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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Female Leadership Framing

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: LANGUAGE

Module No. 14

By: Skill Up Srl

SKILL up CONSULTING TRAINING

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1. Why this subject matters

“ The media serves as the primary lens through which the public defines **leadership**, yet women in power frequently face a landscape governed by **double standards**. Instead of focusing on their expertise or strategic vision, journalistic narratives often disproportionately scrutinize a female leader's appearance, family status, or tone. These **biased portrayals** actively diminish the perceived legitimacy of female authority and reinforce outdated societal expectations instead of properly analizing the actions or the results of women in power.

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2. Learning Outcomes



01

Identify and critically analyze the dynamics of "Female Leadership Framing," recognizing gendered double standards, implicit biases (such as the Motherhood Penalty and Tone Policing), and role violations in the media coverage of women in positions of power.

02

Apply equitable reporting techniques through the rewriting of texts and the formulation of unbiased interview questions, framing female authority strictly based on professional merits, strategic decisions, and policy impact without resorting to gender stereotypes.

03

Evaluate the social impact of media narratives, critically understanding how the delegitimization of female authority and intersectional hostility (e.g., sexism combined with racism) act as a form of symbolic and psychological gender-based violence.

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3. Definition

Gendered Media Framing is the practice of depicting and evaluating women in leadership through the lens of traditional gender stereotypes rather than their **professional merits.** It actively manifests as a **media double standard** where female leaders face intense scrutiny over their appearance, likability, tone, and family life, criteria rarely applied to their male counterparts.

4. How our mind reacts

When the public encounters women in positions of power, the brain often experiences a subtle cognitive friction. Because leadership has historically been associated with masculine traits (such as dominance and assertiveness), a female leader inherently challenges certain ingrained societal "schemas" or mental frameworks.

To resolve this dissonance, the mind becomes highly susceptible to gendered media framing. When a news article highlights a female CEO's clothing, her family life, or her tone of voice, it provides the brain with familiar, stereotypical cues that unconsciously pull the woman back into a conventional gender role.

Women often have no way of being themselves while in a leadership role, either because they are deemed too “bossy and aggressive” if leading firmly, or by being labeled as “soft and maternal” if leading in a more collaborative and empathetic way.

Delegitimizing a female leader's authority through these biased cognitive frameworks is not merely a matter of poor journalistic practice; it is, in every respect, a form of psychological and symbolic gender-based violence. As we will see in the upcoming case study of Italian Minister Cécile Kyenge, this cognitive friction can easily be weaponized by public figures and the media to strip women of their professional dignity and reassert traditional power dynamics.

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5. Common media mistakes



Common media mistakes often manifest as subtle but pervasive shifts in focus that actively undermine a female leader's authority. Key errors include:

- **The Double Bind:** As conceptualized by Jamieson (1995), female leaders are trapped in a paradox. If they lead firmly, they are deemed too "bossy and aggressive"; if they lead collaboratively, they are labeled as "soft and maternal".

- **The Motherhood Penalty:** Interviewers consistently fixate on how a female executive balances work and family life, while rarely asking the same question to any male counterpart.

- **Tone Policing & Appearance Focus:** Journalists disproportionately describe a woman's wardrobe, hairstyle, or physical appearance, distracting audiences from her professional expertise and policies.

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06. The impact of biased narratives on female authority

When media narratives consistently filter female authority through a lens of gender stereotypes, they create tangible, **real-world consequences**. Framing a female politician's policies through the prism of her "likability," or a CEO's corporate strategy through her supposed emotional state, implicitly signals to the public that women are less suited for high-stakes decision-making.

This biased storytelling directly **legitimizes online harassment** and **public disrespect**, acting as a symbolic form of gender-based violence.

Furthermore, it actively **discourages** the next generation of women and girls from pursuing leadership roles out of fear that they will face the same relentless, gendered scrutiny instead of being valued for their abilities.

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7. What good practice looks like

Tech Giant Innova Appoints Elena Rossi as New CEO to Lead AI Transition

"MILAN, 08/01/2026 – Innova Group has announced the appointment of Elena Rossi as its new Chief Executive Officer, effective next month. Rossi, 48, brings over 15 years of experience in the European tech sector, having previously served as the company's Chief Operating Officer. During her tenure as COO, Rossi successfully spearheaded the restructuring of the logistics division, increasing overall market efficiency by 22%. In her inaugural statement, Rossi emphasized her strategic vision for the next quarter: "Our primary focus will be scaling our cloud infrastructure and accelerating our transition into AI-driven enterprise solutions." The board expressed unanimous support, citing her analytical rigor, decisive leadership, and proven track record in navigating complex market transitions."

Why is this a good practice?

This is an excellent example of equitable, unbiased journalistic framing. The article focuses entirely on the subject's professional merits, statistical achievements, and strategic vision. It completely avoids the "Motherhood Penalty" and the double standards typical of gendered framing: there is no mention of her marital status, her appearance, her tone of voice, or how she "balances work and family"—irrelevant details that are almost never applied to male executives.

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8. Case study

Racism and sexism in Italian parliament

In 2013, Cécile Kyenge, Italy's first Black cabinet minister, was the target of a notorious, racially charged attack by Senator Roberto Calderoli. During a political rally, Calderoli publicly stated that seeing images of Kyenge reminded him of an "orangutan." This dehumanizing slur, which Calderoli initially attempted to dismiss as a mere joke, sparked massive national outrage and condemnation across the political spectrum. The incident highlights a severe form of hostility faced by Black women in leadership, where their professional authority is attacked through deeply entrenched, racist tropes rather than genuine political critique. Calderoli was ultimately convicted of defamation aggravated by racial hatred. **(CORRIERE DELLA SERA 2014)**

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What we learn from this case:
The Double Standard

This case vividly demonstrates how hostile media framing and public political discourse can escalate into a form of symbolic and psychological gender-based violence. When a female leader—especially one from a marginalized background—steps into a space of authority, she is frequently attacked not on the merits of her policies, but on her dignity, appearance, and humanity. This intersectional discrimination (sexism compounded with racism) serves a specific systemic function: to delegitimize her authority and signal that women do not belong in spheres of power. Recognizing these attacks as a manifestation of gender-based violence is essential for journalists, who must actively choose to condemn rather than amplify dehumanizing rhetoric.

- What is the article's attitude towards the Italian female minister?
- Do you think male leaders are subject to the same treatment their female equivalents receive?
- Does the article contain any female-specific linguistic choice that otherwise wouldn't be utilized for the male counterpart?

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9. Practical Exercises

01
The Adjective Audit

Objective: To develop a critical eye for tone policing and practice correctly framing a woman's leadership traits using objective, action-oriented language.
Duration: 30 minutes.
Materials: A printed or digital article covering a female executive's or politician's high-stakes decision, highlighters.
Instructions:

- Read the article and highlight any gender-coded adjectives or descriptions (e.g., "bossy," "emotional," "feisty," "soft," "aggressive").
- Rewrite the highlighted sentences using objective, merit-based, and action-oriented language.

Expected Output: A revised text that removes gendered double standards and evaluates the leader based strictly on her professional actions.
Debriefing: How do words like "bossy" (applied to women) versus "assertive" (applied to men) implicitly change the public's perception of leadership?



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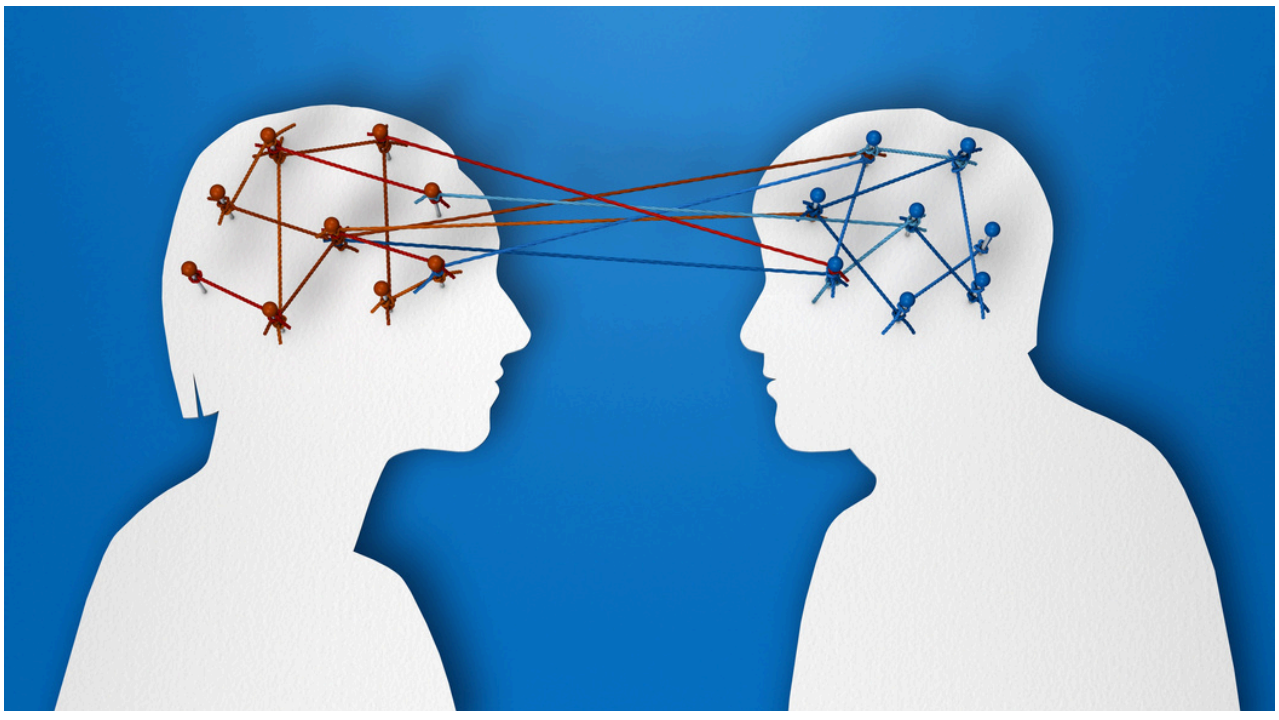
02

The "Flip It to Test It" Rule

Objective: To instantly detect implicit biases and gendered double standards in news reporting.
Duration: 20 minutes.
Materials: Pen and paper.
Instructions:

- Take a published news snippet describing a female leader that focuses heavily on her appearance, family status, or tone.
- Swap the pronouns and the subject to a male equivalent (e.g., replace the female CEO with a male CEO).
- Read the new snippet aloud.

Expected Output: A clear demonstration of how absurd and inappropriate gendered questions are when applied to men.
Debriefing: Why does it feel completely unnatural to read an article analyzing a male politician's suit or asking him how he balances his job with raising his children?



03

The Interview Script Redesign

Objective: To learn how to dismantle the "Motherhood Penalty" and irrelevant cultural narratives during the interview preparation phase.
Duration: 30 minutes.
Materials: A draft interview script.
Instructions:

- Review the provided draft interview outline for a newly appointed female official. Notice how the questions focus heavily on "work-life balance," her wardrobe choices, and "overcoming imposter syndrome."
- Rewrite the script, replacing the biased questions with inquiries focused on her strategic vision, policy impact, and professional milestones.

Expected Output: A professional, equitable interview script.
Debriefing:
How does asking a woman about "imposter syndrome" or her family life in a professional interview actively diminish her perceived authority in the eyes of the audience?

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Checklist time!

Female Leadership Bias Spotting Card

Before publishing an article or conducting an interview with a female leader, check if your draft contains:

- Questions or descriptions focusing on her "work-life balance" or family arrangements (The Motherhood Penalty).
- Infantilizing, paternalistic language or tone policing (e.g., "emotional," "bossy," "feisty").
- Unnecessary details about her clothing, physical appearance, or beauty routines.
- "Double-binding" expectations (criticizing her for being either too soft or too aggressive).

If one or more boxes are ticked, revise the article!

Resources

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Thank You!

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