Women Politicians and Malestream Media: a Game of Two Sides

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Other papers in the series include

I would like to see some kind of talent bank, so that women [journalists] would know who can speak on what. If we can identify our talents in a way which makes it easy for them, so that if an issue does come up, they can say, oh, I must ring such and such a person because that’s her area of interest or expertise. If she’s looking for a balanced response, particularly if she’s looking to interview two or three people, then she would know who to contact. So it’s making it easier for them and giving us the opportunity to profile what we’re good at. (Patricia Lewsley, SDLP)

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, I have been exploring the relationship between women, politics and the media. What began with an interest in Britain’s Labour leadership contest in 1994 - where it seemed to me that Margaret Beckett was consistently undermined and criticised in contrast to the media’s obvious love affair with Tony Blair - has grown into an involving and productive research agenda (Ross 1995). Since those early days, I have undertaken a series of interviews with women parliamentarians in England (Westminster), Australia, South Africa and, most recently, Northern Ireland. This latter series of interviews was conducted while I was the Shelagh Murnaghan Visiting Professor with the Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics at QUB (2001-2003), and this paper draws heavily from those particular interviews.¹

What I am especially interested in, when looking at the relationship that women politicians have to news media, is how their sex influences the ways in which they are reported and the strategies they employ to try and mitigate some of the worst excesses of the news media’s propensity to trivialise their political contributions, undermine their political authority and more generally, render them invisible. I aim to explore the dissonances between the rhetoric of journalistic discourse which purports an impartial objectivity when reporting politics, and the experiences of women parliamentarians themselves in their dealings with and experiences of news workers.

Whilst the media have played an important role in the reporting of politics for some considerable time, the extent to which politicians now use the media as their principal mode of communicating with the public is unparalleled. It is not absurd to suggest that the media, and television in particular, ventilate the real politick, as Prime Ministers and Presidents announce important policy decisions to the populace via the TV camera rather than directly to their peers on the floor of the House (Wheeler 1997; Negrine 1998) This is partly to do with immediacy and partly an avoidance strategy in an effort to get their message across without the irksome interpretation of a political pundit telling us all what this or that Minister really means (Steele and Barnhurst 1996; Bird 1998). But exactly who is allowed access to the media and who journalists seek out for comment is determined by a variety of news conventions, political hierarchies, insider and old-boy networking. Often, these strategies militate against women politicians’ ability to attract media attention, mostly because relatively few occupy significant political positions within their parties or within their particular legislatures. Nor do many enjoy the kinds of personal relationships with political and lobby journalists which provide the easy gateways to accessing media space. However, women parliamentarians are making a difference, they are employing specific strategies to ensure their views are heard, they are achieving significant positions within their parties and, slowly but surely, they are changing the face of Northern Ireland politics.

Whose news?

Women in all the countries where I have conducted interviews share a view that the way in which the media represent politics is different (and worse) now than in previous decades. This is not just because
of the global slide to an infotainment format which precludes context within news reports but instead offers a linked series of sound-bites, but also because the rise of the personality interviewer and pundit means that what comes out of politicians’ mouths is instantly interrogated for the ‘real’ meaning and then repackaged as pithy commentary. In the Northern Ireland context, the very different recent history – thirty years of the Troubles and now a period of relative peace - means that what has traditionally been the mainstay of the news agenda, ie conflict, is no longer available, so other agendas and other stories have an opportunity to surface and receive attention. Unfortunately, this window often has a red light glowing within or is backlit with violence: the good news stories, of which there are many in Northern Ireland, struggle for media attention.

I think the media goes for a sensational story and we miss out on so many good news stories, really worthwhile stuff that’s going on and it’s certainly hard to get good coverage and hard to sustain that coverage. For example, I launched an adult literacy strategy last week which is so important when we have nearly a quarter of our adult population who have problems with literacy. I got an interview on BBC and UTV but you need to sustain that. We have a really good action plan with targets and timetables but it’s been very hard trying to get any more cover for that and yet it’s a huge social issue. (Carmel Hanna, SDLP)

Well, short of taking off all your clothes, you rarely get…you really have to push to get some sort of fame. Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland, not just with women, one of the things that we are all up against is that the media, especially the ones who’ve been around for a while, are so used to dealing with awful things, with sensational things, that they really don’t want to hear a woman standing up and saying, [we’re trying to work together or we have this scheme that’s very successful and people are coming together…‘, they don’t really want to hear that. They want you to shout and scream and there are very few women in Northern Ireland politics who will shout and scream, so you have this double disadvantage. (Eileen Bell, Alliance)

I put out quite a lot of press releases, which are well-researched and topical and relevant to the local community and in a lot of cases, it’s not used. They will go for more sensational stories than factual stories of hard work where we are achieving something. (Joan Carson, UUP)

Of course, the media’s interest in the more salacious and sensational stories doesn’t always have a negative outcome, so that the idiosyncracies of particular journalists’ taste buds will sometimes have extremely positive effects.

Well, this issue of date rape – it was something that we just decided we would mention as we were passing as we believed that it deserved a mention, but the amount of media coverage we’ve got on that, twice, has been absolutely phenomenal and the number of people who’ve rung us saying thank you for taking up the issue. And now we’re looking forward to having some kind of seminar and launch some posters or something. So sometimes, something which you don’t expect to get coverage gets it and something you really think is important doesn’t, and it just depends on the amount of news there is on the day. (Patricia Lewsley, SDLP)

Women are concerned with the way in which, in the absence of real and sustained conflict which so characterised Northern Ireland for so many years, the media will often construct a conflict, as if they are incapable of delivering a different agenda. More dangerously, such stories frame politicians in a poor light, from the point of view of the public, as if they too are incapable of operating without hostility.
They go wherever they get a quick story. The issues are different now: while the conflict was going on, the only issue was the number of funerals every day and thank god that’s changed. But they are still inclined to zone in on what flowers we have in the Assembly, which is silly stuff but which the more extreme parties still get involved in, and it disgusts the people out there, they say, ‘there they are, fighting about the flowers again’, while our hospitals are falling apart. But everyone gets tarred with the same brush, unfortunately. Most of us don’t give tuppence about which flowers to have… but the public get the wrong message. (Carmel Hanna, SDLP)

Listening to the women

When asked, women politicians do believe that there is a gendered agenda in play when journalists report on stories in which women politicians feature (Ross 2002) and especially if stories have a specific ‘women’s’ angle. For some women, their membership of one of the smaller parties produces a double disadvantage in terms of the media’s interest in them where it’s not always clear if it’s their party or their sex which provokes the bigger ennui.

The thing with the media will come. For example, the other day there was a chap from RTE and he was standing with a camera crew and I say to him, ‘I’m coming now’, you know, that sort of thing, but I knew he didn’t want to speak to me… we don’t have that lever of relevance that I feel we should have. (Eileen Bell, Alliance)

For other women, the very fact that they are women militates against their achievement of a media profile, not just because of the more ‘traditional’ social structure in Northern Ireland, but also because few women are in prominent political positions in the major parties (see Racioppi, 2001).

Women in NI have had a number of things which have worked against us and part of it is this overall feeling in the media, young and old, is that it’s always better to ask a man, that a man knows more because men have been dominant. It’s better to hear from a man and we seem to be second-class. As deputy leader, I feel I’m entitled to have some sort of a say and I’ve earned that through the work I’ve done over the years. A few of the media will say, ‘you’re really good’ and that you work hard, but really when it comes to the big issues, they look for the big parties. In a way, that’s another thing I would congratulate Monica [McWilliams] on, she has let them see that we can speak. Monica has her own personal qualities, she’s from the academic world and used to lecturing, used to focused talking and people can then start to think, well maybe they do have something to say, these women. (Eileen Bell, Alliance)

We have that hangover in Northern Ireland, and perhaps more so in the West, a more traditional area. I find that, from a woman’s point of view, they, and when I say ‘they’, I think the general public, the electorate and the media, see any pronouncement from a woman MLA as light or frivolous. I remember there was a very lightweight story and it was immediately seized upon and I felt that was typical where they’d take up something frivolous rather than something that was factual and solid. I’ve mostly been talking about print media but I find with radio and television, they seem to want the big hitters. They’re not interested in the minority parties or women, they will actually ask for who they want, from the big hitters. (Joan Carson, UUP)

As discussed above, the media’s enthusiasm for reporting ‘feel good’ stories is extremely modest and if such stories feature women or women’s issues specifically, this is yet another double disadvantage. Even where women are working cross-party on issues of common interest, itself a
radical step in a Northern Ireland context (but see Porter, 1997), the media are still slow to wake. When parliamentarians attempt to challenge such disinterest, their ploys will often result in frustration.

The Northern Ireland Women’s Political Forum took seven very prominent women from all the political parties including the Women’s Coalition and decided to run their own ‘yes’ campaign. We rang the BBC and were told that they only had four cameras and there were five items on the list, and ours obviously came at the bottom. We went and picketed outside the BBC and picketed at ITV. ITV sent [...] out who was quite embarrassed and annoyed that she had been sent out as the token woman to speak to women: the BBC didn’t send anybody. (Patricia Lewsley, SDLP)

When Lewsley continued to vent her disgust, she received a phone call from a journalist telling her that she needed to get a profile first before she would be guaranteed airtime, since the person in the street wouldn’t know who she was, so organising a ‘yes’ campaign wasn’t a news story because she was a nobody. But this is surely the classic chicken and egg story! Similarly, when a cross-party group of women MLAs took a group of students to meet the Minister for Employment and Learning and she promised a review of student fees, the media weren’t interested in covering the story.

They never reported it! The only person who reported it was a woman journalist, Julie O’Connor, and she was a young reporter with the Mirror and she had come out and taken a photograph of all the women who were there on the day, and done a piece a couple of days before the launch [of the cross-party initiative]. Then we did the launch and she was the only one who turned up. It doesn’t get the priority that something contentious would get, because it’s positive. The reality is that good news is not always the best news in the eyes of the media, that’s why the whole mindset and the culture of the media needs to change. And I think that’s why you get the likes of UTV Life, which has a huge number of viewers on any one evening. Why? Because it’s so positive and it talks about things which are happening out there in the community. (Patricia Lewsley, SDLP)

Women are also very conscious of how the giving of media attention to women and especially women belonging to the smaller parties, is seen as a gift by some journalists, so that they feel they must ‘play the game’ if they are to continue to be asked to contribute to mediated activities such as debates.

Yesterday, all day I was going to be the only one on this programme and then they put someone else up with me, and you go into make-up and along comes the chief presenter and they only have one make-up artist in the studio because they’re cutting back, and suddenly you’re turfed out of the chair because Mr Bigwig has to sit in it. And it just goes with the territory and I keep thinking, if I’d been the First Minister sitting in that chair and Mr Bigwig had come in, would they have turfed me out as fast? So you’re very conscious all the time of your place and that you’re a woman means you’re doubly conscious. But the big guys are getting it now and they’re putting up women all over the place because they now realise, here are these two bloody women coming, we’ve got to stick women up too. So now you look at things on TV and people say, god, we never knew there was a woman there. We were the vanguard action, which is great. (Monica McWilliams, NIWC)

As McWilliams points out, these opportunities are precious and, potentially, have a highly positive effect on the larger political picture for women. Nonetheless, several women mentioned what could be described as the ‘NIWC affect’ whereby the very existence of a political party mandated on a
specifically gendered platform means that these women are asked to give their views on issues to do with women, in preference to women commentators from other parties. Whilst there is some truth to that complaint, it doesn’t always work in the NIWC’s favour.

I’ve been over 20 years in politics, local as well as national, and I’ve been in various offices within my party and now I’m [...], but in no way has that ever been recognised and yet you get the Women’s Coalition, two minutes in politics, and they get everything. Why? Because the media think they’re cute. That’s dying down a bit now, but still it was appalling, on a personal level, to all of us who’ve been in the political arena for years, that you are ignored. (anon.)

Well, if I put my journalist’s hat on, I would say that we are the ‘specialists’ in that area and we have promoted ourselves as such so a journalist goes to the specialist in the area. Now, other Assembly Members specialise in or get a name for environmental issues or anything, we have the label of ‘women’s issues’. But we want to go beyond that label and the danger we face is that we are only asked about those things. So there is a problem both ways round. We don’t only want to be asked about gender and women’s issues, we want to be asked about security and all the different elements. So, it has its advantages and its disadvantages.

When there are really difficult stories, they are the first to contact us, things like reproductive rights and abortion, they’re on the phone instantly, because none of the other parties want to comment. The other parties are delighted when we are asked to give our views [on those topics] because they see it as a vote-loser. So the media constantly come and ask us to speak on those issues. (Monica McWilliams, NIWC)

For their part, Monica McWilliams and Jane Morrice recognise that initially, there was considerable international and national interest in their party for reasons which included novelty, but that such interest can benefit everyone, not least because it demonstrates that it is possible to challenge the orthodoxies of ‘politics as usual’ with all its negative connotations, in favour of a politics which is more inclusive, more human.

Certainly, our experience of the international scene, outside of Northern Ireland, there was huge interest us, the French, the Americans, the Japanese. We were obviously a novelty, unique and a good story to be told. I must say that other parties and even other women in other parties, were not happy that we got an awful lot of the limelight and because of the way we did it, the DIY politics: we were more attractive to the media, definitely, on the international scene, but also here. We got ourselves elected, for one thing, which meant we had a space - when the political parties are being asked something, we had a space there, even though we were the 9th party in Northern Ireland, we still had a place. Now we’re not always approached, not as much as we would like to be, but we have a space which is guaranteed as ours. (Jane Morrice, NIWC)

Morrice is also very conscious, as are other women, of the importance of maintaining a media presence and her role as Deputy Speaker means that she is often on camera even if she’s not speaking, which helps to create a continuous profile both for her party and for herself.

I don’t think we can really complain about our coverage. I think we’ve got pretty good profiles. I’m also Deputy Speaker, so any time that the Assembly is shown, I’m often seen in the Chair, just in the background. And people say they saw you on TV and you weren’t necessarily doing anything but you were there. My Deputy Speaking role has helped us a lot. For example, there was a big controversy last week about consulting gay and lesbian groups and I was in the Chair
at the time. In all the clips of the exchanges between [...] and the others, I was having to keep control so my voice and me saying, order, order, was there in all the clips. It’s about a presence. I suppose it’s terrible to say that I’m satisfied, but I think if we went too overboard, people might get bored. I like the coverage we’re getting and I think we’re hitting the right buttons and we’re working hard at it. (Jane Morrice, NIWC)

**The Bridget Jones effect**

The vast majority of women whom I have interviewed, including the Northern Ireland MLAs, agree that journalists are especially fascinated in them as gendered beings, in their sartorial style, their domestic arrangements, where they do their shopping and so on. In my previous work with women politicians, most of them believe that their outward appearance is the focus of both more column inches and airtime than anything they might say, and that such a focus is much more likely to apply to women than their male political colleagues. Even a very cursory comparison of news reports which feature women and men would demonstrate that women’s age and marital status is nearly always included in such reports and certainly included much more often than in stories which report on men. Why is that and what does it signify?

I feel that the media would say things about a woman politician, even when we’re out electioneering, and they’d remark on what your appearance was like and whether you were wearing something bright or dull or whatever it was. As against asking you about what you were actually fighting for, what your policies were. (Joan Carson, UUP, Northern Ireland)

As long as a man has a suit on and clean shirt, no one will really comment on his hairstyle, whereas with women, they always comment on your clothes, on what you’re wearing. To a lesser degree now than it used to be, but certainly there’s another agenda there. They’re more likely to comment on what a man is saying than what he’s wearing. (Annie Courtney, SDLP)

However, not all the women MLAs were hostile to the media’s fascination with things sartorial. Iris Robinson (DUP), for example, is very happy with the way in which the media regularly describe her as well-groomed, stylish and good-looking for a 52 year-old grandmother. ‘I have a standard, for me, and I want to maintain that. I have seen many women get married and then let themselves go. I haven’t done that’. She is proud of how she looks and believes she sets a good ‘standard’ for women in the Assembly, a good role model to younger women thinking about a parliamentary career, showing that you can have a family, look good and be a parliamentarian. But it must be said that Robinson’s take on the media’s propensity to commodify women politicians was a highly singular one, even if some other women believe that things are gradually improving.

I think it’s improving from the point of view that they’re not talking about her suit so much, so it’s, ‘here’s such and such and this is what they’re saying’, but we’ve built up our own credibility and respect with the media, so they see that what we’re saying is worth saying and it’s worth listening to. I remember asking a journalist one day, when he was talking about us getting our pay hike and I said I would like the media to swap jobs or follow me around for 24 hours. So he said, oh, you want us to see you combing your hair and putting on your make-up. Yeah, I said, I want you to see how quickly I have to do that before I drop my daughter off at school and then go through a 12-hour day and follow me through that day. And he was taken aback a bit, but at the end of the day, the challenge has never been taken up! (Patricia Lewsley, SDLP)
Perhaps the media believe that outward appearance is related to innate ability, in which case the legions of male politicians whose suits are crumpled and ties stained need to look to develop their careers elsewhere. Or is it that the expectations on women politicians are that much higher than for men? Whatever the reason, the outcome is the same – trivialising women by making them less than the sum of their body parts. A woman politician is always described as a woman politician in the media, her sex is always on display, always the primary descriptor. She is defined by what she is not, that is, she is not a ‘typical’ politician who in principle, bears no gendered descriptor but who is clearly marked as male (Ross and Sreberny 2000). The English campaign group, Women in Journalism, recently undertook an analysis of newspaper photos and found that although there are clearly more men than women in public life, the way in which print media use images of women is, ‘at best old-fashioned and at worst complacent.’ (Carter et. al., 1999: 12)

Of course, women choose to dress in stylish and/or provocative ways because they can and because it is a way of achieving a media presence quickly. This strategy is useful for women in opposition and especially for women in minority parties who would otherwise find it hard to get coverage. Often women will do or wear or say something unexpected in the hope that they might be able to slide in a policy statement along with the quote and the picture. But there is also a political purpose being provocative, since it is important to expand the scope of our perceptions of who politicians are, what they look like and what they do: it really isn’t just a boys’ game any longer.

**Strategising media, taking control**

Part of the problem, and therefore of the answer, about women politicians’ media profile lies in the political economy of the newsroom (see Meehan and Riordan, 2002), in the fact that most newsrooms, in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, are dominated by men. As Carter et al. (1998: 3) point out, ‘feminist and gender-sensitive studies of journalism are becoming increasingly concerned with the changing patterns of news media ownership [especially] within local, national and global contexts.’ But women are beginning to exert some control over the ways in which they relate to the media, through cultivating relationships with particular journalists, through focusing on local news media and by making time to craft a media strategy. These proactive responses are no guarantee of success, of course, but owning part of the solution is, in itself, an empowering strategy to employ.

Because of the news media’s influence, most politicians who are in opposition are very keen to find opportunities to vent their policies because they know that the first call will go to government spokespeople and then comments will be sought from their political opponents. Although the power-sharing arrangements which have been agreed for the Northern Ireland Assembly mean that the traditional demarcation lines between ‘government’ and ‘opposition’ are not so relevant, the smaller parties nonetheless find it difficult to achieve a media voice as do most of the 15 MLAs who are women. For this reason, women tend to grab whatever media opportunities come their way.

I try and do all the media I can, whatever media opportunities are there. For example, I’m health spokesperson for our party and for that reason, it is important that I take part in the debates today, and I try to get in questions during question time. (Annie Courtney, SDLP)

The media are a hugely influential tool. I work closely with them because it will be to my detriment if I don’t and we work very hard on that. You have to be organised. At the start, I would have been making the odd phone call here and there and hoping that stuff would get out, but you’ve got to do it as a piece of work the same way you do everything else and it needs a system in place, all the contacts in place, the network, resources, it needs somebody attached to it as a job. Don’t think they’re going to follow you because you’re doing something important, they won’t. But it would amaze you the things they do pick up. Every day we say to ourselves
in the office, how did they come to focus on that thing out of all the other things we’ve done this day or this week. We sit down actually and analyse what they’re covering and we still wonder how that got to be a story. And some editor somewhere has said, make that the story and that suddenly becomes the story. (Monica McWilliams, NIWC)

They also have to be much more proactive in their dealings with the media, judging the line between trying to achieve a regular media profile and saturating the media with so many press releases that they all end up in the waste bin. Importantly, politicians recognise that a media profile is important for their political careers both inside and outside the formal party structure, since the voters who put them in want to see that they’re getting something in return for their support.

My PA puts out press releases but you have to be careful that you don’t put out too many, don’t flood them. I am always covered at least twice a week in my local paper: there was one week in which the councillors I used to work with complained because I had five reports, but it wasn’t me, it was the paper, they just picked up on the different press releases I’d put out. I try to curry favour with the newspapers and I usually get something, even if it’s just a snippet and we work hard at that, not just on the big issues but on the small issues…I don’t believe that any publicity is good publicity, but I do believe that you need to have frequent publicity, so that the people who voted you in know that you’re doing something for them. (Eileen Bell, Alliance)

Cultivating journalists
The cultivation of relationships with journalists is a strategy which many women mentioned, recognising that journalists are more likely to respond positively if they are given stories and comments in the context of some kind of personal interaction rather than simply via an impersonal press release. As much as some might resent the fact that they have to orientate their relationships with journalists to fit the latter’s requirements and expectations, they nonetheless feel that the price is worth paying.

Yes, I spoon feed some of them, and will phone them, chat about things. If they phone about one particular thing, I will make myself available and be particularly friendly, and I have invited some of them to come and meet me personally and have given invitations to meet me in Parliament Buildings. Yes, I feel it is working, although it’s been slow and hard. We’re into our fourth year and it feels like water dripping on a stone, but it is starting to work. I feel I have had to work harder than perhaps a male colleague would have to have worked. And they seem to expect little or nothing from a man whereas they have great expectations and criticisms about what a woman does. (Joan Carson, UUP)

I think I have a good relationship with the media, built over years: I’m the second longest-serving member of our council. I think I’ve built up a certain amount of respect with the media because I continue to do my council work: I was deputy mayor in 1992/93 and mayor 1993/94 and during that time, there was still the Troubles. It was really brought home to my when I had this eye injury and it was reported in the paper that ‘MLA may resign’. When you see something about yourself in black and white, it brings it home to you. I think that from every media outlet, the BBC in Ulster, I had flowers and cards and good wishes, so my relationship with the media is fairly good. (Annie Courtney, SDLP)

Learning the ropes
Whilst women value the relationships they have with journalists, most are canny about always giving a comment when asked. Despite the desire to take advantage of every media opportunity, they are
circumspect about being ‘bounced’ into giving an interview without adequate information at hand. Increasingly, they are gaining the confidence to take some control over the way in which their media interactions progress as they learn more about how the media operate and how best to use that knowledge to their advantage. As someone who has spent a long time in politics, Patricia Lewsley is putting her experience to good effect and Jane Morrice has a lot of inside knowledge to help her in her dealings with her ex-colleagues.

I’ll do a telephone interview at two minutes notice if they’re ringing me about something that I’ve been involved in and I have all the background information on it. I’ve learned the technique, like many others, of saying, ‘listen I can’t speak to you at the moment, can you give me two minutes?’, and I can then go off and find the information. Because my experience has taught me that really, in a radio or television interview, you’re only going to get three sound bites, so you really only need to know three points, you don’t need to know 45 pages. And I think that’s the key thing…if people can just focus on the what the message is that they want to get across. And it’s OK to keep repeating yourself, you learn that too, so the journalists get fed up with you and they’ll cover the piece that you’ve given them. And yes, we’re all prone to saying something out of context which we didn’t really mean to say in the first place and that’s a big fear for many people, that they’ll be tripped up by something. But again, that’s about the technique, saying, yes, that’s grand but the real issue here is…rather than going down the road to try and explain it again. (Patricia Lewsley, SDLP)

Yes, I have an advantage because, having worked in the media here for five years, I still know an awful lot of people, I know how and who to contact, so I haven’t found it as difficult to get my point across as some people. It’s easier for me. It was a very useful experience [being a journalist] because not only do I have the contacts as result, but I know the tricks! So, I’m not intimidated and I’m very used to length of time you should talk for, I had so much training in 30-second sound bites or doing the two-minute interview or the ten-minute interview. I am also very aware of things like the fact that the journalist is often as nervous as the politician or the interviewee. So I know about talking through the questions beforehand, what are you going to ask me. I could say, ‘it might be a good idea that you ask me this’, and an awful lot of people don’t understand that you can tell an interviewer what to ask. There seems to be a them and us, still, between the press and the interviewee, but if you guide them…they are often grateful. If there’s something you want to say, you lead the interview in that direction, in a chat beforehand. (Jane Morrice, NIWC)

The importance of the local
If backbenchers - and most women politicians are in this category - find it hard to achieve prominence in the national media because of newsroom pressures to deliver to increasingly tight deadlines and therefore less time to obtain quotes from other than the usual suspects, then local media offer far more opportunities for publicity and self-promotion. As the British MP Tony Wright argues, ‘when backbench politicians perform in Parliament, their real eye is frequently on their local media’. (Wright 1998:21) An intervention from the floor, be it a prepared speech, the introduction of an amendment or a new policy intention or an impromptu point, can all be quickly (re)packaged and delivered to a news hungry local news desk as a press release: ‘local MP challenges….’ and so on. Ensuring at least a local profile is crucial for parliamentarians who rely on their local constituents to get out and vote for them next time round.

Local media are more interested, probably because…if we launched something in Derry which was a very big event, like the Millennium Forum, we get the media down but unless it is
something very very big, we will not attract the national media. We’ll get the local press but we’ve found that over the years, if we want to advertise something, we have to take it to Belfast and get the publicity there which doesn’t go down too well with the locals, or just accept that they may or may not pick up our press releases. (Annie Courtney, SDLP)

I find that when I get a good story or issue into my local paper, the provincial will then pick it up and run with it. And I find that the Newsletter or the Telegraph will sometimes pick it up. I’ve also had journalists from the provincial papers telephone and ask for further information and there will be further contact with them about a story. So I feel that I’ve built up a good relationship with some of them but I cannot say the same for radio.. But it’s been a hard slog. (Joan Carson, UUP)

I’m a strong believer that all politics is local and I think if a politician forgets about the local issues, that politician might not get re-elected. It’s alright having the ‘high’ politics and they are important to some extent, but the local politics are more important and I take that very seriously. I think in my constituency, they think it’s fine that I have a high profile as a Minister, but I think that I also need to speak out on local issues, as a councillor and an MLA. Northern Ireland is a small place, everything is fairly local. (Carmel Hanna, SDLP)

I’ve come to realise that the local media is probably the most important. I need to be in my local newspaper at least every other week and if I’m not, then by the third week, I’d start worrying. Every week, others would start worrying and that wouldn’t be good for me either. Every other week is good and steady, putting out a press release that they would pick up. Often, I put out a press release and they don’t pick it up for two weeks, and I’m saying to them, ‘come on, that was urgent’, but at least it still gets read two weeks down the line. So that’s the most important thing. But obviously television is at the other end of the scale in terms of reach. (Jane Morrice, NIWC)

The lifestyle piece
If all publicity is good publicity, does that extend to so-called lifestyle journalism? Women were mostly very positive about doing extended, magazine-style interviews which take a more rounded look at their lives, even though there is always a danger in agreeing to appear in such features because of the way in which, without careful editorial control, the subjects of such pieces can be trivialised and undermined (see Ross 2002 for examples of this). But in the main, women were keen to try and extend the public’s perception of who politicians are and what they do and how they live, to try and personalise the public’s perception of ‘the politician’, even if some people, as with Eileen Bell’s colleague, misread appearances in alternative media outlets.

Although I’ve never been approached, I’ve seen several of my women colleagues appear in Northern Woman. I’ve done interviews for some of the Sunday papers, I’ve done a kind of ‘local girl becomes Minister’ story, for the Sunday World. Yes, I think it’s very important that people see us as ‘normal’, especially women who are in politics. (Carmel Hanna, SDLP)

In the last couple of days, I’ve been talking to the editor of Northern Woman, and she said she would like to do an interview and I gave her my card and I need to push that, or the Tatler which is another one people read. And I think that is something we are going to do. Channel 4 did a programme on me called ‘Black Sheep’, because of my mixed marriage and the problems we had as a result, and I very much push for equality. I sponsored an event up here the other week called ‘the mighty silence’, which was about lesbian and bisexual women, and that was
very well received and there’s a magazine called ‘Feminine Issues’, and one of my colleagues saw it and saw me in it and said, oh god, there’s Eileen Bell, people will be thinking she’s a lesbian. And the woman in the office there said, well, who knows?, so now he’s convinced I’m a lesbian and I’m 33 years married, although of course that doesn’t mean I’m not! (Eileen Bell, Alliance)

I have no problem with that sort of thing at all. I can appreciate the value of that as much as the value of other things because you know, the people out there, the ordinary people who’re interested in hearing about Beckham’s foot and the Royal Family, you’ve got to appreciate they exist as well and they want to know more about us and I have absolutely no problem at all talking about my experience, my career, my family, my health issues. I don’t find that demeaning in any way and I think it’s interesting to know the background of people: if I’m giving a talk, I always give my background first so that people know where I’m coming from. (Jane Morrice, NIWC)

Conclusion

Even taking the most generous view of the media’s role in the articulation of a normative social world order which privileges men and male concerns over those of women – i.e. as mere conduit of social quo politics - it is nonetheless irresistible to contend that there must be some element of complicity, some sense of collusion with the circulation of words and pictures which routinise what it is to be female and male in contemporary society. And it is precisely the ‘packaging’ of politics (following Franklin, 1994) and in this current context, the ‘packaging’ of women politicians, which we need to read more carefully. If news is a commodity and we are all consumers, then how women politicians are ‘sold’ to us in qualitative terms is as important as how often they appear in the news: volume matters but context matters more.

I do have experience, I do my work today as a result of what I’ve seen so that nothing like that will ever happen again and therefore I think I should be listened to. You can’t tell them what to write in the papers, you can’t tell them what to put on the television, you just have to try and get it into their heads and you have lunches with them, you sit down and have a chat with them and you cultivate that relationship. Generally speaking, they are all as keen as we are to report peace but I remember, shortly after the cease-fire, I was sitting with one of them and he said, what are we going to do now? (Eileen Bell, Alliance)

Notes

1 Each of the 15 women MLAs who held office at the time of the study (spring 2002) were contacted and asked to take part and of those, the following women actually participated, to whom I am most grateful for the time they gave me: Eileen Bell (Alliance); Joan Carson (UUP); Annie Courtney (SDLP); Carmel Hanna (SDLP); Patricia Lewsley (SDLP); Monica McWilliams (NIWC); Jane Morrice (NIWC); Iris Robinson (DUP). Dara O’Hagan (Sinn Fein) also agreed to be interviewed, but this never took place.

2 Women in Journalism is a British network group comprising women journalists from all UK media which provides support for members and undertakes research on their own profession’s practice, particularly focusing on issues of gender.
References


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