

Sex Matters' response

BBC editorial guidelines consultation, December 2024

These guidelines are largely good, but they are not reflected in BBC output. **The BBC must take strong steps to ensure that these guidelines are respected and adhered to.**

1. Currently, **accuracy is frequently breached when men who identify as women are described by the BBC as women.** For example, in this recent report:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm2ekm47m2po>

Former police worker charged with firearm offences – there is nothing to indicate that the person is male/ a man. **It is a breach of accuracy to report a person's gender identity as if it is their sex** by using commonly understood words like “woman” in a novel and contested sense without explanation or qualification.

Impartiality is also breached when these people are reported as if their belief in gender identity is a fact which everyone must accept. The right not to believe in gender identity and to believe in the immutability and saliency of sex as a biological reality is protected under the Equality Act. It is also the mainstream position. **By presenting a contested and fringe belief as fact, the BBC is promoting that world view, a breach of impartiality.**

There is a further lack of impartiality in this article, since it fails to mention the reason this person was prohibited from possession of a firearm – because he had been sentenced for a crime (Firearms Act 1968 s.21). He had made a bomb and also made videos in which he fantasised about killing women who expressed concerns about transgender demands.

2. **BBC guidance on reporting sex and gender (Dec 2023) is opaque and ambiguous.** This needs to be improved for the editorial standards to be upheld. Polling suggests that 40% of the public do not understand the terms trans woman and trans man. Justin Webb's clarification on the Today programme that transwomen are male was therefore justified, since it contributed to audience understanding. But he was censured for it. David Jordan told a Commons select committee that Webb should have said “biological male”. If this is a settled decision, it should be written into guidelines for all BBC staff. Has the guidance on reporting sex and gender been updated to reflect this change, and to take account of the need to ensure audience understanding?

3. The briefing document says that “The guideline on breadth of opinion has been expanded and recognises that appropriate breadth and diversity, combined with freedom of expression, may mean the inclusion of views some in the audience find offensive.” We welcome this. But

it **does not appear to apply to accurate reporting on who is male and who is female**, particularly where this matters most, which is when – as in the example above – men who identify as women threaten or commit violence against women who resist the imposition of gender-identity beliefs.

Specific points about the revised guidelines

- The BBC does not treat **young people aged 16 and 17** as children. This is inconsistent with government guidance, which defines a child as under 18.
- News stories on the website **ascribing motivation to suicide** are in breach of Samaritans guidance on reporting on suicide and contradict the report on the issue by the government's adviser on suicide, Professor Louis Appleby. This is a notable problem in stories relating to transgender identities of both children and adults.
- Impartiality is compromised when **geographical location is used to, in effect, downgrade the significance of a story** (local v. national news). This appears to have been used to deflect attention from stories on contested issues such as gender identity. For example, reporting of the legal case of the social worker Rachel Meade was originally presented as "Dartford social worker wins employment tribunal". Her residential location was irrelevant and certainly had no place in the headline or in determining that it was a local story. Both of these were changed after complaints.
- **Old fact-checks and explainers that misrepresent facts** should be removed, updated or labelled with a redirection to more accurate content. For example, there is considerable misinformation on the news and sport sites about the South African runner Caster Semenya. Recent persistent efforts by readers have led to one such story having a flag added, but this should not fall to readers to police. **It should be the responsibility of relevant news specialists to ensure that outright misinformation is removed from BBC websites.**

Please also find attached for reference Sex Matters' input to the BBC thematic review on portrayal and representation.