
**CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL
ONTARIO REGIONAL COUNCIL**

CFRA-AM re PSA

(CBSC Decision 95/96-0149)

Decided October 21, 1996

A. MacKay (Chair)*, R. Stanbury (Vice-Chair), P. Fockler, T. Gupta,
M. Hogarth, M. Ziniak

*Since Mr. MacKay had participated in the preparation of the series of Public Service Announcements, which included the one dealt with in this decision, he abstained from participation in this matter. Mr. Stanbury, the Vice-Chair, chaired the meeting.

THE FACTS

A series of radio and television public service announcements (PSAs) were prepared by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) on behalf of its radio and television members as a part of their anti-violence campaign. The particular PSA complained of ran on CFRA-AM on March 6, 1996. It involved several women, Krishna, a student aged 23, Joan, a homemaker aged 57, Marie, a teacher aged 32, Mei, a banker aged 29, Petra, in retail sales, aged 18. The text of the PSA was as follows:

At first, you may think that these women have nothing in common. But they do. They have all suffered at the hands of someone close to them. What begins with control, emotional and verbal abuse, often becomes physical violence. And every day the list grows longer. Don't let it continue. Have a plan for your safety and get help. Violence makes victims of us all. A message from Canada's private broadcasters.

The complainant faxed his complaint to the CBSC on the same day. He framed his complaint in the following terms:

I believe this ad violates the CRTC policy on gender since it showed only women as victims of violence and implied that the cause of all violence in the family is men.

The policy which all radio and TV stations have agreed to is that both men and women must be shown to have equal responsibility and equal benefits and needs in family life.

In this ad only women's needs are shown. The responsibility for violence, it is implied, is men's alone. This is unfair, biased, and ignores a large part of the problem: women's violence against children as well as men.

In accordance with its procedures, the CBSC forwarded the letter to CFRA for response. The General Manager of CFRA, in his letter of March 27, dealt with this issue and others raised in a series of four letters from the same listener complaining about gender issues on CFRA in the month of March. The General Manager's response to the issue at hand was;

The Public Service Announcement you refer to in your letter is one that CFRA has aired for many months in support of awareness of family violence. It is a well documented problem in our country and in our local community. We have reviewed the copy and are quite satisfied it does not violate the spirit or letter of the CRTC's policy on gender portrayal. This announcement has been airing for close to 12 months without a single complaint until your letter.

The viewer was unsatisfied with this response and requested, on May 31, that the CBSC refer the matter to the appropriate Regional Council for adjudication.

THE DECISION

The CBSC's Ontario Regional Council considered the complaint under the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB). Clauses 2(c), 3 and 4 of that Code read as follows:

Clause 2: Diversity

- (c) Television and radio programming shall respect the principles of intellectual and emotional equality of both sexes and the dignity of all individuals. Television and radio programming should portray women and men as equal beneficiaries of the positive attributes of family or single-person life. Women and men should perform in a range of occupations and function as intellectual and emotional equals in all types of thematic circumstances. This should be the case for both

work and leisure activities requiring varying degrees of intellectual competence.

Guidance: Women and men should be portrayed as working toward a comfortable existence through mutual support, both economically and emotionally, and in both public and private spheres. Despite the problems of societal systemic discrimination, television and radio programming should reflect an awareness of the need to avoid and overcome discrimination on the basis of gender.

Clause 3: *Demographic Spectrum:*

Television and radio programming shall portray the wide spectrum of Canadian life. Women and men shall be portrayed with fair and equitable demographic diversity taking into account age, civil status, race, ethnocultural origin, physical appearance, sexual orientation, background, religion, occupation, socio-economic condition and leisure activities, while actively pursuing a wide range of interests. Portrayals should also take into account the roles and contributions of the mentally, physically and socially challenged.

Guidance: Compared to men, the portrayal of women in television programming has often been more restricted with respect to age, appearance, background, occupation, lifestyle and interests. Additionally, the elderly, the disabled, and native peoples have also been under-represented. Special attention should be paid to increasing the portrayal of ethnic and visible minorities, whose presence constitutes an ever-expanding aspect of Canadian society.

Clause 4: *Exploitation:*

Television and radio programming shall refrain from the exploitation of women, men and children. Negative or degrading comments on the role and nature of women, men or children in society shall be avoided. Modes of dress, camera focus on areas of the body and similar modes of portrayal should not be degrading to either sex. The sexualization of children through dress or behaviour is not acceptable.

Guidance: "sex-ploitation" through dress is one area in which the sexes have traditionally differed, with more women portrayed in scant clothing and alluring postures.

The Regional Council members listened to a tape of the program in question and reviewed all of the correspondence. The Council considers that the PSA in question does not violate any of the provisions of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code*.

The Content of the Program

Unlike the program at issue in *CFRA-AM re "Family Fortune"* (CBSC Decision 95/96-0145, October 21, 1996), the PSA in this matter does involve an issue of portrayal. Furthermore, while men are not mentioned in the text of the PSA, the Council accepts the interpretation that men are understood as being the principal perpetrators of the physical abuse which is the subject of the announcement. That being said, the question for the Council to address is whether the pointed portrayal is unjustifiably negative or degrading. The notion of equality which is proposed in Clause 2(c) does not mean congruence or absolute identity in all respects. It implies rather the principle of equitability, that is, an equality of treatment and the equality of application of standards to both sexes. It implies that it may in circumstances be appropriate to draw attention to differences between the sexes, provided that those conclusions are based on and reflect reality. The fact that a portrayal may have some negative implications does not mean that it will be in breach of the Code. For that result to occur, the portrayal must be unfairly or unjustifiably negative.

It is the view of the Council that the purpose of the PSA was to raise awareness of the consequences of violence on society. While this particular PSA focused on violence imposed by men upon women, other PSAs addressed other aspects of violence, such as media literacy and child abuse. The Council also accepts that there is an implication in this PSA that most domestic violence involves violence by men against women. The Council is *not*, however, of the view that this portrayal *misrepresents* the problem of family violence.

The Council further recognizes, however, that some male listeners who were not, themselves, violent, could be troubled by PSAs that left the impression that all men were violent. Council members are, however, more strongly of the view that fair-minded men and women will acknowledge that physical abuse is more often perpetrated by men on women than the other way round and that this PSA is *not* a depiction of the actions of all men or even most men. It constitutes an alert to the public in the same way that AIDS PSAs do, without implying that all or most or even a large number of persons are thereby pinpointed or isolated. Such PSAs are a recognition of the fact that society suffers from problems, whether more or less widespread, of which we must all be aware and to which we must commit our consciousness, if not other forms of assistance, to avoid their spread. This is such a case. Its fair, realistic and justifiable presentation does not constitute a breach of the Code.

The Broadcaster's Response

In addition to assessing the relevance of the Codes to the complaint, the CBSC always assesses the *responsiveness* of the broadcaster to the substance of the complaint. The Council considers that the General Manager's letter, which reflects some frustration at being inundated by complaints of a similar nature from a single complainant, nonetheless

responds fully and fairly to each of the issues raised. It was an entirely proper response. Nothing more is required.

This decision is a public document upon its release by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council. It may be reported, announced or read by the station against which the complaint had originally been made; however, in the case of a favourable decision, the station is under no obligation to announce the result.