



INTERNATIONAL LAW  
JOURNAL

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**WHITE BLACK  
LEGAL LAW  
JOURNAL**  
**ISSN: 2581-  
8503**

**Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal**

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING GENDER IDENTITY AND GENDER EQUALITY: A SOCIO- LEGAL PERSPECTIVE**

AUTHORED BY - UTKARSHA BARTWAL & MEGHA JUNEJA<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

Media has traditionally perpetuated strict gender norms, depicting men as powerful and women as nurturing and appearance centered. These stereotypes affect personal identity formation, particularly among children and adolescents, constraining self-perception and societal roles. Current trends reflect a move toward diverse and inclusive portrayals challenging dominant norms and enabling wider understanding of gender. Social media have emerged as key platforms for projecting marginalized voices, advocacy, and the representation of non-binary and trans-identities. In spite of these developments, negative stereotypes and disinformation continue to circulate, revealing the dual ability of the media to advance social change or maintain inequality. Legal systems have tackled these problems by enacting legislation against stereotypical representation and by building public support for gender equality legislation. Media literacy is needed to combat negative narratives, allowing people to critically consume content and promote more accurate, diverse representation. By resolving these challenges, the media can be a force for change in attaining gender equality and promoting a more inclusive society.

Keywords- *Media, Gender Equality, Identity, Stereotypes*

## **THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON GENDER IDENTITY FORMATION**

Media is both a mirror of society's values and an influential force that molds public opinion and individual behavior. Its ubiquitous nature shapes how people think about themselves and others, especially in terms of gender. Media reinforces or subverts traditional gender norms through advertisements, television programs, films, and the internet, with far-reaching effects on gender identity formation. How men and women are represented in media influences social expectations and individual self-concepts deeply, beginning early in childhood and extending

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throughout a lifetime. The relationship between gender and media has been a focal point in feminist media studies for decades. Scholars like Laura Mulvey and Bell Hooks have explored how mainstream media often reinforces patriarchal structures, portraying women primarily in passive, stereotypical roles. Mulvey's theory of the male gaze<sup>2</sup> illustrates how films and television shows are designed from a male perspective, positioning women as objects of desire. Historically, the media has played an influential role in affirming conventional gender roles. Men are typically represented as tough, forceful, and dominant figures. Men are presented as being breadwinners, protectors, and providers and exhibiting traits such as resilience, independence, and ambition. Women are typically represented as being nurturing, emotional, and submissive. Media portrayals typically restrict women to roles as caregivers, homemakers, or beauties, putting emphasis on physical appearance and emotional sensitivity rather than competence and strength. These depictions can be particularly seen in advertisements and in movies, where television commercials for cleaning supplies target women nearly solely, locking women into stereotypes that household duties are largely female domains. Likewise, action movies often depict male heroes solving problems using aggression, reinforcing the idea that men are born fighters and problem-solvers. These portrayals are representative of prevalent biases in society and reinforce them, forming a reinforcement cycle that maintains strict gender norms.<sup>3</sup>

The power of media is particularly strong in children and adolescents, who are developing their self-concepts. Children watch media from an early age that influences their conception of what it is to be a boy or a girl. Cartoons, toys promoted by advertisements, and children's television programs frequently feature characters that reflect traditional gender stereotypes. Boys are made out to be brave and adventurous, whereas girls are shown as caring, soft, and appearance-oriented. Being shown such stereotypical images at an early age can restrict children's view of their possibilities. Boys can feel compelled to suppress feelings or shun activities that are seen as feminine, like dancing or care giving. In the same way, girls exposed to media where beauty and passivity are highlighted will internalize that beauty is more important than capability. All these early messages find their way into career choice, hobbies, and relationships, having long-term effects on a person's development.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Media Studies. "Laura Mulvey's "Male Gaze" Theory | Definition and Examples." Media Studies, Media Studies, 2 Aug. 2021, [media-studies.com/male-gaze/](https://media-studies.com/male-gaze/)

<sup>3</sup> **Julia Turbiville Wood. *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*. Belmont, Ca, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003.**

<sup>4</sup> **Tovar, Maryann, et al. "Social Media's Influence on Identity Formation and Self Expression." *Teens, Screens, and Social Connection*, 1 Jan. 2023, pp. 49–61, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24804-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24804-7_4).**



Whereas traditional media has frequently promoted and perpetuated gender stereotypes, there is a trend, as of late, toward greater inclusivity and diversity. Media that is questioning of traditional gender roles can open eyes and assist in developing more fluid conceptualizations of gender. Television programs and movies, for example, that feature strong female heroines, like Wonder Woman or Moana, give young girls strong female role models. These characters showcase bravery, brains, and leadership, defying the idea that women have to play submissive or passive roles. Equally, images of men playing care-giving or emotional roles, including fathers who actively engage in child rearing or male characters exhibiting vulnerability, can be used to deconstruct gendered stereotypes surrounding masculinity. Social media sites have also been responsible for challenging conventional gender representations. Influencers and creators from different walks of life utilize these spaces to narrate personal experiences and subvert the norms of society. Gender equality and body positivity campaigns have increased, urging followers to challenge stereotypical ideals and celebrate individuality.

Yet, media influence on gender identity does not exist in a vacuum but intersects with other social structures, including race, class, and sexuality. For instance, Black women's representation in media tends to integrate gendered and radicalized stereotypes, representing them as either hyper sexualized or excessively aggressive. Similarly, LGBTQ+ have long been excluded or stereotyped in dominant media, and their identities overlooked or caricatured. Positive, inclusive representations of these intersections in media are essential to a more just society. Movies like Black Panther and television shows like Pose have advanced the representation of diverse identities, offering audiences better and more multi-dimensional representations of gender. Such representations not only affirm the existence of marginalized groups but also subvert hegemonic discourses, provoking more empathy and understanding in viewers.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the significant impact of media on gender identity construction, media literacy is key to enabling individuals to critically assess the messages they receive. Educating children and teenagers to dissect media messages can empower them to challenge stereotypes and resist internalizing destructive narratives. Schools, parents, and teachers can contribute significantly to creating this critical consciousness. Media literacy activities can be as simple as examining advertisements for gendered messaging, debating character roles in movies, and finding

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<sup>5</sup> Pérez-Torres, Vanesa. "Social Media: A Digital Social Mirror for Identity Development during Adolescence." *Current Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 43, 24 Apr. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-05980-z>.

alternative representations within independent or foreign media. Even more effective may be encouraging teenagers to produce their own media to express themselves and challenge traditional norms.

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## **MEDIA'S ROLE IN CHALLENGING AND REINFORCING GENDER STEREOTYPES**

Over the past few years, media has been a strong platform for challenging mainstream gender roles and presenting diverse portrayals of gender identity. Social media, specifically, has been at the center of elevating the voices of marginalized groups, such as non-binary and transgender communities. These media outlets present an opportunity for people to narrate their experiences, deconstruct stereotypes, and campaign for inclusivity. Movements like #Me Too and #Representation Matters have also reinforced the necessity of addressing gender inequality and emphasizing the importance of diversity in media representation. Through highlighting issues such as sexual harassment, discrimination, and the absence of genuine representation, these movements have not only ignited international discourse but have also pushed media producers and corporations to re-examine their representations of gender.<sup>6</sup>

Even with these advances, the ability of the media to perpetuate negative stereotypes continues to be a major issue. Mainstream media, fueled by marketability and popularity, tend to focus on profit over authentic representation, maintaining traditional gender roles. Women, for example, are regularly sexualized or stereotyped into beauty, care giving, or emotional roles,

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, Florian. "Media Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Preference-Based Reinforcement: Toward the Dynamic of Self-Reinforcing Effects by Integrating Audience Selectivity." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 73, no. 5, 5 June 2023, pp. 463–475, [academic.oup.com/joc/article/73/5/463/7190600](http://academic.oup.com/joc/article/73/5/463/7190600), <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqad019>.

while their achievements in leadership roles are underemphasized or ignored. On the other hand, men are largely portrayed in a way that emphasizes power, authority, and stoicism, reinforcing narrow definitions of masculinity. This overrepresentation not only reinforces a strict gender hierarchy but also shapes societal perceptions in ways that undermine attempts to achieve gender equality.<sup>7</sup>

The effect of such depictions is widespread, determining how people perceive themselves and others. When women are repeatedly shown to be inferior to men, it reinforces the idea that their voices and skills are less valuable, both at work and in society at large. In the same vein, when men are not given the liberty to show vulnerability or emotions, it reinforces toxic masculinity, restricting their capacity to relate genuinely with other people. For transgender and non-binary people, the media's emphasis on gender stories tends to erase or distort their experiences, further stigmatizing these groups and fueling societal misconceptions regarding gender diversity.

Though there are growing attempts to diversify media representation, these steps are usually followed by pushback or tokenism. True representation is more than the addition of diverse characters or stories; it calls for a systemic transformation in the way stories are presented, who presents them, and whose voices are given priority. Until such changes are adopted throughout the media industry, the danger of reinforcing stereotypes will continue, and the strides made in amplifying marginalized voices will be restricted.

The double function of media as both a stage for progress and a vehicle for traditional norms makes critical media literacy essential. Consumers need to actively question and critique the representations they are exposed to, holding creators responsible for their decisions. By creating a culture where multiple stories are valued and not commodified, media can realize its potential as a force for good, promoting gender equality and dismantling the walls of traditional norms.

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<sup>7</sup> International Media Support. "The Crucial Role of Media in Achieving Gender Equality." International Media Support, 21 Feb. 2020, [www.mediasupport.org/the-crucial-role-of-media-in-achieving-gender-equality/](http://www.mediasupport.org/the-crucial-role-of-media-in-achieving-gender-equality/).



## **THE LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER**

The socio-legal approach brings to light the ways in which media representation interacts with legal institutions to construct norms in society. Media representations have the power to challenge or affirm laws and gender equality, discrimination, and rights to identity. For instance, positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ in media has been associated with higher public approval for anti-discrimination legislation and marriage equality. In contrast, negative or stereotypical representation reinforces prejudices, contributing to social stigma and discrimination. Legal frameworks globally have attempted to counteract harmful gender representations in media in several ways. Most regulations aim at advertising that reinforces gender stereotypes by, for example, banning ads that imply activities are unsuitable for one gender. The United Kingdom's Advertising Standards Authority, for example, introduced guidelines in 2019 that banned advertisements that portray damaging gender stereotypes. Such legal interventions signal a growing recognition of the media's role in shaping societal norms.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, media plays a critical role in the enforcement of gender-related legal protections. High-profile media coverage of gender-based violence, for example, has spurred legislative action in many countries. Cases like the Delhi gang rape in India (2012) or the Harvey Weinstein scandal (2017) gained global attention through media, leading to significant legal reforms and increased public awareness about gender-based violence.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF GENDER DISCOURSE**

The advent of social media has significantly altered how gender identity and perception are shaped. Unlike traditional media, which is largely controlled by corporations, social media provides a platform for individuals and communities to share their narratives. This democratization has given rise to diverse representations of gender, challenging mainstream stereotypes and creating space for underrepresented voices.

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<sup>8</sup> Santoniccolo, Fabrizio, et al. "Gender and Media Representations: A Review of the Literature on Gender Stereotypes, Objectification and Sexualization." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 20, no. 10, 9 May 2023, [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10218532/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10218532/), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105770>.

Movements such as #TransRightsAreHumanRights and #HeForShe have utilized social media to promote gender equality and inclusivity. By sharing personal stories and educational content, these campaigns have fostered greater understanding of complex issues like gender dysphoria, inter-sectionality, and the spectrum of gender identities.

However, the unregulated nature of social media also poses challenges. Hate speech, cyber-bullying, and the spread of misinformation about gender issues are prevalent. These issues underline the need for legal frameworks that balance free expression with protections against harm. For example, countries like Germany have implemented laws requiring social media platforms to remove hate speech and harmful content within strict time frames.<sup>9</sup>

## **THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING LEGAL AND POLICY REFORMS**

Media has been instrumental in driving legal and policy changes related to gender equality. Investigative journalism, documentaries, and public awareness campaigns have exposed gender inequalities and injustices, pressuring governments to act. For example, media coverage of gender pay gaps has led to transparency initiatives and equal pay legislation in several countries.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, media advocacy has played a role in advancing the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.<sup>11</sup> The portrayal of same-sex relationships in television and film has normalized such relationships in the public eye, paving the way for legal recognition of same-sex marriages and partnerships in many jurisdictions.

On the other hand, media can also resist or hinder progressive legal reforms. Misleading or biased reporting can create moral panics around issues like transgender rights, influencing public opinion and slowing policy progress. For instance, some media outlets have framed debates around transgender participation in sports as a threat to women's rights, overshadowing the broader conversation about inclusivity and equality.

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<sup>9</sup> Gallagher, M. 2011. Media and communication policy: Struggling for space. R. Mansell and M. Raboy (eds), The handbook of global media and communication policy. Malden, MA, Wiley Blackwell.

<sup>10</sup> Annan, K. 2005. Gender equality and empowerment of women through ICT. Women 2000 and beyond. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/w2000-09.05-ict-e.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Cook, Rebecca J, and Simone Cusack. Gender Stereotyping: Transnational Legal Perspectives. Philadelphia, Pa, University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

## **GENDER, MEDIA LITERACY, AND LEGAL EMPOWERMENT**

Media literacy has become a critical skill in enabling individuals to analyze and challenge the often-stereotypical portrayals of gender in the media.<sup>12</sup> Media literacy is defined as media literacy as “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts”. The ability to critically assess media content is crucial in an era dominated by digital platforms, where representations of gender and identity are frequently shaped by commercial and cultural biases. Studies have shown that media literacy can foster awareness of gender biases and promote more critical consumption of media content.<sup>13</sup> Educational initiatives that focus on teaching media literacy empower people to identify and confront these biases, fostering a more inclusive society that values diversity and equality.

One of the most pervasive issues in media is the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Women, for instance, are often depicted in limited roles that emphasize beauty and care giving, while men are portrayed as dominant, ambitious, and unemotional.<sup>14</sup> These representations not only perpetuate outdated norms but also hinder progress toward gender equality. Media literacy programs equip individuals with the skills to dissect these narratives and question the cultural and commercial motivations behind them. By teaching people to recognize patterns of bias and omission, such initiatives can inspire a demand for content that reflects the full spectrum of human experiences.

In the digital age, misinformation about gender and identity adds another layer of complexity. Social media platforms, while democratizing content creation, also amplify harmful stereotypes and spread falsehoods. For example, viral campaigns or posts may perpetuate myths about gender roles or misrepresent marginalized identities. Media literacy education addresses this by encouraging skepticism, promoting fact-checking, and fostering an understanding of how algorithms shape the content we consume. Informed individuals are better equipped to navigate this landscape and advocate for accurate and respectful portrayals.

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<sup>12</sup> Potter, James. *Theory of Media Literacy: a Cognitive Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Tabassum, Naznin, and Bhabani Shankar Nayak. “Gender Stereotypes and Their Impact on Women’s Career Progressions from a Managerial Perspective.” *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 10 Feb. 2021, pp. 192–208, [journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2277975220975513](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2277975220975513), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2277975220975513>.

<sup>14</sup> Mendes, Kaitlynn, et al. *#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture through Digital Feminist Activism*. 2018.



From a legal and policy perspective, promoting media literacy complements broader efforts to achieve gender equality. Governments can play a pivotal role by enacting legislation that ensures diverse and accurate representation in media. For instance, Norway and Sweden have implemented gender quotas in public broadcasting, requiring balanced representation of men and women. These measures not only provide a platform for underrepresented voices but also challenge audiences to rethink ingrained stereotypes. Legal mandates for diversity, when combined with educational initiatives, create a powerful synergy that advances both media literacy and social equity.

Moreover, media literacy intersects with the goals of international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>15</sup>, particularly Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls. By promoting critical media engagement, educational and legal initiatives support this global agenda, addressing the cultural dimensions of inequality alongside economic and political factors.

## CONCLUSION

The media holds immense power in shaping gender identity and perception, influencing societal norms, individual behaviours, and legal frameworks. While it has the potential to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity, it can also reinforce harmful norms and perpetuate inequalities. A socio-legal perspective underscores the need for collaborative efforts between media creators, policymakers, and society to ensure that media serves as a force for gender equality. By fostering diverse representations and holding media accountable through legal and social mechanisms, we can create a world where all individuals are free to express their identities without fear of discrimination or prejudice.

Together, media literacy and legal empowerment can serve as powerful mechanisms for social change, fostering a more equitable society where gender equality is not just an aspiration but a reality. To achieve this, it is essential to invest in educational programs that combine these two components, ensuring that both young people and adults are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate media and legal systems and challenge gender-based inequalities.

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<sup>15</sup> "The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020." Unstats.un.org, 2020, [unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/).