Do Women Count?

It’s time to hold the mainstream media accountable.

By E. J. Graff

In 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon published a provocative and now-famous essay asking, “Are women human?” If they are, she asked, why aren’t systematic violations of women’s lives—sex trafficking, bride burning, domestic violence, “selling” of child brides, mass wartime rapes—treated as violations of human rights?

Nearly a decade later, the world is still waiting for a solution. Among the factors that contribute to this oversight is the way women are portrayed (or not portrayed) in the news media. The news is supposed to deliver an accurate snapshot of our world, with all its important problems, issues, and players. If women are not revealed as part of our shared human reality, how can women’s problems be treated as such? And so I am adapting MacKinnon’s title slightly, to ask: In the news media, are women shown in full, as active and important parts of the world—or are we missing, misrepresented, or marginalized? In short, do women count?

In the news media, the answer is: not as much as men.

Consider the findings from “Who Makes the News,” a report issued every five years by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP). In 2005, after groups in seventy-six countries examined almost 13,000 news stories and 26,000 news sources, GMMP published this conclusion: “The world we see in the news is a world in which women are virtually invisible.” Their analysis shows that only 21 percent of news subjects—the people who are interviewed or whom the news is about—are female. In global news, the project found that men constituted 83 percent of experts and 86 percent of spokespersons. In stories on politics and government, only 14 percent of those interviewed or portrayed are women; in economic and business news, 20 percent. When women do make the news, it is as “stars”—celebrities or princesses—or as background: a woman on the street, a neighbor, an eyewitness, or the voice of popular opinion. Women are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims and more than three times as likely to be identified by family status—for example, as wife, daughter, or mother.

To put it another way, women are mainly shown as having families and feelings and sexualities and bodies and problems. Men are shown to have authority and expertise and power and knowledge and money. Next time you watch a report about an earthquake or a famine, think about which sex is speaking about the geology or weather patterns . . . and which sex is crying over the dead body, or is the dead body. What does that say about women’s place in the world?

Similar statistics have been collected in the United States. Bearing in mind that women make up 52 percent of our population and 47 percent of the civilian workforce, you may be surprised to know that in a 2005 study, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism found that out of 16,800 news stories from forty-five different American news outlets—broadcast, print, and Web—more than three out of four news stories included male sources. Only 30 percent included even a single female source. Only in lifestyle stories did women show up in more than half the stories. Statistics were worse on cable news and on PBS NewsHour, where just 19 percent of stories cited a woman. That same year, a women’s group called the White House Project determined that only 14 percent of the guests on the Sunday-morning public-affairs TV shows are female.
Could it be that women don’t count in part because it’s men who are doing the counting? Studies have shown that women represent only 21.3 percent of news directors at U.S. television stations and 24.7 percent of news directors at radio stations. At the nation’s most influential intellectual and political magazines, the articles are written overwhelmingly by men. A 2005 study by the Columbia Journalism Review found that at the Atlantic the male-to-female ratio was 6 to 1; the New Yorker, 3.5 to 1; New York Times Magazine, about 2.5 to 1; Foreign Affairs, 6 to 1; and the New Republic, 8 to 1.

Why is this important? Because the news purports to be objective, to tell it like it is. The media help create our image of the world, our internal picture of what’s normal and true. And when the news is being written by men about men, a significant part of reality is missing from view.

For example, consider the fact that the gender wage gap—what full-time working women make compared to what full-time working men make—has stayed at around 77 cents to the dollar since 1993. That’s fifteen years in which women have made no progress toward financial equality.

What explanation are the news media most likely to offer for the wage gap? Women don’t make more money because they want to stay home with their babies. You have probably read those stories—the mommy-war stories, the opt-out stories. The reportorial method involves finding a few of the writer’s college friends, ten women who also went to Princeton or Yale and whose husbands are now investment bankers (or something financially comparable). Academic researchers find that, typically, these elite women have taken a few years off as an extended maternity leave, as working women traditionally do when their families can afford it. But the writer declares a new and significant trend of women “opting out” of the workplace. These articles are bad reporting: they’re anecdotal stories from a nonrepresentative group, flagrantly ignoring the actual data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which show no such flood of women abandoning work for home.

Why does this matter? Because the news media are ignoring the fact that a large number of working women—women who need the money to help support their families—can’t break into better-paying jobs because of active discrimination, job segregation (“women’s jobs” and “men’s jobs”), and severe sexual harassment. Instead, the news media are covering women’s economic problems as personal (women just want to stay home and be moms), while they cover men’s economic problems as political (good union jobs are disappearing because of globalization or rising health-care costs).

By ignoring women’s real lives and instead offering up myths as if they were facts, the news media do real damage. If the news media report on the wrong problem, public policy is less likely to deliver the right solution. And when women aren’t in the news, the news is inaccurate, slanted, and biased.

The news media’s failure to report fully and accurately on issues related to women and their lives is why Brandeis’s Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism launched its Gender & Justice Project, a “beat” devoted to covering the unreported and underreported issues facing women and families. Just one reporter dedicated to women’s lives is not enough, but it’s a start. To follow our coverage, please go to our Web site, www.brandeis.edu/investigate. And let’s make sure women count.

E. J. Graff, a resident scholar at the Brandeis Women’s Studies Research Center (WSRC), is senior researcher at the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, where she directs the Gender & Justice Project. She collaborated with former Massachusetts lieutenant governor and Brandeis WSRC resident scholar Evelyn Murphy on the book Getting Even: Why Women Don’t Get Paid Like Men—and What to Do About It (Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 2005).