

Comment & Analysis

Hobbled by misogyny in SA's media

The latest media figures show that women are slowly advancing, but their experiences tell of little change at the top

MEDIA
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Apresstitute, a whore, a harridan, an animal and a quisling — these are just a few of the misogynous labels that one of South Africa's best-known black women editors has endured in cyberspace as she has stood up boldly against state capture.

"For months, I have looked at them when I'm alone. Quickly, like a dirty secret," writes Ferial Haffajee in the 2018 Glass Ceilings in South African Media study being launched by President Cyril Ramaphosa at a South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) dinner on Press Freedom Day, October 19. The study, the third since 2006, was undertaken by Sanef and Gender Links, with support from the Media Diversity Development Agency.

"The images make me wince with their distortions and insults," says Haffajee, who has shattered glass ceilings at the *Mail & Guardian*, *City Press*, *Huffington Post* and now the *Daily Maverick*. "I snap my phone shut and move to another screen. Or make a cup of tea," she says of the poorly Photoshopped images, which include her baring her breasts in the newsroom and sitting on the laps of powerful men.

"Images are powerful and the designers have very specific messages. I feel shame, and fear that my family will see them and not understand their genesis."

Nearly 25 years into democracy, the race and gender dynamics of the South African media have changed dramatically but black women are still under-represented in decision-making; in the few media houses willing to share wage data, the gender pay gap is growing, and sexual harassment is taking new and ugly forms in cyberspace.

"The industry is slowly changing; more women are entering senior roles but we would be naive to think sexism, racism and male chauvinism will end in our lifetime," writes Sanef chair Mahlatse Mahlase, in a foreword to the largest-ever gender survey of South African media, covering 41 media houses with 10054 employees who agreed to share their data, and 203 perception questionnaires from media workers in these, and an additional 18 media houses willing to share their views but not their numbers (59 media houses in total).

All three reports (2006, 2009 and 2018) have included the SABC, Media 24, the *M&G* and a variety of private media willing to respond. The 2018 report is unique in featuring 45 community media, in addition to 13 private media and the public broadcaster. Overall, these have all largely achieved gender parity, with 3% identifying as gender nonconforming (a parameter introduced for the first time in 2018) — the largest number of these from community media.

The most interesting shifts have been in the gender and race composition of media decision-making. In 2006, white men comprised 46% of



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

top media posts. Now they account for just 14% of these positions. White women have dropped from 23% to 6% of top decision-making — less than half the current percentage of white men, but just about right in terms of their demographic.

Black men, who constitute 45% of the population, have shot up from 22% to 50% of top media decision-making posts. The proportion of black women in top media management has increased fivefold from a very low base of 6% to 30% — 20 percentage points lower than black men, and far from representative of 46% of South Africa's population.

In-depth interviews with black women in the media conducted in the study attest to daily struggles with race and gender.

"When I started at the SABC at the tender age of 18, I was asked if they should use my voice or get someone to do a voiceover for my script. It went over my head then that, because I am black, my accent might not be right for the precious SAfm listeners of the English news on SABC3," writes Mahlase.

"There was also the waking up in sweat and panic, asking yourself if you should have gone on that dinner date instead of covering the earthquake in Haiti, or relocated to

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the Democratic Republic of Congo, ending a relationship. And now that I have a relationship, I am battling to find a balance between work and life, and I realise that being a wife, mother and journalist requires you to have some supernatural powers."

Although 81% of media houses have maternity leave policies, only 31% have paternity leave policies.

"We have capable women who can occupy top positions but they are bypassed," said one respondent explaining the "family penalty". "There is still a problem of perception — women take maternity leave, women have emotional issues, women can't/won't work long hours because of family responsibilities, women should be at home looking after children."

Ironically, adding to this reticence is the stigma attached to advancement policies for women. "Some women don't participate because they do not want to be seen as quota appointments," said one respondent. Once women rise to the top, problems often surface. Some men refuse to take orders from a woman.

Despite the recent global push for transparency on the gender pay gap, which has led to startling revelations by the United Kingdom media and their own probing into government finances, only three South African media shared wage data. This showed a gender pay gap of 23% compared with 17% in 2009. The report comments that the widening gap is consistent with the rapidly changing media landscape in the digital era. This is characterised by a few top executives (predominantly men) and a large number of junior staff responsible for social media, with the middle tier in which women predominate all but decimated.

The one constant in a rapidly

changing media landscape is the old boys' network. "Sexist and inappropriate language was routinely used by men to refer to women or to make sexually explicit comments," says Portia Kobue, the news editor of Kaya FM, reflecting on her time as executive producer for Morning Live and later head of Interface, a discussion and analysis programme at the SABC.

"My impression was that sometimes men found it difficult to separate a woman's professional profile from their personal ones. To them, women were objects of desire and were there for their gratification."

Indeed, the complaints at the SABC became so bad that it established a commission on sexism and sexual harassment, which will report to the broadcaster's board at the end of October. But staff expressed doubts about concrete action being taken.

"The SABC has so many challenges, I don't think gender is a priority at the moment," said one. Another commented: "Gender is not top of our list. Our bigger obstacles are growing our audiences, reaching new audiences, beating our competitors."

As mainstream media struggle for their very survival, it is little surprise that only a few lone voices are speaking out on potentially the greatest threat of all — the new forms of sexism officially christened "cybermisogyny" by Australian academic, gender and media activist Julie Posetti.

In the Glass Ceiling survey, 6% of the official respondents recognised its existence, compared with 30% of women and 9% of men in the perception questionnaires.

In an article, titled Trends in Newsrooms: Business of Gender Equality, in *The Media Online*, Posetti elaborates on steps being

undertaken globally to provide training for women journalists to fight cybermisogyny. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has begun "social media defence classes" as an intervention, a strategy she welcomed, saying media employers "need to practise responsible corporate citizenship and ensure their staff have the social media skills and the emotional support required ... it needs policy, strategy and action".

The South African media is operating in a climate of the #MeToo movement globally and the #Totalshutdown movement nationally, which has seen an increased assertiveness from women about sexism and patriarchal domination. With each successive Glass Ceilings research study, the issues have become less about numbers and more about the underlying patriarchal culture of the media that makes it inhospitable to women, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

"Cybermisogyny is both a cause and consequence of the sexist stereotypes that pervade our media houses," says the report. "The surest long-term solutions are to rid not only our newsrooms but [also] our entire societies of the misogyny that finds its way to and mutates on social media platforms. Systemic and holistic solutions are needed."

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