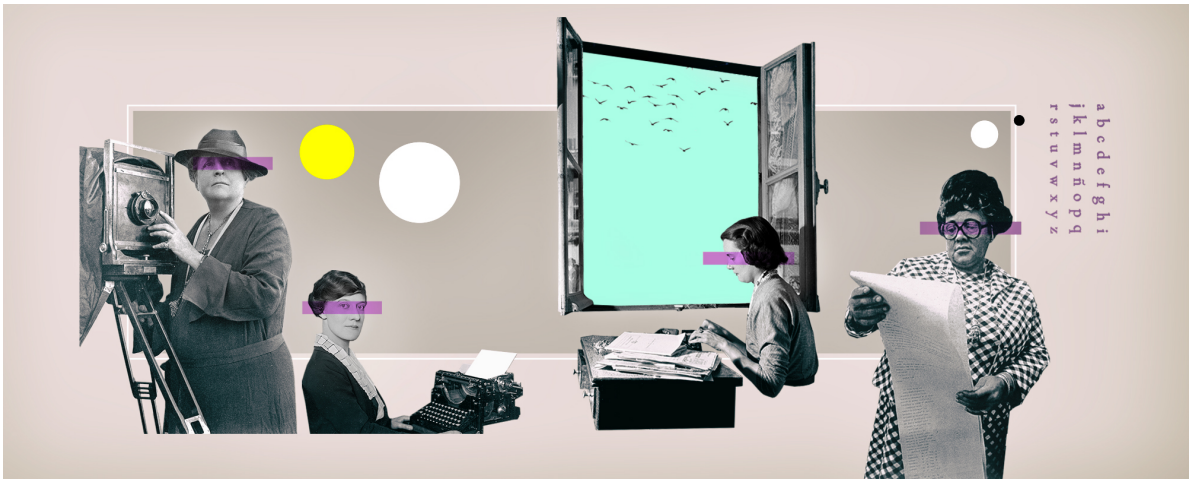
INCLUSIONS, VISIBILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

# Feminist journalism: a radical, cross-cutting intervention

Isabel Muntané




Nadia Sanmartin

Feminism is changing our perception of the world and this is a revolution. A bloodless and profoundly transformational revolution, because it involves individual and collective daily life. Communication is one of the most important, influential tools available for spreading and consolidating this process of change, and doing so through feminist journalism plays an essential role. Mainstreaming the gender perspective in our professional practice not only allows us to fulfil our profession's objectives in terms of quality, but also meet society's demands for this revolutionary process. We do this as a declaration of principles, without hiding behind concepts of neutral or objective journalism (which we know do not exist), but also flying the flag for critical, quality journalism, dignified journalism that favours diversity, the common good and in defence of human rights.

Journalism is a profession that can transform society and guarantee the foundations for a plural, free, conscious and egalitarian world, while ensuring vital collaboration from a critical public. Feminist journalism helps generate critical thought that can rectify gender inequalities and help us question reality, which until now has been seen as a single truth imposed by androcentric power. Such a perspective enables us to disseminate information that is diverse, true and verified, to explain what is happening and in doing so, provide the keys and tools for everyone to understand and, if they wish, question what we publish. Such journalism is not just a political option, which of course it is, but also a means of meeting social demands for a change of approach, whereby information is innovative, diverse, bold, critical and analytical. Information that does not ignore half the

population, women, or the diversity and richness provided by other identities and realities that are hidden in 'official' journalism. As Rita Segato states in her book *La guerra contra las mujeres*, the deconstruction of misogyny that minimises discriminations and violence against women, will not only lead us to "understand what is happening to us as women and everyone in the position of women, dissidents or the 'other' under the patriarchy, but also understand what is happening throughout society as a whole".

> Feminist journalism helps generate critical thought that can rectify gender inequalities and help us question reality, which until now has been seen as a single truth imposed by androcentric power

Putting this feminist journalism into practice, as opposed to supposedly objective mainstream journalism, means applying the gender perspective as an analytical and transformational tool. Because, as the anthropologist Marcela Lagarde explains, "the gender perspective permits analysis and understanding of the characteristics that specifically define men and women, their similarities and differences […] it analyses women and men's chances in life, the meaning of their lives, their expectations and opportunities, the complex and diverse social relations that arise between the two genders and the institutional and day-to-day conflicts they face in whatever way they can.[2]" This perspective also helps reveal and combat discourses built upon the sex/gender system, which discriminates not only against women but against everyone who, for whatever reason, does not or does not want to define themselves under the image of the dominant male role in heteropatriarchal society. To do this, all journalists need to be trained in the gender perspective, because we are all constructed out of the inequality of the sex/gender system which we express in our intimate, social and professional relations and, of course, in the communicative material we create.

Using the gender perspective as a tool for feminist journalism, we can recover untold history, describe alternative realities and generate new meanings. Only in this way can we overcome a history that has robbed us of female models, as they refused to occupy the public space and break the division between public and private space, which keeps women entrapped, like the example of Penelope being told to shut up by her own son.

Working from this standpoint means we reveal other realities and place them at the centre of information production from the moment we denounce and reveal the multiple inequalities of ethnicity, class, age, origin, abilities, sexual orientation and gender identification that configure intersectionality and which affect everyone to varying degrees. Thus it means giving a voice to everyone that mainstream media has consciously or unconsciously forgotten, placing forgotten topics, organisations and territories in the news' agenda, thereby revealing the multiple discriminations of a sexist, racist and classist society. Above all, it means focussing information on people and human rights, above and beyond so-called authoritative institutions and voices. All we are doing, in itself a major

task, is revealing discriminatory trends in a situation legitimised as natural.

Although it is true that we are now seeing a change in media discourse, such progress is slow and littered with incoherence and contradiction. It is not a question of applying a feminist makeover or producing feminist specials on key dates, it is a matter of cross-cutting, radical intervention where women are the focus of news and we stop broadcasting sexist ideology through symbols that keep us in a feminised, private space. To give an example, there is little point in a newspaper using inclusive, non-sexist language when it continues to assign fashion, motherhood and impossible body image, rather than politics, science and the economy, as women's interests. Authoritative discourse and the voice of knowledge is no longer a matter inherent to men alone. As Noam Chomsky suggests, we need to apply internal filters to media content and routines that, for instance, establish how much time and space is dedicated to a news item, who is featured, in which section we include it, which experts we consult, which topics discuss and prioritise and the kind of language we use.

> Feminism is changing our perception of the world and this is a revolution. Communication is one of the most important, influential tools available for spreading and consolidating this process of change, and doing so through feminist journalism plays an essential role

All this intervention conveys a message to the media regarding a social reality that demands to be heard and which is covered by legislation that forces us to change our perspective. Along with European and international directives, recommendations and agreements, in Catalonia we have two framework laws, Law 17/2015 of 21 July, on effective equality between men and women, and Law 5/2008 of 24 July, on the right of women to eradicate gender-based violence. Both laws contain articles setting out specific obligations and measures that Catalan government-managed or financed media must implement to ensure effective equality between men and women. These measures include: avoiding sexist stereotypes of the functions performed by men and women in different areas of life; employing non-sexist and non-androcentric use of language; disseminating political, social and cultural activities promoted by women or aimed at women under equal conditions; showing the diversity of origin and cultural reality existing in Catalonia, women's realities and expectations and establishing mechanisms that guarantee the visibility of women's contributions to social progress throughout history; ensuring that sexist content that justifies, trivialises or incites violence against women, is not disseminated; reporting news stories relating to gender-based violence, excluding elements that might be considered titillating and which contravene the principles of professional journalism in Catalonia; and guaranteeing active participation of women, equal presence of women and men and a plural image of both sexes in all fields, with special attention to spaces of knowledge and opinion.

However, it is safe to say that the laws have not been obeyed and as yet there is no penalty mechanism to ensure their implementation. To give just one example, while the laws state that parity in the presence of women and men in spaces of knowledge and opinion must be guaranteed, we still find men over-represented in radio and television discussion programmes and on the op-ed pages of print and online media. This has been shown by data collected on several occasions by OnSónLesDones (Where are the Women), who have monitored the Catalan media since 2016, where men's opinions make up 77% to 80% of the total, depending on the media outlet.

When we demand decent feminist journalism be put into practice, we are demanding that these laws be obeyed because, whatever we understand by quality journalism, there is a legal framework we have to observe. And such legislation could, in theory, be sufficient to produce the journalism demanded by feminism.

## Feminist journalism to change individual and collective life

Feminist journalism is the result of a long, transformational road covering aspects relating to individual and collective life, arising from growing awareness that has created a crisis in our conception of the world, imposed values and legitimacy of the truth, all of which has gone unquestioned until now. Such professional education cannot be disconnected from personal change and deconstruction; they are interconnecting vessels required for progress, if we agree that "adopting the gender perspective leads to an internal intellectual revolution at a personal level and a cultural revolution of our mentalities",[3] as Marcela Lagarde claims. Thus, such education does not only change the information we produce, it also transforms us as people and professionals while hopefully impacting on the organisation of industry and work as a whole. The reasons are clear. If we dismantle the power hierarchies between genders in our daily lives, we will also do so in our professional relationships and roles, leading to the inevitable translation of this process to industry.

Feminism is a political practice that transforms relations, and if our goal is to build new journalistic output, we need to understand and accept that this cannot be detached from labour relations. Hence we must also apply the gender perspective to organisations to build a feminist media industry that makes people the focus of the organisation. As highlighted by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, changing the social conditions of production requires developing a horizontal, supportive vision, and this is what feminism provides. Applying the gender perspective to the organisation also opens up numerous frontiers previously considered impassable in the profession. Frontiers not only related to the product of journalism, but also to the industry and labour relations.

> If we dismantle the power hierarchies between genders in our daily lives, we will also do so in our professional relationships and roles, leading to the inevitable translation of this process to industry.

We know that our business culture is established by patriarchal citizens who value and serve only hegemonic masculinity, demanding the highest levels of performance from us without considering our individual and collective needs and our differing personal and life conditions. Changing this requires a realisation by the media industry that people are interdependent, but this does not make us more vulnerable or mar the final product; quite the contrary, it opens up new opportunities. Focussing on people and this interdependence means we can satisfy the care needs that everyone has and enjoy what is, in the end, both a collective and individual project. We also need to reflect on how leadership is constructed and seek areas for consensus-based debate and decision-making. This will help us to understand that sometimes professionals and media output must give way to the common good. In short, it is a personal and social transformation that will inevitably have a political impact.

We know this transformation will not be easy because society maintains sexist power structures that are out of the media industry's reach, greatly hindering the introduction of the gender perspective in building new labour and leadership relations. If we also consider the precarity in the sector, with 'low-cost' temporary and false self-employed journalists, under production pressures that in many cases are impossible to meet without almost dying in the attempt, then the difficulty in building this decent journalism becomes clear; yet it is not impossible.

We are facing a glorious challenge and this should give us strength and energy, because the tools are already at our disposal. All phases of the news process are related and all decisions affect the end product. It would be naive on our part not to realise that there is a policy and ideology in news production that is set by interdependent political and economic interests. We must be sufficiently skilled to intervene in this part of the process, as we must also be when producing information. We all have a great deal of power and decision-making capacity, much more than we imagine. We can have an impact on media output by altering the cultural, social and economic models we use when writing texts and selecting images. I would even go so far as to say we can influence the hierarchy of information. However, we need awareness and arguments to back us up; it bears repeating once again that this change in media focus cannot be achieved without training in the gender perspective.

## Avoiding complacency

As we have said, the gender perspective enters both individual and community life; it demands great personal and professional efforts and changes which in themselves lead to resistance. It causes discomfort and defensiveness among those who prefer not to question themselves. They then act to maintain the *status quo* and the comfort of the power that reaffirms their beliefs.

Feminists have to avoid complacency, and as June Fernández accurately noted in the 2018 conference La visibilitat feminista: reptes i aliances (Feminist visibility: challenges and alliances), there is no need to discuss "whether the fact that feminism has become

mainstream is a triumph of the movement or a trick by the heteropatriarchal capitalist system to neutralise it”[4]. But, we do need to realise that placing feminism at the forefront of the political agenda and the media is risky and we must be alert to weapons being redefined by the patriarchy’s institutions and organisations to halt and depoliticise this progress. The resistance is well organised, well financed and backed by social and political structures, which we must remain aware of. It uses a variety of strategies, some of which are easy to spot while others are more subtle, and hence more dangerous.

We are witnessing a wave of sexist, racist and neoliberal discourse which uses our tools as a smokescreen to destroy what we defend. This is the phenomenon that the writer Brigitte Vasallo terms ‘purplewashing’, namely the process of co-opting feminist struggles in order to legitimise exclusionary, normally racist, policies towards minority populations, generally focussing on women. Vasallo’s term is derived from ‘pinkwashing’, which “indicates the aggressive co-opting of the rights of lesbian, gay, trans and bisexual (LGTB) populations to generate a nationalist identity based on the (supposed) respect of these rights”[5]. As journalists, we must be alert to media that, despite their good intentions, reproduce these arguments while failing to understand that when, for instance, they criticise use of the headscarf among Muslim women, they are not doing feminism or its objectives any favours. Or when they talk about a ‘wolf pack’ instead of gang rape (as in the case of the San Fermín festival gang rape), we are playing by the rapists’ rules, hiding the actual facts as defined in the penal code, while also creating a false sense of impunity by lessening the impact of the crime.

Similarly we must show sufficient critical awareness to avoid reproducing supposedly feminist campaigns whose stated aim is to create collective awareness, while using the goal of feminism to depoliticise it. This can be seen in campaigns sponsored by multinationals, with clear economic, commercial and brand interests, who use the defence of the women’s rights to perpetuate the patriarchal system. If we do not report on these campaigns from a gender perspective, we fall into the trap set by the system, feeding the patriarchy’s inequality, and fail in our efforts to bring about a paradigm shift, one of the goals of feminist journalism.

We must also be alert to other, much less developed discourses which gradually gain ground through persistence, even though in many cases they are nothing more than fake news. Such discourses come from neo-sexism, from men who are precise in their use of language, manipulating meanings and signifiers, even going so far as to twist meanings and define themselves as feminists. They are the product of a renewed version of hegemonic masculinity and sexist domination. Such discourses can be easily identified as a patriarchal reaction to the strength of feminism, and they talk about intrafamily violence, false accusations and the inexistence of the wage gap, to give just a few examples. Using the newsroom to combat these organisations and men, whether they be self-proclaimed feminists or constitutionalists defending equality, is not easy and requires close attention. It requires prior reflection and a critical feminist viewpoint to prevent their automatic dissemination.

> While we must be ready to fight these manipulations of discourse, we must also be alert to the false introduction of feminism into organisations

While we must be ready to fight these manipulations of discourse, we must also be alert to the false introduction of feminism into organisations. Firstly, we will never tire of repeating that placing more women in executive positions does not represent a change in the organisation. We need feminist women, women who believe in the feminist economy, who place people at its centre and who fight for organisational social justice. Secondly, there is little use in proclaiming gender equality to put more women in power or raise awareness of gender stereotypes if we do not also denounce other forms of discrimination, such as those suffered by young, disabled or racialised people. Nor will it be of any use if unaccompanied by direct intervention in situations caused by inequality in industry, such as the glass ceiling, sexual division of labour, unending or exhausting working days or lack of labour rights, to give just a few examples. Making feminism visible in the media is the start of a committed, sometimes exhausting process that will shake-up patriarchal mentalities and structures above and beyond inequalities between men and women. We must also make it clear that mainstreaming the gender perspective in the media requires a joint effort from both women and men. The result benefits not just the communication product, but also people. Feminist journalism opens up our perspective and provides tools for building a way of thinking that enables us to progress towards a society of free people, where people can decide on the future knowing that the media are their allies in this struggle. From this position, we are convinced that the public will regain their trust in the media, and such an alliance will benefit everyone: the media and society.



**Isabel Muntané**

Isabel Muntané is a journalist, founding partner of Almena Cooperativa Feminista and co-director of the Master on Gender and Communication from UAB, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She contributes as an analyst in different Media and carries out strategic research projects to introduce the feminist point of view in the Media. She have carried out different researches such as *March 8: where are the refugee women in the EU communication?* in co-authorship with María Serrano (2016) and *Brave women. For new information on sexual violence*, co-authored with Violeta Garcia (2016 and 2017). In 2016 she was rewarded with the honorable mention of the XI 25N Prize of the Barcelona City Council for the project *Brave Women* and in 2019 she was awarded with the Aspasia prize in defense of gender equity in the field of communication