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Feature writing in women's magazines: a limited ideological challenge

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Susan Liddy

Introduction

Since the emergence of the international women's movement in the early 1970s, women's magazines have increasingly popularized feminist ideas. The fragmented format of the genre ensures that a debate on feminist issues can surface in features side by side such old reliables as beauty tips, recipes or advice on how to attract and keep a man. In 1991, over one third of feature writing in *Woman's Way* and three quarters in *U*, reflected items from the Irish feminist agenda. Issues like the wage gap, the absence of state funded childcare, the need for equal status legislation, rape and domestic violence were all debated on the feature pages of these magazines, though considerable differences did emerge between the two publications.

Of the issues which did reflect a feminist agenda, many are underpinned by patriarchal ideology relating to women, women's place in the family and in the greater society, which serves, ultimately, to legitimate female subordination. Under discussion here, is the extent to which these features remain within the parameters of patriarchal ideology, even when influenced by feminism, and how this can vary according to the readership of each magazine. Before undertaking such an analysis, it is necessary, in the first instance, to clarify the concepts of feminism, ideology and patriarchy, and to justify the selection of these specific magazines and the category of features within the magazine itself.

Ideology defines and explains the social world and our place within it; moreover, our everyday feelings, thoughts and actions are shaped by it. Ideologies construct aspects of the social world as 'natural' and 'universal' though they are, essentially, social constructions. This is particularly true of the dominant ideology in any culture. A dominant ideology is produced and perpetrated by those in positions of power and its ideals are thus more easily able to be presented as 'natural'.

The dominant ideology in a patriarchy, which Rich has described as a familial, social, ideological and political system in which men, and not women, wield power, incorporates notions about a woman's place and the conduct and demeanour deemed appropriate to the female sex (Rich, 1986:57). Patriarchal ideology refers to 'the particular set of linked ideas that seem to support female subordination and make it seem natural' (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992:18). The assumption that patriarchal institutions and practices are 'natural' or of purely individual concern is merely 'an ideological curtain' that conceals the reality of women's systematic oppression (Jagger, 1983:101).

Within a society, at any given time, there may be a variety of ideologies competing for hegemony or widespread acceptance of one particular way of making sense of the world. In a patriarchal society, for example, women are often encouraged to develop characteristics of restraint and complacency, to think of themselves primarily as wives and mothers, to accept that housework and childcare are innately 'women's work' and to express a sexuality which affirms the centrality of the male in their lives. Patriarchal hegemony ensures that many women and men internalize these beliefs and expectations and, despite their restrictive nature, do not view them as a sign of subordination.

Feminism, as defined by Dahlerup (1986:6) and endorsed in this piece of work is:

> an ideology whose basic goal is to remove the discrimination and degradation of women and to break down the male dominance of

> society. It is the ideology behind the women's movement, which comprises 'the conscious, collective activity of women fighting for feminist goals.'

Feminism is not a unitary ideology, however, and there exist different strands of feminist thought proffering different explanations both for the existence of a male dominated society and the measures that should be taken to combat it. An examination of the Council for the Status of Women's 1990 *Annual Report*, and a review of the development of feminism in this country identified welfare liberal and radical feminist agendas which were used as a framework for the analysis of features.

Welfare liberal feminism promotes equal rights for women and calls for the incorporation of women into the public sphere, side by side and on an equal footing with men. Its focus is on law reform with welfare liberals contending that it is the responsibility of government to actively break down existing bias by direct intervention. Among the issues prioritized are, for example, equal status legislation, inadequate childcare provision and gender equality in education.

Radical feminists reject the concept of inequality and argue that law reform is not sufficient to eradicate the male domination of society. Women are an oppressed group and this oppression is rooted in the way in which a patriarchal society constructs female sexuality. Radicals highlight such issues as pornography, rape and sexual harassment and exhort women to take control of their own sexuality. Law reform alone, they argue, is not sufficient to liberate women. Nothing less than the creation of a new society is demanded.

Two magazines, *Woman's Way* and *U* were selected for analysis for a number of reasons. These are the two most popular Irish produced women's magazines in terms of circulation and readership (see Table 1); *Woman's Way* is an example of a weekly publication and *U* an example of a monthly; each of the magazines is targeted at a different audience and age group. This facilitated a comparative analysis of the impact of feminism on the coverage and treatment of the welfare liberal and radical feminist agendas within features in these magazines.

A 'typical' *Woman's Way* reader is seen to be between 16 and 70 years old with the majority readership in the 20-40 age bracket. Most readers are married with children and belong to a one income family. Effectively, the reader of *Woman's Way* is the Irish homemaker. In contrast, the *U* reader is between 18 and 26 years old, Dublin based and economically independent. She is single, or if involved in a relationship, is living with a partner.

Table 1

MAGAZINE CIRCULATION AND READERSHIP, 1990

MAGAZINE	CIRCULATION	READERSHIP
Woman's Way	72,350	407,000
U	23,732	160,000
Image	Not audited in recent years	131,000
IT	21,245	126,000

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation (JNRR), 1990

Within the magazines, attention was directed specifically to the category of features. Features are general articles which deal with a variety of topics from the world beyond the domestic. It was decided that only here could a debate on feminist issues surface. Following a process of 'qualitative mining' (McCracken, 1988:11), which involved a close

textual examination of features in these magazines, key themes were identified viz femininity, the division of domestic labour and sexuality (including restrictive contraception and abortion facilities, and the sexual double standard).

Femininity

In this context, femininity refers to socially constructed aspects of temperament involving patience and non-confrontational. It is, effectively, a 'grand collection of compromises' that each woman is expected to make if she is to be a successful example of her sex (Brownmiller, 1984:16). There is agreement among welfare liberal feminists and many radical feminists that femininity, as opposed to femaleness, is a patriarchal construct and serves to restrict women. There is nothing random about the social construction of femininity, it is argued. In a patriarchal society, girls are socialized to acquire a 'feminine' temperament; the characteristics of which are designed to be both pleasing and non-threatening to men.

Welfare liberals contend that feminine and masculine identities are the near exclusive product of socialization, and males and females are moulded according to sexual stereotypes which reflect the values and needs of the dominant group. Some radical feminists agree that the socialization process creates femininity. Thus, they argue, many characteristics that patriarchy actively encourages in women are deemed inappropriate and undesirable in the male. Even those radical feminists who valorize biological femaleness recognize that many aspects of femininity effectively contribute to female subordination. Femininity, then, is viewed as one aspect of a 'double-bind' process which is a daily reality for women.

> Women are damned if they do not become 'feminine' but they are no less damned if they follow the precepts of femininity, for this disqualifies them from participation in high status, male activities.
>
> (Spender, 1988:38)

An examination of *Woman's Way*, during 1991, indicates that certain traits traditionally perceived as feminine, viz patience and being non-confrontational, are still posited as an appropriate female response. An attempt is made to dissipate anger by focusing on minor successes rather than major grievances. Thus, a feature on sexism in primary schools exaggerates the significance of limited achievements. 'Breaking barriers – does school really promote equality?' (*Woman's Way*, 11 October, 1991:15) comments:

> ...at the All-Ireland football final this year primary school girls played football in Croke Park in the interval. Five years ago such an idea would have been unthinkable.

Similarly, while drawing attention to the continuing discrimination facing women in golf clubs around the country, 'Golf and the Gender Game', (*Woman's Way*, 29 March, 1991:21) displays little anger and urges passivity and restraint. The secretary of the Irish Ladies Golf Union contends that 'aggression isn't going to get us anywhere'. A spokesman for the Golfing Union of Ireland cautions against a 'militant' attitude and observes:

> ...the ladies are very good at getting good conditions for themselves by using subtle, non-confrontational methods... they set their cause right back by being so aggressive.

There is no question that male members might forego play in order to maintain the condition of the course. Effectively, this stance accords a very decisive second class status to women by a woman. This illustrates the way women can internalize the values and norms established by the patriarchy and very often do not, or will not, perceive them as strategies devised to exclude women from the public sphere or to limit their involvement in that sphere.

In the same way, 'Why sport is a different ball game for women' (*Woman's Way*, 4 October, 1991:23) condemns the lack of media coverage for women's sports but endorses patience as the preferred strategy:

> What I would hope is that the coverage of women's sports will grow as a natural progression, rather than an exercise in positive discrimination.

'They're in the Army Now' (*Woman's Way*, 1 November, 1991:20) celebrates what is represented as huge strides in equality in the Irish Army by noting that there are one hundred women in an army of 13,000. It is an 'extraordinary imbalance', the feature acknowledges. However, the female soldier who is interviewed exhibits typical 'feminine' qualities of patience and docility.

> When we first came, there weren't many appointments open to us. Now there are, and I suppose in another ten years everything will be open to us.

In this way, even in features where discrimination is acknowledged and condemned, the countenance of this 'feminine' behaviour serves to diffuse anger and curtail action.

Ideological hegemony ensures that fundamental assumptions relating to women, as defined by a patriarchal society, are internalized as norms by a majority of women and men. Features are written within and reflect this context. In effect, many women collude with patriarchal ideology. In 'Golf and the Gender Game' (*Woman's Way*, 29 March, 1991:21), the 'lady captain' of one golf club illustrates how women themselves can collude with the patriarchy. Many ladies, she comments, are motivated by a love of sport and when it comes to the question of full membership of golf clubs they demur. Maintaining the condition of the golf course must be the top priority: if everyone was able to go out and play at weekends, it would soon deteriorate.

The vision of femininity reflected in *U* is less submissive, less accommodating, than that in *Woman's Way*. Restraint, calmness and patience are not called upon; instead, women are encouraged to reconsider feminine virtues of 'niceness' and submissiveness. 'Sexual Violence' (*U*, May, 1991:70) urges women to fight this 'niceness', to fight a socialization that gives them 'very little permission to be angry', and to stand up and be heard: 'Once we start to talk to each other more openly, we might be surprised by what comes out.' Similarly, 'The Sounds of Silence' (*U*, May, 1991:78) contests feminine conditioning and the approved ways of dealing with men in a pleasant, supportive, unassertive way.

> In our efforts to be affiliative, co-operative and self-sacrificing we have often unwittingly been shoring up institutions that are basically destructive, exploitative and manipulative...

'I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No!' (*U*, March, 1991:54) highlights how hard it is for women to break free from the feminine stereotype. We are brought up to be polite, helpful and to follow the rules. 'How on earth can she assert her rights and choices without being seen as an inflexible hard bitch?'

'Femininity', as constructed in patriarchy, encourages submissiveness and functions to maintain the status quo. As the examples have illustrated *Woman's Way* endorses many traditional elements of femininity and does not perceive this as being another aspect of oppression. *U*, on the other hand challenges this patriarchal ploy designed to contain women and, effectively, calls for the rejection of many of the 'feminine' traits fostered in women by a patriarchal society. This is perhaps explained by the fact that the majority of *Woman's Way* readers are older, are married with children and are financially dependent on men. *U* readers are financially independent and primarily single which may account for the readiness of that magazine to confront many patriarchal procedures for keeping women in line. Magazines, of course, exist first and foremost as commodities, i.e. as a window for the advertising industry, so the maintenance of sales is obviously of

primary importance. Essentially, readers must be kept happy. Therefore, to some extent, features must reflect the reader's preoccupations, concerns and lifestyles.

Division of domestic labour

Patriarchal ideology asserts that the division of labour in the home is natural and universal rather than historical and social. It promulgates the notion that taking sole responsibility for housework and childcare is 'natural' for women. In Ireland today, it is a notion that still takes priority, even if women also engage in paid labour outside the home. Neither *Woman's Way* nor *U* contest the status quo in this area, though there is a suggestion that it is not the ideal situation for women.

Both welfare liberal and radical feminism stress the importance of escaping economic dependency through employment; from this women gain 'a measure of that economic, social and psychological independence which is the sine qua non of freedom' (Millett, 1970:88). Women have always worked, so the issue is not labour but economic reward. Yet, housework, which is overwhelmingly carried out by women in Western society, is unpaid labour (Abbott and Wallace, 1990:121-145). Moreover, in the workforce, women still earn substantially less than men (Bradley, 1989:14-19; Blackwell, 1990:30).

Within features in *Woman's Way*, the success of welfare liberal feminism manifests itself in an acknowledgement of the need and right of all women to paid employment. However, the primacy of marriage and motherhood, with its assumption of economic dependence, results, in the main, in the promotion of low pay, low status work viz small home based businesses, part-time jobs or job sharing, as an intermediate measure.

Woman's Way's treatment of paid employment for women mirrors the trends emerging in studies carried out in Britain (Winship, 1991; Ballaster et al., 1991) and in the US (Tuchman et al., 1978; Glazer, 1980) in portraying paid employment as secondary to the career of wife and mother. This has considerable impact on the type of employment strategies discussed and the extent to which women are portrayed as free to pursue a full time career outside the home. Full time work outside the home is acceptable only insofar as women are prepared to work the 'double day' as a 'natural' consequence. It is acknowledged that the employed woman is responsible for more than her fair share of menial household tasks but the question of why women should shoulder this responsibility remains unasked. It is observed in 'Job-sharing – the best of both worlds' (*Woman's Way*, 31 May, 1991:18), that:

> I think the mother is still responsible for picking up all the pieces and organizing all the washing, getting it out on the line and then in before it rains and so on, no matter how supportive the partner is.

In the same feature, it is stressed that job sharing may damage one's profile in the workplace: you may not be taken as seriously as you might if you were in the position full time. Nonetheless, it is presented as an ideal strategy for women who are reluctant to ask for time off to attend school sports days and so on, and who are concerned about not being 'the perfect mother'. There is no assumption that the father who misses school events might experience the same concern. Inadequate childcare is cited as a prohibitive factor for many career-minded women in *Woman's Way*. What is not discussed is that the lack of childcare facilities has not hindered career-minded men. Even the term 'career man' is an unfamiliar one: women are, unquestionably, assumed to be the natural carers.

In contrast to *Woman's Way*, *U* 's treatment of paid work does not revolve around traditional marital responsibilities and the emphasis is firmly on the establishment of a full-time career. Nonetheless, there is also recognition in both *Woman's Way* and *U* that exclusion from the workforce has been replaced by subordination of women in terms of horizontal and vertical segregation. Horizontal segregation refers to the tendency for

women's employment to be segregated into a narrow range of occupations and sectors of industry. Vertical segregation relates to the fact that:

> in every sector of the economy, women are relegated to the lowest levels of the job hierarchy and grossly under-represented in top jobs.
> (Bradley, 1989:12)

Women are encouraged to devise individual strategies such as buying the services of other women, depending on a co-operative relative or managing their own time in such a way as to accommodate the demands made of them in the public and private sphere. Ideally, relationships should be egalitarian, it is implied, but the reality is, they are not. Instead of developing the argument to investigate why this is so and how the situation could be altered, strategies are sought to circumvent a confrontational look at the unequal balance of responsibility in the home.

The 'Sponge Woman' and 'Deputy Woman' models surface in features in *Woman's Way* illustrating one way of diffusing potential conflict (Glazer, 1980:90). The 'Sponge Woman' absorbs new responsibilities again and again in order to retain the option of remaining in the labour force. Sponge women take on paid work while continuing to carry out all the domestic tasks in the home, by being determined, efficient and well organized. The 'Deputy Woman' delegates responsibility to others in order to facilitate participation in the labour force. *Woman's Way* has not identified the centrality of motherhood as being a factor in the consignment of women to a different category of (low paid) work or in the off-putting prospect of the 'double day'. On the contrary, to be permitted to earn a wage while engaging in obligatory home duties is presented as something of a 'perk'.

The majority of *Woman's Way* readers are married with a family and the majority of part-time workers in Ireland (seventy per cent) are married women (Blackwell, 1989:33). Moreover, in a *Woman's Way* survey carried out in conjunction with the Council for the Status of Women, it emerged that the availability of part-time work and more flexible working arrangements were important issues for women themselves. In its promotion of paid employment, then, *Woman's Way* must bear the reality of readers lives in mind. *U* recognizes the inequality inherent in the division of domestic labour both in the home and the workplace. Unlike *Woman's Way*, it makes no attempt to valorize part-time work, for example, simply because this is the type of work that suits housewives who want a little financial independence. Instead, it focuses on career opportunities like airline pilot, costume designer, camera woman etc. Neither does *U* engage in a discussion on how to confront the inequalities in the private arena. This is likely to be related to its readership. Primarily young, single, working women can afford to look at the harsh realities of women's status in the labour market. Moreover, they can acknowledge structural inhibitors like the unequal division of labour without concerning themselves with a search for a strategy to combat the problem.

Female sexuality

Radical feminists argue that sexuality is not a private matter to be explained in terms of sexual preference or psychological processes fixed in infancy 'but rather that it is socially organized and critically structured by gender inequality' (Walby, 1990:121). Patriarchy, they insist, has fashioned female sexuality to be passive, submissive and male-centred as a means of retaining control over the activities of a subordinate group. A patriarchal society controls women's sexuality not only by means of 'compulsory' heterosexuality but by the institution of marriage, pornography, rape and other forms of violence and coercion. While neither magazine rejects outright the patriarchal model of female sexuality, there do emerge considerable differences in awareness between *Woman's Way* and *U*.

Features in *Woman's Way* and *U* endorse patriarchal ideology pertaining to a number of issues around the area of sexuality. Heterosexuality is presented as 'natural' and men

are inevitably depicted as the prime focus of female desire and attention. In the main, both magazines are concerned with heterosexual relations, which are represented as the normal expression of female sexuality. While *U* does acknowledge lesbianism and, moreover, does attempt to break down ignorance and misconceptions relating to lesbians, nonetheless, it stops short of embracing it as either a political statement or a valid sexual option for all women. Lesbianism is viewed with tolerance and understanding but from a safe distance. It is a practice engaged in by other women, not 'us', the readers of *U*.

The institution of marriage is never brought into question by *Woman's Way*. In 1991, the year of this study 'Single Mums in the 90's' (*Woman's Way*, 6 September, 1991) suggests that Irish society has become more accepting of the single woman who has a child outside marriage. However, there is no suggestion that the institution of marriage itself may be flawed. While marriage is not rejected outright by *U*, neither is it presented as wholly unproblematic. 'Love, Marriage and Problems' (*U*, February, 1991) highlights the difficulties which can arise in marriage viz alcohol abuse and domestic violence. De Valera's 'fairy-tale vision' of marriage is rebuked. *U* introduces the possibility of choice in relation to marriage and suggests that a woman could opt to have a child outside marriage, if she so wished.

This is not a necessarily surprising stance, however, if one considers the marital status of the reader. The *Women's Way* reader is married with a family and is, arguably, less likely to condemn an institution which is an integral part of her life and experience. In contrast, the *U* reader is more likely to be co-habiting than married, if indeed, she is involved in a heterosexual relationship at all. This allows for a more dispassionate appraisal of the institution of marriage. *U* recognizes that domestic and sexual violence are the means by which a patriarchal society maintains the status quo both at an individual and collective level. Features explore the way in which male power is exercised and reinforced by domestic violence, sexual harassment, pornography and rape. In 'The Politics of Seduction', (*U*, June, 1991) it is declared that: 'Through sexuality, the fundamental aggression, that of men over women, is maintained.' *U* points out that women keep silent about domestic violence to protect their husband's job or to save face with the neighbours. They also keep silent about sexual abuse because of uncertainty about society's response. However, despite confronting many of the ways that patriarchy oppresses women, there is never a suggestion that women might possibly be better off without men in their lives.

Patriarchal ideology in relation to female sexuality is not questioned to any great extent in *Women's Way*. However much of it is comprehensively rejected by *U*. Women in *U* are encouraged to empower themselves, to express and enjoy their sexuality and to shake off many patriarchal shackles. Despite very great differences in *U*'s treatment of female sexuality, the dominant ideology underlying features in both magazines is nonetheless predominately patriarchal. *Women's Way* seems not yet comfortable with female sexuality outside the confines of marriage. It is discussed only in a problematic context viz the plight of single motherhood and the dangers of contracting Aids from one night stands. *U*'s rally cry for assertiveness and sexual confidence is underpinned by the assumption that heterosexuality and male approval is central and desirable in all women's lives.

Radical feminists contend that, in a patriarchal society, a number of mechanisms serve to maintain male control over women's sexuality. These include restrictive contraception, abortion, and the sexual double standard. A patriarchal society withholds contraceptive information and either limits abortion or seeks to outlaw it completely. Effectively, radical feminists believe that men restrict female sexual expression and restrict the availability of contraception and abortion in order to maintain their own power over women's bodies. Welfare liberal feminists contend that because it is women who become pregnant and who are expected to care for the young, restrictive contraception and abortion facilities are discriminatory. Moreover, as sex is a private matter between consenting individuals, such restrictions are a violation of the individual's right to privacy.

The 'sexual double standard' refers to the sexual morality which dictates that men can enjoy sexual freedom and 'good' women cannot. It condemns women who wish to engage in sexual activity with a variety of partners while admiring men who do likewise. Patriarchal ideology stresses the greater sexual urge of the male, thereby sanctioning the double standard. Unlike the male, the female is groomed to become a sexual object not a sexual subject. Women are considered to be sexual objects for use and appreciation by other sexual beings, men. They have been socialized to view an active sexuality as 'unfeminine' and must resort to exercising their 'feminine wiles' and hope for success. The calibre of the man they eventually 'catch' will often determine their own status (Greer, 1971:19). Both magazines identify the sexual double standard. However, while *Women's Way* does not endorse this, neither does it reject it. In 'The one night stand goes on, (*Women's Way*, 20 September, 1991), it is acknowledged that men can: 'Sow the wild oats but women who express their sexuality outside the confines of marriage are labelled tarts'. Nonetheless, sexual restraint is prescribed for its readers; our bodies should not be passed around 'like a tray of hors d'oeuvres'. *U*, on the other hand, comprehensively rejects the cult of virginity and defines female sexuality as heterosexual and active. Moreover, women are called upon to rebel against the sexual double standard, to defy the passive role society has forced upon them. In 'The Politics of Seduction' (*U*, June, 1991:32), it is suggested that: 'More women are making the first move and this is actually happening more often'.

Despite the inclusion of items relating to the welfare liberal and radical agenda, neither magazine makes any connection between the patriarchal control exerted on women in relation to sexuality viz sexual harassment and rape, for example, and women's lack of autonomy as regards their reproduction. Abortion on demand, as a women's right to control her own fertility, is not advocated. The question of power, about who precisely controls reproduction in our society, is not confronted. *Women's Way* tries to understand why so many abortions occur each year but does not call for any change in the legal position of abortion. *U*, however, does advocate access to information and implies that individual women must then decide what choice they wish to make. 'Home Truths' (*U*, July, 1991:87) argues that: 'If you're having sex, you must take responsibility, you must understand what's happening'.

Summary

In 1991, features in *Women's Way* and *U* have debated issues on the welfare liberal and radical feminist agenda. Of those features which did reflect feminist concerns, coverage was primarily welfare liberal in the case of *Women's Way* and radical, in the case of *U*. However, the ideological challenge of these same features is, ultimately, rather a limited one; coverage occurs predominantly within the parameters of patriarchal ideology, though this did vary between the two magazines. Features continue to reflect a number of patriarchal notions relating to women and women's place in the family and the wider society. Effectively, many of the features which endorse feminist ideas implicitly maintain patriarchal ideology.

This may be indicative of the fact that women's magazines just cannot afford to recognize and acknowledge the extent to which a patriarchal society oppresses women; the woman's magazine is itself a product of such a society. Moreover, to identify the existence of patriarchy is synonymous with the possibility of identifying a world in which the plight of many readers is bleak and the prospect of change remote.

Because magazines are part of an economic as well as an ideological system, features must, to some extent, be mindful of the lives and experiences of the majority of their readers. In the case of *Woman's Way* most readers are married and financially dependent on men. Arguably, this has a bearing on the issues which arise for discussion in feature writing. Discrimination occurs 'out there' in faceless institutions like golf clubs or education or politics but is not identified as occurring in the home or in personal relationships. What emerges is an understanding that if women's lives are ever

to change, the key lies in altering many of society's structures and practices which will open up greater choices for future generations. In contrast, the majority of *U* readers are younger, financially independent and primarily single which may account for its greater readiness to confront unpleasant truths about the lives and experiences of women in a patriarchal society. Features assume that readers are ready to engage in another level of debate by recognizing the existence of a struggle of power between men and women.

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