

The importance of equality in the media

‘Media’ is the term used to refer to the communication tools that provide us with information and knowledge. However, such communication tools can also fuel hatred, misinformation, and stereotypes.¹

In an equality context, stereotypes need to be explored for their negative effects as they propagate a fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people.² Members of the public often criticize the media for “*perpetuating harmful or unrealistic social stereotypes*”³ based on the grounds of age, race and ethnic origin, religion and belief, gender as well as sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics.

For instance, **young people** are often represented as a problem with news coverage focusing on youth gangs, crime and antisocial behaviour rather than the challenges facing young people or the positive things they do,⁴ while **older people** are often depicted as helpless, fragile, unable to make decisions for themselves, and unable to contribute to society.⁵

Moreover, the way in which people with a minority **racial or ethnic background** are portrayed in the media can also reinforce negative stereotypes that can lead to further inequalities. In many EU Member States, the general climate towards non-EU citizens, including immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees has contributed to a markedly negative climate.⁶ The media also conveys a stereotypical portrayal of different **religions** and cultural groups.⁷ In fact, in Western media, negative stereotypical depictions of the Islam and its followers dominate. Muslims are often associated with low-paid jobs, violence and criminality, and women’s oppression.⁸

Additionally, **LGBTIQ+ persons** in Europe have often been portrayed as a threat to the nation, religion, and traditional notions of gender and the family.⁹ Gender stereotypes are also

¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/media>

² <https://www.simplypsychology.org/katz-braly.html>

³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/media>

⁴ <https://revisesociology.com/2019/09/23/media-representations-of-age/>

⁵ <https://www.helpage.org/blogs/jemma-stovell-22620/challenging-assumptions-on-the-international-day-of-older-persons-1120/>

⁶ <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-10-years-of-combating-racism-in-europe-a-review-of-the-work-of-th/16808c1feb>

⁷ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/153-euromed_en.pdf

⁸ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-658-22681-7_12

⁹ https://www.coe.int/t/Commissioner/Source/LGBT/LGBTStudy2011_en.pdf

prevalent in every day media with imbalanced visibility of women vis-a-vis men. When visible, women are portrayed as less authoritative, less capable, and less serious than men, and commonly framed in stereotypical (home and family-focused), sexualised, or auxiliary roles.¹⁰ On the other hand, **men** are represented as being in power, control, authority.¹¹

Current affairs programmes regularly limit the participation of women experts in a number of areas. When they show up, discussion topics focus on areas that are considered in traditional terms as 'women's topics', such as parenting, fashion, and leisure. In contrast, men continue to predominate in the expert categories concerning politics and finance.¹²

In this context, **media education** is the key to address stereotypes in the field. Media literacy should form an integral part of a lifelong process involving the whole community as it is the community that must learn to challenge and question the media system. Moreover, existing and new regular media programming and productions should reflect the diversity of society and feature fundamental rights and diversity in all their forms.¹³

In this context, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) Online Annual Conference held in May 2021 included a session on stereotypes in different types of media that involved online workshops, during which participants discussed equality in print, broadcasting, and online media. Analysis of the print media included the portrayal of women and men; how female figures are hypersexualised while male figures are positioned to show that they are in control, in a position of power, and assertive. Workshop participants stated that the rise of societal expectations leads to mental health issues since many people are feeling pressured to be something they are not.

Highlighted were the news and current affairs programmes as the most followed information sources. Gender balance was observed in newscasters on a given week. On the contrary, women on local current affairs and discussion programmes are heavily underrepresented. However, women on local broadcasting are present in the so-called 'lighter' programmes

¹⁰ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU\(2018\)596839_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU(2018)596839_EN.pdf)

¹¹ <https://revisesociology.com/2019/11/25/representations-of-men-in-the-media/>

¹² [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU\(2018\)596839_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU(2018)596839_EN.pdf)

¹³ Source: 'Media4Diversity Taking the Pulse of Diversity in the Media: A Study on Media and Diversity in EU Member States and 3 EEA countries'

relating to cuisine and home economics. The hypersexualized and passive portrayal of women in online media, especially on social media was also discussed with a focus on how women are more likely to write derogatory comments on other women's posts than men on online platforms rather than in real life, mainly due to the possibility of anonymity in the former.

In order to counter similar discrimination on the media, the NCPE reviews local newspapers on a daily basis for any such advertisements, as defined by Chapter 456 of the Laws of Malta that safeguards equality in employment and prohibits discriminatory vacancy adverts.

Where discriminatory adverts are identified, the NCPE formally notifies the publisher and suggests alternative wording and actions to be taken. The general public and other stakeholders are encouraged to inform the NCPE of discriminatory adverts so that the necessary action can be taken. It is important to note that the number of discriminatory adverts decreased drastically over the past years. In 2020, 3 discriminatory adverts were identified compared with 43 in 2017.

The NCPE also raises awareness about rights and obligations in relation to equality through various initiatives such as research, awareness raising campaigns, and policy review and recommendations. In 2020, the NCPE provided its input from an equality perspective to an Act to amend the Broadcasting Act, Chapter 350 of the Laws of Malta. Moreover, training sessions are also offered on request to organisations on issues related to equality, including stereotypes.

In April 2021, the NCPE published a [newsletter](#) titled 'Equality in the Media'. The newsletter addressed the current legislation in Malta, stereotypes in the media, cyber violence, the NCPE's role as the national equality body, and recommendations on how the media can promote diversity.

The media is a powerful tool that shapes opinions and influences social values. In this regard, all media organisations have a great responsibility to ensure that fair treatment must also focus on gender, age, race and ethnic origin, religion and belief, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics.



National Commission for the Promotion of Equality

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