

Chapter 6

Exploring the Affordance of Equality and Equal Opportunities to Female Journalists in Rwanda's Media

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Abstract

Rwanda's media industry has expanded in diversity and plurality. Various reforms and efforts to professionalise and enable media contribute to national socio-economic development efforts. Media have gradually been liberalised and transformed into free and independent communication platforms and spaces for dialogue consistent with the principles of democracy and the protection of civil and political human rights. A major area of concern in most media development endeavours in Rwanda has been the creation of appropriate work environments where gender is mainstreamed in all media activities – from education to practice. This chapter examines the state of current gender equality in the Rwandan media to understand how issues of equality and equal opportunities are afforded to female journalists. A mixed-methods approach reveals an inequitable allocation of journalistic roles between male and female journalists and claims of biased coverage of women's issues, salary discrepancies, a general misunderstanding of the concept of gender equality and its implications, and modest approaches in the implementation of gender-related policies. The authors argue that continued focus on gender mainstreaming in the Rwandan

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media should foster gender equality and develop capacity, inclusiveness, and non-discriminatory work environments.

Keywords: Rwanda; Rwandan media; gender equality; women journalists; gender policy

Introduction

Gender equality comprises equal rights, responses, and opportunities for women and men and girls and boys (UNESCO, 2014–2021). This conceptualisation implies that the interests, needs, and priorities of women and men are taken into consideration and their diversity recognised. The United Nations' (2015) *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* conceives of gender equality as a crucial element in policy development that engages the international community and a plurality of stakeholders. Goal 5 envisions a world of 'universal respect for human rights and human dignity' where 'every woman and girl [can] enjoy full gender equality without any legal, social, and economic barrier to their empowerment' and further declares gender equality as a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world (United Nations, 2015). The principles of gender equality and non-discrimination have been sanctified in numerous international treaties, including the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950, article 14), the governing treaties of the European Union (Treaty on European Union, 2009, articles 2 and 3), the European Charter of Fundamental Rights (Treaty on European Union, 2000, article 21), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Union, 2004), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (African Union, 2015), the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Organization of American States, 1994), and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (Southern African Development Community, 2008) among very many others.

These international frameworks have informed Rwanda's engagements with gender equality, and the country is now a signatory to several conventions. Subsequently, a legal and policy enabling environment has been created to facilitate the realisation of gender equality and empowerment of women across different sectors. The national constitution (Republic of Rwanda, 2015a), for example, provides a minimum quota of 30% women in all decision-making organs. The Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion's (2010) *National Gender Policy* underlines the urgency with which the national government seeks to remove all forms of gender-based discrimination and create an environment where both men and women equally contribute to the country's development. Gender empowerment is also a key, cross-cutting aspect of the socio-economic transformation outlined in Republic of Rwanda's (2015b) *Vision 2050*.

The Rwandan [Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion \(2021\)](#) reports that efforts have been made to cascade gender empowerment efforts at local and national governance levels. The [Inter-Parliamentary Union Report \(2021\)](#) ranked Rwanda ninth globally in women's political representation at 61.3%. The [World Economic Forum's \(2019\) Global Gender Gap Report 2020](#) also indicates substantial progress in women's participation in the labour force at 83.9%. The report also identified Rwanda's good progress in women's empowerment. But not all reports agree. The [African Union's \(2015\) Agenda 2063](#) and [Moodley et al.'s \(2019\)](#) report indicate contrasting findings that show little progress in addressing gender inequality across different sectors of the economy, including the media.

A growing issue of concern within the Rwandan media is the absence of gender mainstreaming in most news media institutions and media training/education institutions. Various stakeholders underscore the need to professionalise the media sector in ways that strengthen a balanced, fair, and equal gender representation in training and practice (e.g. [Akinbobola, 2020](#); [Media High Council, 2019](#); [Wood, 2015](#)). Such proposed efforts align with Rwanda's policies of gender empowerment as laid out in frameworks like the [Republic of Rwanda's \(2017\) National Strategy for Transformation 2017–2024 \(NST1\)](#), the formerly Media High Council's [Rwanda Media Policy \(2011\)](#) as well as in such mechanisms as the [United Nations' \(2015\) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which especially addresses Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Study Purpose and Questions

This study examines the current status of gender in the Rwandan media to comprehend how issues of equality and equal opportunities are afforded to female journalists such that they can equally participate in media work by answering these questions:

1. What is the current gender composition in the media industry in Rwanda?
2. What are the existing gender roles and how do women journalists participate in media work?
3. How is the professional performance of female journalists perceived by their male counterparts?
4. Are there gender equality policies and guidelines in Rwanda's media institutions, and, if so, are they fairly applied?

Literature Review

Studies on gender issues in news media contexts have been weighted towards gender balance in job segregation; representation and portrayal in media content, including who makes news ([Steiner, 2009](#); [Wood, 2009](#)); and audiences in their access to and use of media, among other issues. Gender inequalities in the media are often related to conflict in the newsrooms about who should perform which roles, salary discrepancies, sexual harassment, and limited or stereotyped

representations of women in media discourses (Akinbobola, 2020; Santoniccolo et al., 2023) – even where gender equality policies exist. Despite the increase in women beat reporters covering politics and business, women are typically assigned to stories in arts, education, and health that consequently impact their progression up the organisational ladder (North, 2014).

Santonniccolo et al. (2023) have defined ‘gender wage gap’ as the difference between the remuneration offered to men and women for doing the same work. It is also described as the ‘percentage difference between the annual earnings for women compared to the annual earnings for men in work fields’ (Pires, 2017, p. 3). Salary discrepancies are a reoccurring financial issue in all aspects of the media business and most career paths worldwide. In the United States, for example, women earn around 80% of men’s salaries for the same work in the same position (Pires, 2017).

In addition to gender inequality in sub-Saharan Africa, sexual harassment also is raising concern among media and gender researchers. The World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA, 2022) reports that one in four women has faced sexual harassment at work, about 35% have experienced verbal harassment, and 17% have experienced physical harassment. WAN-IFRA further reported that African media has the highest number of sexual harassment problems. Yet most of the time, cases of physical and verbal sexual harassment go unreported because of fear of further victimisation and a lack of confidence in management systems and interventions.

The 6th *Global Media Monitoring Project* report by *Who Makes the News?* (2021) revealed that women make up 25% of the persons heard, read about, or seen in newspaper, television, and radio news, which is only a single percentage increase since 2010. Suppressing women’s voices in the media violates the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’ espoused in the SDGs. Underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in news stories significantly distort the way women view themselves because, of the many influences on how men and women are viewed, media are the most pervasive and most powerful (Wood, 1994, 2009). All media ‘forms are purveyors of communicating images of the sexes’, many of which ‘perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions’ (Wood, 1994, p. 31). The stereotypical portrayal of men and women in media content both reflects and sustains socially endorsed views of gender that falsely imply that men are the cultural standard and women are invisible and less important (Steiner, 2009). Despite the empowering effect of technology, the ordinary woman is often portrayed by the Rwandan media as passive and disinterested in public participation-related issues (Jjuuko & Njuguna, 2019). Such depictions and/or images sustain and reinforce socially constructed views of the genders among audiences and at the workplace (media institutions, in this case) and normalises the mistreatment and sexual harassment of women as well as rape and gender-based violence.

Gender Equality in the Rwandan Media

Women are critically underrepresented in Rwandan newsrooms, television and radio stations, film production houses, and journalism and media training institutions

(Akinbobola, 2020; Media High Council, 2013, 2019; Wood, 2015). Women media owners are few, over 70% of journalists operating in 2011 were men, and less than 10% of the women working in the media were in management positions as directors, media managers, and chief editors (Media High Council, 2012; Rwanda Governance Board, 2016). About 40% of female journalists report on social and legal issues rather than economic, politics, and business (Media High Council, 2019). The latest statistics from the Rwanda Media Commission (2019) indicate little change in the past decade: of the 1,611 accredited journalists¹ in Rwanda, 1,129 (70%) were men and more men than women are in media management positions.

Reports also indicate that Rwandan female journalists suffer various forms of discrimination and sexual harassment. According to Akinbobola (2020), most female journalists in Rwanda, as in several other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, decry discrimination in salaries, sexual harassment, and male chauvinism as hindering their performance in media houses. They also cited a lack of editors' trust in their ability (as women) to independently cover news stories from the field. Yet most women respondents (80%) chose journalism out of passion, talent for the career, and the opportunity to empower others through news.

An online survey by WAN-IFRA that polled 103 journalists in 2021 indicated that about 41% of women journalists in Rwanda had experienced verbal sexual harassment at the workplace that was most often committed by male editors and programme managers. The report established that most victims chose to remain silent to keep their jobs and preserve their reputations with colleagues who considered these offences trivial. Others were not aware that they had been sexually harassed since this concept was not clear to them. According to the report, the offenders were merely warned. It is important to note that about 24% of male journalists had also experienced verbal sexual harassment and about 12 were physically harassed. A February 2021 editorial in *The New Times*, a national daily newspaper, reminded Rwandan media of their duty to respond to and act on such sexual harassment reports.

Gender-based corruption has been implicated in the recruitment process as well as in the working conditions for female media practitioners. For example, student admission into journalism and communication training institutions reflects gender imbalance, and approximately 30% of students at the University of Rwanda were women between 2013 and 2015 (Media High Council, 2018; Wood, 2015). What is worse, of the few female students who study journalism, only 15% end up employed in the media industry for either lack of interest, opportunities, or inadequate investment opportunities in the media sector, and those who proceed into journalism and related work are frustrated by the looming gender inequalities in media institutions (Akinbobola, 2020).

The studies highlighted in this brief literature review emphasise the need for gender mainstreaming in institutions not only in Rwanda but also other countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan media contexts. This will tackle gender-related issues within media and society as a whole. Despite the excellent studies on media

¹There are no reliable estimates of the number of unaccredited journalists in Rwanda.

in Rwanda, we must continuously update the literature and systematically analyse the status quo. This study re-examines the current gender situation in Rwandan media to comprehend how issues of equality and equal opportunities are afforded to female journalists and investigates other issues of gender discrimination in the workplace.

Method and Approach

The study used a mixed methods approach comprising an online survey, focus-group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews to gather quantitative and qualitative data in a complementary way that would provide an overview of the issue and more in-depth insight. We also chose different categories of respondents (journalists, managers, and editors) to get different perspectives. The survey respondents were accredited journalists in print, broadcast, and online media, media managers, and editors selected from official lists of accredited journalists provided by the Rwanda Media Commission. The online survey included both closed- and open-ended questions and was customised for the various categories of respondents. Two hundred accredited journalists responded (42% women and 58% men). We also conducted two face-to-face FGDs. In each focus group FGD1 (including male journalists) and FGD2 (including female journalists), eight practising journalists of the same gender randomly selected from the pool of survey respondents participated. The Key Informant Interviews targeted media managers.

All the respondents gave informed consent to participate in the study. They were anonymised and given the option to complete the questionnaire if they wanted. The data were analysed as a whole to answer the four research questions. Both qualitative and quantitative data are presented in a complementary manner.

Findings

The findings presented below answer the research questions about the current gender composition in the media, gender roles and participation of women in media work, male journalists' perceptions about women's professional performance, the impediments female journalists face while performing their duties, and the existence and implementation of gender equality policies in news media institutions.

Gender Composition in Rwanda's Media

Women are underrepresented in both professional journalism practice and leadership positions like news and production managers and editors. Of the 200 journalists surveyed, 6% of women compared to 23% of men occupied these positions. The findings were confirmed and elaborated on in the FGDs with eight women. One female respondent argued that gender disparities arise from 'discrimination against women in hiring' and what she called 'sexist stereotypes on the capabilities of women journalists', such that 'some men are considered and treated as superior [to] women during recruitment' (FGD2-F5). Another added that recruiters

are ‘blinded by gender stereotypes that women are not brave as men’ and do not therefore consider their professional capacity during recruitment (FGD2-F3).

A related finding was that employers are also concerned about female journalists’ responsibilities as both wives and mothers, which can divert women’s attention from their professions and career paths, such that they are categorically denied recruitment opportunities. One of the senior managers interviewed stated that even though gender is considered an important aspect of the media house, gender equality is yet to be attained. He affirmed that only 30% of his staff are women, and men dominate most leadership positions with just a few ‘talented females in positions of responsibility’ (interview, July 2021). He was, however, concerned about the general conflation of ‘gender’ with ‘women’s emancipation’. He argued, in this regard, that this misunderstanding goes against the need to balance men and women in different roles and added that, ‘empowering women is empowering the nation’.

Gender Roles and Female Journalists’ Participation and Work Confidence in Media

Assessing the roles played by media professionals was crucial to this study’s goal of understanding the contribution of women journalists to the news production process. More male journalists have reporting, production, and editorial roles (singly or in combination) than female journalists. Men are overrepresented as editors, photographers, and graphic designers. Both, however, are equally freelancing. The high number of female journalists who own media houses (mostly online media) was a remarkable finding: of the 22 media house owners surveyed (who are also accredited journalists), 86% are female. Among participants with management positions, women also dominate as owners of media houses, especially online news sites. Some of the women media owners who participated in the FGDs observed that an online media business start-up is less complex than venturing into the mainstream, which motivates more women to take up the ventures.

The data from the FGDs also gave us insights into the journalistic focus of female and male journalists. The findings imply that some media institutions, particularly those with religious affiliations, consider women incapable of ‘perform[ing] certain journalistic tasks as men do’ (FGD2-F6). Typically, women are not given such assignments as ‘presidential conferences, working during night shifts, or reporting stories outside the country – simply because women are considered unable to withstand the pressures and expectations of such work’ (FGD2-F6). Female FGD participants also criticised their supervisors for considering soft news stories easier to report and therefore fit for women: ‘Supervisors should be aware that reporting social or soft news stories is as complex as reporting hard news, and should value this section of news’ (FGD2-F1).

The subject of women’s participation in media work raised another crucial concern: women journalists’ levels of professional confidence in their ability to satisfactorily perform journalistic tasks or work in the industry in general. Survey respondents were asked to rate their levels of confidence on a Likert-type scale. [Fig. 6.1](#) visualises those results disaggregated by gender.

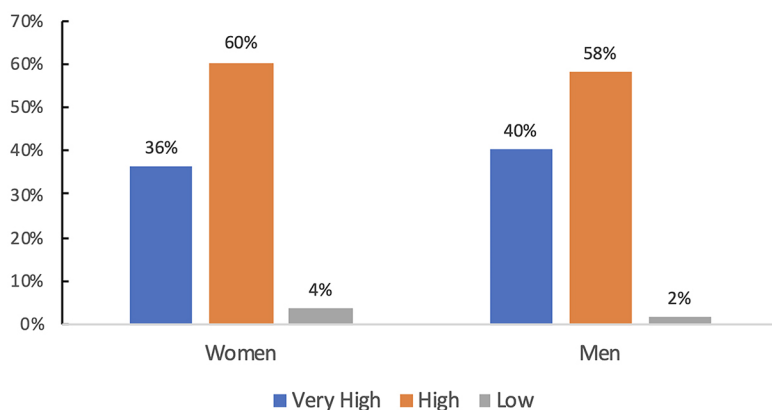


Fig. 6.1. Journalists' Level of Professional Confidence.

The results indicate a substantial level of professional self-confidence among both male and female journalists. Of the 77 respondents (47 male and 30 female) who evaluated their level of confidence as 'very high', 40% were men and 36% were women. In total, 115 male journalists rated their confidence either 'high' (58%) and 'very high' (40%), whereas 80 female journalists self-reported the same confidence bracket (60% and 36%, respectively). Only five journalists (2% of male and 4% of female respondents) indicated a low confidence in performing journalistic tasks. In other words, the disparities in the levels of confidence between the men and women were minor.

Professional confidence was followed up in the FGDs. A male participant opined that women generally 'lack confidence and fear to perform certain journalistic tasks' (FGD1-M4). He, however, explained this phenomenon as the result of workplace gender discrimination: men, who are usually the managers, 'don't give women opportunities to exhibit their potential' (FGD1-M4). His colleague was more explicit:

Female journalists are competent, but they lose their confidence because they are considered as simple helpers [assistants] to their male colleagues. The biases and gender stereotypes against them also prevent them from filling the same tasks with male journalists. (FGD1-M7)

One of the female participants stated that since confidence is built over time, colleagues should be given an opportunity to cover hard news stories to develop and increase their knowledge and experience (FGD2-F6).

Male Journalists' Perceptions of Female Journalists' Professional Performance

Gender roles in the media industry may be determined by stakeholders' perceptions of who performs better. Previous studies have shown a strong bias towards male journalists as more capable of effectively performing journalistic tasks than their female counterparts (Rwanda Media Commission, 2019; Wood, 2015). This

Table 6.1. Professional Performance of Female Journalists and Male Media Practitioners.

Are Male Journalists Better Performers?	Journalists		Editors/Managers/Directors	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Yes (%)	36	13	73	22
No (%)	37	59	27	78
Not sure (%)	27	28	0	0
Total	117	83	11	18

study sought to confirm this finding in the Rwandan context, and the results are shown in [Table 6.1](#).

Most male media managers (73%) affirmed the ability of male journalists to outperform female journalists, whereas the majority (59%) of female journalists and female media managers did not. Perhaps more striking was the finding that more than 25% of men and women journalists were not sure. One male survey respondent noted in an open-ended question that female journalists are ‘sometimes naïve about certain areas and get trepidant to report on topics like politics and economics [which] require critical thinking skills’. This thinking described as ‘disrespectful’ by a female participant in an FGD: ‘such are perceptions and stereotypes that media managers (and society) use to frame women as “weak” and “incompetent”’ (FGD2-F6). A male FGD participant shared a similar view and argued against such frames that view women as incompetent:

Many women journalists work with men journalists and have the same responsibilities with the same capacity to carry out all related journalistic assignments. We all can do research and write news and have the same knowledge and expertise [...]. We are all the same and deserve equal treatment. (FGD1-F7)

Some of the participants in FGD2-F acknowledged not always working towards their emancipation and recognition as equal partners in media work. These reported that often times they ‘don’t try to go an extra mile’ (FGD2-F3). As women, however, they felt an obligation to do their ‘best and not wait for favours from our supervisors owing to our gender’ (FGD2-F5). Another participant (FGD2-F7) reiterated the need for self-help by ‘becoming relevant’ and building up the confidence to speak out about the discrimination against women journalists.

Gender Equality Policies in Media Houses

A gender policy in an institution designates the resolve of management to address any gender imbalances and conflicts that may arise among the organisation’s male and female members. This study thus sought to explore whether such policies

Table 6.2. Existence of Gender Policies in Media Institutions.

Our Institution Has a Gender Policy	Journalists		Editors/Managers/Directors	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Yes (%)	77	65	91	65
No (%)	12	12	9	12
Not sure (%)	11	22	0	23
Total	117	83	11	18

exist in media organisations and whether the respondents were aware of them. Table 6.2 shows the quantitative results.

The findings indicate that institutions in Rwanda have policies on gender equality, with gender sensitisation, which aims to create equality among male and female members of the organisations, as a priority. Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that some staff members, albeit few, were unaware of the existence of such policies in their workplaces. Of the 117 male journalists surveyed, the majority (77%) confirmed the existence of gender policies at their media organisations. A small percentage (12%) indicated that their media houses lacked the policy, and 11% did not know. About 65% of the female journalists reported being aware of gender policies in their media houses, whereas 22% were unsure and 12% confirmed the lack of such a policy in their institutions. The majority of the 11 male managers (91%) and 18 women managers (83%) confirmed the existence of gender policies in their media institutions.

This finding points to the need to raise awareness among staff not only about the existence and substance of the policies but also about their implementation and enforcement. For example, an FGD respondent voiced a concern that some media houses lacked the financial means to operate professionally, ‘making such policies irrelevant’ (FGD1-M5,7). The study further sought to assess if the policies (where they exist) are applied in a non-discriminatory manner and to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. Results are shown in Table 6.3.

While most male respondents (in both categories of journalists and managers) considered the gender policies of their organisation non-discriminatory, their female counterparts were less likely to agree. Indeed, of the 200 journalists studied, 60% of female journalists affirmed that the existing gender policies were being applied discriminatively against them. Specific examples of this discrimination were discussed in the FGDs, including limited recruitment opportunities and that story assignments. Whereas 73% of male media managers believed that policies were applied justly, almost as high a percentage of female media managers (61%) opined that the application of the policies was discriminatory. A small number of journalists in both categories were not sure about the effectiveness of the gender policies in their institutions. The respondents who did not know of such policies (Table 6.2) support the inference that the policy development process may not have been participatory. Participatory approaches in policy development are a useful

Table 6.3. Are Gender Policies Effectively Applied Without Discrimination?

There Is No Discrimination at the Workplace	Journalists		Editors/Managers/Directors	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Yes (%)	70	35	73	39
No (%)	20	60	18	61
Not sure (%)	10	5	9	0
Total	117	83	11	18

way to ensure that the critical issues pertaining to all stakeholders are captured in a knowledge base that guides the policy and what it represents (Poole et al., 2019).

Adherence to the gender policy has been lacklustre in some Rwandan media institutions for different reasons. A female FGD participant declared, ‘There are some media managers who don’t agree with gender perspectives, and they choose not to adopt gender guidelines in their newsrooms’ (FGD2-F4). One of the media managers described the broadcaster’s adherence rate to the gender policy as average, stating that they are working to achieve a ‘1:1 ratio of male and female staff in the next five years’ (interview July 2021). The qualitative data gathered during the FGDs and interviews demonstrated that although the current gender laws and policies clearly stipulate the importance of gender policies, they are not implemented because the staff do not generally understand them. The need for awareness creation on the notions of gender, gender balance/equality, and all related issues in the entire industry is still great.

Discussion

The results from this study have confirmed gender discrepancies in professional journalism practice and in leadership positions. The dominance of male practitioners in the Rwandan media industry is not a new phenomenon. A [Media High Council \(2019\)](#) study that sampled 355 journalists established that men outnumbered women in the media sector due to business decisions that did not favour women (36.6%), the nature of the profession (28.6%), and perceived low self-esteem and ability among women regarding the profession (18.6%). The same study revealed that only 19 (12.8%) female journalists occupied leadership or editorial positions. Our findings are also consistent with the [Rwanda Media Commission \(2019\)](#) study that revealed that of the 1,611 accredited journalists in Rwanda, 1,129 (70%) were men.

Our findings from the Key Informant Interviews show that there is a general misunderstanding, particularly among male managers, that women are incapable of performing certain journalistic tasks and that female journalists (e.g. at the Rwanda Broadcasting Agency) are more talented than journalists. These findings flag the need for recruitment policies that encourage and motivate qualified female candidates to apply for jobs to address the existing gender gaps. At the time of writing, more male journalists (possibly explained by their bigger population, generally) eventually apply for media jobs and get hired, thereby reinforcing the discrepancy.

The high number of female owners of (mostly online) media was an interesting and remarkable finding. Of the 22 media house owners (who are accredited journalists), 14 were female, and they comprised the bulk of female respondents with management positions. FGD participants attributed this trend to the comparative ease of online business start-ups as compared to ventures into mainstream media. One interpretation of these data is that since women are given fewer opportunities in leadership roles in traditional media, the launch of an online start-up could be a sign of resilience. Further research into these women's motivations is warranted.

A gender policy in an organisation is just the first stride towards the achievement of gender equity and equality among the members of the organisation. The actual challenge lies in effective implementation and enforcement. The results on media policy can be interpreted as highlighting how FGD respondents perceived the centrality of a gender policy in ensuring equitable treatment of male and female journalists as they pursue and realise their career dreams. The survey and FGDs showed that media industry stakeholders are generally aware of gender equality as a critical debate in the industry. Although gender debates are not prominent in the newsrooms, some journalists indicated that when issues like sexual harassment arise, the managers remind the journalists about the existing gender policies and the need for policy adherence. Whether these discussions comprise most of the situations when the gender policies are thematised also merits further investigation. If so, how does this limited context of engagement with these policies impact how they are perceived?

Conclusion

Before considering how issues affecting women and men in the wider society are represented or portrayed in media content, we should start with news media institutions and newsrooms themselves. Gender mainstreaming as a way of addressing the concerns raised in this study should seek to foster gender equality and should be reinforced by inclusivity, non-discriminatory work environments, and professional, equal treatment for all categories of journalists. Potential outcomes from these efforts may include women journalists who are well-mentored to face the industry, media owners and managers who are sensitised on the rationale of gender equality in the success of the media industry, and professionals who are gender-sensitive in all aspects of their work.

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