

Gender: the next step



The face of race has a gendered complexion, writes **Phumla Mthala**.

The recent report into racism in the media conducted for the South African Human Rights Commission was the first step towards understanding how race, racism and racial stereotypes are represented in the South African media. There were some suggestions, however, that the study was limited by focusing on solely on race, and that class and gender were also important aspects to look at. These questions necessitate an examination of the relationship between race, gender, and class.

We need to understand how the practices of race, gender and class are created, expressed, challenged, reinforced and circulated in our society. One way to do this is to examine the role of black women in South Africa's history.

The Apartheid government enforced a racially divided society. Race was central in this system, but its impact went beyond the boundaries of race — into gender and class. For example, it served capitalist ends to have a racist system as it reproduced conditions for cheap labour via influx control and the pass laws. These pillars of apartheid prevented black people from permanent residence in urban areas. They impacted most heavily on rural black women, who carried the burden of producing the cheap labour power for white mines and farms, and in time they also served to ensure that women



Nomavenda Mathiane and Lakela Kaunda ... testified at the HRC hearings to ensure that racism was not seen as something that affects men and women equally.

remained largely unskilled.

Those women who did move to the towns found themselves at the bottom of the urban social hierarchy, having fewer rights not only because they were black — but also because they were poor. In some instances, the type of work they found served to further alienate them and undermine their rights as human beings. Employment as domestic workers or jobs as prostitutes to mineworkers, are just two examples. This is not to suggest that these were the only jobs black women performed, nor that black male mineworkers for instance were enjoying greater rights.

So, it wasn't only apartheid that robbed black women of their rights — but also capitalism and patriarchy. While these three forms of inequality closely interlock with one another, they are conceptually independent. For example, while the position in which black women find themselves in the strata of power relations can be partly explained by patriarchy and class discrimination, racism was and still is a dimension in their socio-economic positioning. This merits research into race and racism. But there is also a dire need for research into the gender dimension — i.e. those experiences that black women have in South Africa which have no equivalents in the lives of white women or indeed black men.

Accordingly while the recent research into racism in the media was valuable, there is also a need for research to be done into representation of black women in the media. Because of the historical position of black women at bottom of the social strata, the media in South Africa struggles to portray them any differently. This poor media status of black women is further reinforced by the gendered character of news.

The relationship of news to political and economic interests of men has long

been noted. Communication scholars have argued that, in this masculine narrative (news), women frequently carry — rather than create — meaning in the stories in which they appear. Although they are often participants in the event that is being reported on, their opportunity to interpret events is very limited. For example, if there is a report on violence or a disaster, the women tend to only appear as victims — while the persons who will be accessed to interpret the event are in most cases male. For far too long we have witnessed wailing black women in tragedy/disaster items.

Women frequently appear in media as 'ordinary' people who do not represent any social or political group. Rather they represent a type and are seldom 'experts' in a particular area. The 'soft' and 'hard' news distinction also further genders news, with women more frequently being represented in 'soft' news items and men dominating 'hard' news items.

There is near invisibility of black women in the news, and where they do appear, it is still mostly in the following stories: underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, overpopulation, disasters (burning of shacks) and violence against women. In these items, they mainly appear as victims and people who have absolutely no control over their destinies.

It is indisputable that black women are largely uneducated, are victims of violence and live in abject poverty. However, it is short-sighted to see the media's role as merely to reflect society. Media influences society and society in turn influences the media. The structures and social practices of racism are starting to be challenged by the media, but journalists have the added challenge and responsibility to represent black women in all their diversity.

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ROSIE NGXINGO b.1933

Kuhlwile phambile, kusil' emuvu
— It is night ahead, it is day behind

When the Xhosa warriors were going into battle, the women and children were waiting for the warriors to win so that they could move into the town. However, things went wrong and the thousands of women and children had to run very fast away from Grahamstown. In this picture I have shown how the women, children and the few cows they had brought with them had to run away very scared because they did not know what was happening. Since the time of this battle, women and children have had to always run away from the British in the Eastern Cape and I think we have lost a lot of understanding about what all the wars were about. In my own life I have had to also run away from many things because of apartheid and so I think I can understand how the women must have felt. For me the battle was very sad because from then on, women and children were lost and never had a proper place to make a home.

