

Chapter Two: Why Should Gender be an Issue for the Media?

In the small country of Lesotho in Southern Africa, where there are only weekly newspapers, the national office of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), consistently monitors and puts out reports on how the weekly papers report on gender violence; MISA's national office in Zimbabwe trained its media advocacy workers across the country on 'why gender and free speech' are two sides of the same coin; and at the regional level, MISA has developed a gender policy and is a key partner with gender and media activists throughout the region to provide gender training to journalists, work with editors and managers to develop gender policies and guidelines and as a sponsor of the region's first gender and media awards to recognize reporting that makes a difference.

MISA is not a women's organization, nor is it a feminist organization. It is a regional organization, with national offices, that fights for a free and independent media, media pluralism (a diversity of print media and broadcast stations, public and privately owned, within a country) and for the protection of the rights of journalists to report without fear of repression.

But the men and women who work within MISA know that the media cannot be "free" and "independent" as long as women who work within the media experience injustices that range from discrimination in promotion and hiring to sexual harassment in the newsrooms, and as long as the news is told day in day out through the voices and perspectives of men. These are **gender** issues.

Gender is the way in which society assigns characteristics and social roles to women and men. The roles, functions and characteristics of men have been given greater value than that of women, creating unequal gender power relations which perpetuate discrimination against women in both the public and private spheres. **Sex** (the biological difference between women and men) becomes the basis for discrimination and the violation of the rights of women and girls in all societies.

Therefore, if we look at the media, gender inequalities, biases and prejudices show themselves in the following ways, among others:

In the newsroom:

Opportunities in the workplace - Women often comprise the rank and file of journalists and presenters in the print and broadcast media but few are in the top leadership positions.

Equal professional opportunity: Women reporters are often assigned to health, education, and social issues, while men are given the political and economic assignments which are seen as part of the career path to senior editorial and media management positions. [*More women are seen in the international media, such as CNN, BBC as war and political correspondents, but this has only emerged in the last five to 10 years and is not the norm in the majority of media worldwide*].

In the content:

Who speaks in the media? - If we read, listen to and watch those who are speaking in the media – those who are quoted in stories on events of the day – the majority are men,

although women and men live in the societies reported on and both have views on the events and issues. Women are made 'invisible' by the media's omission of their voices and images.

Gender stereotypes - When women do appear in the media, they most often are portrayed as sex objects, beauty objects, as homemakers, as victims (of violence, poverty, natural disasters, war and conflict, etc.); or they become front-page and headline (main story) news when they engage in activities which are not in line with society's prescription of what women 'should' and 'should not' do [E.g. *Mothers who kill or abuse their children are often portrayed as 'unnatural' women and these stories often are given lots of prominence in news pages and broadcasts*].

What is considered newsworthy? News on the violations of women's human rights and discrimination against women are few and far between. When the media does cover gender issues such as violence, sexual and reproductive health, women in decision making, these articles are often confined to special pages and segments in the media and tagged as 'women's issues', rather than being placed on the news pages as issues of concern to everyone.

Invisible women: Certain categories of women receive even less attention in the media, such as elderly women, women from minority ethnicities and religious groups, the working class, and women with different sexual orientations.⁸

While the media worldwide fight tenaciously to guard, protect and obtain legally the right to be free from government censorship; free from political and economic interests and controls, the media has been unable to detect, analyze and change alone, the gender biases, prejudices and inequalities that influence and impact on its operations and content.

Gender biases and prejudices in the media emerge through the 'choices' media managers, advertisers, and media professionals [editors, journalists, sub-editors, news photographers, etc] make each day. Decisions about who will be promoted; who will not; what will make news; what will not; who will be interviewed; who will not; etc are decisions affected by media professionals' beliefs about where women and men 'should be' in society.

The fight to free the media of gender biases and inequalities has come largely from gender activists who have identified the media as a key institution in the struggle for gender equality. Gender and feminist activists see the media as:

- The mediums through which messages are transmitted (through editorial content, images and adverts) about the gender roles of women and men in any society. The messages can either reinforce, or challenge gender stereotypes and sex based discrimination;
- As news and communications channels that can put women's rights and gender equality on the agenda of public policymakers. One way the media can do this is

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Shivas, M. 2000. Alternative Assessment of Women and Media based on NGO Reviews of Section J, Beijing Platform of Action, cited in *Whose News? Whose Views?*, Colleen Lowe Morna, 2001

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by holding governments accountable to many of the international and regional women's rights conventions and instruments they have signed in the same way the media holds governments accountable to conventions on torture, political rights, labor rights, etc.

- As institutions that practice sex-based discrimination, and therefore also sites where the struggle for gender equality must be confronted.

Activity – Discussion Points!

Use the following questions to do a simple and quick gender analysis of your national media

1. Look through the daily or weekly newspapers. How many images of women do you find? What roles do the women pictured appear in? How many images of men do you find? In what roles are they seen?
2. How many women reporters or correspondents do you see on the local television prime time news? (Do not count the women and men who present the news or read it, known as 'presenters') What issues do the women report on? What issues do the men on television news report on? Is there a difference?
3. Look at the bylines (reporters' names) on political and economic stories in your national newspapers. Can you identify how many of the writers and reporters on these issues are male, and how many are female?
4. Which women, and men, are rarely seen in your national media? Which women, and men, are seen most often in your national media?
5. Look at the adverts on television and in the newspapers. Which adverts have women in them? Which adverts have men in them? How are the women portrayed? How are the men portrayed?

Box Three: Why Gender Equality Makes Good Editorial and Business Sense for the Media

Freedom of speech: Giving equal voice and air-time to women and men, representing both in their multiple roles in society is intrinsic to freedom of expression and speech.

Good governance: 'Do as I say and not as I do' can no longer be the mantra of the media which is being more and more scrutinized by all sectors of society. As much as the media has a duty to serve as a watchdog on society, the media itself must lead by example and practice good governance in its own operations.

Respecting women's and men's human rights: The media's editorial content, through images, language, portrayal and absence of a diversity of voices and views, and its workplace should not be the site for the violation of women's rights to voice, equal opportunity, integrity and dignity. Language used by the media should not perpetuate stigma, discrimination or sexist attitudes against women or men.

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Women are a large growth market for the print media: In most countries, women constitute the highest potential growth market for the print media and have also been shown to be among the most loyal readers. Segmenting readership by gender and responding accordingly, would, in all likelihood, reveal that gender sensitivity is a good business proposition.

Women's needs as listeners and viewers: Few analyses of programming for radio and TV are gender disaggregated. They fail to take account of women's time constraints as a result of their multiple roles and of their preferences with regard to content. As research elsewhere has shown, gender sensitivity in programming could yield significant business gains.

Women as consumers: Women make many of the decisions on household spending. This is yet to be factored in many countries into the way advertising is designed. Is advertising that demeans and turns women into commodities really enlightened self interest on the part of advertisers?

Source: adapted from *Whose News? Whose Views?* edited by Colleen Lowe Morna, Gender Links, 2001