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Feminist approaches and the South African news media

Denise Buiten

Abstract

Despite apparent feminist advancements within contemporary South Africa, gender transformation in the media industry has been both limited and irregular. Based on interviews with journalists and editors from three weekly newspapers – the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Sun* and the *Mail & Guardian* – this article explores how journalists articulate their understandings of gender and gender transformation within the media, and reflects on how these articulations draw on wider feminist discourses in South Africa. While journalists express an engagement with feminist thought and advocacy around the media, this is largely limited to liberal feminist discourses with an emphasis on women's inclusion in the media. The limitations of this discourse have implications for the kinds of gender transformation occurring within the news media, and it is argued that the advancement of a 'progressive' feminist lens can contribute towards more comprehensive gender transformation within the industry.

Keywords: discourse, feminism, gender, journalism, media, news, social transformation, South Africa

Introduction

The South African news media have, over the past decade, been subject to increasing research and activist attention around issues of gender. Feminist media activism and media monitoring groups have worked to promote change within the mainstream media in South Africa (Geertsema 2010) and despite a relative dearth of feminist media research (Bosch 2011), work in this area is progressing in various ways. In addition, feminist perspectives and an awareness of gender are increasingly, if not yet fully or effectively, being mainstreamed within the media industry (Buiten 2010).

As is becoming apparent to researchers and activists within the field, however, the progress made in transforming the South African media industry in terms of gender has been limited (Geertsema 2010) as well as irregular (Buiten 2010). This pertains to both the ways in which newsroom cultures are being transformed, and how this

impacts on the production of gendered media texts. This article explores approaches to gender within the South African news media industry, focusing on print news. Based on research with journalists and editors from three weekly South African publications, this article reflects on the ways in which particular feminist approaches are represented within journalists' views of gender in the media and, subsequently, also the ways in which media texts are shaped. It is argued, here, that while journalists express an engagement with certain areas of feminist thought and advocacy around the media, this is largely informed by discourses emerging from a liberal feminist paradigm, with an emphasis on women's inclusion in the media. It is further argued that the limitations of a liberal feminist discourse have implications for the kinds of gender transformation occurring within the South African news media, including the ways in which gendered media texts are produced.

Gender and social legacy in South Africa

Emerging from an expansive period of interconnected racial, class and gender inequality into a new democratic dispensation, South Africa represents a site of continued struggle with the social and material legacies of its history. Along with relations of race and class, gender has increasingly been acknowledged as a key area of research relevance in addressing a wide range of social legacies facing the country. Historical evidence that decolonisation and democracy, in and of themselves, do not end gender injustices (Connell 2011), has also led to strong emphasis being placed on gender in this post-apartheid democracy.

In line with this growing recognition, South Africa's new democratic structures were set up with a strong emphasis on gender equality through the national 'gender machinery'. Women's participation in leadership and decision-making has also been promoted through policy, some of which requires gender quotas to ensure parity in government, workplaces and institutions, and thus South Africa has some of the most progressive gender legislation in the world. Deborah Posel (2004), in her examination of the ways in which issues of sexuality have been conceptualised and addressed within post-apartheid South Africa, underscores the significance of the constitution and the bill of rights in advancing the human rights agenda – an approach that has had implications for a range of policies and approaches. Meintjes (2003, 140) points to successes in domestic violence legislation reforms in post-apartheid South Africa, arguing that the 'discourse of gender equality found its way into mainstream politics'. These advancements, according to Meintjes (2003), can be attributed to the active civil engagement of women and women's groups, as well as emerging discourses of human rights. Her analysis shows that significant legislative advancements have been made in relation to gender.

Despite profound accomplishments in the areas of policy and legislation, and even the proliferation of rights discourses, significant challenges remain. Gender relations, forged within and through historical processes of colonisation and apartheid, have been implicated in gendered patterns of violence (Bennet 2001; Gqola, 2007; Salo 2007; Sathiparsad 2005; Vogelmann 1990), HIV (Jewkes, Levin and Penn-Kekana 2003;

Naidoo, Matebeni and Pietersen-Snyman 2004; Pettifor, Rees and Kleinschmidt et al. 2005), poverty (Posel and Rogan 2009; Reddy and Moletsani 2009) and various other pressing social issues. For example, Posel (2004, 55) argues in relation to rights-based approaches to sexuality in post-apartheid South Africa, that 'the allocation of sexual rights does not in and of itself change established sexual practice. Nor does it resolve the problems of sexual violence, abuse and homophobia.' While human rights instruments and formal legislative reforms play a significant role, they do not automatically transform wider social meanings and practices.

As such, the historical paths/trajectories of gender transformation in South Africa are strikingly uneven; significant advances in terms of gender equality exist in regard to policy and legal measures, while important lags persist in respect of broader social and cultural transformation. Gender is reproduced not only through material and institutional structures, but also through the sharing of social and cultural meanings, norms, values and related practices. While policy and legal reforms can both respond to and help shape social and cultural change, a reliance on state-driven formal feminist advancements cannot drive comprehensive change – there needs to be broader critical public and media engagement with the meanings and practices of gender. High rates of gender-based violence in South Africa, despite significant human rights and policy reforms in this area, are a good example of this. Research suggests that everyday discourses which reproduce violent masculinities play a significant role in perpetuating gender-based violence in South Africa (Gqola 2007; Moffett 2006; Vogelmann 1990), and as such social meanings relating to gender are significant. For those within the media industry, attending to these broader social and cultural dimensions of gender therefore means integrating an awareness of gendered meaning making in news production, for example in relation to understandings of masculinity and how they shape news content.

The media and social transformation

South Africa's news media represent a powerful site through which social and cultural meanings around gender are articulated and contested. The South African press has, in particular, taken a central role in recasting post-apartheid national and transformational agendas. During the early period of its transition into democracy, South Africa's mass media emerged as political actors in their own right and as significant actors in shaping notions of democratisation and political transformation (Jacobs 2003). While this role has, in recent years, evolved and been reshaped, the South African news media continue to play an active role in shaping and reflecting transformation agendas and debates. Discourses invoking the media's role in serving the 'public interest' or the 'national interest' within a post-apartheid democratic context have been very influential (Wasserman and De Beer 2006). The news media play a significant role in supporting and promoting full citizenship within a democracy (Geertsema 2010). In many senses, then, the South African media have been cast as more than 'objective' observers, but rather as vital (if complex) social and political agents.

The role of the South African news media in shaping post-apartheid transformation agendas includes the shaping of discourses of gender transformation. Here, too, the

uneven trajectories with regard to gender transformation that characterise wider social issues are evident – news representations often advance women’s formal equality in terms of leadership, participation and rights, yet continue to reproduce various problematic social and cultural understandings of women and gender (Buiten 2010). Examining this unevenness is instructive in understanding, first, how the media continue to shape gender transformation agendas and, second, how particular forms of feminist discourse have become mainstreamed within the media while others remain marginal. Here, the argument is made that those feminist discourses that have come to shape mainstream print news media in South Africa can offer only limited opportunities for gender transformation. As such, the ways in which feminist approaches are developing within the media industry – the trajectories of feminist thought – require reappraisal.

Research methodology

Research on gender and the media in South Africa has generally focused on how gender and women are represented in the media (Gadzepo 2009; Geertsema 2008, 2010; Lowe Morna 2005; Steenveld 2007) or on the ways in which gender shapes newsroom cultures and experiences (De Bruin and Ross 2004; Gadzepo 2009; Lowe Morna 2001, 2007a and b; Lowe Morna and Shilongo 2004; Opoku-Mensah 2004). Specific research has looked at the linkages between these areas, particularly in terms of how journalists perceive their role in framing gender and gendered relationships within their news coverage. The research presented here investigated media professionals’ perceptions of gender and gender transformation, and the ways in which they considered and applied these issues within their work as media producers. In so doing, the research set out to explore the nature of the gendered discourses informing news coverage.

The research involved a critical thematic discourse analysis of qualitative interviews with 16 South African print news professionals. The thematic analysis was deductive and constructionist, identifying latent themes within the interview transcripts, such as underlying assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies theorised as having an impact on the semiotic content (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis also drew on a Foucauldian conception of discourse as both reflective and constitutive of social life, and of discourses as bodies of knowledge or a connected set of statements that manifest through language to ‘produce and organise a particular order of reality, and specific subject positions therein’ (Lazar 2005, 143). Discursive themes were identified in relation to the research question and conceptualisation of gender embedded within feminist theoretical approaches, as discussed below.

Participants included 11 journalists and four editors, sub-editors and deputy-editors from three well-known national weekly newspapers, the *Sunday Sun*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail & Guardian*. These newspapers – all English national papers – were selected for their diverse readership and style. The *Sunday Sun*, a tabloid newspaper, was launched in 2002 and has a rapidly growing readership of mostly black South Africans from working-class backgrounds (SAARF 2007). The *Sunday Times*, a well-established newspaper launched in 1906, has a readership demographic reflecting a roughly proportional representation of racial groups in South Africa, but a greater

urban and middle-class readership (SAARF 2007). The *Sunday Times*, which straddles traditional and tabloid print news styles, has become increasingly ‘tabloidised’ over the years, meaning more tabloid in style without identifying as fully tabloid.¹ The *Mail & Guardian* is a niche newspaper with a smaller readership of predominantly middle-class urban South Africans, and with the highest white readership of the three newspapers (SAARF 2007). Its style is more critical and political in nature, oriented at a more formally educated and leadership readership.

Journalists’ responses to questions of gender and gender transformation were considered against the backdrop of wider approaches to feminist activism and thought in South Africa.

Feminist approaches to gender and the media

The historical development of feminist thought in South Africa, both within and beyond the media industry, has been shaped by developments in gender activism and research. These developments include the reproduction and reshaping of dominant early approaches to feminism, in particular liberal feminism associated with the first wave, and some of the more fundamental challenges to these approaches that have characterised more recent feminist dialogue, notably from radical and black, ethnic minority, and ‘third world’ feminisms. For the purposes of this research, the identification and terming of these broader developments – ‘liberal-inclusionary’ and ‘progressive’ feminist approaches respectively – were employed to frame and contextualise broad approaches in feminist thinking, particularly in South African research and activism. An outline of these feminist approaches is provided here, as it informs the discussion of findings that follows.

Liberal-inclusionary feminism

Liberal-inclusionary feminism is identified as a contemporary form of liberal feminism, shaped, in particular, by contextual forces leading up to and following the fall of apartheid in South Africa, when significant activity was taking place in shaping post-apartheid policies and institutions. Liberal-inclusionary feminism reflects liberal feminist ideas and concerns associated with the first wave of feminism in the United Kingdom and United States (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004; Tong 1998), as well as what Hassim (2006) calls ‘inclusionary’ gender politics particular to post-apartheid South Africa. It is characterised by an emphasis on women and their involvement in the so-called ‘public sphere’, with a strong focus on equal participation; the representation of women’s voices in legal, political, institutional and cultural roles; and legislative and policy reforms. This approach has been widely promoted via gender and media activism and research, which has tended to focus on the inclusion of ‘women’s voices’ and women’s participation in the media sector.

Liberal feminism has been challenged on a number of fronts. Most notable are arguments that, in its focus on ‘getting women into’ public spaces, liberal feminism

leaves so-called private sphere gender relations largely intact, and does not adequately interrogate the public spaces into which women are inserted (Tong 1998). In addition, by focusing on the unitary category of 'women', it has been criticised for sidestepping crucial issues of difference, and for being preoccupied with the numerical representation of women's voices rather than the more complex ways in which these voices are (differently) constructed (Connell 2011). Despite extensive critiques from a range of feminist positions, liberal feminism continues to be an influential mainstream feminist paradigm – one towards which non-feminist actors and institutions tend to be more favourable and, for many feminist activists, a necessary and strategic starting point for creating change.

Within South Africa, elements of liberal feminism are reflected in a concentration on women's quantifiable representation in power structures and policy. Women activists at the turn to democracy became increasingly concerned about the potential for women's voices and leadership to be sidelined post-independence (McEwan 2000), as happened not only prior to independence in the anti-apartheid struggle (Connell 2011; Hassim 2006; McClintock 1991; McEwan 2000), but also in various post-independence contexts within Africa such as Mozambique and Zimbabwe (McEwan 2000). As such, it was deemed important that the period of transition to democracy be strategically approached, to ensure that key changes and rights for women were ensured from the outset.

Formal legislative and policy changes – especially around the representation of women in leadership structures – were therefore tactically pursued, despite (or with) the recognition that these changes alone would not lead to comprehensive change. As Hassim (2006, 173) observes, this strategy was born out of the knowledge that 'transitions to democracy offer unique opportunities for women to influence how democracy is broadly conceived. The restructuring of a more inclusive political system provides an important context in which women can advance their particular represented claims.' This led to an initial 'intense focus on numbers – that is, measuring the extent of women's participation and a concern about the nature and quality of representation and participation' (Hassim 2006, 173–174).

In this context, South Africa has seen the emergence of a range of specialised institutional and policy mechanisms, the so-called 'gender machinery', aimed at bringing about the inclusion of women in decision making, especially within politics and the paid workforce. This has, in turn, 'shifted the issues of gender inequality out of the realm of politics and into the technical realm of policy making' (Hassim 2006, 262). As such, inclusionary gender politics in South Africa have led to women's participation being institutionalised in policy and formal structures. While valuable, the more complex questions of gendered discourse and power can, in many ways, remain secondary within this approach. The pursuit of measurable parity can also depoliticise activism and research, leading to technocratic analysis, rather than an engagement with power relations (Gouws 2010).

Progressive feminist approaches

A 'progressive' feminist approach flows largely from critiques of liberal-inclusionary paradigms and involves a more complex and layered understanding of gender transformation. The approach is conceptualised here in terms of a range of contributions made by feminist theorists and writers, incorporating numerous feminist theoretical developments that have arisen in response to the limitations of liberal feminist approaches focusing on women's public participation. What is termed progressive feminism here is not a single feminist typology, but a term to denote key developments in approaches to feminist studies that have challenged liberal feminist approaches. In particular, the work of postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist writers informs this framing of a 'progressive feminist' approach.

Directing attention beyond gender parity in formal rights and representative participation, this approach is more concerned with gendered social meanings and their relationship to power. For example, in relation to gender-based violence (moving beyond legal and equitable representation reforms, and the assumption that these measures are sufficient to address gender-based violence), a progressive feminist lens would interrogate the social meanings and values – expressed by both women and men – which serve to shape a social and cultural environment that enables such violence as an expression of unequal power. As such, relying less on the numerical representation of women to lead to diverse and transformative voices, attention is paid to the ways in which voices (both men's and women's) are constructed, and as regards gender as a relational issue in that it impacts men and women in different ways. In addition, moving beyond a primary focus on traditionally masculinised public spaces and issues (such as party politics and the paid workplace), the spotlight of social and political interrogation turns onto more intimate spaces and experiences such as sexuality, personal relationships, identity and values – a contribution of radical second-wave feminist theory (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004). This represents a turn from attending principally to 'public' spaces and relationships (for example, in relation to policies, laws and government structures) towards recognising the political nature of spaces and relationships historically deemed 'private'.

Representing broader shifts in feminist theory and gender studies, a progressive feminist approach is indebted to the rigorous questioning of unitary notions of 'women' on the part of black and southern feminists (Waylen 1996). This questioning of women as a discreet category has led to more complex and nuanced approaches to representation. A progressive feminist approach also draws on the nascent field of masculinities studies (Connell 2000, 2005; Morrell 2001a and b) which has further contributed to the notion of diverse (rather than singular) constructions of gender, and has asserted that looking at the construction of masculinities, as well as femininities, is important for understanding gender and its relationships. This has allowed gendered research into media content to go beyond an assessment of women's inclusion and 'gender stereotypes', and to engage in more nuanced analysis.

In the South African context, a 'progressive' feminist approach resonates well with what Hassim (2005) advocates as an alternative to the limitations of inclusion. Arguing

for ‘transformational’ rather than ‘inclusionary’ feminist politics in South Africa, Hassim underscores the importance of tackling the structural, social and cultural underpinnings of gender inequality at all levels, not merely at the level of public participation.

Feminist discourses and news journalists

Identifying both liberal-inclusionary and progressive feminist approaches in journalists’ responses was valuable in locating them in relation to key shifts in wider feminist discourse in South Africa. The research found that, while journalists’ views on gender and gender transformation showed contradictions and tensions, progressive feminist discourses were seldom reflected in the responses of news journalists and editors, while liberal-inclusionary feminist discourses shaped, and set limitations on, how journalists understood gender issues. Responses varied between participants, and especially between newspapers. For example, participants from the *Mail & Guardian*, in particular, reflected the development of a strong progressive feminist lens in addition to a liberal-inclusionary one. However, liberal-inclusionary discourses occupied a more dominant position in shaping understandings of gender within the media.

While most participants demonstrated a strong awareness of debates and activism pertaining to women’s position in the media industry as a workplace, far fewer participants made the connection between their work as journalists and the production of gendered media texts. A focus on gender within newsroom relationships, rather than gender representations in the media, largely prevailed. Again, the *Mail & Guardian* provided some exceptions to this pattern, with participants showing a consciousness of the ways in which their understandings of gender shaped gendered news texts. For most participants in the study, however, the way in which gendered meanings are constructed through texts was largely invisible beyond the extent to which ‘women’s voices’ were included. The key findings outlined here are explored in greater detail below.

Gender transformation as ‘women in the workplace’

When asked what the terms ‘gender’ and ‘gender transformation’ evoked for them, most journalists and editors responded first in terms of women’s measurable representation and advancement in the workplace. Many participants immediately responded by focusing on these issues in relation to the newsroom in particular. The following types of responses were common.

Sunday Sun participant: ‘OK, in our field and anywhere else ... because in South Africa, these days especially I have seen women given great opportunities, both in the government and in the private sectors.’

Mail & Guardian participant: ‘When I hear gender transformation that’s what I’m ... hearing, sort of what processes are, I don’t know, are taking place to achieve that. So are there more women managers? Are more women being employed? Um, do you have a balance of men and women in the newsroom? Are women allowed to take leadership positions?’

Sunday Sun participant: 'Normally in the newsroom I believe that women have been oppressed in terms of, of positions. I cannot give you an example of where there's an editor as a woman besides, you know, these [women's] magazines.'²

Women's empowerment was largely figured in terms of their participation in public spaces and workplaces – especially in business and politics. Empowerment for women was also connected to economic viability, with an implicit connection made between women's income and empowerment in all areas of life. The link between women's economic independence and other issues of gender equality is well established and is a key driver in motivating women's inclusion in the workforce. The significance of social, cultural and discursive equality, however, and the notion that there is no neat or total correlation between income and all areas of equality, were left largely outside of the realm of the discussion on gender transformation.

Add women and stir

Gender was largely conceptualised as a 'women's issue' by participants, whose responses to questions with regard to 'gender' and 'gender transformation' focused primarily on the ways in which women are gendered and on the social change required for women.

Sunday Sun participant: 'I think it is about women. [Laughs slightly] Ja, it is not much that I think of that it relates to men. I think it all, it all relates on women because woman has always been the one, the ones with problems relating to gender.'

Sunday Sun participant: 'Uh, well ... for me it would mean, um, uplifting women ... because that has been the gender that has been, you know, previously disadvantaged.'

In these extracts, women's historical disadvantages are linked to the notion that it is primarily women who are gendered and who experience their gender in problematic ways. For many participants, 'gender' references 'women', and this conflation of 'gender' and 'women' casts gender transformation as a project that requires change, primarily by and in respect of women, rather than inclusive of men. For participants this was also linked to the priority of including greater numbers of women in newsrooms, thus assuming that a critical mass of women in the newsroom will transform gendered news practices (Carter, Branston and Allan 1998).

The salience of equitable representation is a key concern within liberal-inclusionary feminism, and as such this focus in responses reflects that approach. From a progressive feminist perspective, too, equitable representation is significant in a context in which women have borne and continue to bear the brunt of patriarchal constructs and institutions; however, it is regarded as one of a range of factors impacting the gendered status quo. While a focus on women with regard to gender reflects feminist inroads into the media, it is largely limited to a liberal-inclusionary perspective. Through this lens, women are isolated as a homogenous disadvantaged group, thus sidestepping differences among women at the nexus of race, class, sexuality and more. In addition, the relational nature of gender and the location of masculinities within patriarchy and

gender transformation are not recognised, which isolates women's concerns from the lives of men. As such, gender transformation strategies are less likely to address the roles of men and masculinities within the media industry.

Part of the gender and women synonym, whereby 'gender' is conflated with 'women', was also the discursive construction of women as the (often passive) recipients of gender transformation, which was framed as conceded, allowed or promoted by male gate-keepers through the language employed. One participant, for instance, spoke of employing a woman deputy president as '*tak[ing] a woman to be his deputy*'. Another participant, in discussing sexuality, spoke of '*accommodating*' gay sexualities. The notion of gender transformation as being conceded to women also surfaced in the use of phrases such as '*give/allow women a chance*', '*bring women in*' and '*allow women to participate*'. Together, this phrasing with regard to gendered social change frames women (and, in one discussion, people with diverse sexualities) as being inserted into a largely unchanged public sphere. Male journalists and editors were constructed as 'giving' women entry into the public sphere, while the gendered nature of this public space remained largely unproblematic.

All the editors interviewed supported changes in the number of women making and being represented in the news. The analysis of news content (Buiten 2010) showed that there were certainly progressive efforts in this regard. As such, this point of liberal feminist media advocacy largely appears to be mainstreamed into news media. However, this places limitations on the kind of issues that are widely discussed and addressed in terms of gender transformation in the industry, constraining possibilities for change by maintaining a narrow focus on 'women's inclusion', which is largely inserted into existing arrangements.

A 'woman's perspective'

One of the primary ways in which 'women's inclusion' was framed, was through the notion of having a 'woman's perspective' in the media. A number of participants (particularly from the *Sunday Sun*) highlighted the role of women journalists in bringing a different – i.e. feminine – perspective to the news.

Sunday Sun participant: '*I told her [a female member of staff], your challenge is to see to it that when we publish the newspaper that you must be proud to say ... if a female reader gets hold of this newspaper can she put it down and say I've gained something.*'

Sunday Sun participant: '*Do we bring [women] in to ... make certain [gender] quotas set by the government ... or do we change it, for real change, for example to say "bring your perspective"?*'

The second extract provides an example of how an important aspect of women's inclusion in the workplace was framed as incorporating a 'woman's perspective'. As these extracts show, a 'woman's perspective' is assumed to be inherent, naturalised and homogenised in such discussions, with participants arguing that there was a different approach towards, and interest in, news content among male and female journalists and readers. These differences were largely framed in essentialist (rather than social) terms.

Sunday Sun participant: 'We're trying desperately to also fill in the fashion content of the newspaper so that it has more of a woman's voice.'

Sunday Times participant: 'The story that appeals to a woman reporter is not necessarily going to appeal to a man.'

At the same time, one journalist and sub-editor from the *Sunday Times* expressed her frustration with the notion of female journalists bringing a 'woman's perspective' to the news. The discussion with her suggested that an implicitly homogenised 'woman's perspective' in the news had been strongly advocated for within the newsroom, and that some staff were, as a result, both sceptical and weary of the feminist media advocacy associated with this.

Sunday Sun participant: 'I think people harp on about ... you know, you need to write for women. It's like, what are women ... what are women interested in? Women aren't homogenous. Any more than men are homogenous ... I mean I understand why people talk about it [gender transformation in the media], but I sometimes think it's ... it's ... it's ... the debate is happening at a very lofty intellectual level.'

In this extract, the respondent recognises and critiques the ways in which the notion of a 'woman's perspective' has been increasingly mainstreamed into the news media industry ('harped on about') as well as some of the limitations and frustrations associated with this. A unitary conception of women (and, indeed, men) both homogenises gendered subjects and forecloses discussions about how women's and men's voices are socially constituted. In addition, leaving the question of gender transformation in media representations 'up to women' sidesteps the power relationships between men and women, and the role of men in establishing and challenging the status quo. As such, notions of 'women's voice' assume a correlation between numerical representation and wider gendered social transformation.

Constructing gendered news content

An exchange between the researcher (R) and a journalist/participant (P) from the *Sunday Times*:

- R: What comes to your mind when you hear the words 'gender transformation'?
- P: Gender transformation and equity, what comes to my mind? Oh, number one is to ... how can I put this? To correct imbalances, basically. We know – I know – for a fact that women didn't have the opportunities that they have now. So when you speak about gender equity then I know that it's mainly about women getting a fair share of the economy, if I can put it that way. And as ... getting the representation in the workplace ... right.
- R: What do you think are the most pressing gender issues facing South Africa at this point in post-apartheid South Africa?
- P: [Long pause] Repeat the question again?
- R: Um, what do you think are the most important or serious gender issues that we face in this country?
- P: Most important ...

- R: In post-apartheid South Africa ...
- P: OK, I just say like, um, when looking at big companies like the senior management, that's where you don't find many women. So that's where basically the big challenge lies.
- R: Yes. And when you're busy working on your news pieces, do you ever come across gender issues or women's issues in the stories that you cover?"
- P: [Long pause] Not really ... Because there ... the ... Most of the stories we do are ... based on issues. Issues like service delivery. Issues like, uh, unemployment. Issues like ... like your normal day-to-day issues. Crime. Not really gender-related issues. For me I won't say that I do come across those kind of issues.

This exchange exemplifies two principle issues to emerge from the research. One is the extent to which a liberal-inclusionary discourse produces and sets limits on the ways in which journalists understand gender transformation, including a specific focus on women's inclusion in workspaces. The other is the relative lack of connection made between gender transformation and the construction of news texts, as opposed to a strong connection made between gender issues and employment in the media industry. This participant, like many others interviewed, was uncertain about how to respond to questions about gender within news texts. When asked about their role in producing gendered news texts, a number of participants expressed confusion or discomfort with the idea that their work might have a particular social or ideological leaning, and several did not know how to respond to the questions, moving the discussion back to the issue of women in the newsroom. One participant from the *Mail & Guardian*, while conceding that the construction of news stories could potentially be shaped in gendered ways, argued that the newspaper took on a '*gender neutral*' approach, due to the '*affirmative action*' taking place. For this participant, the absence of overt sexism reflected gender neutrality, resonating with the argument that journalistic discourses tend to construct 'ideology' as one or other of the 'extreme' ends of the ideological spectrum (Gans 1980). As such, few participants felt there was a significant link between how news stories are written and wider questions of gender transformation; news as a gendered text was largely invisible.

Where some participants did see a link, this was mostly related to the sexualisation of women in the media, particularly in tabloidised newspapers such as the *Sunday Sun* or *Sunday Times*. For example, one *Sunday Sun* participant discussed the need to '*balance*' content that sexualised women and another also spoke about the '*page three girls*' in the *Sunday Sun* and the need to '*portray a different and serious side of women*' as part of '*women empowerment*'. A number of participants spoke about creating greater visibility within the news of women's leadership. Two participants, on further discussion, highlighted the need to follow laws around the treatment of certain gendered issues, for example by not naming a rape victim.

The mantra of journalistic objectivity, however, served to limit discussions with journalists about the gendered construction of news texts, with most arguing that objectivity made redundant the need to approach news with a gender lens. A binary constructed between 'objective' and 'biased' news reporting, as De Bruin (2004) argues, is effective in foreclosing critical engagement with gender due to the framing

of dominant cultural values around gender as ‘objective’. As the quote below from one participant suggests, objectivity was prized as superseding and negating the need for a politicised gender lens. In a discussion about journalistic objectivity, when asked about a journalist’s role within social and gender transformation processes, one participant had the following to say:

Sunday Sun participant: ‘No, you need to be objective. Forget about transformation, forget about social responsibility as a person. You need to be objective. Look at the facts.’

The same participant had earlier discussed the high-profile story of Jacob Zuma’s rape trial, in which Zuma indicated he had engaged in unprotected sex outside of his marriages with a woman he was aware had HIV. In discussing this story, the participant argued that the extent to which Zuma’s moral judgement was questioned and ridiculed within the media was not because of a lack of journalistic objectivity, but because the ‘facts’ of the case had spoken for themselves. Another participant told a similar story in which he related the media’s need to highlight the unequal treatment of working-class sports fans – an issue he said had ‘*touched [him] personally*’ and spoke about the ways in which had he sought to do this. At the same time, however, he framed the featuring of this social issue as an act of journalistic objectivity, of presenting the facts. These examples exemplify the ways in which notions of journalistic objectivity served to construct ideological messages as neutral and self-evident.

Interestingly, participants from the more tabloidised newspapers, the *Sunday Sun* and the *Sunday Times*, most powerfully articulated a belief in and focus on ‘objectivity’, equating factuality with ‘objectivity’, and by extension ‘gender-neutral’ reporting. During deeper discussions most journalists conceded to the limits of objectivity and cited stories around the strategies they used to construct a particular message for their readers. Often, this was framed as part of ‘educating’ the public. However, while the limits of journalistic objectivity were recognised, this was more reluctantly conceded than openly acknowledged.

Sunday Sun participant: ‘I’m flexible, I’m not biased in any gender issues. If I write about women abuse I will criticise men. If he is wrong, I feel he is wrong, I will do it. If a male, like a woman is abusing her husband, I must do it to my best ability without being involved. But I don’t have a problem with gender issues ... whatever stories ... gay or lesbian. I can still write about that.’

Participants from the *Mail & Guardian* discussed the gendered nature of news texts with a greater level of comfort. Sceptical of the notion of objectivity, instead employing the concept of ‘balance’, some journalists from the newspaper openly acknowledged the application of a ‘gender lens’ in constructing news texts, as such claiming an ideological and political position, rather than invoking journalistic discourses of professionalism that prize objectivity. Two participants from the *Mail & Guardian* expressed their scepticism at the notion of journalistic objectivity, with one asserting: ‘I’ve never been a big believer in the, you know, objective journalism thing because I don’t think there is such a thing.’ The generation of news texts was discursively framed

as an inherently social and political process. However, participants from the *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Sun* showed far less engagement with the idea of media texts as gendered representations.

Implications for media representations

There are important implications for these patterns in the journalists' responses. As part of a wider research project on gender and print news media, interviews with journalists were supplemented by an analysis of news texts from each newspaper (Buiten 2010).³ The findings highlighted that gender discourses informing journalists' views are linked to discourses within media texts: for example, while gendered representations within newspaper texts showed diversity and, indeed, high levels of discursive contradiction in terms of gender and transformation, women's formal rights and participation within the public sphere were both implicitly and explicitly advocated in all publications analysed, while gendered expressions related to the private sphere of intimate personal and sexual relationships revealed far less progressive understandings of gender. In the more tabloidised newspapers in the study, including the *Sunday Times* and especially the *Sunday Sun*, both subtle and overt anti-feminist sentiments, misogynistic representations of women and homophobic or heteronormative discourses emerged. This was often in apparent contradiction or tension with the simultaneous promotion of women's rights and equal participation within society (Buiten 2010). As such, the increased mainstreaming of liberal-inclusionary feminist ideas in the media, and simultaneous lags in media engagement with ideas emerging from progressive feminist theorising in recent decades, appeared to have a significant impact on the kinds of gendered media texts being produced.

Similarly, the extent to which journalists articulated a critical engagement during interviews with regard to their own role in producing gendered texts was closely related to the ways in which gender transformation was approached within news media representations. Where journalists and editors articulated a stronger belief in 'objective' reporting and made fewer connections between their own understandings of gender and the ways in which meanings in news media texts are constituted, the news texts themselves showed greater discursive contradiction around gender, and misogynistic and homophobic discourses emerged, especially related to private sphere gender relations (Buiten 2010). On the other hand, the politicised approach to news, expressed by journalists from the *Mail & Guardian*, was reflected in its news content, which represented elements of a progressive feminist lens that politicised gender beyond women's public participation and at times also engaged with constructions of gender from a relational perspective, rather than focusing solely on women as gendered beings (Buiten 2010).

Activism and research beyond inclusion

In South Africa, a liberal-inclusionary feminist approach has directed a great proportion of gender and media research and activism. It is also seen to have left an enduring mark

on the historical movements or trajectories of feminist thought that have penetrated South African media institutions. Parity in the representation of women as news professionals and news sources has enjoyed significant activist attention in this country (Geertsema 2008, 2010). In research, too, there has tended to be a focus on quantifying gender representation in the media, rather than examining content qualitatively through a feminist lens (Bosch 2011). Although attending to the numbers of women and women's issues in media content and in newsrooms is an important practical and tactical starting point, there is a need to go beyond some of the limitations of liberal-inclusionary feminist approaches in terms of both understanding and challenging the status quo of gender and the media in South Africa.

Even within much gender and media activism in South Africa, progressive feminist understandings remain subservient to liberal-inclusionary paradigms that focus on 'getting women in' – getting women into the media industry as professionals, and getting women, 'women's voices' and 'women's issues' into media representations. Complex, nuanced ideological challenges to media representations become subsumed in debates over equal rights and equal access, and this trend is largely reflected in the expressions of journalists.

Geertsema (2010), in her study on the discourses informing the approach of the prominent South African gender and media organisation, GenderLinks, suggests that professional-technical approaches to 'mainstreaming' gender in the media (an approach that resounds deeply with liberal-inclusionary paradigms) may be implicated in the limited success of gender and media activism in South Africa, which can leave the ideological status quo largely intact. As Jane Duncan (2006, 22) argues, contemporary gender and media movements in South Africa are 'depoliticized, tame, safe, and timid', largely sidestepping deeper engagement with the structural roots of inequality in favour of such an approach. Indeed, the reach and currency of liberal-inclusionary paradigms with regard to gender and the media are well illustrated in the way activists employ these conventionalised discourses to argue for change.

How gender transformation is discursively constructed sets limits on what is considered possible and important, and as such has a bearing on the kinds of change (and approaches to change) that are envisaged and pursued. In other words, if women are seen as the locus of 'gender', then gender transformation strategies, within and beyond the media, will only address women. This will serve to reproduce the notion that gender transformation is women's responsibility, and that men are not gendered, thereby significantly curtailing the potential reach and impact of gender transformation strategies.

Restrictive associations between gender transformation and women's positions in public spaces, especially the workplace, also have a limiting effect on the spaces and issues which are made visible (or invisible) and as such recognised (or unrecognised) as gendered to journalists. While women's participation is championed, the ways in which they are viewed in relation to the more intimate spaces and roles in their lives (including relationships and sexuality) remain deeply problematic. This contradiction between women's relative 'public' advancement and their 'private' experiences of

gendered power is mirrored in the wider social issues facing women in South Africa today, for example, in the ongoing plague of sexual violence.

Finally, a focus on ‘women’s voice’ as a route to transformation obscures the ways in which both men’s and women’s voices are gendered, and potentially coopted into existing power relations. For example, the 2005 *National Gender Survey* found that, when asked if a woman who is raped after drinking is responsible for her own rape, more women (41.01%) agreed with this statement than men (33.39%) (Commission on Gender Equality 2005). Given the ways in which gender and gender inequality operate relationally, and operate in different ways within the voices of both men and women, it is important to move beyond homogenising assumptions that foregrounding women’s voices constitutes gender transformation. We need to take a closer look at the gendered meanings and discourses that inform both women and men.

A technocratic, rights-based, inclusionary and workplace-focused approach to gender in the media – a liberal-feminist approach – does not adequately serve to challenge the social construction of gender in the media. Indeed, this approach can serve to depoliticise gender, and tends to rely on the state and other institutions to initiate parity reform, rather than encouraging complex debates around gender and the ways in which it manifests in everyday life. A more progressive feminist lens is needed in media activism and research in South Africa, if more comprehensive and meaningful change in the media is to be achieved.

Notes

- 1 One participant called this style ‘*quali-pop*’, blending ‘quality’ with ‘popular’ journalism.
- 2 Despite this perception, Ferial Haffajee was editor of the *Mail & Guardian* for some time, before moving to *City Press*, and the Deputy Editor of the *Sunday Sun* at the time was also female. As such, there are examples of women in significant editorial positions within print news, albeit not at the same levels as men, which makes this comment an interesting assumption.
- 3 This research article focuses on the component of the research involving interviews with journalists and editors. However, other aspects of the research are raised here to underscore the significance of certain findings, presented here, for the production of gendered media texts.

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