



Visible Invisibility: Gender Discrimination in South African Media Workplaces

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Introduction

When we look at gender inequality in contemporary South Africa, we are confronted with a seemingly paradoxical situation. South Africa's transition to liberal democracy has brought about a greater official recognition of gender rights. In fact, the new South African constitution is one of the most progressive constitutions in the world with regard to the legal protection of gender rights. However despite many attempts at addressing gender inequality and achievements in this regard, Gender discrimination is pervasive and is known to occur in almost every professional setting. Newsrooms and the media industry are no exception. As an umbrella term, it encompasses various forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, often negatively affecting women more than men. Unequal gender norms within a workplace can compromise productivity as workers are unable to perform their jobs effectively. Things that may lead to this loss of morale and motivation could include jokes about an employee's gender that imply inferiority, offensive jokes of a suggestive or sexual nature and jokes implying that an employee's work is sub-par due to his or her gender. Stereotypical views regarding gender can cause those in senior positions to engage in the illegal practice of passing a person over for promotion due to gender. While this can happen to both genders, management most often passes over women for promotion due to preconceived notions about their roles and abilities.

The findings reveal interesting and concerning issues about gender discrimination in the country's newsrooms. The findings show that gender discrimination is a problem and long history of inequality among the sexes is the basis for gender discrimination and the foundation for efforts to decrease inequality among the sexes. Secondly gender discrimination in the country's newsrooms is about power as those in positions of authority are usually the perpetrators against those in the lower echelons who are the victims.

The report first outline the methodology adopted for this project, then gives a breakdown of what discrimination is and gives examples of the different types of gender discrimination. The last part looks at how gender discrimination manifests itself in newsrooms.

1. Methodology

1.1 How data was collected

Like many of the social inequalities prevalent in our society, gender discrimination is a complex problem and no single policy measure can effectively address gender discrimination. In order to study and understand the prevalence of gender discrimination in South African media workplaces a survey was rolled out in two newsrooms where 41 participants responded; and five in depth interviews with both male and female journalists from the respective media institutions.

1.2 How the survey was administered

Given the sensitivity of the subject being researched, an anonymous survey was administered amongst media workers from the *Mail & Guardian* and *Independent Media Group*. The survey consisted of 31 questions that were answered by media workers. The questions were distributed through a web link that was emailed to a contact person at the respective media houses and subsequently emailed to media workers in the newsrooms.

In order to guarantee anonymity on this topic, the responses were only available to Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) employees working on the project. In addition, information that could reveal the identity of the respondents was not required, unless otherwise specified by the respondent.

The survey ran for a period of three weeks, from the 6th of October 2014 to the 27th October 2014. A total number of 41 people responded to the survey with 28 responding to all the questions in the survey and 13 only answering some of the questions, depending on how the questions were relevant to the respondents' experiences.

1.3 Who were the participants?

Many of the participants cited that there were disparities in most newsrooms in how female management was treated in comparison to their male counterparts. There is also the general feeling that the media industry is still very male dominated particularly at management level even though there is change in terms of getting more women in senior positions and more women taking up the profession. Figure 1 below shows the gender breakdown of the survey participants. More than half of the participants were female, 65 per cent. The low uptake by men could point to the perception that gender discrimination mostly affects women.

Figure 1

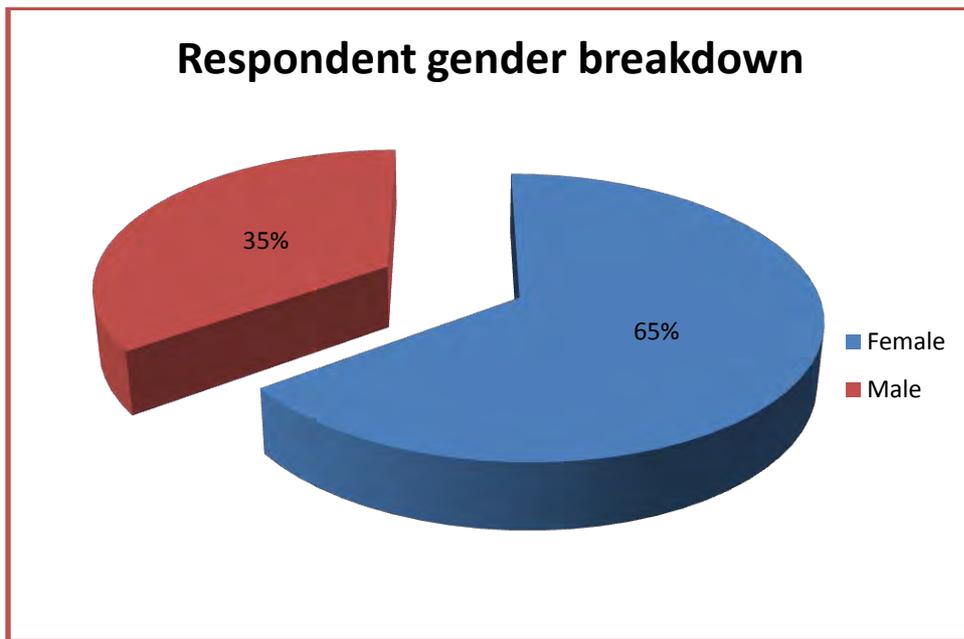
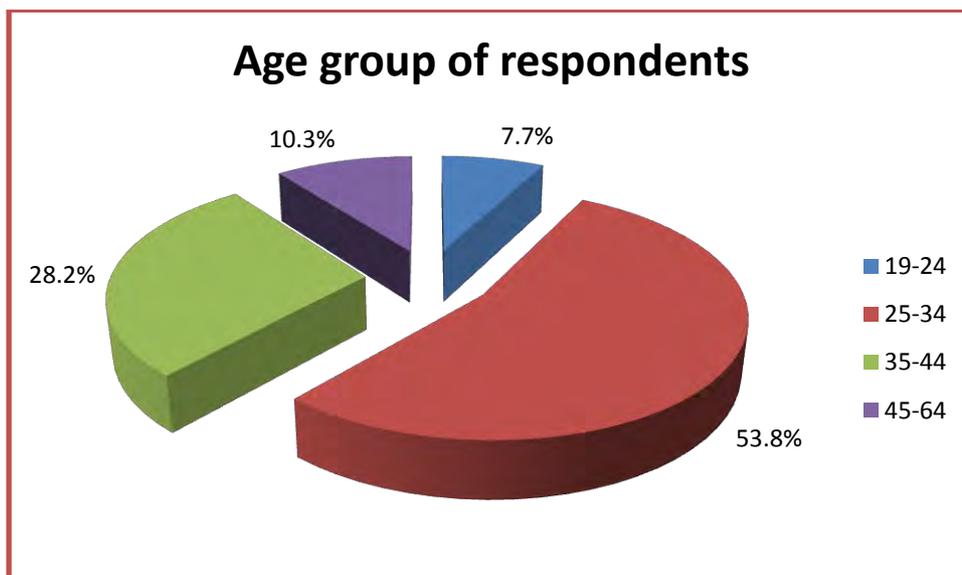


Figure 2 shows the different age groups of the survey participants. A majority of the participants fell in the 25-34 age group followed by 35-44 age groups. This is not surprising as the newsroom gets younger. Research conducted by the Wits Journalism Project shows that 60 per cent of journalism graduates land themselves jobs in the trade itself mostly at internship levels¹.

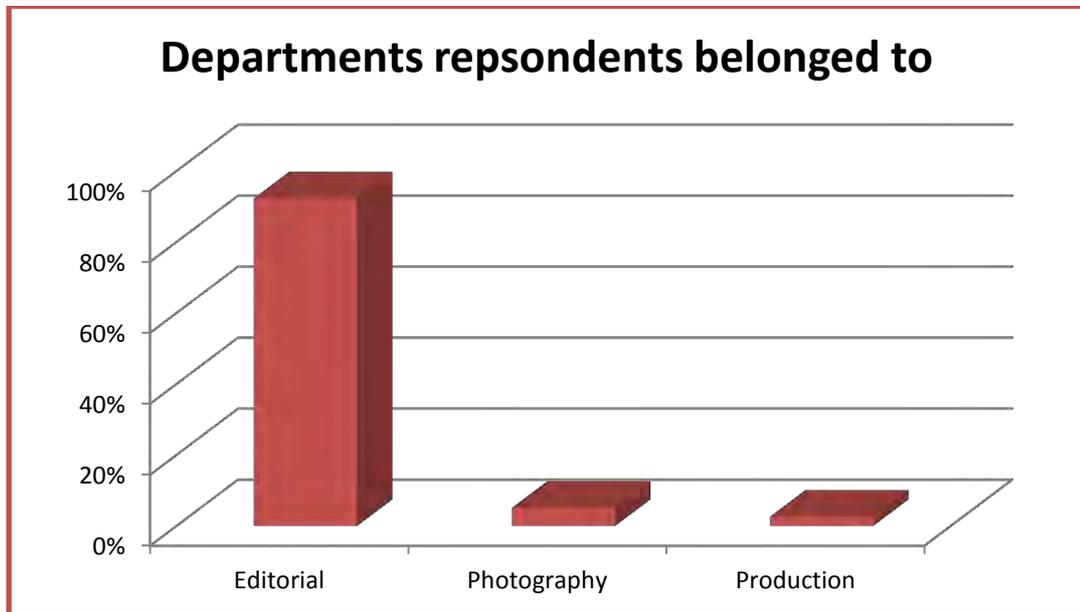
Figure 2



¹ State of the Newsroom South Africa 2014. Disruptions Accelerated. A Wits Journalism Project. Edited by Glenda Daniels. 2014, p.89.

Figure 3 shows the departments which the participants belonged to. Most of the participants belonged to the editorial department which in this research included Reporters and Senior Reporters, Line Editors, Sub Editors and Editors-in-Chief. Thus demonstrating that the newsroom was the place where gender discrimination was encountered.

Figure 3



2.1 What is discrimination in occupation and employment?

Discrimination is the distinction, exclusion or preference for or against a person on arbitrary grounds. This could either be on the basis of their gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnic or social origin, race, marital status, HIV status, pregnancy by an employer which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity in employment and occupation².

2.2 Gender Discrimination at work

Gender discrimination mirrors and reinforces discrimination in other social spheres, e.g. family, community, school and political arena and intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as age or race.

As a concept, gender refers to the “differences between males and females that are socially constructed, changeable over time and have wide variations within and between cultures.”³ Unlike sex which is biologically determined, gender speaks to learned behaviours and expectations to fulfil one’s image of being a man or a woman.⁴ Such behaviours and expectations can also be unlearned. Gender is also a socio-economic and political variable with which to analyse people’s roles, responsibilities, constraints and opportunities.⁵

By extension, gender roles are “socially determined behaviours, tasks and responsibilities for women and men based on socially perceived differences that define how they should think, act and feel based on their respective sex.”⁶ Gender roles have a life-cycle dimension thus meaning they can and do change through individual choice and in response to events and processes such as the transition to democracy in the South African context. Gender discrimination can therefore be understood as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of socially constructed gender roles and norms that prevent a person from fully enjoying their rights.”⁷

2.3 Types of Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination generates inequalities between men and women. More and more women find that they have to prove themselves in their workplaces so that they are seen as equals to their male counterparts at the workplace. Below are some of the forms of gender discrimination:

- Financial inequality whereby women earn a lower wage than men although they share identical professional qualifications and credentials.

² Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) information sheet

³ Johanna Son, Gender and Development Glossary: A Tool for Journalists and Writers (Thailand & Philippines: IPS Asia-Pacific, 2010), 33.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Ibid., 36.

- Glass ceiling whereby women are prevented from competing for higher positions and climbing the professional ladder through fair and equal promotion in the workplace.
- Gender stereotypes whereby definitions of femininity and masculinity⁸ influence the types of jobs or story topics that female journalists are assigned compared to their male colleagues. For instance, Editors have the tendency to assign “soft news” like entertainment and lifestyle to female journalists and “hard news” such as politics, economics, and sports to male journalists.
- Pregnancy and motherhood, which are frequently used as factors upon which women are discriminated against and denied employment or promotion. These are unfairly perceived to be obstacles to a woman’s ability to perform professionally. They are also anticipated as potential threats to a woman’s long-term commitment to a job.
- Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature⁹

As an extension of most of the above forms of discrimination, age or ageism, as well as a woman’s physique and aesthetic appearance have been known to play a role in discrimination against women, especially in the media profession, namely broadcast media, where age and appearance often dictates success.

⁸ Femininity and masculinity refer to the “set of expectations about how women and men respectively, should behave, think and appear in a given society.” See Johanna Son, Gender and Development Glossary: A Tool for Journalists and Writers (Thailand & Philippines: IPS Asia-Pacific, 2010), 31.

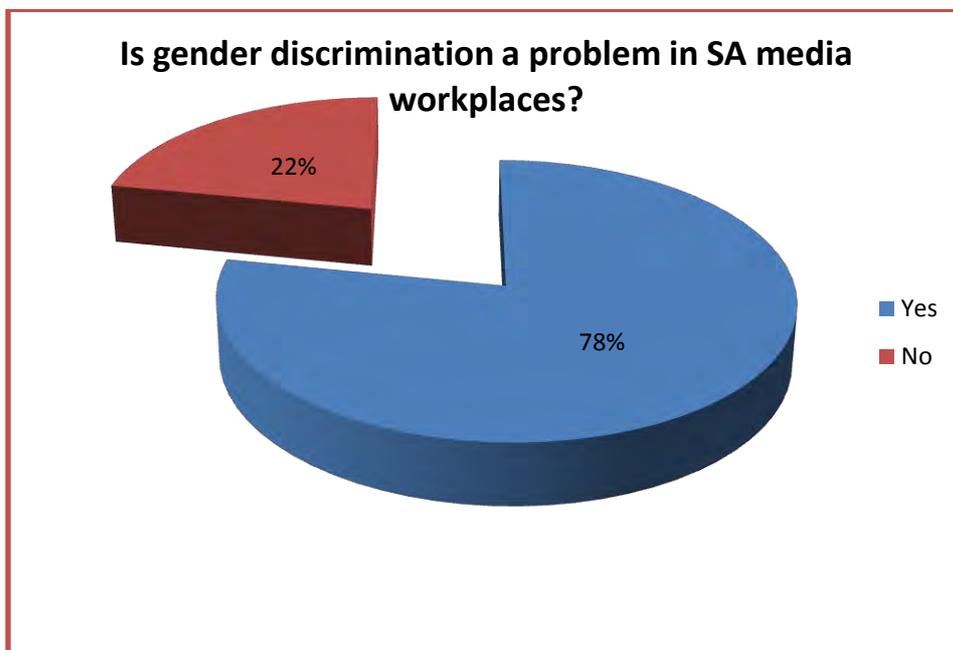
⁹ Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC): What is Sexual Harassment? Available on the world wide web: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/pdf/whatish.pdf>

3.1 Is gender discrimination a problem in South African media workplaces?

Twenty years into democracy South Africa still struggles to achieve its set targets of workforce gender balance¹⁰. Only 23 per cent women occupy economic decision-making positions and make up only four per cent of CEOs of private companies. Women constitute 59 per cent of those infected with HIV. Over three quarters (77 per cent) of women in Limpopo, 51 per cent in Gauteng, 39 per cent in Western Cape and 37 per cent in KwaZulu Natal have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime¹¹. These are just a few reasons why gender inequality and discrimination are a huge problem in this country and women as demonstrated by the findings above tend to be the ones who bear the brunt. Against this backdrop we sought to enquire the extent to which gender discrimination was specifically a problem in South African media workplaces. As demonstrated in Figure 4 below 78 per cent of the participants thought gender discrimination was a problem in South African media workplaces.

Though South Africa is performing well against the indicators specified for the third Goal of the Millennium Development Goals; the goal that focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment,¹² on the ground persistent discriminatory practices, social norms and persistent stereotypes which often shape inequitable access to opportunities, resources and power for women and girls still exist. Further, serious gender-related challenges persist, including unacceptable levels of gender-based violence.

Figure 4



¹⁰ See Twenty Year Review South Africa 1994-2014. <http://www.20yearsoffreedom.org.za/20YearReview.pdf>

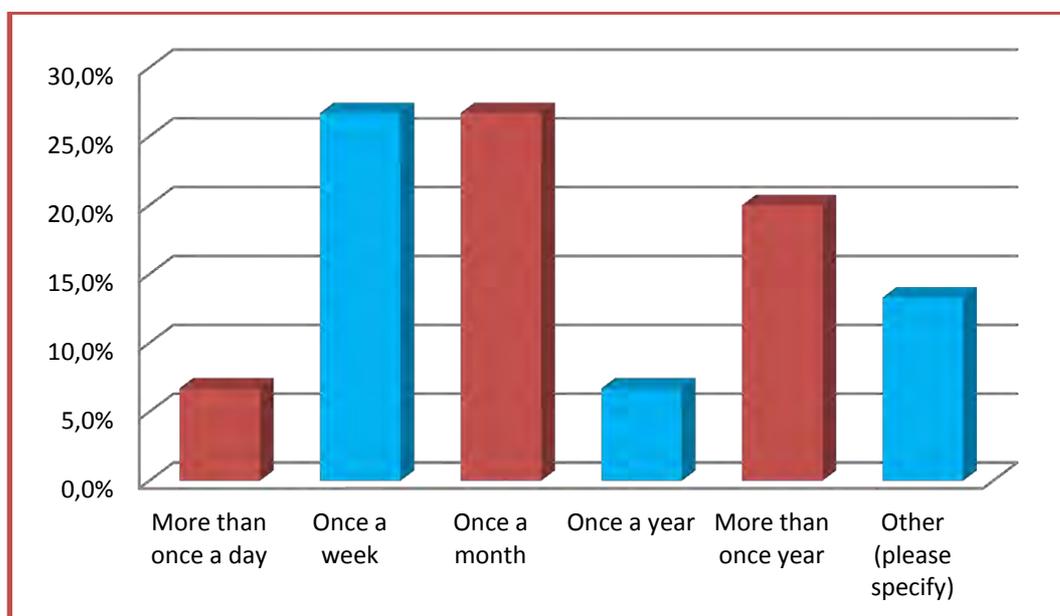
¹¹ Gender Links: "The War @ home: Findings of the Gender Based Violence Prevalence Study in Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal and Limpopo Provinces of South Africa": <http://www.genderlinks.org.za/page/16-days-of-activism-2012>

¹² GOAL 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN At 45%, South African parliament is second in Africa after Rwanda in terms women representatives in Parliament. For more information See: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml>

In order to establish the extent to which gender discrimination was a problem in media workplaces, we asked media workers who had been victims of the practice how often it occurred. According to our participants, gender discrimination did not take place often. MMA notes that although the results might not show that gender discrimination was not institutionalised when compared to Zimbabwe where similar researches to this one were conducted¹³, there is room for improvement because as shown by the figure below 26 per cent of the victims encountered gender discrimination once a week or once a month respectively.

3.2 How often did this form of gender discrimination occur?

Figure 5



¹³ See Media Monitoring Africa Report: http://www.mediamonitoringafrika.org/index.php/resources/entry/power_patriarchy_and_gender_discrimination_in_zimbabwean_newsrooms/ p.13

3.3 Reasons why participants thought gender discrimination was a problem

Figure 6



In the survey, participants were asked to give reasons why they thought gender discrimination in South African newsrooms was/was not a problem. The word cloud above shows the 14 most important words and phrases that came out from their responses. We can deduce from the word cloud that there is a general feeling that work is gendered in newsrooms just like in many workspaces in the country and around the world. From the responses many of the participants felt that beats¹⁴ were allocated according to what was considered to be a female or male story. One of the participants stated that “Women tend to be assigned soft beats -- education, metro, health. Men, generally, cover crime and protests. There are also a lot of more female reporters and a lot more male photographers”. Participants also mentioned that there were not enough females in editorial and managerial positions in the newsrooms. Participants were of the view that women have traditionally borne the brunt of gender discrimination in the workplace. This discrimination can take the form of: not being hired or promoted because they have disclosed that they are pregnant; not being groomed for senior management positions within the company because of assumptions about their inability to display strong leadership; being paid less than male colleagues for performing the same jobs despite having similar or superior qualifications; bullying; and sexual harassment. Differential treatment accorded to women based on their age, physical attributes and grooming also constitutes discrimination.

¹⁴ A beat refers to the subject area that a reporter is assigned to cover i.e. business, international politics

3.4 Main causes of gender discrimination in South African media workplaces

Figure 7 below shows the 14 most prominent words and phrases which came out when participants were asked to identify the main causes of gender discrimination in their workplaces. In their responses participants highlighted how inequalities and social injustices continue to persist and that this was a result of patriarchy being firmly entrenched in our society.

“We cannot isolate the news rooms. It’s a societal and national problem so the news rooms are not peculiar, they mirror what is prevalent in society, historically and otherwise, and the prejudices that exist amongst us as South Africans, as a people”- **Respondent**

From this we can deduce that gender dynamics in most workplaces tend to reflect those of the society in which we live. Gender stereotyping is still firmly rooted in our social structures; one of the respondents stated that many people still had archaic conceptions of gender and gender relations which elevated “male ways” to superiority... The respondent also stated that femininity was seen as an inferior quality particularly for people in leadership positions. Homosocial bonding¹⁵ in newsrooms was also a barrier for many female journalists. Respondents felt that male journalists preferred to work and trusted other males because they look like them as many media workplaces were led by men.

“There is also a pressure to be very masculine in one’s communication so you have to talk like a man does to be taken seriously in the boardroom when you’re exchanging story ideas”
-**Respondent**

Culture plays a contributing factor in the exacerbation of gender discrimination. Cultural norms result in women bearing primary responsibility for childcare and domestic responsibilities thus leaving most women, particularly in rural areas with less option to education and employment opportunities. Women who have equal access to secondary and tertiary education, and regular employment opportunities often have the added pressure to break boundaries and push harder than their male counterparts.

“Women have something to prove. I think people look at them and it’s all too easy to just give the big important stories to the male journalists. I still think there’s this feeling like they can do the hard new stuff and the politics and the women do they softer feature stories”- **Respondent**

¹⁵ homosociality means same-sex relationships that are not of a romantic or sexual nature, such as friendship, mentorship, or others.

Figure 7



3.5 Different types of gender discrimination

Discrimination comes in different forms and in South Africa Section 6(1) of the Employment Equity Act (EEA) prohibits employers from unfairly discriminating, directly or indirectly, against an employee in any employment policy or practice on numerous grounds including gender and sex. Also, section 6(3) categorises, as unfair discrimination, harassment of an employee on many grounds including sex and gender. Discrimination is to show favour, prejudice or bias for or against a person on any arbitrary grounds, for example on the basis of race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, family responsibility, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age disability, religion, HIV status, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language and birth by an employer¹⁶.

Figure 8 below shows the types of gender discrimination the survey participants experienced in their respective media workplaces. As mentioned in the preceding discussion (see page 7), gender stereotypes were cited as one of the biggest causes of gender discrimination. The figure shows that gender stereotypes was the most experienced form of gender discrimination at 75 per cent followed by financial inequality and glass ceiling both at 56 per cent.

It's a... I earned a lot less than my male counterpart until I found out, and when I found out I pushed a lot to earn more than them. I was earning less than people I managed and this was... it took me a long time to get to that place and I only got to that place when I managed people where I saw how women and men differed in their salary negotiations-**Respondent**

Whilst the survey does not directly tell us which gender experienced the above mentioned forms of discrimination, the fact that only 23 per cent women occupy economic decision-

¹⁶ Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) information sheet

making positions and make up only four per cent of CEOs of private companies and the fact that 64 per cent of the participants were female inclines us to believe that females are the hardest hit by gender discrimination in many of our workplaces. These alarming findings beg the following questions: Is there a glass ceiling that prevents female journalists from reaching the very top of the income distribution? How do we address gender stereotypes in the newsrooms and beyond, particularly those that elevate heterosexuality as the most important gender in our society/workplaces? According to the Commission for Employment Equity women comprise 43 per cent of the skilled workforce, 42 per cent of those with professional qualifications, 30 per cent of senior managers, and 20 per cent of top management. The trend is clear: The higher up you go on the workplace ladder, the fewer women you find¹⁷ In a country where we have had women run the most powerful provinces like the North West and Western Cape as Premiers and a handful of the biggest companies, it's still disappointing to see that we have such a long way to go when it¹⁸ comes to gender equality and breaking the glass ceiling in the newsrooms.

Interestingly pregnancy and motherhood scored low, this highlighting the progressiveness of South Africa's laws when it comes to protecting workers rights, which is something to be celebrated. This also highlights that employers observe and adhere to these rights.

Sexual harassment also featured at 47 per cent as one of the types of discrimination experienced by participants. From interviews we conducted with journalists many felt that females were a more easier target of sexual harassment than their male counterparts but that their experiences of this was more leaning to comments made in passing regarding how a female colleague was dressed or being vulgar towards women than being coerced into sexual relationships. There was also the feeling that sexual harassment was an individual problem rather than an organisational problem as it was a simpler form of discrimination to deal with compared to glass ceiling and financial inequality as it solely depended on how strong the person was in terms of character. "Let's start with sexual harassment. That's one thing I see as more of an individual problem. It's about the person who is perpetrating that particular offence and one shouldn't really think that's a media or news room problem"- **Respondent**

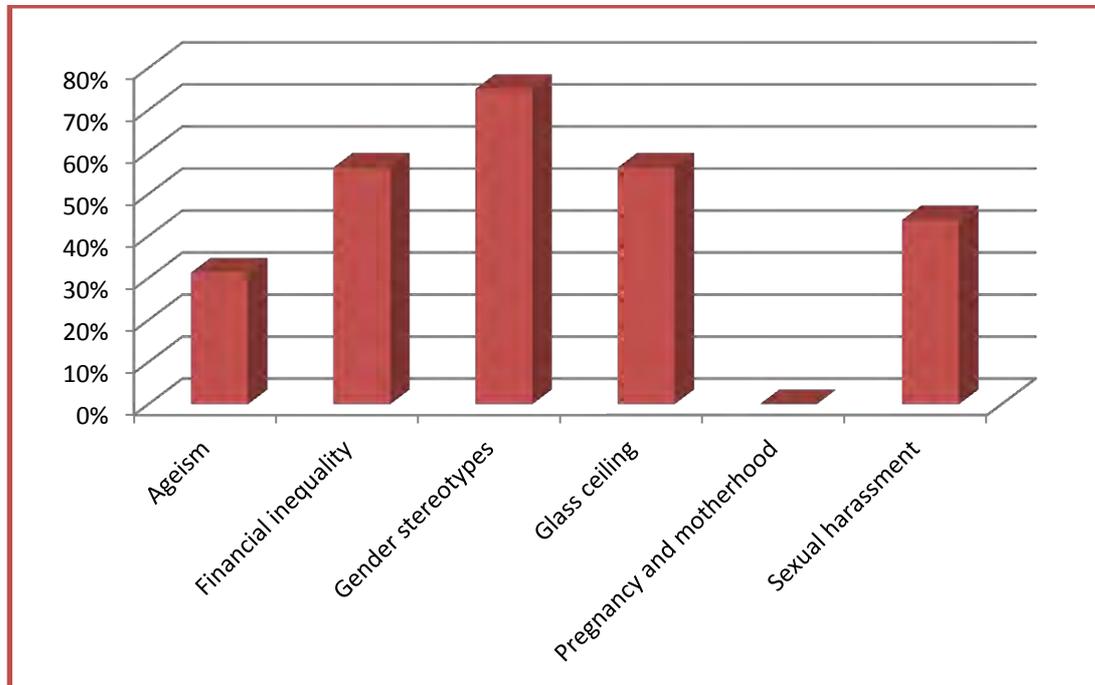
"For me, the discrimination comes in the form of just daily behavioral things that happen in the physical office like comments, the way they talk to you, the jokes they make, the topics that they speak to you about like frivolous things, fun jokey things and they don't speak about those things to the men. That's what I've noticed"- **Respondent**

¹⁷ Prof. H. Botman . Stellenbosch Rectors blog. *Universities' role in the struggle for women's rights*. March 2014. Available on the world wide web <http://blogs.sun.ac.za/rector/tag/women-empowerment-and-gender-equality-bill/>

¹⁸ Gender Links: "The War @ home: Findings of the Gender Based Violence Prevalence Study in Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal and Limpopo Provinces of South Africa": <http://www.genderlinks.org.za/page/16-days-of-activism-2012>

3.6 Gender discrimination experienced

Figure 8



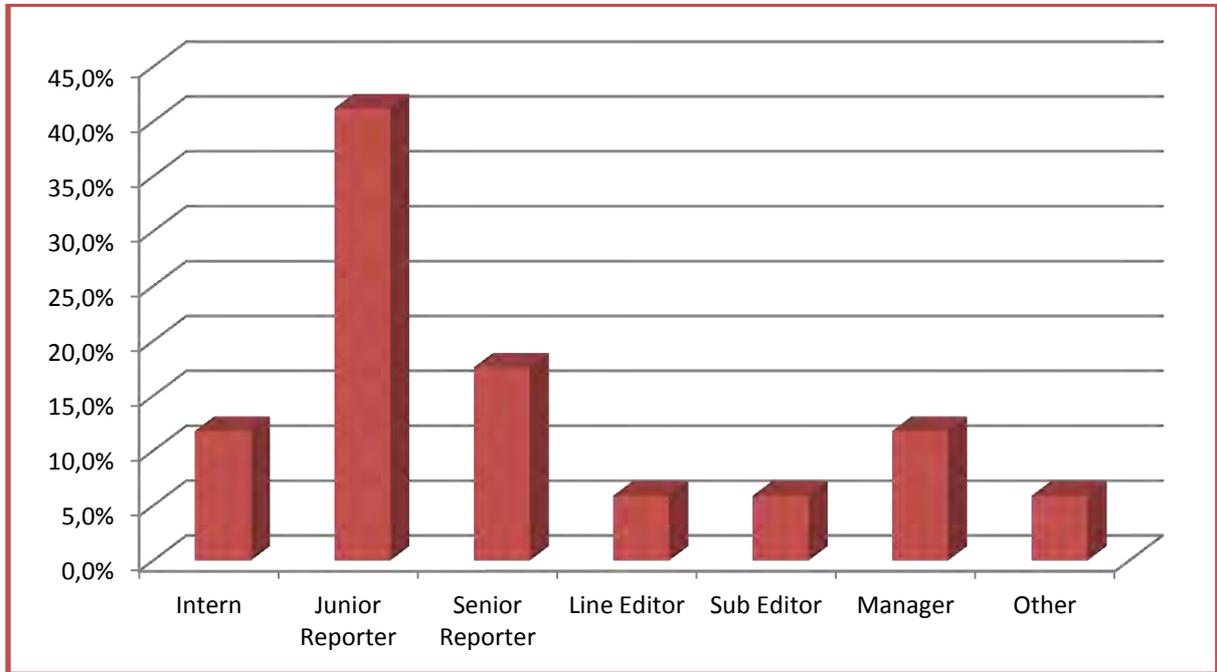
3.7 Who are the victims of gender discrimination in South African media workplaces?

It can be argued that power and how it is played out is at the core of how gender discrimination plays out in society and its structures. Often those who are in power will try by all means to maintain power inequalities. In general, men possess more social power than women, however white men possess more social power than black males; white women possess more social power than other women of colour¹⁹. Figure 9 below shows the roles occupied by victims of gender discrimination. At 41 per cent, Junior Reporters were the victims of discrimination followed by Senior Reporters and, Interns at 11 per cent each.

¹⁹ See article titled *JSE says black South Africans own 21% of shares in top 100 companies* available on the world wide web <http://www.bdlive.co.za/business/2012/12/06/jse-says-black-south-africans-own-21-of-shares-in-top-100-companies> / also see article titled *IN THE MARKETS: Politics not the only factor in transformation of JSE* available on the world wide web <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2014/04/29/in-the-markets-politics-not-the-only-factor-in-transformation-of-jse>

3.8 Victims of gender discriminations by role

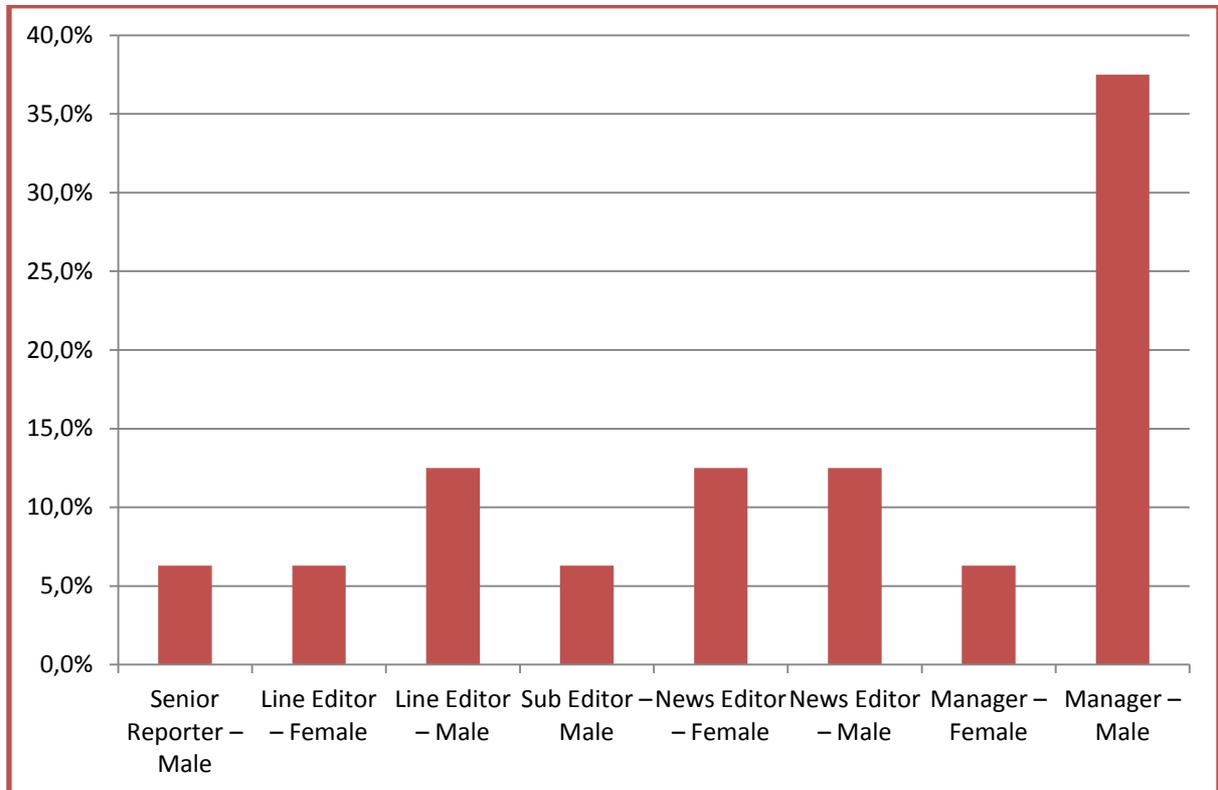
Figure 9



From figure 9 above we can see that most of the employees that occupy junior positions are prone to be victims of discrimination. The figure below shows that there is correlation between figure 9 and figure 10 as most of the perpetrators of discrimination were in positions of seniority and were predominantly male. Thirty seven percent of the perpetrators were identified as male managers. Whilst there are efforts made in ensuring that females take up positions of seniority in newsrooms, from the figure above we can see that males still occupy seniority in newsrooms.

3.9 Perpetrators of gender discrimination by gender

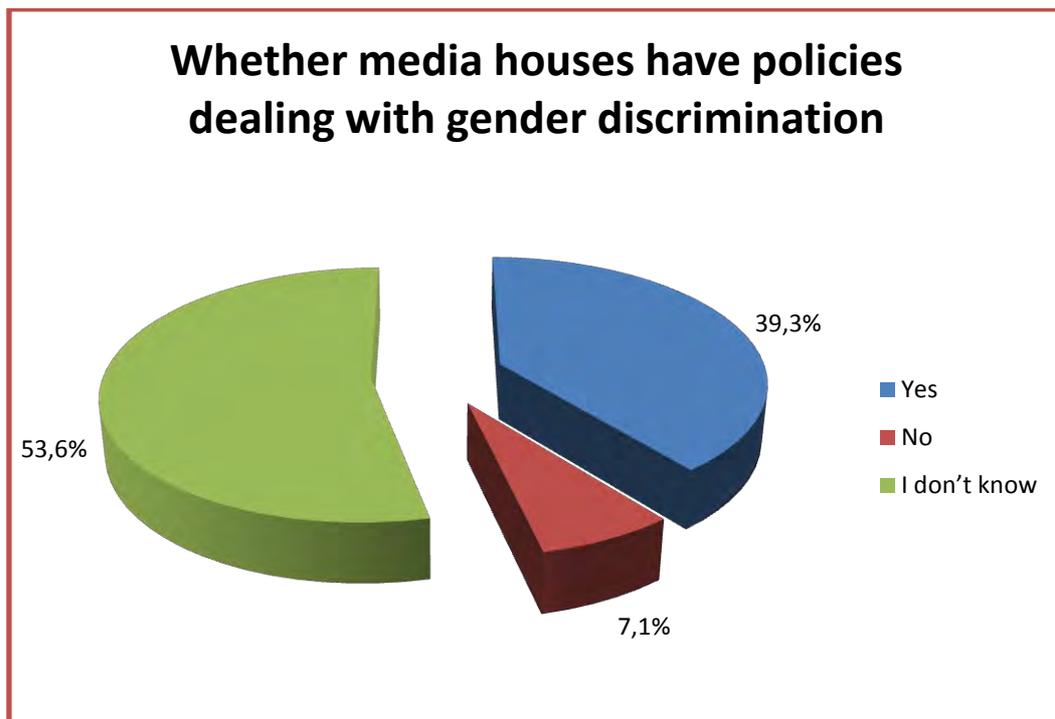
Figure 10



4. Importance of reporting gender discrimination

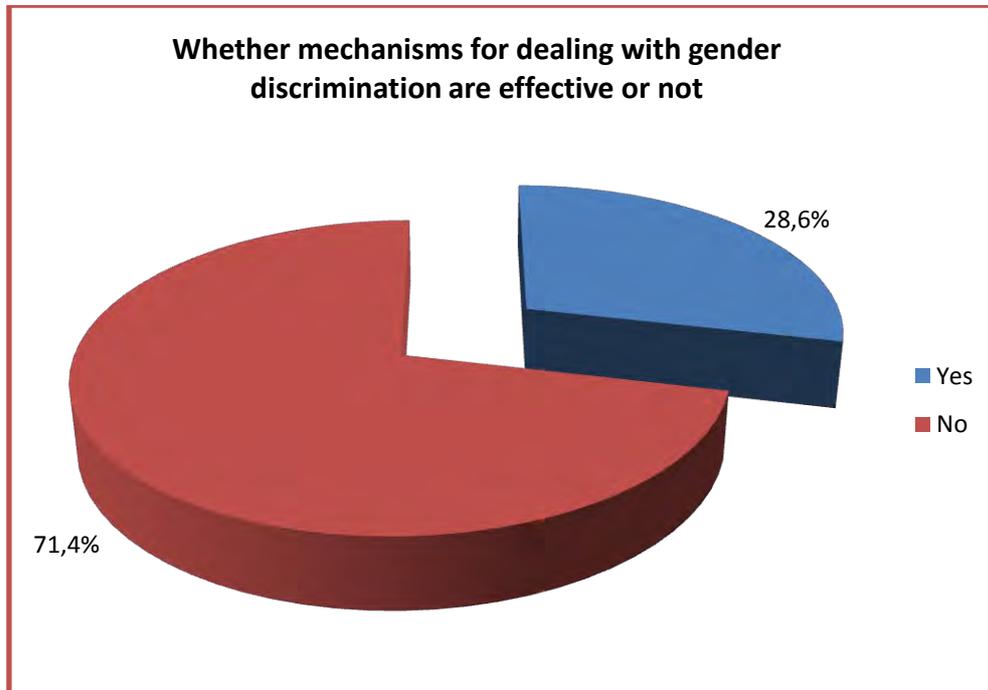
The first step to dealing with gender discrimination is ensuring that places of employment develop gender awareness policies. Gender relations in the workplace require active and ongoing management, it is therefore important to firstly fully comprehend the broader implications of what constitutes gender equality and conduct employment systems review of policies, procedures and practices. The effectiveness of gender awareness policies will determine an organisations success in dealing with discrimination in the workplace.

Figure 11



We asked survey participants if they were aware that their respective media workplaces had gender awareness policies, particularly those dealing with gender discrimination. Figure 11 above we can conclude that there is a greater importance for journalist orientation where there is also greater emphasis on mandatory equity and diversity training. That 53 per cent were not sure whether their media houses had policies dealing with gender discrimination indicates that even if the policies are there, the people who are supposed utilise them cannot do so because they do not even know whether the policies exist or not. It is however a positive indicator that 39 per cent of the survey participants said that there were policies in place to deal with gender discrimination.

Figure 12



When asked about the effectiveness of the mechanisms in place for dealing with gender discrimination a majority of the participants stated that these mechanisms were ineffective. This is not surprising as many of the media workers feel that mechanisms barely existed, nor were they enforced. Some of the explanations given behind this sentiment are:

“People laugh at women who say they are discriminated against in the workplace, and call us "bra-burning feminists"- **Respondent**

“I hate to be this negative but... what mechanisms? I haven't seen any”-**Respondent**

“Never heard of any initiative to deal with such discrimination”-**Respondent**

“The mechanisms are there for legality instances but issues of gender discrimination have become so ingrained to most newsrooms that it is barely noticeable”-**Respondent**

If gender discrimination in South African media workplaces is still a big problem and the mechanisms for dealing with it are ineffective as clearly articulated above, then the question is; what could be done to reduce gender discrimination in the country's newsrooms?

Figure 13

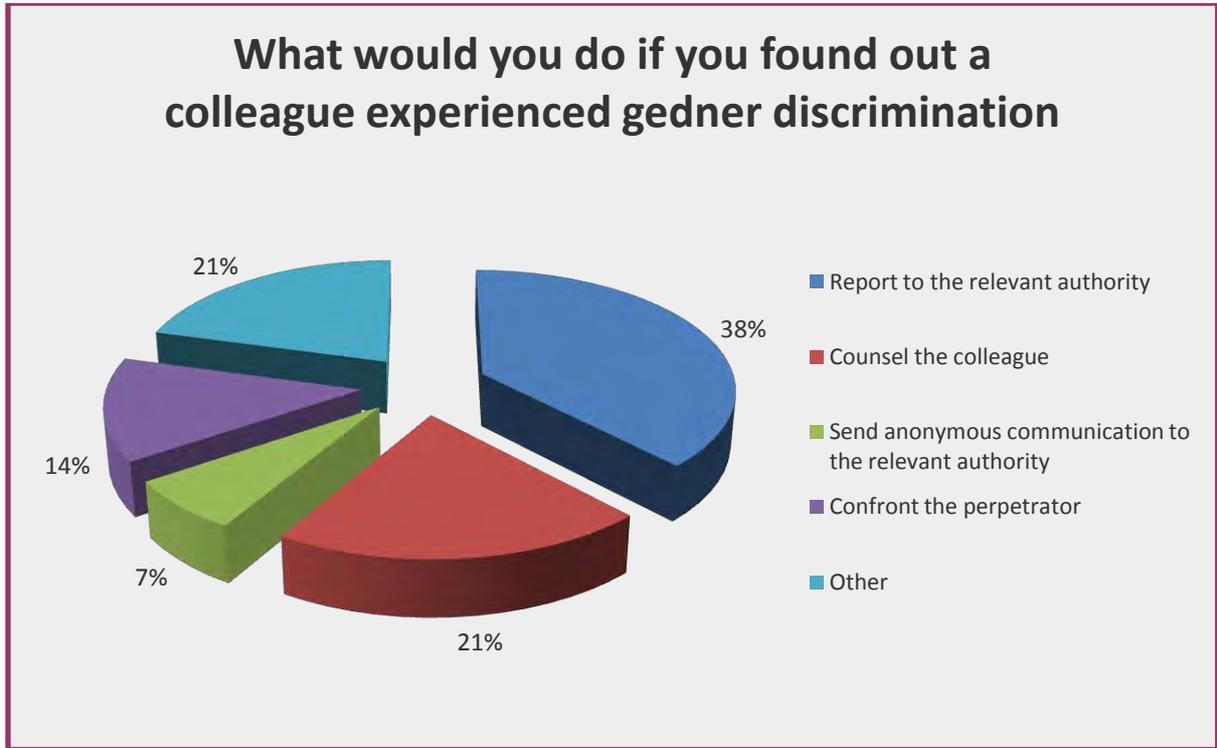


Figure 13 above shows that 38 per cent of the participants stated that if they were aware a colleague had experienced gender discrimination they would report it to the relevant authorities, 21 per cent stating that they would counsel the colleague. It is very positive to see that even though a majority of the participants felt that mechanisms barely existed, nor were they enforced, 38 per cent of the participants found it important to report the matter to relevant authorities.

Conclusion

The problem of gender discrimination cannot be isolated to the news rooms. It's a societal and national problem and newsrooms are not peculiar, they mirror what is prevalent in society, historically and otherwise, and the prejudices that exist amongst us as South Africans, as a people. The study has established that root causes of gender discrimination, the inequalities and social injustices that continue to persist are as a result of patriarchy being firmly entrenched in our society.

The study has also shown that gender discrimination is a nuanced and realistic problem with various forms of discrimination experienced by journalists. The driving factors behind gender discrimination are clearly far more challenging to combat. This means that solutions to it require innovation and strategic approaches. They require on-going, long-term commitment by various stakeholders who can facilitate a shift in the way men and women relate to each other and are treated, not only on a professional level, but in all other spheres. Among other things this requires not only men's involvement in strategies that seek to eradicate the practice but also strategies targeted at them.

