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# Women Making News: Gender and Media in South Africa

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*Article No. 1***Women Making News:  
Gender and Media in South Africa****Margaretha Geertsema**  
**[Butler University, USA](#)****Abstract**

South Africa's news media are still in a process of transformation after the transition to democracy in 1994. The media continue to face the challenge of ensuring equal and fair representation to the entire population, and gender and media activists in particular have taken up the challenge of bringing about change. Research shows that women have not yet achieved equal access and representation compared to men: they are under-represented as reporters, news sources, and audience members. Yet, in comparison with other countries, South Africa has about as many female reporters as the average reported in the Global Media Monitoring Project and more female news sources than the global average.

**Introduction**

Thirteen years after the first multi-racial elections brought democracy to South Africa and ended apartheid, the news media, as well as other social institutions, are still in the process of transformation. The news media have a particularly important role to play in a country where political participation is a new experience for many people. Media in South Africa also face the challenge of ensuring equal and fair representation of the entire population.

Gender and media activists, in particular, have taken up the challenge of bringing about change in the media. This paper provides an overview of the current South African media landscape with a particular focus on women in the media. The first section presents background information about South African demographics, followed by an overview of the current media landscape. I will then present a summary of research on women's participation and representation in the news media, with a final section on gender and media activism.

**South African Demographics**

The South African population is diverse in terms of race, language, and class. The majority of the population of almost 48 million consists of Africans (80%), followed by whites (9%), "coloreds" — the category for people of mixed descent (9%), and Indians/Asians (2%) (Statistics South Africa, 2007, p. 1.) South Africa has 11 official languages, with most citizens speaking IsiZulu (24%), followed by IsiXhosa (18%), Afrikaans (13%), Sepedi (9%) English (8%), Setswana (8%), Sesotho (8%), Xitsonga (4%) and

other languages (7%) (CIA World Factbook, 2007). As can be expected in a multi-lingual society, it is quite difficult for the news media to serve the needs of each group.

Women constitute 51% of the total South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2007) and lag behind men in literacy, education, and employment. According to Unicef (2006), the adult literacy rate was 84% for men and 81% for women during the period 2000 to 2004. This divide is clearly based on race, as 18% of African women 25 years and older and 13% of African men have no formal schooling, compared to fewer than 1% of white women and men (Statistics South Africa, 2002). The lack of schooling is evident in the unemployment rate among blacks, which is 25% (Statistics South Africa, 2005). Within each population group, and in both urban and non-urban areas, the unemployment rate is higher for women than men. The unemployment rate is highest among urban African women (36%) and lowest among non-urban white men (5%). Furthermore, the mean hourly earnings of men are higher than for women in all population groups, and white males earn nearly five times as much per hour, on average, as African females (Statistics South Africa, 2002). These statistics indicate that many women of color in South Africa continue to suffer a triple, intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender.

Women politicians participated in the drafting of the progressive new South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996, which is based on non-racialism and non-sexism. The constitution also provided for a Commission on Gender Equality to promote gender equality in all areas of society. Today, 30% of South Africa's parliamentarians are women, placing the country eighth in the world in terms of gender equality in government (Garson, 2006).

### **The South African Media Landscape**

Freedom of the press is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights and in 2007, the annual World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders ranked South Africa 43rd in the world in terms of press freedom. This freedom was not always allowed in South Africa, as the media faced severe restrictions under the apartheid government, especially during the states of emergency in the 1980s (Tomaselli & Louw, 1991; Tyson, 1993). Instead of the authoritarian press system of the past, South Africa would probably aspire to a mix between a socially responsible press and a development press in the future (Jackson, 1993). In fact, there is such strong pressure on the news media to contribute to nation building and reconciliation that African journalists might be accused of acting against the national interest if they expose any wrongdoing by the government (Steyn, 1994; Tsedu, 2000). However, a study by the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) suggests that the news media have to tackle much more fundamental problems, including the lack of contextualized reporting, basic writing skills, accuracy, and knowledge of current events (Steyn & De Beer, 2004).

South Africa has a wide variety of television, radio, and print media. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the public broadcaster, offers four free-to-air television channels that broadcast in 11

languages, reaching a daily adult audience of approximately 18 million people (SA Government Information, 2007). In addition, the first private subscription television service, M-Net, broadcasts in more than 50 countries across Africa and the Indian Ocean islands. Satellite television is currently only available through MultiChoice, which offers 55 video and 48 audio channels. E.tv is the only private free-to-air service and it depends on advertising revenue. The SABC's national radio network consists of 15 public service broadcast stations and three commercial radio stations that broadcast in 11 languages (SA Government Information, 2007). South Africa also has 12 private radio stations that received licenses from the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) (SA Government Information, 2007) and more than 100 community radio stations. (South Africa: the official gateway, 2007).

Four major press groups control the newspaper industry in South Africa, providing 20 daily and 13 weekly newspapers, most in English (South Africa: the official gateway, 2007). The daily newspaper with the highest circulation (301,800) is the *Daily Sun*, aimed at the black working class (South Africa: the official gateway, 2007). *The Sunday Times* is the biggest national newspaper, with average weekly sales of 504,657 (South Africa: the official gateway, 2007). Three of Media24's daily newspapers target Afrikaans readers throughout the country, while almost 150 weekly regional and local newspapers serve particular communities (SA Government Information, 2007). While the South African telephone system has been described as the most well developed and most modern in Africa (CIA World Factbook, 2007), only 11% of South Africans were using the Internet in 2006, indicating a persistent digital divide (International Telecommunications Union, 2007). The government aims to narrow the divide by providing technological infrastructure to underserved communities through telecenters and digital hubs (SA Government Information, 2007).

### **Women Making News**

Several studies indicate that women remain under-represented in newsrooms across the country, as the majority of newsrooms remain white and male (Steyn & De Beer, 2004). Interviewees in the Sanef study found that women cover "soft" news better than men. Yet, at some private radio stations and in on-line media, almost all staffers are women. Many of them are under the age of 30 and hold management positions. Almost all newsrooms have male editors, except for the *Mail & Guardian*, which appointed Ferial Haffajee as South Africa's first female editor of a major newspaper in April 2004.

Research findings from both the Global Media Monitoring Project 2005 and studies completed by the nongovernmental organization Gender Links provide a more detailed picture of women's participation and representation in the media. Two research projects, one conducted strictly in Southern Africa and the other globally, focused specifically on women in the news. The first and most comprehensive study was the Southern African Gender and Media Baseline Study (GMBS), which spanned the month of September 2002 (Made, Lowe Morna & Kwaramba, 2003). This study showed that in South Africa, 30% of women

were reporters in television, 44% were reporters in radio and 29% worked as reporters in print media (p. 34).

South Africa has about the same percentage of female reporters as in the 75 other countries that participated in the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) on February 16, 2005 (Gallagher, 2005). In conducting this project, the GMMP found that 38% of reporters in South Africa were female and 62% male, whereas globally 37% of reporters were female and 63% were male (Gallagher, 2005, p. 18; Lowe Morna, 2006, p. 32). While this is a hopeful result, the inequality between male and female reporters remains a reality. The GMMP found that in South Africa, women account for 22% of television reporters, 20% of radio reporters and 48% of print reporters. These figures showed a fairly drastic change over two and a half years, suggesting that the results from the GMBS were probably more credible. In yet another study conducted in Southern Africa, results showed that women comprised 40% of radio talk show hosts.

Women in South Africa may be under-represented as news sources (those quoted in the news) when compared to men, but the GMMP found that they are more often included in South Africa than in other countries. When examining the percentage of female sources quoted in the news, South Africa is ahead of 13 Southern African countries with 26% of news sources being female, compared to the global average of 21% (Lowe Morna, 2006, p. 3). In South Africa, 28% of news sources in the press are women, 20% on radio are women and 12% on television are women. Lowe Morna also found that more stories in the South African media reinforced gender stereotypes than those who did not. Women are more likely to be identified as victims than men, and women are more likely to be identified by family status than men. A study on talk shows revealed that none of the talk shows monitored in the study focused specifically on women's empowerment or gender equality.

Two Afrikaans publications in South Africa deserve to be singled out for degrading and stereotyping women. The first is the Afrikaans tabloid, *Die Son*, and the second is *Loslyf*, the Afrikaans porn magazine. *Loslyf* created quite a controversy in South Africa, especially since the editor is a woman. Both these publications belittle women, portraying them as mere sex objects.

South Africa's English-language newspapers do not have specific women's sections but call the traditional women's pages "Lifestyle" sections. These sections typically include "soft" news on relationships, health, home and garden, fashion, travel, the environment, and food and wine. The Afrikaans newspapers, at least in their online editions, still have a section called "Women," with similar content as the English lifestyle sections. The owner of the three Afrikaans newspapers, Media24, is also online at [www.women24.com](http://www.women24.com), where content from its publications is available in English. One exception is the *Mail & Guardian*, which publishes a section called "Body Language" where women's issues are addressed from a feminist perspective. When Haffajee became editor of this paper, she indicated that she wanted to publish more stories on domestic violence and rape (Coleman, 2004). Newspaper sections

targeting women often arrange special events and competitions for readers. While the *Sowetan* does not have a women's section, it launched a Women's Club seven years ago to arrange motivational speeches and networking opportunities to empower women.

Several magazines are also available for women, including *Sarie*, *Fair Lady*, and *True Love*, a publication aimed at young black women. South African editions of internationally based women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* are also sold in South Africa.

The gender gap in news preferences within the South African media audience is fairly small. A study of media audiences found that both men (40%) and women (49%) identify television as their main source for news. Radio is the second most important news source for women and men (34% in each case), but more men (21%) than women (15%) rely on newspapers as their main source of news. One of the biggest gender gaps was found in reliance upon the Internet for news, with 4% of men relying on the Internet for news in comparison to 1% of women.

According to the audience study, the majority of citizens are relatively unsophisticated news audience members. Most men and women prefer short news reports, and more women (9%) than men (5%) prefer news that asks for feedback, like letters to the editor and talk shows. A low percentage of men and women identified opinion and commentary as their favorite news genre. The study found that a high proportion of women and men found the portrayal of women as mere sex objects uncomfortable or insulting, with only 7% of men saying such images encourage them to buy the newspaper or watch the news. Both men (56%) and women (73%) said they would find news more interesting if women were featured in a greater diversity of roles.

A study on radio talk shows conducted in Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe showed that women compose only 25% of callers to radio talk shows in South Africa and 39% of guests called to the shows. The topic that most females preferred to talk about is gender equality and women's empowerment (29%), compared to 8% for men. Most men preferred to talk about current affairs (27%), compared to 15% of women. Both women (27%) and men (21%) were interested in social issues. More women called in when the station aired programs on education and health, indicating that more shows on this topic might increase women's participation.

### **Gender and Media Activism**

Gender and media activists are doing important and innovative work in South Africa. Gender Links, a nonprofit organization based in Johannesburg, and the Southern African Media and Gender Institute (SAMGI) in Cape Town both work to promote gender equality in the media. The Gender and Media Southern Africa Network (GEMSA), an organization that developed out of Gender Links, undertakes research, training, and advocacy in 13 Southern African countries. Colleen Lowe Morna, executive

director of Gender Links and founding CEO of the South African Commission on Gender Equality, has written several training manuals and has overseen various research studies designed to improve the coverage of gender. Gender Links also expanded its initial focus, which was gender and media, to include work on gender justice, gender and governance, and policy development. Gender Links initiated a new publication, *The Southern Africa Media Diversity Journal*, in 2006. Additionally, the feminist publication, *Agenda*, has been published since 1987 and distributes a radio program, offers internships, and organizes a writing program for women.

## Conclusion

When assessing media, South African women have not yet achieved equal access and representation as compared to men. Women are under-represented as reporters, news sources, and audience members. Yet, in comparison with other countries, South Africa has about as many female reporters as the average reported in the GMMP and more female sources than the global average. Gender and media activists in South Africa are working tirelessly to bring about quantitative and qualitative changes in the media industry. The media have a responsibility in this new democracy to transform themselves into diverse institutions that provide audience members with alternative viewpoints, including those of women. Yet, the most important change that could significantly close the gender gap in media attention is an improvement in the literacy, education, and employment of women.

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