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**Gender transformation and media representations:
Journalistic discourses in three South African
newspapers**

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite apparent feminist advancements within contemporary South Africa, media representations continue to reproduce discourses that inhibit processes of gender transformation. As such, the media represents an important site of continued struggle over gendered meanings and power. While prolific research on gender and the media has been undertaken, there is still a need in South Africa to explore the ways in which media professionals themselves perceive their role in generating gendered media texts. This research therefore aimed to unpack media professionals' perceptions of gender transformation through their work. Furthermore, given the perceived limitations of certain approaches to gender and the media in South Africa, feminist theory conceptualised as "progressive" was applied in the study towards strengthening engendered media production research. The study involved a thematic, critical discourse analysis of newspaper texts and interviews with journalists and editors from three weekly news publications. The study revealed a high level of discursive contradiction in gender representations, especially in the tabloidised newspapers. Gendered meanings were effected through different discursive devices, namely complicit, advocate and spatial discourses, which played out variously within different spaces of the newspapers. In particular, gender transformative representations of the "private" sphere lagged significantly behind those related to the "public" sphere. In addition, important negotiations over gendered meaning were being undertaken in the more "informal" newspaper spaces, such as columns and jokes pages, often neglected in news media research. The interviews further highlighted lags in feminist trajectories pertaining to the "private sphere", with liberal-inclusionary feminist conceptions of gender transformation, focused on women's public participation, predominating. With a few exceptions, progressive feminist perspectives, moving beyond numerical representation towards greater attention to symbolic, relational and integrated understandings of gender, were generally lacking. In addition, many participants conveyed a largely positivistic discourse of objectivity through the media. However, various discursive strategies through which social transformation values were imbibed into newspaper texts were identified, and the research highlighted potential discursive opportunities for gender transformative change. The central strategy identified was the need for the development of a progressive gender lens and the decentralisation of a liberal-inclusionary feminist paradigm within the media and broader society.

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