
Women in Croatian Media

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Summary

Despite the process of feminization which has swept through the journalist profession, on Croatian TV screens there are twice fewer women than men, women are twice less the focus of attention, they are most numerous in the afternoon shows while on primetime they usually make cameo appearances. The topics that women deal with are mostly of general interest, connected with entertainment or art, media or medicine and are a far cry from the dominant male topic - politics. This is paralleled by the occupations which the two sexes usually take up and which, apart from other indicators, signal a significantly lower social status of women as compared to that of men.

One of the key issues by means of which Europe still tests the progress of democracy in the newly created states of central and eastern Europe, besides the rights of national minorities and the freedom of the media, is the social position and role of women.

This particular sensitivity regarding this issue is understandable not because the quandaries of women in European countries have become the thing of the past so that every deviation from their standards is unthinkable for these countries, but because they view the social position of women as the indicator of the level of social awareness and the social relationships in a community.

A straightforward answer about the degree of social awareness in Croatia is not possible due to at least two reasons; the first is the lack of understanding for this type of social research and the second the extraordinary complexity of the problem compounded by the dramatic transitional changes in our country. "The genie from the bottle", as various ideas resurrected after the demise of the communist systems are often branded, has had an enormous influence on the existing social values and among them the one on the equality of women in social, economic and political life of the country.

The ongoing unofficial revaluation of the position and the role of women in the society by individuals and groups has culminated in acrimonious debates about women's reproductive rights. Despite the fact that several studies have shown that about three quarters of the respondents, regardless of sex, religion and education, are in favour of the existing law which allows women the right to decide on the number of children they want to have, there are partisans of the traditional values who equate

such freedom of choice with crime and stubbornly insist on the necessity of changing it.

Naturally, these illustrations are just the tip of the iceberg which vacillates between the two completely different models of social development: the traditionalist, characterized by authoritarianism, traditional social values, ethnocentrism, and clericalism and the modernist, characterized by pluralism, repudiation of traditional values, “civil option” and the separation of the church from the state.¹

Regarding the place and the role of women in a society, it is only too logical that the mentioned concepts advocate almost diametrical opposites: a woman’s place is primarily at home, with her family, a woman is accomplished only as a mother (of several children at that), her work outside the home is not considered to be equally important to that of men, and her participation in political decision-making is negligible. The other side insists on woman’s working outside the home, the creation of equal opportunities for men and women in the realization of professional careers (even political), on social care for children, etc.

The aggressive attitude of the individuals and the groups who advocate the traditionalist concept is manifested through the ideological disqualifications of those who think differently; they try to label the concern for women as “leftist” and erase it from the social priority agenda. The de-ideologization of this problem will show that it is a permanent problem, that the solutions offered by various political systems, and still offered today, have been given thumbs up or thumbs down by women, but the valuable thing is the process of boosting their aspirations, the development which represents the bulwark against the spread of the ideas that run counter to the interests of today’s women.

Because of all this, the resignation which occasionally floods a regular watcher of TV or a regular reader of newspapers, gives way to a genuine and active concern for the position of women, who “the Berlin wall has come crashing down on”, in the picturesque simile of a leading Slovenian woman politician.

One of the most interesting indicators of the position and role of women in a society, apart from the usual ones, such as the percentage of women in workforce or politics, is “the media portrait of women”, particularly the image of women projected by the most powerful media of them all - television.

¹These are the usual categories in the classification of conceptual orientations: the scale radicalism-conservatism by Eysenck (Eysenck, 1953), liberalism-conservatism (Ingelhard, Klingelmann, 1979), left-right (Šiber, 1993) or modernism-traditionalism (Zakošek, 1994).

The manner of depicting female and male figures and the relationship between them most certainly speaks volumes about the level of social development as well as about the trend it is to follow in the future.² The ways and the intensity of TV's influence on its viewers are well-known from the specialized literature, and the best-known are: perpetuation of cultural values and ideals regarding the sexes, propagation of culturally conditioned notions of the sexes and the selection of certain information and images.³

In accordance with our topic, particular attention will be paid to the influence of television on the viewing public in the *content-related* sense (from the aspect of the social role of women) as well as in the *formal* sense (the type of shows in which women appear, the length of appearance, the type of activity, the level of programme, participation in the programme creation, etc.)

Foreign, especially American literature, mentions two basic stereotypes in the portrayal of women: the positive and the negative female.⁴

The positive, good female is depicted by means of the attributes connected with the traditional women roles, regularly stressing beauty, humility, family orientation, servility to men (husbands), and helping everybody who needs help. The women who comply with this stereotype are described as "angels", "martyrs" and "helpers", i.e. individuals whose function is to satisfy other people's needs and goals. If a woman works outside the home, her marital and family situation are given predominance while her professional career is "the second violin", complementary to her central life role.⁵

The second stereotype offered by television is in a completely opposite vein; a negative female, totally different from the traditional female role

²Within the Canadian project "Global Media Monitoring Project - Women's Participation in the News", on January 18th, 1995, hundreds of women volunteers watched television, listened to the radio and read newspapers in their respective countries (over seventy) in order to come up with the way women are represented in the media and through that make conclusions about their position and role in those countries. The data from that study will be mentioned throughout this text.

³Pearson, J. C., Turner, L. H. and Todd-Mancillas W. 1991, p. 232.

⁴Female parts usually signalize subservience and helplessness (Dohrmann, 1975; Lichter, Lichter and Rothman, 1986), weakness, passivity, almost exclusive concentration on the family (Downs and Gowan, 1980).

⁵In their interviews, several female members of the Croatian parliament stressed the importance of family and children for their success and thus, consciously or not, "toned down" their image by portraying themselves as positive, good persons or superwomen. It is also possible to interpret the mention of children as a sign of insecurity and a line of retreat in case of a failure ("even if I fail at work, I have realized my life task").

and described by the attributes such as hard, cold, aggressive and calculating, and usually labelled as a “witch”, immoral, in a word - an anti-woman.

It is interesting to compare these stereotypes with those for men - a true man is mentally stable, competitive (aggressive, strong, plucky), professionally successful (income and social status).⁶

Not all researchers agree that sexual presentation is entirely black and white. They corroborate this by saying that famous men and women in some professions (law, medicine) are portrayed in a similar fashion, in similar social roles, equally interested in their professional promotion and the concern for their families.⁷

These stereotypes might sound more like fun than worry if not for the numerous proofs of the power they wield over our awareness.⁸ Thus we arrive at some hard evidence that the length of watching TV correlates with the acceptance of social stereotypes.⁹ If we divide the viewers into regular, average and occasional, it means that the first group will be much more conservative in their attitudes towards men and women than the others.¹⁰ It sounds almost as a paradox that television, which broadens our horizons, at the same time affects people's mind in the opposite direction.

Besides the already described stereotypes about men and women, the relationships they strike are also very interesting. Their function is in strengthening or confirming the traditional male and female roles. If we accept J. Wood's classification¹¹, television presents four types of relations: female dependence versus male independence, female incompetence versus male authoritativeness, female focus on the private sphere versus male focus on the public sphere, and women as victims and sexual objects versus men as conquerors.

From all that has been said so far, it is easy to draw a conclusion that the described sexual stereotypes which television advances for the benefit of its viewers are overly simplified and vague, in other words, they

⁶Downs and Gowan, 1980.

⁷Modleski, 1982.

⁸In 1986, M. Kimball made a comparative study of the attitudes on sexual stereotypes of children who do not watch TV and those who watch it; the latter manifested much more prominent stereotypes than the former. When the first group of children began to watch TV, their stereotypes changed and became similar to those of the second group (Wood, J. T., 1994, p. 238).

⁹Tan 1982, Zemach and Cohen, 1986.

¹⁰Pearson, J. C. Turner, L. H. and Todd-Mancillas W., op. cit. p. 260.

¹¹Julia T. Wood, op. cit. 1994.

are a product of the initial typological stage of thought. This can be illustrated with the following scheme:

“Good” women	“Bad” women
housewives	politicians
wives	managers
mothers	doctors
helpers	lawyers and others
home-care workers and others	

It ensues that working women cannot come into the category of “good”, that housewives are *a priori* positive, because they stay with their families and sacrifice for them, though there have been so many examples on TV screens where “good” women were the epitome of human negativity and vice versa, and where working women were shown as altruists and positive figures.

If we want to answer whether (and to what degree) these described stereotypes correspond to the image of women on Croatian TV screens, the impressions must give precedence to the empirical studies of that phenomenon.

The sample was a whole-day programme scheme of the first channel of the Croatian Broadcasting Company (HRT) on January 18th, 1997, in order to make it at least partly comparable to the results of the already mentioned Canadian project. The findings of our study should be understood more as an illustration or a case study, which might help us in confirming or correcting our intuition regarding the portrayal of women on Croatian television. The programmes were recorded and analysed chronologically, and they included documentaries, news, family and children’s programme, shows, educational and religious programmes, and commercials.

The variables used in the analysis were grouped according to the aforementioned content-matter and formal characteristics of female and male figures. Due to a smaller number of cases and the character of the study subject, apart from several quantitative methods, certain qualitative methods were used in order to get as broad picture as possible.

1) Let us start with the formal side of the participation of women and men in the creation and the realization of programmes:

The journalists covered by our sample included 20 men and 33 women, which makes a ratio of 38% men and 62% women.

Among thirty six registered cameramen there was only one woman.

Among the anchorpersons there was an equal number of male and female journalists (11 men and 11 women), but among the senior editorial staff there was an entirely different ratio: 15 men and one woman.

Regarding the voices we hear in certain programmes, we heard male voices in 75 cases, female in 48, while men appeared as hosts or announcers 45 times and women 53 times.

From these data it is possible to conclude that journalism is becoming equally attractive for women and men. There have been high percentages of women participation in journalism worldwide, regardless of the type of the media. Thus in eastern and western Europe there are 37% of female journalists, 43% in the Middle East, 68% in the south Asia and the almost incredible 71% in India.¹² All this signifies the feminization of journalism on the whole. In Croatia, the percentage of female journalists on television is even higher than in the world - 43%.¹³ Perhaps it would be interesting to mention the case of Bulgaria where there was much ado about the feminization of television, since 50% of the so called creative positions have been taken over by women (anchorwomen, talk show hosts, reporters, etc.).

In Croatia, women are also numerically predominant in the mentioned positions - 54%.

However, in Croatia as well as in Bulgaria, women are rare among the technical staff. In Bulgaria, there are only 6% of female cameramen.¹⁴

The grave concern regarding the “female invasion” of coveted television career slots is best illustrated by the words of one of the leading people of the Bulgarian parliamentary committee for television and radio, who wanted to downplay the problem of the overrepresentation of women on television by saying that the top executive posts in these media are still occupied by men.

Such situation, in which women participate but do not decide,¹⁵ is evident from Croatian data which show that an exceptionally small number of women occupy higher editorial posts. Nevertheless, in Croatia the top editorial position is occupied by a woman (among the top eschalon of the Bulgarian national television there is not a single woman).

¹²Canadian project “Global Media Monitoring Project - Women’s Participation in the News”, a report, p. 11.

¹³Ibid, p.11.

¹⁴V. Tabakova, 1996, pp. 69-72.

¹⁵“There is the rub: two thirds of graduated journalist are women, but they make only 2 % of the managers of newspaper companies and solely 5 % of newspaper publishers.” (Wood, J. T., *ibid*, p. 235).

The formal part of the analysis deals with the total number of men or women included in our study, the number of men and women who were in the center of attention (who are talked about or are talked with) and those who represented a visual background to a certain event, including the beginning of broadcasting.

The total number of men amounted to 287 as compared to 170 women, which means that men appeared as twice as much as women.¹⁶

If we analyse the type of broadcasts which most often featured men, the top two were news programmes, while women participation was most conspicuous in documentary, educational and youth programmes. These differences will be discussed later in the text.

Men were the focus of attention in 208 cases and women twice less - in 111 cases.

On the other hand, the percentage of cases in which women “served as the visual background” was 53%.

Similar results can be found in other studies: worldwide, women make only 21% of the centre-of-attention persons, compared to 79% of men (naturally, there are regional variations). North America has the largest percentage (27%), while in the countries of eastern and western Europe that share is very modest: 15 and 16% respectively.¹⁷

Our results are higher than these, which is to a large extent attributable to the part of the broadcasting scheme covered by our research.

There is no doubt that the time when a programme is broadcast is directly linked with its ratings. That is why we have divided our sample programmes into three groups: from the start of broadcasting until noon, from noon until seven p.m. and from seven in the evening until signing off. We counted the number of men and women that appeared during these periods and noticed that in the morning programme, men were more numerous than women (70% versus 30%), almost balanced in the afternoon (45% of men and 54% of women), but the gap remarkably widened in the evening (83% of men and 17% of women). There is a similar lack of women during primetime; they are somewhat better represented in the afternoon programme.¹⁸

¹⁶In prime time programmes, the number of male whites is triple the number of female whites (Basow, 1992, p. 159); in children's programmes, there are twice as many men than women, while in the news women make up 16 % of anchorpersons and report ten times more about men than women (in J. Wood, p. 235).

¹⁷Canadian project “Global Media Monitoring Project - Women's Participation in the News”, a report, p. 11.

¹⁸Julia T. Wood, op. cit. 1994, p. 261.

Having in mind the high ratings of the evening programme, we may say that during the primetime of the day in question (January 18, 1996), women were almost symbolically represented.

It is interesting to check whether women are better represented in certain types of broadcasts or their presence/absence is constant, regardless of that variable. There were three documentaries in our sample, with 44% men and 56% women. The unexpectedly higher percentage of women was due to the programme "Bedem ljubavi", without which the participation of women would be only 24%.

Light entertainment consisted of "Good morning, Croatia", a cartoon and a featured film; the number of men was two times bigger than that of women. However, we must admit that the ratio of men and women in the programme "Good morning, Croatia" was almost balanced - 14 men versus 11 women.

The programmes for the young had a balanced ratio of 45% of men and 55% of women, while in the educational programme women were exceptionally dominant (95%). However, in religious programmes, women were conspicuously invisible (100% men).

News and political programmes confirmed our assumptions: men dominated with 77% as compared to 23% of women.

Men and women were equally represented in commercials. (We shall say more about commercials later.)

2) The content-matter analysis of the presence of men and women on television requires the answer to the question to which subjects (topics) the members of each sex relate to, in which occupations they take part, i.e. which are the dominant roles for men and women.

In Croatia, the usual topics linked with men are politics, all sorts of art, defence, sport, religion, and the topics for which it is unclear which area of life they belong to. In the already mentioned Canadian project, the order of the topics is only partly similar: almost 30% of men dabble in politics, followed by catastrophes and accidents, crime and the topics related to law.

The women from our sample most often appear in general topics, followed by art and medicine, the media and politics. Unlike this, in the Canadian study, women most often appear in the topics linked with catastrophes and accidents (20%), followed by crime and justice (17%), art and entertainment (8%), and social topics (8%).

The most conspicuous difference between the sexes is the one manifested in the field of politics, with the ratio of 93% men to 7% women; these are followed by the topics related to business (91% of men and 9% of women), war and terrorism (90% of men and 10% of women), etc.

Such division into “male” and “female” topics signalises the difference in the occupations. So far, women in the media are mostly shown as persons without a particular occupation (28%), while professional women appear in 18% of the cases. Unlike them, men in the media are mostly politicians (40%) and professionals (17%).¹⁹

Our research confirms the findings about the usually undefined occupation of women (16%), followed by women from the art-related professions (14%), media-related (11%), and medical professions (10%).

Men are most often politicians (35%), then artists of all sorts (14%), military personnel (9%) and experts (6%).

Regarding the topics/occupations relation, we think it is desirable to pay additional attention to the portrayal of men and women in commercials. It is generally thought that the difference between the treatment of men and women is most blatant in commercials. For a more precise analysis, a much broader sample would be needed, so we interpret these data solely as a case study.

As our starting point, let us take a few well-known postulates.²⁰

a) The number of instances of male speech is dominant to that of female speech: percentages range from 87% (Courtney and Whipple, 1974) to 93% (O'Donnell, 1978).

These findings were confirmed by our research, but with a significantly lower percentage (57% of male voices as compared to 43% of female voices).

b) The range of occupations for men is broader, while women are typically housewives (Verna, 1975; Schneider and Schneider, 1976; Courtney, 1974) or their profession is unknown (Bretl and Cantor, 1988).

In Croatia, men are most often artists (musicians, composers, pianists and dancers - 55%), then professionals who explain and inform (20%).

In Croatia, women's occupations usually are undefined (39%), followed by artists (singers and dancers - 23%) and housewives and mothers with 15%.

c) Men and women advertise different types of products: as doctors, men give advice on medicine (Mant, 1975), they advertise automobiles, drinks and petrol, while women focus on hygienic products (Courtney, 1974), cosmetics (Time, 1973), household products (O'Donnell and O'Donnell, 1978).

¹⁹Canadian project “Global Media Monitoring Project - Women's Participation in the News”, a report, p. 24.

²⁰According to Pearson, J. C., Turner L. H., and Todd-Mancillas W., *passim*.

In our study, too, men advertise medicinal products, newspapers and magazines (for computers), salutary effects of chewing gums, but also music events (concerts, ballets, festivals). Women advertise washing powders, food, shampoos. As studies show, men advertise products used outside the home, while women are “responsible” for the ones used in the home.

d) Male and female images in commercials are entirely different: men are more ambitious, dominant, brave and strong (Busby, 1975) while women are mostly dependent, passive, less knowledgeable and ailing (Mant 1975).

In Croatia also, men stand out as clever, knowledgeable and experienced (they explain chemical processes, advise ill women, take care of economy). Women are usually emotional (extremely unhappy, insecure, but eventually triumphant), are emotionally focused on men (seduction) and are only briefly satisfied and fulfilled (with a child or a quality product, all with the aim of making her family or husband happy).

As a rule, women in commercials are young (80% of the women were extremely young) and on the whole younger than men. The only exceptions were the boys who took part in commercials.

While with men other characteristics are of primary importance, with women the aesthetic moment is the top priority. Women in commercials have to be beautiful and attractive. Thus in our study, 61% of women were beauties, while the others were average-looking.

Conclusion

The typical trend for Croatia is the growing feminization of television, which is manifested in the high percentage of women journalists (62%), and the equal number of women among senior editorial staff, announcers and anchorpersons.

The tendency of diminished participation of women in top politics is noticeable on our television, too, with the exception of the chief executive post which is in Croatia occupied by a woman.

Though the programmes are mostly created by women, female individuals are two times less represented in the broadcasts than their male counterparts, and the programmes are twice less women-centred (as persons who are talked of or talked with).

The absence of women and their dominance in the afternoon television programme, which is not as highly rated as the programme in the evening hours, reflects on the image of women. In the evening hours, women are only symbolically represented.

While men usually appear in the news broadcasting, women dominate in shows, documentaries or educational programme.

These formal components of the “female media portrait” in themselves testify to a lower ranking position of women in Croatian TV programme.

The social role of women (content-matter component) presented through the women-related topics and occupations points to the predominantly low social status of depicted women, with the exception of some highly exposed women or experts from the field of medicine. If we compare these findings with those for men, we might conclude that dealing with political topics and the presentation of men in politics-related occupations in itself signifies power, strength and a higher social status.

This almost black and white picture is corroborated by the presentation of people in TV commercials. In them, the relations between men and women are given a patronizing overtone, where men are protective towards women, which only reasserts their lower position on the social ladder as compared to that of men.

Television is a reflection of our reality (the world we live in), but it also in turn influences us by presenting such sexual stereotypes and the relations between the sexes; thus, the results of the analysis of women’s image on television are a good indicator of the level of development of social awareness in our surroundings.

Don’t most of the women on Croatian television belong into the category of “good women”?

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