Gender and Media Coverage: 
An analysis of Mauritian Newspapers

Ragodoo NJF, University of Mauritius

“What women suffer, then, is more insidious than invisibility. It is deliberate erasure”
Louise Armstrong
(Social critic and author)

ABSTRACT

Background and Problem Statement

The under-representation of women in the media has been studied extensively in the developed world context: Women are rarely given professional coverage with regards to key business, political and economic issues, and this gender bias also extends to other spheres such as news, sports and leisure. This lack of representation of women has profound consequences on the image of women as competent leaders in society and as role-models. It leads to the perpetuation of the patriarchal mode and excludes female sensibility and insight in the decision-making process. Gender-based studies on media-coverage in the context of developing countries, however, are relatively scarce.

Objectives

The primary aim of this work is to analyse the media representation of women from a developing world context. For this purpose, a gender-based analysis of News coverage, professional interventions, participation in the political debate, and sports reports has been carried out. The extent to which women are utilised as a marketing tool in newspaper adverts, and the way they are portrayed as sex objects, are also analysed. In order to have to take a deep-insight into the present gender-coverage situation, the way women are portrayed in these reports has also been dissected as well.

Methodology

A three-years review (July 2008-June 2011) of the two popular weekly newspaper publications has been carried-out so as to have a clear picture of the present situation with regards to gender representation in economic, political and social spheres. In addition, a structured-interview schedule has also been applied to a representative sample of journalists so as to gather their views on the present media coverage of women.

Key Findings

What emerges out of this study is that the present newspaper coverage is much more tilted towards men than in the developed-world context. Women are virtually invisible in the economic and political debate, as well as in professional interventions and local sports reports. Even worse is the fact that, whilst men clearly have their voice heard on national issues, women are present mostly in reports on domestic violence, sexual abuse and family issues and are referred to as average citizens and rarely as experts. Also, newspaper reports portray women in a much more negative and degrading manner.

On the other side, even if journalists are conscious that men pre-dominate in terms of media coverage, they generally under-estimate the extent of this gendered media coverage and its biased contents, considering the present situation as being normal and reasonable.

Originality/ Value

This work contributes to the scarce literature on gender and media coverage in the context of a developing African country. It presents a clear picture of the actual situation, analysing the level of under-representation of women in specific areas. It also outlines the views of journalists on the present situation, and proposes important steps to move towards greater gender-equity in media-coverage in a developing-world context.

1.0 Introduction

In the contemporary information-globalised society, the mass-media plays an increasingly important role in the representation of men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. In the developed world, the under-representation of women in the media has been studied extensively. However, gender-based studies on media coverage in the context of developing countries are relatively scarce. This paper, therefore, contributes to the gender literature in the developing world by focusing on the current status of women as subjects in newspaper reports in the context of Mauritius, a rapidly developing African country.

2.0 Literature Review

The position of women in the political, economic and social spheres is constantly evolving, and the mass-media need to keep pace with this increasing participation of women in public life. However, In spite of the undeniable progress with regards to the participation and visibility of women in the public sphere, Jaworska and Larrivée (2011) point out that gendered conventions are still reflected in the media and that, in return, media reports are shaped by such conventions.

At the political level, for instance, research has showed that the media have tended to strongly differentiate...
the coverage of male and female politicians, using and reinforcing gender stereotypes (Kahn, 1992, 1996; Robinson and Saint-Jean, 1995; Ross, 1995; Bystrom et al., 2001; Gidengil and Everitt, 2003). It has been suggested that female politicians are less competent than their male counterparts (Serini et al., 1998; Gidengil and Everitt, 1999; Scharrer, 2002). This is shown in the ways in which descriptions, denominations, and qualifications apply to women in positions of power. In contrast to male politicians who are often portrayed as dynamic, female politicians are often represented as passive. Frequent references are made to their appearance, emotions, marital and maternal status, while their professional achievements are downplayed. The way in which they are addressed and named often denotes a familiarity that is not used with men (Lithgow, 2000).

In a study of the media misrepresentation of African women in politics, Anderson, Diabah and Mensah (2011) assert that African female political leaders are presented in a negative way by the international media, calling into question the credibility of these women as leaders of their nations. Several studies have shown that this gender stereotyping or biased reporting does not only affect female political leaders in Africa (Kahn, 1996; Gidengil and Everitt, 2000; Lithgow, 2000; Everitt, 2005). There are reports originating from both developed and developing nations that confirm the covert and sometimes overt biases that female political leaders in these different parts of the world suffer (Lithgow, 2000). Some of the studies have shown that such negative representations affect the voting patterns in these nations. That is, negative or limited media coverage of female candidates is correlated with poor electoral performance (Gidengil and Everitt, 2000).

On a more positive note, recent studies claim that the media have started to treat female political figures more equally. Everitt (2003), for instance, argues that contemporary national or large regional newspapers place less emphasis on gendered images due to the greater professionalism of journalists and the growing presence of women in politics. Kahn (1996) also shared the view that instances of biases and negative representation of female candidates have declined significantly in the media (especially newspapers with larger readerships) as a result of more professional reporting and sensitivity about gender biases.

Taking a broader perspective on the issue of media, power, and femininity by examining the coverage of and by women in the so-called women’s pages in the New York Times over the last 50 years, Cotter (2011) focuses on two news-discourse parameters: bylines and story topics. The diachronic analysis reveals a rather slow evolution in relation to the presence and coverage of women’s issues. While women’s stories have expanded to include more diverse roles and identities, females are still predominantly framed as mothers, wives, cooks, and consumers of fashion. Political roles, for instance, are less visible. This could partially explain the media ‘difficulties’ in positioning women in the realm of politics. Such a role does not simply have a place in the ‘traditional’ coverage of women in the media.

On the other side, research of sport media has continually shown that female athletes receive less media coverage than their male counterparts in both written coverage (i.e., Bishop, 2003; Bryant, 1980; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Fullerton, 2006; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991) and broadcast coverage (i.e., Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Billings & Eastman, 2003). Such studies argue that the underrepresentation of female athletes sends a hegemonic message that these athletes’ accomplishments are not as important as those of males. Investigating the portrayal of females in the U.S sport media, Fink and Kensicki (2002) demonstrated that females are given less coverage than male, and that the coverage given is more sexual in nature. An examination of textual and photographic coverage in Sports Illustrated found that the magazine portrayed female athletes as sex symbols through the use of photographs taken outside of a sport setting, the athletes wearing revealing clothing, and in some cases, the athletes fully nude with objects covering their breasts or other body parts. Thomsen, Bower, and Barnes (2004), on their part, focused on the photographs of females in magazines such as Fit, Shape, Sports Illustrated for Women, and Health. When they interviewed adolescent female volleyball players, it was found that the athletes used these photographs to construct concepts of body image and physical ability. This suggests that the photographic coverage of female athletes has an impact a societal level.

With regards to the gender dimension of news coverage, the situation is even worse. Exploring the coverage and portrayal of women in online news magazines, Yun et al (2007) found that highly-circulated news magazines devote only 3–5% of their articles to female news subjects. Liu Ping (2009), after a deep investigation of news programmes, came to the conclusion that, although “feminisation” emerged to some extent in post-modernism news reporting, gender inequality is still deeply rooted in the field of hard news and is leading to the marginalisation and weakening of the female voice. Liu Ping’s study showed that 70.5% of the audience investigated assumed that soft news programmes (characterised by the extended news reporting covering women's care and foster, philanthropy which are distributed by the family and the society, such as leisure, entertainment, fashion and consumption) should be covered by female presenters. But only 35% of the audiences thought the soft news should be responsible by male presenters. On the other hand, 29.5% of the audiences believed that hard news, namely the senior significant serious news, should be assumed by female presenters, while the percentage of the audiences who considered the hard news should be the male’s responsibility accounted for 65%. As such, most of the audiences accept the point of view that technology, legal, economic and other hard news programs should be presided by men, whilst the entertainment, leisure, life and other soft news programs should be covered by hostesses.

In fact, inadequate women’s coverage seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. In 2000 the Association of Women Journalists (Association des femmes journalistes – AFJ) studied news coverage of women and women’s issues in 70 countries. It reported that only 18 per cent of stories quote women, and that the number of women-related stories came
to barely 10 per cent of total news coverage. News talk shows are equally problematic. The White House Project (2009) reports that only 9 per cent of the guests on Sunday morning news shows such as Meet the Press and Face the Nation are women, and even then they only speak 10 per cent of the time—leaving 90 per cent of the discussion to the male guests.

In an investigation entitled ‘women professionals in the media’, the European parliament (2000) underlines the fact that the media plays an important role in the production of information, images and programmes having a strong influence on social behaviours. As such, the absence and invisibility of women in debates on key issues can have a negative impact on the involvement and commitment of the next generation of women. For this reason, the commission included in its proposals suggestions concerning the need to adopt measures aiming at equal participation and professional intervention of women on key economic and social issues.

On its part, the Eastern African Journalists Association, in a document entitled ‘enhancing Gender equality in the media in eastern Africa’ (2008), and basing itself on 10 country reports on gender study, clearly points out that much remain to be done to achieve gender equality in the way men and women are portrayed by the east African region. For the association, there is a clear bias in favour of men, given that the East African media is still male dominated, whether in terms of professional journalists (only 20% of women), or in the decision making mechanism. As a result, women issues are under-represented, given that male journalists are not interested in covering gender issues and these are not taken seriously. Gender equality is hardly considered newsworthy and, as such, men’s voices dominate in all the hard news. Based on the study carried out by the association, there was an overall consensus (100% of respondents) amongst journalists interviewed that gender portrayal in the media is heavily skewed in favour of men and that women are always portrayed as victims.

From the above, it is clear that, whether in the developing or the developed world context, media reports have been dominated by men over the years, and this heavily impact on gender relations in society. However it is essential to take a deeper into this under-representation of women in the media so as to be in a position to evaluate the extent of the imbalance in gender portrayal and the forms that it takes. This is the primary aim of this work.

3.0 Methodology

This study focuses on the representation of women in the media in the context of Mauritius, a rapidly development economy in Africa. Mauritius has an adult literacy rate of 87.9% (Indexmundi, 2009) and the press is viewed as an institution in the country, with more than 80% of adults having a favourable opinion with regards to the contribution of the press towards the Mauritian society (Media-Focus, 2010). In fact, the percentage of newspaper readers is also relatively high, with 80% of adults stating that they consult at least one weekly newspaper on a regular basis (Media-Focus, 2010).

For the purpose of this work, a three-years review (July 2008-June 2011) of two popular weekly newspaper publications (having a weekly average readership of 50%) has been carried-out so as to have a clear picture of the present situation with regards to gender representation in economic, political and social spheres. The critical discourse analysis has been applied to examine the way women are portrayed in newspaper reports. Critical discourse analysis is an approach which allows the description and interpretation of social life as it is represented in talk and texts. It focuses particularly on the relationship between power and discourse, studying the way in which ‘social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context’ (van Dijk 2001: 352). The critical approach to discourse aims to challenge social orders and practices that we accept as ‘natural’, but which are, in fact, ‘naturalised’; in other words, when one way of seeing and interpreting the world becomes so common (and so frequently constructed in discourses) that it is accepted as the only way. In casting light on this process, critical discourse analysts seek to make visible the ‘common-sense’ social and cultural assumptions (or ideologies) which, below the level of conscious awareness, are embedded in all forms of language that people use (Fairclough 2001).

Over and above the newspaper review, a structured-interview schedule has also been applied to a representative sample of journalists so as to gather their views on the present media coverage of men and women. For this part of the research, a mixed-methods approach has been applied (Puxty et al., 1987). This method helps to bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2004a). Proponents of mixed-methods research adhere to the compatibility thesis, sharing the view that both quantitative and qualitative research can be used in a single research only. They also share the philosophy of pragmatism, putting forward that researchers should use the approach or mixture of approach that works best in a real world situation (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The combination of methods also provide for complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses (Brewer and Hunter, 1989).

4.0 Findings and Discussions

With regards to news coverage, it is essential to point out at the very outset that women are depicted from a negative angle in an overwhelming majority of articles reviewed. Indeed, in 92% of articles whereby at least one woman was the main focus, a negative image of women was portrayed. This took a variety of forms, and ranged from fights between women involved in politics, women at executive or managerial levels misusing their position, to cases of theft, prostitution, embezzlement and infanticide involving women. Only in very rare cases were women portrayed from a positive angle in the news, and this generally had to do with women having been awarded a prize, or having been successful in business undertakings.
Such articles tend to portray these women as exceptions to the general trend of ‘intrude’ in a traditionally men’s domain. These reports inevitably reinforce the image of a patriarchal society where men are in control and dominate the business world.

In terms of ‘front-page’ visibility of women, this is also generally linked to a negative representation of women. Indeed, women were present in the front page in 75% of newspapers reviewed, and this presence on the front page was linked to a negative image in 91% of articles. It is important to point out at this stage that the most popular topics covered on the front page related to cases of infidelity, sexual harassment and deviant sexual behaviours. Women involved are portrayed in a derogatory way and the titles generally presented the situation in a funny and sarcastic manner, even if these occurrences were causing a lot of sufferings to those involved. Examples of such main headings read as follows:

‘A female police officer sexually harassed by her colleagues’
‘He finds his son having sex with his wife’
‘A 14 years old girl elopes with her uncle aged 35’

It is clear that such occurrences could have been treated in the interior pages, but are purposely placed in the front page (with photos illustrating the title) as these topics are likely to catch attention, and have the potential of influencing people to buy the newspaper. However, these titles are at times exaggerated and used as teasers to boost up sales.

Professional interventions

As far as women’s professional interventions are concerned, these were very scarce. Indeed, men covered some 92% of professional interventions in the papers reviewed. The 8% of women’s professional interventions had mainly to do with issues linked to society such as domestic violence, sexual abuse and family problems. Female doctors were also consulted at times with regards to women’s health, even if at this level too, men were omnipresent. Still, the interventions of professional women generally convey a message of powerlessness with regards to the degradation of the social fabric and the perpetuation of male domination in society. Through their interventions, the discourse of professional women underlines the fact that, in spite of all their commitment and dedication, they need to put in a lot of effort so as to face, and to compete against, an aggressive and competitive men’s world. There is a need for them to prove that they deserve to be where they are. As far as mainstream professional interventions on popular topics such as the economy, business and law, women were not consulted at all, and seem to be invisible. Less than 5% of such articles referred to women as consultants. Whenever they did intervene, women were also depicted in a far more cautious and defensive manner, as compared to men’s intervention, which were portrayed as being much more aggressive and full of self-confidence.

Participation in the political debates

Women’s visibility was clearly marginal in that sphere as well. In term of media coverage, only 9% of newspaper articles reviewed considered the opinion of women in the political debate. Still, when this was carried out, it generally lack the spontaneity characterised by men’s interventions and was reported in such a way as to suggest that they are impeding on the traditionally ‘masculine’ world of politics. Women’s loyalty to their party and to their leaders came first, and their ability to think for themselves was, as a result, underplayed. Thus, the credibility of these women as leaders was very often called into question, and their aspirations were depicted as being controlled by the glass ceiling preventing them from reaching the highest levels in politics, and depicted as such. However, it is also important to note that the political discourse, being constructed in stereotypically masculine terms, still consider the presence of women occupying key positions in the Mauritian political system as a new and innovative element. In fact, newspaper reports on women engaged in politics tend to focus on their personality traits in stereotypically feminine terms, as they are portrayed as wives, mothers and daughters. This is in line with the literature in the area (Sapiro, 1993) claiming that these traditional roles which women are assigned are usually not compatible with their participation in active politics. Thus, while the media coverage of men tend to focus on their political record and experience, that of women focuses more on their family relationships and appearance, drawing attention to the point that they are ‘female politicians’.

Sports

In line with the other themes already discussed, women are clearly marginalised in the sport reports as well. However, the magnitude of this marginalisation is phenomenal. Indeed, based on the newspaper reviews carried out, sports articles covering the sports results and achievement of women constituted only an average of one article in every 9 pages dedicated to sport reports in the newspapers under review. Over and above this quasi invisibility of women in the sports section, the way that female athletes are presented clearly sends a hegemonic message that these athletes’ accomplishments are not as important as those of males. Indeed, whereas the main headings are generally dominated by men’s performance, women’s achievements are only reported in sub-headings, or in the last paragraph of the articles. In terms of space occupied, two main sports get the lion share of coverage: Football and Horse-Racing. It is clear that these are primarily men’s domain. In terms of photographic coverage of male and female athletes, which is reported in the literature as having more influence on sports media consumers than textual coverage (Rowe, 1999), the massive presence of men and the invisibility of women is even more pronounced. The study found a 10:1 ratio in number of male to female photos, and is much greater than the disparity noted by Hardin et al (2002) and Duncan and Sayaovong (1990) whilst studying specialised sports magazines. At this stage, it is also important to mention the fact that women photograph displayed in the mainstream paper investigated were, in general, neither of a glamorous nature, nor sexually suggestive, as underlined in the literature by Duncan and
Sayaovong (1990) and Fink and Kensicki (2002). Images of this nature consisted less than 10% of the women’s photographs displayed. However, what was noted is that, whilst men’s photographs generally show athletes whilst performing, thereby emphasising the notion of strength, women were generally portrayed after the event, as being passive and smiling. This contributes to reinforce the traditional and gender-stereotyped image of men and women in society, whereby men are expected to be active and courageous, and girls expected to be passive.

Women as objects

From the newspaper review carried out, it can clearly be seen that the image of women are to a large extent being used for marketing purposes. Indeed, adverts displaying one main person were analysed, and the results are as follows:

Main person of the advert being a man: 7%
Main person of the advert being a child: 20%
Main person of the advert being a woman: 73%

As far as the products being marketed is concerned, the image of children was generally used for health products and services, insurance, educational materials, and security services. Men were mainly found in adverts offering professional training, banking services and house equipment/maintenance, whereas the image of women were associated with products such as cars, sports equipment and beauty/medical products, amongst others. A deeper insight also reveals that some 23% of adverts with women photographs were in fact marketing products/services aimed primarily at male consumers.

It is not only for the marketing of products and services that images of women are used. Indeed, a number of articles and pictures generally depict women as sex objects. In each publication of the weekly newspapers, there is at least two articles and/or two images depicting a women in a sexually suggestive way. These images are typically found in (i) the Movies section (ii) the fashion section and (iii) the Stars section, and are there for illustrative purposes only. They could easily have been replaced by less provocative images. However, it is clear that there is a marketing strategy behind the inclusion of these images, which portray women as mere sex-objects.

Views of Journalists on media coverage

Based on reports from journalists queried, it is clear that the latter are, in general, conscious that men predominate in terms of media coverage. However, when asked to rate the level of this inequality, they generally underestimate the extent of this gendered media coverage and its biased contents. The majority of respondents considered the ratio of this inequality as being of 3:1 in favour of men. Only 17% of journalists queried thought that the ratio of coverage was more than 5:1. This clearly shows that, even if they are aware of the fact that men are being given more coverage than women, they are not fully conscious of the magnitude of the over-exposure of men and of the invisibility of women. In fact, some 32% of the journalists queried even considered the present situation as being normal and reasonable. When asked about the possible under-coverage of women, journalists tend to shift the blame on women themselves, claiming that they are not involved in sports, societal issues and political debates, opting to focus on the domestic sphere. They also outline the fact that women professionals are generally less accessible than men, and tend to be over-cautious about statements made.

5.0 Conclusions and recommendations

From the above study, it is clear that women are massively under-represented in all the spheres investigated, whether with regards to news coverage, professional interventions, participation in political debates and sports. In addition, this study reveals that women were still being used as instruments for marketing purposes, and being depicted as mere sex objects in the media. This is inevitably contributing towards the replication and the perpetuation of the patterns of gender-based patriarchal domination. On the other hand, journalists do not seem to realize the extent of this under-representation of women, opting to shift the blame on women for their invisibility in the social, economic and political debates.

As such, it is essential to take the necessary measures are taken to remedy to this tilted and biased media coverage. The legal framework needs to be amended so as to ensure that women are given the opportunity to participate fully, bringing in their views and contribution in the on-going national debates. Representation and consultation of women need to be made mandatory before decisions on key national issues are made. As it is presently, even if women constitute the majority of voters at elections, their views are rarely taken on board, and they are still very much under-represented in the decision-making spheres.

Also, it is important that the code of ethics of publishers be reviewed so as to ensure that a fair treatment of women be emphasized. This is an essential in the sports coverage so as to promote the image of women involved in sports, and send the right message to the new generation. Else, the latter will lack role-models, and will lack motivation to take up sports activities. Reviewing the code of ethics will also be helpful in ensuring that women are not treated as sex-objects.

It is also essential to provide more gender-based training to journalists so as to provide the latter with the necessary tools to ensure that women are given a fair and balanced media coverage in the news. Through training sessions, journalists can also be made aware of the need to balance newspaper sales with a fair and objective reporting. Too often, journalists are tempted to write articles based on the demand of the readers. This can be prejudicial to the image of women in society.

It is clear that the present situation with regards to gender representation in the media will not change overnight. There is an urgent need for strong actions to be undertaken by women’s organisations to ensure that they are
given a fair treatment and provide with more media space to express their views. The fact that girls outperform boys in the educational setting has to be transposed to the media as well so as to improve the visibility of professional women. This flawed and under-representation of women in need to be dealt forcefully. The active participation of all stakeholders is needed in that process.

REFERENCES


