



Serial Drama as a Catalyst for Gender Equality

Introducing Gender Equality through Media Pedagogy

Kim Toft Hansen

is Associate Professor in Media Studies at Aalborg University with broad expertise as PI, WP-leader, and co-investigator in research projects funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark, Horizon 2020, and The North Denmark Region. His main research interests are Nordic TV production, TV crime series, spatial identity construction, young adult dramas, and European difference discourses.

Louise Brix Jacobsen

is Associate Professor in Media Studies at Aalborg University. Her main research interests include Scandinavian TV series and identity construction, mediated gender identities, fake news, and media hoaxing. She has extensive experience in knowledge exchange and collaboration with practitioners such as high school students and teachers.

Sarah Arnold

is Associate Professor, and the current Head of the Department of Media Studies at Maynooth University. Her research interests include women's roles and their participation in film, television and media; emergent screen entertainment experiences; as well as technologies and production cultures.

M. Elena D'Amelio

is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of San Marino. Her main research interests focus on Italian stardom and celebrity, gender and motherhood studies, transnational cinema and serial dramas, memory and media. She is the PI of the research project Memories on Film: Enhancing the Institutional, Family, and Amateur Film Heritage of the Republic of San Marino.

Raluca-Nicoleta Radu

is Professor at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest. Her work focuses on media and journalism in general, and audience studies and digital radicalization due to disinformation in particular. Her recent work includes Romania's contribution to the Digital News Report, the EU-funded GEMINI project on gender equality in the media, and the PROMPT project on malevolent narratives at European level.

This special issue of Academic Quarter responds to the pressing need for the reinforcement of gender equality as a principle in European society, following recent attacks on more liberal policies and attitudes towards gender both in Europe and further afield, especially the US. Media has been central both to the organisation of gender equality initiatives and activities and to the resistance to it, no more evident in the co-optation of social media platforms by well known gender conservative figures like Andrew Tate and Elon Musk, both of whom have driven highly misogynistic discourse which has made its way to Europe (Ging 2019; Haslop et al. 2024). While media is often cited as the cause or agent of anti-gender rhetoric (Cesarino 2023; RESIST 2024), it is also leveraged for the promotion of gender equality as evidenced in the increasing visibility of and attention to gender issues across various media including TV and film, broadcasting, social media and the press (McInroy and Craig 2017; Bell and Keer 2021).

This special issue attends specifically to serial drama as a tool for the promotion of gender equality. Focusing on young people as key stakeholders in gender equality and change agents for an equitable world, the various contributors to this issue identify some of the challenges that educators face in teaching gender equality and proposes several valuable tools and techniques for using serial dramas addressed to or watched by young people as a mechanism for developing their knowledge and understanding of gender issues and topics such as stereotyping and progressive representation.

Serial drama serves as a powerful thinking tool for teaching gender equality to students by leveraging its narrative structure and emotional engagement (Spalletta 2024; Hansen and Jacobsen 2025).

Through serialized storytelling, these dramas can delve deeply into complex social issues, allowing for sustained exploration and character development. This format provides an engaging opportunity to present diverse perspectives and experiences related to gender, fostering empathy and understanding among viewers. One key aspect of serial drama is its ability to depict the lived experiences of characters over time, highlighting the nuances and challenges of navigating gender roles and identities (Heim 2020; Dove-Viebahn 2024). By portraying characters who confront and challenge gender stereotypes, serial dramas can encourage viewers to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes (Holtzman and Sharpe 2014). This reflective process is crucial for developing critical thinking skills and promoting gender equality. Moreover, serial dramas often incorporate relatable scenarios and conflicts that resonate with young audiences, making abstract concepts more tangible and accessible (Andò and Hipkins 2022; Farci and Scarcelli 2022). The emotional investment in characters and their journeys can lead to a deeper engagement with the issues presented, facilitating meaningful discussions and learning.

In an educational context, serial dramas can be used to illustrate theoretical concepts and provide real-world examples of gender dynamics. Teachers can leverage these narratives to create interactive and participatory learning experiences, encouraging students to analyze, debate, and apply their understanding of gender equality in various contexts (Arnold and Fox 2025). This approach not only enhances comprehension but also empowers students to become advocates for gender equality in their own lives.

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-25 (EU 2020) emphasizes the importance of negotiating and dissolving gender stereotypes that contribute to gender inequalities through unconscious biases, a process known as 'gender mainstreaming'. This special issue presents perspectives that address European young adults, particularly those in high schools, offering tools to negotiate and transform gender stereotypes and gender equality issues. By leveraging popular culture, especially serial drama, the issue motivates a common language for creating and comprehending new modes of representation and depiction of worldviews and social relationships. A key aspect of critical media literacy research is its focus on the politics of representation, examining how marginalized and dominant rela-

tions, including gender, race, class, and sexuality, are portrayed in the media (Kellner and Share 2007, 2019). Contributions in this issue use popular serial drama as an 'awareness tool' or 'thinking tool' for new understandings and pedagogical reflections on social relations between genders and social justice issues regarding gender equality.

Research-action approaches to teaching and learning

This issue represents scholarly perspectives that address how European serial dramas represent gender, gender equality, and gender issues; how we can map European young adults' understanding of gender issues through serial drama; how creatives reveal debates about gender issues in developing serial drama; and how research into these perspectives can be used to develop educational tools for teaching gender equality to European young adults. Contributions to the issue cover two or more of these perspectives, with a focus on educational or pedagogical approaches to teaching gender issues through serial drama.

This special issue is developed in collaboration with the EU research project GEMINI (Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New Training Insights).¹ GEMINI is a research-action project aimed at high school students and their teachers. To encourage behavioral changes, this research project responds to the research questions presented above. In relation to this project, contributions to this issue present their material in a form that serves both as research publications and as contributions that may be integrated into a teaching context. This includes readings of serial drama from different geographical contexts, video essays and other types of video material, and directive material for teaching activities or reflections on how teachers can use serial drama cases to teach gender issues to European upper secondary students.

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, gender equality training involves providing "relevant knowledge, skills, and values" that equip individuals and societies with the tools to effectively implement the gender-mainstreaming strategy in their field (EIGE 2016). For contributors to this issue, this targets especially students and teachers in European upper secondary education. The elementary theoretical assumption is that it is possible to teach gender equality through popular serial drama, as it involves

teaching activities guided towards relevant media consumption among young adults. Additionally, this approach has the potential to create young 'gender ambassadors' by utilizing the dramatic potency inherent in serial drama for gender equality training in schools.

In the articles that follow, the various contributors stress the need for and value of gender education across several European contexts. Despite the documented differences in gender education in each national context - Irish secondary schools provide little education specific to gender compared to, for example, Denmark - contributors make the case for engaging young people in gender topics in secondary school. Further, they provide tangible evidence for the successful use of serial drama as a pedagogical tool. A number of contributors adopt the GMN Triangle - a method that teachers can adopt for using serial drama scenes to develop young people's understanding of gender issues, media literacy, and narrative comprehension. Collectively, the contributors provide examples of appropriate serial dramas that provide ample opportunities for engaging young people in education settings on gender issues and topics.

Contributions

In the first article of the issue, **Kim Toft Hansen** and **Louise Brix Jacobsen** introduce the aforementioned pedagogical tool - the GMN Triangle - that has proven useful in developing students' awareness and understanding of 1) Gender Issues; 2) Media Literacy; 3) Serial Drama Narrative Comprehension. They argue that the tool enables teachers and learners to maintain a critical distance from sometimes sensitive issues. Using scenes from series' *Euphoria* (HBO 2019-) and *Rita* (TV2/Netflix 2012-20), they demonstrate how the GMN Triangle can be used to explore issues such as toxic masculinity and gender bending.

Evidencing the variety of attitudes to gender equality and practices of serial drama viewing among European young people, **Martica Spalletta**, **Nicola Ferrigni** and **Paola De Rosa's** contribution to this issue documents the results of a pan-European focus group study with young people aged between 15 and 21 years old. Findings revealed that European young people tended to favour 'authentic' and non-stereotypical representations, and were put off by seemingly didactic representations of gender issues. The study also

found common practices of using streaming series by young people and a rejection of the notion that serial dramas can influence opinions, but more varied understandings and attitudes towards gender, reflecting perhaps differences in educational and societal attitudes towards gender.

Izzy Fox and **Sarah Arnold's** contribution turns attention to the Irish educational system, drawing upon interviews with teachers who detail the various challenges and obstacles to teaching gender education, namely, the limited teacher training on gender, little space in the curriculum for addressing gender, and a growing anti-gender backlash to gender topics in Irish society. Using the GMN Triangle, Arnold and Fox illustrate how serial drama can be used to develop students' media literacy and gender knowledge which can provide an antidote to anti-gender sentiment. They examine sequences of Irish drama *Normal People* (RTÉ/BBC 2020) through the GMN Triangle to illustrate how gender hierarchies and dynamics are represented within the series.

Turning their attention to Italian serial drama **Valentina Re**, **Arianna Vergari** and **Maria Elena D'Amelio** explore the more liberal and LGBTQ+ positive representations of gender and sexuality on youth-oriented series *Prisma* (Amazon Prime Video 2022-24). They note how *Prisma* adopted the SKAM methodology of drama, which develops stories and narratives founded upon deep research on young people. Consequently, *Prisma* evidences more nuanced and complex representations of youth identity and sexuality and Re, Vergari and D'Amelio demonstrate how key narratives and sequences focusing on the representation of 'coming out' can be examined using the GMN Triangle to engage young people in learning about gender issues via serial drama.

In a companion piece to this article on *Prisma's* representation of queer characters and storylines, the video essay (edited by Arianna Vergari), along with its accompanying guiding essay (written by **Valentina Re**, **Arianna Vergari** and **Maria Elena D'Amelio**), offers a close analysis of the formal and aesthetic techniques of the drama that contribute towards the development of a sensitive and empathetic portrayal of a coming out story. By first acknowledging the variety of film and TV coming out narratives, the video essay identifies shifting political strategies in the representation of such issues and this helps to contextualize this narrative in *Prisma*, which

moves beyond stereotype and defies expectations and norms which typically portray fraught experiences of family rejection.

Greta Iapalucci follows with the introduction of another pedagogical tool aimed at using serial drama to develop students' knowledge and understanding of gender, through case studies of scenes that reinforce or, on the contrary, challenge widely held stereotypes. Deploying multimedia annotation software in the classroom enables students to quantify speaking times of male and female characters on screen and then to qualitatively identify instances of four common stereotypes related to gender identity. By undertaking the systematic coding of gender representations students can initiate and steer discussion on gender topics and reflect upon the meaning and impact of them.

Greta Delpanno's video essay explores how the two series *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019-23) and *Un professore* (Rai 1 2021-) serve as both entertainment and educational tools, engaging with themes of pedagogy, representation, and identity formation. It highlights television's role in constructing and challenging social norms, and the series' contributions to informal sex education and philosophical discussions. While critiqued for potentially commodifying diversity, these shows play a crucial role in shaping identity and fostering cultural shifts. Alongside the guiding text, the essay emphasizes the importance of critical engagement with media narratives to understand their impact on viewers and broader cultural discourse, ultimately advocating for a more nuanced appreciation of serialized storytelling.

Conclusion

The intention of this issue is to provide those engaged in education with tools to develop young people's knowledge and understanding of gender representations, gender stereotypes, and gender equality and inequality. To evidence the importance and urgency of this goal, since this journal issue was first proposed in 2023, there have been a range of profoundly impactful and detrimental push-backs against gender mainstreaming and gender equality initiatives. In Bulgaria, the introduction of legal amendments regarding how gender is integrated in education means that the provision of education or information around non-traditional gender identity is now prohibited (Amnesty International 2024). In Hungary, Viktor

Orbán's government has introduced a constitutional amendment that recognizes two sexes only, effectively erasing the legal existence of other genders (Kassam 2025). In the US, the Trump administration has issued executive orders affecting federal agencies and specifically targeting their Diversity, Equality and Inclusion programmes, as well as their recognition of gender diversity (Wendling and Epstein 2025). In a political climate that is increasingly marked by anti-gender rhetoric and action, it is therefore crucial that there is resistance to this as well as counter-measures available to educators to ensure a safe and equitable world in which gender is understood and respected.

References

- Amnesty International. 2024. Bulgaria: Ban of "LGBTI propaganda" in schools is attack on the entire LGBTI community. Amnesty International Online. Accessed May 16, 2025. <https://www.amnesty.eu/news/bulgaria-ban-of-lgbti-propaganda-in-schools-is-attack-on-the-entire-lgbti-community/>
- Andò, Romana, and Danielle Hipkins. 2022. "Teen Identity, Affect and Sex in Rome. Italian teen girl audiences and the dissonant pleasures of Netflix's underage prostitution drama Baby." *Studi culturali* 2:207–232.
- Arnold, Sarah, and Izzy Fox. 2025. "Challenges and opportunities in teaching gender equality in Irish secondary schools." *Gender and Education* 37(3): 364–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2462051>
- Bell, Katherine. M., and GR Keer. 2021. "Representing queer communities: News media stylebooks and LGBTQ visibility." In *Handbook of Global Media Ethics*, edited by Stephen J.A. Ward, 1233–1252, Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32103-5_62
- Cesarino, Letícia. 2023. "New media, nationhood and the anti-gender kaleidoscope." *Gender and Language* 17(1): 102–110. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.25636>
- Dove-Viebahn, Aviva. 2024. "Controlling the Narrative, Examining the Self: The Unruly Femme Subjectivity of Fleabag." *Sexualities* 27(8): 1401–1414. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231157072>

- EIGE - European Institute for Gender Equality. 2016. Gender Equality Training: Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit. Accessed May 15, 2025. <https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/mh0716093enn.pdf>.
- EU - European Commission. 2020. A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. Accessed May 13, 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legissum:4576339>.
- Farci, Manolo, and Marco Scarcelli, eds. 2022. *Media digitali, genere e sessualità*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Ging, Debbie. 2019. "Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere." *Men and masculinities* 22(4): 638-657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401>
- Hansen, Kim Toft, and Jacobsen, Louise Brix. 2025. "Unpacking gender issues through contemporary serial drama: High school pedagogical approaches to gender and media literacy." *Academic Quarter* 30. [to Kirsten: insert DOI-link to article in this issue].
- Haslop, Craig, Jessica Ringrose, Idil Cambazoglu, and Betsy Milne. 2024. "Mainstreaming the manosphere's misogyny through affective homosocial currencies: Exploring how teen boys navigate the Andrew Tate effect." *Social Media+ Society* 10(1): 20563051241228811.
- Heim, Julia. 2020. "Italian LGBTQ Representation in Transnational Television." *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 8(2): 189-203. https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms_00016_1
- Holtzman, Linda, and Leon Sharpe. 2014. *Media messages: What film, television, and popular music teach us about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation*. London: Routledge.
- Kassam, Ashifa. 2025. "Hungary passes constitutional amendment to ban LGBTQ+ gatherings." *The Guardian*. Accessed on May 16, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/14/hungary-poised-to-adopt-constitutional-amendment-to-ban-lgbtq-gatherings>
- Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. 2007. "Critical media literacy: Crucial policy choices for a twenty-first-century democracy." *Policy Futures in Education* 5(1): 59-69. <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2007.5.1.59>
- Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. 2019. *The critical media literacy guide: Engaging media and transforming education* (Vol. 2). Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004404533>

- McInroy, Lauren. B., and Shelley L. Craig. 2017. "Perspectives of LGBTQ emerging adults on the depiction and impact of LGBTQ media representation." *Journal of youth studies* 20(1): 32-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1184243>
- RESIST Project Team. 2024. The RESIST Project Report. National and Transnational Reports on the Formation of Anti-Gender Politics. Accessed May 13, 2025. <https://zenodo.org/records/10778419>.
- Spalletta, Marica. 2024. "GEMINI–Gender Equality through Media Investigations and New Training Insights." *Cinéma & Cie. Film and Media Studies Journal* 24(43): 167-169. <https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/27280>
- Wendling, Mike, and Kayla Epstein. 2025. "Trump makes 'two sexes' official and scraps DEI policies." BBC News Online. Accessed May 16, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czx84en1yp4o>.

Note

- 1 This publication has been published as part of the research project GEMINI (Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New training Insights). The project has received co-funding from the European Union under Grant Agreement No. 101088073.