

jennifer pozner

Jennifer Pozner knows a thing or two about “Bridezillas” and “Bachelor Babes,” but she’s no reality-TV junkie. Pozner is a media critic and the founder and executive director of Women in Media and News (WIMN), a multi-faceted organization created in 2002 to address the marginalization and underrepresentation of woman in media on just about every level.

One strategy Pozner deploys to advance WIMN’s mission is media literacy education. “Bridezillas, Bachelor Babes, and Husband-Hunting Harems: Decoding Reality TV’s Twisted Fairy Tales” and “Condoleezza Rice is a Size 6 and Other Things I Learned from the News” are some of the recent multi-media presentations Pozner has given at college campuses across the country. WIMN also offers media training workshops for grassroots women’s and social justice organizations, works for equity in the media democracy movement, and provides

resources for media producers to diversify and broaden the sources they use for news stories.

A study of nightly news programming by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting found that only nine percent of professional and political voices presented on the three major TV networks in 2001 belonged to women. Part of Pozner’s goal for WIMN is to establish a comprehensive POWER Sources database. POWER Sources—which stands for “Perspectives Of Women Expand Reporting”—will be a free on-line service for journalists who are striving for equity in their coverage to identify women professionals and experts from a variety of disciplines, from plumbing to politics to physics.

POWER Sources is projected to launch in 2006, but Pozner herself is filling the gap in the meantime. On a case-by-case basis, she personally guides media makers to appropriate sources, while traveling frequently to attend conferences and give lectures and trainings.

Even with her heavy schedule, Pozner finds the time to critique popular entertainment and news media for a variety of local and national publications, and expand WIMN, whose mission embodies the spirit of *all* her endeavors.

Interview by **Emily Udell**

Illustration by **Susie Ghahremani**

What makes the work of WIMN important now?

Studies have been done that show women are systematically marginalized and nearly invisible in many news venues. While it’s great to do the studies, media outlets don’t respond to the studies. I interviewed producers from *Face the Nation* and *Meet the Press* after September 11, when studies showed that they were rarely, if ever, quoting women and having them as guests to talk about terrorism and war. Nine percent of the



time, the guests on terrorism and war were women. What did they say to me? They said, "Our goal is to deliver the newsmakers, not to get women on the air." As if "women" and "newsmakers" are mutually exclusive!

You're taking on many media reform issues under the umbrella of WIMN. Why do all these strands of media activism need to be folded into the mission of a single organization?

Media companies, when they merge, act in similar ways to every other kind of industry. When newsrooms are merged, reporters are fired, editors are fired, people have to do more stories in fewer amounts of hours and days, budgets are slashed so they don't have translators, and it's very difficult for even the best reporters, who are slogging through and trying to do diverse, accurate, comprehensive, journalism, to find new sources. We're putting together this database of women experts across the country so that we can help those reporters. It's a win-win situation—for the community groups, women experts and professionals who have previously not had access to those forums, as well as for journalists. ¶ So in WIMN you have these three aspects—advocacy with journalists, media trainings with women's groups on campuses and in communities across the country, and the analysis—but those wouldn't be complete if you didn't have a fourth prong, which is structural reform. It's a structural problem because profit is an underlying motive. Women always suffer when advertisers are making news agendas and setting the priorities for what becomes entertainment. Advertisers have always exploited women in print and broadcast, and now they're weaving their ideas directly into content of our favorite programs—even in news shows. All of those strategies together make a holistic argument for change across the board. That's why our organization is structured the way it is and why our organization is unique in the landscape.

One of the goals of WIMN is to get media reform issues on the agendas of grassroots women's organizations and get women's issues on the tables of organizations that are doing media reform work. Why hasn't this bridge been explicitly created already, when it seems like such a logical connection?

The simplistic answer is that sexism exists in the media democracy movement just as much as it exists on the left in general, which is still very male-dominated when it comes to people at the top, who gets funding, who gets their leadership respected and heard. But in terms of feminist and social justice groups, the reason that structural media reform has not been on the top of most groups' agendas is that we are all spread so thin. How do you tell somebody who's working to make sure that an Afghan woman isn't sent by Immigration back to the same forces that abducted her father and killed her brother, that they need to take time out of what they're already doing to attend your rally at the FCC? Those connections haven't been made in the past, to some degree, because who has the time? But the connections *need* to be made. What we're doing is trying to raise the stakes and break down for women in the social justice movement why media matters as the overarching issue that connects every issue that they're working on. ¶ Within the media reform community, WIMN is constantly working to make sure that the issues of gender and race and class are not sidelined as important issues that we'll talk about on another day.

Many feminists activists that I talk to say that their activism around women's issues is interwoven with other struggles like LGBT rights, labor rights, racial oppression, globalization, or environmental issues. Do feminist activists dilute their effectiveness by approaching issues this way, or is this the strategy of the future?

Whether or not young women identify specifically, semantically, as feminists, they're bringing a feminist progressive agenda to globalization, to alternative models of citizenship for immigrant domestic workers, to fighting prison abuse, to activists across the board. That is *absolutely* the wave of the future, because it's never been a great strategy to isolate and focus on a single issue. Feminism isn't about a couple of single issues. Feminism is about women *across the board* having access to physical, economic, social, and political freedoms. Those who would say that feminism is elitist and only focused on abortion or only focused on pay equity don't know much about the movement. At the core, feminism is integrated with anti-racism, with class analysis, with queer anal-

ysis. And very far from diluting the power of the movement, it expands the power of the movement.

One of your media literacy lectures focuses on the absence of women's voices in the coverage of the current war in Iraq. What do you think some of the ways that the low percentage of female journalists and pundits represented out there has shortchanged America?

To understand the problems of the marginalization of women effecting public opinion and (eventually public policy), you just have to look way back to the immediate aftermath of September 11 where the majority—90 some-odd percent—of sources and experts and guests and pundits were men. Almost all of those men—corporate representatives and government officials and former government officials—made the case for war and military intervention absolute necessities. When there were a couple of rare women who dared to speak out, like Susan Sontag in the *New Yorker*—who said "Maybe the answer to the ever-present question 'Why do they hate us?'" was a little bit more complicated than "Because we love freedom"—they were immediately bashed as a traitor, as un-American. A *Newsweek* editor said something like: "The same people who say not to blame the victim in rape cases are now saying that Uncle Sam wore a short skirt and asked for it." That's how they summarized Susan Sontag's discussion of the fact that America

has to look at its foreign policy if we want to maintain our safety. Why did they bring in a rape metaphor out of nowhere? If you only have men who are the pundits and the editors and the judgment callers, that type of thing happens on a regular basis. ¶ You also had poll stories that said we had unanimous support across the board, [that] some 90-odd percent supposedly wanted to go to war. Simultaneously you had stories that said that the gender gap on war had all but vanished, that women were just as hawk-like as men. But the very few poll stories that *actually* coded answers for gender found that 48 percent of women favored little to no military response after September 11 in Afghanistan, and that 44 percent, I believe, favored some-to-robust military response. That's more women who wanted no war, or some very low intervention, than wanted any intervention. Yet even the headline of that *Post* story that reported that women were more peace-oriented than men was something along the lines of "Nine in 10 Favor Robust Military Response, Public Unyielding in War Against Terror." Even when they finally get around to asking us our perspectives, because we're not making the calls at that level, women's voices are misrepresented even then. ¶ They were also using stories about Afghan women, who the Bush administration "found" after September 11, even though women in this country as well as abroad had been talking about the oppression of women in

Afghanistan by the Taliban for years. The Bush administration and the media seized on the idea of the burka after September 11 and said "we need to go into Afghanistan to liberate the Afghan women." They were able to use triumphant visuals of women taking their burkas off after the bombs, and say "Now women are free." But the opportunistic use of Afghan women was never discussed in any of those forums, by Afghan American women, or by women who had been lobbying on behalf of Afghan women for years, and nobody was ever brought on who could frame what Afghan women were actually going through.

Some of the work you do involves critiquing representation of women in popular culture—in reality TV shows or on prime-time television. How do you respond to critics who might ask, "What's the point? Corporate media's flawed on so many levels you can't expect accurate representations of women from it?"

The fact is that the majority of the millions of people—many of them young girls—who tune in to every episode of *The Bachelor* to find out who will get to go home broken-hearted are being told that only the women with the lowest self-esteems, the lowest standards, and the lowest-carb diets will be rewarded with love and security. Those people are not bringing a lot of critical, political approaches to these images. If we don't take a look at what the public is seeing on a regular basis,

and what the public is learning about women, especially in this form of "reality TV." They're scripting these so-called "unscripted dramas" to tell us that women are catty gold diggers; are bitchy and not to be trusted, especially by other women; are dumb as a pile of rocks; are unable to live free, happy, positive, successful, fulfilling lives unless they're married and unless they're very classically western waxed and idealized. These shows are the new backlash against women.

But I guess it comes back to: Why does pop culture matter?

We get our ideas about ourselves in many ways from pop culture. If people say "just turn off the TV," and "just support indie media," well *of course* we should support indie media, of course we should make our own images, *of course* we should not bring toxic images into our own homes if we don't want them, but what of the people who haven't been through media literacy programs, what of the people—the millions of people—who need our help in understanding what these shows are about? We need to be a little less inside the playing field, and we really need to work with people where they are. And where are they? They're in pop culture. We don't just get our information from the news, we don't just get out entertainment from pop culture, we get both from both of those venues and we need to look at both of those venues pretty critically. ☺

