Women’s Media Activism and Gender Sensitive Journalism in Serbia and Croatia

Introduction

Women’s media activism is very diverse and a model developed by Bayerly and Ross (2006) offers a useful way of categorizing these activities according to four most common ‘paths’ women activists take. According to their research, there are four major ways in which women approach media activism. They named these four ‘paths’: ‘politics to media’, ‘media profession to politics’, ‘advocate change agent’ and ‘women’s media enterprises’. In the first case, women engaged in feminist activism come to learn media related skills in order to publicize a particular stance on women-related issues or to enable other women to speak. The second ‘path’ refers to women who are media professionals and who, as insiders, try to increase coverage of ‘women’s issues’ or to advance women’s status in the media industry. The third category includes those feminist activists whose work focuses on making the mainstream media and journalism more egalitarian in terms of gender. The fourth one entails development of women’s alternative media.

In this paper I examine the forms and the impact of women’s media activism on the television journalism in Serbia and Croatia. Because I am interested in feminist attempts to make the mainstream media content more egalitarian in terms of gender, I focus on the second and the third paths in Bayerly and Ross’s categorization. By analyzing the interviews I conducted with pro-feminist journalists and feminist media advocates from women’s NGOs, as well as NGOs’ media-related publications, I discuss how and to what extent they succeed or fail to introduce the elements of gender sensitive journalism into the mainstream television media. I show that women’s NGOs’ educational programmes for journalists have been largely successful in raising some journalists’ interest in gender sensitive journalism and in establishing relationships with them that lead to further collaboration. In addition, some of the pro-feminist journalists, working for HRT, the Croatian public broadcaster, and TV B92, the Serbian commercial television channel, were in a position to introduce elements of gender sensitive journalism at the levels of programme or channel policy. However, as this aspect of my
research shows, their opportunities to achieve that have largely depended on the overall levels of institutional support for such a type of journalism within individual television channels.

The main criterion for the selection of the interviewed journalists was their involvement in the production of the particular types of television programmes which I chose to focus on in my thesis. Accordingly, I interviewed Serbian and Croatian television talk show journalists who worked on the programmes that often dealt with gender- and women-related issues, as well as committed television journalists who were supportive of feminism and women’s NGOs in their work. Altogether I interviewed fifteen journalists, six Serbian and nine Croatian journalists. Seven of them are pro-feminist journalists who have worked on various news and current affairs genres, and eight are talk show journalists without an explicit pro-feminist stance but who have often touched on gender-related issues. Regarding the interviews with feminist media activists, I selected those who were involved in activities that aimed to introduce elements of gender sensitive journalism into the mainstream media. The selected interviewees came from women’s NGOs, governmental institutions for gender equality and professional journalistic organizations. In Serbia, I conducted seven interviews, while in Croatia I interviewed six activists.

Through my analysis, I engage with debates in feminist media research about the possibilities for feminist agency in the mainstream media. In contrast to feminist media scholars, such as Liesbet Van Zoonen (1989; 1994), who have emphasized the power of institutional and professional constraints over pro-feminist journalists, I agree with those feminist scholars, such as Barker-Plummer (2000), Bayerly (2004), Freeman (2000) and Mills (1997) who have argued that journalists sympathetic to women’s movements often used exactly their professional identity and values to argue for a greater coverage of women’s and feminist issues. In addition, I fill in a gap in feminist media research on gender and journalism, by not only attending to the efforts of pro-feminist journalists but by looking at the ways in which women’s NGOs with a particular focus on media activism affect gender sensitivity of the mainstream television media. While some studies of global feminist media advocacy have appeared in the last decade (Gallagher, 2001), this field is still underresearched as Byerly and Ross (2006) point out.
Secondly, my analysis is situated with respect to the post-authoritarian and post-conflict societies of Serbia and Croatia. Both countries have seen an intensification of feminist political activism after 2000 (Branković et al, 2007; Drobnjak, 2005; Kesić, 2007; Kušan, 2005), the year in which authoritarian regimes were ousted. A number of feminist legislative and political initiatives have followed due to a combination of women’s NGOs’ activism and the requirements posed before these countries in the course of EU integrations processes. In addition, the globalization of women’s media activism that was spurred by the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, has also contributed to the rise of feminist media advocacy in the two countries. For example, some Serbian and Croatian women’s NGOs engaged in international advocacy projects such as Global Media Monitoring Project (Gallagher, 2005). However, the Croatian women’s NGOs have had better opportunities for their media activism than their Serbian counterparts. Unlike Croatia, which has enjoyed relative stability after 2000 partly due to the political establishment’s consensus over the EU integrations, Serbia has been plagued by crises, such as the assassination of Zoran Djindjic, the Prime Minister in 2003. Also, gender politics has been marginalized in Serbia to a greater extent than in Croatia, as the political establishment has been largely preoccupied with questions of national sovereignty and state borders due to the secession of Montenegro and Kosovo. My analysis is set against these particular contexts, which show how different developments in post-2000 Serbia and Croatia have produced different opportunities for gender politics in general, and feminist media advocacy in particular.

Women’s NGOs and pro-feminist journalism

Serbian and Croatian women’s NGOs’ seminars about gender sensitive journalism or about media coverage of LGBT population have proved to be an effective way for the NGOs to raise some journalists’ interest in these areas and establish themselves as credible sources for them. In Croatia, a women’s NGO B.a.b.e. has been active in feminist media advocacy since 1996 and has held a number of seminars on women and the media as part of Zagreb Women’s Studies Centre’s programme and in its own organization. In addition, the Rijeka-based lesbian NGO LORI conducted seminars and more informal forms of education for journalists on media coverage of LGBT
population during their 2005 campaign for sensitizing the media. In Serbia, seminars on women and the media have been held within a wider programme Women Can Do It. Since 2005, Peščanik, a women’s group from Kruševac, a town in Serbia, has run the programme’s media-related part, which has involved trainings in gender sensitive journalism for local media journalists. Also, since 2003, Labris, a lesbian group from Belgrade, has held seminars for journalists, which focused on media treatment of LGBT population but also addressed some forms of sexism in the media.

The contribution of these seminars to the advancement of gender sensitive journalism is visible from the examples of pro-feminist journalism, which I examined elsewhere in my thesis. Most of the pro-feminist journalists whom I interviewed for my PhD research, mention their experience with women’s NGOs’ education as crucial for their interest in, and knowledge about, various aspects of gender inequality. The following quote by a TV B92 journalist shows how the NGO seminars can provoke participants to critically reflect on gender inequality:

As many people, I thought and felt that professions belonged equally to men and women, because I did not feel threatened. Until Svenka [a Serbian feminist linguist] said [at Labris’s seminar] that even the word ‘parent’ existed only in a masculine form, while women were those who gave birth. That really struck me; that was a good argument that made me think why women couldn’t be addressed with [nouns in] feminine forms, why they couldn’t be visible in their professions. Now I reached a point, it is a process, you know, I reached a point where I can’t talk in masculine forms [about women]. Now that sounds so awkward to me … as awkward as it would sound to other people if the Prime minister who was male was addressed as a woman. (Journalist 3)

Other journalists also stress that the seminars provided them with the excellent network of contacts in women’s NGOs, which have been useful to them when they wanted to cover women- and gender-related issues. These contacts often lead to collaboration between journalists and women’s NGOs on a regular basis, where women’s NGOs call ‘their’ journalists when they want to publicize their actions and these journalists call women’s NGOs when they need sources on ‘women’s’ or other relevant issues for women’s NGOs.

Furthermore, the pro-feminist television programmes that I analyzed in my thesis, such as Speck of Respect (RTS) and Macho Men and Tom Boys (TV B92) in Serbia, are a
direct outcome of these seminars. A producer of *Speck of Respect* attended seminars organized within Women Can Do It programme, which led her to her work on documentaries on various forms of gender inequality. As she established excellent contacts with the NGOs through the seminars, she relied on them throughout her work on the series to provide her with data, advice and to participate in the programme as sources (Journalist 1a). In the case of *Macho Men and Tomboys*, its producer attended both a Labris seminar and a regional seminar organized by the Croatian NGO B.a.b.e. Her film was actually produced as part of the B.a.b.e. workshop, since one of its aims was the production of documentaries on the topic ‘women and the media’. Also, the same journalist initiated the adoption of the policy on gender sensitive language in TV B92 in 2006. When the policy was introduced, the journalist invited Svenka Savić, a feminist linguist whom she met through the NGOs seminars, to help them standardize gender sensitive names for female professionals. In Croatia, documentaries and reports on ‘women’s’ and other issues produced by NGOs such as B.a.b.e. and Fade In were shown on HRT, the public channel, because a HRT pro-feminist journalist enabled that. Her links with women’s NGOs were also initially established through various seminars where she both learned from the NGOs and taught its members about PR.

By examining the interviews with the pro-feminist journalists and the activists, as well as the NGOs’ manuals for journalists and their other materials related to this form of their activism, I found that the NGO seminars for journalists have served several important functions. Through the seminars, the NGOs have established themselves as productive sources for individual journalists by providing them with their research data and various other types of information. In addition, the NGOs have raised journalists’ critical awareness of discriminatory media representation of women/LGBT population by informing them about the results of their media monitoring and by explaining concepts and ideas produced within feminist, gay and lesbian, and queer studies. Lastly, the NGOs have established relationships with individual interested journalists that would lead to future collaboration. Below, I discuss in more detail the ways in which the NGOs have pursued each of these objectives. I also assess the NGOs’ approach to the relationship between ‘knowledge’ and gender sensitive journalism, which is both beneficial for the advancement of gender sensitive journalism and simplistic in some ways as it reduces the
problems of sexist and homophobic ideologies and power relations to the problem of the lack of knowledge.

The NGOs such as Croatian LORI and B.a.b.e. and Serbian Labris and Sandglass provide journalists with the basic data and knowledge about critical approaches to gender and sexuality. The workshops and manuals often present the data about discrimination and violence against women/LGBT population and inform about: the state of their rights in different countries; legal regulations in that area; international conventions that Serbia and Croatia adopted; and the state mechanisms responsible for gender equality (LORI, 2004; Labris, 2005; Peščanik, 2007). In addition, the NGOs circulate feminist and LGBT perspectives on gender and sexuality, by providing brief explanations of concepts and ideas developed within feminist and LGBT activism and theory. At the workshops and in the manuals, the NGOs explain concepts such as sex, gender, misogyny, discrimination, women’s rights, sexual orientation, heterosexism, homophobia, transgender, intersexed, transsexual, coming out etc. Some of their publications, such as the Reader developed within the programme ‘Women Can Do It’ and published by the Serbian NGO Peščanik (2007), also include brief explanations about the five thematic areas seen as most relevant to women today: violence against women, women’s health, women’s education, women and economy, and women’s participation in decision making.

In addition, the NGOs’ trainings seek to sensitize the journalists for recognizing sexist and homophobic ideas underlying much of the media representations of women and LGBT population. The NGOs present the results of their media monitoring and draw journalists’ attention to the specific ways in which the media justify, enact and reproduce discrimination against these groups. Criticisms of the media are followed by particular suggestions for gender/LGBT sensitive journalistic practices. Together with the critical analysis of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ examples from the media, the NGOs try to engage journalists’ sense of professional responsibility. As some of these publications say, it is the media’s duty to investigate and condemn discrimination and violence, and to contribute to gender equality and LGBT human rights by sensitizing the wider public about these issues. Accordingly, there is a strong emphasis on the ways in which media laws and journalistic codices regulate journalists’ work with respect to discriminatory media practices. Most of such media seminars and workshops always refer journalists to
the relevant clauses from the laws and codices which forbid discrimination on any ground or even state that it is a professional duty of journalists to confront anyone who advances discriminatory ideas publicly.

Finally, the third purpose of the seminars for journalists is to enable the NGOs to establish and further collaboration with the media. The member of LORI, whom I interviewed, speaks of that aspect of their seminars:

In the last part [of the seminars], they tell us what they need, how we can be more helpful, what the easiest way it is for them to work. So, they get education and we get information about how to reach them, how to ensure that something is published. And we establish contacts with them which have been very important to us. (Activist 13)

While most NGO media seminars have this aspect, collaboration and exchange of experiences between journalists and feminist activists have been at the centre of two workshops organized by the Croatian women’s NGO B.a.b.e. The workshops were imagined as a mutual education of journalists and women’s NGOs’ activists. In the workshop, the journalists “educated activists about how to work with the media but then activists became instructors and talked to the journalists about their problems [with the media]”, as one of the interviewed activists says (Activist 7). According to another interviewed activist of B.a.b.e., the exchange of experiences between activists and journalists made clear some of the problems in their communication. Many activists are afraid of talking to the media because they fear they will be misinterpreted, whereas many journalists are poorly informed about women’s NGO sector (Activist 8). The workshop aimed to tackle these problems by enabling both activists and journalists to understand the other party’s needs and concerns, as well as establish contact between them.

While the problem of journalists’ lack of critical awareness of gender and LGBT discrimination is clearly more complex and deeper than their lack of information, there are still many areas where NGOs’ provision of information and certain kinds of knowledge is a meaningful approach to media advocacy. Providing journalists with data about gender discrimination or information about legislation and policies in the area of gender equality are such examples, as journalists seem to be largely ‘uninformed’ about these issues. For instance, the Serbian NGO Peščanik (2006) found at one of their
workshops for journalists that most participants were not able to list a single state institution that deals with problems of gender inequality and a minority had a vague recollection of the existence of the Governmental Council for Gender Equality. In a different case, as my interviewee from a Croatian lesbian NGO LORI says, the NGO paid a lot of attention to explaining the differences between transsexual, transgender and intersexed people to journalists, as they found that journalists were not familiar with the terminology at all (Activist 13).

However, the NGOs occasionally conflate journalists’, sources’ or audiences’ unawareness of gender and sexual inequality, or even their active support for ideologies that legitimate and reproduce the inequalities, with the lack of knowledge and information about the media, gender or sexuality on their part. In the Croatian NGO Lori’s manual for journalists, the NGO routinely strengthens their critique of the homophobic statements in the media by pointing out how they display a lack of scientific knowledge about human sexuality (LORI, 2004). In another example, a media literacy manual produced by the Croatian NGO B.a.be. argues:

[...]If the female consumers of the Croatian media knew how to analyze the media and to reflect about their meanings, then certainly most of them wouldn’t have said in our research that women and men are represented equally in the media. (Sarnavka, 2006)

The NGOs reduce ideological dimension of social inequalities to the lack of knowledge for at least two strategic reasons. First, references to scientific truth and data, which show that gender inequality exists or that same-sex orientation is a natural and normal variation of human sexuality, strengthen the NGOs’ critiques of inequalities because they present them as grounded in objective reality. Second, if the problem of sexism and homophobia in the media is approached as a problem of the lack of knowledge and information, then tackling the problem becomes a more manageable task.

But, even if the reduction of ideology to the lack of knowledge is a strategic move, the NGOs risk presenting education about gender equality and LGBT human rights as a quick-fix solution to the problem of sexism and homophobia. Although their publications define these problems also in terms of the ‘lack of consciousness’ about discrimination and with regard to the structural inequalities which certain media representations legitimate and naturalize, the NGOs’ emphasis on knowledge as a solution reveals the
extent to which power relations and identities associated with particular dispositions towards sexism and homophobia are harder to address within feminist and LGBT media activism. While the NGO education clearly does engage and enable some journalists to apply critical approaches to gender and sexuality in their work, this process is much more complex than purely cognitive. It potentially affects their identities, relationships with others and pities them against the existing power relations. This process is ultimately about the production of feminist or LGBT political consciousness, a form of ‘consciousness raising’, an activist method at the heart of the second-wave women’s movement. But defining it this way would make it incompatible with the journalistic professional ideology which forbids journalists to be advocates.

Finally, my comparison of Serbian and Croatian women’s NGOs educational programmes for journalists led me to uncover two additional significant features of women’s media activism in the two countries. Firstly, my data shows that the examined Croatian women’s NGOs influenced the Serbian NGOs and journalists I studied. The Croatian NGO B.a.b.e., for example, had a regional project EQVIVA, which involved Serbian journalists together with Croatian and Bosnian. One of the two B92 pro-feminist journalists whose work I examined in my thesis made her first film about gender inequality as part of this workshop. While this is an example of a direct influence, there have been other more indirect influences where the Serbian NGOs used Croatian NGOs’ materials or consulted their projects as templates. Serbian women’s NGOs used the Croatian translations of the materials within the international programme Women Can Do It, as well as some of their own materials produced for the programme, as this initiative was introduced to Croatia slightly earlier than to Serbia (Activist 2). Similarly, the Serbian lesbian NGO Labris consulted the Croatian NGO Lori’s media monitoring projects from 2001 before they started similar projects in 2003 (Activists 4).

Secondly, the Croatian feminist media advocates have established better links with pro-feminist journalists working for the most influential media with the national coverage than is the case in Serbia. In Croatia, the educational programmes for journalists, organized by B.a.b.e. independently or through the seminars in Women’s Studies Centre in Zagreb, involved some journalists from the most prominent media, such as HRT as the prime example. As a result, B.a.b.e. and Women’s Studies Centre, have established a
network of several prominent journalists who work at HRT and who have been supportive of their activism over the years.

In Serbia, the seminars in gender sensitive journalism were organized within the programme Women Can Do It, which was largely oriented towards stimulating women’s agency in local communities and thus involved work with journalists from the local media. This has meant that the main educational programme for gender sensitive journalism has largely left out journalists working for the media with the national coverage. Exceptionally, these seminars included journalists such as a producer of Speck of Respect, who worked at a local branch of the state broadcaster RTS. In addition, while seminars by Labris, which involved journalists from the national media, did touch on some forms of sexism, they still largely focused on homophobia in the media. My intention certainly is not to minimize the importance of feminist media activism at the level of the local media or with regard to the problem of homophobia, but to point out a gap in the Serbian feminist media advocacy which lacks a women’s NGO that would work with journalists from the media with the national coverage over a longer period as B.a.b.e. have done in Croatia. Consequently, while there are pro-feminist journalists working for the television channels with the national coverage in both countries, such as Croatian HRT and Serbian RTS and TV B92, there are more of them in Croatia, and their links with women’s NGOs are better there than in Serbia.

Explaining the differences in women’s media activism in Serbia and Croatia is not easy without a broader and systematic comparison between women’s NGOs’ opportunities for activism in the two countries, as well as their interests in particular areas of activism, over the last two decades. On the grounds of the cases I looked at, they can partly be explained by the differences between the two countries in terms of their relationship with the EU. For example, the programme Women Can Do It was introduced to Serbia later than to Croatia because of this reason. The programme was introduced by the EU-backed Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, which was established in 1999 but included Serbia only after the political changes in October 2000. In addition, both Croatian NGOs, B.a.b.e. and LORI, list EU and state funds as sources of financial support for their media-related projects, while such sources do not appear in the case of the two Serbian NGOs, Labris and Peščanik (Kunac and Sarnavka, 2006; Labris, 2010b;
LORI, 2004; Sarnavka, 2006; Peščanik, 2006, 2007). Some of the Croatian state funds come from the institutions created in the course of EU integrations, such as Governmental Office for Gender Equality. In Serbia, the same institution, in collaboration with UNDP, allocated the first funds to nine women’s NGOs only in December 2009 (Labris, 2010a).

While more research is needed to investigate the links between the position of women’s NGOs, EU integrations and feminist media advocacy in the two countries, these particular findings show a similar pattern as in the case of gender equality politics in the two countries after 2000, which I discussed elsewhere in my thesis. The Croatian women’s NGOs could use some of the opportunities for their media activism provided by the gender equality policies adopted as part of EU requirements, whereas similar Serbian initiatives were marginalized by political instability, crises and preoccupations with the questions of nation-state.

The Agency of Pro-feminist Journalists

As I found in my PhD research, pro-feminist journalists working for Serbian and Croatian television media often have to negotiate their political commitments with the professional criteria for the selection of, and approach to, topics and sources. The hierarchy of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news, journalistic orientation towards novelty and topicality, as well as journalists’ concerns over audiences’ reactions, all work to limit the opportunities for gender sensitive coverage of ‘women’s issues’. In addition, the professional norm of credibility of sources, which requires ‘gender neutrality’, limits the extent to which even many pro-feminist journalists try to increase the presence of female sources. Nevertheless, as I found, most of these journalists actively try to increase the critical coverage of issues of concern to women in general, and feminist issues in particular. Moreover, many of them often find the ways to argue in favour of the gender sensitive coverage of ‘women’s issues’ in line with the professional values of journalism. A minority of them also tries to raise women’s participation in the media, consciously choosing female sources in situations where they find both men and women who are competent to talk about an issue.
Their agency certainly introduces aspects of gender sensitive journalism into the programmes for which their work. By extension, as journalists often look for their topics and sources in the other media, it can be also argued that pro-feminist journalists initiate further coverage of ‘women’s issues’ and the visibility of certain female/feminist sources in other programmes and the media. However, the opportunities for gender sensitive journalism on the levels of programme or television channel policy, depend on the influence of pro-feminist journalists within the particular television channels and the presence or the lack of the institutional support for the particular types of journalism that allow for gender sensitivity. In the cases that I examine, pro-feminist journalists were successful in their attempts to further gender sensitive journalism in those television channels where they could draw on, or create, the institutional support for public service and investigative types of journalism.

Both in Croatia and Serbia, new media laws were adopted in 2002 and 2003, which required the transformation of the state television channels into the public service television. According to the Croatian pro-feminist journalist with a senior position within the public channel, the newly posed obligations to HRT to provide public service were partly understood in terms of the coverage of civil society issues, including women’s NGOs’ concerns and activities (Journalist 11). Before, as she recalls, coverage of women’s NGOs and issues such as violence against women and gender inequality was largely a matter of initiatives of several female journalists within HRT. A good example for this is collaboration between the programme Good Morning Croatia, where she worked before, and the NGO Fade In, created with the aim of promoting NGO causes through the media. As Fade In’s journalist recalls, when their collaboration started in 2001, most journalists within GMC were not interested in NGO or ‘women’s issues’ (Journalist 14). Therefore, the pro-feminist journalist who wanted to increase such coverage accepted Fade In’s offer to provide this for GMC. In Fade In’s journalist’s view, GMC was the door through which Croatian NGO sector, including women’s NGOs, went public. This production was partly financed by HRT, which bought Fade In’s reports for GMC, but also from various NGO donators as HRT money was sufficient only for reports made in Zagreb.
However, in 2004, a question was raised about how the new status of HRT as the public service broadcaster will be implemented in terms of the programme policy. As the above mentioned pro-feminist journalist held a senior position at HRT, she conceptualized parts of the programme policy in line with the idea that public service should also involve the coverage of the NGO sector. With a team of associates, she conceptualized the Department of Mosaic Programmes according to the format of the already existing morning magazine, *Good Morning Croatia*. As s/he says, the two defining features of programmes in this department were that they often dealt with civil society issues and that their approach was more accessible and intimate than in the traditional informative formats. These programmes approached the viewers as “a neighbour would talk to a neighbour.” But they also, in her view, opened the space for investigative journalism and many issues, such as sexuality, gender, and ethnic minorities. After this department was created, it became an umbrella department for some already existing critical programmes as well, such as *Latinitsa*.

Her account reveals several factors influencing the opportunities for gender sensitive journalism in HRT. Its new legal status opened a question of how the channel fulfills public service role. This afforded the legal grounding and stronger legitimacy to those journalists who were interested in covering NGO issues and activities. Furthermore, as she and several other HRT journalists say, the political changes that happened in 2000 were instrumental with regard to the coverage of NGO issues in general, and ‘women’s issues’ in particular. Given the nationalist (gender) politics of the nineties (Chapter 3), NGO and ‘women’s issues’ were largely the preserve of *Good Morning Croatia* and *Latinitsa* then. But after 2000, barriers to NGOs’ presence in the media lessened and women- and gender-related issues gradually became more widespread and accepted. Due to the combination of these developments and her own senior position, she was able to introduce more systematic coverage of NGO-related matters. This was primarily achieved through the creation of the Department of Mosaic programmes, whose programmes were meant to regularly cover NGO issues. By defining the department’s public service provision in this way, she also enabled a greater coverage of ‘women’s issues’ and women’s participation in its programmes. Still, as the programme policies change from time to time, and with them the structure of the departments, this is likely to
be a temporary policy. It still shows that in order for gender sensitive journalism to be advanced at the policy levels, it takes a mixture of the influential pro-feminist journalists and the favourable institutional environment for the types of journalism that are compatible with gender sensitivity.

This is also visible from a different example of the Serbian pro-feminist journalist, working for the public channel RTS, who produced Speck of Respect, the series about gender inequality and women’s status in different areas (Journalist 1a, 1b; Note 16). In her case, the presence or the lack of the institutional support was also crucial for her success or failures regarding the production of special programmes about ‘women’s issues’. While she had the support of the then television director to produce the series, she was completely ignored by the most powerful man within the channel, Aleksandar Tijanić, the Director General, and found little overall interest in this topic within RTS. The television director’s support was important as it made the project possible at all. However, in terms of the subsequent treatment of the programme after it was produced, the journalist was left to her own devices and the series was largely marginalized. According to the journalist, the programme was not properly advertised on RTS, it was initially buried in the very late time slots and it was actually never given its regular time slot but was constantly moved around so it was very difficult to know when the next episode will be shown.

This treatment can be partly explained by the way in which the producer and her interest in the coverage of ‘women’s issues’ were completely ignored by the Director General. As one of the episodes of the series dealt with women and the media, the producer sent a letter to Tijanić inviting him to participate in the programme as an interviewee. She never got any reply although she invited him to take part in the programme produced for ‘his’ television channel. She was similarly treated by Tijanić again when she proposed to continue the series and work as someone who is specialized for the coverage of women’s and different marginalized groups’ concerns. The person who was crucial for approving her project proposal was the Director General. She sent her proposals on two occasions, in 2006 and 2007, and never got even a reply.

Such an approach to the coverage of ‘women’s issues’ by the Director General can be partly explained by his publicly known stances about women and feminists. Tijanić
has, for instance, described his own brand of journalism as “journalism with balls” and has been vocal in defending instances of sexism in the media, particularly with regard to women’s NGOs 2003 lawsuit against TV Pink related to derogatory statements about women. In one of his defences of TV Pink’s programme in question, Tijanić talks about women’s NGOs in a following way:

> How would Serbia look without Serbian men? Just a crowd of happy, fat, not depilated Serbian women. Hopelessly more open down than in their heads. All bought in the same shopping mall. Cohorts of vaginas in a destructive attack on anything that acknowledges logic and reason. Women’s Gestapo system crews. (2004)

While I am not saying that such statements express RTS policy with regard to gender sensitive journalism, I do think that it would be very hard to imagine any programme politics aiming to critically interrogate gender inequalities in an institution where the man who holds such views has large amounts of power and is crucial in decision-making process.

In addition, such treatment should also be seen in the light of the problems with the transformation of the ex-state television channel into the public service television. In 2004, the management of the house and senior editors did tackle an issue of transformation into public service television in terms of its programme strategy. As an RTS senior editor recalls, one of the ways in which RTS management addressed this issue was by creating a special department called Programme Actions (Note 10). This department was meant to include channel’s flagship programmes, which were generically quite diverse, and satisfy three purposes: public service requirements; better thematic overview of these programmes; and higher ratings. As she says, the programmes in this department were meant to focus on some “serious, eternal themes” and be protected from the pressures of daily politics and event-oriented journalism characteristic of informative programmes.

However, an example of one of the flagship programmes belonging to this department – the talk show Key which I analyzed elsewhere in my thesis - suggests that the implementation of public service requirements is highly questionable. While the interviewed producer of Key did stress that the programme covers some issues, such as disability, that no other television channels cover, she repeatedly evaluated different
themes in terms of the ratings they can ensure. While she did not explicitly say she would not cover themes that get low ratings, her dislike for them was fairly clear. In terms of the coverage of ‘women’s issues’, as I noted before, she explicitly said that raising an awareness of gender inequality is not her intention. In addition, neither she nor the senior editor, mention coverage of NGOs as any particular concern within the public service remit. This declarative support for public service television is visible in other ways as well. For example, at the time of my fieldwork, RTS website stated that they have a new department for civil rights and national minorities, but when I tried to find this department it appeared that it did not exist!

Finally, the example of the pro-feminist B92 journalists also shows that aspects of gender sensitive journalism can become a part of a departmental or a channel’s policy when there is a combination of the influence of pro-feminist journalists and the institutional support. As B92 journalists’ accounts reveal, the coverage of ‘women’s issues’ has arisen from the interplay between the women’s NGOs’ media activism, individual journalists’ initiatives within B92, and the way B92 journalists and management have understood and defined the profile of this television channel (Journalists 3 and 5). Two particular issues have received particular attention within TV B92 and have been dealt with at the level of the channel rather than at the level of individual journalists’ initiatives. In 2006, B92 introduced the usage of feminine forms for female professionals and its informative journalists decided to systematically cover issues related to domestic violence.

In the first case, it all started after a B92 journalist attended NGO workshops about gender, sexuality and the media and subsequently produced a B92 Investigates documentary about this topic. As she became aware of some of the problems in this area, she raised the issue of sexism in language within her television channel. In particular, she and several of her colleagues who supported her addressed B92 management with regard to the usage of masculine nouns for female professionals on their television channel. According to the two interviewed B92 journalists, an interest in activism has been a part of the channel’s identity because of their oppositional stance to the Serbian regime in the nineties. Thus, the management of B92 supported this initiative and decided to systematically attend to this aspect of language usage. This decision was then introduced
in a top-down manner: Veran Matić, the director of B92, informed employees about this; meetings were held where this decision was explained; and a list of the most common nouns for female professions was drafted so journalists could consult proof readers if they were not sure about particular words.

In the second case, as the other B92 journalist recounts, the issue of ethics in covering domestic violence was raised after scandalous press coverage of the murder of a two-year old girl by her stepfather. After many negative reactions to such coverage, the NGO Center for professionalization of the media called a meeting where this issue was discussed. She and her B92 colleagues attended the meeting and later on made a decision to systematically cover different types of domestic violence. In addition to this meeting, she also attended a workshop about sensitive approach to victims of incest, which was organized by the NGO Incest Trauma Center in Belgrade. Following this decision, she often covered violence against children and violence against women in the news and this work led her to produce two documentaries on VAW. Furthermore, as part of the decision to engage with the problem of VAW, B92 has initiated a fundraising campaign to finance a safe house in Belgrade.

Both journalists covered gender based discrimination and violence within news and B92 documentary series, *B92 Investigates*. The existence of this series within B92 television schedule is highly significant in this discussion as well. According to the second journalist, as B92 has been branded primarily as a channel with the strong informative programme, its informative programme was conceptualized to include particular elements important for its credibility: quality news, hard talk programme and investigative documentaries. The fact that B92 has had a time slot for in-house investigative documentaries has proved vital in terms of covering issues such as gender based inequality and violence, as it was within this programme that the two journalists had the opportunity to explore these issues in more depth than in short news items.

However, although this series is produced by B92, it is funded only partly through commercials but it largely depends on donations to B92. Furthermore, B92 advocacy against VAW and gender inequality in its informative programming is at odds with the rampant commercialization of its entertainment programme, which includes a number of reality shows that have been criticized for their sexist and homophobic content. For
example, while B92 has covered issues such as discrimination against lesbians in the news, it also raised protests by Labris, the Belgrade based lesbian NGO, after participants of Big Brother made homophobic comments on the show. Veran Matić, B92 director apologized for this, but the channel still remains weirdly schizophrenic in its programme policy with advocacy for social equality in its informative programmes and sexist and homophobic discourses in its entertainment programmes. Finally, due to the excessive commercialization of B92, programmes such as B92 Investigates perhaps have an uncertain future. As one of the producers says, there is money from donations for the programme at the moment, but that does not mean that in the future B92 management will not decide that producing documentaries is a too expensive way to retain credibility.

**Conclusion**

After the political changes in 2000, gender sensitive journalistic initiatives, and a greater attention to the problems of gender inequality and violence against women generally, appeared in the Serbian and Croatian television media due to the same reasons. Because of the feminist activism of women’s NGOs and some female politicians, backed by UNIFEM and EU requirements in the course of integration processes, issues such as violence against women or gender discrimination became much more a part of official politics. As much of journalistic work is driven by the events and sources in the area of official politics, the bigger political prominence of some ‘women’s issues’ resulted in their greater coverage in the media and more access for some feminist sources. In addition, feminist media advocacy, which involved trainings for journalists and different forms of collaboration, resulted in the appearance of pro-feminist journalists who tried to introduce aspects of gender sensitive journalism in their own work or at the more general levels of programme and channel policy. However, the differences in the speed of institutionalization of gender equality politics, the opportunities for public service and critical journalism in the television media, and the scope of feminist media activism, created different outcomes with regard to gender sensitive journalism as well.

In Croatia, the opportunities for gender sensitive journalism were generally greater than in Serbia for all these reasons. Although the institutionalization of gender equality politics was mired in numerous problems in Croatia, that process nevertheless
opened the mainstream public sphere to feminist concerns and sources from women’s NGOs. ‘Women’s issues’ became politicized because of that and are discussed in political terms not only in the activist programmes but also in some episodes of the popular talk shows. Furthermore, gender sensitive journalism was further enabled in parts of HRT programme in the course of the transformation of HRT into the public service broadcaster. In some departments, such as Mosaic Programmes that included *Good Morning Croatia* and *Latinitsa*, public service was conceptualized in terms of the greater coverage of NGO concerns and critical journalism. This concept of the public service is by no mean uncontested in HRT, as the recent closure of the investigative journalistic programmes, such as *Latinitsa*, shows. Also, the possibilities for critical journalism oscillated depending on the changes in the management and leading editors of HRT, with the situation worsening in 2007.\(^1\) Nevertheless, there has been a strong presence of critical journalists in HRT, some of whom are also gender sensitive.

Finally, as my research has shown, feminist media advocacy was more intense in Croatia than in Serbia. The women’s NGOs, such as B.a.b.e., created good relationships with a number of prominent journalists, some of whom worked for HRT which has been the most powerful broadcaster until recently. Also, members of women’s NGOs appeared in the popular programmes, such as talk shows, and were able to utilize to some extent the state institutions for gender equality to pursue their media activism, holding media institutions to account publicly for the ways in which they fulfill their legal obligations to promote gender equality.

In Serbia, women’s NGOs and feminist politicians have achieved many important legislative changes and established some state institutions for gender equality but their main initiatives, the Gender Equality Law and the National Policy for Gender Equality, were unsuccessful until 2009. The legislative, political and institutional activities with regard to problems such as violence against women or sex trafficking did result in their greater media coverage. But gender equality politics was still marginalized because of the crises such as the assassination of the Prime Minister in 2003, very high

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\(^1\) In 2007, Hloverka Novak Srzić was appointed as the Editor-in-Chief of the News, which raised many protests by HRT journalists, as she was very prominent at HRT in the nineties when the channel was a mouthpiece of HDZ.
levels of political instability and the political establishment’s preoccupation with the questions of the nation-state, triggered by the secession of Montenegro and Kosovo. Accordingly, feminist concerns and sources have been less present in the popular talk shows I examined, and more limited to the pro-feminist programmes. Also, ‘women’s issues’ are not discussed in politicized terms in the popular programmes. That is, there are no explicit political agendas involved or investigations of the failures of institutions to combat gender discrimination or violence against women.

Furthermore, the transformation of RTS into the public service broadcaster was followed by bigger legal irregularities, cruder forms of government control and more political continuity with the previous regime than in Croatia. Therefore, there have been fewer opportunities for critical journalism there and the coverage of NGOs has not been a part of the concept of public service even in limited ways as in HRT. In Serbia, the opportunities for critical and gender sensitive journalism were better at the commercial television channel, TV B92, which is an atypical commercial channel as it was created as a television version of the highly politicized, oppositional radio station in the nineties. Although the channel has undergone waves of commercialization after its inception in 2001, the interest in critical, investigative journalism still survived in its documentary programmes. This enabled gender sensitive journalists to pursue the topics that they were interested in as well. But in terms of viewership, TV B92 is well behind RTS and TV Pink, which are the main competitors for ratings, whereas HRT has had a more powerful position in the television scene of Croatia.

Finally, while some Serbian women’s NGOs also established links with interested journalists and spurred their gender sensitive initiatives, there has still been a lack of a sustained attempts to introduce gender sensitive journalism into the television media with the national coverage. In addition, feminist media advocates from women’s NGOs, whom I interviewed, largely avoided appearing in the mainstream television programmes, such as talk shows, because of their hostile and confrontational formats. Also, they could not use state institutions and policies for gender equality for their media advocacy and their attempts to utilize media laws and institutions were unsuccessful. Coupled with the previously described problems in the areas of gender equality politics and television
media, the less intense feminist media advocacy is yet another reason why gender sensitive journalism was advanced to a lesser extent than in Croatia.

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Note 2. Note on my conversation with a member of the women’s group Hora about Speck of Respect, Serbia. 09 Nov 2006.
Note 3. Note on my experience of being a guest in one of my interviewee’s programmes. 29 Nov 2006.
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