



Showering coverage on Jacob Zuma

November 25 will see the start of the International 16 Days of No Violence Against Women and Children Campaign. As the country focuses on issues of violence and abuse of children and both men and women, it is worth considering one of the most prominently reported rape cases; the trial of former deputy president Jacob Zuma and how issues of gender based violence raised by the case were represented in the media.

One of the key questions that arose from the analysis of the coverage was, whether the case was reported in a manner that empowered and encouraged women who have been sexually assaulted to report their cases. In addition to this the question also needs to be asked as to whether the justice system and justice processes were reported and explained in a clear and informative manner. These are critical questions as they may directly influence how people receive and understand the issues at hand, especially during the 16 days of activism campaign.

As part of the MMP's ongoing gender focused media monitoring, the MMP undertook a media monitoring project looking at 11 Gauteng based daily and weekly print media for four months. In total 836 articles were monitored.

Key findings:

Prominent coverage

One of the key elements of the media's coverage was the prominence and amount of coverage afforded to the trial. While much of the prominence and amount of coverage can be directly attributed to the accused being Jacob Zuma, the prominence also highlighted the high rates of gender based violence in the country and brought issues such as the legislation used to prosecute cases of rape, (like the Sexual Offences Bill), into public debate.

What were the stories about?

While the case focused on gender based violence, the media tended to focus on different aspects. The majority of the coverage focused on the testimonies and court processes with 51% of the coverage dedicated to these articles. The media also raised the issue of rape and HIV/ AIDS, as the complainant in the case was an HIV positive woman and this was afforded a total of 5% of the coverage. The coverage also focused on the behaviour of the supporters of both the accused and the complainant (12%); and politics of what the trial means to the political landscape of the country (10%). Issues regarding the sexual history of the complainant; the sexual offences bill; moral regeneration came up in the reports about the cross examination taking place in court.

MMP's monitoring revealed that articles that focused on testimonies given in court made up 32% of the total number of articles monitored and tended to be event based with very little explanation and analysis. The analytical and feature articles tended to focus more on the political career of the accused, although there were a handful of articles which focused on issues of gender based violence, legislation and rape. These gender based violence focused reports made up 9% of the total number of the articles. These reports included articles on gender based violence in general (4%); women's rights (4%); and rape (1%). The reports on the evidence tended to be presented in a dramatic and often extremely graphic manner. Headlines such as "Burn the Bitch"; "Zuma pushed harder and harder"; and "Battle of Zuma's bed's" formed the basis of such dramatic coverage, especially by the daily publications. Surprisingly, issues relating to rape received minimal coverage during the trial period, with only 1% of the total number of articles being focused on rape.

The recent case of Mongezi Jingxela, in which survivors of his actions are reported as being afraid to testify in public because they fear they will be discriminated against and their experiences made public serves as a good example of the possible negative effects of insensitive, sensationalist, non-analytical media reporting on cases of gender based violence. Indeed, such reporting raises a broader question as to the potential impact it has had on other women who are survivors of rape and other forms of gender based violence, reporting their cases.

Who spoke?

Another important criteria the MMP analysed was the use of sources, or who spoke in the stories. The monitoring revealed that the accused, his legal team and supporters, received more than double the amount of coverage than the complainant, her legal team and supporters. The accused, his legal team and supporters were the most prominently accessed people with each being sourced 15%, 14% and 9% respectively. The complainant and her legal made up 7% each of all people sourced. The question that arises is why the discrepancy? Especially given reported suggestions that media were in fact negatively biased against Jacob Zuma. There are a range of possible factors to consider. The first is around legalities surrounding the naming and /or identification of the complainant. Not only does withholding a person's name and identify make it more difficult to report on but it can often be extremely traumatic and difficult for survivors to be interviewed. In addition to this it is imperative that where adult survivors are interviewed there is informed consent, and in the Zuma trial the complaint was not available to the media for interviews. It should be noted, however, that her legal team and gender groups and human rights based NGO's were available for comment and they could have been drawn on for expert comment. In contrast, Jacob Zuma had a dedicated media team handling the media.

In addition to highlighting the inequitable spread of sources, monitoring who spoke also highlights the diversity, or lack thereof of people accessed. It is assumed that accessing a broader diversity of people, from a range of sources will result in more balanced reporting – not only on gender based violence but on almost all matters.

A study conducted by the MMP in 1998 and subsequent studies by the organisation and other organisations on the representation of gender based violence and of women in general reveals a lack of analysis and explanation in media reports on such issues. MMP has found that women are generally represented as powerless and as being in need of the protection of either the justice system or men. One of the guidelines produced by, Women's Media Watch, states that "domestic violence, rape and murder have been historically unchallenged in our society and need to be challenged by the media now."

It must be acknowledged that reporting on court cases tends to focus on events as they unfold in the court room, so event based reporting is to be expected. However given the detail and attention paid to political analysis of the case, and the focus on the potential and existing impact on Jacob Zuma's political career, it does suggest a gender bias in many print media that issues of gender based violence received so little analysis and discussion. At the end of the trial, in spite of the significant amount of reporting, there were only a handful of stories that had explained or analysed the justice system, how it operated – or failed to operate. Key questions around how speedily this case had been dealt with compared to others were largely unanswered.

The media has a responsibility to challenge the testimonies of witnesses that perpetuate stereotypes. The manner in which the media reported on the statement made by the accused on how he took a shower after having sex with an HIV positive woman as a precautionary measure serve as an example of challenging messages coming out from the trial. The media challenged the statement, and highlighted the problems it may cause especially coming from someone who used to head the country's HIV/AIDS council and also the moral regeneration committee.

Such reporting should not be limited to issues of HIV/AIDS but similar attention could and perhaps should also be paid to when equally stereotypical and undermining claims are made surrounding, for example how a woman dresses as somehow contributing to her being raped. In this regard some of the print media monitored were notable for the poor and stereotypical manner in which they covered the details surrounding the complainant's wearing of a kanga. Several of the human rights and gender based organisations that demonstrated outside the court tried to highlight the impact such messages have on society. Instead of media focusing on these messages, in some instances they opted to focus on comparing the activist's numbers and actions to those of the supporters of the accused.

There are significant trends in reporting gender based violence that were again highlighted by the media's reporting of the Zuma rape trial. Firstly it is important to note that rape is not a crime of passion or lust but of power and control and that it is a human rights violation. Accordingly reports that perpetuate myths of rape as a crime of passion serve to perpetuate common myths. Secondly while it may be difficult in the case of adults (and in the case of children almost impossible) to interview the survivor, there are a wide range of gender and human rights focused experts available for media comment, and they will help bring diverse perspectives

to stories – in the just the same way as diverse political analyst make political stories more interesting to read. Thirdly, while it is common news practice to focus on the dramatic elements of gender based violence stories, the emphasis on graphic detail needs to be questioned and if used, justified. It is easy for most readers to imagine or get a sense of the events without extreme gruesome detail it is often a lot harder to understand the broader implications, on the justice system, policing and society more broadly. Fourthly, and of particular relevance during the 16 days of activism campaign it is to be remembered that in cases of gender based violence and child abuse, peoples fundamental human rights to dignity, bodily integrity, safety and equality have been violently and intimately violated. It should be remembered that in dealing with victims or survivors of theses cases, the justice system, police, society, NGO's and the media all have a critical role to play in helping to respect and protect their rights to dignity and privacy and prevent them from being further violated. In this regard it should be noted that extra protection is to be afforded to children and thus any instance where media name and or identity a child survivor of abuse is itself a further form of child abuse.