

Women and Local News

*Representation of Women and
Women's Issues in local TV news*

March 2001

A Grand Rapids Institute for
Information Democracy Report.
(GRIID)

GRIID is an affiliate of the Community Media Center

GRIID



Methodology

This report is the result of a month long study of the daily news broadcasts of three Grand Rapids news stations: WOOD TV 8 (6:00pm and 11:00pm), WZZM 13 (6:00pm and 11:00pm), and WXMI 17 (10:00pm). The study ran throughout the month of March in order to research the local news coverage of women's issues during Women's History Month. Each day's newscasts were taped and then viewed by Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy staff and volunteers. News logs were kept for each program with specific codes assigned for each of the areas of interest that were documented.

The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID) is an affiliate of the Community Media Center (www.grcmc.org). GRIID offers Media Literacy training and resources to the community in order to help the public actively participate in the consumption of media and to promote democratic values with all media systems.

Introduction

The month of March has been nationally proclaimed Women's History Month. In response to this, the Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy participated in a news study to analyze the amount of coverage that women's events and issues were given by the Grand Rapids based TV news. Included in this report is information regarding women's voices throughout the month of March and the portrayal of women as authority figures.

In the beginning of March, the *Grand Rapids Press* printed a schedule of Women's History Month events. Of the 23 events listed, only one was mentioned during the specified news watching time. Of the one event that was mentioned, it was mentioned during a commercial break and not during any news cast. The only event that was covered in a broadcast during the specified news watching time was a story about a fashion show at Gilda's Club to raise money for cancer survivors.

It was found that the majority of coverage that could be considered women's issues were stories of violence against women. However, while there were a considerable number of stories about the rape, assault, and murder of women, these stories were presented as non-gender news stories. Current statistics suggest that one in four women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime, and many women's groups have declared violence against women an epidemic, yet the Grand Rapids based TV news did not fully acknowledge that these are not only crimes, but crimes against women.

A high profile news story during the end of the month was the murder of Jolene Walker. Both channels 8 and 13 emphasized that Jolene was a prostitute, which could suggest to viewers possible justification for the murder. Both stories presented on WOODTV8 stated that “Police were able to identify her through fingerprints. She has a record of prostitution arrests.” This reporting seemed to stray from the fact that a murder of a woman was committed by a man. Channel 17 was more fair in their coverage by acknowledging Jolene as a woman who was murdered by a man. Of the three stations, only WZZM13 and WOODTV8 asked anyone with information to call Silent Observer, and then only WZZM13 actually gave the number to viewers.

Both Channels 8 and 17 did a piece about the drug GHB, commonly known as the date rape drug. Governor Engler declared that March is “GHB awareness month” to educate the state of Michigan about date rape. In both news stories there was no mention of women as the primary targets of date rape. Words such as “person’s” and “people” were used, again putting a non-gender slant on a story that could have raised awareness about violence primarily perpetrated against women.

Another story that gained attention was the story about a 17 year old Muskegon girl who gave birth to her baby at school and then put it in the trash. The TV news focused on the act with statements such as “leaving the baby to die.” Channel 8’s caption said “Mother Punished,” and while the mother was responsible for the welfare of the child, little was mentioned about the girl’s step-father who raped and impregnated her. This type of slant in a story tends to put the blame completely on the girl, however, and by decontextualizing the piece, viewers may not fully understand the circumstances which motivated the girl to dispose of her child.

Although the story was never verbally connected with Women's History Month, one positive piece by FOX17 told an uplifting story about the life of Mother Hollimon. The piece was done after her death, but focused on her life as a women, mother, and pillar in the African American community.

WOODTV8 also covered some positive pieces about women in the Grand Rapids community. Every week during March, a woman or group of women was featured on a Women's History Month promotional commercial. The commercials usually addressed positive things the featured women were doing within the community.

WZZM13 also featured a commercial during March. The commercial addressed breast cancer, and it featured the WZZM13 sports caster who spoke about how his mother's breast cancer affected him and his family. While it was a piece that was attempting to create awareness about breast cancer, it was seemingly trivialized when the sportscaster said that at first he thought that "oh, that stuff is just for girls," but then he realized that "breast cancer affects everyone"

The study during Women's History Month puts forth findings that question the importance to the Grand Rapids based TV news of covering women's issues. Even during a month dedicated to the history and heritage of women, they were misrepresented in crime stories and not represented as minority voices. While the TV news did dedicate small segments or commercials to women's history, their overall lack of coverage seems more prominent when considering that there were events and activities in West Michigan throughout March to celebrate women that were completely overlooked by the TV news.

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH EVENTS CALENDAR

The Grand Rapids Press

March is Women's History Month, and many events are planned across West Michigan. Take a look:

THROUGH MARCH 16
"Disclosures" — This exhibit of photography and ceramics by nine artists addresses feminism through a lens of equality and justice, regardless of race or gender. Center Art Gallery, ground floor of the Spoelhof College Center at Calvin College.

THURSDAY
"A Good Swift Kick" — A lecture with Annelies Knoppers, researcher at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. In Europe, soccer is primarily played by men and a common assertion is that women's bodies "are not made" for the sport. In America, soccer is a popular women's sport. Did something happen to soccer or women's bodies when the sport crossed the Atlantic? At 3:30 p.m., Meeter Center Lecture Hall in Hiemenga Hall at Calvin College.

FRIDAY
Women's Choral Festival — Enjoy a free concert featuring the combined efforts of the Calvin College Lyric Singers and women's choirs from Grand Rapids Christian, East Kentwood and South Christian high schools. Conducted by Sybil Johnson, Professor of Music at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. At 7:30 p.m., Fine Arts Center Auditorium at Calvin College.

SATURDAY
"Cleopatra" — Watch this 1961 film written and directed by the "Grandmother" of the French New Wave, Agnes Varda. The story centers on a French singer who thinks she has cancer and re-examines her life while awaiting the medical tests. At 8 p.m., Commons Lecture Hall on the ground floor of the Commons building, Calvin College.

Lilith's Legacy — Listen to a festival of music and film by female artists at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts (see story on B1). Admission is \$10. From noon to 7 p.m., 41 Sheldon Blvd. SE. For more information, call 454-7000, ext. 16.

Celebrate Hip Ladies in Herstory — Heartside artists celebrate great women of today and the past. For more information, call Sarah at 454-0928, Heartside Ministry, 54 Division SE.

TUESDAY
"To Remain by Herself: Christian Women and Asceticism in the Fourth Century" — Explore the thought-worlds of women who exerted significant influence on developing Christian orthodoxy at a lecture with Dr. Kendra Hotz, professor of Religion & Theology. At 3:30 p.m., Meeter Center Lecture Hall in Hiemenga Hall, Calvin College.

WEDNESDAY
Different Voices — A panel led by Calvin Students for Christian Feminism will discuss with other Calvin students and faculty how ethnicity, nationality and culture affect the experiences of women. At 3:30 p.m., Meeter Center Lecture Hall in Hiemenga Hall, Calvin College.

Art Flicks — Free films about women in the arts will be shown at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, 41 Sheldon Blvd. SE. For more information, call 454-7000 ext. 16.

MARCH 8
"From Hoopskirts to Handball" — A slide presentation about the process of reforming women's dress in the 19th and 20th centuries, sponsored by the Greater Grand Rapids Women's



WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

History Council and the Grand Rapids Historical Society. At 7:30 p.m., Gerald R. Ford Museum.
"Battle for the Minds" — View a documentary on the rise of fundamentalism in America's largest Protestant denomination and the subsequent impact of that rise on women. A panel discussion with Calvin professors will follow. At 3:30 p.m., Commons Lecture Hall on the ground floor of the Commons building, Calvin College.

MARCH 11
Vox Angelica — This four-woman medieval chant ensemble specializes in the chants of Hildegard von Bingen, a mystic, prophetess and healer from the 12th century. Tickets for the concert sponsored by the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts are \$10. Call 454-7000, ext. 16. Vox Angelica. At 7 p.m., Cathedral of St. Andrew, 267 Sheldon SE.

MARCH 12
Women in Ancient Times, Ancient Worlds — Learn from Calvin students as they relate the breakthroughs of women in ancient Rome, Greece, Asia, Africa and Pre-Columbia America at this presentation led by students in Dr. Bert DeVries' History honors course on Women in Antiquity. At 3:30 p.m., Meeter Center Lecture Hall in Hiemenga Hall, Calvin College.

MARCH 13
Truth: The Testimonial of Sojourner Truth — A play featuring Rashryl McCreary with percussionist Bill Ransom offers a dramatic performance about a stalwart woman who fought tirelessly for the rights of African Americans and women. At 7 p.m., Wealthy Theatre, 1130 Wealthy St. SE.

MARCH 13-17
The Films of Fajth Hubley — Screenings and lectures by the legendary independent animator at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, 41 Sheldon Blvd. SE. Thursday and Friday at 7 p.m. followed by a talk by Hubley. Saturday screenings only at 4, 7 and 9 p.m. For more information, call 454-7000 ext. 16.

MARCH 15
The Courage of Her Convictions: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Struggle for Civil Rights — Dr. Garth Pauley, professor of Communications Arts & Sciences, will lecture on this courageous — yet often neglected — figure in the American civil rights movement. At 3:30 p.m., Meeter Center Lecture Hall in Hiemenga Hall, Calvin College.

MARCH 17
Women's Film Festival — Seven recent films address topics of gender and nature. Noon to 9 p.m. in the Loosemore Auditorium in the DeVos Center, Pew Grand Rapids Campus of Grand Valley State University, 401 W. Fulton St. Free admission and refreshments. Park in Seward for west of campus, off Lake Michigan Drive. For a schedule or more information call 895-2325.

MARCH 19 and 20
 Panel discussions and presentations exploring topics of gender in relation to agriculture, faith, nature, literature, professionalism and mythology. 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 19 and 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. March 20. Keynote address at 2:30 p.m. March 20 by Sandra Steingraber, author of the acclaimed book "Living Downstream: An ecologist looks at Cancer and the Environment." Steingraber was named one of Ms. Magazine's Women of the Year in 1997. In the Cook-DeWitt Center, Allendale campus. Free and open to the public in the Grand River Room of Kirkhof Center at Grand Valley State University's Allendale campus. For a schedule and more information call 895-2325.

MARCH 23 and 24
"Preaching to the Perverted" — Performance artist Holly Hughes, one of the infamous "NEA four" defendants, whose federal grants were revoked for offending "standards of decency" in 1990, relives her day in court. Admission is \$12. For more information, call 454-7000, ext. 16. At 8 p.m. both nights, Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, 41 Sheldon Blvd. SE.

MARCH 23 and 24
UICA Dance Collaborative dance concert — For more information, call 454-7000, ext. 16. At 8 p.m., Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, 41 Sheldon Blvd. SE.

MARCH 27
"The Lives and Music of Women Composers Around the World" — A concert by the female music faculty at Aquinas College. From 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m., Wege Ballroom, Aquinas College.

MARCH 27
Linda Chavez, recently nominated as Secretary of Labor for President Bush's cabinet, is keynote speaker at a Grand Valley State University fundraiser. A 6:30 p.m. reception and 7:15 p.m. dinner in the Ambassador Ballroom of the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. Tickets are \$75 and proceeds benefit minority women pursuing graduate business education. Call 336-7100 for tickets and more information.

MARCH 31
Resourceful Women's Conference — Dr. Alexa Canady, chief of neurosurgery at the Children's Hospital of Michigan and the first black female brain surgeon in the nation, is the keynote speaker (9:30 a.m.) at this free public event. Call 459-8281 ext. 4116. Conference runs from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Donnelly Center, Aquinas College.

Of the 23 Women's History Month events listed in the Grand Rapids Press, only one was mentioned during the allotted news watching periods. The "Hip Ladies in Herstory" art exhibit at the Heartside Arts Market was briefly mentioned during a Channel 8 Women's History Month promotional commercial.

DATA



Who's voices do we hear?

Total number of men interviewed during the month of March: 439

Total number of women interviewed during March: 347

Racial Breakdown of Women's Voices:

<i>African American:</i>	53
<i>Arab American:</i>	0
<i>Asian American</i>	2
<i>Euro-American:</i>	282
<i>Hispanic:</i>	6
<i>Multi-racial:</i>	4
<i>Native American:</i>	0

Breakdown of Women's Voices by Channel



Total number of men interviewed during March: 201

Total number of women interviewed during March: 148

Racial Breakdown of Women's Voices:

<i>African American:</i>	29
<i>Arab American:</i>	0
<i>Asian American:</i>	2
<i>Euro-American:</i>	117
<i>Hispanic:</i>	1
<i>Multi-Racial:</i>	1
<i>Native American:</i>	0



Total number of men interviewed during March: 102

Total number of women interviewed during March: 85

Racial Breakdown of Women's Voices:

<i>African American:</i>	10
<i>Arab American:</i>	0
<i>Asian American:</i>	0
<i>Euro-American:</i>	74
<i>Hispanic:</i>	3
<i>Multi-Racial:</i>	1
<i>Native American:</i>	0

Breakdown of Women's Voices by Channel



Total number of men interviewed during March: 136

Total number of women interviewed during March: 109

Racial Breakdown of Women's Voices:

<i>African American:</i>	14
<i>Arab American:</i>	0
<i>Asian American:</i>	0
<i>Euro-American:</i>	91
<i>Latin American:</i>	2
<i>Multi-Racial:</i>	2
<i>Native American:</i>	0

WOOD TV 8
(6 & 11pm)



<i>Types of voices</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Citizen	13	5
Resident	7	11
Homeowner	1	2
Parent	11	20
Student	15	25
Family/Friend	3	11
Worker/Employee	7	0
Witness	0	2
Juror	0	2
Suspect	5	0
Victim	1	5
Volunteer	0	0
Patient	4	5
Consumer	6	8
Neighborhood Org.	1	1
Organizational Rep.	30	21
Educator	3	3
School Administrator	17	4
Daycare Provider	0	2
Entertainment/Artist	7	4
Religious	1	0
Fire Department	3	0
Police	19	4
Lawyer	1	0
Doctor	20	3
Business/Economics	21	3
Government Official	8	7

**WXMI Ch. 17
(10:00pm only)**



<i>Types of Voices</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Citizen	1	5
Resident	8	4
Homeowner	0	0
Parent	4	17
Student	7	9
Family/Friend	1	7
Worker/Employee	0	0
Witness	0	2
Juror	0	0
Suspect	3	0
Victim	3	1
Volunteer	0	0
Patient	1	0
Consumer	2	1
Neighborhood Org.	0	3
Organizational Rep.	17	14
Educator	0	4
School Administrator	10	4
Daycare Provider	0	1
Entertainment/Artist	4	4
Religious	1	0
Fire Department	4	0
Police	12	0
Lawyer	4	2
Doctor	0	2
Business/Economics	12	2
Government Official	6	3
Other:		
Athlete	1	2
Paramedic	1	1

**WZZM 13
(6 & 11pm)**



<i>Types of voices</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Citizen	17	9
Resident	4	9
Homeowner	1	2
Parent	7	8
Student	9	16
Family/Friend	1	7
Worker/Employee	5	8
Witness	0	2
Juror	0	0
Suspect	5	0
Victim	0	3
Volunteer	0	0
Patient	0	3
Consumer	3	5
Neighborhood Org.	0	1
Organizational Rep.	19	13
Educator	3	4
School Administrator	10	1
Daycare Provider	0	1
Entertainment/Artist	6	3
Religious	0	0
Fire Department	4	0
Police	10	0
Lawyer	9	1
Doctor	3	2
Business/Economics	11	2
Government Official	8	3
Other:		
Athlete	0	2
Unemployed	0	1

Recommendations for the Media

- 1) Make sure to interview women from different racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds.
- 2) Feature more stories on positive gains that women have made by using individual organizations that promote opportunities for women such as the YWCA, GROW, NOW, Women's studies departments, etc.
- 3) Feature women's voices in areas other than "traditional" roles such as mother, teacher, nurse, etc.
- 4) Seek out women professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and business people as spokespersons for news stories.
- 5) If it is difficult to find women for spokespersons on the economy, environment, business, government, etc., then do stories on those barriers.
- 6) Use gender identifying words such as "man," "woman," etc. within news coverage to contextualize stories. Instead of saying "a woman was raped," say "a man raped a woman."
- 7) Recognize violent acts against women as crimes against them and address them as serious public health issues. While the events seem isolated, they are part of a cycle of violence perpetrated against women on a daily basis.

Who to Contact

**WOOD TV 8
120 College SE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503
456-8888
News Director: Jim Loy**

**WZZM 13
645 3 Mile Rd NW
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49544
785-1313
News Director: Sheryl Grant**

**WXMI 17
3117 Plaza Dr. NE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525
364-8722
News Director: Tim Dye**