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Where are women voices in talk radio?

By Talifhani Munzhedzi

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Having been a fan of talk radio for a number of years, what worries me is a lack of women voices - not as presenters, but as contributors to programmes. This is not healthy in a democracy such as ours, which guarantees the freedom of expression. The country's agenda cannot solely be left in the hands of a few men who call in to radio stations to air their opinions. It's not that radio stations don't accept female callers, there are just few women voicing their opinion on our radio stations on matters of the day.

Talk radio stations like SAfm, 702 and CapeTalk command a sizable number of listeners who keep the conversation going on issues affecting us. If one can do a proper count of participants daily, it could be safe to assume that almost 80% of those calling in are men. Now the question is, are radio stations concerned about this and should they be worried at all? My simple answer is yes.

The 2011 Census showed that in South African there are 51.7 million people, about 25.2 million are male, and 26.6 million are female. This number is set to increase in the coming years.

We need women voices

Radio stations should take this seriously and encourage women voices to be heard. Some radio stations say they cannot prevent enthusiastic male callers in favour of a few women who call in, but I think they should take serious measures to come up with programming that encourages women to call in. This does not mean stations should adopt a certain style of taking dating and relationship topics to make the core of its programming, it simply means coming up with issues that touch the nerves of majority of women. I don't necessarily know what those issues could be - that's why we need women voices.

Talk radio stations have fallen prey to what we call 'regular callers' who have now hijacked the airwaves commenting on each and every topic. This has led to a lot of talk radio programmes becoming static, boring and lacking diversity of views - not only from different listeners but also across both genders. Some radio producers have suggested banning regular callers to allow new voices, but stations will run a risk of facing lawsuits and also not having people to rely on to start debate on air.

Making a concious decision

I have heard women saying 'we will leave politics to men', and will focus on what is happening at home. Isn't it time for talk radio producers and programme managers to rethink their content by coming up with topics and issues and how they affect women at home? Some stations will say they do that on a daily basis, but I think there should be a conscious decision to rally female voices to participate on air.

Unisa Radio for instance, adopted a programming strategy which is biased towards women as they are the majority of the station's core listenership. Then there are radio stations that have gone to an extent of hiring more female talkshow hosts to push the female numbers, but this does not necessarily mean that more women will call in. Content that is being put on air by managers and producers will remain pivotal to attract female voices.

South Africa is a country with high inequality and gender based violence - women will have to be on the forefront of these issues. Gone are the days where these issues can only be addressed by politicians and community leaders. Women themselves should raise their voices. If this means that radio stations have to approach women in the streets to call in, so be it.

If talk radio wants South African women to contribute, a conscious decision will have to be made to attract their voices.

ABOUT TALIFHANI MUNZHEDZI

Talifhani Munzhedzi is a deputy station manager at UNISA Radio. The radio station strives to be amongst the few if not only campus radio stations to provide the talk radio format to students and staff. To listen to UNISA Radio go to http://radio.unisa.ac.za, to contact Tali Munzhedzi email Munzhta@unisa.ac.za.

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