

Locating Gender in Media¹

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Global Trends

Despite being comprised of an almost equal number of women and men, the world seen in the news media reinforces stereotypes about what is perceived as masculinity and femininity. According to a report by the United Nations, women are only the subject of approximately a quarter of all reporting. This can be observed in the news coverage of armed conflict, for instance. Men are asked to explain and interpret the conflict in many different roles: as combatants, warlords, experts, and politicians. Women's opinions are rarely asked and if they are, these views are usually delivered from the perspective of women as "family figures", victims and even as those who have been sexually exploited. Gender-sensitive reporting shuns stereotypes that limit and trivialise women and men to present an accurate portrait of the world and its possibilities.

According to a [survey by the National Union of Journalists Malaysia in 2020](#), women were much less represented in senior editorial roles such as directors, bureau chiefs and editors. It was reported that such under-representation results in a toxic and self-perpetuating cycle in which there are few mentors in newsrooms that would build the necessary platforms for future female leaders.

Introduction

In promoting fair representation in the media industry and the use of gender fair language and portrayal, it is crucial to assess the status of gender equality in operational policies, including in decision making, rights of women media practitioners, extent of participation and freedom of expression, amongst others.

Gender equality in media in Malaysia is also to be located within the entire media ecosystem in the nation. We have seen a worrying trend over the course of the last 20 months where media has come under intense scrutiny by the government and have experienced various forms of crackdown, including being investigated, harassed and subjected to legal action by the State for their critical reporting or dissenting views. Repressive laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), the Official Secrets Act (OSA), the Sedition Act and the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) continue to be utilised, at times arbitrarily, to stifle media freedom.

¹ In June 2021, the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), in collaboration with KRYSS Network, Institute of Journalists, Gerakan Media Merdeka and National Union of Journalists, has initiated focus group discussions with media practitioners, women's human rights groups and LGBTQ groups to gain insights into the challenges related to gender policies and reporting in media, and subsequently work towards developing Gender Guidelines for Media. This paper is aimed at providing a preliminary analysis and developing recommendations that would set the framework for a Gender Guidelines for Media as a way forward.

It is also noted that women journalists experience exacerbated attacks and discrimination on the basis of their gender, particularly within the online sphere. In mid-March 2020, reports surfaced that [Malaysiakini journalist Koh Gah Chie was harassed on Facebook](#) over an article she wrote quoting Environment Minister Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man defending logging in Kelantan. The post contained personal and abusive attacks against Koh, many of them racist and a few calling for her to be physical harmed. The same year also saw online attacks, often gender-based, against other women journalists following crackdown by the authorities. These include attacks against [South China Morning Post former correspondent, Tashny Sukumaran](#) in May 2020 over an article she wrote on the May Day raids on migrants in Kuala Lumpur by Immigration Department officials. Similarly, Melissa Goh of Channel News Asia was attacked online for her reporting on the issue of migrants in Malaysia. [CodeBlue Editor-in-Chief, Boo Su-Lyn](#): was summoned by the police in June 2020 to give a statement in response to four articles reporting the declassified findings of an independent inquiry committee formed to investigate the 2016 fire at Hospital Sultanah Aminah in Johor.

It is within this landscape, where media freedom is at threat, that there is a need to strengthen the analysis in order to elevate the transformative role of the media in the context of its own operations as well as in ensuring that the gender equality lens is applied in the portrayal and overall coverage.

Part 1: Promote gender sensitive reporting

“In terms of coverage of issues, when do we cover issues about women? Where are the stories that empowers women, where are the women in politics, economics and why is it that we have so limited coverage and space given to women?” [Source 1]

Firstly, the prevalence of gender stereotypes and objectification of women is concerning. Media continue to associate women with traditional gender roles and emphasised women’s ‘caretaker’ roles, especially in professional settings. There is also often the unnecessary references or depiction of a person’s appearance, leading to either body shaming or normalising unrealistic body standards on the basis of gender.

Two, there is a need to avoid negative gender portrayal. Media practitioners should always check their own personal biases before producing stories as deadnaming (e.g. portrayal of Nur Sajat) is a common occurrence. There is also a need to challenge current “house styles” in news outlets, and emphasise the need to not reveal personal information of women or LGBTQ people in court reporting; not mention names of women and children when reporting on matters that could leave negative impact on the subjects.

It is also noted that there needs to be greater respect for gender pronouns such as making a single mention of legal or birth names, and giving prominence to preferred names while reporting on issues related to transgenders.

Three, there is a trend of toxic masculinity in media. Media often propagate the ‘boys will be boys’ mentality and frequently only men are quoted as “experts”, including on women’s issues.

There is often a gap in locating and applying the gender lens when reporting on mainstream issues. This is often reflected by the lack of diversity in terms of sources.

“Often they are listening so much to the men, rather than the women. For example, in the case of COVID, you look at men being quoted so much, and women not quoted as experts, unless when we are talking about gender issues, we tend not to think about them immediately, I am guilty of this as a journalist as well, we don’t think about balancing that perspective, we should be balancing out our sources as well.” [Source 2]

Four, the use of shaming language is concerning. Media should not use religion to undermine or justify use of shaming language, and avoid unnecessary correlation to religious or cultural values (e.g. it is not necessary to say it is sinful to be a LGBTIQ). Media should revamp outdated “house styles” in news outlets for gender-transformative language, avoid problematic quotes and consider paraphrasing comments from interview sources that may contain language that is overtly shaming in nature.

Five, often sexual harassment and gender-based violence is not reported within the larger eco-system of violence against women. There is a need for media to correctly identify the crimes associated to gender-based violence. They should frame crimes as crimes and not “incidents”; believe women and survivors; and do not justify why the attacks against them happened. It is worth noting that media should refrain from disclosing any identifying information about the victim, especially if minors are involved.

Part 2: Promoting a gender equality work environment

Firstly, there is a lack of female representation in the management board. The interviewees at the focus group discussion attributed the lack of female leaders due to the ‘inconvenience’ if they become wives or mothers in the future. Furthermore, there is a perception that editors treat women journalists as less committed, and therefore not assigning more important roles to them. Other concerns raised include unequal pay.

“80% of us are female journalists, some of us are working mothers, they need to pick up their kids. There are editors who are not understanding enough and often treat the women negatively by stating that ‘by 5pm she is not able to anything’. It often feels like we are not respected enough as a mom, wife or daughters. We are just asking for some understanding.” [Source 3]

Women journalists also often experience challenges in relation to the multiple roles that are expected of women in the society. They often lose opportunities for promotion due to challenges related to childcare and being primary care-givers of aging parents. This has led to many instances where women in media are silently stereotyped by assuming they would prefer to “take a step back” from career ambitions to focus on their marriage or family.

“Costs are always the factor to take into consideration when it comes to assignments, but that shouldn’t be the reason why we should prevent equal access to opportunities, we can change that with better technology in force. Even for traditional TV, we can broadcast our live coverage from home. These are the small things that we can enforce.” [Source 6]

This shows an urgent need to increase representation of women in management positions to break the “patriarchal” informal channels of communication. There is a need to correct the assumption that they will need lots of time away from work and will be less committed to their professional duties.

“It is not easy for women to be accepted in the Boys club, it is still a very male dominated space, where they often go out for drinking, because of that, women journalists were often left out, it is harder to have conversation with bosses.” [Source 4]

“There are many more senior female journalists providing better stories but they were often sidelined because of the ‘lepak session’ with the bosses. They have no access to formal discussion in the office. The male colleagues get more promotion opportunities as a result of that.” [Source 5]

Two, it was highlighted that there is the lower participation of women in journalist unions. Women are sometimes seen as “too weak or easily cajoled” into acceding to demands of management when developing the Collective Agreement.

Initiatives should therefore be in place to encourage women to participate in unions and provide input in Collective Agreements. Proactive measures should be in place to get insights from women from diverse backgrounds as women are not one unified bloc and what is trivial to some may be a dealbreaker for others.

Three, there are stereotypes of journalists who do not “fit the mould” (e.g. effeminate, etc) and they are often given portfolios that is not of their preference. Other concerns of unequal opportunities (e.g. they were not sent for more important assignments) were also raised in the focus groups.

“When it comes to gender equality, when we talk about men and women who do not fit the ‘bentuk’ (preconceived ideas) of a women or men, they will all be sidelined. ‘Orang yang lembut’ cannot be seen as someone who can cover crime, court. I have a story that this person would like to do political news, and because of his appearance, he was sidelined. He resigned because he found that these are things that he didn’t want to do. If you look at the academic credentials, they have impressive credentials.” [Source 7]

Four, there are concerns raised about sexist jokes and sexual harassment at workplace. A journalist shared a story of an intern being sexually harassed by experienced editor and it was widely known in the workplace that the said editor was prone to such behaviour. There are also other stories about editors using women journalists as “bait” to land interviews with certain sources. This becomes a norm within the work environment.

“The mentality that a woman is more able to have better stories because of how they look, or behave, is still prevalent.” [Source 8]

“There was an instance where a politician stayed in hotel, the journalist who is going to interview him told the editor that the politicians gave her his room number and get her to come to his room. The editor did not take it seriously and said that you ‘pandai pandai’, maintain good relationship with him and not fall into

his trap. The prevalence of getting women to approach men tend to lead to sexual harassment.” [Source 9]

Recommendations

There is a need to shift the discussion away from nitpicking on negative narratives for women, including on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity to discussing serious issues that are relevant (e.g. the mental health status of LGBTIQ teens). To assist the shift of discussion, media should also highlight local activism, stories and lived realities of women.

Regular trainings on gender sensitivities should also be encouraged, so that media do not reaffirm stereotypes.

It is also advisable for media organisations to adopt the following recommendations to promote the use of gender fair language in reporting. Media organisations:

- a. should openly state their transparency policy
- b. include trigger warnings at the start of articles
- c. employ gender-sensitive media personnel
- d. provide a glossary of terms for media reference
- e. should give platform to gender activists to speak out, whenever gender-based issues are raised
- f. provide training on understanding the intersectionality framework to include more voices as their sources
- g. include critical thinking modules in training of future journalists
- h. diversify perspectives inside newsroom, especially in decision making levels and
- i. obtain multiple viewpoints (not just all men, not just all lawyers) when writing stories
- j. have an inclusive or diverse panel of editors in newsrooms to mitigate use of discriminatory language.

In promoting gender equality within media organisations, a more inclusive human resource (HR) arrangement should be in place. The HR Department of the media organisation should arrange regular discussions with women journalists to discover the sections of media they are most interested in, and try to assign them according to interests and capabilities instead of judging people based on existing stereotypes.

To encourage more female participations in the senior positions, there is a need to look into options for women who still want to work on the ground after reaching a senior position. This includes offering better services for women in media, especially childcare, work from home opportunities, and flexible work hours.

Media organisations should also:

- a. establish policies on bullying, sexual harassment, and gender equality, as well as spell out redress mechanisms.
- b. provide an independent in-house avenue to raise complaints in the event of sexual harassment.
- c. provide a more conducive environment for all, a policy should be in place to avoid the use of terms that diminish women’s credibility (e.g. terms that infantilises women when talking about their achievements).
- d. ensure Editors also take pre-emptive action and be responsible for the safety of women reporters. They should avoid sanctioning further action if the circumstances appear suspect, instead of just telling reporters to protect

themselves. Editors should never suggest provocative action by female reporters (e.g. in terms of dressing and mannerisms), as a means for them to obtain stories.

Conclusion

Gender-sensitive selection of topics and stories, as well as use of gender-fair language, should exist at every stage of the media's news gathering process. The establishment of an enabling environment that upholds and promotes fair representation of women in the media will facilitate their constructive participation in the public sphere.

Media will have to consider strengthening its own policies and actions in order to alleviate the abovementioned concerns. It is critical for media to play a transformative role in advocating a more inclusive mindset and alleviate the barriers that women and other minority groups face, including within the media industry itself.