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Women and the media in Bulgaria

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1. National context

1.1. Background and general policy

Bulgaria is a signatory to the United Nation’s Conventions on the rights of women\(^1\) and firmly committed to the principles and goals of the final documents, adopted at the UN World Conferences on Women\(^2\). The EU accession of Bulgaria in 2007 enforced the introduction of the concept of equality and equal opportunities as developed within the European Community, especially the establishment of institutional mechanisms for gender equality and the advancement of women. The Bulgarian Law on Protection against Discrimination (in force since January 2004), which governs the protection against all forms of discrimination including gender, transposes a number of EU equality directives.

The Law on Equality between women and men (in force since 2016) establishes the principle of equality as a coordinated state policy and designates specialised bodies and mechanisms for its implementation at all levels.

Despite all these achievements, in the beginning of 2018, the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention for prevention and combating of violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) resulted in one of the most destructive debates on the issue of Human Rights that has ever taken place in Bulgarian society. Many of the participants in the debate used the Council of Europe Convention for their own political and ideological goals, openly incited to discriminate against women, homophobia, transphobia and hatred against the European Union’s fundamental values: respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.

1.2 Patriarchal society and strong gender stereotypes in the media and in advertising

Strong gender stereotypes in everyday life present one of the most serious challenges Bulgaria is facing. Bulgarian media, in general, do not tackle stereotypical images of women and men, and instead of promoting gender equality the media reinforce gender stereotypes or neglect the topic. The discriminative and misogynic attitude towards women is often expressed from the high level political tribune and very often mass media present such kind of expressions as something

\(^1\) CEDAW, Convention on the Political Rights of Women, Convention against Discrimination in Education, and Equal Remuneration Convention

funny, or something “innocent”. By reaffirming stereotypical images Bulgarian media “constitutes a barrier to individual choice for both men and women”.

The debate about the Istanbul Convention and the subsequent decision of the Bulgarian Constitutional Court against ratifying the Convention, confirmed the findings of a Eurobarometer survey released in 2017 where 81% of Bulgarians (the highest in the EU) think that the most important role of woman is to take care of her home and family. This ranked Bulgaria as the EU sexism champion. The survey found that 60% of Bulgarians believe there is no problem with the way women are presented in the media and in advertising. The Eurobarometer survey also found out that respondents in Bulgaria are the most likely to stereotype based on gender.

Lack of gender sensitivity in the society as a whole regenerates gender stereotypes in everyday life and the stereotypical image of women in the media. There are conflicting tendencies in building images of women in the Bulgarian media – varying from openly discriminating texts to publications ascertaining the rights of women in Bulgarian society. The female role model and success story is restricted so much that it becomes unrecognisable.

Monitoring of the stereotypes promoted by Bulgarian media when presenting women and girls is not among the obligations of any institutions. And there are very few and sporadic initiatives aimed at media monitoring of women’s image conducted by NGOs.

**In general, Bulgarian mass media reproduce discriminatory stereotypes about women and portray them in a sexist way.** Very often women are associated with the household or sex-objects, and in a limited number of news programs do women appear as main actors or experts.

According to the Gender Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2015 women are under-represented in the Bulgarian media. The study found out that women were 44% of news subjects in television, and only 18% in radio. The total percentage of female news subjects was 37% of all stories. And when they are presented, they are more often eyewitnesses and victims of crime and violence than experts or spokespersons (only in 33% of all news they appeared as experts). All these news stories with female subjects were focused on education, birth control, medicine, health and consumer issues. GMMP 2015 found that news stories are almost three times more likely to reinforce gender stereotypes than to challenge them. Of all news, 21% of stories challenge gender stereotypes, while 69% of news stories reinforce gender stereotypes.

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3 "I prefer women to other affairs", said one Bulgarian MP in 2014, in response to a question about what he thinks about the possibility of a woman running for party leader. Bulgarian media, especially public media, did not respond adequately to such a sexist and misogynistic speech.

4 The EC Report on equality between men and women 2008 (COM(2008) 10) reaffirmed that “Stereotyping constitutes a barrier to individual choice for both men and women” (p.11). The EC was convinced that that “It is necessary to remove cultural barriers in order to facilitate access for women and men to non-traditional occupations,” and that “The media as a whole must participate in efforts to tackle stereotypical images of women and men and must promote a realistic image of their abilities”.


There is a significant lack of research on women’s representation in advertising in Bulgaria. But some analyses\(^7\) show that overall, sex role stereotypes and sexualised depictions of women dominate Bulgarian TV ads. In advertising and magazines, women are usually portrayed as young, slim and very often associated with sex objects. Women are more likely than men to advertise domestic products (88.1% vs. 59.4% men)\(^8\), while men are more likely than women to advertise non-domestic products, they more often advertise banks and insurance companies, as well as car accessories. Women more often than men advertise food, cosmetics, cleaners and detergents, and children’s products, and in the last two categories they are absolute leaders. Furthermore, twice as many men as women are portrayed in independent roles – usually as workers and professionals (40.6% vs. 17.8%).

However, even when a woman is depicted as professional, she is represented stereotypically, which reveals the level of stereotyping. The study, made in 2014\(^9\), shows that in ads women are shown visually not speaking, mainly portrayed as product users, and very rarely as authorities. Most of women are portrayed in suggestive dress, partially nude.

2. Policy debate

According to the Annual Report 2017 on the State of Journalism and Freedom of speech in Bulgaria of the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria\(^10\), the culture of pressure in Bulgarian media is on the rise. “The Big Return of Political Pressure” is how over 200 Bulgarian journalists characterise the media environment in 2017. “The pressure on independent media has been systematic for the past ten years,” said The White paper on Media freedom in Bulgaria, published in May, 2018 by the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria.\(^11\) The White paper drew attention to the lack of media freedom, pressure on independent media and collapse in the confidence in the media product, but there is no word about women and the media. And indeed, Bulgaria has fluctuated in the rankings and reports of many international media and watchdog organisations since the early 2000s. In the World Press Freedom Index 2018\(^12\) Bulgaria occupies 111\(^\text{th}\) out of 180 countries, which position puts the country last among the 28 EU Member States.

In this context, women and the media issue is not under discussion and it is considered as a luxury topic, even bizarre, and not relevant to the Bulgarian situation. Such an attitude about the issue concerning women in the media raises serious concerns and confirms the lack of gender sensitivity and knowledge among Bulgarian media professionals. By ignoring the discussion about gender equality and gender stereotypes, women’s rights of freedom of expression and information are seriously violated. Thus, Bulgarian women continue to struggle to have their voices heard and there is little debate in Bulgaria about the lack of media freedom (“journalists are about to completely lose their freedom and fall into the trap of the

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\(^8\) Maria Kotseva TV commercial representation of women in Italy and Bulgaria in view of the EU fight against gender stereotypes.

\(^9\) Ibid


\(^12\) Reporters without Borders, https://rsf.org/en/ranking#
political class”\(^{13}\)) and the distrust of the Bulgarian media (over 65% of Bulgarians distrust the media\(^{14}\)).

3. Transferability aspects

As described above, Bulgaria is facing serious challenges concerning the issue of women and the media: freedom of speech and fair gender representation of women. The realisation of free and independent media is essential for the achievement of gender equality in the media and for promoting a fair portrayed of women and men in the media. The battle for freedom of speech is a process, not a one-off act, just as breaking gender stereotypes is a long process that requires efforts from public authorities and from the civil society.

The role of public authorities in this process is fundamental. France’ good model of giving inter-ministerial nature of public action and mobilising several ministers on the issue of women and media would stimulate the process of achieving both freedom of press and fair gender representation. Such a high-level initiative gives a very strong positive signal to the public and puts gender equality as an important topic on the political agenda. It would give an opportunity for starting regular gender media monitoring and to produce (and publish) relevant gender statistical data. As described, Bulgaria presently has a significant lack of gender media monitoring and production of gendered statistical data.

The annual report on women’s presence on TV and radio programmes provided by the French High Audiovisual Council (CSA) could be transferred into Bulgaria. The electronic media regulator (Council of Electronic Media - CEM) could play the role of an observatory on media gender practices on TV and radio programmes.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Bulgarian media suffer from a lack of freedom of speech, which generates hate speech and disregard for human dignity. “The language of hatred has become a model, […]. The downturn of dignity is the norm, the discrimination - everyday life”, is the comment about 2017 Bulgarian media environment given by Rosita Elenova, member of the Bulgarian Council of Electronic Media.\(^{15}\) The misrepresentation, sexualisation and dehumanisation of women in the media confirm and reproduce gender stereotypes, and contribute to sexist attitudes.

It is time for policy-makers and other stakeholders, in close collaboration with women’s movements in Bulgaria, to make a critical assessment of the existing policies, with the objectives of making the media actively support the advancement of women’s rights. **Comprehensive policy frameworks and regulatory mechanisms** need to be put in place in order to make the media a useful tool to promote and contribute to greater gender justice and respect for women’s human rights.

The following actions and steps are recommended:


• **Action Plans** with the objective of making the media actively support gender equality, respect of women’s human rights, and women’s empowerment, to be developed by the Bulgarian government.

• **Monitoring and evaluation mechanism** to be put in place in order to play a role as an observatory on media gender practices. The reports on women’s presence on TV and radio to be produced on annual basis.

• Development and implementation of **programmes that will increase women’s access to media**.

• **Gender balance to be established at all decision-making levels within the media.** This could be achieved through measures such as affirmative action and quota systems.

• A media critical analysis to be carried-out in order to raise awareness of both audiences and journalists on how gender power asymmetries are at play in the media. **Feminist analyses** should be made an integral part of the curriculum in journalism schools.

• **Media education** needs to be provided from an early age to teach young people how to decode media images and messages.