

Claiming back the F Word: Feminism and Women’s Glossies

Joy Watson & Claudia Lopes

Introduction

Since the launch of the Ladies Mercury, the first British women’s magazine, in 1693, women’s glossies have become a significant cultural artefact in today’s society. They carry important messages about the way in which society operates at a particular point in time, the values it aspires to and the social norms at play in a given context. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by digital communication and increasing access to the internet, the magazine industry in South Africa has a significant readership as evidenced by the consumer magazine circulation statistics for January to March 2015.

The figures illustrated in the table are, however, not a clear indication of the influence that magazines have in shaping social norms and thinking. In South Africa, a significant proportion of the population does not have the means to purchase them. However, the impact of women’s magazines is widespread in that they are passed on from person to person, can be found in doctor’s surgeries, at hairdressers, at public libraries etc. The cognitive view of the world depicted in them and their subliminal messages about what it means to be a woman are also embraced by many women who then inadvertently pass these notions of womanhood on to other women around them. Women’s magazines are therefore powerful conduits of messages of popular culture, gendered social norms and what it means to be a woman. Given this, the purpose of this paper is to:

- Consider examples of how women’s magazines have undermined women’s rights.
- Consider examples of how they have promoted women’s rights.
- Sketch a framework for more collaborative engagement between women’s magazines and feminist activists in South Africa.

Ranking	Magazine	Circulation
1.	Move!	121 494
2.	Kuier	105 306
3.	Drum	100 387
4.	Rooi Rose	91 768
5.	Bona	91 558
6.	Tuis/Home	89 497
7.	Woman and Home	86 127
8.	Sarie	83 369
9.	Women’s Health	68 265
10.	Vroue Keur	65 167
11.	Cosmopolitan	61 556
12.	Ideas	61 377
13.	Good Housekeeping	56 521
14.	Finesse	55 329
15.	Fair Lady	49 697
16.	Your Family	43 605
17.	Leef	37 913
18.	Marie Claire	33 885
19.	Essentials	34 310
20.	Elle	31 867
21.	Destiny Magazine	28 570
22.	Fitness Magazine	21 120
23.	Longevity	19 374

Ratings of magazines in the “Women’s General” Sector in South Africa, January – March 2015 (The Audi Bureau of Circulations South Africa)

The history of women's magazines has traversed a path marked by moments of both contributing to and undermining women's rights. It is no easy job to summarise the key ways in which women were represented in magazines at different points in time. This is because this representation has consisted of mixed, at times, contradictory messages. In 1909, Good Housekeeping inadvertently contributed towards women taking charge of their own sexual gratification.¹ This was, by no means, the intention. At the time, it was thought that a series of pelvic massages performed by doctors, helped address hysteria in women. The precursor to the modern vibrator was invented when doctors wanted to develop a labour-saving device that would spare them the hand fatigue of manually administering pelvic massages. The treatment was not in any way linked to women's sexual pleasure. In reviewing different devices, Good Housekeeping, was contributing to women taking charge of their sexual pleasure, an example of where magazines contribute positively to issues of sexuality, albeit unknowingly. The content of magazines at this time was mostly still conservative in nature and women's sexuality was not to become an area of focus until the 1960s.

Very generally speaking, the period of the 1930s – 1950s can be described as a time where the central focus on women in magazines was that of a housewife and mother.² This followed on from the Second World War when jobs were scarce and women's roles centred on the home and taking care of children. In 1965, Helen Gurley Brown was appointed editor of Cosmopolitan magazine in the USA following the publication of her book, *Sex and the Single Girl*.³ She was editor for 32 years and her contribution was to significantly change the focus of how women were represented. *Sex and the Single Girl* challenged the prevailing social norms of what it meant to be a woman.

As a consequence of Gurley Brown's influence, women's magazines started to market the idea of women being single, of enjoying sex outside of marriage and of building their careers. However, this was done in contentious ways and located within the framework of women's primary role being to please men. Gurley Brown was contentious in her views on how women should present and engage with men. One such renowned, problematic statement was "If you're not a sex object, you're in trouble."⁴ Even in her promotion of being single, Gurley Brown managed to locate this within the context of doing so while transforming one's self to become a man-pleasing trap. Yet Gurley Brown's message was revolutionary for its time, in some ways it positioned men as complementary to a woman's life rather than central to it. While advancing problematic notions of womanhood, she also created the space in the magazine industry for women to construe notions of womanhood which defied prescribed gender roles as wife, mother and housekeeper. In 1970 a group of feminist protesters led by Kate Millett occupied Gurley Brown's offices, demanding that Cosmopolitan publish articles with a more feminist perspective. To her credit, Gurley Brown published an extract from Millett's manifesto, "Sexual Politics." Notwithstanding this, most magazines at the time continued to carry stories and portray women in ways that served to undermine a women's rights agenda.

The power of women's magazines in negatively impacting on women

The purpose of this paper is to pull out a few examples of how women's glossy magazines have sought to promote women's rights and the ways in which they have undermined them. However, this analysis is not clear-cut. This is because there are times when the magazines clearly do seek to promote a women's-rights agenda (the interview with 3 survivors kidnapped in Nigeria in the August 2015 South African edition of Cosmopolitan is one such example) and there are times when they clearly feed destructive notions of womanhood – such as the "Assess My Breasts" campaign run by Nuts magazine in the United Kingdom in 2004 where girls were encouraged to send in pictures of their breasts that were then rated by men.⁵

Far more complicated, is that magazines denote multiple and conflicting ideologies, as concluded in research into women's magazines and the social construction of womanhood.⁶ This generally, is the murky, layered terrain of what the glossies do – they can both contribute to positive notions of womanhood and undermine a woman's sense of self.⁷ In order to address the negative impact of magazines on women, it is important to recognise this dual, double edged nature of what the glossies do in terms of constructions of femininity and womanhood. Winship (1987) talks about her simultaneous attraction and repulsion in both finding pleasure in the escapist aspect of magazines and recognising their mass popularity and her rejection of the notions of womanhood put forward by them.

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One significant way in which this duality plays itself out is in relation to women's sexuality. For both women and young girls, magazines are useful conduits of information about sex, a subject which is not often easily discussed in the open. Magazines can therefore play a positive role in imparting information about sex. However, of concern are the problematic connotations associated with women's sexuality. Notions of sex and what it means to be 'sexy' is mostly viewed through the lens of heterosexual men. Most magazines play to this, building images of women as the objects of men's sexual desire. So while the focus is on sexual liberation, the message is that sex takes meticulous preparation and calculated planning for women. The focus is largely on men's stimulation with tags such as “10 ways to please your man”. The role of women in the sexual game is centred on man pleasing and teasing. They are expected to plan, conform and perform.⁸ The pleasure of men is pivotal and the male gaze has primacy. Men's sexuality, on the other hand, is depicted as being spontaneous, easy and unstoppable.

Women's sexuality is also placed firmly within the parameters of heteronormativity. The issues and consciousness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersex persons is something mostly not engaged with, unless the angle in is about some 'girl fun' that is aimed at titillating and gratifying men's sexual pleasure. While these articles tread lightly on the domain of lesbian sex, it is mostly not for the pleasure of the women involved, but conforms to the voyeuristic gaze and sexual pleasure of the man who is watching. The underlying notions of sexuality in magazines can have potentially dangerous repercussions. The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls found that constant exposure to the constructions of sexuality in magazines negatively affected notions of womanhood to the extent that the associated imagery could result in readers being more accepting of rape myths, sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence and adversarial sexual beliefs about relationships.⁹

While the way in which magazines feed unhealthy notions of sexuality is largely subliminal, there are times when problematic notions of gender relations, sexuality and violence are overt. The 2007 spring/summer collection for Dolce and Gabbana, for example, featured in several different magazines, depicted a swimwear model restrained to the floor by a man while three other men looked on. By the time the advertisement was pulled from circulation for its graphic simulation of gang rape, it had run in several publications including the men's USA magazine *Esquire*.¹⁰ Exposure to imagery and messaging of this nature can undermine women's worth, role and place in society; it normalises gender inequality and the unequal power relations between men and women; and more easily excuses or condones the abuse of women. While this example¹¹ is an overt example of how imagery in magazines can promote messages about violence against women, the messaging is usually much more subliminal than this. Violence against women is one of the world's most endemic violations of human rights: it destroys women, families and the very fabric of society and thus it is problematic when magazines, which have a reach to hundreds of thousands of people, inadvertently contribute to its proliferation.

Another key way in which glossies can be destructive to notions of womanhood is in relation to body images. Gough-Yates (2003) describes the constructed images of women in magazines as unreal, untruthful and distorted. Several studies such as Kilbourne (1999) and Freidric et al (2007) attest to links between women's magazines, negative body images and depression. A study done by Bradley University in the United States show that an estimated 70 percent of women feel worse about their bodies after reading magazines.¹²

Some magazines have responded to this by trying to introduce bigger-sized models, but mostly the norm of thin, young, 'beautiful' in predetermined, orthodox ways, has prevailed. When *Seventeen* magazine was first published in 1944 in the USA, the average model weighed 58.9kg. These days the average model is estimated to weigh about 52.1kg.¹³ In 1997, the editor of "Woman" in Australia, Cyndi Tebbel, caused an uproar when she decided to use a size 16 model on the cover of the magazine. The issue was followed by one that promoted a "No Diet Day." Both strategies elicited a positive response from readers and circulation figures remained stable. Yet Tebbel took tremendous strain from advertisers who felt that "no-one would want to buy lipstick from a big, fat, grumpy woman."¹⁴ She was eventually forced to resign. The focus on seductive models clad in skimpy outfits have been flaunted by magazines so much so that they have become a cultural norm, with many young girls and women aspiring to these notions of womanhood and "sexiness".

The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls¹⁵ found that girls exposed to sexualised images from a young age are more prone to mental issues problems such as depression, eating disorders and low self-esteem. This aggressive sexualising of culture has real, practical consequences on women's lives. When the images that are internalised are potentially negative, it becomes important to challenge popular culture, particularly because it is inextricably linked to issues of social justice.

Even where positive stories on body image are covered, this is at times located in the context of contradictory messaging. The South African edition of *Cosmopolitan*, for example, ran a story on "Ten Struggles of Being Not Fat But Not Skinny Either"¹⁶ The article describes the everyday body weight issues that women contend with such as buying clothes that fit, eating out, going to the beach and meeting potential partners. It is a tongue-in-cheek exploration of weight issues with a light, humorous approach to a subject that usually elicits anxiety and depression. The article ends with the concluding statement "I'm average and I look fine. Get over it." Yet, directly across on the opposite page, one is confronted with "With Herbex, I lost 35kg!" in big, bold text. This is the contradictory messaging that detracts from the gains made with positive stories

about women's bodies. This brings to the fore the issue of advertisements which are the life-blood of magazines in terms of bringing in revenue and the control which magazines have over the ways in which women are represented in them. This is a critical site requiring transformation - the problematic ways in which women are represented in the advertising industry.

Positive contributions to women's rights

In as much as the media is able to influence negative perceptions of notions of womanhood and femininity, it is also in a very powerful position to challenge harmful ideologies and create positive social change. Spanish glossy magazine MIA, for example, runs an annual "Red Card against Abuse" campaign and regularly supports projects that address women's rights. In addition, it is also the only Spanish magazine to feature its own readers on its covers. In 2013, Mia received global recognition by UN Women for its commitment to women's equality and empowerment.¹⁷

Considering the extremely high rates of violence against women in South Africa, it is encouraging that some of our own local magazines take up the fight against gender-based violence - whether it is through the telling of stories of women's lived realities of violence, running educational articles on the subject or through awareness raising campaigns. In 2003, advertising agency, Lowe Bull Calvert Pace, and FHM ran an anti-rape campaign on behalf of a local NGO, People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA).¹⁸ The campaign featured a double-spread page advertisement which required the reader to force apart the two pages that had been glued together revealing a woman lying on her back with her legs spread apart and a by-line which read, "If you have to use force, it's rape". The campaign was simple, to the point, incredibly effective and powerful. Another example of a local magazine that has a history of taking up violence against women is Marie Claire. In 2015, for example, Marie Claire featured two initiatives, the "Naked Issue" (run annually over the last few years) and the "In Her Shoes" campaign to raise awareness of the abuse of women and children. Both campaigns have aimed to support initiatives that address sexual and domestic violence and both have made a point on calling on men to take a stand against abuse. While the campaigns are commendable for seeking to take up the issue of violence against women, both have met some level of contention. The "In Her Shoes" campaign, for example, which featured a number of local male celebrities in high heels, has stirred significant rancour from feminists who have criticised the magazine for its shallow interpretation of what it means to "walk in a woman's shoes" in relation to gender-based violence and for some of its misguided choices of protagonists.¹⁹ No doubt, Marie Claire had embarked on this campaign with good intentions but this illustrates the need for greater collaboration between women's magazines and feminists in order to take up issues that affect women in the most sensitive, effective manner possible.

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Another positive example of how magazines have adopted a women's rights agenda is in its depiction of the changing roles of women. Long gone are the days of depicting women solely as carers and homemakers. Moser and Levy (1986) developed an analytical framework that describes the triple role that women play in terms of the division of labour in most societies. In terms of this, in most low income households, women's work includes a *reproductive role* which entails childbearing and rearing responsibilities which is required in order to ensure the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force. It also entails a *productive role*. This is work done in the labour force to secure an income, often as secondary income earners (mostly in agriculture in rural areas and in informal sector enterprises in urban areas). Lastly, women play a *community managing role*, which is essentially work done in the interests of the community such as caring for the aged and building community institutions (such as churches, youth centres etc.)

Many modern magazines tend to provide stories that attest to the different roles played by women, as mothers, as partners, as career women, as people who care for the community. The triple role of women is therefore acknowledged and women are depicted in far more holistic ways. At times, there are even attempts to cover stories that encourage women to accomplish in career fields traditionally associated with men, such as science; computers, business etc. The focus of many magazines has been to represent women as powerful, independent, career-driven, gym-going, diet-watching, fashionista supermoms with an ever-growing checklist that defines the modern woman. Interviews with celebrities often reinforce this notion of womanhood, of being able to traverse the world, commanding different career platforms and being social cause ambassadors, while still being able to raise families and look desirable.

While the expansion of the traditional roles associated with women is a positive development, these depictions are not without their problems. For example, the underlying class assumptions²⁰ of this kind of representation are very clear, it is targeted at middle class women and the lives that they aspire to live – rarely do magazines cover stories or seek to represent in their imagery, women who are domestic workers, women who work in factories or sex workers. While this is understood in the context of appealing to a particular readership, the argument is that there may well be potential readers that fall outside of the conventional scope of target audience who could well be attracted to a certain magazine if it took up issues that they could relate to.

Another problem is that while the focus on the multiple roles of women can be positive, it can also serve to reinforce the notion that women must juggle multiple roles and identities. This can inadvertently place unrealistic and unfair expectations and pressures on women to do more and work harder. The implications are that if you fail to meet these demands, then you must be failing at being a real woman. Notwithstanding the limitations of the roles of women depicted in magazines, the coverage of stories such as women in traditionally masculine industries and women who fight social justice causes is important. This is because this discourse is an important step in continuing to break down the mould of prescriptive gender roles.

Women's magazines have also played an important role in focusing on women in leadership positions, thereby encouraging women to aspire to such positions. In 2013, for example, Elle ran a story entitled "Does having more female newspaper editors mean more gender balanced news?"²¹ The article sought to explore the challenges faced by women editors and journalists working in largely patriarchal, male dominated industries. It used the strategy of interviewing women editors and journalists so that they could share their experiences of covering women's issues and challenging gender stereotypes. Similarly, Marie Claire ran a story entitled "The Women Who Put Rapists Behind Bars."²² The story covered interviews with a police officer, a

scientist and a prosecutor and focused on their experiences of what it means to be woman working in the criminal justice system, the challenges that they face and the way in which their work impacts upon their personal lives.

One other way in which magazines have a potentially powerful contribution to make in challenging gender inequity is by promoting feminism. Feminism is about more than gendered roles, reproductive rights and eradicating violence against women and girls. It is about fundamentally transforming a gendered social order and subverting the social, cultural, economic and political norms that disadvantage women.

Women's magazines are important role-players in shaping cultural norms and can play a significant role in positively transforming this. In May 2012, Cosmopolitan magazine in the United Kingdom launched the "Bring Back the F Word" campaign. This entailed a series of initiatives to advocate for gender equality and to argue that there has never been a more important time to be feminist. Part of the campaign aimed to address the issue of unequal pay between men and women and called for an annual audit to assess the differences in income between men and women. Similarly, Elle magazine also launched an initiative to rebrand feminism. The project aimed to make feminism accessible to women who do not consider themselves to be feminist. Importantly, Elle magazine in the United Kingdom worked with feminists to conceptualise, plan and initiate the project.

While the impact of these campaigns is unclear, it is an important step in consciousness raising at two levels. Firstly, it gets the magazines who adopt the campaign to think more about how they represent women, but also, the campaign can play a huge role in transforming the way in which readers think about what it means to be a woman and how patriarchy is challenged in society. Some of the key questions for consideration in taking on a feminist agenda include the following:

- *Does the magazine content/ images promote gender equality?*
- *Are prescriptive gendered roles challenged? E.g. what roles do the women in the advertisements play? How are they represented? How are women portrayed on the cover?*
- *Is the reader provided with information that educates, empowers and equips them?*
- *Does the content/ images make the reader feel good about herself?*
- *Does the content/ images promote problematic notions of sexuality?*
- *Are there features to raise awareness of gender-based violence?*
- *Does the content/ images promote heteronormative frameworks?*
- *Are there contradictory messages?*

Where to from here?

This paper has sought to briefly explore some of the ways in which women's glossies depict harmful messages and images that detract from eradicating gender inequity. It also sought to bring to the fore some of the ways in which magazines have empowered and helped women re-define themselves over different periods in time. The pivotal argument that the paper makes is that there is a need for relationship building between women's magazines and feminist researchers and activists and women's organisations. Through the building of this relationship, it would be possible to cross-pollinate work on both sides and reinforce messages that seek to build and empower women, tackle gender and social inequity and make women generally feel good about themselves.

Some of the key areas of focus in doing this are as follows:

- **Relationship building:** There is a need for greater collaboration between women's magazines and feminist activists and women's organisations. This networking and sharing

of information is critical to understanding (on both sides) what issues women face at any point in time.

- **Sharing of information for stories:** One of the challenges in covering feminist issues in magazines is the limited budget often available to conduct research or investigative journalism. Feminist researchers work on pulling together this kind of research on an ongoing basis. There is need to explore ways of sharing information that can be used for the development of cutting-edge stories that address pertinent issues.
- **Planning joint campaigns:** There is a need to look for the joint areas of interest in terms of campaigns targeted on promoting women's rights and working collaboratively to run these and raise awareness of them. Campaigns on gender-based violence are particularly important here.
- **South African initiative to claim back feminism:** Currently the South African state is not doing well in terms of promoting women's rights on the whole. While significant progress had been made in the period after 1994 and South Africa was hailed as a best practice model, women's rights seem to have fallen off the agenda and taken a political backseat. There is need for new, innovative strategies and the building of new alliances in taking this on. A joint feminist/ women's magazine campaign to claim back feminism and women's rights would be strategic at this point in South Africa's political landscape. The lessons learnt from such campaigns abroad could be used to inform this.

¹ Baxter and Cosslett (2014)

² Friedan B, 1963

³ Gurley Brown, 1962

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The editor at the time, Terri White, denied that this was sexist and had negative effects for women and girls. She later went to concede that, in retrospect, the campaign was a damaging one from a gender-rights perspective.

⁶ Norvall E, 2011

⁷ Several studies explore this. See, for example, Baxter and Cosslett (2014), Crouch (2013), Gough Yates (2003), Kilbourne (1999) and Freidric et al 92007)

⁸ Baxter and Cosslett (2014)

⁹ Kalof (1999); Milburn, Mather and Conrad (2000) and Ward (2002) in the American Psychological Association Task Force Report on the Sexualisation of Girls, 2010.

¹⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2999045/Dolce-Gabbana-fire-just-days-referring-children-born-IVF-synthetic-critics-discover-ad-depicts-woman-gang-raped.html#ixzz3iFBUEZBo>. Accessed 8 August 2015.

¹¹ For a range of other examples, visit <http://www.businessinsider.com/sex-violence-against-women-ads-2013-5?op=1>. Accessed 8 August 2015.

¹² Crouch 2013.

¹³ Baxter and Cosslett, 2014.

¹⁴ <http://adage.com/article/news/australian-editor-resigns-advertiser-protest/12761>. Accessed at 28 July 2015.

¹⁵ Kalof (1999); Milburn, Mather and Conrad (2000) and Ward (2002) in the American Psychological Association Task Force Report on the Sexualisation of Girls, 2010.

¹⁶ Matt S, Cosmopolitan, South Africa, January 2015.

¹⁷ http://weprinciples.unglobalcompact.org/files/attachments/Pr%C3%A1ticas_de_Neg%C3%B3cios_Compani%C3%AAs_Leading_the_Way_18_Nov_2013.pdf. Accessed 15 July 2015.

¹⁸ <https://marzipanandmarmite.wordpress.com/2011/10/08/if-you-have-to-use-force>. Accessed 15 July 2015.

¹⁹ Amongst the 18 male celebrities featured in the campaign, two have previously made sexist and inappropriate remarks about women and rape and another had charges of assault laid against him by a former girlfriend.

²⁰ Note that it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the race implications of the representation of women. Race, class and spatial location issues are, however, critical to considering how women are represented in the media in general, particularly so in post-apartheid South Africa.

²¹ Mallison T, Elle, May 2013.

²² Wiener M, Marie Claire, July 2015

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