

Introduction - Gender Inequality on the Airwaves.

Ireland as a nation has always shown remarkable engagement with media, in particular broadcast media. As a people we are invested in the controversies and crises of our time and these issues are often discussed on the airwaves. It would be fair to say that public debate has, on numerous occasions, influenced the direction of government policy. Women on Air has consistently said that the first draft of public/social policy is often thrashed out on air, particularly on talk radio programmes. Since those contributing to such programmes are predominantly male, then we as a people and more specifically, you as politicians, have a problem. Women make up over 50% of the population and are significant taxpayers. They undertake the majority of unpaid work as carers for both young and old. Since currently their views and life experience are not equally reflected on our media, then you as politicians and we, as a nation, have a serious democratic deficit on our hands.

It is well beyond time for government to implement a strategy that puts gender equality, and the metrics to measure and monitor it, at the core of every government department. It was no accident that one of Joe Biden's first acts when he became president was to establish the White House Gender Policy Council, locating it at the heart of the administration with access and oversight of every government department. The council is charged with leading the development of the first-ever National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, with a comprehensive agenda to advance gender equity and equality in domestic and foreign policy.

Our brief pertains specifically to gender representation on the airwaves and a political strategy to promote parity needs to be designed and implemented.

Some observations

Women on Air strongly contests the tendency to conflate gender inequality with general diversity issues. It is obviously of concern that minority groups are under-represented on Irish broadcast media but since women actually form the majority of Irish society it is misleading to categorise gender issues as issues of diversity. The classification of gender inequality under the moniker of diversity allows the issue to be downplayed by treating it as one of many inequalities rather than a specific one affecting the majority of the population.

Whilst women's voices continue to be in the minority as contributors on air, they will remain the 'other' and will not be regarded as usual or mainstream and therefore their voices are not afforded the same value. This state of affairs not only does a disservice to women but to society in general. It is worth noting that many derogatory terms are still attached to women's voices, such as "shrill", "high-pitched" and "emotional". Men's voices tend to be described as 'deep' and 'authoritative', positive words associated with status. Interestingly, a number of research studies have found that women's voices are becoming deeper, seemingly because they understand that a deeper voice is connected to power and authority. Were women's voices to form an equal part of the national conversation, that bias would surely change and female tone and nuance would become normative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establishing a Baseline- Data drives Change.

Unlike other European countries, there has been little in-depth research in Ireland to determine the level of on-air female representation, it is the elephant in the room. It is patently clear there is a major discrepancy between male and female on air participation; it is also patently clear that it is of the utmost urgency that data is needed to establish the level of that underrepresentation. The limited, and somewhat dated, data that does exist suggests the problem is considerable and not unique to Ireland.

- In 2015, the National Women's Council's "Hearing Women's Voices?" study found that women continue to be underrepresented across news and current affairs across all Irish radio stations monitored. The overall figure was 72% for men, 28% for women.
- The House of Lords report in 2014-2015 refers to the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 study that found that only 26% of experts and contributors to UK radio and TV were women.
- In 2018, the EPRA (the European platform of regulatory authorities) noted the disparities between the representation of men and women both on and off screen and that women were typically subject to more stereotypical and degrading portrayal than men.
- In its Gender Action Plan of April 2018, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland identified data collection and publication as a key area in promoting gender equality.
- In 2013, the Economic and Social Research Council surveyed 10 countries such as the US, Australia and the UK and found that news coverage was heavily weighted towards male news sources, with women only interviewed or cited in 30% of TV news stories. In all 10 countries, female sources tended to appear in longer news items and softer news topics such as family and lifestyle.

The relative paucity of data in Ireland and elsewhere is a serious barrier to progress. We find ourselves limited in making our case through the lack of data. If we cannot assert with confidence where and when the problem is, then solutions will remain elusive.

Monitoring is key to this and the "Hearing Women's Voices?" report makes detailed suggestions based on its Irish research. It suggests that someone be appointed at programme level to monitor female representation; that the radio stations monitor gender breakdown across all programmes. The BAI recognise the key importance of monitoring. In 2017, they said that broadcasters would be asked to report on gender balance and that the regulator would be more active in this area. In 2018, the National Women's Council of Ireland asked the BAI to monitor the Irish airwaves for gender balance on a yearly basis. The BAI is committed to progress on this issue so pursuit of it should prove useful.

It is time to let the data do the talking. We are convinced that a yearlong monitoring project concentrating on a number of key high audience programmes from the public and independent radio sectors is essential to establishing a true picture of female representation

on air in Ireland. Women On Air has done some preparatory work in this field. In addition we are advocating for more research into the many and complex issues surrounding gender imbalance on our airwaves. More information will help to shift perceptions and the need for radical rebalancing will become more apparent.

2. The Case for Compulsory Quotas

As in many areas of inequality, the issue of quotas for gender balance is controversial. Most reports recommend voluntary targets but hesitate when it comes to the issue of compulsory quotas.

The Hearing Women's Voices? study suggests that the BAI set minimum gender quotas for guests/experts of 30/70 over a three-year period; it also suggests they should highlight programmes that achieve a 40/60 balance and challenge those who do not. Politicians of various parties have engaged with the issue of on air quotas but no progress has been achieved.

- WOA is advocating for compulsory quotas for broadcast media where it is possible to require them. We point to the success of quotas for the election of women to the Dáil, particularly in the 2016 election. We accept there are challenges but do not consider them insurmountable. In the meantime, there needs at least to be measurable targets, and effective monitoring.
During Irish elections, broadcasters already allocate set amounts of time to different political parties. Allocating certain amounts of time along gender lines would be a far easier task, willingness to engage with the necessity is clearly the imperative needed. An initial requirement of 60/40 male/female on air representation would at least establish a baseline that could progress to 50/50 after a given period. Without such quotas, it is unfortunately the case that progress will be slow and uncertain.
- There is much discussion at Government level about a transition from the TV licence fee to another revenue raising mechanism for public service media. There are also discussions about the requirement for the Broadcasting Act 2009 to be revised in light of the changed media landscape and the establishment of a new 'Media Commission'. The establishment of conditions that support gender equality on our airwaves must be considered as part of all policy decisions relating to the broadcasting sector. Provisions should be provided for that ensure that the required measurement, monitoring and evaluation tools are put in place, and we suggest that any public funding – BAI or TV Licence - is linked to reaching agreed targets.

- At the same time, work needs to be done at the programme level in Ireland to ensure that programme makers understand the requirement for parity. The experience of the BBC's Outside Source is enlightening and indicates the importance of also dealing with the issue at the programme level. Its presenter Ros Atkins made a commitment to on air gender equality. They started off with 39% in January 2017 and with considerable effort they managed to increase their average to 52% by that summer. And the programme increased its viewership by 25%; the initiative proved so successful that the BBC has adopted it across the organisation. The movement has spread, and many other organisations are now committed to this 50:50 plan and many broadcast organisations in other European countries have taken the BBC's lead with its 50/50 programme, an opt-in process. Programme teams voluntarily sign up to the 50/50 programme and aspire to reach the target. This is a voluntary initiative that could be developed and promoted across all strands of Irish broadcasting.

Summary

The current situation is unsustainable and unjust. Women consume media and pay for publicly funded media just as men do; they are entitled to hear their concerns, their views and most importantly their voices on the airwaves in Ireland. Equally, seeing is believing - if women hear more of their own gender on the airwaves, it will encourage more to follow suit.

Our key recommendations are succinct and achievable. Firstly, the level of underrepresentation of women in broadcast media should be established by setting up a year long monitoring project of high audience/influential programmes in the public and independent sectors. Secondly, gender quotas should be required from all broadcasters who are in receipt of funds from the public purse. Women on Air is willing and able to lend its expertise and knowledge base to promote the implementation of these recommendations.

As Pulitzer prize-winner Geneva Overholser put it, "News media are at their best when they call upon the wisdom of all the people whom they serve, when they reflect everyone's experience and bring in the hopes and dreams of every sort of person".