guys were black. … They happened to be her husband's labourers. So what had happened is that her husband had stripped her naked in front of her workforce, and said here, anyone who wants to rape her, can rape her, … The two guys who were hired to kill him, happened to have witnessed that. So… um… but the two guys got life or whatever, and she got pardoned on … got a pardon eventually because of her circumstances, and people were saying that that is not because of her gender, … it is complex.. ….in the boardroom, but there is this idea that … she got off because she was a woman, and the two guys should have also got off. But it is slightly different because they did do it for money, whereas she… you know. You don't necessarily have to agree, but you know there was that whole sort of debate. And this … The Judge Desai rape case, where the judge was accused of rape … a lot of interesting arguments. …it is a bit of an eye opener for me. … I tend to seem to kind of assume certain things. Like no means no and condoms are your choice … And whatever…

Some of the men suggested the fact that she came to the room at three in the morning with condoms, that she couldn't have been raped… that kind of stuff.

… interestingly… another is virginity testing. All the women in the newsroom are anti-virginity testing, and all the men are… looking at it …. That that is the culture. … therefore it must be good. And… why is the onus being put on women, why on the onus not put on men. … Why is it only women who are getting tested … why are men not doing it? And a lot of the men argue the culture angle.
I think that is one issue where there is a very clear split.

Can you give some examples of where this influenced the publication in anyway?
Well, I think that thing is… because of the kind of newspaper we are, well, like the one guy who is very into the culture argument, he wrote his piece and it is very clearly written as his opinion. So we are lucky we have the latitude to do that. …We can argue, but he's not going to change his mind. That is his opinion, and he will write his story like that. And it is clear that it comes across as his opinion. But then in the next week we would have a piece that I would source from some kind of gender, human rights type people, who will write the other side of the story. So we do tend to sort of balance it out like that. So it is not a situation where the both arguments ends up in one… result… we do tend to have both sides. … I mean like for example with the Anita Ferierra type thing, we might also take one line in a news story and than another line in an editorial. That the news story will be in a particular way, and then people will write an opinion about it in the editorial.

There have been numerous studies that highlight gender biases in the media and specifically the news, do you deal with gender representation differently from other people in your position?
…I am very conscious of it… and I am very conscious of when it comes to things like headlines, and things related to my section... I don't want it…I don't want every story about AIDS in Africa, to be illustrated with an African woman for example, … I don't want… making those kinds of judgements … putting those kinds of headlines that you put on stories, … you know… I put… a level of consciousness about representation. … and also you know, not just about women, but about men as well. About how we represent men. … do we … when we talk about crime do we always represent that with a black man, or a young man, or whatever or a working class man… There race and gender and representation are all sort of tied up together.

Has the environment of the newsroom changed under the leadership of a woman?
… I think that a lot of the … I think its … that some of these aggressive men don't feel as free to express themselves as they did before. I think they still say what they have to say but I think… I can't think of a better way to say this… but I think, it is less macho, and people now… I think that a lot of the women feel that there is more space for them to talk and be heard, and I think a lot of the men have had to temper down... on their behaviour… I think that… this is my purely subjective opinion… but I think that my opinion.. some of the men don't feel as free to just …… whatever they want… they kind of have to choose the words more carefully. There is a very good example of a case here, but this is not for the record, but there was a case where a women lawyer was in the process of suing someone and one of the men said…oh.. it would be good if we got a picture of her because she is thin and very fragile… and all of the women were sort of whoof… on him and he quickly backed down… including the editor. Everyone was like… what are you saying… It was interesting and perhaps under the previous editor it may have been sort of … where as with this editor… we

like all sort of dumped on him and the editor sort of joined our side. You know what I am saying, its being sort of obscure, but if the editor wasn't her maybe that sort of concern would have been dismissed.

I think this editor is good in the sense that this is an issue for her. And that race and gender are issues that she is very aware of. So I think… people just think more carefully now before they make… Its not to say that we have all become very cowardly. We do have very robust debates,… but I think that some of that unthinken prejudice has fallen by the wayside. Some of that knee-jerk stuff, it is no longer really, … doesn't really find a happy hunting grounds here anymore.

Some theorists suggest the some of the issues such as gender representation will be addressed naturally as a result of an increased number of women in the workplace. What are your thoughts on this theory?
I don't agree with that at all. I mean that … I think that when I am talking now and I am saying this about this editor, you need to be aware that she is one that does have gender consciousness But, I personally wouldn't put women in positions… if a woman is not gender aware, I would rather have a progressive man than a non-gender aware woman, because … if you think about government and you have this 50/50 campaign and all these women in government, its great, but what has it done for the everyday woman? If they are not pushing a women's agenda, or doing anything to improve the lot of women, what's the difference. What difference does it make? So I have, I have worked in places where, women in power have made absolutely no impact because… they have been male clones… because they don't bring… anything different… you know, you can't blame them, they've modelled themselves on men. … I think leaders of that generation had very male role models and they adopted a very male stance. So it is not an automatic prerequisite. I personally don't automatically feel that a woman boss is better than a male boss. It really depends on the person, their integrity, their values … their… you know. I don't go for all that blind solidarity … if you want my solidarity as a woman, I want to see what you are doing for it.

And with this editor?
Well I think she has changed the dynamic quite a bit, … I mean we disagree…don't get me wrong… and we have arguments about things, … so its not like we are all automatically on the same side because we have the same chromosomes or whatever… And I do argue with her and we do have robust debates. … but I do kind of feel more solidarity with her than I did with the previous male editor …. And this male editor was and still is a good friend of mine, you know on that sort of level of understanding. I think so.

I think also you know, what has changed a lot , is like here, like when I first got here, I was obviously the only woman in these meetings, … where now we have a female news editor, where as the news desk has always been a big, traditionally male dominated environment. So that has changed the dynamics a bit for a start. We are now, … what the editor has done… is more open editorial meetings and … so there are more women that come to it from different levels and positions, … it is not as strictly power related as it was,… so that also makes it more women, more younger people, more kinds of voices, and that has sort of changed the culture a lot. I mean I personally find that in these meetings when there are more women, … I find it better than it being more women… I don't like it when I'm in meetings and I am the only woman. I think the women tend to support each other a lot as well. … Again not automatically,…there are some people who don't have any gender politics at all, and they are women and we are aware of that, and that's fine, that is their choice. But I think, you know,

in meetings, where we discuss, instances and new ideas… where ….. you would tend to get more support from women… And that helps because then you don't feel all alone.

Comment on the state of women in the media in South Africa.

That is difficult for me to answer because I don't know the actual dynamics that go on. I know we see more women. I know we see more women in leadership positions, but what difference that actually makes for the people that work for them, and… I'm not sure, and I mean that ,… I have worked for high profile women in other organisations, and that hasn't necessarily … not everyone has a good experience with having a female boss and that doesn't necessarily make any difference. And I think… in a way, …this is kind of a particular argument… I have had this discussion with friends,… and some would say that … women bosses can be more pretentious, than white bosses or male bosses. And I have to say yes otherwise that what is the point of transformation if you are going to have black female bosses who will clone the white male style then, really what is the difference. But other people, say no, they should just… Margaret Thatcher was a good example,… I don't think she was that successful… because her politics were crap. But other people will say but yeah, she went into a male dominated world and won. So that … there are two different …

It depends on how you draw the lines of the battlefield, Was she successful there? Yes, Did she further the cause of women? No.

Exactly, it depends on what you look at.

Any other comments that you think are relevant?

I do training around the continent… I think newsrooms are a lot less gender aware than we give them credit… I think that there are still high levels of sexism … experiences that other women have accounted to me. I think that with media in particular, we spend a lot of time pointing our figure at other people and we don't necessarily examine ourselves that closely. And I … in other African countries, women face appalling levels of harassment as women. Yeah, I actually have a … know of an editor in another country who said, he can't send women out on assignment because people will sexually harass them… Like it is their fault. You know. Or alternatively that when they are out, they're out shining their nails. You know, that sort of thing. And I mean it is not that blatant, but I think there are a lot of pockets of … that kind of attitude. I think we do… I mean if I say to the men here, I think we need a gender workshop to examine your attitudes, people will roll with laughter, call me in and tell me I'm having a nervous breakdown. But I think, why not, every other sector of society examines itself and goes on … or has transformation training, … why should we be any different. … a bit more of self examination. You know… and what I find always interesting is the parallel between race and gender. Which is that… people are very… want to be … I don't like the word PC… but people want to do the correct thing and talk in the correct terms when it comes to issues around race, but they don't have the same sort of diction around gender. And they would all be terrified if you called them a racist, or horrified, or whatever. But they are not that concerned about being called a sexist.

Why do you think that is the case?
… Well, its about what are the power dynamics, at the moment… because race has become a big issue, with black empowerment, democracy and all of that, that is where the power lies. If you know, if suddenly we had an all female government and cabinet, and that gender… or

it was GEE instead of BEE… I promise you, people would be very worried about gender… It is just about what….that is my opinion.

I think that also… in race you have an 'other' - sort of thinking. The mentality that they live down there and I don't have much to do with them. Whereas in gender … they all have wives at home, so they feel like they know women. … its you know.