

# Educating media professionals with a gender and critical media literacy perspective: how to battle gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the media workplace

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While journalism and journalism schools were long the almost exclusive domain of male professionals, over the past few decades the latter has increasingly become dominated by female students, but not, as would be anticipated, the former. What explains the reversal in gender proportions as we move from university classrooms into the workplace and up the corporate ladder? At most colleges around the world women make up the vast majority of journalism and communication students, but once they hit the workplace their numbers plummet and continue to dwindle until they become a tiny minority in the upper echelons of corporate media (Byerly, 2011). Even in countries with high levels of gender equality, the patterns of professional inequality persist (see, for example, Djerf-Pierre, 2007).

In the journalism field specifically, the repercussions of this disparity go beyond gender representation and counting numbers of males and females in the workforce. Lower representation at decision-making and governance levels has direct consequences on the content produced, the issues covered, the voices represented and the manners in which women – and men – are portrayed (Byerly and Ross, 2006; White, 2009; North, 2009; Djerf-Pierre, 2007). Moreover, the low number of women among hiring managers and committees ensures that voices that may challenge discriminatory hiring practices remain weak and timid, if not silent (Byerly, 2006; Djankov et al., 2003). But even when women make it into the media workforce, a host of obstacles that discourage their continuity at work await them, and many seem to quit early in their careers. As for the few who last, a discriminatory climate keeps them outside of positions of power and impedes them from moving beyond the glass ceiling<sup>1</sup>.

This chapter outlines these obstacles and the prevalent discriminatory climate in the new media industry, and demonstrates how a combination of institutionalised gender discrimination, entrenched sexual harassment, rooted cultural sexism and the lack of laws, policies and enforcement mechanisms that protect and empower women to stay and advance in their careers all lead to reproducing this gender inequality and discriminatory climate that keeps many women out of the media workforce, discourages their advancement to higher positions, pushes women's issues out of the public sphere and normalises stereotypical media portrayal of women and men. The chapter then discusses whether more proactive educational policies at the university level, and changes in policies at the legislative and institutional levels, may help alleviate this situation and contribute to better preparing women (and men) to deal with the dominant discriminatory culture in the workplace, manoeuvre their career advancement and try to alter these practices. In addition, the chapter suggests that injecting critical media literacy and gender studies into journalism and media studies curricula may help better prepare students for a workplace rife with gender and other discriminatory practices.

The chapter uses as its case study Lebanon, where surveys, observations and in-depth interviews with journalists and media managers have been conducted to address this matter. Despite the focus on this small country, research demonstrates that Lebanon is not unique when it comes to gender inequality in the media workplace (Byerly, 2011) and many of the findings may be generalised globally (see also White, 2009).

Lebanon has historically been one of the most liberal and progressive countries in the Arab world, with a relatively free media climate and a culture and legal environment largely conducive to gender equality (Melki, Dabbous, Nasser and Mallat, 2012). Lebanese women have legal access to virtually all occupations and professions and enjoy equal constitutional rights with men. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in most industries and positions of power, especially within political offices and the news industry, and continue to face a host of discriminatory laws and practices, especially those governing marriage,

divorce, inheritance and child custody, bolstered by a confessional sectarian political system that reproduces persistent conservative patriarchal social mores (Shehadeh, 1998; Khalaf, 2010).

## Representation of women in the news industry

When it comes to media education in Lebanon, women comprise two-thirds of journalism and communication university students. In some specialties, such as print journalism and public relations, they significantly exceed that ratio to reach four-fifths and eight-ninths, respectively (Melki, 2009). However, they make up less than one-third of the news industry's workforce. Furthermore, the disparity becomes greatest in higher corporate positions, where women make up only 22% of top management and barely 15% of governance (Melki and Mallat, 2013). While these numbers clearly demonstrate gender disparity in the news industry, they barely scratch the surface.

The survey (mentioned above) of 250 female journalists and news personnel from 60 randomly selected news institutions operating in Lebanon draws a revealing picture of the make-up of this workforce. The vast majority of these women are 34 years old or younger (75%), not married (71%) and have no children (74%). Additionally, the majority (67%) have worked less than 10 years in the news industry, while 15% have worked 10-15 years and 18% have spent more than 15 years in this career. Interestingly, almost all (92%) hold college degrees and the majority even have some postgraduate studies or degrees (55%). This suggests that only a few of the women who make it into the news media workplace last in this career while most leave, especially those who start families, despite having strong educational credentials.

As for their primary job, the majority of surveyed women are reporters (60%) and a significant minority are editors (32%), producers (15%), and web editors (11%), but only a small minority are middle managers (6%), senior managers (5%) or board members (1%). Most (67%) have no employees reporting to them while 18% have five or fewer employees under their management and 14% run a staff of six or more personnel. Moreover, only 33% have female supervisors. This distribution of female journalists and news personnel in the workforce is consistent with previous studies of the Lebanese news industry (Melki and Mallat, 2013) and also reflects global trends in this realm (Byerly, 2011).

More importantly, this inequity, especially at senior management and governance levels, means women are not involved in policy-setting and managerial decision-making, although they are directly affected by such policies and decisions. This becomes evident when comparing the gender make-up of newsrooms headed by female managers to those led by male managers. For example, al-Jadeed TV's news director is one of the very few female news executives in mainstream Arab TV. Al-Jadeed's newsroom management positions are predominantly occupied by female journalists. Almost all newscast producers and executive producers are women, including al-Jadeed's deputy news director and its programming manager. Another example is the online news outlet Now Lebanon, which has an Arabic division led by a male managing editor and an English division led by a female managing editor. The former is mainly made up of male reporters and editors (about three-fourths male) and the latter is mainly staffed with women (about three-fourths female), which better compares to the gender ratios present in journalism and media schools in Lebanon. The differences, however, extend beyond gender proportions to newsroom cultures. Researchers observing these newsrooms noticed significant differences in the responses and tones of female journalists employed in such newsrooms, particularly in regards to news coverage priorities, sexual harassment and a strong sense of empowerment and confidence not common in newsrooms led and dominated by men.

The preceding suggests that strong social and institutional factors preclude many women from entering the journalism and media field, discourage them from enduring in this line of work and prevent them from advancing in their careers. The next few paragraphs will discuss some of these factors, namely: the prevalence of gender discrimination and sexual harassment that creates a work environment hostile to women and obstacles to their advancement; the lack of laws, codes of professional conduct and enforcement mechanisms that protect and empower women; and the archaic institutional policies that together with a patriarchal cultural mentality continue to expect women to fulfil a major domestic role while holding down a full-time job.

## Gender discrimination, sexual harassment, archaic laws and discriminatory policies

Gender discrimination and sexual harassment remain overlooked taboos, especially in the news media workplace (Alabaster, 2012; Kim and Kleiner, 1999), and remain absent from most Arab university curricula

(Dabbous-Sensenig, 2002). The issue of sexual harassment, however, has recently generated increased public debate, thanks to amplified media coverage of attacks on female journalists in countries experiencing an Arab uprising and the growing number of women who are speaking out, despite this being a major taboo in the Arab world (Saud, 2012; Gatten, 2012; Lil Nasher, 2012; Sidahmed, 2012). The survey of journalists and news personnel conducted for this study shows that sexual harassment and gender discrimination together create a hostile environment that pushes women out of the industry.

In fact, the majority of surveyed participants believe that gender discrimination is a problem (73%) for female journalists in Lebanon and that it negatively affects their own outlook for advancement (80%). Even more agree that sexual harassment is a problem (87%) and that it negatively affects their outlook for career advancement (82%). Although a minority say they had considered leaving their jobs or the profession due to gender discrimination (10%) or sexual harassment (10%), one can only speculate about the number of women who have already left their job due to these issues, or those who never made it into a job they qualified for because of discriminatory practices or because they were asked to perform sexual favours during their job interview. This latter issue seems to be a widespread practice in the industry despite the lack of scientific evidence to gauge its prevalence. Nevertheless, anecdotal testimony suggests this occurs frequently and strongly contributes to repelling women from the news field. A panel of female journalists appearing on a Lebanese TV show expressed this latter experience in shocking detail (Ahmar Bel Khat el Areed, 2013).

But how many working female journalists and news personnel experience sexual harassment? Although most women underreport such experiences, the survey showed that the majority of women (more than 1 in every 2 women) have encountered at least one kind of sexual harassment at least once in their careers. The most common kind of sexual harassment faced was verbal sexual harassment (60% experienced it at least once), followed by non-verbal sexual harassment (48%), physical sexual harassment (26%), threatening sexual harassment (10%) and environmental sexual harassment (10%)<sup>2</sup>. In addition 10% reported experiencing at least once physical assault of a non-sexual nature. This means the least prevalent kind of sexual harassment is at least as prevalent as physical assault and violence against journalists, a matter which gets significant news coverage every year and which has several international organisations monitoring it (The Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012; Weaver, 1992; White, 2009).

Nevertheless, sexual harassment remains an under-covered story and news institutions largely ignore it. In fact, the majority of participants noted that their companies had no sexual harassment policies (72%), and only few agreed that their companies deal effectively with complaints about sexual harassment (38%) and gender discrimination (32%).

This problem is compounded by a legal system that does not recognise gender discrimination and sexual harassment as matters that merit specific laws. The Lebanese penal code does not specifically criminalise sexual harassment or even gender discrimination in the workplace. The only mention either receives is the right of victims to resign without providing the standard two to four weeks' notice (Gatten, 2012). Likewise, the press syndicate's code of professional conduct does not include any gender provisions, is void of any stipulations or regulations regarding sexual harassment and conflates vague references to gender discrimination with general discrimination categories.

Even law enforcement and security personnel, who are supposed to protect citizens from such harm, are in fact part of the problem. The majority of women who reported experiencing sexual harassment ranked law enforcement personnel and politicians as the number one source of such violations. As one reporter notes, 'I can't emphasize enough how many times I've been harassed by public officials, and members of the Lebanese police, security and armed forces. But who am I supposed to report it to? The same entities that are supposed to protect you from such harassment are the ones who engage in and perpetuate it. If you try to report it to local authorities, they either ignore you or laugh it off, or even worse, say that you must have invited it upon yourself.' Reports of Lebanese police officers harassing – and at least in one reported incident raping – women in their custody further discourage reporting such incidents (Nazzal, 2012).

While laws and codes of professional conduct offer no protection on the outside, institutional policies and practices provide less help on the inside. Only 69% of surveyed participants said their companies offered maternity leave<sup>3</sup>, while 13% said they offered child-care assistance and 8% said they provided paternity leave. In addition, only 57% said their companies had in place gender equality policies. This corroborates the argument made above that discriminatory practices push married women with children out of the industry, especially when taking into consideration the tough schedules and work demands of a journalist or news professional. Combine these institutional policies with an enduring culture that continues to expect professional women to be fully and solely in charge of domestic duties, especially child-rearing and the picture is more complete. While this study did not directly tackle this cultural matter, participants' responses demonstrate that they feel they are at a disadvantage compared to men. A significant

percentage of the surveyed participants agree that had they been men, they would have had more opportunities (48%), would have been making more money (37%) and would have been taken more seriously by their superiors (22%).

In sum, a combination of factors contributes to keeping women, especially married and older women, out of the journalism field, especially at higher management levels. These factors include a work environment hostile to women (sexual harassment and gender discrimination practices), institutional policies and a culture hostile to women with families.

The preceding suggests strong social and institutional factors preclude many women from entering the journalism and media field, discourage them from enduring in this career and prevent them from advancing in their positions. These factors include a work environment hostile to women rampant with gender discrimination practices and sexual harassment; the lack of laws, codes of professional conduct and enforcement mechanisms that protect and empower women; and archaic institutional policies that together with a patriarchal cultural mentality continue to impose high expectations in the domestic realm.

## Recommendations

Based on this enduring situation, this chapter recommends the following:

1. Preparing and equipping journalism and media students for the realities of the profession. This may be achieved through including critical media literacy and gender studies in the curriculum. Such curricula not only inform students about the history of gender discrimination, current discriminatory practices and how to deal with problems such as sexual harassment, but also instil in students a strong sense of critical thinking that pushes them toward changing the status quo. This extends beyond tackling gender representation in the workforce to cover gender depiction in the media.
2. Working toward developing and enforcing institutional policies that discourage gender discrimination and sexual harassment and provide a work environment more conducive to women with families. Almost all surveyed journalists supported having their companies adopt specific codes of conduct for sexual harassment (97%) and gender equality (96%).
3. Working toward developing legal codes that specifically criminalise gender discrimination and sexual harassment and adding explicit language in the codes of professional conduct championed by press and media syndicates that address these matters. Almost all surveyed journalists supported having specific laws in the Lebanese penal code that refer explicitly to gender equality (97%) and sexual harassment (99%).
4. Forming a professional group devoted to promoting and advancing gender equity in newsrooms. Such a group could be a sub-division within an existing structure (such as the press syndicate) that would be charged with supporting women's advancement in the profession and serve as a site for professional and legal guidance.

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1 The term 'glass ceiling' was coined in a 1986 Wall Street Journal report on corporate women by Hymowitz and Schellhardt. It generally refers to the unofficial barriers women face as they climb the corporate (or other professional) ladder. So, while there may not be any legal or professional obstacles preventing women from being promoted to managerial levels and beyond, there are cultural and societal impediments, which have come to be referred to as the glass ceiling. Women can see the upper echelons, but they can't reach them. The term has since been applied to obstacles in other fields faced by different groups.

2 Adopted from Brown & Flatow (1997), sexual harassment categories are defined accordingly: verbal sexual harassment includes sexual comments, name-calling, jokes or stories of a sexual nature; nonverbal sexual harassment includes staring, winking and body gestures; threatening sexual harassment includes offering rewards or threats in return for sexual favours; environmental sexual harassment includes suggestive cartoons, calendars and nude photos; and physical sexual harassment includes unwelcome touching, physical contact and cornering.

3 Lebanese companies are only required to offer seven weeks of paid maternity leave (Alabaster, 2012).

# Enlisting media and informational literacy for gender equality and women's empowerment

Alton Grizzle

## ABSTRACT

*The importance of affording media and information literacy (MIL) competencies to women/girls and men/boys globally has received increasing attention and has been renewed over the past decade. MIL has been positioned as a basis for the ethical use of information, freedom of expression and freedom of information. It has been proposed as a tool to stimulate personal, social, economic, cultural and political development, and to enhance education. This contribution explores how MIL could be enlisted to promote gender equality in and through media. The concept of MIL is discussed from UNESCO's standpoint, drawing on what many experts call converging literacies. The contribution considers various applications of MIL to development. It presents a cursory look at what gender equality is by purporting gender as identity and as development, and highlighting UNESCO's definition of gender equality. It proposes how gender-sensitive MIL in respect to delivery and use of these competencies could enhance gender equality in and through media. The contribution ends with suggestions as to what gender-specific MIL programmes should entail and questions which should be addressed through empirical research.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Media and information literacy, UNESCO, gender equality, media, ethical use of information, freedom of expression, freedom of information.*

The need to ensure media and information literacy for all citizens globally has received increasing attention and has been renewed over the past decade. International institutions such as UNESCO, the European Commission, the World Bank, the Arab League, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have drawn attention to the need to promote public policies oriented to the development of media literacy and information literacy in all citizens (Frau-Meigs and Torrent, 2009).

Many countries, governments, donors, international development agencies and institutions are advocating, developing, and supporting activities, and in some cases national programmes, to achieve this goal (See Pérez Tornero and Pi, 2010; Frau-Meigs and Torrent, 2009; Horton J., 2007; and Grizzle and Torras Calvo, 2013).

Three research questions are considered in this analysis:

1. What is Media and Information Literacy?
2. What are gender and gender-based approaches to development and how are they connected to media and information literacy?
3. How might media and information literacy empower citizens to advocate for gender equality in all aspect of development including in and through the media?

## Media and Information Literacy: A Necessary Convergence

Media and information literacy is a term coined by UNESCO to encapsulate two converging fields of study, information literacy and media literacy (Grizzle and Wilson 2011). A pure definitional approach to explain what information literacy (IL) and media literacy (ML) are could lead to confusion. As Virkus (2011) notes, "Since [the] 1970s many definitions of IL have been offered and several overviews and analysis of the concept have been published" (p.17). She cited Herring (2006, par.8) who points to a plethora of definitions of IL as a clear indication of the lack of agreement on what the concept means.

Consider the following definitions of IL below: