



### 3. A Hard Ladder to Climb: Women and Power in Media Industries

Karen Ross<sup>9</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

When women media professionals attain very senior editorial positions, their achievement continues to make front page news, as it is such a rare occurrence. When Jill Abramson became the first woman editor at the New York Times in 2011, she broke a run of 160 years of male editors. When Katharine Viner did the same thing at the Guardian in 2015, she ended an even longer reign of exclusively male editing history. One of the world's most respected media institutions, the BBC, has never appointed a woman Director General since it began life under John Reith in 1922. Further, its publication of top earner salaries in the summer of 2017 revealed startling differences, in some cases as much as 300% between women and men doing the same job. These three examples demonstrate that even media organizations which enjoy a significant reputation for their content seem to ignore issues of gender equality in relation to who produces and edits such content. Media and journalism courses are dominated by women – students – trend which has been rising over the past two decades – who graduate and enter the industry in higher numbers than men (Reid, 2015). It seems odd, then, if we assume that women and men are equally competent when entering the industry, to find men advancing more quickly than women, earning a higher salary for work of equal value and routinely achieving very senior positions, leaving their female colleagues languishing in the less prestigious media jobs and rarely getting beyond junior management posts.

<sup>9</sup> Professor of Gender and Media, Director of Research at the School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University, U.K.

How can we account for this phenomenon and the problem of gender inequality which, we argue, lies at its heart?

## EVIDENCE

While we have had decades of research looking at the broader gender and media agenda, especially looking at issues of representation and consumption, there has been rather less research on working practices, careers and promotion within media industries themselves. One of the first efforts to document and analyse the specific issue of women and decision-making was commissioned by UNESCO and reported on as *Women and Media Decision-making: The Invisible Barriers* (1987). In her introduction to the book, Gallagher (1987, p.14) commented that 'men's attitudes, beliefs and even organizational procedures [showed a] surprising degree of consistency across the studies.' Successive studies over the following decades showed, more or less, the same kind of patterns (Gallagher, 1995; Robinson, 2005; Smith, 2015; North, 2016a; Jenkins & Finneman, 2018; de Vuyst & Raeymaeckers, 2019), finding that despite the numbers entering the industry, women advanced unevenly into decision-making roles compared to men, often doing better in larger organizations.

In 2011, the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) published findings from its study of women's employment in news companies (conducted and managed by Carolyn Byerly) covering 59 nations and 522 organizations, finding that men held 75% of both top management and board positions: women's presence was strongest in routine news gathering roles and weakest in technical roles (e.g. camera work, creative direction, etc.). In 2013, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) published the findings from a study of all the (then) EU Member States plus Croatia (28 countries) into gender and decision-making in 99 large-scale European media houses. That study, conducted and managed by Karen Ross and Claudia Padovani, found that, of 3376 senior posts they coded, 30% were held by women. When we looked a little closer, we found that 16% of CEOs were women, as were 21% of Chief Operating Officers, demonstrating that although a proportion of women are in positions of authority, they are much less likely to be in positions of power.

These studies are important, not only because of their findings, but because of their comparative scope and geographical reach. National studies are often dismissed because of the specificity of the socio-cultural context, but where cross-cultural studies show similar trends and patterns, they command more credibility for the suggestion that 'something' is happening which is structural, rather than situational, and requires explaining.

We suggest that there are any number of factors in play at any one time in any one media organization, but the point is that these factors are found universally, exerting more or less influence in different ways at different times. Factors such as routine gender-based discrimination, workplace harassment, non-existent or poorly implemented gender equality policies and informal promotion processes, serve to produce a working environment that does not support women or their career aspirations. While some studies have provided slightly more optimistic findings, the general trend shows little significant progress over time and even in studies where improvements have been noted, they have tended to occur in individual countries or individual media organizations (Djerf-Pierre, 2007), or specific media forms such as digital media (De-Miguel et. al., 2017). The most recent scholarship shows that progress for women into decision-making positions remains painfully slow, for all the reasons we have sketched out (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016; North, 2016b; Melki and Mallat, 2017).

So far, we have looked at academic studies, but other stakeholders have also been involved in exploring the issues which women face in developing their media careers, most notably professional associations such as the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the European Women's Lobby (EWL) and various working groups of the European Commission and Council of Europe (see, for example, European Commission, 2010; EWL, 2010). These studies produce the same conclusions as the rest.

Importantly, the structural and cultural barriers which prevent women's advancement into managerial and editorial positions also operate to prevent women's occupation of boardroom seats. In the EIGE (2013) study mentioned above,

the percentage of board members who were women was 27%, but women occupied few (22%) deputy positions. In October 2012, European Commissioner Viviane Reding formally proposed that the European Parliament should enact legislation to accelerate the number of women in the boardrooms of public companies. The proposal aimed to achieve a 40% presence of the 'under-represented' sex (for which we should read 'women') among non-executive directors of the top 5000 publicly-listed companies by 2020, and by 2018 for publicly-funded organizations. Her proposal was, more or less, immediately rejected by her fellow Commissioners on the grounds that it contravened the Commission's own regulations. The proposed legislation was subsequently reframed as an 'objective' and thus has no prospect of achieving the change required.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of studies discussed above have made recommendations and suggested actions which could be taken to address the long-standing problems, both structural and cultural, which impede women's efforts to pursue their career aspirations and fulfil their potential. It really does not make sense at any level, ethical or business-wise, to deliberately or unconsciously under-utilize the talents of 50% of the media workforce. One significant problem in working for change has been a lack of knowledge by media managers about the scale of the issue and potential solutions.

### **GOVERNMENTS SHOULD:**

- Require all organizations with 500+ employees to produce Gender Equality Plans on an annual basis with sanctions on organizations which: (a) do not comply and/or (b) which fail to meet their own targets for improving the gender balance of their workforce at all levels of the organization.

## **UN AGENCIES SHOULD:**

- Support the development of prizes for excellent practice in gender equality for different media categories, similar to the Prix Iris or Pulitzer.

## **MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD:**

- Undertake a Gender Audit of the workforce to identify women and men's presence at all levels of an organization.
- Where there is an under-representation of women or men at a particular level, review recruitment and promotion policies to ensure they are fair and transparent. The audit should be undertaken on a regular basis to identify patterns and trends and to enable progress to be measured year-on-year.
- The findings from such an audit should be analysed and interpreted and a plan of action developed to monitor and act upon persistent gender imbalances. Such audits could be required as part of continuing funding arrangements for organizations which are wholly or partly publicly or government funded.
- Organize a staff survey on equality and diversity to better understand workplace culture and to act on the findings if they suggest that staff believe that gender-based, or any other forms of discrimination, are taking place.
- Ensure that there are policies in place for reporting discrimination, and enforce clear sanctions where behaviour of staff is found to be in breach of such policies.
- Take positive action to redress gender imbalances at senior levels by appointing the woman when deciding between a female and male candidate of equal merit. Members of shortlisting, recruitment and promotion panels should participate in equality awareness training to ensure that they are not introducing unconscious bias into their decision-making processes.

- Where algorithms are used in recruitment processes, these should be investigated for gender bias and revised (or even abandoned) if such biases are seen to be operating.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS**

### **(MEDIA UNIONS AND WOMEN FOCUSED NGOS) SHOULD:**

- Develop partnerships at global, regional and national level, to recommend and assess the implementation of women-friendly working practices developed by media organizations.
- Share best practice between each other and liaise with the academic research community to disseminate good practice.

### **ACADEMIC RESEARCH COMMUNITY SHOULD:**

- Promote further and larger-scale research projects to measure women's inclusion in decision-making positions in both large and small organizations, including the digital media sector, to identify patterns, as well as good practices, where they exist.
- Devise action and dissemination projects, including online repositories, which share research findings and good practices amongst the wider practitioner and stakeholder community.

## **RESOURCES AND GOOD PRACTICE**

### **DATABASES**

- A collection of good practices in relation to women, decision-making and power is currently being curated as part of an EU-funded project: *Advancing Gender Equality in Media Industries* (AGEMI),<sup>10</sup> coordinated by Karen Ross (University of

Newcastle, UK) and Claudia Padovani (University of Padova, Italy) and will be online in late 2018. For further information, [contact: agemi.eu@gmail.com](mailto:agemi.eu@gmail.com)

- European Institute for Gender Equality<sup>11</sup> – a number of online (and downloadable) resources around gender and media.

## **CAMPAIGNS AND INITIATIVES PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY**

- Step it Up for Gender Equality.<sup>12</sup>
- End News Media Sexism.<sup>13</sup>
- The Women’s Room<sup>14</sup> (UK) and SheSource<sup>15</sup> (US) are databases of women experts established as a resource for journalists to encourage more women’s voices in the media.

## **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT WOMEN – TRAINING AND NETWORKING**

- International Association for Women in Radio and Television.<sup>16</sup>
- Alliance for Women in Media<sup>17</sup> (US).
- Women in Film and Television<sup>18</sup> (UK).
- International Women’s Media Foundation.<sup>19</sup>
- Women in News.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Co-funded by the “Rights, Equality and Citizenship/Justice” programme of the European Union

<sup>11</sup> <http://eige.europa.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/step-it-up>

<sup>13</sup> <http://whomakesthenews.org/articles/wacc-launches-campaign-end-news-media-sexism-by-2020>

<sup>14</sup> <http://thewomensroom.org.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/shesource/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.iawrt.org/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://allwomeninmedia.org/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://wftv.org.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.iwmf.org/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://womeninnews.org>



## **MEDIA PRIZES PROMOTING GENDER CONTENT AND WOMEN MEDIA PROFESSIONALS**

- Alliance for Women in Media – the *Gracie Awards*.
- IWMF – *Courage in Journalism Awards*.
- Alliance of Women Film Journalists<sup>21</sup> - EDA Awards recognize women filmmakers and photojournalists.
- Women in News WAN-IFRA Editorial Leadership Award.<sup>22</sup>

### **TEXT BASED RESOURCES**

- Directorate General for Internal Policies Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Women's Rights and Gender Equality. *Gender Equality in the Media Sector*. European Union.  
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses>
- Edström, M. and Mølster, R. (2014) *Making Change- Nordic Examples of Working Towards Gender Equality in the Media*. Nordicom.
- European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2013) *Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States*.  
<http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/eige-publications/advancing-gender-equality-decision-making-media-organisations-report>

<sup>21</sup> <http://awfj.org/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.wan-ifra.org/press-releases/2018/03/13/wan-ifra-women-in-news-editorial-leadership-award-call-for-nominations>

- World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (2016) *WINning Strategies: Creating Stronger Media Organizations by Increasing Gender Diversity*. WAN/IFRA. [http://www.wan-ifra.org/sites/default/files/field\\_media\\_image\\_file\\_attach/WAN-IFRA\\_WINning\\_Strategies.pdf](http://www.wan-ifra.org/sites/default/files/field_media_image_file_attach/WAN-IFRA_WINning_Strategies.pdf)
- UNESCO Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media (2012) <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/gender-sensitive-indicators-for-media-framework-of-indicators-to-gauge-gender-sensitivity-in-media-operations-and-content/>

## REFERENCES

Byerly, C. M. (ed) 2013. *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Journalism*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

De Vuyst, Sara and Raeymaeckers, Karin (2019) 'Gender as a multi-layered issue in journalism: a multi-method approach to studying barriers sustaining gender inequality in Belgian newsrooms.' *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(1): 23-38.

De-Miguel, Roberto; Hanitzsch, Thomas; Parratt, Sonia; Berganza, Rosa. 2017. 'Women journalists in Spain: An analysis of the sociodemographic features of the gender gap.' *El profesional de la información*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp 497-506.

Djerf-Pierre M. 2007. The gender of journalism: the structure and logic of the field in the twentieth century. *Nordicom Review*, Jubilee Issue, pp 81-104.

European Commission. 2010. *More women in senior positions – key to economic stability and growth*. Luxembourg, EU.

European Institute for Gender Equality. 2013. *Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States: Women and the Media – Advancing gender equality in decision-making in media organizations*. Luxembourg, Office of the European Union.

European Women's Lobby. 2010. *From Beijing to Brussels: An Unfinished Story*. <http://www.womenlobby.org/spip.php?article124&lang=en>

Gallagher, M. 1995. *An unfinished story: gender patterns in media employment*. Paris: UNESCO.

International Women's Media Foundation. 2011. *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media*. Washington, DC: IWMF.  
<http://www.iwmf.org>

Löfgren Nilsson, M. and Örnebring, H. 2016. Journalism Under Threat. *Journalism Practice*, Vol.10, No. 7, pp. 880-890.

Jenkins, Joy and Finneman, Teri (2018) Gender trouble in the workplace: applying Judith Butler's theory of performativity to news organizations.' *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(2): 157-172.

Melki, J. P. and Mallat, S. E. 2016. Block her entry, keep her down and push her out. *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 57-79.

North, Louise 2016a. 'The gender of "soft" and "hard" news.' *Journalism Studies*, 17(3): 356-373.

North, L. 2016b. Damaging and daunting: female journalists' experiences of sexual harassment in the newsroom. *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 495-510.

Reid, A. 2015. *Women outnumber men on UK journalism degrees*.  
<https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/women-outnumber-men-on-uk-journalism-degrees/s2/a563890/>

Smith, Vivian (2015) *Outsiders still: why women journalists love and leave their newspaper careers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

UNESCO. 1987. *Women in media decision-making: The invisible barriers*. Paris: UNESCO.