

Two lessons as to women's future engagement with their rightful places in news organisations (and the profession they enable) emerge from the feminist research to date. The first is that women enjoy greater progress in the news profession in general when there are national laws in place that provide the statutory basis for gender equality and structural supports for the raising of children. The Nordic nations are particularly strong examples of this, as we have seen. Thus, both professional associations and feminist popular movements should continue to advocate for these state-level policies. The second lesson, though less obvious, is that women should enter media policymaking in a more determined way to advocate for their own interests. Gallagher (2011) and Byerly (2014) are among those who have commented on feminists' slowness to address macro-level issues that shape the structure of media industries and their operations. In the broader political economy of neoliberalism that has emerged since the 1970s, men's power has been consolidated in both the financial and political realms, serving to further marginalise women. If women are to gain the voice they seek through journalistic practice, the challenge is for them – for us – to seek organised ways to more actively engage the policies that allow this consolidation.

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Women in decision-making structures in media

Karen Ross

Introduction

As with so many other aspects of social, cultural and economic life in the 21st century, women's occupation of decision-making positions in media industries is low relative to their proportion in the sector's labour force. Despite increasing numbers of women graduating from professional and vocational programmes and entering the industry, most research suggests that they get stuck at middle management and rarely achieve the really top jobs. Given the dominance of US scholarship in this field, the research on which this short paper is based aimed to explore women's penetration of top level management across a range of large media organisations, both public sector and privately-owned in the EU and Croatia. The work was funded by the European Institute for Gender Equality and the idea for it arose from the decision of the Council of the European Union's Presidency in the first half of 2013 (Ireland) to prioritise Area J of the Beijing Platform for Action. Area J has two aspects, one relating to the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through media and new communication technologies, and the other to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. Whilst the project addressed both these elements, this paper is focused exclusively on the first element¹.

Women in decision-making in media organisations: policy context

The small number of women occupying senior positions in media organisations has been a cause for concern for several decades. Professional bodies such as the International (and European) Federation of Journalists and Women In Journalism, NGOs such as the European Women's Lobby and the various Working Groups of the European Commission and the Council of Europe have undertaken a number of studies over the past few years to explore this issue and have suggested a range of practical measures to improve and enhance women's career opportunities within the media sector². Actions to support the recruitment and promotion of more women into senior roles within the media industry have been complemented by similar efforts to enable more women to take their seats around the boardroom table. The most recent initiative came in November 2012, when the European Commission formally proposed legislation to accelerate the number of women in the boardroom. The proposed Directive set out the objective of a 40% presence of the under-represented sex among non-executive directors of publicly-listed companies by 2020, and by 2018 for publicly-funded organisations.

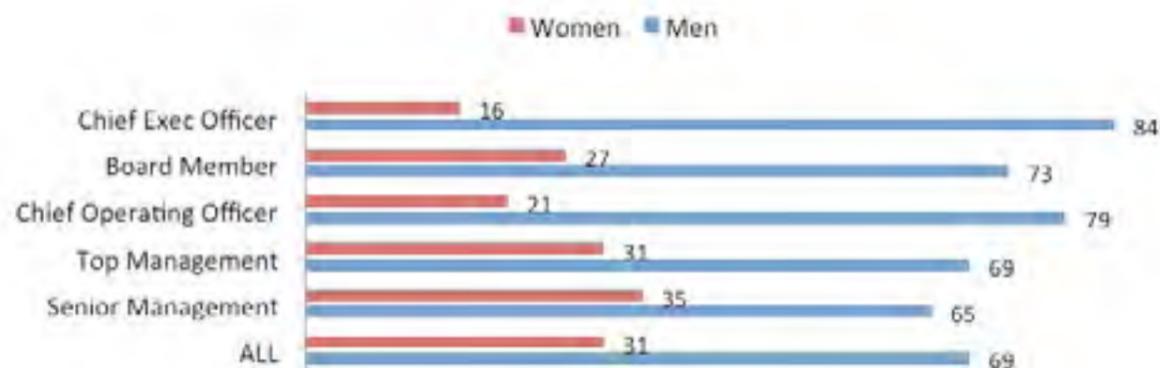
Research design and methods

The research aimed to explore the extent to which women are employed in decision-making positions in large-scale media organisations across Europe, including on boards, how senior women actually experience their media workplace and what kinds of gender-equality and/or women-focused policies are in place in those organisations. Once the resulting data had been analysed, the project intended to develop a set of indicators which would be adopted by the Council of the European Commission – see later. A total of 99 organisations were researched across the European Union Member States and Croatia, comprising 39³ public sector organisations, 56 privately-funded companies and 4 companies with mixed-funding. The criteria for selecting the latter included size of organisation (in terms of workforce), popularity of service/product (for example, audience ratings for TV and radio; circulation for newspapers), and importance (for example, in terms of opinion-forming). In most countries, decisions had to be made using several criteria, for example, when a newspaper had a high circulation but a small workforce, or where several TV stations all claimed to be the 'most popular' but where verifiable data on ratings was impossible to obtain. Within the sample for any one country, the public service broadcaster was always included and then up to three private organisations, depending on media density. In most countries, the private media selected comprised at least one newspaper and at least one TV station: radio stations were included in countries where radio was particularly popular, or in high media density countries, or where the public service broadcaster split TV and radio into two separate operational structures.

Findings

The data collected in this study illustrate a number of key themes which impact and influence the extent to which the BPfA hopes for increasing the number of women in decision-making positions in media industries have been or can be achieved. Whilst this is a small-scale survey with 99 organisations in the sample, they comprise all the public service broadcasters (39 separate organisations) in EU-27+HR: the 56 private organisations constitute some of the major European media corporations, most of which have international parent companies. The four organisations with mixed funding (public and private) are also major media players. So although no claims are being made about the representativeness of the sample (at least in terms of the private media sector), the findings are nonetheless important as they are indicative of the EU media sector in general terms and give confidence to the robustness of the indicators which draw on the results. The most disturbing finding, as illustrated in the Figure below, is the low number of women who occupy senior decision-making positions or have seats on boards: 1,037 positions out of a total 3,376 counted (30%) were held by women.

Figure: Percentage of women and men in decision-making positions and on boards in 99 major media organisations across EU27 + Croatia



Women occupy around one-third of all positions we counted in public service broadcasting organisations and around one-quarter of positions in the private sector: public service broadcasting sector organisations and those with mixed funding were much more likely to appoint women into senior roles (59%) than private organisations (41%). The data collected shows that in some countries, women are present in relatively high numbers at both strategic and operational levels in relation to the EU-27 average. There could be any number of reasons for these counter-trends – both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. One ‘positive’ reason could be because organisations have proactively worked to promote opportunities for women through both equality codes and positive action strategies but also by making recruitment, selection and promotion processes entirely transparent and based on merit and competence rather than internal networks and nepotism. One less positive reason could be the operation of what has been described as the velvet ghetto, that the gradual incursion of women into traditionally male professions such as journalism has the effect of reducing the status of those professions and thus the salaries offered⁴.

‘If the selection [of candidates] is based almost exclusively on a political relation, women are generally disadvantaged as far as top positions are concerned; when selection is based on résumés and the quality of work, the issue changes completely.’

(Maria, public service broadcaster)

As far as gender equality plans, diversity policies and codes are concerned, just under half the organisations in the survey have some kind of equality policy which at least mentions gender, although less than one in five organisations have a policy which is explicitly focused on gender. A similar number have formal mechanisms in place to monitor their gender and/or equality policies and nine organisations have an Equality or Diversity Department. In terms of practical measures, the most frequently mentioned measure

related to sexual harassment and fewer than 25% of organisations mentioned this, followed by a dignity at work policy (19%) and a maternity leave policy (17%). Only six organisations support structured training programmes for women, although slightly more (nine per cent) provide equality awareness training for staff. In terms of sectoral differences, public service broadcasters were significantly more likely to have developed formal gender and equality structures than the private sector organisations.

Women in decision-making in major media organisations – three indicators

The indicators set out below measure the involvement of women (and men) in the decision-making structures of major media organisations across the EU Member States and Croatia, as well as the inclusion of women on the boards of those organisations and the existence of codes and measures aimed at encouraging women’s career development.

Indicator 1

This indicator tracks the proportion of women and men in executive decision-making posts across a range of management and operational functions, including: Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer (e.g. Director-General, Editor-in-Chief), Top and Senior Level operational management.

Indicator 2

This indicator provides information on the proportion of women and men on the important decision-making boards which govern media organisations, including the most senior external oversight committees (either of the organisation or its parent company), responsible for the strategic direction of each media organisation, for example the Board of Governors or the Board of Trustees.

Indicator 3

This indicator is concerned with the existence of policies, including those relating to: gender equality, equal opportunities/diversity; sexual harassment or dignity at work; parental leave; mechanisms for implementing and monitoring gender equality such as committees and officers; and practical measures aimed at supporting women’s career development such as leadership/management training for women; equality awareness training for staff; flexible working arrangements.

Conclusions

Women continue to be under-represented in the decision-making structures of major media organisations, both at operational levels as senior managers and at strategic levels, as CEOs and board members. Importantly, the results of this study suggest that there is no clear link between the existence of gender or diversity or equality policies in organisations and high numbers of women in decision-making positions: sometimes the two things went together and sometimes not. This is largely because, unless policies are actively monitored, workforce analyses undertaken and action plans developed, then policies remain at the level of paper but not of practice. The testimonies of many of the senior women who were interviewed made clear that the cultural context, at different levels of an organisation, has a significant impact on women’s career prospects. In other words, a supportive working environment which recognises the value of women’s contribution and which acknowledges their different caring and family responsibilities is as important as the existence of formal equality policies. However, the most obvious manifestation of an organisation’s commitment to gender equality is the development of a formal equality policy framework which includes mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and action. This is important both in structural terms but also to provide a clear signal to all employees that equality issues are taken seriously. This is part of the cultural context of any organisation, which is crucial in determining both its operational ethos but also, as importantly, what come to be seen as its behavioural norms.

‘If you are surrounded by men, you tend to take their standards, rules and agendas for granted. And believe me, they would be different in mixed teams.’ (Katharina, private newspaper) ‘If a woman is really determined to cross the border into ‘male’ areas... she must adjust at least partly to the rules of the “men’s club.”

(Erzebet, private newspaper)

We are very pleased that that the Council of the European Union adopted the indicators we developed in June 2013⁵ although what will happen next is hard to predict. Women are mostly overlooked for promotion for reasons other than their competence, including their gender (discrimination on grounds of sex) and their (in)flexibility to take on new opportunities because of their domestic and/or family responsibilities (discrimination on grounds of family or caring role). Sometimes women do choose to prioritise family over career but this is often because workplace cultures make it impossible to achieve a work-life balance which benefits both the individual and the employer. Much of the literature on gender and media makes clear, as did the senior women media professionals interviewed for this study, that the cultural context in which women (and men) work is both part of the problem but could also be a large part of the solution, so that encouraging senior managers to take gender equality seriously is good for employees and, as recent studies on boardroom performance show, good for business.⁶

1 The data presented here were collected in 2012/2013 as part of the Study on Area J of the Beijing Platform for Action: Women and the Media in the European Union carried out for the European Institute for Gender Equality under contract EIGE/2012/OPER/07. The views presented here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the European Institute for Gender Equality.

2 See for example, EFJ, IFJ, EWL; European Commission Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2010. Opinion on “Breaking gender stereotypes in the media”, Brussels: European Commission.; The Council of Europe’s latest report, Steering Committee for Equality between Women and Men, 2011. Women and Journalists First. Geneva: CDEG.

3 There are 39 public sector organisations here because some countries disaggregate TV from radio and also because Belgium has two public sector organisations who broadcast in French and Flemish respectively.

4 See Gorpe, S., Petersone, B. and Walker, G., 2012. Feminisation of the Public Relations/Communications Profession in Europe: Initial Findings: Where Are Women in Public Relations Academia and in the Professional World?. EUPRERA conference, Istanbul, Turkey September 2012.

5 See Council of the European Union Conclusions of 20-21 June 2013 on Advancing Women’s Roles in Decision-making in the Media [online] Available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/137546.pdf>.

6 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011. Women on Boards. London: BiS.; Committee for Economic Development, 2012. Fulfilling the Promise: How More Women on Corporate Boards Would Make America and American Companies More Competitive. Washington DC: CED.; McKinsey & Company, 2012. Women Matter 2012: Making the Breakthrough, McKinsey & Co. Available at: <http://www.mckinsey.com/client_service/organization/latest_thinking/women_matter> [Accessed 15 November 2012]

Gender and newsroom cultures

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Introduction

The theme of this chapter, gender and newsroom cultures, represents a field of inquiry that has been the topic of academic interrogation for several decades. Specific references to ‘gender,’ however, only started to occur in the 1980s. Prior to that, descriptions of newsroom practices mostly referred to ‘men’ or did not pay any attention to the sex and gender of newsroom workers at all.

During this time academic interests shifted from a mainly descriptive level – taking stock of women’s portrayal in media (through a stream of content analyses) and recording women’s newsroom presence (through a steady series of employment figures) – to a more analytical level of trying to understand the newsroom dynamics and identifying strategies for change. This process is still ongoing but seems to face the same challenges that were around decades ago: ‘Disappointingly, despite women’s greater presence in newsrooms, the landscape of news has changed very little over the past decade’ (Ross and Carter, 2011, p. 1161). Women ‘still tend to lag behind in terms of career progression and salary [...] there are still very few women in senior positions within news organizations’ (Ross and Carter, 2011, p. 1161).

Time to step back and raise some questions: What evidence have we collected? How have we used it? What assumptions have we been making? Which blinkers have we perhaps worn? Has our terminology been clear? Part of the answers to these questions can be found by analysing the major debates and research – which is what I will try to do in the first part of this chapter.

This chapter starts with a description of the conceptual development of studies of newsroom practices over the last 60 years as they have been demonstrated in academic publications; it excludes personal testimonies by early female pioneers. It will try to identify the assumptions, sometimes implicit, that underlie the concepts researchers have worked with.

My concluding remarks will try to spot where the challenges ahead of us lie, and whether region-specific social, cultural and political contexts may present us with such different realities and concerns that priority setting for newsrooms and gender cannot be generalised.

‘Gender-neutral’ newsrooms

When studies on newsrooms started to be published with some regularity, in the early 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the possible differences between men and women in newsroom production were not recognised as issues deserving any attention – if they were noticed at all. Most research was focused on individual behaviour of newsroom workers and the interpersonal or group dynamics between them, without disaggregating data with regards to sex. White’s (1950) classic gatekeepers’ study on ‘Mr. Gates’, for instance, identified the influence of personal and idiosyncratic biases in news selection, but it took more than 40 years before the female equivalent of the study – Ms. Gates – was conducted (Bleske, 1991). When Breed (1955) described how social control in the newsroom could work as a possible force in conforming to corporate norms, there was no recognition of the fact that, compared to men, pressures on women would most likely have been of a different nature and quality. Gieber’s (1956) study on decision-making in news selection was based on interviewing 16 individual ‘desk men’ without mentioning anywhere that this one-sided sample composition may have been a limitation. Newsroom workers and professionals were treated as ‘sex neutral’ while ‘gender’ had yet to emerge in media studies – or in any other discipline for that matter – as a useful concept.

Although in the late 1950s and 1960s analyses of newsroom practices and media organisations in the USA and Europe began to include issues of power and control as influential factors (Pool and Schulman, 1959; Flegel and Chaffee, 1971), the idea that male and female experiences of power and control may be vastly different had not entered the discussion. A search for ‘women and news’ in JSTOR, EBSCOHOST: Academic Search Complete, EBSCOHOST: MasterFILE Premier, SagePub for the 1960-1970 period hardly leads to any substantial publication.