

Research Report on

Gender stereotypes in the Hong Kong media: a scoping study

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Executive Summary

This scoping study was undertaken by The Women's Foundation and sponsored by the Equal Opportunities Commission under its Funding Programme for Research Projects on Equal Opportunities 2013/14. The report examines whether and how Hong Kong's media creates and exacerbates gender stereotypes. It explores the potential associations between the portrayal of women and men, girls and boys in the media and the ensuing perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of media consumers.

In particular, it explores the potential correlation between the objectification of women in media and four important social issues facing Hong Kong today: first, the persistence of gender stereotypes which are particularly entrenched for men and boys; second, the increase in cases of harassment of, and violence against, women, with offenders getting younger; third, the rise in eating disorders and body image issues particularly among young women and girls; and fourth, the under-representation of women in policy and decision-making roles. To our knowledge, this is the first study, to date, to conduct a literature review of existing local research on these important themes and that collates the key findings from the existing local research and provides global comparisons where relevant.

Background

Even in the 21st century, the vast majority of films, TV programmes, advertising and video games – to cite a few examples – have and still depict women in a non-objective and often demeaning light. This has prompted academics and researchers around the world to strive to identify associations between media exposure and societal perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. This literature review was conducted against the backdrop of international research that has established causal links between: (1) accessing violent and/or stereotypical media (such as pornography, advertisements, and video games) and corresponding harmful perceptions, attitudes and behaviours towards women; and (2) exposure to fashion and beauty advertisements and other media that promotes unrealistic and unhealthy body images on the one hand, and eating disorders, body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem particularly amongst women on the other.

In conducting our scoping study, we were particularly cognisant of the following social issues affecting Hong Kong which motivated us to try and uncover potential links between these issues and media exposure as identified in the existing research:

- Hong Kong's female workforce participation at 54% lags behind many developed countries – e.g, 71% in the UK and 67.6% in the US
- Despite women being more educated and more prevalent in the workforce than ever before, women continue to be under-represented on Hong Kong corporate boards and in senior management roles. Women make up just 11% of the total director pool of Hong Kong's listed issuers and comprise just 33% of senior management roles.
- Eating disorders are increasing exponentially in Hong Kong with the number of individuals between the ages of 20 and 29 who are clinically underweight doubling from 1995 to 2010.
- Sex offenders in Hong Kong are getting younger and younger. Half of the juvenile sex offences committed in the New Territories in 2013 involved 11-14yr olds which is three times the number of cases committed by the same age group in 2009.

Key Findings

There has been very little significant research conducted in Hong Kong on the causal links between media consumption and corresponding perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. We discovered that a large gap exists in terms of comprehensive, quantitative and longitudinal studies compared with other developed economies. For instance, the US has several leading organisations like the Geena Davis Institute that are tracking media exposure and its impact on society. Meanwhile, there is a substantial body of UK research on a range of issues from [the effect of pornography on young consumers to the correlation between media exposure and stress and anxiety levels among girls]

Nonetheless, from the data that is available, we managed to identify some key trends and areas of concern that we believe warrant further in-depth research and analysis:

- **Gender stereotyping and social expectations:** Gender stereotypes remain very prevalent in Hong Kong and are exacerbated for both sexes after media exposure like watching certain television programmes. Specifically, men have more entrenched stereotypical beliefs and are more prone to negatively judge different personality traits and behaviours. This is particularly worrying since studies conducted in Hong Kong and China have found links between traditional gender beliefs on the part of men and potential aggression against women. Meanwhile, working women feel pressure to conform to societal expectations of women as home-makers and caregivers in order to be considered successful.
- **Body image and self-esteem:** Women who are saturated in media that idealises specific body images and perceptions, attitudes and behaviours are more likely to experience body image dissatisfaction, a lower sense of self-worth and eating disorders.
- **Limited female role models:** In the vast majority of programmes and advertisements, men are featured in roles of authority and male voices tend to be used for commentaries and voice overs whereas women tend to be depicted in domestic roles. More than other developed territories, the representation of gender-specific professions (secretaries and nurses being depicted by women for example) is still very apparent in Hong Kong media. By contrast, in recent years, analyses of Hong Kong English and Chinese school textbooks have showed a marked decrease in gender stereotypical representation.
- **Greater permissiveness in sexual coercion and higher proclivity towards sexual harassment:** Exposing boys and girls to sexually explicit materials has harmful consequences. Boys who are exposed to pornography have more negative stereotypes of women and a greater proclivity toward sexual harassment. Girls who are exposed to pornography believe sexual coercion is more permissible in relationships. This is particularly concerning given reports estimating that 40% of Hong Kong teens aged 15 to 17 routinely access pornographic materials.

Recommendations

From this scoping study, we have generated a set of initial recommendations for government, private sectors, and individuals. We present these as preliminary recommendations since in many cases they need to be corroborated with further research.

Our findings suggest all media consumers in Hong Kong, particularly women and young girls, are absorbing a plethora of mixed messages that play a significant role in shaping professional choices, interpersonal relationships, sense of self and perception of others. To temper these consequences, we need to train media consumers, both men and women and boys and girls, to filter what they see and to embrace a set of healthy and positive core values and aspirations. This requires joined-up and co-ordinated efforts across government, the education sector, media, civic society and society.

Recommendations	Responsible Stakeholders	Issues to be addressed
1. Introduce media literacy programmes to train children and young adults to filter the media messages they are absorbing and to embrace a set of healthy and positive core values. This should include sex education and advice on forging balanced relationships based on mutual respect	Government; Educators; Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	Generally, there are very few media literacy programmes available for children and young adults. Meanwhile, sex education in Hong Kong is largely outmoded and piecemeal.
2. Review guidelines governing what is appropriate content for all forms of media including TV programmes and advertisements. Create awareness and promote responsibility among media platforms about the impact of stereotyping on societal norms and behaviours	Government; Advertising companies; NGOs	There is a lack of consensus between stakeholders - i.e., the Govt, regulators, parents, educators, and media platforms on what constitutes appropriate content. More engagement is also needed with media platforms to create promote self-regulation with respect to inappropriate content.
3. Review existing practices of monitoring access to pornographic materials and implement measures to control the ease of access by underage viewers	Government; Media	It is unclear what restrictions currently apply to prevent underage viewers from accessing pornographic materials particularly online, and who is responsible for enforcement.

Recommendations	Responsible Stakeholders	Issues to be addressed
<p>4. More in-depth local research (particularly longitudinal/ quantitative) is needed to determine the scope, impact and related effects of media on various aspects of society including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The correlation between exposure to media and the strongly entrenched gender stereotypes held by men and boys - The correlation between video games and violence and aggressive attitudes towards women - The correlation between exposure to advertising for beauty – e.g., whitening and slimming products and lower self-worth and body image issues on the part of women and girls Potential associations between culture, media and career aspirations of women in Hong Kong - Targeted studies on the impact of different types of pornography (e.g. non-violent vs violent) - The correlation between exposure to media and lower career aspirations of women and girls 	Researchers; NGOs	<p>Most studies included in this review were descriptive and correlational in nature, not allowing any determination of causality.</p> <p>Many studies omitted to provide full demographic account of their samples, making it difficult to understand the results in context. For example, it would be valuable to understand variables such as socio-economic status and education level.</p>
5. Encourage a more equal representation of roles for women and men in television/ films / advertisements	Advertisers; Producers	<p>Women in television and films are often in stereotyped jobs (e.g. secretaries, nurses, teachers) or in stereotypical roles (e.g. housewives, child carers) that reinforce gender biases about women not having the same leadership aptitude as men</p>