



Ruth Seopedi Motau

A women's issue?

Sexism in the media

Nikki Naylor

Women have always had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the media. The media can be both crucial agent for change in highlighting the concerns and perspectives of women, but have also the power to render women invisible by shutting out issues which affect us, rendering us silent and thus maintaining the dominant status quo.

Historically, women tend to be either symbolically trivialised in the media, by linking them to a narrow circle of topics, concentrating on their private life or appearance, or they are annihilated. Evidence of this is the number of silent and decorative young women present in the media. Women are also “symbolically annihilated”¹, by not writing about them, or not depicting them as real women.

Ten years after apartheid we view our lives through the constitutional prism of freedom, dignity, equality and democracy. But how has this translated for women in the media? Has freedom of speech simply translated into freedom of the powerful white or black male elite to dominate and control the press, or have the voices of the most vulnerable and exploited been heard?

In 1998 Rape Crisis launched an advertisement that was labelled “offensive”, “anti-men” and “dis-

criminatory”. It featured Charlize Theron saying: “People often ask me what the men are like in South Africa. Well, if you consider that more women are raped in South Africa than in any country in the world; that one out of three women will be raped in their lifetime in South Africa; that every 26 seconds a woman is raped in South Africa. And perhaps worst of all that the rest of the men in South Africa seem to think that rape isn’t their problem. It’s not that easy to say what the men in South Africa are like. Because there seem to be so few of them out there.”

A group of men calling themselves “beswaarde manne” (offended men) lodged a complaint with the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) calling for the immediate ban of the advertisement. They complained that the advertisement insinuated that all South African men were rapists, which amounted to “a gross generalisation” and “created an impression about other normal men”. They argued the advertisement was “bad taste” and “derogatory to the extreme”. The ASA found that the advertisement seemed to imply that half of South African men were rapists and the other half simply condoned rape. On this basis the advertisement was found to discriminate against men. As a result it was banned. Rape Crisis and the Commission on Gender Equal-

ity appealed the decision. In the build-up to the appeal the matter received wide media coverage with people expressing their views on whether the advertisement was indeed offensive. What was striking was the extent of the uproar in relation to this “offensive” advertisement; yet there is no similar uproar when a woman is raped in South Africa.

Rape Crisis argued that the advertisement was important as it raised awareness around rape. It asked men to account socially and broke the silence around rape, removing it from the realm of being a “women’s issue” to a broader public interest issue. Rape, the argument went, was society’s problem and apathy was tantamount to condonation.

Just as the “Arrive Alive” traffic campaign made viewers feel uncomfortable, the “Real Men Don’t Rape” advertisements did the same. It forced people to take notice of a broader social problem and then asked viewers to position themselves along a spectrum, in terms of whether they saw rape as their problem or not. Legal arguments around the importance of freedom of expression, artistic creativity and equality were also raised.

The result was a resounding victory in that the appeals committee at the ASA over-ruled the previous ban, and the advertisement was on air again

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the same evening. However, the apparent victory for equality and freedom needs to be criticised at another level.

What concerned me then and still concerns me now, is the time and energy Rape Crisis had to invest in fighting to have the advertisement aired. The South African public did not want to hear what Charlize Theron had to say about rape. However, there are a number of offensive advertisements on television, in which women are displayed as objects, through the focus on their physical attributes, yet they remain on our screens year after year. No uproar, no call for bans, just silence.

Does this mean that the display of women as objects, focusing on their breasts and appearance, is what people want to see, and the media continue to oblige this desire? The Charlize Theron advertisement has since been taken off air and is no longer seen on television screens. Thus, what appeared to be a victory for freedom, equality and dignity should be viewed as a limited one in the broader scheme of things. While it brought the issue of rape into the public domain and creatively forced people to take note, the notion that all South African men are potential rapists appeared to be too radical for the public to grapple with.

On 26 October 2001, a nine-month-old girl was raped in her home in the town of Louisvale, Upington. Her 16-year-old mother was reported to have been drunk at the time, and had left her alone while she went in search of either food or alcohol. The child, nicknamed "Baby Tshepang", suffered serious injuries. Almost immediately six men from the community, including the great-grandfather of the child, were arrested and charged with the rape. In 2002 the charges were dropped after DNA tests failed to establish that any of the men had raped the girl.

On 19 January 2004 Judge Siraj Desai was arrested in Mumbai, India while attending the World Social Forum. He was accused of raping Salomé Isaacs, a fellow South African delegate at the conference, who reportedly was in his room after a night of clubbing and post-midnight drinks. In May 2004, after she had withdrawn the charges, the judge was acquitted in India of all charges.

The manner in which the media dealt with these two seemingly different cases sheds light on perceptions and stereotypes which abound in the South African media and public.

Soon after the arrest of the six men in the Baby Tshepang case, the newspapers were flooded with headlines in which the men were referred to as "ill-educated, barbaric drunks" (*The Star*, 30 October 2001). Monsters were depicted, with newspapers even commenting on their "shabby clothing" (*Pretoria News*, 14 November 2001). They were all assumed to be evil, and more critically, guilty, long before the start of any trial. The words "sex perverts" and "sadists" (*City Press*, 4 November 2001) were used contextualising rape as a sexual act and not one of power and violence. These men were depicted as the dark monsters every South African would like to believe rapists are. Just like the "beswaarde manne" who wanted to paint a picture of decent, upstanding South African men as being distinct from rapists, the media did the same with the depiction of the alleged rapists in the Tshepang case.

Conversely, in the Salomé Isaacs' case, the words used to describe the judge were "educated", "respectable", "high moral standing" and "dignified". The immediate, instinctive response by the media perpetuated a number of rape myths. Men who rape are drunk, of low social standing, unemployed, uneducated and barbaric by their very nature. The monster is not a judge, is not educated,



not respected, does not wear suits, speak eloquently or come from a good home.

What makes these cases interesting is the fact that all the accused have been acquitted, or charges have been dropped. All names have been cleared. So this is not about the guilt or otherwise of the men, rather it is about the automatic assumption that the low-income, alcohol-consuming, uneducated man is more of a potential rapist than a judge. The potential harm this causes for women who are raped by high-profile men is very real and does nothing more than silence women further.

Perhaps the media should have placed more emphasis on what it means to be raped in South Africa for a young girl or woman, rather than try to deal with "who the monsters are". We also need to question why these two cases made headline news, and not other rape cases? Dramatic effect. Drama, that is what people want!

Some may argue that, since rape made the headlines and child abuse was highlighted, this cannot be viewed negatively, as we want the silence to be broken. My earlier comments about the quality rather than the quantity of exposure is important in this regard. It is not about bringing rape into the headlines, but rather about the quality of the report, once a rape case makes it to the headline.

So, what has freedom meant for gender equality in the South African media? I would argue that all we have done in South Africa is allow for Barbie to be more visible, and for a different type of Barbie to be manufactured. We have made Barbie more accessible to the black community. We have made Barbie non-racial without recognising all her other classist, capitalist flaws. We have made Barbie talk about rape and violence, without questioning the very myths upon which she bases her statements. We call this equality.

I am criticising the advertising of Barbie, as

well as our advertising industry, our TV and film industry, our portrayal of women in every sphere of South African life and, of course, our very own beauty pageants. It means that, where black women were previously excluded from the Miss South Africa pageant, and a black Miss South Africa was unheard of – we now have black Barbies and make-up for darker skins. South Africa still prides itself on the notion of a Miss South Africa pageant – widely publicised and covered by the media. Only that now, we cover the event under the auspices of raising money for AIDS orphans and projects about violence against women.

So it's all different, not the way it used to be? We do not objectify women anymore? We have a powerful black woman controlling the show and calling the shots. It's not about beauty anymore, it's about intelligence, social commitment and responsibility? But look at her, notice her and her bodily dimensions – then ask yourself how far we have really come. Then quickly go to the back page of the *Sunday Times*, look at her, notice her and her bodily dimensions, and then ask yourself again, how far have we really come? Flick on the television – Baywatch, the online shopping channel, the diet pill advertisements, the make-up, the news, the murders, the violence, the rapes, can you see all the beautiful faces... Be proud because we are non-racial, we are equal, we are beautiful, we are free, we are all one rainbow nation...

Now look at the real women around you in the street, the flower vendor, the sales woman, the receptionist, your mother, your sister..., see us, hear us and hear the words...

"Newspapers are only a poor shadow of reality; their information is important... not because it reveals the truth, but because it discloses the biases and perceptions of both those who produce the paper and those who read it."²



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¹ This term is borrowed from the early work of Gaye Tuchman. 1978. *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Nelson Mandela. 1994. *Long Walk to Freedom*. London: Little, Brown and Company.