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# Gender-Sensitive Media: A Voluntary Code of Ethics



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## Preamble

The Gender-Sensitive Media Code of Ethics (CoE) is a voluntarily accepted and self-regulated Code. It describes the standards, attitudes and behaviour expected from professional journalists, presenters, anchors, researchers, producers, script-writers, camera-persons as well as the policy-making editorial staff, senior management and owners of media houses.

The CoE articulates the ideals every media person should aspire to achieve, and which now need to be accepted and made mandatory from within each organization itself, not imposed from outside, and particularly not regulated by the Government.

It is the right of the public to receive honest, accurate and objective news (in addition to opinions, as in editorials, op-eds or talk shows). Therefore, it is the duty of every media person working in the news and other sections, to report and present unbiased, impartial facts to the public. Just as they must, at all times, uphold the trust conferred upon them by the public; and as they must protect the reputation of their profession by never using their position for unworthy motives; so also they must never disrespect, insult, humiliate, harass or ridicule women, either as colleagues/staff, or as guests, or as the subject of their reporting or opinions.

Women face two types of discrimination and injustice in the media: (a) women and men staff are not treated equally in media houses; and (b) the portrayal of women is biased and stereotyped. Among other issues in most media houses and organizations, women are not paid equally for work of equal value; are not provided equal opportunities for training and capacity building; and are, therefore, not able to attain senior managerial and decision-making positions.

Very importantly, most media women are not respected by their male colleagues and superiors, while some are subjected to sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination or even victimization.

The quality and quantum of the coverage and portrayal of women and girls, whether for news, views or entertainment, still continues to demonstrate attitudinal biases, patriarchal and misogynist tendencies, ridicule and disrespect, despite decades of evidence-based training, requests and protests.

This Code of Ethics has been developed with full stakeholder participation and consultation of all categories, levels and cadres of media men and women. It is designed to be voluntary and self-imposed by all categories of the media, and within each category at all tiers, with the endorsement and acceptance of the owners, chief executives, editors and the senior management of each media house.

The purpose of this Code of Ethics is to help individual journalists, media persons, management and owners of media houses to promote gender justice in their

organizational policies as well as in their professions to become better at their work, by accepting and applying an established understanding of the expected universal gender-sensitive standards, attitudes and behaviour.

This Code deals with the following six main areas: Right to Privacy; Pictorial Depiction of Women; Balanced Representation of Women; Projection of Gender Roles in Advertisements; Quality Coverage of Women's Issues and Maintaining Professional Standards. These areas are described in detail as follows:

### Right to Privacy

1. There must be no identification of women and girls in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) cases, amongst others: gang-rape, rape, adultery, abduction, elopement, acid-throwing, child sexual abuse, trafficking, prostitution, or coverage of other stigma-inducing issues, e.g. single-motherhood, abortion or positive HIV/AIDS diagnosis. Names and photographs of the survivors, or other particulars indicating their identity, location and profession/occupation, must not be published, broadcast or telecast. However, in rare instances, if exceptionally brave women survivors choose to publicly speak out, the media needs to support them with sympathetic coverage, not doubly victimizing or disrespecting them.
2. Stories about women/girl survivors of gender-based violence must not be sensationalized by the print or electronic media. When covering high-profile "VIP" visits to GBV survivors of rape/gangrape and sexual assault, care should be taken to maintain the confidentiality of their identities. On the other hand, the media must show and identify the perpetrators ("name & shame").
3. Television channels must not show re-enactments of crime shows, or raids on suspected criminals, whereby some anchorpersons carry out vigilante "justice", particularly in GBV cases, or become moralizing clerics themselves in "reality" shows.
4. The media needs to maintain confidentiality, such as the identities of recipients of charity or '*zakat*' given out by Governments or "VIPs", especially television coverage of widows, orphans and women in poverty – such events should not be presented to promote the "VIPs" or political parties, as they destroy the recipients' self-respect.

### Pictorial Depiction of Women

5. Emphasis of the media coverage or treatment should focus on the importance of the issue or event, rather than on the physical attributes (looks, dress, hairstyles) of the personalities (men and women). The success achieved by

women and girls in any field should be emphasized.

6. There is a pressing need to create a balance of the portrayal of domestic vs. foreign personalities (men and women) in entertainment, sports and fashion coverage. The pictures should complement the news items in a positive manner rather than sensationalizing and overemphasizing the foreign persons portrayed, while overshadowing or omitting national personalities.
7. There should be no uncaptioned pictures of glamorous women appearing in newspapers or on the electronic media (at events and gatherings), especially published or telecast without their permission.

### Balanced Representation of Women Working in Media

8. Short-term as well as long-term goals need to be outlined for achieving gender balance in media houses. As a short-term goal, owners/editors/CEOs of media houses are urged to include a minimum of 33% women in their offices including in the senior, managerial/decision-making positions.
9. The work environment of media houses needs to be made conducive and woman-friendly through affirmative action, as well as through training, gender sensitization and orientation of all cadres of staff. Rights such as maternity/ paternity leave, child crèches and day care for children, separate toilets for men and women, security at the workplace, and transport facilities for women are mandatory, not an option. It is imperative to strictly implement the sexual harassment law and its accompanying code (AASHA) in all media houses.
10. Women working in the media should be given the opportunity to cover all sectors and a variety of issues, and not merely be relegated to covering issues stereotyped as “women-oriented” issues or “soft beats”. Equal opportunities for training, capacity building and career development need to be provided to all employees (men and women) of all media houses.
11. In news items and all other features (stories, opinions, columns) calling for opinions/quotations from the public and also from the experts and authorities, the views of women representing all social and economic strata need to be reflected, not just re: women-specific issues.

### Projection of Positive Gender Roles in Advertisements

12. Advertisements offering masculine potency drugs etc. must be strictly regulated and monitored to focus only on medical problems and remedies. Advertisements from quacks or those for male grooming products with

content that portrays a violent and sexually aggressive false image of masculinity, or indirectly signals GBV and sexual aggression as being positive, must not be published, broadcast or telecast. Media and advertising organizations should act responsibly and self-regulate, realizing that the negative influence of such advertisements can cause immense financial, as well as physical and mental health damage to their readers/audiences, especially the youth.

13. Insensitive and provocative advertisements, or ridiculing people through the use of film songs and clips of movies must not be projected, especially those with sexist, misogynist and violent overtones.
14. There is an urgent need for the media to encourage and work with the advertising agencies and their sponsors to project healthy positive gender roles, i.e. showing men engaged in domestic activities and involved with their children, while showing women in managerial positions in professions outside the home too. There should be an immediate end to the continuing commodification of women in advertisements of men's products, e.g. shaving creams, garments, etc.
15. Likewise, the denigration of girls' and women's aspirations, goals, status and role, as is widely portrayed in women's grooming products, should end immediately.

### Quality Coverage of Women's Issues

16. There is a strong need to highlight a wider range of issues women and girls are increasingly facing, i.e. illiteracy, ill health, lack of Reproductive Health and Rights (RHR), escalation of GBV/Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), drug abuse, disabilities, abduction, prostitution and trafficking, bonded and slave labour, poverty and hunger, homelessness, widowhood, divorce, single parenthood, forced and early marriage, forced conversions, repeated and unsafe childbearing, *karo kari*, *sang chatti*, *irjai*, *swara*, *wanni*, *badal-e-sulah*, Quran marriages, burying girls/women alive, exploitative home-based, piece-rate or contractual labour; unsafe and hazardous working conditions, unequal wages or non-remunerated work, amongst many other sufferings of women and girls.
17. All women in general, and working women in particular, must be treated with respect, dignity and honour by all forms of the media, regardless of their profession, with particular respect required for women working in the media, NGOs/CSOs, activists, the entertainment industry, actors, models, air/rail/bus stewards, policewomen, nurses and other paramedical staff, peasant women, factory workers and domestic staff amongst many others.

## Maintaining Professional Standards

18. Derogatory, patronizing, judgemental, insulting, humiliating and ridiculing words or phrases must not be used for women/girls in any form of the media, whether news reports, current affairs, sports, entertainment or advertising. Only the facts should be presented on the news, while opinions must be stated with respect.
19. The media has the right to report on sensitive or controversial gender issues, but maximum caution should be exercised to ensure that:
  - a. the event portrayal is not distorted to reinforce negative images or sexist stereotypes;
  - b. there is no use of derogatory or judgemental words and opinions;
  - c. if a certain aspect of the story needs highlighting; reporters, anchors, presenters and other mediapersons should give priority to public opinion rather than their own, as well as alternative points of view;
  - d. gender balance should be maintained.
20. There is a need for the media to use a checklist and comprehensive gender-sensitive criteria to determine the 'news worthiness' of each item, which needs to be debated within the organizational structures of media houses, e.g. elopement cases which do not fall under any major news category (other than adding spice and sensation to serious news, i.e. law, politics, economics, business, crime, sports) ought not to be worth reporting at all.
21. The marital status of women and the number, sex, age, names of their children ought not to be mentioned in reporting on rape/gangrape, acid crimes, abduction cases, and other GBV incidents.
22. A whole list of gender-insensitive, disrespectful and humiliating vocabulary like "*kanwari maan*", "*khoobroo dosheeza*", urgently needs to be replaced with an alternative gender-sensitive vocabulary, which has already been developed in the form of a Glossary, and is available for the media and the advertising industry to adopt.
23. Follow-up of crime stories re: GBV/VAWG needs to be undertaken and highlighted, i.e. whether or not a case was filed; the manner it progressed in court; the attitude of the police and judiciary; and whether or not the perpetrators of the crime were convicted.

