

Union survey reveals widespread discrimination against woman journalists



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National Unions of Journalists' questionnaire to women journalists

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In brief

Britain's National Union of Journalists has carried out two questionnaire surveys of its women members, to find out their experiences and problems at work. Forty per cent of the union's 30,000 members are women, and research repeatedly shows that women get a bad deal in Britain's media. Though women media professionals tend to be highly qualified, they also tend to be worse paid. Their work tends not to achieve the same prominence, and they are generally outnumbered three to one when it comes to high-profile news reporting, opinion pieces or expert interviews.

The most recent survey, carried out in 2014, shows many women are paid a good deal less than similarly qualified male counterparts – in some case as much as €12,500 a year less. Women still face a shockingly high level of sexual harassment, and are often judged by higher standards when it comes to their personal appearance. Those with childcare responsibilities tend to be overlooked for assignments deemed to be demanding, while men with children are not treated in this way. Half of the women who completed the survey had caring responsibilities, and of these four-fifths said that these sometimes conflicted with their working hours.

The NUJ made use of these results in the evidence it submitted to the House of Lords Communications Committee inquiry on women in news and current affairs broadcasting in September 2014. It recommends that the industry regulator Ofcom should make use of its power to require broadcasters to conduct a regular diversity audit and publish the results. However Ofcom prefers to take a voluntary approach.

Women writers outnumbered three to one

The British media suffers from significant and persistent gender gaps. A study conducted in 2011[1] counted the number of male and female writers on seven national newspapers as well as the number of reporters on Britain's staple morning news and current affairs radio programme (the *Today Programme*). It found that the average share of female reporters was less than a quarter (22.6%). The study also showed that all national papers had large gender gaps in their byline averages, with the politically contrasting *Daily Mail* and *Guardian* newspapers recording the highest number of women writers, though this was still only around 30%. The latest research done in the UK by Creative Skillset[2] shows that more women than men enter the TV industry in their 20s; the women are better qualified academically, work longer hours, do more in-service courses – yet they earn on average £6,700 (€8,000) a year less than men in equivalent jobs. They also have a 50% chance of being out of the industry by age of 35. Thus, there is a problem of ageism in the industry – women tend not to get to the very top levels of management because half of them have left the industry by the time they are 35.

Opinion sections in newspapers can shape a society's opinions and therefore are an important measure of women's voices in society. However, this is also a male-dominated sector. According to recent research by the *Guardian* on articles written between July 2011 and June 2012 in three national newspapers, women write only around a quarter (26%) of opinion pieces in UK newspapers (*Guardian*, 7 September 2012).

Women's poor representation in the media in the UK has led to the launch of campaigns to change things. In February 2012, *Broadcast Magazine* launched an 'Expert Women' campaign to help increase the number of female experts interviewed on television. Though the private sector broadcasters Channel 4 and BSkyB, pledged their support, the BBC (in the public sector) is not supporting the campaign despite admitting that it does not have enough women in news and current affairs roles (*Telegraph*, 5 March 2012).

Although some progress towards equality has been made in decision-making, this is more apparent in middle management than at the top levels of the media industry. For instance, in television, there is a significant lack of female directors, scriptwriters, camera and sound operators and women in technical roles – and there are too few women on the boards of broadcasting companies.

Reaching out to women journalists

Britain's National Union of Journalists has 30,000 members, 40% of whom are women. It has a gender mainstreaming strategy which includes organising conferences, workshops and training. It also has an Equality Council, which seeks to promote equality across the union in areas such as equal pay, work-life balance and childcare/dependent care. The council monitors the progress of legislation, campaigns for improvements and promotes equality within the organisation.

As part of this strategy, it surveyed its women members to identify what experiences and problems they have had at work – for instance to assess whether they have been steered in a particular direction because of their gender, whether their copy tends to appear in women's or feature pages rather than in hard news sections, and whether they have experienced discrimination, harassment or bullying. On that basis, the NUJ wants to find out its female members' opinions on how the union should address these problems, so that it can organise to tackle them collectively.

The first NUJ survey was carried out in 2005-6, and succeeded in making direct contact with women journalists who could not attend NUJ meetings because of childcare and household commitments. It collected data that helped it to understand patterns, themes and priorities for action, and it identified cases of discrimination, harassment and bullying against female members. It organised a women's conference NUJ members to contextualise and discuss the survey results.

The union initiated the survey at its own expense, and found it to be an efficient tool to use, as it used very few resources other than staff time – the NUJ is a very small organisation, and its research department closed a few years ago due to a lack of funding. The effort was complemented by the organisation of an NUJ women’s conference on the topic, which was planned by the staff and took place in the union’s own building.

2014 survey in broadcasting

In 2014 the NUJ conducted another survey, this time targeted at its members working in television and radio. It received 227 responses, which show, according to the NUJ’s equality officer Lena Calvert, that “in many ways broadcasting has become an easier environment for women to work in... but there is still a worryingly high level of sexist behaviour in newsrooms and studios.”

One fact that stands out is that many women are paid a good deal less than similarly qualified male counterparts – in some case as much as €12,500 a year less. Women still face a shockingly high level of sexual harassment, and are often judged by higher standards when it comes to their personal appearance. Those with childcare responsibilities tend to be overlooked for assignments deemed to be demanding, while men with children are not treated in this way. Half of the women who completed the survey had caring responsibilities, and of these four-fifths said that these sometimes conflicted with their working hours.

The NUJ made use of these results in the evidence it submitted to the House of Lords Communications Committee inquiry on women in news and current affairs broadcasting in September 2014.[3] It pointed out that broadcasting is seen as a glamorous career in which competition for jobs is high, and that managers exploit this: while in the media and arts in general 56% of workers had faced bullying, harassment or discrimination, in television this figure was 70% and in radio 73%. The NUJ believes that the industry regulator Ofcom should make use of its power to require broadcasters to conduct a regular diversity audit and publish the results. However Ofcom prefers to take a voluntary approach.

Potential for further use

The surveys have helped to make equality a more visible issue within the union and to bring its female members together to identify and talk about issues at work. However their impact has not been formally evaluated. The union cannot measure whether they have resulted in permanent structural changes. In any case it has no power to change the situation as it has no collective way to liaise with management about whether women are being given more access to decision-making roles.

The NUJ plans to explore the statistics and use them to formulate a strategy, and in particular the union has decided to assess every area of its own organisation to see whether women are fairly represented at all levels. A women's network or online forum may be launched. There is further potential to capitalise on the results: for instance they could be used to compile a good practice guidebook and as a resource in training courses for NUJ members. A simplified version of the questionnaire could be posted on the website.

The lessons learned from the process are that commitment on the part of the journalism unions is essential to identify the problems their female members face within media organisations. In the short term it is difficult to see changes resulting from this type of initiative, but long-term impacts should be important and could be translated into a better negotiating process between the union and the employers.

Questionnaires to explore the experiences of female journalists and the problems they face in the media industry could be transferable for use by other similar organisations in different countries.

[1] Seghi & Cochrane (2011), Cochrane, K. (2011)

[2] Creative Skillset (2011)

[3] <http://www.parliament.uk/women-in-news>

Contacts/Further Information

Contacts

Sarah Kavanagh, Senior Campaigns and Communications Officer

National Union of Journalists

Headland House
308 Grays Inn Road
London
WC1X 8DP
UK

+44 20 7843 6381

sarahk@nuj.org.uk

Further information

[NUJ 2014 survey results](#)



[WiN – Women in the NUJ](#)



[Sedghi, A. & Cochrane, K. \(2011\) 'Women's representation in media: who's running the show?', Guardian, 6 Dec 2011](#)



[Cochrane, K. \(2011\) 'Why is British public life dominated by men?', Guardian, 4 Dec 2011](#)



[Holehouse, M \(2012\) 'BBC refuses to sign pledge to get more women on screen', Telegraph, 5 Mar 2012](#)



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