

Women brave odds in journalism

By Omwa Ombara

Until recently, journalism was regarded as a male oriented, male dominated career. The news desks did little to brush shoulders with 'skirt wearers' and those of the latter who dared venture into this field were subjected to gender discrimination; sexual harassment, biases in assignments, lack of promotions and general intimidation.

Now that a high percentage of women are graduating from Kenya's major institutions of journalism such as the University of Nairobi, Daystar, USIU and KIMC, women journalists have taken the bull by its horns. They have decided to tackle male domination and its related problems within the media.

Mr. Mutegi Njau, *Nation* Newspaper's Investigative Editor attributes the concept of journalism as a male dominated field to the socialization process. "The society did give preference to the male child in terms of education in the past. Naturally, women were left behind. This explains the domination of men in most sectors. There is discrimination of women at all levels, not just in journalism. And it starts from the day a female child is born," he says.

He however laments that some well-trained women journalists continue to suffer from this socialisation hangover. "Although we offer equal opportunities to members of staff regardless of sex, some women journalists tend to shy away from serious assignments." He chastises women journalists who go for current fashion at the expense of their jobs. "How seriously would you take a reporter who appears at the office in high-heeled shoes? Is she capable of covering a riot?" he muses.

Mr. Njau cites a recent case in which staffers were expected to stay in the office most of the night to keep up with the update of the election results. Only one woman journalist managed to stay up until 11.00 a.m. The rest fled the newsroom to the comfort of their homes, leaving behind a male dominated newsroom.

"What about cases where a reporter is expected to cover a story in Kariobangi South or Dandora at 3.00 a.m. Such an area is not easily accessible to a male reporter, let alone a female one. It is only common sense for a woman journalist to shy away from such an assignment. In such a case, the odds are against them and we really can't blame them. We'll therefore have to assign such a story to a male journalist," he says.

Ms Catherine Gacheru, the Mombasa *Nation* Bureau Chief concurs with Mr. Njau. She confirms that promotion is on merit at the *Nation* and duties are assigned according to experience, ability and commitment.

"You either stay single and stay in the office 24 hours to get your promotion or get married and be damned," Mercy Oburu.

She argues that although journalism is largely male dominated, women could still prove themselves by striking a balance between their jobs and families. "You don't have to cheat on either, because what matters is quality time, not quantity time," she adds.

Ms Gacheru however believes that the media world is changing and becoming more accommodative to women. That unlike seven years ago, more women are now in the

mainstream and are asking for their rights. She castigates women journalists who opt out of the mainstream media to join the Public Relations field to avoid family conflicts. She believes they are losers who can't stand the pace in the real game. Women would excel in journalism if only they could stick to the profession.

There is definitely a new crop of women journalists coming up, says Ms. Wambui Kiai, a lecturer at the School of Journalism (University of Nairobi). She commends the School's effort in offering equal training opportunities to both male and female students. Being the only woman lecturer among male colleagues, Ms Kiai says she has never experienced any form of sexual harassment from her colleagues at the School. She however wishes that the University administration could popularise journalism among the undergraduate students.

On the question of men dominating

never be one of them."

Ms Kiai encourages media bodies such as The Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK) to popularise journalism in high schools so that more women can join the profession and fight for their rights from within.

Ms Ashina Kibibi, a television producer at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation says that when she joined the profession three years ago, she had a problem with male colleagues who would refuse to take orders from her. But she had to fight the odds and prove herself. "I have never opted for the easy way out. No woman should!" she reckons.

Ms Kibibi strongly feels that women journalists who have failed to make it to senior positions have only themselves to blame. She knows of colleagues who have turned down transfers on promotion simply because they could not leave their husbands behind. "Why can't they sensitize their husbands", she wonders!

She however agrees that single women journalists or single mothers tend to do better within the profession than married ones.

The promotion of Ms Mercy Oburu of KTN from Chief Reporter to News Editor is a positive signal on how women are making their mark in journalism. This is however only a drop in the ocean. Ms Oburu says she has never experienced any form of bias or harassment in the course of duty. She emphasises that promotion at KTN is purely on merit and that upward mobility is equal for both men and women. She attributes her promotion to commitment and hardwork.

However, a reliable source at KTN reveals that there are cases of sexual harassment, particularly by



Catherine Gicheru, *Nation* Bureau Chief, Mombasa



Beatrice Mategwa, KTN reporter

the male editors. This, she says explains why only four out of 250 women staff are married. The source refers to this spinsterhood as a set-back to women who have had to choose between their jobs and marriages. "You either stay single and stay in the office 24 hours to get your promotion or get married and be damned!" she says. She however hopes that in future, the management will take into consideration their social needs vis a vis the long working hours, "especially now that we have a woman news editor."

Mr. Charo Tsuma, a researcher at the Media Institute feels that media women would do better if they could be more vocal about their problems, especially sexual harassment. Mr. Tsuma believes that sexual harassment within the media is quite complicated and that many women are suffering in silence to keep their jobs. Although there is no evidence, Mr. Tsuma says it is a question of dangling carrots, he says, "some news editors are known to make advances which when rejected results in blacklisting. And when interviews are carried out, the results are as black as the preceding events."

Outstanding journalists like Ms Dorothy Munyaho (Chief editor of Gender Review magazine and former acting news editor with the *Nation*), Ms Sylvia Mudasia (the 1995 *Nation* reporter of the year, and 1996's organising secretary of the Kenya Union of Journalists), Ms Mumbi Risa (Features Editor, *East African Standard*), Ms Esther Kamweru (former managing editor, *Standard on Sunday*), and many others have set the ball rolling. That is why upcoming journalists must take up the challenge.

Girls too have their own problems

By Munyori Buku

If you think that women are only disadvantaged at the political level, think again. In education, it is worse.

According to the Eighth National Development Plan 1997-2001, 65% of girls who enter primary schools do not complete Standard Eight. Only 35% do. In the case of boys, 45% fall by the way side.

Matters are even worse for the girl child in arid and semi-arid lands. In the North Eastern Province, for example, 70% of girls who enter primary school do not reach class three.

The Adult Education Blueprint, 1994, gives the literacy levels for men and women as 85.2% and 67.8% respectively.

During a training programme for primary school headteachers funded by the British government in 1996, it was revealed that out of the 16,000

headteachers in primary schools, only 1,500 are women.

Sources from the Teachers' Service Commission reveal that about 11,000 girls drop out of primary and secondary schools every year due to pregnancy. This is equivalent to 30 girls every day!

These figures illustrate how disadvantaged girl children, and by extension women, are in society.

Education is regarded as one ladder which can uplift those in the low rungs of society. If girls do not have adequate access to education, they and women in general will not improve their lot politically or otherwise. The problem is deeper than just failure to win elections.

A number of factors are to blame. Cultural norms that regard women as the extensions of manhood impede the full participation of women in education, business, politics and other careers.

Cultural practices such as female circumcision, invariably referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), and early marriages hamper the empowerment of women in Kenya.

Affirmative action has been regarded as one of the ways of solving the predicament of women. This is why the Kenya Constitution Amendment 1997 proposes that the nomination of 12 MPs and councillors should take cognisance of gender balance.

The Forum for Africa Women Educationists (FAWE) has been calling for affirmative action and other intervention measures at primary and secondary schools' levels. This would be more beneficial to more than the current policy which favours intervention at university level. The latter policy only benefits about 200 girls a year, while affirmative action at lower levels would help more girls than this.

Other measures to alleviate this

problem include giving the correct psychological motivation to girls. This would mean that only textbooks that are gender-sensitive are approved for use in schools. Books that emphasise the traditional roles of women such as cooking, baby-sitting, working in the farm should be discouraged. These books depict men in a better light in offices, as doctors, lawyers and in other prestigious careers.

If books are gender-sensitive, they will make girls look up to some of the examples as role models. Further, girls grow up in a school environment where those in positions of responsibility are men. This mystifies these responsibilities and it appears as if only men can do them.

These positions must be equitably given to women heads, not only in the education system but in all other sectors.