Gender equality in the media and digital sectors

International Women's Day provides an opportunity both to celebrate women's achievements and to take stock of progress towards gender equality. This year, the European Parliament is highlighting the situation in the media and digital sectors, with a report scheduled for debate during the March plenary session, following a high-level event on 8 March itself.

The EU's commitment to gender equality

Under the Treaties (Article 19 TFEU), the European Union (EU) can enact legislation to combat gender-based discrimination, and is committed to upholding and promoting the principle of gender equality in all its actions (Articles 2 and 3(3) TEU and 8 TFEU). The European Commission's current priorities, set out in the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 include tackling inequalities between women and men in decision-making and the labour market, combating violence against women, and fostering gender equality and women's rights across the world.

Public perceptions and expectations

Nine in every ten (91 %) respondents to a November 2017 Eurobarometer poll think that promoting gender equality in the EU is 'important to ensure a fair and democratic society', while more than eight in ten say it is important for companies and the economy, and to them personally. However, whilst women and men hold similar views on the importance of equality, there are marked differences when it comes to perceptions of progress. Fewer women than men believe that equality has been achieved at work, while only 37 % of women, compared to 50 % of men, think it has been achieved in leadership positions in companies and other organisations. The poll also asked about perceptions of gender stereotyping in society. Here too, women were more likely than men to think there is a problem with the way women are presented in the media and advertising (59 % vs 48 %), and to feel that this problem needs to be addressed (45 % vs 33 %). More than four in ten men think there is no problem, compared to one third of women (44 % vs 33 %).

Gender equality in the media sector

Limiting – or positive – messages and role models conveyed in the media matter, because they influence both girls' and boys' perceptions of their own abilities and the directions they take in life. Stereotypes can also propagate harmful attitudes about masculinity and the position of women that perpetuate discrimination, sexual objectification and gender-based violence. All EU Member States have ratified the United Nations (UN) Beijing Platform for Action, which recognises the media's potential to advance gender equality and the need to tackle the unbalanced portrayal of women in media content and their under-representation in the media workforce. Nevertheless, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) finds that, 20 years on, women still account for under one in four of the people we see or read about in the news (25.7 %). A correlation exists between greater gender balance in the media workforce and more balanced content. However, women are still under-represented, particularly at decision-making levels and in the governing bodies that influence media policy. In 2017, women accounted for only 35 % of CEOs and board members in public broadcasters across the EU-28 (ranging from 0 % in Poland to 64.3 % in Lithuania). The figures for news reporting are better, although women still represent a minority (40 %) of news reporters across the 22 EU countries surveyed by the GMMP, and are less likely to be assigned to more prestigious 'hard' news stories. A Parliament study also highlights a number of concerns expressed by women working in the media industry, including widespread precarity, discrimination in pay, hiring, and promotion, lack of work-life balance measures, sexist working cultures, including 'normalisation' of sexual harassment and bullying, and the absence – or ineffective enforcement – of codes of practice and regulations. Women journalists are subject to high levels of threats and violence, including online abuse, which has a chilling effect on individuals, women's public participation and democracy.

Gender equality in the digital sector

The 'digital revolution' is blurring the boundaries between traditional and online media, and fundamentally changing many other areas of our lives. Gender analysis finds that this is bringing both opportunities and risks. New media open up spaces for new voices, forms of awareness-raising and mobilisation – as the recent wave of 'hashtag activism' against sexual harassment has shown. The broader digital sector also offers highly skilled, better-paid and 'future-proof' jobs that could help to eliminate the gender pay gap. However, inequitable access, gender-biased algorithms, online content that does not reflect women's needs and realities, and lack of involvement of women themselves in shaping that content, all threaten to reinforce existing gender inequalities. Digitalisation is also creating new risks and barriers, not least the colonisation of online spaces by misogyny and cyber-violence. Existing data point to a worldwide digital gender gap. In the EU, this is not primarily a question of women and girls lacking basic internet access or skills – although the number of women who have never used the internet remains significant (14 % of women compared to 12 % of men). The gender gaps are much wider in advanced IT skills, tertiary education, employment and decision-making in the digital sector, with girls and women less likely to continue studying science and technology beyond the age of 15, enter or continue a career in ICT, reach specialist and managerial levels or start their own tech companies. Women's under-representation affects individuals and the wider economy.

Current and potential EU action

Existing EU legislation on equality in employment, which includes provisions on equal pay and protections against discrimination and harassment, applies to the workforce in the media and digital sectors, and could be used more effectively to reduce horizontal and vertical segregation and improve women's working conditions. Recent European Commission proposals address some of the longstanding issues, including the gender pay gap and unequal caring responsibilities. When it comes to addressing gender balance and stereotypes in media content, the situation is more complex. The 2010 Audiovisual Media Services Directive already requires these services to prohibit sex-based discrimination (Article 9) and incitement to hate speech (Article 6) in their content. A proposed revision of the directive would extend the scope to online video-sharing platforms. However, regulation of media content is essentially decided at national level, and varies between countries and for public and private companies, and there is no consensus on the balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility of media operators in areas such as gender equality. The EU can however act in this area to encourage good regulatory practices. In the digital sector, the need to ensure inclusion and tackle access, skills, representation and safety barriers affecting women and girls has been recognised globally in the Sustainable Development Goals and within the EU's Digital Single Market Strategy (Pillar 2). Key actions announced by the Commission include enhancing digital skills among women and girls, promoting female employment in the ICT sector (2016-2017) and awareness raising on education and vocational training options (2018-2019). The Bulgarian Council Presidency has made 'Women in the Digital World' one of its priorities, and will be working with the EU's Institute for Gender Equality and other EU agencies to improve data and understanding. Particular attention is also to be paid to tackling gender stereotyping across all EU policy areas, with co-funding available under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme.

European Parliament position

The **European Parliament** has previously drawn attention to the need to eliminate gender stereotyping in its 2013 resolution on this topic, which emphasises the importance of training for media professionals. Its 2015 resolution on empowering girls through education warns that work done in schools to combat gender stereotyping is often undermined by the media, and calls on Member States to provide guidelines to schools to counteract this. Parliament's 2016 resolution on gender equality and empowering women in the digital age urges the Commission and Member States to take action to encourage girls to study science and technology subjects (STEM) and to provide funding and support for female ICT entrepreneurs. The FEMM committee report on gender equality in the media sector in the EU, to go to plenary in March, assesses women's representation in the media workforce and the portrayal of women in the media, and proposes action by the Commission, Member States, national regulatory bodies and media companies. The committee also aims to pose an oral question to the Commission in the same plenary session, asking about its plans to address the gender gap in digital skills, with a view to empowering women and girls through the digital sector.

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