

# Sexual harassment still rampant in newsrooms

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One of the thorniest and most uncomfortable workplace issues in media houses is sexual harassment. Recent research released by Gender Links, a South African non-governmental organisation, suggests that sexual harassment continues to be a problem in southern African media houses.



"Glass Ceilings: Women and Men in Southern African Media", resonates with the voices of media women who are fed up, have left, or are considering leaving the noble profession.

Portia Kobue, executive producer of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's Morning Live, noted that, "Men (in the media) still grapple with this issue. If I like a man's advances, I won't complain but if I don't like it I will say it's sexual harassment. Men still use it as a way of saying we are confused — and that sexual harassment is just a buzzword. There are plenty of sexual suggestions in the context of work."

## Policies

Only 28% of the 126 media houses surveyed for the research said they have sexual harassment policies, although this percentage differs significantly by country. Some countries have regulation on sexual harassment within the national labour laws, which media houses have followed. For example, 82% of the media houses in South Africa have sexual harassment policies. Sexual harassment is an important component of the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998 in South Africa.

However, this is not the case in other countries, and there is often a gap between policy and practice. There is a section in the amendments to Zimbabwe's Labour Relations Act that deems sexual harassment an unfair labour practice, and the country has a national gender policy. However, women in media houses surveyed in that country say there is a gap between national laws and policies, and what really goes on in their workplaces.

A female respondent in Zimbabwe, for example, pointed out that complaints often go unresolved. "Where issues of sexual harassment or sexist language are concerned, women who raise these issues are often not taken seriously and in particular cases of harassment, male bosses sympathise with those accused of harassment and at times try to underplay

the charge at hand.”

## Calling

Zainah Liwanda, a Malawian journalist turned researcher, was a reporter known for impeccable sources and well-written and meticulously investigated stories. Although Liwanda is no longer with the media she firmly believes reporting is her calling, and it is her passion. This is clear when she says, “I miss the newsroom! But one thing I know is that one day I will go back. That’s my destiny. I was trained as a journalist and I will die as one.”

Liwanda worked for seven years in the newsroom in various positions. Her first job was in 2000 when she joined Blantyre Newspapers Limited, publishers of the *Daily Times*, *Malawi News* and *Sunday Times* as a sub-editor. She was designated to the *Malawi News*. In 2003, she joined Nation Publications Limited (NPL) as a senior reporter. After about two years, Liwanda was promoted to news analyst.

Asked about the main obstacles women face in advancing in editorial departments, she said there were many, among them being that men who dominate decision-making positions in media houses generally do not give women a chance to progress or be promoted. Liwanda cited accusations by male counterparts of female journalists being favoured if, say, their stories made the front page, or if they were promoted or advanced in any way. Some male sources were also an obstacle, she said, as they wanted to exchange sex for stories, and some female journalists quit for fear of these advances.

## Agrees

A female respondent in Zambia agrees, “High levels of sexual harassment dominate in most media houses. For instance, editors would like sexual favours from female journalists if they are to be assigned more frequently to cover or attend seminars and workshops, otherwise you are bound to be in the office full-time, and not be given special assignments. Promotion is another critical area where female journalists fall prey to male managers who make it conditional on sleeping with them.”

Women in media houses often find they must develop a thick skin to persevere in the business. Setsable Sibisi, head of current affairs at Swazi TV, can attest to this. “In the newsroom I have been called a bitch and accused of sleeping with the boss. But I don’t let it affect me. There are only two females in the newsroom, and I’m the only female manager. I try not to take it personally, as people will always try to intimidate - so it means I am doing something right, for people to take note.”

In Swaziland, many respondents mentioned that inappropriate sexual verbal communication or gesturing happens constantly in editorial departments. But the term “sexual harassment” tends to be incorrectly limited to when someone touches another colleague in a sexual way. As one male respondent put it, “If I tease someone and she appears to be fine - sometimes we continue to make statements, and sometimes they make the statements. They seem to love this because they don’t complain.”

## Rampant

Whatever the laws might say, discrimination in media houses is rampant. In essence, no matter how good women are in the media, they are regarded as women first and professionals second. Unless the media is transformed from within, there is unlikely to be much change in the way that women are reflected in media content.

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