

Making Belgium aware of its media's gender imbalance



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Awareness-Raising Campaigns for the French-Speaking Community of Belgium

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In brief

In 2011 the Association of Professional Journalists (AJP), which represents 4,000 French- and German-speaking journalists working in Belgium, surveyed the position of women in the French-language media in Belgium. This study formed part of a global study carried out under the auspices of GMMP, the Global Media Monitoring Project.

The study found that only 28% of people interviewed in the media were women, and that only 26% of newspaper articles and 29% of radio news items are written or presented by a woman.

AJP therefore prepared studies of 11 good practices in implementing gender equality, and conducted an awareness-raising campaign to bring these facts and examples to the attention of policy-makers, judges, journalists and the general public. It visited newsrooms, held workshops, published articles and produced a mass-circulation leaflet.

The campaign brought the issue of female underrepresentation in the media to the attention of decision-makers, and established links between the AJP and the media organisations. The minister is considering funding similar campaigns in the future, to amplify its impact.

One woman in two is not seen or heard

Belgium's French-speaking media suffers from a gender imbalance. Only 28% of interviewees are women – which means that as 51% of the population is female, one woman out of two is absent from the picture the media provides. Hard news subjects show the lowest share of women (26% of women featuring as journalists, reporters, and sources on political topics and only 20% on economic issues). Women's voices are heard more often on social themes (42%), criminal affairs (38%) and health issues (38%). Women rarely figure as 'authorities in the field' in the news: they are pushed into the role of vox populi (57%-70%), whereas men often feature as representatives (82%) or experts (73%).

The situation in media production is no better: only 26% of newspaper articles and 29% of radio news items are written or presented by a woman; on TV, this share rises to 43% because of the large number of young and attractive women among newscasters.[1] Gender imbalances in access and participation to decision-making are even starker: a study carried out in 2008 on a sample of press, radio and television operators showed that out of 40 people responsible for media content just nine were women (22.5%).

In the ten best-selling newspapers and the ten best-selling magazines there were just six female editors-in-chief (out of a total of 20). Women are to be found in top-level positions in media organisations only in the newsrooms of typically female-targeted publications.[2] The make-up of the labour market coupled with the specific make-up of the media labour market accounts for the majority of the gender imbalances.

Targeting decision-makers

To change the situation, the Belgian Association of Professional Journalists (AJP) ran a campaign to raise awareness of the underrepresentation of women in the French-speaking press in Belgium. The AJP represents some 4,000 French and German-speaking members, one-third of whom are women. Along with its Flemish counterpart VVJ (Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten) it makes up the AGJPB (Association Générale des Journalistes Professionnels de Belgique).

The campaign was targeted at media policy-makers; media regulatory and self-regulatory bodies; members of judicial courts, judges and magistrates addressing media affairs; members of media decision-making bodies; newspaper editors-in-chief, journalists and communication workers; teachers and students of media studies and journalism courses; women working in newspaper newsroom; the entire audience/readerships of Belgium French-speaking news media; and the entire French-speaking community of Belgium.

They thus aimed to start a collective analysis of the causes of the under-representation of women; to push managers in the industry to achieve gender equality in recruitment, pay and promotion; and to stimulate editors, journalists, teachers and journalism students to question their own practices, to develop an interest in the good practice that have been introduced in other newsrooms, to test certain recommendations, and to undergo training in gender and stereotype issues in the media.

The AJP disseminated the results of the Study on diversity and equality in the French-speaking daily press in Belgium (2011) which it carried out as part of the 2010 GMMP report. This gave a detailed picture of the gender imbalances in access to and participation in French-speaking Belgian newspapers. It also mapped, identified and disseminated 11 good practices implemented in newsrooms to improve achieve gender equality.

This dissemination work involved visiting the newsrooms of the different press organisations covered by the study to present the results, discuss them with the editorial staff, and exchange good practices. AJP reached the scientific, teaching and militant arenas through workshops, communications and by publishing the complete scientific GMMP reports for the French-speaking and Flemish community of Belgium. The general public was reached by publishing a summary of the results in the form of a leaflet, through journal articles and reviews, and through the AJP website.

Questioning current practice

The campaign was entirely consistent with the objectives of the Belgian Gender Mainstreaming Law adopted on 12 January 2007 and was designed to structurally integrate a gender dimension into federal policy.

Its impact has not been evaluated yet but is bound to improve the gender balance and women's access to decision-making positions in the media. Its basis in a detailed study that provided exact information on the proportion of women in the press was of the utmost importance in precisely identifying the public that would benefit most from awareness-raising activities and that would be most receptive to the good practice examples. As well as conveying information on the underrepresentation of women in the media and the different way women and men are treated in media content, it encouraged the stakeholders at different levels to question and improve their own practices. As a result, more people are conscious of the problem and there is more reflection on what its causes are. However to create permanent change, the campaign would need to be repeated very regularly.

The process made media organisations aware of how they portray women in their daily contents and established direct contact between the AJP and the media industry, academic communities, policy-makers and NGOs, which could enable further joint efforts.

According to the AJP, the campaign was efficient in terms of the financial resources allocated (approximately €23,000), the human resources involved and the organisational process required. With a modest financial input, the campaign was able to raise awareness of the issue of women's underrepresentation in the media at a very high level.

The competent minister is considering granting new funding so that initiatives such as the High Audiovisual Council (CSA) barometer and the AJP and GMMP studies, as well as the awareness-raising initiatives that followed them, can be repeated. However, no formal decision has yet been taken.

Ending gender bias improves quality

Five factors have contributed to the initiative's success. Firstly, the AJP is a professional union of journalists which has everyday practical knowledge and experience in the field. Secondly, its activities were based on the exact data that resulted from two monitoring projects (the AJP's 2011 survey of the Belgian daily press and the GMMP's 2010 report on news media all over the world). They used concrete findings and examples from the media to identify the problem and to show how action can improve the situation. Thirdly, the campaign was targeted at people whose decisions can make a real difference. Fourthly, the AJP formulated a very persuasive argument that addresses gender imbalance as a community problem: its approach was to show how women's under-representation in the news leads to lower-quality coverage, as it gives a biased picture of the world. Lastly, it used an effective combination of different methods – conferences, congresses and the presentation of good practices.

One obstacle the project faced was that not all schools and editorial departments were open to having their awareness raised. Goodwill is necessary for this type of action, and if this goodwill is lacking, nothing can be forced upon schools or writers and the actions are fruitless. A second obstacle was a lack of awareness of gender and equality issues in the written media. Relevant actors at different levels and in different fields are insufficiently aware of gender inequalities in the population of journalists, in the treatment of women in the media and in the content of journalist work.

The campaign was only an initial step and shows the need for effective policies to tackle women's under-representation in the media. However in principle the idea is transferable, and there would be no problem in reproducing such a campaign elsewhere. Given that the media are an area in which gender inequality has received relatively little research and policy attention, awareness-raising activities could be very useful in other contexts.

Its most valuable lesson lies in the way it effectively identified the key actors that should be targeted by awareness-raising initiatives in the news media, and in particular the daily papers.

[1] Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010

[2] Women at the Top, 2008, Institute for Equality of Women and Men

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[Association des Journalistes Professionnels](#)



[Global Media Monitoring Project \(2010\)](#)



[GMMP 2010 report for Francophone Belgium](#)



[GMMP 2010 report for Flanders](#)



[Femmes au sommet \(Women at the Top\)](#)



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