

What's Just got to do with it?

Violence against women and the media: some of the conclusions, recommendations and guidelines from the Commission on Gender Equality workshop held in Durban in March

Violence against women is one of the most serious violations of human rights in South Africa. A third of all South African women are battered by their partners. South Africa has among the highest rape and femicide (the killing of a woman by her partner) statistics in the world.

In its often insensitive handling of violence against women, the media are frequently more a part of the problem than the solution. Yet the media could play an enormously positive role in changing public perceptions and attitudes.

Representatives of South African NGOs and media organisations met in Durban in March to assess critically the way in which violence against women is treated by the mainstream media. The workshop was convened by the Commission on Gender Equality and sponsored by Unicef.

Presentations included an analysis of selected press coverage of violence against women during the period 1 November to 31 December 1997 by the Media Monitoring Project; and case studies on media coverage by People Against Women's Abuse (Powa), Tshwaranang, Women's Media Watch and Zoe Rathuss from the Women's Legal Service in Australia. A panel of journalists responded to these observations.

In a statement released by the participants, it was pointed out that:

- While other crimes such as bank robberies and highway shoot-outs, etc. are regularly featured on the front pages, violence against women is relegated to the back pages, and this includes rape and domestic violence resulting in death (known as intimate femicide).
- Most of the reporting focuses on sensational rapes and murders, but domestic violence (which is more difficult to cover) receives little attention. Efforts by organisations trying to draw attention to these crimes are not being reported.
- Women are not seen to have their own identities. They are often described as someone's wife, girlfriend or daughter. For example, in the widely publicised alleged

rape of Nomboniso Gasa, she was repeatedly referred to as the wife of an ANC member of parliament rather than a member of the Commission for Gender Equality.

- Stories on abuse and rape frequently imply the women "asked for it" through such references as "she was wearing revealing clothing" or that "she started an argument that led to a beating".
- The fact that the perpetrators of rape are often known to the victims is seldom documented.
- The word "love" features with disturbing frequency in headlines relating to violence against women. Love is often cited as the motive for men who kill their partners. This belies the fact that rape and battery are crimes of power and control, not lust.
- Women are frequently depicted as victims of crime

who are reduced to the level of their suffering: the terrified wife, the hysterical victim, the battered woman. The media seldom carries stories of women who survive brutal attacks.

- The media focus on the event, and particularly the bizarre or unusual, rather than an analysis of the issues and trends surrounding violence against women.
- The sources of stories are frequently the courts and police and not individuals and organisations who represent the interests of women.

The workshop recommended that the media should acknowledge that violence against women is a fundamental human rights violation. The dignity of the woman is paramount. She has the right to be

depicted as a human being and not be reduced to a suffering victim or statistic.

She has the right to have her perspective reported either by herself, if she is willing, or by organisations fighting for the rights of abused women, if she is not. She is the survivor of abuse and her fight against it must be recognised. Domestic violence, rape and murder have been historically unchallenged in our society and need to be challenged now, the participants said.

Comprehensive guidelines to avoid the use of sexist language should be developed and monitored by media organisations and the Press Ombudsman, they added.

Reporting guidelines

- 1 Violence against women should be accorded the importance it deserves in terms of how stories are written and placed in the media.
- 2 Perpetrators of violence should be named wherever possible.
- 3 Stories should be based on a variety of sources and where possible include the views of the victims themselves in a way that does not lead to further suffering.
- 4 Information about support services should be made available - especially by the public broadcaster.

And here's the proof...

Woman dies after row

Headline in the Sowetan, 30 June 1997

(There is no blame allocated, it seems the "row" is the cause of death.)

Jealous husband: three are killed

Headline in the Citizen, 24 July 1997
(The husband killed three people, again no blame is apportioned.)

Suicidal cop fights for life

Headline in the Sowetan, 12 August 1997.
(The cop had killed his girlfriend by shooting her twice before he tried to kill himself. There is no mention of her murder in the headline.)

Policeman among 3 killed as lovers' tiff ends in tragedy

Headline in the Star, 25 August 1997.
(The husband came across his wife and a policeman at a braai. He shot both of them dead and then turned the gun on himself. The policeman makes it into the headline but not the wife.)

Wife killed after argument over pie

Headline. Source not known.
(The woman had objected to her husband that a pie was not a suitable meal for a six-month-old baby. He took the baby from her arms and shot her in the head.)

Word Powa

Sally Shackleton, the information officer for POWA (People Opposing Women Abuse), who supplied these examples, says in a study she did on intimate femicide, the word "tiff" (dictionary definition: "petty quarrel") comes up in newspaper copy again and again, as do "lovers' quarrel" and "love triangle" and "tragedy". All these words obscure blame and seem to imply that the woman's death came about because of the "tumbling of events", Shackleton says. In one article in the Star in which a celebrity accused her boyfriend of domestic violence the phrase describing the situation was "a bruising love battle".