

## The Portrayal of Women on TV in South Africa

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Machel (1998) refers to the sex roles and gender roles of women. Sex roles identify the biological make up and difference between the male and the female. Gender is constructed socially and identifies the relationship between men and women in the context of power relations. Gender is not natural or god-given, but is created by society through socialisation, using institutions such as the family, the church and religion, school and education, and the state and laws. Gender relations can therefore be changed by the very society that created them. Gender roles exist in all spheres of society starting with the division of labour in the family. Women are usually allocated the role of domestic chores as if it were natural for them to do this. This work is hidden and not paid for. For most women in this country, domestic chores are additional to the work they do outside the house. This means that women have very little spare time. These socially determined roles for men and women are culturally or socially created and are given the status of being natural and normal as if they "have always been" and "will always be." From these gender roles, certain characteristics, that are a reflection of what it means to be male or to be masculine, are expected of men while other characteristics are attributed to women as a reflection of their femininity. For example, men are supposed to be natural leaders, decisionmakers and providers in society, beginning within the family, while women are the caregivers, supporters and followers of men.

### **Gender Relations**

Gender and gender roles define the way women and men behave in society and in relation to each other, the way in which they perceive themselves and their attitudes. Gender relations affect the unequal power relations in society, the essence of which is the domination of men and the subordination of women. These gender relations structure the roles of men and women, shape the ideas, knowledge, values, culture, attitudes, structure of society and, in essence, social life itself, and are reinforced in books, history, stories, songs and the media.

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy, based on these socially constructed notions of gender, gender roles and gender relations that we have discussed above, is the system of male domination and control at all levels of society. It is reproduced through a web of laws and private and public institutions such as the family, religious and traditional beliefs, practices and norms. It is also reproduced through ideological apparatuses such as the school, education in general and the media. Violence against women is an expression of an extreme form of reinforcing patriarchal control of women. In South Africa, while there is the overwhelming system of patriarchy, different women experience different forms of male domination and oppression according to their class, status, religion, race and even ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example, white, middle class women will experience patriarchy differently from rural African women.

### **Different Approaches to Gender**

There are different approaches to gender depending on different understandings of inequalities and how to overcome them. These approaches are:

- a gender blind approach
- a women specific approach
- a gendered perspective

The first two approaches are limited in their perspective and cannot adequately address the problems of gender inequality. The ANC subscribes to the third approach, a gendered perspective, which more concretely understands the context in which gender inequality exists, and has the capacity to develop programmes to dismantle gender oppression.

#### *A gender-blind approach*

In this approach, all human beings are viewed as the same and are seen to be deserving of the same treatment. In other words, society should be dictated to by universal laws and values.

#### *A women-specific approach*

This is complex. It can sometimes be progressive, liberal or conservative depending on how it is used, who uses it and for what purposes. Women are viewed as a special category in this approach deserving special treatment in order for them to enjoy equality with men. This approach exists in many different forms, for instance, a welfare approach and an equality of opportunity approach.

##### *(i) A welfare approach*

This says women need specific inputs. If taken alone in the long term this will further disempower women since it ignores intellectual and cultural capabilities, individuality, creativity and sense of responsibility.

##### *(ii) A equality of opportunity approach*

This focuses on the creation of opportunities for women to enter the spheres of authority, power and control. Fairness and equity are seen only as the springboards to enter the male domain without necessarily changing the status quo in terms of power, power relations, dominant ideas and values. This approach wants women to engage in masculine activities in a masculine world.

#### *A gendered perspective*

This approach does not look at men and women alone, but at the relationship between them, how societies are structured along gender lines, and the impact of these relations as a whole in society. It explores the subordination of women to men and how this relationship impacts on all aspects of life and society. A gendered perspective is concerned with ensuring a gender analysis with regard to policies, programmes, planning strategy and evaluation. In other words, it looks at fundamentally transforming unequal power relations and changing society.

### **Towards a gendered perspective**

In a recent discussion document Machel (1998) states, "The practical gender needs that are addressed have to take place in the overall context of an endeavour to transform the status quo. That means that the voice, knowledge and experience of those previously marginalised must be found at the centre of operations. The values and culture, the attitudes and traditional practices and all the unequal power relations between men and women must be systematically changed." Gunter (1996) divides stereotyping into sex roles stereotyping and sex trait stereotyping. Sex roles stereotyping reflects changes in beliefs about the family, child care, the role of women in marriage and a

possibility of self performance through work. In the world of television women tend to be confined to a life dominated by the family and personal relationships, outside the home as well as in it. He quotes the study by McNeil in which 75% of men are depicted as employed whereas less than 50% of women are employed (1986, 11). The sex trait stereotyping on the other hand, Gunter argues as reflecting more commonly held stereotypes about women's characteristics, e.g. women are more emotional than men. But the word "emotional" is not used in association with aggression or dominance, it is more often than not used in reference to the neuroticism commonly associated with women and femininity. Examples of these forms of stereotyping can be seen in many forms of programmes. Daniel Learner (1958) believed that mass media, especially the radio and television, not only conveyed information but assisted with the changing of behaviors and attitudes of people. It was Wilbur Schramm (1996) who built on this and believed the role of mass media and its power to disseminate information could enhance the lives of people in a meaningful and humane manner. Singhal and Rogers, felt that information was a vital ingredient in moving a nation towards development (1989, 205). This was done through the media, where directed social changing of society was intended to cause both social and material advancement, including greater equality, freedom and other socially valued qualities for the majority of people through their gaining greater control over the environment.

The strategy used for current mass media programs has increasingly looked at the genre, entertainment education. According to Singhal and Rogers (1994, 382) this versatile genre has its roots thousands of years ago in origins of fairy tales and mythology. Some people call this symbiosis of education and entertainment, *edutainment*

(Myers, 1996) as it focuses on the impact of entertainment to both entertain and convey an educational theme. Nariman (1993) defined *edutainment* as a process that reinforces values, attitudes and behaviours that viewers can use to their own personal advancement. The soap opera or television novel originated from the earlier radio novels and the radio soap operas that flourished in the nineteen thirties and forties. Soap companies sponsored these programs if advertisements were shown between the programs. The advertisements were successful and the selling of the products escalated. Besides being entertained, soap opera viewers were simultaneously engaged in programming and advertising which definitely affected the behaviours of people. Soap opera viewer's interpretations acknowledged that the messaging results in social and economic change and they can therefore apply the messaging to their lives.

Albert Bandura explains the social learning theory: "social learning theory approaches the explanation of human behaviour in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural and environmental determinants. Within the process of reciprocal determinism lies the opportunity for people to influence their destiny as well as the limits of self-direction. This conception of human functioning then neither casts people into the role of powerless objects controlled by environmental forces nor free agents who can become whatever they choose" (1977, vii). Tan states attitudes, values, perceptions and behaviours of man are response tendencies because they are all

reactions to external stimuli (1985, 243). He describes the impact and value of social learning theory on communication. The main determinant of learning is reinforcement and incurs when man learns from direct experiences and from observation of modelling. Human thoughts, affect and behaviours are markedly influenced by observation according to Bandura (1977).

Modeling, either alone or associated with corrective feedback, is a determinant and plays a prime role in spreading new ideas and social practices within society. This theory is particularly relevant to mass communications because many behaviours are learnt through modeling observed in the mass media. Television gives its audiences great opportunities for observational learning experiences through role models. The learning performance distinction is a key to success in the social learning theory. The viewers tend to emulate certain role models, be it positive prosocial behaviour or antisocial behaviour (Singhal & Rogers 1989).

Only then will proposed change come into effect. Changing attitudes is fundamental, and the importance of attitudes as a predisposing condition to behaviour in communication situations plays a pivotal role. The contribution of television reinforces pro-social attitudes and behaviour. It is important that tradition values are portrayed in the soap operas so as to subtly convey both an entertainment and an education theme in some aspect of development. Myers (1997) feels messaging has to be perceived, understood, accepted and incorporated into people's own lives.

#### **Background and Aim of Research**

In April 1995 the author was project leader for a research project jointly embarked upon by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the South African Broad-casting Corporation (SABC) and the Vaal Triangle Technikon to do research on the portrayal of women on South African television. The aim of the study was to determine how women are portrayed on television, specifically channels TV1 and CCV. The research comprised three phases:

1. The recording of TV1 and CCV broadcasts during pre-determined time slots with substantial audience ratings (ARs)
2. Eight focus group discussions with approximately ten persons (television viewers per group) to probe their opinions and impressions regarding the portrayal of women on television
3. The design of a categorisation system for content analysis to study the portrayal of women on television

The group discussion phase was designed to probe the opinions and impressions of the respondents regarding the portrayal of women on South African television. Group discussions were held in the group's home language and gender was used as a divider. During these sessions the respondents opinions and impressions regarding the portrayal of women on South African television were probed. The results obtained by means of the focus group discussions were utilised for the design of a quantitative and qualitative analysis system. This entailed the development of a general model for analysis, establishing a categorisation system for each of the presentation formats or programme types involved, data sheets, coding lists and coding guides. Eight Coders were trained to use this analysis system to analyse various programmes that were video-recorded in phase one. The Coders were male, female and of four different language groups.

### **General Research Design and Procedure**

The sample of television programmes analysed consisted of six weeks of broadcast television, analysed and coded by a team of eight persons. Before the actual analysis all Coders were required to pass a training course. The training consisted of in-depth discussions of the aim of the study, the content categories to be used, and the definition of programme types. These were followed by the analysis of selected training material (video recordings covering a spectrum of programme contents), comparisons of the results of the Coders' analysis and further discussions of the Coders' interpretation of the categories and definitions used.

Upon completion of the training session, the viability of the categories used and the coders' utilisation of these categories were tested by means of an inter-coder reliability study. Once the training and reliability study had successfully been completed, the actual analysis of the programmes in the particular sample started. A separate data sheet was used for every programme.

#### *Sample of Television Programmes Recorded*

Recordings on weekdays (totalling 6 hours per day)

Recordings on weekends (totalling 3 hour per Saturday and per Sunday)

1. Dramas/stories and advertisements - which is divided into three subcategories, namely work environment, family environment and social environment.
2. News and actuality programmes - where distinction was made between the presenters and the participants.
3. Other programmes - which was also divided according to presenters and participants.

### **Results of the Content Analysis Phase of the Research**

#### *Dramas*

From the statistical analysis of this sample it was clear that more females than males featured in dramas on both TV1 and CCV. The majority of the female characters portrayed in dramas were between 18 and 35 years of age, married with children of their own. In the dramas the majority of female characters were portrayed in a family environment, second in a work environment, and then in a social environment.

*Work environment:* Women in the work environment were presented as highly competent and powerful, slightly more so in TV1 dramas than in CCV dramas.

*Family environment:* 50% of the TV1 dramas were coded as *portraying unhappy family situations*. In the family situation again most of the females portrayed positive role models, coded as "caring," "loving," "determined" etc. Where applicable the relationships with partners, children, relatives and friends were usually friendly.

*Social environment:* Female role models in the social sphere were mostly positive, although some females in this environment were described as presenting negative role models, being liars, promiscuous or hostile.

#### *Advertisements*

The majority of the women in advertisements were portrayed in the family environment slightly less in the social environment and least in the work environment.

*Work environment:* Women's relationships with men and women in advertisements were mostly coded as "not acceptable." The female role models in the work environment were overwhelmingly positive in advertisements - women were described as positive, professional, intellectual and skilful.

*Family environment:* This was portrayed as happy and the females were portrayed as highly competent and powerful. The relationships with partners, children, relatives and friends, were applicable, mostly friendly. The female role models in the family environment were also very positive - they were described as efficient housewives, loving mothers, caring wives etc.

*Social environment:* Females were rated as highly competent and with average power. The dress of the females were casual and smart. They were also very eloquent. Relationships in general were friendly. Females as role models in the social environment were regarded as positive.

#### *News Programmes*

There were approximately the same number of females and males presenting news on TV1 although there were more male presenters on CCV.

*Presenters and co-presenters:* On TV1 there were more presenters that were coded as eloquent and friendly towards their colleagues and audience than on CCV. Presenters and co-presenters of news programmes on both TV1 and CCV were regarded as positive role models. They were seen as professional, competent, inspiring, pleasant and committed.

#### *Actuality Programmes*

There were more male presenters and co-presenters presenting actuality programmes than females.

*Presenters and co-presenters:* Female presenters were coded as being highly competent, powerful and were seen as positive role models.

*Female characters in actuality programmes:* Most of the actuality discussions where female characters featured were associated with the work environment. The competence of female participants was rated as high.

#### *Other Programmes*

There were more male presenters in other types of programmes.

*Presenters and co-presenters:* Female presenters of these other programmes on TV1 were regarded as being as competent as men, while on CCV 62% were equally competent to men and 31% were more competent.

*Female characters:* The female characters in other programmes were coded as being average to highly competent.

From the results of the group discussions and content analysis it was apparent that women were generally perceived to be portrayed positively on TV1 and CCV, on a par with men. In the *group discussions* (especially in the male groups) it was stated that the female body was still exploited and that men were still better hosts and announcers. It was, however, agreed that portrayals of women have progressed from featuring them as housewives to featuring them as professionals and that television now tends to reflect accurately women's role in South Africa. Interesting was the finding that women in news and actuality programmes, as well as in dramas and stories, were seen as the victims rather than the perpetrators of violence.

With regard to *stereotyping*, some responses indicated that women were stereotyped as people belonging in the kitchen and bathroom, for example in soap advertisements. In competition and music programmes women were also seen as decorative accessories only. In dramas women were sometimes stereotyped as housewives, prostitutes and materialists.

From the *content analysis* it was evident that women in *dramas and advertisements* were mostly portrayed in a family environment and less in a work or social environment. Ingham (1998) states the most watched, and perhaps influential, genres of television viewing are advertisements and soap operas and it is these two forms of television that viewers focus on. She quotes figures which show that in television drama women are out numbered by men 3:1 or 4:1. In cartoons women are out numbered 10:1 and in soaps women are out numbered by as much as 7:3 which is quite surprising when one considers that this genre of television viewing has a very high proportion of the female audience. Even children's television is dominated by males 70-85%. She also goes on to say men dominate the production side of television so it is hardly surprising then that the masculine patriarchy ideology is presented as the norm when women are so out numbered by men on the screen and behind the screens on television. Television

stereotyping occurs in relation to various roles in which men and women are portrayed, and also has a connection with the personality attributes that are displayed.

Trowel found women are more likely to appear in personal hygiene products, 75% of all adverts using females were for products used in the bathroom or kitchen, 56% of women in adverts were shown as domestic housewives, and only 18 different occupations were shown for women in comparison to 43 for men (1998, 96). Ingham figures advertising as prescribing the role of women as being very much a family and home oriented one. She also states that when women are shown in a position of power in advertisements it is often portrayed as being unnatural.

In a large number of advertisements women are seen as housewives or sex objects. The majority of soap operas are set in a domestic situation because the home is the place where women's expertise is supposedly valued, and it is also a place of comfort. In the more glamorous American type soap operas women of all ages use their sexuality to gain power. In middle-age, women are presented much more frequently as being desirably sexualant in comparison to those in the more domestic soaps.

Ingham states that while television can be said to reflect the changing roles of women, tending to portray them in a light of approval or disapproval, positive or negative according to the roles that patriarchy favours, the housewife is favoured, while the woman in power is often shown to be the villain. More importantly women are often represented as not being so intelligent as men and having to rely on them. A woman is often either intelligent or beautiful, but rarely both. It is important to note also the effects that these portrayals have on people.

In the sample of *news broadcasts* analysed there were approximately the same number of male and female presenters on TV1, while on CCV there were more male presenters. In the group discussions the women reading the news broadcasts were described as well balanced, well dressed, spontaneous, professional, confident, talented and fluent. Only a few individuals in the group described the female news presenters as unprofessional or incompetent. The mostly positive group responses corresponded with the results of the content analysis where female news presenters were coded as positive role models.

A study carried out by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) looked at the front page coverage or prime time viewing of three daily newspapers, five radio stations and three public television channels over the period 17 -21 July 1996. It found that fewer women are reported in media items than men, and that male reporters are more likely to report on political and labour issues than females. 82% of those shown in the survey were men. Men are more likely to be talked about to be interviewed or be represented as doing diverse everyday actions. Women are featured as victims. With regard to subject matter, 93% of those represented in the political category were men, and the nature of women's issues covered were very similar to those of a study on "The Portrayal of Women in the South African Electronic Media" carried out by Media Watch. The findings suggest that violence against women, health and reproductive issues, as well as women's empowerment, received the greatest attention in mainstream media.

The CASE study also examined 163 advertisements. It found that 31% of people in the advertisements are female compared to 80%

in non-commercial media items, reflecting the fact that women are the largest single consumer group, and women were more likely to be represented in the domestic sphere as housewives (24%), daughters (11%) and mothers (9%). On the other hand men were generally shown in the public sphere as decision-makers (15%), political personalities (13%) and professionals (8%). As a result of the findings of the research of "The Portrayal of Women on TV" the CASE study found that 21% of front page and prime time coverage was on the empowerment of women, compared to 4% on fashion and beauty. This is a very encouraging sign as this was all in 1996 after the research findings had been published. It suggests pressures are being successfully exerted on SABC programmers. There is still a long way to go before women and men have equal air-time but the basis has been laid.

### **Conclusion**

It is most important to question how real the representations of women are on television and how this affects the attitudes of those who watch? In the content analysis report it was noted that there were more male presenters and co-presenters of *actuality programmes* on TV1 and on CCV than female presenters and co-presenters. There were also more male participants in *actuality programmes*. There were approximately the same number of female and male participants on TV1, but more male participants on CCV. In the group discussions reactions were negative towards those music programmes where women were badly portrayed, improperly dressed or boring. Whilst some individuals in the groups described women as professional and competent in competition programmes, there were many negative comments regarding the role of women - mainly that they were exploited in these programmes. *Suggestions* on what changes can be made with regard to the role of the women on TV: it was suggested in the group discussions that the women's bodies should not be exploited in advertisements, music programmes, competition programmes and in some dramas. With regard to news broadcasts and *actuality programmes* it was suggested that women should be involved more actively, and female issues should also be discussed more frequently.

In a submission to the Commission on Gender Equality during its information and evaluation workshop in May 1997 the Institute for Advancement of Journalism made the following observation on the kind of stereotypes that are reflected in the media and advertising.

*The images:* Women are often not seen in the South African media and advertising agencies. Women are merely decorative images to sell items. Certain women such as those with disabilities and rural women are almost completely invisible.

*News values:* One reason for the invisibility of certain categories of women is the refusal by the South African media to accept development as a national news story.

*Language:* Women are all too often called girls in the South African media. Important female figures are spoken of as the wives of someone else. For example, when actress Dorothy Lamour died the British Broadcasting Corporation called her a "talented comedian and actress." The South African Broadcasting Corporation described her as a "sexy side kick of Bob Hope and Bill Crosby." The South African media is especially an old white boys club. In management courses run by the Institute for Advancement of Journalism the proportion of women participants is always lower than 25%. I should like to conclude with these words spoken by President Nelson Mandela at the opening of South Africa's first democratically elected parliament in 1994 and which underscore



the seriousness which the government of South Africa takes the issue of gender equality.

It is vitally important that all structures of government including the President himself should understand fully that freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. All of us must take this on board, that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) will not have been realised unless we see in visible and practical terms that the condition of the women of our country has radically changed for the better and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society.

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