

The Image of Women in Romanian Newspapers: Myths and Reality

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The present paper aims to analyse the image of women – both as writers and actors - in the Romanian written press, providing a parallel between the image of women after the fall of the communist regime in Romania and the image of women nowadays, in the context of social change and the emancipation of women.

Key-words: feminism, misrepresentation, double bind, stereotype

Feminism and the Power of the Media

We all experience the power of mass-media in our lives due to its massive outreach. The freedom of the press and the freedom of self-expression are amongst the most important features of a democratic society. Therefore media should be considered the most significant instrument in the construction and development of democracy and human rights.

The focus of this paper is on the news media. News media remain the major and most influential source of information, ideas and opinion for most people around the world. It is a key element of the public and private space in which people, nations and societies live. Who and what appears in the news and how people and events are portrayed matters. Who is left out and what is not covered are equally important. Across the world, the cultural underpinnings of gender inequality and discrimination against women are reinforced through the media.

Since the media is all around us and it has such a great impact on what we do, on how we think, on how we perceive reality etc., it's no wonder that feminists have long tried to raise people's awareness to the representation, or should I say misrepresentation, of women in the media - both as actors and as authors.

The media during the communist regime

During the communist regime in Romania, the written press was actually a 'weapon' in the hands of those in power, with precise tasks and missions. Regarding the position of women in the Romanian society, communism brought with it the great promise of equality - equality which was exclusively rhetoric -; the communist press heralded the liberation of women, who were equal to men from a legal, social and economic point of view. But despite this so-called liberation of women, the Romanian society remained a society dominated by men: the equality between men and women as citizens in the face of law and administration was clearly an improvement, but by no means did it affect the power imbalance between men and women. It is often considered that socialism changed

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the “private patriarchy into a public one.”² This 'emancipation through work', which was supposed to ensure women's independence from men, actually only managed to subjugate women even more: they became slaves to two masters – to the state and to a family in which gender roles have remained intact. Ceausescu used to praise women's double role: that of mother and that of worker, thus creating in the 80s a double image: that of the productive and reproductive woman. Though the media tried hard to convey this image/message, one thing is certain: the woman was represented as anonymous, as a symbol, an ideal reality rather than a real human being.

In a nutshell, the media during the communist regime became a perfect instrument of non-communication, painting a parallel image of reality: on the one hand we have the image of the happy woman, smiling from the pages of newspapers and magazines, taking care of her children, working happily long hours in factories, driving tractors etc. On the other hand we have the harsh reality: an ordinary day in the life of a woman - described by Mihaela Miroiu³ - which starts at 6 o'clock, when the woman wakes up, stands in line to buy milk, prepares the kids for school, goes to work by bus, queues for food, comes home from work, cleans, feeds the family, warms up the bed with bottles of hot water etc.

The media after the fall of the communist regime (1989-2000)

After the fall of the communist regime in Romania, in 1989, mass media witnessed a major change and development: the number of publications has increased considerably and all forms of mass media (radio, press, television) have become accessible to the people.

December 1989 may be considered the big bang of the Romanian press; the freedom of expression, after 50 years of communist oppression and control led to an explosion of publications: 2000 new titles appeared and anyone who wanted to become a journalist could become one. It was an experimental period, with little censorship, a press focused more on opinion rather than on information.

Post-communist Romanian press maintains the gender stereotypes of a communist patriarchal society: women continue to be anonymous, discriminated in the labour market, continuing with the double burden – the work in the private and public sphere.

The representation of women in the media has long been the subject of articles, research and so on. The Global Media Monitoring Project is the largest and longest longitudinal study on the gender in the world's media. It is also the largest advocacy initiative in the world on changing the representation of women in the media. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) maps the representation of women and men in news media worldwide. GMMP research has been carried out in 5 year cycles since 1995 and relies on the voluntary efforts of hundreds of individuals and organizations. The 1995 studies (in which 71 countries worldwide participated) revealed that women are grossly under-represented in news coverage in contrast to men. The outcome of under-representation is an imbalanced picture of the world, one in which women are largely absent. The studies equally showed a paucity of women's voices in news media content in contrast to men's

²E. Magyari-Vincze, 2002. *Diferența care contează*. Editura Desire, Cluj, p. 171 quoted in Vladimir Pasti. *Ultima Inegalitate*. p. 102

³<http://decretei.blogspot.ro/2012/12/mihaela-miroiu-sexul-corvoada-si-risc.html> retrieved on 20. 08. 2013

perspectives, resulting in news that presents a male-centred view of the world.



Following in the footsteps of the above mentioned project, Cristiana Ghetau⁴ analysed in 1995 three Romanian daily newspapers for a period of three months (October, November, December). Analysing them through gender-sensitive lens, she came upon the same discrepancy between the female and male actors of the news, as well as a distorted representation of the silent half of the population. If as far as the authors of the news are concerned, we can witness a more or less balanced situation: 60% male journalists and 40% female journalists, the situation changes dramatically when it comes to the actors of the news: 88% male actors and 12% female actors. Even these 12% present women in stereotypical roles as victims of male violence, top models or show business VIPs. The same discrepancy is to be found where the topic of the news is concerned: men appear in political, economic, military and religious news, while women mainly appear mainly as victims of accidents, catastrophes and crimes.

Two years later (1997), after the elections of 1996, the situation doesn't seem to have changed too much in Romania: out of 38 articles about women, in 26 women are portrayed as victims (of sexual abuse, of pimp networks etc.), in 5 as monstrous human beings (criminal mothers or wives), in 4 as delinquents and in 4 by reference to their social status.⁵ The content analysis of the Romanian written press points out to the fact that the authors and the actors of the main news are men; only 10 percent of the articles published deal with feminist issues: unemployment, double day of work etc. The obvious tendency was to present women either as victims or as anonymous actors of the news (no mentioning of their profession, accomplishments etc., the only reference being made to their name, age and marital status).

The Media Nowadays (2000 - 2010)

Little by little the Romanian press starts to show signs of professionalism, mainly thanks to the first BBC school in Iasi and to the arrival of foreign trusts. But with professionalism, a drawback was to be noticed; since these trusts functioned on the principle of profit and marketing, this led to the degradation of Romanian journalism and has started since then on a downhill race after the sensational and the scandalous.

The Global Media Monitoring Project of 2009/2010, in which 108 countries participated, showed

⁴Quoted in Otilia Dragomir et al. 2002. *Femei, cuvinte si imagini*, Iasi: Polirom. p. 57

⁵Otilia Dragomir et al. 2002. *Femei, cuvinte si imagini*. Iasi: Polirom. p. 58

small and slow changes in what the gender dimension in the media was concerned: only 24% percent of the people heard or read about in print, media or TV news are female, as opposed to 76% - that is more than 3 out of 4 of the people in the news which are male.

As actors of the news, men continue to be portrayed as experts or spokespersons while women appear as mainly eyewitnesses. While women still continue to appear as victims in the news, the number has clearly decreased since 1995. As authors of the news, since the year 2000, the percentage of articles written by women has increased in all major topics; nevertheless the articles written by men continue to outnumber those written by women. The topic of the news written by men and women continue to reinforce existing gender stereotypes: men's voices dominate in hard news (of political and national importance), while women continue to be relegated to soft news stories (like health and entertainment).

In the year 2010 Romania participated in the Global Media Monitoring Project with the following conclusions: 'at the national level like as with the global one, a slight, evidently not sufficient, improvement in the presence of women in the news but a more important one as authors (presenter, reporter, announcer etc.) of the news. Unfortunately news that challenges stereotypes remains very scarce, but we noticed gender awareness among women journalists concerning journalistic practices and an enlargement of their topic fields (economy, legislation etc.)'⁶

Only 21% of news subjects – the people who are interviewed, or whom the news is about – are female. Women's points of view are rarely heard in the topics that dominate the news agenda; even in stories that affect women profoundly, such as gender-based violence, it is the male voice (64% of news subjects) that prevails. When women do make the news it is primarily as 'stars' or 'ordinary people', not as figures of authority.

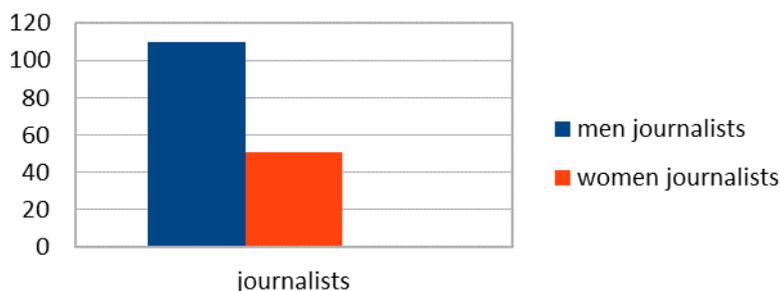
As newsmakers, women are under-represented in professional categories. As authorities and experts, women barely feature in news stories. While the study found a few excellent examples of exemplary gender-balanced and gender-sensitive journalism, it demonstrated an overall glaring deficit in the news media globally, with half of the world's population barely present.

The mis/representation of women in today's media: a case study

For this research, I have collected data from three newspapers (first and last page), during the month of August 2013: *Romania libera* – quality press, notoriety, *Adevarul* – quality press, notoriety and *Evenimentul Zilei* – quality press, notoriety (according to BRAT – National Bureau of circulation and ratings). I have started from the hypothesis that although there are signs of improvement regarding the gender dimension in the written press, although there are a dozen female NGOs in Romania, although there are women in top positions in the business world, MA and PhD programmes dealing with gender issues, publishing houses like Polirom with a collection of gender studies – despite all these, gender discrimination and stereotyping continues to affect women both as authors and actors of the news. The purpose of this data was to confirm the theory according to which male reporters continue to be given more hard news stories than their female colleagues and that women are under-represented both as experts in the news and as newsmakers.

⁶Romania – Global Monitoring Media Project 2010, National report

The first dimension to be analysed was that of women as authors of the news. Out of 160 articles,



only 51 were written by women journalists as compared to the 110 written by men.

The same discrepancy is to be noticed when it comes to the editorial board of the above mentioned newspapers: if the number of women journalists seems to have increased lately, and the number of female and male journalists seems to be balanced – Romania Libera – 15 men/11 women in the editorial board, Adevarul: 24 men/18 women, Evenimentul Zilei: 21 men/9 women – when it comes to hierarchy, women are facing the glass ceiling effect - a political term used to describe "the unseen, yet unbreakable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements"⁷ The bottom of this hierarchy seems to be feminine by excellence, women occupying positions such as secretaries, proofreading etc. while the top of the pyramid is a 'men-only' space - top positions like editor in chief, general manager, advertising manager etc. are occupied only by men.

While analysing the issue of the articles written by men and women, one encounters the same stereotypical division: women writers are mainly given stories that have to do with health, music, education, fashion – seen as an extension of domestic responsibilities while men deal with politics, finance, justice, international affairs etc. If women are given subjects in these fields, they deal mainly with scandals.

As actors of the news, women do not usually star in front page articles – unless they are involved in some sort of scandal: the love affair between Corina Cretu and Colin Powell, corrupted female judges. Once only I came across a front page article, written by a female journalist, in which the actor was a woman, an art expert, curator at the National Art Museum. All the other front page articles are either gender blind or they reinforce the existing stereotypes: the Visinescu case, Ovidiu Silaghi investigated by the DNA, Victor Ponta cut his holiday short, Nicolaescu's reform etc.

In the first three weeks of August, the only articles about women in the three newspapers under scrutiny dealt with corrupted judges, Miss Beach, scandals with Miss Romania, Cinderella in disco version and the secret wish of Corina Cretu who apparently has an ulterior motif in her relationship with Colin Powel.

Women tend to star in articles like: Elena Udrea black-listed, Anya and the coffee secret, Star at 14 – Rhianna of Romania, Scandal at Miss World, Angela tells us what she can do in the kitchen, Alexandra Stan, failed come-back, robbed by a 17-year-old sex bomb etc. I encountered but a few articles that try to challenge existing gender stereotypes: Medeea Marinescu – wonder kid, the straight A student, the art curator previously mentioned, the Incredible Simona Halep- female tennis

⁷Federal Glass Ceiling Commission. *Solid Investments: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, November 1995, p. 4.

player.) Therefore we witness a limitation of feminine roles: in the public sphere we have the mother or the housewife and in the public sphere we have the so called 'independent' woman, which is nevertheless dependent on the fashion and cosmetics industry, and – when mentioned in the news – reference is made mainly to her physical appearance rather than her accomplishments. Such stereotyped presentations influence heavily women's decision to get involved, or rather NOT to get involved in the political sphere.

In conclusion, the women in the news are either anonymous, or neighbours, housemaids, mothers, wives or daughters of the men in the news. Like Mihaela Miroiu once said: the recipe for a woman to be completely uninteresting for the media is to be a professional, a pupil or a student. If a woman is a criminal, she has much more chances to be in the spotlight. Even a retired woman has more chances to appear in the news than a professional.⁸

Besides the tendency to present women more in the private area, dealing with things such as fashion, cooking etc. and presenting them in the public sphere only in negative circumstances (bribe, corruption, scandals), I have also noticed the tendency to mention women by their first name, without mentioning their title, or any other pre-determiner: 'Angela tells us what she can do in the kitchen' - Angel Merkel (the German Chancellor) or 'The serious mister Ponta and Elena Udrea'.

The image that emerges from such data is the image of a world in which women are virtually invisible, a world in which half of the population is absent. This absence, this invisibility simply suggests that they are not important, that their opinion doesn't matter – we are thus dealing with a case of subtle sexist stereotyping in the news.

Despite the undeniable progress in what the gender dimension in the media is concerned, there are still many barriers to be surpassed, and at this pace, it will take quite a while until we witness genuine gender equality in journalism, and until the representation of women in the media is fair and balanced. Today women still struggle to earn the same advantages men are granted in the newsroom; women are still far from equality as they face professional barriers of appearance and age.

What can be done in this respect? Well, first of all managers should be aware of such stereotypical thinking and should promote non-stereotypical journalistic practices; MA programs on gender should be offered; faculties and research centres should be more active and more visible.

⁸Mihalea Miroiu. *Sex si maini, cap si muschi.* in Revista 22, Anul XIV, Nr. 784, 18-25 martie 2005

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