

## **Women As Journalists: Incompatibility of Roles?**

**by Rian van den Wijngaard**

### **Abstract**

This article outlines the situation of women journalists in Senegal. The ideas expressed on the role of women which prevail in Senegalese society lead to the belief that the role of a journalist and the role of women are incompatible with one another. This article, based on research among women journalists in Senegal, describes how women journalists perceive themselves as women and how they fulfill both roles.

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# **Quand la Femme Devient Journaliste: Incompatibilité des Rôles?**

## **Résumé**

Cet article met en exergue la situation des femmes journalistes au Sénégal. Les idées exprimées sur le rôle des femmes dans la société sénégalaise portent à croire que le rôle de journaliste et de femme sont incompatibles.

Cette article est basée sur des recherches conduites au sein des femmes journalistes au Sénégal, et décrit comment les femmes journalistes se perçoivent comme femmes, et comment elles s'acquittent des deux rôles.



## **Introduction**

Communication researchers and scholars have frequently been concerned with "the creators" of the media, that is journalists.<sup>1</sup> It is striking that research attention has mainly been paid to male journalists and has been restricted to the researchers' own geographical area, usually North American and European countries. Much less research has been done on women journalists, in, for example, African and Asian countries.<sup>2</sup>

This article attempts to answer a basic question: in what ways do journalistic activities play a part in the way women journalists in Senegal perceive themselves as women? The article first describes the situation of women journalists in Senegal, their training and working conditions. It then focuses on four aspects which play an important part in the lives of women journalists: family, motivation, professional practice and professional requirements. The article is based on a qualitative study carried out among 22 female journalists in Senegal in 1989.

## **Training and Working Conditions of Women Journalists in Senegal<sup>3</sup>**

In 1989, 30 women and 270 men were employed in journalism in Senegal.<sup>4</sup> In all, interviews were held with 22 women. Of these 22 women journalists, 13 received their journalism education at the Centre des Etudes Scientifique et Techniques (CESTI) in Dakar; four were trained in-house; two did not have formal training in journalism and three studied abroad. All were between 24 and 51 years old: half were younger than 30 years, five were between age 31 and 37 and six were 38 years or older. Their youth is a result of the gradual increase in the number of female students at CESTI since the beginning of the 1970s.<sup>5</sup>

Most women journalists work in the capital Dakar, mainly because of the concentration of both government-owned and private media in that city.<sup>6</sup> Also most of them prefer positions in Dakar as there are more facilities (equipment, transport) there than in the regional offices.<sup>7</sup>

The small number of women in journalism can be attributed to such factors as (i) compulsory education; (ii) the low standard of living, and (iii) the difference in the value put on education for boys and girls, which often means that girls are either not allowed to go to school or are taken out of school earlier than boys. Furthermore, as will be shown below, the choice of a career for boys and girls is influenced by

the belief that women should not enter certain professions like journalism.

## **Family Influence on Choice of Profession**

Data collected from the interviewers indicated that 15 families of the respondents' approved of their daughters going into journalism. The reasons for this varied. For some families the prospect of the income their daughters would earn after their journalism education was important. Other families were glad that their daughters were admitted to an institution for professional training on a government scholarship as they were not obliged to pay for the schooling themselves.

In the other seven families, the women received a negative response, regardless of their motives for their career choices. The major reason for resistance within the families was the prevailing image of women journalists, as one female journalist reported:

*Pour mon père il est important, puisqu'il est Musulman, de faire ce que dicte l'Islam. Et comme il voyait au Sénégal à un certain moment des femmes-journalistes qui fumaient et parfois même des journalistes qui buvaient de l'alcool, pour lui cela signifiait que, si tu voulais faire du journalisme tu allais faire la même chose. Donc, il n'était pas question que sa fille fasse du journalisme.*

Initially, the seven women found themselves opposed to their families in their decision to become journalists. However, the conflict fizzled out because of the determination of the women with regard to their chosen careers and because the families, either through a family council or through mediation by one or more family members, reconsidered their views on the profession and on what is fitting for women. However, as one journalist put it, the women still had to prove to their families that *"une femme pouvait être journaliste aussi bien qu'un homme et pouvait avoir une excellente réputation."*

The fact that women journalists are just as good as men and that they do not lose their good name in the process, is not a subject of discussion in many families nowadays. What has come to count is social status and a monthly income from which the family can benefit.

## **Motivation for Becoming Journalists**

Thirteen of the 22 respondents wanted to become journalists above everything else. They attributed their interest in journalism to their own disposition and to a professional calling. The women were, in



short, "*fascinées par ce métier, elles veulent tout donner, tout savoir, elles aiment écrire et entreprendre des choses.*" To them, journalism appears to be the only profession in which they can make all this come true. The other nine women had economic and ideological motives. One of them expressed her motives as follows:

*Je suis l'aînée d'une famille de 22 enfants. Et il fallait que j'arrête mes études pour aller suivre une formation professionnelle pour gagner de l'argent plus tard.*

Another one, a 40-year old director of a regional radio station, stressed that she wanted to be more than a mother and a wife; "*Ma mère a eu beaucoup d'enfants et je n'ai pas voulu la suivre,*" she said. The arrival of her first and only child did not compel her to stop working in radio. For some journalists this woman, along with a handful of other radio and television journalists (who had been working in the field since the early 1970s) served as a role model. As a 28-year old journalist put it:

*...au Sénégal à un moment donné alors que j'étais encore assez jeune, les gens ont commencé à avoir la télévision et, on a commencé à voir des journalistes à la télé; il y eu une journaliste qui m'a frappé. Je l'admirais même si je puis dire. Je me disais, tiens cette femme là, elle a beaucoup de volonté, elle est là parmi des dizaines et des dizaines d'homme et elle fait la même chose. Et quand j'ai réussi au CESTI je me suis dit moi aussi, je peux faire la même chose.*

## **Working Alongside Men**

In their professional careers women journalists are faced with the same problems that apply to all journalists. These problems include government control over the media, poor working conditions and rising unemployment. However, because of their small number and 'traditional' opinions about women in Senegalese society, women journalists are also confronted with specific problems. A 24-year-old freelance journalist expressed herself on the man-woman ratio as follows:

*Dison que les hommes étouffent un peu. Ils sont toujours un peu plus nombreux que nous. C'est sûr. Ce sont eux qui prennent les décisions. On est un peu marginalisées.*

This quote is representative of the views of about half of the women journalists interviewed. Words such as "*étouffent un peu*" and "*un peu marginalisées*" indicate that men set the tone, but this is not formulated

as a real problem. Those journalists who do perceive this as a problem call attention to frustrating aspects of the situation. For instance, one woman journalist draws attention to the distribution of work:

*Il n'y a pas mal de choses qu'on ne confiera pas aux femmes, parce que ce sont des femmes. Il y a des choses qui leur passent sous le nez et qu'on remettra à leurs confrères-hommes. On préfère, selon l'importance des dossiers, de l'affaire...même des reportages, des voyages, donner ce travail aux hommes, parce que ce sont des hommes.*

Women in higher positions<sup>8</sup> were of the view that their male colleagues were constantly looking over their shoulders to point out their mistakes in everything they did. Their mistakes were made to look as large as possible by the men. The women also had to deal with gossip arising from jealousy and envy on the part of both women and men. One woman experienced great opposition when she was appointed director of a regional radio station. The fact that a woman was appointed to such a high position was not easily accepted by men. In the words of this woman:

*Les gens d'ici se sont beaucoup opposés, surtout les religieux. On m'a même menacé de mort. Pourtant je suis venue ici. Mais les hommes ont beaucoup de problèmes avec une femme-directrice, ils ne veulent pas vraiment obéir à une femme.*

Being harassed by men in the form of sexually explicit remarks or physical contact was, for many of those interviewed, a topic on which they provided formal answers without elaborating. Three examples here are:

*Ça m'arrive plus au travail qu'à l'extérieur. (a 28-year-old free-lance journalist).*

*Au travail même, non. En dehors du travail, parfois. (a 32-year-old journalist).*

*Cela ne se produit pas seulement ici mais partout où on se trouve. Cela arrive dans mon quartier, dans la rue, dans le bus (a 38-year-old journalist).*

However, three women working for Chaîne Internationale (radio) Dakar said they had positive experiences with their male colleagues. They described relations in their workplace as "assez cordiales, correctes." This is in contrast with the experiences of most other women. The men's flirtatious behaviour was an important reason for them to keep contacts after work to a minimum. To quote a 27-year-old journalist:



*Si je suis invitée pour prendre un pot, pour aller au cinéma, je dis toujours que je n'ai pas encore fini mon boulot, que j'ai encore quelque chose à faire.*

Most of those interviewed considered it necessary for women in journalism to possess "extra qualities" to enable them to work as a minority among a large group of men. By this they mean "la confiance en soi-même" and "l'assertivité".

## **A Special Profession**

Journalism is a profession where great value is attached to such qualities as a critical yet objective standpoint, an independent attitude, and an almost full-time availability for and dedication to the profession. The first two professional requirements, a critical objective standpoint and an independent attitude, do not seem to be compatible with tenderness, obedience, and dependency. These are the qualities that, according to the Senegalese standards, characterise women.

According to the women themselves, the critical and independent standpoints of women journalists pose a threat to many men. To quote one of them:

*...les hommes ont créé le mythe de la journaliste. Surtout quand on est femme, les hommes ont peur; peur des journalistes, parce qu'ils se disent que surtout une femme, elle sait de quoi elle parle, est sûre d'elle-même et a partout des relations dont elle se servira si elle en a besoin.*

This threat can also be found in the "masculine" nicknames given to women journalists by their male colleagues. In nicknames such as 'le fils de blanc' and 'le colonel' their femininity is denied, although their authority and power are affirmed.

Included in the requirements of full-time availability and total dedication are putting in long working hours, working on public holidays and keeping up with the news outside office hours. These professional requirements pose problems, particularly for women with children.<sup>9</sup> Journalists who recently had babies were of the opinion that nothing at the office was done to take the changed situation into account:

*Après mon congé de maternité j'ai repris, mais ça ne voulait pas dire que j'étais en grande forme. C'est tout un bouleversement organique quand tu accouches. Ce sont des problèmes que les hommes-journalistes ne rencontrent pas....Au début, mes supérieurs ne comprenaient pas tellement pourquoi subitement je ne venais plus régulièrement au boulot (a 28-year-old journalist).*

Eventually this particular journalist was given temporarily adjusted working hours. All women journalists with children said that the combination of total dedication to work and their household duties put a heavy strain on them. One much-heard phrase was "*Si ce n'est pas le boulot, c'est la maison et vice-versa*". This double workload greatly influenced the private lives of six of the respondents. Partly due to their husbands' lack of understanding of the dedication the profession requires, there was so much tension that they decided to end their marriages. They were very much determined to pursue their careers. They said their present fiancés had to accept their choice of profession and, in particular, their activities outside the home. According to most of the women journalists interviewed, many Senegalese believed that women journalists had lost something of their femininity because they spent so much time away from home. One respondent said:

*On dit que les journalistes ne sont pas de bonnes épouses, qu'elles sont frivoles. Elles fréquentaient toutes les personnes importantes. Elles ont accès à tous les milieux, elles fument et boivent et encore pire que ça... on pense que les journalistes négligent leur maris et leurs enfants.*

This results in gossip about (divorced) women journalists and a reluctance on the part of men to marry them.<sup>10</sup> Partly because of this image, the journalists were of two minds. On the one hand, they described these suspicions and reluctance as "*irrêelles*", "*absurdes*" and "*ridicules*" and they referred to two recent amendments to the *Code de la Famille*, the legislative system. In 1989, the code was amended to include the right to paid work for women and an article which says that a woman is not obliged to live in the same place as her husband, should her work require that she live elsewhere. The journalists expressed the hope that these amendments would form a basis for improving the position of women.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, most of the journalists interviewed emphasized the importance of remaining a woman; they were immaculately dressed and constantly tried to prove that they were very capable of fulfilling their duties as mother and wife. By keeping appearance and behaviour in line with the qualities attributed to them on the basis of biological facts, they wanted to avoid the impression that they might be "different".

## Conclusion

Most of the women journalists interviewed had idealistic, ideologic and economic motives for their choice of the profession. As soon as



they entered the profession, the women found that their professional knowledge and journalistic qualities were insufficient. A majority of Senegalese feel that women journalists fall short of the ideal image of women and therefore fail as wives and mothers. As evidence, especially for men, the fact that women journalists are self-assured and assertive women who, because of their profession, are "often away from home" and are "frequently with men" is cited. This prejudice is strengthened by the fact that a number of women journalists are divorced.

Male colleagues doubt women's capacities; and they see them merely as sexual objects and the moment women pose a threat to them, they give them masculine nicknames. Instead of taking a critical look at their attitudes or even changing them, male colleagues cling to the prejudice that being a journalist and being a woman do not go together. In short, women journalists find their femininity questioned. Most of them, therefore, try to accentuate their womanhood by, for example, feminine clothing. Moreover, along with professional tasks, they continue to perform their duties at home to prove that they are not different from other women.

## Notes

1. See van Cuilenburg, J. J. and G. W. Noomen (1984) *Communicatiewetenschap* pp. 121-137, and Grossenbacher, R. (1988). 'Journalismus in Entwicklungslandern,' *Medien als Trager des sozialen Wandels?*, pp. 36-62.
2. See Grossenbacher R. *op cit*, p. 36 and van Zoonen L. (1988) 'Rethinking Women and the News.' *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 3, pp. 35-47.
3. For information on Senegal, see, for example, Gellar, Sh. (1982). *Senegal: An African Nation Between Islam and the West*. Boulder Colorado: Westview Press; and Hesseling, G. (1985) *Histoire politique du Sénégal: Institutions, Droit et Société*. Paris: Karthala.
4. Information on the number of journalists was obtained from the Department of Communication in Dakar and through some individual informants. Three women and about 20 men worked for international press agencies in Dakar: the Pan African News Agency (PANA) AFP, AP, Reuters and Inter Press Service (IPS).
5. Available information shows that during the 1980s the number of female Senegalese graduates was three times more than during the 1970s.
6. In the mid-1970s, the 'ouverture démocratique' took place: the legalization of opposition parties in 1976 led to an enormous growth of the hitherto banned private press and, in 1979, to the foundation of the journalists' union, Syndicat des Professionnels d'Information et de la Communication (SYNPIC).

7. There are regional radio stations in Saint Louis, Kaolack, Ziguinchor and Tambacouda. Agence de Presse Senegalaise (APS) and *le Soleil* have offices in seven of the 10 districts. See also Grossenbacher, R. (1988) *op. cit.*
8. In 1989, four of the 30 women journalists held high ranking positions: Director of television in Dakar, Director of regional radio, Head of Chaîne Inter (radio) in Dakar and Head of Information with UNICEF in Dakar. However, women did not hold the positions of editor-in-chief or general director.
9. Eighteen of those interviewed had one or more children, the remaining four had none.
10. A survey carried out in Nigeria on women in the media shows that until the mid-1970s it was commonly believed that '...women in the arts, theatre, broadcasting and mass media were too assertive and wayward, not the right material for marriage, homemaking and motherhood.' See Irukwu E. (1985) 'Women in Nigerian Broadcasting: A Study of their Access to Decision-making Positions,' p. 67.
11. It is worth noting that in 1984 a group of women journalists founded a politically independent organisation by the name of Association des Professionnelles Africaines de la Communication (APAC). This organisation is the first organisation of women who work in the French-speaking West African media. Its objectives include to tackle the specific problems of women journalists working in the media and, through these same media (in the form of articles and reports) to play an important part in improving the position of women in African societies.

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