

CNEL

National Council of Economy and Labour

REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMININE CONDITION ON TELEVISION

A research on TV fiction and entertainment programmes

*SUMMARY OF METHODS AND MAIN RESULTS*

### **1. Goals**

The goal of this research, promoted by CNEL and conducted by Carres, Osservatorio di Pavia, with the scientific coordination of Professor Gianni Losito of the "La Sapienza" University of Rome, was to survey and describe the representation of women in television programmes with reference to two fields of expression, or macrogenres, that occupy a predominant segment of the schedules of the leading nationwide networks: fiction and entertainment.

The section of this research that addresses TV fiction is a quantitative content analysis, which differs from past studies in that it compares the representation of the feminine and masculine conditions by using variables that define not only the sociodemographic and occupational profile of the main characters that appear in TV fiction but also their outward appearance, their normative and value universe of reference, their personality, their antisocial and prosocial behaviour, and the way in which they interact with other characters in the context of family, friends and work.

The section of this research dedicated to entertainment instead uses a qualitative analysis, which is inherently more suited to grasp the changing structures of the formats that constitute this genre and is more sensitive to the complexity and specificity of the levels of meaning that are blended and intermingled in these formats. The goal of the research was to survey whether entertainment programmes represent the complexity of the feminine condition by proposing models that match the new feminine identity or instead suggest an image inspired by traditional stereotypes, relegating female characters to a subordinate and marginal role.

## ***2. Methodology used for the research on fiction***

### *2.1. Units of analysis and sample*

The units of analysis that were considered and on which the data of the research were surveyed are television fiction programmes and their main characters, defined as the characters whose presence in the programme is indispensable for the development of the plots.

As generally occurs in researches that analyse the content of TV fiction, the sample investigated was determined in relation to a "typical" week of the broadcasting schedule, i.e., a "normal" week of the TV season that lacked any particular events affect-

ing the schedules and the viewing habits of the audience. The week chosen was the week from Sunday, 11 March 2001 to Monday, 17 March 2001, and the fiction programmes chosen were those broadcast in the afternoon, late afternoon and evening slots (12:00 to 23:00) by the Rai, Mediaset and TMC (now La7) networks. In all, the sample is composed of 162 programmes, 51.9% broadcast by Mediaset, 25.9% broadcast by Rai and 22.2% broadcast by TMC. The majority of these programmes is US-produced (64.8%) rather than domestic (22.8%) or from other countries (12.3%), was broadcast in the afternoon slot (60.5%), and did not have particularly significant audience ratings. 1,045 main characters were identified in the sample programmes: 444 were female (42.5%) and 661 were male (57.5%).

## *2.2. Data collection tools and methods*

Two analysis forms were used to acquire the data: one for the programmes (form A) and one for the main characters (form B). A content analysis form is structurally similar to a survey. As a survey is an ordered sequence of questions posed to the interviewed individuals, an analysis form is an ordered series of items that can be considered as "questions" that are aimed at the units of analysis considered and are answered by appropriately trained analysts on the basis of explicitly defined rules.

Although the reliability of the analysts is a necessary prerequisite for this kind of investigation, it is nonetheless advisable to implement data gathering methods that allow to check the subjective interpretations of the individual analysts. Our research employed the most frequently used method, which consists in performing the survey by using pairs or groups of analysts, who first perform an individual analysis and then perform a group analysis of every analysis unit. Cases causing disagreement among the various analysts are discussed within the pair or group; final coding for that analysis unit and for the item at issue is performed on the basis of a collective decision at the end of this discussion.

### *2.3. Data analysis procedures*

The information collected with the two analysis forms was inserted in data matrices, to which the following data analysis procedures were applied: analysis of the frequencies of all the variables extracted from the analysis forms used; analysis of the relations between variable pairs by means of contingency tables and application of the chi-square test; analysis of the principal components on multiple variable sets with ordered categories; multiple correspondence analysis and cluster analysis on variable sets - with unordered categories or categories

treated as such - considered to be of particular interest in relation to the goals of the research.

### **3. Methodology used for the research on entertainment**

Qualitative analysis of entertainment programmes was performed on programmes broadcast during the same week and in the same slots considered in the research on fiction. The formats examined are current-events shows, variety shows, talk shows, games, and satirical information. Within each format, the programmes were selected according to the following criteria:

- relevance in terms of audience;
- significance in relation to the subject being investigated and ability to offer different viewpoints regarding the feminine image;
- balanced presence of the offer of public and private networks;
- coverage of the afternoon and evening programming slot.

The following programmes, divided by format, were selected:

Current events:

*La vita in diretta* (Raiuno, afternoon)

*Verissimo* (Canale 5, afternoon).

Variety shows:

*Domenica in* (Raiuno, afternoon)

*Buona Domenica* (Canale 5, afternoon)

*Matricole* (Italia 1, evening)

*Dove ti porta il cuore* (Raiuno, evening)

Talk shows:

*Uomini e donne* (Canale 5, afternoon)

*Un pugno o una carezza* (Raiuno, evening)

*Tempi moderni* (Italia 1, evening)

*Quelli che il calcio* (Raidue, afternoon)

Games:

*Passaparola* (Canale 5, late afternoon)

*Sarabanda* (Italia 1, late afternoon)

Satirical information:

*Striscia la notizia* (Canale 5, evening)

#### **4. Main results of the research on fiction**

##### *4.1. General differences between the masculine and feminine conditions in programmes*

The overall analysis of fiction programmes clearly shows that they do not have a very strong propensity to represent explicitly the problems linked to gender inequalities. They appear for various reasons in the plot of approximately one third of the sample programmes, and are predominantly handled thematically in an aproblematic or even legitimising manner. Only a small percentage of programmes suggests critical attention to the inequalities between the masculine and feminine conditions. Among the programmes that do not deal with themes related to these inequalities, those that do not propose negative or degrading models of women are predominant, but there is also a significant percentage of other programmes that instead suggest negative stereotypes in a latent manner (sometimes weakly, sometimes forcefully).

The discriminating stereotypes that recur more frequently in the representation of the feminine condition relate to the following aspects:

- female decision-making abilities, both in the workplace and in private life, are expressed far more weakly than masculine ones, with significant differences among the pro-

grammes broadcast by the various networks (Rai fiction tends to minimize, in relation to this aspect, the inequality between men and women) and according to their country of production (Italian fiction assigns a greater role to female decision-making abilities);

- female characters are defined with a deficit of autonomy with respect to the male world and are characterized by greater dependency, with limited differences among the networks but significant differences in relation to the country of production (Italian fiction exhibits a greater emancipation of female characters);
- female characters are represented more than male ones in a family context and less in work-related situations (especially in Mediaset fiction), although there is a significant trend toward balance between the sentimental and private domain and the public environment, both for men and for women (this trend is particularly noticeable in Rai fiction).

#### *4.2. Basic characteristics of characters*

Leading characters are mostly adult, unmarried, non-Italian, almost exclusively white, and middle-class.

Women and men have a similar sociodemographic profile, with some differences related to age (more young women are present), marital status (less frequently identifiable for men than for women), level of education (women are less represented at the upper levels) and main status (which for women is predominantly related to emotional ties, relationships and family, while for men it is predominantly work-related). Women, more than men, are proposed with an image that on the whole is positive.

#### *4.3. Profile of the working woman*

The female characters whose occupation was identifiable are mostly employed in the field of specialized activities and professions and executive work; a significant percentage also performs manual work, while few women are engaged in more remunerative and prestigious activities, in management and entrepreneurial activities.

The predominant field of occupation is the service sector, in a socioeconomic situation that guides the female career within specific fields proposed conventionally as more congenial to women instead of facilitating their access to fields historically characterized as male. The level of importance of their work is in any case generally medium-high, albeit lower than the work of males, especially for adult and elderly women.

For female characters as a whole, there is a predominantly "expressive" characterisation of work, considered in almost one half of the cases as a priority opportunity to achieve fulfilment on a personal and social level. Work as a necessity, i.e., as a mere tool for meeting the essential needs of day-to-day life or for achieving financial independence, characterises mostly women of a lower financial and cultural condition. Work experienced as a means to achieve success or to wield power over others is instead a prerogative of women of higher financial standing.

As a whole there is a slight tendency to represent working women with a less positive image than non-working women (while exactly the opposite occurs for men): the profile of non-working women is outlined by resorting more markedly to personality traits such as altruism, trustworthiness, responsibility, charm, and honesty. Women busy at the higher professional levels are particularly characterised negatively by attributes such as selfishness, cynicism, unpleasantness, dishonesty, to which women employed in manual or executive work are instead immune. Working women, however, are proposed more frequently than non-workers with traits of strength, assurance, energy, determination, rationality and intelligence, especially in professional situations that entail responsibility. Manual female workers are instead more fragile, static and passive.

As regards the normative universe of reference, working women are oriented, more than non-working ones, toward values related

to personal fulfilment, especially for managerial roles, but are not insensitive to the values that characterise emotional and family ties, which are instead the priority reference for non-working women.

#### *4.4. Main differences between male and female characters*

The most noticeable differences between women and men in how they are represented by fiction are linked mainly to the fields of outward appearance, values, personality traits, working condition, and involvement in prosocial and antisocial behaviours. Outward appearance is far more important for women, a clear majority of whom are attractive and in good physical shape, than for men, who are more often proposed with "average" physical characteristics. The way in which the body is represented is also different in the two cases: the female body is exposed more often with the aim of seduction and ostentation.

As regards reference values, the focus of female characters is constituted by emotional ties, relationships and family life, albeit with a significant tendency to internalise and apply also the values linked to autonomy as well as personal and professional growth. For men, instead, values related to fulfilment, such as personal independence, distinction, success, wealth and power, are definitely more central.

In characters depicted in a working status, the values that revolve around fulfilment are privileged most of all by men, but also - albeit to a lesser extent - by women. However, it is interesting to note that fulfilment is shown as a goal that is sought predominantly by men even when the main status of the male characters is linked to emotional ties, relationships or family life, whereas it comes considerably less important for women represented in the same positions of status. For the same characters represented with a working-type main status, whether male or female, the values related to the world of family ties (love, motherhood, fatherhood) are instead less important. The working condition therefore seems to bring together men and women in paying attention to the values that in the sample as a whole instead mark their difference more significantly. This closeness occurs due to the shift of female characters toward typically male value sets. The same does not occur for male characters when they are presented in a main status related to emotional ties, relationships or family life: men exhibit, in this case, a greater attachment to emotional and family values (which in the sample are found to be more typically feminine), but without approaching the percentages recorded for women, and by modifying only moderately their priorities.

As regards personality traits, the differences between men and women are mostly on the "fragile-tough" axis, which is linked to assertiveness: men are more characterised by commitment, energy, rationality and dominance, while women more fre-

quently have traits of weakness, passiveness, inertia, irrationality. Differences are also evident on the "good-evil" axis and indicate a more positive quality of women, which however is partly due to the presence, in the sample, of predominantly male deviant characters. As regards other aspects of personality, there are no clear differences between men and women, but there are different nuances or manners of exhibiting similar characteristics. Women with a work-related main status are shown as slightly more "evil", and are stronger and more assertive, than those represented with a main status related to family ties or emotional ties and relationships.

Variables related to work reveal differences in levels of occupation (higher for men), in the types of profession (women are less involved than men in more remunerative and prestigious activities, which imply higher levels of competence, responsibility and satisfaction), in the field of work (the service sector is predominant for women, whereas the military, law-enforcement and private security sectors are predominant for men). Both men and women associate work mostly with expectations of personal and social fulfilment, but for women, more than for men, work is also experienced - as mentioned - as a means for meeting essential needs. For men, moreover, work is more often a means to achieve success and gain power over others.

Finally, men, more often than women, have pro-social behaviours and are exposed to them. The quintessential feminine pro-social deeds are socially-approved emotional-tie behaviours, which are

also widespread among men. Men, however, are also frequently involved in altruistic deeds and in actions that demonstrate their sense of duty and their ability to control negative inclinations in themselves and in other people. In any case, the fact remains that men are also much more often the perpetrators, as well as the victims, of antisocial behaviours, particularly those characterised by the use of violence. Conflict and deviance are therefore predominantly male: men are their main active and passive protagonists. Female conflict also arises rather significantly, but it is less violent and harsh and is more characterised in terms of non-physical aggressiveness. It is aimed against both men and women, although this last circumstance is less frequent.

#### *4.5. Interim conclusion*

On the basis of the results of this research, we can conclude - albeit provisionally, in view of the changes that seem to characterise fiction - that this genre does not represent the feminine condition in an explicitly sexist manner. Although the feminine world is underrepresented (and this might be interpreted as a sort of "symbolic nullification"), the image of women in today's fiction can no longer be traced back, as used to occur, to the image proposed by popular literature, picture stories, and the reporting of media personalities in gossip

magazines. Even in the world that is "constructed" -- rather than faithfully or unfaithfully reflected -- by fiction, women seem to follow their own path, gradually achieving goals from which they were traditionally excluded in that very same world.

However, the central role of the male character is still predominant, especially in the workplace. Women work less than men, and if they work, they have less opportunity than men to access professional work that confers greater success and prestige. Moreover, for working women, especially in the case of career women, there is an implicit compliance with a profile that is generally defined in male terms and affects not only positive characteristics but also and most of all negative ones: commitment and success (if any) at work betray and "pervert", for many female protagonists of fiction, a feminine identity that is still predominantly represented in a traditional manner. Accordingly, role conflicts involving working women, torn between emotional family ties and duties on the one hand and work duties and responsibilities on the other hand, are presented in a conventional and a problematic manner, with an implicit condemnation of women who solve these conflicts by privileging the latter instead of the former.

The conclusions to be drawn from the results of the section of this research dedicated to the analysis of entertainment programmes are instead quite different. In these programmes, the marginal role of women is much more evident and has various

characteristics, often implicit ones, that in any case are linked to stereotypical ways of representing the feminine condition. This marginality is noticeable in relation to a presence that is qualitatively less significant, in these programmes, not only of women who work in the field of politics, professions, sport, the jet set, but also of ordinary women, who are too often presented with fully traditional attitudes and behaviours.

This essential marginality is combined with a presentation of the female body that is instead anything but marginal and is indeed central, but in manners that offer a very limited variety of models and goals. Attention to the female body thus becomes almost exclusively instrumental and routine, reducing the body, deprived of its subjectivity and expressiveness, to a mere accessory or overused trick to attract the attention of an audience that is presumably believed to be otherwise distracted. Differently from what occurs in fiction, entertainment programmes therefore offer an implicit and recurring image of women that is centred on the body, prevails over all other images, and suggests an equally traditional and stereotypical representation of gender relations that is still substantially male-chauvinistic.

## ***5. Main results of the research on entertainment***

### 5.1. Representation of feminine and male conditions in quantitative and qualitative terms

The people presented in entertainment programmes can be substantially classified into four categories: the *powerful*, the *famous*, the *professionals* (journalists, presenters, columnists, recurring guests) and *ordinary people*. The feminine presence was evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively in relation to each one of these categories.

Before dealing with the differences in the representations of men and women, it should be noted that television, at least in all of the programmes present in the schedules, does not seek to faithfully reproduce reality. Television consists predominantly of fiction, shows and entertainment. Therefore, its representation of the feminine and masculine condition does not reproduce reality faithfully. In the specific case, moreover, one must consider that the predominant focus of entertainment and information on important or successful individuals (the *powerful* and the *famous*) clearly does not allow to consider television personalities as representative, in any way, of the personalities that populate real life.

However, after tracing the gene map of television programmes by means of their characters, it is fair to ask whether the kind of representation of women and men in the media - and in the relationship of the two genders with reality - complies with the principle of equality or fairness. The key issue is to determine

whether, when equal contexts are represented, women have specific roles, within plots, that are different from those of their male counterparts, and if the roles are the same, whether the manners in which women are represented are characterised by explicitly sexist stereotypes.

Analysis of the female and male representations in quantitative and qualitative terms yielded interesting results, summarised below, for each one of the categories of individuals mentioned above.

Represented individuals	Media vs reality	Representation of women with respect to men (quantitative profile)	Representation of women with respect to men (qualitative profile)
Powerful ?? Politicians ?? Heads of state / spiritual leaders ?? Professionals	Overrepresented	Underrepresented	Marginalisation
Famous ?? Sport stars ?? Artists ?? Generic	Overrepresented	Fair Underrepresented Fair Overrepresented	Marginalisation

Professional ?? Journalists ?? Presenters	Overrepre- sented	Fair Fair Fair	Fair Fair Fair
Ordinary people ?? Current af- fairs ?? Ideal audi- ence ?? True stories	Underrepre- sented	Fair	Repetition of stereotypes present in the community and of identity- forming habits in public or private life

### 5.2. *The female body*

While the feminine image, understood as a complex, variegated and even contradictory combination of objective and subjective aspects, of problems and prospects, of forms of identity and social relation, is struggling to emerge - at least in the programmes that we analysed - the feminine image understood as the *body* is the subject of almost obsessive attention. In our research in afternoon and evening schedules of an ordinary week of TV programmes, we witnessed the forceful emergence of the semantic area related to the female body. This emergence is so forceful and across-the-board that it deserves careful consideration.

The body is one of the privileged sites of social discourse. Specifically, the representation of the female body reveals something about the female role in the dominant social discourse, and therefore offers an important viewpoint for understanding the positions of status and the roles that society reserves for it. Any discussion of the body that aims to consider this element (the practices that involve it, the meanings assigned to it, and its representations) as an indicator of a configuration of gender relations has to address the deep roots of the thought systems into which this discourse has gradually organised itself. In the history of Western thought, the identification of women with the corporeal aspect has entailed their inferior position in the symbolic order of power, condemning them to a condition of inescapable subordination.

However, it is true that the body, which has been traditionally the subject of many forms of oppression, has been able to become, in other periods, a tool for liberation, to establish itself as a form of desacralisation and "subversion" with respect to traditionally-orientated and highly puritanical cultural systems. Yet this cannot lead to the conclusion that the female body has been liberated once and for all, or that it is safe from the risks of reintegration into new exploitation systems, for example the consumeristic one, as many authors (Baudrillard, Goffman, Galimberti, and others) have denounced.

These thoughts enter the problematic domain that opens up when one observes that women are persistently represented mostly as bodies, albeit by means of different and complex roles (the erotic body, the beautiful body, to a lesser extent the maternal body) in entertainment programmes. Are these representations of the body linked to the concept of freedom, which is a result of sexual liberation, understood in individualistic terms as the freedom of the individual to assert and manage his or her own body, choosing the manners of its expression? Or are they rather an adaptation to preexisting male-dominated models, which are functional to market forces and consumeristic criteria? Can one speak of freedom of the female body or rather of a consent of the body to its own submission?

If one explores the phenomenology of the representation of the female body in the analysed television programmes, the space for freedom of expression of that body seems to yield under the pressures to adapt to predefined models of femininity, without any rethinking, reinterpretation or deviation from the norm. Women's bodies are subjected to a continuous and relentless gaze that very often deprives it of its subjectiveness. The models of feminine corporality are reduced to a narrow range of possibilities that are scarcely sensitive to different forms of expression and often are linked to a traditional view of gender relations. The types found by our research are:

- the *body exhibited as a decorative element*, an objectified body, devoid of identity, confused and interchangeable with other bodies. This body is sometimes motionless, sometimes ready to start moving on command, and never becomes active autonomously. It keeps the place that it has been given and, accompanied by an eternal smile, lends itself well to enhance the active role of male protagonists. This body is crystallised image of a harmless femininity, understood as docility and passiveness;
- the *sponsor body*, of which the so-called "veline" are the most significant example, is a sort of trademark of the programme *Striscia la notizia* and is a radicalisation of the process of reducing the body to an object-merchandise, subordinate to the dynamics of commercial promotion;
- the *measurable body* is first of all the body of would-be models: compliance with the dominant aesthetic canon becomes a precondition and a sign of membership of a "group" to the rules of which one must adapt. Obsession for measurements, however, extends far beyond this context. The measurable body is a body that renounces its difference to enter a class of equivalence within which all the items are interchangeable: it is a body that renounces its subjectiveness to adapt to the objectiveness of the model, a body that ceases to be regulated by its own experience to be

ruled by the standard that generates the class of equivalence, forgoing its expressiveness and internalising the power of control exerted by the canon;

- the *transformed body* - which would seem to include some potential for expression in the concept of change - likewise merely produces an adaptation to the dominant aesthetic canons by means of a series of sacrificial practices ranging from diets to fitness training, from the most disparate aesthetic treatments to plastic surgery, excluding all the possibilities of expression that the dominant model does not include. However, the body that achieves the perfection of the model suffers from vertigo and must step down from its pedestal to regain closeness to imperfect bodies and offer itself to them as an attainable model: hence the *normalised body*, which continues to play with reality-model dialectics;

- the *domestic body*, which combines two contrasting and previously separate feminine icons, i.e., the erotic woman and the caring woman (wife-mother), a body that maintains its erotic value while diluting its potentially disturbing and aggressive aspects in the reassuring environment of the household;

- the *devouring body*, finally, is the body that "devours" everything that accompanies it, in particular scripts that timidly suggest meanings other than those expressed by the body, but "explode" under its supremacy, which therefore forms the dominant meaning of the message. The ambivalence is only apparent and even in this case does not allow deviations from the norm: the aspects that cooperate in forming the dominant meaning, creating a disconcerting blend, are the customary ones, which are harmless and if anything gratifying for the male eye: the sexy body, the fragile woman, the domestic woman, et cetera: the devouring body is the one that asserts the superiority of its reasons over these other aspects and - differently from the domestic body - suggests, but does not combine, separate and contrasting feminine icons, claiming its absoluteness.