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The representation of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans-gendered people

Introduction

The Bill of Rights enshrined in the South African Constitution clearly and unambiguously outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender and marital status (Act 108 of 1996, chapter 2, paragraph 9). Yet Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans-gendered (GLB&T) people remain stigmatised and marginalised in South African society. GLB&T people are confronted on a daily by social and institutional discrimination and little is known about the challenges and concerns facing them.

Representation in the media

Issues affecting GLB&T people are virtually absent in the news media and, on the rare occasions they are represented, they are often misrepresented. Preliminary monitoring by the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) reveals that articles and photographs published in the news media fail to capture the diversity and complexity of GLB&T people.

Majority of coverage is received during Gay Pride Week and this is often limited to photographs taken at the annual March. The media's coverage of Gay Pride Week tends to be reported as just another event and a source of entertainment to the public. It is common practice for newspaper and television reports to carry photographs of people dressed as drag queens, with a lot of emphasis on fashion. Such emphasis is a misrepresentation as "drag queens" only represent a

segment of GLB&T people. In this regard the media needs to broaden its representation of GLB&T people from its limited representation.

Preliminary monitoring reveals that articles and photographs published in the news media fail to capture the diversity and complexity of GLB&T people. For example, a photograph published in the Sunday Independent (30/09/01, pg 1) focused attention on drag queens at the Gay Pride March and comments on the attire of the participants. The caption at the bottom of the photograph reads, "The other rainbow nation was out gender bending in Johannesburg yesterday. Fishnet stockings, spandex, sequins and some impossibly high heels were part of the 12th Annual Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade. Pamphlets and condoms were handed out like candy. While this year's march had a celebratory feel, there was a lone protestor who said discrimination against gays was still rife in black communities." The issue of racism and discrimination against homosexuals is mentioned but not further explored, and focus is clearly on the "gender bending" nature of the event.

An earlier photograph that appeared in the same newspaper (12/08/01, pg3) also depicted a drag queen and was headlined "Woman for a day". In this instance, the caption reads, "Jessy, left, was a princess for the evening with a tiara perched on her purple bob, while Thelma Klench sported sixties blonde bouffant at a 'divas and bitches' bash at a JHB gay club to celebrate Women's Day. The party promised special rewards for those pitching up in drag and plenty of girls, and several hundred boys, unleashed their inner woman". No article accompanies the photograph and while there is a caption the photograph is not contextualised- even though the festivities are linked to Women's Day, the piece does not explore the links between this event and the commemoration of a national holiday.

While it is perfectly reasonable to cover the Annual Gay Pride March or festivities in celebration of Women's Day, which has the benefit of raising awareness of GLB&T pride, it is insufficient to report on them almost exclusively during the holding of an annual event. It is necessary that the media provide in-depth coverage on issues about GLB&T people and represent them as being part of

broader society. Coverage of GLB&T people tends to represent them as “outside the norm” as an “other” who are different from the rest of society.

The GLB&T people comprises a diverse range of people from different race, class, gender, educational system or any racial group but cut across all groups and sections of society. The media, however, has a tendency to represent GLB&T people as homogenous and amorphous, and fails to communicate the importance of some of the issues facing them. This reinforces the marginalisation and stereotyping of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered, leading to generalisations and stereotyping that can translate into discrimination. Furthermore, the media does not represent the concerns and difficulties faced by GLB&T people as being of importance and of value.

The media needs to represent different people, and the specific issues they face, in a comprehensive and thorough manner. GLB&T people should be depicted as a part of society, one that has some special interests but also one that faces many of the same challenges as every other citizen.

More seriously, the media often fails to report on violence against members of GLB&T people. According to organisations such as the Triangle Project & the Gay and Lesbian Equality Project, rape, discrimination and racism feature prominently as issues of concern within GLB&T people, yet the mainstream media gives it little or no coverage at all. For example, a gay black person in a squatter camp may have a completely different experience of being gay from Steven Cohen.

It is crucial that the media represents the concerns of GLB&T people within the broader framework of human rights. This would communicate the message that issues affecting GLB&T people are of importance and value and should be treated with the same gravity afforded to issues affecting heterosexual people. Mainstreaming is important, too, because it does not make these issues and concerns exclusively the domain of GLB&T people. In the same way that violence against women also affects men and children, so violence against gays and lesbians should affect all people.

There are however some exceptional items which deal with issues and challenges faced by GLB&T people. The first was a breakthrough court ruling that enables gay and lesbian couples to adopt children, which was covered by various newspapers, including The Star, Citizen, Sowetan, Beeld and the Sunday Independent. In a case testing the provisions of the Bill of Rights, Ms Anna Marie de Vos, a Pretoria High Court judge, and her life partner, Ms Suzanne du Toit, challenged sections of the Child Care Act and the Guardianship Act in the Constitutional Court which prevented them from jointly adopting their two children. The Constitutional Court ruled that such a provision was unconstitutional.

The second was an application brought by Kathy Satchwell, a Johannesburg High Court judge, to challenge the Judges' Remuneration and Conditions of Employment Act that excluded same-sex partners from various benefits available to married spouses. In terms of an amendment to the Act, Satchwell's partner, Lesley Carnelly, will now be entitled to receive death benefits if Satchwell dies and can be registered as a dependent on her partner's medical aid. Certainly, these issues need more coverage in the media and not only when the issue is raised by prominent individuals in society.

Conclusion

The media should represent GLB&T people in terms of the complexity and diversity afforded to other people. GLB&T people also have careers families, friends, needs and a wide range of interests. It is necessary to communicate and mainstream issues of interest to the gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered people through the media i.e. transform what is perceived as "other" to normal and acceptable. Mainstreaming issues of concern and interest to GLB&T people would serve to conscientise and educate people, promote understanding and tolerance, and challenge homophobia and discrimination. This could significantly contribute to lessening the marginalisation of GLB&T people and meaningfully promote the rights embodied in the Constitution. It is essential that the media represents all of South African society's diverse people and cultures and works as a force to counter discrimination.