
**CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL
ONTARIO REGIONAL COUNCIL**

CTV re PSA (Family Abuse Crisis Exchange)

(CBSC Decision 95/96-0140)

Decided April 30, 1996

A. MacKay (Chair), R. Stanbury (Vice-Chair), R. Cohen (*ad hoc*), P. Fockler,
M. Hogarth, M. Ziniak

THE FACTS

This complaint involves a 30-second Public Service Announcement (PSA) for the Family Abuse Crisis Exchange (F.A.C.E.) which ran on the CTV Network on February 8, 1996. The only visuals were a doll house and a doll with bandages. A voice-over dealt with the topic of domestic violence. It told that the doll's child-owner was never touched, but that the abuse of the child's mother was itself a source of injury to the child. The text of the PSA was as follows:

First he started drinking, then calling his wife stupid, ugly. It escalated. He started pushing her. Sadly enough, she wasn't the only one traumatised. Although he never raised a hand to their four year old daughter [pause], this is her doll. Domestic violence hurts everyone. Please help us to help the victims of abuse.

The Letter of Complaint

On February 9, 1996, a viewer complained about "Canada's sexist double standard regarding violence against men on television." The complainant's letter read as follows:

I am writing regarding an advertisement on CTV for "FACES" which I saw at 11 pm on Thursday Feb 8, 1996 on their Ottawa station. The ad accused fathers of beating their wives and implied that this damaged the child, also portrayed as a female.

I am sure that you realize that virtually all the portrayals of domestic violence victims are shown on Canadian Radio and TV to be female and the perpetrators to be male.

This is a highly emotional issue and this ad promotes sexual hatred and degradation for the purpose of fund raising for a facility which excludes men from its services on the basis of their gender.

Regional police have discovered two men murdered by their wives within the last few weeks in Ottawa. I volunteer at Men's Support Services which provides counselling for men who have survived relationship violence, most at the hands of mothers, wives and their girlfriends. Governments refuse to fund men's services because they say domestic violence against men doesn't exist. TV and radio news reserve the use of the term "domestic violence" for women victims. Although there are more of them, male murders are described as "unusual" or "strange" or it is implied that the (male) victim had guilty involvement.

I have read the CRTC's policy on sex role portrayal in Radio and TV and it seems to me that these CTV ads on domestic violence consistently and flagrantly violate the spirit and the letter of your policy. I quote from your guidelines: "Negative or inequitable portrayal of women and men can be both explicit or implied." From what I have seen, all negative representation in domestic violence on TV have been [*sic*] men: language in ads and programming labels men always as perpetrators.

Your policy on changing interaction states, "Women and men shall be portrayed ... in a wide range of roles, both traditional and non-traditional, in paid work, social, family and leisure activities" and further states, "Men should not always be portrayed as the aggressor in personal relationships." What percentage of portrayals of domestic violence show women as the aggressor? Does the figure zero on CTV advertising conform to your policy?

Your policy on commercial messages states, "The various aspects of sex-role portrayal dealt with in the appropriate clauses of the Code shall apply to portrayal in commercial messages." Do you not agree that this ad, like the ads of the Ontario government on domestic violence, violates your policy? Where is the balance? Where is the diversity?

Of course, TV stations claim women don't beat men because men are not coming to police and laying charges, or going to shelters because of domestic violence. That's true, but men are more likely to be arrested by the police than get help if they have been bruised and battered by a wife. And there aren't men's shelters and few support services for abused men.

According to Winnipeg family violence researcher Reena Sommers, women admit to beating their men more often and more severely than men hitting women. Radio and TV portray women in non-stereotyped roles, but why do you let them get away with not portraying men as victims of violence, especially in this area?

Do you have any representation from men's groups on your studies into this policy, or have you reserved input, consultation and funding only for women's groups to implement this policy in a one-sided fashion? I note your policy lists input from women's groups only, all of whom have received substantial government funding.

I thank you for your attention to this serious matter about Canada's sexist double standard regarding violence against men on television.

Sincerely,

...

P.S. I suggest a fair remedy would be require TV and Radio stations to give equal time to Men's Support Services to show the other side for balance.

The Broadcaster's Response

In her letter of February 22, CTV's Vice President, Corporate Communications, and Director of Programming, said:

The "advertisement" you mention in your letter is actually a public service announcement for Family Abuse Crisis Exchange (FACE). CTV provides airtime free of charge for public service announcements which meet with the following criteria. They are of national interest, of broadcast quality, be approved by the Telecaster Committee and for a not-for-profit organization.

In your letter you suggest that CTV is discriminating against men's groups. This is not the case. CTV will air any public service announcement which meets the above mentioned criteria. The only reason that we do not air public service announcements for men's groups is because we have never been asked by a men's group to do so.

CTV is aware that the problem of domestic violence is not only against women. As you will see from the enclosed video cassette, CTV News ran a story on "Battered Husbands" on March 11, 1995.

If your support group would like to provide us with a public service announcement which meets the above mentioned criteria, we would be pleased to telecast it to help raise public awareness of this problem.

The complainant was unsatisfied with this response and requested, on February 29, 1996, 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 for Television and Radio Programming*, clauses 1 and 4, which read in part as follows:

(1) *Changing Interaction:*

Broadcasters recognize the changing interaction of women and men in today's society. Women and men shall be portrayed, in programming, in a wide range of roles, both traditional and non-traditional, in paid work, social, family and leisure activities.

Guidance: The roles and opportunities for both sexes are becoming more diverse due to such factors as the elimination of female-only and male-only occupations, changing patterns of parenting and lifestyles. Women and girls should be portrayed in a range of roles as diverse as that shown for men and boys. Men should not always be portrayed as the aggressor in personal relationships. Women and men should be portrayed as working

together in circumstances where the "power" balance does not always favour the man by virtue of his position or personal attributes.

(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 Regional Council members viewed a tape of the PSA 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

While the F.A.C.E. PSA depicts the perpetration of domestic violence by a man against a woman, the Ontario Regional Council does not consider that this PSA was unfairly or unjustifiably negative. It did not create fear nor contain any material which could be considered offensive or hateful. Its spoken words and visuals were seen by the Council to be neutral. While the Council understands that some viewers could be troubled by PSAs that depicted men as the only aggressors, this PSA was only one in a series which was created to alert the public to several widespread social problems. It considers that this PSA achieved that result without a generalized negative or degrading portrayal of men.

Even if the PSA in question could be seen to have *some* implicit negative implications, the Ontario Regional Council does not conclude that this portrayal *misrepresents* the problem of family violence. It is accepted by the Council that men are most often, although not always, the perpetrators of abuse. Moreover, since the "power" balance in abusive relationships is more often than not in favour of the man, the Council is satisfied that this PSA was a realistic and justifiable presentation of a societal problem. Furthermore, it cannot be forgotten that one of the purposes of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* is to charge broadcasters with the responsibility of addressing the issue of power imbalance, as this PSA does.

While it is fair on the part of the complainant to point out that, as the Guidance section in Clause 1 provides, that "Men should not always be portrayed as the aggressor in personal relationships," the isolation of a *single* PSA (which was not, for its own internal dramatic reasons, abusively discriminatory or exploitative) cannot fall afoul of this provision. In fact, the point of this statement in the Guidance section relates to larger issues of balance which CTV directly addressed by raising the story entitled "Battered Husbands" which it had aired on March 11, 1995.

The Broadcaster's Response

While it is a responsibility of membership in the CBSC to be responsive to audience complaints, in this case the station was seen as not only meeting, but exceeding its responsibilities. In *CFOX-FM re The "Larry And Willie" Show* (CBSC Decision 92/93-0141, August 30, 1993), the first decision of the CBSC which discussed the responsibility of the broadcaster to be responsive as well as to respect the provisions of the various CBSC-administered Codes, the broadcaster went as far as inviting the complainant to present a commentary of its choice with a commentator of its choice to counter-balance the Irish jokes to which the complainant had objected. The B.C. Regional Council considered this approach by the broadcaster to be

of a thoughtful and collaborative nature and, indeed, exemplary in the fulfilment of broadcaster responsiveness to a complainant, despite the fact that the station itself did not consider that it had acted in a racist or offensive manner.

Correspondingly, the Ontario Regional Council finds that CTV's express offer to telecast a PSA from the complainant's support group to be equally generous and exemplary. 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.