



Survey Report: Obstacles to Women Journalists in Scotland

Women In Journalism Scotland (WIJS) were kind enough to allow me to add a question to their 2020 survey. Respondents were asked: 'What would you say the greatest challenge(s) are to being a woman in journalism in 2020?' We received 80 responses, and I undertook some broad-brush thematic analysis to identify common issues.

It is key to hear from women working on the front line of news journalism in Scotland, and although these respondents were from print, digital, and broadcasting media spheres, similar issues may be found across other media industries in the country, as detailed in the European Parliament [Gender Equality in the Media](#) report and indeed the GEMS Commissioned Research found alongside this paper entitled, 'I just didn't see anyone like me': Women's experiences in Scottish media, creative and cultural industries.

The pandemic and its impact on working lives, home lives, childcare and public trust in the media was emphasised by respondents: "equality being one of the first things to regress as a result of the stresses of 2020."

Other major events in 2020 were also mentioned in the context of revealing systemic imbalances in society and institutions: "Despite structural inequalities being made visible by the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement and climate crisis, journalists and readers alike seem unwilling to confront and address these concerns in ways which can bring about meaningful change for all."

The responses highlighted seven main challenges to being a woman journalist: the job market, industry norms, internal industry policies, the masculinist work culture, abuse, childcare/domestic labour, and mental health. These are outlined below with relevant anonymous excerpts from survey responses.

1. The Job Market

One of the strongest themes to arise was the difficulty of getting – and keeping – jobs. 19 of the 80 respondents mentioned this:

- "Finding and securing reasonable employment."
- "Availability of well-paid consistent work."
- "Lack of opportunity at all levels to find permanent paid positions."
- "Getting your foot in the door in the first place. Getting a permanent job."

Freelancers found this particularly hard:

- "Good jobs are scarce. Retired journalists soak up the freelance crumbs."
- "As a freelancer, the biggest challenge is finding work."

- “Limited opportunities for salaried jobs, while many freelance jobs don’t pay commensurately with the amount of time that goes into the work.”

Getting a job is more difficult for women of colour:

- “Lack of opportunities for diverse women in broadcasting.”

Even those with jobs talked of the uncertainty of keeping them:

- “Lack of job security.”
- “Getting work, keeping your job.”
- “Staying in work.”

The pandemic was, unsurprisingly, a critical factor in job retention:

- “Lack of certainty.”
- “Covid destroying jobs.”
- “Just holding on to your job.”
- “I lost my staff job due to the pandemic and women are disproportionately affected. The government has spoken about creating new job opportunities or providing retraining to do something else, but what I want to see is women being able to KEEP their industry jobs in the first place so there’s less need to funnel money into new opportunities; rather give money to businesses so they can keep women in their roles instead of having to make them redundant.”

The job market itself was seen as a factor – and as disproportionately affecting women working in the sector:

- “Worsening jobs market impacting women more.”
- “Lack of jobs.”
- “Getting commissions when budgets are slashed.”
- “Fewer paid opportunities.”
- “The number of job losses is worrying, especially cuts to part-time positions which are predominantly held by women.”

Another worrying comment referenced unequal recruitment practices:

- “Jobs not being fairly advertised - male colleagues getting roles without anyone else being made aware they are available.”

2. Industry Norms

There were 15 or so comments on industry-related practices which are affecting women’s ability to do their job. Some are not gender-specific, and others reveal the more complex and indirect effects of media industry norms on women:

- “If you want to do anything beyond breaking news or clickbait, it’s very hard these days.”
- “In a year where only a couple of major issues have dominated the agenda (Covid and American election), it’s been much more challenging to bring other key stories to public attention.”

- “The same as facing anyone in journalism, falling sales leading to fewer jobs/commissions and younger (less expensive reporters) being favoured over those with experience.”
- “The BBC and the Tory Government.”

Again, the impact of the pandemic was evident here, and while some effects were gender-neutral, others were clearly affecting women more than their male colleagues:

- “Covid - killing print titles, collapsing ad spend.”
- “Lack of face-to-face networking, impacts storytelling and types of stories can work on.”
- “The job is certainly more challenging but expectations re: workload and deadlines have remained the same with no extra compensation, which is frustrating.”
- “Having to take time off to care for my children during lockdown impacted on how I was viewed in the newsroom. Instead of doing news when I came back I was pushed into features and those who had not taken time off were given bigger stories.”
- “Working from home seems to come with the expectation that people will work longer hours as they are no longer commuting.”

Specifically, the cuts to budgets and financing of news journalism arose more than once:

- “Honestly, probably the slump in ad revenue, which hadn't really recovered since 2008. Until the industry solves the problem of how to monetise effectively I don't think any journalists' jobs are truly secure.”
- “Dwindling budgets.”
- “Amount of work and responsibility rising while the resourcing to do it is plummeting.”

This can affect women more than men, both in terms of job availability, as seen above, or in terms of the choice of jobs available that pay quickly:

- “Articles paid by words regardless of whether it's based on a press release or an in-depth investigation. In a way this can make it more appealing to go for easier stories simply because you will be paid quicker because the article will be ready to be published quicker.”

3. Internal Industry Policies

Another key area that respondents felt was challenging was sets of policies which disadvantaged them in the workplace, particularly as they are more likely to be freelance or part-time workers:

- “Childcare, maternity, part-time working are all still huge issues. Countless examples of downsizing newsrooms where women part-time workers are adversely hit.”

Maternity Pay/Leave

- “A lack of decent maternity pay to allow for work/life balance.”
- “Maternity leaves are an insult.”

Flexibility

- “Lack of flexible roles.”
- “Set up in a way that is inflexible.”
- “Working hours are not conducive to those who may have childcare responsibilities.”

- “The workload.”

Career Progression

- “Sadly, it is still difficult to progress your career as a female within journalism. When I started out there were hardly any women involved, it became better over the years but sadly we are back at almost square one. I'm still the only female in conferences more often than not.”
- “Career development and progression when you are a part-time worker.”
- “Lack of opportunities for promotion/being passed over.”
- “For those still climbing the ladder it feels even more impossible to move upwards, particularly when stuck at home means you're even more out of the loop.”

Equal Pay

Equal Pay was mentioned nine times:

- “Lack of equal pay.”
- “Equal pay. All my male colleagues getting paid more at BBC.”
- “Equal pay. Equal opportunities.”
- “Pay parity is one - I have a relatively senior role but, because my professional peers are all men almost twice my age, I don't know what my salary is in relation to others.”

Low pay in more general terms was also signalled as problematic:

- “Insufficient income to support the family.”
- “Low pay compared to other professions.”
- “Low pay and long hours.”

There was little hope that these issues would change, and the lottery of having a ‘supportive employer’ was noted by one respondent, demonstrating that the policies themselves are either inconsistent or insufficient to protect women in the workplace if the effect can be changed significantly by their manager.

4. Masculinist Work Culture

22 respondents remarked on various aspects of sexism in the workplace, grouped here under Sexist Culture, Sexist Stereotypes and Sexist Leadership.

Sexist Culture

There being a timeless quality to the sphere of journalism came through clearly, with archaic, old-fashioned values that do not seem to shift with society:

- “Having to deal with the same nonsense I was dealing with in 1995.”
- “The same as 2019, 2018... Men are still being treated better than we are.”
- “I think we still work in an industry that is dominated by men.”

Behaviours from male colleagues contribute to an unequal culture:

- “Attitudes from older male colleagues.”
- “Being treated and viewed equally.”

- “Sexism still existing in the workplace and some male interviewees being inappropriate.”

The style of some aspects of journalism – particularly news journalism – remains grounded in masculinist norms of competition and dominance. To be clear, women are as capable as men in engaging with such journalistic norms, but more often than not have been socialised to communicate differently.

- “Loud shouty journalism (Question Time via Fox News) being mainstream.”
- “Being heard among the men - particularly the female reporters fighting to be heard among the male-dominated politicos.”

Sexist Stereotypes

Many comments referred to women having their professionalism and knowledge disrespected by male colleagues whose perception of women was obfuscated by stereotypes:

- “Being seen as a tick box addition to male-dominated roles rather than being there based on experience and knowledge of the subject.”
- “Not being taken seriously. Sexism still exists especially in journalism.”
- “Trying to be heard and be taken seriously in a work environment where loud and aggressive voices often prevail.”
- “From an older woman’s perspective I still think younger women struggle to be taken seriously/be regarded as expert in their specialist fields.”
- “Patronising comments.”

Sexist Leadership

A key issue preventing more inclusive workplace practices and culture is the lack of women in leadership and decision-making roles within media organisations. This was demonstrated by the comments from women working in the field:

- “Institutional sexism at senior management level (well cloaked).”
- “Bullying men being promoted into senior positions.”
- “Being under the charge of out-of-touch middle-class white men who don’t really care what you have to say.”
- “Still a grossly disproportionate number of men ‘at the top’ and having to battle to have a woman’s perspective heard/understood.”
- “Despite award-winning female voices, positions of power are held by far more males.”
- “In our newsroom the majority of higher-up positions are still male-dominated, women need to be encouraged to apply for these positions.”

Again, the draw of having a supportive line manager can make all the difference to women’s experience of the workplace – as well as their progression in their chosen field. That this is left to chance is highly problematic and suggests a lack of enforceable policies and practices in the industry to support women workers:

- “I don’t think that women are encouraged to pursue senior roles. I had to fight to be taken seriously as the deputy of my department though, thankfully, I had a supportive line manager who gave me that opportunity. The ‘old boys network’ is alive and well - in

newspapers, at least - and I still worry about being the token woman in the management meetings.”

Another comment referenced ‘imposter syndrome’, which speaks to the complicated sets of social and cultural reasons that women do not always apply for senior positions.

5. Abuse

A key area of concern for women working visibly in the public sphere is abuse received online or in person. This was referenced by 13 respondents:

- “The online abuse of women, particularly women from marginalised groups, is horrific. I don’t know a single woman journalist who hasn’t experienced it.”
- “Misogynistic abuse.”
- “Levels of abuse.”
- “Online abuse.”
- “Potentially being targeted on social media.”
- “Armchair misogynists emboldened by world events.”

The issue of journalists being pressured to have a social media presence to engage and keep abreast of opportunities was raised, alongside the bearing on self-censorship and mental health:

- “Another issue is the expectation to promote work on social media. Not that this is essential but it feels as though not doing it and not having an online presence would be of detriment to your own opportunities as a freelance worker.”
- “Obviously social media is often an unpleasant place, even if it isn’t directed at you personally, so spending a lot of time on it can be draining on your mental health.”
- “The main challenge is in the online abuse women are subject to in the toxic environment of social media - and how that can lead to self-censorship and people leaving the profession (not to mention the impact on mental health).”

Abuse was also linked to a deterioration in respect for and trust in media reporting in general:

- “Online abuse for reporting fact (especially related to politics, civil movements and vaccine info).”
- “Public distrust.”
- “So many people despise you and what you do. Even family members talk about lying media, biased BBC. It’s exhausting, dispiriting.”
- “Also targeted abuse at female reporters also seems more prevalent.”

6. Childcare/Other Caring Responsibilities/Domestic Labour

Of the 80 respondents, 18 mentioned childcare, caring responsibilities, domestic work, and the struggle to balance home and work life:

- “Being the main childcare provider.”
- “Women still bearing the brunt of family responsibilities.”
- “Domestic responsibilities.”

The gendered impact of this was pointed out:

- “Childcare and home responsibility seem to fall on women to a disproportionate degree.”

Achieving a work-life balance was thought in general to be hard, with nine women specifically mentioning this as a key obstacle:

- “Balancing work commitments and life commitments.”
- “Trying to juggle home and work responsibilities.”
- “Managing childcare/home life with work.”

Moreover, the impact of the pandemic on these responsibilities was stark:

- “Juggling childcare and work in an unprecedented way.”
- “Ongoing extra caring responsibilities due to pandemic.”
- “Childcare continues to be an issue as while schools are back there is no holiday club provision in the holidays.”
- “Having had no grandparents to help with childcare due to shielding restrictions.”
- “Juggling young children with a significant workload while working from home has been challenging, even with the support of PT nursery and partner.”
- “Women being expected to work from home while also home-schooling kids and being a 1950s house-wife.”
- “The lack of a work/home life divide while WFH.”
- “Balancing ‘always on’ work and other responsibilities while working from home.”
- “Even more juggling.”
- “Time.”

7. Mental Health

There were a number of comments about the impact of the pandemic on women’s mental health:

- “Working from home brings a large degree of social isolation with it, which often sees me sitting home alone, with no human contact, between 9am and sometimes 6pm.”
- “Negative impact on my mental health.”
- “Mental wellbeing is the focus.”
- “Balancing the mental load.”

This was perceived as directly affecting their capacity to work as they would normally:

- “Impact of the pandemic on personal mental health impacting ability to work to best of my ability.”
- “Staying strong and continuing to do great work.”

Several comments referenced the impact of socially constructed expectations that women be nurturing and emotionally supportive:

- “Women take on more of the emotional and physical load. I feel while men are getting the job done, more women are stepping up and going above and beyond.”

- “Keeping momentum, looking after others’ needs before your own.”
- “The challenge of trying to stay positive and support so many people who are struggling.”

Key Points for a Theory of Change for Scotland

The intersections between industry norms, organisational policies, cultural inequality and gap in earnings are further exacerbated by the abuse women journalists disproportionately face – and their mental health suffers as a result. On top of this is the suite of external factors, including caring responsibilities, domestic labour and trying to earn a living while facing uncertain career progression. The result is an environment ultimately hostile to women’s succession in the journalism sector.

The effects of Covid-19 have clearly exacerbated what were already significant barriers to equality in the sector, and these are even more pronounced for multiply marginalised women from other underrepresented groups.

Many of the obstacles here reflect those drawn from the BBC 2018 Gender Equality survey:

“The top barriers to progression as identified through consultation are: availability of development experiences; availability of career advice; a perceived gender bias in recruitment processes; a perceived stigma associated with flexible working; culture and behaviours; and the level of support on returning to work after maternity leave.”¹

In addition, the Spotlight on Women in Journalism section of the GEMS Commissioned Research report by Dr Meryl Kenny, Dr Sarah Liu, and Dr Fiona McKay highlighted similar issues including a “male, pale, stale industry”, gender balance dependent on perceptions of ‘hard’ vs ‘soft’ news, job security and career progression, balancing work and care, pay inequality and discrimination in the workplace.

Clearly, the status quo is unviable as a set of structures to improve equality in the journalism sector. The complexity of interlinking obstacles is dismaying, yet certainly not insurmountable, nor will immediate, radical, policy-led interventions solve the problem. In this way I hope not to fall into the trap that Benschop and Verloo describe: “feminist academics express a preference for structural transformation but they also present it in their critiques as ‘mission impossible.’ Their transformative approaches are unattractive to policy-makers and practitioners because they are bereft of practical instruments and strong in ‘scary radicalism,’ thus prompting fear and resistance”.² It is clear that change is needed to ensure that the journalism industry is protecting the rights of those who work within it, and that this change is measurable, manageable and participatory, including those whose voices are not heard, and leadership within organisations.

¹ BBC (2018) Making the BBC a great workplace for women. BBC. Available at: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/diversity/pdf/making-the-bbc-a-great-workplace-for-women.pdf>.

² Benschop Y, Verloo M (2011) Gender Change, Organizational Change and Gender Equality Strategies. In: Handbook of Gender, Work and Organization, pp 277–290. London: John Wiley.

Solutions, Interventions and Ways Forward

It is important when considering suitable interventions in light of the obstacles mentioned here to keep in mind that a truly intersectional approach must involve alternative responses to those generally put forward:

“A disproportionate amount of attention is paid to glass ceilings and work–life balance, which are biased (even if unintentionally) toward white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Without question, such women are the most likely beneficiaries of glass ceiling projects, part-time work arrangements, flexible leave policies, and teleworking projects. These kinds of change projects target the classic nuclear family rather than lone mothers. They also fail to focus on the concerns of working-class women, ethnic/racial minority women, and/or lesbians.”³

Solutions to these issues are not as simple, then, as focusing on internal organisation policies – although this can, of course, be of use. This is reflected in the responses to the GEMS Commissioned Research paper which advocate for the removal of quarterly targets, the installation of integrated mentoring into workloads, diversifying leadership and grassroots funding for those early in their careers. The variation across the Scottish media sector is also noted, underlining the importance of holding smaller media organisations to account as much as the larger ones, which are more likely to have some EDI systems in place.

None of these changes can be made without stakeholder involvement and buy-in from both industry leaders and senior leadership teams within organisations. Resistance to change takes many forms, and clearly, the cultural, policy-led and attitudinal obstacles described here by the women in the WIJS survey require multiple adjustments at micro and macro levels. The active participation of all those affected by such adjustments is paramount, and this is where an Equal Media and Culture Centre for Scotland can take a facilitatory role: sitting outside of the employer-employee paradigm, creating opportunities for congress, and providing support for self-monitoring.

³ Ibid.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT ENGENDER

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

ABOUT GENDER EQUAL MEDIA SCOTLAND

Gender Equal Media Scotland is a coalition of journalists, organisations and academics working to bring about women's equality in Scotland's media. The post of Development Officer is hosted by Engender, Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, on behalf of GEMS.