

Zimbabwe Media Body launches Gender and Professionalism Report

By [Simba Nembaware](#)

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The Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ) launched the Gender, Media and Ethics and Professionalism Report to coincide with the end of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence last week.



The study was conducted on behalf of VMCZ by Virginia Muwanigwa from the Women Coalition, Faith Ndlovu from the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe and Natasha Msonza from the Research and Advocacy Unit. The three are female researchers, media practitioners and women rights activists.

The study interrogates media coverage of gender and women's issues for three reasons: to bring about equity and equality; to ensure proper utilisation of human and other resources in the media sector; and to ensure that there is sustainable development that is human centred and incorporates the diverse views of women, men, boys and girls.

Providing context and background

The research, "based on a qualitative analysis, sought to provide context and background to the media coverage; assess media adherence to best practices of fair, accurate and balanced coverage of gender and women's issues as per national, regional and international debates; and conduct interviews with key stakeholders in the media, gender and women's rights movements."

Acting director of VCMZ Loughy Dube says complaints received by the organisation highlighted a need for gender sensitivity in the media fraternity. Dube says generally the mere mention of the word "gender" creates the impression that the topic under discussion is about women.

"Gender is not a women's issue but a societal issue that encompasses men also," says Dube.

UNESCO (2009:p4) notes that "gender equality does not mean that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female".

Women continue to be marginalised

The VMCZ study shows "that women continue to be marginalised as media practitioners, news sources and news subjects. Conversely, a cursory glance across the media outlets in Zimbabwe shows that the men dominate in leadership and in coverage as news sources and subjects.

When women do appear in the media, their coverage is likely to be unsavoury and unflattering mainly through sourcing patterns, story angles, and the reinforcement of stereotypes among other issues".

The report also found out that "while fair and objective reports are overwhelmed by the negative or gender neutral reports; there are cases of gender aware media coverage of women and women's issues. These reports challenge stereotypes by depicting women as change agents both economically, socially and politically and as peace builders and leaders in their communities.

Need to diversify sources

In most newsrooms, there is general consensus on the need to diversify sources and increase coverage of gender and women's issues. However, the study findings emphasise the urgent need for increased and more balanced coverage of women as news sources and news subjects, fairer and more positive portrayal of women; a more diverse portrayal of women in the range of their roles and mainstreaming of gender into all areas of media coverage be they political, economic or social.

The research confirmed that the coverage of gender and women's issues is skewed based on the power and gender relations within the sector. This has led to media products that perpetuate rather than interrogate disparities among women, men, boys and girls.

The absence of women in ownership and top media leadership means there is no representation of that diversity at that level. In the management and newsroom programmes, women do play a role but this is largely peripheral because of socio-cultural reasons.

While presence of women in the media leadership will gradually transform the attitudes, norms and standards of reporting, currently, there is more pressure on those women who land top posts, to conform to male-centric newsroom culture and traditions.

The Report recommends that VMCZ should incorporate specific references to gender sensitivity in its Code of Conduct to facilitate adherence by its members. "While the Code speaks to accuracy, fairness, objectivity and the need for the media to ensure ethical conduct in their reportage, this is alluded to rather than clearly elaborated. As a result, it leaves to individual interpretation, the relevant clauses.

Need to change prevailing newsroom culture

There is need to change prevailing newsroom culture of gender insensitive reporting. Currently, there is need for editors to understand why it is important to feature women's issues, both negative and positive, from a non-sensationalist perspective.

The current gate-keeping calls for a change in their attitudes towards women's issues. Demands by internal and external stakeholders for positive transformation should be matched by commitment from the top."

It is also recommended that media training institutions "should incorporate a robust gender-reporting module in their curricula. While currently, there is some gender component in media training, feedback is that it does not adequately prepare and sensitise journalists to be able to practically deliver gender sensitive reports".

Speaking at the launch of the Report VMCZ Board member, Tapfuma Machakaire, said work on a gender sensitive code of

conduct has begun with consultations on the document starting soon.

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