

## **Representation of Croatian Women in the Media**

*A woman is embarrassed little that she does not possess high insights, that she is timid, and not fit for serious employments, and so forth; she is beautiful and captivates, and that is enough.*

*- Immanuel Kant*

Media representation of women in post-communist Croatia plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing traditional and sexist stereotypes of Croatian women<sup>1</sup> and their accomplishments. The emergence of nationalist rhetoric and a market-oriented economy since Croatia's independence in 1991 has contributed a new social reality for Croatian women that subordinates their value in society to their reproductive function and physical appearance; therefore idealizing the requisites of youth, fertility, domesticity and beauty. Women's interests in the public sphere have been relegated back to their bodies as mothers or sex objects. Representation of women's real experiences, issues and professional accomplishments have been marginalized or trivialized, thus reinforcing patriarchal ideology and power in Croatia. This paper will examine the extent to which the media represents Croatian women in the social and political sphere by exploring media's projection of negative female stereotypes, exclusion of women, as well as highlighting feminist resistance and activism in Croatia against gender discrimination. Although several feminist organizations have made some progress in monitoring media

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<sup>1</sup> Women who are defined as *ethnic* Croats

and promoting positive images of Croatian women, mainstream media continues to misrepresent and silence women, and by doing so it perpetuates negative female stereotypes and undermines women's advancement in Croatia.

In the former Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, which lasted from 1945 to 1991, socialist ideology offered women access to equal rights and opportunities, as well as recognition in history, particularly with the achievements of the Anti-Fascist Front of Women (AFZ) during World War II,<sup>2</sup> but these gains eventually proved to exist more in official Communist discourse rather than reality. Barbara Jancar-Webster contends:

No further improvement in Yugoslav women's status occurred after the war...victory came to be associated with official appreciation of the value of woman's traditional economic and social functions in the private sphere as these were translated into the public sphere during the war.<sup>3</sup>

Growing numbers of women entered the work force, but their economic and political status remained marginalized. Women comprised of approximately 40% of the labor force, but their employment tended to be in low-profit industries, such as textiles, tourism and health care.<sup>4</sup> Scholar, Sabrina P. Ramet points out that the Communists made significant attempts to produce propaganda highlighting the importance of gender equality, such as state sponsored films or programmatic statements at party forums, but

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<sup>2</sup> AFZ consisted of women in the region who were mobilized and educated to support the partisan movement during WWII. Participation in the war won them economic and legal rights, which were demanded before the war. According to Barbara Jancar-Webster, "the gains made by Yugoslav women in the National Liberation War moved them in five years from a 'feudal' condition of dependency to 'modern' legal and civil equality" (p.86-7)

See Jancar-Webster's article, "Women in the Yugoslav National Liberation Movement", in *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans* ed. Sabrina P. Ramet. A book on the subject has also been published by Jancar-Webster, entitled *Women & Revolution in Yugoslavia: 1941-1945*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.87.

<sup>4</sup> Vesna Kesic, "From Reverence to Rape," in *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War and Resistance*, ed. Marguerite R. Waller & Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), p.28.

she argues that they failed because they did not “take up the task of using the educational system to reshape people’s thinking about people’s thinking about gender differences”<sup>5</sup>. For example, schoolbooks were sexist in that they promoted traditional values and roles for boys and girls.<sup>6</sup> In a study conducted in the late 1980’s on primary school textbooks, sociologist, Lydia Sklevicky, discovered that the leading role consisted primarily of male soldiers accompanied by their horses, followed by distinguished male politicians and artists, whereas women marginally appeared as peasants, wives, mothers, daughters, old women and female symbols (for motherhood, liberty, etc.).<sup>7</sup> The representation of women in mass media and popular culture provided an alternate image, which tended to promote western ideals of the ‘liberalized’ Yugoslav woman, but this was hardly the reality according to feminist writer and activist, Vesna Kesic, who states that “it was very distant from the experience of the vast majority of men and women who still lived under conditions between traditional and modernized industrial society”<sup>8</sup>. She points out “from the 1970’s on, Western commercial principles and consumerism penetrated fully into the everyday life of Yugoslav society. We had it all—beauty contests, soft porn, the import and advertising of cosmetics and other beauty industry merchandise.”<sup>9</sup> Women’s

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<sup>5</sup> Ramet, Sabrina P. “In Tito’s Time.” In *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Ramet points out that in a study (published in 1979) on third grade school textbooks, 68% of main characters were male, 32% female and that 73% of the total persons depicted in the book were male. These images contrasted in that males were depicted as “strong, courageous, and warlike” and females as “maternal, beautiful and indecisive”. p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Sklevicky, Lydia. “More Horses than Women: On the Difficulties of Founding Women’s History in Yugoslavia.” *Gender & History*. Vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1989), p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Kesic, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

magazines promoted similar content then as they do today. Despite this notion of 'liberalization' it was hardly the reality for most Yugoslav women. Women's identity and roles during the socialist era proved highly paradoxical in that official discourse promoted their equality in terms of class, yet in reality they continued to be undermined by traditional, patriarchal beliefs and practices. The legacy of traditional belief systems, the failure of class equality under socialism, in addition to the influence of western market and mass media practices seem to have all contributed to reinforcing Croatian women's subordinate position, a legacy which has carried forth to present day Croatia.

Women living in western democracies continue to struggle against negative stereotypes presented in mass media, which perpetuate discriminatory attitudes towards women and their status. The situation is not much different in Croatia, but what distinguishes this country from the West is the influence of nationalist agendas, as well as the degree of sexual exploitation of women's bodies in advertising campaigns. The nationalist rhetoric of the ruling party in power during the 1990's, *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica* (HDZ)<sup>10</sup>, was instrumental in projecting traditional portraits of the ideal Croatian family to assert a homogenous ethnic identity in the public sphere, and ultimately to encourage demographic renewal. This was not difficult to execute since the ruling HDZ government controlled a large part of media in Croatia.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic Croatian women were heavily idealized in traditional roles of motherhood and domesticity in the media. The production of this portrait glorified motherhood by metaphorically

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<sup>10</sup> In English, the Croatian Democratic Union. HDZ governed Croatia from its independence in 1991 to 2000. A coalition of six parties is now in power.

<sup>11</sup> In 1998, electronic media remained largely controlled by HDZ. Croatia had no private television station or private national radio station, and broadcast licenses granted were inconsistent and subject to HDZ interference. *Human Rights Watch World Report 1999: Croatia: Human Rights Developments*. <http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/europe/croatia.html> [April 14, 2002].

symbolizing it with the Croatian 'homeland'.<sup>12</sup> Political and cultural language in public discourse was instilled with terms and concepts such as "Mother Nurturer," "Mother Earth," and "Croatia, a proud woman" as a strategy to solidify a national identity among Croats and assert the new nation state during the civil war in the early 1990's and afterward.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of Croatia as a 'mother' may symbolically allude to the importance of women in terms of 'nurturing' or creating the new nation state, but paradoxically this representation serves to subjugate them as biological reproducers in society, thus undermining and marginalizing their roles as active participants in the new political and economic spheres.

Media representation of traditional roles for women was not only propelled by the governing HDZ, but also supported by the Catholic Church. Writer, Slavenka Drakulic recalls, "tremendous attention was paid to the family, such as constant television coverage of baptisms where the godfather was a member of the government".<sup>14</sup> The government and the Catholic Church have united and together serve to symbolize the dominant patriarchal protectors of the new nation-state and its future generations. The HDZ constantly put forth the concept of the "fruitful virgin-mother" in their public speeches in the early 1990's when they addressed large groups of women.<sup>15</sup> The Catholic Church and pro-life organizations, particularly the NGO, Croatian Population Movement, led by Don Anto Bakovic, heavily propagated anti-abortion messages. Bakovic is

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<sup>12</sup> Kesic, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.29.

<sup>14</sup> Slavenka Drakulic, "Women and the New Democracy in the Former Yugoslavia," in *Gender Politics and Post Communism* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.123.

notorious for repeatedly exclaiming, “Croatia is dying out...[and] the demographic situation in Croatia is catastrophic and we [ethnic Croats] need to stop the extinction”.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the financial backing for Bakovic’s NGO was partially financed for several years by donations from the state budget<sup>17</sup>; therefore, legitimizing the pronatalist views and agenda of the HDZ government.

Prior to Croatia’s independence from Yugoslavia, women were free to choose abortion without any special consent and the cost was covered by the state. By 1980, abortions began to exceed births in Yugoslavia and in 1989, it was recorded that 22% of all women having an abortion that year, had previously had four abortions.<sup>18</sup> A study on the legacy of an abortion tradition in Yugoslavia and its impact on women in present day Belgrade, revealed that the majority of women randomly interviewed still held traditional beliefs and practices concerning contraception due to a lack of information; as a result, the majority are resistant to modern alternatives.<sup>19</sup> This lack of knowledge seemed consistent regardless of the woman’s age or occupation. The situation is somewhat similar in Croatia. The Communists may have legislated accessibility to abortion in 1978, but it seems that women received little or no education on sexuality or

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<sup>16</sup> Don Anto Bakovic. [interviewed by Vuk Duricic]. *I am not Afraid of Sanctions as Long as Croat Hen Lays Croat Eggs*. < <http://www.cdsp.neu.edu/info/students/marko.slodall1.html> > [April 7, 2002].

<sup>17</sup> Be Active, Be Emancipated (B.a.B.e), *NGO Report on the Status of Women in the Republic of Croatia, 1997*. “Reproductive Rights: Article 12”. < <http://www.babe.hr/end/reports/cedaw-repo.htm> > [April 7, 2002].

<sup>18</sup> Rasevic, Mirjana. “Yugoslavia: Abortion as a Preferred Method of Birth Control.” *Reproductive Health Matters*. No. 3. (May 1994). < [www.rhmjournal.org.uk/PDFs/03rasev.pdf](http://www.rhmjournal.org.uk/PDFs/03rasev.pdf) > [February 13, 2002], 68. The study focuses on women in present day FR Yugoslavia (now Serbia & Montenegro), but offers background and may suggest similar experiences throughout former region concerning preference for induced abortions rather than modern methods.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.

reproduction, thus contributing to the problem of high abortion rates. Since abortion is no longer subsidized in Croatia<sup>20</sup>, women are more inclined to seek illegal alternatives, thus risking their health and sometimes their lives. Although abortion rates began officially dropping in the early 1990's, it is believed that many women choose to have abortions illegally or in expensive gynecological clinics in Slovenia.<sup>21</sup> The religious and nationalist climate in Croatia has prevented women from obtaining adequate information on abortion, as well as alternate contraceptive methods. In a recent survey in Croatia on the human reproductive system, it was discovered that only 20% of secondary students, 10% of their parents and 50% of the teachers understood the reproductive process.<sup>22</sup> The lack of knowledge about the reproductive system crossed three generations, thus illustrating the government's past and present neglect of providing adequate sex education. The government has attempted recently to remedy this situation by offering through the National Institute for Maternity, Family and Youth, two-day seminars, held four times a year, to adolescents, parents and teachers. Considering the conservative and religious climate in Croatia, and particularly the name of the institute, it seems unlikely that abortion would be broadly discussed or regarded with approval. The little or lack of

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<sup>20</sup> Pronatalist policies were installed during the early years of the ruling HDZ party. Abortion is still legal up to 12 weeks, but it is no longer subsidized. It was the first medical service to be removed from the list of subsidized services after Croatia's independence from Yugoslavia. An abortion today costs approximately 2000 Kunas (\$180 USD), an amount equivalent to one half of an average monthly salary. Due to the pressure of the Church, all family planning clinics were closed. Contraceptives are available, but they are limited and expensive.

See Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CRLP) and Be Active, Be Emancipated (B.a.B.e), (March 2001). *Women's Reproductive Rights in Croatia: A Shadow Report*. [http://www.crlp.org/pdf/sr\\_croatia\\_0301\\_eng.pdf](http://www.crlp.org/pdf/sr_croatia_0301_eng.pdf) [April 7, 2002]

<sup>21</sup> B.a.B.e... "Reproductive Rights: Article 12"...

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.14.

organized efforts by the state or media to educate the public about health and sexuality continues to remain marginal.

Croatian women who have attempted to resist nationalist views and patriarchal norms have often encountered hostility in the media; for example, *Globus*, a popular weekly, notoriously conducted a smear campaign against several feminists while accusing them of supporting “anti-Croatian ideas”.<sup>23</sup> In 1992, *Globus* published an article entitled, “Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia,” which accused five Croatian women writers (Jelena Lovric, Rada Ivekovic, Slavenka Drakulic, Vesna Kesic and Dubravka Ugresic), or “witches” as they were called, of propagating lies to the Croatian people about the rapes of Croatian and Bosnian women because they had examined the recent wartime rapes in terms of gender, rather than the outcome of Serbian aggression.<sup>24</sup> As a result, these writers were considered traitors amid the intense nationalist discourse of that time. The article in *Globus* also criticized these women writers for speaking abroad about the position of women in post-communist Croatian society. The weekly retaliated by intentionally humiliating these women writers with detailed information about their personal lives; an act that ultimately aimed to trivialize their political and professional work and expose them to public harassment.<sup>25</sup> What is evident is that female intellectuals and journalists, who spoke out for women’s rights and issues, were punished for breaking past the traditional boundaries of ideal womanhood, which explains why many of them left Croatia. The only ‘feminists’ that escaped harassment belonged to conservative

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<sup>23</sup> Press Now Dossier, *Printed Media: Independent Newspapers* <<http://www.xs4all.nl/~pressnow/media/kroatie/croatia5.htm>> [17 March, 2002], *Globus*.

<sup>24</sup> Pavlovic, p. 136.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 137.



women's groups that supported nationalist views and traditional family values, such as the NGO's Kareta and Bedem.<sup>26</sup>

The media has been instrumental in maintaining explicit stereotypes of Croatian women that serve the agendas of conservative governing powers or private retail companies in the market, both highly male-dominated arenas. It seems paradoxical that a government that espouses traditional values and praises the virtue of women as mothers does little to regulate the proliferation of soft-pornographic images of female bodies in mainstream media. According to a report by the feminist NGO, *Budi aktivna, Budi emancipirana* (B.a.B.e)<sup>27</sup>, "the market economy has encouraged the production of pornography [and] in highly commercialized private publications soft pornography is the foundation of the market strategy".<sup>28</sup> Images of half-naked women are commonplace in magazines and newspapers because women's bodies have market value; their sexuality is exploited to entice male consumers to buy specific products. Crow Magazine, an e-zine on the Internet that monitors women's representation in the media, addresses the "pornographic attitude in everyday life" in Croatia by pointing out:

Even 'serious' magazines and newspapers in Croatia feature ads for sex phones or sex services with pictures of women in all possible positions with a face expression of utter enjoyment for exposing wide spread legs with sub-titles: 'I am waiting for you,' 'If you are tense, call me!,' 'I am hot and like it manly' etc. Such images have become normal. Political magazines and papers (Nacional) usually have the middle section considered entertaining and relaxing reserved for a centerfold half-naked beauty.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Pavolvic, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> In English, "Be Active, Be Emancipated" (B.a.B.e). The word Babe (Bah-beh) in Croatian also means "old hags," a pejorative term for an old woman. According to the women of B.a.B.e., they want to give new meaning to this ugly name that is used against women.

<sup>28</sup> B.a.B.e – CEDAW, "NGO Report on the Status of Women in the Republic of Croatia, 1997: Media and Public Representation of Women" ...

<sup>29</sup> Crow E-Zine, "Means of Sexual Discrimination: Pornographic attitude in everyday life" <<http://www.Crowmagazine.com/porn.htm>> [17 March 2002], Pornographic Attitude.

Women's bodies have become exploited for market profit as nameless, de-personified objects. Their bodies are used in advertisements that range from cars to cell phones as a means to predominantly attract male consumers.

The marketing strategies of companies advertising their product in Croatia are less confined to adhering to gender sensitive policies. Sexual discrimination is pervasive in various advertising campaigns, regardless of the size and prestige of domestic or international companies. For example, Volkswagen recently promoted a campaign in Croatia in which large posters expressed the slogan "exchange the old for the new" (*staro za novo*)<sup>30</sup> above the image of two beautiful young women in the forefront with two matronly middle-aged women in the background. The underlying message of the text and images seems evident: why settle for your old wife when you can have a beautiful young woman. Another Volkswagen ad illustrates a young attractive woman lying on a bed with one hand holding an apple, the other hand placed between her legs; the text reads: "Dad, who is this for?" (*tata, za koga je ovo?*), the answer "for the privileged, my son, for the privileged" (*za povlasticare sine, za povlasticare*).<sup>31</sup> The "privileged" in this context actually refers to citizens in Croatia who are subsidized to purchase this car, such as war veterans, people with special needs, etc.,<sup>32</sup> yet the text and images are highly sexualized. Although the ad is aimed at consumers in Croatia, the message of the ad still connotes a sexual message, even in translation. The word "privileged" seems to suggest

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<sup>30</sup> Advertisement in Crow E-Zine, "Monthly News: Shameful Advertising" (February 2001) <<http://www.crowmagazine.com/feb01.htm>> [17 March 2002].

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

that the person (man) getting the car (woman) is a 'lucky guy'. The image of the young woman in the ad is overtly sexualized simply by the fact that she is holding an apple in one hand, an object which symbolically alludes to sin, and the other hand is placed between her legs, thus signifying a connection between the two. The ad appeals to the pursuit of male desirability of a woman's body to entice potential (male) consumers. The objectification of women as 'things', such as an automobile, is common in advertising strategies, but what is significant about advertising in Croatia is the degree of sexual exploitation of women's bodies that is acceptable in the public sphere. According to Crow Magazine, the Volkswagen ad campaign has not stirred any public reaction in Croatia because people find these types of ads "normal".<sup>33</sup> Although women's bodies are regularly exploited in ad campaigns in the West, a notable company such as Volkswagen would not project the same advertisements in Canada or the United States, as it did in Croatia. There seems to be a higher degree of public acceptance of explicit nudity and sexuality in mainstream print media in Croatia. One may argue that North American culture is too conservative, but that does not diminish the fact that it is still 'women' in Croatia that are negatively portrayed and exploited in advertisements, rather than men. It is unlikely that the Croatian public would see large posters of a man with his hand between his legs to promote Volkswagen cars, or a picture of male legs with a pair of underwear at his ankles promoting a new scent of a female deodorant.<sup>34</sup> According to Crow Magazine, "no man is ever undressed unless he is used on ads that are related to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> A recent ad campaign advertising men's deodorant consisted of an ad (on large posters) showing a woman's legs only with her panties down around her ankles, conveying the message that this man's deodorant is so good that it would cause women's panties to fall down by themselves. In Crow E-Zine, "Monthly News: Matter of Personal Responsibility," (April 2001) <<http://www.Crowmagazine.com/april01.htm>> [7 April, 2002]

[his] body hygiene [although] women are undressed in all occasions and in relation to every imaginable thing.”<sup>35</sup> This reflects that men are predominantly in positions of power, which enables them to use media to serve their political and economic interests, and in doing so reinforce patriarchal ideology that defines and normalizes acceptable roles for women, whether it is mother, wife or sex object. Women who do not fit into these stereotypical categories, face exclusion in the media because they do not represent or promote traditional ideals of womanhood; for example, women who are mature, oversized, lesbian or disabled.

Women’s magazines in Croatia contribute to the propagation of stereotypical representations of women. Most mainstream magazines feature similar contents that focus on keeping women in front of the mirror or in the home, therefore trivializing her potential to achieve something credible in important fields, such as science, politics or business. Stereotypical choices of subjects include beauty, fashion, tips to attract or keep a man, gossip, kitchen tips and astrology.<sup>36</sup> These types of magazines for women are common, but in Croatia there are few alternatives; articles or magazines that seriously address women or women’s issues are rarely featured or trivialized on the basis of their political irrelevance.<sup>37</sup> The most popular women’s magazines in Croatia today are *Gloria, Mila, Regina, Svijet, Tara, Tena and Zaposlena*.<sup>38</sup> *Gloria* is Croatia’s best selling

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<sup>35</sup> Crow E-Zine, “Power of the Media: Fighting Stereotypes” <<http://www.crowmagazine.com/stereo.en.htm>> [17 March 2002], What If.

<sup>36</sup> Crow E-zine, “Women’s Magazines in Croatia: How to Break the Chain of Clones?” <[http://www.crowmagazine.com/zencas\\_e.htm](http://www.crowmagazine.com/zencas_e.htm)> [30 January 2002], Introduction.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Gordana Vilovic, “Croatian Women’s Press: Women Between the Kitchen and the Beauty Parlor,”

women's weekly magazine with an average circulation estimated to exceed 120 000, which places it significantly ahead in ratings and popularity of other women's magazines.<sup>39</sup> Considering the difficult economic situation in Croatia, particularly for women, who comprise the majority of unemployed or those working in lower paying jobs, *Gloria* sells well in the market.<sup>40</sup> The magazine is successful in engaging female readers to read about the lives of celebrities, soap operas, beauty, romance and domestic tips. It is not surprising that this content is appealing to Croatian women, since their consumer habits were highly influenced by similar types of content and advertising during the socialist era when enormous imports from the West penetrated the Yugoslav mixed economy.

According to writer Gordana Vilovic, the success of *Gloria* is due to its fairy tale quality, where there is "no poverty, no ugliness or social injustice".<sup>41</sup> Considering that the public was and is recovering from a civil war, it is not surprising that women choose to escape with women's magazines that promote fantasy. Another reason for *Gloria's* success is due to its coverage of soap operas, particularly South-American tele-novels, which have become very popular.<sup>42</sup> Although *Gloria* may appear harmless in its content, what is problematic is that it contributes to promoting messages that aim to keep women

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<<http://www.mediaonline.ba/mediaupite/lista.htm?zanr=5>> [28 January 2001], 2. According to Vilovic, exact circulation of this magazine is not known. The estimated number sold is high considering the small population of Croatia (est. 4.4 million) and the difficult economic situation of recent times.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p 2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 2-3.

in front of the mirror or in the home, therefore trivializing and undermining women's achievements and position in society.

These types of women's magazines are common in Croatia, but what is troubling is that there are no alternatives; magazines or articles that seriously address women or women's issues are rarely featured or trivialized because of their political irrelevance.<sup>43</sup> *Zaposlena* (Career Woman or Working Woman) is the only women's magazine that attempts to promote prominent women in Croatia and their professional achievements, but its contents prove to be less serious due to its inclusion of numerous articles featuring fashion, celebrities, cosmetics and recipes.<sup>44</sup> This contradiction sends the underlying message to its young readers that they are capable of attaining jobs and becoming professional career women, but their 'success' is also contingent on their looks and domestic talents. Despite this ambiguous message in *Zaposlena*, the magazine is still important because it at least attempts to project women's issues and accomplishments into public discourse. Unfortunately, *Zaposlena* does not have a high circulation (estimated at a low 6,000 copies).<sup>45</sup>

The cumulative effects of misrepresenting women's interests and issues in mainstream media results in undermining women's social and political advancement in Croatia. Young attractive women who are professionally successful are often portrayed sexually or their interests are trivialized. For example, in one of Croatia's daily newspapers with the biggest circulation, *Vecernji list*, an interview with Croatia's best

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<sup>43</sup> Crow E-zine, "Women's Magazines in Croatia: How to Break the Chain of Clones"...

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

fencer, seventeen-year-old Doris Vrecko is illustrated with a photograph showing her wearing a scant, seductive outfit and leaning against a piano, with the heading, “my piano teacher pushed me into the fencing”.<sup>46</sup> Rather than presenting Vrecko in a positive context that would display her accomplishments as a superb fencer, the focus of interest is re-directed toward her sexual attractiveness; therefore her real achievement is underplayed. Another example found in *Vecernji list* (VL) is an interview with Jelena Ravlic (J), the leader of young members of the HKDU parliamentary party (Croatian Christian-Democratic Union) in which the entire dialogue between the interviewer, Darko Djuretek, and Ravlic revolves around her sexual attractiveness and preferences in a partner:

VL: Do you wear sexy mini-skirts?  
J: Depends on the occasion...  
VL: What about sexy underwear?  
J: Yes.  
VL: How does it look like?  
J: Lacy G-string and bras with tiny silicon strips.<sup>47</sup>

Ravlic responds to these questions without much resistance, which is disturbing considering that she is in a professional position and serves as a role model. This example is indicative of the sexist attitude towards women that has been normalized in Croatia, to the extent that many successful women do not even question it. The lack of gender sensitivity in these newspaper portraits reveals the existing patriarchal attitudes that construct mass media realities, which ultimately subjugate women to an inferior status by trivializing their accomplishments.

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<sup>46</sup> *Vecernji list* (24.08.2000) in Crow E-Zine, “Monthly News: Public Acceptability of Absurdity” (September 2000) <<http://crowmagazine.com/sep00.htm>> [17 March 2002].

<sup>47</sup> Interview excerpt from *Vecernji list* (23.06.2001) in Crow E-Zine, “Monthly News: Equal in Stupidity” (June 2001) <<http://www.crowmagazine.com/june01.htm>> [17 March 2002]. **NOTE:** The entire interview in pdf. format can be found here or <http://arhiva.vecernji-list.hr/2001/06/23/010623-40.pdf>

Female politicians in Croatia have yet to receive serious and substantial media attention. Although the number of women in the Croatian Parliament increased to 21 percent in the elections in 2000,<sup>48</sup> female politicians received modest media coverage in the pre-election campaign. A study on the visibility of women in politics and the media during the pre-election period revealed that female politicians were dramatically under-represented in electronic media, primarily television, thus asserting the hypothesis that media presentation mirrors the political reality of women in Croatia.<sup>49</sup> In the study, 13% of the televised segments of *Dnevnik III* represented female politicians, but only two women out of 254 persons spoke directly to the camera.<sup>50</sup> Women who spoke on the program mainly discussed the topic of parenthood and were not shown commenting on issues concerning disasters and Croatian foreign policy, which were frequently discussed.<sup>51</sup>

Women in press reports were also under-represented. A study conducted by the women's human rights group, B.a.B.e, revealed that 13% of the articles concerning the HDZ (written about the most in all daily papers) represented women politicians; whereas the Coalition of Four (HSS-LS-IDS-HNS)<sup>52</sup> had the biggest percentage of articles

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<sup>48</sup> Biljana Bijelic, "The First Step: Getting in the Door, Croatia: Taking Our Cause to the Voters" (March 2001) <<http://www.wedo.org/5050/croatia.htm>> [24 January 2002].

<sup>49</sup> Study conducted by a sociologist team of Women's infoteka from December 12, 1999 to January 1, 2000, analyzing segments of the informative-political TV program "Dnevnik III" Women's infoteka, "Elections in the Media: Media observation and the representation of women on the Croatian political scene" <<http://www.zinfo.hr/engleski/pages/research/elections%202000/ElectionsMedia.htm>> [8 April 2002].

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, conclusion.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> HSS-LS-IDS-HNS coalition party is comprised of the Croatian Peasant Party, Liberal Party, Istrian Democratic Convention and Croatian People's Party.



mentioning women at 31%.<sup>53</sup> Despite these figures, the SDP/HSLs<sup>54</sup> is the only party that had a gender sensitive pre-election campaign in which women were promoted as active participants, but overall the representation of women during the pre-election campaign was marginalized in electronic and print media.

Many feminist groups in Croatia have been instrumental in monitoring media and protesting sexist and discriminatory ads and articles, most notably the efforts of B.a.B.e and Crow Magazine (e-zine). Members of B.a.b.e have been very active in protesting negative stereotypes of women in the media and in public discourse, which has often resulted in positive outcomes. Their collaboration with female journalists in Croatia and women activists from Germany, led to the successful removal of Volkswagen's offensive sexist advertising campaign.<sup>55</sup> Among B.a.B.e's media monitoring activities, the organization's projects include: protecting women's human rights, organizing activist demonstrations, conducting research, presenting positive female role models, as well as discussing women's issues on their radio show, *Mjesečnica*<sup>56</sup>. Also, B.a.B.e took part in a nation-wide campaign to improve women's political participation; the results from the preliminary survey suggests that women's participation has dramatically increased from

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<sup>53</sup> B.a.B.e, "Electorine: Women representation in press reports of party pre-election campaigns" (December 22, 1999) <<http://www.babe.hr/eng/research/elektorine2.htm>> [24 January 2002].

<sup>54</sup> SDP/HSLs is a union between the Social Democratic Party and the Croatian Social and Liberal Party.

<sup>55</sup> B.a.B.e. *Annual Report: 2001*...Monitoring Media, p.10.

<sup>56</sup> The term *mjesečnica* in English refers to a women's 'monthly menstruation cycle'. The monthly radio show discusses important women's issues relating to topics such as politics, economy, eating disorders, domestic violence, etc., which are generally invisible in mainstream media.

2.8% to approximately 10%,<sup>57</sup> thus revealing that efforts to raise awareness among women as a means of inciting greater participation can ultimately generate change.

Crow Magazine, Croatia's first women's e-zine on the Internet is another positive example of an organization that is committed to exposing negative stereotypes of women in the media, as well as representing 'other' female voices and experiences. For example, the recent issue of Crow focuses on the subject of oversized women and their invisibility in the media.

The activism and influence of grassroots feminist groups, such as B.a.B.e and Crow Magazine, are a positive step in affirming and promoting positive representations of women and women's accomplishments in Croatia. It is important to keep in mind that there are other women's groups that define themselves as 'feminist', yet they subordinate women's issues to purported national interests. Feminism has yet to take shape in Croatia. It appears that most women are still unwilling to challenge the status quo. In a recent study conducted at the University of Zagreb, researcher Kristina Zaborski discovered that "traditional roles are still accepted even amongst the younger, educated population".<sup>58</sup> Djurdja Knezevic, director of the feminist publishing house, *Zenska Infoteka*, contends that sexism is entrenched in Croatian society and institutions, "especially the universities".<sup>59</sup> These results are indicative of the past and existing patriarchal traditions that continue to influence women in Croatia, particularly in the their

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<sup>57</sup> Ba.B.e. *Annual Report 2001*...Local Elections, p.16.

<sup>58</sup> Kristina Zaborski, "The Future of Feminism in Croatia?!" *Bread and Roses No. 9* (Spring 1998), <<http://www.zinfo.hr/engleski/pages/publishing/breadandroses/br9/9kristina.htm>> [10 April 2002].

<sup>59</sup> Djurdja Knezevic quoted in article "Croatian Women Battle Sexism" by Dominic Hopkins. *Institute for War and Peace Reporting* (January 4, 2002). <[http://www.iwpr.net/archive.bcr2/bcr2\\_20020104\\_2\\_eng.text](http://www.iwpr.net/archive.bcr2/bcr2_20020104_2_eng.text)>

educational upbringing. The emergence of nationalist ideology in conjunction with the transition to a market economy in the new state has reinforced the subordination of women's identities and roles to their bodies, thus muting their voices in the public sphere. The retrogression of women in Croatia has been aided by the reinforcement of distorted female stereotypes propagated by media, which serve to endorse discriminatory and sexist attitudes, thus confining women to a subordinate place. Small changes are taking place, but until Croatian women demand greater access to the public domain, where they can challenge their exploitation and censorship, their progress will be slow. Women in western democracies have struggled for these same rights, and still continue to do so; Croatian women will have to find their own path, and this has begun with the organization of several activist women's groups, who strive to assert women's rights and promote positive female role models in the media, which will ultimately contribute to creating space for women's advancement in Croatia.

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