Combating gender stereotyping and sexism in the media

Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy

> **All nations have their own traditions, and gender stereotypes are part of it. But it is good to remember that they are made by people and can be reformed by people.**

Tarja Halonen, Former President of the Republic of Finland

Gender equality

Gender equality means an equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Achieving gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, respect for the rule of law and economic growth and competitiveness.

Gender stereotypes

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. Stereotypes are both descriptive, in that members of a certain group are perceived to have the same attributes regardless of individual differences, and prescriptive as they set the parameters for what societies deem to be acceptable behaviour. Stereotyping becomes problematic when it is used as a vehicle to degrade and discriminate women. Abolishing negative gender stereotypes is essential to achieving gender equality, and the media are central to prompting this change.

Women's image and the role that women play in the media

▬▬ Women's image and the role that women play in the media are heavily influenced by existing social and cultural norms, including gender stereotypes. At a time when visual means of communication predominate, the stereotyped images of women and men circulated by the media can undermine progress made on gender equality.

▬▬ **At the same time, the media are a source of power and influence in promoting social values and in shaping opinions – so why not use it to advance the cause of gender equality?** The media have a significant impact on how social and cultural norms relating to women and gender are perceived and evolve. Gender-neutral portrayals of women and men can be a key factor in promoting and strengthening social awareness of gender equality, but also in preventing and eradicating gender discrimination.

Using Council of Europe standards to eradicate gender stereotyping and sexism in the media means:

▶ promoting a positive and non-stereotyped image of women and men in the media;

▶ encouraging the media to pursue policies to promote equality between women and men and to combat gender stereotypes;

▶ reconciling media freedom and the promotion of gender equality;

▶ promoting female leadership positions in the media as a tool for positive change;

▶ strengthening self-regulatory mechanisms and codes of conduct to condemn and combat sexist imagery, language and practices;

▶ proactively addressing the effects of gender stereotyping by educating and raising awareness in society through the media coverage of issues such as gender-based violence against women.

■■■ As an organisation set up to protect and promote democracy, rule of law and human rights, the Council of Europe has worked on gender equality and the media for many years. The following standards can be used by member states as benchmarks towards eradicating gender stereotyping and sexism in the media.

■■■ **The Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2013)1 on gender equality and media** provides specific guidelines and suggests action to ensure gender equality and to combat gender stereotyping. The recommendation is addressed to member states and media organisations, and contains 16 implementation measures in the following six categories: 1. review and evaluation of gender equality policy and legislation; 2. adoption and implementation of national indicators for gender equality in the media; 3. provision of information and promotion of good practices; 4. accountability channels; 5. research and publication; and 6. media literacy and active citizenship. To support member states in their efforts to implement the 16 measures contained in the recommendation, the Council of Europe has prepared a handbook with practical suggestions and examples of good practices.

■■■ **The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)** is the most comprehensive legally binding treaty addressing the root causes of violence against women and promoting greater equality between women and men. The convention aims at changing attitudes and eliminating gender stereotypes not only among individuals, but also at the level of institutions. Taking into consideration the fact that young girls' self-image is shaped, among other things, by the images they see in the media, as well as the potential impact of gender stereotypes in the context of violence against women, the convention addresses the responsibility of the private sector, in particular the media and the information and communication technology sector, to work towards an enhanced respect for women's dignity and to become involved in the prevention of violence against women (Article 17). The Istanbul Convention

requires states to encourage the media to pursue policies to promote equality between women and men and to combat gender stereotypes.

Good practices

▬▬▬ The Council of Europe has put together a compilation on "Gender Equality and the Media at National Level", with examples of activities carried out by Council of Europe member states to combat gender stereotyping and sexism in the media. Some of the good practices include:

- ▶ national and targeted media campaigns;
- ▶ specific legislation;
- ▶ awards for the non-stereotyped portrayal of women;
- ▶ women expert databases;
- ▶ training courses aimed at raising the awareness of media professionals to the gendered nature of information and the media.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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