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## Gender Issues in News Coverage

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**Abstract:** This entry discusses the participation and representation of women in the news media. Women entered journalism primarily to appeal to female audiences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were expected to write about topics considered to be of interest for women, such as food, fashion, family and furniture. Today, global studies show that women remain underrepresented at all levels of news organizations, with a glass ceiling preventing women from rising to top positions. Female journalists are especially facing challenges in war reporting and sports reporting, and as opinion columnists. In terms of representation, women are frequently represented in a negative or stereotypical light in the news media. Despite growing interest in the field, there is still a lack of information on these topics outside of Western countries. Future studies should look at gender and news coverage in nations where research is currently absent.

### Keywords

Women, journalism, female reporters, newsrooms, representations, stereotypes, feminism

Gender issues in news coverage is a field of growing interest among primarily female journalism studies scholars. Gender broadly refers to the socially constructed roles of men, women, and people who do not identify with the binary division of male/female. However, this field of study has typically focused on women's participation in the production of news and the news media's representation of women. The participation and representation of non-binary genders in news is an understudied area that will not be included in this entry but one that needs further study in the future. When studying gender in news media, one should avoid gender essentialism, which argues that men and women have certain traits because of their biological sex. For example, some people argue that women are more nurturing and caring than men, and therefore they will be able to interview sources more effectively. It is also important to understand intersectionality, which views gender as only one of several overlapping factors in someone's identity. Feminist theory shows that gender intersects, for example, with issues of race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and ability. This entry is divided into two sections: first, the participation of female reporters in the production of news, and second, the representation of women in the news media..

### How female reporters participate in the production of news

Traditionally, journalism has been seen as an unsuitable profession for women. Women were associated with the private sphere of the home, while men participated in the public sphere outside the home. Journalism required women to move outside of the private sphere, which was often met with disapproval of men. Men argued that women would lose their femininity if they entered the field of journalism (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004). Still today, female journalists are in some cultures seen as "loose" women who do not fulfill traditional role expectations for women. Around the world, journalism remains a male dominated field with women making up a smaller percentage of news staff than men.

The history of women's entrance into the news media is one of the reasons for the continuing inequality between men and women in newsrooms. In the United States and the United Kingdom, white, middle class women entered the newsroom in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to write "women's news" – news written by women on topics thought to be of interest to female readers (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004). Newspapers created women's pages (see IEJS0160 Women's Pages) to attract female readers. These pages focused on the four F's: food, fashion, furniture, and family. While women's pages created a space for women in newspapers, women's issues were marginalized to the women's pages and female journalists ghettoized into writing only "women's news." As for radio, men considered women's voices as too shrill, and they believed women lacked the authority to read news (Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2004).

Drawing on the hierarchy of influences model (IEJS0023 Hierarchy of Influences), the participation of female journalists in news production is frequently studied at the individual level of analysis. At this level, scholarship looks at how many men and women work in newsrooms, as well as at what levels of news organization they are working. The *Global Media Monitoring Project* (GMMP) (Macharia, 2015), a longitudinal study launched in 1995, looks at women and men's participation in the news globally in 5-year intervals. In 2015, 114 countries participated in the study, in which volunteers perform a content analysis on news stories gathered on one day. To determine how many stories were written by men or women, coders look at the published bylines (IEJS 0221 Bylines). In 2015, the study found that female reporters wrote an average of 37 percent of stories while male reporters wrote 63 percent of stories. This shows an increase of 9 percent since the first study in 1995, when women wrote 28 percent of stories compared to men, who wrote 72 percent of stories in that year. More specifically, women reported 41 percent of stories on radio, 38 percent of stories on television, and 35 percent of stories in newspapers, showing that women remain the most underrepresented in newspapers. The GMMP also found that 49 percent of stories on radio and television was presented by women and 51 percent by men, with women presenting 57 percent of stories on television and 41 percent of stories on radio. The higher percentage of stories presented by women on television is often attributed to the focus on women's appearance on television.

The GMMP also studied the types of stories male and female reporters typically work on. The study found that female reporters most frequently report stories on the topic of Science and Health, with 50 percent of all stories on this topic reported by women. On the opposite side, female reporters least frequently cover stories on Politics and Government, with 31 percent of stories on this topic covered by women. These findings confirm concerns that female reporters continue to be ghettoized by covering "soft" news, while male reporters are covering more important "hard" news (IEJS0229 Hard and Soft News) that eventually lead to promotions. This horizontal job segregation goes back to women's early roles in the newsroom as writers of "women's news." It is unclear whether more women in the newsroom will change news content, but the GMMP showed that female reporters tend to use more female sources (29 percent) than male reporters (26 percent).

Also looking at the number of men and women working in the news media, the *International Women's Media Foundation's Global Report* (Byerly, 2011) distributed surveys to and conducted in-depth interviews at media houses in 59 nations. This study found that men make up 64.9 percent of news workers with women making up the remaining 35.1 percent, results that mirror those of the GMMP. The *Global Report* also studied at what levels men and women are employed in news organizations, finding persistent vertical job segregation. The study found that men make up 73 percent of top management jobs, compared to women at 27

percent. According to the report, most women work at the level of senior professionals (41 percent), indicating a glass ceiling at this level. The report also found that 66.7 percent of men are employed on a full-time regular basis, while 33.3 percent of women are similarly employed. This means women's employment in news organizations is more precarious than those of men.

While male and female reporters are sometimes attacked because of their work, violence against individual female reporters is a major concern (IEJS0248 Violence against Journalists). Another study by the International Women's Media Foundation, *Violence and Harassment against Women in the News Media: A Global Picture* (Barton & Storm, 2014), found that two-thirds of the 977 female journalists around the world who responded to a survey indicated that they had experienced intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to their work. More than one-fifth said they had experienced physical violence related to their work, and 14.3 percent said they had experienced sexual violence related to their work. Sexual violence was defined as touching of a sexual manner against one's will, exhibitionism, rape, forcing one to perform sexual acts, beating of sexual parts of the body, and exposure to AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. Almost half of the respondents (47.9 percent) indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment at their jobs, which varied from unwanted physical contact, invasion of personal space, suggestive remarks or sounds, unwanted comments on dress or appearance, jokes of a sexual nature, display of sexually offensive material, inappropriate downloading of sexually exploitive materials, or verbal threats of a sexual nature. As many as 21.1 percent of respondents said they had experienced online account surveillance.

Moving beyond the individual level of analysis to the routines level, newsroom cultures remain masculine despite more women entering the field. In an edited collection, De Bruin and Ross (2004) argue that researchers should move beyond the "body count" to focus on gender and journalistic culture. This collection includes work from a variety of countries, including the United States, Spain, Sweden, Israel, India, Canada, and Estonia as well as from the Caribbean and Africa. Research has shown that the "macho" or "blokey" culture of newsrooms alienates women. This culture allows sexist behavior toward women to continue, ranging from discrimination related to story assignments, to a lack of promotion for women, to other offensive behaviors in the newsroom. Feminist scholars have pointed out that traditional news values such as conflict and seriousness are masculine, limiting women's participation in news production. Some argue that the value of objectivity (IEJS0091 Objectivity) is in fact a white and male point of view. Reporters are discouraged from bringing their own identities and experiences into news reporting, in effect disempowering female reporters. Feminist reporters, in particular, are distrusted because other reporters think they cannot be objective in their news coverage.

Female reporters are especially facing an uphill battle as war reporters, sports reporters, and as opinion columnists. War reporting (IEJS0218 War and Conflict Coverage) is considered to be one of the most difficult areas of journalism for female (and male) reporters because of the hyper-masculine military environment and physical dangers. While female reporters have covered wars and revolutions from the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a noticeable increase in female war reporters after 2001. The number of Arab female war reporters, in particular, has grown recently. This is as a result of the interest in wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but also due to a desire by news organizations to exploit women's appearance on television. Female correspondents are especially vulnerable to sexual violence and rape in war zones, and they often do not report these incidents to their editors to protect their careers. CBS chief foreign correspondent Lara Logan's rape in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011, however, was well publicized. Some mainstream media coverage blamed Logan, arguing that she was raped

because of her good looks and because she put herself in a dangerous situation as a mother. Female war reporters have come up with conflicting strategies to survive in war zones, for example by either downplaying or emphasizing their femininity. Sports reporting (IEJS0215 Sports Coverage) is another area in which female reporters face many challenges. Like war reporting, sports reporting is a highly masculine environment that continues to be dominated by men. Female reporters have struggled with access to locker rooms where interviews take place after games, and with people more generally questioning their knowledge of sports. A third area of journalism where women lack access is as columnists on opinion pages. Opinion columns are most frequently written by white men, partly because they dominate newsrooms. But scholars have also considered that women may believe that they are not qualified to voice their opinions, especially in areas of politics and economics.

Several academic studies look at challenges that female reporters face in different countries. These studies are important because obstacles may be country specific, yet some conditions appear across countries. The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism (Byerly, 2013) provides country case studies from 29 nations that participated in the *International Women's Media Foundation's Global Report* study (Byerly, 2011). The goal of these chapters is to provide context for data gathered through surveys and interviews. Other studies have looked at a female reporters in a variety of countries, including in Iraq and in the Arab world in general, New Zealand, Korea, Sweden, Portugal, Australia, Ireland, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Canada, South Africa, Taiwan, and China. In Lebanon, for example, female journalists remain systematically marginalized through gender discrimination and sexual harassment. In Korea, women face verbal and physical sexual harassment and age discrimination. They experience discrimination in story and beat assignments, promotions, and training opportunities. In Australia, an ongoing and systemic gender bias works against women, especially mothers. Women blame themselves and their child-rearing responsibilities for their lack of opportunity in the newsroom. In Taiwan, women face gendered harassment online and incivility in the digital sphere, with comments focusing on women's physical appearance.

Women's participation in and experience of online spaces have also been explored. Research shows that the political blogosphere (IEJS0196 Blogs and Bloggers) is dominated by men, with bloggers believing that women simply do not blog about politics, women's blogs lack quality, and that the top bloggers do not link to women's blogs. Similarly, Wikipedia is overwhelmingly edited by men, with mainstream media blaming women themselves for not participating. Female journalists and bloggers are also frequently experiencing harassment and threats online.

Studies have shown that women make up the majority (as many as two-thirds) of female journalism students, for example in South Africa, the United States, and New Zealand. However, sometimes studies refer to students in journalism and mass communication, which could include students in public relations and advertising. Regardless, despite the high numbers of women studying journalism, women remain underrepresented in newsrooms (York, 2017). Possible reasons for this discrepancy include that women choose to leave newsrooms and to go into other fields, and that newspapers hire more men than women. The newsroom schedule is often incompatible with family life, as women continue to take responsibility for children and other family members. Journalism is also a high-pressure profession with reporters working irregular and long hours for low pay. Some journalists report work overload and exhaustion. For women, the lack of female leadership in the newsroom because of the glass ceiling can also lead to a lack in female role models.

When looking at the education of male and female journalists before entering the field, journalism education lacks a focus on gender in the curriculum. For example, a study of 25 journalism institutions in 13 Southern African countries (Made, 2010), showed that only a few institutions have policies to achieve gender equality, males make up the majority of academic staff while females make up the majority of students, gender remains largely absent from curricula, attention to gender topics depends on the knowledge of individual instructors, and that gender is missing from course materials and also from assessments of student and faculty work. One noteworthy case of incorporating gender into the journalism curriculum was in a joint project between the Southern African gender and media activism organization Gender Links and the Department of Media Technology at the Polytechnic of Namibia to implement a gender mainstreaming project in the curriculum from 2001 to 2004. Despite this project, gender was not incorporated across the curriculum and remains a challenge in journalism education. In Australia, only one course exists that focus on gender and journalism.

### **How the news media represent women in the news**

The other strand of research on gender and news coverage deals with the way that women are represented in the news media. Most frequently, scholars argue that the news media symbolically annihilates women and women's interests -- this means the news media ignore, ridicule, and trivialize women. Research has looked at the inclusion of women as news subjects in the media, as well as media coverage of a wide range of issues related to women. For example, scholars have studied the representation of feminism and the women's movement, violence against women, political women, and women and war.

Once again, the Global Media Monitoring Project (Macharia, 2015) provides some helpful data in this regard. The most recent study found that women make up only 24 percent of people heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television, and radio news, with men making up 76 percent of news subjects. This number has increased from 17 percent of women as news subjects and 83 percent of men as news subjects in 1995. The study also found that women appear most frequently as news sources in stories on science and health (35 percent) and least frequently in stories on politics and government (16 percent). The function of women in news stories is most often to provide a personal experience (38 percent) and least often as an expert (19 percent). In 16 percent of stories analyzed, women were represented as victims, whereas men were only represented as victims in 8 percent of stories. Women were more frequently identified by family status (19 percent) than men (5 percent), and were also more frequently shown in newspaper photographs (30 percent) than men (23 percent). The study found that only 10 percent of stories focused on women, and only 4 percent of stories challenged gender stereotypes.

The mainstream news media and feminists have had a strained relationship, with the news media often delegitimizing, marginalizing, and trivializing feminism. Especially during the second wave of feminism in the United States, feminists believed that the news media exploited, distorted, belittled, and patronized women and the women's movement. As a result of this treatment by the mainstream news media, women created their own feminist publications (IEJS0130 Feminist Press). More recent research, however, shows that news coverage of second-wave feminism in U.K. and U.S. newspapers was more positive than what previous scholars have thought (Mendes, 2011). Coverage was found to be fragmented and contradictory, with newspapers simultaneously representing the movement as serious and trivial. A common problem was that the news media represented feminists as deviants, bra-burners, lesbians, and militants. These newspapers also used postfeminist discourses to show feminism as redundant

and harmful. Mainstream news media coverage of Slutwalk, a global movement against violence against women, was more positive than that of previous movements (Mendes, 2015). The most dominant frame used in mainstream news media coverage and feminist blogs was that Slutwalk challenges rape culture and promotes awareness of violence against women. A secondary frame was more negative, representing the movement as misguided.

Representations of violence against women is frequently studied (for example, see Cuklanz & Moorti, 2009) because of continuing stereotypical news coverage of survivors. In coverage of sex crimes, Benedict (1993) has identified a list of rape myths often perpetuated by the news media. They include that rape is similar to sex, that the assailant is motivated by lust, that the assailant is perverted or crazy, that women provoke rape, and the only “loose” women are victimized. Scholars have found that these myths and others are pervasive in media coverage of rape cases. Research has also been done on media coverage of human trafficking and sex trafficking, as well as on representations of female genital cutting. Representations of violence against women in “other” or non-Western cultures can be particularly problematic, as Parameswaran (1996) showed in her study of the death of an Indian-American woman. The woman’s death was wrongly represented as the result of “bride burning,” showing her as the victim of a non-Western culture. Another angle to study representations of violence is to look at media representation of women who commit violence. For example, scholars have looked at media representations of women who kill their children or women who participate in other types of violent attacks.

The news representation of women in politics in different countries is another area of study (see Raicheva-Stover & Ibroscheva, 2014). Typically, research shows that the news media focus on the appearance of female politicians, including their hairstyles and clothes, instead of on their stances on important issues. This was also one of the findings of a study on female politicians in Bulgaria, namely that they were seen as women first and political candidates second. A study of news media coverage of first ladies of the Arab Spring showed that they were shown as both glamorous and modern or as greedy and oppressive. In Hong Kong, female officials are represented as perfect women who are both leaders and housewives. They are both rational and tender, and they focus on both work and family. However, this construction creates an unreasonable expectation of female politicians. A related topic here is media coverage of women in political scandals (IEJS0095 Scandals), for example how Monica Lewinsky was framed in American newspapers after her relationship with President Bill Clinton.

Scholars are also studying news coverage of women in a time of war or during protests (IEJS0218 War and Conflict Coverage). Some have argued that the United States used the oppression of Afghan women as a justification for the military invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In another case, scholars have demonstrated how the “rescue” of American private Jessica Lynch was used to build support for the war in Iraq in 2003. In Israel, scholars found that women were mostly absent in news coverage during the Second Lebanon War (2006). When shown, they were represented as victims, mothers, and caregivers. Muslim women have traditionally been portrayed as passive victims in Western media, especially after 9/11, but during the Arab Spring protests, they were shown as active participants in political unrest. This indicates a shift in media coverage of Muslim women.

As indicated above, despite growing interest in the field, there is still a lack of information on gender and news coverage in English outside of Western countries. Future studies should look at these topics in nations where research is still absent.

## SEE ALSO

IEJS0023 Hierarchy of Influences  
IEJS0091 Objectivity  
IEJS0095 Scandals  
IEJS0130 Feminist Press  
IEJS0160 Women's Pages  
IEJS0196 Blogs and Bloggers  
IEJS0212 Opinion Columns  
IEJS0215 Sports Coverage  
IEJS0218 War and Conflict Coverage  
IEJS0221 Bylines  
IEJS0225 Diversity in News Organizations  
IEJS0229 Hard and Soft News  
IEJS0248 Violence against Journalists

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### **Further Readings**

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### **Brief Author Biography**

Margaretha Geertsema-Sligh is professor and director of the Eugene S. Pulliam School of Journalism at Butler University, USA. Her research focuses on gender and news in a global context and has been published in a various academic journals, including in *Feminist Media Studies* and *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. She was born and raised in South Africa.