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# Fighting for Better Representation of Women in and on RTÉ: Women's Work in Promoting Gender Equality at Ireland's National Broadcaster, 1979–1981

## Abstract

This article examines the role that women's activism and advocacy played in early Irish television and the opportunities for and representation of women in national broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ). It focuses on two groups: RTÉ's own Working Group on Women in Broadcasting, which reported in 1981, and the Women in Broadcasting Study Group of 1980, headed by Senator Gemma Hussey. Both investigated practices of employment of women and the roles that they undertook as well as the role of women in RTÉ programs and in television advertising on RTÉ. The article argues that, although there were tensions between the two groups and each group had different interests, different methodological approaches in their reports and were received in the public and by RTÉ very differently, they effectively worked together to compel RTÉ to implement their recommendations and take the issue of gender equality more seriously on a long-term basis.

## Keywords

Television | Media Work | Women | Advocacy | Ireland

## Introduction

This article examines the role played by two groups established to investigate and make recommendations about women's role in and representation on national broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ). The article focuses on two groups that formed to investigate RTÉ's employment of women as well as the role of women in RTÉ programmes and in television advertising. The groups were: the Working Party on Women in Broadcasting, established internally at RTÉ in 1979 and reporting first in 1981; and the Women in Broadcasting Study Group, established external to RTÉ by Senator Gemma Hussey in 1980 and inclusive of representatives from all facets of Irish society and

reporting to RTÉ in 1980. The article argues that, although there were tensions between the two groups and each group had different interests, different methodological approaches in their reports and were received in the public and by RTÉ very differently, they effectively worked together to compel RTÉ to implement their recommendations and take the issue of gender equality more seriously on a long-term basis. Both the cautious and conservative approach (the internal Working Party) and progressive approach (the external Study Group) were key to raising wide awareness of and drawing attention to the lack of quality and quantity of female representation in and on RTÉ.

## Irish Television

According to Richard Barbrook, one of the purposes of early Irish broadcasting, which commenced in the 1920s, was to assert national and cultural autonomy.<sup>1</sup> Barbrook claims that Irish broadcasting was a public service medium which was shaped by cultural nationalism in numerous ways: it asserted a Catholic, Irish-language and rural identity in an effort to distinguish from British colonial rule. However, the Catholicism of Irish nationalism also necessitated a politically, ideologically and conservative identity which emerged through Irish broadcasting. Although the launch of RTÉ television in the early 1960s is sometimes viewed as a catalyst for modernisation, scholars argue that RTÉ retained an ethos of cultural nationalism and worked at sustaining and preserving Irish national identity, particularly its Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> As Lance Pettitt suggests, the modernising process was gradual which he evidences in the national Irish soap opera *Glenroe's* very slow questioning of sexual morality as well as in popular talk shows' reluctance to address issues of national concern such as abortion and divorce referenda.<sup>3</sup> Brennan argues that the launch night of Irish television on New Years Eve 1961 has come to be imagined as a dramatic switch from the conservative DeValera era in which Catholic Ireland ruled, and the modern era ushered in through the economic policies of Sean Lemass who opened up Ireland to the world.<sup>4</sup> Brennan argues that this idea masks a complex reality in which both conservative and modern tendencies coexisted for a long time, if not to this day. Likewise, Dolan refers to this to and fro between the modernising and liberalising potential of television, particularly commercially and consumerist oriented television, and the desire by those in power to use television to exert a strict moral framework.<sup>5</sup> This period during which television launched has since entered into mythology as the start of Ireland's modernisation, with the 1950s

seen to mark a shift between Ireland's insular parochial tendencies and its turn towards a global outward-looking economy and culture.<sup>6</sup>

Arguments for RTÉ as a modernising force are typically centred on two things: RTÉ's need to attract commercial revenue through advertising; and the talk show hosted by Gay Byrne called *The Late Late Show* (RTÉ 1962-present).<sup>7</sup> Regarding the former, RTÉ was said to take on 'modern' characteristics through its opening up to advertising and its practice of importing programmes that would attract the audiences that advertisers wanted to reach.<sup>8</sup> From the late 1970s onwards, RTÉ took on an increasingly commercial identity, learning from the financial success and popularity of commercial television in the US and the UK.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding *The Late Late Show's* supposed modernising effect, popular mythology points to one now infamous episode in which a seemingly blasé conversation about marital relations offended Church leaders so much that RTÉ required the host to issue an apology in the national newspaper, the *Irish Times*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the tense and volatile relationship between the Irish Catholic Church and RTÉ is often taken as a representation of the broadcaster's progressive identity.<sup>11</sup> However, as Brennan has argued, the urge to pin Ireland's supposed shift towards a more open, sexually and ideologically liberal society on RTÉ and its popular talk show neglects a much more complex history in which RTÉ pointed in conservative and liberal directions both institutionally and in its programmes. This 'myth of progress' also negates how RTÉ neglected the diversity of the population that it addressed and the issues most important to Ireland's various social groups including women, ethnic minority Travellers, LGBTQ groups and non-Catholics. In particular, RTÉ seemed unsure about how to deal with the women's movement, activism for reproductive rights, divorce, and women in the workplace. As Wait has suggested, the many persistent claims about the social change instigated or amplified by RTÉ are tested when assessing RTÉ's treatment of women in its organisation and in its representation.<sup>12</sup>

## Gender and Irish Culture

Instead, despite Irish television being heralded as a turning point in Irish social history by many cultural commentators, it was, in some respects, resistant to many social changes, especially those relating to the family, gender and sexuality and often acted as the mouthpiece of the Catholic Church.<sup>13</sup> What drives the narrative of change is the sometimes radical and progressive programmes

produced about issues such as civil rights, nationalism, and the Church which reflected an emerging literary tradition of historical revisionism and questioning of the status quo.<sup>14</sup> However, the narrative of Ireland's emerging modernity in the late 1950s and RTÉ's role in this process has been questioned. Often associated with a late postwar shift from a national to a global economy and a drive towards improved education, standards of living and economic activity, the narrative of modernisation suggests the march of progress and social and economic liberalism. Yet, as one of the key symbols of progress, RTÉ was less a facilitator and sometimes more an inhibitor of social change.<sup>15</sup> This mirrored wider Irish society in which women remained in many ways shackled to a Catholic conservative past. During the 1950s and 1960s Irish women had no legal access to contraception, had no right to divorce, had no right to equal pay; and were subject to a marriage bar in civil service employment which prevented them from working after marriage.<sup>16</sup> A smooth transition towards liberalism was not experienced by Irish women who, instead, had to engage in extensive activism and advocacy to enact social change.

Although advocacy by and for Irish women had long existed, those advocacy groups which emerged during the late 1960s and particularly into the 1970s and beyond - women's organisations, groups and movements - were established to provoke radical change in relation to the aforementioned issues.<sup>17</sup> This included the National Association of Widows in Ireland formed in 1967 to fight for the rights of lone mothers; the Irish Family Planning Rights Association established in 1970; the formation in the early 1970s of a First Commission on the Status of Women in Ireland which emerged from collaboration between various existing women's organisations; and, in 1970 the Irish Women's Liberation Movement which issued a manifesto in 1971 *Chains or Change*.<sup>18</sup> Launched on RTÉ's *The Late Late Show* in 1971, this manifesto, demanded equality of education, equality before the law, equality in pay, access to contraception and justice for deserted wives who, at that time, had no access to state supports. Linda Connolly argues that this television exposure was both a help and a hinderance offering a platform, on the one hand, but subjecting the movement to scrutiny and criticism, on the other hand.<sup>19</sup> Further, Anne O'Brien points out that the host encouraged controversy in his attitude to the women.<sup>20</sup> She cites host Byrne's 'challenge' of an RTÉ report on the absence of women by offering his hosting chair to a female colleague, supposedly undermining the claim that women never hosted RTÉ programmes.<sup>21</sup> O'Brien also foregrounds the irony of this supposed offer of equality with the actual reality that since its launch in 1971 there has never been an Irish host for *The Late Late Show* which continues to air on RTÉ.

## Gender and Television Work

This absence of women in television production has been the subject of much recent scholarship. Many critical histories of early and formative television have pointed to the opportunities that were available to women in television work, particularly given their marginalisation in radio broadcasting as it professionalised.<sup>22</sup> However, scholars also point to the means by which television work became gendered, how women were excluded or how they left the television industry altogether.<sup>23</sup> Other histories have engaged in a recuperative exercise aimed at highlighting the contributions of women to television, often taking the form of individual biographies that critically assess the circumstances in which women worked, while championing women's role in television and securing their place in the grand narrative of television history.<sup>24</sup> However, concern about exceptionalising women's work has caused scholars to examine histories from below and to examine and map the ordinary, day-to-day operational, technical and administrative work undertaken by women beyond the key 'above the line' roles. Sandon, Terkanian and Arnold, for example, examine the technical and engineering work undertaken by women, particularly in the wartime and postwar period, finding that both male culture and policy combined to make working conditions challenging for women.<sup>25</sup> Baker and Hill examine the administrative and secretarial work undertaken by women and point to how this was devalued because of its gendered status.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars have paid equal attention to the activism and advocacy of women who formed organisations and movements in the effort to gain more access to and better representation of women in (and on) television. Baker's and Connor's examination of the strike undertaken by female secretaries in the Australian Broadcasting Commission reveals a very temporary shift towards equality in the organisation.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Galt's extensive study of television union activism in the UK demonstrates that gender policies did little to improve the actual working conditions of female union members.<sup>28</sup> Perlman demonstrates how the National Organization of Women's petitions during the 1970s to have better representation of and roles for women in television had material results and were an effective tool in gaining better access to broadcasters and policy-makers.<sup>29</sup> This makes for an interesting comparison with the Irish case discussed in this article, since similar strategies of data collection, reporting and political advocacy were utilised to challenge RTÉ to improve its representation of women in the organisation and on its screen. While there has been a fairly sustained drive in Ireland from external and internal organisations and groups to advocate for more

women in RTÉ and better quality and quantity of female representation, there has been less focus on this in Irish television scholarship.

Scholarship on women and Irish television does point to the limited opportunities, the structural inequalities and the gendering of roles that is pervasive across Irish television organisations and companies. O'Brien's study of women in media work has identified both top down and bottom up cultures and practices that produce inequality.<sup>30</sup> Kerrigan, Liddy and O'Brien's extensive study of inequality in the Irish audiovisual sectors found that, while there is a will to create better opportunities for women, there has been a struggle to find a way to attain this.<sup>31</sup> Wait's research on women and Irish television is one of the rare instances of scholarship on women's roles in early Irish television, the wider public attitudes to women who worked in television and the culture that negated women's creativity, skill and labour in television's early years.<sup>32</sup> Wait's work is concerned with the period between 1957 and 1973 and ends at this article's jumping off point with the First Commission on the Status of Women that was instrumental in foregrounding gender inequality in Ireland and which spurred on and complimented women's activism around work, status, civic engagement and human rights.<sup>33</sup>

## Research Methods

This research is concerned with understanding a particular historical movement and the activities of various people and organisations around the question of women's work in, and representation on, early Irish television. It takes a qualitative approach to the investigation of women's opportunities in front of and behind RTÉ cameras and RTÉ's response to claims of bias and sexism that emerged from studies undertaken by various groups who were concerned with women's place in Irish society and media. This article is concerned with the different 'actors' in the field of Irish television: RTÉ as an organisation and mass media and groups organised around women's role in RTÉ. Given the period under which the events took place, this article also, by necessity, adopts historical research methods since it aims to investigate and represent the complexities of the past and the complex interactions between the aforementioned actors that have shaped Irish television as it is today.<sup>34</sup> Finally, this study is grounded in the case study approach since it aims to understand a particular phenomenon from multiple perspectives and through various sources of data.

In order to understand the roles of and relationships between the groups concerned with women and RTÉ, the article examined the emergence of public discourse about the role of women in television during the height of women's feminist activism and calls for gender equality in Ireland in the 1970s, particularly from key public figures and RTÉ itself. National newspaper databases were used to identify the emergence of trends in such reporting and the subsequent period in which public discourse declined. In addition, the RTÉ archives were consulted and key data relating to its engagement with and response to women's activism helped to establish the boundaries of this research. Focus was then narrowed to two main activities and working groups that were instrumental in lobbying for improved representation of women during the late 1970s and early 1980s: the Women in Broadcasting Study Group, led by Senator Gemma Hussey; and RTÉ's own Working Group on Women in Broadcasting both of which were vocal in identifying issues with women's representation at the organisation and in making a series of recommendations for change that RTÉ then responded to. The main sources of data are: the RTÉ document and audiovisual archives held at RTÉ; the Gemma Hussey archives held at University College Dublin; the Irish national press; and public interviews and recordings with people who were actors in the events. To date, women's role in Irish media during this period has not been systematically studied and, consequently, this article contributes to this scholarship and offers a feminist approach to Irish television history.

### **RTÉ and television in the 1970s**

Although broadcasting had existed in Ireland since 1926, television arrived comparatively late, on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1961 with a single station, *Telifís Éireann* (TÉ). Like radio, Irish television was established as a public service, albeit also dependent upon commercial funding. Although it had no formal competitor station, in reality many Irish audiences, especially along the Eastern seaboard, were able to access British television.<sup>35</sup> This rendered RTÉ somewhat vulnerable to market forces, given Ireland's small size, low revenues and, consequently, low funding available to the broadcaster.<sup>36</sup> The early period of Irish television was also shaped by internal and external forces, with RTÉ expanding its service dramatically in the 1970s with two new radio stations and an additional television station in 1978. RTÉ also found itself in a challenging political environment regarding the Northern Ireland Troubles when the Irish government, under legislation titled Section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960, effectively curtailed broadcasters' ability to represent the voices and positions of

paramilitary organisations that were involved in the Troubles, something that RTÉ itself resisted.<sup>37</sup> RTÉ argued that it was crucial that it represented the various voices that emerged from the conflict, but the State feared that airing such views threatened the Irish State itself.<sup>38</sup> On this latter point, part of the mythology of Irish television's liberalising and progressive ethos emerges from a focus on news and current affairs and, in particular, programmes that addressed these challenging political and national moments and movements. Talk shows like *The Late Late Show* were considered to be socially liberal, and current affairs programmes like *7 Days* (RTÉ 1, 1966-1976) were seen to be taking on difficult political and social subjects.<sup>39</sup> With so many social campaigns and movements championing various political and often national causes, and many social justice movements advocating for better rights and a more equitable society, RTÉ current affairs programmes gave voices to such movements. Equally, RTÉ had attempted to produce programmes to reflect larger social campaigns such as International Women's Year in 1975. However, as Wait points out in her study of early Irish television, this mythology of change that dominates much scholarship on the topic is based on a selective and limited assessment of the historical narrative of Irish television.<sup>40</sup> For Wait, the selective lens adopted in producing this history of RTÉ is a gendered one, insofar as those programmes championed as agents of change were largely those with limited representation of women.<sup>41</sup> Ferriter also points to the dearth of women in leadership roles in RTÉ and in 'serious' programmes departments such as news and current affairs and sports.<sup>42</sup> By the 1970s, while attention to women's issue was fomenting in Ireland and in Irish broadcasting, change was slow in RTÉ. In fact, it was largely through the efforts of individual women and women's groups that RTÉ was changed rather than the change-maker. It is to this topic that we now turn.

## Two Groups with One Shared Goal

'Men dominate broadcasting' read a headline of the *Sunday Independent* newspaper on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1979. The news report referred to the compiling of a report by the United Nations Report on Women in Media and quoted one of its authors, Irish academic Mary Gallagher, as saying that 'The vast majority of women who work in either television or radio, are in the clerical grades. It is the exception rather than the rule if any woman takes a 'decision making' position.'<sup>43</sup> Having asserted the problem of women's underrepresentation in media, it pointed to what would become two key drivers of change to the pattern of gender inequity at the national broadcaster RTÉ. It introduced



the Working Party on Women in Broadcasting which was established in 1978 by the RTÉ Authority to examine the employment of women in the organisation as well as the representation of women and women's issues on its programmes.<sup>44</sup> This same report turned to Senator Gemma Hussey, who was by 1981 the Fine Gael (a main centre-left Irish political party) Spokesperson for Women's Affairs.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to the formal investigative process being undertaken by the Working Party, Senator Hussey was more scathing of RTÉ and more urgent in her call for change. Hussey is quoted as saying,

Women contrary to what I have often heard said by weary sounding RTE (sic) executives, are not a "minority interest group"...They are the majority of the population, whose roles and attitudes affect virtually the roles and attitudes of the other sex. There are implications in the role of women and its changes which fundamentally affect every human activity including employment, structures and the basic unit of society - the family.<sup>46</sup>

The report, in effect, spelled out the key players in the movement to improve women's representation in RTÉ as well as the differences in approach taken by each. The Working Party, during the years of its first reporting (1979-1981), was inward-facing and concerned with women in the organisation, it was highly bureaucratic and beset by challenges including the commitment of RTÉ staff which was uneven, the capacity for the Party to implement real change, since the RTÉ Authority had the ultimate say on if and how any recommendations would be implemented.

At the same time, outside the organisation, Senator Hussey had an established reputation as a feminist concerned with women's representation and participation in public life. She was a founding member of the Women's Political Association (WPA), which included Mary Robinson, later the first female President of Ireland. The WPA's goal was to raise public awareness of the need for gender balance in political representation. It was this same interest in gender balance and equality of opportunity that saw Hussey form the Study Group discussed in this article. Hussey was herself a politician and was elected a member of the Irish Seanad, first as an independent and later as a member of Fine Gael.<sup>47</sup> Hussey used her status as a Senator to make representations in Seanad debates about problematic gender representations on RTÉ. Already aware that RTÉ was establishing its own internal Party to examine gender inequality, Hussey nevertheless saw it as important to have an external pressure group to advocate for better representation of women on RTÉ screens and in the

RTÉ workplace. To this end, she established the Women in Broadcasting Study Group in 1980, which was invited to make a submission on this topic to the RTÉ Authority and its Senior Management that same year.<sup>48</sup> Hussey's report was compiled between August and October 1980, with submission made by 10<sup>th</sup> November 1980 suggesting a more urgent and quickly produced report. Minutes of the Study Group's meetings suggest that the workload of gathering data and engaging in television viewing and analysis was distributed among the members, who volunteered to undertake specific tasks to speed up the production of the final submission.<sup>49</sup> The Study Group was more outward facing, seeing women's participation in media as a societal issue and media as a potential facilitator or inhibitor of progressive social change on the women's issue.<sup>50</sup>

### **One Goal, Two Methods**

Each group adopted very different methodologies to the issue of gender equality and RTÉ. Both groups were concerned with examining the employment and career opportunities for women at RTÉ, the nature of female representation on RTÉ programmes, and the advertising on its channels. The Working Party's membership was largely made up of existing RTÉ staff members who including Patricia 'Tish' Barry (Producer's Assistant), Bob Collins (Assistant to the Director-General), Deirdre Friel (Senior Television Producer) and Clare Duignan (Radio Producer).<sup>51</sup> It had membership from external employment organisations. Meetings were often sporadic, with frustration expressed from members about the slow progress and last-minute meeting cancellations.<sup>52</sup> This contrasted with the Study Group which was made up of volunteer members from across the political, academic and private spheres and who had a much stricter deadline to meet.

Since it was operating from within the organisation, RTÉ's Working Party focused on gathering data from its employees, employment records and its policies. The Working Party had pursued a variety of different avenues for data collection, including undertaking questionnaires and carrying out analysis of its television and radio programmes. However, RTÉ's own Audience Research Department was clear about the limited resources available for content analysis of programmes which it claimed, in a report to the Working Party, was 'an enormously time-consuming and expensive procedure requiring professional analysts.'<sup>53</sup> The Audience Research Department, therefore, recommended document analysis of existing personnel files and, only if this did not contain sufficient

data was a survey or questionnaire to be undertaken. The Working Party formed subcommittees on Programmes, on Job Opportunities for Women and on Advertising, each of which was tasked with data gathering and with reporting back to the Working Party. Their submissions formed the basis of the report which was submitted to RTÉ in April 1981.

The Study Group had proceeded with more urgency. Despite having convened in mid-1980, well after the establishment of RTÉ's own Working Party, they produced their report much more quickly. This was, in part, driven by Hussey herself who had already publicly criticised the lack of progress of RTÉ's Working Party during government debates about broadcasting.<sup>54</sup> Hussey's approach was to form the Study Group very quickly where they decided on key issues, on each member's responsibilities in the group and on what the final submission should look like. Where the Working Party delegated data gathering to its subgroups, in the Study Group each person was assigned a task of data gathering. Study Group members focused on the representation of women on programmes, in advertising and in the RTÉ-issued publication, RTÉ guide. One member was tasked with gathering data on numbers of women working in key roles in programme production.<sup>55</sup> The Study Group produced a series of findings on the quality and quantity of representation of women across the main two channels for both radio and television across a three-month timeline. It also, in its final submission, included staffing data taken from the 1979 RTÉ handbook which spoke to the small number of women in senior positions. The submission provided comparative data from other national contexts.<sup>56</sup> The Study Group's report was submitted before the Working Party's report – November 1980 compared to the Working Party's April 1981 submission. Nonetheless, despite the very different approaches to research and data gathering, and the different lenses through which each group examined the gender issue at RTÉ, both the Study Group and Working Party produced remarkably similar findings and recommendations.

### **Different Groups, Same Findings**

'Senator Hussey today welcomed the Working Party report and said its recommendations were "almost identical" to her own report.'<sup>57</sup> Both the Study Group and the Working Party were concerned with three interrelated issues: 1) the representation of women in RTÉ programmes, 2) the advertisements RTÉ broadcast; and 3) the employment of women at RTÉ. Although each group were working with different overall datasets, both reached very similar conclusions and made

recommendations about the overall treatment and representation of women by the broadcaster. While RTÉ only referred to addressing the recommendations of the Working Party, the reference to the Study Group's activities in government addresses and debates, and the public representation of the Group's concerns in the press, meant that the women-in-broadcasting issues were a matter of public attention and in the public domain. That both groups sequentially made the same charges against RTÉ and made similar recommendations was important in pressuring RTÉ to take action. Over subsequent years, and following publication of both reports, RTÉ maintained a Liaison Group charged with implementing the 44 recommendations of the Working Party, which mirrored and reinforced those of the Study Group.

On the first issue of women in programmes, both groups claimed RTÉ was underrepresenting and undervaluing women and their expertise in its programmes. The Working Party found that programmes that regularly featured contributors and panellists had fewer women than men.<sup>58</sup> It cautioned RTÉ to avoid stereotypical representations of women that didn't reflect the changing role of women in Irish society and to pay particular attention to imported programmes that may feature poor representations of women. The Working Party praised the radio programme *Women Today* (on air at the time) and recommended that a television equivalent be produced, stressing the importance of television as a mass media. It also recommended that 'broadcast interviews avoid trivialising references to women' and that women's issues, interests and skills be better represented across its programmes.<sup>59</sup>

The Study Group's findings were very similar: men dominated all areas as reporters, announcers, experts and news readers. Prime time news television significantly over-represented men. Programme hosts were largely male and when women were present on programmes they made 'little impact when one examines the amount of air time allowed them.'<sup>60</sup> When women appeared on RTÉ, the Study Group claimed, they were stereotyped as caring and domestic or they were sexualised.<sup>61</sup> Men were also stereotyped, but as professionals, leaders, and heroes. Like the Working Party, specific recommendations were made regarding the 'introduction of a prime-time women's affairs programme such as *Women Today* on RTE television.'<sup>62</sup> However, the Study Group went further in recommending that RTÉ carry out independent research on sexism and stereotyping in its programmes and reporting on such; in suggesting the implementation of an 'awareness programme' for RTÉ producers about sex stereotyping; in calling for the introduction of a 'language directive' for those involved in programme making; in aiming to eliminate gender stereotyping; and finally, in establishing an ongoing analysis

of complaints about gender imbalance and stereotyping.<sup>63</sup> Stereotyping and underrepresentation were characteristic not only of programmes but of advertising, too. While the Study Group was more ambitious in its recommendations, its findings were undermined in the press, with one journalist stating that more evidence was needed to make the case that RTÉ should change.<sup>64</sup> The Working Party had this evidence.

On the second issue of women's representation in advertisements, both groups found that women, overall, were poorly represented and that advertising and programmes generally leaned on outdated and problematic gender stereotypes. Women were either misrepresented or underrepresented and, therefore, both groups called for changes to the codes of advertising standards and for better quality and higher quantity of representation of women in advertisements. The Working Party concluded that RTÉ 'television advertising typically portrays women in limited and traditional roles and as being dependent and incapable of rationale thought.'<sup>65</sup> The Working Party pointed to the influence that television advertising may have, particularly on children. Among its more tangible recommendations were that RTÉ's code of advertising standards was changed to make it clearly non-sexist; that the voice-overs for advertisement slides would be gender balanced; that the complaints process for viewers regarding advertisements be made clear; and that decision-making groups for advertisements be gender balanced. There were additional but less concrete recommendations including that advertisements reflect 'women's changing role in Irish society' and that advertisements should be 'restrained' in their sexualisation of women. The Study Group also found that the images of women were 'outdated, degrading and trivial' and often limited to roles such as 'housekeeper or sex object.'<sup>66</sup> It found that women were largely absent, particularly in voice-overs, where men were overrepresented as the voice of authority or experts. The Study Group, like the Working Party, recommended that RTÉ adopt non-sexist guidance for advertisements. It suggested specific changes to the Code of Standards for Broadcast Advertising such as the inclusion of statements like 'advertisements must not be sexist' and 'advertisements should not portray women as being exclusively or mainly responsible for childcare and home care.'<sup>67</sup> RTÉ did act on the recommendations of the Working Party. A Liaison Group tasked with the implementation of the recommendations subsequently worked on re-wording its advertising Code of Standards to avoid sexist language and discourage gender stereotyping.<sup>68</sup>

A final, but crucial set of recommendations from both groups pertained to the third issue that was the employment opportunities and working conditions for women in broadcasting. For the

Working Party, in particular, the concern for women working at RTÉ was reflected in many of the recommendations. For the Study Group, although it did not have access to much internal data relating to employment, it nonetheless also made strong recommendations about the training and employment of women. The Working Party identified four key areas of concern: 1) gender segregation of roles and jobs, which was associated with undervaluing of women's labour and a lack of women at senior levels of RTÉ; 2) the lack of effort to encourage women to apply for non-traditional roles and the lack of information on how to apply for work; 3) the lack of opportunities within the organisation for women's professional and technical development; and 4) the impact of women's care roles and family responsibilities on their work life and the lack of supports available at RTÉ for the same.<sup>69</sup> While the Study Group spent less time detailing the issues and inequalities that women experienced in RTÉ work, it did provide some statistics that evidenced a lack of women in leadership and senior positions in the organisation and in programme production. It also noted that the lower down the hierarchy of jobs one went, the higher the proportion of women one found at RTÉ.<sup>70</sup> Both groups, in finding similar issues regarding women's opportunities at RTÉ, made very direct and ambitious recommendations for RTÉ to act upon.

In response to the four key areas of concern regarding opportunities for women at RTÉ, the Working Party recommended that: 1) RTÉ review entry points to the organisation with a view to encouraging proportionate representation of women; 2) RTÉ establish an attachment scheme for those wishing to change roles in the organisation, provide schools with information on entry routes into RTÉ work, include an equal opportunities statement on RTÉ job ads, and eliminates age qualifications and non-essential academic or professional qualifications from RTÉ job ads; 3) that the existing RTÉ Training and Staff Development Department be resourced so that it can assist women in moving out of traditional female roles, that opportunities for further study for career development are promoted, and that, more generally, attention should be paid to the promotion of women to senior roles; and 4) that RTÉ establish creche facilities, provide parental leave opportunities, and encourage flexible working arrangements. The Study Group's recommendations mirrored many of the Working Party's recommendations: it promoted training schemes for women, specifically those seeking technical work, a positive discrimination scheme to encourage women into more senior and visible roles, with set targets of 50% for newsreaders, and workshops that aimed to promote gender equality in broadcasting.

The training, career routes and measures to promote the employability of women that were reflected in both groups' recommendations were included in RTÉ's responses, which the organisation promised to act upon. In response to the Working Party's report, RTÉ came out in support of the recommendations stating that it 'agreed in principle with the recommendations in the Report in the context of what was realistic and in a timescale which was practical.' It committed to approving an 'action programme as soon as possible.'<sup>71</sup>

RTÉ did act upon the recommendations by soon forming a Liaison Group, made up of original Working Party members and other Trade Union representatives, and chaired by Adavin O'Driscoll. Through its three existing sub-groups, the Liaison Group was tasked, with investigating the various recommendations and with producing 'responses' to each of the 44 recommendations. However, progress was frustratingly slow. Liaison Group members often expressed frustration with the lack of commitment from those in key senior positions at RTÉ in improving the working conditions and employment opportunities for women. Much time was spent drafting proposals for the redrafting of the RTÉ Code of Advertising Standards and the draft policy document that was to state RTÉ's commitment to creating opportunities for women. In fact, these were still under discussion in 1984.<sup>72</sup> There was a perception that RTÉ was less advanced regarding gender equality in the workforce, something made all the more evident when the Liaison Group invited other state bodies such as Aer Rianta (at that time operator of Dublin Airport and Aer Lingus, the national airline) and ESB (Ireland's nationalised electricity and energy supplier) to present their gender equality and affirmative action activities, which greatly surpassed those as RTÉ.<sup>73</sup> Numerous times, the Liaison Group questioned the investment made by RTÉ in women's issues and drew attention to the lack of actions on fairly simple things like inclusion of equality statements in job advertisements. It was, in fact, felt that the Personnel Department were inhibiting progress on this front.<sup>74</sup>

In addition, where some changes had been implemented, for example in terms of information on careers at RTÉ or published guidelines for interviewers, it was felt that these had little effect on the negative attitude and culture that worked against women.<sup>75</sup> According to Chairperson Adavin O'Driscoll, 'the general feeling among women in RTE [about RTÉ's commitment to change] seems to be one of despondency.'<sup>76</sup> A commonly cited reason for the lack of change in the opportunities for women at RTÉ was the national recession which had an impact on RTÉ's external recruitment and put it in a challenging financial situation. This was said to make it difficult to improve recruitment of

women, since there was effectively a recruitment freeze.<sup>77</sup> RTÉ's financial difficulties were also given as the reason that the promised creche facilities were stalled in 1984, eventually materialising in 1986.<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, the implementation of the various recommendations was uneven in the years that followed and, when the responses to recommendations – good or bad – were made, the Liaison Group's activities were more subdued.

## Conclusion

Despite the limits on the successful implementation of recommendations from both the Working Party and the Study Group, what remained was public attention to the role of women in Irish broadcasting and a concern with equality in media representation and media work. Both groups had brought attention to the lack of gender equality in Irish broadcasting and ensured that this was a matter that required action by RTÉ as the main national broadcaster. Hussey was able to place the role of women in broadcasting on the political agenda and to take RTÉ to task as a publicly funded entity. She was able to give the subject serious political weight and to use her position to critique RTÉ in the areas of women's representation and women's careers. Equally, the Working Party were able to pressure RTÉ from the inside and to use public media and the press as a way of drawing attention to the inequalities experienced by women within the organisation. Both groups approached the issue with different motivations and different attitudes, but with the same overall goal. Although Hussey criticised the Working Party's slow pace, it was still the latter that could actually instigate change, even if many within RTÉ resisted. In the following years, and in the years since, the groups' reports have been referenced time and again in news featuring the opportunities available to women in RTÉ and wider society.<sup>79</sup> In addition, attention has remained on the question of equality in media work. Women who worked at RTÉ often drew attention to conditions for women, especially for working mothers. Positive experiences often related to the availability of creche facilities on-site at RTÉ – a rarity now as it was then.<sup>80</sup> Negative responses refer to the impossibility of balancing RTÉ work with motherhood and caring responsibilities.<sup>81</sup>

Given such ambivalence about the progress achieved for women in and on RTÉ, perhaps the legacy one should consider here is that of the groups' activities and the subsequent responses from RTÉ. The efforts undertaken by the Study Group and the Working Party are historical achievements since both groups specifically detailed what needed to change. Many of the things they identified – better



representation of women on screen, more opportunities for women in technical roles, more representation of women in senior roles – still need to change as evidenced in recent gendered pay scandals and in the persistent lack of female hosts for programmes such as *The Late Late Show*. Although there continues to be a need for improved conditions and opportunities for women in Irish broadcasting, the legacy of activism has continued, particularly in recent years that has seen investment in monitoring and reporting of gender equality across broadcasting and film in Ireland. In recent years, RTÉ itself has appointed a Diversity and Inclusion Lead and published its Diversity and Inclusion Charter which commits to improving diversity within its organisation and the representations it produces.<sup>82</sup> Wider audiovisual organisations and agencies have also made similar commitments, with Screen Ireland (previously the Irish Film Board), an important funder of Irish audiovisual production, producing a Six Point Gender Action Plan in 2015 aimed at increasing the number of women in key roles in film and television.<sup>83</sup> The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland – a key funder of Irish television – likewise produced a Gender Action Plan in 2018.<sup>84</sup>

## Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this article.

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