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People Empowered.

Luba Kassova

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# From Outrage to Opportunity:

How to Include The  
Missing Perspectives  
of Women of All Colors  
in News Leadership  
and Coverage

The third in the series of Missing Perspectives reports



# Part 2

How to include the missing perspectives of women in news coverage: representation, storytelling, and portrayal. The problems and the solutions



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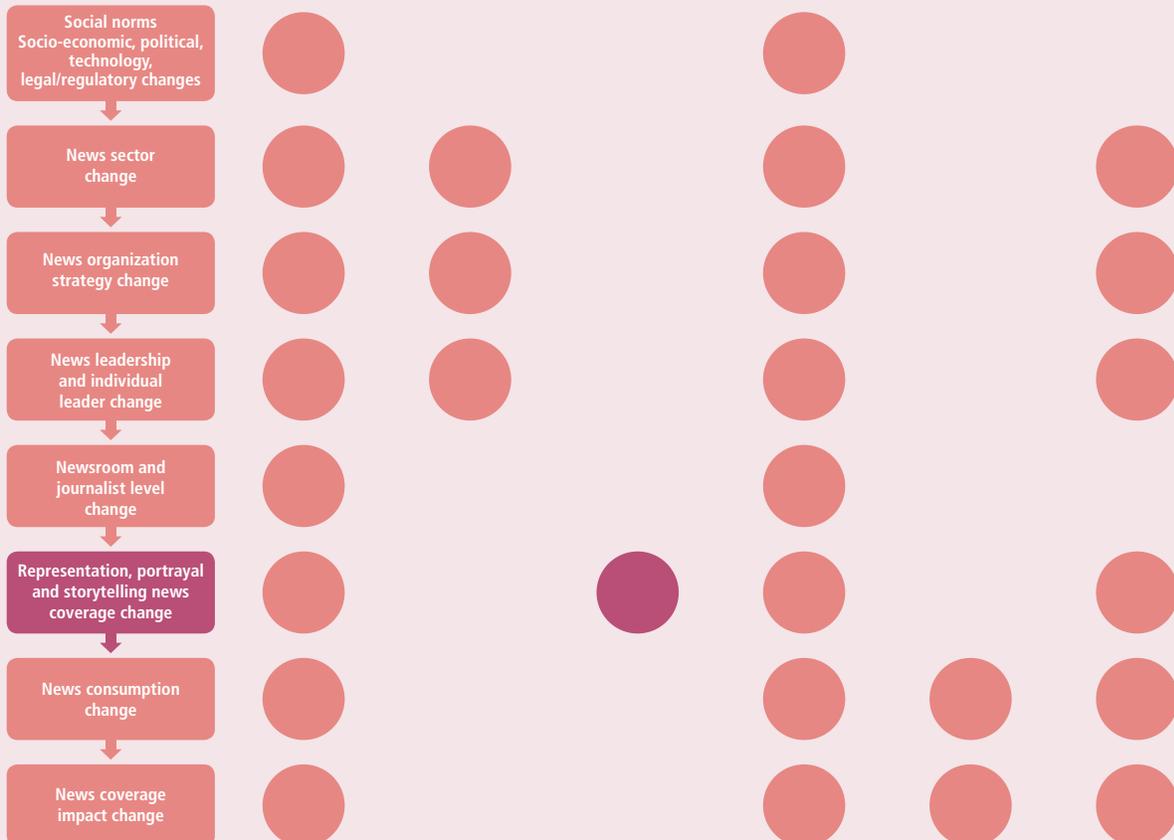
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## Part 2 at a glance

This part of the report focuses on two elements in the news value chain: newsgathering and news outputs. It explores the missing perspectives of women in news coverage, including the underreported societal issues that disproportionately affect women such as the pay, power, safety, authority, confidence, health, and ageism gender gaps. It forensically examines why women's share of voice as protagonists and contributors in stories remains marginalized, and why their stereotypical portrayal mainly as non-experts and victims in the news has been stuck for decades. Importantly, it explores what drivers and solutions of positive change are available to improve the balance in women's representation in news coverage, storytelling, and portrayal. Four trailblazing news organizations are featured for their successes in reshaping news coverage to be more inclusive: Khabar Lahariya, Nation Media Group, The Fuller Project and the Guardian.



This section uncovers that editors' lived experiences and their internalized journalistic standards influence their decisions about what to run in the news and often lead to them omitting stories/angles that focus on different gender gaps. The micro/human stories within the big political, economic, or health stories are often missed out, as are the perspectives of people of color (in the UK and the US) in political news. Status quo bias and gender blindness are two key institutional biases of news organizations. They lead to the gaps in newsgathering/coverage that manifest in women-centric stories or angles and women's voices being missed. In addition, journalism suffers from a short-term outlook, a tendency towards reductive storytelling, and resistance to a forensic analysis of its own shortcomings, all of which impede progress. Women's portrayal in the news is the news industry's blind spot. The problem is simply missed.

Optimistically, there are many institutional and individual solutions that are available to news organizations to unlock the stalled progress. Among them are those that cluster around raising awareness of the issues, removing existing barriers (e.g. appointing newsroom storytelling inclusion champions; launching gender or race desks) and creating new habits (e.g. 360 degree editing, or conducting cost-effective portrayal deep dives).

# Chapter 1

## The existing but underexplored gender gaps in news coverage

The absence of an explicit gender lens in 99% of online news coverage in six countries from the global north and south, uncovered in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*, indicates that the news fails to cover sufficiently, or indeed misses out altogether, the various gaps where women's opportunities and realities lag behind those of men. AKAS has identified seven such gaps which form the subject of the following chapters: gaps in power, pay, safety, authority, confidence, health, and ageism. In each of these areas, the male-favoring biases that underpin societal structures, cultures, and organizations provide men with an unfair head start over women.

I asked 22 editorial news leaders from India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, the UK, and the US which two of the seven gaps they thought should be tackled most urgently in news coverage. Most, both in the global south (64%) and the global north (63%), identified the **pay gap** as the most urgent, not least because it is measurable and straightforward to track and address (see Figure 25). The pay gap was the only one which generated agreement among

the majority of editorial leaders, whether men or women, and irrespective of their ethnicity.

“I think the pay gap is something that is data driven that we can tackle in a very [...] tangible way. It's something for which there are solutions... And the power gap, because ultimately, all the other things will relate to that.”

These were the thoughts of a male senior news leader from the global north on why the pay and power gaps should be prioritized in coverage.

Slightly less than half of the news leaders interviewed (45%) identified the **power gap** as requiring urgent coverage. It was seen as underpinning many of the other existing gaps and was particularly closely interlinked

**Figure 25: News coverage priorities identified by senior news leaders (2022)**

		News leaders	%
Pay gap	Women are paid less than men for the same work	14	64%
Power gap	Men have more power than women	10	45%
Confidence gap	Women tend to be less confident than men	6	27%
Authority gap	Women are seen as less authoritative than men in news and in life	6	27%
Safety gap	Women experience or are threatened with violence more than men	5	23%
Health gap	Women are taken less seriously than men when experiencing medical issues	5	14%
Ageism gap	Women are discriminated against more than men as they age	1	5%

Source: Author's interviews with 22 senior news leaders, February-April 2022. NB One respondent chose to prioritize three gaps. Q: Which two of these existing gaps between men and women do you think should be tackled most urgently in news coverage?

with the authority gap. One female news leader from the global south contextualized the power gap within the experience of news organizations:

*“Somebody can play up numbers and say, ‘We have so many women in leadership positions’. But if you don’t give those women the power to execute their mandate and their leadership, then it’s just superficial. If women have their roles, they should also be given the authority to execute them. And then, of course, there’s the power play in the newsroom, it’s really a man’s world. So you find yourself, a lot of times, not part of that power at all.”*

There was, however, no significant consensus among the news leaders interviewed about the urgency of covering any of the other gaps identified. The **ageism gap** remained under the radar for all but one female news leader from the global south, while the **health gap** was chosen by a minority or by news leaders who tended to hold different interpretations of what actually defined it, suggesting that news leaders are less familiar with this gap.

The **confidence gap** was prioritized by 27% of the diverse group of news leaders interviewed. All of those who chose this gap were from the global south and within this group there was a perception that sometimes women impose their own glass ceiling by lacking the confidence to push themselves harder. One female leader from the global north, while not selecting the confidence gap as one of her top two to focus on in coverage, spoke in some detail about its detrimental impact:

*“So many people, especially women, don’t have the confidence, or don’t go for jobs, or I’ve suggested them for jobs and they’ve been like, ‘What are you talking about?’... and then they’ve seen who’s got it - a white male - and thought, ‘Actually, no, maybe I am better than that’.... There are some brilliant people who work in our newsroom, who don’t speak up as much as they should because they don’t have the confidence.”*

As in the case of the confidence gap, the **authority gap**, which was perceived as closely related to the power gap, was prioritized by 27% of the leaders interviewed. Those selecting this gap as an urgent coverage lens highlighted



how often women were dismissed despite their expertise. A male news editor from the global north summarized the problem:

*“I think that often women, even with the highest level of expertise, are not taken as seriously as men, and often it could be for whatever reason. Especially in certain areas, like science and finance, men have dominated for so long. I think women don’t get the same automatic respect for their expertise and authority.”*

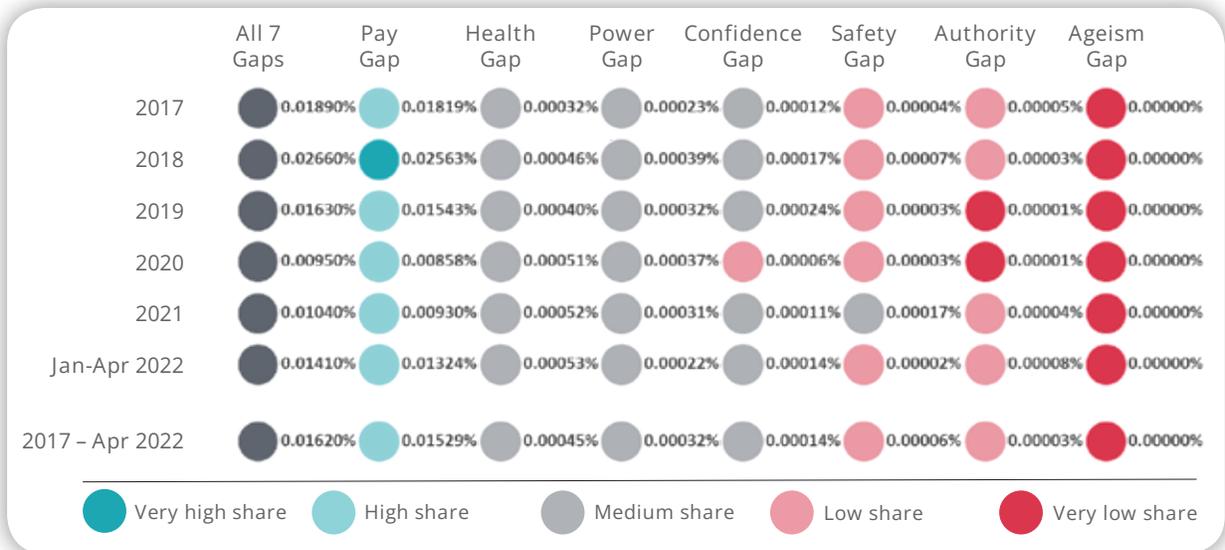
### **Editors’ lived experiences inform their decisions about what to cover in the news**

Interestingly, the news editors I interviewed frequently considered the gaps through the lens of the journalism industry, rather than that of broader society. This was the case for 13 out of the 22 leaders who pondered this question. This emphasizes how important editors’ own lived experience is in deciding which stories they should cover. To understand the level of news coverage each of the gaps has received, AKAS ran an analysis of global news coverage between January 2017 and April 2022, using the GDELT Project’s global online news archive of over 900 million English and non-English online news stories.<sup>84</sup> Figures 26 and 27 show a significant alignment between the views expressed by global news leaders in the interviews and the proportion of global news coverage dedicated to each gap. While all the gaps received minimal attention in the news, as evidenced by the low proportion of coverage, the pay gap enjoyed more coverage than any of the others (see Figure 27). At the opposite end of the spectrum is the ageism gap, which received no attention either in news coverage or among news editors.

The following sections examine in more detail the seven gaps that exist between women and men, using global data and/or analyzed data from the six countries of focus in this report, as well as the opinions of the global news leaders who were interviewed for this project.

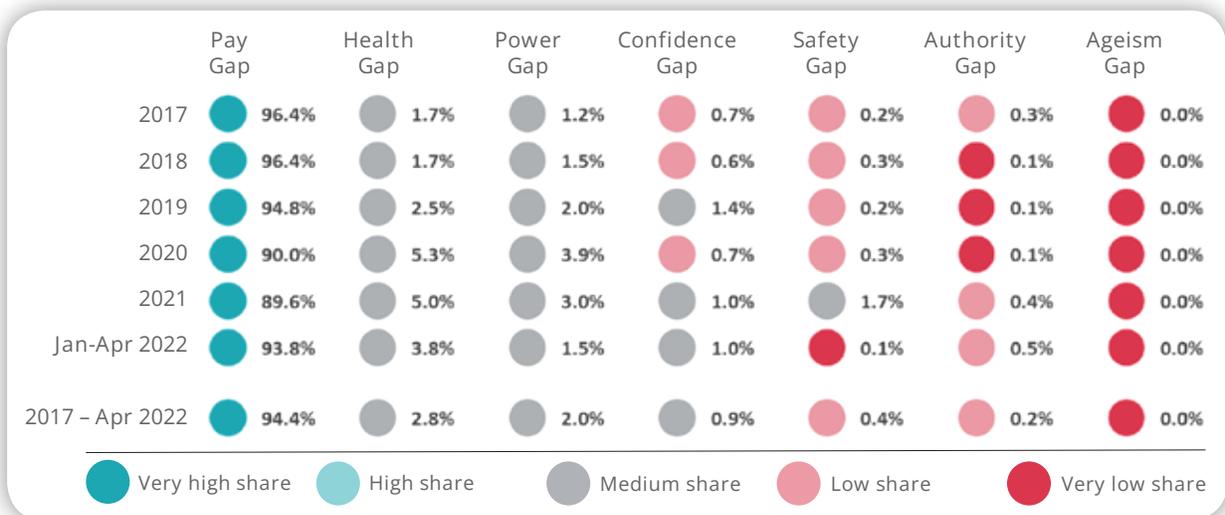
84. The archive was searched to determine the proportion of articles that contained the terms “female” or “women” or “gender” and each of the seven gender gaps.

**Figure 26: Proportion of news coverage containing any of the gender gap terms (2017-2022)**



Source: AKAS analysis of GDELT Project global online news archive (2022)

**Figure 27: Profile of the gender gaps in news coverage compared to one another (2017-2022)<sup>85</sup>**



Source: AKAS analysis of GDELT Project global online news archive (2022)

85. All figures have been rounded to one decimal place, so rows may not total 100%.

# The power gap

The power gap, which measures how much more power men have than women, manifests in multiple societal dimensions and can be analyzed through the prism of various industries across the private and public sectors. This section focuses on the gender power gap at the most senior leadership levels in global business and politics. It also briefly touches on the findings of a recent survey that exposes the current gender power gap in news media leadership in the UK.

**Men are over 20 times more likely to be running Global 500 businesses than women. This is an improvement on the past**

Every year Fortune publishes the Global 500, a list of the 500 largest companies in the world whose combined sales total \$31.7 trillion, or one third of global GDP. This list provides a useful benchmark of who leads companies in the global economy. Fortune also records the gender and race of the CEOs who run these companies. Last year Fortune reported that “*The number of women running Global 500 businesses soars to an all-time high*”<sup>86</sup> while CNBC announced that “*A record number of women are now running Global 500 businesses*”.<sup>87</sup> Seeing the actual numbers swiftly shatters the high expectations built into these headlines. It turns out that the “*record number*” of women is 23 out of 500, which equates to 4.6%. For every 21 CEOs running a Global 500 business, one is a woman. In the US the proportion of women running these most successful businesses in the world is higher (8.2%), meaning men are 11 times more likely to hold CEO roles than women.

Since Fortune began tracking the gender of Global 500 CEOs in 2014, the number of women in these roles has hovered between 12 and 17. Having 23 therefore, few as this is, represents a notable change. In 2021, the racial diversity of women running Fortune 500 companies also improved from one in the previous year to six, thanks mainly to entrants from the US and China. As a result, 26% of the female CEOs and 1.2% of all CEOs in 2021 were women of color. A more recent Deloitte analysis of CEOs from across the world shows that in the six countries of interest, women made up 5-7% of all CEOs.<sup>88</sup>

**Men are 3.8 times more likely to be Members of Parliament than women globally. This gender gap in political leadership varies significantly by region. There have only been small improvements in recent years. Gender quotas work**

The latest Inter-Parliamentary Union report<sup>89</sup>, published in March 2022, revealed that the global proportion of women parliamentarians in 2021 was 26.1%, which is largely flat (up 0.6%) since 2020. However, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Pacific regions, women’s representation in parliaments actually declined, while in the Americas, Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa it grew. The proportion of women parliamentarians remained largely unchanged in Asia.

In the 48 countries which held parliamentary elections in 2021, the proportion of women parliamentarians was 2.1 percentage points higher than in countries whose elections had been held prior to 2021. The number of countries with gender parity or a higher proportion of women in parliament has grown from three to five, with Mexico and Nicaragua having joined Cuba, Rwanda, and the United Arab Emirates.

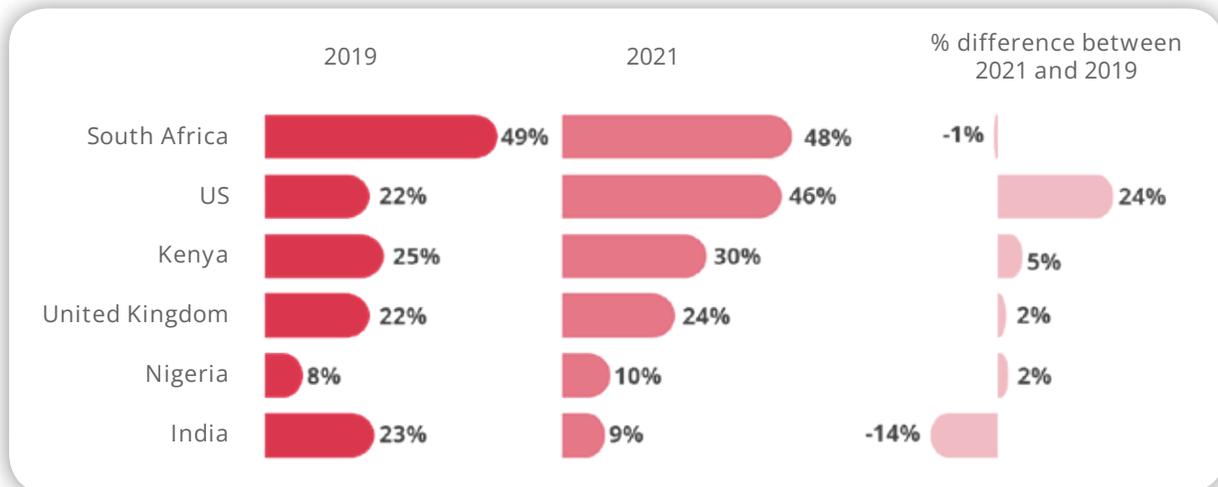
86. Hinchliffe, 2021

87. Connley, 2021

88. Deloitte, 2022

89. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022

**Figure 28: Women in ministerial positions (2019, 2021)**



Source: 2019: World Economic Forum<sup>91</sup>; 2021: IPU Women in Politics 2021 report<sup>92</sup>

The marginal year-on-year uplift in the share of women in parliaments globally (0.6 percentage points) has been attributed to imposed quotas, particularly when they have been accompanied by well thought-through implementation and enforcement rules. In countries with some form of quota for the single/lower house in 2021, 32% of the elected MPs were women, compared to 20% in countries without quotas.

### 1 in 5 parliamentary Speakers globally are women

The 2021 IPU report found that on 1 January 2022 only 22% of Speakers in parliaments were women, creeping up from the previous year by 1.1 percentage point. The proportion of women was slightly higher for the 73 Speakers appointed in 2021: among these, women accounted for 25% of all Speakers, improving the female-male ratio to 1 in 4.

### South Africa and the US are nearing gender parity in women's appointment to ministerial positions. The US has enjoyed the biggest increase since 2019, while India has suffered the steepest decline

Examining the change in the highest levels of political power since 2019 in the six countries of focus in this publication, it emerged that some movement had occurred since the publication of *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*. Three of the six countries recorded improvement in the proportion of women in ministerial roles, the proportion remained stable in South Africa, there was a modest decrease in the UK, while in India it has collapsed. With the shift in power from President Trump to President Biden, the proportion of women in ministerial roles in the US has more than doubled. The share of women in ministerial roles in South Africa remains just below parity, while in Kenya it has grown moderately.<sup>90</sup> Cabinet ministerial positions for women have dropped to a recent

90. At the time of writing in September 2022, the new Kenyan Government's cabinet has not been formulated.

91. World Economic Forum, 2019

92. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021

low of 23% in the UK. However, the proportion of women in the most senior political roles is worst in Nigeria and India where for every one woman in a ministerial position, there are 9 men.

**In the journalism industry in the UK, power continues to reside with men. Leadership and newsroom culture has not shifted since *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News* was published. Moreover, it has contributed to the marginalization and attrition of women journalists**

A recent survey of 1,200 UK journalists<sup>93</sup> revealed that the industry is still perceived as very male-dominated, both at the top and in newsrooms. 70% of female and 59% of male respondents agreed that the most senior roles are dominated by men, while 74% of

all respondents deemed newsroom culture “*macho and intimidating*”, a view endorsed by an even higher proportion of journalists (81%) in national newspapers.

A clear majority of female journalists (81%) felt that high-status journalism beats such as business and politics remain male-dominated. This is corroborated by the fact that in the past ten years, women have constituted just 23% of business/economics/finance shortlists and 26% of politics nominations at the Press Gazette’s British Journalism Awards. By contrast, there has been gender parity in nominations in the arts and entertainment and interview categories.<sup>94</sup>

During the pandemic, the consequence of this male-dominated leadership and culture has been seen in women journalists being more than twice as likely to be furloughed and 40% more likely to be made redundant.<sup>95</sup>

93. Tobitt, 2021

94. Tobitt, 2021

95. Tobitt, 2021



# The pay gap<sup>96</sup>

“Another generation of women will have to wait for gender parity. As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt, closing the global gender gap has increased by a generation from 99.5 years to 135.6 years,”

stated the World Economic Forum’s 2021 Global Gender Gap Report.<sup>97</sup> Its 2022 report, published in July 2022, indicated that the time to reach full parity had declined marginally, but was still 132 years.<sup>98</sup> The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks the evolution of gender-based gaps across four key dimensions in 156 countries: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. According to the 2021 report findings, there was progress towards wage equality at a global level, albeit at a slower pace than previously due to the negative impact of the pandemic. The assessment was that income disparities had only partially been bridged and that there was a persistent lack of women in economic leadership. The latest analysis projects that it would take 151 years to close the economic participation and opportunity gap, which includes the pay gap. None of the countries in the global south or north that have been examined in this report are near to closing this gap.

The monetary gap extends well beyond the disparity in pay between men and women, to

also encompass wealth (i.e. owning a business or property, shares, mortgage equity, and pensions). Recent research<sup>99</sup> has shown that women at the top of the income scale can still experience large wealth gaps compared to men as they own fewer wealth-based assets. In Germany for example, men’s overall business wealth is more than five times greater than women’s. AKAS’ analysis of the GDELT database of global news coverage has revealed that a meager 0.0019% of online global news between January and April 2022 mentioned the wealth gender gap, a decline from 2019 when the figure was 0.0023%.

## The pay gap in India

According to a Payscale report<sup>100</sup> in India, women’s salaries are 18 percentage points lower than men’s, although it is unclear which year this report refers to. Similarly, using data from 2018, the Monster Salary Index (MSI) showed that women’s median gross hourly salary was 19% less than that of men.<sup>101</sup> The MSI also shows that “*that gender pay gap increases with more years of tenure*”.<sup>102</sup>

## The pay gap in Kenya

According to data retrieved from the Gender Gap Africa website<sup>103</sup> in August 2022, men in Kenya earn 39% more than women, which implies that the gender pay gap is 28 percentage points. The tool developed to report on the pay gap uses estimated earned income data from the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2021.

## The pay gap in Nigeria

AKAS was unable to find an official source that focused on the gender pay gap in Nigeria. The only academic source that our researchers were able to identify<sup>104</sup> implies that in 2015-16

96. The difference in wages between men and women for the same type of work or work of equal value

97. World Economic Forum, 2021

98. World Economic Forum, 2022

99. Crow, 2022

100. Banerjee, 2022

101. Chakraborty, 2019

102. Monster Salary Index, 2019

103. Gendergap.Africa, 2022

104. Adeosun and Olowabi, 2021

the gender pay gap was 22 percentage points. This research also concluded that *“females are highly deprived when married, and when it comes to education, they are relegated to the back.”*

Data retrieved from the Gender Gap Africa website in August 2022 implied an even larger pay gap of 42 percentage points. An extensive gender report<sup>105</sup> of 30 leading Nigerian companies published in 2020 by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) - a member of the World Bank Group - contained a disclaimer about limited transparency around gender-segregated pay and leadership composition. None of the companies examined in the report had published pay information broken down by gender or a strategy to close the gender gap; 60% had not disclosed the gender composition of their management teams; and 47% had not published a policy to tackle sexual harassment. Similarly, UN Women<sup>106</sup> has found that more than half (53%) of the indicators needed to monitor the UN's Sustainable Development Goals from a gender perspective are unavailable in Nigeria, with observable gaps in important areas such as the gender pay gap, unpaid care and domestic work, and many others.

These data gaps could be a result of gender blindness when it comes to certain metrics or a deliberate attempt to conceal a dire discrepancy between men and women in areas such as earnings. After all, a company can only address what it knows to be a problem. Furthermore, addressing gender-based inequity can be costly and only deemed worth doing if high value is placed on gender equality.

### The pay gap in South Africa

Statistics South Africa<sup>107</sup> quotes the gender pay gap that was highlighted in the Quarterly Labor Force Survey 2018 report, which showed

that women earn 24 percentage points less than men per month for the same type of work. Similarly, data retrieved from the Gender Gap Africa website in August 2022 implied an even larger pay gap of 30 percentage points. Moreover, the quoted Governance, Public Safety and Justice survey shows that a majority of ordinary South African men and women may be resistant to closing the gap: 68% of men and 62% of women agree that *“women earning more than their partners would almost certainly cause trouble.”*

A more recent source<sup>108</sup> from 2020 suggests that South Africa's average gender pay gap is stagnant at between 23% and 35% vs. an average global gap of 20% as reported by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The report concludes that the gender pay gap therefore represents a stumbling block to gender equality in South Africa and seems to have greatest impact on women in the middle and upper wage bands.

### The pay gap in the UK

In 2021 the Office for National Statistics<sup>109</sup> reported that the UK's gender pay gap for hourly earnings across all full- and part-time workers but excluding overtime was 15 percentage points in favor of men. This gap has nonetheless almost halved in the last two decades, having stood at 27 percentage points in 1999.

Worryingly, a recent survey of 16,000 women and men conducted in February 2022 by YouGov found that women in the UK are significantly less likely to request a pay rise than men, which exacerbates the existing structural inequity and points to the need to tackle the gap at the societal (e.g. through legislation), organizational (through policies) and individual (through confidence training) levels.

105. Nigeria2Equal, 2021

106. UN Women, 2021

107. Stats SA, 2021

108. Bosch and Barit, 2020

109. Office for National Statistics, 2021

## The pay gap in the US

According to Pew Research Center's analysis<sup>110</sup> of the average hourly earnings of full- and part-time employees in 2021, the gender pay gap has been static in the US in the last 15 years or so. In 2020 men earned 16 percentage points more than women for the same type of work. The gap was smaller for younger women aged 25 to 34, where men's earnings exceeded women's by 7 percentage points. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics's analysis in Q3 2021, the gender pay gap among full-time employees in 2021 using median weekly earnings was also 16 percentage points.<sup>111</sup>

A 2019 report from members of The Washington Post's union<sup>112</sup> showed that women and people of color were paid less than their white male counterparts. Men over 40 were earning on average 1.5% more than women of the same age, while men under 40 were earning 14% more than women under 40. This suggests that women employees at The Washington Post were more likely to be employed at lower salaries, but that the discrepancy perhaps narrows as they progress within the organization. Young journalists of color, however, earned on average 7% less than young white journalists.

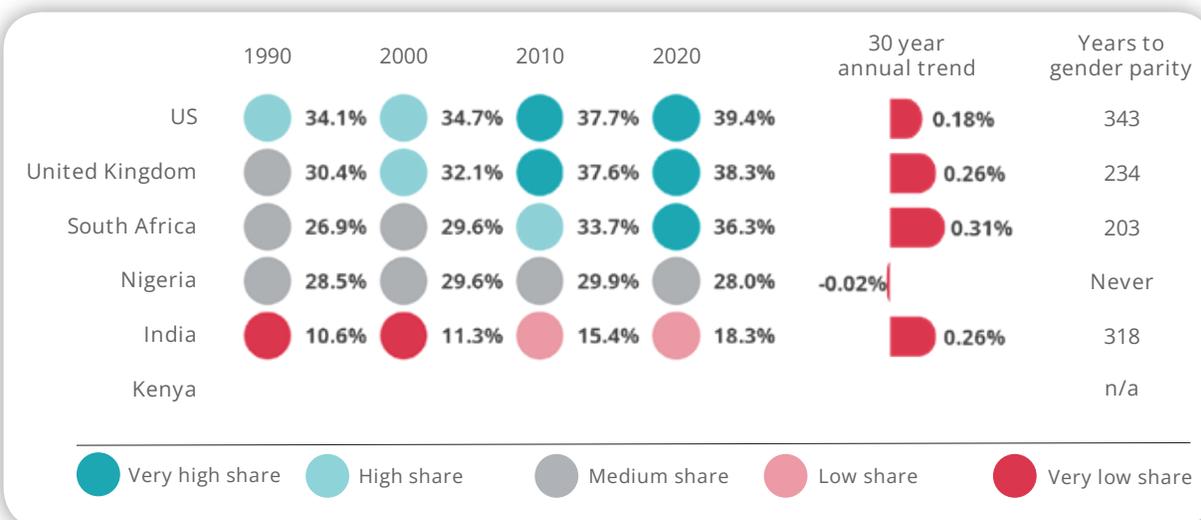
## The disparity in men's and women's share of income remains substantial and stubbornly persistent, even when the number of women in the labor force is taken into account. If current trends continue, parity will take hundreds of years

Whereas the *gender pay gap* is a micro indicator at the individual level, *women's share of labor income* in a country is a macro indicator that aggregates all men's and women's labor income. In simplified terms, it is the gender pay gap adjusted for women's participation in the labor force. As set out in Figure 29, the World Inequality Report 2022<sup>113</sup> presents women's share of labor income in five of the six countries of focus. This analysis shows that in the last three decades there has been some progress towards gender earnings parity (where women's share of income is 50%), with the exception of Nigeria where women's share stagnated at 28% in 2020. In the US (at 39.4%), the UK (38.3%), and South Africa (36.3%), women's percentage share was in the high 30s in 2020, whilst in India it was only 18.3%. Even more worrying for all the countries in question was that, based on the 30-year trend between 1990 and 2020, it would take between 203 and 343 years to reach gender parity in earnings. For Nigeria, gender parity will never be achieved if the 30-year trend persists.



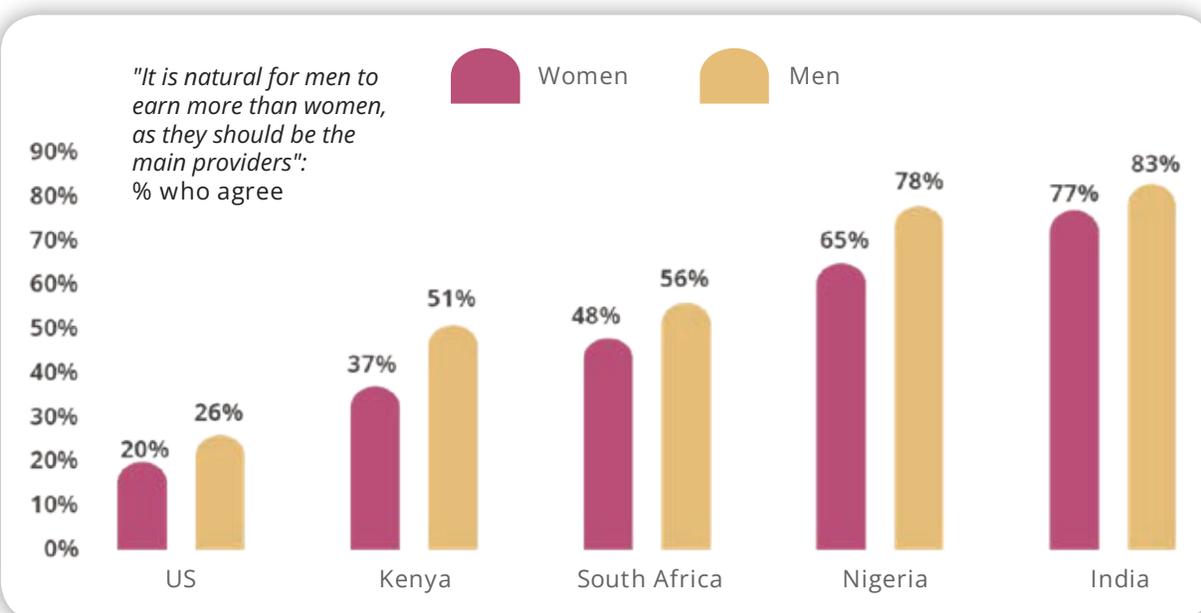
110. Barroso and Brown, 2021  
111. Sheth et al., 2022  
112. Connley, 2019  
113. Chancel et al., 2022

**Figure 29: Women's share of labor income across countries where 50% represents gender earnings parity (1990-2020)**



Source: The World Inequality Report 2022 <sup>114</sup>

**Figure 30: Levels of cultural tolerance of the pay gap (2020)**



Source: UN Women<sup>115</sup>

114. Chancel et al., 2022

115. UN Women, 2022

## **In countries where research is available, up to four fifths of women expect there to be a pay gap**

Perhaps one of the most concerning aspects of the gender pay gap is its cultural acceptance across gender. Research undertaken by UN Women (see Figure 30) illustrates how tolerant men and women are of the concept of men earning more than women. The majority of men and women in India and Nigeria, the majority of men in Kenya and South Africa and almost half of women in South Africa agree with the statement that *“it is natural for men to earn more than women, as they should be the main providers”*.

1 in 5 women and 1 in 4 men in the US, and almost 2 in 5 women in Kenya agree with the statement too. This cultural acceptance of the pay gap contributes significantly to suppressed progress and the maintenance of the pay gap. Addressing the cultural barriers to equality in pay at a societal level would be crucial to closing the pay gap.

## **The pay gap in journalism is significant and a source of much discontent among female news leaders**

Global evidence, including from the UK and US, confirms a significant existing pay gap in journalism. According to a GMMP study of

pay inequity in journalism, women journalists and media professionals reported earning 61% of what their male counterparts earned.<sup>116</sup> A recent AKAS analysis of the pay gap in 18 news outlets in the UK in 2022<sup>117</sup> revealed a median pay gap ranging between 4.6 and 22.4 percentage points, with a crude average of 15.2 percentage points. A gender pay gap analysis of news organizations in the UK<sup>118</sup> revealed that 95% of those tracked have not reached gender parity in pay, with gaps varying between 5 and 20 percentage points.

In the US, a first-of-its-kind pay equity study of 14 Gannett newsrooms also uncovered stark pay disparities for women and journalists of color: women earned \$9,845 less, or 83% of men’s median salary, while women of color earned \$15,726 less, or 73% of white men’s median salary.<sup>119</sup> The majority of the news leaders who were interviewed for this project (64%) highlighted the pay gap as the most urgent gender gap to cover in the news. Some also thought it in some ways the easiest for news organizations to tackle as it was easy to measure.

116. Mohamed, 2022

117. AKAS analysis of UK News Organizations Annual Gender Pay Gap Reports (2021-22)

118. Kassova, 2021b

119. TNG Gannett Caucus, 2021

# The safety gap

The evidence examined in this section is not able to consistently present a gap between men's and women's safety because the available data is often not differentiated by gender. It is, however, a widely-accepted truth that women are overwhelmingly less safe in the world we live in than men. In March 2021 the World Health Organization published the devastating statistic that 1 in 3 women globally experience physical or sexual violence in the course of their lifetime, whether caused by an intimate partner or a non-partner.<sup>120</sup> The research concluded that violence against women is endemic in every country and culture, causing harm to around 736 million women globally, a number that has shown no improvement in the last decade. Moreover, violence is exacerbated in emergencies such as the COVID pandemic: during the first wave when many countries introduced lockdowns, the World Health Organization reported a 60% jump in calls to domestic violence hotlines in Europe.<sup>121</sup>

The safety gap affects women journalists even more adversely than other members of society, with online and offline violence frequently devastating their personal lives and impairing their ability to uphold democracy through their journalism. This section examines the extent of the problem that women journalists face and the scale of the problem for women generally in the report's six countries of focus. Analysis of news content and of the interview responses of the senior editors presented at the start of this chapter illustrates how little space is given to the gender safety gap in the news. Only 0.4% of the coverage of the seven gaps AKAS examined was dedicated to the safety gap, a stark contrast with the 94.4% dedicated to the pay gap. When examining the total news coverage between January 2017 and April

2022 through analysis of the GDELT database, AKAS found that only 0.0006% of all global coverage mentioned this gap in relation to gender.

**India, South Africa, and Nigeria are among the least safe countries for women. The UK is among the safest; the US is average. However, even in the UK there have been high-profile cases exposing women's safety concerns**

The 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index (WPS Index), published by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and the PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security, ranks the UK ninth in terms of women's security, inclusion and justice (see Figure 31). The US is placed 21st, followed by South Africa and Kenya, ranked 66th and 90th respectively. Nigeria ranks 130th while India ranks 148th out of 170 countries.

Women's security is defined across two dimensions: intimate partner violence and perception of community safety. Intimate partner violence measures the proportion of women who experienced physical or sexual violence committed by their intimate partner in the preceding 12 months. Perception of community safety records the proportion of women aged 15 and above who report that they "*feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where [they] live*".

According to the WPS Index, women feel most safe at home and in their community in the UK, followed by the US. However, in these countries in the last year, 4% and 6% of women respectively have experienced violence from their intimate partner. Among our six countries of focus, the proportion of women enduring violence from a partner was highest in Kenya

120. World Health Organization, 2021

121. Campistrion, 2020

**Figure 31: Women’s security, inclusion and justice (2021)**

Gap	Title	Metric	UK	US	South Africa	Kenya	Nigeria	India
The gender safety gap	Security	Intimate Partner Violence (%) <sup>1</sup>	4%	6%	13%	23%	13%	18%
	Security	Perception of community safety (%) <sup>2</sup>	77%	71%	33%	48%	42%	56%
	Inclusion, justice and security	Rank on WPS Index 2021 (out of 170) <sup>3</sup>	9	21	66	90	130	148

Most favorable with respect to women
  Least favorable with respect to women

Sources: (1) World Health Organization, 2022; (2) Gallup Global Law and Order report, 2021; (3) PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security and Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2022

and India in the last 12 months, with almost 1 in 4 and 1 in 5 women respectively affected. In Nigeria and South Africa, the proportion is approximately 1 in 7.<sup>122</sup>

Women in South Africa are least likely to feel safe out at night, with only a third reporting feeling secure vs. 77% in the UK and 71% in the US. Again, in Nigeria and Kenya, a minority of women feel safe out at night (42% and 48%), although 56% of women in India report feeling safe.<sup>123</sup> It is, however, important to note that surveys aiming to measure safety in India often reflect a less acute picture for women than that borne out by the statistics. One wonders whether the stigma that exists for women around being violated, which is linked to the country’s strong patriarchal norms, represses the likelihood of Indian women admitting to having been subject to violence or generally feeling unsafe.

India, South Africa, and Nigeria are often identified as being among the world’s least safe places for women. During the first wave of the pandemic, governments in Nigeria and South Africa were forced to act on the prevalent gender-based violence by passing legislation or declaring a national emergency against gender-based violence.<sup>124</sup> The Women’s Danger Index<sup>125</sup>, produced for the 50 most popular tourist countries in the world, ranked South Africa as the most dangerous country for women travelers.<sup>126</sup> This ranking is partly based on the estimation that over 40% of South African women would be raped in their lifetime. South Africa also has the highest levels of intentional homicide of women. India is ranked the ninth most dangerous country for women but first in the gender inequality index. The UK was ranked 11th safest out of 50 countries, and the US 32nd safest. Kenya and Nigeria were not among the 50 countries examined.

122. World Health Organization, 2021b

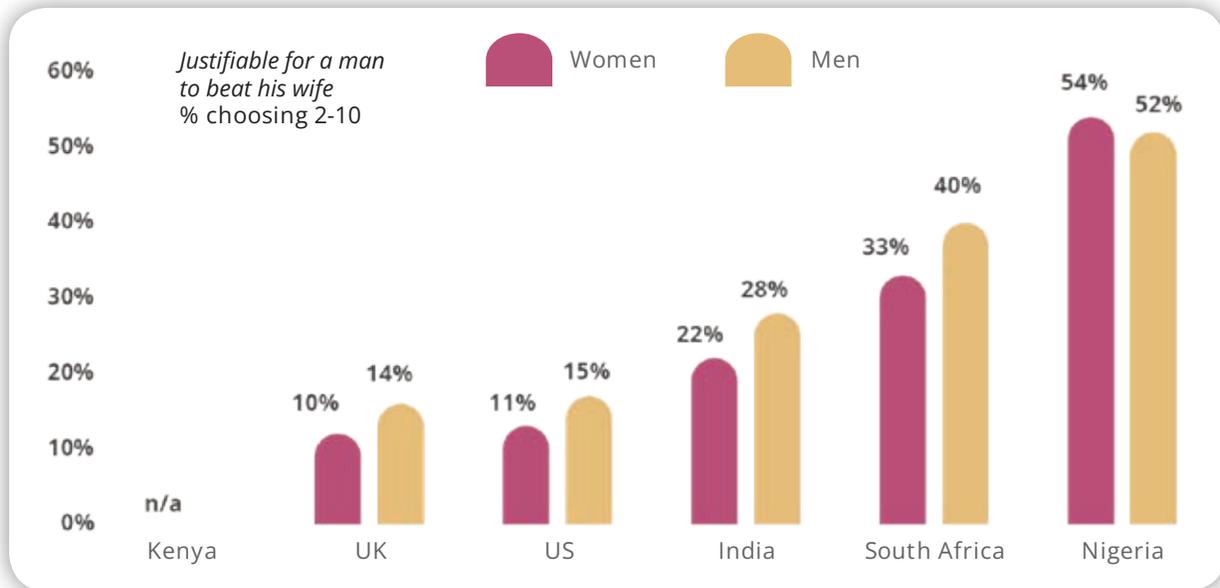
123. Gallup, 2021

124. Kassova, 2020b

125. The Women’s Danger Index is based on eight factors: street safety for women, intentional homicide of women, non-partner sexual violence, intimate partner sexual violence, legal discrimination, global gender gap, gender inequality index, and attitudes towards violence against women.

126. World Population Review, 2022

**Figure 32: Level of tolerance towards violence against women (2017 – 2022)**



Source: Haerfer et al., 2022

### **Violence against women correlates with the strength of the pro-male/ anti-female norms and stereotypes prevalent in a country**

Members of the public in Nigeria, South Africa, and India – men and women alike – are more likely to tolerate male violence against women than people in the UK and US, as shown in Figure 32. This broadly correlates with how safe women feel in each country.

The results from the latest UN Women’s Gender Equality Attitudes Study, released in 2022 (illustrated in Figure 33) show that, firstly, media is perceived as strongly reinforcing gender stereotypes across the six countries of focus, whether in the global north or south. Secondly, Indian men and women exhibit the highest level of endorsement of gender stereotypes, followed by Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. Gender stereotypes receive the lowest reinforcement in the US (no data is available for the UK). These results correlate with the assessments of how unsafe the different countries are. For example, India,

which has been shaken by a series of horrific incidents of men’s extreme violence against women in the last ten years, is also shown to be extremely gendered when it comes to attitudes towards women’s and men’s roles in society. A recent devastating story of a young married woman who was sexually, physically, and verbally assaulted and abused in Delhi, having been accused of causing a man’s suicide by rejecting his advances, stunned Indian society not only because of the extreme brutality of the victim’s treatment, but because of the alleged active involvement of women in it.<sup>127</sup>

### **The vast majority of women journalists are experiencing some form of online or offline violence which has a chilling impact on their mental health and work. News organizations are “turning a blind eye”**

The latest ICFJ global research into online violence against women journalists<sup>128</sup>, based on nearly 1000 responses from women journalists

127. Mitra, 2022

128. International Center for Journalists, 2022

**Figure 33: Strength of gender patriarchal stereotypes prevalent in countries (2020)**

Question	Gender	US	Kenya	South Africa	Nigeria	India (2020)
		% all who agree				
In the media women are typically portrayed in traditional female roles (wife, mother, caregiver or supporting tasks)	Women	69	73	75	84	88
	Men	61	75	72	78	86
In the media men are typically portrayed in traditional male roles (providing for the family, as a leader or businessman)	Women	80	76	72	82	85
	Men	71	82	71	80	87
In general, men are better business executives than women	Women	14	27	36	45	72
	Men	22	39	51	63	78
Service jobs (i.e. secretarial, administrative, cleaning) are better suited to women	Women	19	49	53	55	83
	Men	26	49	62	64	80
In general, men are better political leaders than women	Women	20	45	47	65	71
	Men	27	50	58	74	73

Source: UN Women, 2022

and experts across the world, uncovered that 73% of women journalist respondents had experienced online violence in their work but only 25% had reported it to their employers (a similar proportion to the one reported by journalists in the UK in a survey described below). The findings emphasized that these high levels of violence have severe consequences not only for the individuals targeted, but more generally for press freedom and gender equality in the news media.

Women hold back from reporting aggression partly because they know that while a few news organizations deploy effective and empowering responses to violence against women journalists, the vast majority do not. The researchers have concluded that there is a need to shift the onus for managing gendered online violence away from the individual journalists affected to the organizations they represent, and to systemic actors such as

politicians and the digital platforms who are deemed to facilitate and fuel this violence.

New data published this year in a WAN-IFRA<sup>129</sup> global study that examined the sexual harassment of journalists in 20 countries found that on average 4 in 10 women media professionals have experienced sexual harassment of some kind in the workplace. Women and gender non-conforming media professionals are almost three and a half times more likely to experience harassment than men.

A recent qualitative study of 32 print and broadcast journalists in the US<sup>130</sup> suggests that journalists have been so accustomed to harassment that they now see it as part of their job. Although the study needs further validation, women journalists reported seeing harassment and attacks as the price they pay for being female journalists. Male journalists

129. WAN-IFRA Research, 2022

130. Chakradhar, 2022

by contrast saw it as a source of pride and validation that they must be doing their job right. Despite being trained to be objective and not put themselves at the center of stories, journalists are realizing that their emotions play a large part in the journalistic process and that they need help, which they are often not getting from their employers. The researchers concluded that gender identity is an intrinsic part of being a journalist for women, but not for men: unlike women, men are not forced to deal with their gender identity while doing their work. This phenomenon, however, is not confined to the US. A few of the editors from the global south who were interviewed as part of this project, particularly those in India, were preoccupied with the problem of women's and women journalists' safety. The following quote from a senior leader in the global south illustrates this part of the problem:

*"If you look at the example of Rana Ayyub<sup>131</sup> in India, a man would have never been subjected to the level of misogyny and trolling that she is... The misogyny that comes out in the attacks [on women journalists], the threats, the violence - it's always rape, [and] sexual violence that's being threatened - and definitely the trolling and abuse of journalists is gendered. And that is a huge problem with social media because now you don't need someone threatening you in a dark corner, they can just threaten you on Twitter. The level of threats that female journalists get is far, far, far more than male journalists."*

A government survey of 360 journalists in the UK<sup>132</sup> exposed the high level of harassment that journalists face. 80% of all those surveyed said that they had experienced threats, abuse, or violence as a result of their work. Over a third reported both online and offline

abuse that included intimidation, threats of violence, violence, death threats, bullying, sexism, racism, and homophobia. 1 in 5 said that they had chosen not to report the issue to their employer. 1 in 10 feared that doing so would affect their career prospects. More than a third of female journalists stated that they felt unsafe doing their jobs while a third of non-white journalists had experienced racism. Around 1 in 5 non-white journalists felt extremely affected in their work compared to 1 in 10 white respondents. Journalists thought that organizations and the police held the key to the solution to this far-reaching problem, making the heartfelt appeal: *"Take it seriously. Pursue the matter. Prosecute."* Unfortunately, as with the ICFJ's global findings quoted above, most of the respondents in the UK felt *"not at all"* confident that reports of abuse would indeed be taken seriously and just under half were *"extremely dissatisfied"* with the existing processes put in place. This call to action was encapsulated by a senior editor from the global south, who was interviewed for this report:

*"Women journalists deal with a much harder presence online, in terms of intimidation, in terms of threat, and I think that kind of behavior needs to be called out. The fact that it is harder for women to do the same jobs that men get to do - whether it's journalism or outside of that - [is] a reality that needs to be confronted, and... addressed by governments, by all stakeholders, by organizations, because very often, it's a blind eye that's turned... It'll be the headline for one day and then it's forgotten. It is an everyday problem for women, and it holds them back from being able to do the things that they would want to do."*

131. Rana Ayyub is a prominent Indian Muslim journalist who has been subject to a sustained ongoing and brutal campaign of personal intimidation and abuse on account of her work in publicizing allegedly state-sponsored mistreatment of the Muslim community in India and corruption in the Modi administration.

132. Tobitt, 2021b

# The authority gap

*“The authority gap is the mother of all gender gaps”* states the prominent UK journalist Mary Ann Sieghart in her book *The Authority Gap*. *“If women aren’t taken as seriously as men, they are going to be paid less, promoted less and held back in their careers. They are going to feel less confident and less entitled to success.”* Sieghart defines the authority gap as twofold: it is the gap in the influence granted to men and women, firstly on the basis of their expertise, and secondly in terms of them being in charge. I interviewed Mary Ann Sieghart about her book and her thoughts on the authority gap in the context of journalism. Originally a high-profile business and then political journalist at the Financial Times, The Economist, The Times, and The Independent, Sieghart has a wealth of experience and wisdom to share on the impact of the authority gap on women, not only in society at large but also specifically in the news industry.

## **“Power is a subset of authority”**

When asked to prioritize seven gender gaps, some of the senior news leaders interviewed for this project explicitly linked together the power and authority gaps. It was a common belief that the power gap preceded the authority gap. Sieghart holds a different view: for her, authority is wider than power.

*“So power is a subset of authority, but authority also means things like being an expert on a subject, or having an interesting enough view that people think they ought to listen to what you are saying. And so many of the behaviors associated with the authority gap, such as interrupting women, not listening to them as attentively as to men, patronizing them, challenging their expertise, have nothing to do with power. They have to do with another form of authority: expertise.”*

Thus authority is based on knowledge, skills, talent, and status, while power rests on status alone.

In our interview, Sieghart recalled one of her most frustrating personal encounters of the authority gap, which was in fact in no way related to an imbalance of power. Staying at a friend’s house in the UK during her tenure as a presenter of BBC Radio 4’s flagship program *Start the Week*, she endured an entire dinner party sitting next to a man who failed to ask her a single question throughout the evening. Happily answering her polite questions about his life, work, and family, he remained ignorant of her high-profile and prestigious role until the following morning, when a fellow guest asked her a simple question about it. As she remarked:

*“I thought to myself: ‘Four syllables would have elicited that from me last night, mate. ‘What do you do?’ is all you had to ask me.’ It was so rude to ask me nothing. Extraordinary.”*

That man’s apparent sense of superiority and entitlement to all the attention, which resulted in this lopsided encounter, is a facet of the authority gap which Sieghart unpacks with ample evidence in her book.

In essence, according to the author, the authority gap not only subsumes the power gap but also underpins other gaps, such as those of pay, confidence, and ageism. In the news industry it manifests in multiple ways, including in women’s muted voices as experts and opinion editors, and their role as token leaders.

## **The macro impact of the multiple microaggressions that make up the authority gap**

In her book, Sieghart lays bare the numerous manifestations of the authority gap for women. Her analysis of hundreds of survey findings and interviews with famous women — global leaders in their field of expertise — reveals the extent to which women are systematically patronized, underestimated, interrupted, unnecessarily challenged, talked over, labelled, and ignored. All these microaggressions have a cumulative effect

which crystallizes into systemic discrimination, limiting women's career choices, pay, and progression.

For her, the problem is systemic:

*"I think it comes from the way we are brought up. So in that sense, I think it is systemic. I don't think it's innate in our genes or our hormones, or evolutionarily determined, because there are matriarchal societies in which women are more confident and competitive than men. But I think that girls are taught to be quiet, well behaved, wind their neck in, be modest and uncompetitive. And they're taught that by both their parents, and teachers, and also by their peer group."*

### **The asymmetrical world of judgment that the authority gap creates for women leaders**

In her book and during our interview, Sieghart highlighted the damaging effect of the asymmetrical world that the authority gap has created for women. The asymmetry consists in what is societally accepted as positive in men being rejected as negative in women. In leadership this manifests in women being penalized for being assertive, determined, self-promoting, and decisive; qualities encouraged as positive in men. Where men are applauded for being in charge or being good negotiators, women are seen as power-grabbing, ruthless, and greedy. This asymmetrical judgment of women, holding them to higher standards than men, results in high levels of self-doubt and an erosion of women's confidence. As Sieghart alludes to in her book, research<sup>133</sup> demonstrates that more than twice as many female leaders as male experience strong feelings of being an imposter (54% vs. 24%).

The asymmetrical judgment of women compared to men was also evident in the interviews I conducted with news leaders as part of this project. Some news leaders, especially in the global south, placed women

at the heart of the problem of their lower representation and inclusion in decision-making in news. The deliberation over the historical performance of top male and female news leaders in a news organization by this senior male editor from the global south, exemplifies the implicit bias against women leaders and the asymmetrical judgment they receive:

*"If you look at the history [of this organization], you will find that most of the news makers have been men, but the people who have worked here before will tell you that also some of the most efficient, and some of the most ruthless editors, were women."*

### **The biases powering the authority gap were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to be in the war in Ukraine**

Nothing exacerbates the authority gap in society and in news more than crises, be they wars, conflicts, or global health emergencies. *The Missing Perspectives of Women in COVID-19 News* revealed that while women were dramatically and disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, their share of quoted voice as experts or story protagonists in online news about COVID was additionally marginalized compared to that of men. Early on during the emergency, many heads of state and news outlets framed the global pandemic in war terms, activating the bias that warfare is a "man's affair" and significantly eroding women's authority, thereby widening the authority gap into more of a gulf. Women were pushed out of COVID-related political decision-making at a country level in five of the six countries the report focused on. In India, Kenya, Nigeria, the UK and the US, male politicians formed between 80% (Kenya) and 100% (in England) of the decision-makers on pandemic matters. Journalists reverted to well-established sources who were more likely to be men. Women scientific experts were crowded

133. Muller-Heyndryk, in Sieghart, 2021

out by men scientists in the news. The existing (and historical) bias of using more male protagonists in news stories deepened.

One of the most alarming quotes I read early on during the pandemic, that exemplified the authority gap, came from US and European women scientists voicing their desperation about battling the pro-male biases in science as well as their marginalization in the COVID-19 story: *“As women who are deeply involved in COVID-19 science, it has become clear to us that our expertise means little when it comes to real decision-making in this public health emergency. We are frustrated that our work is being overlooked and misrepresented in the media. We’re exhausted knowing that after this is all over, we will have a powerful fight on our hands to reclaim the professional ground that is slipping away from us during this emergency.”*<sup>134</sup>

Research which AKAS conducted for an article in Foreign Policy<sup>135</sup> found that at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the gender gap in news coverage widened further. Gender bias was even more pronounced in Ukrainian news coverage of the war than in the global coverage: as the war gained momentum, indicators imply that only 18% of the quoted voices in Ukrainian news media belonged to female experts, sources, or protagonists, versus 23% globally. Once again, women’s authoritative voices were muted in times of acute crisis.

### **The authority gap occupies a marginal space in the minds of editors and in news coverage**

When asked about which gaps should be prioritized in news coverage, from the choice of the power, pay, safety, authority, confidence, health, and ageism gaps, only 27% of the senior news editors questioned (six out of 22) prioritized the authority gap. The same number prioritized the confidence gap whereas

134. Buckee et al., 2020

135. Kassova and Scharff, 2022



many more prioritized the pay and power gaps. Interestingly, of those who did prioritize the authority gap, two thirds were from the global north, with the same proportion being women. The authority gap was rarely picked up by leaders from the global south - unlike the power gap, which was prioritized more by leaders from the global south than north.

Women news leaders who focused on the authority gap did so in the context of either not being listened to or being dismissed outright.

*“I think the authority gap is a real issue in our society, the way that women are perceived. It’s just in everything - we’re just dismissed,”*

were the words of one female senior news leader from the global north. A male senior leader from the global south acknowledged the unfairness of the intertwined authority and power gaps:

*“In newsrooms, you’ll notice that reporters are more likely to listen to the authority of a male editor compared to that of a female editor. We still have female editors, but my sense is that it’s a power issue. Men tend to project power more, and that has a bearing on how reporters, male or female, respond to assignments.”*

### **The most pernicious aspects of the authority gap in news lead to a vicious cycle of reinforcement**

When I asked Sieghart her opinion about the most pernicious aspects of the authority gap in the context of the news industry, she emphasized two, both of which highlight the underrepresented perspectives of women in news coverage. Her first was the absence of “female authority figures” writing in newspapers.

*“So I counted, in The Times last week, on the Op Ed pages, full columns, there were 14 men and three women giving their views on the world. The previous week, it was 12 to six, but it’s still either twice or four times as many men as women. And that is subliminally telling us that men have more important things to say than women, that men have more authority than women.”*

The second most pernicious aspect of the authority gap according to Sieghart is the inadequate number of female experts quoted in news stories.

### **The importance of counting representation in news as a debiasing technique and a remedy for the authority gap**

Sieghart dedicates many pages of her book to various unconscious biases that intersect to produce the authority gap. These biases include gender or affinity bias<sup>136</sup>, and internalized misogyny by men and women alike. Nonetheless, she is optimistic that once these biases are “spotted” they can be corrected through systematic intentional work. This encompasses reaching gender parity in experts quoted in the news, in which respect Sieghart references the success of the BBC 50:50 project.<sup>137</sup> She also shares her admiration for Ed Yong – a well-known science-focused staff writer at The Atlantic – who publicly corrected his own pro-male expert bias, increasing the proportion of female experts in his work from 25% to 50% through systematic counting of each of his outputs. “But you have to keep counting,” warns Sieghart, aware of the pitfalls of a one-off intervention,

136. Hiring and surrounding oneself with people similar to oneself

137. *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News* contains a BBC 50:50 case study which includes analysis of the factors which have led to the initiative’s success

*“and you have to keep monitoring, because our brains are so skewed, that we think if women make up only 30/35, at a pinch 40% of anything, we’ve got equality, and we really haven’t. At 30% it’s still two to one. But it’s a bit like if a man and a woman speak for the same length of time, we think the woman has dominated the conversation. We’re so skewed that we’re expecting women to be lesser. And if they’re just equal, we think women are dominating. And I think it’s the same with female experts. With all these things, if you don’t count, you get it wrong in your head.”*

I ask Sieghart about the one thing she would change immediately in the news industry if she had a magic wand, to improve either representation, inclusion, or the portrayal of women in the news. She responds readily, without faltering, by asking whether she could present two ideas instead of one. One of her two immediate fixes is to systematically count the gender of experts as a way of rewiring our biased brains, with a target attached to keep monitoring success and to stick with this intervention over a long period of time.

*“It [the effort to correct the male-expert-bias] is like an elastic band: as soon as you stop pulling, it just snaps back to the default of having many more men than women.”*

The other immediate fix Sieghart proposes is also aimed at correcting individual journalistic behavior.

*“...Whenever a journalist is writing about a woman, he or she should always ask themselves, ‘Would I have said this about a man?’ So when gratuitous comments on what women are wearing, what they look like, their hairstyles, their voice are made, ask yourself, ‘Would I say this about a man?’, and if not, delete them.”*

She goes on to share what feels like an uplifting and hopeful manifesto for how the global news industry could close the authority gap in news.

*“I want 50/50 in terms of executives. I want 50/50 for Op-Ed columnists. I want 50/50 for experts quoted in new stories. And count and hold people to account if they don’t achieve it.”*

# The confidence gap

There is no consensus among industry practitioners and academics as to whether a confidence gap between men and women truly exists, and whether it is completely socialized through nurture, or also contains a biological component. Some place women at the heart of the problem, arguing that while the gender confidence gap is starkly real, it is up to women to close it through their own personal efforts. Others place societal systems and organizational structures at the heart of the problem, arguing that there is in fact no confidence gap between women and men. Instead, they contend that in-built systemic and organizational anti-women biases result in women being discriminated against, with the outcome of a “felt” confidence gap, or “imposter syndrome”, although this is viewed as a 1970s biased construct that is no more prevalent among women than men. This system-centric framing questions the highly individual-centric lens that is propped up by a multi-million-dollar industry of self-help books, coaches, and other self-improvement tools. Furthermore, it condemns the narrative of the individualized confidence gap for blaming women for their lack of confidence rather than shining a light on society and organizations, with whom, according to them, the blame squarely sits.

This binary way of looking at the issue, which forces an opposition between systemic and individual factors that create a confidence gap, is misplaced, and reduces the potential for solving the problem in the first place. The confidence gap is experienced profoundly on a personal level by millions of women around the world, as was spontaneously recognized by a few of the senior editorial leaders who were interviewed as part of this project. For example, systemic misogyny that manifests in endemic violence against women results in the demolition of women’s feelings of self-worth and confidence at a personal level. To deny the experiences of women at an individual level would be to gaslight the perspectives

of millions of women who feel “less than” or not good enough. Self-worth is socialized and to improve it, it needs to be re-socialized at a systemic and an individual level.

Among our interviewees, one female senior news leader from the global north made a strong case for the role news plays in alleviating women’s feelings of loneliness through covering the gender gaps and unveiling the taboos surrounding their gender and racial identities.

*“You can feel very much on your own, or like you’ve been over the top. Society sometimes gaslights women, and I think it’s really important to set out in a journalistic way, why there are gender differences, and provide the evidence. For me, it’s always about the audience. And it’s an education thing, especially for younger women of different socio-economic backgrounds. Let them see that they’re not alone.”*

Another very senior woman news leader, this time from the global south, delivered a compelling call to action to improve the portrayal of women in the news as a way of closing the confidence gap:

*“Very often, you have a situation where women almost feel apologetic for getting a job because they think, ‘Am I really good enough?’ And the men never think that way. I think that through the way we portray women and their stories and narratives in the media we can bridge this confidence gap in a significant way.”*

## **There seems to be a north-south divide on the perceptions of the importance of the confidence gap which needs to be explored further**

We have already established in this chapter that the confidence gap, as well as all the other gender gaps, is not being covered in news nearly enough. Only 0.00014% of the global news coverage between January 2017 and April 2022 included a confidence gap angle. The

interviews with 22 global news leaders who were asked about the existing gaps revealed an interesting north-south cultural difference. Although it was mentioned by news leaders in the global north too, the confidence gap was given more weight among global south news leaders. Just over a quarter of all interviewees (27%) chose the confidence gender gap as one of the two key gaps they thought should be urgently prioritized in news coverage. All of these were from the global south (two men and four women). Just under half of all news leaders from the global south who were interviewed chose the confidence gap as a top priority to report on. It should be noted that the insights from different pieces of research outlined in this chapter are skewed towards Western practitioners and academics, which begs the question as to whether we may be missing some important cultural, gender, and racial lenses which should be researched further.

### **The existing confidence gap between men and women is seen as the problem of individual women**

Katty Kay, a former BBC World News America anchor, and Claire Shipman, a senior national reporter for ABC News, co-authored *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know*,

first published in 2014. They examined the confidence gap through the lens of the individual (rather than organizations or the system) and quoted research that uncovered that confidence is as important as competence for success. After interviewing some of the most influential women in the US and analyzing dozens of global studies, they concluded that women had ample competence but were lagging significantly behind men in terms of confidence. The two authors were taken aback by the extent to which women suffered from self-doubt.<sup>138</sup> They downplayed systemic explanations for the slower trajectory of women's professional success compared to men's and settled on women's acute lack of confidence as the problem and the solution: *"Some observers say children change our priorities, and there is some truth in this claim... Other commentators point to cultural and institutional barriers to female success. There's truth in that, too. But these explanations for a continued failure to break the glass ceiling are missing something more basic: women's acute lack of confidence."*<sup>139</sup>

Kay and Shipman noticed that women often explained their success away through luck or factors external to themselves, whereas men attributed their success to their own competence. The authors concluded that while much of what they found was relevant to both women and men, there was a *"vast confidence gap that separates the sexes"*. Their conclusions were based on multiple



138. Kay and Shipman, 2014  
139. Kay and Shipman, 2014

research studies<sup>140</sup> which showed that women underestimate their abilities, are less likely to apply for promotions, and believe that they will do worse in tests than men. Moreover, men were found to overestimate their performance by as much as 30%. Women were also found to be more likely than men to assume blame if things went wrong and to credit others for their successes.

Kay and Shipman admitted to female and male brains being a lot more similar than different, and claimed that there are genetic factors unrelated to sex that influence people's confidence levels. However, they also quoted studies using fMRI scans which found that women's amygdalae tended to be more easily activated in response to negative emotional stimuli. Women were also more apt to ruminate over things that had gone wrong in the past, resulting in them being less likely to take risks. In addition, the authors pointed out women's and men's vastly different levels of testosterone (up to 10 times higher in men and a fuel for confidence) and estrogen (higher in women and a fuel for connection and bonding). They highlighted that it was unclear whether these differences between men and women are inherited or a result of life experiences (influenced by culture and systems).

***“Confidence is the factor that turns judgments into action. Women can increase their confidence by acting.”***

The two journalists were very optimistic about the solution to closing this confidence gap, which they saw as sitting squarely in women's hands. They endorsed the definition of confidence provided by Richard Petty, a psychology professor at Ohio State University, who states that confidence is the factor that turns thoughts into judgments about what we are capable of, and turns those judgments

into action. Kay and Shipman were convinced that with individual effort and women pushing themselves to act, confidence could be acquired. In their words, *“... confidence accumulates—through hard work, through success, and even through failure. The natural result of low confidence is inaction. When women don't act, when we hesitate because we aren't sure, we hold ourselves back. But when we do act, even if it's because we're forced to, we perform just as well as men do. Almost daily, new evidence emerges of just how much our brains can change over the course of our lives, in response to shifting thought patterns and behavior. If we keep at it, if we channel our talent for hard work, we can make our brains more confidence-prone. What the neuroscientists call plasticity, we call hope.”*

The pernicious side of this women-centric argument is that women are seen as solely responsible for their career growth (and blamed for it stalling). This way of thinking was detected in the views of a minority of the senior leaders interviewed for this project. Nothing encapsulates the argument better than this quote shared by a senior female news leader from the global south:

*“A lot of women in our line of business today are very, very comfortable looking for the easiest stories to cover. They don't read wide, they don't want the challenge... Women kind of impose ceilings on themselves, 'I believe I cannot go beyond this'. That makes a lot of people overlook women who have demonstrated that their lack of self-confidence is one reason why they shouldn't be promoted beyond a certain level.”*

A softer, more understated argument that still viewed women as limiting their own careers was shared by a few news leaders, including a woman news leader from the global north who stated:

140. E.g. The Institute of Leadership and Management, UK, 2011, a survey of British managers about their confidence in their professions; Hewlett-Packard review of personnel records which found that women working at HP applied for a promotion only when they believed they met the job requirements 100% (vs. 60% for men); Ernesto Reuben, a professor at Columbia Business School, studying “honest overconfidence” prevalent among men, 2011.

*“Women feel that if we’re going to apply for the job and there’s a list of requirements, we have to meet every single one. If men are going to apply for the job, they may meet only a few but would still go for it.”*

## **The confidence gap opens up in childhood because it is underpinned by structural barriers manifested in patriarchal norms**

Girls’ confidence declines early in their childhood. Different research has pinpointed different starting points in girls’ declining confidence.<sup>141</sup> According to one US study, girls’ self-confidence plummets by 30% between the ages of eight and 14. It identifies that at 14, girls’ self-assurance is 27% lower than that of boys.<sup>142</sup> Once this confidence gap opens around puberty, it remains in place throughout adulthood.<sup>143</sup> Other evidence suggests that the gap appears much earlier: that by the age of six or seven, girls are 20-30% less likely to assume that people deemed highly intelligent are of their own gender.<sup>144</sup> The fact that the confidence gap is absent in very young children suggests that girls absorb “*not being as good as boys*” subtly and gradually through gendered norms that bias their outlooks and self-perception.

## **The confidence gap is a structural issue, not an individual one, some argue**

A growing number of practitioners are rejecting the framing of the confidence gap as a woman’s (individual) issue, making way for the previously neglected systemic framing of the problem. In their new book *Confidence Culture*, Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill<sup>145</sup> argue that at the heart of the problem of the

corporate glass ceiling lies not poor self-esteem or imposter syndrome but gender inequalities perpetuated by organizational cultures. The co-authors argue that “*fixing the women’s workplace confidence ‘problem’ has generated a cottage industry of courses and training programmes*”<sup>146</sup> which place the responsibility for solving the problem with women, letting organizations off the hook. They believe that organizations’ efforts are too individual-centric and are aimed at fixing women instead of fixing existing institutional bias. They reject the notion of a confidence gap for women leaders and believe that women are being undervalued and experiencing unequal treatment. They advocate changing the world, not women. “*We urgently need to shift this emphasis and tackle the structural inequalities that the pandemic has so clearly spotlighted and that the cost-of-living crisis is now highlighting so brutally. We need to challenge the endless encouragement of women and girls to work on and care for themselves (because no one else will). Rather than an individualised and psychologised confidence culture, we need to invest in building and sustaining social structures and policies that support, ensure and reinforce women’s safety, well-being and power.*”<sup>147</sup>

This view was presented earlier by Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey, who argued that the confidence gap and the imposter syndrome concept developed in the 1970s came at the expense of a structural lens shining light on systemic racism, classism, xenophobia, and other biases.<sup>148</sup> The study which gave birth to the concept of the imposter syndrome excluded women of color, and people with different levels of affluence, professional backgrounds, or genders. Tulshyan and Burey argue that the imposter syndrome misattributed systemic inequality. “*Even if women demonstrate strength, ambition, and resilience, our daily battles with*

141. Kassova, 2021a

142. Ypulse, 2018

143. Shipman et al, 2018

144. Bian et al, 2017

145. Jacobs, 2022

146. Jacobs, 2022

147. Gill and Orgad, 2022

148. Tulshyan and Burey, 2021

*microaggressions, especially expectations and assumptions formed by stereotypes and racism, often push us down. For women of color, self-doubt and the feeling that we don't belong in corporate workplaces can be even more pronounced ... because the intersection of our race and gender often places us in a precarious position at work."* They concluded that it was important to fix the bias, not women.

The harmful side of the systemic argument when taken to its extreme is that it denies the experiences of millions of women who perceive themselves as lacking confidence at a personal level. It can also come across as somewhat patronizing in telling women that what they feel is "*wrong*". In addition, this argument is primarily a Western narrative, which does not take into account any potential cultural differences that women in the global south carry. Condemning the multi-million self-help industry and individual growth programs could lead to stalling progress at an individual level and potentially to sacrificing altogether a generation or two of women, while organizations and society were busy correcting biases against women at a structural level. To tackle the deeply ingrained systemic problem of gender and racial discrimination, the problem has to be tackled jointly at the societal, organizational, and individual level (the latter being a consequence of societal and organizational biases).

The tension between the systemic, organizational, and individual responsibility for

tackling professional growth was poignantly illustrated by a female senior news leader from the global south who was interviewed for this project:

*"While there are issues that newsrooms have to attend to, women themselves [also] have to put their hand up, and sometimes there is that lack of confidence from some of them. I do think the confidence gap [matters]. And certainly the pay gap, because it is linked to confidence as well – people should have that confidence to be able to state their case and ask for what they believe they deserve."*

While systemic discrimination in societies and organizations is the fundamental cause of this confidence gap, its effect is felt at a deeply personal level. To close this gap therefore, efforts need to be directed at a societal level (by tackling the anti-women biases built into the fabric of society), at an organizational level (by raising awareness of the systemic problems and tackling the built-in discriminatory biases within organizational cultures and processes) but also at an individual level (by tackling the individual damage that has been caused to women through being subjected to the deeply-ingrained patriarchal norms). In this latter aspect, women benefit from individualized tools that support them in reframing wrongly internalized blame, guilt, and a feeling of inferiority. Only when the problem is addressed at these three levels can the confidence gap be reduced and eventually closed.

# The health gap

“

*“At the hospital I felt like a nuisance. The doctor saw me as a nuisance and wanted to get rid of me immediately. Because if they had taken my pain seriously, they would have done an actual consultation, whereas that didn’t happen. It was me starting to talk, her stopping me every 10 seconds and telling me I was having a meltdown. She dismissed me before she had heard me.”*

”

Listening to Caroline earlier this year about her experience at the Accident & Emergency (A&E) department of a London teaching hospital was my first encounter with the health gender gap. Despite experiencing the most excruciating pain she had ever felt, Caroline was told there was nothing the hospital could do for her, and that she should go home and do some yoga. The pain and her feelings of powerlessness were so intense that for a few hours Caroline contemplated taking her own life.

Although I have written two reports and numerous articles focusing on various aspects of gender inequality, I was yet to be acquainted with the vast and multi-layered health gender gaps prevalent globally. The pain gender gap, which Caroline experienced that traumatic day, represents just one facet of the overall health gap that has been a reality for millions of women worldwide for centuries and continues to cause great detriment to their health and wellbeing. When triggered to investigate this gap in more depth, I discovered unsurprisingly that the gap in men’s and women’s health experiences was widespread in many countries

and, like other gaps, contained systemic, organizational, and individual components. As the interviews with senior news leaders revealed, this particular gap remains largely under their radar, in line with our analysis of GDELT data which demonstrated how marginal the coverage of it is in global news (see Figures 26 and 27). The frequent ethnic homogeneity of health news editors that the AKAS research uncovered also goes some way to explaining why the substantial health gap that exists between white populations and ethnic minorities is rarely covered in news.

## The systemic, institutional, and individual elements of the health gap

At a systemic level the health gap manifests in gender (and racial) societal biases, and the historical mistreatment of marginalized groups, exacerbated by income and educational inequalities. It is equally endemic in the existing system of medical research and cuts across as many as 90 of the 156 countries around the world<sup>149</sup> where the health gender gap has been measured. At an organizational level, the health gap is seen in disproportionately delayed treatments for women; the selective commissioning of services (especially during the pandemic); misdiagnoses caused by the dismissal of symptoms or systematic misattribution of physical symptoms to psychological volatility; delays in dispensing medicines or painkillers; woeful data collection; and information based on knowledge of male anatomy being used in decisions about female anatomy. At an individual level, the health gap is manifested in health professionals’ prejudice against women and other under-served groups (e.g. Black and Asian populations in the US, UK, and South Africa), and in return these groups’ lack of trust in health professionals, institutions, and the system. It tragically also manifests in diminished quality of life for women wracked with preventable and enduring pain, and in higher rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease, despair, and distress.



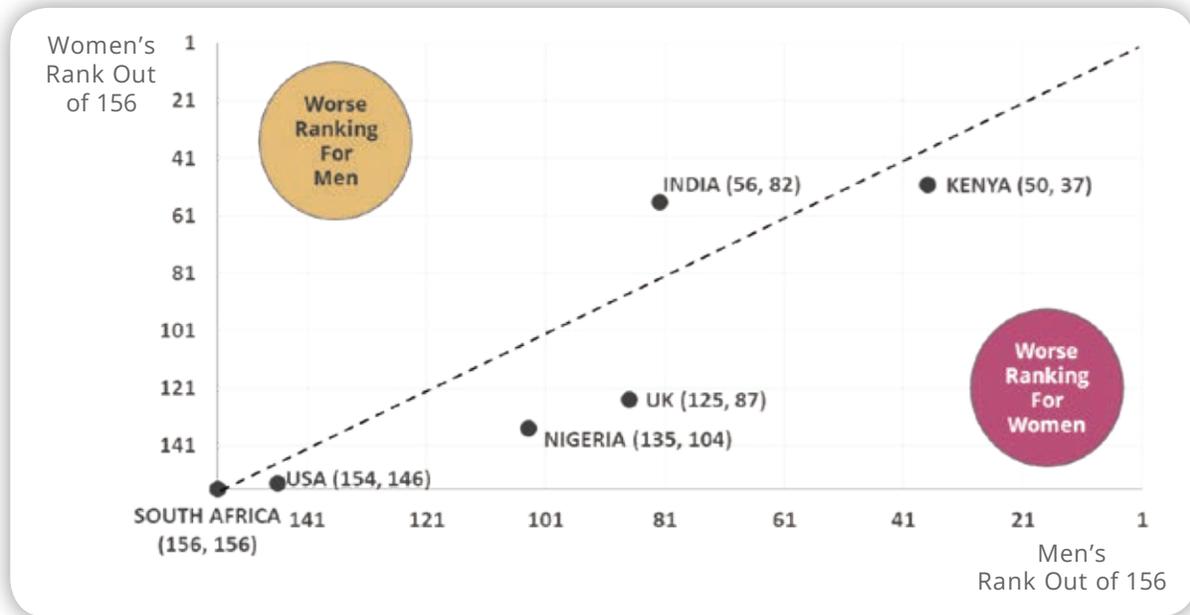
Awareness of these gaps may be being undermined by the perception that the health gender gap has been all but closed. The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap index<sup>150</sup>, for example, shows the health and survival subindex to have a much lower gender gap than the subindices relating to political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity. However, this low gender gap for the health and survival subindex is explained by the subindex being based on only two indicators – sex ratio at birth and healthy life expectancy. Consequently, this measure is too narrow to pick up on a range of areas where health gender gaps are prevalent.

As we discovered earlier, the health gap occupies very little editorial mind space and features very little in global news coverage. Among our interviewees, the editors who thought that the health gap should be prioritized in news coverage interpreted it more in the context of women-specific issues. One female senior editor from the global north saw the need for more news coverage of women-centric health issues as a way of serving women audiences better, while educating men along the way. Another male editor from the global north saw the need for it exclusively through the lens of bridging the knowledge gap between women and men around issues such as menstruation, childbirth, breastfeeding, and menopause.

*“Men need to be more sensitive and take more seriously the medical and health issues of women because, by nature, these are mostly things that will not resonate with us because we do not experience them...”*

150. World Economic Forum, 2022

Figure 34: Women’s and men’s relative health ranking in six countries



Source: Manual (2022)

**The UK’s women suffer the biggest gender gap in health rankings, followed by Nigeria, Kenya, and the US. There is no such gender gap in South Africa, although the country ranks bottom in health rankings. In India the health gender gap is in favor of women**

Despite the scant attention paid to it by news media, the gender health gap remains significant across all six countries of focus. Research by Manual<sup>151</sup>, which examines the health gap between men and women across 156 countries around the world in terms of the prevalence of disease, health outcomes (both physical and mental), and access to healthcare, makes sobering reading. In 90 countries (including the UK, Nigeria, Kenya, and the US) women’s health ranks lower than men’s (see Figure 34). South Africa ranks worst among the 156 countries for both men and women. Among

the six countries of interest for this report, only India displays a gender gap in favor of women.

Nonetheless, the Manual study recognizes the complexity of the issue, stating that “*in most countries, men are in more positions of power, have more privilege and more wealth than women. However, all this advantage doesn’t necessarily translate into better health.*” In 66 countries, men’s health ranks lower than women’s. Intriguingly, a WHO study<sup>152</sup> found that men were less healthy in countries where levels of gender inequality were high (although this does not explain the unusual case of India, which demands more research).

As shown in Figure 34, among the six countries, the UK’s women were found to suffer the largest gender health gap. Indeed this relative gap is the largest in the G20 and the 12th largest globally.<sup>153</sup> Interestingly, relative to the other four countries in this study, women in Kenya and India enjoy a better health ranking, with women’s health ranking notably higher

151. Manual, 2022

152. World Health Organization, 2018

153. House of Lords Library, 2021

than men's in India. The overall poor health ranking of South Africa, the US, Nigeria, and the UK, as opposed to Kenya and India, can be attributed to various factors, including obesity rates, which are lowest in India and Kenya and highest in the US.<sup>154</sup> Another factor could be the relatively lower annual death rates in Kenya and India (5 and 7 per 1,000 respectively) compared to between 9 and 11 per 1,000 in the other four countries.<sup>155</sup> The youth of the populations in Kenya and India may also play a role, with under 15s comprising 39% and 26% of their populations respectively vs. 18% in the UK and US.<sup>156</sup>

### **The pain gap is at the heart of the health gap. It is also linked to misdiagnosis, delayed treatment, wrong medication, and withheld painkillers**

Caroline, a psychotherapist herself, shared this reflection on her hospital experience:

*“When you are burnt out and in great physical pain, your defenses are very low: I was already questioning myself. And then I went to the hospital, and was told, ‘Your pain is worthless’. And it fed right into this feeling of: ‘You are worthless’.”*

Women's experience of their pain not being taken seriously is age-old, with documented examples dating back hundreds of years. An increasing number of studies have shown that bias against women's expressions of pain adversely impact the diagnosis and treatment of their health conditions. A 2018 study analyzing journal papers on sex, gender, and pain published in the UK, US, and Europe since 2001, revealed that terms like *sensitive*,

*malingering, complaining, and hysterical* are applied more frequently to pain reported by women.<sup>157</sup> Meanwhile a study<sup>158</sup> of men and women presenting at emergency rooms in the US with abdominal pain revealed that on average, women waited 16 minutes longer to be seen by a doctor than men and were also less likely to be given painkillers. When these were prescribed, women also had to wait longer to receive them.<sup>159</sup>

Research in the UK echoes these disparities. A study of 93,000 UK patients, conducted by Oxford University, found that women were 13% less likely than men of the same age to receive life-saving drugs after a heart attack.<sup>160</sup> Women have also been found to be twice as likely as men to die in the 30 days following a heart attack.<sup>161</sup> UK studies show that misconceptions of female pain as being anxiety-induced contribute to women being around 50% more likely to be misdiagnosed after a heart attack.<sup>162</sup> Furthermore, a 2020 survey of women with endometriosis found that the misattribution of gynecological pain to mental ill-health led to delayed and missed diagnoses in 50% of cases.<sup>163</sup>

### **In countries with multi-racial populations, the pain gap is even wider for women who are Black, Asian or from other minority ethnic backgrounds**

Women who are Black, Asian or from other minority ethnic backgrounds experience greater health inequalities than white women, their accounts of pain often being underestimated and discounted due to false beliefs about racial difference and pain sensitivity.<sup>164</sup> As the UK's Royal College of

154. World Obesity, 2022

155. The World Bank, 2022a

156. The World Bank, 2022b

157. Cleghorn, 2021

158. Chen et al., 2008

159. House of Lords Library, 2021

160. Conrad et al., 2019

161. Bakker, 2018

162. Cleghorn, 2021

163. Cleghorn, 2021

164. Cleghorn, 2021

Obstetricians and Gynaecologists reported in 2020, the effects of implicit racial bias on perceptions of Black women's pain contributes to missed and delayed diagnoses, particularly in the areas of maternal and reproductive health.<sup>165</sup>

Globally, women experience more chronic pain than men through conditions such as endometriosis. It is therefore critical to close the gender pain gap by raising awareness of different biases in play, introducing gender-sensitive diagnostic processes, and increasing gender-based research into the biological and psychosocial origins of pain differences. *“But to fully achieve gender equality in healthcare, medicine must also examine its past as it looks to the future. Historical cases show how gendered myths about pain resonate powerfully across centuries of scientific and biomedical advances.”*<sup>166</sup>

**Research has revealed a strong racial bias in UK healthcare, leading to worse care and poor health outcomes for Black, Asian, and other minority populations. The intersection between gender and race leads to even worse outcomes for female minority ethnic groups**

A recent comprehensive study of the health system in the UK exposed shocking racial inequality affecting Black, Asian, and other minority populations in every aspect of healthcare, harming the health of millions of patients.<sup>167</sup> Substantial disparities have been identified in rates of miscarriage<sup>168</sup>, and particularly psychiatric referral, assessment

and treatment<sup>169</sup>, with for example, *“clear, very large and persisting ethnic inequalities”* in the compulsory admission of ethnic minorities to psychiatric wards, particularly affecting Black people.<sup>170</sup> The issue of mental health is also significant in gender gap terms with Black British women more than twice as likely as Black or white men to suffer a Common Mental Disorder<sup>171</sup> (32% vs. 14%), and one and a half times more likely than white British women (13%).<sup>172</sup>

These findings compound those of an earlier study that concluded that Black, Asian, and minority ethnic women in the UK received a lower quality of care and experienced poorer health outcomes than other women, including higher rates of morbidity and mortality.<sup>173</sup> Meanwhile, a number of organizations in the health and medical research sector have admitted that racism exists in their institutions.<sup>174</sup>

The result of this systemic and institutional racial bias manifests at an individual level in a negative feedback cycle in which Black, Asian, and other minority ethnic women and men in the UK avoid seeking healthcare assistance and interaction with health services because previous poor experiences lead them to fear implicit racial bias and potential prejudice and discrimination.<sup>175</sup>

**A gender and racial health research gap exacerbates the biases in healthcare**

A significant data gap in medical research contributes to health disparity outcomes in the UK. Women generally, but especially those

165. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2020

166. Cleghorn, 2021

167. Gregory, 2022

168. BBC News, 2022

169. Gregory, 2022

170. Gregory, 2022

171. Generalized anxiety disorder, depressive episode, phobia, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, common mental disorders not otherwise specified

172. NHS Digital, 2016

173. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2020

174. See Farrar, 2022, NHS England – Midlands, 2022, Mind, 2022

175. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2020

from ethnic minorities, are less likely to be invited to, or participate in medical trials and research - despite women comprising 51% of the population.<sup>176</sup> In addition, more research is needed to better understand the institutional and individual impact of racial bias in women's healthcare and how it can be eradicated.<sup>177</sup>

**Unfortunately, the top global health-related decision-makers responsible for closing the health gap are between 3.4 and 19 times more likely to be men than women**

Given the existing health gaps between women and men, which are riddled with unconscious bias, it is imperative that women

are included in the decision-making efforts to improve health and healthcare. However, despite comprising 70% of the health workforce globally, women account for a mere 25% of senior and 5% of top positions in health organizations.<sup>178</sup> To ensure women- and racially-transformative policymaking, it is important to seek greater gender and racial diversity at decision-making level. News media can facilitate this by introducing a gender lens as a default when covering health and healthcare news.

176. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2020  
177. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2020  
178. Batson et al., 2021

# The ageism gap

The issue of ageism particularly impacts women, exacerbating gender inequality in multiple areas including participation in work, rates of pay, and the portrayal of women in media. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the ageism gap was not even on the radar of the editorial leaders interviewed for this publication. Only one of the 22 editors interviewed - a senior woman from the global south - felt that this gap was an urgent enough issue to be prioritized in news coverage. A GDELT content analysis of global news coverage of all the gender gaps identified revealed that the ageism gap has not been receiving any attention in the news, providing yet more evidence of how women become hidden in society's shadows as they age.

This section looks at ageism predominantly through the lens of news media and highlights the results from various research pieces that have focused on understanding the gap that ageing opens up between men and women.

## Ageism is a problem amplified for women that exacerbates gender inequality in news throughout the value chain

The latest research<sup>179</sup> into news protagonists and experts shows a marked difference in the profile of men vs. women in the news stories told in print. As Figure 35 shows, the majority of male subjects and sources are aged over 50, while the majority of female subjects and sources are under 50. This sends a strong signal that women's presence in the news may be linked to their physical looks, while men's is not. The ongoing gendered ageism in the news media increases with age. Only 3% of all women in the news are found to be in the 65-

79 age group, compared to 15% of the men.<sup>180</sup>

**Figure 35: Age distribution of subjects and sources in print news (2020)**

Age of subjects and sources in print news globally. Percentage distribution by sex		
	Women	Men
Under 49	65	41
50+	35	58

Source: GMMP, Macharia 2020

Another research study found an inverse relationship between gender, age, and visibility so that as a woman's age increased, her visibility in the news decreased while the reverse was true for men.<sup>181</sup> Both the Global Media Monitoring Project<sup>182</sup> and a study by the European Commission<sup>183</sup> found a marked age-related pattern among female news presenters and reporters that stood in contrast to their male colleagues: women dominated in younger age-groups and men in older age-groups. Among presenters, women made up 83% of those aged between 19 and 34, 49% of those aged 35 to 49, and 28% of those aged 50 to 64. A similar pattern emerged among television reporters, where women constituted 50% of those aged 19 to 34, 28% of those aged 35 to 49, and 24% of those aged 50 to 64. Female presenters or reporters over the age of 65 were virtually non-existent.<sup>184</sup> The European Commission study reported a similar trend. In recent decades, successful court challenges against news media organizations by high-profile female television presenters in the UK have provided further evidence of an ageism problem.<sup>185</sup> The one and only senior editor (a female from the global south) who raised the issue of ageism during the interviews we conducted for this project had the following to say, which corroborates remarkably the quantitative research findings shared above:

179. Macharia, 2020

180. Macharia, 2020

181. Ross et al., 2018

182. Macharia, 2015

183. European Commission, 2010

184. Macharia 2015

185. Ross et al., 2018; Ross & Carter, 2011



*“Whether we like it or not, the business of television is sexist. You see the female anchors getting younger and you see the male anchors who have been there forever... and then you’re doing away with the older women who have experience at their fingertips. It’s something you see around the world, and it’s unfortunate that, in our line of business, we’re starting to look for the young, the pretty, not too big/buxom women — you want them spaghetti thin — you want them to be soft on the eye, because that is what sells the ratings.”*

### **Women protagonists are unnecessarily identified by age in news stories. Age is also linked to an increasing pay gap in newsrooms**

The Global Media Monitoring Project<sup>186</sup> found that in newspaper reports, a woman’s age was often mentioned even when it had no direct relevance to the story. Age was quoted for 21% of women that featured in news stories, but only for 11% of men. Data from a different study in the UK and Ireland provided similar evidence: 36% of women who featured in news stories had their ages included despite no relevance to the story, compared to 19% of men.<sup>187</sup>

Previous academic research has also identified that the gender pay gap in many countries tended to increase with age as women were overlooked for promotion.<sup>188</sup>

### **Older audiences, especially women, are left out of news coverage, as well as neglected in policy making and political focus**

In investigating the issue of those most affected by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, AKAS conducted a content analysis of global news articles published between 24 February 2022 (the date on which Russia launched a

186. Macharia, 2015

187. Ross & Carter, 2011

188. Ross & Carter, 2011

full-scale invasion of Ukraine) and 22 April 2022. The analysis was looking for articles that mentioned Ukraine, children, and elderly people or elderly women in their title. Given that older people make up a third of all those who needed humanitarian aid in Ukraine at the time<sup>189</sup>, that two thirds of Ukraine's over-65s and 71% of its over-75s are women<sup>190</sup>, and that the Ukrainian population is the sixth most female in the world<sup>191</sup>, we were interested to understand how much relative attention elderly women received in news coverage. The analysis found that 97% of the articles focused on children and only 3% on elderly people. Of those articles, only three (which is 3% of all articles mentioning the elderly) had zoned in on elderly women. This illustrates just how invisible elderly women are in the news, despite being in dire need of assistance. According to Justin Derbyshire, CEO of HelpAge International, the disproportionate impact on the elderly of the ongoing war in Ukraine, which makes it the world's oldest humanitarian crisis, must serve as a wake-up call for governments and the international community to urgently reset their approach, which he views as ageist.<sup>192</sup> If ageism prevails across news media, governments, and international and intergovernmental institutions, the world will be increasingly poorly equipped to address the needs of its ageing population.

For its 2020 report, the GMMP investigated for the first time the representation in the news of people aged 80 and above. Despite the global population getting older and age having been considered *as a common denominator* for being at risk during the global COVID-19 pandemic, it found that the over-80s had not attracted much attention in the news. Instead, people in the oldest age group were rarely in the limelight: *"Only 3 percent were above 80 years in the newspapers and in television news less than 1 percent were above 80 years of age. Women 80+ were even more invisible than the men in that age group."*<sup>193</sup>



In this chapter we explored seven substantive gender gaps which are grossly underreported in news coverage globally. We zoned in on the power, pay, safety, authority, confidence, health, and ageism gaps, all of which are global in nature, affecting women in all of the countries of interest in this study. In the following chapter we will explore the reasons why women-sensitive storytelling is out of news focus. We will also examine why women's representation as news contributors and protagonists is still marginalized and why their portrayal in the news is one of the news industry's blind spots.

189. Derbyshire, 2022

190. United States Census Bureau, 2022

191. World Bank Data, 2022

192. Derbyshire, 2022

193. Macharia, 2020

# Chapter 2

## The existing systemic, organizational, and individual biases in news coverage

Why is it that women's share of voice in news coverage as protagonists, experts or sources has been stuck between 15% and 30% globally for decades without significant movement? And how detrimental is this in view of the substantial and wide-ranging gender gaps established in the previous chapter? Why does gender parity of voices in coverage remain so unattainable? These are the questions that will be tackled in this part of the report. Contrary to the popular belief that was dispelled in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*, it is not solely due to a structural underrepresentation of women in public life, important as this factor is. To unpack the barriers holding the news industry back, I spoke with dozens of senior news editors from the six studied countries, as well as with trailblazing news practitioners and academics from around the globe, including Canada, Norway, Sweden, and the UK, all of whom were steeped in various aspects of the issue. Importantly and unusually, we have explored the problem on three levels

— societal, organizational, and individual — and have delved into various aspects of news coverage, some of which remain a blind spot in the news industry as we will discover later in the chapter. To understand women's presence in news coverage we have examined:

- the barriers and drivers in improving women's **representation in news** (e.g., who is the story about, whose perspective it amplifies)
- the **stories** that are told or missed (e.g., which topics are written about more by women/men or feature more women/men, what angles are relevant to women, what stories are missed)
- how women are **portrayed** (what role they play in the story, what questions they are asked, how they are described, how much space they are given to express their opinions, how frequently they are represented visually).

# The problem related to the representation of women in news coverage

## The glass ceiling for women's voices in news coverage hovers between 15% and 30%

Let's start with a reminder of what we already know. *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News* revealed that women's share of voice as protagonists, experts, or sources in online news in 2019 in the six countries of interest was between 14% in India and 29% in the UK. During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, their share of voice was between 16% in India and 25% in the UK.<sup>194</sup> According to the latest Global Media Monitoring Report, in 2021, as reported by the long-standing report editor Sarah Macharia who was interviewed for this project, women's presence in news globally averaged 25%, ranging between 17% in the Middle East and 33% in North America.<sup>195</sup> Maite Taboada, professor of linguistics at Simon Fraser University in Canada, who leads the Gender Gap Tracker there, found that in the last four years of tracking the gender of quoted voices in news, women's share of voice only reached around 30% on the best performing days.

## There is a terminology problem... experts, contributors, sources, protagonists, case studies, witnesses, spokespeople...It is unclear who the news industry is talking about

One of the problems that surfaced during the data gathering and interviewing phase of this study was the absence of a shared

convention within the news industry around the types of contributors that feature in a story. When speaking with Lara Joannides – Creative Diversity Lead at BBC News and 50:50 – I learned that the BBC distinguishes between *presenters, reporters, expert contributors, case studies* and *vox pops*. To keep the methodology simple, however, and to maximize teams' participation in the 50:50 initiative, at a company level the expectation was for teams to only report the proportion of women contributors in aggregate across all these categories. In addition, when counting the contributors who are women, the BBC teams are instructed to count “*only what they can control*”, which, for instance, leaves out the gender of central protagonists in a story, such as Prime Ministers or the only witness to a calamitous event. Jane Barrett – Global Editor, Media News Strategy at Reuters, who was interviewed for this project – explained that she breaks down contributors into three categories: *protagonist sources* (those that are central and indispensable to the story), *discretionary sources* (everyone whose voice the journalist chooses to amplify in the story) and *secret sources* (the whistle-blowers, whose identity is never revealed). In the Gender Gap Tracker, Maite Taboada's team at Simon Fraser University counts *people mentioned* – men or women who are mentioned in the story by name – and *people quoted* – those whose voices are reflected in the story. The Global Media Monitoring Project adopts yet another approach, distinguishing between *subjects, spokespeople, experts or commentators, eyewitnesses, a person expressing popular opinion, and a person with a personal experience* who expresses their own view of a story. For *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*, AKAS and the Media Ecosystems Analysis Group, who conducted the content analysis, agreed the following delineation of news contributors: *experts, sources and protagonists* (the latter being defined as those whose name was mentioned in the headline of the article).

These different conventions point to a two-fold problem: firstly, we cannot size the problem of

194. Kassova, 2020b  
195. Macharia, 2020

women's underrepresentation in coverage at an industry level if we do not share a similar understanding of what we are measuring; and secondly, we cannot see, let alone change, what we do not measure. Unlike the measurement of the proportion of women in newsrooms or in news leadership teams, which are consistent across the industry, quantifying the proportion of women who feature in the news becomes a more subjective and company-specific exercise. This makes sharing best practice across organizations harder. Perhaps the news industry's inconsistency in thinking around women's share of voice in news coverage is also partly a reflection of the low priority that the industry affords to resolving the issue.

### **The good news: the proportion of women news experts has grown in the last five years globally. Databases and lists may be making a difference**

In our conversation about the factors that drive success in improving women's share of voice in news, Sarah Macharia revealed that the first

*"appreciable increase in the proportion of experts who are women quoted in the news"*

in the GMMP global longitudinal study occurred in the latest wave of reporting. The proportion of women experts, although still marginalized, increased by five percentage points, up from 19% in 2015 to 24% in 2020.

*"Previously it had been fluctuating, one point down, two points up, but now we saw that five-point change. And I think it's not a coincidence that, in the past few years, there has been a push to develop directories of women experts. And maybe they are working. Research needs to take place to understand to what extent media organizations are actually using the directories, but I think that this might be one of the reasons why we saw this jump in women's share as experts."*

Macharia believes that organizational intentionality, which we will be covering in more detail in the next chapter, is at the core of giving more voice to women's perspectives

in the news, and highlighted the BBC's 50:50 initiative as a case in point.

### **Societal and institutional barriers are impeding the improvement of women's representation and portrayal in news coverage. Beware the combination of the status quo bias and gender blindness**

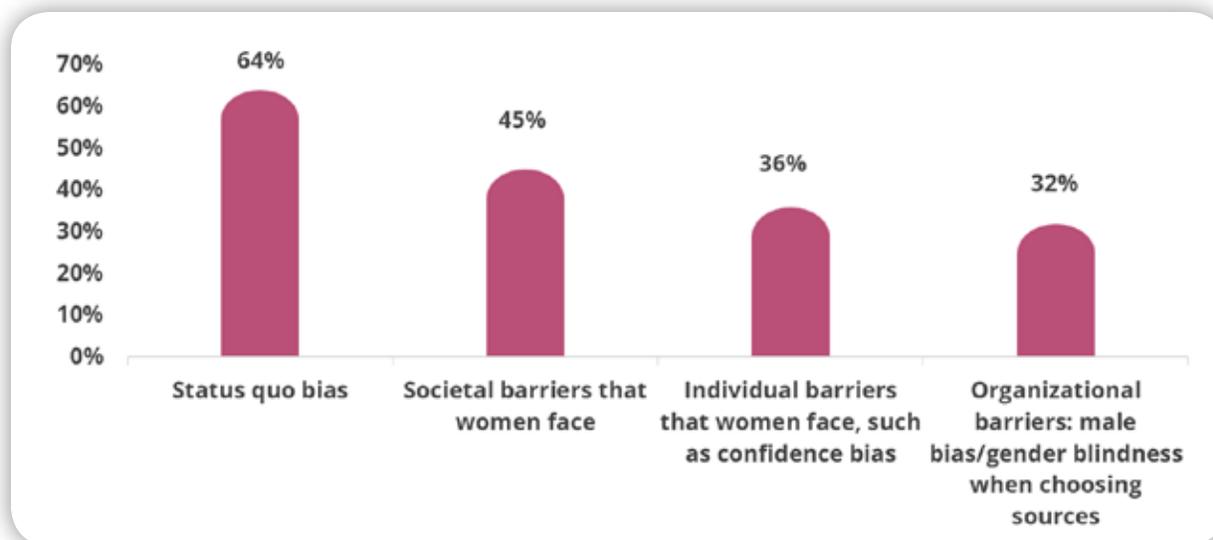
The most common reason news leaders interviewed for this project suggested for the intractability of this newsgathering problem was **institutional and individual status quo bias**, noted by 14 out of 22 respondents or 64% (see Figure 36). The harshest criticism voiced by an interviewee was that journalists were not sufficiently organized to widen their networks and proactively source female contributors. More commonly, interviewees acknowledged that to change things it is necessary to overhaul established professional networks and habits which typically favor men (who are usually the most senior experts already on the books) and undertake some original research. A senior female news editor from the global south zoomed in on both male and status quo biases.

*"Sometimes we say: 'This is what is normal.' So when you need to talk to people on economic issues, you go for well-known economists, , and they all just tend to be men. And you are not thinking consciously. We need to say: 'Okay, we know so and so, but let's find a woman's voice.'"*

Lara Joannides explained how the 50:50 initiative helped journalists break the status quo bias by reaching out to less senior sources who were more likely to be diverse.

*"Now we're saying to teams: 'Actually, do you need to speak to the scientist who's the head of the department? Or can you speak to one of the researchers who may be less senior, but has actually been at the core of this work, and may be doing the more detailed or manual tasks relevant to this scientific story?' And yes, maybe they've only been working in the field for five or ten years, and*

Figure 36: Barriers highlighted as key to improving the proportion of women featuring in news (2022)



Source: Author’s interviews (2022) Base: 22 senior news leaders across the global north and south

Q: Academic and news research has shown that there is a long-standing male bias in news coverage, with the proportion of female protagonists and experts in the news stuck at around 20 to 30%? What are the key barriers to improving that proportion in your view?

*not 25 years, and don’t have their name on the department, but maybe they’re a better person to speak to, and they will also more likely be more diverse.”*

A male global news leader also referenced the structural challenge that journalism faces:

*“[Social] movements take time. We have new reporters who have come through educational systems that are trying to emphasize more equitable approaches to reporting. But often reporters - new and veteran - are habituated in particular ways of reporting, so it does take a long time to change old habits.”*

**Women face structural barriers in every society, especially in terms of their representation in sectors such as politics, economics, and business**

Just under half of the interviewed senior news leaders (45%) recognized the structural

barriers that inhibit the progress in women’s visibility in news coverage (see Figure 36). These fundamental barriers were also acknowledged by the industry experts who were interviewed for this chapter. Women’s lower visibility in some key sectors such as politics, economics, and business was emphasized in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*. In the words of Reuters’ Jane Barrett:

*“I think it [the lack of women as news protagonists] is a sign of how slowly things are moving in society as a whole. And I don’t know whether society moves on, or whether we have plateaued for a while. So the elected officials, whether they’re corporate or political, are a reflection of the world that we live in.”*

Agnes Stenbom – Head of IN/LAB (Schibsted) in Sweden and project manager for the AIJO<sup>196</sup> project in 2020 – reflected on the structural barriers that journalists face when covering stories.

196. AIJO is an industry-wide platform for collaboration around AI. Through the LSE JournalismAI Collab, representatives from eight major news organizations across the world have together explored how we might leverage the power of AI to understand, identify and mitigate newsroom biases, particularly around gender. The participating organizations were: Schibsted (Scandinavia), Reuters (global), AFP (France), Deutsche Welle (Germany), Nikkei (Japan), La Nacion (Argentina), Nice Matin (France), and Reach (UK).

*“Journalists report on what’s happening in the world and in this particular week, we had ongoing world events where the majority of people involved were men. We had political meetings, the G20 summit, we had the Space X rocket launch, Joe Biden and Donald Trump were competing for the presidency. So the focus points of the big news stories were men. And of course, then we write about men and we depict men in pictures.”*

Taboada highlighted the structural barrier that women face in war coverage in Canada and Spain, (her home country), which resulted in women’s quoted voices declining at the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022:

*“...all the war experts seem to be men. You look at NATO experts. So the kinds of topics that are being covered are security, war, energy, where men seem to dominate.”*

Some news leaders also mentioned women being more likely to be abused and harassed online which results in their media visibility coming at a higher psychological cost, a factor that at times dissuades them from being in the public eye.

### **The global ecosystem of international organizations and non-profits, which deprioritizes progress in news media**

Macharia outlined another systemic barrier, in this instance related to the global ecosystem of international organizations and non-profits, which deprioritizes progress in news media. To her, the main barrier to improving women’s visibility in news coverage is

*“the lack of prioritization of media in gender-focused initiatives. Media are usually at the periphery of gender equality work. You have health at the center, education, but there’s still a lack of common understanding of media as one of the ways through which discriminatory social and cultural norms can be dislodged. As such, media continue to remain at the periphery of attention.”*

Macharia argues that there are very few international agencies that provide funding for work that focuses on gender in media and, moreover, that this funding has shrunk over time.

*“...We are getting a fraction of what we used to get. And that lack of prioritization, lack of acknowledgement or recognition of the role of media in advancing gender equality and women’s rights is a big challenge.”*

### **Individual barriers that women contributors face include lack of confidence and media training**

Around a third of the interviewed senior news leaders noted the existence of **individual barriers that women experts face** which may result from the long-standing structural inequality women face (see Figure 36). Some interviewees, especially in the global south, and media experts, perceive women to have less confidence in offering their opinion than men. This perception was encapsulated memorably in the following quote from a senior female political editor from the global south:

*“When I was in TV, I would reach out to women and they’d be like: ‘No, TV’s too showy.’ We don’t want to share our opinion because we feel shy – ‘am I qualified to have that kind of opinion or not?’ I think many women do that... So I think all of us are kind of responsible as well. We choose to let other people speak instead of thinking that our opinion has any kind of value.”*

A female news leader from the global north noted the apparent confidence gap between women and men who are approached to share their expertise in media news.

*“A lot of the women I get in touch with will say: ‘This is a really fascinating question, thank you for emailing me about it, but I think X Y Z is better qualified to answer your questions on this.’ Whereas I’ll email a man who might not actually work on this specifically, and they’ll often say: ‘Yeah, yeah, of course, here’s what I think.’”*

As part of this project, I interviewed Svein Tore Bergestuen – Norwegian co-author of *A Guide to the Professional Interview* and a former journalist – about his views on the differences between men and women sources and journalists. He highlighted behavioral differences between female and male sources, recognizing that the stereotype didn't apply to everyone.

*“So journalists try to gather information that confirms the story that they have in mind. They often miss extremely important, both information and sources, such as women, who basically - in journalism at least - don't come forward as often as men to say: ‘Listen, I have something I want to say’. So you have to find that information. And when you are in a conversation or an interview with a source, if you don't use the method of asking open-ended questions, with empathy, you won't get high quality information from people.”*

Some senior leaders noted that women are also less likely to have had access to media training, so they are more hesitant to pursue opportunities and are therefore losing out to men who have fewer qualms about sharing their expertise. For example, Barrett shared her view that men politicians tend to be better equipped to navigate the media than women:

*“...they're very good at getting the headlines. They play the game. They know how to give a good soundbite. They know that if they say something outrageous, they probably won't be held to account for it, but they will get some column inches.”*

### **Male bias resulting in gender blindness inhibits improvements in women's share of voice**

The fourth barrier to improving women's share of voice in news coverage, highlighted by a third of the interviewed leaders and also covered at length in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*, is the male bias in newsrooms and news leadership. It is captured in the observations that **newsrooms and organizations are largely run by men, making**



**them less sensitive to the differences that female perspectives bring to stories.** In the words of a senior female news leader from a high-profile beat from the global south:

*“[Source and protagonist gender imbalance] goes back to who’s making the decisions - and we use the phrase ‘old boys’ networks’. They call on one another because they are familiar and at ease with one another, and they’re calling the shots.”*

Jane Barrett reflected powerfully on why this bias prevails across the newsroom culture, among men and women.

*“I think one of the really difficult things, and I’m sure I’m guilty of this as well, is that as we’ve come up through the newsroom, very often we’ve been learning by osmosis. You learn by what you see around you, and so as I was growing up in the newsroom, I learned from a lot of very good, very successful, very excellent men. And so, naturally, you’ve kind of almost copied, you’ve taken on board their view of what’s the news story - not just their view, but how to report something. The vast majority, maybe 90% of people I learned from in my first year, were men.”*

### **Journalism-specific barriers: short-term outlook, reductive journalism, and organizations’ unwillingness to report on themselves**

Three journalism-specific barriers, mentioned by a minority but noteworthy nonetheless, emerged in the process of interviewing the 41 senior news editors for this project. The first is the short-term outlook that journalists typically display due to the nature of their work, reporting on the here and now. This short-term outlook plays out in two ways: the constant need for trade-offs between limited resources to cover breaking stories, and the lack of capacity/space to think through strategic issues, which include gender- and racially-balanced news coverage. Barrett summarized the issue as follows:

*“...Journalism is a very, very busy, constantly stressful industry. People don’t necessarily have the time to sit back and actually think about where the business is going, where the industry is going... When you’re stuck in operational and managerial tasks, you don’t give yourself that time to think at the top of the leadership pyramid and consider: ‘What are some of the structural faults that we currently have, that might look like a little crack in the wall at the moment, but might become devastating?’ Diversity has been a crack in the wall for such a long time, but so far we’ve mostly dealt with it by hiring people from different backgrounds. That’s a great and important start but diversity is much bigger than that. Diversity is also: ‘Who are we talking to? Who are we talking about? What stories are we going after?’ It’s a much bigger issue.”*

Joannides highlighted the barrier that big breaking stories, such as the war in Ukraine or COVID, impose on journalists who try to maintain a diverse contributor story base.

*“I think really, it [the biggest barrier to achieving gender parity in news coverage] is more resources and time. It’s not a lack of ambition, or motivation, or will. And it’s not lack of there being the people out there for us to get on the news. What we found is that when the teams are super stretched, and producers are up against it, and you’ve got half the team off sick with COVID, and you’re trying to get a program on air, it can be really hard to keep doing that counting and then trying to say: Right, the first person who picks up the phone to agree to your interview is a man, are you going to then spend another 10 minutes trying to find a woman when you have a program to put on air in half an hour?”*

It seems that in these circumstances of time and resource pressure, journalists revert to well-established sources who tend to be men.

The resource trade-off, which often leaves diversity initiatives at the end of a long tail, was encapsulated in the words of a senior news leader from the global north.

*“You come back with these great ideas, this great foundation of something, but the resources are always so tight, that putting them into practice takes extra work, extra resources, and this is constantly a problem, because you are told: ‘Oh, but we already have a roadmap. We don’t have any space on the roadmap till October...’”*

Another barrier to progress in diversifying perspectives in news coverage was articulated beautifully by a senior female news editor from the global north in her response to a question about the drivers of inclusion of women news leaders of color. She defined it as **perspective reductionism**, which partly stems from the incredibly fast-paced and pressurized news agenda, and which can lead to an oversimplification of arguments.

*“Making room for people to have diverse points of view is a challenge. We in journalism can be very reductive, we don’t really like complex stories sometimes. We say: ‘This is the story. Here’s the solution, or not the solution. And here’s the situation and that’s it’. Bringing diverse viewpoints inherently adds complexity to our conversations, and our coverage, which is a good thing, but not everyone has that perspective.”*

Finally, a third common barrier that inhibits progress towards gender balance in news arises from journalists’ inhibited ability to be introspective and report on their own organizations and industry, despite being wonderfully skilled at holding other organizations and industries to account. It was referenced vividly by a senior news leader who summed up the state of affairs as follows:

*“...Journalists have that sort of slightly ivory tower mentality that still lives on. On the other side, we always say that we’re not the story ... So we try to get ourselves out of the way. And then there’s probably an element of shame and fear. We’ve been bashed a lot over the last 15 years. Our business model has been totally upended. And now, we’ve been told there’s something else that we don’t do right.”*

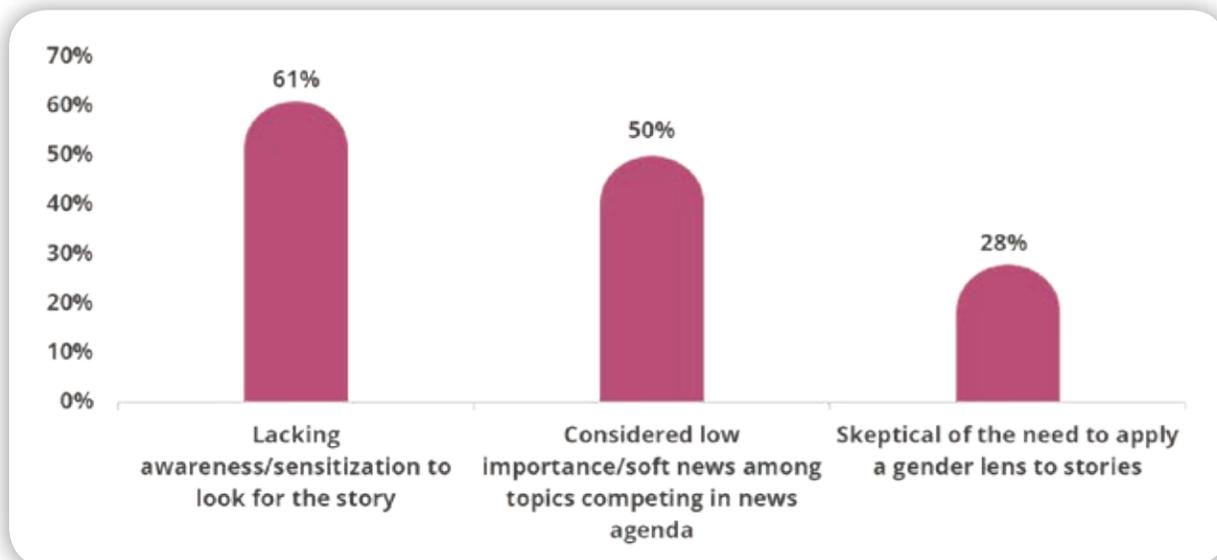
## The problem with the missing gender angles in news storytelling

*The Missing Perspectives of Women in News* uncovered that online news coverage in the six countries of interest was essentially missing gender equality angles with under 1% of the news coverage in all six countries containing a gender equity or equality angle.

I asked most of the news editors I interviewed for this project why they thought the proportion of stories that contained a gender equality angle was so pitifully low. Notably, the top reason offered was a **lack of awareness of and sensitization among journalists to gender issues** (see Figure 37). That is, the majority of the interviewees (61%) recognized the gender blindness within news that indicates that reporters may simply not see the gender angles inherent in the stories they are covering (e.g. the gender ramifications of particular economic policies or new political or health legislation). A senior female editor from the global south summarized the problem:

*“I think that what is missing is that sensitization of journalists to actually look at the gender angles of the stories that they cover. If a journalist was trained to look for a gender angle in [a current health news story in my country], then they would look at the proposed [policy] changes - how are they going to affect men and women differently? For example, has the maternity cover been increased, or has it been reduced? How many women are likely to benefit?”*

**Figure 37: Suggested reasons for the low proportion of gender equality stories/story angles in news coverage (2022)**



Source: Author’s interviews (2022). Base: 18 senior news leaders across the global north and south  
 Q: Currently less than 1% of online news coverage contains gender equality story angles. In your view, is it that gender equality story angles are of lower importance to newsmakers? If so, why is this?

The second most frequently mentioned barrier was that **gender stories are likely to be considered of low importance or interest**. This was put forward by half of those who were asked the question and often interlinked with the fact that men drive news organizations, which leads to a gender lens simply being overlooked (see Figure 37).

*“I think it is a couple of different things. That it’s considered lower importance is definitely one of them. I think there’s definitely a perception that there’s not as much interest in or focus on them”*

reflected a male news leader from the global north. One female news leader from the global south explicitly made the connection between low perceived importance and the male-dominated culture in newsrooms.

*“The issues confronted by women are not top of mind for the people who are setting the agendas in those newsrooms. I think it’s actually quite simple... I think it’s because men set the news agenda and some men don’t think about the world through a woman’s lens.”*

Another female leader from the global north highlighted the pressure that a competitive news agenda puts on the decision to include gender angles.

*“I think people are sometimes scared to put a lens on certain subjects because they think, ‘Well, we’ve only got so much capacity to cover certain stories, and we’re going to cover these because we know that this and that will fly!’”*

### **Story segregation due to the gender-stereotypical assignment of editorial roles in beats may be suppressing women’s consumption of high-profile news genres**

In Part 1 of this report we discovered that the journalists who take editorial decisions with regards to political, business, and foreign affairs news in the six countries of interest are overwhelmingly more likely to be men (and in the UK and US, white men). Here is how Macharia summarized the problem, drawing evidence from all GMMP study editions.

*“Topics such as politics are the movers and shakers in the newsroom, these are the more prestigious beats, as are international stories. International stories tend to be assigned to men rather than women. Political stories as well are reported largely by men, as revealed by the global media monitoring research. The story assignment patterns in legacy news media are replicated in digital news media. The digital newsroom continues the kind of job segregation, story assignment segregation found in the traditional, physical newsroom.”*

Barrett reflected on a prevalent belief that enables this segregation:

*“There has been this belief that women will go off and do the ‘mushy stuff’. We need to break that bias. What you find is that when you send female reporters into hard news stories you don’t just get great journalism but also new perspectives. For example, the story of how terrifying it is, as a mother, to carry your child across the country to get them to safety and to leave everything that you’ve worked for behind. That’s not mushy, it’s important storytelling.”*

Part 4 of this report will reveal that women globally have a higher level of interest than men in 11 out of 16 news genres and lower interest in just five news genres. Politics, business, and international news happen to be among those five, along with sports and science/technology. One can’t help but draw a link between who makes the editorial decisions and the appeal of the news genres to different audiences. In other words, the genres in which men dominate the editorial roles tend to appeal more to men and less to women.

## **What stories are being missed?**

### **The micro stories within big political, economic or health stories are often missed out**

Having measured women’s share of voice in English-speaking Canadian media using the

Gender Gap Tracker for four years, Taboada confirms that more men are quoted in business and finance news genres. However, when analyzing the economics genre, she found that

*“when you look at micro level, like local businesses, especially during COVID, there were a lot of articles about the impact of COVID on small businesses, on the local economy, then you would see more women.”*

According to the Reuters Institute research reported in Part 4 of this report, women audiences are most interested in local news, and more so than men (62% vs. 56%). Agnes Stenbom from Schibsted in Sweden found that topics focusing on micro-aspects of the pandemic, such as personal finances, holidays during the pandemic, or family health<sup>197</sup> were consumed more by women. In Part 4 we shall also find out how increasing women’s share of voice at every stage of the value chain has a positive impact on women’s news readership (see Amedia case study).

When asked to summarize the stereotypical way of thinking about important stories, Joannides found that macro angles, which are less likely to appeal to women audiences, dominated over micro angles.

*“I think for our flagships, it’s often the main political stories: things like the economy and Brexit, and the latest scandal. And I think, often, with all of those kinds of big political stories, it then does just become very Westminster and Millbank-centric<sup>198</sup>, and you kind of lose that voice of, ‘Well, actually, there are probably angles that you can look at on all of those stories in terms of how it affects women’. We had with COVID, for example, it took a little while, but eventually, we did start talking about how COVID was disproportionately affecting people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic representative backgrounds, and then also women, particularly, having the longer effects of how it’s impacted them in the workplace, and things like that. But it was kind of the afterthought.”*

197. Stenbom, 2020

198. Westminster and Millbank are UK Government locations.

With the knowledge that high-profile beats rarely have editors who are people of color, it is no surprise that it took so long for the news industry to spot the structural inequalities stories disproportionately affecting people of color in relation to the pandemic story. Jane Barrett passionately evolved the argument by focusing on what she believes are the broader societal consequences of not covering stories that are relevant to diverse audiences:

*“The lack of understanding from people at the top [in the news industry] about how some people actually live, creates such a huge gap, that no wonder those people start to feel that they don’t belong at all. That starts to sow the seeds of people just disengaging from politics, or from journalism, not thinking it’s for them and opting out. That then leaves the ground really fertile for misinformation, for revolt, for some quite nasty things that can happen if people don’t feel that they’re heard, or represented, or listened to, or being helped.”*

### **The perspectives of people of color are missed in political news**

A few of the news leaders who were interviewed for this project mentioned story angles being missed, even on big stories such as the US elections or Brexit, due to the homogeneity of the newsroom. This can result in a disconnect from swathes of audience communities. A senior leader from the US spoke about the political angles relevant to ethnic and racial minority audiences who were simply not considered important.

*“We [in news organization] have a politics team that covers politics in America. I realized early in my tenure that if you cover the Senate, you should be covering all dynamics about what it takes to get re-elected to the US Senate. And that means you should focus on how they’re trying to drive out appealing to voters of color. And those types of stories, frankly, tended to fall really low down on the priority list. The editors weren’t people of color either.”*

A news editor from the UK also offered their perspective on how big stories had taken the

news industry by surprise due to its blind spots in the areas of ethnicity and race.

*“During the last US election the question came up about Hispanic voters, and lots of other people made assumptions about what Hispanic voters were going to do. And then we were kind of shocked and surprised when they didn’t do that. What we should have thought was: ‘Oh, we don’t have anyone in our newsroom who looks like that, we should get some people who look like that, because we missed that story’. Just start from thinking about what your newsroom looks like, what your audience markets look like, and who you want to reach, and then make your newsroom look like that, instead of trying to fill in gaps retrospectively.”*

### **Greater weight is given to news relevant to white people and little use is made of a structural inequality lens when covering crime**

Some senior news editors from the global north raised the issue of story coverage being tilted towards the interests of white audiences at the expense of those of audiences of color. A senior news leader from the global north alluded to the lower weighting that newsrooms give to shootings of people of color in the US vs. of those who are white.

*“So thinking about the Buffalo shootings, for me, that was like, ‘Are we really covering this? Are we treating it as a [news organization name] story? Or are we treating it as a kind of, ‘Oh these things happen. Black people get shot, like, what can you do?’”*

A very poignant manifestation of the coverage bias in the US and the UK being tilted in favor of white people is well-documented in the “missing white woman syndrome” in news coverage. The term was coined as far back as 2004 by the American newsreader Gwen Ifill and it seems that this syndrome is as vigorously in play today as it was then. It encapsulates the tendency for news media to cover the disappearance of attractive white women more than that of Black or Brown

women. Recent examples include the extensive coverage of Gabby Petito in the news cycles in the UK and the US compared with the modest coverage in the UK of the murder of Sabina Nessa, a woman with south Asian heritage, in the same week in 2021; or, again in the UK, the extensive coverage of Sarah Everard's murder compared with the significantly lesser coverage of that of Black sisters Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry during the same period. AKAS' analysis of the GDELT database of stories found that in UK online news coverage, Sarah Everard was mentioned over eight times more than Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry combined in the period from April 2020 to September 2022 (37,203 mentions vs. 4,337). In the critical first 10 days of media coverage, Nicole Smallman or Bibaa Henry received 96 mentions whilst Sarah Everard received 11,121.

Another worrying problem is the fact that stories in news about missing people of color often lack a structural inequality lens in news, which would highlight their disproportionate vulnerability and invisibility in society. *"You cannot miss what is not seen. Because US society often renders Black women invisible, public outcry may be muted or absent when we go missing. That absence can best be understood as part of a larger societal attitude toward Black girls and women, in which the American body politic keeps us on the margins of society,"* wrote Julia Jordan-Zachery in The Washington Post.<sup>199</sup>

**“Women’s stories” vs. “news angles relevant to women”: Both editorial approaches to improving women’s visibility in news storytelling have value**

The research for this project, including the case studies of news companies and interviews with senior news leaders, unraveled two distinct editorial approaches to covering gender issues. The first defines women’s stories or



199. Jordan-Zachary, 2021

women's issues as a discrete topic area that must be covered vertically in a dedicated beat. The second approach argues that the gender lens cuts horizontally across all stories, that it is an angle that can be applied to any story. Interviewees often viewed gender equality stories as a stand-alone category of news coverage relevant exclusively to women in a way that diminishes their appeal. Examples include period poverty, menopause, childbirth, maternity, or successful female business entrepreneurs. Here is the account of a senior female news editor from the global south juxtaposing the two editorial approaches.

*"It's [news coverage of gender issues] a consideration that it's soft news. And I think that having that exclusive lens through which gender empowerment stories are reported on is probably a bigger problem... It has to be filtered throughout news coverage, it shouldn't be this special story that you have."*

This editorial approach creates a false opposition between "real news" and "gender stories" in which the latter invariably lose out in the context of an intensely competitive news agenda and publics or decision-makers who do not prioritize gender issues.<sup>200</sup>

*"So how do editors determine what is important? Editors basically try to read the mood of the audience. So it [the low coverage of gender issues] is not really a newsroom problem, it's a general problem of society. Society itself does not assign any priority, high priority, to issues of gender imbalance."*

This was the structural explanation offered by a male senior news editor from the global south to explain the low proportion of coverage of gender issues. Those editors who defend the horizontal approach expressed a worry that dedicating a beat to covering gender issues "ghettoizes" the gender lens, thereby discouraging all journalists from applying it to the stories they cover. Lara Joannides made a compelling case for the need to look for angles

relevant to different audience groups in the coverage of all stories.

*"We need to make sure that the stories we're telling, and the angles we're coming at them from, are going to be appealing and representing all sorts of different kinds of voices and perspectives. So I just try and keep the representation and the perspective sides separate."*

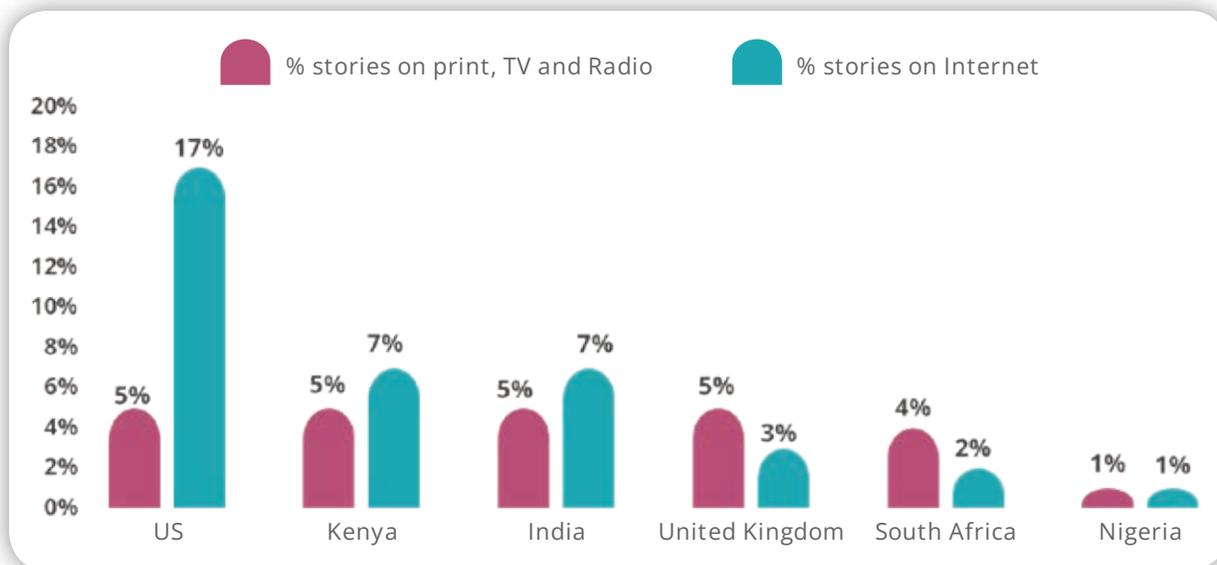
In the next chapter, we will argue that given the low proportion of stories that contain a gender angle, it is helpful and indeed perhaps necessary to combine both editorial approaches.

## News industry's blind spot: women's portrayal in the news

In the last few decades, the news industry has not succeeded in shifting the stereotypes which women fall captive to in society. These stereotypes - which unfortunately news coverage globally is much more likely to reinforce than to challenge - are related to an undue focus on women's appearance and age, sexuality, traditional societal roles as mothers and men's side kicks, and on personality traits (rather than professional competence). Women are significantly more likely than men to be described in the news in terms of how they look, how old they are, whether they are mothers and wives, or in derogatory terms relating to their personality, physique, or sexuality. None of the company-specific gender initiatives which AKAS has analyzed to date in any of the *Missing Perspectives* reports target understanding or improving how women are portrayed in the news. **Portrayal**

200. See Kassova, 2020a

**Figure 38: Proportion of stories which clearly challenge gender stereotypes. Responses on print, television and radio news and internet (2020)**



Source: GMMP, Macharia, 2020 Sample sizes: Number of stories analyzed on print, television, and radio news: UK (480); South Africa (133); US (188); Kenya (105); India (486); and Nigeria (179). Number of stories analyzed on internet news calculated using GMMP data: UK (433); South Africa (100); US (188); Kenya (100); India (514); and Nigeria (200).

**is not measured systematically within the news industry.** Some news organizations focus on counting how many women are represented in the content, but not how they are talked about. This is a problem, because unless women are portrayed as empowered individuals, their roles in society will remain perceived as inferior to those of men. The portrayal analysis offered in the latest edition of the Global Media Monitoring Project report exposes the extraordinarily small proportion of news coverage that challenges the existing stereotypes across the six countries of focus in this report (see Figure 38).

Sarah Macharia voiced her concerns regarding the news industry’s lack of progress over the years in dismantling gender stereotypes.

*“We see a bit of [upward] movement in sources and subjects who are women, women experts, but really, as we saw in the GMMP results, change has occurred in what can be counted. But in the really structural issues – what we call the qualitative indicators which look at gender stereotypes in the news e.g. the proportion of stories that raise issues about gender equality, sexualization of women in the stories, etc. That has either been on a plateau, or on a downward trend.”*

## Case study: Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a standout exemplar of the undetected but substantive portrayal problem. It was the gender equality in media leader: the only country out of 123 measured which achieved a positive score in the newly developed gender equality in media index (GEM-I) in 2020.<sup>201</sup> This means that according to the index, women in Bulgaria were uniquely accorded marginally higher status in news than men. In their article *Axes of power: Examining women's access to leadership positions in the news media*<sup>202</sup>, Carolyn Byerly and her colleagues analyze the relationship between women in the news industry across all professional roles<sup>203</sup> and the percentage of women who are subjects or sources in news stories. Their analysis pointed to positive and weak to moderately-strong correlations between these two elements. Based on advanced statistical analysis of data from 2010-2011, they concluded that for every one percentage point increase in the proportion of senior women professionals, there was a 0.32 percentage point increase in women's proportion as subjects and sources. Bulgaria stood out among the analyzed countries, the poster child performing exceptionally well in terms of both the high proportion of women in news organizations and in news coverage as subjects and sources. We may get very excited by these results until we discover how women are portrayed in news coverage in Bulgaria. But portrayal was not measured in the index.

### **Despite having reached gender parity as reporters and as subjects in news coverage, women in Bulgarian news are often portrayed in a traditional, often submissive, and even offensive light**

As a Bulgarian I have had the opportunity to regularly follow news coverage from leading and smaller news outlets. What has become abundantly clear to me over my years of news consumption is that reporters, regardless of their sex, portray women mostly in stereotypes. Women are often described in terms of their appearance, age and sexuality, family status (e.g. as mothers, wives or mistresses), as men's side kicks, and as victims. Men are widely accepted by both men and women as superior in many areas of public life including politics and business, and the news coverage mirrors these beliefs. For example, 41% of adults in Bulgaria agree that men make better political leaders than women<sup>204</sup>, while 34% hold the view that men make better business executives. This places Bulgaria in 53rd and 52nd place in terms of the strength of endorsement of men over women out of 88 measured countries. A gender equality lens in Bulgarian news, as in news coverage in other countries, is mostly absent. Male-favoring norms are at the heart of the issue and unless news organizations conduct portrayal analyses/deep dives, these norms will not be on anyone's radar, thus having little to no chance of being softened and eventually eradicated.

To illustrate this argument, the AKAS team conducted a portrayal analysis of the main protagonist in a story which gripped Bulgaria between June and August 2022. The central protagonist was Lena Borislavova – a Bulgarian lawyer and politician, and Harvard graduate – who headed up Prime Minister Kiril Petkov's government's political cabinet between 2021 – 2022. During her short political career, she became the target of several media attacks. These attacks were not of a political, but were rather of a personal nature, specifically accusing Borislavova (more than Petkov) of an improper intimate relationship with the Prime Minister. None of the supporting evidence in the form of photos or video footage provided conclusive evidence of any wrongdoing. The last item of photographic evidence proved to be a purposely fabricated material that caused outrage in society. Nevertheless, these attacks took their toll on Borislavova who withdrew from participating in the forthcoming

201. Djerf-Pierre and Edstrom, 2020

202. Byerly & McGraw, 2020

203. Excluding governance

204. World Values Survey data, 2017-2022

parliamentary elections. A portrayal analysis of the news coverage of the story in Bulgaria<sup>205</sup> revealed that the majority of the articles (58%) included a sexual reference about Borislavova. 33% of the articles made reference to her appearance and the same proportion used derogatory terms to describe her. Two articles bore the headlines: *“Lena cocked up again. She made an appearance almost in her bra and a skirt with a deep slit”* and *“Seduced and abandoned. The fate of much trash”*. Another article concluded: *“Borislavova undoubtedly possesses excellent physique but it is out of order for her to parade it in the Ministerial Cabinet.”*

Other articles referred to her as *pushy, fiery* or an *ambitious brunette*. 29% of articles mentioned or focused on her family status. An article in a major Bulgarian newspaper *Trud*, made the following damning statement: *“There is a Bulgarian saying: ‘She washes his feet and drinks the water.’ It refers to women who tend to men in power, and instead of being looked after, are turned into pathetic concubines.”* Only a minority of the articles (38%) quoted Borislavova herself. Her perspective, published on her social media platforms, was that the personal attacks on her were a result of the government’s unique attempts to break away from the corrupt past, and in the absence of uncovering thefts, dirty dealings or other incriminating actions, the government opponents attacked her personally. *“Being involved in politics in Bulgaria has its price”*, she reflected.

To conclude, Bulgarian women’s representation in newsrooms and in news leadership exceeds parity, and, according to the GMMP 2010 data, their representation as protagonists was also very high then. However, measuring these two indicators can create a falsely positive picture of gender equality in Bulgarian news, which is far from being the case. Only through a portrayal analysis, an exercise which need not be extensive or costly, could we get an accurate reading of the true positioning of women in society and in news, as well as a sense of the prevalent gender norms in the society.

205. The analysis is based on the top 24 articles discovered through a search in Google news between 15th June and 29th August 2022

## The identity question trap that diverts attention from the expertise of women of all colors

The questions that journalists ask the experts, protagonists, and sources in their stories are critical to how these contributors are portrayed in the news. In our conversation Bergestuen argued that journalists ask leading questions to confirm their own story hunch.

*“The problem with journalists has always been that they are trying to get people to confirm their theories, their stories. Instead of gathering information in an objective way, they are trying to gather information that supports their story.”*

The questions which journalists ask frame the story that is being told. For example, are protagonists and experts asked about their expert knowledge or about their gender, racial or other identity? According to academic research conducted in Canada<sup>206</sup>, women and racial minority protagonists in news about politics, such as political candidates, are frequently asked more questions related to their gender or racial identity than men and white candidates. This line of questioning detracts from any portrayal of women or women of color as leaders in their areas of expertise and instead presents them through the lens of their gender and/or racial identity. Taboada commented on the findings of this research.

*“Of course, many women who run [for political positions], run because they want to fix things for women. But I think it’s a problem also, if that’s the only kind of platform that they have – their condition as women. Because many of them will want to talk about policies for local businesses, or international relations. But when a reporter puts a microphone in front of them, and says: ‘So how do you balance work and life?’, that is a question that takes away from other more policy-oriented questions.”*

206. Henderson, 2019  
207. The AIJO Project, 2022a  
208. Vos, 2013

## Women who feature in the news are given less space than men. They may be more concise but they are also more likely to be edited down

One of the unique insights that the AIJO project offered is that women’s quotes were shorter than those of men. In the period which the AI analyzed, the average quote length was 103 characters for men and 97 for women.<sup>207</sup> Although this represents just a 6% gap, it is consistent with other research<sup>208</sup> showing that women tend to get less speaking time. I asked Taboada and Stenbom, both of whom participated in the project, for their views on why this might be the case. Stenbom admitted to having been surprised by the realization that it is not just about who journalists quote, but also how they are quoted. While she expected more men to feature in stories due to their societal dominance, she did not expect the women quoted in the articles to be given less space.

*“Okay, unfortunately, we had to write more about men this week because men are holding more offices of power than women, and they are more represented in senior leaderships and in the business world, etc, etc, but at least we should give men and women the same amount of airtime.”*

Taboada added a further nuance to the thinking by introducing a potential hierarchy of quotes and introducing the concept of a filler quote.

*“I think it’s a result of women being added as sources, rather than the main source. One good thing of all this measuring, is that reporters are more aware. So we have more quotes by women. But to the extent that they’re aware, sometimes quotes by women are fillers, or they’re an additional perspective, compared to the main perspective of the expert or the politician.”*

Bergestuen offers a very different perspective when I ask him to highlight the differences between women and men sources. In his view women tend to be briefer in their answers partly because they are more diligent in following the instructions and answering the question they have been asked as closely as possible. Men are more likely to embellish their answers when they are asked a closed question, whereas women do not.

*“So, whereas the men will say, ‘No’, and then give a long answer, or, ‘Yes’, and a big answer, women sources, in my experience are more disciplined, they are keeping it short because they were only actually asked for a yes or no answer. So that means that if you want to have more reliable information from female sources... well then you have to ask different questions.”*

### **Women are marginalized in images in news coverage. For every four images of men there is one image of a woman**

One of the most universal currencies that is comparable across news providers is the use of women in photographs. Images are also the easiest and perhaps the most subliminal way for audiences to calibrate the likelihood of the issues that matter to them being addressed in the news. They either recognize people who look like them in the news or they do not. Agnes Stenbom shared that the eight news partners working on the AIJO

project from across the world decided to use images as one way of measuring gender bias in online news coverage because *“images don’t speak a language, they are universal.”* The findings predictably fall within the ranges of proportions we reported in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News* reports. The analysis of 28,051 images collected between 9th and 15th November 2020 from Schibsted (Scandinavia), Reuters (global), AFP (France), Deutsche Welle (Germany), Nikkei (Japan), La Nacion (Argentina), Nice Matin (France) and Reach (UK), which contained 31,660 faces, revealed that on average, out of every four images one was of a woman (23%). The ratio varied between 4.8 to 1 and 1.8 to 1 (17% and 36%).<sup>209</sup> Surprised by the finding, Stenbom warns against potential complacency among Scandinavian media born out of Scandinavian countries’ higher levels of gender egalitarianism.

*“I think it’s very important that despite Scandinavia being more gender-equal than many other countries, we also recognize the issues that we have in our newsrooms and in our news products. We are not doing as well as we should when it comes to gender diversity in the newsroom and in the output that we produce.”*

The following chapter will explore ways of closing the gender gap in women’s representation and portrayal in news coverage. It will also provide ideas for news coverage which focuses on the needs of a broader and more diverse audience.

209. The AIJO Project, 2022b

# Chapter 3

## Solutions on how to improve women's representation and portrayal in news coverage and their centrality in storytelling. Drivers of positive change and recommended interventions

Having examined the barriers and biases that contribute to the flatlining marginalized proportion of women in news coverage, in this chapter we are turning to the drivers of progress. When asked to identify the key drivers that would improve women's representation as protagonists and experts in news coverage, the interviewed senior news editors highlighted four key factors, with one in particular standing out. This was the central need for **organizations to be proactive and targeted about change in a systematic way**. It was not enough to tinker around the edges and hope for improvement,

most of the interviewees (64%) noted; newsrooms needed to prioritize the issue, quantify it, and maintain momentum (see Figure 39).

News leaders from the global north and south mentioned organizational initiatives such as the BBC's 50:50 project, developing and using female contributors' lists, launching industry-wide initiatives, or creating champions at a newsroom level. In the words of a male senior news editor from the global north:

Figure 39: Perceived drivers of improving women’s representation in news coverage (2022)



Source: Author’s interviews (2022). Base: 22 senior news leaders across the global north and south  
 Q: What are the drivers of improving women’s representation as experts and protagonists in the news?

*“The barriers are outdated assumptions, and a bit of laziness, and people not being sufficiently organized or sufficiently creative. You need to put some work into it, be organized, develop a network, and share information, and all those things are entirely doable, and we’ve had real success doing it.”*

A male news editor from the global south explained how becoming conscious of the problem helps to tackle it but also how sporadic, rather than systematic, the nature of the initiatives currently is.

*“Often when you raise [the issue of representation in sources] it improves. Resistance is not like, ‘I don’t want to do it’. We do it when it is highlighted by someone. If the editor says: ‘We need to do this’, it is done, but if it is not monitored, people then just revert back to old positions.”*

A minority of the senior news editors (27%) who were interviewed about this also spontaneously noted the specific importance of **monitoring the data and setting targets/quotas** to maintain internal motivation for dismantling established habits. A female senior

news leader from the global south made a strong case for the need for targets.

*“Within the newsrooms, you set quotas. You make your people count [source and protagonist use], because unless you count [the bias] and name it, it goes unnoticed and people don’t even recognize that they are pursuing their biases. A quota is one way of forcing some kind of counting, some kind of reckoning to happen, and then setting a target for trying to change that.”*

At the launch of the BBC’s Impact report in March 2022 in London, the instigator of the BBC 50:50 initiative<sup>210</sup>, British journalist, editor, and broadcaster Ros Atkins, explained in his opening speech why he thought the initiative had been so successful: it relied on facts and competition. *“Journalists like facts and competition. We didn’t have enough facts and therefore could not compete [in increasing the proportion of diverse contributors in coverage] in a friendly manner.”*

210. The BBC 50:50 initiative relies on a simple methodology of counting the gender (and more recently ethnicity) of news contributors with a view to improving diversity.

# Practical solution ideas for making change happen: from raising awareness to breaking down barriers and creating new habits

Similarly to Chapter 9 of Part 1, which explored potential solutions to closing the diversity and inclusion gap in news leadership in high-profile beats, in this chapter we are exploring ideas and solutions that drive gender (and racial) balance in news coverage. All the ideas outlined have been put forward by the interviewed news leaders or are underpinned by other evidence. They are clustered according to whether they aim to **increase awareness**, **remove barriers**, or **create new habits** (see Figure 24 in Part 1) and whether they aim to bring about change at an **organizational** or **individual** level. Every idea is labelled according to whether it tackles the **representation** of women in news coverage, **story coverage** or the **portrayal** of women/people of color in the news.

All the solutions generated in this chapter build on the recommendations outlined in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News* and *The Missing Perspectives of Women in COVID-19 News*.<sup>211</sup>

## Raising awareness of the problem and solutions is key

When presented with the robust evidence of how marginal the news coverage containing a gender angle is, three out of the 22 news leaders who were asked this question (14%) felt very surprised and four (18%) felt that their organization regularly covered issues with a gender lens. Awareness of the problem of male bias in the news industry is thus still patchy. Moreover, this lack of awareness is rarely recognized or addressed. Only two of the 22 senior news editors (9%) who were asked to identify the drivers of improving women's visibility in news, highlighted raising awareness of the problem. This makes the focus on raising awareness of the issue that much more important both at an organizational and industry level, as well as the individual level. A female news editor from the global north

211. Kassova, 2020a, pp. 153-161; Kassova, 2020b, pp. 67-69

highlighted the importance of stories in raising awareness of the gender dimension.

*“[There’s a] need for organizations to understand what the current news issues are and how they might be able to address that particular subject in relation to gender... Just connect the dots. If they’re interested in a story about the economy, how does gender equality factor into that?”*

No one made a more convincing case for raising awareness as a solution to women’s underrepresentation than this male editor-in-chief from the global south.

*“When you go through our news stories, you would find that it’s like a ratio of eight to two in terms of the voices. But I wouldn’t say that it stems from deliberate acts of discrimination, I would say it’s just about insensitivity and ignorance, which I think might be cured by embracing the thought option, which is to have more training and more workshops and to deal with the subject.”*



### RAISING AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEMS AT AN ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL:

1. **Portrayal: raise awareness of existing biases/stereotypes related to how women and people of color are typically viewed by society. Put in place behavioral tips for journalists for how to circumvent these in coverage**

Earlier in this report (Part 1, Chapter 8) we examined the cultural stereotypes that women and people of color are burdened with, which are often reinforced by news organizations. Being aware of these biases, or at least not reinforcing them, is important for news organizations if they are to break them in coverage. Here is an example list of common biases:

- Women being seen as less competent or committed once they have children
- Men being judged more on potential, and women on performance
- Being authoritative and ambitious being seen as a positive for men, but not for women
- Asian minorities in the UK/US being seen as a great match for technical work but not for leadership
- Black professionals being seen as more aggressive and pushy than other groups
- Black women being seen more as angry where other groups are seen as assertive

## 2. Representation/portrayal/storytelling: raise awareness of existing gender and racial biases in representation, portrayal and storytelling within the news industry

During the interviews with senior news leaders and experts in the industry, it became apparent that news organizations, journalists, and leaders all tend to underestimate the extent of the problem, believing representation to be more balanced than it actually is. This makes initiatives which rely on evidencing assumptions, such as the BBC 50:50 project, very useful not only for raising awareness of the problem of women’s underrepresentation in news coverage but also for intercepting it by the mere act of counting. In the words of a news editor from the global south:

*“I think you don’t see it until someone makes you aware. A lot of people just don’t have that orientation...They don’t realize how wrong it is that everybody on the opinions page are men.”*

The existing biases in storytelling which need to be understood at an organizational level are:

- The marginal focus on gender equality angles within coverage of key stories such as the pandemic<sup>212</sup>
- The marginalization of female/racial perspectives in key political, economic, foreign affairs, and health stories

212. Kassova, 2020b

- The prevalence of macro angles over micro angles, including in more human interest stories<sup>213</sup>

### 3. Portrayal: raise awareness of the existing stereotypes in women’s portrayal in news, especially related to victimhood and support roles, and find ways of circumventing them

In the previous chapter we established that portraying women in a stereotypical way is a serious blind spot in the news industry, with no examples found of news organizations measuring this issue systematically. News editors from the global north and south highlighted the women-as-victims bias that prevails when portraying women in the news. In the words of two different women news leaders from the global south:

*“I think we are guilty, as newsrooms, of still depicting women largely as victims. Also depicting women largely as people who do not have a voice. When we change the angles we choose, we will hopefully start to see change and progress.” “[Changing coverage] depends on the mindsets of those who control the business and on the kind of example of women you have at whatever level... You must tell stories of success, as opposed to women [only] being raped and beaten and trafficked and prostitutes. We must tell stories of women who are leading organizations, blazing the trail, dying on the frontline, of women Generals, and women who have been silenced...”*

A male editor from the global north delved beneath the stereotypes, touching on one of the reasons why women are depicted as victims in news.

*“Where they’re the victims, women tend to be picked because they are, especially in developing countries, the matriarchs running things and have direct contact with children. So reporters wanting to choke heartstrings and build empathy, will typically talk to women.”*

To intercept this tendency to portray women in a certain way, consider training journalists to interview male sources where they would typically interview women and vice versa.

### RAISING AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEM AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

#### 4. Representation/portrayal/storytelling: take time periodically to assess your own use of contributors and protagonists in storytelling. Examine your storytelling from all three perspectives

The three previous recommendations focus on the importance for institutions of raising awareness of the existing skews in coverage. However, it is important for every journalist and editor to measure the skews in their own coverage/beats in terms of representation, storytelling, and portrayal, just as The New Yorker journalist Ed Yong did.

## Breaking down the barriers that lead to marginalizing women’s/people of color’s coverage in the news will facilitate change

### BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS AT AN ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL:

#### 5. Representation/portrayal/storytelling: measure the impact of journalism to improve understanding of the role of journalism in triggering societal change and to secure more funding

213. Kassova, 2020b

One of the case studies that follows this chapter relates to The Fuller Project, who specialize in reporting on women's issues globally. The Fuller Project's leadership argue that it is crucial not only to produce and publish high quality journalism about women, but also to track its impact in order to develop the case for the importance of journalism in changing societies. Demonstrating impact activates the large community of foundations and donors, who are more likely to invest in journalism (vs. other programs on the ground) if they understand the positive impact it has on societies. Measuring and demonstrating impact has the potential to also address the structural problem of international and inter-governmental organizations' growing under-investment in media initiatives relating to gender, which was raised by Macharia in the previous chapter.

**6. Representation/portrayal/storytelling: ensure that the initiatives you launch are sustainable**

Some of the news leaders who have experience of trying to redress gender imbalance in news coverage drew attention to the importance of sustainability. For initiatives to be sustainable, they need to be designed with the end user i.e. busy journalists and editors, in mind. According to Joannides, to make the BBC 50:50 initiative a success, the methodology had to be simple, the participation had to be voluntary, and there had to be buy-in at the top.

*"We keep the methodology really simple to make sure that teams can do it and sustain doing it."*

The three core principles that power the BBC 50:50 counting methodology are for journalists to count only what they can control; to only count a contributor once; and to always use the best contributor for the story, regardless of their gender or ethnic identity. Expertise trumps gender or any other identity characteristics.

**7. Representation/portrayal/storytelling: rejoice at incremental change. Expecting a sweeping step change fast is unrealistic. Find different arguments to involve different stakeholders**

A senior news leader from the global north involved in diversity-enhancing initiatives in news coverage argued for the importance of planning for and expecting incremental change.

*"So, rather than having this big explosion of: 'This is our answer to gender inequality in our output', you can do it more incrementally, but it's more sustainable. You're not having to force anyone to do anything. Some teams will participate because the majority of people in that team feel it's important to have gender balance. For another team, it will be getting disapproving looks from the editor if you're not involved. It's trying to figure out what works for different people."*

This point was also highlighted by Joan Williams in her book *Bias Interrupted*, which was discussed earlier (Part 1, Chapter 8). She argues that bias can be interrupted by small, systematic, and measurable changes to work processes and with training.

**8. Storytelling: appoint newsroom inclusion champions or experts to facilitate expansion of coverage perspectives from grassroots level**

When asked what drove the increase of gender balance in news coverage, a senior news editor from the global north offered an important tip.

*"Dedicate somebody to it, don't make it everybody's job, because you need to build up expertise and you need somebody whose focus is that. And that way, they'll become a kind of champion for it, and they can go around sharing their expertise with everybody, rather than hoping it will just happen by osmosis... Make it somebody's job."*

Another news leader from a different organization in the global north hailed a similar idea:

*“We created a team of inclusion champions, there’s like 100 people across [the news organization] that are really involved in the effort, and it’s just changed the tenor of our coverage, the conversations around coverage.”*

## 9. Storytelling: the role of weekly editorial meetings and resource groups in identifying story angles

The BBC’s Joannides highlighted how difficult these initiatives are to implement and how they can only succeed if there is a group effort.

*“...it just needs to be a group effort, which is what we’re trying to do with 50:50 through our partners network as well. Because it’s really hard to do.”*

A senior news leader from the global north put forward the suggestion of dedicating weekly editorial meetings to exploring diverse perspectives of big stories, or what stories are being missed.

*“I think the one initiative that seems like such an easy lift and yet it is so hard, is to have a weekly, very open meeting where we are specifically talking about diverse perspectives on the news. We have a huge newsroom. So it’s very, very hard to engage people through that massive bulk. It’s much easier in a newsroom of 100.”*

The news leader’s suggestion was to reach out to various organizational support groups dedicated to underrepresented population groups and

*“bring them into the news decision-making.”*



## BREAKING BARRIERS AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

### 10. Representation: don’t always target the most senior expert or protagonist. Less senior experts are more likely to be women and as likely to understand the work

Joannides highlighted the benefit of reaching out to experts who are at the level below the most senior in their organizations, as a way of diversifying sources and experts.

*“Can it be someone else who’s also senior level, but is a woman, and we can speak to? And then she might be the director one day, which is great.”*

She suggested that this approach has brought the additional benefit of uncovering unique story angles, which otherwise would not have been spotted. Dorcas Muga, the Gender Editor in the Nation Media Group in Kenya, who was interviewed for the case study that follows this chapter, shared her team’s experience in diversifying their pool of story protagonists by redefining the narrow view of what constituted a protagonist in business news. They expanded the definition to include owners of small and medium-sized businesses who were more likely to be women, rather than just owners of multi-million corporations, who tended to be men.

### 11. Representation/portrayal: make newsrooms more inclusive and accessible through outreach training to help women experts develop a media presence and boost their confidence

In the previous chapter we explored women’s experience in navigating media typically being more limited than men’s. A news editor from the global south summarized the issue as she perceived it.

*“... women in [country] are not cultured to take advantage of news coverage, they’re not really*

*well equipped to know how to handle the media, how to look out for opportunities. The men are more experienced. They know who to talk to in the newsroom, they know when to call the editor, when to issue a statement or convene a press conference. You find that the women... are quite laid back, so you almost have to make the extra effort to get them into the media.”*

In Part 1, we read about Bloomberg’s New Voices initiative which provides media training (via an independent external company) to female experts in the sphere of business and economic news, in which men are typically over-represented. According to its manager, Laura Zelenko, it has proved successful and seems to have had positive spillover effects on the participating women’s career progression. A senior female editor from the global south heading a newsroom admitted to her own need for help and to the solution she thought would boost women’s visibility in coverage.

*“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked to do an interview and I’ve declined because I don’t think I’m 100% on top of the subject matter. I think you change it by... helping women develop their confidence and get over this.”*

## 12. Representation: give more advance notice to female experts before engaging them in an interview

In the Nation Media Group’s case study which follows this chapter, the Gender Desk editor Dorcas Muga highlights the childcare barrier and appearance pressures that women in Kenya often face, which impedes their ability to participate in expert interviews as freely as their male counterparts. To evade these barriers, Muga suggests giving female experts a longer lead time when inviting them for interviews, to allow them to prepare and make any necessary adjustments to childcare or other arrangements.

## 13. Storytelling: look for gender angles that do not alienate men. All stories are women’s and men’s stories

Several of the news editors who were interviewed for this project from the global north and south, including Tracy McVeigh from the Guardian, and Eivor Jerpåsen and Igor Pipkin from Amedia (see the case studies in Part 2 and Part 4), argued for the need to tell stories that include gender angles in a way that does not alienate men. McVeigh argues that men are part of the solution to gender inequality and therefore to push them out of the conversation would be damaging. Pipkin and Jerpåsen argue that it makes more business sense to find story angles that appeal across different audience groups.

## Developing new habits accelerates positive change



### DEVELOPING HABITS AT AN ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL:

## 14. Representation/portrayal: count contributors broken down by category to avoid reinforcing stereotypes in your news coverage

Counting the proportion of women and women of color in news is critical to curtailing the existing male-dominated bias in news coverage. The need for simple methodology has to be weighed against the importance of ensuring that women contributors are not only clustered around non-authoritative news roles (e.g. story witnesses, case studies or vox pops) and victims. To avoid this, it is important to count at a slightly more granular level. Joannides from the BBC explained that while the BBC at a company level only collected the aggregated proportion of women vs. men contributors in news coverage, the individual teams were encouraged to count the contribution that women made across different contributor categories and ensure

that women contributors do not just fall primarily in the case studies category.

## 15. Storytelling: hire editors with lived experiences from underrepresented groups to mitigate the risk of homogenous storytelling

The evidence gathered and presented in the first two chapters of Part 2 of this report builds a convincing case for hiring editors and reporters whose lived experiences come from communities underrepresented in news. Their experience would enable them to spot stories and story angles that would otherwise be missed by a more homogenous editorial group, dominated by men globally and white men in the global north. While evidence also shows that having diverse editors and reporters is not alone sufficient to achieve gender- and racially balanced and relevant news coverage, it is an important success factor. Both Khabar Lahariya in India (whose case study follows this chapter) and The Fuller Project rely heavily on the lived experiences of their reporters and editors in producing high quality women-centric journalism relevant to their audiences.

## 16. Inclusive storytelling: 360 degree editing

Reuters' Barrett introduced the concept of 360 degree editing, which encompasses the perspectives of different communities and audience groups in terms of how a particular story affects them. For her this type of editing starts with considering what angle the news organization might be missing and finding *discretionary sources* who can fill in the gaps. The protagonist sources are typically men with higher socio-economic status but filling in the gaps demands finding different sources. She walked me through the thought process:

*“How are we going to report that story? Where’s the data that we should be getting? Who should we be speaking about? Who are the discretionary sources that we should be going to speak to? It’s 360 news editing, because you’re truly trying to look at, for example, not just*

*what Rishi Sunak said yesterday, but how this is going to impact people. It’s telling you the story from more of a female perspective, or more of a different ethnicity perspective, as well as bringing more of a socio-economic angle.”*

The previous chapter highlighted the tension that exists between the two editorial approaches to raising the visibility of women and racial/ethnic minorities in the news. One was vertical, dedicating a beat to produce gender- or race-focused coverage, the other striving to offer a gender or racial/ethnic lens horizontally, across beats. The content analysis of millions of stories across the six countries has previously shown that the coverage of gender in the news is pitifully low. This means that there is room for every editorial approach to increase coverage relevant to women (and ethnic minorities).

A female senior news leader from the global north spoke enthusiastically about inclusive storytelling across topics, whereby every story is covered through the lens of multiple key audience groups as a means of moving away from over-representing (white) men’s perspectives.

*“...We tend to go to official coverage, which then inherently leads to covering more men, and inclusive storytelling is broadening your sources, deepening your social relationships, going to different communities which would inherently produce more stories about women.”*

Another female news leader from the global south made the case for horizontal coverage of gender issues.

*“I think there is a low proportion of gender equality stories because all the other issues - politics, economics, and all of that - are taken as separate from the conversation on gender, on equality. When you look at human development indices, the countries with the best human development indices are the countries where equality is important. Where you get equality right, you will be better with your politics, better with your economics, because you’re thinking about ‘people.’”*

The following two recommendations explore ideas which focus on vertical news coverage of gender and race. The two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive. Organizations might start off with vertical coverage of gender/race issues and move to a more horizontal approach once inclusive thinking about stories has become embedded in the organization. That will, however, take time, given the structural, institutional, and individual biases in play.

## 17. Representation/portrayal/ storytelling: launch Gender or Race Desks if the culture is open to it

In 2019, the Nation Media Group in Kenya launched Africa's first Gender Desk, which has had a notably positive impact in amplifying women's voices as reporters, protagonists, and sources in the coverage of one of the biggest news providers in East Africa.<sup>214</sup> Muga, the Gender Desk's editor, shared that the trailblazing work of the Gender Desk has been emulated by competitor news providers, leading to additional amplification of women's voices in the news and the challenging of male-favoring norms.

Examples of other vertical editorial interventions also exist in the global north. A female senior news political editor from the global north shared her progress in creating a small but important team dedicated to covering politics and race. The team formed part of the politics beat and focused on issues affecting Black and Hispanic voters.

*"I evolved over the years from feeling like it's everybody's responsibility to cover these issues to, no, we need to be very specific and purposeful about covering Black politics and race and issues of diversity. I tried over the years to make the argument to my mostly white male leadership that we had a responsibility to be more representative of our audience and the conversations and dynamics that are happening and shaping politics. And you can't cover politics unless you understand that we have to*

*cover diverse communities and not just look at everything in one way. My arguments had to boil down to business imperative. And of course, after George Floyd, it became a lot easier to make that argument."*

At the end of the interview, she added poignantly:

*"I hope that maybe one day this won't be necessary, but it is now."*

## 18. Storytelling: the power of newsletters/publication sections/ newspaper pull-outs

During the research for this project some editors shed light on various initiatives they had launched to amplify the voices of women. Tracy McVeigh spoke about the bigger than anticipated success of *In Her Words* newsletter, and Muga about the success of *The Voice*, a monthly pull-out magazine within *The Nation* newspaper, which is dedicated to women's stories and female protagonists. When done well, these interventions attract a broader audience than women, even though they are primarily targeted at women. A business news editor from the global south spoke about the importance of not ghettoizing news coverage about women by confining it to key moments such as International Women's Day (important as this date is for amplifying women's voices globally).

*"I think, as newsrooms as well as people who set the agenda, we need to push gender stories more. You get a lot of attention on women's issues and gender issues on specific dates but otherwise, it is covered, but not adequately. One of the things I used to be proud of, the publication that I edited, one day every week, we dedicated our center spread, a double spread, to women's issues, women's profiles, and we did that throughout the year."*

214. AKAS, 2022

## 19. Storytelling: invite members of marginalized groups in society to be editors for a day

One idea that was shared by a news editor from the global north, which had been implemented at their news organization in the past, was to invite members of the audience from marginalized groups in to be news editors for the day as a controlled learning experience. This would involve them having the opportunity to decide what stories should make it on air or on the website or what the running order of stories should be.

## 20. Representation/portrayal: audit the gender and race of people in photo images used in your news output

In the previous chapter we discovered that the images used in news coverage are as male-biased as the story coverage itself. To raise awareness of and course-correct this imbalance, it is transformative to conduct periodical audits of the people used in images in news coverage, as AIJO did in 2020 (see previous chapter). Agnes Stenbom from Schibsted in Scandinavia - one of the eight news organizations participating in the AIJO project - shared enthusiastically the positive impact the project had had on the various Schibsted newsrooms.

*“So we now have different initiatives, for example, reaching more young women, which is informed by this type of analysis.”*

## 21. Portrayal: conduct cost-effective deep dives to understand how news contributors/protagonists are portrayed

As revealed in the previous chapter, news organizations have no consistent understanding of how women or women of color are portrayed in their news coverage. What proportion are portrayed as victims, power brokers, men’s sidekicks, perpetrators, sources of authority/knowledge, sexual objects, primary care givers or key family members?

The answers to these questions are largely unknown. Without this knowledge, news organizations are much more likely to be unaware of how deeply they reinforce gender and racial stereotypes and consequently, are less equipped to improve their audience portrayal. Understanding the portrayal of women and women of color need not be an expensive exercise. Newsrooms could take a slice of their coverage on a chosen day or take 50 randomly selected online stories, or find another cost-effective methodology for analyzing a slice of their content with this lens in mind. This could be supported by in-house audience research and insight teams, where these exist. Portrayal analysis is guaranteed to deliver important insights for journalists and editors as to where their journalistic biases lie and what needs to be done to soften/dissolve the stereotypes reinforced in the coverage.



### DEVELOPING NEW HABITS AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

## 22. Storytelling: use more micro angles, including human stories, in storytelling. Combine these with global angles highlighting the universality of women’s problems

In Chapter 2 we uncovered that micro angles, which are more likely to feature women and be relevant to women, are often underexplored in news coverage. In the words of an editor from the global north:

*“... I remember an audience and they all spoke at length about social care. They had either worked in care homes, or had relatives they were carers for, or were fighting a battle to care for elderly parents. This was a subject that meant the world to them, and they just weren’t seeing the story being told in a way that they could connect with. That’s because we’re telling it from our [journalistic] perspective all the time, which is about arguments over policy, or economic priorities. We’re not engaging people on the ground and bringing these bigger macro political issues to life through real people’s stories in a way that is engaging them.”*

As shown in the case study that follows, The Fuller Project have found that the highest quality journalism about women combines a local or hyperlocal angle with a global perspective, demonstrating the universality of an issue to women around the world.

### 23. Portrayal: assess women's portrayal in own coverage and measure length of quotes by gender/race

If you are a reporter or an editor, consider taking a small random sample of your/your team's output and analyzing how women/women of color are portrayed in your news output. You will almost certainly be surprised by the results.

### 24. Portrayal: focus on expertise, rather than identity when interviewing contributors

When interviewing women/women of color, ask questions that delve into their areas of expertise rather than their identity. Doing otherwise risks reinforcing existing stereotypes and undermining their authority. An example of the identity trap that journalists fall into was shared by a senior editor from the global north:

*"Often, when we do tell stories about race or gender, we go to people to tell stories about their community, rather than about more general stories like politics or education. Somehow you have to be the spokesperson of what your characteristic or your community is. I think we still think stereotypically and pigeonhole people: 'Well, we'll go to a woman of color to tell the story about bringing up her boys and their relationship with the police'. And you*

*can tell that story, but I'm not necessarily going to ask you what you think about xxx political story."*

A senior female editor from the global south shared a different aspect of the opportunity to ask women experts questions based on their expertise rather than their gender identity:

*"There needs to be a female CEO, and she needs to be put on a panel with her male counterparts and given enough time, just like everybody else. And the conversations put to her should not be limited to the fact that she's a female in that position, and that's the problem that we have, we approach women only from that perspective. So what happens is that men are having the conversations around the issues at hand, while women are made to speak about the fact that: 'Yay, I'm a woman in the room.'"*

### 25. Portrayal: ask more open-ended (rather than closed) questions which draw more out of female sources

Svein Tore Bergestuen, whose views were introduced in the previous chapter, makes an impassioned case for using much more open-ended questions in journalism to avoid the confirmation and cognitive biases that frequently stand between journalists and the truth. He also argued that women are less forthcoming as sources, being less likely to offer information they have not been asked to share. When asked a closed question, in Bergestuen's view, women typically give much more succinct answers than men. He therefore recommends asking a lot more open-ended questions than journalists usually do, and doing so in an empathetic manner.

# Trailblazers who are reshaping news coverage of gender issues in the global south and north

## Introduction to four case studies

As previously indicated, Part 3 of this report will provide an overview and analysis of 168 news initiatives, implemented by 118 organizations in four regions and globally. These initiatives, researched by AKAS over a period of months, address various aspects of the gender inequality that exists in news. In the research process, certain organizations stood out for their innovative efforts in reshaping coverage about women and other marginalized audiences whose voices have traditionally been rarely heard in the news, causing them to remain outside the focus of policy-making. Khabar Lahariya in India, Nation Media Group in Kenya, the Guardian's Global Development desk in the UK, and The Fuller Project in the US are among these trailblazing organizations and feature as case studies in this section. Khabar Lahariya – the subject of the Oscar-nominated 2021 documentary *Writing with Fire* - is an extraordinary all-women news operation whose coverage of the most underprivileged rural audiences is making waves throughout

India. Nation Media Group has set up Africa's first Gender Desk in Kenya, its coverage leading to the enhancement of the lives of thousands of women in Kenya. The Fuller Project, with whom Nation Media Group partnered in launching the Gender Desk, is a not-for-profit newsroom dedicated to reporting on issues that impact women globally. The Guardian's Global Development desk, whose reporters are predominantly women, has reached gender parity in bylines. In 2022 it launched *Her Stage*, a newsletter featuring and targeting women in developing countries.

The four case studies that follow are anchored in interviews with Khabar Lahariya's Editor-in-Chief Kavita Devi, Nation Media Group's Gender Desk Editor Dorcas Muga, the Guardian's Global Development Editor Tracy McVeigh and The Fuller Project's CEO Xanthe Scharff. The interviews not only explore the work of each of these organizations in improving gender equity in news coverage, but also lessons learned along the way and future plans for reducing gender inequity in news.

# Case study: Khabar Lahariya in India

## What is Khabar Lahariya?

Khabar Lahariya is a trailblazing and unique all-women news service in India which has been operating since 2002, telling stories from a feminist perspective. It delivers ultra-local journalism, focusing on the plight of underprivileged rural audiences who rarely feature in mainstream news. Khabar Lahariya has grown from an eight-page weekly newspaper with a circulation of 4,000 to a fully digitalized multi-platform news proposition reaching millions. It has 556,000 YouTube subscribers and c170 million cumulative views on YouTube<sup>215</sup>, 20,100 Twitter followers<sup>216</sup> and 11,930 monthly unique visitors.<sup>217</sup> 462 websites have linked to Khabar Lahariya, eight of them educational.<sup>218</sup> To date, the organization has won 13 awards. From its launch, when women formed “hardly two or three percent” of its audience, the news provider has succeeded in reaching an increasingly gender-balanced audience, with women comprising 33% by 2016.<sup>219</sup> The latest gender profile data from SimilarWeb estimates that 46% of Khabar Lahariya’s website audience is currently female.<sup>220</sup> Together with its parent company, Chambal Media, today the organization has a team of 30. Khabar Lahariya employs 20 full-time reporters from marginalized communities (including Dalit, Muslim, Tribal and Other Backward Castes), as well as women from the so-called upper castes. Many, including Kavita Devi, its Editor-in-Chief, are Dalit, previously characterized as “*untouchables*” – the most discriminated-against community in India. Three of Khabar Lahariya’s female reporters are the main protagonists in the 2021 Oscar-nominated documentary *Writing with Fire*.

When I speak with Kavita Devi and Outreach Manager Srishti Mehra, who interprets for us between Hindi and English, I am amazed by Devi’s warmth, by how lightly she seems to wear her ego, and by the friendly banter between the two women. Devi, a child bride at 12 and illiterate until that age, talks with passion and pride about the feminist vision and future direction of Khabar Lahariya.

A co-founder of the news service, Devi has been a part of Khabar Lahariya’s courageous journey of success for the past 20 years. She takes most pride in the fact that for two decades, despite financial and safety pressures, and the gender-, caste-, language- and education-based discrimination that reporters have encountered along the way, Khabar Lahariya has been able to deliver independent journalism relevant to rural audiences as an all-women-led organization. She considers “*the transition from pen to digital a massive achievement*.” Devi is also particularly proud of the Chambal Academy, a recently launched program which aims to train women in the journalism trade, imparting knowledge that once opened the door to journalism and professional fulfilment for Devi herself.

## What makes Khabar Lahariya exceptional?

### An egalitarian and highly collaborative culture

The management team, reporters, and staff at Khabar Lahariya are bound by a strong sense of community that “*drives and brings everyone together*”. Many of the reporters have been with the news service for at least a decade, which has meant that their sense of belonging there has deepened. Devi explains that there has never been a rigid hierarchy or a strong segregation of departments within the organization. No idea is ever dismissed, whoever its author. With the responsibilities in the organization shared, the culture is one of mutual learning and support for individual and collective growth. A lot of emphasis is placed on collaboration and learning.

215. YouTube data, March 2022

216. Twitter data, March 2022

217. SimilarWeb, February 2022

218. Ahrefs, February 2022

219. Ananya, 2016

220. SimilarWeb, February 2022

*“Because it has been a long journey – we have naturally been through rough patches as a service and in our personal lives – we derive strength from the community. Our success has only been possible because we believe in teamwork and transparency. We can only grow and progress individually when we are together as a collective.”*

Kavita Devi recognizes that a lot of organizations claim to do this, but at Khabar Lahariya these values are truly applied in practice.

### **A vision of delivering feminist journalism**

Devi is crystal clear that the reporters and management are fully aligned around Khabar Lahariya’s vision of delivering what she describes as “*feminist journalism*”. She gives a broad and very inclusive definition of this as a journalism that strives to give equal voice not only to men and women, but to any community that is underrepresented or discriminated-against:

*“We are feminist and believe in equality. When we were starting out and defined ourselves as feminist, there was usually the perception that we were anti-male or that we were against certain communities, but we have been very conscious not to be that. We approach every story and everything we do, through the lens of equality.”*

### **Giving voice to the marginalized: as reporters or sources/protagonists**

Devi denounces the negative impact of India’s rigid caste system on the professional growth opportunities for Indian journalists. She also denounces the undue emphasis Indian newsrooms place on how a person looks, how fluent their English is and which university they graduated from.

*“None of these things are what makes a Khabar Lahariya journalist. And yet despite missing out on all these checkboxes, they are journalists, reporting on issues that audiences care about. This is what feminist journalism is.”*

One of the immense strengths of Khabar Lahariya’s reporters is their lived experience and their connectedness to the problems of the communities they report on. This is a critical factor in the success of the news outlet. In Devi’s view, no one understands the issues of a community better than someone who comes from that community, so, for example, if a piece is about what it is like to be a Muslim woman in India, the person best placed to write it will be a Muslim woman.

### **Compassionate journalism: human-centered rather than headline-centered**

Khabar Lahariya and Devi herself spend considerable amounts of time thinking about and protecting the safety of their reporters as well as pre-empting and/or mitigating the impact of their journalism on the protagonists of their stories. There have been times when a rural crime story has made it to the headlines of mainstream Indian news and where Khabar Lahariya’s reporters have worked alongside mainstream media reporters. On these occasions, Devi has seen a stark difference between Khabar Lahariya’s approach to stories and that of mainstream media reporters. For example, she has witnessed mainstream reporters “*bombard the victim’s family*” with requests, their pressing hunger for the story “*bite*” leading them to ignore all concerns for the family’s safety, privacy, and wellbeing. By contrast, Khabar Lahariya reporters had chosen to speak to the victim’s family at a later point with sensitivity and care.

*“The lens of sensitivity and empathy for our own safety and for the safety of the people we report on, is something we are very conscious of and spend a long time discussing in training.”*

## What has Khabar Lahariya learned in its 20-year existence?

Khabar Lahariya has faced two principal challenges in the last two decades: securing financial stability and editorial independence and ensuring the safety of its journalists and sources.

### Securing financial stability and editorial independence

Kavita Devi acknowledges that Khabar Lahariya has gone through its fair share of financial challenges in its two decades of existence. However, she talks with pride about the fact that all Khabar Lahariya reporters have been employed full-time until now. Devi understands the economic imperative for the women who join the organization - often as the sole earners in their family - to have a steady income. So she is hopeful to maintain this reporter-centric model of employment in the future as well as introducing a freelance model in states like Bihar where Khabar Lahariya is currently expanding.

In the interests of editorial independence, which forms the bedrock of Khabar Lahariya’s journalism, the leadership team made an early decision not to allow advertising on any of its properties, seeing this as potentially compromising. Khabar Lahariya’s current financial model consequently relies on partnerships with other newsrooms and NGOs, as well as on subscriptions. They offer a monthly, quarterly, or annual subscription of their premium product called *KL Hatke*, which is English content delivered on a bi-monthly basis.

### Safety before the scoop: ensuring the safety of journalists and sources

Preparation and planning form a large part of Khabar Lahariya’s strategy for keeping its reporters and sources safe. The editorial approach is to plan for pressure points in advance of covering a story that is deemed sensitive. This pre-work on every story, whether it focuses on violence against women or on a political election, is seen as critical by the Khabar Lahariya team. Similar to great chess players, the pivotal question that Khabar Lahariya’s reporters ask themselves is: “*What could go wrong?*”<sup>221</sup> They then map out these risks and sensitivities, identifying whether they are to do with a potentially violent situation, likely distrust towards the reporters, or indeed simply a complex topic. Sometimes reporters are paired up on more sensitive stories as a safety measure. Because Khabar Lahariya reports extensively on marginalized communities, the editorial team is often concerned with the safety of their story protagonists and reporters are specifically trained to put the safety of the protagonists before the story scoop. The editorial team has also developed explainers and guidelines which are used in training reporters to cover different types of stories.

### What next?

Looking ahead, Kavita Devi sees the subscription-based model as a major source of revenue in Khabar Lahariya’s future. She also envisages continuing to partner with other news or non-governmental organizations. Khabar Lahariya will remain an all-women organization which will deliver human-centric rural journalism in a culture defined by inclusivity, transparency, and a nurturing spirit. As a concrete expression of this, the Chambal Academy represents a huge source of excitement for Kavita Devi. The first training program which was piloted in 2021 has been a success, training 270 young

221. Tough, 2013

rural women in mobile journalism, audio, video production, and other media-related skills. Some of these women have already started writing stories for Khabar Lahariya in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar, while others have secured internships and fellowships. Devi is thrilled to be expanding the network of empowered female journalists. She is also excited to have come full circle, taking forward what she loves doing most: independent feminist journalism, challenging those in power and holding the mic for people whose voices would never otherwise be heard.

# Case study: Nation Media Group in Kenya

## What is Nation Media Group?

Nation Media Group is the largest independent media house in East and Central Africa with operations in print, broadcast and digital media in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda. Its flagship newspaper *Daily Nation* is the largest print newspaper in the country and the second largest online.<sup>222</sup> It also publishes a monthly supplement, *The Voice*, that focuses on women protagonists and women's issues. *Daily Nation* reaches 1.4m monthly unique visitors online<sup>223</sup>, and has 753,000 YouTube subscribers and 2.8m Twitter followers. 40% of its audience are women.<sup>224</sup> 53,436 external websites link to *Daily Nation*, of which 18 are governmental and 256 educational.<sup>225</sup>

In 2019, Nation Media Group launched Kenya's (and indeed Africa's) first Gender Desk – a news beat – under the leadership of Pamella Sittoni, who was Managing Editor at the time. The beat was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and launched in editorial partnership with The Fuller Project.

I speak with the Gender Desk's editor, Dorcas Muga, about Nation Media Group's pioneering work, the lessons learned in the last three years, and what she dreams of achieving in the future. While Muga is excited about the waves the Gender Desk has made in Kenya, she is ambivalent about Nation Media Group being the only news organization with a gender desk in Africa. She would rather see more media houses offering the gender lens in news to improve women's visibility and status in news and in society.

*"It is exciting in the sense that we are pioneers, but it is also sad. You see: the more news houses cover gender stories the merrier, the more the gender agenda becomes a real issue to the media houses, stakeholders and policy-makers around the world."*

## What makes Nation Media Group exceptional?

### Elevating women's voices as reporters, protagonists, and sources in Kenya

The launch of the Gender Desk has made a dent in the male-favoring society and has brought unique success to Nation Media Group through elevating women's voices and delivering a more gender-balanced vertical readership. Bylines in the Gender Desk are nearing parity (49%) vs 42% in Kenyan newsrooms.<sup>226</sup> At the same time, a portrayal analysis of a sample of stories showed that 94% of experts featured in the Gender Desk stories were women<sup>227</sup>, in contrast to the 14% identified in the COVID stories that emerged from Kenya in 2020.<sup>228</sup> Women's share of voice in Gender Desk stories in 2020 was 59%, much higher than, for example, the 22% recorded on nation.africa.<sup>229</sup>

### Trailblazing new ways of gender-based reporting, picked up by other media

The launch of the Gender Desk has enabled Nation Media Group to ramp up their reporting on important gender-based issues such as violence against women. For example, for the last three years, during the annual *16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence* campaign, Muga has been

222. Reuters, 2021

223. SimilarWeb, February 2022

224. SimilarWeb, Desktop and mobile demographics – Gender, Traffic-share as of February 2022

225. Ahrefs, 21st March 2022

226. Hanitzsch et al., 2019

227. AKAS/The Fuller Project portrayal analysis of Gender Desk stories in 2021, AKAS 2022

228. Kassova, 2020b

229. AKAS/The Fuller Project analysis using Google search engine, Google search analysis of NMG urls, AKAS, 2022



given a page each day in the flagship *Daily Nation* print newspaper to feature stories dedicated to highlighting the problems and solutions surrounding gender-based violence. She has noticed that in the last year or two other media, such as *The Standard*, have emulated the approach taken by the *Daily Nation* by featuring their own women-centric content more prominently.

*“Now more media houses are talking about women’s issues, after seeing what The Nation is doing, which helps socialize the issue of marginalization of women in society.”*

### **Sensitizing the newsroom to the need for gender-based reporting**

In 2019, in advance of launching the Gender Desk, Nation Media Group conducted gender-sensitivity training with all its reporters and editors, an action which Muga assesses as pivotal in paving the way for the successful launch of the beat. The training created momentum and broke down some of the barriers to women-centric reporting that exist, especially among male journalists/editors. Some got so excited that they even started submitting their own story ideas. However, according to Muga, this momentum is now in need of a velocity boost, having been somewhat interrupted during the pandemic.

*“Yes, we have made some strides, but there is still a lot of room for improvement,”*

Muga reflects, emphasizing the critical importance of ongoing gender-sensitivity training in the newsroom.

*“Ongoing sensitization to gender issues at all levels is very, very important. We need to do it regularly for people (especially for anti-feminists) to accept that we have to tell women’s stories.”*

If training is not offered on an ongoing basis, the default male lens for looking at the world draws journalists back into their familiar bias, leaving women’s voices on the margins.

### **Impacting policy making**

One of the key successes that Dorcas Muga identifies following the launch of the Gender Desk is the fact that policy-making bodies in Kenya have “*noticed the work*” that the desk is doing and are alerting the editorial team to various events happening in the country. Moreover, the government has made tangible policy changes as a result of Gender Desk story coverage, which is a source of pride for Muga.

## **What has Nation Media Group learned along the way?**

### **Giving women experts more advance notice**

*The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*<sup>230</sup> report found that at 20%, women’s share of voice as experts, protagonists or sources in Kenya is 3.7 times smaller than that of men. I ask Muga how the Gender Desk goes about finding women experts, particularly for higher-profile subjects such as politics, business, and health. While she acknowledges the structural challenge that results from there being a smaller pool of women experts in these areas, Muga also highlights some successful ways of securing women’s contributions as news experts or sources. She has observed that one important requirement is to give women more advance notice than men. In her view, men are more than ready to show up at short notice. Women, on the other hand, face gender-based challenges such as the need to organize childcare or to ensure that they look as presentable as possible because social opinion judges their looks harshly, unlike those of men.

*“When their photos appear in the paper and their hair is not well done, social media is all over it, judging them for being a prominent woman who looks bad.”*

So, giving women more time to prepare or even pre-record their segments, and reassuring them of the importance of featuring their stories, allows women to organize their time and appearance in a way that allows them to participate in panels or contribute to news stories.

### **Unlocking the pool of women protagonists in business and politics news**

A significant pool of businesswomen protagonists became available to Nation Media Group when journalists reframed the way they defined this category. They broadened the definition from well-recognized women – “*The ‘Bill Gates’ of women in Africa*” – to ordinary women who own small and medium-sized businesses, of whom there are many: the women who generate \$1,000 a year; or those who sell fruit and vegetables on the streets. Telling the stories of these women is as important to the Gender Desk as showcasing the uber-successful role model businesswomen.

Muga explains that being an election year, 2022 presented a great opportunity for the Gender Desk to amplify the voices of the women who were vying for political seats. To do so, the Gender Desk not only profiled female candidates in the *Daily Nation’s* monthly print pull-out *The Voice* in a column titled *The Aspirant*, but also covered up to three candidates online weekly in the months preceding

230. Kassova, 2020a

the election. It had come as something of a shock to Muga to find her WhatsApp/inbox inundated by women eager to tell their stories when this column was launched.

### **The need for a gender champion in every company department**

Besides the need for ongoing gender-sensitivity training, which Muga believes should be extended beyond the editorial team, she also sees value in establishing gender champions in different company departments as a way of helping the organization's culture facilitate gender equity. This idea came about after Muga noticed that colleagues from different departments had started approaching her about gender-based issues, zoning in on maternity leave or the need to allocate a private space for breastfeeding mothers.

### **What next?**

Muga is looking forward to a time when the Gender Desk will have the resources to carve out a dedicated space for a small team of journalists who will focus their efforts exclusively on gender investigative pieces (protected from the relentless daily news cycle), producing work that will generate even bigger local, national, and international impact. She believes that going forward, it is important to include gender-based reporting more prominently on television, as the most powerful platform in the multimedia mix. Muga's personal dream is to create an empowering current affairs strand covering forums which feature ordinary women from across Kenya in discussion with experts, focusing on important topics such as the negative impact of early marriage or the importance of education.

# Case study: The Fuller Project in the US – a global remit

## What is The Fuller Project?

The Fuller Project is a global non-profit newsroom which is dedicated to reporting on issues that impact women. It has 16,400 Twitter followers and a website that attracts 18,700 monthly unique users.<sup>231</sup> 1,100 external websites link to its website<sup>232</sup>, 15 of them educational.<sup>233</sup> Women make up 51% of the project's website traffic.<sup>234</sup> Through partner sites, The Fuller Project achieves considerably greater reach: its coverage of Afghanistan for instance netted 3.85 million+ impressions on Twitter and 83K+ profile visits<sup>235</sup> in August and September 2021.

From small beginnings, with just two stories at its inception seven years ago, The Fuller Project has since published over 300 stories. In 2021, it produced more than 100 stories through investigative and enterprise reporting, and collaborated with 23 outlets around the world, from *TIME* to the *Lesotho Times*, reaching more than 10 million readers. Astoundingly, approximately 1 in 10 of their stories received an industry award (achieving 11 industry awards in 2021 alone). The team has grown from a loose network of freelancers to 16 full-time staff and many editorial contributors, 92% of whom are women.

I speak with The Fuller Project's CEO Xanthe Scharff, who co-founded the organization in Istanbul in 2015 in response to women's increasing disempowerment in Turkey (and Syria) under President Erdogan's autocracy. We discuss the newsroom's global pioneering work, what they have learned in the last seven years and what lies ahead. Scharff is resolved to accelerate progress in amplifying women's voices in the news,

*"especially those facing race and identity bias, who have been left out of news and mainstream narratives for centuries. History is written without women's voices. The barriers and harms they face are considered tangential – instead of central to security, economic, legal, environmental, and other issues that impact everyone."*

## What makes The Fuller Project exceptional?

### Impact-driven journalism

"*Impact is our north star*" shares Scharff.

*"That means that we aim to do journalism that makes a difference, whether in terms of spurring policy change, informing our audience, or exposing abuses."*

By telling stories about women and the barriers they face daily, The Fuller Project's journalism raises awareness about systemic and structural inequalities that disproportionately impact women, inspiring action in response. Since 2015, their investigations have led to tangible changes in multiple areas: changes in policy to address child trafficking; in pushing for historic new levels of funding for maternal care; in banning abusive practices; driving news cycles and front pages; and leading to large

231. SimilarWeb, February 2022

232. Ahrefs, March 2022

233. Ahrefs, 21 March 2022

234. SimilarWeb, Desktop and mobile demographics, traffic share as at February 2022

235. The Fuller Project estimates provided on 22nd April 2022



Jessie (Kai Tsehay: The Fuller Project)

scale releases of data. Their reporting brings not only a gender lens to the journalism, but often also prompts editors to re-think the framing of stories.

### **Investigative and enterprise reporting across beats**

The focus of The Fuller Project's newsroom is on investigative and enterprise reporting that centers on women. Collectively, the team has expertise in gender issues that span areas from health to violence to climate.

*"The reporters don't parachute in or chase headlines. They are on the ground before a story breaks, and stay long after other news organizations move on."*

They bring context, history, and a systems-lens to produce reporting that makes a difference.

### **Globally relevant and locally rooted journalism**

One of the distinctive features of The Fuller Project's journalism is the connections it makes between the local and the global, driven by the belief that what happens to a woman in one part of the world affects women everywhere. Scharff believes that the common factor in some of their greatest successes is the linkages they have found between women's experiences across the globe.

She argues that global news is often driven by the assumed perspective of a US audience that has limited knowledge about the world. The Fuller Project challenges this with reporting that is rooted in marginalized communities both globally and across the US. Audiences are invited to engage with global issues in a way that is informed from on the ground, with authentic sources and local journalists producing reports that are then shaped by editors in the region.

For example, in a story about supply chain disruptions The Fuller Project profiled two women, a JCPenney employee in California and a garment factory worker in Lesotho, whose livelihoods had been destroyed by the collapse of the retail industry. They wanted readers to understand how two women's lives — in two very different worlds — were inextricably linked. The story, with a rare global angle, has been published by the Associated Press and picked up by more than 100 news outlets globally and within the US.

## Partnerships make the global-local link possible

Partnerships are central to The Fuller Project's model because they support local reporting, deep sourcing, and a connection to audiences in the places where the newsroom reports. Through partnerships they also foster a community of editors and reporters who together are disrupting bias in news.

In some contexts, such as Kenya's Nation Media Group, The Fuller Project has a staff reporter embedded in the partner newsroom. Here, they were able to support the launch of a Gender Desk and subsequently provide global coverage of issues affecting women. Co-reporting, co-editing, and co-publishing makes the journalism locally rooted but also globally relevant. Its success often rests on cross-publishing reports for both a regional and a global audience.

Xanthe Scharff reflects with pride on the Nation Media Group partnership. The deep expertise in gender reporting that The Fuller Project brought to the collaboration through their embedded reporter has supported the Gender Desk's efforts to redefine the standard for reporting on women in Kenya, bringing global stories about women to their audience.

*"We brought our co-reported journalism to global outlets such as The Guardian, The Telegraph and Foreign Policy, elevating the prestige of the Gender Desk and the gender reporters within the broader company, contextualizing locally-rooted reporting for a global audience, and spurring impact with reporting that was noted, engaged with, and acted upon by a large number of policy influencers."*

## Staying on a story to provide a fuller account when others have moved on

Since its founding, the expertise of local contributors has enabled The Fuller Project to report on the ways in which US and global policymakers fail to listen to, protect or serve women during warfare. Building on years of reporting in Afghanistan, many months before the US withdrawal, they partnered with the women-led Afghan newsroom Rukhshana Media to launch an enterprise series in *TIME* magazine. When Kabul fell, The Fuller Project broadened this series to include urgent dispatches from women across the country, amplifying the voices of ordinary women — students, journalists, dressmakers, and pharmacists, among others. Instead of ending their coverage a month or two after the Taliban takeover like many other news outlets, the editors maintain daily contact with Afghan women reporters, and The Fuller Project is still reporting on women's day-to-day lives under the Taliban: their challenges, their fight, their strength.

Contributor Zahra Nader, a former New York Times reporter and the first Afghan woman to report for a western news outlet, led The Fuller Project's Afghanistan reporting. She appeared on *CNN Newsroom*, MSNBC's *The Week with Joshua Johnson*, and *Democracy Now*, among others, to discuss the experiences of women on the ground in Afghanistan.

## What has The Fuller Project learned along the way?

### Sustainability rests on building up all organizational functions

According to Scharff, many young non-profits invest all their capital in their journalism. But ultimately, this works against their potential for long-term sustainability and more significant growth.

*"Like many early-stage non-profit newsrooms, for years we invested almost exclusively in our reporting. We have learned the importance of building the other functions of the organization that support the potential for impact and sustainability."*

Additionally, as a newsroom that focuses on impact, The Fuller Project decided to develop its capacity to communicate about its journalism (rather than just produce it) through evidence gathering and external communications.

### Pitching stories centered around gender issues requires time and editorial guidance

I ask Scharff about the difficulties of pitching women-centered stories in an industry that sees gender story angles as less relevant to audiences, barely covering them. She acknowledges that when The Fuller Project was first formed, many of the reporters experienced this issue in their freelance work.

*“However, since we built a platform and set up a model where reporters would have time, editorial guidance and support; and resources to do deep enterprise and investigative journalism, we have had no issue placing our stories or building partnerships with news outlets.”*

Her conclusion is that when there is investment in reporting about women, the journalism that results is revelatory, engaging and read by a wide audience, making editors want the story.

### How to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes in reporting

One of the reasons Scharff set up The Fuller Project was to counteract women’s frequent portrayal in the news

*“as victims and by family status, which propels harmful stereotypes about victimization.”*

To avoid reinforcing these stereotypes, the project’s journalism is produced by expert reporters who are well-versed in their beats and local contexts. They carve out time to go beyond the surface of the story to uncover layers of history and context.

Similar to Khabar Lahariya’s humane and source-centric approach, The Fuller Project’s reporting centers on their sources’ lived experiences, reported by journalists who are immersed in the sources’ communities. Moreover, the reporters are deliberate in being thoughtful and respectful of how they project the images and voices of the sources in their stories. *“We do not chase headlines”*, Scharff affirms definitively.

No less important in combating stereotypes is the diversity of the team. The Fuller Project newsroom limits the blind spots in coverage that can lead to stereotypes by actively welcoming the informed and editorial perspectives of its diverse team.

### What next?

Xanthe Scharff is resolute that The Fuller Project’s vision will remain steadfast:

*“journalism that fully represents women, giving readers The Full Story, and spurring gender equality.”*

The Fuller Project will continue working on ramping up its newsroom and growing the impact of its journalism. *“Where there is injustice against women, The Fuller Project is there, exposing the story and spurring positive change.”* There is no doubting Scharff’s determination that the newsroom will be a global beacon for reporting that lifts women’s stories from their communities clear of any noise.

## Case study: The Guardian's *Her Stage*

The Guardian's Global Development website, which is a vertical of the Guardian newspaper, is dedicated to global development issues. Gender equity is a significant area of its focus and in January 2022, under the leadership of the site's editor Tracy McVeigh, the website launched the newsletter *Her Stage*, to cover issues relevant to women but in a way that is also accessible to men. The newsletter is published on a roughly monthly basis.

The wider Guardian website is the third most-read English-speaking newspaper online in the world.<sup>236</sup> It reaches 92m monthly unique visitors<sup>237</sup>, has 1.9m YouTube subscribers and 10.5m Twitter followers on its main account.<sup>238</sup> 44% of its traffic is women.<sup>239</sup> 1.2 million external websites link to the Guardian, of which 1,066 are governmental and 6,593 educational<sup>240</sup>, making it one of the most linked-to news providers in the world. Of the external websites linking to the Guardian, nearly 67,000 link to the Global Development website - 832 educational and 63 governmental.<sup>241</sup>

An analysis by AKAS of the volume of feminine vs masculine pronouns ("she said" vs. "he said") used in news coverage on the Guardian's Global Development website between 1st January and 10th June 2022 uncovered that the phrase "she said" received a 49% share of the total (vs. 36% in the Guardian as a whole). This indicates near-gender parity in the use of experts, sources, and protagonists on the Global Development website. Gender parity has been exceeded in the vertical in terms of bylines, with women contributing to 51% of all bylines. Unusually, a large majority of the journalists in the global development team (83%) are women, which represents an inverse picture to that of the foreign desk, 83% of whose staff are men. The proportion of women in the Global Development desk is also double the global average for poverty and development beats, where 39% of the journalists in 2019 globally were women.<sup>242</sup>

*Her Stage* newsletter focuses on issues relevant to women in developing countries and targets unique audiences to complement the Guardian's statistically older and slightly more male readers. I speak with Tracy McVeigh about her editorial vision for *Her Stage*; what she has learned since the launch of the newsletter; and the gender issues within the wider news industry. I am taken by her distinctive honesty, unburdened by self-censorship, and by her understated demeanor that is so out of sync with the significant role she plays in such a prestigious brand.

### What makes the Guardian's *Her Stage* exceptional?

McVeigh highlights two key measures of success that the Guardian tracks (among others) for *Her Stage*. The first is sign-up rates; the second, open rates. "*The open rate is the more important one*", she clarifies. Quantitative analysis of the open rates of *Her Stage* points to a much higher engagement than that expected according to established industry benchmarks. The average open rate for *Her Stage* so far has been 65% vs. an average of between 15% and 25% for industry newsletters.<sup>243</sup> The sign-up rate has grown threefold in the five months since the newsletter's launch.

236. Majit, 2022

237. SimilarWeb, May 2022

238. YouTube and Twitter audience figures as of 10 June 2022

239. SimilarWeb traffic share, as of 10 June 2022

240. Ahrefs, 21 March 2022

241. Ahrefs, 10 June 2022

242. ICFJ, 2019

243. Othen, 2021; Campaign Monitor, 2022

## Targeting an audience beyond the Guardian's core readership

*Her Stage* aims to attract and engage an audience that falls outside the Guardian's "core audience", targeting audiences in African countries and India. The stories are carefully curated by McVeigh so that, while focusing on women sources and protagonists, they in no way alienate men.

*"I think it's a lot easier to sell a newsletter that pops into somebody's email. It's very bright, it's very mixed in tone. You could be engaged in that newsletter, I hope, all the way to the bottom before realizing that it is, perhaps, a woman's place, a woman's newsletter", she explains. "I didn't want it to be a women-only space. I wanted it to be a women-dominated space, but not exclusive. So it felt that the format of a newsletter worked. It fitted into the work we were already doing and fed into what we were trying to do."*

## Bringing in voices that nobody has heard before

McVeigh explains that the newsletter is proving a good vehicle for driving two goals simultaneously: introducing more indigenous women writers and photographers as Guardian Global Development website bylines, and investigating more deeply the lives of women in the developing world. These were the reasons behind McVeigh's decision to target less established women writers and, unlike other newsletter publishers, to steer away from big names in the op-eds.

*"The idea is to try and bring voices that nobody's heard before."*

I ask McVeigh what she is most proud of in the context of the site's coverage of gender equity and she singles out her team's dedication to amplifying women's voices in their storytelling. This is borne out by the statistics already cited, which shine a light on how much more gender-balanced the Global Development website's coverage is than the benchmarks reported in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News/COVID-19 News*.

*"Most of the reporters on the team here wouldn't even think twice about making sure their stories are full of women. And actually, a news journalist, a home news journalist, often wouldn't even think about that. But I think, within this team, people are thinking about that all the time. And some of it has to do with representation. We do have a heavily female team."*

## What are the learnings along the way?

**"All the issues are women's issues". Pushing men out of the conversation would be damaging**

I ask McVeigh why she chose to launch a newsletter instead of a vertical or a column dedicated to women's issues. Her answer is rich, alluding to past deliberations:

*"I have always felt slightly uncomfortable with this idea of women's issues, because women are 50% of the population. All the issues are women's issues. And in order to achieve proper equality, issues have to stop being called 'women's issues'. If you don't have men as part of that journey towards equality, we will never achieve equality. It has to be an inclusive place."*

McVeigh offers evidence of the critical role that men have in solving issues that affect women exclusively, such as FGM [female genital mutilation].

*“I think that siloing women’s issues is not the way to go. Obviously, there are issues, like abortion, like reproductive rights, that are more important to women, but also, I think if we push men out of that conversation, we’re not going to win the battles. We must have men involved, otherwise we’re never going to get anywhere. FGM is a perfect example. I was in Kenya a few months ago, looking at FGM. I was stunned by how many men were involved in the anti-FGM movement. Dads, young activists. It was remarkable to look at how many men were there. And it felt really powerful.”*

### **Gender balance in reporting: “I have interviewed a man, I need to look for a woman”**

While the Guardian Global Development website does not have targets for the proportion of women bylines, sources, experts or protagonists, the success in achieving gender parity or near-parity could in part be attributed to the reporting culture within the team, where considering the gender of quoted sources is innate. In McVeigh’s words:

*“I think only once on this desk I’ve had to say: ‘Actually, that’s disproportionately male’. And that was when I’d asked somebody to gather a whole lot of voices and they’d gathered something like 80% men, and so we didn’t run it. I think most people do automatically think: ‘Okay, I’ve interviewed a man, I need to go and look for a woman’.”*

### **The missing women of color in the news**

As we discuss the culture of awareness of the diversity of sources, McVeigh candidly recalls an incident early in her career when she had not included a person of color in a story she was about to file and was emailed by someone she did not know to make her aware of the fact. I ask her how well the news industry in the UK covers issues relevant to women of color now. *“I think appallingly,”* is her immediate response. She goes on to clarify:

*“If you do not have representation in your organization, then you will always be on the back foot when it comes to being on top of those issues. I think that’s a problem. Newspapers [in the UK], traditionally, have been places where Oxbridge white men have kind of cut their teeth and sat around and rubbed their chins and talked about the great issues of the day. Obviously, that’s changing, and for the better and there’s some wonderful people working here who don’t have those kinds of backgrounds, but there’s still that problem.”*

### **“There is nothing more to say about gender equality here.” The persistent gender blindness in the news industry**

According to McVeigh, a key barrier to increasing the volume of news coverage dedicated to gender equality issues is the misperception, reported in *The Missing Perspectives of Women in News*, that the gender inequality problem has been resolved. Her observation is insightful:

*“Journalists go: ‘Nothing to see here. Of course, you’ve got equal pay, of course you’ve got maternity leave. I couldn’t sack you if I wanted to.’ Despite the facts, which clearly show it’s not the case, I think there’s a genuine belief that there’s nothing more to say here.”*

### **Misogyny is keeping women off news platforms. News organizations must be watchdogs**

Perhaps most depressingly, McVeigh brings up another structural problem which the news industry faces at present. Namely, platform capture on social media, which allows the large-scale abuse of primarily women journalists.<sup>244</sup>

244. See “The double-edged sword of technological advancements”, p. 55 in Kassova, 2020a

*“Women are less keen to stick their heads above the parapet, for very obvious reasons. They get shut off a lot of times, whether on social media, on TV, even in newspapers. The misogyny is successfully keeping women off those platforms, I’d say, very successfully. I don’t say anything controversial on social media at all, unless I’m really angry, because I just don’t want to invite that kind of nastiness, because I carry it about with me.”*

She too touches on the childcare barrier highlighted by Dorcas Muga in the Nation Media Group’s case study in Kenya. According to McVeigh, women journalists are less likely than men to be able to accommodate out of hours media requests because of clashes with their childcare responsibilities.

From an organizational perspective, McVeigh sees the solution lying in news leadership demanding that their output is gender-balanced.

*“And then for journalists, and TV producers, and radio, who I think are the worst offenders at not giving women the air they need, they need to be forced, they need somebody who turns and says, ‘Hang on a minute, this isn’t going out until you get a proper gender mix’ on this board, or panel, or discussion. Everybody needs to be watchdogging this.”*

### **What next?**

Assuming the newsletter continues to perform well, McVeigh’s future vision for *Her Stage* is for it to get its own dedicated editor. She believes it could do with its own voice. In the ideal scenario, McVeigh would find two or three women in the developing world who would guest-edit it on the ground, curating its feature stories, and writing the op-ed.

What would McVeigh change right now about the news industry to improve women’s representation, inclusion, or portrayal in the news, I ask. Her response is unique and profound. It highlights the systemic economic barriers that women journalists from certain backgrounds face from the outset in their attempts to enter the profession.

*“Making housing cheaper in London. Because if you’re a young woman of Bangladeshi origin, who’s just gone to journalism school in Manchester, you have got very little chance of coming to work in a London newspaper. You can’t afford to come down and do the work experience. You can’t live in London unless you’re lucky enough to have a friend. You can’t come here and get into an industry in the way that other wealthier young people can. So there’s actual physical, economic barriers to an awful lot of people coming into this industry. There were for me, there’s an awful lot, and that’s not gone away. In fact, it’s probably getting worse.” It is these systemic disadvantages that McVeigh would like to eliminate first.*