



How the media can make Women's Day The Media Monitoring Project's National Women's Day Media Challenge 2005

What is the challenge?

Following the highly successful challenge issued to the South African media last year for the coverage of National Women's Day, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) has decided to re-issue the challenge to media this year. The MMP's challenge is for the media to mainstream women on National Women's Day. Instead of media merely concentrating on so called "women's issues" and only on the celebrations that are set to take place on the 9th of August, the MMP challenges the media to fill their papers, radio broadcasts, television schedules and news programmes with women.

It is clear that many of the South African media support the fight for gender equality, efforts to raise awareness, and the celebration of women. As a demonstration of their commitment, the MMP urges the media to take up the challenge and actively show their support for women this National Women's Day.

What happened last year?

The MMP assessed a number of print and broadcast media during the week preceding National Women's Day, on the day itself and on the 10th of August 2004.

Top Three for 2004:

1. Mail & Guardian
2. This Day
3. Sunday Times

Despite being a weekly paper and therefore only having one edition in which to respond to the challenge, the Mail & Guardian managed to out-perform all of the other media monitored during the period. Not only were numerous items devoted to women featured in the *Mail & Guardian*, but the medium also included women as a central focus of its news agenda. This meant that the *Mail & Guardian* mainstreamed women in their paper, including female journalists, sources, female perspectives, diverse images of women, famous and ordinary women as authors and contributors. The *Mail & Guardian's* ability to determine its own news agenda ensured that the medium generated meaningful discussions about women's rights and issues, instead of just event-based reporting on some of the functions held in commemoration of National Women's Day.

What the others did

Other print media were notable for responding to the MMP's challenge on a quantitative level by including a large number of articles devoted to women in their editions leading up to as well as on National Women's Day. However, in many instances, the items only paid lip service to women, and were event-based or shallow in their analyses of the public holiday and the issues that were raised. The

majority of the media, including television media, provided reactive coverage of National Women's Day rather than proactive, investigative coverage of the day, women's' rights and issues.

For broadcast media, both television and radio, coverage of women's issues in the week preceding National Women's Day as well as on the day itself included a greater number of items than usual relating to women. SABC 3 responded better to the challenge than its counterpart, e-tv, however, there is room for improvement on both channels' news bulletins in relation to women. A number of radio media also devoted substantial airtime to discussions of women and women's issues. In some instances these debates and discussions extended to concerns around women's rights and gender equality, but in many instances the coverage afforded to women on the 9th of August 2004 was event-based; focused on the commemorative functions held in honour of National Women's Day.

Individual performances

Given their previous notable performance, some of the media can be directly challenged. The *Sunday Times* performed well last year and filled its Business Times section with women. Its infamous back page and the *Sowetan Sunday World's* "page 3 babes" are sections of these two weekend newspapers that are - albeit controversially - dominated by women. The real challenge would be to see whether the remaining pages of these media can be similarly dominated, not only by images of women, but by women: sources, journalists, and editors, so that women's opinions and views on the broad range of news stories and issues are raised in the edition.

Media houses News 24 and the Independent Group both have incredible women (as journalists, sub-editors and columnists) already working for them; the challenge is for all their different media to give those women free reign, just for one day.

The SABC television stations outperformed the other media monitored during the 2004 16 Days of Activism Campaign in terms of accessing women as sources during the period. It would be interesting to see if the channels could repeat this achievement for National Women's Day. For other broadcast media, it is hoped that progressive radio stations like Kaya FM, which has its own gender policies, SAfm, who is consistently at the forefront of change and debate, their competition Radio 702, who thrive on "walking the talk", and RSG, which always performs so well in the MMP's gender ratings, will take up the challenge with enthusiasm and vigour.

How can media rise to the challenge? Some possible solutions:

- Fill entire news bulletins and newspaper editions with contributions from women;
- Make women editors for the day, (it worked with Madiba why not Graca?);
- Use women as sources in every story;
- Use the same news agenda, but apply a woman's perspective to each item;
- Women can be found in all sectors of society, from business to sport. Why not find and include businesswomen, commentators, experts, workers, entertainers, nurses, leaders, teachers, doctors, academics, lawyers, and sports women?
- Invite advertisers to participate. Advertisers can use this opportunity to be creative and come up with different, positive portrayals of women;
- Diversify images and photographs of women;
- Use women photographers, designers, producers, talk show hosts, DJs and directors;
- Why not approach famous and so-called "ordinary" women to be guest writers for National Women's Day?

Why the challenge?

Over the past six years, the MMP has conducted an annual monitoring exercise of media coverage during the period in and around National Women's Day. Consistently, the results have been characterised by a marked increase in the coverage of women and 'women's issues' for the short period preceding the commemoration of the day. While such coverage does tend to give women some of the credit they deserve, much of it still fails to celebrate and represent the diversity of women in South Africa.

Coverage monitored in the past often focused on the role that women have played – and continue to play - in the democratic transformation of South Africa, in sharp contrast to coverage of women during the rest of the year, where the role of women is often trivialised and marginalised. While such coverage may be considered positive, unfortunately, the attention on women and women's issues is short-lived. The MMP's research shows that the focus on women in the media declines almost immediately after the 9th of August.

The MMP looks forward to the South African media's response to this challenge. While the challenge is only for one day – the potential impact and positive spin-offs may be far reaching – including the creation of greater awareness, more readers, more listeners and more viewers.

Questions, suggestions or comments:

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