Seen but not heard:
how women make front page news

Women in Journalism

Research led by Jane Martinson (WiJ chair)

Research team: Jane Martinson, Kira Cochrane, Sue Ryan, Tracy Corrigan, Fiona Bawdon

Report written by Fiona Bawdon (WiJ deputy chair)

Published 15 October 2012
Womeninjournalism.co.uk

Contents

1. Background to research

The spark for Women in Journalism's research came from an article written by WiJ committee member Kira Cochrane (see appendix 1). Kira wanted to examine the role of women in the British media and hit upon a way of doing this which was as simple as it was brilliant: she (and a team of researchers) counted all the male and female bylines in seven national newspapers over a four-week period. The findings showed that over three-quarters of bylines were male.

WiJ decided to take Kira's idea and adapt it to encompass not just the gender of those writing the news, but of those being written about, and also photographed, in national newspapers. We settled on restricting our analysis to the front pages only, as this would keep the scale of the project manageable while provide a telling insight into the role played by women - both as writers and the written about – in the main news stories of the day.

An obvious question in an increasingly digital age, is do newspaper front pages any longer have any relevance? Our answer to this is a resounding yes. The front page is the face that a newspaper chooses to present to the world; it is its shop window, if you like, and what its editors choose to display there gives a powerful insight into the paper's priorities and preoccupations. Just as importantly, within newspapers themselves, however many hits the digital version of a story may generate, there remains a particular kudos, still some glory, in writing that day's 'splash', the front page lead story. Therefore examining the gender split of those writing the leads gives an insight into where male and female journalists fit into the pecking order of individual newspapers and within the industry as a whole.

2. How the research was conducted

We collected the front pages from all the major national daily (Monday to Saturday) and Sunday newspapers for a four-week period (from Monday 16 April to Sunday 13 May 2012, inclusive). The period for the research was chosen fairly randomly, but we were careful to avoid events which might obviously skew the findings (such as International Women's Day or the royal wedding).

The dailies we analysed were the Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Financial Times, Guardian, Independent, Sun, Daily Telegraph, Times; Sundays were the Sunday Express, Mail on Sunday, Sunday Mirror, Observer, Independent on Sunday, Sunday Sun, Sunday Telegraph, Sunday Times, People.

Although the Sundays were analysed in the same way as the dailies, we have excluded these results from our findings because, on reflection, we decided that just four editions of each Sunday paper (because the research was restricted to a four-week period) was not a big enough sample to draw meaningful conclusions about them as a separate category. (Although, interestingly, in certain key areas, such as the overall split between male and female bylines, the results for the Sundays was identical to that of the dailies: 78% male, and 22% female, respectively.)

A team of five WiJ committee members were allocated roughly two newspapers each to analyse (generally, one tabloid; one broadsheet). To avoid the risk of obvious bias, researchers were not allocated papers where they had strong or recent connections.

The analysis fell into three broad categories: Byline count; Content analysis of lead story; Analysis of photographs.

(i) Bylines

The researchers counted the number of female and male bylines on each front page (where gender was not clear from the name – Kim, Chris, Sam, etc – or the name was unfamiliar, this was checked with the newspaper in question; in a very few cases where the gender couldn't be identified, this byline has been excluded from the count). They also recorded whether the journalist writing the **lead story** on each front page was a woman or man (where there were multiple bylines on the main story, only the name appearing first was counted for this part of the analysis).

(ii) Lead story content analysis

Each lead story was allocated to a subject category (which, for simplicity, reflected the main 'desks' found in most newspapers): National/Home Affairs, Foreign, Business, Showbiz/Arts/Lifestyle; Sport (plus, Other/Don't know/Unclear).

Where an article could have fitted into more than one category (say, a story about extra government funding for aspiring Olympians, which could have been designated Sport or National), the researcher used their judgement to determine what the story was *mainly* about and allocated it to one category, accordingly.

Next, the researcher recorded how many *named* women and men were quoted or mentioned in the lead story. They also determined in what *capacity* each named woman or man had been quoted or mentioned, and allocated them to one of six possible broad categories.

Definition of categories:

1 Expert – anyone speaking/mentioned in their professional capacity, ie, politicians, sports pundits, health professionals, business executives, and so on.

2 Victim – which could be of a 'love rat', of crime, injustice, illness, accident or misfortune, etc.

3 Family member – which could be the parent, sibling or friend of a celebrity or crime victim, etc (ie, someone quoted/mentioned solely because of their connection with someone else).

4 Perpetrator/aggressor – ranging from major and minor criminals, to a badly behaved train passenger, or a noisy (or nosy) neighbour, and so on.

5 Celebrity – anyone mentioned/quoted because they are famous, so would range from Pippa Middleton, to Cheryl Cole, to Alan Sugar.

6 Other – If none of the above categories fitted, researchers could opt for 'Other' and were asked to specify what capacity a named person had been quoted/mentioned.

These seemingly eclectic categories were arrived at after conducting detailed 'dummy runs' using different newspapers and seemed to capture most of the examples we came across during the research proper. As above, where an individual could have fitted into more than one category, the researcher used their judgement to determine which one was the most appropriate in each instance. Some individuals moved between categories, depending on the context of a particular story, for example, Simon Cowell would be an 'Expert' if quoted on his opinion about the future of reality TV, but as a 'Celebrity' if mentioned because of revelations about an affair (Cowell's biography was published during the period of the research and received much coverage).

(iii) Photo analysis

Researchers were asked to count the number of photos of people on each front page, and how many of these were of women and how many of men. (Photos which didn't feature any people were excluded from the count.)

They were also asked to note anything particularly striking about the choice of pictures on the page. This section was left as open as possible, but could include any obvious contrasts in the way women and men are shown (such as, men wearing suits, women in bikinis), or, equally, could be used to note where obvious clichés or gender stereotyping had been avoided (such as the use of a female riot squad police officer).

3. Findings

Some of the findings surprised us; others were more predictable.

Among the perhaps more counterintuitive results was that, although business is generally seen as still a largely male preserve, the FT had one of the highest byline counts for women, with a third of its 134 front page bylines being female. By contrast, at the Independent, which is generally seen as a progressive newspaper, over 90% of its 70 front page bylines were male. During the four-week period of the research, a woman journalist's name appeared first on the day's lead story just once (see below).

(i) Bylines

We found that 78% of all front page bylines were male; 22% were female. We also counted separately the gender of the journalist whose name appeared first on the lead story, and the results here were similar: 81%, male; 19%, female.

The percentage breakdown for front-page bylines each newspaper is given below, which shows the variation in the gender balance between different papers. The actual number of bylines is shown in brackets, and there are wide differences here, too, with (what used to be known as) the broadsheets generally having the highest number of bylines and the tabloids the lowest. For example, the Telegraph had the greatest number of bylines (142); and the Express the fewest (24). The Express is also the paper where women journalists fared best, with half of its front page bylines being female.

Bylines for all front-page stories

	% male	% female
Daily Express (24)	50	50
Daily Mail (37)	76	24
Daily Mirror (28)	79	21
FT (134)	67	33
Guardian (87)	78	22
Independent (70)	91	9
Sun (40)	83	18
Telegraph (142)	86	14
Times (65)	82	18

As well as looking at all the bylines on all the stories appearing on the front pages, we also did a separate gender analysis of the first name to appear on the day's lead story. How many times did women journalists secure the most prestigious spot in that day's paper?
As outlined above, the overall figures for this element were not noticeably different from those for all front page bylines (22% female for all bylines; 19% for lead story only). However, the detailed breakdown suggests that on some papers, it is still a relative rarity for women journalists to bag the top spot. The

research was based on Monday to Saturday newspapers over four weeks, ie, 24 copies of each newspaper, which gave a maximum of 24 opportunities for a woman's name to appear first on the main story of her particular publication. Again, the most equal split was at the Express, where there 12 out of the 24 lead bylines were female; the figures for the other papers (in descending order) were: Daily Mail, 6; Daily Mirror, 5; Guardian and Times, 4; Telegraph and Sun, 3; FT, 2; Independent, 1. (All of these are out of a potential maximum of 24.)

Apart from the poor showing at the Independent already mentioned, the other striking finding from this further analysis is that, although a third of all FT front-page bylines are femaie, women journalists at the 'Pink 'un' don't get to be the main writer of the lead story very often.

Each lead story was categorised according to its subject matter (see section 2, for more details) as we wanted to test whether there were differences between the topics that men and women write about (for example, were men more likely to write, say, about sport and business, and women more likely to write about, say, showbiz and national issues?). However, in the event the analysis didn't identify any noticeable discrepancies in subject matter. (Whether a far bigger sample size or analysis of the entire content of newspapers, rather than just front pages, would show a different picture is outside the scope of this research.)

(ii) Lead story content analysis

As well as writing most of the front page news, we also found that men dominated the content of the news stories themselves. Of all those quoted or mentioned by name in the lead stories, 84% were men, and just 16% women (based on a total count of 668 people). We also found significant differences in the roles that named men and women play in news stories, for example, three-quarters of 'experts' (see section 2 for explanation of categories) were men; and 79% of 'victims' were women.

It's important to note that this more detailed examination was based on a smaller sample, limited to the *first* named person mentioned or quoted in each lead story only. The restriction was to keep the analysis manageable and means the findings are based on relatively small numbers (79 women; 182 men). However, despite that obvious caveat, WiJ believes the results are still indicative of the different roles ascribed to men and women in much news coverage. (What's more, these findings tally with the initial analysis that we did of the first *three* people quoted in lead stories, which suggests they are representative of the wider picture.)

So based on detailed analysis of this representative sample, what role did the women play in the lead stories in which they were named? Of the sample of women, some 61% of them were mentioned or quoted in their capacity as 'experts'; 19% of them as 'victims'; 11% as 'celebrities'; 5%, 'family members'; 4%, 'aggressors/perpetrators'. The corresponding figures for men were: 82%,

'experts'; 2%, victims; 5%, celebrities; 4%, family member; 6%, aggressors/perpetrators.

The most interesting findings here are that while nearly a fifth (19%) of women quoted or mentioned were 'victims'; hardly any men fell into this category (2%); and that men featuring in news stories are significantly more likely than women to be 'experts' (82% of total men, compared with 61% of total women).

The breakdown for individual papers in three key categories (expert, victim, celebrity) are shown below, which also make interesting reading. For example, the Express keeps up its even-handed approach, with half of the women quoted or mentioned being experts and half of them being victims; at the Mirror the proportion of women who are victims is similar (53%), but just 6% of women featured in Mirror lead stories as experts. At the Guardian, all of the named men in its lead stories were experts; compared with 82% of women (the other 18% of women were victims).

Obviously, the caveat about the percentage findings being based on small numbers would apply even more strongly to these figures for individual papers.

Table shows proportion of women and men quoted/mentioned in three main categories

	% Experts		**% Victims**		**% Celebrities**	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
Daily Express	50	69	50	0	0	8
Daily Mail	83	80	0	7	0	7
Daily Mirror	6	36	53	0	35	18
FT	89	100	0	0	11	0
Guardian	82	100	18	0	0	0
Independent	100	94	0	6	0	0
Sun	13	48	13	10	25	19
Telegraph	100	100	0	0	0	0
Times	90	100	0	0	0	0

F = female M = male

Figures show breakdown of proportions within each gender in three of the possible six categories (as explained above, the others were: Family member, Celebrity, Other.

(iii) Photo analysis

There was less of a gender divide in the use of front page photographs. Out of a total of 808 photos of people, women accounted for 36%; men, 50% (the remaining 14% would have been mixed groups or where the gender was unclear).

The Daily Mail and Daily Express had the highest proportion of pictures of women (56% and 55%, respectively), and the FT the lowest (17%). There was no obvious broadsheet/tabloid split in the results: women accounted for around a third of the photos on the front pages of the Sun (34%); Guardian (32%); and Independent (31%). At the Times, the proportion was slightly lower (28%); nearly half of the Telegraph's pictures were women (49%), putting it somewhat higher than the Mirror (41%).

The following is a list of top 10 individuals whose photos featured most often as the **main photo** on a front page during the research period (in descending order):

1 Duchess of Cambridge (nee Kate Middleton) (19 appearances)
2 Simon Cowell (13)
3 Nicolas Sarkozy (10)
4 Madeleine McCann (7)
5 Jeremy Hunt (7)
6 Prince William (7)
7 Pippa Middleton (7)
8 Francois Hollande (6)
9 Rupert Murdoch (6)
10 Fabrice Muamba (5)

The list highlights two key factors: again, how much men dominate the news agenda (with seven out of the 10 people on the list being male); but also the particular function that women fulfil for newspapers. While there are generally strong news-related reasons for the appearance of most of the men on the list (Sarkozy had just lost the French presidential election' Hollande was president-elect; Cowell was the subject of a biography; and so on), the same cannot necessarily be said for the three females to make it on to the list: Duchess of Cambridge, Madeleine McCann and Pippa Middleton. For the Middleton sisters, the wearing of a new hat or new dress could be enough to prompt a lead front page picture, in a way that would be unlikely to be the case, say, if Prince William or Harry stepped out in a new tie.

4. Acknowledgements

Thanks to the research team: Sue Ryan, Tracy Corrigan, Jane Martinson, Kira Cochrane, and Fiona Bawdon.

Huge thanks also to WiJ's administrator, Kate McMillan, for co-ordinating the research; to Rachel Cranshaw, for inputting the data; and

to Simon Rogers, who gave up so much of his own time to provide invaluable data analysis expertise.

We are also grateful to Google for its generosity in hosting the launch of the research.

www.womeninjournalism.co.uk

4. Appendices

Appendix 1

Why is British public life dominated by men?

In a typical month, 78% of newspaper articles are written by men, 72% of Question Time contributors are men and 84% of reporters and guests on Radio 4's Today show are men. Where are all the women?

Kira Cochrane
The Guardian, Sunday 4 December 2011 20.00 GMT

I don't know when the breaking point came. Was it the 2010 election, in which the most prominent women on the national stage seemed to be the leaders' wives? Was it a drip, drip, drip of Question Time panels featuring one woman alongside four men and a male presenter? Could it have been the low growl of voices waking me each morning on the Today programme, or a growing feeling that I hadn't seen a female byline on the cover of some newspaper sections for weeks? Was it images of the Commons? Images of the Lords? Was it the prime-time television comedy shows with their all-male panels? Or the current affairs shows, also apparently aimed at a mixed audience, that barely featured women?

It was all those factors, in truth, and so in mid-June I

began a count. I started with bylines (the name of the journalist who has written the article). For four weeks I counted every byline in the Monday-to-Friday editions of seven newspapers, looking at the number of male and female writers. I knew there were only two female editors of national newspapers: Tina Weaver at the Sunday Mirror, and Dawn Neesom at the Daily Star. But I wanted a clearer picture overall.

I did the count for the first two weeks, a colleague did the third, and two researchers the fourth. We doggedly counted each byline, in every part of each paper, and while this wasn't a scientific study, each individual week brought forth broadly similar figures (the count was timed to end before the start of the school summer holidays, to avoid any skewing of the statistics). There wasn't a single day, on a single newspaper, when the number of female bylines outstripped or equalled the number of male bylines. The Daily Mail came the closest of any newspaper to parity on Monday 27 June, when its contributors were 53% male and 47% female – reflecting the fact that, whatever the Daily Mail's style and tone, it clearly recognises the commercial importance of its women readers, targets a mass of material at them, and is rewarded as the only daily national, besides the Daily Express, whose female readers currently outnumber male readers.

At the end of the month we averaged all the daily percentages and the results were: the Mail, 68% male bylines, 32% female; the Guardian, 72% male, 28%

female; the Times, 74% male, 26% female; the Daily Telegraph, 78% male, 22% female; the Daily Mirror, 79% male, 21% female; the Sun, 80% male, 20% female; and the Independent, 84% male, 16% female. (A new editor was appointed at the Independent during the count, so we had another look at the paper's bylines on the week beginning Monday 14 November, to see if there was any change. Although the paper has some excellent female columnists and writers, the figures were exactly the same.)

It is arguable, of course, that counting bylines is a blunt tool – that an analysis of how many words by male and female writers are appearing in the newspapers would be far better. If someone intends to do that analysis, I would love to read it. However, having leafed through many news, sports and arts sections with a very small proportion of female writers, I'm not sure the result would be all that different. I should also note there were sometimes a few names that weren't easy to pin down as male or female, however much we searched for details, (I'm speaking, primarily, of people called Chris), and these were left out of the count. Their number never exceeded five on a single newspaper on a single day, and that was anomalous – mostly there were fewer than 15 unclear bylines across all the newspapers over the space of a week, out of more than 3,500 bylines in total. So while they might have added a blur to our snapshot, it was of a very mild variety.

During that four-week period, I also logged the gender of reporters and guests on the Today programme. (All the

shows I looked at, including Today, were on the BBC, which reflects the agenda-setting nature of the corporation.) It is well-recognised that the main roster of Today programme presenters is male-dominated – John Humphrys, James Naughtie, Evan Davis and Justin Webb, with Sarah Montague the only woman. But I wondered whether this 80/20 split spilled over to its other contributors.

Using the breakdown of each morning's programme, published on the BBC website, and discounting the lead presenters, I added up the number of reporters and guests who appeared on each episode – counting each reporter only once if they were, for instance, appearing repeatedly on a single show to relay the business or sports news. On Tuesday 5 July you had to wait from 6.15am until 8.20am to hear the one female contributor who appeared alongside the 27 male contributors on the programme: arts correspondent Rebecca Jones talking about the Hampton Court Palace flower show. Overall, across the month, discounting the main presenters, Today had 83.5% male contributors and 16.5% female ones.

I spoke to the editor of the Today programme, Ceri Thomas, on Friday 11 November – a day when only two female contributors appeared on the programme. The day before there had been just one. I asked if there was a strong enough female presence on the show at the moment. "I think nearly every day there is not," he said. "And within the programme it's a very active discussion.

And not just a discussion – it's pursued actively, too. Every producer on the programme is aware we're trying to increase the representation of women on air. People such as the planning editor, who is in a position to do a bit more about it, have it as a specific objective." He adds that the show's listenership is about 50/50 men and women, "and I'm bound to say to you, it almost never comes up as an issue from the audience ... I suppose it might be two letters a year, or something of that nature." He makes this last point, in different words, three times in our 10-minute conversation.

If most Today programme listeners aren't bothered by the male dominance of the media, other people certainly are. Earlier this year Chitra Nagarajan, a member of the activist group Black Feminists, started the "diversity audit" hashtag on Twitter, where people can note the comparative male or female presence on any show, or at any event – as well as collating information, according to their interests and concerns, about race, class, sexuality, disability or other factors.

Nagarajan says that, from an early age, she became used to entering a room, looking around and seeing "who else was there that wasn't white. And then, since I started going along to events, you look at the panel and notice they're all male – even at events where the issue actually affects women disproportionately." Earlier this year, Nagarajan did an analysis of Question Time, looking at the comparative number of men and women on the show, and

also black men and women. Of the 12 shows that started on 27 January, seven featured all white guests. Only three non-white women appeared on the panels in that period – numbers of non-white men were even lower: just two appeared.

The analysis I did of every Question Time episode this year, up until 3 November, found that, including David Dimbleby, the show featured 71.5% male contributors and 28.5% female contributors. If you exclude the presenter from that count, it was 66% male contributors, 34% female. There were 13 programmes out of 34 that featured only one female panellist. There were no programmes in that period that featured only one male panellist – all had at least two.

I also did an analysis of every episode of the current affairs radio programme Any Questions?, presented by Dimbleby's brother Jonathan, from the start of the year to 4 November. In that case, including Dimbleby himself in the count, the contributors to the show were 70% male, 30% female – excluding the presenter, 63% male, 37% female. Across all these examples, women's representation never tended to reach much more than a third. It reminded me of a conversation I had with Dr Katherine Rake a few years ago when she was leading the women's rights campaign the Fawcett Society. She told me: "The number of women at the top often hovers around a third, and then stalls." Once women reach that level of visibility, she suspected, there was a feeling they were everywhere,

and their presence was becoming a bit too dominant.

As Nagarajan says, the absence of women, and particularly black and ethnic-minority women, on current affairs programmes is deeply problematic. "When I was doing my count," she says, "it was the early months of the year, when revolutions were happening in the Middle East and north Africa, but very rarely did you actually see a woman from any of those countries speak. You occasionally saw the men speak, but never the women, which I think ties into the whole idea of black women's vulnerability and invisibility. So black women never speak for themselves – other people speak for them, and over their heads – when it comes to their rights. And the image you see of them is as weak, vulnerable and not being really important agents for change."

Seema Malhotra, director of the Fabian Women's Network, has also been speaking out on this issue. She published a letter in the Guardian last month, alongside 61 other influential women, raising concern about the number of all-male panels at policy debates. The letter stated: "We will no longer be attending events where there is an all-male panel without exceptional reason and will be encouraging others to do the same."

When you consider the representation of women in mainstream politics, their invisibility at policy debates and on current affairs programmes comes as no surprise. Nan Sloane, director of the Centre for Women and Democracy,

points out that the current figures are easy to remember: 22% of MPs are female, 22% of peers and 22% of the cabinet. (After the election, only 17% of the cabinet were women, but that number edged up with the recent appointment of Chloe Smith as economic secretary to the Treasury.) Interestingly, when the figures for women's representation across the newspapers and the Today programme are averaged, they produce almost exactly the same result – 22.6%.

And while individual women MPs are far from guaranteed to promote positive measures for women – Margaret Thatcher was hardly a feminist, and more recently, Nadine Dorries has campaigned to restrict abortion rights – there is something very odd about the sidelining of women in our national conversation. ("Nothing about us without us," as that all-purpose campaigning cry goes.)

Sloane says there is a clear democratic justice argument for having more women in politics, "which is that you have 51% of the population paying equal taxes, who are not equally represented when it comes to deciding how their money is spent ... I don't go for the argument that if you have more women around the table you wouldn't have cuts that affected women. That's not how politics works. But if you had more women involved, they'd be more likely to pick up those nuances at an early stage and bring their experience to bear, particularly locally, I think." It was at the all-male coalition agreement talks that the idea of introducing pre-charge anonymity for rape defendants

was brought up – when this became public, there was an outcry from women MPs of all parties, and the proposal was very quickly and embarrassingly ditched. "If there had been at least a couple of women in that room initially," says Sloane, "they might have said: 'Do you really think this is wise?'"

Another factor that obviously affects women's visibility is the pressure of parenthood. Journalist Gaby Hinsliff, who decided to resign from her job as political editor of the Observer two years ago, wrote movingly about the difficulties she'd experienced trying to balance a round-the-clock career with family life. Her article prompted an outpouring from both women and men negotiating a similar workload, and she has written a book on the subject, Half a Wife, to be published next month.

She says in the 14 years since she became a lobby journalist, much of the conscious sexism in journalism seems to have diminished, but there's still a major exodus of women from the newsroom in their 30s. How much does she think this is down to parenthood? "Pretty much all of it, to be honest ... [But] when it comes to whether women get to be editors, or section heads, then I think it's partly about children, and still partly about something else."

Unsociable and unpredictable hours keep many women out of politics, too, but Sloane says she doesn't accept the argument that "'women are just always going to go off and

have babies, so what can you do?' If that's how a large part of the population is going to live, then you need to gear things to take account of that, rather than treat it as an aberration. Because it's not, is it? Most people have children."

Sloane says the truth is that local parties – as well as the electorate at large – expect an MP to be a middle-aged man in a suit, and so often seem to select on that basis. It is certainly the case that despite the small increase in female MPs at the last election (up around 2%, although only because of the mass clearout following the expenses scandal), the very top of our political culture – David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Ed Miliband – looks more homogenous, and more of a closed establishment, than ever.

The fewer women there are in the public eye, the more anomalous they look when they do appear. I'm often wryly amused by the male journalists who comment on how terrifying they find all-female environments – an appearance on Loose Women, for instance, or Woman's Hour. I was struck by a quote from Martin Amis, in a recent Observer interview with feminist activist Gloria Steinem. When Amis met Steinem in 1984, at the offices of feminist magazine Ms, he wrote that he was aware of his "otherness, my testosterone, among all this female calm". What's rarely acknowledged is that women have to operate as "other" on the public stage most of the time – the difference being that they could never admit this, and

could certainly never confess to terror, however comic, for fear of being seen as pathetic.

The marginalisation of women, as with the marginalisation of any other group, means those who do put their head above the parapet are highly visible, and much more likely to be taken as representative of their entire sex. If a male comic performs badly on Have I Got News for You, he lets himself down. If one of the few women to appear performs badly, she's proof that women just aren't funny. (In series 40, 41 and the first four episodes of series 42 – all screened this year – 84.5% of the five people who appeared on the programme were men, while 15.5% were women. Eight out of 23 episodes featured no women. Twelve out of 23 episodes featured one woman. In series 10 of the panel comedy series Mock the Week – excluding the one compilation show, the same as Have I Got News for You – 92% of guests were male, 8% female. Out of 11 shows, five casts were entirely male, and the other six featured six men and one woman.)

Clearly there is an element of sexism – even if unconscious – on many TV shows. I spoke to one booker who said she still feels the key question that is often asked of women who will appear on air is "Are they fuckable?", and she has been shouted down when trying to book women MPs for programmes, has heard them called yappy, "and yet the most slimebag male politicians wouldn't get questioned or blocked at all". Writer and broadcaster Bidisha says she was always struck by the "absolute unwillingness that

would descend" when she suggested a female guest for shows she was presenting – she was once told a leading writer was only good for talking about "menstruating nuns".

Natasha Walter, the feminist writer and activist, says the male domination of current affairs shows is, as with politics, partly about the way "the masculine establishment reproduces itself. They know the men, the men are already visible, so they're the easy ask ... It's not conscious sexism, or conscious discrimination, but it's slight laziness."

The trouble is, the fewer women who appear on these shows, the fewer feel comfortable doing so – and more broadly, and most importantly, the fewer girls and young women are likely to feel confident claiming public space, speaking their minds, believing women are valued for their voice and opinions. Katie Snape, who books the guests for Sky News, is highly committed to getting more women on screen, and says she often has trouble booking the number she would like. "I always have these conversations with women where I say: 'We'd love to have you on the panel', and I explain why, and they laugh, and they're very self-effacing, and they say: 'Gosh, I'm so flattered, but I just don't think I'd have anything to say.' And I've never rung up a man who has said that."

Women are more worried about getting a drubbing – and they're right to be. The bookers and broadcasters I spoke

to under condition of anonymity said women, in viewer feedback, come in for vicious comments about their looks, voices and temerity in putting themselves forward.

Bidisha says being cast in the role of token woman becomes unbearably frustrating. "If you're the token woman in year one of your career, and you're still the token woman in year 10, you get tired and want to do something else with your life, because it seems to be making no difference. The token woman wants to be there with her sisters and her friends, in a forward-thinking, progressive, egalitarian culture."

She feels the "only solution is female solidarity, so that's why I'm behind the Orange prize, the women's writing magazine Mslexia, the Women of the World festival, because I do feel the numbers game doesn't change, but positive action makes an enormous difference." Any broader change will have to come from women organising around the issue, she says – such as the boycott of male-dominated panels, for instance. Walter also calls for more solidarity. "I think we have to consciously show more support, as women, for women who appear in public. When a man pushes himself forward, he's seen as taking his rightful place, isn't he? And we admire him for his courage. But do we really have quite the same attitude to a woman?"

Additional research: Suzie Worroll, James Browning, Grace Nzita and Nicolas Niarchos

Appendix 2

About Women in Journalism

Women in Journalism is a networking, campaigning, training and social organisation for women journalists who work across all written and new media. We have around 550 members, including many of the most senior women in the industry. Unlike other media organisations, we welcome journalists from all sectors - magazine, newspaper and digital - attracting both staff and freelancers, prominent editors and more junior writers. We currently have a 55/ 45 split between freelance and staff members respectively.

www.womeninjournalism.co.uk

wijuk@aol.com