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Someday, With Help, News Media May Get It

By Sheila Gibbons, WeNews Commentator

Media advocates gathered last week in Germany to discuss how coverage of women can break a 30-year impasse. Sheila Gibbons says two identical headlines about women published by the same South African paper show how it can be done.

Editor's Note: The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.



Sheila Gibbons

DRESDEN, Germany (WOMENSENEWS) – Mountains of research analyzing news media's poor record reporting on and about women compiled over the last 30 years have given rise to one big question: Why are fresh ideas about reporting on women resisted so consistently by editors and publishers around the world?

To address the question, to find ways to persuade news executives to view their research findings as tools, not threats, two dozen scholars and activists from 15 countries on four continents met in Dresden June 18 for the International Symposium on Women and News, sponsored by the Feminist Scholarship Division of the International Communication Association, an academic organization headquartered in Washington, D.C.

Of everything that was said there, the most encouraging report came from one group in South Africa called Gender Links. Their experience shows nothing is quite so effective as a persistent, high-profile, sensitive and local monitoring operation.

Some at the symposium had participated in a 10-nation study of news coverage on March 8 of last year, International Women's Day. A full report will be published next year.

The researchers found that the day – established in 1977 by the United Nations to focus attention on women’s issues and advancement – had been hijacked by public officials who used it to court female constituents and by advertisers, who saw it as an opportunity to sell flowers, jewelry, dining and beauty products for men to give to women.

Reporting on issues such as pay equity and domestic violence – which would have been appropriate to the day – was scarce. When it did occur, researchers said, the reports usually noted that women in the European and North American countries being monitored were far better off than women in other countries, Muslim women in particular.

International Women’s Day “was seen as an anachronistic event belonging to another time and to other countries, where women are oppressed,” said Pamela Moores of Aston University in Birmingham, England. Such coverage had the effect of disqualifying women in developed countries from continuing to press for change, because the news coverage implied that the real barriers to change for women are elsewhere.

Attention-Getting Problems

Margaret Gallagher, an Irish media researcher working in England who authored the most recent Global Media Monitoring Project 2005 report which analyzed a single day of monitored print and broadcast news about women in 76 countries, recalled how difficult it was to persuade reporters to cover the February 2006 press conference in London when the report was released.

One who did attend, Stephen Pritchard, the readers’ editor of The Observer, wrote that the monitoring report – which found that there is not a single major news topic in which women outnumber men as newsmakers – makes for “shaming reading.”

Presenters at the symposium urged researchers and activists to make it easy for journalists to see what it is about articles – photo choices, cropping and headlines – that makes a news report a success or failure from a gender perspective.

Ammu Joseph, an independent journalist and author from Bangalore, India, described a Times of India report about the nation’s 2005-2006 budget. Not a single woman was among the 14 industrialists and corporate heads quoted about the budget, Joseph said, “nor was there a woman among the four commentators, whose analyses and prescriptions were published on the special edit page titled, ‘What the budget means: Our view, their view.’”

Joseph added, “This is despite the ready availability in India of outstanding women in industry and the corporate and financial worlds.”

Research and Receptivity

The symposium recommended new dimensions for research and ways to improve news executives' receptivity to media scholars' work. These ideas include:

- * Measuring whether public broadcasters produce more gender-aware news programming than commercial media and, if so, why?
- * Predicting the consequences of continued stereotyping of women and omission of them as sources and subjects of news.
- * Considering audiences as citizens as well as consumers.
- * Making research more practical and delivering it in the language of journalists, not social scientists or philosophers.
- * Producing more comparative research, such as media depiction of female politicians in several countries.
- * Measuring success. A fine example, according to Gallagher, is Swedish Public Television's Vasterbotten News, whose director in 2001 pledged gender balance among interview subjects. Women are now 44 percent of those interviewed and while the male audience numbers have remained constant, the percentage of female viewers now exceeds the males' by five percentage points, Gallagher says.

South Africa Group Sets an Example

Colleen Lowe Morna, executive director of South Africa's Gender Links Associates, which advocates gender awareness in media, remembers a presentation to the South African National Editors' Forum, after which an editor asked, "Where in the world is gender balance in the media? And if there is no such place," she asked, "why should South Africa be any different?"

Morna told the Dresden gathering that that the answer came to her later, "more clearly than I could articulate it at the time," she said. "Why is it, that on every other count South Africans want to be measured by and exceed world standards? Yet when it comes to gender, we are happy to be counted with or below the lowest common denominator! There is no other country, no other region of the world that understands the pain of being silenced as intrinsically as southern Africa. Why then can't we take the lead where gender and the media are concerned?"

The opportunity for leading by example certainly is there for the South Africans. There is indifference elsewhere, much of it stemming from news executives' belief that gender discrimination in employment of journalists and lack of gender awareness in news reporting are not the problems they once were and, thus, don't merit vigilance from those running newsrooms.

Morna's organization has been incredibly productive in churning out research and in forging cooperative relationships with media executives, efforts that very well may propel her country and its journalists into the lead on this issue.

In fact, my favorite success story from the symposium is one of Morna's. She displayed a front page of South Africa's The Star newspaper from 1996. The headline: "All the President's Women," below which were pictures of the three women then-South African President Nelson Mandela had been married to.

Fast-forward to 2003, and the same headline in the same newspaper. This time, the pictures are of all the women in President Thabo Mbeki's cabinet. It's not rocket science, is it?

Sheila Gibbons is editor of Media Report to Women, a quarterly news journal of news, research and commentary about women and media. She is also co-author of "Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism," Strata Publishing, which received the "Texty" Textbook Excellence Award from the Text and Academic Authors Association, and of "Exploring Mass Media for A Changing World," Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, publishers.

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