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Malta participating in a gender project funded by the EU

Juan Ameen

Promoting change in gender roles and overcoming gender stereotypes is the priority theme at the heart of a new EU funded project which the Centre for Communication Technology (CCT) at the University of Malta is taking part in.

Juan Ameen

Dr Brenda Murphy, who lectures in media and Cultural Studies in the Department of Communication Studies, is the local co-ordinator in this trans-national project that has been approved and funded by the EU commission.

The project's trans-national partners are key players in journalism education and include the European Journalism Centre, Radio Netherlands Training Centre, and the European Journalism Training Association.

This project is set up for various reasons. It will try to stimulate new approaches to media portrayal of women and men in public life and in politics, by producing and disseminating an audio-visual training toolkit – for use in broadcasting and journalism training situations throughout the 25 EU Member States – based on analysis of examples drawn from current media output. It will also involve a wide range of media organisations (broadcasters, journalists, trainers) in the development of this toolkit to: (a) exchange good practice in gender portrayal; (b) build awareness of the need for diversity in media content so as to achieve equal representation and participation in society.

One of the advantages of this project is that it will provide media training organisations with a toolkit that can be easily included in mainstream journalism training and further training throughout the EU Member states. Also, there will be included in the toolkit interview material, media strategies, models and approaches aimed at helping women – of different ages, and from varying ethnic groups – to participate equally with men in public life and political decision-making

What is the reasoning behind such a project? Despite the progress achieved in promoting gender equality and narrowing gender gaps in many fields over recent decades, the persistent under-representation of women in public life and political decision-making remains one of the most important issues to be addressed. By 2003 just 25 per cent of parliamentary seats in the EU-15 were occupied by women (up from 23 per cent in 1999), and the percentage is lower in the new Member States. The Commission's 2004 report on equality between women and men concludes that this amounts to 'a fundamental deficit in European society' and calls for renewed commitments and partnerships to realise full democracy by achieving a balanced representation of women and men in decision-making structures.

Traditional gender roles and stereotypes have perpetuated a view of life in which 'women' and 'politics' are perceived as almost antithetical. These stereotypes seriously affect women's relation to the political world – whether as politicians, voters, or citizens. To the extent that the media are central intermediaries in politics – reporting, reflecting, representing political debate and the political process – the participation of women and men in political life cannot be separated from the role of the media. This role has changed substantially over the past decade. Politics is no longer mediated simply through the customary genres and channels – newspapers, radio and television news, and current affairs programmes. Today, politicians and political debate can just as easily be found in popular media genres – talk shows, quiz shows, and gossip magazines. Politics has become both popularised and personalised, and so too have the media. Superficially, this development might appear to benefit gender equality: after all, the slogan 'the personal is political' has for years provided a conceptual road map for the women's movement. But most studies of the popularisation (or 'tabloidisation') of the media conclude that the tendency to trivialise and personalise can have a negative impact on democracy and informed citizens

In this context, gender equality becomes a casualty rather than a beneficiary. Longitudinal research into media representation of women politicians in Canada over the past thirty years suggests that despite some shifts, new stereotypes are simply replacing old ones. In Europe, even in countries with a strong tradition of women in political office such as Finland, Norway and Sweden, studies show that the media persist in emphasising the family situation and/or appearance of female politicians or candidates. Women in politics seem less newsworthy than their male counterparts. The 2000 Global Media Monitoring Project found that women politicians were consistently –

and often dramatically – under-represented in news coverage. For instance in Sweden, where women hold 45 per cent of parliamentary seats, only 23 per cent of politicians in the news were female. The pattern was similar throughout the 10 EU Member States monitored. The media's concept of what is newsworthy affects not only how often women appear, but the issues that get reported. Certain stories simply are ignored by the media, according to the Fawcett Society, which campaigns for women's participation in politics in the UK. They argue that journalists tend to stay away from certain parliamentary debates – for instance, on domestic violence – which is still regarded as being outside the mainstream policy agenda.

This adds up to a complicated process in which media language and images, news values and priorities, and journalistic approaches all help to produce gendered representations of women and men in public life and, as a result, contribute to the reproduction and confirmation of gender stereotypes. This project aims to intervene in that process, to make visible the media practices involved in it, and to promote critical reflection and change

The project, Gender, Politics and Media: Challenging Stereotypes, Promoting Diversity, Strengthening Diversity, will be coordinated by the European Federation of Journalists. The trans-national partners are heavyweights in journalism education and include the European Journalism Centre, Radio Netherlands Training Centre, and the European Journalism Training Association. The project also includes five national partners: BBC from the United Kingdom, NRK from Norway, ZDF and RBB from Germany (on behalf of the ARD group of broadcasters), and the University of Malta, Department of Communications Studies.

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