

Area J — Women and the media: harmful stereotypes persist

Introduction

The EU's overarching gender equality commitments and measures have rarely addressed women and the media. The media were not mentioned as a priority in the European Commission's strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019 or in the Council of the EU's pact for equality between women and men 2011-2020. Nevertheless, the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2018) marked a significant development in updating the EU legal framework on media, calling on Member States to eliminate discrimination based on sex in audiovisual commercial communications provided by all media service providers under their jurisdiction.

Although the EU has limited competence to tackle the broad variety of gender equality policies within media organisations themselves, the European Parliament has highlighted persistent gender stereotypes in the media and called on the European Commission and Member States to take action. New forms of media also put women at risk of harassment, particularly those in public positions. The increasing prevalence of social media poses a challenge for regulators, as new rules need to be established to deal with the harassment that women suffer on these channels, including possible sanctions against media organisations.



Gender stereotypes persist across media sectors

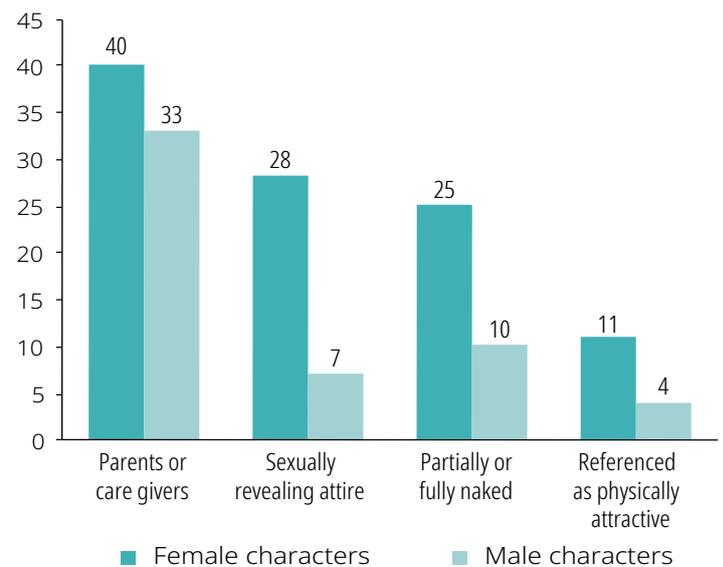
As a source of entertainment, education and information, the media has enormous potential to reflect, (re)produce and reinforce social patterns, norms and stereotypes. Stereotypes can serve as the basis for escalating acts of bias and discrimination and ultimately lead to bias-motivated violence. In a 2017 EU-wide survey, more than half (54 %) of respondents recognised a problem with the way in which women are presented in the media and advertising in their country, with nearly 4 in 10 (39 %) believing that the issue ought to be addressed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women were more likely than men to recognise the problem and to support related action.

Gender inequalities and stereotypes persist across all sectors of the media, including television advertising, visual media and the video game sector. A 2016 study focusing on gender representation in advertising in eight EU Member States found substantial gender imbalances when broken down by age, in addition to clear stereotyping of the roles assigned to women and men. Significantly, pervasive gender stereotypes in television adverts appear to be uncoupled from the level of gender equality in the country concerned.

Gender stereotypes also persist in the film industry. A study of the annual top 100 fictional films from 2007 to 2017 revealed a strong gender bias among speaking characters, with male characters outnumbering female characters by two to one. Virtually no progress was observed over the period. Like in advertising, the gender gap differs across age groups and is concentrated among older age groups. The study showed clear stereotyping of roles, with women more likely than men to be shown as parents or caregivers, and much more likely to be shown in sexually revealing attire (see Figure 1).

In the video game sector, despite a fairly even gender balance among gamers, the games themselves still lack diversity. Only half of the 118 games showcased at the annual E3 industry convention in 2018 allowed users to choose the gender of their character in role play, and three times as many offered exclusively male protagonists as female protagonists. While there is some evidence of a longer term in-

Figure 1. Portrayal and sexualisation of speaking characters in the top 100 films of 2017 (%)



Source: Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Case, A., and Choi, A. (2018), 'Inequality in 1 100 popular films: Examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT, and disability from 2007 to 2017', USC Annenberg, Los Angeles. Retrieved from <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inequality-in-1100-popular-films.pdf>

crease in video games featuring playable female characters, they are still more often depicted in sexualised and secondary roles. This sexist representation is thought to derive — at least in part — from the under-representation of women in video game production, which reinforces a masculine gaming culture, limiting innovation and creativity.

In contrast, online streaming services appear to be having a positive impact on the portrayal of gender and the visibility of the LGBTQI* community, through influential programmes such as *Orange Is the New Black*, *GLOW* and *Luke Cage*. Recent research found 112 regular and recurring LGBTQI* characters, an increase of over 50 % compared with 2017-2018. Looking forward, increased use of such services will give them greater power to shape public perceptions.

Newer forms of media increase the risk of cyberviolence

In addition to the existence of harassment within traditional media domains, the unregulated nature of newer forms, such as social media, has increased the risk of victimisation for women. Although social media provide a positive platform for discussion and mobilisation on gender equality (demonstrated by the #MeToo movement), they can also manifest specific forms of online gender-based violence, including cyberstalking, hacking, impersonation, cyberbullying, sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse.

Social media also poses specific challenges for female media professionals. For example, women journalists face higher risks of online harassment, due to their heightened public presence and exposure online. The Mapping Media Freedom project reports 101 incidents of online harassment of journalists in EU Member States (May 2014 to September 2018). Female journalists were more likely to be subject to defamation/discreditation and sexual harassment, whereas male journalists were more often subject to psychological abuse.

Women face cyberharassment and abuse in various circumstances, including when in key decision-making positions. A worldwide study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) found that two in five (41.8 %) women parliamentarians had extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of them-

selves spread through social media. Such harassment is an attempt to silence women and thus represents an attack on democracy and an affront to basic human rights.

Online harassment can have serious long-term health effects and strongly dissuade women from participating in public life. For instance, it can lead some to opt out of the journalism profession or avoid reporting on certain issues — the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has noted that 38 % of women journalists admitted self-censorship following online abuse. The unregulated nature of social media has thus heightened the risk of victimisation for women.

Despite the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the media and their role in facilitating cyberviolence, the regulation of such content is challenging and raises questions of balance against the need to protect freedom of speech. Some cases of online abuse are not recognised as bullying or harassment and go unpunished. Despite being one of the most common forms of harm, online platforms' definitions of what constitutes online harm rarely include violence against women. Assessing the current situation for many gender-related issues in the media is also hampered by a lack of comparable EU-wide data.

Recommendations for action

The EU should consider further development of the regular monitoring and guidance to address gender-based stereotypes and sexist abuse in the media and online. This would help raise public awareness and keep these topics on the policy agenda. For instance, the EU could ensure appropriate funding and involvement from Member States for monitoring initiatives such as the Global Media Monitoring Project, enabling regular, comparable monitoring of media across the EU and beyond. In the longer term, the EU should consider further regulation of cyberviolence and other forms of gender-based discrimination in the media, for example through an EU-level instrument.

Member States should also consider important actions to tackle gender inequality in the media. These include the implementation of the Council of Europe Recommendations

on Preventing and Combating Sexism (2019), which define sexism and call for the end of gender stereotypes in the media and other areas of life. Ratification of the International Labour Organization Convention No 190 concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work would also be a step forward in this respect. Beyond this, Member States could collaborate with regulatory authorities to develop guidance for online platforms on harmful content that exceeds the level of acceptability and is likely to require regulation or removal. They could also extend the monitoring role, scope and powers of broadcasting and press councils with regard to gender equality in the media industry and consider adopting new indicators for monitoring purposes. The Unesco Gender Sensitive Indicators for the Media provide a potentially useful example of such indicators.

Further information

In addition to inequalities in how the different genders are depicted in and by media content, gender imbalances prevail within media structures and organisations. The contribution of women to decision-making within the sector remains low, which contributes to gender gaps in pay and pensions. Women tend to predominate in public relations and marketing roles, while creative and technical roles are more often held

by men. This has important implications for the portrayal of women and men in media content.

Further information on EU policy developments and trends in the area of women and the media can be found in EIGE's Beijing + 25 report. Some other policy briefs based on this report also present challenges that are closely related to women and the media (such as Area D, Violence against women).

EIGE regularly produces reports reviewing different areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) or other EU policy priorities, as requested by the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. This factsheet is based on the report *Beijing + 25: The fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States*, prepared at the request of Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Other publications include:

- [Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Not without a better work-life balance](#) (2019)
- [Gender Equality and Youth: Opportunities and risks of digitalisation](#) (2019)
- [Women and Men in ICT: A chance for better work-life balance](#) (2018)
- [Study and Work in the EU: Set apart by gender](#) (2018)

You can explore all of EIGE's previous BPfA reports and publications at <https://eige.europa.eu/beijing-platform-for-action>

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European Institute for Gender Equality
Gedimino pr. 16
LT-01103 Vilnius
Lithuania

Contact details

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