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## MASS MEDIA AND POLICY OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

### ABSTRACT

The article deals with the role of mass media forming gender mentality of mass society. The author considers options, which representatives of mass media may choose, that is, to plant the new notions and the policy of gender equality in the minds of people or to preserve the stereotypes of sex and gender in modern society. The attention is focused on the limited understanding of femininity, which the author names "biological femininity". This concept is widely spread in Lithuanian society and is supported by popular women journals, which concentrate on the woman's body but not on her mind or spiritual development. Girls, teenagers, women are orientated to the strategy and tactics of finding a lover, partner, husband, thought how to be happy. People who back up the biological femininity acknowledge the dependence of woman upon man. Thus woman's life is turned into the complex of fears, such as, fear to lose one's own beauty, fear not to be able to find a partner, fear of losing the husband, fear of mothering, fear of social success. The fears women experience lead to the loss of confidence, the inability to build up one's own personality or to the destruction of woman's personality.

**Key words:** femininity; gender mentality; mass media; stereotypes of sex and gender.

On 15–17 June 2001, the Second Conference on Women and Democracy took place in Vilnius. The conference was planned by the Nordic Council of Ministers, the ministries of the Nordic and Baltic countries, the USA, Poland, Germany and Russia. In 12 workshops various gender problems were discussed, especially focusing on trafficking in women and children.

Among the conference issues the theme of mass media promoting equal opportunities for men and women was included. Obviously that mass media in the transitional society of market economy do not promote gender equality but rather the stereotypical gender mentality, which brings great profit to the enterprises of mass media and therefore is artificially maintained. To prove this point it is sufficient to refer to the popular Lithuanian magazines for women and

Lithuanian dailies, which throw some light on gender awareness in modern Lithuanian society, and show that Lithuanian magazines and newspapers exploit the stereotypical images of the feminine woman and the masculine man because it is so profitable. Not only the privatized press but the cosmetics, clothing, fashion industries, entertainment business make use of stereotypical gender relations. In such a way mass media support the patriarchal ideology and the hierarchy of sexes. Popular women journals constantly mould the consciousness of girls and women and thus instill the concept of biological femininity into it. This concept grounds woman's fears of nonfemininity.

It is possible to assume that mass media can promote gender equality in certain political and social circumstances, such as, a totalitarian regime where the press functions under the power instructions; in a state where the population is educated enough and is conscious of women's emancipation and gender equality; in a state where the laws protect self-expression of every individual of any sex. However, the 21st century is the epoch of consumer society where the laws of market economy often contradict morals and respect of man and overstep the moral, psychological and social care of men and women. In consumer society the competition of market economy is more important than the ideas of sexual equality. Modern society grows up too slowly to the consciousness of gender equality, which is to be part and parcel of everyday existence. But the hope remains that the national policy orientated to gender equality might mobilize mass media to raise public awareness of gender policy and sensitize law enforcement on all national development policies, all spheres of life and that such efforts might bring the vision of gender harmony nearer.

In Lithuania the traditional gender mentality still prevails. The issues of gender equality were first addressed in the 1930s and 40s by NGOs and women's studies centers of Lithuanian universities in 1990–1991. Despite the Law of Equal Opportunities, 1998, the Office of Ombudsman of Equal Opportunities and the Commission for Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, established in 1999 and 2000 accordingly, Women's issues information center and about 70 existing non-governmental women's organizations, the published data of gender misbalance in society management, political parties, professions, etc., there is no official policy of gender equality, no concrete mechanisms of gender equality implementation in the country.

The greatest achievements in initiating gender research belong to Lithuanian scientists, representatives of the humanities and social sciences, who tackle gender problematics in their works and in reality face gender prejudices and hatred of feminism. The only gender research journal *Feminism, Society, Culture* is issued by Women's studies center of Vilnius University.

Lithuanian society is guided by mass media's stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity. Those single articles or TV shows which deal with women's discrimination do not change the general climate. On the contrary, mass media exploring men's violence against women and children, accentuating

the myths of the weak and the strong sex, eroticism, etc., and presenting this material without critical commentaries and conclusions of equal opportunities, consolidate the patriarchal mentality.

Lacking the theoretical background of gender research and knowledge of gender history journalists often make excuses saying that gender equality and feminist ideas do not interest the common readers, that journalists write the stuff the general readers greatly need. In such a way the main Lithuanian dailies *Respublika* and *Lietuvos rytas*, which mould public opinion, adapt to the public mentality and help to spread the stereotypical gender understanding. Anton Chekhov's words written to Nemirovich-Danchenko is an apt answer to such a narrow-minded vision: "You must not lower Gogol to the people, but raise the people to the level of Gogol" [1, 29].

Journalists who play up to the primitive thinking of readers are the brainwashers. They do not fight gender stereotypes, sexual discrimination but fortify the traditional gender ideology and contribute to woman's fears of nonfemininity.

One of the latest examples, taken from *Stilius*, the supplement of the daily *Lietuvos rytas*, published an interview with a vice-chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament [*Stilius*, no. 2, June, 2001]. A woman journalist asked the politician his opinion of women in the Parliament. The politician compared women with flowers which decorate man's life, make man feel great and important, make man experience pride of himself. He did not speak of women as his colleagues who together with men take part in a political life of the country. The woman interviewer put up with image of women as the Parliament's adornment and stimulants of men's emotions. No comment was made by her because the journalist avoided being nonfeminine.

Mass media write, speak, show feminine women and masculine men, and pay attention to the body of women who submit to wishes and orders of the superior sex. Otherwise, according to the popular press, women are condemned for loneliness. Without taking care of their appearance they hardly find a good job. Creating the model images of men and women mass media orientate women for men hunting strategies, present marriage as a long awaited reward. Focusing only on woman's sexuality but not on her intellect, creativity, woman as personality, journalists train readers to think about the human being only in biological terms.

Lithuanian popular magazines for girls and women are crammed with recommendations of how to take care of one's own body, what to eat and drink, what cosmetics to use, what clothes to wear. All these recipes are meant for finding a man, a lover or a husband. Nothing is said of the value of human existence, of personal mental development, of the strive to become an independent personality. The need of cultivating only the woman's body in mass society means the propagation of biological femininity.

Traditionally the stereotypical femininity is contrasted to the stereotypical masculinity and thus the hierarchy of sexes is preserved. The popular journals usually underline man's initiative of selecting his partner. The instincts but not

human intellect play a decisive role in this process. The interviewed men, in spite of their social position, back up the notion of biological femininity and thus preserve the hegemony of the masculine sex. Having taken for granted sexual equality as the basis for gender communication, they might not be able to cover up their moral, intellectual and psychological weakness, convincingly discussed in Asley Montague's book *The Natural Superiority of Women* [2].

Expanding Montague's arguments we may add the considerations on the woman's double vision. During centuries women were forced to exist as the second sex. They learned to hide their wisdom and ability to see through man's thoughts and intentions. Calling women "cunning" men evaluate negatively woman's diplomacy in gender communication but, on the other hand, in such a way they acknowledge woman's psychological insight, which is also confirmed by a well-known saying "woman is the neck turning man's head". For ages men considered themselves the rules of family and society. Dizzy with success they started to lose the psychological ability to understand woman's mentality and take her as an equal partner.

In patriarchal society man's mentality and sexuality are objectivized, man's opinion of the feminine sex is turned into a standard. For instance, men take a final decision in beauty contests and model competitions. Their opinion pre-determines woman's future life. And it goes without saying that in these competitions men choose the most feminine winners. By the way, the decision makers are not always young and handsome looking.

With a view of finding out how Lithuanian popular press inspires into women biological femininity, I looked through the women's journals of 2000 *Panelė* ("Missis"), *Edita, Ji* ("She"). The impression I got was really shocking. In the beginning of the 21st century maturing girls and young women are fed on sex, love adventures, exclusive recommendations for body building and care, for food and diets, fashions and styles, for using heaps of cosmetics. The basic qualities of personal growth, intellectuality and spirituality, are not discussed and their significance for an individual is not revealed. Journal advices for women round up by a romantic and sentimental story of Cinderella, by a tale of a happy marriage of a Lithuanian girl with a foreigner, young, old, divorced, black or yellow skinned and, above all, rich.

The titles of journal chapters and articles promise the possibility of a happy existence for girls (*Panelė*) if they live for their bodies. Such titles as "Romantic Love", "Infants of Happiness", "Temptation Magic", "The Instructions for Feelings", "Dream of a Perfect Body", "Help Me, I Am Not Beautiful", "Walking Erotic", "Gone with Passions", "Make the Body Elastic", "Walks Nude and Poses for Man", "How They Pick Us Up", "Health-resort Romance", etc., express the essence of stereotypical femininity. By the way, the journal *Panelė* has a corner of the spiritual, in which a priest attempts to remind of morals, and a corner of culture, in which spiritual values are contrasted to material ones in a simplified way. Such titles as "Real and Pseudoculture", "Good and Bad

Films", "New Books" do not outweigh in quantity and quality the descriptions of eye shades, hair and nail colors, clothes of all seasons because "good", "real", "new" are not analyzed and intellectual information does not prevail over "bad", "pseudo" and old gender stereotypes.

The pages devoted to the stereotypical femininity do not bring up teenagers as unique individuals but prepare them to be part of mass society, uniformly dressed, decorated, colored and, above all, uniformly thinking.

Reading girls' letters to *Pelenė* one can see that the journal is "the best friend" of youngsters. It means that the girls are lonely and alienated from their families, friends, school, that the workers of social security or public health care institutions do not pay enough attention to gender education, that in Lithuania there are not progressive changes in school and university programs what gender relations are concerned. The girls sincerely believe in the greatest authority of the journal and follow blindly the teachings of mass mentality molders. They trust the journal which predicts that those girls who become beautiful are desired by men and that desired girls become rich and happy.

The same "philosophy" is evident in the journals *Edita* and *Ji*. These publications rear girls as erotic cats and sexual calves, who are to learn the "ABC of temptation" utilizing cosmetics, romantically decorating sleeping rooms and dreaming of holiday adventures. In these journals women advisers do not write about potentialities of the human mind and spiritual mysteries, the unceasing striving of the soul toward spiritual beauty and truth. The popular journals teach women how "to attack men by glances", "how to submit to man", "to praise, honor and pamper him" [*Ji*, no. 3, 2000], how "to do everything that man could be pleased, that is, not to reproach him, but repeat many times that he is extraordinary" [*Edita*, no. 3, 2000].

The journalists try their hand at presenting distorted feminist theory, in this way as if negating biological femininity: "Women is not more stupid than man", "she has to earn not less than man", "women has the right to experience sexual satisfaction" and this fact "the girls are to know from childhood" [*Edita*, no. 8, 2000].

One can come across the parody of militant feminism. The journal *Ji* (no. 16) advises women "not to be like a silly hen", "not to give all salary to the husband", "not to make excuses coming home late", but order man to pick up his scattered socks from the floor [*Ji*, no. 4, 2000].

"Sex and body slaves" could really be taught the ABC of feminism not in a vulgarized but simple and intellectual form, if the representatives of mass media took care of the spiritual life of women and men. Elements of feminism could change their thinking and life but, alas, in Lithuania mass media presents a feminist as a caricature and feminist theories are ironized and rejected. It so happens for several reasons. The journalists and people know too little of feminism and the essence of equal opportunities for men and women. This kind of policy still is not a priority of the Lithuanian government.

The younger generation, which comes to substitute the elder women who started the women's movement in Lithuania, thinks that young women have ample possibilities of freedom and gender equality. Young people really have freedom of motion and action, they rather early start enjoying sexual freedom. However, intellectually they are not matured enough to understand that gender prejudices and patriarchal traditions will overtake them later when they start the family and be responsible not only for themselves but for family members as well.

Young women of today are brave enough to reject the dogmatic traditional morals, to demonstrate their nude body, to provoke men by impudent behavior. The world famous singing groups, such as, English group "Spice Girls", Russian group "Strelki", Lithuanian group "Mango" even by the name of a group reveal the idea of mutiny, sharpness, bitterness or, in other words, the revolt of girls against woman's passiveness, submissiveness to man. However, this revolt is rather exterior protest than the intellectually conscious action because the girls are not aware of the threat that may come out of the traditionally thinking men. Those men, who support the idea of women's obedience and service for man and family, would not put up with an impudent challenge of girls, of their wish to be free and independent. Trafficking in women and murders of girls in Lithuania confirm this consideration. The intention of young women to be beautiful and free provokes physical, psychological, emotional and sexual violence of men towards women, and biological femininity is one of the causes of men's violence toward women.

A British journalist Germaine Greer is right maintaining that "the language of independence conceals utter dependence upon male attention, represented as difficult for a girl to get and all but impossible for her to keep" [3, 407]. The diseases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia [4, 436–448], from which girls and young women often suffer, indicate this dependence. Women torture their bodies by diets and fasting because they are afraid not to be beautiful. This fear makes women lose the psychological stability and may cause the complex of inferiority, lack of confidence.

The fear to be not beautiful starts the line of nonfemininity fears, which a traditional woman may experience. The fear to remain a spinster follows. If a woman gets married, she faces the fear of not justifying husband's expectations to be a good wife. Having borne a child she doubts her motherhood, feels guilty of being not a good mother. When she starts working and tries to combine family and professional life, she experiences distrust in her professionalism and fear of social success [5, 169–184]. The women may also learn what the fear of childlessness is.

Gender stereotypes define motherhood as woman's duty. A childless or a working, career-seeking woman does not fit very well into an idealized image of mother.

Thus woman's life is like a mosaic of fears and complexes which Colette Dowling named the complex of Cinderella [6]. Cinderella's complex begins

with acceptance of biological femininity, with Cinderella's wish to be beautiful and to please the Prince. This complex is instilled into girls from childhood. At time when boys are encouraged to be confident of themselves, the girls are brought up to be good and submissive. At 8–10 years of age when girls begin to mature physically, they are taught not to trust the unknown men or senior boy-friends, they are warned not to walk alone late at night. Fear of violence creeps into the heart of a little girl. Today girls in Lithuania are scared not only of unknown men, but also of their fathers and stepfathers, who exploit sexually their daughters and stepdaughters.

The fear coming from the adult world crushes the girl's integral perception of reality. She stops being carefree because grown-ups force her to be feminine. Emily Hancock gives advice to a woman, who wants to be psychologically independent and wishes to create new identity, to go back to an integral world of childhood and remember the happiness of freedom, her dreams of future [7, 3–39]. Justinas Pikūnas and Aldona Palujauskienė in the book *Development of Personality* also maintain that a woman, who is able to revive her memories of child's spiritual flight, of girl's happiness when she used to climb the trees, girl's sense of freedom [8, 99], is able to mould her new identity after life crises. But is it possible to safeguard the integrity of girl's childhood when it is ruined by gender prejudices and violence? The girl's interior world remains integral in case when the surrounding people support the spiritual values which condition the harmonious existence of an individual [9, 218].

When a girl becomes a woman, no popular journals with their rosy dreams can substitute the everyday reality. Human communication is very complex. Living for others and serving the family members is the essence of the wife's and mother's roles. Mass media is to prepare women for this life test, but not to propose them false life dreams, because in the marital life a woman has to summon up her inner strength in order to withstand the family life routine which may ruin woman's personality. In the marital life biological femininity may fill up the gaps of the spouses communication for a short time. A wife and a mother is to show her psychological and intellectual ability to keep up the family members together.

Feminists negate that motherhood is woman's duty and fate. They assert that patriarchal society psychologically and ideologically orientates women to motherhood [10, 88], thus making men free from the duties of parenthood. Family coexistence requires that both, man and woman were aware of hard psychological work, of sharing parental duties.

The Cinderella myth and the idealized motherhood, which are steadily escalated by mass media, preserve the patriarchal mentality and do not promote equal opportunities for men and women. These myths shadow the understanding that for the creation and development of woman's personality not only the body care but also great spiritual and intellectual efforts are needed. The escalated images of a beautiful Cinderella and a perfect mother may lead a woman

to inner destruction because human beings are powerless to stop time annihilating the beauty of human body, and no woman, who is aware of her own ego, is able to grow up to a complete self-sacrifice.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is hopeful to think that mass media could raise the questions of complexity and contrariness of human nature and gender relationship. The escalation of stereotypical gender mentality and the idea of hierarchy of sexes, but not the policy of equal opportunities for men and women, distorts the worldview of both sexes, ruins the psychological stability of a person, blocks the development of man's or woman's personality. Men's and women's movements, the policy of equal opportunities do not divide human being into body and spirit but declare harmony of gender communication. The woman who strictly follows the principles of the biological femininity, advertised by mass media, becomes a one-sided individual, dull not only for man, a partner or a husband, but also for her own children.

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