



Breaking glass ceilings: Women in sports media

By Colleen Lowe Morna, Pat Made, Kubi Rama and Dumisani Ghandi



Abstract

Launched in August 2009, *Glass Ceilings: Women and Men in Southern African Media*, presents data and findings from research with 126 media houses (approximately half of all media houses in the region), representing 23, 678 employees. The research found that there is still a pronounced gender division of labour in beats, including sports, where men dominate with 76% of reporters. However, women journalists are challenging this gender stereotype in some countries.



Key words

media, gender, sport reporting, glass ceilings



Glass ceilings in the media

This *Glass Ceilings: Women and Men in Southern African Media* study on gender employment patterns in media houses took place in the context of the August 2008 SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, which includes articles urging the media and all institutions in the public and private sectors to achieve gender parity in decision-making positions by 2015. The Gender Protocol also calls for the mainstreaming of gender in all media laws, policies and training. It urges the media to give equal voice to women and men; challenge gender stereotypes; and, ensure balance and sensitivity in all coverage, especially that relating to gender violence.

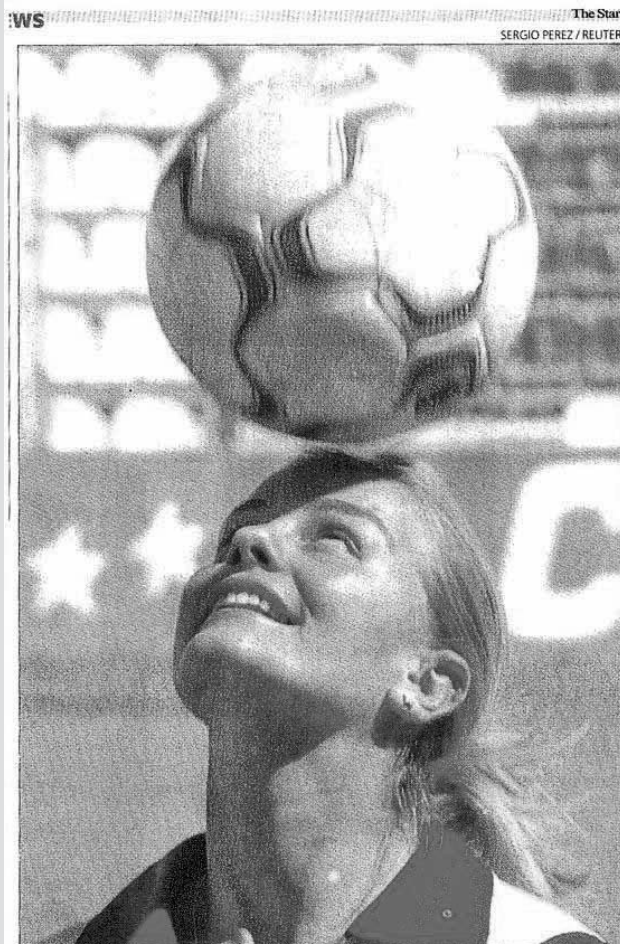
Amongst its extensive findings, the research points out that the gender division of labour in beats is still pronounced. Male journalists dominate in areas considered as "hard beats" such as investigative/in-depth reports (80%), sports (76%) and political stories (75%). Women journalists predominate in coverage of gender equality and gender violence (71% each) and health' (59%).

The scarcity of women on the sports beat could explain why media continually marginalises women's sport and often presents it in a different style that reflects

and reinforces gender stereotypes. Women are virtually missing from the sports pages, affecting the way that girls and women are socialised into sport. Findings from the Gender and Media Baseline Study (GMBS), Global Media Monitoring Project, and Mirror on the Media Tabloid research all show that media rarely reports or sources women. Considering the significant percentage of sports related content in both mainstream and tabloid newspapers, (17% and 21% respectively), this is a significant gap. The GMBS showed that of all the topic categories, women's voices featured least in sports (5% of the total).

Milene Domingues is a good example of how gender biases and prejudices are conveyed in and through the media. The headline starts by introducing the soccer player as "Ronaldo's wife," so immediately for the reader her identity is tied to her husband.

In other words, her most prominent role is that of a wife to a famous male soccer star. The fact that she has been traded to a Spanish team for a sum which makes her the highest earning woman footballer outside of the US, which is the main news, has been buried at the end of the fifth paragraph in the story. Throughout the story Milene's soccer skill is played down and the fact that she is Ronaldo's wife and the mother of his child is the central focus on the story. Throughout, the story compares or discusses her achievements in relation to that of her husband. For example, her salary is described as "small change to her husband – top scorer in this year's World Cup – who earns that in 15 minutes."



Holding her own ... Milene Domingues, wife of Real Madrid star Ronaldo, heads the ball at the Spanish club Rayo Vallecano yesterday.

The Star, Friday, September 27, 2002

Ronaldo's wife in super feat

BY LECH MINTOWT-CZYZ

Her husband is the world's most feted footballer, with a salary of about R66-million.

And Milene Domingues – also known as Mrs Ronaldo – is doing her best to keep up.

In fact, the talented midfielder was dubbed the Queen of the Keepy-Uppy in her native Brazil, after keeping a ball in the air for nine hours and six minutes – or 55 187 touches.

And now her skills have earned her a record R3.3-million transfer deal in her own right.

Milene (23) has joined Spanish club Rayo Vallecano from Italy's Fiamma Monza for around R8 000 a week, thought to be the highest wage earned by a woman footballer outside the US.

It may look like small change to her husband – top scorer in this year's World Cup – who earns that in 15 minutes.

Ronaldo, generous with his praise, has likened her style to French star Zinedine Zidane's, and declared: "She is my blessing by God, my life's dream."

It was in 1999 that the couple got together. Within three months she was pregnant – their son Ronald is now 2 – and they married on Christmas Eve that year in Rio.

As she was presented to the Spanish media at her new club, she would only say: "I'm really looking forward to getting back into action. I expect my husband to be watching my debut."

If he does, the man who will soon be performing in front of 87 000 people at Real's Bernabeu stadium will be one of a crowd, which averages a mere 500. – Daily Mail

A question often asked is whether this is not just the way society is. It is true that the gender division of labour exists in all societies. However, even where women are present, they are often absent in media. The media often ignores, or reports in a cursory manner, sportswomen even when they win major competitions and awards. Much like in politics and business coverage, women on the sports pages are often appended to men, as girlfriends and wives to famous players.

Raymond R. Nauvel of *Le Dimanche* in Mauritius believes that women are better suited to soft beats and vice versa, "More women could have an impact on the work in the sense that they bring a feminine touch to the environment, but not necessarily in the news. They might be good to write on social issues or corporate social responsibilities. This could bring some diversity in articles, but men are best suited to write on politics and sports." However, not all editors agree. Sports editor Phatisani Moyo, who joined South Africa's *Mail and Guardian* in 2008, is clear about his mission, "To diversify coverage beyond rugby and soccer and to include women." He believes that if girls are to go for sports, the media must first improve its coverage of women in sports.

According to a woman respondent in Malawi, men have a definite advantage in newsrooms, as they often start in the profession earlier and accumulate experience. As a result media managers tended to underestimate women journalists like her. despite the fact that, as she says, "I am not afraid to accept the challenge with my male counterparts in sport and other beats, because I have experience."

Changing the face of newsrooms

According to the research, in Botswana, equal numbers of women and men report on both sports and crime. One of the female sports reporters in the country, Masego Pilane at *Information Services* proudly recalled her coverage of the *All Africa* games; and, she has won awards for excellent sports reporting. However, this did not come easy. As she puts it, "Other sports journalists did not take me and other women sports

journalists seriously." She feels female journalists are prejudiced because of their sex and their stories are always looked at with a negative eye, leading to over scrutiny. Men do not have to constantly prove their worth the way women have to do.

Anny Andrianaivonirina is a sports journalist and photographer at *Midi Madagasikara*, and managing editor of *Midi Flash*. Both these newspapers belong to the Midi group. Andrianaivonirina reflects on how the newsrooms at Midi have changed since her arrival in 1995. She says before 1995 the newsroom consisted mainly of men, but more women have since been accepted. There are now more female journalists than men at *Midi Flash*. The first journalists who volunteered to launch *Midi Flash* were also women.

Andrianaivonirina believes it was important to reach parity in the newsroom to balance the high levels of male chauvinism. In her view, the differences in treatment between men and women in everyday life are not acceptable when women and men are doing the same work. *Midi Flash* is more focused on feature writing than news, and Andrianaivonirina feels women journalists are better in that type of journalism. She says, "Women are more cheerful. They bring a different touch to the newsroom. They gather news more easily than men and learn more easily how to take pictures."

Andrianaivonirina believes the men in her newsroom consider women their equals. "The men admired our courage to break stereotypes and taboos in our features, in particular on matters regarding sex." She says the best way to sustain parity in the newsroom is to continually perform with a high level of competence.

Top Congo

Albert Ntoni, director of Top Congo, one of the DRC media houses having a higher proportion of women overall, and women in senior management positions, has worked in the media for 17 years. The drive towards parity has not just been a coincidence. It derives from the gender-sensitive approach of management at Top Congo. Ntoni says they achieved



Women are breaking glass ceilings in media

Photo: Trevor Davies

higher numbers of women through the belief that “we had to give opportunities to everyone.”

“So we have 19 women, 21 men and four men technicians. I proposed that management nominate a woman as deputy editor-in-chief. Nearly everyone has accepted this news, because we consider posts with responsibilities should also go to women. This nomination will be officially announced [next week]. I insist on parity,” he says.

Ntoni says he knows that placing women in these positions can be challenging. “My wife works in an enterprise and manages 45 men, all of them older than she. Her nomination was not well accepted by the men. We have considered that. They give her a tough time. So I understand the situation better. My vision is different. Everyone must have a chance. The essential factor is to get results. Whether you are a woman or man, if you are a hard worker, we take you on board.”

Gender parity is important for Ntoni because, “men and women have different ways of seeing things. It is always good to have two versions. If today we are one of the best radio stations, it is because of parity.” Ntoni also believes women media practitioners add value to the work of Top Congo. “They are more concise. Men are more artificial. They have a big contribution in radio, especially in areas like health and society. They dig deeper into things. And it is the same if you are in sport. Their work is more concise, more in-depth,” he says.

There is no formal gender policy at Top Congo, but an implicit one exists to say that everyone is equally considered. Top Congo is also one of the media houses interested in developing a gender policy. In the meantime, Ntoni says, “men and women are provided with all the resources they need. And when I have a vacancy, all candidates are put to the test on their capacities. I am sure that even if I go away, this spirit will continue.”

Women in every space

In February 2004, Ferial Haffajee became the first woman of colour to head a leading South African paper, the *Mail and Guardian*, and the third woman editor in the country. For five years, Haffajee steered the paper to greater heights before moving on to become editor-in-chief of the weekly *City Press*.

Statistics from the latest South African *Glass Ceiling* report confirm that under Haffajee's stewardship, the *Mail and Guardian* attained gender parity at the top and in senior management positions. Women began cropping up regularly on the front page, and in photos and headlines inside the paper.

The women sources number count in the *Mail and Guardian* points to the many challenges that this paper and many others still face. However, it does not tell the full story. For example, one of the tasks that Haffajee set herself, and largely succeeded in achieving, was to ensure that women's views and perspectives are taken into account in *all* sections of the newspaper. In other words, instead of opting for a space for women, she opted for women to be in every space. This is gender mainstreaming at its best; the tougher but ultimately far more sustainable route for increasing women sources and achieving the real objective, which is to give women voice in all areas of endeavour.

Haffajee did not create a women's section, because these "tend to deteriorate into empty lifestyle sections," she said. "We wanted a diversity of voices that would reflect our nation and bring them into pages one, two and 11. It took a long time but we did it." The shift involved seeking out women in male-dominated fields like the economy, politics and science, and not only on the classic events like International Women's Day. A young Muslim explaining why she likes to wear a hijab; black women in favour or against lobola (bride price); and lesbian adoptive parents featured alongside women economists, scientists and entrepreneurs. Unlike other weekly newspapers that have a back page featuring blonde and blue-eyed pin ups



Ferial Haffajee

from Hollywood, the *Mail and Guardian* has a *Body Language* column that addresses male and female sexuality with the same opinionated sauciness. Topics like ageing, menstruation, giving oral sex and wearing sexy underwear surface in the popular column in a way that gives women voice and allows them to celebrate their sexuality, rather than be voiceless objects and wall hangings.

Rapule Tabane, now deputy editor-in-chief, joined the *Mail and Guardian* as senior political reporter in 2003 and two years later became the political editor. He had worked before at the daily *The Star*. "I thought of myself as pretty progressive, but when I started looking at our front page, I learned how often we didn't have women there," Tabane said. "Ferial made us think about sections that only reflected men. Once you have this consciousness, you make an effort to look for women sources and photos."



Critical consumers means good media, GL Media literacy participants

Photo: Rochelle Davies

Tabane noted, “a cascading effect, signs that people got in line with her [Ferial] thinking”. For example, the sports section started covering netball and gymnastics, sports popular among women, as well as women’s soccer, hockey and rugby. Sports editor Phatisani Moyo, who joined *Mail and Guardian* in 2008, is clear about his mission, “To diversify coverage beyond rugby and soccer and to include women.” He believes that if girls are to go for sports, the media must first improve its coverage of women in sports.

● **Writers Bio**

This article was excerpted from *Glass Ceilings: Women and Men in Southern African Media*. Colleen Lowe Morna is the Executive Director, Kubi Rama Deputy Director, Dumisani Ghandi the Assistant Director: Media Research and Policy at of Gender Links. Pat Made is a writer, trainer, and gender activist based in Zimbabwe.

Notes

¹ Excludes the coverage of HIV and AIDS