Stories on Karima Brown, Sophie Tema, Ferial Haffajee and Joyce Sikhakhone by Sarita Ranchod.

HERSTORIES
CELEBRATING
PIONEERING
WOMEN
IN SOUTH AFRICAN
JOURNALISM
At Sue Valentine’s departure, Brown was promoted from senior producer to executive producer of AMLive. As executive producer of the SABC’s premier current affairs programme it has been part of her responsibility to “hold on to old audiences and build a black audience, more reflective of our country”.

One of Brown’s proudest personal achievements at AMLive is the introduction of a regular HIV/AIDS slot. “We are the only national current affairs programme with a dedicated, weekly AIDS slot. This slot makes HIV/AIDS a national issue and goes beyond the sensationalism of reporting AIDS, by looking at all the ramifications of this pandemic, whether it be the politics of HIV/AIDS, matters of treatment, testing or research.”

Another programming achievement she notes is the inception of a radio producer, and so began her love affair, almost by chance. She moved from RSG to AMLive on May Day 1997, “when John Maytham, Charles Leonard, Ferial Haffajee and Hein Marais were the super-producers of the time. SAfm was the flagship for changing things around at the SABC,” she says.

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“The SABC was at an exciting time,” says Brown. “They were prepared to take on the contradictions of change. There was a great deal of debate and disagreement between the older people and the newer people. Part of the SABC was open and prepared to be a platform for debates in the country,” she recalls.

She highlighted labelling and boxing as one of her challenges and in addressing this performed in an innovative partnership with the Mail&Guardian to enable the audience, more reflective of our country.”

On the day of our interview, Karima Brown, Executive Producer of SABC radio’s flagship current affairs programme AMLive, is in her ninth year at the SABC where she has spent the bulk of her career producing AMLive and Midday Live.

Her first interaction with the SABC was as a studio guest on Afrikaans radio station Radio Sonder Grense (RSG). After the Interview Kenneth Makatees suggested she try her hand at being a radio producer, and so began her love affair, almost by chance.

Prior to joining the SABC Brown had been working in local government and urban policy research. Much of her work focused on faith-based communities and their responses to democratisation and change. In some cases the constitutional changes sweeping the country did not speak to the transformative values of some of our faith-based communities. I worked on addressing these changes within these communities,” she said.

As an anti-apartheid activist in the Cape Youth Congress (CAYCO) during the turbulent 1980s she was involved in community and underground media initiatives on the Cape Flats. Through these activities Brown met journalists like Zubeida Jaffer, Rehana Rossouw and Mansoor Jaffer, who all showed her that media could be used as a strategic site of struggle. “At that point I could never have imagined one day working at the SABC, which was anathema at that time.”

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“This was an opportunity for me to work as a producer in English, my first language,” says Brown. “We were prepared to take on the contradictions of change. There was a great deal of debate and disagreement between the older people and the newer people. Part of the SABC was open and prepared to be a platform for debates in the country,” she recalls.

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Our understandings of transformation and change needs interrogation: “These are not static, and to think of transformation and change as referring to race and gender only, is a limiting approach. At the SABC I work with people from rural areas, of different sexual orientations, from different class and linguistic backgrounds. All of these things define who we are.”

She highlights labelling and boxing as one of her challenges of working in media. “While I am not religious, the fact that I have a Muslim name makes people assume I have a particular position on Palestine or the US,” says Brown, as an example of how narrow and limiting unfounded assumptions are.

After nine years at the public broadcaster, Brown is preparing to take up a new challenge: moving to the Independent Newspapers group as political correspondent responsible for the presidency, government and the civil service. “I felt it was time to move. When I came here I knew very little about radio. I understood the political changes in the country and the kinds of stories that needed telling. Now I want to be able to write better, to interact more with my own thoughts. I am excited about moving to the written medium.”

Brown has a 13-year-old son, who she says does not enjoy reading. “Perhaps through working with the written form I will find the magic formula to get my son excited about reading. In the context of all the technology surrounding us, I feel it is important to emphasise the importance of reading and writing, and there’s nothing like a good old newspaper.”

At the conclusion of our interview I feel inspired. I have met a mind that is alive and thinking. I think about her move to the written word and the writing that this mind in interaction with itself could produce. I am reminded of Brown’s words: “There is value in wisdom and insight,” and think that today I have met a wise and insightful woman, whom I look forward to reading.
for shelter. I wrote about the families of political prisoners, people in the open veld, women left in tents and churches. The editor of the time, Lawrence Gander, had an independent version of the Sisulu book. This busy woman is currently researching and conducting interviews for Sisulu's award-winning biography, A South African Love Story, on the lives of Walter and Albertina Sisulu. Sikhakhane also had an opportunity to put her documentary filmmaking skills to use when she worked as executive producer of the film version of the Sisulu book. This busy woman is currently wrapping up a manuscript for a book about the life of Albertina Sisulu.

Commenting on the state of South African media 10 years into democracy, Sikhakhane says: "We don't realise what apartheid's monsters spared this pioneering woman journalist's life, and that she has lived to continue telling her multiple stories."
Ferial Haffajee, editor of the Mail & Guardian, says she has never wanted to be anything other than a journalist. “At primary school when we would be asked what we wanted to become, my answer was always ‘journalist.’”

Haffajee says her choice of career was inspired by her love of reading and writing. While at Christian Botha High School in Boksfontein, Johannesburg, which she describes as “a poor school, with progressive and dedicated teachers” she worked on the school newspaper and “got a feel for print.”

After completing matric she was accepted to study journalism at Rhodes University, but her parents could not afford the cost of sending her away to study. Instead she went to Wits University where she read African Literature and English, and also tried to fulfill her mother’s dream of her becoming a lawyer by taking a law major. Haffajee left the Weekly Mail when the newspaper was launched, and decided that was where she wanted to go.” After completing her BA degree this quietly determined and focused woman applied to the Weekly Mail’s training programme and was accepted onto their one-year training programme.

She started at the Weekly Mail in 1991, which she says, “feels like yesterday,” but says, “I was a different person then, and the Weekly Mail was a different newspaper.” Unlike the current situation, when she joined the Weekly Mail training programme “there was a lot more money for training and I was part of a large intake of trainees,” she says.

After completing the one-year training programme she was recruited as the Weekly Mail’s labour reporter and general news hand “This was the beginning of a complete love affair for me. I could write about my interests. There were no limits imposed on me. Covering labour issues struck a chord with my personal life, as both my parents were clothing workers and had always belonged to trade unions.”

Haffajee left the Mail & Guardian for three years to try her hand at the Financial Mail, but returned in 1996. She later also worked at the Financial Mail, but once again “came home” to the Mail & Guardian.

Recalling formative on-the-job experiences, Haffajee says: “At the Weekly Mail I can’t point to any one particular mentor, as so many people were supportive of my work. The entire workplace was geared towards training young people. If you had a smidgen of talent, there were many wings under which to be nurtured.” Having said that, Haffajee adds that she did some of her most exciting writing under the guidance of Charlotte Bauer; while Barbara Ludman had the particular skill of “honing the ‘I’ writing of many young journalists into professional writing”.

Drew Forrest, now one of her two deputy editors, taught her the ins and outs of labour reporting. She notes that it is odd that one of her mentors now works as her deputy editor, but says the Mail & Guardian is a space able to work within the challenges of our history and times.

Throughout our interview colleagues wanting her advice intermittently interrupted us. She deals with the interruptions with a calm kindness, promising that she will be there as soon as she can. I get a sense that this woman takes everything in her stride. I cannot imagine what would throw her off balance.

Since Haffajee’s editorship of the Mail & Guardian the paper has visibly sought to increase its women sources and women writers, receiving praise from media monitoring organisations for rapid progress in this regard. Haffajee credits her abiding interest in gender issues to Pat Made, the respected Zimbabwean feminist, journalist and media trainer. “Pat was one of the first people who drew my attention to the importance of capturing ordinary voices, to understanding politics and inequality through the eyes of ordinary people. She taught me how to do it.” she says.

Of her experiences as a woman in the newsroom, she says she has been “lucky to work in an enlightened space like the Mail & Guardian. It has always been a gender-conscious space in which debate is vigorous.”

Haffajee’s experience includes time at the SABC — posing more challenges in terms of gender issues. “When I joined the SABC — in addition to inheriting a racist past — it also had to confront a legacy of gender inequality. Of the old guard, the senior people were male. I entered at the cusp of change.” Haffajee mentions broadcasting veterans Amina Frense and Sylvia Vollenhoven as senior women she could look up to while at the SABC.

While she loved the adrenaline of producing radio, Haffajee jokes that she “didn’t have a voice for radio” and realised she loved writing most. But, she says: “The SABC is ultimately the place to go back to. If you want to effect change in society, if you want to change voice and change perspective, if you want to make women’s voices heard, the SABC is the place to do it.”

Her experience at the Financial Mail introduced her to “an entirely different world” where she learnt that the business and economic networks are still very much male. Praising the strong women-led team at the Financial Mail, Haffajee says: “While women run the Financial Mail, the audience and style of business is still male,” pointing obliquely to the fact that more women running newsrooms does not by necessity lead to more gender equitable coverage.

Of the personal gender considerations of being a woman working in the media, Haffajee mentions that her first marriage could not withstand the strain of her being a journalist. At the time she worked at the SABC where work would start at 3am.

And how does one find balance in journalism? “It is a passion and you live it. That is not easy.” She notes that employers are however becoming increasingly flexible – with more opportunities for women to work as freelancers or on contracts that suit their lives. “If employers thought laterally there would be a lot more space for women to make arrangements that work for them.” But, she cautions that the increasing flexibility of employers has a lot to do with “the cost-cutting era” where work can be done more cheaply from home.

Commenting on the state of South African media 10 years into democracy, Haffajee says, somewhat despondently: “We are not in a great space. There is a lack of quality and depth in South African journalism at present. It shouldn’t take only an hour to get through the Sunday papers.”

She argues that this lack of quality and depth impacts on the gendered nature of coverage. “There is a lot of short-cutting taking place. Gender-sensitive reporting is not about Women’s Day supplements or women’s pages. Gender-informed coverage needs to be much more considered and long term than at present.”

Haffajee observes that some of the women’s magazines are doing excellent work when it comes to engendered reporting and writing, but that newspapers and other media are lagging. “At the Mail & Guardian we are trying hard to make gender less self-conscious, to ensure that gender perspectives are included in a cross-section of the newspaper.” On progress made in this regard, she says: “We are doing well, but it will take a while to get it right.”

A gender perspective, she argues, should inform how one chooses a freelancer, which economists are quoted, who is featured and on which page, who speaks on the budget. Asked about accessing women as sources and as experts, she says: “I have access to various networks of women and I make use of those, but to be frank, it is not always easy. It is often easier to get hold of a woman economist than a woman economist.”

And the significant media attention her appointment as editor of the Mail & Guardian has garnered? “It is wonderful to be so celebrated as a woman editor, but it is sad that after so long there are so few of us.”

At the end of the interview I am left with the sense of a quiet, focused and determined woman who goes about her chosen task with a steady and calm determination. I can’t imagine anything will get in Haffajee’s way of transforming the Mail & Guardian into not only “Africa’s Best Read” but also into a newspaper that reflects ordinary people’s voices and views, and importantly women’s voices and viewpoints.
Getting hold of veteran journalist Sophie Tema is not easy. Whenever I call her to make an appointment, she is at the prison doing life-skills training, or she is at a security prison doing hard news training. The prison then of course has to be switched off. We miss each other numerous times, and when, at last, we do speak, it is late in the evening. She seems to have time for everyone and everything.

After quitting journalism, Tema started an NGO called the Learn and Earn Trust, which aims to rehabilitate prisoners by focusing on life skills, handicraft skills and HIV education. At the Leonkop Prison, inmates are also being trained in home-based care to take care of terminally ill prisoners. This is where she now spends most of her time: in maximum-security prisons working “with hardened criminals”.

Asked how she made the switch from journalist to prison worker, Tema says she resigned from her job as journalist at City Press in 1993 to take care of her mother who was ill. After her mother’s death she decided to quit journalism. A factor that influenced her decision was that in her experience, women were not promoted. “After nearly 30 years in journalism, I was not promoted to anything more than journalist. I realised this was a waste of time,” she says without remorse.

And how did she end up working in prisons? She was watching television one day and heard the then Minister of Correctional Services speaking about the desperate need to rehabilitate prisoners. In that moment, Tema, who has never set foot in a prison before, realised that this was what she needed to do. She says that she is working at Modderbee Prison doing life-skills training. “I designed a life-skills programme that the prisoners could identify with, that made sense in the contexts of their daily lives. I realised that copying the US approach would have no relevance or impact on their lives.”

Since working at Modderbee Prison, word has spread about her work and she was approached by a number of other prisons, including the Johannesburg Prison where she works with women inmates. Tema says the biggest challenge of what she does is that while there is great need for this kind of work, there is a desperate shortage of funds. She often finds herself covering travel costs out of her own pocket.

Judge JJ Fagan has also appointed Tema as an independent prisons visitor, which means that she can go into prisons to listen to the experiences and complaints of inmates and has the authority to take up their problems and ensure they are sorted out.

Asked about how she came to be a journalist, Tema says she had wanted to be a lawyer. When her father heard this, he told her she did not approve because “lawyers have to lie to earn a living”. She then asked her father what he would like her to do and he replied “journalist”. Tema says at that time it was completely unheard of for a woman to be a journalist.

After her father’s death in 1962, Tema got a job as a telephone operator at the English-language newspaper, the Rand Daily Mail. Tema notes that she soon ran into problems, including being paid less than the white journalists. “The women journalists were in turn paid less than the white journalists,” she recalls. Tema adds that she was news editor, “but the highest level a black man could rise to in the newsroom was news editor,” she recalls. Tema adds that black journalists’ salaries “could never compare with what the white journalists earned, and that black women journalists were in turn paid less than black male journalists.” She is left wondering how “unity in the newsroom” could be promoted in such a vastly inequitable space. She also notes that Tema tells me all of this without a trace of bitterness. She has clearly made peace with her experiences in journalism.

Now, spending most of her time in maximum-security prisons, she says the inmates treat her with respect. “I often feel safer inside a prison than outside.” Of her experiences of working with prisoners she says: “I feel like a mother towards them, working with their children.”

Tema’s “motherly instinct”, viewing situations through the lens of “mother”, giving and making time for others, made it possible for her to do some of her best work in journalism. “It is this humility and compassion that she now brings to the work of rehabilitating criminals.”
The 21st century female journalist must reclaim her “writeful” place in media archives. The doors were opened in the ‘60s by the likes of Mary Nontolwane and Winnie Madlungo (radio broadcasters), Joyce Sikhakhane Rankin, Judy Mayet and Sophio Tema for print. Although these women made in-roads into the media for women, their roles were confined to story-telling, community-based reporting and entertainment. Still, they were welcomed and played a significant role in the liberation of black South Africans. They worked beyond deadlines and in their communities they became the voices of direction, the voices of reason. They were teachers, social workers and leaders of their people, emancipating women through their writings and programmes.

The ‘70s saw a new breed of female journalist who faced teargas, bullets, detention, police harassment and other atrocities by Nationalist Party government. As media workers, they worked side by side with their male colleagues, fighting for liberation. Girls were driven to sacrifice themselves for the freedom of the press and literally risking their lives for this industry. Some battles were won – like recognition of unions. Some were lost – when publishers decided to promote journalists they empowered males as if women could not lead newsrooms. This created a wave of departures for the disgruntled. ‘70s women journalists castigated and brilliant writers quit the profession on mass – Suzette “Stray Bullet” Malunga, Matilda Masipa, Pearl Luthuli, Maud Motanyane and many others – to start their own businesses, study or venture into different fields. Today, Pearl is a publisher, Matilda is a judge and Suzette is a communications specialist.

The ‘80s women came and left the newsrooms as fast as they could. Firstly corporates were beginning to realise that communications with their target markets was vital. Women journalists had great potential in advertising, research and communications and were snapped up in no time. Also, journalism did not pay well, especially if you were a woman. By the ‘90s there was a dearth of black women in journalism. Democracy was around the corner and clearly the newsroom was the last place to be for the creative who also had dreams of emancipation and a new position in the new South Africa.

The 21st century female journalist must therefore continue doing the job by learning both of media and leadership. She should take advantage of education and training at tertiary level in sales and marketing, HR policies, financial aspects, and both the resources of the particular medium they chose to venture into. Female journalists must also specialise in many areas of reporting so that they can have better chances of heading different desks – economics, labour, politics etc. To claim the “writeful” place, the 21st century female journalist must be an all-rounder who is versatile with any subject, anywhere with anyone.

By Joyce Dube
SABC News Marketing Manager

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