


Still dealing in dichotomies?!

 Keren is a PhD candidate in the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. a communications professional with over 12 years of UK government communications experience. In this post she wonders whether women's issues be properly addressed if women are, in fact, losing ground politically and are less well represented in public life than they were 10 years ago. Follow her on Twitter @KerenDarmon or email k.n.darmon@lse.ac.u

On January 18, 2013, [The New York Times](#) reported anticipation among leading women of the world about the rise and globalization of women's issues. A month later, however, [The Observer](#) reported a decline in women's presence in British public life. So which is it? Are women's issues genuinely featuring more seriously on the political agenda and are we truly witnessing a wave of positive change in women's status and condition across the globe? Or are things unchanged, if not getting worse, in terms of women and power? Can women's issues be properly addressed if women are, in fact, losing ground politically and are less well represented in public life than they were 10 years ago?

For me these questions don't sit in isolation. They are not just about how many women sit in boardrooms or in parliaments but also about how women live their lives and how they are portrayed in the media.

In February, the first the jury in Vicky Pryce's trial for taking speeding points for her (then) husband, Chris Huhne, could not reach a verdict and was **dismissed**. Many interesting issues were discussed during this trial, but I am not a legal expert and this is not a discussion of the legalities of the case. Instead, however, I was struck by the depiction in the media of Vicky Pryce during the trial. One headline in particular caught my eye: "Jury asked to decide if Vicky Pryce is weak-minded or manipulative woman". [1] Surely the jury were being asked to decide whether she was guilty or not guilty?! No wonder they couldn't reach a conclusion! Yes, this was a complicated case in which the unusual defence of marital coercion was used, and yes, the wording in the heading came from the prosecution, but I am still left with the feeling that it is particular to her being a woman and a successful one at that.

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It is not without precedent to suggest that popular culture depicts women as one of two things: mother or whore, with very little room for complexity. The wording might change but the sentiment remains the same: women are either or, not both, and certainly not many other things besides. And this pervasive notion seems to persist even when dealing with a highly accomplished economist and civil servant (Vicky Pryce), even in an era when women are supposedly on the rise.

It also persists when dealing with a highly acclaimed, rewarded and commercially successful author like Hilary Mantel. Having written a well-considered, intellectual article for the London Review of Books, with the heading "**Royal Bodies**", the author was lambasted by the red-top press, such as the **Daily Mail** and by the prime-minister, David Cameron, for daring to discuss the Duchess of Cambridge. However, if they had bothered to read her article, they would have (hopefully) understood that Ms Mantel, far from criticising the Duchess, was making the point that media depictions of her risk reducing Kate Middleton to a two-dimensional idea of a woman rather than celebrating the whole woman that she is. If anything, Ms Mantel was calling for more caution and discretion on the part of the media and more freedom for the royal mother-to-be. But they didn't bother to read the article, because setting up this enquiry into what it means to be royal as a **traditionally**

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dichotomous battle between princess and witch both sells more papers and also fits much better into the popular notion of women and womanhood.

Seeking diversion from difficult issues, I went to see a film at the weekend: Disney's **Wreck-it Ralph**. The supporting female in this animated movie about the lives of video game characters, is a sassy young girl called Vanellope, who is battling against discrimination and exclusion. She is what they call a "glitch." Something is wrong with her code, which makes her pixilate every so often, and for that she is ostracised in her community. She is imperfect. She is also the only girl character in her game who isn't a pink-clad girly-girl. After completing her challenges and overcoming her obstacles, Vanellope's code is magically fixed and this out-spoken little girl is transformed into a princess. It turns out she had been one until the bad-guy messed with her code, turned her into a 'glitch' and thus gained power over her. And so even in the cinema I couldn't escape the reductionist view of what girls and women can and/or should be: "glitch" or princess. Interestingly, in the last few minutes of the film Vanellope uses her re-gained powers to step out of her princess dress and go back to being a "glitch." At the same time she also changes the rule of her game-world from a monarchy to a democracy.

Following the dismissal of the jury in Vicky Pryce's case, another jury was appointed and they found her guilty of perverting the course of justice. In early March both she and her former husband were sentenced to **eight months in prison**. And so we see that living in a democracy doesn't necessarily make things fair, in the way that Vanellope might have hoped it would. If things were fair, a man caught speeding would pay a higher price than his former wife, whose crime it was to lie about it. Perhaps if women were equally represented in the judiciary, in politics and in other public offices, justice would be meted out more fairly and (male) politicians wouldn't jump so quickly into the fray to demonise female authors.

And so I ask, when will we know that equality has been truly achieved? When we have more women in positions of power or better portrayals of women in the media? In my mind there is no either/or in this regard also: we simply need to keep striving for both.

1. David Sanderson, "Jury asked to decide if Vicky Price is weak-minded or manipulative woman", *The Times* (London), February 6, 2013 Wednesday, NEWS; Pg. 4.

The working title of Keren's PhD project in LSE's Media and Communications Department is: Framing (neo) Feminist Protest in the New Media Ecology. She is using the SlutWalk movement as her case study. Keren's academic interests include feminism, framing theory, political communication, communication power, women and the media, changing communication practices in the new media ecology, public dissent and agenda setting.

As a communications professional, she joined government in April 1999 and worked across the external communications spectrum from press office/ media relations, to marketing, corporate communications, stakeholder relations and strategic communications. Prior to that, Keren worked as a researcher and assistant producer in television news and as a journalist on local newspapers. Email her at k.n.darmon@lse.ac.uk or follow her on Twitter [@KerenDarmon](https://twitter.com/KerenDarmon).

