

EQUALITY MATTERS

Equality in the media



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Message from the Editor

'Media' is the term used to refer to the communication tools that provide us with important information and knowledge. Different types of media can be used for learning, for news updates and entertainment.

In this context, the rapid development of media technologies and telecommunications has changed the very nature of the media. While such communication tools can encourage participation in the happenings of society, they can also fuel hatred, stereotypes, and misinformation. Many disadvantaged and marginalized groups in our societies are especially vulnerable to these risks due to their gender, age, race and ethnic origin, religion and belief, as well as their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics.

This newsletter features information on the current legislation in Malta eg: Chapter 456 - The Equality for Men and Women Act and Chapter 350 - The Broadcasting Act, the different types of media, stereotypes in the media, and gender equality in the media sector. Reference is also being made to cyber violence, the NCPE's role as the national equality body, and recommendations on how the media can promote diversity.

We augur that you will find this newsletter informative and useful.

Different types of media

Print media (newspapers, magazines, books, banners, billboards, brochures, flyers)

Broadcasting media (television, radio, movies)

Internet media (social media platforms, websites, online forums, podcasts)



The Broadcasting Act - Chapter 350 of the Laws of Malta



According to 'The Broadcasting Act - Chapter 350 of the Laws of Malta' 16K (c) (ii), audiovisual commercial communications provided by media service providers shall not: *"include or promote any discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation"*. [1]

However, such legislation does not impose regulations on **stereotypes in the media**.

Stereotypes in the media

Stereotypes are a fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people. By stereotyping we infer that a person has a whole range of characteristics and abilities that we assume all members of that group have. [2]

Members of the public citizens 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.



Age

Youth are often represented in terms of lifestyle and identity. They are also more likely to be represented as a problem, with a lot of news coverage being dedicated to youth gangs, crime and antisocial behaviour, rather than the challenges facing youth or the positive things they do. [4]

In this regard, the European youth network, Support and Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities (SALTO) has a YOUTH in Action programme that deems that **stereotypes** and **prejudices towards young people** limit youth's self-development and take away their opportunities. [5]

To combat these stereotypes and prejudices, **SALTO-YOUTH** published a **booklet** that aims to give youth workers **practical tools** to improve the image of their target group. [6]

These tools highlight the importance of getting more **positive images** of **inclusion groups** into

the media to counter the often negative news.

Inclusion groups refer to groups of **young people** with fewer opportunities who are facing situations of exclusion or discrimination, **those:**

- from different **cultural backgrounds** e.g. refugees, immigrants, speakers of minority languages,
- facing **social challenges** e.g. discrimination, limited social skills, risky behaviour, in precarious situations, single parents,
- in **economically disadvantaged situations** e.g. homeless, poor, unstable employment or long-term unemployed,
- with **educational problems** e.g. school drop-outs, no qualifications, learning difficulties,
- from **challenging geographical areas** e.g. remote or rural areas, urban problem areas, disadvantaged neighbourhoods,
- with a **disability** or **health problems** etc.



Older people are often assumed to be helpless, fragile, unable to make decisions for themselves, need to be protected, and unable to contribute to society. Another **common stereotype** about older people is that they do not know how to use technology. These stereotypes lead to further age discrimination

and undermine people's inclusion and participation as they age. [7]

In this context, **AGE Platform Europe** published guidelines to avoid stereotypical communication when talking about ageing and older people. [8]

Language

Instead of...

Catastrophic terms about growing population of older people ("time bomb", "silver tsunami")

References to youth to describe older age ("accumulated youth") or positive aspects of one's personality ("young at heart")

Terms that are homogenising and stoking stereotypes ("seniors", "elderly")

Pronouns ("they", "them") or framing that are "other-ing" older people as a group to set aside assuming they are different from "we"

Possessive assuming older people are someone's property ("our older people")

Adjectives around frailty to describe a whole age group ("vulnerable", "at risk" population)

Prefer to...

Talk affirmatively about long and healthier lives and ageing as opportunity

Use direct affirmation of being old ("I'm old and that's ok") or alternative adjectives to describe positive aspects of one's personality

Use "older people" or "older adults" that are more neutral

Use "we" and "us" pronouns in reference to the universal experience of ageing and giving a voice to self-advocates

Remove the possessive pronouns

Specify the risk factors that are putting people in situations of vulnerability



Images

- **Prefer pictures showing people's faces** rather than their back or a body part (wrinkled hands) – it helps representing older people as persons with emotions and thoughts
- **Try to represent diversity in older age** in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, ability, etc.
- **Avoid pictures of hunched-over person** – although many older people are living with a disability, disability can take various forms and not only be physical
- **Prefer group pictures instead of lonely older people** – if possible intergenerational for this specific topic (although not necessarily a family gathering as more and more older people are also now ageing without children)
- **Prefer promoting active representations** – older people are far too often pictured as passive, looking at others or contemplating the landscape from a bench, receiving care or guidance rather than doing things or passing on knowledge
- **Prefer coloured pictures** instead of black and white or sepia.



**"Prefer group pictures
instead of
lonely older people"**

Race and ethnic origin

The way in which people with a minority **racial or ethnic background** are portrayed in the media can reinforce negative stereotypes. 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**. This climate is generally reinforced by

inflammatory political rhetoric. Such hostility can easily spill over into intimidation and the threat of violence. **The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)** emphasises that public figures and political parties bear a particular responsibility to **promote tolerance** and **respect** for different cultures. [9]

Religion and belief

Religion is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to spirituality and moral values. [10] The media convey a stereotypical portrayal of different **religions** and **cultural** groups. [11]



Islam is the most widespread religion in Europe after Christianity and the majority religion in various Member States of the Council of Europe. The hostility towards Islam as a religion and to Muslim people has revealed deep-rooted prejudices against Muslims.

Indeed, in Western media, **negative stereotypical depictions** of the Islam and its members dominate. This intolerance and stereotyped view of Islam has manifested itself in several ways, ranging from verbal or written abuse of Muslim people, discrimination at schools and workplaces. [12] Muslims are often associated with low-paid jobs, violence and criminality, and women's oppression. [13]

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression or Sex Characteristics

Since 2015, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) has also been

empowered by Chapter 456 of the Laws of Malta to investigate complaints of alleged discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics in employment, education and vocational training as well as by banks and financial institutions. [14]

Despite such legislation to ensure that the Maltese society is a society free from any form of discrimination, biased, incorrect information on what constitutes sexual orientation and gender identity, and stereotypical portrayals of **LGBTIQ+ persons** in the media continue to contribute to the shaping of negative attitudes.



LGBTIQ+ persons have often been portrayed as a threat to the nation, religion, and traditional notions of gender and the family. Many LGBTQ+ people fear that public knowledge of their sexual orientation and gender identity will lead to discrimination, harassment, rejection or even violence.

Moreover, the **invisibility of LGBTQ+ persons** and the **absence of a serious discussion about their human rights situation** are also recurring themes that need more attention. [15]

Gender

Gender stereotypes are generalised views or preconceived ideas, according to which individuals are categorised into particular gender groups, typically defined as ‘women’ and ‘men’ and are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex. [16]

Women are **less visible** than men across **media types** and, when visible they are portrayed as less authoritative, capable, and serious than men, and commonly framed in stereotypical (home and family-focused), sexualised, or auxiliary roles. [17] On the other hand, **men** are represented as being in power, control, authority. [18]

According to the Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission (GEC) [19], **gender equality in the media** is practiced when “*equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation of both women and men*” are present.



Gender equality in the media sector

Women are under-represented in a number of areas in the media both in terms of **participation** and **visibility**, as well as **experts in current affairs programmes**.

Recent studies in Malta found that **women** on the public service media participating in current affairs programmes **totalled less than 20%** in the first months of 2019. [20]

When women do show up, they discuss topics 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. [21]

Along similar lines, the 2015 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) report found that **women** were **less likely to report** what the researchers described as the ‘most prestigious’ category of news: **politics and government**. [22]

Proportions of stories in newspapers, radio and television news reported by women and men, by main topic (2015)

| Topic | Number of stories | Percentage reported by women | Percentage reported by men |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Politics and government | 678 | 30% | 70% |
| Crime and violence | 343 | 34% | 66% |
| Social and legal | 1,256 | 38% | 62% |
| Celebrity, arts and media, sports | 341 | 42% | 58% |
| Economy | 403 | 43% | 57% |
| Science and health | 237 | 44% | 56% |
| Other | 26 | 46% | 54% |
| Total | 3,284 | 38% | 62% |

Source: Global Media Monitoring Project (2015), GMMP Global Report

Moreover, in Malta, **18.9% of news organisations were led by women** in 2019, with just a few making it to editorial positions. [23]

When it comes to **Boards of Directors**, Malta's national broadcaster had one woman out of 6 members in 2018, whilst all the other private broadcasters had no women on their boards except one.

In 2020, Malta registered **substantial progress** in this regard with the appointment of women in high positions, including the **Chair of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) Board**, and the **Head of News of the PBS**.

Gender-neutral representation of men and women can be a key factor in eradicating gender discrimination while **strengthening and promoting gender equality**.

Mediating Women [24] is a foundation based in Malta focusing on gender equality and the media.

It aims to **promote gender equality** in and through the media through various initiatives, such as encouraging self-regulation within media organisations for equal opportunities.

Additionally, women and girls are more likely to be victims of **cyber violence**.

Cyber violence



The heightened powers of the media, especially the Internet, can serve to increase awareness and to enhance access to information, but they also have inherent dangers [25] such as **cyber violence**.

In practice, **acts of cyber violence** may involve online harassment, hate speech, stalking, threatening, bullying, blackmailing and bias offences against social groups or communities based on their gender, age, race and ethnic origin, religion and belief, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Gender

The cyberviolence experience of **women** and **men** is quite different. While online attacks on **men** are more frequently based on their professional opinions or competence [26], "**women are more likely to be subject to sexist and sexualised abuse and invective, the extremity of which may be magnified by the anonymity offered by the internet.**" [27]

Research shows that **women are 27 times more likely to be harassed online** than men. [28] Specific groups of women, for example young women, politicians, journalists or public figures, are often the target of sexist abuse.

Indeed, around **63% of women journalists** in the EU have been confronted with verbal abuse while **58% of female politicians** from 45 European countries have been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks. [29]



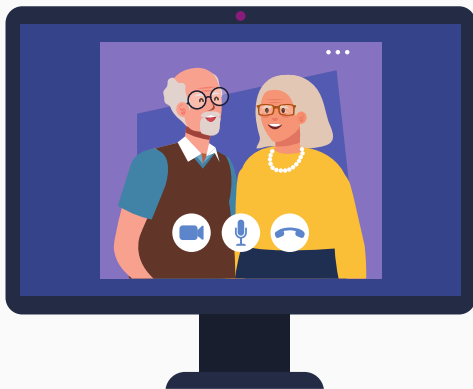
"Research shows that women are 27 times more likely to be harassed online than men"

Age

Youth

Over the last decade **cyber bullying** has become a global issue affecting more and more **young people**.

With the increased use of mobile technologies and permanent online access more young people have become actors in cyber bullying as victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders. Around **6%** of 9 to 16-year-olds have been bullied online across Europe. [30]



Older people

Verbal and derogatory **online abuse** has profound negative effects on the human rights of **older persons**.

Negative and sometimes unfounded comments severely impact their physical and mental health, promote negative images or in the worst cases lead to violence, abuse and neglect of older persons. [31]

Race and ethnic origin

Online hate speech can correlate with occurrences of actual racist crimes and harassment.

The European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) stated that the global COVID-19 pandemic has caused negative implications to fundamental human rights; it has particularly increased **racist and xenophobic incidents**, particularly towards people of Chinese and Asian origin – these incidents include **online hate speech** and **harassment**. [32]

**"the global
COVID-19 pandemic...
has particularly increased
racist and xenophobic
incidents"**

Religion and belief

Online violence based on the grounds of **religion and belief** is also on the rise in view that more than 84% of the world's population identify themselves with a religious group. [33]

There are continuing **acts of intolerance and online violence** based on religion and belief against individuals, including against persons belonging to religious communities and religious minorities worldwide. [34]

"Online violence based on the grounds of religion and belief is also on the rise"



Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression or Sex Characteristics

*"LGBTI-phobic **hate speech** is violence and speech and/or aggression towards LGBTI people due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity and/or sex characteristics. It includes homophobic and transphobic hate crime and hate speech."* [35]

Around **12%** of LGBTI individuals aged between 18-24 experienced cyber-harassment

due to being LGBTI in the 12 months before the carrying out of the 2019 FRA survey. [36]

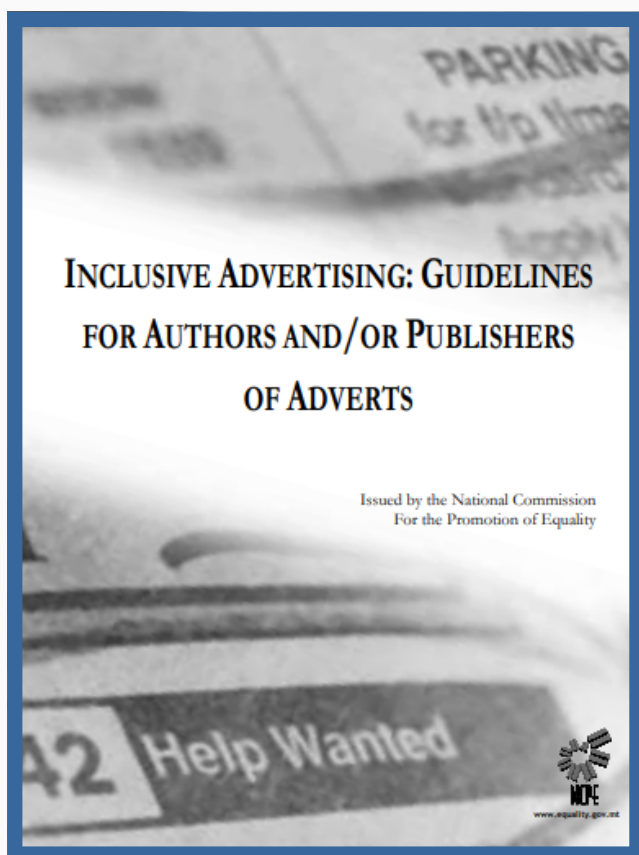
As **stereotypes** and **hate speech** proliferate, more work needs to be done to promote diversity and eliminate any media representations which encourage discrimination.

NCPE's work

The NCPE **reviews local newspapers** on a daily basis for any discriminatory advertisements, as defined by Chapter 456 of the Laws of Malta [Equality for Men and Women Act] that safeguard equality in employment and prohibits discriminatory vacancy adverts.



As per Article 10 of the said legislation, **it shall be unlawful**: “(1)... for persons to publish or display or cause to be published or displayed any advertisement, or, otherwise, to advertise a vacancy for employment which discriminates between job seekers ...”



Where discriminatory adverts are identified, the NCPE formally **notifies** the publisher and the company, informing them why the advert is discriminatory and **suggesting alternative wording** and actions to be taken whilst referring them to the NCPE guidelines.

Moreover, in 2009, the NCPE **published guidelines** in both English and Maltese titled ‘**Inclusive advertising: Guidelines for Authors and/or Publishers of Adverts**’ to raise awareness about the laws that deal with equality between men and women when it comes to advertising job vacancies, as well as advertising by educational establishments with regard to courses, training or vocational guidance. [37]

The **general public** and other **stakeholders** are also encouraged to inform the NCPE of discriminatory adverts so that necessary action can be taken.

The NCPE also works to raise awareness about rights and obligations in relation to **equality**.

This is done through **various initiatives** such as research, awareness raising campaigns, projects, and policy review and recommendations.

Indeed, in 2020, the NCPE provided its **input** (i.e. to include gender mainstreamed policies) to an Act to **amend** the Broadcasting Act, Chapter 350 of the Laws of Malta.

The NCPE also offers **training sessions** on request to organisations on issues related to equality, including on **stereotypes**.

Additionally, **media organisations** can do a great deal to promote a more realistic image of the groups facing discrimination and the long-term issues that they deal with.



Recommendations

What can the media do?

News Production/Content Production

- Existing and new regular media programming and productions should **reflect the diversity of society** and feature fundamental rights and diversity in all its forms.
- No formats for media content productions **dealing exclusively with issues of diversity** need to be overlooked.
- Respond to a growing demand for higher quality journalism standards and programming with ethical values that foster **social cohesion** and **inclusion**.
- Support and develop new formats and **use new media and technologies** in order to have an impact on the new generation of media consumers.
- Establish internal and external structures involving managers, journalists and editors to **review the quality of reporting diversity**, encourage best practices and improve news-room performance.



Organisation/Strategy

- Voluntary codes of ethics should be applied and publicised as clear mission statements and declarations **to avoid all forms of discrimination** in reporting as well as reporting based on common stereotypes and prejudices.
- Establish diversity policies based on pre-initiative research and continue with on-going evaluations of all diversity activities.
- Take part in **media diversity projects** that will ensure better transfer of knowledge and experience in dealing with these issues.

Human Resources

- Existing Employment Policies and Internal procedures should recognise the need and opportunity for both women and men to benefit from **equal opportunities** for advancement within the organisation. Vulnerable groups should also be provided with adequate access to media facilities.
- Train in **diversity reporting** and in effective ways to overcome stereotypical portrayal of groups facing discrimination. All personnel at all levels will benefit from knowing **how to deal with diversity issues** and **use a fair and inclusive vocabulary**.
- Use, disseminate and translate the several existing manuals for journalists covering issues, terminology, and providing guidelines **related to discrimination** based on national, ethnic or racial origin, religion or belief, young and old age, disability, sexual orientation. This can also be facilitated by greater networking efforts among media to exchange good practices.



Follow NCPE on social media



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