

# AI Empowering Women in the African Media

**Sherry Rockey**

[srockey@encompassworld.com](mailto:srockey@encompassworld.com)

*The media has an enormous and far-reaching impact on women's empowerment. A growing number of organizations are being created to strengthen women's voices in the news media. The author speaks to the application of AI to program evaluation with International Women's Media Foundation's African Women's Media Center (AWMC) and the impact it had on the program and the women it serves.*

It is easy to overlook the profound impact the media has on our view of the world. Whether we get our information from a tiny community radio station in rural Mali or from the New York Times, the media provides a filter that shapes our notions of what is important. The media tells us what events warrant our attention, how to perceive those events, who has the expertise to interpret the events and what they mean for our lives. Even in the most objective of news organizations, the process of deciding what is news and how that news is presented is influenced by the life experiences and perceptions of media decision makers. In nearly every country in the world, and particularly in developing countries, the vast majority of those decision-makers are men.

## AI and Program Evaluation

In 1997, the premier organization helping women gain access to these decision-making roles — the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) — founded the African Women's Media Center (AWMC). At the time, I was the Executive Director of the IWMF. The African Women's Media Center, located in the West African country of Senegal, was established to promote news coverage of issues affecting women and society by supporting women in media leadership roles and providing access to education, skills training and resources.

As this program approached its three-year anniversary, and with the encouragement of the program's donor, the IWMF sought to evaluate the success of the program to date and to develop goals for the future. To design and carry out this evaluation, we contracted with EnCompass LLC, a small, woman-owned consulting firm. While I am now a vice president of EnCompass, the company was new to me at the time, as was the concept of Appreciative Inquiry. I have learned since that EnCompass had been successful in using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an approach to strategic planning, and organization and community change, and in adapting AI to use in evaluations.

I asked EnCompass to design an evaluation that would assess whether the AWMC was working effectively toward the goals the IWMF had set out in creating the Center, whether the AWMC was reaching the people it needed to reach, and if its programs were meeting the needs of African women journalists. But, because the Center had only been operational for three years and because its social change goals were long-term, I was concerned that the

evaluation results would highlight deficits and focus on targets not yet reached.

The EnCompass team addressed these fears by presenting the concept of Appreciative Inquiry as a framework for the evaluation. They explained that an AI-based evaluation that emphasized participation, dialogue, and discovery of best practices would bring credibility, sensitivity, and honesty to the process and at the same time would provide the data that we needed for designing the future of the program. Another reason for choosing AI was the compatibility of its asset-based and participatory approach with the organization's overall purpose, structure and programs and with the oral history traditions of African cultures.

EnCompass incorporated Appreciative Inquiry throughout the evaluation processes. AI was used to:

- ◆ Focus the evaluation and develop the evaluation questions
- ◆ Design and conduct appreciative individual and group interviews with AWMC members, AWMC Advisory Committee members, collaborators, and IWFMF and AWMC staff
- ◆ Design and implement an appreciative questionnaire
- ◆ Synthesize results and prepare the evaluation report

By using AI, we were able to:

- ◆ Obtain, document, celebrate and disseminate program successes and best practices
- ◆ Foster in-depth dialogue and reflection among different stakeholders, including members, leadership, management, and collaborators
- ◆ Reach and actively engage as many as possible of AWMC's members and the leadership of both the AWMC and IWFMF
- ◆ Engage the AWMC in interactive, whole-systems learning

### Impact and Results

The evaluation results confirmed the AWMC's unique role in offering African women journalists training and access in traditionally male arenas. The results showed that AWMC programs were meeting member needs in ways that were not being met otherwise. From the evaluation, we were better able to determine the priority needs of African women journalists for training, resources and opportunities, and to develop a strategic plan around those priorities.

But the evaluation's impact went well beyond the data. By using an Appreciative Inquiry approach, the evaluation process affected organizational culture in a variety of ways, some of which changed the AWMC's image of itself and how it operated. The AWMC was transformed into an organization that not only sought empowerment for women, but gave it as well.

The appreciative process gave the women journalists who are served by AWMC programs a platform and an opportunity to articulate their commitment to the goals and values of the Center. A day-long Appreciative Inquiry session ended with the participants feeling a sense of ownership for the work of the Center and with an increased stake in its future. Although they were initially hesitant to engage in an evaluation where they would be asked to critique a program that provided them with valuable resources, the appreciative

process created a safe place from which they could contribute to a future visioning of the Center without feeling critical.

It was in this way that the most controversial issues were revealed. These were the desire for African leadership of AWMC and the need for clarity about the roles and responsibilities of its Advisory Committee members. It had always been the IWWMF's goal to transition the AWMC to a more Africa-based and Africa-led autonomous organization. The AI process of the evaluation reinforced that goal and moved us in that direction more quickly than we would have otherwise gone.

With the AWMC's members now empowered to express their wishes and willing to take greater ownership for the success of the Center, the organization made some dramatic changes — beginning with the Center's leadership structures. The American staff and board leaders gave way to African leadership and the inactive advisory committee was replaced with a more participatory, grass-roots based committee that was given real responsibility for strategy and implementation. The new leadership used the best experiences and wishes outlined through the AI process to build a program strategy that directly spoke to the needs and priorities of the membership.

Despite my initial fears, the evaluation was a positive, affirming experience for the IWWMF, the Center's leadership and staff and its members. Because we used an Appreciative Inquiry framework, the results generated new energy and attracted new commitments and leadership. By focusing on best experiences, what is valued about the organization and its programs and on stakeholders dreams for its future, the evaluation itself became an empowerment tool. It changed the role that women journalists play in the life of the Center and gave them the power to re-create the organization reflecting their image and elevating their vision to the highest priority.

*A more in-depth analysis of the IWWMF evaluation can be found in the Winter 2003 edition of "New Directions for Evaluation," the journal of the American Evaluation Association. Written by EnCompass president, Tessie Catsambas and EnCompass CEO, Laverne Webb, the chapter presents EnCompass' work with the IWWMF as a pioneering effort in using appreciative inquiry in evaluation.*