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Challenging the Lion in Its Den: Dilemmas of Gender and Media Activism in South Africa

Margaretha Geertsema

Abstract

Media activism groups work to bring about change in the mainstream media, but their gains are often limited. Drawing on theories of the political function of news in a democracy, media sociology, and feminism, this article focuses on the specific experience of Gender Links, a Southern African gender and media organization founded in 2001. An analysis of institutional materials and 25 in-depth interviews shows that Gender Links is using a professional-technical approach to feminist media activism that is insufficient in bringing about deep and long-term change on an ideological level. It is suggested that Gender Links could benefit from more emphasis on political and countercultural approaches. The research also highlights some of the other dilemmas posed by issues related to funding, networking, the grassroots, press freedom, the profit motive, and the strong backlash from a patriarchal culture.

Keywords: Democracy, feminism, gender equality, Gender Links, media activism, media sociology, professional-technical approach, public sphere, social change, South Africa.

Introduction

The impact of feminist media activism organizations that work to improve women's access to and representation in the news media seems to be limited. Despite efforts to bring about change, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) found that the percentage of women included as news subjects increased from only 17 percent to 21 percent since 1995 (WACC, 2005). Fewer women than men work in the news media, except as television and radio presenters, and only 10 percent of stories focused on women. When considering the political function

of the news media in democracies, it remains highly problematic that half of the population does not have equal participation in this important societal institution. The news media, which are constructing news through interactions with various groups in society, sustain, or even worse encourage, this distorted view of the world. Even though feminist media activism organizations devise sophisticated strategies to impact the news media, they have little success. The news media, it seems, are impervious to their efforts.

The nongovernmental media and gender organization Gender Links (GL) anticipated resistance from the media. Thenjiwe Mtintso, GL's first chairperson and the South African ambassador in Cuba, commented during the first year of this organization's existence that "gender in media is an uncharted path—exciting but also frightening. Frightening because when you dare to challenge the lion in its den, you are likely to encounter extreme difficulties" (Morna, 2001, foreword). Over the past nine years, GL has attracted international attention to its work: it has authored a wide range of publications related to gender and media, offered several training workshops, undertaken research studies, and lobbied on the highest levels for gender equality. As such, this organization presents an important case study to examine questions related to gender and media activism. In this article, I will argue that GL's professional-technical approach to feminist media activism is insufficient to bring about deep and long-term change on an ideological level, and that the organization would benefit from more emphasis on political and counter-cultural approaches. In the process, I will highlight the dilemmas of GL's gender and media activism in South Africa. While GL works across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region of 13 countries, this research project only focuses on its work in South Africa. GL is based in Johannesburg, South Africa, with two new satellite offices in Mauritius and Botswana.

Media and Society

In South Africa, as in other democracies around the world, the political function of the news media is to provide citizens with the information they need to participate successfully in governing themselves (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). The news media should provide a public sphere where debates can take place free from government intervention and commercial interests (Habermas, 1991). The value of these concepts in an African context has been questioned (Berger, 2002), and feminist scholars have pointed out that women are typically relegated to the private sphere and excluded from equal public participation (Landes, 1998). Still, they are useful when considering the obligations of the news media. A free press has responsibilities toward citizens, including the responsibility to monitor those in power and to offer a voice to those without public voices (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

Typically, journalists stand firm on protecting their editorial independence. Yet, studies in the field of media sociology have shown that several factors inside and outside the newsroom influence the news product (Epstein, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1981; Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) developed a hierarchy of influences on the news media that work from the micro- to the macro-level: the influence of individuals, media routines, the news organization, extra-media factors, and those taking place on an ideological level. Extra-media influences vary from the pressures exerted through interest groups, public relations campaigns, news sources, advertisers, audiences, and government controls to those of the marketplace (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The news media often view interest groups, or people who want to convey their view on issues to the public, with suspicion, fearing that they will threaten freedom of the press and the media's objectivity. However, interest groups can provide a much-needed conversation between the public and the media, who are expected to serve all citizens equally. GL can be seen as one of these interest groups that are trying to influence the media to reach the feminist goal of gender equality. Just as studies of news production reveal much about the final news product, a study of processes used in media activism organizations can also shed light on the extent to which they are successful in bringing about change.

Local and Global Feminisms

Feminism is concerned with changes in consciousness, the empowerment of women, and the achievement of gender equality. On a global level, some disagreements existed in the past between women from the North and women from the South with regard to the most important goals and best strategies of action (Basu, 2003). During the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985), feminism in the West was considered to be mostly concerned with issues of gender, but third world women argued that women's oppressions were multiple and intersecting (Mohanty, 2003). Today, however, one of the greatest strengths of women's movements is the "wide diversity of particularized local activity that women do" (Bunch, 2001, p. 133).

Feminist scholars have tried to clarify the most important differences between African feminism and Western feminism. Even so, South Africa presents a hybrid case of both kinds. In general, African women are uncomfortable with Western women's strong opposition to patriarchy and hostility to men (Geisler, 2004; Mikell, 2003). In postcolonial states, women often postponed feminist concerns to work side by side with men for national liberation. The same happened as women in South Africa joined the struggle against Apartheid. Second, some African women view Western feminism as overly individualistic and in opposition to African community values. Third, African feminists question the relevance of

separating the public and private spheres into gendered areas, as power relations work differently in African societies (Steady, 2005). African women often frame their work for gender equality in terms promoted by the United Nations and development organizations, but concepts such as feminism, gender, and human rights have been criticized as Western (Brems, 1997; Steady, 2005). As a result, African women activists have often refused to call themselves feminists.

Over the past two decades, however, a new wave of gender activism developed on the continent (Mikell, 2003). Since 1985, women from the South have challenged the dominance of the North in the international women's movement and new initiatives increasingly started coming from Africa (Tripp, 2006). Energized and activated by the U.N. Conference for Women in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985, African women organized across the region for inclusion in decision-making positions in the African Union (Adams, 2006). According to Tripp (2003), women took advantage of political opportunities after independence in African states, and the previous focus on welfare and domestic issues was now being replaced by women's political participation. In addition, African women's networks have worked on peacemaking and the impact of gender on HIV and AIDS on the continent.

In South Africa, a distinct feminist movement developed in the 1970s, but women have been active in feminist politics for much longer (Meer, 2005). As early as the 1950s, black women fought against Apartheid policies, culminating in the women's march to the Union Building in Pretoria on August 9, 1956, to protest pass laws. English white women formed the Black Sash in 1956 to organize against the violation of human rights under Apartheid. Since the end of Apartheid, South African women have made strides on several fronts. In 1991, representatives from a wide range of women's groups, political parties, and nongovernment organizations formed the National Women's Coalition (NWC) to promote women's issues (Cock, 1997; Hassim, 2002). A Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) was created as an independent body that reports annually to parliament on the progress of gender equality, including the work of the National Gender Machinery (NGM) (Meintjes, 2005). In addition, some argue that a "black feminism" is emerging in South Africa (Cock & Bernstein, 2001, p. 150). This new feminism is "based on Black women's experiences of multiple oppressions and includes issues such as access to clean water and housing that have not been traditionally defined as feminist" (Kemp et al., 1995, p. 133). While many South Africans continue to resist the label of feminism, partly because it is seen as a foreign concept, several South African organizations work on women's issues (Steyn, 1998).

Gender and Media Activism

The Beijing Platform for Action agreed upon at the Fourth World Conference on Women urged nongovernmental organizations and professional media

organizations to establish media watch groups to monitor media coverage and to ensure that women's needs and concerns are reflected (Beijing Declaration, 1995). To provide evidence from research at the conference, the Canadian non-governmental organization Media Watch and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) organized the first Global Media Monitoring Project. This project, repeated in 2000 and 2005, became a global measurement of women's access to and representation in the media. In 2005, 18 African countries participated in the 76-country study, but only five African countries (Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe) participated in all three studies (WACC, 2005). Regional and national feminist media monitoring and activist organizations also emerged, for example the Federation of African Media Women (FAMWZ), now the Federation of African Media Women in SADC (FAMW-SA), and the African Woman and Child Features Service (AWC), Nairobi. Feminist media scholarship in Africa, however, remains lacking (Gadzekpo, 2009; Opoku-Mensah, 2001).

While attention to issues of representation is important, scholars and activists argue that more attention should be paid to strategies for change (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Pozner, 2005; Sandler, 2008). Social change is typically approached in one or more of the following ways: professional-technical, political, and countercultural. According to Antrobus (2004, p. 128), the professional-technical approach is the "conventional, mainstream approach" commonly used in Western democracies. The political approach emphasizes conflict and power relations, whereas the countercultural approach challenges deep values and norms in a patriarchy. Independent media scholar Margaret Gallagher (2001) highlights strategies used by women media activists, including research, monitoring, policy work, campaigns, and protests. These strategies correspond to established political strategies, both reformist and revolutionary, of feminist activism in general (Antrobus, 2004). But gender and media activists are fighting an uphill battle. An Alternative Assessment of Women and Media based on NGO reviews of Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action listed some of the obstacles facing activists, including patriarchal societies, media ownership, a lack of media policies, and an absence of sanctions against violators of women's rights in the media (Beijing Platform, 2000). Gallagher (2001, p. 18) found that "in the name of freedom of speech, the media claim the right to represent women as they wish" and denounce activists as "feminist police." Funding is scarce and often comes from Western donors, which leads to continuing dependency (Sakr, 2004).

Feminist media activism groups are not alone in their struggle. Other community groups are also dissatisfied with the media and are working to bring about change (see De Jong, Shaw, & Stammers, 2005; McChesney, Newman, & Scott, 2005). In fact, women's groups experience many of the same problems as other media activism groups. In a study done in the United States, United Kingdom,

and Canada, Hackett and Carroll (2006) found some of the biggest problems for media activism groups are a lack of funding, staff burnout, poor organization, a lack of focus and strategy, and “turf wars” with other groups. Media activism groups also struggle with the “strong founder syndrome” that occurs when the organization’s existence depends on a strong, charismatic leader. Further, journalists often resist influence from activists in an effort to remain “objective.” Alliances and coalitions, however, can strengthen media activist organizations and expand their reach (Hackett & Carroll, 2006).

Journalism in South Africa

The transition to a democracy in South Africa in 1994 introduced progressive policies toward the news media and women. Freedom of the press, nonracialism, and nonsexism are all guaranteed in the new South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996. The South African media are considered to be free, with the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders ranking South Africa 36th in the world for press freedom (Press Freedom Index, 2008), and Freedom House ranking South Africa at 59th (Freedom of the Press, 2008). However, a deeper analysis of press freedom in South Africa suggests that “this freedom is relatively fragile” (Sparks, 2009, p. 209).

Sixteen years after the end of Apartheid, the media continue to face difficult challenges, with many of the new black editors and journalists “still finding their sea legs” (Hunter-Gault, 2006, p. 127). A study by the South African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF) suggests that the news media have to tackle quite fundamental problems, including the lack of contextualized reporting, basic writing skills, accuracy, and knowledge of current events (Steyn & De Beer, 2004). While the most severe restrictions on the press were lifted at the end of Apartheid, some concerns exist about the profit-driven media’s continued focus on elites only (Lovaas, 2007). New tabloid newspapers are filling this gap by targeting the black working class and giving voice to those who have until now been excluded from the mediated public sphere (Wasserman, 2008). South Africa’s media have also become more connected to global media flows through media from global companies and contra-flow into Africa (Teer-Tomaselli, Wasserman, & De Beer, 2007).

Since South Africa’s media history was dominated by the struggle against Apartheid, media and gender activism only emerged during the 1990s. The Media Monitoring Project South Africa (now Media Monitoring Africa) was founded in 1993 and continues to be active in monitoring media content on issues related to gender, children, elections, HIV/AIDS, xenophobia, and race. Another group, the Women’s Media Watch, started out in 1995 as a community-based media education and production project to train citizens in the production of graphic media (Gallagher, 2001). In 2001, Colleen Lowe Morna, previously the first chief executive

officer of the CGE, founded Gender Links. The GMMP 2005 study, conducted in Southern Africa by GL, showed that women in South Africa constituted 26 percent of news subjects, compared to the global average of 21 percent (WACC, 2005).

Despite the efforts of these and other groups, Jane Duncan (2006, p. 22), executive director of the South African Freedom of Expression Institute, describes current media and gender movements as “depoliticized, tame, safe, and timid.” Duncan says that gender and media activism groups subscribe to a liberal feminist approach which focuses on equal rights while ignoring structural reasons for inequality. This concern relates to what has been called the “NGOization of feminism,” where the traditional feminist movement has been replaced by “small-scale professionalized organizations” that tend to be hierarchal instead of antihierarchical (Lang, 1997, p. 102).

Method

To uncover some of the dilemmas of feminist media activism in South Africa, this article explores the work of Gender Links as a case study. Results are based on an analysis of GL institutional materials and in-depth interviews. GL has created a wealth of publications, including training materials, research reports, and books. In addition, Gender Links’s work is well documented in reports available on its Web site and obtained from GL. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants in Johannesburg during a two-week period (July 16–27) in 2007 (see below for the list of interviewees). All interviewees gave the researcher permission to use their real names and positions in this article. Using an inductive approach, interview transcriptions were coded and arranged into main categories and subcategories.

Introducing Gender Links

GL was founded in Johannesburg in March 2001 when Morna left her position as CEO at the CGE. Morna (2007) describes the humble beginnings of GL as a “meeting of minds” of several people who are still serving on the board of directors. Some of the early highlights of GL’s work include the Gender and Media Baseline Study (GMBS) of 2003 and the founding of the Gender and Media Southern Africa Network (Gemsa) after the first Gender and Media Summit in 2004. Gemsa forms an umbrella network of people and organizations in the SADC region and is responsible for gender activism, whereas GL focuses on research, training, and policy work.

Gender Links divides its activities into four main areas: Gender and the Media (GEM), Gender Justice, Gender and Governance, and Advisory Services. The research in this article deals primarily with the GEM area of work. Included in GEM activities are gender and media research, gender and media policy,

gender and media training, opinion and commentary articles called “Write about Rights,” the Gender and Diversity Media Centre, and the Gender and Media Summit. Recently, Gender Links secured the contract to write the GMMP 2010 report, the first time that this will be done by an NGO from the South. GL is also closely involved with the International Women’s Media Foundation’s Global Glass Ceilings study (GL Annual Report, 2009). To a certain extent, this global participation and leadership illustrate the increasing influence of Southern feminists on the international feminist agenda.

Employees at GL and other interviewees have high praise for the organization’s perceived accomplishments. GL’s work is described as “ground breaking,” “revolutionary,” “innovative,” “cutting edge,” “productive,” and “overwhelmingly successful.” Patricia Made (2005), a Gender Links board member, credits GL for spearheading a gender and media social movement in the Southern African region. But, as is the case with other media activism organizations, the biggest problem for GL is finding funding to ensure its survival as an organization. The main sources of funding come from Northern foundations, which could lead to dependency. However, over the past year, Gender Links has successfully secured a four-year funding agreement from the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development’s Governance and Transparency Fund and a two-year agreement from the Dutch government’s MDG3 Fund, which supports the U.N.’s third Millennium Development Goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women (GL Annual Report, 2009). GL also established the R2-million endowment fund.

Despite growing evidence of the depoliticizing impact of gender mainstreaming, Gender Links subscribes to this approach in its planning and daily activities. In her analysis of gender mainstreaming in development agencies, Tiessen (2007, p. 187) found that gender mainstreaming has “neither failed nor succeeded as a strategy to promote gender equality,” but that “catchy terminology” does not bring real change: “To achieve . . . transformations in thinking, we need to move beyond the technocratic and efficiency models in development to devise more sustainable strategies that foster reflection and analysis.” Wendoh and Wallace (2005) also found that success stories of gender mainstreaming are few and far between, while stories of resistance abound. Rao and Kelleher (2005) suggest that one of the reasons for the failure of gender mainstreaming is the domination of management discourse at nongovernment organizations.

A Professional-Technical Model of Feminist Media Activism

Gender Links is following a professional-technical approach to feminist media activism, but this model does not address deeper issues of power and cultural changes (Rao & Kelleher, 2005). In other words, GL’s strategies are aimed at the levels of individuals, news routines, and organizations. Evidence of the

professional-technical model of feminist media activism is visible through Gender Links's strategic planning, focus on efficiency and results, and pervasive use of management discourse. Morna, who holds a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University, also received a certificate in executive management from the London Business School. Since Morna occupies a central place as leader, and as is the case with other media activism organizations and their leaders, interviewees are concerned about what would happen if she were to leave.

GL makes use of professional management strategies to complete its work in a highly systematic and efficient way. Unlike other media activism organizations who often have a lack of focus and strategy (Hackett & Carroll, 2006), Gender Links has a clear, well-articulated, and well-documented vision and mission (see GL Policies, 2007; GL Annual Report, 2008). In 2007, GL moved from two- to three-year strategic plans, with the intention to create a five-year strategic plan from 2010 on (GL Policies, 2007). They use strategic plans to devise quarterly and annual plans.

Employees at Gender Links have detailed performance agreements that are broken down into areas of responsibility and weighed by percentage. Staff members submit biweekly reports to their immediate supervisor and have regular meetings to discuss progress of their work. GL is very focused on achieving results, which are reported as quantitative "outputs" and qualitative "outcomes." While Gender Links strives to measure all results of the organization's activities, it remains unclear how exactly long-term ideological changes can be produced and quantified.

Interviewees commonly used business jargon to describe GL's work, including the following: "capacity building," "mobilize," "multiply," "cascade," "rollout," "multi-pronged," "multi-level," "integrated," and "synergy." Morna describes Gender Links's work as an "intricate spider's web rather than . . . well-defined silos" (GL Annual Report, 2007, p. 5). These synergies are considered to be a major strength of GL's work: "Project work doesn't happen in isolation, but rather there are connections with all of the other projects that are happening, both internally, as well as some other external processes that impact on the work of the organization" (Moolman, 2007).

Some employees seemed exhausted, overwhelmed, and stressed because of their heavy workload. As pointed out in the external evaluation (Minnie & Mapuwaenda, 2006), employees often work on too many projects and on short deadlines. The rush of getting things done can result in mistakes and unprofessional work. In the long run, the pace may be too much for staffers. Janine Moolman (2007), who worked at Gender Links for several years, says she simply experienced burnout and ended up feeling "very tired and jaded." GL says that it recognizes these workplace problems and has taken steps to rectify the situation. The organization implemented a wellness program and hopes to build an image that is relaxed and friendly as well as professional and efficient (GL Policies, 2007). Gender Links also hired a deputy director to help distribute the workload in the organization.

Too Much Work, Too Little Funding

The economic reality has a direct impact on the work of activist groups. Gender Links's heavy workload comes as a direct result of its precarious funding situation. Limited by funding, GL was a small but ambitious organization during its first few years. Only during the past year has GL's staff grown from 13 to 26 as a result of increased funding (GL Annual Report, 2009). Morna (2007) says she could only hire as many staff members as the various projects would allow her to hire: "There's one thing worse than staff being overworked and that's staff being fired." She continues:

I think what we've done and done successfully is to avoid this temptation of trying to establish this huge, big bureaucracy and infrastructure that then becomes a massive running cost that we can't afford and that doesn't actually result in increased ownership of work. It's a big temptation.

Donors are typically only willing to support short-term projects, and employees end up working on several of these at the same time. Also, donors can orient an organization's efforts into a direction that would benefit the donor and not necessarily the NGO. Gender Links is aware of its obligation to funders but strives to "ensure that it retains strategic control and direction of its work" (GL Policies, 2007, p. 8). GL has had up to 25 sponsors at one time, creating an administrative nightmare. In part, Gender Links's decision to work across the SADC region is motivated by the need for funding. As Morna (2007) comments:

South African NGOs really, really struggle to stay alive because there's not a lot of funding out there for NGOs, particularly this kind of strategic transformative work that focuses only on South Africa. The theory is that South Africa is a rich country; it should be able to fund itself. And there's not a lot of donor money for South Africa.

In the 2007–2010 strategic plan, Gender Links prioritized core or basket funding so that it can continue its work without the pressure for short-term results. While that remains the ideal, GL recently changed its approach to finding fewer donors that would provide greater amounts, as well as multiyear funding (GL Annual Report, 2009).

Troubled Networking

Through its partnerships and networks, connections among various programs, and work across multiple levels, Gender Links strives to optimize its impact. Networking is an established strategy of feminist activism, and GL forms many alliances and networks to "multiply" its "output." These partnerships, however,

also create headaches for the organization. GL describes its work as “catalytic”: “We saw ourselves really . . . forming strategic alliances and partnerships with different organizations that should be doing this work anyway” (Morna, 2007). Made commented on Gender Links’s partnerships in the Annual Report of 2007 (p. 4):

With a small staff of some 11 people at its Johannesburg-based office, the volume of research, training, policy, campaign and lobbying work leaves some wondering if there is a magic formula at play. It is bottled in the form of partnerships and networks.

On the one hand, some partners are concerned that GL always tries to take the lead in joint projects. Employees, on the other hand, believe they work faster and harder than partner organizations, that partners do not always give Gender Links credit for its work, and that some partners are jealous of GL’s success (Minnie & Mapuwaenda, 2006). Several GL employees dismiss partner problems as jealousy about GL’s success. Interviewees also mentioned that partners find it difficult to agree on the focus and method of projects, and that these organizations end up feeling overwhelmed and threatened by GL. As a result, Gender Links tries to manage conflicts through “Memorandums of Understanding” and contractual agreements with partners. In an environment where there is intense competition for funding, turf wars commonly take place. Some groups believe GL is overstepping its boundaries, especially when GL expanded its original focus on gender and media work to the gender and justice arena. Despite problems, Gender Links remains committed to working with partners:

The fact that there are tensions within partnerships of a complex nature is not a good reason to abandon the approach. Every stakeholder in the gender justice sector agrees that there is no other way to address the scourge of gender violence than through a concerted, multi-faceted campaign. (GL Strategy, 2007, pp. 58–59)

Connecting with the Grassroots

Gender Links aims to stay in touch with the grassroots but sometimes seems to lose touch in its efforts to work across levels. Kubi Rama (2007), the deputy director of GL, explains that the organization addresses gender equality on both the macro-level and the community level:

You’ve got to address the legislation, policy, framing documents, instruments, because without those in place, you can keep doing what we’re doing and there’s no kind of concrete pulling together of all of it. At the same time, you also need to work with women in their own communities. And

that is what the local government project is about—to work with women at a local level. And, at some point, all of these things come together.

However, Nonhlanhla Sibanda (2007), who previously worked as a programs officer at Gemsa, left the organization to work for People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA). She was particularly concerned with GL's lack of connection with poor, rural women:

When I went for the interview, I just had this perception that they [Gender Links] had this whole top-down approach. That when I looked at the organization, it was more like they would look at elite women, the many “feminists,” the so-called “gender activists.” The feminists, you know, the directors of organizations and all of that. And my question was . . . how do these people come to [think] that they know and understand better the challenges of the everyday, ordinary woman, whatever ordinary is anyway.

The Gender Links Organizational Evaluation reported a similar concern related to media outreach, namely that GL mainly targets the mainstream media and “appears to enjoy limited relationships with community media, who are much more inclined to target poor communities in more rural areas outside of capital towns and cities” (Minnie & Mapuwaenda, 2006, p. 76). Gender Links has since worked with several community media groups through its Media Action Plan on HIV and AIDS.

In response to allegations of elitism, Loga Virahsawmy (2007), Gender Links director of the Francophone region and Mauritius office, insists that GL works with “everybody.” She especially emphasizes GL's work with local counselors:

Some of them . . . are not very fluent in English. So Gender Links is getting people to translate this manual into local languages. We take this manual and work with these people in their own language, and then they can participate. . . . These counselors are grassroots people, they are not elite women.

Diversity and Freedom of the Press

Freedom of the press is sometimes used as a defense against the inclusion of gender perspectives in the news. People who make this argument state that the news media should not be pressured into altering content in any way. Gender Links states that the news media can only fulfill its mandate in a democracy if they reflect diverse voices, including those of women. GL sees the participation of citizens in the news media as central to a democratic society and states that the democratic ideal of the news media is threatened when audience members

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are not served (GL Strategy, 2007, p. 49). As a result, GL works to ensure a greater diversity of voices in the news media and to help citizens understand media content. Gender Links also works to convince the mainstream news media that gender-sensitive journalism is in fact good and ethical journalism. One way to convince the news media to include gender is to frame the debate in terms they are familiar with:

We've got to find ways of speaking to the media in its own language, using its own framework, its own code of ethics, its own principles of fairness, of balance, all these sorts of nice things, and saying, "Actually, there's something fundamentally wrong with both the imbalances and some of the lack of sensitivity that we see in the media." (Morna, 2007)

According to Morna (2001), gender equality makes good editorial sense because it not only supports freedom of speech but also leads to new and interesting stories.

Yet, one of the most important reasons the news media resist gender and media activists is their commitment to freedom of expression, editorial independence, and journalistic objectivity. Editors do not want to feel they are giving special considerations to any interest groups outside the newsroom. Tim du Plessis (2007), editor of the Afrikaans daily *Beeld*, says:

They [gender activists] can come and make their case, but I feel those things are covered by our ethical code for journalists. I don't like them saying that there are special rules for how you write about HIV and those kinds of things. It seems to me to interfere with freedom of speech.

Also, some in the media fear that too many groups will put pressure on them on various issues: "What comes next is teachers will come and say, 'But you have to write a certain way about education.' And in the end you sit with everybody and everybody tells you how to publish your newspaper" (Du Plessis, 2007). Marga Ley (2007), an associate editor at *Beeld*, agreed: "If we have one agenda, then we need to have another agenda, and another one. So we don't have any such prescriptions."

Some articles related to gender and media in the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development adopted in August 2008 also raised eyebrows. Gender Links coordinates the work of the Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance, a group of regional and national NGOs that spearheaded the protocol. William Bird (2007), the director of Media Monitoring Africa, expressed his reservations:

The moment the media get their hands on that thing, instead of looking and saying, "Hey, this is really good," or "Wow, we need to consider these elements about gender equality in media," they're going to see it

and they're going to say, "Oh, limiting here, limiting there, prescribing there, imposing government, encouraging government interference." And instead of being about gender, it's going to be all entirely about media freedom.

In response, Rama (2007) argues that the news media define freedom of the press very narrowly to suit their own interests. Indeed, the idea of freedom of expression as giving voice to all segments of society is "generally accepted by media practitioners in the SADC region, except that a huge blind spot exists in terms of extending this right to women" (Minnie & Mapuwaenda, 2006, p. 19).

Diversity and Profit

Managers and editors of private media companies are often more concerned with profit than with serving the broad society. Gender Links argues that a gender-sensitive approach to news is not only good journalism; it is also good for business. The flip side is also true: a lack of diversity and responsiveness to audience needs is bad for business (GL Strategy, 2007, p. 49). Even though broadcasting in South Africa follows a public service model, the press remains dominated by profit-driven corporate media. Gender Links makes the argument to the media to "draw more on [their] enlightened self interest" (GL Strategy, 2007, p. 19). Yet, interviewees say the South African news media do not see any financial benefit from gender sensitivity, but instead fear that pressure for gender equality will lead to a decrease in profit. Rene Smith (2007), a GL consultant, says the media do not see gender work as beneficial: "They wouldn't even respond to e-mails. It's not in their best interest. It's not in their financial interest, as far as they're concerned, even though we could show them that it is in their financial interest." Newspaper editor Du Plessis (2007) states his concern plainly: "Don't forget that this is a business. We have to sell the paper. It must be commercially viable."

Interviewees experience the news media in South Africa as very resistant to gender equality. The organizational evaluation reports that editors and journalists continue to show "strong resentment about the gender agenda" (Minnie & Mapuwaenda, 2006, p. 19). The authors of the report claim that the media are not only patriarchal; they also promote patriarchy (p. 13). This problem is not unique to South Africa, though. At international women's conferences "the difficulty of persuading the media to take up issues of gender equality has arisen as a major frustration" (GL Strategy, 2007, p. 14). In fact, opposition to gender equality in the media also takes place in the United States and other Western countries. Morna (2007) asks how many newsrooms in the United States actually have a gender policy: "How many would be willing to even talk about that? How many would be willing to engage? As far as they are concerned, 'Oh, they've got a few

women in the media now, so it's all over.' Well, it's not. The content of the media is still very skewed."

Gender Links seems to face most resistance in the South African media, which are more developed than in other SADC countries and are already highly regulated. Ferial Haffajee (2007), editor of the *City Press* paper and a GL board member, says because of the existing regulations, she disagrees with Gender Links's efforts to roll out gender policies across the region:

I think my gender policy is the constitution of South Africa. We've got various laws which flow from this: the Employment Equity Act, the Black Economic Empowerment laws, each of which sets out very detailed ways in which women in the workplace must be advanced. Now, I use those two laws to guide my work.

Facing the Backlash

Gender Links made a conscious decision to include men and women in its work, a philosophical approach that differentiates GL from other women and media activism organizations. But men continue to feel alienated by feminism, and GL experiences a strong backlash from a patriarchal culture. With regard to the inclusion of men, Morna (2007) says:

GL has taken a very definite position that . . . we have men in our ranks, and we are quite deliberate about that. . . . If we finally get parity, we're still going to have 50 percent men. So, we've got to learn to work with men, and men have to learn to work with us.

Male employees at Gender Links specifically point out that their work is beneficial to men and women, who are all affected by media stereotypes, and that GL is not "anti-male." The numbers support these statements: in 2007, men accounted for 39 percent of participants in Gender Links workshops (GL Annual Report, 2007, p. 42).

Several staff members embrace the idea of gender equality but are hesitant to call themselves feminists. When asked whether an interviewee considers herself or himself to be a feminist, they frequently responded with another question: "What is feminism?" For example, Gender Links's editor Deborah Walter (2007) responded: "Feminism? I don't know. That's a tough question. I don't know why. I mean, I know. . . . Yeah, I don't know." In general, interviewees thought feminism is perceived as something radical that serves the empowerment of only women, potentially at the expense of men. Yet, Rama (2007) points out that this understanding of feminism as a struggle for women only is problematic, especially in a country where black men also remain marginalized. Alternatively,

some believe that feminism should specifically focus on the needs of women. Moolman (2007), who now works for a women's organization, says she felt GL's understanding of gender was "narrow." She goes on to say that discussions of "gender" water down a more overt feminist project:

I wanted to be in a space where I could express my feminism and not be, "Oh, there Jan goes again." Where I could say actually and categorically, "No, I do not want to work with men, and this is the reason why," and not have to feel like there's something wrong with me.

So instead of labeling their work as feminist, Gender Links employees position themselves within a broader human rights framework. Several employees talked about a "human rights perspective" that includes gender equality. For example, Loveness Jambaya Nyakujarah (2007), GL's assistant director and gender justice program manager, says: "I'm a human being who wants fair rights and wants everyone to have equal opportunities."

Even though GL has an inclusive approach, men sometimes feel threatened by gender activism. Moses Mlangeni (2007), a senior economics journalist at the South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio division and a participant in a Gender Links workshop, says some men feel attacked:

[They feel] all guns basically are aimed at you. Men feel uncomfortable. "Hey, these feminists, they are targeting us. Every man is an idiot. Every man is stupid. Every man is bad." That is why sometimes you find it very hard or difficult for some men to comment or make their opinions heard on women's issues, because they are believing that this thing is about extreme feminism.

A strong patriarchal culture in South Africa contributes to the backlash against gender activism. Gender Links's strategic plan points out that "patriarchy and democracy are still comfortable bedfellows. . . . It is a violent system as experienced vividly in the mind boggling number of women and children who are raped in our society" (GL Strategy, 2007, p. 13). Purity Zwane (2007), a university professor who participated in a GL workshop, says African women have been taught to be submissive to men. Sikhonzile Ndlovu (2007) describes women's submission this way:

We are very patriarchal. . . . There are things that a woman can never, never do, according to the customs. If you are in your room, the tradition says that a woman cannot sit on a chair while there are men in the house. The women should sit on the floor. And for me, I understand all these things about gender, and I think I'm quite enlightened, but if I get to a certain environment . . . you don't need to be told. You know your place.

Susan Tolmay (2007), Gender Links's gender and governance manager, also referred to culture and customs, pointing to those that prevent some women from owning land: "When the husbands die, they [the women] become the property of their sons or their fathers or brothers. . . . And we may have good constitutions, but they aren't necessarily being put into practice."

Interviewees talked about a general "gender fatigue" in South Africa. Some people argue that gender concerns are a luxury compared to the perhaps more pressing issues of race and poverty (Smith, 2007). Rama (2007) says she regularly encounters gender fatigue: "I often get told, 'Oh, the gender thing. The gender thing.' . . . And I said, 'You know, if we treated black people in the same way we treated women, would we accept it?'" Similarly, Tolmay (2007) says that some people are simply not interested in gender: "There's just a fatigue around. . . . I remember someone saying, maybe it was a year ago, 'Gender is unsexy.'" Even members of the public who get invited to Gender Links events seem to suffer from this gender fatigue (Ndlovu, 2007). And it is partly because of this gender fatigue or burnout that politicians want to move on to other, more pressing issues (Minnie & Mapuwaenda, 2006).

Conclusion

This article considered some of the dilemmas of feminist media activism as experienced by the nongovernmental organization Gender Links in South Africa. As the employees at GL know, media activism can be complicated and messy. Activists have to find the best arguments and approaches to make an impact on the mainstream media. GL is in step with other feminist and development organizations in its use of the dominant professional-technical approach to social change. However, experts question the long-term impact of this approach and recommend the integration of political and countercultural approaches. Gender mainstreaming, a strategy that perfectly fits the professional-technical approach, has also been discredited as depoliticizing and ineffective in bringing about changes on an ideological level. This poses a fundamental challenge to Gender Links: How does this organization move forward to bring deep change to patriarchal values in South Africa? There are no easy answers to this problem.

Several other dilemmas were also highlighted in this article. Like other media activism organizations, Gender Links has too much work and too little money. Funding is by far the greatest concern for GL, and the executive director is constantly working on proposals for funding. Staff members end up working on short-term projects that get funded more easily, but they often work on multiple projects under tight deadlines. To an extent, donors can also dictate the direction of GL's work. Alliances and networks are central to GL's approach, but these create problems related to turf wars and competition. In an effort to work on multiple levels,

Gender Links can easily lose touch with grassroots groups and movements. Media groups discount GL's arguments for the inclusion of gender perspectives based on their right to freedom of the press, ignoring their responsibility to serve all citizens equally. They also defend their actions as mandated by the profit motive without considering that gender equality may be good for business. Finally, Gender Links is facing a harsh backlash from a patriarchal society.

As for limitations, this study focused on South Africa only and not on the other SADC countries where GL is active. An extension of research to those countries would provide valuable information about media and gender activism in an understudied region of the world and an opportunity for comparison. Attention should also be paid to other areas of Gender Links's work, including those of gender justice, gender and governance, and advisory services.

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2. Bulbulia, Shehnaaz. (2007, July 17). Staff member, Institute for the Advancement of Journalism.
3. Davies, Trevor. (2007, July 16). Consultant, Gender Links (GL).
4. Du Plessis, Tim. (2007, July 24). Editor of *Beeld*.
5. Gandhi, Dumisani. (2007, July 18). Gender, HIV, and media manager, GL.
6. Haffajee, Ferial. (2007, July 24). Editor of *City Press* and GL board member.
7. Ley, Marga. (2007, July 24). Associate editor, *Beeld*.
8. Mahleka, Themba. (2007, July 19). Intern, Gemsa.
9. Manyaka, Ethel. (2007, July 17). Member of Press Council of South Africa, Business Unusual workshop participant.
10. Mlangeni, Moses. (2007, July 20). Senior economics journalist at SABC Radio, Business Unusual workshop participant.
11. Moolman, Janine. (2007, July 27). Information and media manager, Women's Net, formerly assistant director and editor, GL.
12. Morna, Colleen Lowe. (2007, July 18). Executive director, GL.
13. Ndlovu, Sikhonzile. (2007, July 26). Media literacy coordinator, GL.
14. Ntshangase, Jacob. (2007, July 17). Executive director, Institute for the Advancement of Journalism.
15. Nyakujarah, Loveness Jambaya. (2007, July 26). Assistant director and gender justice program manager, GL.
16. Rama, Kubi. (2007, July 23). Deputy director of GL, formerly chief executive officer of Gemsa.
17. Sibanda, Nonhlanhla. (2007, July 19). Former programs officer, Gemsa.
18. Siziba, Nompu. (2007, July 20). Economics researcher, SABC, Business Unusual workshop participant.

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19. Smith, Rene. (2007, July 26). Consultant, GL.
20. Steyn, Christelle. (2007, July 19). Consultant, GL.
21. Tolmay, Susan. (2007, July 18). Gender and governance manager, GL.
22. Virahsawmy, Loga. (2007, July 19). Director Francophone and Mauritius Office, GL.
23. Walter, Deborah. (2007, July 24). Editor, GL.
24. Zikalala, Snuki. (2007, July 24). Group chief executive of News, SABC (suspended on May 6, 2008, pending an investigation into allegations of misconduct).
25. Zwane, Purity. (2007, July 17). Lecturer, North-West University (Mafikeng Campus), Business Unusual workshop participant.

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