

The 25th of November 2004 marks the start of the 16 Days of Activism Campaign: No Violence Against Women and Children. The campaign aims to raise issues of abuse of women and children, to not only reflect on what happens in society but also how abuse is represented in the media. The 16 Days Campaign presents a window of opportunity for the South African media to focus on and engage with the issues of abuse in a meaningful way.

Reports on child abuse form part of the daily South African news agenda, but the majority of reports have little or no educative and informative value. Many reports focus on the details of the abuse, and do not state explicitly that child abuse is a crime, punishable by law, or that children's rights have been violated. Coverage of cases of child abuse is often limited to the details of the incident, with the most commonly represented form of abuse being sexual abuse. The Media Monitoring Project's (MMP) recent Empowering Children & Media (ECM) project found that 44% of all abuse cases focussed on sexual abuse cases, this is in stark contrast to the actual incidents of child abuse in South Africa. As a result there is minimal engagement with the different forms of abuse. The frequency of news reports on child abuse ultimately results in the desensitisation of the crime. Typical items tend to represent the survivors of child abuse as mere statistics, or objects rather than the subjects of the crime. Another trend is to represent the children as disempowered victims. This is not to say that the media should not report on child abuse, but rather that the form, the content, and the manner in which the crime is presented should be re-examined. The media can use the opportunity presented by the 16 Days Campaign to provide numerous reports on child abuse and foreground that it is against the law to abuse a child, be it physical, sexual, psychological or emotional abuse.

An analysis of selected print media from the past few months revealed that a key area of concern was that the media continues to name and identify children who have been abused or who are key witnesses to crimes. The naming and identification of children is strictly prohibited by section 154 (3) of the Criminal Procedures Act (No. 51 of 1977), which states:

No person shall publish, in any manner, whatever information, reveals or may reveal the identity of the accused under the age of 18 years, or of a witness at criminal proceedings who is under the age of 18 years.

And the Child Care Act (No. 74 of 1983), which stipulates:

- No person shall publish information relating to children's court proceedings;
- The identity of the child involved shall not be revealed;
- Publicity should serve the interests of the child; and
- Information provided must be approved by the minister/commissioner.

Despite these laws, a number of recently published articles clearly contravene aspects of these laws. The Metro section of the Sunday Times featured: "This boy has not been the same since he watched his sister die in a pool of blood after a man raped her and slit her throat last weekend" (Sunday Times, 07/11/04, p. 6). The article named and photographed the child, and members of his family, despite the child's position as a key witness to a crime. In addition, the title gives some sense of

the trauma suffered by the child, something that is exemplified in the gratuitous details of the rape and murder of the boy's sister.

Another report that contravened the Acts, named and identified a 15-year-old child, who after being assaulted and dumped in a field, opened an attempted murder docket, appeared in the *Cape Argus* (18/10/04, p. 5). While the image was in black and white the child's distress is clearly visible. The circumstances surrounding both of these cases clearly endanger the children by divulging their names, identities and whereabouts. The media was probably right to report these stories, but the trauma often associated with such crimes necessitates extreme caution and adherence to ethical and legal guidelines. Aside from the legal reasons for prohibiting the publication of these children's names and identities the Bill of Rights 28 (2) says, "A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child." The question to be asked is if the publication of these children's names and identities was in their best interests however, it seems difficult to see how they could be. Both stories would have been equally effective if pseudonyms had been used and if the children's faces obscured. These measures would have ensured the reports' compliance with the Criminal Procedures Act, respected the children's rights to privacy, and made certain that their best interests had taken precedence.

The language used in stories further undermines the representation of children. Language in news reports on child abuse is a common way of violating children's rights; the language used in some items often tends to be inappropriate and insensitive towards children. A report published in the *Daily Sun*, described a 14-year old girl who was allegedly raped by her neighbour as a "Sex siren at 14" (*Daily Sun*, 01/10/04, p. 2). The report represented the child as promiscuous, and claimed that she blackmailed a man; he was "forced by the sexy teenager to have sex with her." It is questionable that a minor could physically "force" a 33-year old man to have intercourse with her.

The article foregrounded the alleged perpetrator, rather than the child's perspective, which resulted in the language used being accusatory, placing the blame on the child as a seducer, a "sexy teenager". The article would appear to dismiss the possibility that the child may have been raped, and did not raise the issue of statutory rape, despite evidence provided that the girl's mother had laid charges against the man. The language and tone of the report suggested that engaging in sexual relations with a minor is acceptable, and that a minor is capable of seducing an older man. Irrespective of whether the 14 year old child consented or not, the alleged perpetrator is necessarily guilty of statutory rape.

MMP's research has revealed that there are few follow-up reports on instances of child abuse. One notable exception was the follow-up to the Baby Tshepang rape, which was featured in *The Star* (*The Star*, 27/10/04, p.1). *The Star* is to be commended for taking the initiative to feature a story about Baby Tshepang, years after the case was resolved, for the sole purpose of showing readers that the child was still alive 3 years later and surviving. The report helped to portray Baby Tshepang as an individual, not just a statistic and also raised the issue of the men who had been falsely accused.

The media plays an important role in accentuating the issue of child abuse however it is important that in doing so, the media protect and promote the best interests of the child by publishing information that does not compromise the interests of the child. As one of the child participants commented about the naming and identification of children who have been abused, **"I think it is better that there is no photo because if you had the face it will affect the child. If they had the details about the child you can go and find that child, then the child will be more scared and people will tease her."**

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