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Citation: Ross, Karen (2014) Women in Media Industries in Europe: What's Wrong with this Picture? *Feminist Media Studies*, 14 (2). pp. 326-330. ISSN 1468-0777

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.909139>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.909139>>

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Women in Media Industries in Europe: what's wrong with this picture?

Karen Ross

Introduction

Over the past 40 years or so, the large volume of work on gender and media has mostly focused on women's representation and there is a complementary and growing literature which considers women's employment in media, mostly news, industries. However, there is very little work which has explored the extent to which women have achieved the top jobs in the sector. When the Presidency of the Council of Europe moved to Ireland in January 2012, they chose to focus on Area J of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA, women and media) and worked with the European Institute for Gender Equality in scoping out a set of research projects to be commissioned. This short paper draws from one of those studies which aimed to explore the extent to which women are employed in decision-making positions in large-scale media organisations across Europe, including on boards 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 could be adopted by the Council of the European Union – see later.¹

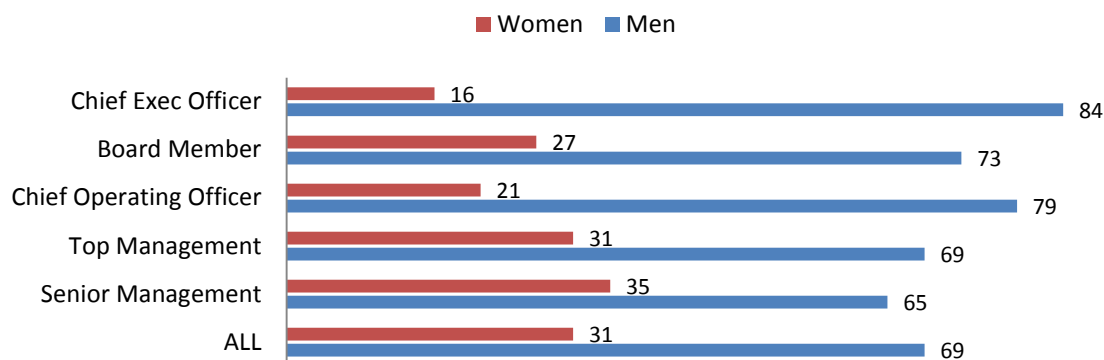
Research design and methods

The survey was undertaken in the second half of 2012 and a total of 99 organisations were researched across the EU Member States and Croatia, comprising all 39² public sector organisations and 60 privately- or mixed-funding companies, selected on size, circulation and/or importance. We also interviewed 65 senior women professionals across the sample countries.

Findings

Whilst this is a small-scale survey with only 99 organisations in the sample, they nevertheless comprise *all* the public service broadcasters (39 separate organisations) in the EU and Croatia and the 60 private and mixed-funding organisations constitute some of the major European media corporations, most of which have international parent companies. So, while we are not making any grand claims to the representativeness of the sample, we suggest that the findings are certainly not atypical of large media organisations and provide a snapshot, at the very least, of the European media landscape. The most problematic finding, as illustrated in the Figure below, is the low number of women who occupy senior decision-making positions or have seats on boards: only 1037 positions out of a total 3376 (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



Around one-third of all positions we counted in public service broadcasting organisations and around one-quarter of positions in the private sector are occupied by women. Public service broadcasting sector and organisations with mixed funding were much more likely to appoint women into senior roles (59%) than private organisations (41%). The findings show 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, one being that some organisations have been proactive in their efforts to enhance opportunities for women, both in terms of policy but also in relation to employment and promotion practices, ensuring a transparent process based on merit and competence. On the other hand, political upheaval in some countries has meant that ‘only’ women were left to manage media organisations and over time, men did not return but instead, moved into more ‘prestigious’ sectors.

As far as gender equality plans, diversity policies and codes are concerned, just under half the organisations in the survey have *any* kind of equality policy which mentions gender, and 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 although fewer than 25% of organisations mentioned this, followed by a dignity at work policy (19%) and a maternity leave policy (17%). Only six organisations provide structured training programmes for women, although slightly more (nine percent) 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.

Discussion

Given the global trend of increasing numbers of women graduating from media programmes and entering the industry, our findings suggest that women develop their careers upto a certain point – we found that the highest number of senior women in the lowest ‘senior’ positions – but then struggle to achieve the top jobs. The women who were interviewed for this study had a variety of different perspectives about their own career progression and about

the importance of workplace culture, including the attitudes of senior managers as a highly influential element in helping or hindering their career progression. A macho workplace, unsupportive managers, ineffective (or non-existent) equality policies and low-level harassment were all mentioned as markers of a woman-unfriendly working environment. The continued existence of ‘informal’ processes of recruitment and promotion also work against women because they are rarely part of the private networks, such as golf clubs, professional associations or the urinal, which are often used to identify ‘suitable’ candidates for senior jobs. These informal modes, together with the lack of formal gender equality policies not only signal poor management practice but suggest indifference or even hostility towards specifying gender as a specific characteristic to be treated separately from other aspects of an equality code. Some organisations in the study told researchers that they had no need to develop gender-specific policies as they had never had any complaints. Such complacency in the face of ongoing and well-documented gender discrimination is hard to understand, but without a clear commitment to equality (in all its forms) from senior management, then staff will always be vulnerable to discriminatory practices, both explicit and unintentional. Power is wielded in different ways and women need to be careful about how they confront misogynistic and unfair treatment, although unions and equality-based NGOs have played a useful part in supporting women in making judicial challenges against their media employer on grounds of both sex and age discrimination.

Some organisations, on the other hand, take a very proactive approach to gender equality, not only through the development of policies and codes but also through monitoring and review initiatives. Several women in the study mentioned the importance of fair and transparent processes in relation to recruitment and promotion, where assessments were made on the basis of skills, experience and competencies and not the ‘old boy network’ which still

appears to play a significant role in promotion. It is salutary to note that in the 85-year history of the BBC, for example, a female Director-General has never been appointed.

Conclusions

We are pleased that in the summer of 2013, the Council of the European Union adopted the indicators which emerged from the survey³ although what will happen next is hard to predict. Our research and many other studies around the world show that women are 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. Few organisations have robust gender equality policies and even fewer have formal or even informal mechanisms to monitor equality processes or statistics, without which policies are only so much paper. Much of the literature on gender and media make 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 and recruit and promote on grounds of competence rather than sex is good for employees and, as recent studies on boardroom performance show, good for business (BiS 2011; CED 2012; McKinsey & Co. 2012).

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Endnotes

¹ The data and information use/presented 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 authors and they do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the European Institute for Gender Equality. The indicators derived from the study aim to benchmark organisational commitment to gender equality by testing them against three criteria: the number of women in senior management positions, including as CEO, Head of Directorate and Department; the number of women on boards; and the number, range and scope of their gender equality policies, including systems for monitoring and acting upon gender inequalities in the workplace

² 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.

³ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lisa/137546.pdf