

Is there a Glass Ceiling for women in the South African newsroom?

Glenda Daniels

Introduction

A little over a decade ago, in 2006, the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) undertook a nationwide Glass Ceiling research project to ascertain if there were obstacles preventing women's advancement in the newsroom. If so, what were they and did this then constitute a "Glass Ceiling"¹? Indeed how did journalists and editors perceive gender discrimination in the newsroom? In 2017, Sanef's Diversity and Ethics sub-committee² conducted a follow up survey to ascertain the current status quo of women. This article researches the "Glass Ceiling" in 2017 and makes projections for the future of women in journalism, given also the broad social background of increased violence against women in South African society in parallel with growing feminist militancy among young black feminists.

The research is grounded in radical democracy, which is apposite because when applied to journalism it argues that for democracy to deepen there should be robust fights and contestations, the media and its stories should be diverse, with as many voices as possible for inclusivity and plurality. Otherwise, it is just the same old elites talking the same language (and male dominating ideologies) to each other. As Michele Weldon, assistant professor emerita of Medill and director of Medill Public Thought Leaders noted: "If you have a newsroom that's predominantly male, then the story ideas, source choices and way a story is presented will reflect that point of view. When that happens, you get a skewed view of the world and that's not what the world is like."³

According to the International Women's Media Foundation (2011) a glass ceiling is an invisible but real barrier to advancement of women in the workplace, where they can be

1 The glass ceiling refers to that unseen un-breakable barrier that prevents – in this case women – from reaching the top of their professions, craft.

2 The author of this research was the chair of the Diversity and Ethics sub-committee at the time of this research in 2017.

3 <http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2014/02/women-journalists-in-the-newsroom.html#sthash.nlfGUaUk.dpuf>

blocked by sexism, sexist practices, sexual harassment, pregnancy, patriarchal views and prejudices, in hiring and promotions as well as salary disparities with men. There can also be gains and then a “backlash”.

According to Faludi (1991), a backlash is also a historical trend, generally recurring when it appears that women have made substantial gains in their efforts to obtain equal rights. It is a counter-assault to halt or reverse the hard-won gains in the quest for equality. McRobbie explains the Faludi backlash as a concerted, conservative response to the achievements of feminism.

Bearing these definitions for the main research question on South African women in the newsroom this research then deploys the theories of radical democracy to highlight the need for diversity and plurality in the media by bringing in the voices from the margins. Chantal Mouffe (2009) argues for voices from the margins and for fights and contestations to deepen democracy but also in the same Derridean deconstruction points out that perfect democracy cannot exist; its always a democracy to come, a process, so this research will argue that feminism is yet to be realised. As Mouffe argued we must accept conflict, different and pluralism as well as division as part of power relations, politics and society. “Antagonism, then, can never be eliminated,” (Mouffe: 2009:13).

This theoretical formulation has relevance here in so far as the striving for equality for women in the workplace of the South African newsroom does not end; there is no final realisation.

Amanda Gouws gender researcher and political analyst from Stellenbosch University argued in August 2017 that women are experiencing a backlash⁴ in all three continents in the global south in the last three years as a consequence of neo liberal capitalism – the overarching global political framework which has not created justice and equality for those on the margins of mainstream politics and economics.

Since the 2006 Sanef Glass Ceiling survey there is little research to show whether the status of women has improved. However, the *State of the Newsroom South Africa: Disruptions Accelerated* (2014) showed the number of women editors had decreased year

⁴ The term backlash gained popularity in 1991 with Susan Faludi's explanation that after gains in feminism there is a backlash from the traditionalists and establishment against such gains.

on year, 2013 to 2014, by 9%. The number of women reporters or juniors in the newsroom was on par with that of males, but the number of women editors had decreased.

This is deeply concerning given that not only are Transformation equity targets not being met but they are retrogressing. A backlash, if you like. With this background, theory and rationale, the 2017 research took place in the form of a survey. **Some of the questions in the 2017 survey included:**

- Is there a glass ceiling for women in the media in SA?
- How many women/ how many men in your newsroom?
- Are there obstacles to women becoming editors?
- Are there pay disparities between men and women reporters and editors?
- Are there gender policies in the newsrooms?
- Do you go out of your way to look for women experts to quote?
- Do women journalists experience cyber or social media misogyny?

Methodology for the 2017 Glass Ceiling survey

Mixed methods were deployed. Partially theoretical and conceptual but mainly a new quantitative survey was conducted in March and April 2017. This research can be considered dipstick as it's not comprehensive but it does give an indication of where women are in the 2017 newsroom. Some of the back ground research used included the Sanef/ Gender Links as well as the Report on the Transformation of Print and Digital Media (2013), which showed that not only are men in the majority in terms of media ownership, on boards and in management positions, but that women predominate in media studies (64%) yet constitute only 40% of media employees and 34% of media managers. The research also made use of three State of the Newsroom research volumes: 2013, 2014, and 2015-16. Qualitatively, comments from the Glass Ceiling 2017 give meaning to the figures.

The unit of analysis was the newsroom across mediums of newspapers, radio, television and online in South Africa, although the majority were traditional media. The main area surveyed was Gauteng because the majority of newsrooms were in that province. Although other provinces of the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, KZN, Limpopo, Mpumalanga for example were also surveyed. There were a total of 150 participants, a little more than the 2006 survey but a comparable number.

“Sexism”, “patriarchy” and “prejudice” dominated the newsroom culture in 2006

The comments in 2006 Sanef survey showed the following key words popped up in the discourse, this was mainly in relation to why males dominated in numbers in newsrooms?

- “patriarchy”
- “sexism”
- “prejudice”
- “marginalisation”
- “historical fact”
- “structural inequalities”
- “family commitments”
- “cultural factors”
- “social injustices”
- “lack of support”
- “discriminatory practices”
- “lack of career planning for women journalists by media managers”

In 2006, what were the obstacles to women becoming senior editors?

- a male hegemonic society
- stereotypical perceptions
- family responsibilities (culture)
- ... women might be prone to “emotional instability”
- ... women not competent

In 2006, regarding gender sensitivity?

- Women journalists are gender sensitive dealing with day to day news events
- A critical mass of women in senior positions will lead to a change

- (Although, various studies showed women often perpetuate existing male constructs of the newsroom environment – also indicated by some of the respondents.)
- Sexism is experienced as feeling like “lesser citizens”: “There’s a sense that many men do often still feel they are superior to women. No amount of workshops is going to change this ingrained sense of entitlement.”
- Racism: “Preferences and privileges enjoyed by white men” still prevail, but also: the “white old boys’ club seems to be replaced by a black old boys’ club”.
- Prejudice and discrimination: “Prejudice is still a factor, especially the higher you go – overt and covert”
- Patronised: “Women are patronised and their opinions do not appear to be taken as seriously as those of men. This can be subtle, like jokes made at their expense when they give their opinions, or teasing. It seems friendly and even affectionate, but it is actually demeaning”

2017: there was No Glass Ceiling, BUT

- A huge majority of the participants (both men and women) said there were no obstacles to women in the newsroom, 79%.
- By a small majority – just over 50%, the participants were women.
- We can also deduce from this that if the majority of the participants were women, then the majority of women said they were not experiencing any obstacles to advancement in the newsroom.
- However, if we look at the next graph – we will see clearly that the majority of men, over 90% said there were no obstacles for women, but it was 70% of women who said the same.
- The above graph is also interesting in that what stands out clearly is that males gave a resounding “No” for whether there were obstacles in the newsroom for women’s advancement and progress, while even though the majority of women agreed a small percentage of them 28%, said there were obstacles.

- This result was a mixed bag of all the results so far, as it was spread out, with No, first, No, there were no gender pay disparities, to “don’t know if there are” to “yes” there.
 - From the spread out nature of the result we can deduce that the majority thinks there may well be pay disparities between the genders, with the assumption that males earn more.
-
- Women seem to be aware that they earn less than men.
 - There were more males who said there were no pay disparities.
 - Even though this result does not seem to be conclusive, in the comments section, women said they were aware of the fact that males of the same experience and qualifications earned more than them.
-
- The majority of participants, 60%, said there were no gender policies in the newsroom, when we combine this with the “don’t know”, 20% (we get a total of 80%) and so can easily ascertain that that there is a lack of awareness of gender policies in the newsroom.
-
- The above graph shows that more men than women said there were no gender policies in the newsroom.

Do you go out of your way to seek women’s expert comment?

- This appeared as an almost 50/50 result.

- More male journalists than women journalists said “no” to making an effort to call on women experts.
- Male journalists and editors go out of their way to call women experts for comments only 30% of the time.
- A total of 58% said no, they did not go out of their way to call on women experts.
- A total of 6% said they went out of their way to call women experts “sometimes”.

Comments from the 2017 survey showed: Stereotypes and the old boys club persist

The following comments are coded: **S for sexist** and **NS for non-sexist**, **N= Neutral**

NS: As with most industries women journalists face sexism. The number of female editors appears to still be skewed, and the "boys club" is still going strong. However, we have, at our newspaper, a decent representation of women in managerial or senior positions.
S: In any work place there are jobs that are better done by men, because of danger, but that is not discrimination. It is just that men will find ways to be safer than women.
NS: What I've realised is that many peoples (women) are stereotyped. They have that mentality of undermining. If you look in the industry we have few women who are writing or reporting sports. It's because we have instilled that sports is for men and women follow that which is not true.
NS: We need more women in the newsroom especially in politics. It is a pity that some or most of them do not like the newsroom or reporting hard news or politics.
NS: There definitely is space for more women leaders in the newsroom, particularly black women.
N: I personally do not think gender in the newsroom is an issue. However, I believe there is very little effort to seek out women experts on issues such as politics, economics and law. However, it may also be that women professionals in these fields do not avail themselves to comment on such issues in the media.
S: In this newsroom we are treated the same. Women get the same opportunities as men. There is no special treatment for either of the two. However, when women go cover a dangerous story they must be accompanied by someone.
NS: There are still very few women editors in the SABC newsroom
N: I have always found the media industry a great place to be, because of its flat structure and diversity. Based on anecdotal evidence, I think women are actually given more space to grow in the media industry than in other more corporate settings, although I've never worked outside of the media industry, so this is just my perception.

N: I believe we have a good gender balance, and racial transformation is more important right now, especially in gatekeeping roles such as section editors and subs.
N: SANEF needs to get lawyers for journalists who need them. Journalists need legal support in times when we are targeted by protesters, police and other entities. SANEF doesn't provide enough support to journalists and the odd statement SANEF releases on issues journalists face is ineffective at dealing with our realities. SANEF wants to promote itself as an entity to protect journalists, but its failing. Do better
NS: It is encouraging to see more women journalists rising to leadership positions in the industry, but there is still a long way to go before there is true equality
N: Why are we still doing these kinds of surveys
S: I think women who want top positions are able to get them if they demonstrate the right abilities, leadership is not for everyone. Some people may display such qualities but do not necessarily want those jobs...
NS: Sexism can be very subtle -- I do have a sense that men are favored in this organization but in an informal, clubby way, a kind of mutual respect that prevails amongst men and entails a slightly patronizing attitude to women. I suppose it would be expressed mainly through men being considered first for opportunities rather than women being specifically excluded

Analysis

In some ways the comment section was as instructive as the overall result that 79% said there was no glass ceiling in the newsroom. Yes, there was no glass ceiling but yes, there was sexism in the stereotypes that persist, and the old boys clubs, or networks, which exclude women. The majority of comments however, can be classified as non-sexist or neutral, combined total at 80%.

In comparison with the survey in 2006 there is less passion in the comments by women. However, this can be attributed to the fact that women do not experience as much discrimination as they did in 2006, or it can be attributed to the fact that women have accepted that sexism exists. It did appear that women in 2017 appeared to be aware they earned less than men of the same experience and qualifications.

The political and social background to the newsroom survey is that sexism and abuse of women is being "called out" in society broadly – and widely exposed in the media – from rape to assault – for example, the deputy minister of education's assault Mduzizi Manana's assault of two women in a nightclub in August 2017. Whether there were male editors or women editors heading the news coverage, the issue received widespread

coverage on mainstream media such as newspapers and television, to digital media platforms and social media. The comments from the women, who participated in the survey, show a certain level of resignation about sexism. Sexism is subtle for some, and for others it was overt, and yet for others, there was questioning about why this survey was happening in the first place. It can be concluded that newsroom participants mostly, did not believe the Glass Ceiling existed in the newsroom but sexism and stereotypes persisted. In addition, there was a backlash in terms of numbers of women editors, knowledge about gender policies and pay disparity remained an issue.

Scenario: 2027

It is unlikely that the same scenario will persist by 2027. For one, this survey was conducted mainly among traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio while start-ups and digital media – for example *Huff Post SA* and *Daily Vox* are sectors where it appears that mainly young women dominated in 2017. This could be a trend that will continue.

The fact that the majority of respondents said that there was no glass ceiling means that newsroom occupants feel that there are no obvious structural barriers to them entering the top echelons of the newsrooms.

Young women have gained feminist confidence in recent years, 2015-2017, given for example, the protests with the hashtag #men are trash, the anti rape protests at President Jacob Zuma's election speech in 2016, among other patriarchy must fall activisms, which we don't have the space to elaborate on here. So, while indeed an old boys network was at play in newsrooms in 2006, and 2017, by 2027 there may now be as many young girls networks, as there are old boy networks.

In the same way that there was an overlap with the 2006 data results on the Glass Ceiling and a shift in awareness by 2017, so in 2027 a similar scenario is likely to be the case. It is more than likely that by 2027 not only will the Mananas of the world be named, and shamed but also jailed due to pressure from society broadly, which will be reflected in the media. As sexist stereotyping, patriarchal norms and values including violence against women become more challenged, more awareness grows, and so, the most optimistic scenario for women in the future newsroom is that their voices will be more mainstreamed rather than sidelined. Women are likely to become more militant about women's voice and

space in a democratic society full of robust fights and contestations, which should be reflected in the media and newsroom, towards a radical democracy.

Bibliography

Banjac, S and Dibetso, L (2013) Gender on the Agenda. Media Monitoring Africa and Fesmedia. Windhoek. Namibia.

Daniels (2013) State of the Newsroom, SA: Disruptions and Transitions. University of the Witwatersrand. Journalism Department. Johannesburg.

Daniels (2014) State of the Newsroom, SA: Disruptions Accelerated. University of the Witwatersrand. Journalism Department. Johannesburg.

Faludi, S (1991) Backlash: the undeclared war against American women. Crown Publishing Group. New York.

Finlay, Alan (2015-2016) State of the Newsroom South Africa Inside/Outside. University of the Witwatersrand. Journalism Department. Johannesburg.

Made, P and Lowe Morna (2013) Glass Ceilings. Gender Links. Johannesburg.

Gouws, A (2017). Interview on eNCA. 8th August 2017. Johannesburg.

International Women's Media Foundation (2011) Report on the Status of Women in News Media (2011) Knight Foundation. Washington.

McRobbie, A (2004) *Feminist Media Studies Vol. 4, No. 3, 2004* ISSN 1468-0777 print/ISSN 1471-5902 online/04/030255-10. Taylor & Francis.

Mouffe, C 2009 The Democratic Paradox. Verso. London, New York.

Transformation Task Team (2013) Report on the Transformation of Print and Digital Media. Johannesburg.