

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277008589>

# GENDER AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Article · January 2014

CITATION

1

READS

9,085

5 authors, including:



[Eva Gerino](#)

Università degli Studi di Torino

22 PUBLICATIONS 151 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Luca Rollè](#)

Università degli Studi di Torino

44 PUBLICATIONS 299 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



New Perspectives on Domestic Violence: from Research to Intervention [View project](#)



Empowering LGBTQ people against violence: a p2p model [View project](#)



## GENDER AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

TANJA DI PIANO, EVA GERINO, ELISA MARINO, PIERA BRUSTIA, LUCA  
ROLLÈ\*<sup>A</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Torino (IT),  
Department of Psychology

### **Abstract**

*The present work aims to examine the Italian scenario for what concerned gender stereotypes against women and, specifically, how they are reinforced and partially created by the media (Volpato, 2011; 2013). It's essential to analyze briefly the evolution of women's movement, particularly in the historic moment that goes from the '60s until today, characterized over time by different claims which have led to innovations in civil and social rights. After this first part, designed to provide a basis for a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon, the work goes into a part related to women's gender stereotypes, highlighting their pervasiveness. Since this is an extremely complex phenomenon, the focus was narrowed to two areas: the role of women within the family (and how the transformation of the couple has produced substantial changes in gender roles) and women seen as an object. Both roles assigned and self-assigned to women are also compared with the media representation to provide a broader picture of the phenomenon. Despite the progress made both from a social and legislative point of view, stereotypes against women are still present on the Italian scene, and the media seems that are using them in their favor, continuing to promote their spread and pervasiveness.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *sexism, stereotipurile de gen, de reprezentare media, campanie publicitari, rolul femeilor.*

**Keywords:** *sexism, gender stereotypes, media representation, advertising campaign, women role.*

---

\*Autor corespondent: Luca Rollè, Email: l.rolle@unito.it

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Born as women or as men means having specific and distinct sexual attributes. Subsequently, through socialization, individuals internalize ways of feeling, interacting and communicating. Their sexual belonging guides the rules that need to be followed and the roles that need to be played from a social and cultural point of view.

Gender is therefore the social construction of biological sex and allows girls and boys to be recognized and to recognize others through symbols, images, non-verbal language, ways to express themselves, appear more or less standardized; while it conditions and limits individuals in defined paths, reducing the opportunity to express tastes, intentions, plans, fantasies and desires that may differ from the rules established by the society to which one belongs.

The literature on gender issues and equal opportunities is very rich and varied, and with this in mind we have tried to consider the most relevant issues for analysing the phenomenon of gender and media representation.

Ever since 1922, Lippmann argued that stereotypes held important functions as products of the culture and heritage of the group's ideas, since they are the vehicles of creating homogeneity of values and beliefs. This reveals one of the reasons why the agents of social influence (family, group of peers, media...) which are able to form, transmit and maintain stereotypes in the generations and between social classes, play an extremely important role.

It's important to have a cultural and historical framework related on the phenomenon, with a brief excursus on the feminist and women's movements in Italy and the objectives that characterized them, in order to understand the process which enables us to talk about gender today.

During the twentieth century, women have struggled to achieve their civil, political and social rights, aiming to affect the static condition: women were seen as an "accessory" of the householder, there were no rights of protection on legitimate children, they were unable to manage earnings derived from their work, impediment to access to public office and to many professions and to exercise voting rights (Sartori, 2009). Between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's battles had their independence and autonomy as a purpose. In Italy this process

underwent a drastic interruption during the fascist period in which women became the subject of an ideology that considered them solely devoted to their family and in a position of subordination to their husbands. After the Second World War, women gained the right to vote (1946). At the end of the 60s and in the following decade, however, they still had to fight for the defence of their work and equal pay, for the conquest of new rights and new freedoms.

The fights and movements today did not come to an end and women are active participants in the debate on the construction of an autonomous identity, specifically for women. This evolution, however, is non-linear and hampered by many obstacles and resistances, especially cultural, making precarious and often only theoretical achievements, calling into question the principles already discounted and consolidated (Thornton, 2005).

Alongside other states, Italy lies on a particular form of backwardness. "Particular" because it is a situation in which women does not suffer from deficiencies in living conditions, education, health care, as is the case in other countries of the world, but from a lack of opportunity. Girls born in Italy do not have the same probability as their brothers to express the power of their thoughts and actions; their opportunity to govern their own lives and the lives of the entire country are lower than they would be if Italy was a country with a real social equality and what would be necessary for the overall development of the community. In the last century much intellectual and political energy have been spent on the question of women. With excellent results, if we look at how women today can move in all spheres of social life and how they have excided men in education and training. With disappointing results if we consider that they are still largely excluded from the corridors of power, and above all that, their public image and their political representation have been subject, in the last two decades, to a degradation that knows no comparison in the history of Western countries (Volpato, 2013).

The closer you get to the higher spheres of power, the worse the situation: women are conspicuously underrepresented. Not to mention that there are still too many women under the mark of gender stereotypes on the choice of the study and subsequent career opportunities. In this context, Italy is not brilliantly located. Even if women are the ones who study more and are more active in the labour

market, they remain a quarter compared to men, especially in the top management positions, while occupying more than half of executive positions and atypical jobs. In Parliament they are about 20% of the deputies and senators, and in the government even less, one of the lowest percentages in Europe (CENSIS, 2008). Yet, according to ISTAT, despite the current crisis and unemployment, women at work have increased in the third quarter of 2008. In this sense, Piedmont stands out compared to the national average, with 56.3% of female employment, not far from the Lisbon targets. Nevertheless, the change is still extremely slow because of the culture and of poor practical law application.

On gender issues, Italy holds a special place among the Western democracies. According to the Gender Gap Report, published annually by the World Economic Forum, which quantifies the size and the time evolution of the gender gap by monitoring 134 countries, Italy recorded a relegation year after year: in 2008 it was on the 67th place, in the 2009 on the 72nd, in 2010 and in 2011 on the 74th, 80th in 2012. The Italian media is distinguished by the grade of women sexualisation: in advertising, television programs and videos. Objectified women are an omnipresent model, as indicated by the comparative surveys in the European media, which denounces the Italian sexist culture. Given these premises, important in order to understand the context within which gender culture was created and developed, the attention is focused on gender stereotypes by highlighting their pervasiveness in various areas, from work, to education, from books to media.

Supporting this topic, two campaigns that have had the merit of emphasizing the phenomenon that is often underestimated: the Pubblicità Progresso campaign of 2013 and the campaign of UN Women. The purpose of the campaign "Punto su di te" ("I count on you") is the exposé in an original way the different faces of discrimination. The fact that it is made public, recognized and brought into the open is the first condition to start fighting it. The posters play on images of women faces with a balloon within which there is an unfinished sentence that shows that women cannot give their 100%. In some posters sentences have been completed by unknown with discriminatory words of vandalism, which shows not only bias, but profoundly negative attitudes. The vandalized posters highlight the intent of the campaign: increase the visibility of discrimination, the need to change attitudes and the urgency of this change.

## 2. DEHUMANIZATION AND OBJECTIVATION

"Dehumanize is to deny the humanity of the other, individual or group, introducing an asymmetry between those who enjoy quality of the prototypical human and who is considered ineffective or lacking" (Volpato, 2011, p.4). The dehumanization is multifaceted, manifold and flexible. It is a social and psychological phenomenon. It adapts to places, people, relationships, takes on from time to time to the content required by the cultural climate of the time. It can be associated with the colonial setting, the ethnic diversity, the marginalization of the poorer classes, and the criminalization of the riots, the demonization of political enemies, religious struggles and to women. Women, in fact, have been animalized, objectified or demonized, depending on the historical era. For centuries, especially in the Middle Ages and in modern times, the demonization was the privileged form that has resulted in thousands of executions which have been called the "witch hunt". In 1486 the "Malleus Maleficarum" explained the natural connection between witchcraft and female nature, invoking the biological inferiority of women and the fact that for their irrationality, weakness and immorality, they were easy prey for the devil. The authors, Johann Sprenger and Heinrich Kraemer (1486), of the Malleus Maleficarum noticed that women "seem to belong to a different nature from men, as evidenced by the lack of origin, consisting of the rib curve with which Eve was created, which has made it an imperfect animal" (Romanello, 1981, p.97).

Each era uses metaphors appropriate to its time to implement the process of dehumanization. If in the past it was more easily to evoke animals, spirits, objects, in more recent times it has gone to mechanistic or biological metaphors. Their common point, however, is the fact that most of the historical expressions related to this phenomenon are instruments of social and psychological oppression, used by groups with more power in order to exploit and humiliate the most vulnerable. The dehumanization can be expressed in explicit or subtle ways. The first strategy includes the open denial of the other individuals or groups' humanity (e.g. the Hebrew genocide) in order to justify a range of behaviours aimed to exploitation, degradation and violence. The subtle form includes, the processes that we can find

in the actions and daily communications, which affect constantly but often in an unconscious way, the humanity of others (Volpato, 2011).

### 3. OBJECTIFICATION AND SEXISM

"Objectification is a particular form of dehumanization that causes the individual to be thought of and treated as an object, instrument, commodity" (Volpato, 2011, p.106). The process of objectification involves a kind of "instrumental fragmentation in social perception, the division of the person into parts which serve as the observer's specific functions and purposes" (Gruenfeld et al., 2008, p.111). According to Martha Nussbaum (1999) the concept of objectification includes seven dimensions:

- Instrumentality: the object is an instrument for the purposes of others;
- Denial of autonomy: the object is an entity lacking autonomy and self-determination;
- Inertia: the object is an entity without the capacity to act and to be active;
- Fungibility: the object is interchangeable with other objects in the same category;
- Violability: the object is an entity without the capacity to act and to be active;
- Properties: the object belongs to someone and can, therefore, be sold or loaned;
- Denial of subjectivity: the object is an entity whose experiences and feelings are negligible.

The boundaries of objectification are fluid and not limited by the dimensions above: one can be more active than the other, one can be latent, and they are at the same time interconnected and autonomous (Nussbaum, 1999). In various studies, the psychosocial attention of researchers has focused on a particular form of objectification: the sexual one. The concept of sexual objectification, already formulated by Kant (1785) in "Metaphysics of Morals", indicates the reduction of a person to an instrument of others' wishes. In recent years the construct was examined by feminist thought, which focused on the reduction of women as sex objects (Papadaki, 2007; 2010). The literature also speaks of "sexualisation" when

referring to situations in which the value of a person is confined to its ability to sexually attract, excluding other features. The person is then seen as a tool intended for the pleasure of others, rather than as a human being, able to make decisions and take actions in an autonomous and responsible way. The concepts of sexualisation and sexual objectification are on the same continuum, they are, in fact, often used as synonyms.

The objectification is a daily experience, from which it is virtually impossible to escape, but precisely because of its pervasiveness, it is difficult to conceptualize it and it is not easy to resist it. The sexual objectification indicates the evaluation of a person on the basis of the utility of its sexual functions “that are separate from the rest of his personality and reduced to the status of a mere tool or look as if they were able to represent it in its entirety” (Bartky, 1990, p.26).

The relationships between men and women are based on massive power differences, interdependence, physical and psychological intimacy. The combination of these elements results in ambivalence, which is expressed in the coexistence, within the same environment, but also in the same subject, of benevolent and hostile attitudes (Glick, Fiske, 1996, 2011; King et al 2012). The same man may have a hostile attitude towards female colleagues at work and loving reactions with the women in his family. The function of sexist ideology consists precisely of this: to legitimize male superiority by a powerful belief system that consists of two various and complementary ways, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. The hostile sexism expressed distrust and dislike reserved for those who do not conform to the status quo; women are perceived as opponents who, instead of accepting their assigned places, try to go against men, weakening their power and limiting their freedom through the weapons of sexuality or race. The hostile sexism is based on the affirmation of the 'natural' inferiority of women, which justifies an open hostility towards them.

The benevolent sexism instead attaches a number of positive qualities to women, defining them as precious creatures, to protect, adore and flatter. Although it may be considered a form of subtle prejudice, it is more socially acceptable, and accepted than the hostile sexism, which is necessary to complete the objective legitimacy of gender differences. The benevolent sexism is often expressed in subtle ways, making it difficult to recognize. Like other types of prejudice, sexism



is reinforced in times of crisis, both economic and political. In the case of sexism, this happens especially for hostile prejudice that feeds the fear of women competition. This phenomenon is also often accompanied by other types of prejudice, such as racism and homophobia, and is unleashed with particular enthusiasm when it can be found as an excuse in violation of the rules; an example is the double standard of morality, which does not deny sexual promiscuity for men while prohibiting it for women. Promiscuous women are targets of hostile sexism, whereas women who respect the common morality are objects of benevolent sexism (Rollero, 2013; Volpato, 2013).

#### **4. OBJECTIFICATION IN DIFFERENT COUNTRY**

To assess the presence of sexism in different cultures Glick and colleagues (2000) have promoted two cross-cultural researches, with the aim of detecting the presence of gender bias in various countries. The first was carried out in 19 countries<sup>1</sup> selected in different continents for the diversity of economic and cultural development (Glick et al., 2000), the second, after a few years, was to obtain a comparison (Glick et al., 2004). The attitude towards the female gender was detected using a scale of sexism (Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, Glick & Fiske, 1996), which measured hostile and benevolent preconceptions, taking into account three aspects of gender relations: relations of power, roles and stereotypes and heterosexual intimate relationships. Among the hostile items you could find: “what feminists really want is that women have more power than men”, while the benevolent form “many women have qualities of purity that few men possess”. The analysis of the data collected showed that the hostile and benevolent sexism are complementary to each other and are present in all investigated areas: the nations who have expressed a high score for the hostile sexism also expressed high benevolent sexism, thus confirming correlation of the two attitudes. In all countries, including Italy, men have expressed higher scores of hostile sexism than women, something that has not occurred for benevolent sexism; in fact it has been

---

<sup>1</sup> United States, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Belgium, England, Germany, Italy, Netherland, Portugal, Spain, Botswana, Nigeria, South Africa, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Australia.

found that women tend to accept the second form, especially in situations characterized by greater disparities (Glick & Fiske, 2000; 2004). The global analysis of the results leads to the emergence of the thought that women tend to adapt to the system in which they appear. On one hand, scores of hostile sexism expressed by women are higher in the most sexist cultures, even if it is in these cultures that a greater difference between the means of women and men is revealed, suggesting the existence of a female resistance to the dominant ideological system. In a society with a high level of hostile sexism, women find benevolent sexism easier to accept. It is easy to understand why: in most situations benevolent sexism, thanks to the secondary benefits that entails, is presented as a foothold in front of hostile sexism. In addition, the experimental data shows that exposure to benevolent sexism in women increases adherence to the idea that society is right, legitimizing social inequalities (Jost & Kay, 2005). As reported by the authors (Glick & Fiske, 1996): "The irony is that, in highly sexist cultures, both men created the problem (sexist hostility) and the solution (sexist benevolence) so that women are forced to seek protection from members of the very group that oppresses them" (p.509).

## **5. MEDIA OBJECTIFICATION IN ITALY: A RESEARCH**

The representation of the woman as an object emphasizes the importance of media and advertising in procuring and strengthening models that lead to the phenomena mentioned above. In the interview with Massimo Guastini concerning his research he analysed, in three different periods of 2013, the representation of the image of women in the media. In total he has seen 11 thousand items of communication, about one-fifth of the annual total. Aiming to detect campaigns without manifestly violating the code of advertising, helping to crystallize the image of women and spread a sexist attitudes and consequent gender discrimination, 84% of the campaigns observed do not represent women. This is because almost 80% of the campaigns examined starring only the product. The economic crisis has clearly limited the costs that involved the use of human models. Only 12% of the advertisements show women. It is interesting to note how advertising talks about women, when it appears alone or with men and/or children.

In 25% of cases she is shown associated with the sphere of eroticism and/or sexuality. In another 25% appears as "model" associated with aesthetic qualities and not be a carrier of other values or skills. We then have a 17% ad which appears in the "motionless woman", a type of woman that is characterized by certain fixity of expression, exacerbated by the generous use of makeup and Photoshop. Finally, the "Mom" category which is 9% in the 3 observation periods. When advertising and marketing "narrate" the woman, essentially stops in these four categories that represent 76% of the campaigns that have shown women. There is nothing wrong with any of the categories. It is the cumulative effect, how often a woman is represented in a certain way, to give us indications on narrative trends with which the advertising and marketing are representing the woman.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

It is very complex and briefly analyses the various aspects of social life. It is difficult to account for the variety and particularity of the areas, phenomena, and situations with respect to which being male or female makes no difference; not to mention the difficulty to take into account the psychological, sexual orientation, cultural specificities that are interwoven decompose and recompose influencing attitudes and behaviour of women and men. What also needs to be taken into consideration is the impact of economic variables and power on the opportunities of individuals of both sexes, the constraints which impose the obstacles that stand in the way and especially the disparities they create. In those circumstances the effort of the present work was to start from concrete data to put into evidence gender imbalances over time and space. The choice to focus particular attention on advertising derives from the assumption that it adapts to what the society "wants" and at the same time raises it, treading his hand in the more profitable direction. Adapts and rises, because advertising does not invent anything, from the beginning, toys and children's products are divided according to gender, in an escalation that will last a lifetime and that will touch more and more areas. Specifically, the scientific literature (Glick et al., 2000; Napier & Jost, 2008, Sartori, 2009; Volpato, 2011) that explores gender stereotypes has largely demonstrated the harmful effects derived from sexist advertising, benevolent or hostile as they are, which, among

other aspects, contribute to maintaining the inequalities between men and women (Rollè, et al. 2014). It is necessary to note that, especially in Western countries, representations of gender tend to be less fixed and rigid, but in spite of, the basic principles that characterize them, have not yet been demolished.

This work aims to encourage the perpetuation of gender research with an interdisciplinary approach, unhinged from the rigid categorizations that pervade society. This would favour the re-appropriation of freedom of expression and choice of every person, regardless of socio-economic extraction, religion, place of birth, sexual orientation and gender obviously. Italy has an urgent need to gain a greater understanding of the influence that prejudices still own, often in ways too subtle to be noticed and social policies need to invest more human and economic resources to raise awareness of these issues.

## REFERENCES

Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.

Censis (2008). *Quarantadesimo Rapporto sulla situazione sociale del Paese 2008*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2011). Ambivalent sexism revised, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 35(3), 530-535. DOI: 10.1177/0361684311414832.

Glick, P., Larsen, S., Johnson, C. & Branstiter, H. (2005). Evaluations of sexy women in low and status jobs, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29(4), 389-395. DOI:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2005.00238.x

Glick, P. (2004). Bad but Bold: Ambivalent Attitudes Toward Men Predict Gender Inequality in 16 Nations, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(5), 713–28. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.86.5.713

Glick, P. et al. (2000). Beyond prejudice as simple antipathy: hostile and benevolent sexism across cultures, *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 79(5), 763-775, DOI: 10.1037//0022-3514.79.5.763

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1999). The ambivalence toward men inventory: differentiating hostile and benevolent beliefs about men, *Psychology of women quarterly*, 23(3), 519-536. DOI:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1999.tb00379.x

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism, *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 70(3), 491-512. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491.

Gruenfeld, D. H., Inesi, M. E., Magee, J. C. & Galinsky, A. D. (2008). Power and the objectification of social target, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(1), 111-127. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.95.1.111

John, J. & Kay, A. (2005). Exposure to Benevolent Sexism and Complementary Gender Stereotypes: Consequences for Specific and Diffuse Forms of System Justification , *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(3), 498 –509. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.88.3.498

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*, New York: Harcourt Brace.

Napier, J.L. & Jost, J.T. (2008). Why are conservatives happier than liberals? *Psychological Science*, 19, 565-572. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02124.x

King, E. B., Botsford, W., Hebl, M. R., Kazama, S., Dawson, J. F., & Perkins, A. (2012). Benevolent sexism at work: Gender differences in the distribution of challenging developmental experiences. *Journal of Management*, 38, 1835-1866. DOI: 10.1177/0149206310365902)

Nussbaum, M.C. (1999). *Sex & Social Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Papadaki, L. (2007). Sexual objectification: from Kant to contemporary feminism, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 6, 330-348. DOI:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300282

Papadaki, L. (2010). What is objectification?, *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 7(1), 16-36. DOI: 10.1163/174046809X12544019606067

Ramon, S., Vakalopoulou, A., Lloyd, M., Rollè, L., Roszcynskya-Michta, J., & Videmsek, P. (in press) Understanding the connections between intimate partner domestic violence and mental health within the European context: implications for innovative practice. *PRAXI*. --,--

Rollè, L., Brustia, P., Caldarera, A. (2014). Homophobia and Transphobia. In: Michalos AC (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Springer, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2905-2910.

Rollè L., Marino E. (2011) Level of homophobia in a sample of University Students. *International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology*, INFAD, Badajoz, Espana, 1(3): 429-435

Rollè, L., Abbà, S., Fazzino, R., Marino, E. & Brustia, P. (2014). Domestic violence and newspaper: an explorative study. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 127, 504 – 508. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.299

Rollero, C. (2013). Men and women facing objectification: The effects of media models on well-being, self-esteem and ambivalent sexism, *Revista de Psicología Social*, 28, 373-382. DOI: 10.1174/021347413807719166

Romanello, M. (1981). *La stregoneria in Europa : (1450-1650)*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

Sartori, F. (2009). *Differenze e disuguaglianze di genere*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

Volpato, C. (2011). *Deumanizzazione. Come si legittima la violenza*, Bari-Roma: Laterza.

Volpato, C. (2013). *Psicologia del maschilismo*, Bari-Roma: Laterza.

Thornton, A. (2005). *Reading History Sideways: the Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Zahidi, S. et al., (2013). *The global Gender Gap Index 2012*, World Economic Forum.