



PRIMED

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

GLOBAL

Gender

LEARNING BRIEF



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Introduction

This learning brief aims to summarise key issues, evidence and trends on media and gender and help PRIMED partners identify opportunities to empower women as both media consumers and content producers as well as to amplify the voices of women in the media. It explores the links between improved gender equality in the workplace and the sustainability and viability of the media (a business case of gender equality). The brief also considers content formats which can promote gender equality in the public sphere and examines the role of self-regulation in ensuring that women are more fairly represented in media outputs.

About PRIMED

Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED) is a three-year programme to support the provision of public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. PRIMED seeks to build the resilience of public interest media to political and economic pressures that are undermining viability, and to develop information ecosystems that enable a better flow of trusted public interest media content. With a strong focus on research and learning, PRIMED is also looking to shape media development policy and practice globally. PRIMED is implemented by a consortium of media support organisations with expertise in different aspects of media and development.



Key Challenges

Women are poorly represented in media content

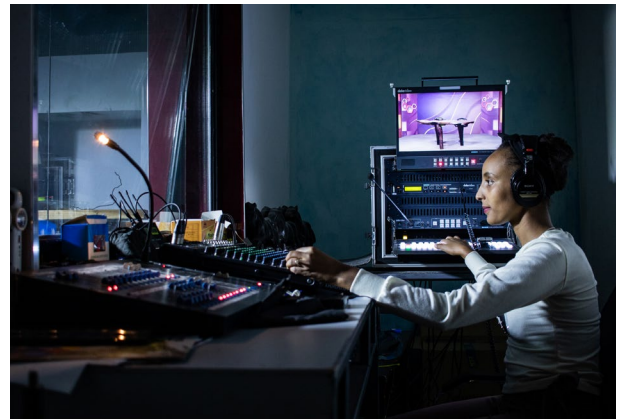
According to the 2020 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP¹), women make up only 25% of the persons heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television and radio news, only a move of 1% higher since the study was conducted in 2015 and 2010. When women are featured in media, they are often portrayed in a stereotypical way, for example as victims or mothers. The GMMP study found that women were least present in news about politics and government with only 24% of news subjects – the people interviewed or whom the news is about – were women².

Women appear to be better represented in entertainment programming. A gender monitoring study of audio-visual media in South Africa found that 48% of characters in entertainment programming were women – a far higher proportion than those who appeared in news stories³. However, the report also highlighted a marked absence of older women, especially in news content.

Media perpetuate stereotypes

According to the Girls' Attitude Survey in UK, women most commonly see gender stereotypes perpetuated on social media, with nearly two thirds of respondents aged 11-21 saying they often see or hear stereotypes on TV, in films, magazines and newspapers⁴. The survey suggests that gender stereotypes perpetuated by media cause women to change their behaviour because of the pressure they feel to be or act in a certain way.

Plan International and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media also conclude that, "In general our most popular films are sending the message that leadership is primarily a male domain. Women leaders are subject to the male gaze and not really 'in charge'. They come with the label 'sex object' still attached and these conditions are not encouraging for girls and young women⁵."



▲ Journalist at work at Asham, a PRIMED partner station in Ethiopia. Credit: Genaye Eshetu/MDIF

Women lack access to information

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, existing gender norms and inequalities can be magnified and multiplied through a lack of access to information⁶. OECD states, "Lack of access to information, resources and services (together with gender stereotypes, inequalities and cultural restrictions) can make certain women and girls (...) more vulnerable to shocks and stresses, ranging from natural disasters to macroeconomic shocks⁷."

Different consumption habits

Research from the US shows that the news genres consumed by women and men are different. Research by the Media Insights Project found that women are more likely to follow news on schools and education, health and medicine, lifestyle topics and entertainment and celebrities. Men are more likely to follow foreign or international news and sports news⁸.

In some regions, women and men may access different types of media. Bosch (2014) shows that, across Africa, "women widely consume radio, with many choosing to listen to community radio stations, though data is sparse concerning gendered access to or ownership of mobile phones". A study of community radio in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea concludes that it is still difficult for women to engage with their local radio stations which are still dominated by men



and do not address the listening needs of women, especially as political and economic actors⁹.

Digital gender divide

The Global Gender Gap Report of 2018 by GSMA concluded that women in low- and middle-income countries are, on average, 10% less likely to own a mobile phone than men. Furthermore, when they do own a phone they are less likely to use mobile internet. A report by OECD concludes that the gender divide in Internet use is actually widening in the least developed countries¹⁰. In addition to prohibitive costs, barriers to mobile ownership include low digital literacy and literacy in specific contexts as well as safety and security concerns in Latin America¹¹.

Women are under-represented in the media sector

A study of media companies in 60 countries by the International Women's Foundation found that women comprise 35% of the workforce worldwide and hold 27% of top management positions¹². In a survey of 27,500 journalists in 67 countries, the Worlds of Journalism Study found that 43% were women but noted significant regional differences. Most women journalists were found in Eastern Europe and Russia and least in Asia¹³. Women often report on so-called 'soft topics', such as health and social issues, while men more commonly report on 'hard topics' that are deemed more important, such as politics and economy¹⁴.

Sexual harassment

Women journalists are more likely to be the target of sexual harassment, which can include gender-based harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion¹⁵. In a 2014 survey, it was found that the majority of threats, intimidation and abuse directed at respondents occurred in the workplace and was perpetrated by male bosses, supervisors and co-workers. It also found that most incidents of harassment

“Lack of access to information, resources and services (together with gender stereotypes, inequalities and cultural restrictions) can make certain women and girls (...) more vulnerable to shocks and stresses, ranging from natural disasters to macroeconomic shocks”

OECD

and violence were never reported, even though a majority of women who experienced them said they were psychologically affected¹⁶.

When it comes to online harassment, research shows that journalism is the only sector in which women receive more online abuse than men¹⁷. In a 2018 report on attacks and harassment against women journalists, based on a survey of nearly 600 women practitioners¹⁸, 63% of respondents indicated they had been threatened or harassed online. Of these, approximately 40% said they practised a level of self-censorship as a result of online harassment¹⁹.



SOLUTIONS

The role of media in changing gender norms

A growing body of evidence highlights the potential of media to drive change in gender norms, both through factual and overt communication about gender equality and through popular entertainment programmes that present an alternative vision of gender relations.

Media can share a wider variety of roles and behaviours pertaining to different sexes, thereby helping people of all genders aspire to different futures and contributing to gender equality²⁰. This can be achieved by ensuring an equal representation of women and men in media as well as reporting in a gender-sensitive way.

Media can also play a role in empowering women and girls by providing them with platforms to voice their opinions and participate in public life as well as by raising awareness of issues that affect women and girls and, thereby, influencing public policy²¹. Giving visibility to women can create powerful role models, presenting a picture of society as it could be²².

A report published by MDIF for PRIMED²³ in 2022 pointed to a growing effort by media outlets to produce more diverse content that better reflects society and ensures better representation of women in the news. For example the BBC 50:50 Equality Project which aims at achieving a fair balance of male and female voices has spread to 690 teams taking part internally and 121 partner organisations across 26 countries. Meanwhile in Poland, Agora spearheaded an initiative called NewsMavens, giving voice to women editors to create a daily news roundup about what's most important in Europe from a woman's perspective. In South Africa, QuoteThisWoman+ (QW+) built a database of female experts in different fields that gives mainstream media easy access to women specialists to interview and quote. A similar directory focused on Latin American women experts in different fields was created by Ecuador's digital news site GK.

A report prepared by Free Press Unlimited²⁴ explores what motivates managers of news outlets around the world to promote gender equality in the workplace. Success factors to promote gender equality identified in this research include clear commitment of management, context-sensitive approach and culture, mainstreaming gender affirmative actions, including on safety of women in the workplace, and accountability mechanisms to monitor progress of each of the actions aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace.

Business and management models can change gender equality

Extensive literature has been published about the business case for (gender) diversity in companies. Increased gender diversity appears to have a positive effect on financial performance, talent retention, innovation, reputation, team performance and motivation. Furthermore, there is a clear correlation between women in leadership positions and increased revenue. Companies with more women in executive management have been shown to financially outperform companies that have no women in senior roles. These findings also apply to women in boards of companies²⁵. However, it is important to note that this is a correlation rather than a causal link: it is also possible that well-performing businesses attract more diverse leaders.

Leveraging talent

With women constituting a growing proportion of the workforce, organisations that provide a working environment conducive to gender equality have access to a larger pool of talent, therefore increasing their chances of having well-performing employees²⁶. A 2018 study argued that companies should see gender equality in the workplace as a talent issue. The paper concluded, "Companies... should be putting energy and resources toward recruiting and retaining diverse employees and creating



inclusive workplace cultures where everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute and succeed²⁷.” Indeed, there are numerous studies which show that a better diversity climate and an inclusive leadership style can reduce turnover, increase employee satisfaction and engagements, and improve the performance of diverse teams. By increasing and fostering diversity, companies are able to hire and retain more talented employees²⁸.

Innovation, team performance and motivation

A 2010 report suggests that the ‘collective intelligence’ of a group has a strong correlation to the proportion of women in the group, making for smarter and more effective teams²⁹. Furthermore, more women in leadership roles provide greater motivation for other women to succeed. An absence of role models and lack of mentoring are seen as barriers to career development for women³⁰.

People from diverse backgrounds bring in different ideas and ways of thinking. Translated to the media sector, this can unlock new perspectives and angles to reporting; innovative reporting formats; and, possibly, increased audience engagement. In a context where trust in media is declining and media are struggling to survive, investing in innovation is a crucial driver for media viability.



 Participants in a workshop at the Association of Women Communication Professionals (AFPC) in Central African Republic
Credit: Free Press Unlimited

Reflecting the community and promoting inclusivity

It is commonly argued that having a diverse newsroom should help to tap into a diverse network of sources, thereby improving the ability of media to interpret and contextualise issues and break relevant stories to their audiences. Tapping into underserved women in the audiences could represent a highly attractive business opportunity for media outlets. According to WAN-IFRA, “[By] increasing the skills and leadership abilities of women working in media, news organisations can improve the journalism product, have access to more diverse sources, and become more competitive. This combination puts these news organisations in tune with their communities and showcases the corporate brand as being inclusive and progressive³¹.”

Successful strategies to increase gender equality in the workplace

In its guidelines to create an enabling environment for gender equality in the United Nations system, UN Women distinguishes three thematic areas to increase inclusiveness and diversity, namely: flexible working arrangements, family-friendly policies and common standards of conduct (to reduce misconduct, abuse of power and harassment)³². Examining case studies from multiple media organisations, the report “WINning Strategies” by WAN-IFRA concludes that³³:

- Gender equality and diversity needs to be consistently and forcefully communicated and actively managed, especially by recognised leaders widely respected throughout the organisation.
- There should be enough women at the entry and middle levels of a company to select from and promote in order for there to be parity at the most senior, decision-making levels. Women should occupy all roles and these roles should not be limited to those defined by social or cultural norms.
- Pay equity is vital.
- Mentoring and development programmes are essential. Gender equity occurs, and will



be preserved, only when women are actively cultivated, supported and promoted.

- Sustained efforts and commitment are needed to keep any gains in gender equality and diversity.



A woman British journalist videos a protest in Baghdad in 2003.

Credit: RABIH MOGHRABI/AFP via Getty Images

Protecting women journalists

Women journalists face a double burden as they are being attacked both as journalists and as women, both offline and online. In extreme cases the harassment and attacks they face lead to self-censorship or withdrawal from the public sphere, which is problematic for the journalistic sector as a whole. There is a clear imperative for media organisations to implement strategies to deal with threats to the safety of their women employees. A report by the International Press Institute (IPI) on newsroom strategies to deal with online harassment in Europe³⁴ called for:

- A declared acknowledgment that online harassment directed at journalists represents an attack on the entire newsroom and the recognition that women, as well as members of minority groups, or journalists covering related issues, are targeted more often and in more brutal ways.
- The development of preventive measures, including regular workshops on issues such as online security, emerging topics that tend to attract abuse, or how to cope with the emotional distress that might result from online violence.
- A commitment by newsroom managers to

improving newsroom culture so that journalists feel comfortable in coming forward with their experience of harassment and reporting cases to the police.

- The development of a set of guidelines and protocols to prevent and counter online attacks, highlighting clearly which types of content will be immediately removed and which alternative strategies will be adopted for content that cannot or should not be removed.
- It is important to report cases of threats, sexual harassment and insults to the police in order to increase the understanding of the phenomenon of online harassment among law enforcement and the judiciary.

In addition, Women in News³⁵ urges employers to commit to zero tolerance for harassment and to establish a practical sexual harassment policy, including educating managers about sexual harassment and its prevention in the workplace. The guidelines call for managers to be trained in the application of the policy and employees to be made aware of its provisions. IPI suggests that both formal support mechanisms and (informal) peer support mechanisms need to be in place to tackle harassment³⁶.

Meeting the needs of women

BBC Media Action's analysis of the reach of the media content in its governance projects has shown that three factors influence the extent to which programmes reach women in the audiences: when and where a programme is broadcast; the programme format; and the political context³⁷. Deliberate efforts by media organisations to engage women can have a significant impact on audience engagement and reader revenue strategies.

A common strategy to meet the needs of women audiences is to create content, including online content, specifically for women. With the rise of the importance of online content to inform people, it can be noted that content specifically targeting women is widespread on the internet. It is still a commonly used strategy to attract women in the audience, and in turn providing advertisers with women consumers. In fact, especially online, a number of media outlets specifically targeting women have been developed. They identified a gap in the market



for original and high-quality content for women and many report to have increased subscribers, listeners or open rates for newsletters³⁸.

The same goes for content for other marginalised groups in society. An example in the United Kingdom is Gal-dem; an online and print publication committed to sharing perspectives from women and non-binary people of colour. “They depict the diversity of experience of what it means to be a person of colour today, and are fast becoming lifestyle brands with both online and offline experiences geared toward underrepresented audiences.” However, Harp (2014) argues that including “women’s content” in newspapers suggests that the rest of the publication is for men. Furthermore, this kind of content is often about family, food, lifestyle and fashion (mostly in the private domain), implying that business and politics – the public domain – are the exclusive purview of men³⁹. Harp argues, “Success in the mainstream digital news environment would be women’s news that is integrated, not segregated. (...) Along with integration, success would be about powerful and challenging stories about women’s status and equality in the world to regularly be front-page news⁴⁰.”

Research suggests that featuring more women sources in news could increase audience engagement⁴¹. A common approach is to establish an accessible and easy-to-use database of women experts and sources. This kind of database enables journalists to find sources on specific topics, such as politics, economy, agriculture, and to diversify their sources.

Finally, a gender-equal newsroom is also believed to contribute to more diverse and higher quality content. Research suggests that women are more likely to read and respond to news with a positive framing⁴². Changing the way that issues are framed in media content could, therefore, be a way to attract women audiences. Furthermore, there is also evidence that women journalists are more likely to cover news with a positive framing. Again, this suggests that improved gender equality in the newsroom could contribute to boosting women in the audiences⁴³.

Empowering women through self-regulation

Very little data is available on the role of self-regulatory bodies and mechanisms in promoting gender equality. Most self-regulation mechanisms lack any specific provisions in this regard. For example, in a policy review of EU Member States, EIGE only found six cases of self-regulation that were media- and gender-specific. This included one “general” code of conduct and five codes of self-regulation for public broadcasting.

The report stated, “The mechanisms they have implemented to reach this goal include: gender quotas for the hiring of the staff, provisions to ensure equal payment, and measures to promote employees’ well-being and balance between work and personal life. Consequently, these policies are the most progressive and they could be considered good practices for the broadcasting sectors in the EU countries⁴⁴.”

In certain contexts, women are excluded from press councils and unions or struggle to reach leadership positions in these organisations⁴⁵. The latest data available (2001) found that women journalists represented 28.75% of union membership and 17% of members in union governing bodies⁴⁶. A higher proportion of women is urgently needed if unions are to fully represent the interests and concerns of women journalists and contribute to gender equality in the profession. Journalists’ unions have the potential to address issues such as the gender pay gap; working conditions; access to training and leadership opportunities; harassment and intimidation in the workplace as well as gender portrayal in the media⁴⁷.



Definitions

Gender: Refers to the socially constructed expectations, beliefs, norms attributed to people (of different genders), which are learnt from families and friends in the home, school, the community, workplace as well as the media, religion and the government. They vary from place to place and change over time. Gender may or may not correspond to biological sex.

Gender discrimination: A situation in which people are treated differently simply because of their sex or gender, rather than on the basis of their individual skills or capabilities which leads to disproportionate disadvantages in all spheres of their life.

Gender equality: Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for people of all genders. Gender equality is not a women's issue but should concern and fully engage people of all genders.

Gender inclusiveness: An environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, and have equal access to opportunities and resources, regardless of their gender.

Gender sensitivity: Aim of understanding and taking account of the societal and cultural factors involved in gender-based exclusion and discrimination in the most diverse spheres of public and private life.

Gender stereotypes: These are socially constructed unquestioned and harmful beliefs about the different characteristics, roles and relations of a certain group based on their gender that are reproduced and reinforced through processes such as education and media.

Gender transformative: A gender transformative approach aims to challenge the root causes of gender discrimination by, for example, addressing discriminatory gender norms, stereotypes and unequal power relationships between the sexes.

Women's and girls' empowerment: The process of redistribution of power, by which women and girls gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices. This includes their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a framework for conceptualising a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face.

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PRIMED

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
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Public interest media are vital to open, just societies – they provide trusted news and information, hold the powerful to account and create a platform for debate. Yet truly public interest media are in crisis.

PRIMED (Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development) is a three-year programme to support public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone – addressing critical challenges, building resilience, and sharing research and insight about what works.

Led by BBC Media Action, PRIMED partners include Free Press Unlimited, International Media Support and Media Development Investment Fund, with additional support from Global Forum for Media Development and The Communications Initiative.

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This brief was edited by Michael Randall who has worked in the media development sector for more than 20 years, mostly for BBC Media Action where he led large-scale projects aimed at promoting public interest journalism in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Michael currently works as an independent consultant, focusing on project design and development as well as monitoring, evaluation and learning.
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Front cover photo: Woman TV anchor reporting from a busy market in Pakistan.

Photo credit: Digital Rights Foundation, Pakistan.