



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



# **HERSTORIES** **CELEBRATING** **PIONEERING** **WOMEN** **IN SOUTH AFRICAN** **JOURNALISM**





# Karima Brown

Trevor Crighton

**O**n 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 conservative 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."

She joined the SABC as a radio producer in 1995 to assist with coverage of the first democratic local government elections. When Brown began her journalistic career at Radio Sonder Grense, the station was trying to recreate itself from being widely perceived as an instrument of apartheid government policy to one that proactively sought to "include the voices and perspectives of Afrikaans-language speakers who had been excluded from the airwaves".

"I joined the SABC 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 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.

"This was an opportunity for me to work as a producer in English, my first language." Brown credits John Maytham for giving her her "first break as an on-air producer" by asking her to stand in for a colleague for two weeks. "I took to it with a passion and found out that this is what I really like doing. I love the adrenaline of live programming."

Brown says most people lack an understanding of what goes into live producing. There is always a team of extremely hard-working people behind a presenter. "As executive producer I've always known the responsibility to lead was mine. It's no joke phoning a cabinet minister at 6am saying not only do I want to interview you this morning, but I want to interview you about what is in today's paper." Brown says her area of journalism is often rendered invisible since it cannot be seen. "It is heard and it is mediated through a presenter. If a presenter rattles off a number of impressive statistics, know that there was a team behind that," she says.

Of her recent experiences Brown says, "John Perlman has been incredible to work with. He is one of the best in the business." 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 the After Eight Debate – a concept she developed together with John Perlman. It is through this programme that the SABC has an innovative partnership with the *Mail&Guardian* to enable the continuation of the day's debates online. "This programme allows for people from all walks of life to engage in all aspects of life on this continent," says Brown.

The increasing "dumbing down" of South African media is a threat to the future of quality in South African media, Brown says. "Refusing to dumb down and insisting on quality programming is an ongoing challenge. Quality programming costs money because there are research costs; there are costs of conducting interviews. We want our journalists to be in the field – not conducting all their interviews by telephone. And we have to fight to retain quality in broadcasting," she states emphatically.

Like other media, the public broadcaster is under increasing pressure to make ends meet

A simple solution is "to open the lines". While this approach can increase ratings, it impacts negatively on the quality of programming output. "Even though the SABC is not an entirely commercial entity, there is constant pressure from advertisers to get presenters to read their advertisements, for example," she says. Brown commends the public broadcaster's commitment to ensuring that control "cannot be bought" by ensuring editorial independence and editorial values consistent with the Constitution.

Brown is particularly proud of the strong team she has helped build at AMLive. "We have a diverse team with producers from all nine provinces. Our diversity informs our programme output which I consider to be a feat," she says. "Our unit has been transformed from a predominantly white, male one to a much more representative team without compromising standards or programming suffering," Brown states firmly.

Asked for her evaluation of South African media 10 years into democracy: "Our media is battered," she says referring to the many instances of South African media being caught in ethically compromising positions in the last year. The increasing juniorisation of newsrooms and the concomitant lack of skills in newsrooms leave our media vulnerable to powerful interest groups pressuring journalists be biased "Because so many journalists are passionate about our democracy we have to guard against taking sides and aligning with certain interest groups. Journalists, because of their powerful position in our democracy are prone to being labelled as patriotic or unpatriotic, as left or ultra-left, or as forwarding a DA agenda," she says.

"What our media need are editors with backbone, professional journalists who stand by their stories, and a media that

acknowledges the big gaps in training, in better writing, in checking facts better." An inevitable effect of the ongoing juniorisation of newsrooms is that "we find there are stories lacking context, lacking a sense of history and understanding. There is value in wisdom and insight, and sadly this is often. In the race to break stories, many younger, less experienced journalists display an absence of understanding and context," says Brown.

Why journalism as a career? "I found my passion in it. It's exciting to be a journalist. It provides an opportunity to pursue your curiosity, and to satisfy that curiosity. It allows me to enter worlds I would not ordinarily have access to. It enables me to enlarge my own world, and to make our world a better place." Brown says she has come to love "the pressure of a deadline, the creative process involved in making good media and the adrenalin of it all".

Asked about the position of women in newsrooms and being a senior woman in a newsroom, she says the notion of women having a common agenda in the newsroom is a false one premised on the general notion of women having a united agenda. While Brown supports the principle of women's advancement, she notes "women are not automatic allies. As a feminist I do not presuppose that other women have the same agenda. I have seen women aping men in the newsroom – being bossy and throwing authority around. That kind of behaviour displays neither leadership nor strength. To assume that because we are of the same gender we have the same positions or agendas is naïve," says Brown.

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," she says, 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.



**B**orn and raised in Soweto, Joyce Sikhakhane attended the renowned English-medium Inanda Seminary School in KwaZulu Natal. Her English teacher, who noted her special writing and listening abilities, encouraged her to pursue journalism as a career.

After completing matric in 1963 she applied to work at the then *Bantu World* newspaper as a cub reporter. "At that point there were no schools for black people to train in journalism, and so training was by necessity on the job," Sikhakhane recalls.

"What also informed my career choice was that I didn't want to attend one of the tribal universities open to African people at that time." By the time she was accepted as a cub reporter the *Bantu World* newspaper was renamed *The World*.

"The editor at the time agreed to give me a six-month chance to prove myself," she recalls, telling me about typing up stories with one finger. "There was competition for access to typewriters. Only senior journalists had dedicated access to them," she says.

When Sikhakhane joined *The World* she had the opportunity to work with men like Aggrey Klaaste, Casey Motsisi and Joe Tholoe who went on to become celebrated journalists. "I was the only woman journalist at *The World* and the newspaper had not employed a woman journalist before. Sophie Tema joined me later and other publications like *Drum* and *The Post* employed women like Jubie Mayete."

Asked why she thinks she was given a chance to enter the all-male domain of *The World*, Sikhakhane says her English language skills undoubtedly gave her an edge. Still she refused to attend university. "My parents were angry with me for not going to university, but I had made the political decision to boycott the tribal universities. My mother also had the impression that journalists were drunkards, and that I would land up being a prostitute. My mother cried about my decision to become a journalist," she says. "I was very assertive and assured my parents I would not become a drunkard or a prostitute." This said, she tells of her most useful journalistic training ground: the magistrate's courts. "In the courtrooms I really learnt to listen, take notes and report."

After her six-month trial period she was made a permanent member of staff. Her male colleagues arranged an "initiation or graduation" for her at a shebeen in Alexandra where she was "baptised with beer and brandy. I got home reeking of alcohol that night and my mother thought her worst fears had been confirmed," she laughs.

At that time working in journalism was a great challenge for a woman: "Patriarchy dominated in the newsrooms and it was certainly hard work for women," noting the late hours of the job as a particular challenge. "I would often get home at 2am after waiting for the sub-editor to approve a story, and then waiting for transport to get home. The company did provide us with transport for the late nights. It wasn't an option to go home by train at those hours. The trains were rough. Sometimes walking to the train in the morning, one would have to jump over corpses. Crime was very bad at that time and murder rates were high," she recalls. And now? I ask. "When people say crime in South Africa is high now, I think it has always been that way. I grew up in such an environment."

Alcohol was indeed the downfall of many journalists at that time, and Sikhakhane recalls how on Fridays the male journalists would take a portion of their pay packets for the weekend drinking spree and hand her the rest of their wages. "The wives would collect the money from me on a Monday morning. The husbands would often not make it home on the weekends."

I ask her what was happening in the country then. "It was the 1960s. The Rivonia Trial was happening and my male colleagues were not very interested." It was the disinterest of her colleagues that provided Sikhakhane with the space to cover the political realities of the country.

By this stage some of South Africa's best journalists had left the country while others were banned or restricted. And the ones who were left seemed to be going through a period of decadence. "They didn't care about themselves or their lives. They were very irresponsible," Sikhakhane says.

While her male colleagues were self-destructive, she says: "They treated me with respect. They were like brothers to me. I was never harassed or abused by any of my colleagues. Instead they were protective of me. But at the same time they did not look after their families."

When the *Rand Daily Mail* opened a township office, Sikhakhane was offered an opportunity to move on from *The World*. "I worked as a junior reporter under the likes of Benjamin Pogrand, Allister Sparks and Peter Wellman. The editor of the time, Lawrence Gander, had an independent, enquiring mind and was interested in the *Rand Daily Mail* exposing the effects of apartheid on the black community. I wrote about the mass removals of people, the dumping of people in the open veld, women left in tents and churches for shelter. I wrote about the families of political prisoners,

and what it meant to live under apartheid restrictions. I wrote about the lives of Winnie Mandela and Albertina Sisulu."

For the courage of her writing Sikhakhane was detained under the Protection Against Communism Act spending 18 months in solitary confinement. "I nearly went mad. I attempted suicide but didn't have access to the necessary materials. I was in total isolation at Pretoria Central, then Nylstroom prison. At 6am we would be given a bucket of water. Another bucket was provided for urinating and defecating. I slept on a mat on the cold cement floor of a narrow cell with a light on all the time. All that I could think of was getting out. I was interrogated about what I had been writing about. The security police wanted to know who I thought I was, writing what I did," her voice resounding with pain and a quiet dignity.

Sikhakhane was arrested along with 22 others including her colleague, photographer Peter Magubane. "Fortunately we had good lawyers like George Bizos and Arthur Chaskalson. We won our case but were redetained immediately, this time under the Terrorism Act. We won again but were now faced with banning orders and restrictions." Upon her release from prison Sikhakhane met up with Steve Biko and Barney Pitso and became part of an underground nucleus providing leadership to the soon to be banned South African Students' Organisation (SASO).

In the context of an increasingly repressive state, she fled South Africa in 1973 in an escape planned by the ANC. Her escape route took her through Mozambique, Swaziland, Germany, Tanzania, Britain, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

"Later on I wrote a book called *Window on Soweto* recounting my experiences of growing up in Soweto, working in newspapers and my experiences of prison and exile." The book, published by British Defence and Aid, was banned in South Africa and the proceeds went to pay the legal fees of political prisoners.

"I was in exile for nearly 20 years and mostly worked for the ANC doing environmental scanning in the Frontline states." In between her ANC work she held media positions in various Frontline states working for the English service of Radio Mozambique, writing radio plays and learning the skills of broadcasting, and as senior journalist for *The Chronicle* newspaper in Zimbabwe. In 1987 however, her job at *The Chronicle* came to an end because of her involvement in the ANC.

Of her experiences in exile, Sikhakhane says she found Zimbabwe most fascinating because of its "cultural and linguistic similarity to South Africa and its history of colonial rule". While in exile she had the opportunity to make documentary films, something she continues to do still. She has made a documentary on Samora Machel with a Canadian filmmaker and a documentary about Zimbabwe on the occasion of 10 years of independence, called *Zimbabwe – The New Struggle*. During this time she also completed an Honours degree in political economy with the Open University, United Kingdom.

Sikhakhane returned to South Africa in 1995 and was deployed to the Department of Intelligence; but still she was drawn back to the media, and spent some time at the SABC as a bi-media (TV and radio) news editor.

She recently took a two-year break from the Department of Intelligence to work with Elinor Sisulu doing research 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 the amount of freedom we have in terms of free speech."

And the matter of women's advancement in South African media? "While there are many women in the South African media now, still only a handful are editors. The media is still dominated by men."

Things like balancing the responsibilities of home, family and child-rearing, mitigate against women's advancement in newsrooms. "And the long hours and late nights do not help," she adds.

Sikhakhane says South African media have a long way to go before they can claim to being representative of the country's demography. "We have only just started," she says.

Concerned about the future of African language media, Sikhakhane sees potential for Internet-based news to be presented in African languages.

In concluding my interview with Sikhakhane, I remember Ruth First who also combined activism and journalism in the search for truth. I am left feeling grateful that apartheid's monsters spared this pioneering woman journalist's life, and that she has lived to continue telling her multiple stories.

# Joyce Sikhakhane





# Ferial Haffajee

Nadine Hutton

**F**erial 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 Bosmont, 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 fulfil her mother's dream of her becoming a lawyer by taking a law major.

While a student at Wits she had made up her mind: "The *Weekly Mail* was the only newspaper I wanted to work at. I'd heard Anton Harber speak at Wits when the newspaper was launched, and decided that was where I 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 broadcasting at the SABC, 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 smidgeon 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 interrupt 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 adrenalin 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 Iraj Abedian 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 where cellular phones have 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 Leeuwkop 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 land 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 had never set foot in a prison before, realised that this was what she needed to do. She started 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 a US approach would have no relevance or impact on their lives. I needed to design something that spoke to their reality and it has been a great success," she says.

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 he 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, Afrikaans-owned and -managed newspaper for Africans, *Elethu Mirror*, in Johannesburg. Tema notes ironically that she got the job because of her proficiency in Afrikaans, which she perfected while attending an Afrikaans-medium mission school in the Free State.

There were only four journalists at *Elethu Mirror*, and in between answering the phone, Tema would write up "snippets, laughter columns and a bit of gossip". She once accompanied a journalist to a beauty contest where he proceeded to get drunk. "The following day he was too babalaas to write his piece and asked for my help. I wrote the story, it went down well and I had proven myself," she recalls with good humour.

Tema says her male colleagues helped her

a great deal and respected her as a woman and as a journalist. "They could not do anything to elevate my status. Those decisions rested with management and management would always promote a white woman over a black woman," she remembers.

When her colleague Humphrey Tyler became editor of *The World* newspaper, he remembered her contribution to *Elethu Mirror* and asked her to join him at *The World* to work on the women's pages. Tema joined him but wanted to do more than the women's pages and started working on "hard news".

It was her experience with Hector Petersen on 16 June 1976 that brought her to prominence. On 15 June 1976 a young girl delivered a letter to Tema advising her of a planned march by students to Orlando, Soweto, against Afrikaans as the medium of school instruction.

"On 16 June 1976 I went to Naledi High School where the march was planned to begin. The students had left and were already in Mafolo. I was with a photographer from *The World*, Sam Nzima. We went on to Orlando West and while driving around the area we came across a boy carrying another little boy in his arms. A little girl was running alongside them. I jumped out of the car and told them to get in. We rushed to the clinic, but by the time we got there he was already dead."

Asked about her reaction to what she saw on that fateful day in South African history, she says: "The little boy was wearing a jersey like my little boys'. My motherly instinct kicked in. I thought this could be my child, or my friend's child. How would I feel if I'd sent my children to school and learnt they were shot dead? I put myself in the shoes of the mother. Imagine finding out your child is not in school, but dead on a cold slab in a morgue."

*The World* was banned in 1976 and then relaunched as the *Sowetan* by the Argus newspaper group. Tema continued to work for the newly formed *Post and Weekend Post*. In 1980 she was offered a job at the *Rand Daily Mail* and worked there until its demise. She then moved to *Business Day* and while there was offered a job at *City Press* where she stayed until finally quitting journalism.

Tema says of her experiences of working at the *Rand Daily Mail*: "Journalists, black and white, were trying to build a unified situation in the newsroom. I can't complain that I was made to feel out of place. Our white colleagues tried their best to make us feel at home, to make us feel a part of them."

Black journalists always had a "problem with management who would make decisions about promotions and could make life unpleasant. There were no promotions for black women and the highest level a black man could rise to 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". I am left wondering how "unity in the newsroom" could be promoted in such a vastly inequitable space. I also note 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 her 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.

# Sophie Tema



# THE STARS... AND THE VERY DARK SKY

**NomaVenda Mathiane speaks to the women who think it's time to take charge of the agenda for both newsrooms and news.**

**F**ormer Sowetan newspaper and award-winning journalist Charity Bhengu swears that when she became a journalist in 1994 she was aiming at the stars. She left the newsroom 11 years later, deflated and dejected. "I had failed to realise my dream. I could not crack it. Not because I was incapable but because of the newsroom environment," she says.

SABC national bulletin editor Alinah Dube says: "Our male colleagues' attitudes nudge us out of the profession." She joined the Sowetan in 1980 and worked her way up to running the Pretoria bureau. She left in 1993 in protest after she was overlooked for a senior position which was given to a junior male journalist.

Masipati Tsotsotso, senior news researcher at the SABC, started off in print. She does not mince her words: "The newsrooms will not change. You sit at newsroom conferences with men who have big egos and it is as if you are not there. It is a boy's club and as long as they run the newsrooms then we are not ever going to crack it in this profession."

Ten years into democracy, South Africa has seen many changes – good and bad. The media have undergone interesting transformation with companies changing hands and editors shifted like pawns on the chessboard to give way to black males.

"What has changed?" asked Sophie Tema, one of the oldest and most respected black women journalists.

Tema became a journalist in 1965 when there were few black women reporters. She recalls working with Joyce Siwani who later went to university to study social science and became a successful social worker; Joyce Sikhakhane who went into exile in the 1970s and is now an author, and Clara Taukubong who got married and left for Botswana.

Tema argues that theirs was not just a profession but a calling. "We did not only work as journalists. We were consulted by members of the community on various issues. We were social workers and we had a passion for our work."

Tema was in Soweto on the fateful Wednesday in June 1976 when the students protested against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. She had the unfortunate ordeal of witnessing 14-year-old Hector Peterson being shot by the police. Tema dropped the story and rushed the little boy to hospital where he was certified dead on arrival. She later testified before the Celliers Commission which was appointed to investigate the causes of the Soweto uprisings.

Tema says she is disappointed that newsrooms have not changed. She said when they were reporters in the '60s, they worked hard to ensure that the women who would come after them would not struggle as much as they did. "Alas, that was a pipe dream. I see women's bylines come and go, and I know the reason why. The men make it impossible for women to succeed."

She said one of her newseditors once called her into his office and told her that she was "a very good journalist but we cannot promote you above that man", pointing to a junior male reporter.

She is also critical of today's practice of doing stories by telephone and Internet. "We went out and looked for stories, interviewed people. There was no Internet to depend on. Today's journalist clicks on the website and that is their source of news. In a way I am glad I am out of it."

Joyce Siwani, who worked for the *Rand Daily Mail*, says: "We were tolerated in the newsroom so that the newspaper could be seen to be politically correct. It was expediency. Nobody cared for us. At times we did not have transport to travel to do the stories and had to share typewriters."

Siwani says apartheid destroyed the soul of black

men. "And as if that was not enough, culturally, men were made natural heads of communities. Now they have to prove themselves. As it is, they are busy in the engine room recapturing their souls."

Former deputy editor of *Business Report* Siphon Ngcobo says: "The experiences of black women journalists are a reflection of the society we live in. Added to that, newspaper companies are the least progressive and most conservative industry. They are like building construction companies where only the tough last."

Most of these companies do not have a development plan to advance members of staff, he said, adding: "And these are the people who wake up everyday and tell people how to run their lives, but look at the newspapers they operate."

"Surely even if they have not transformed, let them at least have a policy and plan at hand to show they mean business and intend to address employment equity and development."

However, former Sowetan journalist Pearl Majola left the profession for totally different reasons. An exception to the rule, maybe. "I was not frustrated. I wanted to make more money," she said laughing.

When she left the newspapers to join the corporate world she did not have a driver's licence, nor did she own a car. She now drives a two-door Mercedes Benz.

"SA journalism is a strange industry. It is the only profession that cannot find women who can make it to the top. Even the government has beaten them to it. We have ministers and directors general who are women. What I know is that journalism doesn't pay."

Joyce Sikhakhane traces the causes of the problem to the period when she became a journalist, the turbulent '60s. She argues that it was a time of great trials and many of the best black male journalists had left the country or died. "The rest were depressed and drank themselves silly. I worked with these men and was struck at their lack of respect for themselves, the women and the profession. They would not touch politics. I became interested in politics and I paid heavily for that. Come 1976, they woke up from their drunken stupor and became responsible. They must not give the impression that they have always cracked it because they did not."

Former *Daily Dispatch* journalist/activist Thenjiwe Mtintso who practised at the height of apartheid and was detained for several months says: "There are so many obstacles strewn on their paths that makes it impossible for black women to stay in the industry."

However, she said, all is not lost, the situation can still be remedied. One of the challenges facing the industry is the matter of ownership, and black business women must buy into this industry, she says.

"It must cease to be the monopoly of white men. Owners and editors must have gender policies that will start addressing problems from entry level right up to management."

"This policy must also define what is news, and all stakeholders must undergo gender training courses so that they can understand how society functions, because 10 years into our democracy newspapers still report they way they did 40 years ago."

Alinah Dube agrees that black women journalists must reflect on the ownership of the media and do something about it. "It is time for us women to form partnerships and buy shares in these companies and decide on the course the industry should take."

Sikhakhane says: "Women need to be organised and make a special effort to change the working environment and draw up the agenda for the news."

## YOU GO GIRL!

**By Joyce Dube  
SABC News Marketing Manager**

The 21st century female journalist must reclaim her "writeful" place in media ownership for the doors were opened in the '60s by the likes of Mary Nontolwane and Winnie Mahlangu (radio broadcasters), Joyce Sikhakhane Rankin, Juby Mayet and Sophie Tema (in 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 pioneers 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, striving for unionism, sacrificing 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. Gifted and brilliant writers quit the profession en masse – Suzette "Stray Bullet" Mafuna, 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 complete the job by learning every aspect of media leadership. She should take advantage of education and training at tertiary level in sales and marketing, HR policies, financial aspects, research and 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.

For the 21st century journalist who is really ambitious for leadership – those are the secrets for success.

You go girl!

*This article is dedicated to those women journalists who have passed on: Zodwa Mshibe, Nokwanda Sithole, Nana Mkhonza and Beledé Mazwai.*

