



**Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-ninth session**

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

**Changing social norms to achieve gender equality: expectations and opportunities**

**Challenging media and film stereotypes on gender sexuality and women's rights**

**by**

**Elisa Salinas\***

**Founder of *The Women's Project***

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3:00 – 6:00 pm**

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## **1. Introduction**

I will be speaking to you in two capacities: first, as a founder of *The Women's Project* (TWP), a non-governmental organization, which works to create equal opportunities for the development of men and women. Secondly, as a TV producer, a job which I have been doing for the past twenty years of my life, a job that inspired and facilitated my commitment to gender equality.

The media is the single most powerful tool at our disposal; it has the power to educate, result in social change, and shape political policies and elections in our lives. As a powerful tool, it could also be used for changing social norms that lead toward the deconstruction of gender stereotyping and hence facilitating progress toward gender equality in societies.

As a powerful tool, mass media could also change people's perception of violence against women and can position it as a harmful exercise which is very costly to society as it prevents women from full and equal participation in social, economic and political life.

Most important, however, statistics show how the media by the composition of who runs it, and by the way it portrays men and women in its contents, has served mostly the status quo, enhancing gender inequality and discrimination.

It is my intention, first, to talk about the dimensions of the problem of gender stereotyping in the media (to expose the mechanisms of production and reproduction of that inequality) and secondly, to present the format of a TV program produced in Mexico by me, that has challenged, for the past 15 years, the stereotyping of gender and sexuality. It has also worked for the promotion of human rights for women.

## **2. How does it work: gender inequality in the Media**

### **Gender bias. Statistics on those who works in the media.**

- In the world, there is a crisis of the representation of women in the media.
- There is also evidence to sustain that men's voices narrate the world. There exist a dominance of men in commentary, expert pools, and hard talk shows. Men, as well, are more likely to be quoted than women in newspapers, television and public radio and the information they transmit to the public to be remembered.
- In the sphere of news, women are asked to write or comment on "female" issues, "pink topics" such as food, family, furniture, fashion, relationships. The world of politics and sports, are considered masculine domains. Although, it is slowly changing. In Mexico, we have a few sport TV programs hosted by women.
- On talk shows, more men than women have positions as guests. For instance, in the United States, women comprised only 14 percent of those interviewed and 29 percent of roundtable guests.
- When it comes to new technologies, 88 percent of video games developers are male, while nearly 50 per cent gamers are women (Data for USA).
- In the newspaper industry the number of women in key jobs is very low.

- It also happens in TV managerial positions, where the number of women worldwide is very low.
- In the film industry, women comprised just 9 percent of the directors of the top 250 domestic grossing films of 2013 and 38 percent of documentary directors whose Gender bias. Statistics on those who works in the media.
- A significant percentage of women in TV all over the world hold behind-the-scenes roles.
- Men write most newspaper articles, although female voices are emerging in new media.
- Women who have just graduated from a journalism and mass communications programs are slightly more likely to land a job than men, but they are also more likely to pursue work in public relations or advertising.
- There is some hope of gender equality in new technologies, however the gender bias is still present. For instance, it is suggested that women outnumber men in social contacts, however, they operate in the private sphere than men.
- Women get low recognition (basically they are unseen) for their performance in the film industry: The 2015 Academy Awards nominated more men than women in non-acting categories by the margin of 5 to 1.
- In 10 years, women have only won once, the Academy Award for directing, writing, original screenplay or adapted screen play.

### **Gender bias. Statistics on those who are portrayed by the media.**

The data on how the media produce and reproduce gender stereotypes by the way it portrays men and women is also not encouraging:

- It suggests that most female characters in the media overall are stereotyped and sexualized. Female characters mostly respond to the dominant stereotype of beauty — they are young, slim, and attractive— and behave like ladies, preferably, in the domestic arena. Violence against women is seen as a dramatization tool, and therefore, is ever present in the media. Men are also portrayed within the traditional stereotype of manhood.
- Female characters are much less likely than males to be portrayed as leaders of any kind.
- Females are at least twice more likely than males to be shown in sexually explicit scenes.
- Girls, as young as age six, are starting to see themselves as sex objects, based on media influence.
- In quantitative terms, female are under-represented in film characterizations. In the USA, 1 out of 3 characters in the top 100 domestic grossing films are women.
- In films, while female characters are on the rise, however, female protagonists have declined. In 2002, female characters accounted for 16 percent of protagonists. In 2011, females comprised only 11 percent.
- The media is accountable for sexist coverage of women candidates and political leaders, making remarks on the way they dress, their sexual and family lives rather than on the ideas they stand for, amongst other sexist remarks.
- Women are more likely to be credited with the personal rather than political or professional lives in the media.

- Research by Lipsett (Guardian.co.uk on-line, 2008) questions why the celebrities that get most negative coverage in the popular press are disproportionately female. What cultural function does it serve?
- Anything that only affects women is taken less seriously by the media than anything that affects men. (When a “famous” woman dies, she gets less media coverage than a man of leadership in society).

### **3. What can be done: using media to change social norms and stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality in Mexico.**

#### **Producing a TV soap opera that promotes gender equality: *What Women Won't Say***

The goal of the TV program is to make women's and girl's biographies visible and powerful in society and through story telling break the silence in their lives. This soap opera has been shown on Mexican TV for more than 15 years. It is an original idea of Elisa Salinas and it has a pool of 40 people in the production team and a pool of 30 script writers and directors, all of whom have been constantly trained by experts on gender, equality, gender violence and human rights. It is 100 percent dramatization.

It is produced and edited in Mexico, with more than 1800 programs, and has been seen by 14 million viewers, in 56 countries, which represent 38 percent of the world's market.

Addressed to women of all ages and from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, religious stands, and with a gender and human rights outlook, it has been studied by UNESCO for its success in improving the quality of life of Mexican women. Amongst other topics, “What Women Won't Say” deals with domestic violence, gender violence, discrimination of women, prostitution, sexual trafficking, sexual abuse, infertility, early marriages, early pregnancy, birth control, divorce, diversity in family setups, women's mental health, drug abuse and health problems such as breast cancer, AIDS, eating disorders, etc.

It is obligatory for every script writer to conduct research on the subject matter he/she will be writing about, and to rely on statistics, experts' opinions, and information provided by NGOs who work in the field and are, most importantly, part of the pool of institutions to which women can seek for help. As the program finishes, according to the topic narrated, the name and whereabouts of an organization appears on the screen. It has a 45 minutes format with a narrative with a social aim, financed by commercial enterprises.

#### ***What Women Won't Say***

- Tells real stories of women, who confront real problems.
- Allow any woman to identify with the story being told.
- Gives the courage to women to break the silence, to speak up about the violation of their rights.
- Takes into account women's voices, with their breadth of expertise, diversity, experiences and humanity, these voices are fully represented.
- Women have leading roles in the drama.

- The female characters play an active role in changing their lives, challenging the sexual stereotypes of traditional female roles.
- Women are portrayed as resilient, showing that they have resources to improve their life style and to solve their problems.
- Provides diverse tools to the viewer for problem solving.
- Promotes new roles for men and women on equal terms.
- Promotes women’s rights ( to health, education, work on equal basis, political participation, economic autonomy, community organization, to reproductive and sexual rights, regardless of ethnic background, age, sexual preference, religion, and gender, amongst others).
- Provides legal information on gender-based violence, especially, on domestic violence.
- Works for the empowerment of women (encourages them to break silence, to have a voice in society and to defend their rights).
- Provides information to women about where to go for help. More than 70 NGOs are linked to the program.

The impact of the program on women’s and the exercise of human rights still needs to be measured more scientifically. Data suggests that about 30% of the viewers in Mexico City called to an NGO’s for help and another percentage (no estimate) go to the premises for help (for legal aid, therapy, skills learning, etc.) The only data available conducted by GDV Group suggests that the viewers considered themselves to be more than passive viewers; they define themselves as customers of the services provided by NGOs. This speaks of action (or intentions of action) towards personal and social change. In the field work, women send their stories to be dramatized every week —40 stories per hour— and people keep saying to us: “thanks to *What Women’s Won’t Say*, “now I have a voice”, “now I feel like a human being”, “now I know that I can go to school because it is my right”, “I will not settle for less”.

Just a few days ago, as a commemoration of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, TWP launched the *HeForShe Campaign* on national TV. This campaign gives voice to male actors as advocates for gender equality.

Finally, I would like to mention that as a part of our strategy to bring awareness and inspire new forms of media content on gender equality, TWP and UN Women Mexico Country Office will hold an international conference, in Mexico City this July. Media creative teams from Spain, Brazil and other Spanish speaking countries will be invited to *The Gender Equality Conference*. This conference is part of the call to action of the 20-year anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+20).

#### **4. Conclusion**

I am aware that programs like *What Women Won’t Say* or *The Media For Gender Equality Conference* are just a few drops in the ocean but if we all join together then we will challenge the media status, as a result new norms will emerge, new role models for men and women will lead our lives, new narratives gender-free of stereotypes will be disseminated in societies, new forms diverse and rich as we human beings are.

## References

The Women's Media Center, "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2014", USA, WMC, 2014

GDV Group, "Evaluation of What Women Won't Say", Mexico, GDV, 2014

Countries in which *What Women Won't Say* has been shown in the world:

