



Women at sidelines of reporting football

By Fungai Machirori

Abstract

For a long time, football has been called the “beautiful” game. The irony, however, is that while anything termed “beautiful” is generally associated with femininity, few women take up an active interest or appreciation in the game of football. Moreover, as an extension of that, very few female journalists report on it. So should we instead call it the “handsome” game in order to reflect football’s dominant masculine character, both in terms of participation and reportage? The following article contextualises gender perspectives on reporting sports against the backdrop of the impending 2010 FIFA World Cup, and ultimately disregards any suggestions that football, and sports reporting, should be the preserves of an impenetrable “boy’s club.” Finally, suggestions are given as to how female journalists can take up an active role in writing the story of 2010 - Africa’s greatest moment on the international arena.

Key words

journalism, gender, coverage, World Cup 2010

Reporting 2010

At the 2009 Highway Africa conference for African journalists, entitled “Reporting Africa: 2010, Development and Democracy,” the recurring question asked was how Africa’s journalists would report the continent’s first ever FIFA World Cup. The question was framed from the perspective of a continent that has long been stereotyped as the world’s poorest, battling to achieve economic parity with the rest of the world, rife with political corruption, mismanagement and therefore an inherent

lack of capacity to host a global spectacle on the scale of the 32-nation World Cup.

As Danny Jordaan, the 2010 Local Organising Committee (LOC) CEO put it to the journalists, urging them to dispel the practice of stereotype-based “shorthand” reporting on Africa, “Your orientation must be different. You must distinguish yourselves. Your story must be set apart.” Jordaan noted the following as some of the most



Taking Shape - 2010 Soccer World Cup Stadium, Cape Town
Photo: Ifilijay

significant economic impact indicators that the World Cup has yielded, and will yield.

- The World Cup will contribute R55 billion to South Africa's GDP between 2006 and 2010.
- More than 20 000 jobs were created for the construction of the World Cup stadiums.
- The additional contribution to the country's GDP as a result of hosting the event will sustain the equivalent of around 120 000 jobs.
- The World Cup has been a catalyst for the building of around 25 new hotels in South Africa in the last couple of years.
- It is expected that an estimated 450,000 visitors will spend R8.5 billion during the World Cup.

This important economic growth, it was said, would also have ripple effects for the rest of Africa with tourism largely expected to enjoy a major boost across the continent. Digesting Jordaan's sentiments and statistics with a few of my female colleagues at the same conference, it became evident that quite a number of them did not possess any interest in being part of reporting the tournament. "I just can't wait for this tournament to come and go," sighed one. "That's all the guys in the newsroom will be talking about from now until next year."

A few others expressed their dread at becoming football widows – a status they said they acquired every four years during the event. With a prevailing air of apprehension about the whole affair, they suggested quickly switching the topic of conversation to something "less depressing." Rather than view themselves as an

intricate component of the World Cup story, these women were instead more than willing to distance themselves from any such role and deconstructed themselves as "the others," the ones standing beyond the periphery fence of proceedings waiting for the hype and hysteria to blow over, and for post-2010 "normality" to return.

When breaking through the glass ceiling, the shards might cut you

There are many reasons that could explain these women's and others' disregard of the impending World Cup, and sports reporting in general. Already, female journalists across Africa experience harsh working environments and high barriers to entry within the profession. As the 2009 *Glass Ceilings: Women and Men in Southern African Newsrooms* report documents, the average proportion of women in the media in southern Africa is 41%. By excluding South Africa, the proportion drops to 32%. The report cites discouraging working conditions, difficulty in juggling responsibilities and inadequate journalistic training as some of the main reasons for this skew.



Women like sports journalists and rugby player Coach Avril Fillies are breaking glass ceilings

Moreover, where women are visible, it is largely within reporting of "safe" beats such as health and other social issues, with politics, business and sport remaining the preserve of their male counterparts. However, this is not to say that some women have not successfully challenged these hegemonic notions of their role in journalism. Many have risen to the pinnacle of their profession breaking through the glass ceiling of expectations to hold positions of authority and respect as editors and reporters in male-dominated beats. However, and sadly so, for every woman who has successfully worked to reverse the status quo, many more continue to meet with regular hostility, and even abuse.

According to the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), earlier this year, two female Ghanaian reporters, Rashidatu Kadiri of Atlantis Radio and Dorcas Oparibea of Top Radio, were assaulted by a policeman at a sports stadium in Accra while covering a local league match. The two, who were travelling with their male colleagues, were allegedly told to leave the entrance of the players' dressing rooms – though they had produced their identity cards - with the policeman said to have touched Oparibea's breast and pushed her to the ground.

While this shocking act attracted disdain and disapproval, certainly there are many more males out there who feel that women becoming involved in the arena of sports reporting represents an invasion of their territory and an emasculation of their powers. It would seem, therefore, that the consequences of attempting to break through the glass ceiling, for many women, are the painful lacerations of the shards produced upon impact.

"Beautiful" even for women?

Thus far, the predominant discourse around women and the World Cup has related to the roles that transactional sex and human trafficking might play in further curtailing Africa's women's rights and freedoms. Little space has however been afforded to the fact that women too have a role to play in documenting this historical event.

World Cup 2010 will undoubtedly hold a position of great significance within the history of South Africa's young democracy. As Duncan (2009) notes, "Sports

brings nations together in ways that no other activity does: to this extent, it has an amazing galvanising effect. This is especially so with soccer in South Africa, which enjoys popularity as the sport of choice of the working class. It can lead to far more genuine reconstructions of national identity than those achieved by post-1994 rugby or cricket."

Football is the universal game that knows no language and no geographical boundaries (although North America remains largely neutral to its charms). And yes, it even permeates across class structures and race groups. However, it is a heavily gendered sport. While female leagues and tournaments exist, the dominant meaning behind football is that of male power contested over 90 minutes of intense confrontation and showmanship.

The irony is that the sport is so often referred to as the "beautiful" game – thereby almost giving it a feminine character. So, the challenge is how 2010 can lead to the reconstruction of the national and continental identity through a gender sensitive and inclusive framework, particularly by allowing women media platforms to be active participants in writing the story of arguably Africa's greatest moment thus far.

"You'd never trust a woman with something as important as a football result"

One of the arguments advanced against women entering into the realm of sports journalism is that they have no prior practical or professional experience to qualify as opinion leaders and authorities. As Boyle (2008) notes, "One of the key aspects of gaining entry into the cultural world of the football journalist is knowledge of your sport. There is an underlying assumption among some male football writers that, ultimately, a woman football journalist, for example, lacks the inherent knowledge to adequately cover the game."

Boyle goes further to quote a veteran journalist, Brian Glanville, who argues that women "do not have the ghost of a clue" about what is happening on the pitch during a football match. Glanville further adds, "You'd never trust a woman with something as important as a football result." Glanville's statement is a loaded one,



Encouraging the next generation of female reporters?

Photo: Trevor Davies

which at once completely disregards female journalists as accurate sources of football news, as well as implies that they cannot be trusted to disseminate important information of any nature. As an extension of "important information," we could note political and economic news, both of which, as previously discussed are predominantly constructed and framed from a male perspective.

Similarly, when the virtual discussion board of South African pay-per-view channel "Supersport" featured a debate around having female presenters on the station, one of the respondents stated, "Why include you [women]. I don't [sic] hear men asking to be represented in netball [.]for example, have female commentators for female matches, personally I prefer seeing Eric Tinkler and Shaun Bartlett who have been there and done it, indepth [sic] knowledge of the game is essential..."

However, why wouldn't, or couldn't, women ever have in-depth knowledge of football, or any other sport? Surely, the prerequisites for entry into reporting on political news do not necessitate a decorated history as a parliamentarian, minister or other political figure. To report on financial issues, one need not be an economist. Similarly, to report authoritatively on health, one need not have the title of "M.D." after their name! So why is sports reporting regarded as hallowed territory only to be treaded by those actually scored a goal, a try or a century?

If one is to report with any sort of animation and enthusiasm about a beat, a general inclination towards it is obviously essential. This, in tandem with training, broad-based research and consultation with "experts," can help mould a prolific journalist who covers a beat to the highest levels of professionalism, accuracy and balance. Yet generally, the field of sports reporting seems

to place less significance on professional media training as opposed to previous top-flight experience. This is why as soon as retirement looms large for a seasoned professional; a post-player role in the media is often mooted. By virtue of having played the game, one is deemed to be competent enough to report on it.

So does media training count for nothing against the golden goal-scoring history of one who knows nothing in the least about the basic tenets of journalism? Just like the retired professional can learn to report the game, it would seem so could the inexperienced reporter learn to appreciate its intricacies. However, this argument has thus far failed to recognise that indeed some female journalists will have had prior professional experience of the sport or sports that they are reporting on. Nevertheless, because female versions of male dominated sporting codes rarely receive any form of media coverage, little is ever known about the careers of female greats.



Women climbing to new heights in Swaziland Photo: Gender Links

Kass Naidoo: paving the way

Kass Naidoo is South Africa's first female international cricket commentator and a woman who possesses a wealth of knowledge about the game. In 2003, Naidoo was a television presenter during the Cricket World Cup held in South Africa – a platform that leveraged her to become one of the nations' opinion leaders of the game. So appreciated was her incisive knowledge that she was chosen by Cricket South Africa as its voice-over artist for the DVD featuring the one day international (ODI) game between South Africa and Australia dubbed as the greatest ever ODI, in which both teams scored over 400 runs each .

In 2008 Naidoo, who has a journalism training background, was appointed commercial manager for Cricket South Africa. In an interview with the *Mail and Guardian*, Naidoo charted her rise to the top of her game. She is quoted as having said, "When I moved to Johannesburg in 1999 I shaved my head [because she did not want to be thought of as just a pretty face] and my parents realised then there was nothing that could stop me from doing what I liked."

Indeed Naidoo's is an important example that shows that women can rise to the top of sports reporting and commentary. But at the same time, her story highlights the fact that, very often, in order to play with the boys, and gain their respect, women still have to dissociate themselves from their femininity and instead, look and act like men.

Role for women reporters in 2010?

In a world such as the one we live in today, it should not be an anomaly for women journalists to want to pursue sports journalism, or any other kind of journalism that they so wish. Therefore, it is of uttermost importance that all structures of socialisation – from the family to the education system to the newsroom – encourage such enthusiasm, wherever it may manifest itself.

As we build up to 2010, the angles for reporting the event are almost infinite as it will have an impact on all aspects of life – from the social (race relations, crime,

health and human rights) to the political (2010 as a tool for party leverage and deleverage) right through to the economic (tourism, investment and trade).

However, how many women will actually be reporting the 90-minute game from the media boxes of the various stadia? Not only what the wives and girlfriends of players (WAGS) will be wearing to matches, but in-depth analyses and round-ups of results. Only time will tell. This is a moment for Africa's women journalists to stand up and be seen.

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Writers Bio

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