Risks of gender communication strategies in the Public Sector. The European Union perspective[*]

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This article explores the risks of gender-sensitive communication in the public sector, with a focus on the European Union (EU) that adopted significant gender and inclusive community policies (e.g. the recent Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025). The analysis is framed within a broader theoretical context, where public communication is understood as a strategic tool for strengthening democratic systems, fostering trust, and promoting social inclusion in an increasingly fragmented digital society. Theoretical perspectives on institutional public sector communication, inclusivity, intersectionality, and media polarization are considered to highlight the tensions between normative policy ambitions and the contested, often politicized, nature of gender public discourse in Europe. Against this background, the study aims to understand what kinds of European communication campaigns on gender issues are conducted, how they are disseminated across different platforms, and which risks emerge from the management of media and channels. Additionally, it seeks to examine how gender-related themes are framed and represented, and what risks may arise in terms of inclusivity and effectiveness. To achieve these objectives, the study considers four selected EU communication campaigns launched between 2020 and 2024. A qualitative approach is adopted, drawing on media content analysis and critical interpretation of campaign narratives. The findings, briefly outlined, point to structural, socio-cultural, and political risks that limit the transformative potential of EU gender-sensitive communication.

Keywords: Public communication, European diversity campaign, strategic communication risks, polarization, gender stereotypes.

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Introduction

Within the scholarship on public communication undertaken by public sector organizations, the strategic communication approaches to inclusive and gender-related issues - such as the use of gender-sensitive language - have gained particular relevance in recent years. These issues have become especially salient in today's fragmented public debate and are marked by varying levels of controversy, reflecting a complex and ongoing cultural transformation within digital society.

This contribution aims to reflect on the challenges faced by public institutions in this regard, highlighting the main risks associated with strategic gender-sensitive public communication. The analysis focuses on the communication approaches adopted by the European Union over the past five years, within the framework of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, with specific reference to institutional communication practices (major communication campaigns).

Emerging sustainability, inclusion challenges, and risks for strategic public communication in the digital society.

Within a society characterized by turbulence, recurrent crises and emergencies, conflicts, and by the imperative to undertake profound and cross-cutting transitions towards sustainability - environmental, socio-economic, and digital - (Oliveira & Gonçalves, 2024), institutional public communication assumes a pivotal and strategic role.

Indeed, it can be regarded as an indispensable instrument enabling the public sector to steer ongoing processes rather than passively undergo them, while upholding and enhancing democratic systems and principles, and contributing to the construction of a relationship of trust between citizens and institutions (OECD 2021; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Ducci & Lovari, 2021).

Institutional public communication (Lovari & Ducci, 2022) can, however, fulfill this role when it can confront emerging challenges by recognizing and navigating with awareness the current hybrid, convergent, and ever-evolving media ecosystem (Jenkins et al., 2013; Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021; van Dijck et al. 2018). This is a rather complex task, considering that we are faced with plural, dense, and fragmented public spheres, characterized by increasing informational disorder, the phenomenon of disinformation/misinformation, and a tendency toward opinion polarization driven by algorithmic logics (Boccia Artieri *et al.,* 2025).

In addition, recent studies highlight the rise of so-called 'incivility' in communicative practices which, although not a new phenomenon, now appears to be intensifying and taking on new characteristics in digital environments - emerging forms of violence expressed through words and images, aggressiveness, and denigration of others, among others - (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024).

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In this context, among the many challenges posed by the transitions toward sustainability (Agenda 2030, etc.), public institutions - acting in step with the cultural movements and processes currently unfolding within society and enabled by digital technologies - are pursuing social inclusion and equal opportunity goals with greater intensity than in the past. They have done so through the adoption of policies supported by specific institutional public communication strategies (as will be illustrated in the following section with reference to the European Union). In particular, several studies emphasize that public communication is now widely recognized as a strategic tool for fostering an inclusive society, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Faccioli & D'Ambrosi, 2023; Spalletta, Ducci, D'Ambrosi & Folena, 2024; Oliveira & Gonçalves 2024).

However, addressing issues of inclusion and, more specifically, adopting gender-sensitive approaches in institutional communication entails that public administrations make carefully considered strategic choices, with full awareness of the potential risks involved.

Risks may stem partly from the characteristics of the contemporary public spheres mentioned above, and partly from factors related to organizational and communicative culture. These include organizational structure and available communication tools, the recognition of professional communicators (Grunig, 2008), prevailing communication models/approaches, one-way or two-way/relational communication planning, and the relationship with publics and stakeholders.

First and foremost, addressing emerging social issues is a duty for public administrations, since by their very nature, they are called upon to pursue the public interest. However, in the way these issues are approached - through communication style (language and tone of voice), the use of channels and communication tools, the tailoring of messages to different target audiences, and the fostering of engagement - institutions run the risk of failing to respect the diverse sensitivities present within society and, as a result, of generating rejection or alienation.

These 'precautionary measures' must, at the same time, be combined with the capacity to exercise agency, stimulating changes in citizens' attitudes and behaviors, or enhancing and supporting processes of change already underway within society. This does not mean that public administrations should never take a stand on certain issues, but rather that they should do so by explaining their reasons in a transparent and contextualized manner and, whenever possible, by linking the promotion of ideas, behaviors, or attitudes to tangible elements (such as the implementation of effective policies, the provision of accessible services, etc.) (Lee, Kotler & Colehour, 2023).

Today, in relation to gender-related issues, these risks are amplified by the 'information disorder' that characterizes public spheres (including the risk of disinformation/misinformation), by the multiplicity of actors and voices crowding digital environments (information overload), and by the fact that gender issues have unfortunately become 'controversial' and subject to politicization in recent years; as a result, they appear to be increasingly polarized and polarizing.

Recent gender and media studies significantly focus on how gender is represented in both traditional and digital media narratives, with particular attention to the construction of stereotypes (Ross & Padovani, 2017; Buonanno & Faccioli, 2020; Farci & Scarcelli, 2022).

Some studies highlight growing interest in the intersection of gender and diversity issues in politics and political communication (Campus, 2013; Saccà & Massidda, 2021; De Blasio & Selva, 2024). These dynamics are further exacerbated by the rise of digital polarization, where online spaces – initially seen as opportunities for democratic engagement – have also become arenas for hostility, incivility, and gender-based violence. There is clear evidence that women and gender nonconforming people are primary targets of hate speech and disinformation campaigns, which often follow specific patterns aimed at excluding them from public debate and cultural spaces (UNESCO, 2021).

Conflicts over gender issues have emerged within official and online channels, amplified by media coverage, resulting in greater polarization and incivility (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021; Farci & Scarcelli, 2022). Gendered disinformation targets women and gender-diverse people with attacks based on stereotypes, including shaming them for entering male spaces, challenging inequality, or defying dominant norms (Di Meco, 2019; Martins, 2024).

Moreover, in an effort to counter potential biases (whether related to gender or to other aspects of inclusion from an intersectional perspective), within such a context, there is a risk of generating misunderstandings, reproducing existing stereotypes, or even reinforcing stigmatization.

The risk of reproducing gender bias is, moreover, increasingly under scrutiny in connection with the use of generative Artificial Intelligence technologies, which are being adopted with growing frequency by public sector communicators. These technologies tend to generate textual and visual content by drawing on materials already available on the web and, as a result, often replicate entrenched stereotypes in the representation of social roles and other gender-related characteristics.

Other risks may concern the ability, or lack thereof, to avoid fragmentation, to coordinate and ensure continuity in gender-sensitive institutional communication activities - especially at the inter-institutional level - and to establish, or fail to establish, 'communication alliances' with other institutions and non-institutional actors (such as non-profit organizations and profit-oriented companies) (Ibidem).

The evolution of a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach in the European Union public communication

The growing attention toward an intersectional approach in public sector organizations is fostering the adoption of inclusive communication practices, which support the integration of minorities and the incorporation of gender-sensitive perspectives into diversity management policies (Basaglia, Cuomo, & Simonella, 2022; Ravazzani, Mazzei, Butera, & Fisichella, 2023; Sebastião & Cotton, 2025; S. Kim, Buzzanell, Mazzei, & J.-N. Kim, 2025). Considering Grunig's (2008) theory of excellence, a proposed approach recognizes and values the inherent differences within organizations and the effect of the growing number of women in communication structures on excellent public relations. This approach improves organizations' relationships with their publics and plays a crucial role in ethical decision-

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making processes. Furthermore, it creates a positive workplace culture by promoting diversity and inclusion as the main components of corporate identity in line with Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (Goal 5: Gender Equality and Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities).

At the international level regulations have increasingly set principles to guarantee accessible and inclusive communication (OECD, 2021, 2023). Specifically, European policies and measures on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) emphasize public communication as a strategic tool for promoting equality and well-being through balanced media representation and open, respectful discourse. The institution of the European Diversity Month, organised with the support of the 27 member states, reflects the commitment of EU institutions and stakeholders to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, supporting the communication through strategic approaches and practical tools, such as social media toolkits. A significant cross-cutting objective is gender mainstreaming, which advocates the integration of the gender perspective into all community policies and actions.

Over the past decade, EU institutions have increasingly focused on gender-sensitive communication, embedding it within a gender mainstreaming and intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991; McRobbie, 2009; Ghigi & Rottenberg, 2019). This evolution is reflected in key documents like the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and in the work of bodies such as the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) to raise awareness about gender sensitive language and provide practical advice for policymakers (EIGE, 2019; European Parliament, 2019; European Commission, 2020). However, despite the attention devoted to these issues in European public policies and the availability of a range of resources for the promotion of Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity, such as the Council of Europe's *Inclusive Language Guidelines* (2024), gender-aware communication still tends to remain limited to specific actions within European institutions. Moreover, its implementation is often perceived as a risk in relation to issues of cultural tradition, which are sensitivities that warrant respectful consideration and debate. At the same time, the growing use of AI-powered tools in public communication can further reproduce or even amplify existing gender biases (European Institute for Gender Equality, *Words Matter* guide, 2025).

Audiovisual content has become central to public sector communication strategies in Europe, as institutions increasingly blend traditional methods with innovative, visually-driven storytelling to promote inclusivity and engagement and protect vulnerable groups in a converged environment (European Commission, 2013), particularly through visual storytelling strategies (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013; Ducci, Lovari & D'Ambrosi, 2019; Luoma-aho & Badham, 2023). This strategic use of audiovisual content is particularly relevant in the context of gender equality, as the audiovisual sector plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions, ideas, attitudes, and behaviours, making it a key driver for fostering equality and inclusion (Recommendation on gender equality in the audiovisual sector).

From this perspective, public administrations are changing and innovating their communication strategies and languages (e.g., visual communication, storytelling techniques, etc.), by using appropriate communication channels, diversifying and adapting the messages in the digital ecosystem, even if new challenges arise concerning the

development of professionals' skills and abilities and the improvement of accessibility measures in public communication (OECD, 2021; Lovari & Ducci, 2022; D'Ambrosi, Ducci, Lovari & Folena, 2023; Luoma-aho & Badham, 2023). These communication practices started with the landing of public entities on visually-driven social media – such as Instagram, YouTube, or nowadays TikTok – and followed by the development of visual strategies, which seem to address the need to engage with different publics, particularly the younger segments, combining a strengthened digital identity of public sector communication with a long-term perspective (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020). This shift is particularly evident in the domain of gender-related topics, where institutions face the dual challenge of developing communication strategies that reflect inclusivity and diversity, as highlighted in international debates (UNESCO, 2021; European Commission, 2020), while enhancing the skills and capacities of public sector professionals to address these issues effectively (OECD, 2021).

One of the key challenges in inclusive communication is overcoming the gender gap in public discourse, particularly in institutional storytelling. Too often, even well-intentioned communication strategies risk reproducing tokenistic or superficial approaches, rather than fostering profound structural change. Recognizing this, European institutions have increasingly integrated audiovisual media into their communication strategies, seeking to promote gender sensitive language through impactful and engaging content[1].

Within this theoretical background, the study advances an analytical lens that integrates gender sensitivity, intersectionality, and strategic risk communication to reconceptualise European inclusive communication within a risk-aware perspective attentive to the dynamics of the digital transition.

A study to explore the EU's approaches to gender communication

Grounded in this theoretical framework, a study investigates how, over the last five years (2020-2025), the European Union has communicated gender-related issues, focusing particularly on the growing reliance on audiovisual content, in their guise of "raising awareness tools" (EIGE, 2016) and the innovative use of high-engagement of social media platforms (e.g.: Meta, YouTube), as a key factor for change (Chadwick, 2006).

Research aims, methods, and data collection

The research aims to explore the potential risks that EU institutional communication campaigns face in navigating between normative policy strategies, particularly focused on gender issues, and the increasing politicization and ideologically driven reframing of gender topics in the public debate.

The research goal is to understand how EU institutional campaigns deal with the tension between normative policy strategies and the affective and ideologically-driven nature of gender discourse in the digital age.

The hypothesis could be summarised as follows: the particularly sensitive nature of gender-related issues – intersecting diverse socio-cultural contexts and heterogeneous political variables across the European Union – represents a significant risk to the effective translation of EU policy frameworks and guidelines into communicative practices that embrace the wide scenario of gender-related issues also from an intersectional perspective.

To test this hypothesis, two research questions were formulated:

RQ1. How are the gender-related EU communication campaigns disseminated–across different platforms and channels (media formats, audiovisual techniques, cross-platform strategies, target adaptation, etc.), and which potential risks may be detected in terms of the impact on connected publics?

RQ2. How are gender-related themes framed (content, values, identity representation, discursive strategies, etc.), and which potential risks may arise?

From a methodological perspective, the research adopts a qualitative approach (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), carrying out a media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005; Tipaldo, 2014) on a selected sample of communication campaigns released by the European Union since 2020, namely: *CharacterHer – Empowering All Talents in the Film and Media Industries (2021); Keep Your Eyes Open (2023); #EndGenderStereotypes (2023); Spot the Violence Stop the Violence (2024)*.

The decision to adopt a sample methodology was based on the need to analyse a limited textual corpus, while still representing – through both verbal/visual strategies and dissemination practices – the full range of campaigns released, as required in qualitative research.

The time frame was chosen based on two types of factors: on the one hand, a normative one, namely the launch of the *EU Gender Equality Strategy* and the *Creative Europe MEDIA Programme* in 2020; on the other hand, a socio-cultural factor, namely the growing public, political and institutional attention to gender-related issues in the last five years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic – which led to the implementation of specific EU policies to counter the effects of the "She-cession" (A.T. Kim, Erickson, Zhang, C. Kim, 2022) – as well as the impact of high-profile cases of gender-based violence and gender inequalities which have profoundly affected public debate.

To this purpose, a background analysis was conducted on the EU's official websites and social media accounts to collect all campaigns addressing gender-related issues released in the mentioned timeframe (2020-2024). This mapping identified 18 campaigns, which collectively reflect the EU's strong and intersectional focus on diversity and inclusion. The campaigns were highly heterogeneous in both themes and audiences, ranging from gender-based violence and minority rights to the representation of women in public life and broader civil-rights issues. From this wider set, four campaigns were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis because they mirrored the thematic diversity of EU gender-related communication while also providing the most complete and structured set of communication materials, in line with the goals of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. The selection criteria included

topical diversity (addressing different aspects of gender-related issues from an intersectional perspective), *target audience segmentation* (reaching varied demographic and social groups), *strategic variation* (using different formats, tones, and communicative goals), *dissemination practices* (centralized and decentralized communication models and varying levels of digital and audiovisual integration).

The following in-depth analysis of the selected case studies was carried out in two steps. The first one consisted of the analysis of the campaign's description – if available – provided by the EU, considering its structural elements (e.g.: main goals, target groups, campaign structures and contents, dedicated websites and SoMe accounts, toolkits, dissemination activities, etc.).

The second step consisted in the development of an original codebook, specifically created for this research. The analytical grid was designed following Tipaldo's (2014) qualitative content-analysis model and integrating typological categories emerging from previous studies (D'Ambrosi et al., 2024; Spalletta et al., 2024), alongside dimensions related to narrative structures, languages, tones (Gadotti & Bernocchi, 2010), primary goals (Kotler, Roberto & Lee, 2002), inclusivity markers, and portrayals of gender roles, with the aim of assessing whether and how audiovisual communication contributes to fostering equality (Table 1).

To ensure methodological transparency and rigor, all authors first coded the same campaign independently to test the analytical framework. Coding outcomes were then compared and discussed collectively, allowing the research team to refine category definitions, align interpretations, and resolve disagreements through extensive consultation to reach an agreement consensus. After that, the codebook was applied to the full dataset through a manual, iterative and inductive process, supported by ongoing discussion among coders.

Dimension	Items
Main Topic	Equality & Rights / GBV / Stereotypes / Empowerment / Education / Health
Objectives	Narrative + Declared campaign goals
Intersectionality	Yes / No
Diversity Categories	Gender identity / Sexual orientation / Ethnic origin / Age / Economic status / Religion / Disability
Portrayed Roles	Family roles / Professional roles / Other roles
Misrepresentation	Caregivers (women only) / Dominant men / Performativity[2] / Tokenism / Trans/Non-binary exclusion / Hypersexualization / LGBTQ+ bias / Submissive women / Supporting roles
Tackling Stereotypes	Yes / No → Which stereotypes? (e.g. toxic masculinity, weak women···)
Tone/appeal	Emotional / Rational
Language	Sentimental-Poignant-Pathetic / Dramatic-Violent-Shocking Aggressive-Accusatory-Denunciatory / Reassuring-Gratifying-Positive Funny-Humorous-Ironic / Empowering-Paternalistic-Prescriptive Provocative-Irreverent-Transgressive / Informative-Descriptive-Documentary
Main Goal	Cognitive, Action, Behaviours, Value-based

Table 1- Codebook

To reach an intersubjective and shared interpretation of each campaign, the individual analyses carried out by different coders were tested through a joint visual analysis of the video content by the overall research group.

Main Research Findings

The main research findings will be presented by analyzing each communication campaign, following the chronological order of their release. Before introducing the in-depth analysis, the following Table 2 provides a synthetic comparative overview of how the four EU campaigns address gender-related dimensions, mapping convergences and divergences across key analytical categories, including thematic focus, intersectionality, role portrayals, and risks of stereotyped or performative gender constructions. Notably, while all campaigns include an intersectional perspective, this dimension remains somewhat limited: identity-related factors that are central to gendered vulnerability and marginalization - such as religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socioeconomic status - are mostly absent. Instead, intersectionality is expressed through broader social markers, such as age, ethnicity, or disability, resulting in a predominantly social rather than identity-based approach. This combined reading offers an essential entry point into the in-depth analysis discussed in the following section, highlighting both shared tendencies and critical gaps in the EU's gender-sensitive communication strategies.

Dimension	CharactHer (2021)	End Gender Stereotypes (2023)	Let's Keep Your Eyes Open (2023)	Spot The Violence (2024)
Main Topic 1) Equality & Rights 2) Stereotypes 3) Empowerment 4) Education 5) Health	(1-3) Supporting diversity and inclusion enhancing women professional empowerment in the film and media industries	(2-3-4) Gender stereotypes in balancing family and professional roles, focusing on role and social expectations	(1-2-3-4) Crimes against children; xenophobic hate and anti-LGBTIQ hate crimes; violent crime and gender-based violence	(1-2-3) Multidimensionality of gender-based violence
Intersectionality (Yes / No)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
1) Gender identity 2) Sexual orient. 3) Ethnic origin 4) Age 5) Economic status 6) Religion 7) Disabilities	(4-7)	(3)	(3-4)	(3-4)
Portrayed Roles 1) Family roles	(2)	(1-2-3)	(3)	(2-3)

2) Professional roles
3) Other roles

Stereotyped Representation 1) Women as caregivers or secondary roles 2) Dominant men / Submissive women 3) Gender performativity 4) Tokenism 5) Trans/No-binary exclusion 6) Hypersexualization 7) LGBTQI+ biases	(3) Performative construction of gender, framing an empowerment-based meritocratic logic, stressing excellence and individual effort criteria (leader, bossy woman, hero…)	(3) Performative construction of gender, framing an empowerment-based meritocratic logic, stressing excellence and individual effort criteria (leader, bossy woman, hero…)	(4) Minimal or symbolic inclusion of marginalized groups, to signal diversity without granting them meaningful visibility, narrative relevance or decision-making power	(4) Minimal or symbolic inclusion of marginalized groups, to signal diversity without granting them meaningful visibility, narrative relevance or decision-making power
Tackling Stereotypes Yes / No and which ones	Yes Women in professional domains are traditionally considered masculine	Yes Women in: Secondary or supporting role or as sole caregivers / Men in: unconventional roles (subversion of conventional gender roles)	No	Both Yes: House-keeping / care roles are assigned to men No: Cooking / Care role assigned to women

Table 2 - Comparison of gender-related issues in the four selected campaigns

CharacterHer – Empowering All Talents in the Film and Media Industries (2021)

The *CharactHer* campaign, promoted by the European Commission within the *Media and Audiovisual Action Plan* (2020) in collaboration with the French-based action tank Collectif 50/50, represents the first initiative at the EU level explicitly focused on diversity and inclusion in the audiovisual sector.

Envisioned as part of the *EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, the campaign seeks to challenge persistent gender stereotypes within film and media professions, traditionally viewed as male-dominated domains. The core message – *"There is no such thing as a 'masculine' job – women can do anything!"*[3] – and the self-description provided highlight the campaign's double aim, consisting of: dismantling the gender-related career stereotypes, by spotlighting underrepresented positions in the industry to promote diversity; overturning the 'symbolic annihilation' of women in the audiovisual sector (Gebner & Gross, 1976), giving them a direct voice, and a main stage, to raise awareness on the idea that *"Who tells the story matters"*.

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The campaign's structure is articulated around a series of tools and formats intended to reach a broad public, while emphasizing women professionals and aspiring talents in the audiovisual sector. At its core is the main campaign video, supported by 12 video-interviews with women professionals from 9 EU countries, portraying personal and professional career paths, focusing on gender-related challenges and representations in the film and media industries[4]. These audiovisual contents are complemented by an educational toolkit, addressed to mid/high schools, film schools, and educational organizations across Europe, reflecting the campaign's ambition to serve as a guidance tool for younger generations.

CharactHer is conveyed through a dedicated website[5] which serves as the campaign's central hub. It was launched by the European Commission via institutional news, mapping goals and activities online. On the one hand, the campaign does not rely on dedicated social media accounts or adopt a coordinated cross-platform and multi-level dissemination strategy, with the official website's social media icons redirecting to the Collectif 50/50 accounts. On the other hand, visibility is primarily achieved through participation in high-profile events, notably the Cannes Film Festival, where the campaign was officially launched in 2021.

From an analytical perspective, also on potential risks evaluation, by addressing the underrepresentation of women in the audiovisual sector, the campaign pursues a clear cognitive goal, aiming to inform and raise awareness of female empowerment in creative roles. The overall tone of voice of the campaign is rational and unfolds into an informative, descriptive, and documentary language. While it appeals to responsibility and reflection rather than emotion, adopting a restrained approach characterized by neutrality and low intrusiveness often risks being weak in persuasion and having limited impact (Gadotti & Bernocchi, 2010).

Consistent with the campaign narrative focus, the roles portrayed are exclusively professional and related to creative and technical aspects of the audiovisual sector. The analysis does not reveal any explicit issue of misrepresentation, with the only exception being an emphasis on gender performativity, which nonetheless seems functional to the campaign's goals.
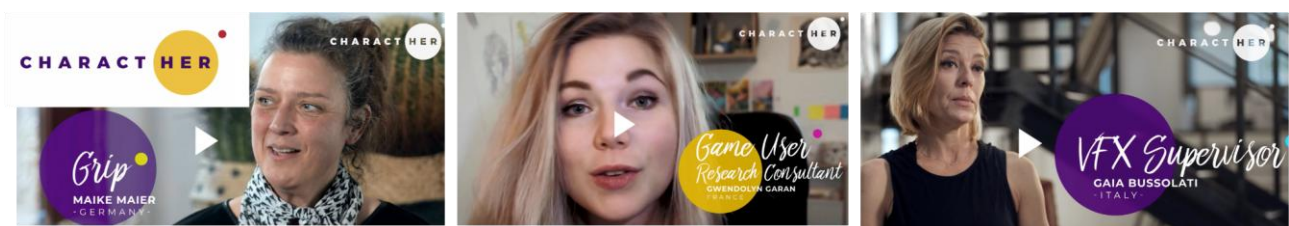

Figure 1- CharactHer's campaign visuals

Regarding intersectional representation, the campaign addresses some diversity dimensions, notably age, disability[6] and geographically spanning Eastern to Western Europe. A factor that highlights the EU's effort to construct a shared narrative and a broader sense of belonging, bringing together the perspectives of women from different member countries. However, the in-depth analysis clearly shows that *CharactHer* predominantly

represents white cisgender women, with the potential risk of neglecting key dimensions of diversity such as racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities beyond the binary, and other underrepresented social groups or experiences.

Keep Your Eyes Open (2023)

The *Keep Your Eyes Open* campaign, launched by the European Commission within the framework of the EU Strategy on Victims' Rights (2020-2025), was developed in response to the significant increase in crimes (e.g., domestic violence, child sexual abuse, cybercrime, xenophobic and LGBTIQ+ hate crimes) reported during the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign's main goal is to raise awareness of victims' rights and empower individuals to recognize and support victims in their communities, encouraging an active stance embodied in the core message: *"I will keep my eyes open"*.

The campaign is promoted in 10 focus countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia), and targets all citizens broadly, with a particular focus on young people aged 18-30. It addresses a wide spectrum of crimes – ranging from gender-based violence to child sexual abuse, cybercrime, and racist and xenophobic hate crimes – and aims to empower the target audiences to: increase awareness of victims' rights, support victims of violence, encourage crime reporting, and recognize signs of violence.

Keep Your Eyes Open is structured around a main campaign video and three thematic ones available in several languages, for a total of 45 audiovisual content items. The campaign's contents are accessible through a dedicated website[7], which serves as a central hub available in 24 EU languages. The website includes an interactive digital tool enabling access to relevant resources and providing direct support: by selecting one of the EU's 27 countries and a type of crime, users can get tailored information about legal rights in the selected national context, as well as aggregated contacts of support organisations, NGOs, and government departments to ask for help. Moreover, the website offers a downloadable stakeholder kit[8] and an open-access children's book[9] targeted for 7-10-year-olds that introduces young readers, parents, and teachers to the experiences and rights of Ukrainian refugee children, highlighting awareness, empathy, and support for victims of war-related crimes.

Despite its more structured digital presence, with an institutional webpage and content organized around thematic areas, the campaign does not rely on dedicated social media accounts – resulting in the issue of limiting peer-to-peer engagement among younger audiences – and its dissemination strategy is shaped mainly through the DG EU Justice and Consumers' YouTube channel via a dedicated playlist[10].

From an analytical perspective, the campaign combines a cognitive goal that aims at informing the target groups about rights and the support services available, with a behavioural and attitudinal one that encourages people to report crimes, offer active support to victims, and recognize various forms of violence. *Keep Your Eyes Open* predominantly

lays an emotional tone elaborated through a dramatic and poignant language that avoids pathetic or aggressive language. The campaign shows a good level of intersectionality, by paying particular attention to aspects such as ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. Violence and crimes are also approached and presented as a composite and multifaceted phenomenon, including: war-related crimes, violence against a person, gender-based violence, xenophobia, LGBTQI-phobia, and violence against children (Figure 2). The campaign's language, which combines a dramatic tone with a sentimental and moving style, appears to effectively balance the strengths of these social communication registers (Gadotti & Bernocchi, 2010) while avoiding some of their adjacent stylistic pitfalls, such as accusatory or pathetic tones. Considering this potential limitations and risks may lie in a reduced incisiveness and memorability of the message the campaign seeks to convey. Additionally, *Keep Your Eyes Open*, in its attempt to develop a multifaceted and multidimensional perspective on violence, may risk not being fully accessible to its intended audiences, given differences in sensitivity, age, levels of awareness, and educational background.
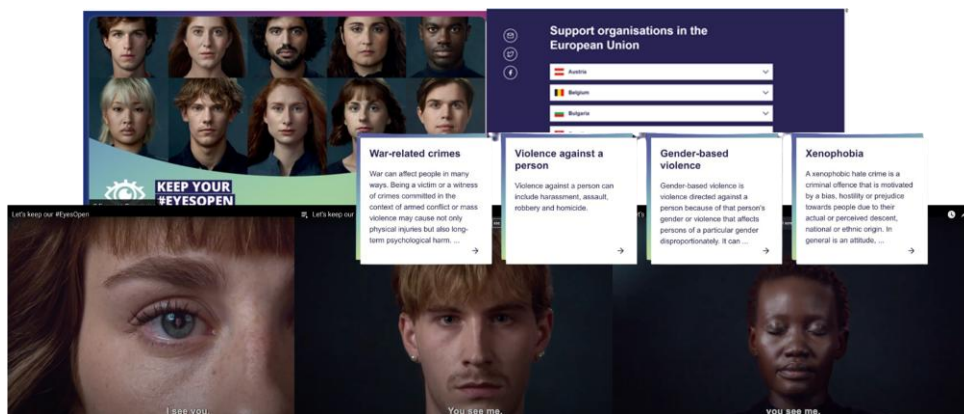

Figure 2 - Keep Your Eyes Open's campaign visuals

#EndGenderStereotypes (2023)

The *#EndGenderStereotypes* campaign, promoted by the European Commission and coordinated by the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, is structured as an institutional communication initiative to challenge the persistence of gender stereotypes in daily life. Conceived as part of the broader effort to promote gender equality across all areas of social and professional life, the campaign adopts a general awareness-raising approach, grounded in the idea – clearly stated in its official self-description – that gender stereotypes influence people's everyday decisions, behaviours, and aspirations, often unconsciously[11].

The campaign's core message is in the call to action *"It is time to #EndGenderStereotypes!"*, which reinforces its main goal: to encourage reflection and promote individual and collective responsibility in recognizing and dismantling culturally

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internalised gender norms. While the campaign positions itself as addressing a wide range of gender stereotypes, the actual structure of its communication strategy is articulated around three specific thematic areas: *career choices*, addressing early expectations around education and work; *work-life balance*, promoting shared responsibilities and care equity; *decision-making*, confronting gender gaps in leadership and representation.

Each theme is developed on a dedicated sub-page within the campaign's web platform[12], following a coherent communicative structure. Every section includes the main campaign video, visual graphics, explanatory texts, statistical references based on EU data sources (e.g., Eurobarometer, Eurostat, EIGE), and direct links to relevant EU policies and funded initiatives.

The campaign speaks directly to diverse target groups, including young people, families, employees, and employers, while paying particular attention to women and girls. The initiative's structure combines general messaging with thematic deep dives, tailored to audience-specific concerns (*e.g.,* hiring bias, gender gaps in STEM, or shared caregiving).

Although the campaign uses hashtags and audiovisual content, it lacks a dedicated digital dissemination strategy. The absence of official social media channels specific to the campaign, combined with its integration into broader institutional profiles (Facebook, X, YouTube of the EU Justice and Consumers), reflects an approach more aligned with maintaining institutional coherence than withfostering campaign-specific visibility or engagement. This is particularly counter-intuitive given the campaign's branding through a hashtag, which typically implies a digitally driven and participatory communication strategy, which in this case is notably absent.

From an analytical perspective, also on potential risks evaluation, *#EndGenderStereotypes* presents itself as a value-based campaign that explicitly aims to challenge normative gender assumptions and promote a more inclusive and equitable society. Its communication strategy is designed to question common biases in a way that is both accessible and directive, relying on straightforward content but morally assertive messaging. The primary narrative strategy revolves around the reversal of gender roles, presented through short video scenes and graphic compositions that invite the audience to reflect on expectations commonly associated with gender. These scenes are typically accompanied by a single adjective followed by a question mark – such as *"Uncommon?"* or *"Surprising?"* – that prompt cognitive dissonance, exposing how ingrained and often unconscious such assumptions are. This approach effectively produces awareness, but its insistence on contrast and inversion lends the campaign a strongly didactic tone, which may limit its openness to diverse interpretations.

In terms of tone, the campaign adopts a predominantly rational register, favouring informative and empowering discourse. However, this is accompanied by specific paternalistic and prescriptive language: the audience is encouraged to reflect and implicitly guided toward "correct" conclusions. Rather than offering ambiguity or space for negotiation, the messaging appears to predefine the viewer's path, suggesting what they should question and how to respond. Regarding intersectionality, the campaign considers some elements of diversity – notably ethnicity and age. Nevertheless, the overall framing remains limited to a male-female binary, with no visible inclusion of non-binary identities or diverse

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sexual orientations. As such, while the campaign addresses diversity to some extent, it stops short of fully embracing the complexity of contemporary gender experiences.

Figure 3 - End Gender Stereotypes campaign visuals

The gender performativity expressed in the campaign is presented as equal across male and female figures, with men and women portrayed in both traditional and non-traditional roles. However, the emphasis on balance and inversion reinforces a binary logic, which risks flattening more fluid or underrepresented gender positions. Furthermore, the campaign's protagonists are always placed in heroic, agentic positions (e.g., professional women at their best performance, caring men), reinforcing aspirational models that may reflect the ethos of a society grounded on excellence and performance.

The campaign's cognitive and behavioural goals aim to raiseawareness and promote attitudinal change. The repetition of the same main video across all three thematic areas, combined with tailored visuals and explanatory content, reinforces a consistent message and narrative structure. Nevertheless, the lack of interactive dissemination strategies increases the campaign's risk of failing to adapt to diverse audiences and real-life contexts.

Spot the Violence Stop the Violence (2024)

The campaign *Spot the Violence / Stop the Violence*, launched by the European Commission in 2024, is inscribed into the UN initiative *UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women*. Globally known through the hashtag #OrangeTheWorld, the UN initiative has a coordinated visual identity mainly characterized by the colour orange, symbolizing hope for a future free from violence.

Within this global framework, the EU campaign presents itself as a social media communication initiative coordinated by the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, in collaboration with the Directorate-General for International Partnerships, for *16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence*. The campaign speaks to digital citizens on social media within the broader scope of connecting the European target to the global ones. For instance, it has been reshared by various official EU international accounts such as EU in Mexico, the UK, Liberia, South Africa, and by institutional social media related to EU Enlargement and Eastern Neighborhood policies.

Despite its symbolically powerful thematic relevance, from a communication strategy perspective, the campaign suffers from a lack of strategic coherence, visibility, and

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dissemination. Although the campaign appears linked to the broader European External Action Service (EEAS) platform *"Break the Silence. Stop the Violence"*, there is no explicit institutional affiliation made visible in the campaign materials, aside from using a common hashtag. Moreover, unlike other analyzed campaigns, *Spot the Violence / Stop the Violence* lacks a clear self-description on the EU's institutional websites and appears to be disseminated fragmentarily on digital platforms. On the one hand, it has no official website, dedicated landing page, or social media accounts, and content dissemination relies on sporadic posts with no clear storytelling structure or coordinated editorial planning, risking the dispersion of its impact due to a structurally incoherent multilevel communication initiative. On the other hand, it has a collection of visuals with key statistics and infographics that can be downloaded from the European Commission gender-based violence page, to be reshared via social media.

From an analytical perspective, the campaign's core message, *"Spot the Violence / Stop the Violence"*, plays a central narrative and symbolic role. The verb "to spot" suggests an active process of seeing, noticing, detecting, and recognising violent actions and invites the audience to become more vigilant toward signs of violence that may go unnoticed. This approach implicitly shifts responsibility onto the viewer, reframing violence not only as a social problem, but as a cultural and perceptual one.

The campaign comprises short videos shared via Facebook and Instagram of the Justice and Consumers DG's official accounts, developed through illustrated animations and real-life videos. Illustrated-animated content focus on two specific areas of life where violence occurs: public and private spaces. With a monocular moving around a flat, apartment by apartment, and on a bus, person by person, the video "spot the violence" among various scenes of everyday life: a domestic scene of violence or harassment on public transport. Real-life setting videos propose two other specific focuses spanning survivors' interviews to a vox populi around Brussels' tourist spot, where an interviewer tests people's awareness regarding the International Hand Sign for Help.
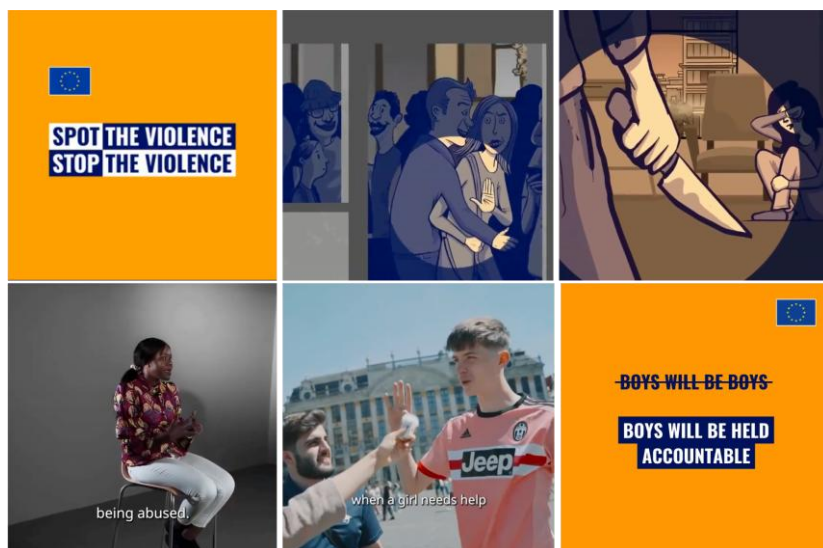

Figure 4 - Spot the Violence Stop the Violence's campaign visuals

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In terms of tone, the campaign is rational, mainly using a documentary and informative language, to raise awareness on everyday situations where gender-based violence could occur, remaining unnoticed. The language also includes a shade of empowerment, providing both actionable strategies and cultural tools to increase public sensitivity to the diverse manifestations of violence. *Spot the Violence / Stop the Violence* invites reflection, encouraging viewers to question what they see and fail to see. The campaign has a clear cognitive goal, and its storytelling can effectively trigger cognitive dissonance. On a deeper level, it pursues a behavioural goal: from a knowledge check on daily-life gender-based violence, aiming to educate citizens to recognize all the shades of violence, and to train practical strategies, as the International Help Signal, to detect situations where a woman is reporting violence.

In terms of gender representation, the campaign simultaneously challenges and reproduces stereotypes. For instance, in one vignette, a man is vacuuming while a woman is reading on a sofa, while in another, a woman cooks and cares for children while the man reads the newspaper. Considering the evaluation of potential risks, the campaign maintains a strategically balanced, though ambivalent position seeking to reconcile divergent expectations while avoiding explicit alignment or fully committing to a clear ideological stance. It develops a reasonably good intersectional approach, depicting different ages, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is relevant to emphasise that gender-based violence is furthermore presented as an exclusively binary issue, with women as victims and men as perpetrators. Non-binary identities, LGBTQ+ issues, and less visible forms of structural violence are not addressed.

Discussion and Conclusion: open challenges and emerging risks

The analysis of the four selected campaigns shows an EU commitment to advancing gender equality and inclusive values, also from a strategic communication perspective, along with the strong effort in terms of policy-making. Nevertheless, the study reveals recurring challenges that could hinder the full communicative potential of these efforts. These difficulties arise both in the digital dissemination practices (RQ1) and in the framing criteria of gender-related themes (RQ2).

Weaving back into the theoretical background, answering RQ1, the detected risks for a gender-sensitive strategic public communication are structural-organizational, socio-cultural, and political in nature, unveiling broader tensions within the EU's institutional and communication landscape. Among the structural-organizational risks identified across the four EU campaigns under investigation in this study, the first major hurdle concerns fragmented and weakly coordinated digital dissemination. All campaigns lack dedicated social media channels, and *Spot the Violence* has no official website, nor any clear reference on the EU institutions' official websites. Several campaigns (*CharactHer; End Gender Stereotypes; Spot the Violence*) do not rely on coordinated cross-platform strategies or clear

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editorial planning covering the entire communication process from beginning to end. Instead, they display a prevailing one-way communication approach, without implementing an accurate and structured relational communication strategy to engage campaign targets such as publics or stakeholders. EU gender communication campaigns thus depict a digital communication mosaic in which some initiatives have websites and structured content but lack social media strategies, while others are disseminated mainly on a single social media platform. Consequently, this patchworked and fragmented management of public communication on gender-related issues risks reducing efficacy and visibility, limiting peer-to-peer engagement – especially among younger audiences or groups with different educational backgrounds – and weakening the campaigns' adaptability to diverse socio-cultural contexts.

As a second point, answering RQ2, regarding the tones and languages, several stylistic constraints emerge. *CharactHer*, for instance, with its rational tone and informative, descriptive, and documentary style, risks emotionally disengaging the target audience. By merely stating its core message rather than persuading, the campaign favors messages that are more acceptable and neutral, therefore having limited impact, as highlighted in the literature on social communication (Gadotti & Bernocchi, 2010). Alongside these considerations, other campaigns – such as *End Gender Stereotypes* – rely on prescriptive or didactic registers that predetermine correct conclusions, leaving little space for audience negotiation. From a stylistic perspective, on the other hand, a campaign like *Keep Your Eyes Open* that goes to the opposite extreme – built on strong emotional appeal and dramatic tones aimed at eliciting compassion – may lack memorability or accessibility for certain target audiences, due to differences in age, sensitivity, or educational background.

Focusing on socio-cultural risks, the study highlights intersectionality gaps, partial representation, and a tendency toward ambivalence that could reinforce gender stereotypes. Despite inclusivity goals, the EU's communication campaigns largely depict white, cisgender women and binary gender roles. By excluding trans/non-binary identities, LGBTQ+ perspectives, and other ethnic minorities, they risk reproducing normative frames of gender equality, neglecting structural inequalities and silencing marginalized identities: failing to respect the diverse sensibilities of European contemporary societies.

Efforts to challenge gender stereotypes in the four campaigns often coexist with aspirational, performance-oriented portrayals that frame gender as a social issue, focusing on aspects such as work-life balance, career, and violence, rather than also addressing the identitarian dimension of gender equality. This tendency, together with the above-mentioned risk of flattening a wide range of complex gender experiences and inequalities (*End Gender Stereotypes; Spot the Violence*), could result in diluting the political message, making campaigns less disruptive toward dominant social norms, reproducing existing stereotypes, or even reinforcing stigmatization. Beyond these dynamics, further concerns arise in relation to new technologies and gender bias. This issue is increasingly under scrutiny in connection with the use of generative Artificial Intelligence, whose potential to replicate and amplify gender bias adds a new layer of complexity to the future of the public communication landscape.

Ultimately, both socio-cultural limitations identified – narrow intersectionality and partial representation on the one hand, and ambivalence with the risk of stereotype reinforcement on the other – can be interpreted as deeply intertwined with the EU's political sensitivities and ideological tensions. While the European Union promotes gender equality as a core value, the tension between normative commitments and policies, and heterogeneous political and ideological stances, exposes a gap between policy ambition and communication practice. Campaigns on gender equality are thus shaped within a highly ideologized political field, where the 27 Member States maintain diverging positions and sensitivities on gender issues, especially regarding identitarian versus social dimensions.

The need to balance institutional commitments with the risk of political backlash seems to result in cautious framing, diluted narratives, and the avoidance of intersectional 'contentious' topics, particularly those related to gender identities, sexual orientations, and migration backgrounds. Such dynamics ultimately seem to weaken the transformative potential of these campaigns, highlighting the contested position that the European Union is compelled to sustain in promoting gender equality within an ideologically and politically conflictual landscape.

Gender issues have become increasingly politicized and polarized in recent years, and this is the primary reason why further investigation is needed into how public communicators themselves perceive and navigate these constraints. Future research could therefore benefit from in-depth interviews with communication officers of the Directorate-General in charge of developing these campaigns, to better understand how political sensitivities, institutional mandates, and social expectations intersect in shaping the communicative framing of gender equality. This second phase of the project will also allow us to develop operational recommendations for institutional communicators, moving beyond symbolic inclusion and toward a genuinely transformative project for gender equality in EU public communication.

It is considered desirable to foster the growth of both theoretical and empirical reflections and studies, as well as to promote innovation and the strengthening of the training of professionals. The focus should be on how public communication can strategically play a role of agency within society, in terms of inclusion and respect for gender differences, in the changing media ecosystem.

Such an evolution should be based not so much on adapting to the algorithmic logic of digital platforms and, more generally, to the digital dynamics that characterize contemporary public spheres, but rather on the appropriation and in-depth understanding of the features of new digital environments (and their programming criteria). This would allow them to be employed in fostering a form of depoliticization and depolarization of gender-related issues, promoting exchange rather than conflict and separation between different cultures (in line with intercultural dialogue among the many European countries), thereby reducing the risk of disinformation and toxic dynamics (e.g., incivility), while adopting an ethical perspective (Bowen, 2024).

In summary, the EU's strategic gender-sensitive public communication must actively adopt and pursue ethical and democratic criteria to effectively exert its transformative *agency* within society. It is imperative that these criteria are grounded in intersectional framing to fully encompass all gender identities, thereby preventing partial representation

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and mitigating the risk of reinforcing stereotypes or marginalizing complex identities. Crucially, the implementation of this approach must be contextualized and adapted to the specific socio-cultural and political characteristics of each EU Member State or region.

Furthermore, this core ethical commitment must be paired with the imperative to reduce the fragmentation in campaign management. This requires strengthening unified coordination and implementing two-way (bidirectional) communication strategies. Practically, this entails maintaining dedicated channels and coherent editorial planning, alongside developing structured listening mechanisms to facilitate active public engagement. From a stylistic perspective, it is necessary to achieve a balance that moves beyond overly rational or prescriptive tones, instead favouring emotional impact to enhance campaign engagement and memorability.

Finally, a critical appropriation of advanced technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence, is fundamental. This is key to leveraging digital dynamics to depolarize gender issues, promote intercultural exchange, and contribute to the reduction of inequalities. Indeed, the primary aim of public communication is not to generate inequalities within the population, but to contribute to their reduction, in the general interest (Zémor 1995).

Biographical Notes

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Notes

[1] Specifically, within the framework of the *Creative Europe MEDIA programme* (2021-27), the Commission has launched initiatives to promote greater gender balance and diversity in the media and audiovisual sector (Action Plan COM (2020) 784 final). These initiatives include funding opportunities for women filmmakers, producers, and screenwriters, as well as projects promoting inclusive storytelling and alternative gender representations.

[2] With the expression 'performativity', the authors refer to the performative construction of a precise stereotype through a narrative and visual emphasis on individual effort, merit, and hyper-excellence. These portrayals stage gendered roles as exceptional - e.g., the 'strong man in command', the 'self-made leader woman', the 'heroic career woman' - thus reproducing an empowerment-based, meritocratic logic rather than addressing structural gender inequalities.

[3] «The *CharactHer* campaign aims at debunking these stereotypes: there is no such thing as a "masculine" job – women can do anything! The film and media industries offer a wide range of professional opportunities that require a variety of different competences. If you're ambitious, determined and passionate, there may be a job for you, no matter your gender or origin!». In https://characther.eu/.

[4] All interviews revolve around three key questions, which serve as the starting point for the reflections shared by the women professionals featured in the campaign: *What advice would you give to someone starting out in your field? Who were your heroes or models when you were younger? Name the film that has made the biggest impression on you (you can name several if you want)*.

[5] In https://characther.eu/.

[6] One of the interviews features an autistic woman, and the selected profiles reflect different generations of audiovisual professionals: https://characther.eu/portraits/

[7] Keep your Eyes' Open official website: https://victims-rights.campaign.europa.eu/en/country/netherlands

[8] The stakeholder kit is downloadable at: https://victims-rights.campaign.europa.eu/en/resources

[9] The childer book is available at: https://icfnextcloudshare.blob.core.windows.net/victims-rights/digital-book/digital_book/DG_JUST_children-book_EN.pdf

[10] DG EU Justice and Consumer' official YouTube channel Keep Your Eyes Open' Playlist: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLK3yPgVWaaEqK3uhKJUrIPefX-QZE5ZAk&si=MNvxu24xy2lgu6bo

[11] The opening line of the website hosting the campaign provocatively asks: *"What gender instantly comes to mind when you think of a certain toy, a job, a sport, or even a colour?"*.

[12] There is no official standalone website for the campaign; instead, the initiative is hosted within the European Commission's institutional web infrastructure. The dedicated pages are managed by the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers and available at:

https://end-gender-stereotypes.campaign.europa.eu/index_en