

Gender equality, media and democracy in Italy.

Current research on gender analysis illustrates that gender equality in news media is still a goal to be fully achieved. Within global contexts, only 24 per cent of the people present in the print, radio and television news are female. On the contrary, 76 per cent of the people in the news are male¹. In the contemporary context, news media have a great impact and influence over public opinion and policy agenda, as they are the major source of information and knowledge about issues and events. If news media can be described as a mirror of the world, it is also true that news media have the power to shape, reinforce and influence how people see the world and, therefore, how they act within it. Owing to this, there is an imperative need to provide more gender-balanced and inclusive news media.

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate how gender inequality in news media can contribute to bring and reinforce gender inequality more generally. In particular, this thesis will attempt to illustrate how the under-representation of women and their stereotyped portrayal in news media can undermine both the construction of gender identity and the quality of democracy.

This thesis has been developed in the following way. In the first chapter, a general theoretical background of the relationship between media and gender has been provided. In particular, three concepts have been illustrated: the concept of culture as life style together with the concept of ideology developed by Luis Althusser; the concept of identity as described by Stuart Hall; finally, the role of gender identity in the decoding process of news media. In the second chapter, considering a specific area, Italy, and a period of time between 2005 and 2010, quantitative data have been discussed in order to demonstrate how there is a persistent gender inequality in news media.

In the third chapter, taking in consideration the relationship between media and gender and the existing under-representation of women in the media as described in the previous chapters, the political and social consequences of gender inequality in the media have been discussed. Finally, the last part of this thesis has attempted to provide the possible solutions in order to promote a better and more inclusive representation and participation of women in news media.

¹ Global Media Monitoring Project 2010, Global Report, p.9.

What is included, excluded or distorted in the media regarding gender issues counts. Indeed the relationship between media and gender shows that the media can have a great impact over the social construction and comprehension of gender identity and differences. But, at the same time, the power of mass media is not absolute. The very gender identity can contribute to create a particular way of decoding which can be in contrast or according to the meaning created by media producers. Owing to this, it is possible to say that the relationship between media and gender is a delicate relationship of mutual influence.

The first train of thought and research which had studied the relationship between media and gender has been the one of the Cultural Studies. Within the Cultural Studies, for the first time the media were considered as frames of social knowledge. That is to say that the media were considered as cultural elements which could contribute to the knowledge and interpretation of reality. According to this conceptualization of the role of the media, researchers within the Cultural Studies started to study how mass media could influence the construction of gender identity. Especially, three particular aspects developed within the Cultural Studies have been useful in order to understand the relationship between media and gender.

The first aspect concerns the concept of ideology elaborated by Luis Althusser. Thanks to the contribution of Althusser together with the attention of the Cultural Studies towards the political implications of culture, the media were believed to contribute to legitimate a particular set of dominant ideas. Because news media are considered as an objective description of reality as they rely on data and facts, it is easy to consider what is portrayed in them as something real and, especially, normal or natural. Owing to this, researches started to think that mass media have the power to legitimate, reinforce and spread in an implicit way a particular set of values and ideas that place women in a subordinate position. The dominant patriarchal culture present in society is, therefore, legitimated and reinforced through the presence of gender stereotypes in the media.

The second aspect regards the thought of Stuart Hall, thanks to which gender stereotypes were considered to have also the power to shape and strongly influence the development of gender identity. Indeed, according to Stuart Hall, the way people frame their

personality and identity is an always changing process which can be deeply determined by discourse and practices of representation through exclusions and inclusions. That is to say that a discourse completely masculine and the use of stereotypes not only fail to convey a more equal and sensitive narration of women, but also they have the potential to determine how women frame their identity. Consequently, gender identity and the comprehension of social differences between men and women are perceived only through a male perspective and point of view. Therefore, not only the way people see women and their social role is influenced by the media, but also the way the women themselves perceive and shape their gender identity.

Finally, even if the media can exercise a great power over the development of gender identity, it is also true that the gender identity itself can contrast the meaning conveyed by media producers and by the dominant culture. Related to this, it has been useful the research of Dorothy Hobson who has studied how women can decode the male made news and programs. Her research has showed that gender identity can determine the kind of programs to watch and also the decoding process which is not always in line with the message conveyed, but it can be also opposite and creative.

As a consequence, considering the relationship between media and gender and how personal identity is framed by what is heard and seen, it is important to investigate how individuals are portrayed and represented in the media. There are, indeed, discourse practices and structures that can deeply undermine the subjectivity and the individuality of people. Thus is important to analyze and consider quantitative data in order to comprehend how people are represented in news media. In order to do so it has been useful the contribution of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP).

The GMMP is a program born in 1995 with the aim to provide good and accurate data in order to raise consciousness and awareness at the national and global level regarding gender inequality in the media. Taking in consideration the Italian context in a period of time between the 2005 and 2010, only the 19% of people present in news media were women. Women are practically invisible in news regarding politics, economics and foreign affairs, on the contrary they gain more visibility in news regarding science, sanity, crimes and violence, celebrities and arts. Instead, considering the way women are portrayed, in the majority of the cases women are often represented in the domestic sphere

as wives and mothers, but rarely as experts, professionals or leaders. Furthermore, women are portrayed more often than men as victims.

However, the overall scenario presents also positive aspects. Indeed the number of female journalist has risen and it has been observed that there is a positive correlation between a major number of women journalist and a major and better representation of women in news media. It is important to say, though, that female journalist in Italy continue to deal with soft news, failing to offer a female perspective in political and economic issues.

Taking into consideration the quantitative data observed, the under-representation of women in the media can be explained through two kinds of interpretations: the first one contemplates exogenous factors, the second one, instead, considers endogenous factors. According to the first interpretation, the media simply reflect the reality of the world. That is to say, that gender inequality in the media is due to the low participation of women in the political and social sphere. Even if it is true that in Italy there is still a long path toward a full gender equality in society, it might be too reductive to ascribe the under-representation of women in the media to the social context. Indeed, it is also true that the media, through the use of stereotypes and a kind of discourse excluding female perspective not only leads to an under-representation of women in the media, but also contributes to legitimate and reinforce the asymmetry already existent in the society. Gender stereotypes constitute an obstacle for the full development of women's capabilities and opportunities as they confirm social prejudices and expectations about the subordinate role of women in society.

Thus, considering the under-representation of women and their stereotyped portray in news media, which are the consequences of such gender inequality in news media regarding how women perceive their identity and their role in society? In which way the political and democratic life of a nation can be influenced when a part of its population does not have a "voice" and a fair and equal representation?

Through the media, women learn which are the appropriate behaviors, interests, roles and expectations that the others have towards them for being women. There are two possible responses to the representation of women in news media. The first one sees

women following the path drawn by the media. For instance, women may perceive that their role in society mainly concerns the domestic sphere and that there are other roles, such as the role of leader or politician, which are surely important but, at the same time, *non appropriate* for them. Indeed, statistics show that only the 53,6 per cent of women is interested in politics against the 68,5 per cent of men. What is not represented becomes something which cannot even be thought. For this reason it is important to underline how stereotypes can deeply undermine the possibilities and potentialities of women.

On the other hand, women may not accept their portrayal made by the media. Therefore, they make their own interpretations and reactions. Indeed, women may not accept the traditional roles through which they are portrayed, but they decide to fulfill positions related to power and leadership. But it is interesting to observe how, also in this case, women are led to change part of their identity: their body. The sociologist Kathleen Jamieson was the first one to underline a particular paradox, called *double bind effect*, which occurs every time women compete in order to play roles of leadership. According to Jamieson, women with the aim to gain consensus and credibility for their role, they have to take male attitudes and characteristics. But when they do so, at the same time they are strongly criticized because they are considered to be too aggressive and little feminine. Moreover, the long and hard process of acceptance women are put through is also aggravated by a more severe criticism and judgment about their capacity of knowing how to conciliate work and family together. The same problem seems to not even belong to men.

On the other hand, it is possible to examine the consequences of such gender inequality in news media concerning the quality of democracy by analyzing the role of the media themselves in society. Indeed, the media play an influential role in society as they are considered the most important sources of information and thanks to them citizens can control the conduct of their representatives and they can participate in the political life in a more conscious and active way. Furthermore, the media can contribute to create a public sphere where everyone potentially can participate in order to express and discuss opinions, ideas and critiques. In this very last aspect it is possible to understand the importance of an appropriate representation of women in news media. Indeed, if women's

point of view is constantly limited, stereotyped and sometimes even invisible, how can women's interests and opinion be taken into account? Is a real democracy the one which does not allow one part of its citizens to express themselves ? If women do not have equal voice in the media with men, and, most of all, if they do not have a representation adequate to their role and participation in society, the quality of public and political debate can be deeply undermined. The general interest, which the political competition attempts to identify and defend, cannot be fully considered as general as it is only the expression of a particular, not inclusive and masculine interest. As a consequence, it goes without saying that the media have a great civic responsibility and if the voice and the portrait of women is not fair and equal, the quality and effectiveness of a pluralistic democracy fails to be fully achieved.

Besides, it is important to underline that gender equality cannot be considered as the spontaneous result of a process of democratization. Gender equality requires a real cultural change. Indeed, only the effort of a cultural change together with an advanced process of democratization can bring to full gender equality comprehending its principal dimensions: the enhancement of capabilities, opportunities and the social and political acceptance of women.

The media, because they are considered as cultural elements, can and must be the principal actors of this cultural change. The solution of the problem can be found exactly where the problem is more deeply rooted. Owing to this, it is fundamental to encourage and implement a better representation and participation of women in news media.

There are a variety of possible solutions that can change the male-centric view of the world and promote an increased representation and participation of women. First of all, the relevance of gender balanced news media as a contributing factor for gender equality more generally has to be brought to the attention of not only media organizations, but also students and the audience. An adequate comprehension of the problem is the first step necessary to raise awareness and activism with the aim to promote a better representation of women. Indeed, the GMMP of 2010 showed that news stories regarding gender inequality or equality were almost non-existent in the global context. It is relevant to stress how gender inequality in news media is not a simple reflection of gender

inequality in society, but it is a factor which strongly contributes to increase such disparity.

The awareness of the social and political consequences of gender inequality in the media should also activate an educative process which would show to the audience how to interpret and analyze media contents, especially when the protagonist of the news are women. Indeed a more active and conscious audience in the decoding process can be a good expedient in order to contrast gender stereotypes and to push toward a better journalist practice. Accordingly it is important to create networks among women with the purpose of enhancing awareness and solidarity.

Another possible solution regards the search of data. In other words it is necessary to provide good and accurate data in order to have quality information and a solid basis from which to analyze and solve gender imbalances. For this reason, more monitoring and gender analysis among media should be promoted. The GMMP is certainly an accurate instrument of monitoring, but it also true that it presents some limitations. These include the fact that it does not consider some aspects such as advertising, editorials and comments. Moreover, because of the considerable quantity of materials to analyze and study, the GMMP analyzes news media only one day every five years.

Furthermore, a meaningful solution can be found in a better and higher quality of journalism and in equal job opportunities. Professional standards for journalists should be improved, as they have a big responsibility in creating public opinion. Moreover, a news guideline in order to improve the treatment of women should be provided in order to avoid forms of physical description, sexist references and stereotyped frames. These news guideline, more regarding of gender balance and of women's perspective, should be offered not only to individual journalists, but more generally to media organizations and educators.

Moreover, even if there is a positive correlation between a higher number of female journalists and a better and more balanced women representation, it is necessary to underline that female journalists still continue to work on *soft* topics and that they are almost non-existent in the top positions of media organizations. It is fundamental to break the glass ceiling which obstructs women from achieving higher positions at the decision making level as these positions strongly determine the quality of news media.

Finally, one last possible solution in order to promote a better representation of women in the media is a strategic and more conscious use of the Internet. Indeed, the Internet can be a form of support for activism and even if it does not have the same authority of the mainstream media, it is still a channel through which women can express their perspectives and realize their potential. Through the web everyone can be at the same time media producers and media consumers. Owing to this, women can express directly, without filters, their perspectives and points of view. Moreover the web could be a platform where enhancing the awareness and solidarity among women at a global level.

To conclude, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate how gender inequality in the media can reinforce gender inequality more broadly. As one might expect, this thesis has a number of limitations and further research can explain and underline in a more specific way other aspects and solutions in order to improve women representation and participation.

The GMMP data shows that Italy still has a long way to go to achieve gender equality, but efforts and improvements can and have to be made. The change is possible and it can be achieved through a better knowledge of the problem, an high quality journalism and equal job opportunities.

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