

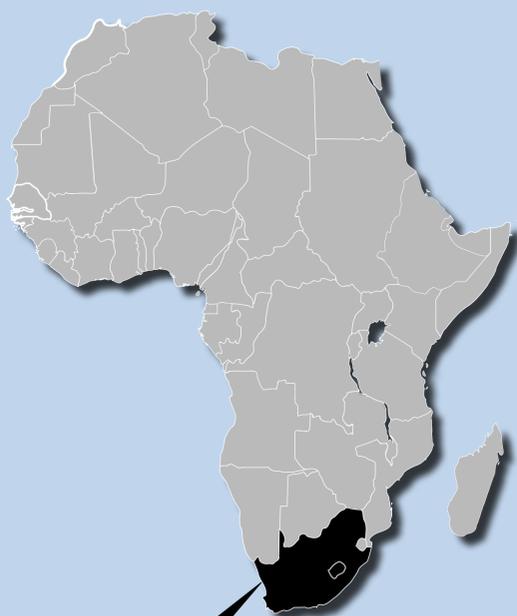


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During my Burch Fellowship summer, I became a writer. For two months, I traveled through South Africa, researching the role of women in the news media. I have always been fascinated by the way women are portrayed in the media and how this shapes generation after generation of young girls. But in South Africa I wanted to see who the women were who were actually creating those images.

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Capetown, South Africa

LIVING BY THE LETTER: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

Since the end of apartheid, South African women have seen so many avenues open for them in the news media, but I wanted to discover how they were embracing their new roles as editors, producers, and CEOs - especially in regards to how they were portraying women.

The journalistic opportunities I encountered were once in a lifetime!



I worked as a beauty assistant for a photo shoot with South Africa's top model, I spoke at an academic conference, I helped produce a daily talkshow and I wrote for a national newspaper. But at the heart of all of my research were the interviews with South Africa's most influential female journalists, and with each interview I felt as though these new ideas and perspectives were changing my entire view of women in the media. Tall, thin, gorgeous women were still being airbrushed on the covers of magazines. Women were still being portrayed as victims over the airwaves. And local women were not being interviewed for articles about business or politics, only beauty and home affairs. I was torn, because I so respected the women who had worked their way through the journalism ranks, but I could not understand why they didn't want to alter other women's roles and portray women in an equal light as men. But these powerful women taught me that in order to promote change, you have to work within the system. They were competing in the same industry as men, and were beating these at their own game, a game that had for so long been an "old boys club".

Only 15 years after entering the professional journalism sphere, women are definitively equal in media production. And over the next 15, I believe they are going to change the way South Africa views women. The female journalists that I met want all South African women to

have access to the professional lifestyles that they lead and believe that changing public perception of a woman's role is the first step in creating an unbiased

community. They also believe that their generation of professional female journalists are the ones that will be able to change things, but they have to establish themselves within the field before they can use the media to reach their goals. The women I met, all intelligent, funny, and beautiful people, want the average woman on the cover of their magazines, they want moms and students being interviewed for real stories, and they want any woman, regardless of color, to be able to become a journalist herself if she has the passion.

What I learned through my experience in South Africa, was that all my research was actually leading me to a conclusion about what kind of woman, and journalist, I am. Writing stories about babies being raised in prison and families being unfairly evicted taught me the power of my words, and how important it is to write with the passion of those who are speaking. Current professional journalists in South Africa have earned the respect they receive as writers, and that is exactly what I want from my own writing. I loved being in the heat of the moment, interviewing locals, and seeing myself reflected in their eyes as a journalist- not as a woman, or a foreigner, but simply as a writer. And without being in South Africa, I don't think I could have ever fully understood the power behind that.

But my Burch Fellowship summer wasn't always about work. My fellowship took me to Cape Town, where I ate breakfast with Desmond Tutu and got to photograph local riots. Along my way I took surfing lessons and ate Zulu dinners with local South Africans I had met along the way. I had the opportunity to



hike the highest point in Southern Africa, swim in the Indian Ocean, see the South African Springboks play a match, go on safari, and meet people from every end of the globe, each with his or her own passion and reason for loving South Africa. At the end of the trip, the best part of my life in South Africa were the friendships I had made, the afternoons spent discussing ideas and relationships and cultures that all seem to interweave. It was my Burch summer that taught me how much heart it takes to be a writer, especially working within the system. It was my research that made me change my views about women in the media. It was South Africa that made me believe that we can all impact the way the world works, with passion, curiosity, and a lot of heart.

