



Rewriting the Story- Guidelines for covering women politicians

There is a disconnect between the position of women in politics and their gender-stereotyped representation in the media. While women make around 30% of parliamentary seats in Europe, they represent only 18% of politicians who appear in the news¹.

Women politicians' invisibility in the news as well as gender bias in political coverage can have a serious impact on politics and on voters' decisions by sending a message which suggests women are not capable of holding political office.

Journalistic ethical codes around the world demand that reporters do not discriminate on the basis of gender and that they respect the dignity of news subjects². These are principles that should guide journalists and editors at times of elections when making decisions on what to cover, whom to interview and how to frame the story.

The media has a lot to gain in terms of audience engagement and relevance by providing inclusive coverage of politics and elections campaigns. Indeed, readers, viewers and listeners will be more likely to connect with and trust media sources that accurately represent their lived experiences and viewpoints.

Ahead of the EU parliament election on 6-9 June 2024 , the time is ripe to make a difference in the way we, media professionals, represent politicians. This series of tips aims at promoting unbiased, non-sexist coverage of women and men political candidates. Fair gender portrayal is a matter of ethics, and ultimately of democracy. Use them!

DO'S

1. **SOURCES:** Aim for gender balance in the sources you are consulting – make sure the women who are included in your story are not just bystanders/consumers/voters, but also actors/experts.

¹ Global Media Monitoring Project , 2020, <https://whomakesthenews.org/gmmp-2020-final-reports/>

² Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists, 2019
<https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists>

2. IMAGES: be conscious of the ratio of face to body in framing: including more of a woman's body can reinforce stereotypes of women as decoration or sex objects, while the focus on the face (more common for men) might result in greater perception of competence, authority, credibility and dominance.

3. LANGUAGE - Use gender sensitive language: in a language where nouns are gendered, use the female form where the subject is a woman (for example, in Italian: "La Ministra" instead of "Il Ministro"; "La presidente" instead of "Il presidente"; in English, is the female pronoun - "she" - used). Use woman/women instead of female/females, the latter refers to biology, not to social constructs. For politicians who identify themselves as transgender, ask them how they would like to be addressed.

4. SURVIVORS - If the story focuses on violence against, or harassment of, women/women politicians, present women as survivors or as women who overcame violence rather than victims and do not justify the behaviour of the aggressors or go into detail about their reasons. Always avoid victimising the women facing violence.

5. REVERSIBILITY - Apply the rule of reversibility (change the subject of the news story from a woman to a man). Does the story still work?

6. INTERSECTIONALITY: Ensure diversity among women sources, avoiding the tendency to invite women with similar backgrounds or profiles. Include women from various backgrounds, religions, sexual orientation, culture, expertise areas, and appearances to provide a more comprehensive and representative perspective.

DON'TS

7. APPEARANCE: Don't refer to the physical appearance of women politicians. For example "the attractive minister". It distracts your audience's attention from her competence as a leader.

8. FAMILY STATUS: Don't refer to women's family/marital status (or only if you do this for men politicians too) and don't make assumptions about 'appropriate' roles for women and men (e.g. a successful politician who is 'nevertheless a good wife').

9. LEADERSHIP STYLE – TOO STRONG OR TOO WEAK? Don't fall into the trap of criticising women who show so-called masculine traits such as strength, competitiveness, effectiveness, intelligence, and tenacity. Women face a "double bind" - they are criticised if they act like men, but if they show so-called feminine traits such as empathy, honesty and compassion, they are not seen as strong leaders.

10. EMOTIONS - Don't judge expressions of emotion - women politicians are often expected to smile and project warmth and caring, but they are also criticised if they smile "too much". Male leaders who express anger are seen as strong, but women's anger is seen as "hysteria"; a woman who sheds tears is "weak", while a man is "in touch with his feelings".

Explanations

DO'S

1. **SOURCES:** Aim for gender balance in the sources you are consulting – make sure the women who are included are not just bystanders/consumers/voters, but also actors/experts.

Explanation: According to the Global Media Monitoring Project³ women make 24% of the persons seen, heard or listened to in the news. They are more likely to appear in unexceptional roles as personal experience providers (42% in traditional media, 41% in news websites) and popular opinion givers (38% in traditional media, 39% in news websites) and less likely to appear in decision-making positions such as experts (24%) or politicians (18%). Worldwide, women represent on average 25.6% of the members elected in parliaments (lower and upper houses included when applicable), and 30.4% in Europe. Portraying women in powerful positions, such as experts or politicians reflects the reality of society, as well as challenging ingrained stereotypes and biases, as well as contributing to changing societal perceptions of women leaders.

2. **IMAGES:** Be conscious of the ratio of face to body in framing. Including more of a woman's body can reinforce stereotypes of women as decoration or sex objects, while the focus on the face (more common for men) might result in greater perception of competence, authority, credibility and dominance

Explanation: Images can either reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes. Focusing on a woman politician's body, rather than her face or accomplishments, perpetuates the notion of women as decorative or sexual objects. Conversely, emphasising a woman's face can enhance perceptions of competence, authority, and credibility, countering stereotypes and promoting gender equality. Consider whether including the entire women's body (or from the knees or chest up) adds information/value to the picture.

3. **LANGUAGE** - Use gender sensitive language: Use gender sensitive language: in a language where nouns are gendered, use the female form where the subject is a woman (for example,

³ Ad lib

in Italian: "La Ministra" instead of "Il Ministro"; "La presidente" instead of "Il presidente"; in English, is the female pronoun - "she" - used)? Use woman/women instead of female/females, the latter refers to biology, not to social constructs. For politicians who identify themselves as transgender, ask them how they would like to be addressed.

Explanation: Language carries gender stereotypes. Using gender-sensitive language can change the perspective of a story and provide information that is inclusive for men, women and non-binary persons. When news reports consistently use gender-neutral or inclusive language, it challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes. For example, using gender-neutral job titles (e.g., "spokesperson" instead of "spokesman") helps break down the stereotype that certain professions are exclusive to a particular gender. Using language that respects individuals' chosen pronouns and identities fosters a culture of respect and inclusivity. It acknowledges and affirms people's right to self-identify and reduces the risk of misgendering or invalidating individuals' experiences. Gender-sensitive language demonstrates a commitment to accuracy and respect in reporting. It builds trust with diverse audiences who may feel marginalised or excluded by language that reinforces stereotypes or excludes certain gender identities.

4. **SURVIVORS** - If the story focuses on violence against, or harassment of, women/women politicians, present women as survivors or as women who overcame violence rather than victims and do not justify the behaviour of the aggressors or go into detail about their reasons. Always avoid victimising the women facing violence.

Explanation: A victim describes a person who has been harmed, injured or killed as a result of a crime, accident. A survivor is someone who has gone through the recovery process following violence. While some people identify as a victim, others prefer the term survivor. The best way to be respectful is to ask for their preference.

Media should avoid depicting gender-based violence as "normal" and sanctioning the survivor. Holding current cultural and inherently sexist views suggesting that had a woman not been engaged in certain activities that would be unremarkable for men (e.g.: dressing in a certain way) she would not have been attacked is very damaging for the survivors and convey the message that it is ok to attack a woman under certain circumstances.

5. **REVERSIBILITY** - Apply the rule of reversibility (change the subject of the news story from a woman to a man). Does the story still work?

Explanation: If you wouldn't ask a question to a male politician, don't ask it to a woman; if you wouldn't say something about a male candidate, don't use those words about his female counterpart.

6. INTERSECTIONALITY: Ensure diversity among female sources, avoiding the tendency of inviting women with similar backgrounds or profiles. Include women from various religions, sexual orientation, culture, expertise areas, and appearances to provide a more comprehensive and representative perspective.

Explanation: Women come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, religions, sexual orientations, and expertise areas. Using a variety of women's voices in the media will accurately reflect the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the female population and avoid perpetuating stereotypes. Inviting only women with similar backgrounds or profiles can lead to tokenism, where a few selected individuals are chosen to represent an entire group. This can reinforce stereotypes and oversimplify the complexities of women's experiences. To identify female experts from different backgrounds, use databases such as Expertalia (Belgium), Expertes (France), 100 Esperte (Italy)

DON'TS

7. APPEARANCE: Don't refer to the physical appearance of women politicians. For example "the attractive minister". It distracts your audience's attention from her competence as a leader.

Explanation: Commenting on a woman politician's physical appearance shifts the focus away from her competence, qualifications, and policy positions. It objectifies her and diminishes her value as a political leader rather than acknowledging her accomplishments and contributions to the public good. This undermines the seriousness of her role and reinforces stereotypes that prioritise women's looks over their abilities. The rule of reversibility can help you decide when commenting on appearance can be relevant.

8. FAMILY STATUS: Don't refer to women's family/marital status (or only if you do this for men politicians too) and don't make assumptions about 'appropriate' roles for women and men (e.g. a successful politician who is 'nevertheless a good wife').

Explanation: Research shows that news media are more likely to mention characteristics such as gender, marital status, parental status, age, personality, and appearance for female politicians than for males⁴. The most prominent expected idea of women is that they are mothers. A political figure's motherhood is often considered newsworthy. Showing women politicians as mothers, or implying that women cannot have it all because they cannot be mothers and politicians convey the message that it is not possible for women to make a political career and distract the audience from their political message. In the same way implying that women who are not mothers may not know or care about certain policy domains is bias. Use the rule of reversibility when in doubt.

⁴ (Bystrom et al., 2001; Banwart et al., 2003)

9. **LEADERSHIP STYLE – TOO STRONG OR TOO WEAK?** Don't fall into the trap of criticising women who show so-called masculine traits such as strength, competitiveness, effectiveness, intelligence and tenacity. Women face a "double bind" - they are criticised if they act like men, but if they show so-called feminine traits such as empathy, honesty and compassion, they are not seen as strong leaders.

Explanation: Such a gendered framing of leadership confronts women politicians with a "double bind" dilemma, meaning they receive conflicting messages regarding what is expected from them. Criticising women politicians for displaying traits typically associated with masculinity perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes. It reinforces the idea that certain qualities are inherently linked to gender, rather than recognizing that leadership qualities are independent of gender. This can contribute to a culture that limits women's opportunities for leadership roles and reinforces societal expectations about how women should behave. By only valuing certain traits in leadership, such as competitiveness and aggression, society overlooks the value of diversity in leadership styles. Women bring unique perspectives and approaches to leadership that can complement and enhance traditional leadership qualities. Criticising women for not conforming to traditional gender expectations can undermine their authenticity and discourage them from being true to themselves.

10. **EMOTIONS** - Don't judge expressions of emotion politicians display. Women leaders are often expected to smile and project warmth and caring, but they are also criticised if they smile "too much". Male leaders who express anger are seen as strong but women's anger is seen as "hysteria"; a woman who sheds tears is "weak", while a man is "in touch with his feelings".

Explanation: Refrain from judging expressions of emotion in politics because these judgements often reflect and reinforce gender biases and stereotypes. Looking too much into women leaders' emotional displays can have detrimental effects on their credibility and effectiveness. Such a gendered perception is reinforced for women from a minority background. If women politicians show some traits usually associated with men, such as anger, they tend to be criticised as incredibly tough leaders with aggressive behaviour. Criticising women leaders for their emotional expressions can undermine their authenticity and discourage them from being genuine in their interactions.

Think further

Use *Rewriting the story* training modules: [Rewriting the Story: tackling media, gender stereotypes in political and public life](#) (2023)

Check the AGEMI web site and its [training resources on gender and media specifically developed for journalists](#)

These guidelines were drafted in collaboration with media professionals, journalists, trainers, professors and media managers from across the European Union as part of the Rewriting the Story: Gender Media and Politics project. The IFJ warmly thanks the participants for their contributions.

The International Federation of Journalists is the Global voice for journalists, representing over 600000 journalists across the world.