
Were women journalists discriminated against during the Liberation Struggle for Namibian independence and hindered in their jobs on account of their gender or colour of skin? If the answer to this question is yes, how did these women journalists handle this? And how do these women evaluate their contribution to the liberation of the country? Maria Mboono Nghidinwa, who was herself one of these women journalists, and who worked for NAMPA, Swapo’s press agency since 1987, attempts an answer to these questions in her book. It is, essentially, her doctoral thesis, submitted to Howard University, Washington and treats the years 1985 to 1990 only. This, the author argues, is because it is only during these last years before independence that the media focused on the struggle and liberation. Yet, this periodisation does not really convince. Right at the beginning of those years, Gwen Lister established *The Namibian*, today the country’s largest and most reputable daily; but the establishment of this newspaper is the direct consequence of Ms Listers experience of gender-based discrimination, surveillance and reporting restrictions and sanctions, while she was the editor at the liberal *Windhoek Observer*. Though the author provides an overview of the history of the media in Namibia, this chapter remains sketchy / impressionist only, and disconnected from an analytical treatment of the author’s key questions, raised at the beginning of her book. Alongside secondary literature and official documents, the author bases her work also on 13 interviews, conducted with women journalists from papers, radio and television. It is this infusion with oral history, that turns out to be a real strength of the book.

Interestingly, only three of the interviewed women are African Namibian. For Ms Nghidinwa this disproportion is clearly a result of apartheid. This made it nearly impossible for Black women to follow the prestigious career path of a journalist; also, before Independence, journalism was very clearly a male-dominated sector. The majority of the interviewed women relates that they were not really taken serious as journalists, regardless of whether they were White or Black. Among others, this was manifested in the fact that women were only seen to be able to report and write on the ‘shallower’ social topics; politics and the economy were not considered to be coverable by women. Moreover, women were considered easier targets for the censorship of the South African authorities. Despite this, the journalists that were interviewed would not phrase these experiences in a feminist discourse. The author explains this to be result of the restraint with which African women engaged with feminism. It was considered by many to be of “white Western capitalist origin” (p. 66). Yet, gender equality as a topic was found to be important by some of the women. It is in this context that *Sister Namibia*, a monthly for women, was established by Joe Rogge and Estellie Coetzee in 1989.
This reviewer considers it a weakness that the author only occasionally concretises this with the results of her interviews. Only when she does so, for instance when Theodora Nadja, who was reporting for the Council of Churches, reports on her experience as an undercover journalist among women’s groups in the north, does her narrative start to show depth and real content.

A more substantial argument regarding the chequered and moving life stories of the women interviewed – extracts of the latter are at the back of the book – is missing; also an analysis of the women’s journalistic production between 1985 and 1990 – this in spite of the fact that the author herself has admonished this as a desiderate. Such rigour would have facilitated more pertinent answers to her key questions.

The reader is left, more often than not, perplexed. This is also due to the author’s in-depth reflexions on critical theory, her approach to interviewing and her methodology; these are surely important for the theoretical underpinnings of a PhD dissertation, but surely quite unnecessary for a book.

So why was Maria Mboono Nghidinwa’s work published, one is inclined to ask at the end of this review? Her attempt to close a gap in our understanding of the role of women in the liberation struggle has only partially been successful. An analysis of the contents of the writings of the women would have been of particular importance, as well as a comparison with the working conditions of women in the field 20 years down, the lack of which renders her work superficial, at times even banal.

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