

Career, Beauty and Motherhood: Representation of Gender Role in Women Magazines in Albania

Ilda Londo

Abstract

This paper examines the way women are portrayed in women magazines in Albania, focusing on three main elements: career, beauty, and motherhood. Assuming that the views, perceptions, and figures portrayed in the media reflect the existing trends, perceptions, and culture in society on gender roles, the analysis tries to identify the way how media discourses and representations of women and gender roles and relations correspond with wider social norms, stereotypes and practices. The article claims that the portrayal of women in these magazines underlies the importance of achieving femininity, and consequently self-esteem, mainly through beauty, downplaying other important aspects in a woman's life, such as professional achievements or struggle for gender equality. Not only does beauty appear to be a typical feminine value and goal: motherhood is also upheld as the ultimate goal that would complete a woman's life. The portrayal of family life and roles in regard to motherhood does not explore any other possibility but the values of the traditional family model, thus reinforcing the existing societal norms and stereotypes. Hence, the combination of the beauty myth and the family myth confines the models of successful women in these magazines, and consequently their readers, to the pursuit of beautification and motherhood; leaving career and other social achievements as an option, rather than as an obligation for one's self-actualization, thus reflecting and reinforcing existing social norms and stereotypes.

Keywords:

Women representation, women in society, gender roles, women and career, beauty myth, consumerism, beautification, motherhood, women and family

Introduction

The transition of Albania from communism to the present political system brought about profound changes in the social, economic, political, and cultural areas in the country. Re-definition of women's role in the society and of their identity has inevitably been part of the overall changes. However, in spite of the women's reassuming the femininity denied to them

during communism, progress in gender equality in the country is not particularly significant. Gender inequality is evident in government, employment, income generation, domestic violence, human trafficking, and career opportunities.¹ Mentality and existing stereotypes in society have certainly their own role in the overall trend.

The way media covers gender-related issues both reflects the existing social mentality and stereotypes and it can either reinforce them or transform them. Actually, the media is one of the most efficient ways of raising awareness on the need for achieving gender equality and improving women's position in society. In this context, analyzing the discourse produced by the media on the portrayal of women in society, and comparing it to that of males, can be revealing of the way media is contributing to the public opinion on women. In order to be able to draw some conclusions in this regard an analysis on the texts produced in a women's magazine was carried out, identifying the main trends of portraying of women. These trends were compared to that of portraying men. The discourse that was produced in these cases was viewed in terms of the language used, thematic content, and visual elements. The main questions that the analysis attempts to answer are: (1) how offered texts depict women, (2) how are gender roles represented, (3) what is the general mood described in women's magazines and (4) how could specific forms of women and gender representation contribute to the overall mentality on women in the country.

The importance of this article lies in the almost total lack of similar studies on gender and women representation in Albanian media. Studies of this nature so far have focused either on general situation of women or quantitative analysis of their media coverage, but rarely on both. There is no in-depth analysis of the discourse produced by the media when it comes to women, their representations, and gender roles. In this regard, this paper will attempt to explore but a small part of the discourse produced about women, aiming to see how media discourses and representations of women and gender roles and relations correspond with wider social norms, stereotypes and practices.

In order to provide a wider picture, the analysis starts with an overall situation of women in the society presently, the main problems they face and the efforts done to address these problems. The paper then follows with a detailed textual analysis of the discourse produced in a women's magazine, focusing on three main prevailing aspects: women and career, women

¹ SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, pg.15.

and beauty, and women and family, hoping to describe the image put forth by specialized women magazines.

Women in Albanian society

After 1990 Albanian society has experienced dramatic changes in economic, political, cultural, and overall social aspects. Women education, emancipation, and employment ranked among the priorities of the Communist regime, although this system did not make any efforts to relieve the women of some of their responsibilities in the family and neither did it fight against gender stereotypes. In addition, the emphasis on equal members rather than recognition of gender divisions resulted in a weakening of the gender definition and the loss of the sense of what being a woman is.²

The advent of the new political system brought along a redefinition of gender roles and consequently a change of women's situation. Although women were able to rediscover their sense of femininity and redefine a part of their identity they had lost, the social guarantees they had enjoyed before vanished. One of the most illustrative aspects is the comparison of present employment to that before 1990. The employment rate of women in communist regime was almost 100%. The implementation of economic reforms affected all society, but women were more vulnerable in this regard, given that many of them worked in factories and enterprises that were shut down due to inefficiency³. Although women represent 51% of the economically active population⁴, their participation in the labour market is 39% compared to 62% of men.⁵

The stark gender-based differences in the labour market do not only pertain to the employment rate, but also to payment, positions, and entrepreneurship. More specifically, statistics show that women's salaries in the non-agriculture sector were 27% lower than that of men⁶. In addition, a UNICEF report in 2000 revealed that 60% of employers preferred to

² Ibid, p.75.

³ Ibid, p.67.

⁴ INSTAT, „Femra dhe meshkuj,” quoted in Social Watch Report 2005: Roars and Whispers: Gender and Poverty, promises versus action, pg 153.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ SEDA& UNDP, “Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania,” 2005, pg. 67.

employ males rather than females.⁷ Even in those cases where women are employed, they experience greater difficulties in reaching high positions compared to their male counterparts. For example, women have a rather satisfactory level of employment in ministries and other state institutions, almost 40%; however, few of them occupy high-rank positions.⁸ Similarly, when it comes to private sector, the presence of women is very low: only 17% of registered businesses are managed by females.⁹

Women situation seems to fare better when it comes to education. Women in Albania are among the most significant contributors to education process: they constitute 64% of the elementary education staff, more than half of the high education staff, and 40% of the staff of universities.¹⁰ The most disturbing trend in this regard is the school dropout rate, which is significantly higher for girls compared to boys. The ratio of dropout rate between girls and boys is 9 to 1, and 90% of the dropout cases among girls happen because their families consider it inappropriate or dangerous for girls to continue their school.¹¹

Existing and reinforcement of gender stereotypes and mentality is also part of the reason why women do not enjoy a high participation and representation in politics and power. When looking at the comparative data of female members of parliament from the first parliament mandate, it is interesting to note that female participation in 2002 parliament is comparable to that of 1945, while the highest representation period was noticed in socialism, in the 1970-1990 period¹². The present Parliament counts 10 women out of 140 MPS, including the Speaker of the Parliament. However, the few cases of the public debate in this aspect have remarked that there is not an auspicious atmosphere for women to get into politics.¹³ These reasons include the lack of any specific legislation on quota or representation in politics, awareness or public debate in the society, the patriarchal mentality, and the lack of awareness and desire of participation of women themselves.

⁷ UNICEF, MICS Report, 2000, quoted in SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, p.68.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, pg 69.

¹⁰ INSTAT, Femra dhe meshkuj, quoted in SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, pg 73.

¹¹ Shoqata Zhvillimi i Arsimit – Brakstisja e shkolles, shkaqet rekomandime, 2001, quoted in SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, pg 73.

¹² INSTAT, Femra dhe meshkuj, quoted in SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, pg 67.

¹³ "Politikisht indiferente apo te frikesuara nga politika," Tema, July 9, 2004.

Civil society has been particularly concerned with improving female participation. Counting almost 100 NGOs presently working in this area, their work has become more coordinated and has overcome the lack of coordination and communication among these organizations¹⁴. Apart from the civil society the government and parliament have also showed a good will in improving women's situation and increasing their participation. So far the legislation that addresses women includes the new Family Code, which brought some fundamental changes, the Constitution of Albania, which forbids any kind of discrimination in this regard, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, ratified in 1993, some articles in both Civil and Penal Codes, and the Labour Code. In addition, the law on Gender Equality was approved, consisting in granting equal access and opportunities in every area to both genders¹⁵.

In addition to legislation, government, and civil society, media also plays a crucial role in improving perception, representation, and participation of women in society and decision-making is the media. However, it cannot be said that it has fulfilled its role in a satisfactory manner. For example, one of the most severe problems affecting women is domestic violence, and research has found that sensational coverage of this category of news has the opposite effect of justifying and supporting violence. "In Albanian press the victim is punished, while the offender is set free."¹⁶ By its own nature, media will reflect the existing stereotypes in the society in the final production of news, or it can even reinforce them. The present media context counts a high number of female journalists, but only a negligible percentage is in leading positions. Consequently, it is essential to understand how the media influences women position in the society. Although Albania enjoys an extravagant number of print and electronic media, publications of an academic, scientific or theoretical nature on women or/and feminist movement have never been published in the country. The only publications that target women in the country is of an entertaining nature, and rarely, if at all, address the social role and position of women.

Women in women magazines

¹⁴ OSF, 90+10 Gruaja ne tranzicionin post komunist, national conference, 2001, quoted in SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, pg 83.

¹⁵ SEDA& UNDP, "Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania," 2005, pg 62-63.

¹⁶ Grupi Shqiptar i Grave ne Media, „Media dhe trafikku,” pg12.

In order to better understand the portrayal of women in media and consequently deconstruct the existing context that brought the emergence of these portrayals I will focus my analysis on the monitoring of three latest issues of “Jeta” magazine. Given the lack of publications of a “serious” nature, it becomes even more important to see what the existing media has to offer in this regard. There are very few publications clearly aimed exclusively at women, be it of a mixed nature, including various topics, like “Jeta” is, or niche publications, devoted to decorating, wedding arrangements, fashion, hair, etc. Some of the titles include “Femra Moderne” (Modern Female), “Shtepia Ideale” (Ideal Home,) “Hair,” “Familja,” (Family), etc. A slightly different version of the same category includes publications targeted at teenagers, but mainly female teenagers, such as “Trendy,” “Stil,” etc. However, even though regular documentation of existing publications in this area is lacking, these kinds of publications cannot be considered numerous.

“Jeta”¹⁷ (“Life” in Albanian) is one of these; this is a monthly publication that covers what they think would be interesting to women, namely fashion, beauty, women and career, family, relations, etc. The magazine comes in a package with two smaller supplements, focusing respectively on kitchen and decorating. Although it cannot be argued that this is one of the most propagated and popular magazines¹⁸, and consequently its views are by analogy the most widespread ones, it is one of the few magazines of its kind and one of the few media where all the staff members are female. In this context, it would be even more interesting to notice the findings, since this will be an all-female perspective from the very beginning. Even though this is a magazine of a more entertaining nature rather than informational one, it would be interesting to examine the thematic content, how women are portrayed, the way gender roles permeate the text, and through this how the texts reflect the social status and perception of gender issues and roles in society in the country. In order to carry out the analysis I will use mainly textual analysis within the theoretical frame of Van Dijk’s discourse theory. This method places emphasis on ideology and cognition, among other things, in affecting the structure of the text as presented to the reader. In this framework, Van Dijk maintains that

¹⁷ „Jeta“ is a monthly publication that first appeared in 2000. A glossy, 110-pages magazine, the publication boasts a well-known photographer as their photo director and according to the last media landscape carried out by the Albanian Media Institute in 2002 having a circulation of 14,000 copies per issue, one of the highest among magazines of all kinds in the country. The magazine also claims that it is distributed abroad in a significant manner covering Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Macedonia, Switzerland, USA, and Canada, targeting the Albanian diaspora present in these countries.

¹⁸ There are no exact data on the circulation of publications in the country and in the absence of legal requirements for them to declare their circulation publicly, there is no authority that monitors the copies they publish and sell.

“the traditional study of media “effects” needs to be reformulated in terms of cognitive processes and representations.”¹⁹ Given the ability of media to reach vast numbers of persons, specific attention should be paid to the discourse it produces, since it affects the mental models²⁰ of media users. “Through generalization and abstraction, however, such models at the same time may be the basis for the indirect control of social knowledge and attitudes shared by many or most group members.”²¹

Consequently, a detailed analysis of the media discourse in the area of women magazines would provide an insight into the mental models that indirectly influence the attitude and ideologies. Having also in mind Bignell’s argument that a magazine is just a collection of signs²² I will attempt to analyze the portrayal of women in this magazine, claiming that the manner how this is done is telling about the existing perceptions and stereotypes of women in society and further shapes their development and transformation.

The magazine in question has a rather definite structure in terms of sections and layout, with no radical transformation from one issue to the next. Some of its regular sections cover a famous character, mostly a female one, fashion, beauty, an argument, advice on relations, health, history, family, career, and tests. At first sight, it could be considered as a distant cousin of *Cosmopolitan* due to similar thematic content. The monitoring includes every article in the last three issues of the magazine, except for the sections on tests, fashion collections styled as an article but consisting mainly of photos, and the horoscope section. Considering that the aim of the analysis is to pin down the main trends in portraying women using textual analysis, quantitative analysis would not be central to the scope of the paper.

Rather, the content of the articles will be analyzed in terms of the way women and men are portrayed and the roles the magazine ascribes to each of them through the language used, selection of themes and quotes, and visual elements. Although it is difficult to discern dominant topics in quantitative terms and the articles do not necessarily cover only one topic, the analysis will be divided in three sections, describing the way the magazine portrays

¹⁹ Teun A. Van Dijk, “The mass media today: discourses of domination or diversity,” pg 31, available at <http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/The%20mass%20media%20today.pdf>

²⁰ I’m using the term as used by Van Dijk: a representation of an experience, of an event observed, participated in, or read/heard by a social actor, Ibid, pg 31.

²¹ Ibid, pg 32.

²² Jonathan Bignell, “Media Semiotics: An introduction,” p.78, quoted in Sian Davies, “Semiotic Analysis of Teenage Magazine Front Covers,” available at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/students/sid9901.html>

women along three main lines: women and career, women and beauty, and women as mothers.

Women and career

As expected from most publications of this nature, it is most certain that successful females will be the ones that make it to the pages of the magazine. This is evident both in the sections on career and the ones depicting one famous character. Here successful women have the opportunity to showcase their careers and inspire the readers with their looks, professionalism, lifestyle, and philosophy. After repeatedly reading these articles there is one recurring theme: more often than not, these characters are not only professional: above all they are beautiful. In fact, most of the leads in these articles start by extolling their good looks and emphasizing that if it was not for their appearance we might never have heard of them as famous persons on the first place. For example an article on Ornela Bregu, a TV presenter, starts: "Once upon a time she was selected just because she was beautiful."²³ A bit further the same line of thought is more explanatory: "She was selected to stay side by side with Adi Krasta²⁴. It was clear: she would be just a beautiful girl that had to smile sweetly and time from time had to articulate what she had learnt by heart from the script".²⁵ This sentence is relevant not just for the case at hand, but rather it articulates the perception of the role reserved to Albanian females in show business: that of beautiful dolls whose main job is to look good besides their male colleagues.

For the sake of fairness, the articles, being success stories, also tell the transformation of these "TV dolls" into more independent and self-made characters. However, their good looks and their debt to them is omnipresent and can never fade. After the same person had succeeded she fell out of luck, or better to say out of shape: "Her looks would be again the holder of her important decisions. Ornela Bregu would no longer be part of the weekly show, because she had gained weight and was no longer fit for the camera."²⁶

In fact, beauty and successful career, with a few exceptions, are almost always the defining characteristics of the women portrayed in this magazine, connoting that it is difficult to

²³ Klaudeta Skenderasi, "Ornela Bregu ne pole position", Jeta, September 2006, pg13

²⁴ Adi Krasta is one of the most famous male TV/radio presenters in the country, who has hosted many well-known shows.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

become famous and successful if you are not blessed with at least acceptable looks. “Being just beautiful is not sufficient to reach success. However, being a beautiful girl is certainly advantageous.”²⁷ Apart from this almost casual relationship between appearance and success, it is also interesting to note that references to luck are also present. For example, a story on the career of a female comedian attributes her first dramatic appearance in a film to the decision of the director rather than to her merits: “It was thanks to the eyes of a master like Anagnosti²⁸ that the tragic inherent in her comical characters was discovered.”²⁹ The same actress stresses this as well, repeating the same words and expressing her gratitude for the good luck that befell her. In the same vein, the story on a ballerina who became a well-known showgirl describes her achievements as an established TV person as “built thanks to fate, toil, but also fragility.”³⁰ This rather curious combination mentions first fate – a determination independent of the person -, her fatigue, and what would normally be a weakness in a person trying to make a career, but also one of the qualities usually associated with female sex: the fragility. Apart from the little power left to her in determining her career, the mentioning of fate, or rather, fortune, first, could also be indicative of the existing perceptions on the roots of success of female characters.

In addition, the career tales of successful women are surrounded by a climate of suspicion, lack of confidence from other persons, and insecurity, emanating first of all from the character portrayed itself, the female hero in this case. “Nobody had believed that an article on a Serb restaurant opened in Tirana would have earned her the prize; she was the incredulous one in the first place.”³¹ Similarly: “Young, beautiful, and talented, she managed to convince everyone, including herself, that starting a TV adventure can be a coincidence, but continuing it and becoming the main person there, is not.”³²

By contrast, the depiction of the few male characters and their careers present in the magazine, does not focus neither on their looks, nor on their fate. Rather than depending on *force majeure* or some divine intervention like fortune or carefully watching their weight in order to preserve their jobs, the males in this magazine go through spiritual crisis emerging

²⁷ Drita Loshi, „Nje 24-vjecare ne kerkim te botes,“ Jeta, July 2006, pg20.

²⁸ Dhimiter Anagnosti is a very well-known movie director in Albania, who has won significant awards.

²⁹ Arta Cano, „Kur te sfidon Marjana Kondi,“ Jeta, July 2006, pg.56.

³⁰ Arta Cano, „Sfida e re e Amit,“ Jeta, August 2006, pg.15.

³¹ Fatjona Mejdini, „Briseida Mema, me teper se pasion“ Jeta, September 2006, pg 22.

³² Arta Cano, „Sfida e re e Amit,“ Jeta, August 2006, pg13.

stronger and more famous than before. In other cases, they have a very clear plan of their career, calculating every moment and factor that could affect their future in the business.

More specifically, one of the stories is about a young singer, who started his career in a group and then went on as a solo, after some soul searching that led to a transformation that was reflected first of all in his music. His numerous quotes include reminiscences of his difficult period: “It was like I had delved into darkness and had lost any hopes of ever coming out of that. Nothing could ever relax me. It was impossible to seek peace, because I had no place to go to look for that.”³³ His spiritual crisis and the way he overcame that and emerged as a different singer, and, arguably, a new man, is a rather long one; in fact, although quantitative analysis was not part of this paper, approximately it can be said that is almost as long as the descriptions of weight changes, hair colour and models, or wardrobe inventory of famous females. However, it is a real challenge to look at the articles on females and find something that resembles a spiritual experience of this kind; or at least not in this length and depth. Consequently, the logical deduction after comparing these articles, although an extremist and oversimplified one, would be that women are locked into their materialistic world, where beauty and looks rule, and it never occurs to them that there are other things in life.

The above impression is also illustrated if comparing and contrasting two other stories: one on a female singer that used to be a model and the other on a male singer and composer. The occasion of writing the articles is the same: both of them have a new song and album issued. Hence, there would be no reason to think that the contents of these articles would differ substantially. However, the practice is rather different. The article on the male singer, married to a world-famous soprano and son of famous lyric singers, reveals his plans to build his own identity and reveal his originality, in order to have the career he thinks he has sacrificed in the past for different reasons; the new album would be the first step. In order to succeed, the artist has been thinking and planning and calculating every detail, such as the timings of his return visits in the country, his appearances on stage, etc. The article is replete with such expressions as: “He had calculated everything,” or “The plan would be so detailed that there would not be even the slightest percentage for failure.”³⁴ As the article rolls on, not only does the hero have a plan: he is an artist with a message: “His art should first of all have what he means to tell the world: a hidden message, but which is not too difficult to perceive.”³⁵ In a few words, the

³³ Klaudeta Skenderasi, „Nje Sajmir tjetër,“ Jeta, August 2006, pg18.

³⁴ Klaudeta Skenderasi, „Revolucioni alla Pirro,“ Jeta, July 2006, pg17.

³⁵ Ibid.

article covers an interesting phase and comeback in the life of an artist, focusing solely on his art and his ambition to be part of Albanian art scene again.

Similarly, a female colleague of his has also issued a new song, although not as meaningful and symbolic for her career compared to the male singer. However, the article, constructed as an interview, apart from the first couple of initial questions on the song, shifts to the appearance of the singer, who also used to model, focusing on the change of her body shape. The first question on a long series of questions of the same nature is: “You have shot your video in a swimsuit. Did the gain of weight bother you?” Diffident of the singer’s confidence in her song, the journalist asks again “It means you feel at ease with your body, even though you’re not skinny as you used to be?”, and then further investigating on her gym habits, her food preferences, and making a not-so-sudden comeback on the issue of the lost silhouette and consequently past wardrobe.³⁶

In light of the above, the contrast with the male singer is obvious: his process of maturing as an artist is evidently offered to the reader, in all its steps. However, when it comes to the female singer, her change of body shape, eating habits, and wardrobe style is all the reader gets. Admittedly, these articles deal with two different kinds of singers and music, and artists that are at different stages of their careers: however, the stark contrast of thematic content is impossible to miss.

Again, albeit the good intention of describing successful women, the tools used to do this fail to shift attention from their appearance to their careers: the good looks are the blessing and curse of females, something they cannot escape or live without. By contrast, the articles on males are totally free of any reference to their looks, leaving the total space to their professional life, occasionally mixed with some details of their private lives.

The Beauty Myth

In this context, the women in the magazine are not only constantly required to look good and seduce, but they are also set standards of beauty that they have to meet in order to be considered worthy. As Greer points out: “Every woman knows that, regardless of all her other

³⁶ Klaudeta Skenderasi, „Jek e jek me Ingridin“ Jeta, August 2006, pg. 29.

achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful.”³⁷ In fact, it is difficult to find an article in the magazine that does not refer to a woman’s look, be it her body, hair, make-up, dress, etc. By constant repetition and stressing of the necessity to look good and the benefits it has for women, the magazine is not in any way exempt from the notion of beauty myth as articulated by Naomi Wolf:

“We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth(...) As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control(...) The beauty myth tells a story: the quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it”³⁸(...)

More specifically, the magazine has regular and lengthy sections covering beauty issues, offering advice and tips that would help any woman to live up to the standards that make up the beauty myth, such as defying ageing, achieving a sun-kissed look, putting on the right perfume and make-up, achieving the perfect body and hair, plastic surgery, having beautiful legs, etc. In this context, the magazine articles assume the authority of being able to identify what constitutes a beautiful woman and let them know into the secrets for becoming one. For example:

„in order for female legs to be beautiful, they have to be fleshy, white, and be slimmer on the lower part. The knee articulation should not be too protruding and the transition from the leg to the thigh must be a light, continuous arch.”³⁹

Hence, any woman whose legs do not fit the description is in real trouble. In fact, the same article suggests that any worry on not having the perfect legs according to this definition is more than legitimate: „Large and heavy calves are not beautiful and for this reason the worries of many women in this regard are fair.”⁴⁰ In this way, the magazine’s message is quite clear: there are specific standards you have to fulfil in order to be affiliated with the beautiful women group, and if you are not in this group, then you ought to try to be.

Any guide, tips, or article on what constitutes beauty and methods to achieve it is underlied by the principle that women owe it to themselves to go through these routine, as this is the only

³⁷ Germaine Greer, “The Whole Woman,” quoted in http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2001/04/the_beauty_myth

³⁸ Naomi Wolf, “The Beauty Myth,” quoted in http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2001/04/the_beauty_myth

³⁹ “Per kembe me te bukura,” Jeta, September 2006, pg. 60.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.61.

way that a woman can like herself and be liked by others in return. This trend is evident in most of the catch phrases, titles, or lines that are frequently found in most articles. For example, it is very often that the reader comes across phrases of the type: „a full guide that fulfils the desire to be liked,⁴¹ „what you ought to know to understand the invisible language of desire,⁴² „what’s the secret of Victoria Beckham’s body,⁴³ „ABC of sun,⁴⁴ „diva-like hands,⁴⁵ „Feet to admire,⁴⁶ etc. In short, every body part is analyzed, classified according to the pre-established beauty scheme, and women are promised the achievement of perfection if the guides are followed.

This perfection is not only worthy to achieve *per se*: its importance lies in the assumption that once achieved, not only will a woman feel better about herself; most importantly, males will be more interested in her. As Berger put it: “[A woman has]...to survey everything she is and everything she does, because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life.”⁴⁷ Seduction is the keyword and ultimate promise made in the pages of the magazine, lending the impression that in the end that is the goal that the readers of these pages are striving for. “Silk for you and me: most of all you are sensual, elegant, in order to experience the pleasure of freshness and soft touch. Not only for you... also for the one standing by your side!!!”⁴⁸ This is an implicit promise made to all women that will buy silk: their couple life will improve instantly in a significant manner.

The methods offered to fulfil women’s desires very often are phrased in an imperative mode: „Go glossy,“ „go high,“ „go blonde,“ „go mini,“ „dress to impress,“ lending the impression that it is essential to follow this guide if women want to impress their men. And this is precisely what they should do, at all costs: „You cannot walk on high heels? Sorry, but this is no excuse, they are in fashion this year.”⁴⁹ As Naomi Wolf puts it: ”the more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly

⁴¹ “Magjia qe vjen nga hunda,” Jeta, September, pg. 62.

⁴² „Seksi? Eshte ceshtje kimie“ Jeta, August, pg. 46.

⁴³ “Me yjet ne tavoline,” Jeta, August, pg. 52.

⁴⁴ „ABC e diellit,“ Jeta, August, pg. 68

⁴⁵ „E bukur nga koka te kembet,“ Jeta, July, pg. 76.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ John Berger, “Ways of seeing,” quoted in Amy Bourne, “Gender and the Social Codes of Looking,” available at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/aeb0301.doc>

⁴⁸ “Mendafsh per ty dhe per mua,” Jeta, July, pg. 96.

⁴⁹ „Buzeqeshi veres,“ Jeta, July, pg.78.

images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us.”⁵⁰ So, the dictate of these guides and methods is clear and they are not up for discussion.

The unavoidable end effect is the urge of women towards striving for perfection according to the standards of the beauty myth, and hence towards consumerism: if women want a higher self-esteem and have more male fans around them, then there are some products they have to buy in order for this dream to come true. “If women's magazines are fantasy-like shop windows that 'show you how your life can be', the products they display are of course also meant to be purchased - in real shops.”⁵¹

Shopping is a woman's sacred duty: not only does her life standard depend on it, but a woman is designed by nature to experience a unique pleasure in the process. All sorts of phrases and wording manners in several articles lead to the undisputable generalization that shopping is a woman's favourite sport.⁵² Here is how this female fantasy is described:

“It is all women's favourite moment. Being able to spend endless hours roaming every possible shop. Trying on every outfit you see and having fun by buying the ones you like. Returning home full of shopping bags, especially when there are discounts.”⁵³

The language used is clearly a call, establishing an atmosphere that would make any female reader spring up from her seat and embark immediately on the sacred process of shopping. However, being this the ultimate experience, it involves a set of rules that every woman has to keep in mind, including dressing up in order for the salespersons to take the customer seriously, never going shopping with a guy, and, hard to believe, better going alone than with friends. Why? This way you can avoid losing time in shops you're not interested in, or having a friend buy the same thing as you, or even getting bad advice in order for her to get the outfit for herself.⁵⁴ The final impression you get is that you cannot afford any risks when shopping, even if this means leaving out of this the persons you cherish. Efficiency in shopping is what counts: that is the sacred experience for every woman and nothing or no one should be allowed to spoil the pleasure.

⁵⁰ Naomi Wolf, “The Beauty Myth,” quoted in <http://homestar.org/bryannan/wolf.html>

⁵¹ Margaret Gallagher, “Lipstick imperialism and the new world order: women and media at the close of the twentieth century,” Paper prepared for Division for the Advancement of Women Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, United Nations, December 1995, available at <http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/cn6/1996/media/gallagh.htm>

⁵² “Sporti i preferuar qe quhet shopping,” Jeta, August, pg. 38.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The importance of the topic becomes even more evident when noticing that the article does not only offer advice: it is more similar to orders, if you want it all to go smoothly. For example, some of the subsections read⁵⁵: „Take mercy on yourself!“, „Never underestimate your look!“, „Never with your boyfriend!“, „Make the right choice!“ and „Smile!“. Similarly, the photos that accompany the article depict smiling women pointing at shop windows, a woman trying on a pair of glasses and smiling widely, as a clear sign of amusement, smiling women holding plenty of shopping bags and so on. Everything on the article points to the happiness associated with shopping as a unique pleasure in every woman’s life, where every little bit of it should be enjoyed to the maximum.

The inevitability of motherhood

“In western culture in particular, motherhood seems to represent that inevitability of ‘anatomy’ which in some way or another affects every woman.”⁵⁶ On first sight, this inevitable notion has not affected the pages of Jeta magazine. Women in career, beautiful, successful women and fashion icons scream out of the magazine. It seems that the image of women is interesting to the magazine’s readers only in terms of their beauty, success, sensationalism, while their profile as mother is not on the focus. However, closer attention testifies the opposite. Although it looks like children are not the focus of magazine, and hence of its readers, the ways the issue comes up and the phrasing used in several cases reveal the “inevitable” nature of motherhood as a part of woman’s life that is not only important, but is a natural expectation of their role in society. “Becoming a parent is undoubtedly one of the most important things in life, or better the most important one, at least for a female.”⁵⁷

One of the most illustrative cases of this constant underlying, seemingly marginal, theme is the story on a successful Albanian athlete, who has the higher number of medals among both male and female athletes in the country. As the article unfolds the reader gets acquainted with her professional achievements, her future plans, her life partner and trainer, and so on. The article closes by describing the athlete’s aspirations for the next Olympic Games, the highest

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ksenija H. Vidmar, „Nasa zena and the image of the mother: contradictions and oppositions, 1991-2000,“ quoted in Peace Institute, „Mediawatch: Making her up,“ pg.34.

⁵⁷ „Ai do nje bebe,“ Jeta, July, p.44.

competition an athlete of this discipline can dream. Right after that, the very last sentences of the story read:

“This large number of activities has postponed the wedding of the two young people, who are missing a celebration with him being the groom and where she will be dressed in white. In fact, they have thought about this often. As well as the time when they will have a baby. After the Olympic Games Klodiana is thinking about becoming a mother.”⁵⁸

Although this is a more than natural decision and way of thinking, the way it is presented after extolling all the professional merits of the athlete, it looks like suggesting that the runner’s life, no matter how many medals she wins, could never be complete unless she’s married and becomes a mother.

Another case illustrating the same line of thought is that of an interview with a married couple from Kosovo, who compose and sing together. Viewed as rather non-conformist and extravagant in their music and appearance in general, the interview with the couple is titled “The two of us against the world,” lending from the beginning the impression that these people cannot be identified with “our world” as defined by the magazine, and possibly the reader. Even before one reads through the interview, the subtitle readily explains the reasons why these people belong to “the Others”: “They are individualists and in love to the point that they have chosen not to have any children.”⁵⁹ The same is repeated in the question asked to the wife: “Meanwhile you can be considered an exemplification in something else: such a solid marriage without any children.”⁶⁰ While expressing a note of admiration for the strong bond that keeps together the two spouses, the above extracts from the article reveal the persistence of the notion that deciding not to have children would be understandable only if you are an alien. As Judith Butler puts it:

“Why shouldn't it be that a woman who wants to have some part in child-rearing, but doesn't want to have a part in child-bearing, or who wants to have nothing to do with either, can inhabit her gender without an implicit sense of failure or inadequacy? When people ask the question "Aren't these biological differences?", they're not really asking a question about the materiality of the body. They're actually asking whether or not the social institution of

⁵⁸ Arta Cano, „Me shpejtesine e Klodianes,“ Jeta, August, pg. 22.

⁵⁹ Drita Loshi, „Ne te dy kunder botes“ Jeta, September, pg.46.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pg.47

reproduction is the most salient one for thinking about gender. In that sense, there is a discursive enforcement of a norm”⁶¹.

In fact, the discourse produced in the magazine in this regard fits “the norm” that it would be difficult for a woman to be happy unless she is part of the traditional family. On the other hand, everybody who has been that lucky as to achieve this, has not to worry about anything. Another story deserves mentioning in this regard. The story is about a Turkish couple: the wife, in a banking career in Turkey, left her job and moved to Albania with her husband, when he was offered a job in Albania. Although she quit her career and turned into a housewife, while her husband quickly made a career, she does not regret anything:

“The man that took her to Albania, Seyhan Pencapligi, is General Director and Board Member of BKT, as well as head of the Banking Association of Albania, while Melda has become a good housewife. This renders her happy, because she takes care of her children and Albanian neighbours keep her glad. Bringing up her children is her priority, in spite of the difficulties of an unknown country.”⁶²

This quote reveals the serenity and security that surrounds such a seemingly difficult decision for a woman wishing to have a career: she gave up every dream of having a career, but she gained a family, and they lived happily ever after.

The images are even more indicative than the quote in this case. The article features two photos, both of them featuring a smiling Melda. In the first shot she is portrayed alone, while the other one depicts the complete family. The pose would be considered a classical one in semiotic analysis of pictures: both spouses are smiling, while the husband, taller, has his arm on her shoulder and holds their daughter by the hand on the other side. Melda, is evidently leaning against him, with her head tilted against his shoulder. In this picture the husband, wearing a suit, is evidently a reference point, offering support for his wife and children, and they all look happy about this.

And it cannot be otherwise, if we assume that this is what any woman wants in the end. At least the story on the comedy actress confirms that this is her dream and she will do anything to defend it, stressing that “family obligations come first, then I think about art.”⁶³

⁶¹ Extracts from *Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler*. Interview by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, London, 1993. available at <http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>

⁶² Arta Cano, „Kur nje turke dashuron Tiranen,“ Jeta, July, pg.32.

⁶³ Arta Cano, „Kur te sfidon Marjana Kondi,“ Jeta, July, pg.56.

Interestingly, the story features similar visual elements with that of the previous story on the Turkish couple: Marjana Kondi, the actress, is featured in a photo with her husband, leaning against him, with her arm wrapped around his. The pattern of women needing and seeking their husband's support is evident, in view of their fragility, at least visually speaking.

Final Remarks

The statistics and overall trends in situation of women in the country show little progress in the struggle for gender equality and for recognizing the special role of women in society. Women face significant problems in several areas, such as employment, education, participation in decision-making, while suffering domestic violence and the existence of stereotypes and patriarchal mentality.

While media could play a pivotal role in changing the situation, little is being done to show such a commitment. In the absence of mainstream media's special coverage of these issues and with a vacuum of serious periodicals covering important issues on gender equality and global developments in this regard, the only option that remains are the entertainment women's magazines. However, this realm, rather than aiding in raising awareness and improving their struggle for gender equality, only serves to soothe and entertain, providing an escape from the everyday struggles, and confirming socially dominant roles and gender relations. There is no attempt to cover any socially relevant issues, such as equal opportunities, trafficking, rape, single mothers, domestic violence, or any other gender-related issue.

The portrayal of women in these magazines places a disproportionate emphasis on beauty, leading to the viewing of women first of all as sexual objects and not as complex human beings with a variety of features other than physical beauty. In addition, the stress on beauty as essential to femininity also seems to place on women the burden of achieving this ideal at all cost, shifting attention from other important aspects of women in society and veering them towards consumerism.

Apart from the beauty myth, women are also offered the myth of family and motherhood, leading to believe that self-actualization is not possible for a woman if she lacks a family or is not a mother. The value of the traditional family is upheld and reinforced, while the discourse

produced is blind or rejects any other alternatives. In view of women's need to achieve beauty and motherhood, career is the least of priorities as portrayed in women's lives in the magazine. Unlike in the case of men, the career success of women is seen rather as a result of her physical features or of some divine intervention, while her talents, skills, intelligence and persistence are downplayed or completely ignored.

In this context, further research on the media coverage and discourse produced in this area and the trends that will follow would provide a valuable insight on the reinforcement or transformation of stereotypes in society, and hopefully with a solution on improving the situation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berger, John. "Ways of seeing," quoted in Amy Bourne, "Gender and the Social Codes of Looking," available at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/aeb0301.doc>

Bignell, Jonathan. "Media Semiotics: An introduction," quoted in Sian Davies, "Semiotic Analysis of Teenage Magazine Front Covers," available at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/students/sid9901.html>

Gallagher, Margaret. "Lipstick imperialism and the new world order: women and media at the close of the twentieth century," Paper prepared for Division for the Advancement of Women Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, United Nations, December 1995, available at <http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/cn6/1996/media/gallagh.htm>

Greer, Germaine. "The Whole Woman," quoted in http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2001/04/the_beauty_myth

Grupi Shqiptar i Grave ne Media. „Media dhe trafiku,” Ilar, Tirana, 2002.

INSTAT, “Femra dhe Meshkuj 2004,” Morava, Tirana, 2004.

“Politikisht indiferente apo te frikesuara nga politika,” Tema, July 9, 2004.

Osborne, Peter and Lynne Segal. “Extracts from Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,” London, 1993, available at <http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>

SEDA& UNDP, “Human Development Report on Albania: Policies and Development for the poor and women in Albania,” Tirana, 2005. Van Dijk, Teun A. “The mass media today: discourses of domination or diversity,” available at <http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/The%20mass%20media%20today.pdf>

Vidmar, Ksenija H. „Nasa zena and the image of the mother: contradictions and oppositions, 1991-2000,” quoted in Peace Institute, „Mediawatch: Making her up,” Boznar & Partner, Ljubljana, 2002.

Wolf, Naomi. “The Beauty Myth,” quoted in http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2001/04/the_beauty_myth and in <http://homestar.org/bryannan/wolf.html>

About the Author:

Ilda Londo is research coordinator at the Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, Albania. Her main work has included various regional research projects on media and society, such as studies on media ownership and concentration, ethnic minorities coverage, media landscape surveys, broadcasting development trends, self-regulation and ethical issues, media legislation reviews and implementation, etc.