

MEDIA ATTITUDES TO DISCRIMINATION IN SERBIA

NOVEMBER 2018

The media have a significant and highly complex role to play in promoting equality and tackling discrimination. On the one hand, media outlets expose discrimination and draw attention to groups that are discriminated against, but, on the other, they can also disseminate prejudice and stereotypes or even practise discrimination themselves. The intricate relationship between the Commissioner for Protection of Equality, the media and the broader public highlights the need for and significance of examining journalists' and editors' attitudes towards these issues.

The purpose of this survey was to (1) identify capacities for reporting and informing the public, focusing on three areas: (a) journalists' perceptions of and sensitivity for reporting the issue and cases of discrimination; (b) attitudes towards discrimination and measures designed to ensure equality and protect members of the public from discrimination; and (c) reporting practices; as well as (2) to provide recommendations for approaches to advancing and promoting co-operation between journalists and the Commissioner for Protection of Equality and aligning activities of these two stakeholders.

Both quantitative and qualitative methodology were applied in view of the complexity of the issue. In addition to the survey, interviews were organised with key stakeholders and heads of journalists' associations,¹ whilst two focus group discussions were also held with journalists and editors.

The survey involved 164 media representatives, who were post-stratified by type of media outlet, position, gender, and age. A total of 48% came from print media, 44% worked in broadcast/online outlets, and 8% were from news agencies. Journalists accounted for 54% of the sample, with editors making up the remaining 46%. Two-thirds of the respondents (67%) were women whilst one-third were men. Three-quarters of those polled were aged between 30 and 49. One in five of those polled were between 50 and 60 years of age. Four percent each were above 60 and below 30. The research was conducted from August to October 2018; the survey was administered and the data processed by the polling agency Factor Plus.

1. Perceptions of discrimination

Perception is a basic cognitive function that constitutes a complex process of actively seeking, selecting, receiving, processing, organising, and interpreting a wide variety of data and information. Perception is important as it allows one to become directly acquainted with relevant characteristics of real-life phenomena and objects. It is not merely a passive reflection of reality, but entails connecting data and information with prior experiences, categorising them, and assigning significance to each item. Perception is the process of acquiring, interpreting, selecting, and organising data and information received by means of sensual stimuli.

1. The researchers interviewed representatives of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS), Journalists' Association of Serbia (JAS), the Electronic Media Regulator (REM), and the Media Association.

1.1. Extent of discrimination and hate speech in Serbia

Some social issues, discrimination included, do not readily lend themselves to being measured precisely. We generally gauge the presence of these issues on the basis of indicators or assessments. Here we asked journalists to **assess changes to discrimination over time in Serbia**.

The respondents agreed that discrimination was present in Serbia. As few as one in 100 (1%) felt there was no discrimination in the country. Also significant was their assessment of whether the extent of discrimination had changed.

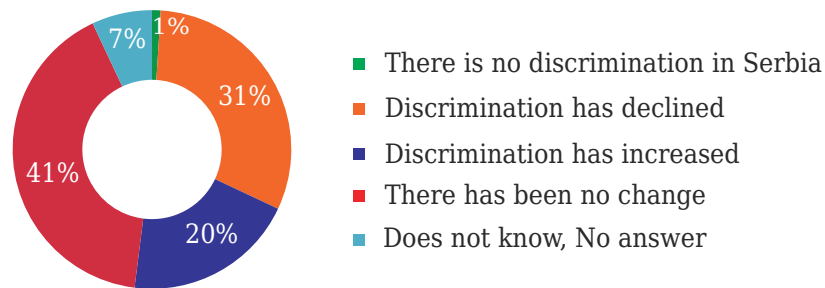


Figure 1. Perceptions of discrimination in Serbia

Most journalists felt there had been no change in the extent of discrimination in Serbia over the past five years. Most of those who did identify change believed discrimination had declined, but a significant 20% claimed discrimination had grown in the past five years.

Interestingly, editors were more critical of the magnitude of discrimination than journalists: two-thirds of all editors claimed that discrimination had remained the same or had increased. One-third felt discrimination had gone down, in contrast to the views of journalists, where only slightly more than one-quarter shared this view.



There were significant differences between types of media outlets in how journalists perceived discrimination. Those from print media were much less ready to report discrimination had declined than their peers from broadcast/online outlets. One-half of all broadcast/online journalists saw discrimination as the same or slightly increased. By contrast, two-thirds of print reporters believed discrimination had remained the same or had even grown.

The vast majority of journalists believed hate speech was present in Serbia, with as few as 6% claiming there was none. Nevertheless, journalists who felt hate speech was ‘somewhat widespread’ outnumbered those who believed it was ‘greatly widespread’ in Serbia.

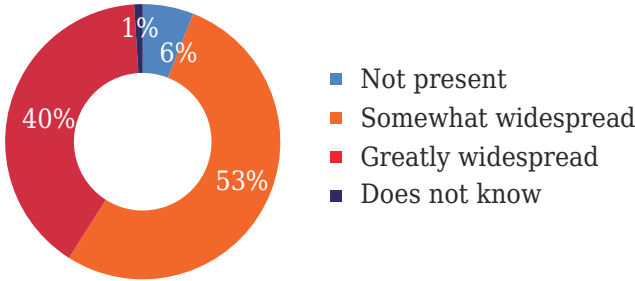


Figure 2. Perceptions of hate speech

Even though there were no major differences between how men and women perceived hate speech, the two genders did differ in how widespread they believed this practice was. Women saw it as ‘somewhat widespread’, whilst men felt it was ‘greatly widespread’.

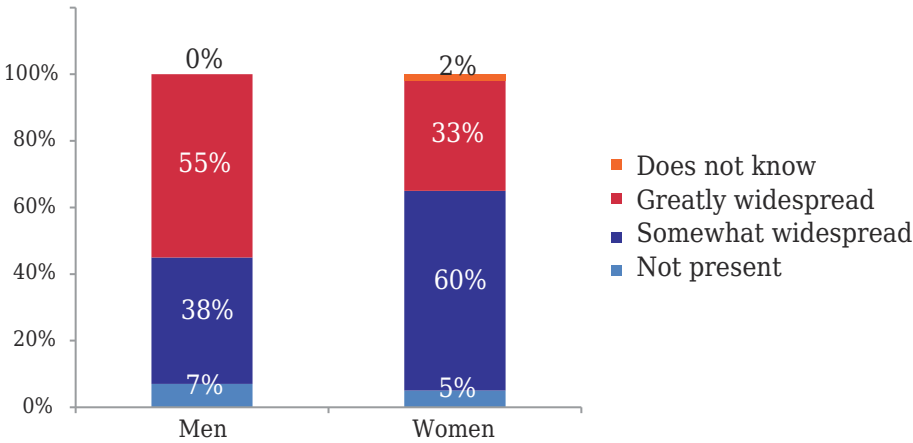


Figure 3. Differences in perceptions of hate speech by gender

Reporters for broadcast/online outlets (47%) and staff of news agencies (43%) were more critical of hate speech and more likely to claim it was ‘greatly widespread’ than journalists of print outlets (33%).

Both editors (91%) and journalists (95%) believed hate speech was present in Serbia, but there were major differences between these two groups in how extensive they felt it was. Journalists mostly considered hate speech to be ‘very widespread’ (as reported by 44%), whilst editors largely saw it as ‘somewhat widespread’ (55%). One in ten editors believed there was no hate speech in Serbia, as opposed to only two percent of journalists who shared this view.

Most journalists believed hate speech ought to be penalised, choosing the option that ‘hate speech should not be tolerated with the excuse that tackling it jeopardises freedom of expression’. Women journalists were somewhat more doubtful as to this issue (17%) than men journalists (13%). Some, but much fewer, journalists (13%) agreed that ‘excessive penalties for hate speech could easily harm freedom of expression’.

Tellingly, as well as somewhat surprisingly, a relatively high proportion of journalists (16%) had no opinion about this vital issue for their profession.

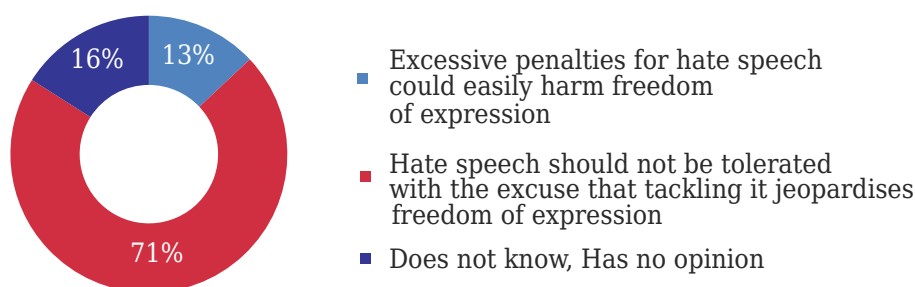


Figure 4. Attitudes towards sanctions for hate speech

Hate speech is present in Serbian media. It emanates from reality television programmes and bursts forth from the pages of tabloid newspapers. It also thrives on social networks, most commonly anonymous Twitter profiles. The media both report hate speech and publish it in editorials.

Stakeholder interview

There were significant differences in perceptions of how hate speech ought to be penalised based on gender, position, and type of media outlet. More often than journalists (8%), editors (19%) expressed concern that sanctions for hate speech could curb freedom of expression. On the other hand, journalists were more likely to be undecided on this issue (18%) than editors (13%)

Staff of print media were readier to voice fears (22%) that excessively strict penalties for hate speech could jeopardise freedom of expression than their peers from broadcast/online media (6%). By contrast, many more journalists of broadcast/online media (24%) had no opinion in this matter than their fellow print reporters.

Perceptions of discrimination are greatly affected by direct experience of or exposure to discrimination. We therefore asked journalists whether they or persons close to them had ever been exposed to discrimination due to any of their protected characteristics.

One-half of all reporters surveyed had no such personal experiences. They reported that neither they nor anyone close to them had ever been a target of discrimination.

Those who did face discrimination claimed this was due to their sex or gender identity (19%), religious or political convictions (18%), age (10%), marriage or family status (10%) and income (10%). Other protected characteristics were the cause of discrimination in relatively few cases (below 5%) experienced by the journalists surveyed.

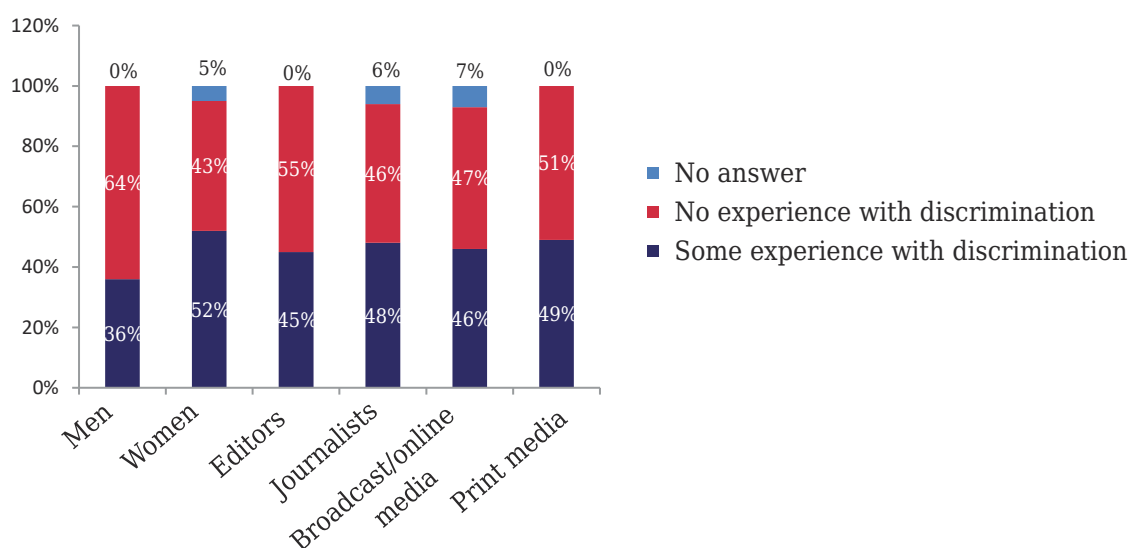


Figure 5. Exposure to discrimination

Men felt they were less exposed to discrimination (64%) than women (43%). There were also gender-based differences in how frequently some protected characteristics were reported. Whilst men believed they were generally discriminated against due to their religious or political convictions (18%), women were more likely to cite sex or gender identity (24%), marriage or family status (17%), and age (13%).

Differences were also observed between journalists of various types of media outlets. **Religious or political convictions were the most widespread cause of discrimination in broadcast/online media (21%), whilst sex or gender identity topped the list in print media, followed by marriage or family status (19%).** Interestingly, journalists were more likely to claim experience of discrimination (at 54%) than editors (45%).



1.2. Sensitivity to discrimination

We gauged sensitivity to discrimination through a battery of statements, of which most described discriminatory behaviour but some did not. The respondents were asked to say whether or not they agreed with the statements.

Statement	Agreement (%)
Extremely high agreement	
An employer that assigns a female employee to a lower-ranked position after she returns from maternity leave as they believe she will not be able to continue doing her old job well	99%
An employer choosing not to employ Roma for fear of losing clients	98%
A university declining to issue a degree certificate with a changed name to a person that has undergone gender reassignment surgery	96%
A dentist refusing to treat a person living with HIV/AIDS	95%
Physical assault against participants in a Pride Parade	93%
An executive who embraces a woman employee whenever they meet, in spite of her reluctance to do so, and offers to take her on a business trip for leisure	90%
High agreement	
An employer asking a young woman about her plans to have children in a job interview	88%
A bank removing overdraft privileges to all clients aged 65 or above	88%
A private medical practice advertising a vacancy for a nurse under 35 years of age	86%

A company director penalising one of five staff in a department for being late in preparing an annual report because he dislikes that staff member for talking too much	82%
Co-workers constantly insulting one of their number for openly criticising the direction in which their company was heading	80%
Moderate agreement	
Municipal officer letting acquaintances skip the queue for service whilst others have to wait	75%
Cheaper hotel prices for Serbian nationals than for foreigners	62%
An employer requiring prospective employees to have driving licences although this is not strictly necessary for the job	60%

Figure 6. *Sensitivity to discrimination*

These findings lead to the conclusion that reporters are highly sensitive to discrimination and recognise it, albeit with some variation in the degree of agreement with the statements offered. Statements mentioning discrimination on grounds of sex and gender or discrimination against particular groups (the Roma, LGBT people, those who live with HIV, etc.). The least agreement was reported for cases that do not constitute discrimination.

Discrimination against particular social groups was tested in a separate question. The respondents were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 5, the extent to which a number of groups were placed in a less favourable position – discriminated against – relative to others.

Here, the respondents felt that the following groups were ‘extremely’ discriminated against: persons with intellectual disabilities (86%); persons with physical disabilities (85%); the poor (84%); the Roma (73%); persons living with HIV/AIDS (63%); the elderly (63%); women (60%); and LGBT people (50%).

Statement	Not at all	Slightly	Extremely	Undecided
Persons with intellectual disabilities	1.2	7.3	86.0	5.5
Poor people	1.8	6.1	84.2	7.9
People with physical disabilities		11.0	84.7	4.3
Roma	1.2	17.7	72.6	8.5
Elderly people		16.5	62.8	20.7
People with HIV/AIDS	3.0	12.2	62.8	22.0
Women	7.3	28.0	60.3	4.3
LGBT people	8.5	15.2	50.0	26.2
People with different political convictions	1.2	22.6	45.1	31.1
Migrants	18.3	16.5	40.2	25.0

Albanians	21.3	14.6	42.1	22.0
Muslims – Bosniaks	29.9	15.9	28.0	26.2
Religious minorities	25.6	22.6	28.7	23.2
Serbs	48.8	9.1	18.9	23.2
Croats	38.4	16.5	14.7	30.5
Jews	38.4	20.7	9.1	31.7
Hungarians	39.6	26.2	3.6	30.5

Figure 7. *Perceptions of discrimination against social groups (in %)*

Ethnic groups/national minorities were seen as relatively free from discrimination. In addition, seven percent of all journalists felt that women were not discriminated against at all, whilst 28% believed women were ‘slightly’ exposed to discrimination. Similarly, 8.5% of those polled felt that LGBT people were not discriminated against ‘at all’.

The respondents were also asked to state how widespread they felt discrimination and unequal treatment of various social groups were in a number of areas of daily life.

Journalists believed discrimination was at its most widespread in employment, work, and career advancement (77%), followed by political engagement (54%). Only four percent of all journalists felt there was no discrimination in employment practices.

The respondents reported relatively high discrimination in healthcare (60%), education and professional development (51%), and social welfare (43%). Slightly less widespread discrimination was perceived in culture (37%), public services, and sports (both 24%).

Interestingly, 10% of those polled felt there was no discrimination in media and public information, whereas one in two reported discrimination was present in this sphere. Half as many respondents believed there was ‘much’ discrimination (15%) as felt it was less widespread (35%).

The greatest proportion of journalists felt sports, culture, the media, and public information were free from discrimination.



	None	Little	Much	Undecided
Employment, work, career advancement	3.7	14.6	77.4	4.3
Healthcare	9.8	17.1	59.7	13.4
Political engagement	7.3	12.2	54.3	26.2
Education and professional development	9.8	21.3	51.0	17.7
The media and public information	11.0	18.9	50.0	20.1
Social welfare	6.1	23.2	43.3	27.4
Culture	15.9	28.7	36.6	18.9
Public services	9.1	26.8	35.4	28.7
Sports	20.1	28.0	23.8	28.0

Figure 8. *Discrimination in various areas (in %)*

1.3. Perceptions of regulation

Attitudes towards anti-discrimination regulations are a key factor that affects how discrimination is perceived generally. To test these, we asked journalists whether discrimination was prohibited and punishable by law.

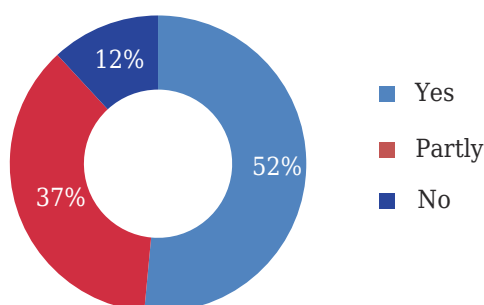


Figure 9. *Is discrimination prohibited by law in Serbia?*

One-half of those polled believed that discrimination was prohibited by law. Slightly more than one-third felt the ban was partial only and that anti-discrimination legislation ought to be improved, whilst one in eight claimed discrimination was not legally prohibited. **The conclusion here is that nearly 90% of those polled were aware of the fact that discrimination was prohibited by law and that discriminatory behaviour was punishable.**

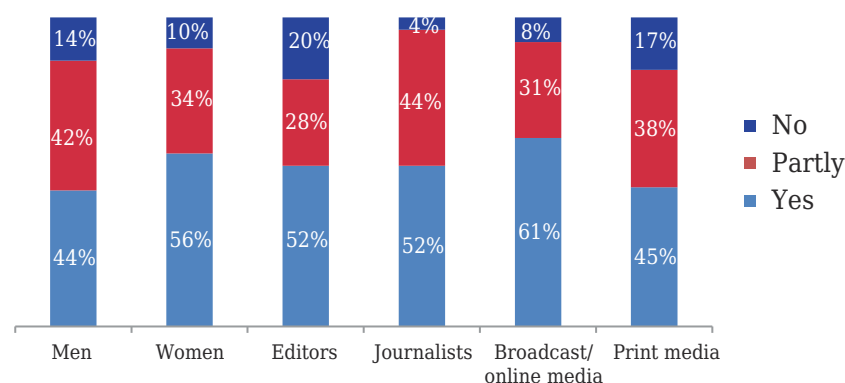


Figure 10. Perceptions of the prohibition of discrimination in Serbia

In an interesting finding, journalists were more aware of the ban on discrimination than editors. Also, broadcast/online reporters were better acquainted with anti-discrimination legislation than their peers working in print.

Journalists were highly critical of sanctions for discrimination. Most (78%) felt that discrimination was only partly penalised, i.e. that sanctions were applied selectively, whilst another 17% believed there was impunity for this practice. Reporters with print media were the most condemning: slightly more than one-fifth of them believed discrimination went unpunished as sanctions were not applied.

2. Attitudes towards discrimination and policies for groups discriminated against

Journalists' attitudes towards equality and equal opportunity policies were tested through their agreement with statements describing these measures.

Statement	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
Persons with disabilities should be allowed barrier-free access to all public buildings regardless of the cost to public authorities	2%	3%	95%
Violence against women is a major social problem, it must not be defended and everyone must engage in preventing it	2%	6%	92%
The government should spend more to allow complete equality for ethnic minorities	13%	27%	60%
Laws should require each business to employ a set number of members of some social groups	20%	20%	60%
Members of some groups (people with disabilities, the Roma, ethnic minorities, etc.) should have some preferential treatment when enrolling in secondary school and university	26%	18%	56%
Gender-sensitive language is important for showing respect to women	28%	23%	49%

Ethnic minorities should be allowed to communicate with public authorities in their own languages regardless of the cost to public authorities	22%	34%	44%
I sometimes get the impression that tolerance of diversity has gone to extreme lengths and that minorities (ethnic, sexual, etc.) now enjoy more rights than the majority population	50%	17%	33%
The Commissioner for Protection of Equality has sufficient powers to ensure protection from discrimination	60%	20%	20%

Figure 11. Attitudes towards equal opportunity policies

The journalists surveyed exhibited substantial agreement with policies designed to provide equal opportunities to members of various marginalised groups. The degree of agreement correlated with how discriminated against these groups were perceived to be.

Statement	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
The extent of protection from discrimination reveals how developed a society is		7%	93%
Public workers and office-holders bear greater responsibility for discriminatory behaviour or statements		8%	92%
Discriminatory opinions are often voiced in the media	10%	13%	77%
Anti-discrimination laws are not applied	4%	26%	70%
Discrimination is a hugely important problem in Serbia and has to be accorded priority	14%	17%	69%
Hate speech should not be tolerated with the excuse that tackling it jeopardises freedom of expression	7%	36%	57%
Discrimination is more pronounced in Serbia than in Western Europe	18%	34%	48%
Anti-discrimination laws are sound	19%	36%	45%
Discrimination is a major problem, but there are even greater problems that the government should prioritise	31%	28%	41%
Public authorities treat all members of the public equally, regardless of their ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender, age, political opinions, or any other personal characteristic	43%	35%	22%
Excessive penalties for hate speech could easily harm freedom of expression	61%	21%	18%

Figure 12. Attitudes towards discrimination in Serbia

Journalists' attitudes towards discrimination in Serbia were assessed based on the degree of their agreement with the statements above. High levels of agreement were recorded for the statements that 'The extent of protection from discrimination reveals how developed a society is' (93%) and that 'Public workers and office-holders bear greater responsibility for discriminatory behaviour or statements' (92%).

Statement	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
The government does not do enough to address issues of equality and discrimination	25%	19%	56%
The government does not sufficiently recognise the importance of discrimination	27%	17%	56%
Public authorities are rife with prejudice against marginalised groups	27%	28%	45%
Political will is lacking for true anti-discrimination efforts	24%	27%	49%
There are more important issues for the government than discrimination	26%	36%	38%
Persons discriminated against do not do enough to change and improve their position	36%	27%	37%

Figure 13. Attitudes towards anti-discrimination measures

The most important thing would be to change how discrimination is treated in public, to ensure it is condemned clearly and fully at all levels of society. Each case of discrimination has to be publicised and public pressure brought to bear to change the mindset of society. It is key to construct a system where, apart from being subject to public censure, those who spread hatred or violate equality are also convicted in court. Penalties also ought to be made stricter.

Stakeholder interview

A relatively high proportion of journalists were undecided with regard to anti-discrimination measures. By contrast, most agreed with statements critical of the views and policies of public authorities and political stakeholders.



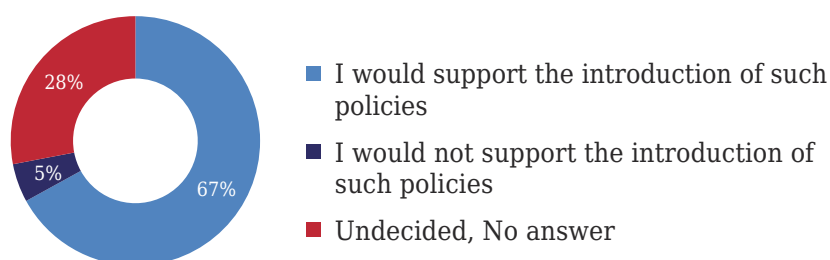


Figure 14. Attitudes towards the use of special policies to protect groups discriminated against

Most respondents were in favour of introducing special policies to ensure groups discriminated against obtain equality with the majority population if such policies remained in effect only until equality was attained. As few as five percent of those polled were opposed to these policies, but more than one-quarter were undecided.

The Commissioner has a good rapport with the media, she is portrayed in a positive light and has built up a good image in public. She has robust support in the media for all of her decisions, especially when she reacts quickly to cases of discrimination. The Commissioner ought to be more vocal when condemning members of the elite who perpetrate discrimination and violate equality. The power of the institution will be proven only through condemnation of discriminators known to the public.

Focus group discussion with editors

We measured journalists' attitudes towards stereotypes and prejudice through the degree of their agreement with the relevant statements.

Statement	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
Women often provoke violence with their behaviour	96%	1%	3%
Women are not fit for politics	96%	1%	3%
Men are better managers than women	94%	2%	4%
One ought to be cautious with other nations even when they seem friendly	85%	8%	7%
Homosexuality is a disease that ought to be treated	84%	7%	9%
One can feel completely safe only when living in an environment where most others belong to their nation	82%	10%	8%
Discrimination is not a particularly significant problem for our society	78%	10%	12%
Those with HIV/AIDS have only themselves to blame for their illness	75%	17%	8%
The Roma are so different that they simply cannot fit into the way of life shared by other Serbians	74%	19%	7%
I have nothing against the Roma, but they still like to steal things	73%	18%	18%
I have nothing against LGBT people, but they should be so at home, not in public	64%	15%	21%
Children with mental disabilities cannot fit in with other children, the differences are too great	60%	31%	9%

Figure 15. Attitudes towards journalists' stereotypes and prejudices



3. Reporting practices

Most reporters claimed they were sufficiently knowledgeable about this issue and could cover it competently. Nevertheless, very few respondents (1%) stated they were ‘highly’ knowledgeable about issues of equality and discrimination.

One-quarter of those polled were critical of their knowledge of these issues. They felt they knew ‘neither little nor enough’ about equality and discrimination, which they felt hindered their ability to report on these matters.

Tellingly, relatively few respondents (3%) claimed they knew ‘very little’ about this issue as it ‘does not appeal’ to them. Ten percent said they knew ‘little’ but were nonetheless interested.

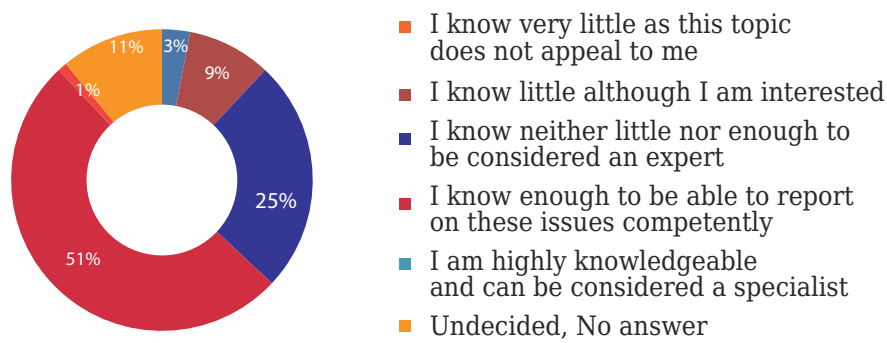


Figure 16. Awareness of equality and discrimination issues

Reporting practices can be understood better if the frequency is examined with which respondents cover discrimination issues.

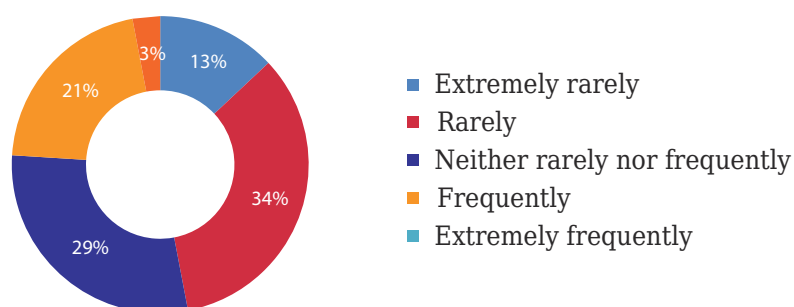


Figure 17. *Frequency with which discrimination issues are covered*

The respondents did not often cover issues of discrimination. Only one in four did so ‘frequently’, whilst only three percent reported on these topics ‘extremely frequently’. Most covered these issues ‘rarely’ or even ‘extremely rarely’.

No particular opinions of discrimination were shared by slightly under one-third of those polled (who claimed to cover these issues ‘neither rarely nor frequently’). When this percentage is added to the proportion of those who report on these topics ‘rarely’, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents have never had any particularly close contacts with discrimination reporting.

Journalists’ attitudes towards equality and discrimination were largely determined by the understanding their editors showed for these topics and their outlets’ editorial practices. According to most of those polled (83%), editors recognised discrimination issues, but one in sixteen reporters claimed their editors did not show understanding. Surprisingly, however, 10% of those polled were not aware of how their editor felt about discrimination-related topics.

In most cases the media show understanding of issues of discrimination, but tabloid papers and television stations will turn a blind eye to discrimination and interpret it so as to boost their ratings. Everyone claims to understand the importance of the topic, but this is only partly so in reality. Most media outlets will say, if it's sensational, it's news.

Stakeholder interview



One-half of those polled (49%) said they worked in newsrooms that lacked specialists in equality and discrimination. Most media outlets ran a ‘jack of all trades’ policy due to a shortage of reporters. Only one-third of those polled claimed their newsrooms had dedicated journalists for particular issues, mainly socially-oriented topics, who were also specialised in covering equality and discrimination stories.

Reporters recognise equality and discrimination issues but not sufficiently. This is because newsrooms lack specialists in any areas – this one included – which means journalists are forced to report business, politics, and healthcare stories without distinction. Reporters are aware of these topics globally, but few are completely versed in them. The problem here is that most media outlets are not sufficiently interested in these issues as they do not raise their ratings.

Stakeholder interview

According to the respondents, **fewer than one-half of all media outlets had codes that governed coverage of vulnerable groups and discrimination.** A relatively large number of those polled (31%) were not aware of whether their operation had such a reporting code. As few as one-quarter of those polled said their outlet did not have this code of reporting practice.

It would be good to have a code of reporting practice for vulnerable groups and discrimination. A reporters’ code would foster the creation of special codes as current ones deal with these issues only superficially and partially. Effort must be invested with journalists’ associations to develop a specific reporting code for equality and discrimination issues.

Focus group discussion with journalists

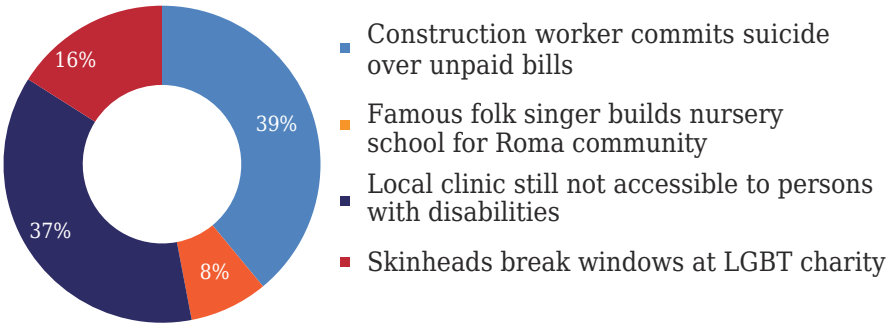


Figure 20. Choice of stories



Reporting practices are also illustrated by perceptions of which stories a media outlet would choose to run. According to journalists, two stories were more likely to be covered: one concerning a social issue (‘Construction worker commits suicide over unpaid bills’), and the other was about discrimination (‘Local clinic still not accessible to persons with disabilities’).

Editorial policy differs from one outlet to the next when it comes to discrimination and equality issues. The media are the most likely to run sensation-seeking stories and rarely provide analysis. Journalists are often unable to follow a story through and it remains unfinished and incomplete.

Focus group discussion with journalists

CONCLUSIONS

The survey has revealed that journalists are aware of the extent of discrimination in Serbia, recognise social groups that are discriminated against, and are sensitive towards discriminatory statements. They also showed substantial agreement as to hate speech being present in Serbia.

The respondents were largely in favour of equal opportunity measures for marginalised groups. They felt that ensuring the equality of vulnerable groups was an important goal that would benefit society as a whole, and that the extent of protection from discrimination revealed how developed a society was.

Journalists did share some stereotypical and prejudiced views of groups discriminated against, but most reporters disagreed with such statements. In a positive development, there has been a slight change in the perception of how significant gender-sensitive language was in ensuring respect for women.

The reporters we surveyed felt they could report on issues of discrimination competently, although most denied being authorities in this field. Newsrooms lacked dedicated specialists for particular areas and most reporters were required to cover a wide variety of stories in multiple fields.

The journalists claimed to cover discrimination only infrequently. Editors acknowledged the importance of equality and discrimination issues, but in practice stories that drove ratings higher received preference.



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Reform assistance
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Пoдpшкa реформaмa
у Србији

This survey was performed as part of the project Strengthening capacities of Serbian institutions and organisations for the proper enforcement of human rights and anti-discrimination legislation, implemented through the UK Government's Good Governance Fund (GGF). Attitudes of media representatives towards discrimination were examined within Component 3 of the project, devoted to enhancing anti-discrimination efforts in the media.

This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies