

Images of women in Serbian media

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The image of women in Serbian media during the Milosevic and post-Milosevic era is discussed in the following article. It includes the notorious role of TV Pink and its cultural impact on society in the 1990s, on print media dealing with problems such as trafficking, and the transition period, changes and challenges.

Serbian media worked in a particularly significant social and historical moment and it is certainly not possible to analyze all aspects of their work in one study. Therefore I concentrate on the main characteristics of this period and the main problems. A stereotyped image of subordinate women whose main attributes were 'feminine' directly or indirectly supported the portrayal of women in the media in issues like trafficking, without recognizing it as a violation of human rights. Media very often supported the spread of violence and crime in society, through uncontrolled advertising by suspect agencies or their indifferent attitudes and inability to define their role as a public service.

Trafficking, domestic violence and discrimination against women on different levels are just part of the problem that Serbian society and women confronted during the last fifteen years. To understand this problem, and more importantly to offer solutions, it is necessary to understand the socio-political and cultural context of Serbian society as well tradition and its impact on the collective awareness of the 'women problem'.

Although the status of women drastically changed in law in the last century, stereotypes still present in the contemporary socio-cultural context enabled transmission of violence and discrimination from generation to generation.¹ Discrimination is caused by specific cultural, social and political traditions and depends on the general level of development. In the context of Serbian society it is a consequence of all these causes and the liberation of women from stereotypical understandings is an ongoing process.

Woman was traditionally understood as one who was subordinate to her husband and his family, and remained so in law until the end of the Second World War. Women were unable to make important decisions, to dispose of property, or to act independently without the permission of a husband.² In spite of that, women were an important part of labour and production. Their work, especially in agriculture, had significant importance both for their families and society.

After 1946 the picture of the society changed and the number of educated women increased.³ From the 1980s and during the 1990s there were no significant improvements in employment in the public sector, which remained divided according to traditionally male occupations. According to statistics 54% of students in 1994-5 were female and their small presence in political and public life testified to the entrenched and unchanged structures that directed socio-political courses. Of 39 deans and directors of the Institutes at the University of Belgrade, only three were women, and in the Serbian Academy of Science and Art there were no women holding important posts.⁴

Since the collapse of the Milosevic regime, the picture of society has not drastically changed, but new problems have appeared. Women remain the majority of unemployed, but not for lack of education since in 2000, 58% of graduate students were women.⁵ This is certainly just a part of the problem in Serbian society where unemployment is generally high.

Significant efforts were made to promote human rights, mostly by non-governmental organizations in building awareness of existing problems that need to be solved. They tried to influence public opinion and social sectors, through different campaigns and to accelerate law reforms. The way in which the media covered and presented some of these problems indicates the deep crisis that is still not overcome. On the contrary, in the last decade it seems that the media were just supporting stereotyped images and turned a blind eye to violence, crime and discrimination.

Images of women in Serbian media in the 1990s

With the beginning of the civil war and the establishment of the Milosevic-era, Serbia entered a new period of its socio-political life. This period left deep consequences on society in general: it was a time when values and morals started breaking apart.

The rise of nationalism, militarism, war and economic crisis intensified violence against women.⁶ Women suffered in many different ways, as victims of war or domestic violence ? women shouldered the burden of the economic and social crisis.⁷ The media played a leading role not just in spreading propaganda, but also in promoting new cultural values for political purposes. Sanctions, crime and corruption strengthened the regime and enabled excellent media space for promoting desirable values and ideas. One of the regime?s most notorious TV stations ? TV Pink ? was a bearer of this mentality. The aim of this station, made mainly for entertainment purposes, was to promote a certain system of values, new aesthetics, and offered the picture of ?unreal life? to audiences as a means of psychological escape.⁸

The image of women embodied as ?folk-singers? insisted on the vulgar and aggressive erotic style. Turbo-folk as mutant music and a sociological phenomenon was created at a time of xenophobia and nationalism. Its impact was to create a false perception of reality and its representatives were often connected to criminal structures. A new fashion was established through these singers, who came to represent a ?new cultural elite?. The new image of woman in the 1990s promoted in the media was a devaluated image of woman as object, camouflaged by a glamorous life style. It soon began to influence commercials and music videos⁹ and even some TV journalists.

This fake, unreal glamour in the media did not match reality. Reality consisted of economic collapse, sanctions and galloping inflation that produced misery and a high rate of unemployment. The fact that the media promoted something that did not exist shows that this type of culture could only be created under conditions of fear and poverty. Some critics compared TV Pink videos with MTV, claiming that it was the same model promoting trash culture and commercialization.¹⁰ But TV Pink remained unique in its mixture of a provincial spirit, Western-style entertainment programmes and false glamour. It formed a specific ideology as a new life style that fitted perfectly into the existing political system. The purpose of this entertainment was to direct the attention of citizens away from the real problems and deep crisis.

Trafficking of women

In parallel with development of the new image of Serbian women in media another problem appeared: trafficking and prostitution. Serbia became not just a transit country in trafficking but a country of origin and destination. All over Serbia and Montenegro¹¹ many bars became centres for prostitution whose victims were women from South Eastern Europe.

Although this problem was known in former Yugoslavia, factors such as the destabilization of the country and its institutions, corruption, war, and the economic crisis made the Balkans a ?paradise? for this kind of crime. During the Milosevic-era and the lack of free media and journalism, information about this issue simply was not given to citizens. The existing moral crisis and the values spread by the media accentuated existing stereotypes and produced new ones especially on the problem of trafficking.

In a country where women were the majority of unemployed, with a high rate of domestic violence,¹² a black market and illegal employment developed in which employers very often did not pay taxes and contributions,¹³ women were forced to accept jobs in order to provide basic financial support for their families. In this situation many of them ended up victims of trafficking. In the 1990s many print media advertised agencies that offered suspect jobs abroad or in the country, using photographs of young girls and women in a pornographic style. These kinds of advertisements were common to almost all daily newspapers and were published together with

regular advertisements.

Transition: Same problems, new challenges

Following the democratic changes in 2000, the situation changed and the public became more familiar with some of these issues. Women's organizations in Serbia and Montenegro started campaigns against the war, domestic violence and trafficking. In 2002 trafficking became a political issue and state institutions took part in preventive and educational campaigns.¹⁴ Presentation of this problem in the media was more in the context of reaction to current affairs and according to an analysis of the press in 2002/3, the approach to this problem was 'sensationalistic with discontinuity in writing and inadequate terminology. Women trafficking was not recognized as a form of violence and exploitation. Women trafficking was not recognized as a social, political and domestic problem'.¹⁵

Lack of professionalism is apparent in the approach, in terminology, sensationalism, and stereotyped portrayal of victims, as well in the inability to recognize it as violence against human rights. These are some of the characteristics of how media treated this problem, without addressing politically or socially. In most of the articles victims were described according to their ethnicity with no clear distinction between prostitution and trafficking.¹⁶ This is one reason why all these cases remained in the category of scandal and daily affairs. They were not followed up and produced no reaction by the public.

The media in Serbia and Montenegro still have the same sensationalistic approach to important issues. Lack of analytical and professional journalism supported the development of a 'tabloid mentality', another phenomenon of the countries in transition. Increased tabloidisation, simplified ways of presenting news, maximum attention paid to celebrities, scandals, affairs, trivialities¹⁷ did not leave much media space for dialogue on important issues without politicising or manipulating them. Together this resulted in lack of adequate information and poor media ethics.

With the democratization of Serbian society there have been improvements in media coverage of certain problems compared to the situation under Milosevic, but this is a process that has just started. While society is awaiting law reform, it is of great importance to build a public space in the media that would develop awareness of certain issues. These include the issue of human rights and, as a part of it, violence against women and children, trafficking, and discrimination against women at different levels. Domestic violence, for example, needs to be recognized in public as a social problem and not treated as a domestic affair. But the Criminal Code System lacks sensitivity to domestic violence.¹⁸ Discrimination against women is still present in employment and, in many cases, women are forced to sign a statement that they will not get pregnant. The presence of women in other important institutions has not drastically increased.¹⁹

Political discontinuity in the democratization process led to old problems and cultural values taking another form but basically remaining the same. In that sense, the new democratic government and its representatives did not condemn the work and influence of TV Pink and its owner, who remained a powerful figure²⁰ and symbol of the Milosevic-era. On the contrary many came into business and partnership with this TV station.²¹

Therefore it is not surprising that the presentation of women and the media coverage of the above-mentioned problems did not drastically change. The media became more pluralistic, but democracy remained confused with anarchy and xenophobia.²²

In a Serbian society confused by democracy and an unstable political scene, reform is perceived as a threat and not as potential change of praxis. Many books and articles published in recent years offered yet another stereotyped image of women whose roles should be limited to their 'natural predispositions given by God'.²³ In Serbian society where issues of different forms of violence and discrimination are still not addressed as a huge political and social problem, it is easy to manipulate and apply this ideology. Even if it was meant as a critique of a contemporary

society, it remained an ideology that supports the 'status quo'.

Reforming the media to reform society

What is democratization meant to be and how is it applied in countries like Serbia? For men formal politics and economics this meant multi-party elections and a free market economy, but for women the reality was predatory capitalism, theft of national wealth, organized crime and loss of social rights.²⁴ The current situation in Serbia shows that it is still a battlefield of different ideologies, but even more so in a society with confused perceptions of democracy. Efforts made in the reform process show that improvements can be made in spite the crisis.

The image of women in Serbian society and the media has moved from the traditional one of mother and wife to the vamp object that serves men's desires in a men's world. In both cases she remains dependent and not recognized as a human being with the same rights as a man. She is a victim, but even worse, remains a victim by her 'natural predisposition', until society sees her differently. This is certainly a consequence of both the mentality inherited from the Milosevic-era and traditional stereotypes, which are found in Serbian society and the media.

In order to overcome deep-rooted injustice, the media have a crucial role to play in informing society and discussing issues of common interest. As long as they remain stereotyped, commercialized, sensationalised and manipulated, the media cannot contribute seriously to solving real problems. They will remain mirrors of a destabilized society, often impacting that destabilization by promoting misplaced values or simply creating indifference.

Notes

1. This includes stereotyped language, taboos, prejudices, and political discrimination, as well as the economical exploitation.

2. Although the 'institution of husband' was repealed after the Second World War, in rural areas some of these customs remained in specific forms, as a part and heritage of patriarchal tradition.

Mapping Misogyny in Serbia: Discourse and Practices, Beograd: AZIN, 2000, p. 259.

3. In 1953, 44,9% of women in central Serbia was illiterate, in 1991, 11% and they belong mainly to the older generation. In 1992, 30% of women obtained PhD degree. Blagojevic, Marina: Diskriminacija: neplaceno, potplaceno i potcinjeno, Mapping Misogyny in Serbia: Discourse and Practices, Beograd: AZIN, 2000, p. 487.

4. Ibid, p. 492.

5. Trgovina zenama: prirucnik za novinare, Beograd: Astra, 2003, p. 32.

6. SOS Hotline 1990-1993, Zorica Mrsevic and Donna M. Hughes: Violence Against Women - An International Interdisciplinary Journal, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 101-128. 1997. <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/sos.htm>

7. www.helsinki.org.yu

8. www.svetlost.co.yu

9. JUL (Yugoslav left wing party whose president was wife of Slobodan Milosevic) in one of its election campaigns on TV Pink advertised its party in videos using this recognizable image of young women in erotic and seducible style.

10. www.svetlost.co.yu

11. KFOR representatives in the early December stated that Kosovo Polje had become a prostitution and white slavery centre. According to available information both the Serbian and Kosovo mafia are involved in the international white slavery. But there are indications that some members of KFOR may as well be embroiled in that illegal trade. (Vecernje Novosti 2 December 2000). <http://www.helsinki.org.yu>

12. According to statistics every second woman is faced with psychological violence, every third is a victim of physical violence and some form of violence threatens every fourth. Trgovina zenama: prirucnik za novinare, Beograd: Astra, 2003, p.33.

13. www.helsinki.org.yu

14. Trgovina zenama: prirucnik za novinare, Beograd: Astra, 2003, p. 51.

15. Ibid, p.53 (translation of the author).

16. Ibid, p.60.

17. Tabloidisation of Media in Serbia, www.arhiv.co.yu

18. Mrsevic, Zorica: Criminal Code Report, <http://www.seeline-project.net/CCR/YugoslaviaCCR.htm>

19. The example of the Theological Faculty is interesting, because although women are allowed to study Theology, they are desirable more as a future 'catechists' in primary and high schools, and are rarely supported to develop their scientific and research activities, therefore the number of women employed at this institution is insignificant. This is a complex problem and reflects a traditional and patriarchal understanding of woman, in which for her is more appropriate to work with the children, accenting in this way her motherhood that 'naturally' puts her in a dependent and subordinated position.

20. This is also the case with many other businessmen who 'survived' October changes and camouflaged in the new political image remained powerful and kept their positions (such as the case of BK television).

21. That is why is completely normal to see one of the politicians in a criminal and half-pedophile milieu performing 'My way?', with ten half-naked girls on the scene in the age of thirteen. www.svetlost.co.yu (translation of the author).

22. <http://www.helsinki.org.yu/doc/reports/eng/Nationalism-post-October.zip>

23. An article 'Role of Orthodox Woman in Contemporary World' (Istina, Sibenik: Casopis Pravoslavne Eparhije Dalmatinske, 2002) translated from Russian, is one of many articles and books with the similar content and message published or distributed in Serbia. It provides many stereotypes, for example employed mother is recognized as a woman that is spiritually weak and ill, and usually does not have enough love for her children; no matter how her husband behaves (including violent behavior) a woman should not depart from him (unless for the unfaithfulness); complete fulfillment of woman's desires as well as her honor can be realized only in her modest and dependent position in the marriage; contemporary woman is losing her traditional attributes such as tenderness, sensitivity, obedience because of her engagement in traditionally man jobs, etc.

24. SOS Hotline 1990-1993, Zorica Mrsevic and Donna M. Hughes, Violence Against Women - An International Interdisciplinary Journal, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 101-128. 1997.

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