

Isha Sesay on the CNN MultiChoice African Journalist Awards

 By [Ilse van den Berg](#)

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The 18th [CNN MultiChoice African Journalist Awards](#) is taking place tomorrow night, 12 October 2013 at the CTICC where finalists will be recognised for their excellent journalism across the continent.



Isha Sesay. Image source: www.cnn.com

Isha Sesay ([@IshaSesayCN](#)), CNN anchor and correspondent, will host the awards. She is a well-known face on CNN International, HLN and CNN/U.S. and is based at the network's global headquarters in Atlanta. On CNN International Sesay anchors 'CNN NewsCenter', a half-hour, weekday news program that takes viewers through the day's big stories of global importance. She also hosts 'BackStory', the weekly program that goes behind the scenes of CNN's global newsgathering operation, and often files reports for 'African Voices.'

I chatted to Sesay to find out more about the awards and to get her insights into the world of African journalism.

■ ***You have been involved in the awards for quite some time now, how has your experience been thus far?***

Isha Sesay: Yes, this is my fifth year hosting and it's gone by really quickly! It's been five incredible years. I was trying to remember how many times I have done it by the amount of dresses I've worn... it's the best way of remembering!

Each time, you know, you think maybe it would get old, but it doesn't and it's mainly because of the journalists that are involved that make it to the final and the fact that each year we get more and more entries and each year we see a higher standard amongst the entries. I mean, this year we had over 1300 entries from about 42 countries and I think in the end we have 27 finalists from 12 countries.

When I get to meet the journalists when I'm here to host, I am always just so inspired and I leave completely pumped up because many of them take huge personal risk to tell stories and in sometimes it isn't a case of taking personal risk - they are operating on a continent where in some parts it's just not easy in terms of infrastructure to get things done. So I love coming - it's been five great years. It really has.

❖ ***What in particular are you looking forward to at this year's awards that is maybe different to previous years?***

Sesay: Yeah, I would say stylistically, the pure aesthetic of the show is a little different from past years which is nice, so you never get to the point where you go "Ah rehearsals... I know how this goes..." And also, every year, I have a different co-host. This year I have someone that I co-hosted with before in Durban - Macfarlane Moleli ([@macmoleli](#)), from Kaya FM, who is just *awesome*. So he is my on-stage husband for this weekend.

❖ ***What are the awards all about and what doors would winning an award this weekend open to a journalist?***

Sesay: The awards are really the most prestigious journalist awards on the continent for a start. It is a platform to really demonstrate the high standards of journalism here on the continent. It's also a time to celebrate the journalists who are doing great work in telling the diverse stories of Africa. It's testament to the fact that Africa isn't just one block, it's not just one "country". We have these journalists across the span of the continent telling such varied stories.

These awards are important to show Africa that we are doing great things, we've got great people here who are operating at the same level as journalists in the US and in the UK. So I think they are really important for that. With past winners we have seen that winning the award not only gives people an immense sense of self-confidence, but also, among the prizes they get to come to Atlanta and serve as part of the Journalism Fellowship Award that CNN does. We have had past winners like Hopewell Rugoh-Chin'ono from Zimbabwe, who has gone on and done a little time at Harvard and people have made films that they are in, they get funding to take up the projects that they want to. It's a big deal! You win one of these awards, it's a big deal - your resumé crosses the desk of someone, they will know you are as good as anyone out there. It's a real feather in your cap.

❖ ***What do you think makes a great journalist?***

Sesay: Accuracy, impartiality, and I think tenacity. You've got to be tenacious - tenacious in going after the story, tenacious in terms of asking the tough questions, tenacious in not letting barriers and impediments hold you back.

❖ ***I know we touched on it previously, but how do you think African journalism compares to journalism in the rest of the world?***

Sesay: Again, you know, I think a disservice that's done to Africa is that when we speak of it we speak of Africa as one block. It's the same as other countries in the world that don't have the greatest freedom and also have their own press challenges. Africa is no different, we hold our own by telling important stories, we are there at the vanguard trying to tell our own stories and I think we are doing as well as other places. We are doing ourselves a disservice if we talk about us lagging behind. These awards are proof of that.

❖ ***Being a female journalist, would you say there are bigger challenges for female journalists than male journalists in Africa? What advice do you have for female journalists in Africa?***

Sesay: I think the important thing to remember is that there are certain challenges we face as women - it's not just being female journalists, it's being women in the world, professionals, the inherent challenges when it comes to motherhood and balancing family and profession. I'm not saying men don't have these challenges, but we do juggle it in a different way.

I don't think one should walk around making their gender define them and limit them. I think they have to push through. I interviewed someone recently who said something very interesting. I asked her that question about gender and whether it has held her back working in the global finance industry. She said that she just pushes ahead and she does the best work that she can. She said that in her experience, and her life story is testament, that people forget she is a woman... They stop focussing on that because she's not focussing on that. She is just focussing on being the best professional she can be and I think that applies to female journalists as well. Let's push ahead and let's not make our gender our defining element.

I don't think we as woman should be talking about setbacks and being held back because then you are only limiting your

own mind.

▣ ***Lastly, do you have any words of encouragement to the finalists before the awards?***

Sesay: Have a good time! You made it this far so you are already a winner. I know that sounds like a cliché but over 1300 entries and you are one of 27 that's here, you *are* a winner. You've done great work and we are commending you. You are here for a multi-day workshop and effectively networking and you are meeting great people... It's a pretty good time so you should come and have a good time.

I would hope that people would walk away knowing that they are on the right track, they are doing great work and hopefully that just inspires them for the future. As I would say to any journalist, male or female, don't let anything hold you back

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ABOUT ILSE VAN DEN BERG

Ilse is a freelance journalist and editor with a passion for people & their stories (check out Passing Stories). She is also the editor of Go & Travel, a platform connecting all the stakeholders in the travel & tourism industry. You can check out her work here and here. Contact Ilse through her website here.

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