

Gender Equality in the News Media in Nepal

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Background

This article is on the policy dimension of gender and media concerns in the Nepali context, mainly focusing on news media. Gender equality in media is needed for both the media industry and also for broader societal goals of promoting gender equality. "Women right to freedom of expression and to information, which includes their right to speak and be heard, as well as their right to participate in media professions, are fundamental to the realization of all their rights and freedoms"¹. While the gender and news media issues are broadly understood in terms of the portrayal of gender in news content and gender equality in news media industries, this article highlights on the latter part. It addresses the current situation in which the news media are operating and the policies that have been adopted by the media organizations to promote gender equality within the media organizations. As a starting point, I highlight selected policies concerning news media industries today in Nepal and contemporary practices of other countries which could be translated to the local context. The final section concludes with recommendations to media organizations and all other stakeholders to promote gender equality in news media industries while highlighting the role of the government from a policy dimension.

¹ UNESCO. 2015. *Inside the News: Challenges and Aspirations of Women Journalists in Asia and Pacific*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233420>.

As data disaggregated by gender is limited, the study has incorporated general observations, policy reviews, and personal communication with media professionals as a form of analysis.

Although the history of mass media in Nepal dates back to 1851 A.D, the participation of women in the Nepali news media began only after the publication of the monthly magazine Mahila Maasik in 1951. Women journalists who worked in the 1950s and 1960s published mainly against the social injustices of that time. Panchayat period (1961-1990) was a dark period for independent media and journalism, sidelining women journalists.² The participation of women in the media was significantly noticed after 1984 when the Nepal Television started hiring women as newsreaders and program presenters.³

The Constitution of Nepal guarantees equal rights for all citizens including all women and other groups facing conditions of discrimination and marginalization. Following the end of the armed conflict in 2006; Nepal has made significant area of gender equality. Women journalists comprise 18 percent of the country's journalists, according to the

² Sancharika Samuha. 2015. *Women Journalists in Nepal: Research on Professional Status of Women Journalists in Nepal*. <https://www.sancharika.org/public/publication/details/2>.

³ Koirala, Samiksha. 2022. "Where are the Women? Representation of Gender in Nepali Newspapers." In *Global Perspectives on Journalism in Nepal Nepalese News Media in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bhanu Bhakta Acharya and Shyam Sharma, 155-173. London: Routledge.

statistics of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ). The number of women journalists is estimated to have increased by almost 100 percent in the period between 2004 and 2014.⁴ It is also important to note no periodical surveys and assessments from the government or any other organizations have been conducted to know the exact number of women journalists and their situation. Although FNJ has started to keep gender-disaggregated data, many women journalists who do not have FNJ membership are not documented. Nevertheless, media researchers and experts agree that number of women journalists has increased in the last two decades. While the participation of women journalists is on the rise; so are the challenges they are facing. According to survey⁵, only 8.1 per cent of women journalists hold senior posts such as executive to mid-level editors, bureau chiefs, and others. When women are missing in decision-making levels, basic facilities like maternal leave, childcare services, flexible working hours, and transport services also tend to be neglected.⁶ A typical divide in the type of stories assigned to men and women journalists was found, with male journalists typically reporting on politics and business and women generally covering entertainment and lifestyle; according to a study report.⁷ The report further revealed that the women journalists in Nepal are restricted by stereotypical beats, face more job insecurity, lower wages, and gender discrimination. It has also pointed out the need for greater gender sensitivity in the workplace and sexual harassment and safety policies. Likewise, a study by Centre for Investigative Journalism⁸ indicates that the majority of women journalists in Nepal do not have transport for news reporting and late shifts, child-care facilities, and even separate toilets at the workplaces.

Various studies (GMMP, 2020⁹; Koirala, 2022¹⁰) in

- 4 Seshu, Geeta. 2014. *The Stories Women Journalists Tell: Women in Media in South Asia*. International Federation of the Journalists. https://issuu.com/ifjasiapacific/docs/women_in_media_in_south_asia.
- 5 Sancharika Samuha. 2015. *Women Journalists in Nepal: Research on Professional Status of Women Journalists in Nepal*. <https://www.sancharika.org/public/publication/details/2>.
- 6 Seshu, Geeta. 2014. *The Stories Women Journalists Tell: Women in Media in South Asia*. International Federation of the Journalists. https://issuu.com/ifjasiapacific/docs/women_in_media_in_south_asia.
- 7 International Federation of Journalists. 2015. *Media and Gender in the Asia Pacific Region: A special report by the International Federation of Journalists (Asia-Pacific)*.
- 8 Aryal, Indira. 2019. *Women in Newsroom in Nepal*. Center for Investigative Journalism. <https://vikes.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Women-in-Newsroom-in-Nepal.pdf>.
- 9 Ed. Macharia, Sarah. 2020. *Who Makes the News?* 6th Global Media Monitoring Project. https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GMMP2020.ENG_FINAL20210713.pdf.
- 10 Koirala, Samiksha. 2022. "Where are the Women?

the area of gender and media in Nepal has provided evidence of the under-representation of women in the news content. In the case of Nepal, only 27 per cent of the news subjects are women, according to the findings of GMMP 2020. The representation of women as news subjects was limited to 13 percent in 2015. As women in Nepal continue to be more visible in the public sphere including in the media organizations; some progress like more women voices in news stories and portrayal of women challenging traditional gender stereotypes are also being noticed.

Mainstreaming Gender in Media Policies

Mainstreaming gender in policies begin from the basic presumption that people of different gender deserve equal treatment and a favorable environment where their professional growth is related to their competencies and not their gender. Although gender mainstreaming has been slow to engage with the domain of media in the local as well as the global context; their concerns have always been linked to policy issues. "Developing gender aware policies for the media has been indicated since the UN Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) as one of the steps to be taken to meet the goals of Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action those of promoting equal access to the media and decision-making (J1), and eliminating gender stereotypes in media content (J2)."¹¹ It identified the adoption of gender-aware media policies as a step to be taken to meet the goals of promoting equal access to the media and eliminating gender stereotypes in media content. It also called upon the governments and other actors to promote gender mainstreaming in policies and programs. Furthermore, the platform called for media organizations to "elaborate and strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms and codes of conduct."

Despite much talk about gender mainstreaming in policies, very little has been achieved in terms of media-focused policies. Policies specifically centered on the media sector that articulate a strong

Representation of Gender in Nepali Newspapers." *In Global Perspectives on Journalism in Nepal Nepalese News Media in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Bhanu Bhakta Acharya and Shyam Sharma, 155-173. London: Routledge.

11 Ed. Macharia, Sarah. 2020. *Who Makes the News?* 6th Global Media Monitoring Project. UNESCO and GAMAG. https://whomakesthenews.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/07/GMMP2020.ENG_FINAL20210713.pdf.

commitment to gender equality are limited. National Mass Communication Policy, 2016 has addressed the issues of gender-specific challenges. The policy has provisions to ensure women's participation in all of the bodies formed under it. Some of the bodies proposed under the policy include Public Service Broadcasting, Media Council, National Mass Communication Authority, National Mass Communication Training Academy, National Mass Communication Museum, and Advertisement Board. Advertisement Board has already been formed and has one woman member. One of the objectives of the policy is to increase the participation of women in the mass media and to increase the capacity of women journalists. The policy also has the objective of eliminating all discrimination and exploitation existing in society through proportional inclusive and participatory principles. However, the government and the media organizations do not have specific programs to support these objectives. The policy also fails to recommend proper mechanisms to report sexual harassment or how a gender-responsive work environment can be guaranteed. Also, from the state level, no provisions are available to monitor whether or not, the media organizations are fulfilling their responsibilities to ensure gender equality in the workplace.

After Nepal transitioned to federalism in 2015, some attempts have been made from the provincial level to ensure gender equality in various sectors including the media. All of the provinces have been passed by the respective parliaments, where Province One has recently registered the new bill in the provincial parliament.

While all the laws hold the provision to include at least a woman in each committee that will be formed under the policy, recommendations to formulate gender policies or to strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms and code of conduct to ensure gender equality is missing in all the policies. Most of these policies also fail to address issues like career advancement, safety, work-life balance, remuneration, and leadership positions in the industry from the perspectives of gender equality.

While most of the bills have included a provision to encourage the participation of women journalists, it's important to note that increasing participation alone is not enough. Along with the participation, the state-level commitment to a gender-sensitive

work environment and provisions to increase the capacity of women journalists are equally important. Intersectional aspect of women was also largely ignored by most of the policies while some of them have clauses to encourage women with a disability and Dalit women journalists. For example, the media bill of Province One states that "media organizations run by women, Dalit and people disability can receive special benefits from the government". Similarly, the bill also allows the journalists falling under this category eligible to obtain a scholarship to study master's level in journalism. The other positive clause from a gender-equality perspective was noticed in Madhesh Province media bill, which states that the proposed press council comprising of the five members will have at least two women members. Despite some of the 'gender components', these bills do not fully acknowledge the structural and cultural barriers to equality. Therefore, more research at local, provincial level and national levels from intersectional perspectives is needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the government's role to address geo-cultural and socio-economic challenges concerning gender equality in media.

Most media organizations are also not doing their part to fill up the gaps in these policies. For example, the majority of the media organizations do not even have policies against sexual harassment or an internal mechanism for filing complaints. However, media organizations, like– Kantipur Publications Ltd. and Himal Media have initiated gender-sensitive policies. For example, the Kantipur Publications has a detailed policy against workplace harassment with a provision of an internal reporting mechanism.¹² Umbrella organization of Nepali journalists, FNJ, and the network of community radio stations, Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (ACORAB) also has a gender and social inclusion policy. Both policies stress the need for a gender-sensitive work environment and media content. The policies have also stressed the physical safety of women journalists. However, the implementation of these policies is not truly functional. This is not all. Types of policies

that are drafted are often limited to general policies on gender equality and policies concerning sexual harassment and abuse. The available policies do not allow room for any meaningful collaboration of stakeholders. As stated above, there are also no

12 The Kathmandu Post. nd. *Workplace Harassment Policy*. <https://kathmandupost.com/pages/kathmandu-post-policy-against-harassment>.

specific points to address intersectional factors and the local contexts.

Gender policies can address different dimensions of inequality, and it is always possible for media organizations to adopt more than one policy. The international experience in the area of gender and media indicates that the adoption of different measures by media organizations reflects different ways in which gender-inequality issues are problematized and addressed. Almost two decades ago, the Commission on the Status of Women has recommended to ensure women's early and full participation in the development and implementation of national policies and legislations in the field of media and communications.¹³ It also had urged stakeholders to create an "adequate monitoring and accountability mechanism to ensure implementations of gender-sensitive policies and regulations as well as to analyze the gender impact of such policies."¹⁴

Gender-Sensitive Media Indicators

To enhance gender equality and women's empowerment in media, UNESCO published Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM) in 2012.¹⁵ There are two main categories of indicators, one for gender equality in media organizations and the other for gender portrayal in media content. The first category of actions to foster gender equality within media organizations includes the following:

- i) Gender balance at the decision-making level,
- ii) Gender equality in work and working conditions
- iii) Gender equality in unions, associations, clubs, and organizations of journalists, other media professionals, and media self-regulatory bodies, iv) Media organizations promote ethical codes and policies in favor of gender equality in media content and v) Gender balance in education and training.

The second category on gender portrayal in media content features gender portrayal in news and current and gender portrayal in advertising. These categories have been divided into sub-categories to

13 Ed. Macharia, Sarah. 2020. *Who Makes the News?* 6th Global Media Monitoring Project. UNESCO and GAMAG. https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GMMP2020.ENG_FINAL20210713.pdf.

14 *ibid*

15 Ed. Grizzle, Alton. 2012. *Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000217831>.

facilitate effective implementation and monitoring.

The indicators are meant for media houses to assess the situation of gender sensitivity and to monitor the effectiveness of gender equality policies if there are any. These indicators can be beneficial in developing a gender equality policy for media content and employment. Likewise, these indicators can be implemented in media organizations to measure the degree of their engagement in promoting a gender-equality and diversity. Thus, it may be a useful tool for gender equality audits within media organizations and highlight their effective ways of mainstreaming gender in their actions.¹⁶ Similarly, the government can use these indicators to revise the existing media-related policies. Besides, journalists' associations and media training institutes can also use these indicators. My personal communication and previous studies show no evidence of Nepali media organizations incorporating these indicators for the formulation of policies or for the evaluation of the work environment or media content.

Discussion and Recommendations

A crucial problem facing worldwide attempts to foster gender equality in and through the media has been, over the past 25 years, the lack of policies that could provide adequate frameworks for the media to operate in society, while contributing to transforming unequal gender relations, at the national level as well as at the level of media organizations.¹⁷ Media organizations often formulate and adopt self-regulatory measures. Governments have, in fact, historically avoided regulating aspects of the sector's functioning, particularly media content.¹⁸

Different interventions have been initiated in the period of last few years to address gender inequalities in the media. Those efforts, however, are not properly embedded within policy frameworks

16 Lourenco, Mirtha E. 2016. "Gender equality in media content and operations: articulating academic studies and policy- a presentation." *Studies in Higher Education* 41:5, 927-931. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/mas_pub_genderequalitymedia_en_lkd.pdf.

17 Padovani, Claudia, & Rosselle Bozzon. 2020. "Media gender-equality regimes: Exploring media organisations' policy adoption across nations." In *Comparing gender and media equality across the globe: A cross-national study of the qualities, causes, and consequences of gender equality in and through the news media*, edited by Monika Djerf-Pierre, & Maria Edström, 99-144. Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855329>.

18 *ibid*

making their impact often weak. Therefore, a strong commitment of media organizations toward gender equality is needed to address the existing issues and the starting point is internal media policies or self-regulations in support of gender-sensitive media.

Training of journalists and media owners or executives is a necessary but not sufficient step to achieving gender equality in media. Some of the policies adopted for gender equality and media have been in the area of capacity building of women journalists and training both men and women journalists for gender-sensitive news reporting. However, it has been observed that these policies are limited to the fragmented activities of NGOs.

A strategic collaboration between the academic and non-academic world in the area of gender and media is needed. The gender and media researchers can help identify major issues to address gender equality in the media. At present, there is no empirical data at the national as well as provincial-level making it challenging to address the specific challenges. Some of the selected NGOs like Sancharika Samuha, Freedom Forum, and Media Action Nepal have started conducting different research to obtain the situation of gender equality in statistics. Leading news media organizations have also made no efforts to track and share gender-sensitive metrics.

Gender and media researchers¹⁹ argue that policy adoption at the level of media organizations could be further investigated through different variables such as organizational structure, presence of supportive management and leadership, the status of women professionals in decision-making positions, and the professional culture within which they operate. Also, it is contended that focusing on organizational instead of country level, comparing, for instance, the private vs public ownership may contribute to a better understanding of internal dynamics.

Finally, it is important to stress that gender inequality is a global issue and not just the problem of the media industry. Therefore, women need to feel more empowered and men need to be motivated to fight against gender inequalities. Building on the above discussions, here are a few recommendations for the government and media organizations:

Recommendations to the government

- Government should ensure the full realization of gender mainstreaming in national and provincial media policies. It also includes acknowledgment of the role of media within gender equality strategies.
- Government should gender equality in media a priority by strengthening collaboration with local and international organizations.
- Ensure women's early and full participation in the development, implementation, and review of national/provincial policies and legislations in the field of media and communications.
- Government should also prepare concrete and sustained measures to foster gender equality in the news media mainly through the active involvement of gender experts. The government should also have regular monitoring and assessment mechanisms.
- Government should collaborate with the concerned stakeholders for a regular survey and comprehensive studies to assess the situation of gender equality in news media organizations. These studies will not only help to understand the challenges and opportunities but also might help provide support mechanisms.
- Allocate adequate resources for the gender-sensitive work environment, capacity building of women journalists, and review of existing policies.
- Focus on intersectional feminist perspectives while bringing policies and programs in the area of gender and media to address women's overlapping identities— including caste, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion.
- Prioritize the appointment of women in key positions and make it mandatory to include at least one-third of women on the executive boards of the state-owned media and media-related government agencies.

¹⁹ ibid

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