

GENDER SENSITIVE REPORTING

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“Sex” refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.

“Gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.

World Health Organisation

“Gender” is a word which often raises eyebrows within the journalistic world. It tends to be associated with hysterical feminism; women who come riding high horses to moralise and sanitise news media. However, this is a sad and unproductive belief as gender concepts encompass much more and would clearly be beneficial to all if well understood as tools for contributing to creating a healthier and more equitable society.

But first things first. Let us start by defining the word ‘gender’. Gender refers to the characteristics that a society or culture constructs as masculine or feminine. It is deliberately separated from the biological notion of sex which relates to one’s physical makeup by referring instead to the social behaviour aspects of human beings. This means that gender is not necessarily fixed, binary or final. Also, although gender has historically been associated with women’s movements and still remain largely so, the term now encompasses alternative forms of gender beyond

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the neat male-female dichotomy to cover LGBT as well (i.e. Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals).

According to Judith Butler, gender is performative, that is, it is actively produced within social interactions. Media being an integral part of the process of social construction, it is thus legitimate to explore the gender dimensions of news production and reception. Especially given that the gatekeeping, filtering and agenda-setting aspects of news production set the stage for possible homogenisation of worldviews which are spread within society. The discourses and opinions of some social groups which are amplified by the media have the potential to become tools of power. Voices which seek to challenge the gender status quo often remain unheard or underrepresented. Stereotypes get reinforced and gender representations are reduced to their most simplistic expression. These standardised mental pictures which are conveniently used as shortcuts for simplifying the world unfortunately have far reaching impacts on our worldview and thus need to be debunked.

The workshop on gender-sensitive reporting, which was also held in October 2012, aimed to address such gender-based stereotypes in the media. It provided guidelines on how to become a gender-sensitive reporter. Gender-insensitivity in reporting and language were also highlighted so that participants are aware of this issue.

The production of meaning

According to the media marxists theorists, most media texts contain a 'preferred' or 'dominant' meaning (Hall, 1973). The media serve 'to reinforce a consensual viewpoint by using public idioms and by claiming to voice public opinion' (Woollacott, 1982). The media use their ideological power to reproduce and reinforce the viewpoints of dominant classes as obvious, central and 'natural' (Curran et al, 1982).

Of course, more liberal theorists believe that although there may be intentions inscribed by news producers within their texts, there exist possibilities for the news consumers to create their own alternative or resistant reading (Fiske, 1989 and Hall, 1973) and some even become producers of meaning themselves (notion of 'bricolage' and guerilla

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tactics by Michel de Certeau, 1980) and activate meanings in texts. For them, the media are potential enablers of ideas and meanings and can thus promote diversity and difference, which may in turn lead to social change.

The question remains though how far the media are using such potential for positive social change.

In this publication, we do not aim to point fingers at news people. Instead, constructive criticism is warranted here as we know full well that individual journalists may not necessarily have a particular gender bias of their own volition. Indeed, we are aware that there are many factors which come into play, to cite a few:

- the individual's upbringing, life experiences and socialisation,
- the policy and editorial line of the media house,
- the economic pressures leading to cost-cutting and thus favouring less expensive forms of reporting with little or no verification,
- the competition for eyeballs leading to sensationalist stories with cheap angles,
- the limited availability of on-the-job training and coaching for young journalists but also for senior journalists to keep abreast of social developments.

Taking all the above in consideration, we thus need to fill the gap in terms of awareness and knowledge about gender issues in general and also understand how to avoid gender biased reporting and ensure there is more attention to gender balance in the news.

"We know that quality journalism is ethical journalism, and that ethical journalism includes full and fair representation of the actions, opinions, concerns and aspirations of women around the world"

(WACC's Deputy General Secretary Lavinia Mohr)

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Monitoring of media: some statistics

The most recent source of statistics about gender in the media is the 2010 Southern African Gender and Media Progress Study (GMPS) conducted by Gender Links in several countries of the Southern African region including Mauritius. Although some progress has been noted over the last five years, there is still a long way to go towards achieving balance both in the composition of the newsroom and in the representation of women and their views in the Mauritian media.

Who owns the media and who are top executives?

All of the key owners of leading media houses are men. Although there are more and women in media houses, the number of women in decision-making positions is still very limited (23% women in top management positions) and no big media owner is a woman. To date, all of the four leading daily newspapers (Le Défi Quotidien, L'express, Le Matinal, Le Mauricien) are headed by men and only one woman is editor-in-chief of a weekly out of the four leading weeklies (Week-End, Défi Plus, 5-Plus Dimanche, Le Défi/L'Hebdo). In radio stations, where there used to be one woman editor-in-chief, there is now none.

Neither is there any senior woman journalist in charge of 'serious' talk shows whereas there used to be a few some years ago. Although there are higher numbers of women in the profession, they seem to be generally confined to the lower echelons and be given preference for softer beats and magazine / feature types of programmes focusing on fashion, celebrity and domestic topics.

Who produces the news?

The GMPS notes that there is an increase in the number of women working in media houses, especially in the radio stations. However, the repartition of roles is still largely in favour of the male journalists with 71% of reporters which means that women are given less opportunities to engage in the core journalistic activities (i.e. sourcing, interviewing, writing and editing). This is in contrast to the fact that most TV presenters are women (64%), a position which tends to foreground physical looks over

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intellect. Women journalists are not in charge of peak hour programmes, especially live news talk shows and phone-in programmes.

Whose voices are heard? How are gender roles represented?

A November 2012 IFJ article states that: *“The 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project revealed a global average of barely one woman in every four people was seen, heard or read about in news stories. This is an improvement from 15 years ago when it was less than one in five. However, the pace is slow.”* In Mauritius, the proportion is even lower with a meagre one out of five ratio according to the 2010 Gender and Media Progress Study for Mauritius. Indeed, sources which are used for the production of news stories are overwhelmingly male (81%). The study rightly highlights the fact that many stories use a single source, which in itself is an ethical issue as the practice does not reflect the need for balance in reporting.

The imbalance in terms of the representation of gender roles also remains a live issue as men’s voices are most likely to be heard on ‘serious’ issues such as politics, economics, employment, sustainable development and also sports. Women’s voices are most likely to be heard in ‘softer’ areas and are thus associated to the domestic sphere (about issues linked to the family and the upbringing of children) or specific problematic gender issues (gender violence, sex trade) and beauty-related stories.

Even though there has been an increase in the representation of women as business people, this is often compounded by reference to the subjects as homemakers or to their physical appearance. Not only are women more likely to be used as presenters, they are also more likely to be the subject of graphic depiction as part of the news stories, often with deliberate attempts to choose sexy angles to titillate the news consumer.

According to the 2010 Southern African Gender and Media Progress Study, *“Women are more likely to be identified by a personal tag than men: Of the sources identified by a personal tag, women sources make up 20%, such as mother, wife or daughter as compared to 16% of men being identified as father, son or husband.”*

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Avoiding sexism in language used

As seen above, important issues such as gender are framed by the way language is used by the media. The choice of words and expressions reflects and even reinforces gender power dynamics. Gaye Tuchman denounces the fact that women are typically subjected to symbolic annihilation in the media through under representation (omission) or misrepresentation (trivialisation or condemnation).

Consider the case of the obituary initially published by The New York Times for pioneering rocket scientist Yvonne Brill which started as follows:

“She made a mean beef stroganoff, followed her husband from job to job and took eight years off from work to raise three children. “The world’s best mom,” her son Matthew said. But Yvonne Brill, who died on Wednesday at 88 in Princeton, N.J., was also a brilliant rocket scientist.”

As noted by Jessica Siegel in the Columbia Journalism Review, *“the surprise is the combination of domestic skills with rocket science.”* She aptly recalls that the AP Stylebook states: *“Copy should not gratuitously mention family relationships when there is no relevance to the subject. Copy should not express surprise that an attractive woman can be professionally accomplished. Use the same standards for men and women in deciding whether to include specific mention of personal appearance or marital and family situation.”*

A careful use of language is necessary in the media. Journalists should strive to use neutral terms as much as possible and avoid assumptions about gender roles. The use of common representations, for example about women being the carers of the family or about the need for them to be beautiful and sexy, only serve to reinforce and legitimate such stereotypes. Also, one can never be too cautious nowadays when making reference to the type of relationships people portrayed in the news are engaged in, for example about marriage or gender of the partner. Assumptions about conventional relationships may misrepresent reality.

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“[...] language does not merely reflect the way we think: it also shapes our thinking. If words and expressions that imply that women are inferior to men are constantly used, that assumption of inferiority tends to become part of our mindset. Hence the need to adjust our language when our ideas evolve.” (UNESCO Guideline on Gender-Neutral Language, 1999)

A good starting point is the above guide which provides a helpful list of tricks and terms which can be used in order to avoid sexism in language. For example, it advocates the use of neutral or plural forms.

Usual term	May be replaced by
man	person, human being, people, humanity...
businessmen	business people, business executives
chairman	chairperson, president
firemen	firefighters
landlord	owner, proprietor
layman	layperson, novice
salesman	sales representative, shop assistant
spokesman	spokesperson
Mr and Mrs John Smith	Jane and John Smith
Miss and Mrs	Ms

The UNESCO Guideline also recommends the use of punctuation to highlight bias or rewriting as in the following examples:

The husband lets his wife work	The husband ‘lets’ his wife work
He helps her with the household chores	They share household chores
Dinner will be provided for delegates and their wives	Dinner will be provided for delegates and their spouses/partners

The French version of the UNESCO Guideline lists the following terms and phrases as being problematic as they carry simplistic assumptions about the gender automatically associated to the functions represented:

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- *Les hommes politiques*
- *Les infirmières*
- *La secrétaire*
- *L'homme de loi*
- *Le panier de la ménagère*
- *L'homme de la rue*
- *Les hommes d'affaires*

Women have the right to be treated in the media as individual persons who exist in their own right rather than as someone's other (wife, mother, grandmother, and sister). As such, they should not be depicted as the possessions of husbands or fathers.

Patronising terms such as 'little lady', 'better half' are a total no-no. Similarly, references to little girls as princesses carry the assumption that society expects them to prepare for a lifetime obsession with beauty enhancement tips and cosmetics. As stated by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor at a Sesame Street , 'princess' is not a career. Continuous force feeding of stereotypes related to canons of beauty no doubt has a great influence on little girls who are groomed to be avid consumers of cosmetics and beauty enhancement products.

"Every women knows that, regardless of her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful... The UK beauty industry takes £8.9 billion a year out of women's pockets. Magazines financed by the beauty industry teach little girls that they need make-up and train them to use it, so establishing their lifelong reliance on beauty products."

(Germaine de Greer, 1999)

Covering women in power

The coverage of news related to women who are associated to power circles is unfortunately also quite dichotomous, swinging from one extreme to the other, that is either that of a 'feminine' and caring weaker sex or that of a tough masculinised leader who betrays her feminity.

Partners or spouses of men who are candidates (e.g. Bill Clinton, Nicolas Sarkozy, Barack Obama, Tony Blair) have been regularly subjected to

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attention of a particular kind which would not necessarily be the case for partners or spouses of women candidates (e.g. Hilary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Ségolène Royal, Angela Merkel). Media coverage has tended to focus on their merit (or lack thereof) as beauty icons, as *“faire-valoir”* during the campaign and even during the mandate in case of success. Women candidates are themselves subjected to extra scrutiny as compared to their male counterparts, often bordering on sexual voyeurism.

Journalists should take care to ensure that their reporting on women candidates, politicians or other public figures does not discriminate on the basis of gender. A good set of questions to be used for testing for discrimination could be:

- Would I report this element if it was a man?
- Would I use the same adjectives and expressions if it was a man?
- Would I present the elements of the news story in the same order if it was a man?
- Would the pictures used be of the same type if it was a man? For instance, am I trying to focus on parts of her body?

On the other hand, women who do succeed are often assumed to be ruthless and to have adopted a male attitude, with the subtext that they are to be viewed with suspicion for having allegedly betrayed their own sex.

As for feminist movements, they tend to be given coverage only for specific occasions flagged as ‘women-only’ events. The case of the recent movement Femen warrants attention as they are highly sexualised due to their radical use of nudity to promote their views (lately termed ‘sextremists’) and media people are often too happy to cover the movement’s actions without really delving into the ideas related to feminist struggles.

“The permanent reduction of women to their bodies and their sexuality, the negation of their intellectual abilities, the social invisibility of women who cannot please the male gaze: these are keystones of the patriarchal system,” writes Mona Chollet in an article entitled ‘The fast-food feminism of the topless Femen’ in *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

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Eroticisation of news

Such hyper-sexualisation and eroticisation occurs not only for what could be termed women-related stories but also for unrelated news stories such as those focusing on sports, technology and cars for instance. The use of pictures of slim, young, fair-skinned, sexy hostesses presenting latest cars and gadgets is very often gratuitous and destined to 'embellish' the page and titillate the senses of male readers. They also brainwash female readers into believing that they have to strive to resemble these models to be beautiful. The same may be said of celebrity and fashion pages which are loaded with pictures and little text. These pages in newspapers and magazines are an easy pretext for splashing images of semi-nude female bodies in a bid to sell more.

Covering sex-related news stories

As for ordinary people, they are also the victims of discriminatory reporting, especially in cases involving sexual aggression and rape under crime sections (*faits divers* in French). There is unfortunately little regard for the protection of the identity of such victims. Even if real names are not cited, often descriptions of place of abode or work, photographs and other clues are carelessly thrown in the report such that identification is made easy. Reporters evoke the fact that the person has given permission to include these in the papers but such victims are often unaware of the possible stigma to which they may further be subjected as a result of media coverage which allows their identification.

Beyond issues of identification, there are also problems of eroticisation and intrusive journalism. The way we speak or write about sexual aggression may affect the perception of the public, blur the line between the victim and the aggressor or encourage voyeurism in the audience. When the victims are inaccessible, reporters may be tempted to rely on third parties (e.g. neighbours, co-workers) to obtain details about the victim and perpetrator, leading to inaccurate reporting with hearsay, rumours and hurtful innuendos. All these result in additional trauma for the victims, especially if coupled with harassment to obtain more information.

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“[M]edia coverage that is sometimes viewed as insensitive, voyeuristic, and uncaring can compound victims’ emotional and psychological suffering. Most crime victims have never before dealt with the news media. They are thrust, often unwillingly, into a limelight they do not seek and do not enjoy solely because of the crimes committed against them. Many victims describe the initial assault from the perpetrator, a secondary assault from the criminal justice system, and a tertiary assault at the hands of the news media. As ABC News and Political Analyst Jeff Greenfield explained in 1986, “What weighs in the scale is not simply the desire of a victim for privacy... but the prospect of further victimization beyond the involuntary thrust into the public arena. And this is something that the journalism community must begin to consider in its daily business.” (Ethics of news media in covering cases of sexual crimes, United States Department of Justice, 2004)

This is not to say that there should not be any coverage of sex-related news stories. Rather than exploit the sensationalist aspects of sex-crime stories, the media can actually play a positive role in society by providing ethical, non-sensationalist coverage. For instance, they can and sometimes do attract the attention of the public to increases in cases of sexual violence, the effectiveness of policies and measures to prevent and reduce such social plagues as well as the network of support which may exist for victims of sexual aggression. In the long run, media coverage can contribute to lifting the veil on hitherto taboo issues and even changes in policy, legislation and law enforcement.

Covering LGBT

As for sexual minorities such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender, there are no formal statistics about media composition and coverage, possibly due to the persistent taboo around such groups of people in a relatively conservative society. However, a cursory look at coverage shows that they are subjected to the same kind of discrimination as heterosexual women. They are more often than not associated with sexual misbehaviour and sex-crime as victims or perpetrators without necessary caution about identification, right to privacy, eroticisation and voyeurism.

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Gender in existing codes of ethics

There is currently only one statutory code of ethics which applies to the broadcasting sector only: the IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority) Code of Ethics. As for the written press, various associations have proposed codes of conduct without any formal adoption or commitment of the media actors, the latest one being the NEPA (Newspapers Editors and Publishers Association) Code of Conduct. Individual media houses have also adopted their own codes but only La Sentinelle has really publicised its code and set up an internal mechanism for monitoring and mediation for a certain period of time.

The IBA Code of Ethics

There is no specific reference to gender issues in the code apart from the caution to avoid discrimination and offence on the basis of 'race, colour, age, sex, religion, social origin, marital status, physical or mental disability'. It does however state that 'Broadcasters should not add to the distress of people involved in emergencies or personal tragedies' and that portrayal of sexual behaviour and nudity to be contextualised and scheduled appropriately and that there should be no crudity. There is also a specific section for children and the code states that '(...) children under 16 involved in police enquiries or court proceedings relating to sexual offences should not be identified in news or other programmes.' and that 'Due care must be taken over the physical and emotional welfare and the dignity of children who take part or are otherwise involved in programmes.'

The NEPA Code of Conduct

This code also refers to discrimination with respect to ethnic group, caste, colour, creed, sex or sexual orientation and disability. It asks journalists to be careful not to reveal the identity of victims of sexual aggression and prohibits the identification of children aged up to 16 in cases of sexual aggression with special precautions in cases of incests. "*La presse veillera à ne pas révéler l'identité des victimes d'agressions sexuelle et s'abstiendra de publier des informations qui aideraient à leur identification sauf circonstances exceptionnelles.*"

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Code de Déontologie de la Sentinelle

This internal code has clauses which cover forms of discrimination (race, physical appearance, religion, sex and disability) with a special mention for racist, sexist and homophobic consequences of reporting: “[*Le journaliste*] exerce une grande vigilance face à ce qui pourrait provoquer des réactions racistes, sexistes, homophobes, etc.”

It also specifies that identification of victims of sexual aggression should be avoided, especially in the case of minors.

A model: The Tanzania Media Gender Code of Ethics

Tanzania is one of the few countries of the continent which has deemed it necessary to have a specific gender code of ethics for journalism, which has been adopted by stakeholders in 2009. The Media Council of Tanzania thus has a Media Gender Code of Ethics which is meant to be read together with its Professional Code of Ethics for Journalists. This code starts by providing a useful definition of terms such as discrimination, gender stereotyping, negative gender portrayal and sexist language. The main sections cover the following:

- Accuracy and fairness: equal space for men and women, more gender specific coverage to challenge stereotypes, training for journalists and continuous learning on gender issues
- Balance, credibility and impartiality: diversity regardless of social standing, involvement of women in production of gender related programmes
- Accountability: holding all policy makers accountable for gender mainstreaming
- Gender stereotyping: avoiding identification of sexual violence, exploitation of women and children as helpless or deserving victims, degrading women, gender oppression and stereotyping, glamourising violence against women, depiction of sexual acts
- Language: use of sexist language, oversimplification, respect for dignity
- Marketing and advertising: gender stereotyping and negative portrayals

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- Gender sensitivity within workplaces: gender balance in recruitment and selection policies, inclusive access to training and mentoring, sexual harassment policies, equal opportunities in allocation of news beats, career pathing and promotion.

Conclusion

Beyond the simplistic representation of gender wars as a simple women against men struggles reserved for hysterical moralising feminists or brainless extremists, gender sensitive reporting is essential to contributing to a more balanced representation of society. Sane relations between different gender groups at all levels of society rest on a respectful and dignified representation of all actors as well as appropriate space for diverse voices.

This is why a Gender Code of Ethics for the Media is being proposed for adoption by all media houses either as part of their internal code of ethics or as part of the common code of ethics to be adopted by the industry as a whole.

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A Gender Code of Ethics for the Media

Gender equality is an integral part of freedom of expression as all gender categories have the right to be heard and seen in the public sphere as full-fledge citizens participating in a democratic society. Gender balance is thus important in news reporting. Equally important is the need to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes.

Journalists endeavour to recognise the diversity of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, ability, sexuality, age and class. They shall strive to eliminate discrimination on the basis of gender from their respective publication and pledge to put more effort to provide for more balance, fairness and accuracy in their reports. They shall strive to be inclusive by seeking a diversity of voices rather than rely solely on usual male dominant sources.

Journalists and media houses shall NOT:

- use discriminatory or sexist language. In case they are citing such language as used by the subjects of their articles, they shall use appropriate quotation marks and reporting verbs while taking care not to promote or support the person quoted.
- depict women in general as inferior, secondary class citizens.
- resort to gender stereotyping of roles (e.g. loving, caring women, tough men, effeminate gays, masculinised lesbians, etc.).
- have recourse to the commoditisation of the female body and gratuitous sexualised and eroticised views of women who are portrayed in the news.
- pander to lurid curiosity.
- publish the identity (name, picture) of rape victims and victims of sexual violence and other sexual offences without informed consent. They shall take all precautions to protect the identity of such victims so that the latter are not subjected to stigmatisation

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and further trauma.

- glamourise violence against women and sexual minorities such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender (LGBT).
- advocate hatred based on gender, nor incite to cause harm.
- encourage misogyny and the reinforcement of patriarchy.

In the workplace, media houses shall allow journalists to work across a diversity of beats, irrespective of gender category. They shall ensure that selection, recruitment, career pathing, capacity building, training, fast tracking and promotion are devoid of gender discrimination and that there is no tolerance for sexual harassment in the workplace. They shall encourage friendly work practices and mutual respect between men and women. Media houses shall encourage the active pursuit of knowledge in gender issues and incorporate same in their training programmes. They shall develop policies to ensure gender balance in coverage and gender equality in the workplace.

This Gender Code of Ethics should be read in line with any General Code of Ethics, whether developed by media houses, media associations or regulators.

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