

GENDER EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE MEDIA: POLICY INTERVENTION IN EUROPE

R. Basílio Simões, I. Amaral, S. Correia Santos

University of Coimbra (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

This paper is focused on gender, media and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Through the analysis of relevant policy documents about the media, the access to and use of ICTs adopted by European institutional players in the last twenty years, we identify and discuss the presence of gender-focused principles and the media dimensions they targeted. By analysing what was deemed important to promote equality and diversity, we highlight the relatively poor integration of specific gender-focused policy intervention and discuss how this relates to the progress achieved in the gender and diversity domain.

Keywords: Gender equality, Diversity, Media, Policy intervention.

1 INTRODUCTION

The media and the access to and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have long been understood as key issues to improve gender equality and women's and men's life. The first concerted international efforts to highlight the nuclear role of the media and ICTs can be traced back to the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), where the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) was adopted. The document acknowledged the media as one of 12 "critical areas of concern" regarding gender equality.

Two strategic goals are covered by the so-called Section J of BPfA: (i). to "increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication"; (ii). to "promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media" (BPfA, 1995: paragraphs 234–245). These two focal points placed the issue of women, ICTs, and equality on the international agenda and demand for different kind of actions to be taken by governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media industries and media professional associations.

Several innovations in designing the promotion of equality, development and peace for women around the world are attributed to the BPfA, which stills stands as an important reference document for the international community in tandem with its follow-up documents ([1], [2]). The BPfA drove away policy from women-focused programs toward a gender mainstreaming approach, defined by the United Nations as "situating gender issues at the centre of policy decisions, institutional structures and resource allocation" [3]. Gender mainstreaming has since acquired a high level of consensus among development practitioners and different kind of stakeholders. This means the systematic integration of women's and men's conditions, priorities and needs into all actions designed to intervene in different spheres of life.

More recently, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets Gender Equality as one of a set of 17 Goals all countries, and not just the developing ones, must achieve, pointing out to the role of media and ICTs in women's empowerment.

What kind of institutional efforts at the European level echoing these international interventions focused on the topic of women in the media and access and use of ICTs is what concern us here. Through the analysis of relevant policy documents about the media, the access to and use of ICTs adopted by European institutional players in the last twenty years, we identify and discuss the presence of gender-focused principles and the media dimensions they targeted.

1.1 Media, Gender, and Inequality

Issues of gender and minority representation have been a major concern of feminist, transnational, and multicultural studies in the past decades. Scholars of this wide-ranging area explore into gender, class, race, ethnic, and sexuality issues regarding politics, economics, culture, media, and ICTs, revealing the complexities of the interconnections between them. While theories and perspectives focusing these subjects may differ epistemologically, a common thread is the notion that both gender and representations are social constructions with emancipatory potential.

The gender dimension of representation allows us to recognise that the images, the semantic universes, the argumentation that circulates in contemporary public spheres can both contribute to reproduce or overcome patriarchal systems and oppressive discursive structures. Other socially constructed categories with which gender intersects, like race and ethnicity, also shape, constrain, and produce cultural politics, structuring contemporary life.

Although well recognised by scholars, the transformative potential of media representations is proven to be limited, particularly in the face of the economic and status-quo oriented interests of the media industry ([4], [5]). Concerns with the prevailing patterns of prejudice and discrimination run along the lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality, at least since the 1970s ([6], [7]). Developed in the wake of these concerns, the concept of 'symbolic annihilation' [8] grasps the way how powerful social institutions like the media routinely suppress powerless groups by marginalising them in their discursive practices.

In 2015, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), the largest and longest-running longitudinal study of gender and news on an international scale [9], reported that 24 per cent of all news stories across the world's media focus specifically on women. Furthermore, just like in previous editions, the representation of women within all forms of media continue to be highly segregated, with the biggest gender gap in political news reporting [10].

Findings from GMMP also show the under-representation of women as news media professionals. Women comprise 39 per cent of journalists, which slightly improved the global GMMP average of 37 per cent, but still reflects the horizontal segregation and the several gender gaps on women's employment in news media research have been documenting ([11], [12], [13], [14]).

Other studies indicate that women's position in decision-making is unequal compared to men's [15]. While employment trends show that women entered media industries in ever-increasing numbers, women continue to face glass-ceiling barriers inside media companies [12]. While education statistics suggest that more women than men are studying for media-related professions, women still struggle to advance their careers [16].

1.2 Gender mainstreaming policy and the media

Although feminist scholarship has been slow to engage with the domain of media and communication policy, their concerns have always been linked to policy issues [17]. Also, by providing evidence of the under-representation of women embedded within the media sector, research has created, at least at some level, media awareness, and fostered gender and diversity advocacy in different and interconnected geographical contexts.

Echoing feminist research and linking back to the Area J of BPfA, some strategies and initiatives on combating gender stereotyping and misrepresentation, as well as women's marginalisation and professional discrimination in media industries were produced in the national, regional and international context in the past decades ([1], [2]).

Likewise, indicators against which media organisations can be measured to determine the extent to which they are actively engaged in promoting a gender-equality and diversity agenda were created. This is the case of the Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM), released by UNESCO in 2012 and designed to act as an extension of a previous effort in this domain directed to the developing world, the Media Development Indicators (MDIs) [18]. In an attempt to encourage media organisations to make gender equality issues transparent, while promoting the analysis of their own internal policies and practices, GSIM is presented as a non-prescriptive set of indicators, which seek to address the intersection of women's empowerment and media development [19].

Historically, gender equality as a key factor in the European community's policies predates the Beijing Conference, but the recognition of gender mainstreaming as a nuclear strategy followed the BPfA. Gender mainstreaming in EU policies has been said to mean the improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated into all policies at all levels and all stages. Sarikakis and Nguyen [20] traced its institutionalisation to the European Commission's Fourth Medium Term Action Programme for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, which signalled a shift in EU's equality legislation beyond equal treatment in the workplace to a far-reaching nuclear goal of the Union. In the following years, a set of institutions and procedures aimed at mainstreaming gender issues across EU policies were created, including policies about the media and ICTs, and among them, we can find procedures to monitor and evaluate its efficacy [20].

In the European context, gender-aware strategies and media-focused policies are prolific. However, policies specifically directed at the media sector, which articulate a strong commitment to gender equality are proven to be scarce and limited in its scope [21]. Also, the effectiveness of existing media policies is highly contested ([20], [17]).

2 METHODOLOGY

Against this backdrop, we used qualitative document analysis to identify what was deemed essential to promote equality and diversity within media policy. Qualitative document analysis is an iterative method that combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis ([22], [23]). This methodological approach was mobilised to systematise policy documents directed to the media and use and access to ICTs and oriented to promote gender equality and diversity. We analysed and categorised relevant European policy instruments from the last twenty years to identify their main principles and their articulation with the different communication and media dimensions: production, content, reception, and ICTs.

3 RESULTS

In the last two decades, the inclusion of a specific gender-focus on relevant policy documents at the European community level rarely takes media into account. Media-driven instruments often ignore or marginalised gender and equality and diversity advocacy. When they articulate in substantial ways this focus, they do not reflect an integrated perspective of the different and intersectional essential dimensions of communication and the media: i). the industries arrangements where the content production happens, including the decision-making matters and the governing boards of organisations; ii). the content itself; iii). the domain of reception, which encompasses namely media and journalism curricula and information literacy programs; iv). ICTs, whose importance can extend from access to digital technologies to the ability to engage in alternative media.

Table 1 shows a set of representative instruments of action, the institutional European Union players that generated them, their main principles and the communication and media dimension/s deemed essential to promote gender equality and diversity.

Table 1. European Union Policy Instruments.

	<i>Document</i>	<i>Institutional Players</i>	<i>Principles</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>
2007	Television without Frontiers Directive (TVWF Directive 89/552/ECC and its subsequent amendments, including Directive 2007/65/EC)	Parliament European and Council of the European Council	Audio-visual regulation: sex discrimination.	Content
2006	Roadmap for Equality Between Women and Men (2006-2010)	European Commission	Elimination of gender stereotypes: actions directed to the media, mainly to promote a dialogue between authorities and different stakeholders.	Content
2004	Council Directive 2004/113/EC	Council of European Union	Implement the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services. This directive should not be implemented in all media content, advertisement, nor education.	Production
2001	Frameworks strategy on gender equality (2001-2005)	European Commission	Gender mainstreaming: national awareness of education and good practices in the media.	Content Reception
2000	Follow up to the Peking action platform 2000-2020 (INI)	European Parliament	Women's rights and equal opportunities: supporting a more positive and realistic portrayal and image of women in the media; advancing the role of women in decision-making in the media industries; access to information, to the media and new technologies.	Content Production ICT

Critics point out that the attempts to regulate the gender stereotyping in media content, the professional discrimination in the media industries, and the unequal access to new ICTs have always been met with a “laissez-faire approach” from the EU’s institutions [20]. Provisions of a soft nature and which do not disturb the economic priorities of the media industry disguised inaction and effective steps for gender equality end up reliant on the willingness of individual media organisations to implement change. As Gallagher [17] contends: “Token or ritualistic references to ‘gender issues’ within policy statements are often presented as gender mainstreaming, though this actually calls for thorough assessment of the gender implications of policy and serious consideration of women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences in policy elaboration.” This is certainly true, but our analysis highlights another problematic factor: the absence of instruments articulating a meaningful communication and media focus, that is, calling to collation and intersecting the different dimensions of the media system: production, content, reception and ICTs.

4 CONCLUSIONS

While the poor integration of specific gender-focused principles into European Union media policy-relevant documents is not new, substantial improvements in the last years were expected, given the poor effectiveness of existing media policies and the well-known strong resistance from media industries [17]. However, to take advantage of the transformative potential of media representations, equality policies also need to integrate a more complex framework of the media, one that incorporates gender equality and diversity in all the meaningful spheres. This would offer new opportunities to gender mainstreaming policy and foster equality, diversity, and social justice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was financed by national Portuguese funds through FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia) in the framework of the project “(De)Coding Masculinities: Towards an enhanced understanding of media’s role in shaping perceptions of masculinities in Portugal” (Reference PTDC/COM-CSS/31740/2017).

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