



Human Rights Conventions

on objectification and stereotyping

Numerous human rights conventions, including legally binding treaties signed by the UK Government, condemn a culture that stereotypes and sexualises women. We outline these here.

..appropriate legislation against pornography

.. gender stereotypes

.. sex objects

Drawn up in Beijing 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) has been signed by nearly 200 states, including the UK Government. This International Document is by far the most specific and damning of media and other forms of objectification. Although one of the older declarations of women's rights, it still seems almost visionary in its demands.

Violence Against Women

This specifically recognises the harm of media objectification, including violent pornography, in contributing to violence against women ¹:

Images in the **media** of violence against women, in particular those that depict rape or sexual slavery as well as the use of women & girls as **sex objects, including pornography**, are factors contributing to the continued prevalence of such violence, adversely influencing the community at large, in particular children & young people.

Women and the Media

The BPfA has specific sections dedicated to the role of the media, calling for it to be part of the solution to violence and discrimination against women, not part of the problem. Strategic Objective J2 'To promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media' calls on Governments to ²:

- a. Promote research and implementation of a strategy of information, education and communication aimed at promoting a **balanced portrayal** of women and girls and their multiple roles
- c. Encourage gender-sensitive training for media professionals, including media owners and managers, to encourage the creation and use of **non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women** in the media
- d. **Encourage the media to refrain from presenting women as inferior beings and exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities**
- e. Promote the concept that the **sexist stereotypes displayed in the media** are gender discriminatory, degrading in nature and offensive
- f. Take effective measures or institute such measures, **including appropriate legislation against pornography**

The Platform even calls for Action to be taken by Government, the *Mass Media* and others:³

Raise awareness of the **responsibility of the media in promoting non-stereotyped images** of women and men, as well as in **eliminating patterns of media presentation that generate violence**, and encourage those responsible for media content to establish professional guidelines and codes of conduct; also raise awareness of the important role of the media in informing and educating people about the causes and effects of violence against women and in stimulating public debate on the topic.

¹ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/violence.htm>

² <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/media.htm>

³ Section 125, J <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/violence.htm>

The Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ⁴ has been described as the 'Bill of Rights' for women. Although far less specific than the BPfA it carries real clout as a *legally binding* document. It has been signed by nearly 200 states, including the UK Government (in 1986). Not only can the Government be held to account over CEDAW, it must also regularly report on progress. NGOs also report on their view of progress (considered by some a far more accurate measure of progress, or lack of).

CEDAW Article 5 states ⁵:

Parties shall take all appropriate measures :

To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the **inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women**

UK Government Report to CEDAW 1995:

The UK Government's report to CEDAW (1995) specifically recognises the power of the **media** in perpetuating dangerous stereotypical attitudes :

It is now generally accepted that **stereotypical attitudes** .. and.. the power imbalance between the sexes contribute to male violence against women. **The role of the media** in its presentation of women is accepted as an important one.

WNC Report to CEDAW 2005:

Until 2010, The Women's National Commission was the Government's advisory body on women. It stated in its 2005 CEDAW report ⁶:

20. The portrayal of women in the media, especially in the press, is highly stereotyped. Not only is there a scarcity of women portrayed in high status or traditionally 'male' roles, but there is an enormous emphasis on **female attractiveness, and women are sexualised**. This gendered portrayal, including female sexualisation, extends to girls and young women, especially in music and fashion. Further, the spread and accessibility of internet porn must harm women as it promotes sexual violence.

The WNC Recommended :

That women's portrayal in the press is regulated to put a stop to degrading images objectifying women being published, and to ensure good role models are presented

The WNC even made specific recommendations on Lap Dancing :

In response to Article 6, 'Exploitation of Women' :

The WNC recognized that the use of women in degrading entertainment exacerbates violence against women.

The WNC Recommended :

That lap-dancing and similar clubs be regulated to ensure that local crimes against women do not increase, including by refusing licenses

⁴ CEDAW <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>

⁵ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article5>

⁶ http://wnc.equalities.gov.uk/publications/cat_view/79-international-cedaw.html

The Istanbul Convention is the first *legally binding* document produced by European states to end violence against women ⁷. To date nearly 50 EU countries have signed up to it, with the The UK Government voting to ratify it in December 2016 ⁸.

Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention states ⁹:

Parties shall take the necessary measures to **promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour** of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the **inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles** for women and men

The Council of Europe (which formulated the Convention) has elaborated this as ¹⁰:

The purpose of Article 12 is to reach the hearts and minds of individuals **to ensure changes in mind-sets, attitudes and beliefs towards women, their role and status in society, their sexuality**, as well as women's agency. The ultimate aim is to change the behaviour of men and women, boys and girls, that is currently all too often influenced by prejudice, **gender stereotypes or gender-biased customs and traditions**, and that helps to perpetrate or condone violence against women (Article 12, paragraphs 1 and 2).

The British Council 2016

The British Council response ¹¹ to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹² recognises:

'Cultural platforms influence, shape and challenge the world through their stories, and stakeholders draw a **clear link between stereotyped and sexist representations in dominant culture and the unfair treatment of women in society.**

⁷ <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008482e>

⁸ Independent 16th December 2016 *Anti-domestic violence bill passes, despite anti-feminist MP's attempt to block it* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/anti-domestic-violence-bill-istanbul-convention-passed-mps-women-vote-parliament-fgm-latest-a7479256.html>

⁹ Article 12, Paragraph 1:

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168008482e>

¹⁰ Preventing violence against women: Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention (2016) pg 7 <https://edoc.coe.int/en/violence-against-women/7140-preventing-violence-against-women-article-12-of-the-istanbul-convention.html>

¹¹ British Council research on gender equality and empowering women and girls in the UK: Meeting the challenge of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pg 4: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/society/womens-and-girls-empowerment/gender-equality-uk>

¹² <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>