‘Mission Possible’: A Gender and Media Advocacy Toolkit

Module 2: Why gender and media advocacy? What is gender and media advocacy?

This module looks at why gender should be an issue for the media and defines what gender and media advocacy entails. It highlights the ways in which gender inequalities, biases and prejudices manifest themselves in the media, among others.
Module 2: Why Should Gender be an Issue for the Media?

**Gender** is the way in which society assigns characteristics and social roles to women and men. The roles, functions and characteristics of men have been given greater value than that of women, creating unequal gender power relations which perpetuate discrimination against women in both the public and private spheres. **Sex** (the biological difference between women and men) becomes the basis for discrimination and the violation of the rights of women and girls in all societies.

Gender biases and prejudices in the media emerge through the ‘choices’ media managers, advertisers, and media professionals [editors, journalists, sub-editors, news photographers, etc] make each day. Decisions about who will be promoted; who will not; what will make news; what will not; who will be interviewed; who will not; etc are decisions affected by media professionals’ beliefs about where women and men ‘should be’ in society.

Gender inequalities, biases and prejudices manifest themselves in the following ways in the media, among others:

In the newsroom:

**Opportunities in the workplace** - Women often comprise the rank and file of journalists and presenters in the print and broadcast media but few are in the top leadership positions.

**Equal professional opportunity**: Women reporters are often assigned to health, education, and social issues, while men are given the political and economic assignments which are seen as part of the career path to senior editorial and media management positions. [More women are seen in the international media, such as CNN, BBC as war and political correspondents, but this has only emerged in the last five to 10 years and is not the norm in the majority of media worldwide].

In the content:

**News sources** - The majority of those who are quoted in stories on events of the day are men, although women and men live in the societies reported on and both have views on the events and issues. Women are made ‘invisible’ by the media’s omission of their voices and images.

**Gender stereotypes** - When women do appear in the media, they most often are portrayed as sex objects, beauty objects, as homemakers, as victims (of violence, poverty, natural disasters, war and conflict, etc.); or they become front-page and headline (main story) news when they engage in activities which are not in line with society’s prescription of what women ‘should’ and ‘should not’ do [E.g. Mothers who kill or abuse their children are often portrayed as ‘unnatural’ women and these stories often are given lots of prominence in news pages and broadcasts].
News focus - News on the violations of women’s human rights and discrimination against women are few and far between. When the media does cover gender issues such as violence, sexual and reproductive health, women in decision-making, these articles are often confined to special pages and segments in the media and tagged as ‘women’s issues’, rather than being placed on the news pages as issues of concern to everyone.

Invisible women: Certain categories of women receive even less attention in the media, such as elderly women, women from minority ethnicities and religious groups, the working class, and women with different sexual orientations.¹

The fight to free the media of gender biases and inequalities has come largely from gender activists who have identified the media as a key institution in the struggle for gender equality. Gender and feminist activists see the media as:

- The mediums through which messages are transmitted (through editorial content, images and adverts) about the gender roles of women and men in any society. The messages can either reinforce, or challenge gender stereotypes and sex-based discrimination;

- As news and communications channels that can put women’s rights and gender equality on the agenda of public policymakers. One way the media can do this is by holding governments accountable to many of the international and regional women’s rights conventions and instruments they have signed in the same way the media holds governments accountable to conventions on torture, political rights, labor rights, etc.

- As institutions that practice sex-based discrimination, and therefore also sites where the struggle for gender equality must be confronted.

Activity – Discussion Points!

Use the following questions to do a simple and quick gender analysis of your national media

1. Look through the daily or weekly newspapers. How many images of women do you find? What roles do the women pictured appear in? How many images of men do you find? In what roles are they seen?
2. How many women reporters or correspondents do you see on the local television prime time news? (Do not count the women and men who present the news or read it, known as ‘presenters’) What issues do the women report on? What issues do the men on television news report on? Is there a difference?

3. Look at the bylines (reporters’ names) on political and economic stories in your national newspapers. Can you identify how many of the writers and reporters on these issues are male, and how many are female?
4. Which women, and men, are rarely seen in your national media? Which women, and men, are seen most often in your national media?
5. Look at the adverts on television and in the newspapers. Which adverts have women in them? Which adverts have men in them? How are the women portrayed? How are the men portrayed?

Box Three: Why Gender Equality Makes Good Editorial and Business Sense for the Media

**Freedom of speech:** Giving equal voice and air-time to women and men, representing both in their multiple roles in society is intrinsic to freedom of expression and speech.

**Good governance:** As much as the media has a duty to serve as a watchdog on society, the media itself must lead by example and practice good governance in its own operations.

**Respecting women’s and men’s human rights:** The media’s editorial content, through images, language, portrayal and absence of a diversity of voices and views, and its workplace should not perpetuate stigma, discrimination or sexist attitudes against women or men.

**Women are a large growth market for the print media:** In most countries, women constitute the highest potential growth market for the print media and have also been shown to be among the most loyal readers. Segmenting readership by gender and responding accordingly, would, in all likelihood, reveal that gender sensitivity is a good business proposition.

**Women’s needs as listeners and viewers:** Few analyses of programming for radio and TV are gender disaggregated. They fail to take account of women’s time constraints as a result of their multiple roles and of their preferences with regard to content. As research elsewhere has shown, gender sensitivity in programming could yield significant business gains.

**Women as consumers:** Women make many of the decisions on household spending. This is yet to be factored in many countries into the way advertising is designed. Is advertising that demeans and turns women into commodities really enlightened self-interest on the part of advertisers?

Module 2: Why should gender be an issue for the media

What is Gender and Media Advocacy?

Critiquing and challenging the media to change the way it portrays and represents women in its editorial content and programming; the way it also confines women to the lowest positions in newsrooms; the way it uses women, sex and violence against women to attract audiences; and the way it ignores discrimination against women in all sectors of society in the main news pages and broadcasts have been core concerns of gender activists.

Gender and media advocacy includes lobbying, campaigning, research, training, media monitoring, communication and alliance-building activities which seek to advance women’s rights and gender equality in and through the media. Its roots are firmly grounded within the women’s movement, but the forms that gender and media advocacy may take are grounded in and connected to local struggles and take direction from those who are experiencing injustices and inequalities, within our communities [women within the media, for example, have been the catalysts of advocacy to change how women are systematically marginalized within the media].

Box Four: Gender and Media Advocacy – Issues of conflict or opportunity?

There are two angles to gender and media advocacy:

1. Media as target audience: Planned and consistent advocacy for gender equality in the media’s workplace policies and conditions of service, as well as in editorial and advertising content.

2. Media as partner and tool for getting across messages on gender equality: The strategic use of the media as a tool for advancing gender equality in all sectors, especially public policy, and to bring gender justice to the public’s attention.

By taking on the media as institutions within which the struggle for gender equality is situated, activists will also create the opportunities for priming the media to be a credible voice when it reports on and covers gender equality issues. The media cannot be used as an effective and credible tool to advance messages on gender equality if the messages it sends daily through reports on events and issues are gender-blind or negative about women’s roles and contribution in a society.

The Media as a Critical Area of Concern: The Beijing Platform for Action

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) which was developed by the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, provided gender and media activists with more ammunition for gender and media advocacy.

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2 An Advocacy Guide for Feminists, Young Women and Leadership, No. 1, December 2003, Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)
The BPFA calls for

- “increased participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new communication technologies.” Governments committed themselves to review media policies and increase the number of programs for and by women and to promote balanced and diverse portrayals of women in the media.³

- Governments to create legislation against the projection of violence against women and children in the media and to encourage training for women in using the media.

- The media to establish professional guidelines and methods of self-regulation for the way women are presented, as well as to support and finance alternative media and all forms of communication that support the needs of women.⁴

- Governments to promote women’s equal participation in the media; encourage women’s media networks; and promote research and implementation of information strategies to ensure a balanced portrayal of women and men.

- Media organizations and NGOs to develop diverse and balanced representations of women; establish groups to monitor the media; and train women to make greater use of information technology.⁵

Section J on Media recognizes that the media have a role to play in addressing issues of gender inequality, specifically, women’s lack of access to media; the fact that women in the industry are generally not in decision-making positions; and the portrayal of gender stereotypes.⁶

At the five-year review of the 1995 Beijing Conference in New York in 2000, out of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the Beijing Platform for Action, 53% of countries cited media as their top priority for achieving gender equality in reports to the United Nations for the five-year review.⁷

Box Five: The impact of globalization

The spread of satellite communications and the opening up of the airwaves and other forms of media to less state-regulation in favor of free markets and commercial interests creates new gender and media challenges for activists. These include:

³ Local Action, Global Change, UNIFEM and the Centre for Women’s Global Leadership, 1999
⁴ Ibid
⁵ Ibid
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- Corporate ownership of media that has forged powerful political and business links and sets limits on freedom of expression
- Foreign ownership of media that has implications for accountability issues
- The creation and interpretation of news that are shaped and influenced by factors associated with the control of media by governments, advertisers and business groups
- Existing media codes that do not have a gender concern or address issues such as the portrayal of violence against women
- The presence of transnational media corporations and the consequent beaming of homogenous media images and perceptions of women
- Influx of pornographic material and databanks on women through the Internet, video tapes and DVDs and also through the print media
- Influx of computer and video games that violate women’s images and reinforce violence against women


Activity- Discussion Points!

1. What media issues are stated in your country’s report to the Beijing +5 and Beijing +10 reviews as areas of concern?
2. Which of these areas cited have been the focus of gender and media advocacy in your country?
3. Which issue(s) has not been the focus of gender and media advocacy?
4. Which issues would your organization prioritize for gender and media advocacy? Why?