

CODE OF ETHICS FOR GENDER REPRESENTATION IN THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA



PERCEPTION



REALITY

WOMEN'S EDUCATION & RESEARCH CENTRE

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and Managers of Television Stations

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PREFACE

This booklet, which contains the first Code of Ethics for Gender Representation in the Electronic Media in Sri Lanka, was prepared as part of a project funded by The Canadian International Development Agency with extensive collaboration from a number of people. I would like to acknowledge their contribution and thank them for their interest.

As an initial step towards formulating the Code, research was undertaken simultaneously by eight research assistants, who monitored the Sinhala and Tamil electronic media for three months. The results of this research provided the groundwork for the deliberations of a consultative forum, comprising media managers, practitioners and researchers. It is their suggestions and recommendations that have gone into formulating this Code of Ethics. It may be pertinent

to add here that, Code of Ethics formulated by other countries such as South Africa, Singapore, and the British Broad Casting Corporation were consulted by us to arrive at consensual decisions.

We want to place on record the assistance given by CIDA and it's staff specially Ms. Sivagurunathan and Ms. Shirani Mills who were a source of inspiration to us.

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Selvy Thiruchandran,
(Executive Director),
Women's Education and Research Centre
58, Dharmarama Road,
Colombo 6

Members of the Consultative Forum

Mr. D. E. W. Gunasekara,
Chairman,

Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation

Mr. Graham Ironside
Director, MTV

Ms. Sharmini Boyle
and

Ms. Sharni Jayawardene
from Young Asia Television

Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran
and

Ms. C. K. Abayaratna
from Women's Education & Research Centre

Members of the Drafting Committee

Ms. Chitra Ranawaka

Mr. Ranjan de Silva

Ms. Sharmini Boyle

Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran

Research Assistants

- ❖ Mr. Namal Weerasena
- ❖ Ms. Vasugi Somasekaram
- ❖ Ms. B.V. Shirani Thejanthi
- ❖ Ms. Prabha Thevarajah
- ❖ Ms. M.D.C.S. Ariyapala
- ❖ Mr. A. Nixon
- ❖ Ms. Sriyani Perera
- ❖ Ms. Tharsini Kumaradas

Members of the Constitutional Committee

Mr. C. V. Vellody

Mr. C. V. Vellody

Mr. C. V. Vellody

Research Assistant

Mr. C. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. N. N. Vellody

♦ Mr. V. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. E. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. P. P. Vellody

♦ Mr. M. D. C. Vellody

♦ Mr. M. D. C. Vellody

♦ Mr. S. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. S. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. T. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. T. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. T. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. T. V. Vellody

♦ Mr. T. V. Vellody

INTRODUCTION

The Research Project of Women's Education and Research Centre on the portrayal of women in the electronic media focused on a number of programmes telecast on five channels over a three month period. Programmes on News and Current Affairs, Films, Tele-dramas and Advertisements were monitored. The results of this research revealed that in the majority of television programmes and films, women are presented as homemakers or performers of service roles in society. Even career women are usually portrayed in conventional employment areas, performing roles such as secretaries, teachers and salespeople.

It was evident from the research findings that the media does not generally perceive contemporary Sri Lanka as being a place where, in reality, women are often breadwin-

ners and are significant economic contributors. Neither does it adequately acknowledge that Sri Lankan women today share more and more responsibility and decision making with men, both in the community and in the family. Perpetuating familiar female stereotypes, the media tends to encourage and reinforce negative images of women.

Another limitation in the portrayal of women by the electronic media, is the lack of sensitivity in dealing with subjects such as rape and sexual abuse. Such scenes are usually sensationalised. Television programmes often project the idea that rape is a form of punishment for women victims and their families. In addition, women are often portrayed as victims of verbal, physical and psychological violence. The manner of the depiction of violence has become an issue of controversy. Whether such levels and types of violence are really needed is questionable. The second question is even more important: whether such overtly aggressive violence that we see leads to violence in actual life situation in society is a moot point that deserves to be taken into consideration.

In the area of news and current affairs programming, apart from the coverage of a few female politicians, women's issues and concerns are largely neglected. Other factual programmes, even those produced by women mainly for a women audience make too many assumptions about women's interests and are usually limited to such subjects as cookery demonstrations, home décor and beauty pageants.

Advertising is powerful and is persuasive by nature. Advertisements are constantly seen and heard by members of the public. The images thus portrayed should have some relevance to social norms and social reality. The advertising that appears along with news and other items has a high credibility factor. Hence, it is imperative that advertising agencies should act with a great degree of moral and professional responsibility. In addition, advertisements tend to exploit women's sexuality, reduce them to limited gender roles, or use them as 'dressing' in selling products. Advertising was seen as an area where women are not depicted often enough as being independent, fulfilled or productive outside in the public scene.

The power of television lies in its ability to influence audiences with representations of the world. All the 'messages' we receive from television tend to shape and structure our perceptions and expectations of society, as well as affect our patterns of behaviour. Grasping this as an opportunity, the electronic media in Sri Lanka should provide a balanced picture of women that reflects their diverse contribution to a rapidly changing society. This would help and reduce to a great extent situations of violence against women and the negative stereotypes of women. It is hoped that this Code of Ethics will encourage media managers and practitioners to recognise the importance of gender equality in producing and scheduling television programmes for Sri Lankan audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND MANAGERS OF TELEVISION STATIONS

These recommendations have been designed to encourage media managers to formulate policy on gender representation in programmes and commercials/advertisements broadcast on their stations and networks. In recognition of their social obligations, as well as their responsibilities as employers, they should:

- * Include gender concerns in guidelines that are provided to advertisers and independent producers
- * Ensure that preview committees are gender sensitive and equally represented by women and men
- * Increase the number of programmes made

for and by women, and ensure gender and cultural representation within programming

- * Increase programming that discusses and critically analyses such subjects as gender stereotyping and the commercial exploitation of women
- * Increase the number of women in training programmes, especially in areas where women are under-represented
- * Increase the number of women who are recruited for programme production
- * Ensure on-going research on women's participation and portrayal in the media
- * To ensure that the policies should be gender responsive in
 - a) Recruitment and promotion procedures
 - b) Production and telecast
 - c) Training Programmes and Commercial Advertisements

GUIDELINES FOR TELEVISION PRODUCERS

These guidelines have been designed to help writers and programme producers to understand and be sensitive to gender representation on television.

In describing and portraying women and men, avoid encouraging or endorsing inaccurate, demeaning or discriminatory references, stereotyping or unwarranted generalisation. In particular:

- * Avoid language that unnecessarily excludes one sex, or gives unequal treatment to women and men
- * Avoid stereotyped gender portrayals that associate particular roles, ways of behaviour, personal or social attributes, or use of products or services, with people on the basis of gender

- * Avoid productions which imply that a person is inferior because of his or her gender, or that either sex is naturally superior at certain tasks or in certain fields
- * Recognise in reporting and commentary that woman and men nowadays are involved in an equally diverse range of roles
- * Try to achieve a better balance in the use of women and men as experts and authorities and give equal prominence to the achievements of both women and men, in non-traditional fields such as sports and politics.
- * Take particular care when reporting incidents of violence (particularly sexual assault) to:
 - (a) avoid offering explanations which may reasonably be seen to diminish individual responsibility for the violence or even shift blame to the victim; and
 - (b) avoid details such as the state of dress or undress of a sexual victim, and unnecessary detailed descriptions of the crime

GUIDELINES FOR FORMULATING ADVERTISING POLICY

These guidelines have been designed to assist television station managers to draw up guidelines for broadcast policy regarding advertising. Such guidelines are intended for advertising agencies and commercial production houses. The objective is to encourage the positive and realistic portrayal of women in advertisements.

- * Avoid using women as decorative, sexual, and commercial, objects to attract the attention of male viewers
- * Avoid using women in advertisements for products that have no relevance to females
- * Avoid portraying women in subservient roles and as stupid individuals in a man-

ner that communicates such roles to be the norm

- * Avoid portraying women in a manner that communicates housewifery as being their only or primary role but promote the portrayal of their multiple roles
- * Avoid portrayal of women in a manner that indicates Housewifery as gaining primacy over other roles that she performs in society
- * Avoid portraying women performing household tasks while the rest of the family relaxes
- * Avoid portraying male children as dominant, and female children playing out future housewife/ motherhood roles

ACTION PLAN FOR GENDER EQUITY IN THE MEDIA

The objective of this Code of Ethics is to ensure equitable gender representation in the electronic media. It therefore applies to programmes that are produced or commissioned, as well as advertisements that are broadcast, by stations and networks. Media heads, department heads and managers should take responsibility for implementing the guidelines that have been set out in this booklet.

Gender sensitising workshops for managers and programme producers should be carried out regularly to increase awareness of the importance of gender representation in television programming. This would be most effective if implemented in collaboration with state institutions and NGOs that are concerned with gender issues.

The establishment of a monitoring committee, made up of representatives of stations and networks, researchers and independent producers, is recommended to ensure that the guidelines set out in the Code of Ethics are adhered to.

It is advisable that this committee consists of men and women drawn from women's NGOs' and Universities as well.

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