

# Youth through the Media Lens



**A baseline study of youth coverage in South African Media**

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## Introduction

News media can play a crucial role in bringing awareness around different issues and how they affect various groups in a society. Furthermore, journalists have the capacity to shape how these issues are understood by their audiences through their reporting. The challenge is existing in a vast world, with diverse audiences and making every day decisions about which issues to focus on and how to adequately satisfy audience's needs overtime. It is a gruelling task but one that must be frequently checked to ascertain which groups tend to be marginalised in the media and to work towards ensuring that their issues are gradually amplified within this space. South African youth for instance face a myriad of issues yet at least one study<sup>1</sup> posits that while this group engage with various forms of media "to build their civic identities" and generally display "high levels of trust in the media", they do not feel that the media are relevant to them.

The picture looks bleak for youth in South Africa and the region. The International Labour Organization's World Unemployment and Social Outlook (2015)<sup>2</sup> for instance indicates that South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, accounted for three quarters of the world's "vulnerable employment" with young people aged 15 -24 worst affected by the crisis. In 2015, Statistics South Africa<sup>3</sup> also estimated that the highest rates of people living with HIV (16.6%) could be found amongst adults aged between 15- 49. Last year also saw the rise of the "fallists" and subsequent #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements and strong activism and protest action by young people in the country, perhaps an indication of the disgruntlement of South African youth.

In 2016, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) therefore conducted a baseline study, to explore the manner and extent to which selected online news media covered youth issues (individuals between the ages 18-35). MMA also held focus group discussions with youth in Vosloorus, Johannesburg to gain a sense of which issues they felt were important to them and whether or not these were adequately reported on in the media.

Much like previous research MMA has conducted into the representation of children (individuals aged 0-18) in South African media, the findings in this report suggest, amongst other things, that youth issues are underrepresented in the news.

The findings further demonstrate a discrepancy between youth expectation and current media reporting trends. The manner in which media tended to report on youth also indicated jarring inequalities afforded to different sexes and racial groups in news reporting.

This report therefore poses a challenge to South African media to adopt a more youth-centred approach to news and for individual newsrooms to examine their own reporting practices and whether there is room to include more youth issues and balance in news reporting.

## Key Monitoring Findings

The results from the analysis suggest that youth issues are underrepresented in the media and that depending on their gender, race and location, South African youth are at risk of being marginalised in local media.

- Provinces with the largest Metropolitan areas were the primary focus of media coverage to the detriment of rural provinces and youth living in these areas
- When it comes to different topics, media tended to focus on crime, sports and protests. Other

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<sup>1</sup> A baseline study of youth identity, the media and the public sphere in South Africa

<sup>2</sup> International Labour Organization's World Unemployment and Social Outlook 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Mid-year population estimates 2015, Statistics South Africa.

significant issues such as health and HIV were not found in the top ten of topics in relation to youth and news reporting.

- Media tended to portray youth in negative roles such as victim and suspect, predominantly perpetuating negative views of this group.
- Gender-bias was evident in the monitored media which disproportionately focused more on males in their reporting while further neglecting female voices on youth issues.
- Although they make up the majority of the population, black youth received less coverage, relative to their size. White youth on the other hand are over-represented in the news, more so than coloured youth who make up more of the population as compared to their white counterparts.
- When considering the nature of information provided in youth-related content, it was clear that journalists rarely explained the consequences of youth issues and events. Relevant policies were also absent in reporting together with solutions-oriented journalism.
- The focus group discussions revealed that youth find that media tended to neglect issues relevant to them and perpetuated stereotypes about youth. Furthermore, the group felt that media needed to do more to include their views in the news.

## **Methodology**

*Written by Musa Rikhotso (Project Coordinator)*

This section outlines the research objectives, and data collection methodology.

### ***Research objectives:***

The project aim was to contribute to the following;

- Understanding how youth and youth issues are covered in the mainstream media,
- Improving media coverage of South African youth to empower them as South African citizens and in line with a human rights framework that is a foundation of media quality and ethical practice and;
- Increased citizen participation in public debate around the role of media and information available on the youth and improved quality in that public debate

Over 2000 youth-related stories were analysed. The criteria used to select stories for the analysis included:

- All the stories that mentioned the word youth, to mean young people.
- All the stories that reported on individuals aged between 18 and 35.

### ***Data Collection:***

A content analysis method was applied in gathering the information. This process allowed MMA to extract data on a daily basis and analyse it according to a standardised methodology. The content analysis was conducted by highly skilled media monitors with strict supervision from the monitoring coordinators. The media monitors were trained on the methodology and quality of the monitoring was frequently checked for accuracy. Dexter (an online monitoring tool) was used to capture the data which was analysed throughout the period according to specific criteria.

Only online articles from *IOL (Independent Online)*, *News24*, *The Citizen* and *M&G (Mail & Guardian Online)* were monitored; this was after a sample study was conducted to determine which online media published enough stories to help form a conclusive analysis about youth issues. Each article was read for research relevance. Articles relevant to the research were then analysed.

The monitoring was conducted from 1 February 2016 to 30 June 2016. This period was selected to ensure that it did not coincide with the major events that were happening in our country (with the exception of Youth Day) such as the peak of the #FeesMustfall movement which would distort the focus and coverage of youth issues.

For the focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of 10 young people between the ages of 18-30 from Vosloorus Gauteng which allowed for qualitative analysis. The mix of genders was equal and the following main questions informed the discussions:

- What societal issues are important to you and why?
- What is your understanding of the media's role? (News media particularly)
- Where do you get your news? Why?
- Do you think it is important for media to cover youth issues? Why?
- Do you feel the media sufficiently represents your issues as youth?
- Where do you think the media could improve?
- Where or when do you think the media has gotten it right?

### ***Limitations:***

During the five-month monitoring period, only four online English media outlets were analysed for this study. Only news articles were monitored to the exclusion of photographs and advertorials. All monitors received the same training and consulted the same methodology guides. Still, the possibility of minor human errors cannot be entirely discounted.

## **Findings**

### ***Origins of Youth Stories***

It is important to consider geographical spread when looking at youth-related news as this gives us an indication of the areas media tend to focus on when reporting on youth. During the monitoring period, it was clear that the analysed media primarily focused on provinces with major metropolitan areas to the detriment of more rural provinces and by extension, youth living in these areas.

Gauteng received most of the coverage (24%) followed by the Western Cape (18%). On some level, it can be anticipated that most news content will come from these economic hubs, however, media also need to consider population dynamics including the spread of youth across the country and the different issues they face in those locations. The Eastern Cape for instance, has the third highest population of youth in South Africa<sup>4</sup> after Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, yet received only three percent of the coverage during the monitored period. Provinces such as Northern Cape, Limpopo and Mpumalanga also struggled for media attention, each receiving only one percent of the pie. This amount of coverage is disproportionate considering the top five origins for youth stories which, when combined, made up for 80 percent of the coverage.

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<sup>4</sup> Population Estimates retrieved from Statistics South Africa

Figure 1 origins of stories

## **Gauteng 24%**



*Eastern Cape 3%*  
*North West 3%*  
*Mpumalanga 1%*  
*Limpopo 1%*  
*Northern Cape 1%*  
*Unclear (last resort) 1%*

## **Topics**

For many, being a young person in South Africa means facing a myriad of social challenges. For instance, while living conditions of youth have improved in some respects over the past decade, according to the United Nations Population Fund<sup>5</sup>, young people are still faced with significant challenges such as high unemployment and HIV infection rates, and an increase in youth-headed households for the ages 15-24. When it comes to basic services more generally, The 2015 General Household Survey<sup>6</sup> indicates that only 45.8% of households in South Africa had access to piped water in their dwellings and every ten households went to public clinics and hospitals as their primary point of access at the event of a household member falling ill. It therefore becomes imperative to explore the general topics and by extension the issues linked to these that media tended to report on during the monitoring period to gain a sense of whether these were in line with the experiences of South African youth. It becomes clear however from looking at the various topics under youth-related news that there is a discrepancy between issues facing youth and those that the media focused on during the monitored period.

<sup>5</sup> Situational Analysis of South African Youth retrieved from United Nations Population Fund

<sup>6</sup> General Household Survey (2015) Media Release.

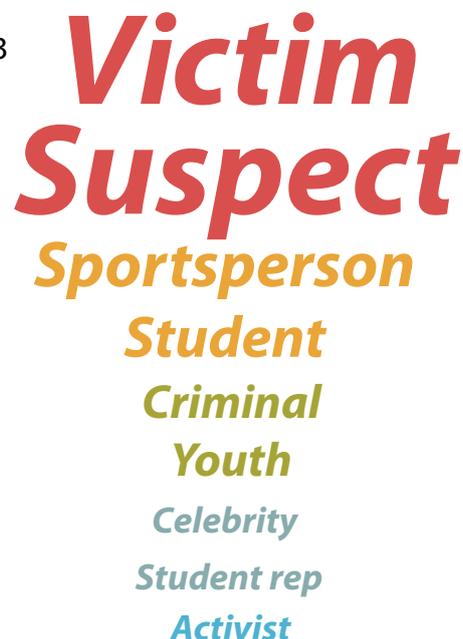
Figure 2



Crime was the leading topic when it came to news reports involving youth (28%) followed by sports (18%) and protests (12%). It is no surprise that protests were in the top three topics considering the coverage of prevalent protest action related to the #FeesMustFall movement. It is concerning to note however that while these protests were linked to the cost of higher education, "Education" as a topic still ranked relatively low (4%) when considering dominant topics in relation to youth. This suggests that issues around education were not explored frequently and instead, media focused more on protest action, isolating the focus on both these issues.

It is encouraging to see, what could be considered positive topics such as Sports and Personalities (which includes profiles of young people) as these usually highlight various initiatives and achievements of youth in different parts of the country. However, the absence of health or HIV-related stories in the top ten topics is concerning considering the challenges faced by youth in relation to these issues.

Figure 3



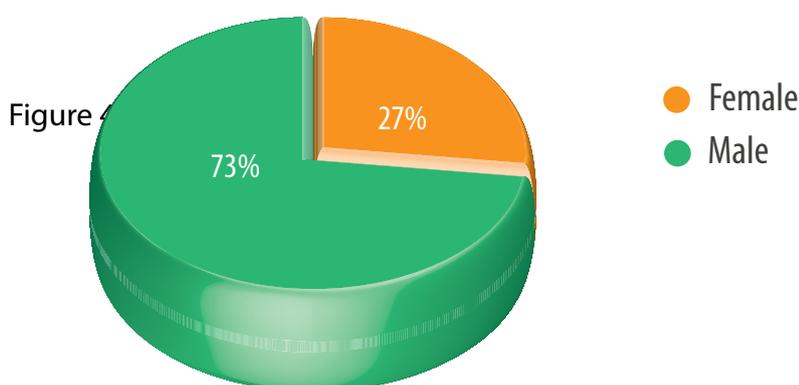
Considering that crime and sports were leading topics when it came to youth –related news, it comes as no surprise that the top three roles for youth were victim, suspect and sports person. It is concerning however that the top two roles (which can be viewed as negative) were quite dominant in media’s portrayal of youth along with roles topics such as criminal (7%). This finding can be compared to previous research that MMA has conducted<sup>7</sup> on children which reveals that media also tend to show this group in predominantly negative roles. More positive roles, while also present in the top ten, were quite low when compared to those that were negative. These include student, student representative and activist. It may also seem surprising that “activist” was the least form of portrayal for youth in the top ten of roles considering that protests were in the top three of topics as discussed in the previous section. However, this may be due to protesting student being predominantly portrayed as students rather than activists in news reports.

## Gender Focus and Voices

Locating how media reports on different genders allows us to analyse the amount of attention afforded to different genders in the media. Furthermore, considering that gender-inequality is a prevalent and persistent issue in South Africa and globally, it is crucial that media aim to give more focus to female issues and their voices. As part of the analysis, youth were classified under gender categories, depending on how they were identified in the particular news stories. The findings show that when it came to gender representation and youth, the monitored media disproportionately placed more focus on male youth over their female counterparts.

This finding is most concerning as it suggests that female-related issues were sidelined in newsreporting and that the monitored media tended to perpetuate gender-inequality in their focus<sup>8</sup>.

The analysis also compared how frequently different genders were accessed in the monitored media. The findings reveal even more disparities between how males and females sources are treated in news reporting as seen in Figure 5.

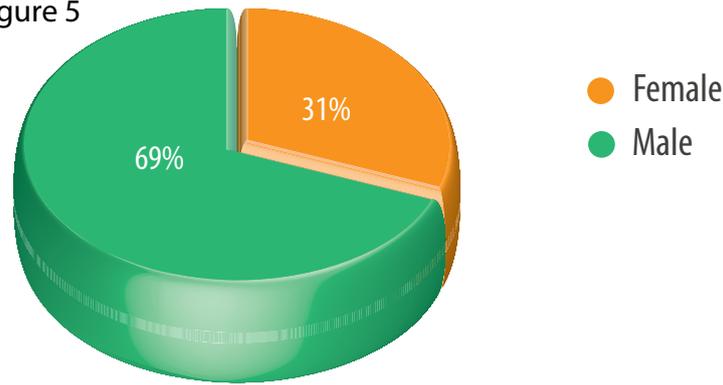


From these findings we can discern how males were frequently accessed and given a voice in the monitored media. Furthermore, when considered together with Figure 4, it becomes clear that males were not only given much more focus in news reporting, but were also afforded much more opportunities to contribute their thoughts and perspectives on issues and events at the expense of their female counterparts.

<sup>7</sup> Research by Media Monitoring Africa: Are we ever going to be heard? 2015 Media Coverage: South Africa.

<sup>8</sup> Past research by Media Monitoring Africa suggests that gender –issues, particularly during elections, are often sidelined in South African media.

Figure 5



### Race of Youth in the News

Given South Africa's history of racial segregation and oppression, it is important to consider how media, now operating in a new democratic dispensation, treat different racial groups in their reporting. When considering population estimates, Statistics South Africa revealed the following racial breakdown for youth aged between 15-34 in 2015:

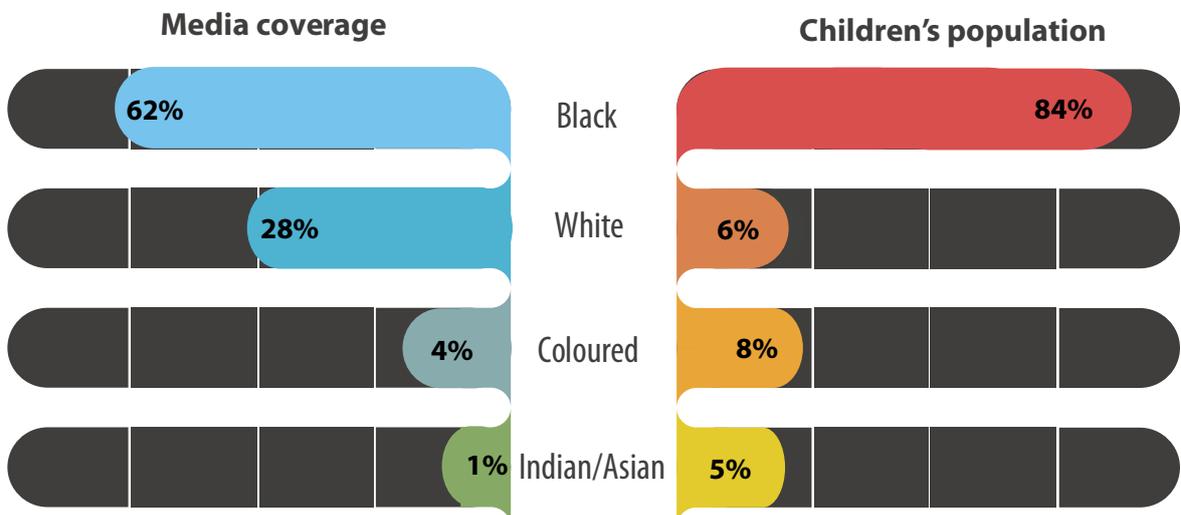
- ∅ Black (30%), Coloured (3%), White (2%) and Indian/Asian (1%).

When combined, this group made up 36 percent of the South African population. Focusing in more on youth aged 15-34, allows us to determine the size of each race within the makeup of youth in the country. In other words, of the 36 percent (population of youth in the country) how big or small are different races within this group of young people? The results show the following.

- ∅ Black (84%), Coloured (8%), White (6%), and Indian/Asian (2%).

While this analysis might have considered the coverage of youth aged 18-35, the population estimates by race of youth aged 15-34, are still useful in giving us an idea of racial representation of youth in the media. We therefore compared, how much coverage each racial group of youth was receiving in the media and the size of that group. Figure 6 below, shows that different races were disproportionately represented during the monitored period.

Figure 6

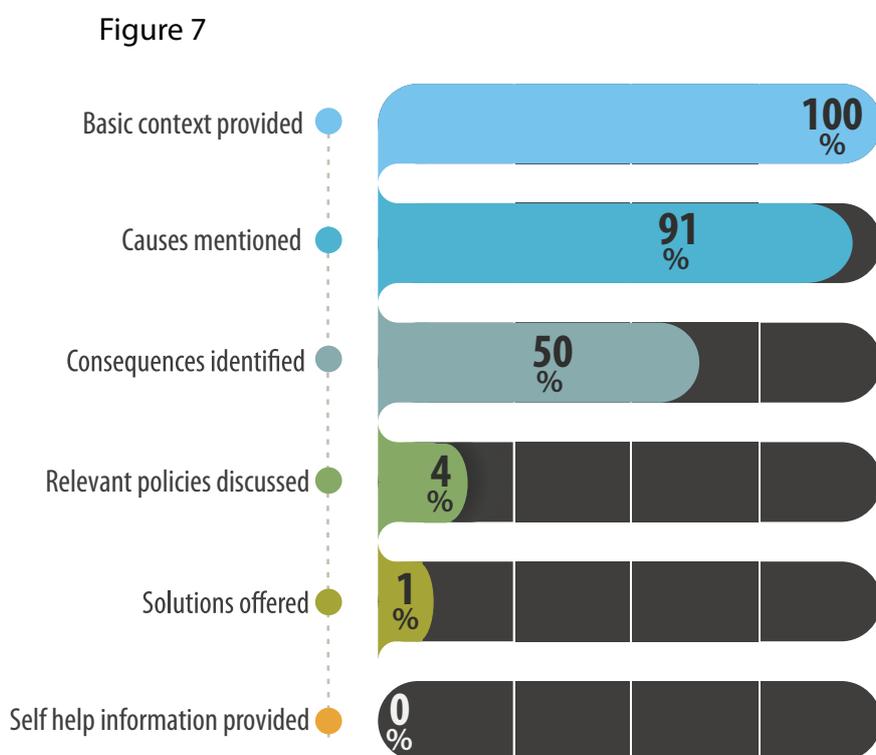


Although black youth were the largest population, they received still received less coverage relative to their population. White youth were overrepresented, almost five times more their representative population. Futhermore, even though statistics suggest that in 2015, there were more coloured youth than white youth in South Africa (a difference of one percent), the disparity between the news coverage of these two groups (22%) was overwhelmingly vast. The focus on white youth suggests that local media need to consider how to equitably cover different racial groups in South Africa.

## Quality of Information

Analysing the quality of information in relation to youth-related news provides an indication of whether or not youth issues are adequately contextualised in the media. For instance, journalists can provide useful information when reporting on youth by providing background information to issues and events affecting youth and going further by providing details of relevant legislation or solutions where possible.

As shown in Figure 7 below it is to be expected that all monitored stories will provide basic information (or basic context) in news stories as this would provide readers with a basic understanding of the issue or event being reported on. However, when further unpacked, the graph shows that the information provided in youth-related news lacks in some respects.



The findings indicate that in most articles, media were able to provide reasons behind the causes of events and issues related to youth (91%). However, when it came to explaining consequences of these, media were only able to do this half the time (50%). This is an important element of news reporting as often it helps readers understand how an issue or event affects the people involved, in this case, youth. It is concerning to note that relevant policies were only mentioned in youth-related news one percent of the time which means that journalists often missed an oportunity to report on and unpack policies related youth issues and also hold policy-makers to account on these. Reporting on solutions was also lacking (4%) during the monitoring period, suggesting that journalists often did not seek out possible solutions when reporting on youth or access experts opinions on these. Furthermore, opportunities to empower youth through providing “self-help” options (0%) were seldom met in the media. Self-help options include examples where media provide contact details where youth can access help or information if they identfy themselves to be in a particular situation or in need of a particular service.

## Focus Group Discussions

### *Youth speak up on South African media*

#### *Anecdotal article by Motshabi Hoaeanne*

Forty years on, the indomitable fighting spirit exhibited by the class of 1976 has changed the course of history for many South Africans. Nonetheless, the spoils of democracy for the current generation of youth come with their own set of obstacles and challenges.

On 16 June, Media Monitoring Africa's held a focus group discussion with a group of young people in Vosloorus, (aged 18 - 30) to explore youth's expectations of local media. According to the group, the nuances that encompass this generation's struggles are not taken seriously enough, often negated for special months and, generally overlooked by the media in favour of stories that sell.

The common-held assumption that youth are ignorant- if not apathetic - was also firmly rejected by this group of young people. Instead, they noted that the information they were getting from mainstream media wasn't exactly relevant to them, but rather a recycling of conventional patterns which don't take into account the changing nature of youth's relationship with media and information.

Displaying a clear awareness of the country's general societal issues and how these directly affect them, the group said that the media don't do enough to focus on youth stories and that social networks carry out that role better, through the multiplicity of perspectives it offers them.

The group also noted that stories that lead in the media, perhaps unknowingly, tend to perpetuate stereotypes, homogeneity, racism, and otherness:

*“We should also celebrate being individuals (and difference) without being afraid of judgement because we look different compared to other people. The truth is that there are people still who don't accept certain things around us, like being gay or lesbian or being your true self and that needs to be looked deeper into” said Natalia Kuis, 25.*

*“I think that the contribution media makes through the stories it reports on is very significant, because through images it portrays it can be very influential in changing the way people think”, added Sanele Msoni, 24.*

An interest in issues such as education, youth development, skills programmes, financial development, corruption, history, reconciliation as well technological advancement was evident. The group said such stories needed more continuous and in-depth coverage as well as follow-up in the media.

#### ***The story of a nation is not complete without its people.***

The common adage that “the youth are the future” rang true for all of the individuals present in the discussion. This was also the reason they believed that it is important for the media to cover youth stories extensively. They also emphasised that this cannot be done in a vacuum. They felt that a shift had to be made in line with integrating the largest population in country in the news.

Nobantu Baba, 27, noted how the media would be able to help society proactively find solutions to problems such as drug abuse if the youth themselves were an integral part of changing that narrative, not only through the platform afforded by media but also through youth's active participation,

*“The media needs to hear our side of the story, in order to actually know what is really going on,” Nobantu said.*

*“I don’t think we are the future, I believe that we are now! If media doesn’t start catering for youth stories who they are going to be selling the papers to, in the next few years?” asked Fezile Mtati, 22.*

*Tumelo Khumalo added, “At the end of the day, we need our issues to be covered. The more the media puts out information for instance on the issues like Nyaope and then give the relevant help centres, they are making us aware, and at the same time that stimulates our need to be engaged in changing our own circumstances.”*

Without overlooking the fact that the stories broke Twitter or received vast coverage, others in the group felt that the coverage of #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall movements while welcome, was mostly “rushed” as the stories developed, which meant that context and history were overlooked.

The group also said media needed to be more discerning and critical of potential candidates moving up to the run-up of elections, so that they can give the before and after picture of promised outcomes of change.

\*Hoeane wrote this piece as part of Media Monitoring Africa’s Youth News Agency, which aims to increase the participation and voices of South African youth in local media.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In light of the findings revealed in this report, it is clear that youth issues are underrepresented in the news and the manner in which media portray youth leaves room for improvement. Media for instance continue to focus on metropolitan areas to the neglect of other less developed areas in the country.

The roles which young people occupy in the media also lack diversity. Many disparities are also apparent in news reporting when it comes to youth including unequal focus afforded to various racial and gender groups. Youth themselves reveal, that the issues media tend to focus on are vastly different to those that they consider as important and they feel media need to listen to them and their views in order to adequately report on issues affecting them.

The following are therefore recommendations to the media going forward:

- ∅ Media are encouraged to make an effort to focus more on youth and their issues to ensure that the complex issues faced by this group are not neglected.
- ∅ Rural areas, and the youth living in these areas, should be prioritised in news reporting to ensure that their voices and issues are given due recognition in news reporting.
- ∅ Media need to reflect issues faced by youth on the ground. Issues such as health and HIV specifically need more attention in the media.
- ∅ Media should portray youth in a diversity of roles in line with those they occupy in society and avoid over-representation of youth in negative roles such as victims and criminals.
- ∅ Gender-biases need to be challenged in news reporting. Media need to aim to cover different genders equally in the media. Furthermore, female voices need to be more prioritised in the media to ensure that the perspectives and views of young women and the various issues they face are given more prominence.

- ∅ Media should aim to cover different races proportionately and avoid focusing on larger or more privileged racial groups over others.
- ∅ Journalists should aim at explaining the consequences of youth-related issues and event more and seek out expert advice on these. Policies related to youth issues also need to be reported on more in the media. Journalists should also aim at providing solutions-oriented reporting.
- ∅ Media should listen and engage the youth more, particularly on the issues they would like to see addressed.

To find out more about MMA visit: [www.mediamonitoringafrica.org](http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org)

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