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COMMENT: House of Lords wakes up to sexism in the newsroom

Professor Karen Ross from Arts, Design and Social Sciences discusses a recent House of Lords report highlighting the underrepresentation of women in the media industry

I have spent the past 20 years researching and writing about women in the media. This was initially sparked off by how I was reported on when I stood as a councillor, with more attention paid to my Doc Martens and single-studded ear lobe than my views on the lack of bed availability at my local hospital.

What I recognised then is that there are different rules for women and men, not only as subjects of news but also in the different pathways they are strongly encouraged along when they enter news industries. Those many years of research have now been backed up by the House of Lords, in a report produced by their Communications Committee.

The report finds that "despite the fact that women make up just over half the population, they are underrepresented, both as staff and as experts, in news and current affairs broadcasting." Its authors also express their concern about "the evidence we heard suggesting that discrimination against women, particularly older women, still exists in the industry."

Powerful women

Women are succeeding in many previously male-dominated spheres. According to Forbes magazine, Angela Merkel is the third most powerful person in the world of either sex, both IBM and General Motors have women CEOs and Janet Yelland was appointed first woman to head the US Reserve Bank in 2013. And although we might read news stories about these women, the folks who pen the prose are mostly men.

When Barack Obama recently held a press conference exclusively for women reporters, it made headline news around the globe, but no one bats an eyelid when the vast majority of journalists pushing and shoving their mics in front of the great and good use the urinals rather than the women's room when it's time for a comfort break.

Of course, this context-setting is only so much fish and chip paper, which is why I'm so pleased to the the chair of the Lords inquiry, Lord Best, makes such trenchant comments about the marginalisation of women both in front of and behind the camera. In his words: "The situation is simply not good enough."

Same old story

I gave oral and written evidence to that inquiry almost three months ago and, together with Professor Suzanne Franks made very clear what the problems are and what needs to change in order address them.

I am therefore rather pleased to see some of my own interventions such as reviving the Broadcast Equality and Training Regulator to monitor the media

sector's performance in pursuing a gender equality agenda and including an explicit commitment to and evidence of gender equality as part of the commissioning criteria for tenders and pitches, making their way into the report and recommendations.

A woman over 50 makes a rare radio appearance. Arthur Edwards/The Sun/PA Archive

But to be honest, the findings from my research and almost all the studies which have been undertaken on the topic over the past couple of decades have all said the same thing. They all tell the same exclusionary story of women's marginalisation: news and current affairs broadcasting is dominated by mostly white, middle-class men talking to each about men's stuff – you know the sort of thing, politics, the economy. Oh, wait a minute, isn't that what Angela and Janet are so good at as well?

So maybe it's not that all men are concerned about terrorism and the euro while all women are fascinated by fashion and Kim Kardashian's bottom. Maybe it's the news media that's shaping discourse that way, by deciding on who should be invited to talk and whose voices are silenced.

Endemic sexism

The report's recommendations send out important signals to the broadcasters (and especially the BBC) that they have been watched and found wanting, and are now being called to account.

Lord Best and his colleagues stop short of identifying endemic sexism as the reason why women are under-represented in the decision-making strata of media organisations, why only one in every four expert contributors to flagship news programmes are women, why there has never been a woman director-general at the BBC. But some of us do not share such reticence.

It is very hard to believe that the reason why women rarely make it to the top of the media tree is because they lack talent, drive or ambition, especially since women graduates are more numerous, better qualified and enter media industries in greater numbers than men. Something happens to them when they try to develop a career – and that same something happens to women in

other industries and other professions. Yes, some of them have babies and, yes, some of them take career breaks – but not all of them – and then again, so do men.

Some front-of-camera women get pushed out when the first wrinkle or grey hair puts in an unwelcome appearance, like Selina Scott and Miriam O'Reilly (obviously not a deal-breaker for some of their septuagenarian male colleagues), but many leave because of what they experience as an unwelcoming working environment.

To paraphrase Van Morrison, we know exactly what's wrong with this picture, but the challenge is what to do about it. The House of Lords report is a long-overdue step in the right direction.

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Contacts

Rik Kendall
Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk
07923 382339