

## The role of informal curriculum on citizenship education: Gender representations in TV and students' gender stereotypes

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### Abstract

*The present study is a long-term project funded for three years by the Cyprus Research Promotion Foundation. The project was entitled "Gender mainstreaming in the Mass Media of Cyprus and the relationship with the perceptions of youth. Comparison with the EU policy" and it aimed at awareness rising in gender issues, at the Mass Media as well as in the role of informal curriculum in students' perceptions. The study was conducted in Cyprus during the period 2004-2007 with a threefold aim, first to investigate the gender representations in TV, second to compare them with primary and secondary students' perceptions and third to compare the gender representations and students perceptions with the European Union's indicators of mainstreaming policy. In this context the present study investigated the role of TV broadcasting- as an important agent of informal education – in the formation of youth gender stereotypes.*

Keywords: *Gender Mass Media, perceptions of youth.*

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## Introduction

The present study is a long-term project funded for three years by the Cyprus Research Promotion Foundation. The project was entitled “Gender mainstreaming in the Mass Media of Cyprus and the relationship with the perceptions of youth. Comparison with the EU policy” and it aimed at awareness rising in gender issues at the Mass Media as well as in the role of informal curriculum in students’ perceptions. The study was conducted in Cyprus during the period 2004-2007 with a threefold aim, first to investigate the gender representations in TV, second to compare them with primary and secondary students’ perceptions and third to compare the gender representations and students perceptions with the European Union’s indicators of mainstreaming policy.

If really “Gender is a system of power in that it privileges some men and disadvantages most women” (Davis, Evans & Robert, 2006, p 2), then gender mainstreaming must be the integration of the gender perspective into every stage of policy processes – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation – with a view to promoting equality between women and men. Among the important measures of gender mainstreaming, the European Commission attaches a great deal of importance to achieving gender balance in decision-making (Council of Europe, 2003). As the European Commission indicates in its 2006 and 2007 reports on equality between women and men, women continue to be under-represented in the political sphere and their access to economic decision-making positions remains insufficient. This makes for a fundamental democratic deficit both at the European level and in the wider international context (European Commission, 2006; 2007).

It is also well known that Mass broadcasting plays a crucial role in preventing or reinforcing gender discrimination as its impact on the population is internationally high. Mass broadcasting is considered the dominant representative of the informal education agents. Although UNESCO views communication as a driving force in the promotion of women’s responsible participation in development in a context of peace and equality, in the process of implementing gender mainstreaming Mass Media, as research shows, play a negative role as they produce and reproduce negative stereotypes.

In this context the present study investigated the role of TV broadcasting- as an important agent of informal education – in the formation of youth gender stereotypes.

## Theoretical framework

The high social impact of mass broadcasting is broadly acknowledged, and its role in preventing or reinforcing discrimination is of great importance. From that point of view, the negative role of Mass Media in the process of implementing gender mainstreaming has been broadly research evidenced. It is argued that Mass Media produce and reproduce negative stereotypes, and they play a dominant role to the stereotyped socialization of youth (Burton & Pollack, 2002; Fenton, 2000; Frankson, 2000a,b; UNESCO, 2003; UN, <http://www.un.kiev.ua/bc/tenders/99/>).

The EU has a long-standing commitment to promoting gender equality, enshrined in the Treaty since 1957 (European Commission, 2005). EU in all its official documents defines gender equality as an equal outlook, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all aspects of private and public life. The main principle underlying gender equality is the right to be different, and the effort to change the structures that preserve the unequal relationship between the two sexes (Council of Europe, 2002; European Commission, 2006; European Commission, 2005).

The mainstreaming policy declares the general objectives in the political, financial, social, and educational scene. It emphasizes the principles which must underlie the measures to be promoted, namely: a) the equal right of men and women to work and, by the same token, to acquire a personal income on equal terms and conditions, regardless of the economic situation, b) the extension of equal opportunities to men and women, in the political and educational sphere and in particular on the labour market, in the context of measures to stimulate economic recovery and to promote employment growth, and (c) the development of positive measures to correct de facto inequalities and thereby improve female status and promote the equity of both men and women.

Moreover, mainstreaming policy urges for adaptation of adequate measures to promote increased representation of women in the public and labour sector and to establish equal opportunities in all the areas. As it is stressed (European Commission, 2005:2):

“Democracy is a fundamental value of the European Union (EU), Member States, European Economic Area States and applicant countries. It is also a key part of external development policy in the Union. Its full realisation requires the participation of all citizens’ wom-

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en and men alike to participate and be represented equally in the economy, in decision-making, and in social, cultural and civil life”.

It is argued that Mass Media promote a non-balanced and stereotyped portrayal of women and they play a dominant role to the stereotyped socialization of youth. There is also strong research evidence supporting that TV affects children's personality, consuming culture, social attitudes, and health (Singer & Singer, 2001).

Stereotypes are infused into every aspect of the societal mechanisms that shape future citizens (i.e., Durkin, 1985; Evra, 1990). They are incorporated into the processes of socialization and create lessons that are taught and learned as early as a child is born. In the contemporary era, where children spend less time interacting with their parents and peers and lose interest in reading books, television is probably the major vehicle through which children learn about appropriate behaviors, particularly gender-appropriate behaviors, and about the relative desirability of performing those behaviors. There is now fairly widespread conceptual agreement and empirical support for the view that television can and does profoundly influence both children and adults (e.g. Frueh & Mc Ghee, 1975; McGhee & Frueh, 1980). From thousands of hours of viewing television, children receive messages about gender roles (i.e., Singer and Singer, 2001; Witt, 1997). The manner in which genders are represented in television programmes impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behaviour in society. Sexism can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they see and read the world, thus reinforcing gender images (Fox, 1993). This reinforcement predisposes children not to question existing social relationships.

## Methodology

Gender representation was studied through randomly selected Cypriot television series. The Cypriot television series consist of self-existent, meaningful episodes and refer to the daily happenings of Cypriot society, while their script is written only by Cypriot citizens - men and women. The series attract high rates of viewers including men, women and children, from all educational and socio-economic layers, in urban and provincial regions.

The investigation of gender's representations on TV focused on roles, behaviors, emotions, characterizations, and self-image, in the private life, the public scene, and the interpersonal relationships. An Instrument of Recording Behaviours (IRB) and Textualised Dialogues were developed for the analysis of the 158 episodes of the sample. The unit of analysis and recording of data on each episode was the scene. The software ATLAS has been used for the analysis of the textualised dialogues.

The comparison with students' perceptions was based on a specifically developed questionnaire that included statements containing the Gender stereotyped depictions in TV. The questionnaire was addressed to a representative sample of primary and secondary school children.

## Results

### Stereotyped depictions

Results' analysis is based both on quantitative measurements and on qualitative differentiations that appear among the two genders. The total numbers of codes that are presented per category for men and women, on the one hand, and the frequency with which each code is repeated, on the other hand, constitute the two basic criteria for the quantitative analysis of the data. At the same time, however, the type of codes that are incorporated in each category constitutes an important element of study on the final configuration of the profile of the genders.

These stereotyped aspects of the profile of the two genders are enhanced by the way men and women are presented to behave. Specifically, in a total of 538 codes of behaviour in the public life superfamily, 65.2% refer to men, while 34.7% to women. This result is enhanced by the qualitative differentiations of the codes that appear in each category. Gender representation on the screen reflects and reinforces a stereotypical image of women's attitudes, roles, and lifestyles in the private and the public sphere.

It is typical that the word "professional" is used to characterize men only, while the word "unemployed" is used with a negative tinge for men, but not for women. This point legalises to a large extent the stereotype of the non working housewife who lacks curiosity about, or is even incompetent

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for, business action. It simultaneously strengthens the importance that a successful professional career and a distinguished economic status of life play in men's life.

In professional life, the total number of codes (men=142 women=110) initially does not show important differentiations between genders. However, the total number of females that appear in the role of employees, in contrast to the total number of male employees that is presented in the 158 episodes, differentiates the picture considerably. In the total of 47 Cypriot women, 27 do not work (57.4 %), while only 11 appear to have a constant job. From them, only 4 are presented in scenes in their work place, while for the remainder of them it is simply reported that they are working. Respectively, in men the percentage of workers is proportionally much higher (78.6%). The cases of unemployed men are such as men released from the army, former prisoners or men in the margin that do not fit in with the "standard" professional status of the Cypriot employee. Simultaneously in Diagrams 1, 2, 3 and 4 it appears that the codes that refer to the professional life of Cypriot women are differentiated by those of men. From the total of the female workers, only in 4 cases women are presented in action in their work place.

However, even in these cases the scenes and the plot of the script present women to be unreliable professionals: a professor who faces serious problems of indiscipline on behalf of her students who speaks ironically to her on a constant basis, a military doctor gullible and ignorant on issues of medicine and a TV hostess- student who is cranky and considers herself beautiful, a super-model and clever while the plot presents her to be dumb and soubrette. In most of the cases the codes that refer to women's professional life refer to hires of cleaners in their houses or discussions about the professional career of their children or for the career they think to follow, but they never decide to do so.

The results that refer to the educational status of the two genders are also negatively stereotyped. In total of 69 men and 54 women, 13 men (18.8%) and only 8 women (14.8%) are presented in roles that indicate an educational background. These proportions, as well as the codes that refer to the educational roles, characterizations and self-esteem of men and women shape a picture for the Cypriot society where education does not have any value and probably can be characterized as a demerit when compared with the precedence that money and "good" professional position have. Additionally, women's behaviours concerning reading, dealing with political and social life, being informed by newspapers and television

news and expressing concerns of finding a job are totally absent. Her profile is dominated by the picture of an unemployed and/or uncultivated housewife with a limited range of interests.

Finally, dealing with politics and having political concerns and action as politicised citizens of Cyprus is excessively limited for both Cypriot men and women. With the exception of one series, where two men are presented to have opposite political convictions and discussions about political controversies, in all other cases, men seldom express political concerns. Simply, they are presented to hold a newspaper or to listen to the news without, however, to proceed in annotations. Regarding women, this action can also be categorized in the non-observed behaviours. In no case is a woman presented to have an individual politicised action or political and social concerns. This allows us to classify these behaviours in the non-observed behaviours of women.

## Students' perceptions

### Primary education

Students tend to consider that men, compared to women, earn higher income, are better as businessmen and better as managers. On the other hand, students tend to consider that women when compared to men are more emotional, more often shout hysterically without a reason, are more insecure and fearful, eat constantly when under stress and are more jealous persons. The results also indicate that students tend to consider that women think about getting married much more than men and also tend to believe that it is more important for a woman than a man to have a wedding portion in order to get married. Students also tend to believe that women surpass men in helping friends, helping the poor and doing charity.

In most cases girls tend to be more favorable towards women than boys as indicated in independent samples comparisons of mean scores. Girls' mean scores were significantly higher than boys' ( $p < .05$ ) in most statements where positive qualities were associated to women ( $2.45 < M < 3.09$ ,  $0.744 < SD < 0.924$  for girls &  $2.06 < M < 2.92$ ,  $0.772 < SD < 0.969$  for boys). On the other hand girls' mean scores were significantly

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lower than boys' in statements indicating a negative quality for women ( $1.74 < M < 3.44$ ,  $0.790 < SD < 1.01$  for girls,  $2.02 < M < 3.59$ ,  $1.02 < SD < 1.12$  for boys).

Paired samples T-test indicated that most mean scores between the statements referring to men ( $1.70 < M < 3.44$ ,  $0.738 < SD < 1.110$ ) and women ( $1.90 < M < 3.51$ ,  $0.692 < SD < 1.183$ ) are significantly different (two-tailed  $p < .05$ ). Mean scores for women were higher in cases emphasizing emotionality and inferior social roles. On the other hand mean scores for were higher in statements related to more prestigious social profiles.

## Secondary education

Students' beliefs about the professional and financial activities of men are reflections of the stereotypes depicted in TV. Women's consuming relationship with money, as this is promoted by the TV series, is also expressed by the secondary education students.

As far as the nature of love life is concerned, the Cypriot man in TV series is flirting and cheating on his partner mainly with foreigners, in contrast to the Cypriot woman who is absolutely faithful and the nature of her love life always has to do with her partner. Additionally, the 'independence' of male personality that is concealed behind the image of a decision maker and master of house is consistent with the quantitative results of the TV analysis: his social activity and public life as they are promoted by the TV is much more intense in frequency, compared to the equivalent of the Cypriot woman.

Finally, 71.2% of the students believe that care of their appearance always concerns all Cypriot women, who also are fashion fans (for 63.3% of students) and are always on a diet (for 52.5% of the students). These stereotyped beliefs are consistent with the quantitative measurements of codes regarding the image of the body in Cypriot television series. Women seem to be dealing with their outfit frequently (277) and in multiple ways (143). The 'body image', indeed, seems to be a category that demonstrates great deviations between the two genders. Another stereotypical perception has to do with the role of the woman as a housewife either married (58.2%) or single (56.8%), which for the majority of the students is immediately related to her TV image: women are depicted having restricted activity in public life and their educational background in the screen-script is low. The amazing majority of the female roles (83%) which were



analyzed are deprived of higher education, whereas only four out of the eleven women referred to as employed are shown in their professional premises. Finally, sensitivity is promoted as a female characteristic since women are usually presented with negative sentiments (fear, agony, stress, love disappointment, hysteria), a fact that is reflected in the majority of students' perceptions with the expression of crying (52.5%).

The immediate relationship between students' gender stereotypes and the media stereotypes is reinforced by the result that the parents' educational and occupational backgrounds, as well as viewing time, do not seem to influence the formation of students' perceptions, since the ANOVA technique does not demonstrate statistically significant difference between the sample in any of the questionnaire independent variables.

The research results shape totally differentiated, and in many aspects opposite, profiles for Cypriot man and woman in gender perceptions of primary and secondary education students. In their overwhelming majority, students' perceptions are differentiated with a statistically significant difference as far as the gender profile construction is concerned.

Specifically, the stereotypes that compose the Cypriot man profile have to do with his financial/occupational activities, his love life, either as a husband or as a single 'hunting' the opposite sex, as well as his dealing with athletics as an expression of his private life. Masculinity of the male model reflects a patriarchal pattern of man – head of the family (*paterfamilias*), with elbow-room and without emotional expressions or sensitivity. Education constitutes a prerequisite condition for his professional career and his financial progress. The dominating and autonomous male pattern is harmonized with the most central and authoritative positions that males generally occupy in western television culture (i.e., Neto & Pinto, 1998; Furnham et al., 1997).

The female profile is mainly composed by stereotypes that refer to her consuming habits, her dealing with her outfit and with housework. The femininity of the female model is founded on the criterion of appearance, as well as on the emotional female nature. Dealing with the housework, regardless her personal status of life ends up to be considered as a dimension of her feminine existence.

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## Discussion

Apart from the two differentiated gender constructions for men and women in Cyprus, it seems that the stereotypes between male and female population in secondary schools are significantly diversified. The girls seem to be prone to the moulding of gender stereotype perceptions, since in the majority of statements, their scores in means differences are higher than those of the boys. This conclusion seems to agree with the research results of former decades discussed by Gunter & McAller (1997), where results were found to support the view that television does cultivate gender stereotypes, although the girls are the ones who are affected the most. Gender stereotypes in students' perceptions indicate an important degree of coherence with those ones promoted by the eight Cypriot TV series. Quantitative measurements in behaviour frequency between male and female TV roles, as well as the content of gender roles are reflected in adolescents' stereotype statements. The results of these two researches support the television dynamics in the shaping of stereotypes as socialization models (Fiske, 2003; Williams et al., 1999).

These results reinforce the debate about the role of informal curriculum, and especially its role on citizenship education. The gender stereotypes as mass media production and reproduction appear in students' perceptions and seem to counteract the formal curriculum where gender mainstreaming constitute the main point of the gender's profile construction.

Finally, the current model of the independent educated woman who self-determines her life is substituted by a female model whose choices and existence revolve round a powerful male model (Koutselini et al., 2006; Koutselini & Agathaggelou, 2006). This result is not consistent with the analyses of gender media stereotypes in western bibliography, where a differentiated image of a modern woman is ascertained. Gauntlett (2002) mentions that the mid 1990's researches in US "found that the woman was young, single, independent and free from family and work place pressures" (Brain et al., 1999: 33), while her role as independent and professional was over-represented in prime-time TV programs (Dyer, 1987; Gunter & McAller, 1997). It seems that the female profile on the Cypriot television does not demonstrate the postmodernism characteristics of the western television culture, but on the contrary, reproduces traditional perceptions regarding the female gender with the proportional consequences in public and private life in Cyprus.

Regarding public life in the overall results of the random sample of television series, we see that not only does public life constitute a field of action of men, but also, even the limited space that is lent to the female gender is presented as "alien" for women: professional life, pecuniary transactions and political concerns appear not to match with the female exemplar. The profile of the two genders, as cultural construction, is presented differentiated with a number of negative stereotypes. This differentiation between the two profiles is so intensely apparent, that a stereotypical picture for the feminine behaviour is shaped. Agreeing with the relevant bibliography (i.e., Burton & Pollack, 2002), it is confirmed that the culture of Mass Media is a Mass Culture that is constructed for the market and is based on the exaggeration and the dividing vignettes of genders. With the use of special conventions, television tries and accomplishes to create a decisive importance's classification of television spectators in male and female individuals.

What is also worth mentioning is that the public life of the two genders, especially of women, but at a large extent of men also, appears to be limited only to their economic and professional life and status. The overall results shape a picture for the Cypriot society where occupying themselves with education and politics, Cypriot men and women waste their time. Education and politics appear to have no value and probably can be characterized as a detrimental when compared with the precedence that money, "good" professional position and personal interests have. The content of both stereotypes seems to be identified with particular characteristics of the pancultural male and female stereotypes: emotional stability and openness to experience as male characteristics, whereas agreeableness as a respective female characteristic (Williams et al., 1999).

However, this is not the case of Cypriot society, where politics play important role in public life, because of the continuous political problem of Cyprus. International research (IEA Civic Education Study, Amadeo et al., 2002) indicated that Citizenship education and active citizenship are of great importance in the Cyprus society, a fact that is being verifying by the mass participation of Cypriots in all the political events (i.e., elections, 2005 referendum). Moreover, education in Cyprus is considered as an investment for qualitative life. Statistics of Education in Cyprus (Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus, 2005) indicate that Cyprus has very high percentages of students in higher education, and a very small number of secondary school student drop out. Concerning women, statistics present them to have equal academic qualifications to men.

## Conclusion

It is obvious that the entertainment role of TV is based on counter-reality scenarios, which generalise some behaviours in a way that provides stereotyped roles. These roles serve the market and the consumption, providing protagonists that have as their main interests the consumption of money. Consequently, these types serve better the TV economic interests, by doing nothing but watching TV. The television industry hopes to appeal to non-educated persons and to influence their consumption habits.

The results show that the woman's profile as it is depicted in the TV series is constructed in terms of the general principle of their exclusion from the economic, professional and political life. In contrary, men's profile is constructed in the principle of freedom of will and independence due to economic independence. The stereotyped depiction of womens profile is a worldwide phenomenon as the relative literature and research indicates (Davis, Evans & Lorber, 2006; Burton & Pollack, 2002; Fenton, 2000; Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996; UNESCO, 2003). Cyprus Mass Media, as the island is a member of the EU, have conform with EU priority areas and legislation concerning gender equality.

The question that arises is why these series have a high rate of audience, although their depictions do not correspond to the real case of the Cypriot society, and why the same stereotypes are found in students' perceptions. Is Bourdieu's (2001) assertion that television performs a depoliticizing role "which naturally acts more strongly on the most depoliticized sections of the public" the explanation of the stereotyped depictions? If so, citizenship education must promote differentiated empowerment to different persons in order to promote equality and social coherence.

Research and reflection on contextualised gender studies aiming at the alignment with the European Union's indicators of Gender Mainstreaming should take into account the different expectations and reflections of the "depoliticized" sections of the public and the important role that the informal curriculum produced by the TV depictions.

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