

6. Violence Against Women in Media and Digital Contents

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INTRODUCTION

Defined by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, as any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field, violence against women (VAW) constitutes the main obstacle for women's human rights.

Based on the theoretical framework of feminism, nowadays legal definitions on VAW have adopted a holistic perspective which recognizes both types (physical, sexual, psychological, economic and femicide), and modalities (institutional, community, work and school) of violence against women and girls.

Most recently, the Sustainable Development Goal 5 Target 5.2 calls on governments and other actors to eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, sexual and other types of exploitation.

The CEDAW recognizes the centrality of media in the elimination of VAW. Actions promoted by the Commission include urging Member States to adopt mechanisms

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to eliminate sexist stereotypes in media and advertising, to encourage media to establish codes of production and to stimulate a public debate on this issue.

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) in 1995 called explicitly on governments to take effective measures, including appropriate legislation against pornography and the phenomenon of violence against women and children in the media (UN, 1995, p.102). The BPfA also recommended media industries to establish guidelines to address violent, degrading or pornographic materials concerning women, including advertising and to disseminate information aimed at eliminating all forms of violence against women.

However, instead of decreasing, sexism and misogyny in media has increased dramatically the last decades. The initial issues around the accountability of media institutions and media actors to end violence against women, are still at the core of international debates. In addition, the new media environment has exacerbated some existing problems and brings new challenges that need to be addressed – such as sex trafficking and misogynistic pornography.

EVIDENCE

Reviewing feminist research during the last 50 years provides evidence of the prevalence of violence against women in media contents. In addition, the complexity of theoretical and methodological frameworks has increased as types and modalities of representing VAW have changed.

Early studies focused on the representation of sexual violence to demonstrate how, through the commodification of women's bodies, media content contributed to the normalisation of sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence and how they reinforced gender inequalities. These studies were identified by their interdisciplinary nature. Influenced by psychoanalysis, Laura's Mulvey male gaze and sexual objectification categories evidenced the patriarchal order existing in the film industry and how these categories discriminated against women in society.

Guided by the questions: “how do media portray women?” and “how do these portrayals limit women lives?” sociologist Gaye Tuchman called attention to the symbolic annihilation of women in media discourse, through omission, trivialisation and condemnation.

The next phase was linked to social intervention. Content analysis served to produce quantitative statistical data about gender portrayals. These data supported campaigns against stereotyped representations in both media contents and advertising, which evidenced the presence of different forms and modalities of VAW in contents – for example, in regard to domestic violence.

Current research promotes holistic analysis, in order to look at different forms and modalities of gender-based violence in media discourse (Vega Montiel, 2014). Findings have demonstrated how media content reproduces sexist stereotypes that associate male identity with violence, domination, independence, aggression and power, while women are linked to emotions, vulnerability, dependency and sensitivity (Elasmar, Hasegawa and Brain, 1999; McGhee and Frueh, 1980; Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995).

In particular, news reports of violence against women tend to represent women as victims and as responsible for the violence of which they are victims. Usually, aggressors are not part of news reports. VAW is not shown as a structural problem, which is the consequence of inequality between women and men in society, but as a mere individual experience that happens in domestic spaces (Diez, 2002; Vega Montiel, 2007).

With the development of ICT, cyber VAW is emerging as a global problem. Almost three quarters of women have been exposed to some form of violence online. Types of cyber-violence include: hacking, surveillance, harassment, malicious distribution and death threats (Broadband Commission for Digital Development, 2015).

The report (cited above) argued that violence online and offline feed into each other. 'Abuse may be confined to networked technologies or may be supplemented with offline harassment including vandalism, phone calls and physical assault. Similarly, the viral character of distribution is now explosive. What was once a private affair can now be instantly broadcast to billions of people across the digital world' (Broadband Commission for Digital Development, 2015: 7).

In countries such as Mexico, cyber violence has been at the core of public debates in recent years. In 2016, at least ten young women denounced through social networks they had been harassed by men in public spaces. These women identified the alleged aggressors and, in response, they became victims of both sexual violence and death threats from Facebook and Twitter users. A very powerful counter-response came from young women in the country. Through the hashtag #MyFirstHarassment (#MiPrimerAcoso, in Spanish), a hundred thousand women told of their first experience as victims of sexual violence.

A similar movement emerged in October 2017, in the USA. The hashtag #MeToo was used to denounce the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein as a sexual aggressor. The hashtag was promptly popularised worldwide for millions of women to publicise personal experiences of sexual harassment or assault.

At the same time, online and social media have also become new and powerful vehicles for misogynistic threats and harassment which can result in the silencing of women. While fewer women than men access the Internet today. There are currently 200 million fewer women online than men – it is no less the case that both new sexist media and new sexist discourses can exacerbate violence against women and girls.

Another dimension of the sexist nature of online discourses, is the widespread circulation of pornography. Some statistics suggest that there are more than four million websites that offer pornography - 12% of the total number of websites in the world. The online pornography industry turns over 97.06 billion dollars per year,

more than Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Amazon, Netflix and Apple combined (Feminist Peace Network, 2006). An estimated 100,000 offer child abuse imagery.

There is also sex trafficking of women, girls and boys that has been enhanced by the new media. Sex trafficking used to happen mainly in countries that correlate with a lack of regulation and policy, including the Internet, and particularly in countries where there is a high percentage of poor women.

So, what to are the conclusions about violence against women offline and online? The initial feminist research questions - coming from the 1960's - are still relevant at the core of theory and research on media contents. 'This still resolves around the most basic questions of power, values, access and exclusion' (Gallager, 2002: pp 5).

In addition, the new media environment has opened possibilities for contestation while also exacerbated some existing problems and new challenges that need to be addressed.

"Media sexism and male-dominated power structures are continually shifting and finding new forms of representation and practice... [so] our critique can never be static or one-dimensional, but we must act collectively... Across disciplines and sectors and across countries and regions" (Gallagher, 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the evidence, we call on the UN and the international community to put into global focus the accountability of media and ICT industries in eliminating violence against women and girls. This is crucial to promoting discussion and to enhancing public visibility and awareness.

THE UN AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHOULD:

- Commission and produce global comparative reports on VAW in traditional and digital media contents, with a cross-national and cross-regional perspective, emphasising advances and challenges. These reports must include the analysis of the dimensions involved in this problem: existing legislation, policy and regulation, self-regulation and co-regulation forms, content of media and ICT, media and information literacy programs.
- Call on Member States to introduce or strengthen regulation and policy aimed at preventing the spread of gender-based violence through the media and ICT.
- Encourage media and ICT organizations to: adopt gender mainstreaming mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and action; adhere to national and international legislation to end VAW; improve gender mainstreaming training programs for content producers.
- Encourage media unions and journalists' groups to adopt basic principles for the production of news on VAW free of sexist stereotypes.
- Promote the exchange of best practices to end VAW in media and online contents and link with the research community.

RESOURCES AND GOOD PRACTICE

- Initiative: 'End Violence: Women's rights and safety online'
NGO: Association for Progressive Communication.
URL: <https://www.apc.org/en/project/end-violence-womens-rights-and-safety-online>

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