



MEDIA DIVERSITY  
RESEARCH CENTRE

# GENDER, MEDIA, AND POWER

Insights from MDI's Work  
(1998-2024)

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# INTRO DUCTI ON

**Gender representation in news media has long been shaped by patriarchal norms, male-dominated newsrooms, and unequal decision-making structures. In response, NGOs, media development organisations, feminist groups, and women journalists have sought to challenge these norms and promote more inclusive and representative coverage. While this struggle is global in scope, its manifestations vary according to national histories, political systems, and legal frameworks. A commonly held assumption is that stronger legal protections for gender equality correlate with fairer media representation; this study critically examines that assumption through evidence drawn from MDI’s project portfolio.**

From 1998 to 2024, the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) has implemented a wide range of projects examining how gender is represented in news media across diverse national and regional contexts. This study systematically analyses MDI projects in which gender is the primary diversity focus, situating them within broader trends in NGO, academic, and civil society engagement with gender and media during this time span. By doing so, the study traces how priorities, methodologies, and normative assumptions about gender representation have evolved alongside changes in media systems, policy frameworks, and public debate.

During this period, MDI projects have examined how women are represented in media content and which voices, perspectives, and experiences are marginalised or excluded. Particular attention is paid to the visibility of women’s perspectives in news narratives and to structural conditions within media organisations that shape coverage. The study also considers the long-term objective shared across many initiatives: increasing gender diversity within newsrooms to embed more inclusive perspectives into journalistic practice and media culture. As scholarship has noted, shifts in newsroom composition have influenced news agendas, with contemporary media more likely to address issues such as gender-based violence and women’s health than in the past (Ross, 2020). This principle resonates with MDI’s long-standing commitment to the idea that meaningful representation requires participation—summarised in the motto “nothing about us without us.”

The study further examines the ideological and methodological frameworks underpinning MDI's gender-focused work, including the relationship to developments in media and gender theory. It considers how historical events, legislative changes, and dominant ideological currents have both shaped and been shaped by debates on gender and media representation. Together, these factors provide the analytical context for understanding patterns of continuity and change across MDI's engagement with gender over more than two decades.

In terms of scope, the majority of projects analysed address women's rights within the broader category of gender, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal norms and unequal power relations in many of the societies where MDI has operated. Gender is understood in line with established academic and policy definitions as a socially and culturally constructed set of roles, identities, and expectations associated with being male or female, distinct from biological sex as defined by the World Health Organisation and the Council of Europe. For this study, the analysis focuses primarily on representations of women and men in media content and institutions. Issues relating exclusively towards transgender and non-binary identities are addressed separately in MDI's work on sexual orientation and representation. This is done to best reflect the specific legal, political, and social debates surrounding LGBTQ+ rights globally, from 1998 to 2024. Notably, issues related specifically to transgender representation have been socially paired alongside representation of same-sex couples across media in this timespan.

## FUNDING TRENDS AND STRATEGIES

Over the last 26 years, media development funding for gender has focused on diversity training, producing media output made by women about their own lives and struggles, improving coverage of women and women's rights campaigns, and academic research on often-ignored issues affecting women in society.

For MDI projects, the most common funding organisation for this topic was the European Commission. Of the 25 MDI projects focused on Gender and the Media, 12 were funded by the European Commission (EC). Nine of these projects were fully funded by the European Commission through its distinct programmes. Three of these projects were funded by the EC alongside other funding bodies. The European Commission is the executive body of the European Union, responsible for legislation and, in particular, the EU budget, which the EC also directly administers to fund multiple programmes, including media development. This also showcases the European Union's priority for media development and gender equality. Since the early and mid-2000s, when multiple formerly Soviet satellite states became members of the European Union, they had to comply with EU human rights standards, specifically regarding gender equality. The establishment of the EU Charter of Human Rights in 2000, which entrenches freedom from gender discrimination, had to be implemented in each EU member state. Therefore, this explains why EU funding bodies make gender equality a top priority in their funding. Aligning these nations with gender-equality standards can create a diverse, well-trained workforce that can then move across Europe, serving different industries without concerns about gender-based legal discrimination. This concern over diversity is one of the key pillars of the European Union's aims and founding beliefs.

Furthermore, monitoring and constantly evaluating whether these beliefs are being implemented in society is a common activity within the European Union. Therefore, it would make sense for the EC, as a funding organisation, to provide grants to fund studies that do this. For example, projects such as **A European Dialogue on the EU Media and Diversity Study (2009-2010)** sought to examine diversity and inclusion standards across the European Union in 2009, just two years after the most recent member states of the EU, Bulgaria and Romania, joined the European Union. Therefore, as the EU membership expanded, standards on gender equality needed to be met to promote shared values and standards.

Additionally, the EC-funded a number of MDI projects, which were set outside of EU member states. Projects such as **Reporting Diversity: Training the media, empowering minorities; a project for improved media coverage of ethnic and minority issues in the South Caucasus (2003-2006)** and **Algeria: Inclusive Media For An Inclusive Society (2013-2017)** were partly funded by the European Commission, whilst another key project, **South Sudan: People's Voice Newspaper (2010-2012)** was fully funded by the EC's 'Country-Based Support Scheme'. This is part of a broader trend to support CSOs worldwide and promote values aligned with the EU Charter of Human Rights. In 2025, the European Commission launched a funding platform for International Partnerships, with Gender Equality worldwide as one of its key goals, including a dedicated funding section. Through this funding programme, the EU partners with CSOs worldwide to advance gender equality, particularly in regions that are or have been conflict-prone, such as Algeria, South Sudan, and Georgia. Notably, as EU diplomat Žygimantas Juška states, the EU's foreign policy "promotes partnership instead of dependency" (Vlašková, 2025, p.200). Therefore, by promoting human rights and gender equality worldwide, the EU seeks to expand its "soft power" by encouraging its human rights values and economically prosperous model in other countries, raising the international standard of the EU.

It must also be noted that the EU was not the only funding group that worked internationally to promote gender equality. MDI received funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO / FCO) for 5 projects in North Africa. **Reporting Diversity: A Project to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Moderate Voices as a Means to Prevent Religious Radicalisation in Egypt (2008-2011)**, **Reporting Diversity: Pilot Media Programme to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Social Inclusion in Morocco (2009-2011)**, **Building Citizen Participation in the Political Process in Egypt Through Better Media, Parliamentary and Civil Society Interaction Egypt (2012-2015)**, **Dune Voices: Bringing the Voices of the Sahara into the Public Sphere (2014-2017)** and **Morocco & Mauritania: My Vote Matters Too (2015-2016)**. These projects occurred primarily in Morocco and Egypt, which are nations allied with the UK, and they showed how the UK similarly sought to promote gender equality in these countries to embed shared values with Middle Eastern allies. Thus, the UK was also using its foreign office to fund projects, which could increase gender cohesion between Europe and the Middle East.

However, the FCDO has reduced funding since 2015, whilst the EU has continued its funding strategy. In particular, in the 2020s, EC funding for media development and research on gendered politics has increased. A clear example is the 2020 Horizon Europe programme, followed by Horizon Europe 2021-2027, which has raised calls to investigate gender-based violence across social media and media disinformation.

Other national funding bodies, such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, have also funded MDI projects in Egypt and Morocco. **Rebuilding Post-Revolution Egyptian Media: Embracing Free Expression, Diversity and Inclusiveness (2011-2013)** and **Morocco: Promoting Freedom of**

**Expression, Diversity and Inclusion in Morocco (2013-2016)**, respectively. Thus, showing how multiple Western nations were interested in promoting gender equality values across North African and Middle Eastern media.

Thus, this approach by the EU and these national funding bodies reflects a broader commitment to global cooperation that is framed as mutually beneficial. It is rooted in the International Relations tradition of *perpetual peace theory* (Macmillan, 2009, p. 52), which posits that the expansion of democratic governance fosters greater cooperation and economic prosperity among states. By centring democratic principles—including gender equality—within its economic and political relations, the European Union effectively “exports” these values alongside its economic goods and market access.

This normative approach is particularly evident in the EU’s engagement with candidate and potential candidate countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, where EU-funded projects are used to promote alignment with EU standards. As Andrew Moravcsik argues, EU membership constitutes the “single most powerful policy instrument” at the Union’s disposal (2010, p. 93). Access to the EU’s single market offers significant economic incentives, but accession is conditional upon compliance with a range of non-economic criteria.

These conditions are assessed through annual enlargement reports that evaluate candidate states’ progress toward EU standards. Among these are legal frameworks for gender equality, a functioning and independent media sector, and the effective enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation. The reports also assess efforts to address gender-based violence, patterns of gender representation in the media, and the prevalence of gender-based cyber-attacks. Collectively, these criteria illustrate how gender equality and media standards are embedded within the EU’s broader enlargement and values-based governance framework.

One could argue that, for the EU, the need to become more gender-inclusive and the need for economic expansion are intrinsically linked. In a 2021 study on economy and gender discrimination, researchers Manuel Santos Silva and Stephan Klasen called the belief that economic underdevelopment is tied to gendered discrimination “misallocation of talent” (Klasen & Silva, 2021, p. 581). Thus, believing “an economy that curbs women’s access to education, market employment, or certain occupations draws talent from a smaller pool than an economy without such restrictions” (Klasen & Silva, 2021, p.590). Beliefs such as these appear to be the ideological foundation for the EU’s focus on gender equality as a key part of its existential goals of economic development. When looking at some of the key European Commission-funded projects that MDI led, such as the **European Dialogue on the EU Media and Diversity Study (2009-2010)** and its predecessor, the **European Union: Study on Media and Diversity (2007-2009)**, we can see how these core values are in place. Both projects were large studies on the state of media diversity in the news media of EU nations. Therefore, with the fundamental belief that economic development is tied to the inclusion and promotion of women across multiple sectors of the economy (including media), it is clear why funding projects such as those led by MDI is essential for the EU.

Therefore, the EC, as a funding organisation, seeks to promote the EU values of human rights, democracy and gender equality across all EU member states and other international regions. This can help encourage economic diversification and development within the single market. However, it also creates a peaceful environment in the EU, an essential component of its creation, to prevent European countries from warring against each other, as they did during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Birchfield, 2017, p. 5). The commitment to these values is further entrenched by the EC funding body, which provides funding to projects hosted outside the EU and in EU candidate nations. This has further solidified the EU’s commitment to gender equality.

# THE EFFECTS OF LAW, CULTURE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ON GENDERED REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA (1998-2024)

It is important to focus on two overlapping yet distinct ways in which gender and media interact. Firstly, there have been advances in women's rights campaigns, such as the expansion of no-fault divorce, anti-discrimination legislation, mandatory parental leave, and other legal gains. These campaigns were primarily driven by large social movements and the governments of the countries in which they occurred. Through this view, the media were the institution that communicated these debates and movements to the general public. Secondly, there is the issue of fair representation of gender within news media organisations, which involves the media as an institution in and of itself, not just a communicator for the rest of the population. Both forms of interaction between gender and the media will be brought into focus to better understand the development of these topics from 1998 to 2024.

Since 1998, campaigns for gender equality have seen massive growth globally, particularly in the expansion and codification of legislation criminalising discrimination. Examples include the 2010 Equality Act passed by the UK parliament. In the USA, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) was passed in 1994 and expanded in 2013, specifically targeting workplace discrimination and unfair treatment. Also, the European Council (the chamber of the EU leadership comprising the heads of government of member states) established the EU Pact for Gender Equality in 2011. Therefore, the legal system had stronger safeguards to prevent jobs, services and applications from being exclusive to one gender, with some exceptions for certain institutions.

Meanwhile, in many parts of the Global South, such as Southeast Asia and Africa, the issue of gender was primarily centred through women's reproductive rights, legal protection, no-fault divorce and rights to freedom of expression. For example, researcher Micah Isitt explains how in the 2000s "Mexico, Colombia, and Nepal passed legislation requiring state funding for abortion services" (Isitt, 2022, p.1). Notably, the Western media coverage of women's rights in the Global South often received criticism from academics, activists and women from these regions, for infantilising women from these communities. The criticism was that reporting and other portrayals in the media regarding these regions often viewed women as helpless and purely victims of an extremely misogynistic and patriarchal society. This portrayal often caricatured cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent and South-East Asia, as wholly barbaric and opposed to progress. This exclusionary view of women's rights struggles in the Global South has been described as "white feminism", thus gender equality exclusive to white women (Borah et al, 2023). This media portrayal could also create further divides between women in these cultures and the goals of gender equality, as they might associate those campaigns with a general hostility towards the cultures they have been brought up in.

This representation of women was particularly seen in English-language media coverage of predominantly Muslim countries, after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the ensuing invasion of Afghanistan by NATO and Iraq by the USA-led coalition. Media portrayals of Muslim women were often exactly that of a victim, devoid of resolve or free will. As Professor Faiza Hirji notes, these views are unfortunately common in Western media since the 1980s, as "Muslim

women and Middle Eastern women have long been depicted as passive subjects, either oppressed or hypersexualised, crucial to constructing an image of the Orient as inferior” (Hirji, 2021, p.78). This ignored the long history of women’s rights struggles across the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries. Notable feminist figures such as Rafia Zakaria, Alison Phillips, Mona Eltahawy, and others have critiqued these portrayals, noting that even when intended to support gender equality, their ignorance of other customs and the exclusion of Muslim women have the opposite effect (Borah et al., 2023, p. 1).

In the 2010s and early 2020s, the rise of social media saw some consistent changes in the portrayal of women in the media. Through developments in social media and mass communications in the digital field, all citizens with Internet access can become media creators and have a more direct access to media consumers across these social media channels. This led to the rise of social and civic gender equality movements, which were organised primarily through digital spaces. One of the key moments in this period was the development of the MeToo movement in 2017 (Weldon et al, 2023, p. 5). The focus of this mass social movement was to condemn and raise awareness of mass sexual harassment towards women in their daily lives. This became a global movement across Europe, the Americas, Japan, Korea, and Australia, among others. The distinctively intimate message was often shared through women’s personal online accounts and gained widespread exposure. Traditional legacy media institutions reported on this phenomenon, but coverage seemed to highlight only the most high-profile cases, often involving celebrities or actors. A key example of this was film producer and studio mogul Harvey Weinstein, who was convicted of rape in 2020.

Across much of the Global South, access to social media enabled state censorship or traditional norms on gender roles to be more directly challenged through social media platforms. Often challenging powerful state narratives and promoting communication between individual women in their communities. Examples include the 2019-2020 ‘Am I Next’ movement in South Africa, following the murder of student Uyinene Mrwetyana in Cape Town. The following campaign against femicide and gender-based violence had a viral element with the name of the protest as a hashtag, which could be shared across social media.

In response to many of these viral protest movements, authoritarian governments have used tactics such as Wi-Fi and electrical blackouts to halt the flow of information. This was seen in the Bangladesh protests of 2024, which eventually ousted the decades-long regime of Sheikh Hasina. In many of these nations, broadcast media is more often controlled by authoritarian governments or closely tied to them. Thus, creating a conflict between social media, often used by activists and younger citizens, and legacy media broadcasting. This can be seen in world media monitors such as RSF and Freedom House world maps, which show a growing tendency toward state repression of media across Africa, the Middle East, and much of central and south-east Asia.

Therefore, media development over the period studied has been tied to how feminist activists have sought to expand women’s rights from strictly institutional and legal equality to the realm of private life and work-life culture. This change coincides with the development of social media, which enables more interpersonal communication and promotes content that displays people’s personal lives. Therefore, both the media and gender equality activism veered more towards interpersonal relations between the two genders and towards challenging patriarchal norms.

# OBJECTIVES OF MDI PROJECTS: EXPLORING HOW MEDIA CAN BETTER REPRESENT GENDER

In relation to gender equality, the majority of campaigns led by feminist advocacy groups and civil society organisations have focused on increasing media content that centres women, strengthening the participation and training of women journalists, and improving reporting on abuses against women, including gender-based violence. These initiatives are rooted in a shared recognition of the structural discrimination women face in everyday social life, as well as the prevalence of violence directed at them. Within this context, gender equality is primarily understood as the advancement of women's social, political, and professional positions to achieve equality with men.

In the early 2000s, when colour revolutions were seen across Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Thien, 2009), in addition to the legacy third wave of democratisation, which was seen across Africa, Asia and South America (Huntington, 1996), the democratisation of gender politics was a key factor in these movements. Women who had the right to vote also sought to exercise further rights in society and improve their standing in the workplace, home life, and the media. MDI's projects in the early 2000s reflect these same objectives. A common objective in media development was the expansion of higher education, which would encourage more female journalists and thus improve reporting on these issues.

Many of MDI's projects, such as **Indonesia: Reporting Diversity Network (2010-2011)**, **Reporting Diversity: Nigeria (2001)** and **Reporting Diversity: Pilot Media Programme to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Social Inclusion in Morocco (2009-2011)**, partnered with universities in each hosting country, in order to improve teaching surrounding diversity in the media. Through university education, students become more knowledgeable about these values, which, in turn, slowly begin to affect societal norms as they become professionals. As sociologist Evan Schofer and his colleagues state, "tertiary education provides a foundation for major global movements and sociopolitical change around diverse issues" (Schofer et al., 2020, p.1).

In the following decade of the 2010s, the same aim of women's greater equality in education and media continued. However, a key emphasis was to increase the visibility, contributions, and inclusion of women from other disadvantaged backgrounds in the media. Therefore, the influence of intersectionality became more prevalent over time. The belief that people's struggles and conditions are shaped by overlapping forms of societal conditioning based on multiple factors – race, gender, ethnicity, religion and others (Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, it is crucial that almost all projects MDI carried out, with a distinct focus on gender equality, had more than a single diversity focus. Gender equality, ethnicity, religion, and other factors were all key to creating comprehensive projects to improve media visibility and diversity for women of all backgrounds.

A key example of this is the project **MAGIC: Muslim Women and Communities against Gender Islamophobia in Society (2021-2023)**, which focused on Muslim women within Europe. Thus acknowledging the struggle of women, members of a religious minority and coming from a migrant background (or migrants themselves) within Europe.

The goal of ensuring fuller and more equitable representation of all women in the workplace was widely embedded in both scholarly debates and media development practice. However, from the late 2010s into the 2020s, a new priority emerged: addressing and countering online hate speech, misogyny, and gender-based violence across digital media platforms. As the use of social media became more ubiquitous, people increasingly admitted to first receiving and reading news through social media networks rather than traditional broadcast channels or physical newspapers. Users became “secondary gatekeepers” of information, relying less on traditional print and televised news media worldwide (de Silva, 2025). However, the issue of media regulation and disinformation became prevalent. In this particular case, the threat many women faced was abuse, targeting and online gender-based violence from often anonymous social media accounts. The attacks were often sparked by a public debate with a politician or pundit, which then escalated into online harassment campaigns. According to the UN, as of 2025, less than 40% of nations have legislation to tackle digital forms of gender-based violence. Therefore, tackling this worrying development was a key objective for CSOs in promoting gender equality across media platforms.

MDI had multiple projects with this focus across various countries, such as ***Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society (2020-2023)*** in Lebanon, ***Through Inclusion to Stability and Harmony: Strengthening the capacities of Chinese journalists and CSOs to advocate for and promote the human rights of marginalized groups through cross-sector collaboration (2018-2021)*** in China, and ***Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) 2.0 (2020-2024)*** in the Western Balkans. All of these projects used different approaches to achieve these objectives – ***Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society (2020-2023)*** trained CSOs in Lebanon to campaign and pressure the government to enact stronger regulation of online content and to catalogue abuse. The project in China sought to train and skill-develop CSOs to create more positive social media content through their own media platforms to challenge harmful narratives. Lastly, ***RND 2.0*** created studies on hate speech across Western Balkan countries, thus maintaining a more academic and journalistic methodology.

These forms of online harassment towards women are often directly connected towards physical violence against women. Thus, each project sought to ensure that governments create legal safeguards to enable women to use these platforms safely.

## IMPACT AND ENDURING LEGACIES ACROSS MULTIPLE PROJECTS

Mentoring academics and training journalists on issues of diversity and gender equality in all MDI projects have been paired to strengthen media development, promote women’s perspectives, and support gender equality. Through these forms of activities with journalists and academics, MDI aimed to improve media content and create more equal societies in the long term. Measuring the reliable throughline between civil society actors’ actions to promote gender equality in the media and citizens’ opinions on these issues is difficult. Nevertheless, the desired effect of these forms of projects are interventions in democracy that political scientist Nicole Bolleyer describes as the ‘transmission belt’ effect in which smaller issues—such as media representation of gender – can have a foothold in the wider democratic debate of a society (Bolleyer, 2024, p.32).

The impacts and interventions of MDI projects such as **Reporting Diversity: Nigeria (2001)** and **Indonesia: Reporting Diversity Network (2010-2011)** could be seen in the project participants' comments, where CSO staff and journalists said they felt empowered by the training on diversity and confident that they gained the ability to promote these values through their work. In Nigeria, for example, the MDI project aimed to "supporting a transition to peace and democracy" in the country. When the project took place in 2001, it was only the second year since Nigeria had returned to civilian rule after 15 years of military dictatorship. Therefore, the impact of training journalists and CSOs to promote gender equality fits well into the mood of a country experiencing new freedoms.

Crucially, the aim of training local journalists in the countries in which MDI was working was intrinsically linked to the creation of media that support and report fairly on issues of gender. Particularly, the creation of articles, radio programmes, broadcast pieces, and other forms of production. This impact was seen across the majority of MDI's projects. For example, **Dune Voices: Bringing the Voices of the Sahara into the Public Sphere (2014-2017)**, which ran across six North African countries, had "443 stories were produced", and they were "republished 568 times by media in the region and internationally", including BBC Arabic. Furthermore, the project **Algeria: Inclusive Media for an Inclusive Society (2013-2017)** had "82 articles published" which "reflect[ed] examples of violations and/or neglect of the human rights of women, youth, and children", which later led to "Twelve media outlets demonstrated a commitment to promoting the rights of women, youth, and children through the publication of reports developed as part of the project's activities". This shows a direct impact on how CSOs and local journalism organisations can put pressure on larger media broadcasting organisations to align more closely with diversity values. In particular, these nations have seen a significant increase in female literacy and education. As women become more prominent members of society in North Africa and the Middle East, it makes sense that they would demand better representation of their stories and viewpoints in the media. Notably, in the project **Reporting Diversity: A Project to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Moderate Voices as a Means to Prevent Religious Radicalisation in Egypt (2008-2011)**, MDI's work had become part of the media curriculum in multiple Egyptian universities, and by the end of the project, an estimated 900 students were taught. Lastly, the project **Morocco and Mauritania: My Vote Matters Too (2015-2016)** directly influenced media coverage of women. As the project's final report states, "MDI's Observatory Study on women's participation in the Moroccan media during elections 2015, has increased the number of marginalised groups and women in media coverage."

Two key MDI projects in Europe had a significant impact, particularly among national media stakeholders, and involved direct contact with them to improve their internal reporting standards. For example, **MAMIL: Macedonian Media and Information Literacy Coalition (2016-2018)** studied media literacy in North Macedonia (then Macedonia) and conducted an extensive study that further detailed many of the recommendations already reported by the European Commission and UNESCO. This report had a larger repercussion for media organisations within North Macedonia. Another key example of how MDI projects impacted media stakeholders was the **European Dialogue on the EU Media and Diversity Study (2009-2010)**. This ambitious research project across European media models had the impact of "closer liaison between media groups and CSOs in areas of intercultural dialogue". By showcasing their research at conferences, multiple journalists felt they gained useful skills and improved their reporting. Therefore, those affected by these projects include educational institutions as well as key media figures such as journalists and media executives.

Although the number of participants might seem small, given an entire country's population, each project provides clear evidence in the media content it produces and other outputs related to women's rights and gender equality in these countries.

In many countries in the MENA region, throughout the 2010s, it became far more common to see female journalists, particularly due to the rise of online platforms, self-run blogs and personal webpages. However, many of the issues women face remain inadequately represented. Furthermore, it seems that only women with access to higher education, and often from predominantly higher-income backgrounds, can access these positions in the media. Therefore, the issues of women from poorer backgrounds remain ignored by much of the media. Even more crucially, these women do not have the ability to tell their own stories across the media. Many feminist pressure groups and CSOs point out that an intersectional view of society is needed. In 2023, the sociologist Martha Gimenez and her colleagues classified intersectional femininity as an increasingly influential ideology in "feminist literature and within the social sciences" (Gimenez, 2023, p.83). Thusly, from the 2010s, there was a clear emphasis by these groups to view social justice campaigns with the understanding that prejudices in society are interlocked and multilayered, and must be tackled as such. Therefore, efforts to make media more inclusive of women must include women from diverse ethnicities, sexual orientations, and economic backgrounds.

The MDI actively participated in these debates, and the vast majority of MDI projects have more than a single diversity topic focus, recognising that these factors are part of an interlocking web of issues faced by a socially diverse society.

The strengthening of intersectional foundations in civil society organisations and movements is a clear impact of the efforts that organisations like MDI have made regarding gender and the media. Multiple media development funding organisations include gender equality and anti-discrimination practices in their application guidelines, including the European Commission. This has created discourse regarding media and gender, which have become far more mainstream due to the promotion of intersectional values. For example, the need for diverse and inclusive casting in mainstream programming, including women of colour and people of diverse ethnic origins, is a common campaign across several countries. MDI has also hosted multiple debates and discussions on the subject of women of ethnic minority backgrounds, such as in April 2023, a Webinar on 'Iran, Feminism and the Media', following the 2022 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests in Iran. Noting once again how, through projects and other independent events, MDI has also created media output and engagement in line with its values. MDI's projects in 2020 have continued this discourse. A clear example is **COVINFORM (2020-2023)**, which sought to research why people of ethnic minorities, particularly women, were most vulnerable during the 2020 pandemic. This is a clear entrenchment of intersectionality as it combines the social pressures of women and ethnic minorities within a larger health crisis. Therefore, crisis events and cross-disciplinary factors, such as the development of medicine and health policy, are interlinked. This reflects an intersectional perspective in which overlapping social factors interact to shape how prejudice affects people.

# RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT THE MEDIA DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS REQUIRE FOR FAIR REPRESENTATION OF GENDER

Stakeholders concerned with gender representation in the media have consistently put forward a core set of recommendations throughout the 26 years covered in this study. The main goal remains increasing women's representation and inclusion in the media and advancing gender equality. Key recommendations to achieve this aim include:

- Structural reforms within media organisations, particularly changes to newsroom practices and the underlying principles guiding reporting on gender-related issues.
- The promotion of legislation that formally enshrines gender equality.
- Increased funding to enable the fuller realisation of project objectives set by both implementing organisations and funders.
- The expansion of projects to additional countries and regions is identified as a means of extending impact and ensuring broader systemic change.

Implementing key legislative changes to entrench women's rights in media representation has been challenging. This recommendation is particularly noticeable in projects which took place after 2020. This is because, due to the widespread use of social media and the spread of news media content through these channels, many of these platforms lacked media regulation. As it was a new medium, many of the standards and rules which existed in legacy broadcasting and print media regarding regulation were not enforced within many online spaces and social media platforms.

One key issue this lack of regulation brought was gender-based attacks, often from anonymous users, on social media platforms. Unfortunately, this is a ubiquitous problem across most major social media platforms. Therefore, in projects such as **Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society (2020-2023)** in Lebanon, a key goal was for major social media platforms to "increase Arabic policy availability and transparency" to spot misinformation and abuse against women and ethnic minorities across social media pages. Across the Western Balkans, the project **Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) 2.0 (2020-2024)** also recommended better management of hate speech and harmful content. Notably, these projects took place in countries which are known to have high levels of gender-based violence and a lack of diverse media representation of women. Online gender-based harassment is therefore a byproduct of this already tumultuous media environment, where harassment of women is common.

The need for legislation which tackles this form of online harassment has become a key struggle for media development and gender. However, legislation to actually tackle it has varied deeply and has created its own controversies. In nations like Azerbaijan and China, which have authoritarian regimes, online security laws are usually described by human rights experts as thinly veiled attempts by the government to suppress its citizens. However, a key piece of legislation that was passed is the European Digital Markets Act in 2024, which seeks to strengthen the enforcement of the terms and conditions related to harassment already present in the terms and services of online platforms, used in the EU. These online platforms are therefore classified as "gatekeepers" due to their massive online influence. Failure to do so will result in lawsuits and bans on these companies.

MDI has also made increasing funding as a key recommendation. In the British Foreign Office (FCO) funded project **Morocco & Mauritania: My Vote Matters Too (2015-2016)** which sought to increase media representation of women during elections, the narrative report claimed “the FCO (UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office) should consider increasing the overhead percentage of projects to reflect the amount of administrative work that adherence to this reporting and monitoring system requires (which is much more extensive than most donor’s requirements).” Unfortunately, these recommendations have not been heeded, as the British Foreign Office and British Foreign Aid are set to dramatically reduce their budget, as announced in 2025. Increasing funding for civil society actors and NGOs is necessary for many of these organisations. From 1998 to 2024, the amount of funding available for overseas development and internal research has steadily decreased. This is a worrying trend, which particularly harms CSOs in poorer countries and newer democracies, where institutions are not robust or transparent enough to ensure women’s rights are enforced.

This is connected directly to another aim regarding gender and the media, the expansion of projects to other countries. The values of gender equality are reflected in international rights, as men and women exist in every society, and the fair representation of women remains a major issue in the media. Therefore, feminist NGOs and gender equality stakeholders seek to ensure that women’s rights are promoted worldwide. Furthermore, when a project succeeds in increasing media representation of women, it aims to emulate this success in other countries. A clear example is **Reporting Diversity: Nigeria (2001)**, in which they hoped to replicate the success of this project by creating similar media diversity monitors in neighbouring countries such as “Sierra Leone, Liberia, perhaps Cameroon”.

Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, the drop in budgets from many national governments, such as the US State Department and the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, and the increasingly hostile attitude authoritarian regimes have towards NGOs, have made these aims difficult. MDI, for example, has continued to work more closely within Europe, as many nations on the periphery of the democratic world, such as Georgia, North African countries, and others, have made it extremely difficult for foreign NGOs to operate without accepting restrictive terms. Some critics of NGOs have claimed that liberal, cosmopolitan views of women’s rights, which many women’s rights organisations adhere to, are simply not viable or accepted in every society. Therefore, this recommendation to expand projects is an unrealistic attempt. However, in each country, there are women and independent organisations that campaign for women’s rights. With the advent of the Internet, the media has expanded so much that almost every organisation has an online presence that connects them to the world. Rather, it is the governments and other internal hierarchical power structures claiming to represent a national culture which repress women’s rights.

Notably, some of the expansion recommendations are more subtle and can access greater international attention, without necessarily starting a project in another country. For example, the **Covinform (2020-2023)** project recommended that its internal research on how COVID affected women of ethnic minority backgrounds be translated into various languages. Particularly, the languages of the countries where **Covinform (2020-2023)** worked. Therefore, this form of expansion can be done with less funding. The expansion, therefore, can be achieved by the project itself becoming a media creator and promoting its research and work across different countries to gain direct attention from key stakeholders.

## CONCLUSION

Through an examination of the interaction between media-focused and gender-equality projects, several positive developments are evident, including increased gender-sensitive media content, a growing presence of women journalists, and strengthened legal frameworks for gender equality. Nevertheless, the expansion of digital platforms and the rise of authoritarian political tendencies have introduced new and significant challenges.

On the one hand, social media has weakened many traditional media gatekeepers that historically reinforced patriarchal norms, enabling women journalists and media users to reach wider audiences through their own channels. On the other hand, digital inequalities persist. According to the United Nations' 2025 *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: Gender Snapshot*, in less economically developed countries, fewer than 29 per cent of women are online, compared to 41 per cent of men. These disparities in internet access are often compounded by authoritarian regimes that exert control over digital infrastructure and censor media flows. While internet access is nearly universal in more economically developed countries, regulatory responses to online harassment and digital gender-based violence remain insufficient.

At the same time, relations between gender equality advocates and governments appear to have deteriorated in recent years. Declining public funding in many Western states, combined with increased censorship and repression in less economically developed contexts, has constrained the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) to engage effectively with policymakers.

In this context, CSOs working to promote fair and inclusive gender representation in the media must address these emerging obstacles to sustain progress. The development of more robust online media regulation at the EU level offers one potential avenue for improvement. In parallel, CSOs' strategic use of social media to disseminate their work and mobilise public support has become increasingly important, particularly in an environment of limited funding. Such approaches enable organisations to reach broader audiences and foster organic communities advocating for improved representation of women in the media.

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## GLOSSARY OF MDI PROJECTS

(Full name, timespan and funder. Hyperlink available)

[Reporting Diversity: Nigeria \(2001\)](#) – World Bank

[Reporting Diversity: Training the media, empowering minorities; a project for improved media coverage of ethnic and minority issues in the South Caucasus \(2003–2006\)](#) – The European Commission, The Eurasia Foundation, IREX Media Innovations Program for Georgia, The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[Training for Trainers: Reporting Diversity \(2006–2007\)](#) – The Sigrid Rausing Trust

[European Union: Study on Media and Diversity \(2007–2009\)](#) – European Commission

[Reporting Diversity: A Project to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Moderate Voices as a Means to Prevent Religious Radicalisation in Egypt \(2008–2011\)](#) – UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[Reporting Diversity: Pilot Media Programme to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Social Inclusion in Morocco \(2009–2011\)](#) – UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[A European Dialogue on the EU Media and Diversity Study \(2009–2010\)](#) – European Commission, Europe For Citizens Programme

[Indonesia: Reporting Diversity Network \(2010–2011\)](#) – Open Society Foundation

[South Sudan: People's Voice Newspaper \(2010-2012\)](#) - European Commission, European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), Country-Based Support Scheme (CBSS) programme

[Twinning Committees as Integration Promoters \(2010-2012\)](#) - European Commission, Europe for Citizens Programme

[Morocco: Towards Inclusive, Responsible & Independent Media \(2011-2013\)](#) - European Commission

[Rebuilding Post-Revolution Egyptian Media: Embracing Free Expression, Diversity and Inclusiveness \(2011-2013\)](#) - Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)

[Building Citizen Participation in the Political Process in Egypt Through Better Media, Parliamentary and Civil Society Interaction \(2012 - 2015\)](#) - UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office

[Promoting Freedom of Expression, Diversity and Inclusion in Morocco \(2013-2016\)](#) - Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation

[Algeria: Inclusive Media For An Inclusive Society \(2013-2017\)](#) - European Commission, UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (Arab Partnership Fund)

[Dune Voices: Bringing the Voices of the Sahara into the Public Sphere \(2014-2017\)](#) - Arab Partnership Fund, UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office

[Morocco & Mauritania: My Vote Matters Too \(2015-2016\)](#) - UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office

[MAMIL: Macedonian Media and Information Literacy Coalition \(2016-2018\)](#) - European Commission

[Through Inclusion to Stability and Harmony: Strengthening the capacities of Chinese journalists and CSOs to advocate for and promote the human rights of marginalized groups through cross-sector collaboration \(2018 -2021\)](#) - US State Department

[GERIS - Global Exchange on Religion and Society \(2020-2022\)](#) - European Commission

[Covinform \(2020-2023\)](#) - European Commission

[Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society \(2020-2023\)](#) - Thomson Reuters Foundation

[Reporting Diversity Network \(RDN\) 2.0 \(2020-2024\)](#) - European Commission, Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgrade

[MAGIC: Muslim Women and Communities against Gender Islamophobia in Society \(2021-2023\)](#) - European Commission, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020).

