

# ‘Men own television’: why women leave media work

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## Abstract

While all media workers face challenges particular to flexible specialization in a networked economy, there are differences in career outcomes for men and women, which occur as a result of gendered work cultures. Within media production these gendered contexts manifest through three main factors, which compromise women workers and can eventually cause them to exit their professions mid-career. Women leave media work because of a combination of the gendered nature of work cultures, the informalisation of the sector and structural restrictions placed on women’s agency to participate in networks. The interplay of these factors ultimately creates an impossible bind for many female media workers forcing them to exit media work.

## Keywords

creative labour, gender, informalisation, networks, screen production, work culture

Despite three decades of second wave feminism’s demands for changes to women’s lives, women still have not achieved equality in the mass media, either in how they are represented, or as workers within the industry. Women are still a minority of employees in the print and broadcast media (National Union of Journalists, 2012). *The Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* notes that women constitute only 33.3% of the full-time journalism workforce, they hold 27% of top management positions, 35% of senior professional positions and 33% of reporter positions (International Women’s Media Foundation, 2011). As well as an undersupply of women within industry, the sector is not immune to patterns that exist for professional women in other high-end careers, whereby a substantial number of women leave their formal employment mid-career (Stone, 2008).

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While men also quit media careers, this is usually explained in terms of their pursuit of other career opportunities, but for women the most common explanation of their large-scale exit from work is that they choose to leave, and mainly for family reasons (Metz, 2011). This perception that women prefer to leave paid work in order to care for their families, goes largely unsubstantiated by research. There is relatively little research on the dearth of women in media industries and even less on why they are not retained in media production work. This article examines women's own narratives of why they left media production careers in Ireland and proposes that they leave because media production occurs within a gendered workplace culture, characterized by the informalisation of work practices and by gendered networking, which in combination act to push women out of media careers.

### **Media work in a digital age**

Media production is increasingly 'fluid, formed of highly complex combinations of individuals and semi-permanent work groups' (Blair, 2001: 150). Within this structure, there is a dearth of mediating institutions between labour and employers, with unions and sectoral organizations relatively weak on issues of pay bargaining and employment regulation with 'an almost exclusively informal recruitment and selection process' (Blair, 2001: 152). This model of media production involves increasingly informal, casualized, freelance and project-based employment (Deuze, 2011) with a proliferation of micro-enterprises and increasing emphasis on creative entrepreneurship and self-employment. Workers in this context are expected to show unstinting commitment while the boundaries of the working day are expanded and complete availability for work becomes the norm. These dynamics are accompanied by further trends towards increasingly short term, precarious work, bulimic work patterns, the erosion of distinctions between work and play and 'profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields' (Gill, 2009: 230).

In response to increased informalisation in the media sector, workers struggled to cope by intensifying use of networks to mediate the uncertain labour market. While 'network' is a term that is almost always couched in positive terms as a flexible, social and dynamic alternative to market forces and corporate bureaucracy (Smith & McKinlay, 2009: 17), a key problem is that while the networks mediating employment are a source of stability and decreasing uncertainty for some, they are an informal source of exclusion for others (Walaby, 2011). Within media production, networks generally favour individuals with high levels of social and cultural capital. Male subcultures can act as old boys' networks that create barriers to women (Walaby, 2011: 10). Senior women have limited access to and are often excluded from strategic informal networks that can provide

Privileged access to information on jobs and promotions (Burt, 1992, Granovetter, 1973); create informal rules of preferment that contain criteria that benefit insiders, such as long hours and presenteeism that are hard for care-givers to meet (Rutherford, 2001); provide support and encouragement to insiders to help them over difficulties, but offer a hostile (Devine, 1992) or chilly climate (Blickenstaff, 2005) to others; as well as gang up on, bully or harass outsiders (Stanko, 1988). (Walaby, 2011: 10)

Networks function not only on the basis of the density of connections but also on the basis of structural social positions (Blair, 2011: 117). 'Even for those with established credentials, breaking through the barrier of established male networks is difficult... creativity and willingness to take risks is not enough' (Smith and McKinlay, 2009: 87). While production studies research has clarified understandings of the creative process of media work (Deuze, 2011; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) and the role of cultural aspects of media production, such as networks, in facilitating or blocking access to media work, very little of this analysis takes gender as a defining aspect of media work. This article makes the claim that because media production is not gender neutral (Ross and Carter, 2011), it can lead to women exiting the industry. It is not a proactive desire to care for families, but rather the gendered nature of media work cultures, added to the informalisation of work organization, and also the restrictions placed on women's agency to participate in networks, that ultimately explains why women media workers 'quit' their careers.

## Methodology

This study describes the structural problems that some women faced when working in Irish media industries. One key consideration is the extent to which generalizations can be derived from a small-scale interview-based study in Ireland. Extrapolating globally on the basis of a small, nationally-specific sample is not possible, and so the research makes no claims at this level, but rather offers a sensitive, qualitative insight into women's working experiences. It examines why women left the industry and so makes no claims for the role of gender in media work more broadly. The reasons that Ireland in particular is useful as a case study are that the industry shares the typical structures of the European broadcast industry, albeit on a smaller scale. The Irish industry is characterized by a triad of public service, commercial and independent company actors. At a national level the broadcast sector has two dual funded, public service broadcasters RTÉ and the Irish language station TG4, and one commercial broadcaster TV3. Over 150 small to medium-sized independent screen production companies are active in the industry. Moreover, Ireland is an interesting case because its record on gender equality in media work is poor, relative to other European states. Table 1 outlines the gender balance of employment in Irish media industries.

The communications industry in Ireland employs approximately 70,000 people and women comprise approximately 30% of that workforce, lagging behind the European average of 44% female employment in programming and broadcasting in 2011 (Ross, 2013: 16). Irish women constitute only 12% of decision-makers in media organizations compared with a European average of 32% (Ross, 2013: 31). The findings are also relevant to other EU states, in particular Italy, Malta and Greece, where women are similarly underrepresented in decision-making roles. Moreover, the findings relate to the media industry at an international level where global research projects (GMMP; Beyerly, 2010) find 'persistent patterns of inequality in terms of under-representation, glass-ceiling barriers to advancement and low pay (in relation to men) still remain firmly embedded within the media sector' (Ross, 2013).

**Table 1.** Employment in Ireland in motion picture, video and television programme production, sound recording and music publishing, programming and broadcasting activities (Eurostat, 2013).

2008	FM	%	2009	FM	%	2010	FM	%	2011	FM	%
Total			Total			Total			Total		
706,000	21,900	31	72,500	22,100	30.4	74,300	22,500	30.2	76,000	23,100	30.3

This article is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with women who had left media jobs. The interviews were conducted with a purposive, snowball sample of 17 women, detailed in Table 2.

### Gender bias in screen production work

Evidence of a work culture that was fundamentally gendered was manifest in reports from all of the women interviewed. They noted that they were expected to subscribe to a traditionally masculine practice of long working hours, a rigid separation of career and life, and a lack of workplace flexibility. They were also aware of industry-bias in perception of women's skills as well as overtly gender-based discrimination against women media workers. Women described long working days, often including anti-social hours, weekend work and frequently involving split shifts. One woman commented:

Film coordinating is a minimum twelve-hour day, and in the last weeks of pre-production it could be fourteen hour days. During shoots you could be doing splits, shooting day and night, no lunch breaks, no breaks at all, it's gruelling... the pressure is immense. (Respondent F)

Any aberration from the practice of maintaining long hours and complete availability was explicitly unacceptable. 'I remember leaving work one day at 6pm and hearing a jibe that I was taking a half day' (Respondent I).

For many women, production companies or broadcast organizations generally demanded a level of availability that was often impossible for women to give because they were engaged in both career and family responsibilities. One production assistant commented 'If I had not had children, I probably would have gone further in my career... it was the pressure of working and being a mother that meant I pulled out...' (Respondent E). For men, having children did not have such a detrimental impact on careers. Across all employment sectors in Ireland, married men worked longer hours in paid employment than married women, with 44.5% of married men working for 40 or more hours per week compared with 14.7% of married women in 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2011: 21). In workplaces that value long hours and complete availability, men's capacity to perform, enabled by women having a greater proportion of care responsibilities, two thirds of all care-work in Ireland (National Women's Council of Ireland, 2009), means that women are placed at a distinct disadvantage by a cultural norm of long hours.

Many respondents highlighted the fact that they could not always simply put work first. 'If a child was sick there was no flexibility, you can't leave set for three hours, there

**Table 2.** Profile of respondents.

	Job title	Contract	Employer	Age	Marital status & children	Educational qualification
A	Series Producer	FT Permanent	Broadcaster	41–45	Married 2 children	Postgrad degree
B	Director	FT Permanent	Broadcaster	41–45	Married 2 children	Postgrad degree
C	Cameraperson	FT Permanent	Independent Company	25–30	Single No children	Postgrad degree
D	Presenter	FT Temporary	Broadcaster	36–40	Married 1 child	Graduate
E	Production Assistant	FT Temporary	Broadcaster	46–50	Married 4 children	High school graduate
F	Production Coordinator	FT Permanent	Independent Company	31–35	Single No children	Graduate
G	Series Producer	FT Temporary	Independent Company	31–35	Single No children	Graduate
H	Producer	FT Temporary	Independent Company	25–30	Single No children	Graduate
I	Presenter	FT Permanent	Broadcaster	31–35	Single No children	Graduate
J	Cameraperson	FT Permanent	Broadcaster	31–35	Married 1 child	Graduate
K	Producer Director	FT Freelance	Various	46–50	Single 1 child	Graduate
L	Producer	FT Freelance	Various	31–35	Single No children	Graduate
M	Presenter	FT Freelance	Various	36–40	Married 4 children	Graduate
N	Producer	FT Freelance	Various	46–50	Single No children	Postgrad degree
O	Broadcast Journalist	FT Permanent	Broadcaster	64–50	Married 3 children	Graduate
P	Producer	FT Permanent	Independent Company	36–40	Married 2 children	Postgrad degree
Q	Producer Correspondent	FT Permanent	Broadcaster	51–55	Married 2 children	Graduate

was none of that... there was no flexibility' (Respondent F). One cameraperson, pregnant with her first baby, could see no way of resolving the work and care balance and left her permanent, full-time job.

The nature of the job is that you finish when the job finishes, 14–16 hours a day... I couldn't see where there would be any let up... with a kid it's not possible to do that, you have to walk away from it. (Respondent C)

Of the 10 respondents who were mothers, all but one – whose husband was at home almost full time – commented on the difficulty of juggling the inflexibility and intensity of media work with childcare, but of all of the respondents who were mothers, not a single one decided to leave work solely on the basis that she actively wanted to be at home with her children.

Nine of the 10 mothers interviewed hit a ‘maternal wall’ of uncompromising conflicts between work and family life. Pregnancy had particularly severe repercussions for four of the women interviewed. A freelancer with a large independent stated ‘when they found out I was expecting they tried to replace me with another presenter’ (Respondent M). A cameraperson who had worked for 12 years with a large broadcaster had a similar experience.

They sent an email looking for voluntary redundancies and I applied (but was) turned down for it... a few months later I found out I was pregnant... when I told them, the next day I was called up to HR, and was told that they had made a mistake about the voluntary redundancy... (Respondent C)

The normative expectation amongst media workers is that it is small independent companies, or freelance workers who struggle most to accommodate maternity leave, because they cannot ‘afford the luxury of employees having a personal life’ (Respondent L). The evidence from this data shows that large companies and broadcasters were also guilty of discriminating against female employees when they should easily have been able to observe legislation protecting women’s status. In reality, the women did not pursue their legislative rights. This was for fear of sanctions from the women’s informal networks, with which they hoped to continue to work or on which they depended for promotion. Their reluctance to insist on rights was due to a desire not to be ‘seen as trouble’ (Respondent C). This issue is discussed in more detail in the sections on informalisation and networks below.

For all of the respondents, media organizations largely failed to consider any alternative to the intense work hours, as well as on occasion refusing to offer part-time or job-share options. As one production assistant, on contract with a large broadcaster, noted ‘It’s the sort of job that you have to do it all or nothing... and then an awful lot of women leave, because it’s very difficult to juggle it, that’s what it came down to for me, family or job’ (Respondent E). Of the seven respondents who did not have children but nonetheless left media work, the inflexibility and intensity of work and the lack of time or space for a personal life still registered significantly as one of the factors that pushed them out of the industry. ‘I was going to work, coming home, sleeping, then getting up, driving to work and that was it. Work life balance is zero, that’s why I left’ (Respondent F). ‘This industry... has no tolerance for your life outside of TV’ (Respondent L).

### *Bias in perception of skills*

Media production work cultures were also gendered in the sense that there was ‘considerable evidence that gendered identities at work were being constructed in traditional ways, drawing in particular on women’s perceived “soft skills”’ (Guerrier et al., 2009:

494). Bias in the perception of women's skills and their appropriateness for the workplace sometimes led to women being given particular assignments or types of production jobs. Being female was a salient issue when it came to commissioning. One female director recounted that 'the interviewer said "we really should have a woman direct this", and it really struck me that he was looking at me and seeing a woman, not seeing my work...' (Respondent B). One cameraperson noted 'Going out to certain stories, a victim of some incident, a murder or a rape, you would be chosen to go because you were female' (Respondent J).

More frequently, the gendering of skills worked to disadvantage women. For more than half of the respondents, negative bias in perceptions of their skills was gender-based. A presenter commented 'A producer told me that the documentary would be taken more seriously with a male voice over' (Respondent I). A female cameraperson noted 'I've gone for interviews... and men with one third of the experience I have were given the job' (Respondent C). A female director was equally blunt about perceptions of women's skills 'a financier, without meeting me, vetoed my appointment... it was because the financier said that "You're not going to get the material, you're not going to get the emotion, because it's a boy's story"' (Respondent B). A producer noted that while women often had good people skills, these were undervalued in the industry (Respondent O). Similarly, a television presenter noted:

I had a greater level of education than anyone else on the team, and more on screen experience than most. But because I was a woman, I was given items on fashion, flower arranging, cooking to present... All 'serious, intellectual' items, or anything to do with current affairs or sport was automatically given to the male members of the team to present... this played a huge part in me deciding to leave. (Respondent Q)

Within the media industry there was also a clear sense that men were perceived to be more suitable to senior or management roles than women (Schein, 2007). A producer commented 'There was automatically higher reverence for men' (Respondent O). Women were simply not presumed to be in charge, even when they were. 'I was the senior producer-director on a documentary, but at every meeting people would immediately address their comments to a male associate producer...' (Respondent D). As well as gendered presumptions regarding status and skills women also faced outright gender discrimination.

### *Gender discrimination*

There was evidence of discrimination in pay.

I was paid less than my male equals on presenting teams in Broadcaster X and in Broadcaster Y. My male counterparts would work far less hours than I did. They seemed to be perceived as being entitled to do this. The net result of this was that as a woman I was of less value. (Respondent M)

Discrimination and bias in the dominant work culture were also clearly at play in the media workplace promotion system. A television presenter commented,

When an opportunity for promotion came up in Broadcaster Y a male colleague told me that ‘female’ qualities, such as compassion, empathy, caring for the guests... were negative qualities to have in this business... A cold, self-serving, almost heartless, masculine approach to the work was venerated. (Respondent I)

Oftentimes a double standard existed in assessment criteria, with men promoted on the basis of potential and women on the basis of performance (McCracken, 2000: 163).

With promotions... the valuable commissions were the talk shows... out of a class of ten there were six people, who were quite gifted, and gender-wise it was 3 and 3 and the boys all got juicy commissions and the girls got children’s and quiz shows.... (Respondent B)

In these ways women in media work are structurally disadvantaged by a gendered work culture. But a further problem is that the networked nature of production work makes it difficult for women to assert their rights, for fear of gaining a reputation within industry networks for being ‘difficult’ or ‘troublesome’ and thereby risking future work.

## **Networks and restrictions**

As flexible specialized individuals increasingly come to characterize the media production sector, it is the networked nature of self-managed entrepreneurs or more particularly the exclusions created by networked production that impact heavily and in specifically gendered ways on female media workers. A film production manager commented ‘Those informal networks were massively important; film wasn’t about what you knew but who you knew. Any job you got was based on who you could pick up the phone to...’ (Respondent K). A cameraperson noted all work came her way because of informal networks. ‘There was never really any interviews for camerawork, it’s a problem in the industry because there’s no processes, you work your way up and it’s all informal and networks...’ (Respondent J). As well as recognizing the centrality of networks to their working lives, women also noted the tendency of some of these networks to be quite masculine, particularly in operations departments. One film director noted ‘Film sets are quite macho, there’s a lot of buddying-up and you’re automatically excluded from that’ (Respondent B). One television producer-director commented ‘Out on a shoot, it’s very much a male crew, and male interviewees would have little male-bonding corners with the crew that you weren’t invited into...’ (Respondent K). At an operations level all of the freelance respondents interviewed argued that they were at a disadvantage with regard to entering the media labour market and sustaining regular media employment, because they were not ‘...one of the lads. You know if they’re ringing you for a job, that they’ve already tried all of the men on their list’ (Respondent J).

Gendering in networks also occurred in a context where female freelance operatives were still something of a rarity in screen production. As one respondent explained, over a 10-year career, there was a dearth of women in film operations.

Of all the women in film that I know, one is a trainee and one is a clapper loader but I don’t know any female Directors of Photography at all actually, I’ve worked with one female boom

operator in TV, I have worked with one female electrician and one female rigger, but they're rarities. (Respondent F)

Women in media have few role models to follow. A cameraperson commented,

There are no older women out there, I'm out in the field every day, and there are no older women out there. I was on a story in London once, there was a woman there on camera, in her forties, and she's the only woman over 40 I've ever seen with a camera in her hand... I'd love to know how women last... (Respondent C)

This absence of women in the industry meant that there were fewer strategically placed women within networks, which meant that the difficulty of entry and sustaining employment for women was unlikely to alter.

There were a few women that helped me in my career, but that's just it, there were only a few and support was almost on an individual basis, so it wasn't like the norm or anything, not like for the guys, where being in a network of men was just standard... it's like men *own* television. (Respondent P)

The networked nature of much media work did not constitute any kind of compensation for women for a work culture that was very masculine, in fact, the two characteristics generally reinforced each other.

### **Informalisation: no structures, no protection**

A third key factor in the explanation of why women leave media work is the informalisation of the industry. The fact that recruitment, production and promotion occur on the basis of informal networks meant that there is a corresponding absence of any formal structures of negotiation or protection for workers in media industries. The informalisation of the industry networks means that recruitment or work allocation was unstructured. For instance, crew would not always know whether they would be booked for jobs or not, until they 'heard' from someone else within the network: '...another person was given the job, and I was put out by that because for one nobody had told me that this other person had been given the job I had to find that out for myself' (Respondent A). While more structured within the film industry, in television, promotions were often-times informally achieved. 'There weren't really any official promotions you just sort of moved along in your area' (Respondent C).

The dearth of formal structures for employee protection, particularly for freelancers whose reputations were vital to all future employment, meant that even in cases of bullying, workers would find that they had little recourse to complaints procedures. One worker observed

It had a devastating impact on me at the time... There was some lip service to prevention of harassment in the work place in contracts or in staff handbooks, but in practice, complaining would seem to come with a huge cost, especially in an industry where everyone is deemed quite replaceable. (Respondent I)

Or as a producer said,

You just had to put up and shut up, because you knew that if you made a ‘fuss’ it would backfire on you, you would be the problem. I worked for a large company, they knew the law but they didn’t act and I couldn’t pay the price of forcing them to act, it would literally cost me work. (Respondent P)

Worker’s dependence on informal networks for work and promotion meant that they were clear that the question of gender bias could not be tackled or addressed directly or formally. One presenter with a large broadcaster commented ‘it was well known that women who complained about discrimination or sexual harassment would “never work again”’ (Respondent I). A freelance producer concurred ‘any complaint you made definitely got in the way of your progress’ (Respondent O). A director pointed out that the lack of comeback on gender discrimination lay squarely with the fact that the decisions were made on the basis of subjective opinions and assessment and that there was no formal criteria for assessing work or competence or complaints about working conditions (Respondent B). She explained the process of being passed over for a director’s role on a ‘bromance’ feature film and the lack of comeback on what were sometimes gender-based decisions.

If the project doesn’t ‘feel safe’ they’ll say it’s not sufficiently creative. It’s all a personal judgement, its not necessarily conscious on their part, and if you tackle it head on you’re a troublemaker... If you use the gender weapon you’re really shagged. (Respondent B)

One respondent described the vulnerability and isolation that came from the informalisation of the sector very succinctly.

There’s no human resources department in film, every woman is doing her own deal and there’s nothing on paper to say you’re entitled to leave or to go and attend to your childcare needs, that’s not in any film contract, its not like other jobs. (Respondent D)

## **Conclusion**

The key findings of this study demonstrate that pervasive ideologies presenting women as proactively ‘choosing’ to leave work are actually obscuring gender power dynamics amongst media workers. Notions that women are ‘opting out’ (Belkin, 2003) presents women as uncommitted to their work, which belies the irony that, in fact, work can be structurally biased against sustainable careers for women. Biases endure in the organizational model of media work, in its networked labour market and in the informalisation of much of its organization. Those gendered dynamics include work cultures that prefer traditionally male norms of work practice, but which obscure the privileged position of many men who are supported in the completion of these patterns by unacknowledged care work on the part of women.

In many ways, women’s marginalization within media industries and the invisibility or normativity of this situation ensures that the glass ceiling remains intact within media workplaces and few women ascend to the top of the hierarchies. This in turn reinforces a

vicious cycle, the organizational model reinforces the dominant and male status quo by rewarding single-minded devotion and commitment to long hours and to power. Status and prestige remain in the hands of the top ranking men, making it even more difficult for women to break through. Finally, by ignoring the gendered nature of work culture, networks and informalisation as factors that force women out of media work and by arguing that women simply 'opt' to be mothers over journalists or 'choose' to be parents over producers, there is lack of acknowledgement of the realities that surround the gendered discrimination against women workers in media, which forces them to adapt to the status quo in the industry by making the 'choice' to quit their impossible position, by departing from their careers.

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