



Photo Credit: EPA-EFE

# GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THE MEDIA

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Media reporting of the Caster Semenya vs IAAF case

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**MEDIA MONITORING**  
AFRICA

# 1 ABOUT MMA

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is a civil society organisation based in Johannesburg, South Africa and celebrated 25 years in 2018. We started as a purely monitoring-based project that was established to analyse the media coverage of the first democratic elections in 1994. We have developed into an organisation that implements successful media strategies for positive social change. While MMA's initial objectives of elections coverage analysis were clear, we soon discovered that the real work of democracy only began when we became one. As such, MMA has been able to evolve to the shifting demands and needs of the media sector, not only in South Africa but across the African continent, all the while ensuring positive impact. We use innovative technologies, social media, and data tools across a range of focus areas which contribute directly to realising our mission. MMA has partnered with various organisations to conduct projects in a range of African countries, including Uganda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho, South Sudan, Nigeria, Kenya and Botswana.

## **MMA's vision is a just and fair society empowered by a free, responsible and quality media.**

Through a human rights-based approach, MMA aims to promote the development of:

- Media that is transparent, diverse, ethical and accountable to its audiences;
- Critical and constructive communications by the powerful; and,
- An informed, engaged and connected citizenry.

MMA covers five key thematic areas, all within the organisations Theory of Change. The thematic areas include 'Access and Accountability', 'Governance and Democracy', 'Media Credibility', 'Children and Youth' and 'Gender'. MMA has a staff complement of 15 permanent employees, ranging in skill and experience including researchers, programme managers and senior management.

# 2 INTRODUCTION

The media is one of the many and most powerful and pervasive influences on how societies view gender, sex and sexuality. As an entity that has now formed part of people's daily lives, the media collects and packages varied types of messaging into our (collective) consciousness that in turn go on to shape how we view and understand human relations based on race, gender, sex and orientation<sup>1</sup>. It is of this reason that the former chair of the South African Commission on Gender Equality Thenjiwe Mtintso noted in the 1997 *Report of the Gender in Media Symposium* that "the media is not a passive conveyor belt which simply transfers information without making value judgements. Journalists are and have always been active participants in this society."<sup>2</sup> The multiple and varied media outlets continuously inundate the public with images of men, women and transgender<sup>3</sup> people, often in a manner that perpetuates unrealistic, stereotypical and limiting perceptions. Apart from the underrepresentation of women<sup>4</sup>, which unwittingly implies that men are the voices of reason and authority, men, women and transgender people as well as the LGBTQIA+ community are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reproduce and sustain socially endorsed views of gender and sexual orientation.

This has been the case with news coverage surrounding the dispute between the world athletics' governing body, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and Caster Semenya as well as the subsequent ruling by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) earlier in the year. The former controversially sought to disqualify Semenya from women races on the grounds of new regulations that maintain that women like Semenya, with certain masculine attributes due to Differences of Sexual Development (DSD), ought to be classified biologically as men. This, despite the fact that Semenya self-identifies and is classified as a woman, was raised as a woman and has always raced as a woman.

As such, the main aim and primary focus area of this project is to look at how the media has and continues to report on Semenya and her ensuing legal battle with IAAF. MMA, through a media monitoring exercise, sought to explore whether the media reproduced and/or perpetuated unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions of Semenya and, the possible implications this had on shaping public discourse around gender, sex and sexual orientation and her legacy as a women's world champion racer.

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1. <https://www1.udel.edu/comm245/readings/GenderedMedia.pdf>

2. Commission on Gender Equality (1997), *Report of the Gender in Media Symposium*

3. A person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex.

4. \\numnum2\MMP-FILES\ADU\Elections\2004\Gender\_Updates

5. A common abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Genderqueer, Queer, Intersexed, Agender, Asexual, and Ally community.

6. [https://www.tas-cas.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/CAS\\_Award\\_-\\_redacted\\_-\\_Semenya\\_ASA\\_IAAF.pdf](https://www.tas-cas.org/fileadmin/user_upload/CAS_Award_-_redacted_-_Semenya_ASA_IAAF.pdf)

7. Disorders of sex development (DSD) are defined as conditions involving the following elements; congenital development of ambiguous genitalia

This report provides findings of the monitoring of the news coverage surrounding the dispute between the Caster Semenya and the world athletics' governing body, IAAF. We used MMA's internal online monitoring tool, 'Dexter'<sup>8</sup>, to conduct a six month monitoring exercise, from 1st February to 31st July, 2019. Our tool scraped media content from the websites of various online news media outlets which were then stored in a searchable database. We then identified the relevant stories as all those that related to the dispute between Caster Semenya and the IAAF as well as the subsequent ruling by CAS. These were, but not limited to, items that specifically spoke to the dispute between Semenya, IAAF and CAS, made links to Semenya's testosterone levels, or just mentioned Disorders of Sex Development in relation to sports. Importantly, we excluded any items that discussed similar topics but were not related to Caster Semenya.

For each story, Dexter used machine learning to extract specific information, which was supplemented by human analysis including (1) name, type and origin of publication; (2) headline and summary; (3) main topic of the story and (4) the identities of all sources (including name, race, gender and affiliation). As a key element in quality control, MMA media analysts reviewed each news item in Dexter to ensure that all data from each story was correctly captured in the system. The results below are an analysis of the dataset in the six-month period and the total number of articles we collected and analysed are 284.

## What we analysed

- **Topics** - The overall topic or central subject was captured and this gave us a broader understanding of the content of the story.
- **Sources** - Any person or organisation that was directly or indirectly quoted was captured. In addition, the gender and the capacity within which these sources were accessed was also categorised under affiliation, gender, race.
- **Issue raised**- In order to gain a better sense of the trends exhibited in the coverage, the Researcher noted the issues raised in the health stories. The issues enabled MMA to capture additional information about stories, often missed by the topics

**The research conducted looked specifically at online articles, which may be considered a limitation. The focus of the research was on the data collected from online articles and not broadcast (radio/tv) or print media. A further limitation to this is that currently, the tech used is restricted to English language text. However, with the data sample selected, we are confident that the data is representative of the broader trends seen in media coverage.**

8. Access to Dexter can be granted upon request.

# 4 WHAT THE DATA SHOWS US



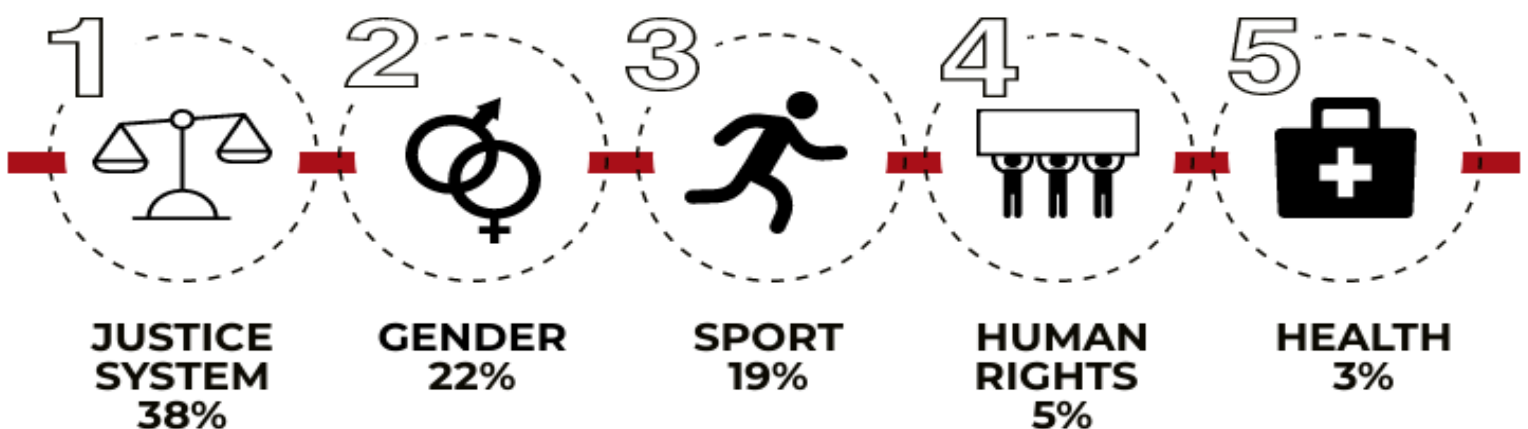
## 4.1 TOPICS

### Top five stories covered

This section presents the key topics we have identified in the selected media sample. The Caster Semenya case has received attention from both national and international audiences. Within these conversations, the issue of gender has been raised and unpacked. In order to further understand how this issue is being covered, it is important to discuss the topics or themes associated with the key words used. Looking at the top five topics help us understand the narratives being shaped in the coverage analysed. The strategy used included allocating a theme or a topic to every story analysed. For example, if a story clearly questioned Caster Semenya's testosterone levels with an element of a gender identity, such a story would be identified as a "gender" story. In the same way, stories involving IAAF members sharing their views on the matter would be identified as "sports regulation".

## TOPICS


Figure1: Top 5 topics covered in the media



The graph above shows a breakdown of the top five topics covered in the media during the monitoring period. Interestingly, justice system dominated the news coverage followed by gender. Stories under this topic included the IAAF ruling against Caster Semenya and decision to appeal. The justice system topic standing at 38% of the total coverage demonstrates that the media is reporting fairly on what should be the first focus. People heard about the IAAF ruling and even before Caster appealed, there was a feeling of frustration among South Africans who believed Semenya was being treated unfairly. By focusing on the justice element, one can assume that the media tries to enable citizens to understand what exactly is at stake.

Gender, at 22% also shows that the Caster Semenya case against the IAAF is all about her gender identity. The consistent use of a terminology like DSD (Disorder of Sex Development) shows that gender is also a main topic as far as this case is concerned. This is contained in many stories reporting on the fact that Caster Semenya might have an unfair advantage because of her high testosterone levels, which is almost close to men.<sup>9</sup> Reading the media and the stories analysed, it is very difficult not to catch a glimpse of a certain kind of gender discrimination.

Notably, sport as a topic, at 19 percent (third) clearly shows that the coverage of Caster Semenya is actually less about sport or its regulations and more about the two previous topics mentioned earlier. The Justice System is the most dominant topic, at 38%, followed by gender 22%.



The content we found in many stories were less sport oriented. In fact, the media tends to report less on Caster Semenya as an athlete and focuses more on the IAAF case and her testosterone

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9. <https://www.prevention.com/health/health-conditions/a27343743/caster-semenya-testosterone-levels-hyperandrogenism/>

## 4.2 ISSUES RAISED

### What were the main issues put forward in the stories?

In addition to the topic of each story, we also went further to look at the underlying issues raised in every article about Caster Semenya. The graph below shows the number of times each issue was raised in the articles.

Figure 2 : Top Five Issues Raised During Monitoring Period



Given the significance of gender equality and women representation in sports and all other sectors of society, it is of paramount importance that the media factors this element of a human rights based approach. However, research shows that the media analysed did not give appropriate balance on issues of gender when reporting on Caster Semenya. The majority of the stories across the different publications all lacked substance in that they did not go further into breaking down the complex issue of Semenya's contested gender (sex development), and focussing heavily on sports regulation and the ensuing legal battle. Generally, it can be argued that many of the articles were context basic, when covering sport regulation and the court case without much consideration of the subject involved.



Looking at the voices that were given power in the media, it seems as though voice was given to the people questioning Semenya's eligibility to compete. The second most highlighted issue is sports regulation, coming out 90 times in all articles monitored. This reveals the areas in which the media was interested in and concerned with in relation to Caster Semenya's legal battle with the IAAF. The third most highlighted issue is Disorder in Sex Development (DSD) at 76. This issue was among the top three precisely to make a point and to justify why Semenya must not compete with other women, suggestively portraying other athletes as helpless and incompetent sportswomen who do not stand a chance against her.

In contrast to the top four issues, Gender Discrimination, Sports regulation, DSD and Higher testosterone, Justice System came at number five, appearing in 46 articles. This suggests that although Semenya was portrayed negatively in the coverage, she was also facing other challenges in court.

These issues tend to dehumanise Caster Semenya and this has in one way or another endangered her sense of belonging in sports as a woman.<sup>10</sup> This was a clear indication that the media's approach to the coverage of the Semenya stories was somehow sensationalised. The coverage therefore did not necessarily provide adequate information, analysis or interrogation to enable readers to make informed opinions about sport and gender and different rules applicable in athletics.

It is also worth noting that while we have observed these issues being raised in the articles, there are other issues, which we believe, could have been raised. For instance, unity and tolerance as an issue was raised only once during the completely monitoring period.

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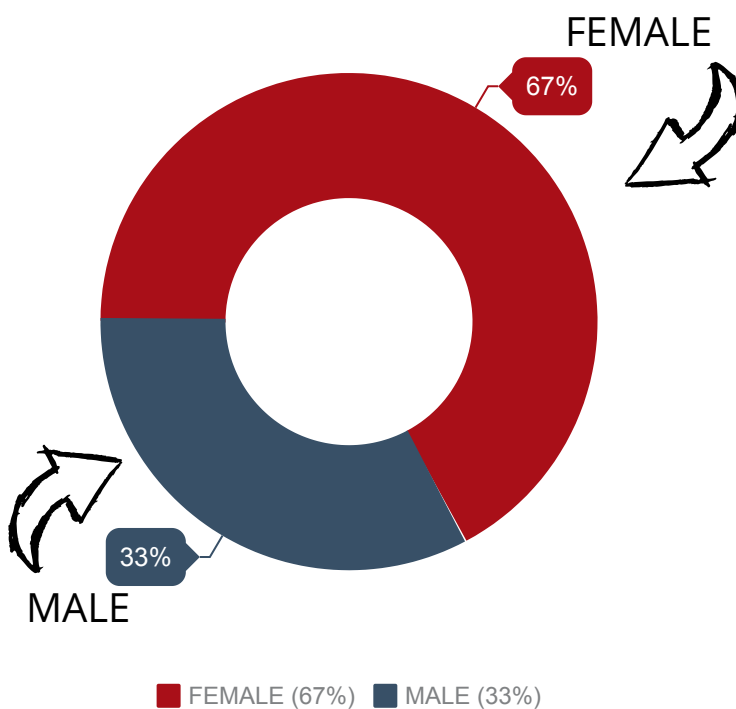
10. See Caster treated like Saartjie Baartman, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-05-08-00-caster-treated-like-saartjie-baartman>

## 4.3 SOURCES: GENDER AND AFFILIATION



MMA has always been interested in the diverse, fair and equal representation of individuals in the media. For our purposes, we define a source as any individual who is accessed or mentioned in a news story. By interviewing these sources it gives us an insight on what is going on regarding the issue and these sources gives us more information about whose voices are being heard, showing us who holds the power in the narrative. In addition by doing this we will be able to see if the media is balanced in terms of accessing a diversity of sources. Caster Semenya has caused controversy in the women middle-distance running sport,<sup>11</sup> this is because she has been a subject of a gender verification process. There have been debates and court battles about her Disorder of Sex Development (DSD). It would be interesting to see who is being accessed regarding Semenya's issue during the court battles against world athletics body, IAAF. Additionally, it would be interesting to look at gender representation in these articles. The figure below contains gender representation for South African mainstream media.

Figure 3: South African media



11. <https://ewn.co.za/2019/07/15/caster-semenya-v-iaaf-a-ground-breaking-gender-test-case>

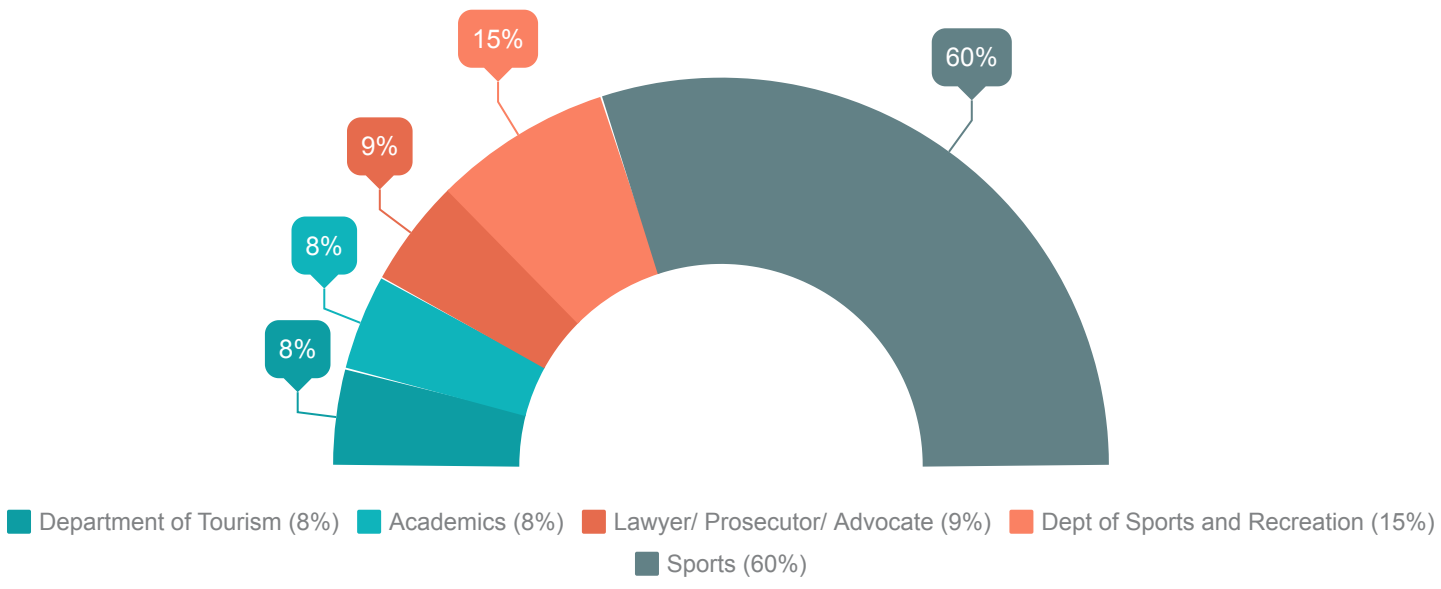


Women in the media are often underrepresented even though they account for 51% of the population in South Africa.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that media favours the opinions and views of men compared to women in society. Looking at these results, we can see a change of representation, where women were being accessed more than men. This means women were accessed in the South African mainstream media regarding the Caster Semenya matter at 67% out of all articles monitored. The majority of females that were accessed were current and former women athlete runners including Caster Semenya, in addition former Sport Minister Tokozile Xasa<sup>13</sup> was also accessed offering support for Caster Semenya.

## Affiliation

During the coverage of Caster Semenya’s court case, there were particular groups, athletes, government officials and organisations that were accessed. We assigned sources to a category that suited the capacity within which they were accessed. By looking at the affiliations, we were able to see which type of people or organisation the media accessed more. Figure 4 below shows the top 5 accessed.

*Figure 4: Affiliation*



12. <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/south-africa-is-young-and-female-stats-sa-report-20180723>  
13. <https://ewn.co.za/2019/02/15/xasa-sets-up-panel-to-support-caster-semenya-in-case-against-iaaf>



Sports (bodies/ officials/ athletes/ golfers/ coaches/ soccer players) as an affiliation was at the top at 60%. This is not surprising because this matter involves a sportsperson, Caster Semenya and her case against sports governing body, IAAF. Sports was followed by Department of Sport and Recreation at 15%. This too is no surprise because the then Sports and Recreation Minister, Tokozile Xasa was very vocal in her support for Caster Semenya. Lawyer/Prosecutor/Advocate followed at 9% and made sense as the coverage involved court proceedings. Lastly, Academics/Experts/Researchers and the Department of Tourism made up 8% of the affiliations each. This is a good indication that researchers were accessed to bring in some expert opinions regarding the matter. While there is no doubt that it is important to hear the voices of sports bodies, officials and athletes about this matter, it was very important to balance the different voices to have LGBTQIA+ groups given space to air their views on this matter especially that Semenya is openly part of this community.

# 5 CONCLUSION



The legal case between world champion athlete, Caster Semenya and the international athletics body, IAAF drew a lot of media attention and coverage. Unsurprisingly, in all the articles collected and analysed, the most dominant topic covered was the Justice System followed by Gender, together making up over half of the news topics covered. This highlights where the central focus of the media lay during the legal battle, on the facts and merit of the case itself as well as the controversy around Caster Semenya's gender.

Whilst this may warrant appraisal, the media however did not do a commendable job in accessing experts and academics (as is evident in the small percentage in figure 4) in efforts to breakdown and further explain the contentious issue of Caster Semenya's gender reality to the benefit of the public. It relied heavily on official voices, including local and international sporting bodies as well as government departments and law experts.

In this way, the media would be fundamental in disproving unfounded, unrealistic and discriminatory prejudices against people of different genders and sex orientation.

Conversely, the media did however do a good job in that it accessed much more women than men to give opinion and expert commentary on an issue that is centred around a woman. Whilst overall the media, both local and international, did not do too bad a job in adequately portraying Caster Semenya and her gender, journalists can and still need to increase awareness of the usage of language when composing/compiling news reports, to ensure that gender-based stereotypes are challenged and ultimately dispelled.

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