

WOMEN IN FRENCH MEDIA: DO WE NEED A LAW?

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Unfortunately, the situation for women working within France's media sector closely resembles that which may be found in the rest of the world. And sometimes it is even worse. Forty-two percent of journalists are women. Yet only 10 percent of female journalists hold a strategic position within the media industry (7 percent in radio; 4 percent in written media). Moreover, males monopolise the major topics and fields of inquiries, particularly where it concerns the economy or politics. Women, consequently, are more frequently assigned stories pertaining to cultural matters. Even if women demonstrate the courage to pursue the riskier stories, e.g., the war in Iraq, their situation improves very (note: very) slowly. In fact, climbing the ladder of social recognition represents perhaps the most difficult task a female journalist may undertake in her career.

In light of the above, two problems are identified: (1) the place and role of women in the media industry and (2) the image of women in the media. Both issues are linked and are very often cumulative: the fewer women in positions of power, the less they appear in the media. Additionally, many women act according to the preferred stereotypes of the day, adding a psychological and social dimension to the problem. Some say that there is a female way of seeing things; a female point of view. But what exactly that is remains a mystery. Take the position of Christine Lagarde, the newly hired General Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). She claimed she will bring a fresh point of view as a woman to the institution. But when asked to clarify her point, she was noticeably speechless.

The situation of women in the media is obviously the result of gender discrimination. Of course education, social background, and history are factors to consider, but no one can deny that women suffer from discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, from both male and female co-workers and managers.

Correspondingly, many are calling for new legislation that would address these specific problems and concerns, particularly where it regards the media industry. Not surprising, this idea is quite provocative and has divided the French feminist movement.

The question concerning this proposed action must address the political and social contexts found in France. Legal equality is startlingly new. Some forty-years ago, women were still legally inferior to men when it came to finding a job or opening a bank account. In 1999, a law was passed to enable more parity. A fierce quarrel ensued between feminists as some claimed that the law opens the door to essentialism. Lawyer Evelyne Pisiert and historian Elisabeth Roudinesco strongly opposed the law, while lawyer and feminist icon Gisele Halimi vigorously supported it.

Even though public authorities fail to prevent and end discrimination, many reports and public conferences stress the ongoing damage caused by gender discrimination. Thus, the question arises: is it really necessary to pass such legislation?

In 2004, the French government passed legislation addressing homophobia. Violence against gays and lesbians, whether verbal or material, are now liable to the penalties inscribed. Sexism itself, however, was not included in this law, which led to a hierarchy

of discriminations. After a long battle, sexism was added and the law now addresses all variations of violence and abuse against gays, disabled persons, women, etc. Sexism was now considered a crime.

A special institution was created (the Haute autorité de lutte contre les discriminations, HALDE) tasked with collecting claims and suspicions of crime. The HALDE still requires more means to inquire about instances of sexism, and more help in encouraging persons affected by sexist acts to bring their case to court.

The question before us now considers whether or not we need a special law that specifically targets sexism. This legislation that would address all violence, wherever committed (at home or at work, etc.), and include compulsory measures for the media industry.

As noted, the feminist movement is divided over the proposed legislation, especially where it concerns the media, because it could affect the right to free speech (censorship can also lead to a cold political correctness, destroying the necessary and often profitable surprises of everyday life). Moreover, many women fear that the perception of being seen as weak, as victims always needing help, as people who cannot take care of themselves and win their own battles.

According to Elisabeth Roudinesco, law enforcement is the real problem. We can pass as many laws as we want, but if no means are provided concerning their implementation, they are effectively useless. For example, we know that the working code is not respected because there are simply not enough inspectors who can visit every work premises to check for law abidance. Others add that it is never easy to rule on culture and social representation, and that a law would never be accurate enough to improve the actual circumstances.

Many feminists fear essentialism and are therefore reluctant to support such legislation. Essentialism states that men and women are sexually defined and, consequently, must be given a different social and legal status. Lawyer Evelyn Pisier strongly opposes this idea, arguing that sexual differences are a private matter. The important thing, she contends, is what people are as persons. The problem is discrimination, not essential gender differences. According to Pisier, in the political sphere, women are not less represented as women, but rather as representatives of mankind. To some analysts, essentialism is a trap that would freeze social and sexual identities. It prevents people from choosing their own path in life, including the context of transexuality.

We can see similar oppositions in the debate over language. Should we ask for a neutralisation of language or for a feminisation of language? Some even ask for the suppression of gender references in all public documents.

In addition, there is a specific fear in France of waging a so-called Sex War. People prefer a certain sweetness within social relationships, particularly those between men and women. This tradition is said to date from the Middle Ages. On the other hand, some feminists believe the idea to be a mere illusion protecting male domination over women.

Feminists opposed to new legislation suggest alternative measures. There are many possibilities we should explore before passing a new law dedicated to women in media. First, we must work on implementing the existing legislation. Here, a special brigade of discrimination inspectors could be created. Education against stereotypes could be developed at schools and in the training school for journalists. Public hearings could be organised and special meetings held at firms could drive attention toward mitigating sexual discrimination. Finally, we could foster a more open and cooperative way of running a business, of managing a team. This would help make room for everybody, not only for the single-minded career-obsessed people.