HOW ARE WOMEN DEPICTED IN NEWSPAPERS?

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Rezumat

Dat fiind faptul ca mass-media are un rol covarsitor in formarea opiniei publice, modul in care presa prezinta diverse categorii sociale influenteaza intr-o mare masura modul in care aceste categorii sunt privite in societate. Acest articol are scopul de a analiza cum sunt prezentate femeile in ziarele britanice. Pentru acest studiu au fost consultate editiile electronice din perioada 9 ianuarie – 1 februarie ale ziarelor *The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, Financial Times*, *The Sun*, *Daily Mail* si *The Daily Mirror*. Concluzia articolului este ca femeile sunt discriminate in presa britanica, atat prin felul in care sunt prezentate in cadrul articolelor, cat si prin numarul articolelor dedicate acestora raportat la numarul de articole dedicate barbatilor.

It is a well known fact that the press is one of the most important powers in the state. In Britain, for instance, two out of three people read a national newspaper regularly. What newspapers choose to print is of primary importance in shaping the way we view ourselves, our communities, our country and the world. Regularly newspapers tell us what to think. What we read is often talked about at home, at work or in the pub. Television and radio often follow the news agenda set by the press. Newspapers, therefore, play a crucial role in forming public opinion and describing social reality. For that reason, the way in which a category of people is depicted in newspapers will have an important influence on the readers. The aim of this article is to analyse how women are represented in British newspapers.

Nowadays more women work than ever before, more women are making an impact at all levels and there are more women MPs. But how well is this reflected by the newspapers? An analysis of the editorial pages of nine British newspapers conducted by advertising agency Publicis' Trends Group for Women in Journalism shows that photographic images of men dramatically outnumber those of women. And that while the men featured in photographs are more likely to be "professionals" and politicians, the women are more likely to be actresses, models and other "celebrities".

As R. Fowler points out in his book, *Language in the News*, there are several stereotypes related to women, that newspaper use: irrationality, hysteria, familial dependence, powerlessness and sexual and physical excess are attributes predicated for women.

According to the same book, marital and family relationships are often gratuitously foregrounded in the representation of women (sometimes women are wholly characterised in terms of family relationships), whereas men are not usually presented in such insistently domestic terms, but often have their professions or jobs mentioned. This seems to suggest that the public identity of women is felt to be dependent on their marital status, while men's identity outside the home and family is
more important.

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These are only a few examples of the discrimination of women in newspapers.
Starting from the assumption that such discrimination is widespread and can be readily detected in a critical reading of *any* newspaper one picks up, I am going to analyse a small sample, collected routinely without hunting for particularly dramatic examples, in order to illustrate it. To this purpose, I have consulted the electronic editions of six important British newspapers, three broadsheet newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian* and the *Financial Times*) and three tabloids (*The Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror*). All the articles belong to the January 9th – February 1st editions of the newspapers.

The Daily Mirror is a popular tabloid daily newspaper. According to Wikipedia (The Free Encyclopedia on the Internet), more recently it has attempted to concentrate on solid journalism rather than celebrity scandals - not always successfully.

On the main page of the electronic version of *The Daily Mirror* (the 9 January 2004 - 17 January 2004 edition) I found five pictures of men and only two pictures of women (Princess Diana and a pop singer).

The sports page does not cover any single female person, only typical male sports are covered (and thus only men) - soccer, rugby, box etc.

The article I've chosen from *The Daily Mirror*, *Soccer gang-rape case dropped*, by Andrew Cawthorne, is about a 17-year-old girl's allegations that she was raped by some football players. Every newspaper covers the soccer gang-rape, but this article is the only one that doesn't write a word about the girl's feelings (every other newspaper does), her disappointment, it doesn't even mention if she has now recovered from the shock or if this incident has affected her health. Also, it's the only newspaper I have found to say that the girl consented to sex (although the article says "*Newspapers, citing anonymous legal sources*, said the case collapsed because the players insisted the girl had consented to sex")

The article shows the whole matter as a problem for the image of English soccer and does not care about the persons' feelings (especially the girl's and her family's):
"The teenager's original allegation she was gang-raped by up to eight top soccer players on September 27 threatened English soccer with its worst ever scandal off the pitch."
The girl seems to be seen not as a victim, not even as a human being, but as an "object" that threatens English soccer.

The Sun is a tabloid newspaper which has, according to Wikipedia, the reputation that the quality of the newspaper's journalism is subordinate to the copious pictures of scantily clad young women in its pages. Its "page three girls" (erotic pictures of women) are famous. The paper contains scandalous and sports news and many articles about celebrities. Women usually appear either when they are celebrities, nude models or in articles about marriage problems (usually celebrity couples).

It is obvious that *The Sun*, even more than other newspapers, uses pictures of beautiful women in order to sell. The pictures of the "page three girls" make the readers see women as sexual objects and thus hinder them from recognising and accepting the real and important roles that women have, especially nowadays, in all walks of life.

Another case, that can be often seen in all media, is the use in advertisements of a combination of a woman's sex appeal and a product to buy: cars, digital cameras, TV sets etc. (maybe that is why expensive cars have come to be associated with beautiful, provocatively dressed girls). This combination can be interpreted in more ways. For instance, it can suggest that the woman can be bought like a product, or that she is less important than the product. In the case of expensive cars and beautiful women, there is already the belief that if you have an expensive car, you can attract or "buy" beautiful women.

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Another article from *The Sun* that I want to discuss is the result of a kind of contest for "party girls" who want to appear on *The Sun*'s page: "Want to prove you're Britain's top Party Girls?" This "contest" encourages young women to write about the way they enjoy themselves at parties and to send photos from such parties. The article I chose, *Inject Fun into a Docs 'n Nurses Party*, narrates how five young women dressed up as "saucy nurses" in outfits bought from a sex shop and went through some of the clubs in London, "showing off their bedside manners". Before leaving the house the girls "spent two hours downing strong Belgian beers". Then they went from club to club "exciting all the men" and thus getting free drinks from them. After drinking excessively they went to a club with a medical theme, where everybody could get a free drink provided they drank it from a syringe. There they "collected a ward's worth of sexy surgeons" and after behaving rather indecently in the club, they went home with their new partners to play their "own private games of doctors and nurses."

The message of this article is that (young) women's main preoccupations are how to look good and how to get a man. They seem to care only about what men think of them and would do anything to attract them.

The five women in the article, dress up in "tiny PVC nurses' outfits", drink too much and flirt with every man. In the end, they choose five partners with whom they go home and spend the night, but "kick them out" in the morning. This suggests that they are incapable of serious or long relationships. The text of the article and the erotic pictures of the women dressed as nurses and drinking alcohol from a syringe present them (and maybe to some readers present women or nurses in general) as being ready to "sell" themselves to any stranger who offers them a drink. The fact that the newspaper encourages and even praises and rewards such behaviour suggests that women are wanted to behave like that and they are seen as being shallow and incapable of strong feelings and serious relationships.

Searching through the articles of *The Sun*, I found one about new trends in fitness training, *Fitness fads for 2004*, by Sinead O'Neill. It is generally aimed at women and, therefore, featuring only pictures of women in the gym, dressed accordingly, and a picture of Jennifer Aniston (who seems to be a fitness fan), wearing a dress with a "daring" décolletage.

As the general content of *The Sun* would suggest that its readers are mostly men, the fact that this article is aimed at women seems to suggest that men don't need to get in shape or maybe it is meant to make men send their women to fitness centres.

Financial Times is a newspaper aimed at business readers.It features many pictures of persons but no woman can be found in 20 or so pictures.
This fact gives the impression that no woman is relevant to business. Women can be found among the columnists, but far from being on a par with men.

Daily Mail is a tabloid newspaper called, according to Wikipedia, by some columnists in the rival *Guardian, The Daily Misogynist* due to some of its columnists' anti-feminist slant.

It has a site for women (http://www.femail.co.uk/) which is generally libertarian, but it lacks depth. It offers horoscope, shopping links, beauty and fashion, celebrities and relationship articles, polls and quizzes. The articles used in this paper are taken from this site.

The first article, *Birth rate drops to the lowest ever*, by Jo Butler, is about the critical fall in birth rate in Britain. It says that this decrease in birth rate is unprecedented and it gives some statistics, comparing the birth rate in Britain with previous ones or with birth rates in other countries. The article warns the readers that such a situation will lead to great economic problems and there will be a population crisis. This decrease is generally due to the fact that

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women "are leaving it later and later before starting a family" and decide "to have children later in life." Also, studies have shown that "one in five women is likely to remain childless." Despite the falling birth rate, analysts believe the population will still rise in coming years, "fuelled by higher immigration."

The general mood of this article is that women are solely responsible for the fact that the birth rate drops: "women having an average of 1.64 children", "they [women] are leaving it later and later before starting a family". The word *woman* appears three times in the text, *women* seven times and *mothers* two times, whereas the words *man/men*, *husband* or *father* don't appear at all, the women's partners being mentioned only once: "women and their *partners*". It is true that women are those who give birth to children but this article gives the impression that women make the decision of having children and have children all by themselves, so if the birth rate falls only they can be blamed. The matter of children is seen as something that should concern only women, although this is an obsolete belief nowadays. In fact the decision whether or not to have children is taken by both partners, so mention of both should be made. Moreover, the article does not engage in further reflection on motives that couples can have for not having children.

Another article from *Daily Mail* that I want to discuss is about Shirin Ebadi, the winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize. Although winning the Nobel Peace Prize is a great achievement, the article about the winner is very short, made up of only five sentences. The headline, *Iranian lawyer wins Nobel peace prize* doesn't even reveal the fact that the lawyer who won the Nobel peace prize is a woman. The fact that she is a woman seems to me even more important in this particular case than in others, because Shirin Ebadi was the first female judge in Iran and she fights for women's rights in an Islamic country, where women are underprivileged. She is also the first Muslim woman to win the Nobel prize. The very short article fails to mention some of her major goals.

The Guardian is a serious broadsheet newspaper with liberal politics.

A quick search reveals the fact that the word *men* appears in the electronic edition of *The Guardian* 56545 times, the word *man* 93072 times, whereas the word *women* appears only 45103 times and *woman* 34576 times (*men* isn't included in *wo-men* and *man* in *wo-man*, as it is a word search).

The Daily Telegraph is a broadsheet newspaper, which takes a roughly central position on the authoritarian/libertarian axis.

A quick search reveals the fact that the word *men* appears in the electronic edition of *The Daily Telegraph* 41406 times, the word *man* 65194 times, whereas the word *women* appears only 30290 times and *woman* 22064 times (*men* isn't included in *wo-men* and *man* in *wo-man*, as it is a word search).

The article I've chosen from *The Daily Telegraph*, *Births fall as women 'hang on to good life'* by Sarah Womack, is another one about the unprecedented fall in birth rate in Britain. It has more or less the same content as the article from *Daily Mail*, but it doesn't concentrate only on women, mentioning also their partners. However, women, rather than both women and men, are blamed for the decrease in birth rate. According to the article, which is based on a survey, people consider children "later matters" and "mixed blessings with clear penalties for parents, especially *women*." This fall in the birth rate is due to the fact that "professional thirtysomethings want to enjoy the good life for longer" and the prospect of sacrificing a hard-earned quality of life makes them cautious. People nowadays try to accumulate as much wealth as possible to

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lessen the impact of children on their lifestyle. The report quoted by the article further says that "contrary to conventional wisdom, many thirtysomething *women* were not desperate for children" and "*women* said that if children were to enhance their relationship, there needed to be fewer 'trade-offs' between parenthood and lifestyle." The survey found out that "one in three *women* without children feared the impact of having a child on her career while 42 per cent worried about the effect on finances." Moreover, in response to the question "Do you think that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled?" fewer than one in eight British women said "yes".

Even from the headline it is clear that women are blamed for the low birth rate. They are seen as materialistic and selfish, caring more about having a "good life" than about children. It also seems that women see children as a burden which makes them sacrifice the quality of their life.

These articles confirm the fact that women are discriminated in British newspapers both by the way they are presented and by the proportion of articles about men to that about women.

There is no doubt that this attitude of newspapers towards women reflects society today, but it also works the other way around, that is discrimination in newspapers helps maintain intellectual habits that promote discrimination in practice.

Newspapers should avoid using stereotypes related to women and represent more accurately the growing role in society that women now play. The role of newspapers is to reflect the world around them and that means an accurate account of women's roles and relevance in all walks of life.

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