

WOMEN AND GENDER

WOMEN AND GENDER ISSUES ARE BLATANTLY UNDERREPORTED IN AFRICA – AS THEY ARE IN THE REST OF THE WORLD. BUT HERE WE'RE DEALING WITH RECORD-BREAKING STATISTICS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND MEDIA COVERAGE THAT DOESN'T BEGIN TO CONFRONT THE PROBLEM. THERE'S ALSO THE QUESTION OF HOW TO COVER 'SENSITIVE ISSUES' – SUCH AS FEMALE CIRCUMCISION – MORE CONSTRUCTIVELY. WOULD IT HELP TO HAVE MORE WOMEN IN THE NEWSROOM? ANOTHER HURDLE IN ITSELF...

Making coverage of violence against women count

The least-reported Crime



Domestic violence is the least-reported crime in South Africa. Reporting on rape is inadequate and distorted.

Gabrielle Le Roux urges the media to make some strides in writing women – and the violation of their rights and persons – into “the first draft of history”...

Women are still virtually absent from the history that our children learn today in school. Women are also underrepresented as newsmakers, opinion-givers and ‘experts’ in the news. American writer Naomi Wolf said recently that news is the first draft of history – so the logic follows that if they are written out of the present, they are bound to be written out of history.

In South Africa, the central role that women played in the liberation struggle has remained fairly invisible in the media. Given that women make up more than half the country’s population, and that in its constitution the ideals of non-sexism and non-racism stand side by side, this invisibility of women needs to be looked at critically. While ‘gender’ is always noted as being important, it is remarkable how few qualitative changes we have seen in the representation of women – seldomly regarded as sig-

nificant as race issues. Racism has become ‘uncool’ in a way that sexism has not; sexism is, to a large extent, still regarded as the status quo.

In beginning to address this we have seen the term ‘women’s issues’ becoming current. Most of the so-called ‘women’s issues’ – such as rape, domestic violence, child abuse or maintenance defaulting – are human rights abuses perpetrated by men. The term, then, is a misnomer.

There is a link between what is not regarded as newsworthy and what is not regarded as political. Crimes against women, particularly domestic violence, were not until recently recognised as being political; rather, they were generally cast as belonging to the private domain.

The current news paradigm includes a notion of journalistic objectivity that needs to be taken apart. “We cannot escape the fact that objectivity is always influenced by ongoing subjective decisions – decisions of

what issues are important, who to interview, who NOT to interview, what facts to include in a story or to exclude, what quote to use, how we create the context of the story, our language, the pictures we use – all very subjective choices,” says journalist and Media Peace Centre Co-Director Hannes Siebert. The set of very subjective assumptions about the divide between the private and the public spheres is nowhere more evident than in the treatment of violence against women in the media.

Domestic violence is the most common yet least reported crime in South Africa – as a news priority ranking lower than crimes against property. In a country where the media focuses heavily on crime, this is an eloquent silence. This silence has a lot to say about how unremarkable it is that women are not safe in their homes. It is so commonplace that it is not noteworthy. Dog bites man is not news; man bites dog is news. This is how journalists are trained – the result is that when a woman beats her husband it is regarded as news, and not vice versa.

The laws regarding violence against women have changed considerably. Legislation on domestic violence, maintenance, customary marriage and rape is in the process of being redefined. These new laws are very good news for women grappling with any of these issues. One of the greatest challenges to the media is to keep people abreast of their rights so that they know how to claim them. How to make legislative changes of interest to readers seems to be part of the problem – but with a human context, it becomes a story that everyone can relate to.

Who is bringing about these progressive changes? If the official recognition of women's rights is to be entrenched enough so that it becomes less fragile, we need to raise the profile of people working very hard to get these issues prioritised in the face of tough opposition. Movers and shakers like ANC MP Pregs Govender, chair of the Committee on the Improvement of the Quality of Life and Status of Women, should be a household name, and the Committee's ground-breaking work mined for its potential stories.

Many myths and stereotypes exist around violence against women, and anyone reporting on the subject will intentionally or unintentionally either perpetuate or debunk these. Many distortions appear in the media around rape. Firstly, the rapes that get reported tend to be high-profile cases or cases where a woman is raped by a complete stranger in a particularly violent way. Incidences of rape where the rapist is known to the woman – the most common form of rape – get less play; date-rape barely features.

Women who are raped or abused still carry a heavy stigma, one that the media can

do a lot to dispel. The 'whore's stigma is the home of many double standards, signifying strong societal resistance to granting women sexual autonomy. If a woman is depicted as 'loose' or a 'bad girl', then she logically 'deserves what she gets'. By making sex-workers the 'other', a lot of space is opened up for abuse.

Who is responsible for stereotyping? This question has no easy answer and often it is in the quest for easy answers and fast understanding that we use stereotypes. With the limited space and time that journalists usually have to get information and news across, they often tend to use a form of shorthand, readily understood by their audiences, which can be dangerous. For instance, if a journalist includes in their description of a rape a phrase like "she was wearing a miniskirt" it cues the reader to draw a mental picture of someone whose provocative clothing might have been responsible for the attack. This obviously works against the reader's outrage at the violation the woman suffered.

Journalists grapple with how to tell the story of domestic abuse or rape. Very often it is only after the woman has left the situation and recovered a bit that the story can be told. These stories – about women who escape abusive relationships – are inspirational to women still caught in the cycle of abuse.

Many women leave relationships on the strength of articles or radio programmes that tell the story of a woman they can relate to who leaves. Most often these women do not tell the journalist that their article was a life-line; perhaps journalists need more positive feedback to write other, similar stories.

Things are changing. When well-known journalist Charlene Smith was raped and bravely told her story, she was well placed to push for the issue to be taken more seriously in a variety of sectors. When Nomangezi Matokazi courageously pressed rape charges against cricketer Makhaya Ntini and won, some journalists took the opportunity to give her a voice and did not succumb to pressure from the United Cricket Board boys' club to side with the rapist. Sadly, the ruling was later reversed on a technicality and arguments derived from antiquated laws.

The South African National Editor's Forum (SANEF), whose members include a wide range of editors from various media across the country, after a recent conference released this resolution to the media:

"The conference heard that recent studies indicated that 17,000 women are killed and raped every year in this country. This is 7,000 more than the death toll for the Kosovo conflict. South African women are not killed by strangers. Every six days a South African woman is murdered by her male partner. South Africa is the only country in the world where children are presenting with HIV because they have been raped

in the misguided belief that this will cure them of the disease.

[We have] resolved to mobilise the media to address this crisis by breaking the silence which has sanctioned the slaughter and abuse of women and children. The forum also pledged to guard against stereotyping of all kinds, including sexism and racism which perpetuate this problem."

This is good news. If this commitment is implemented we will see a complete make-over of the media and it will truly play a responsible part in creating outrage over the endemic disrespect of and violence against women.

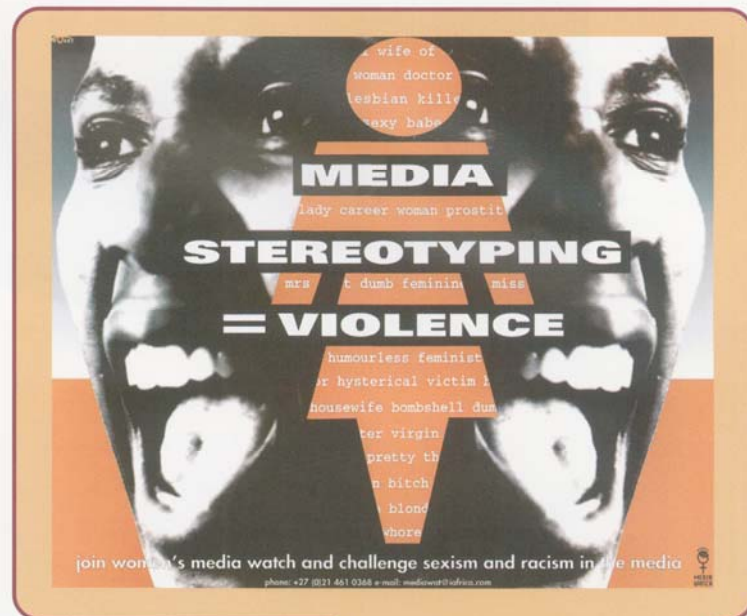
Men also need more space to express themselves feelingly. Justice Malala wrote in an article for *Femina* (May 1998) magazine: "We men are trapped in a dark and secret

world called Men Talk, where we swap tales of conquest and plunder but never of failure or perceived failure." He then told a sad story: "Joe once confessed to having enjoyed himself holding hands and cuddling with a girlfriend. The guys were aghast: You did nothing!? All night?"

How many times do we see men being regarded as newsworthy for breaking their own stereotypes? How many kind, caring, responsible men are portrayed in a positive way? The paradigm around what and who is news needs to shift – radically.

GABRIELLE LE ROUX is a feminist activist who has worked in the field of women's rights since returning to South Africa in 1992. She is currently Head of the Women's Media Watch.

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What is Women's Media Watch?

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Women's Media Watch challenges sexism, racism, classism and homophobia in the media and works for greater access to the channels of communication for the least-heard voices. The group is based in Cape Town and has members nationally, regionally and internationally. Members include domestic workers, Parliamentarians, journalists, sex-workers, women with disabilities, feminist academics, community workers, crisis workers, lesbian activists, women who have been homeless, writers and independent filmmakers. Women's Media Watch membership is open to all people and organisations with a commitment to using the media to deepen democracy.