



**Women on Air Submission**

# **Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality 2020**

## **About Women on Air**

Women on Air was set up 10 years ago this year as a result of a conversation on Twitter between journalist Margaret E Ward and Helen Mc Cormack, then a radio producer. They posed a simple question, 'where are all the women on the airwaves?' They then set about attempting to raise consciousness around the evident gender imbalance on air. The result of that was a well publicised conference called 'Bring on the Women' held in 2010. For the next five years they held consciousness raising events, inviting high profile presenters and journalists to essentially demystify 'the media' to audiences of women. The aim was to inspire women to put themselves forward. As the RTÉ presenter Clare Byrne told one audience, 'just say yes when you are asked to do an interview and work out the rest later ...

Since 2015, under the chairmanship of RTÉ News Editor Roisin Duffy, Women On Air has been propelled by the conviction that in Ireland, the first draft of public policy is often formed on the airwaves, so those experts / contributors who are brought on to programmes to express opinions or give of their knowledge are integral to that process. Viewed in that context, the need for gender equality on the airwaves is not just obvious but essential in a functioning democracy.

With that in mind, Women on Air, with the support of funding by the BAI and time voluntarily given by too many dedicated media and communications professionals to mention here, set up an intensive mentor-based media training programme to build confidence, demystify media and train women with something to say, to say it. WOA also currently also holds one day 'workshops' with a similar aim, to arm women with the necessary skills to do interviews and to maintain a presence on air, across radio, TV and online platforms. We also continue to have consciousness raising events, and to participate in public fora such as the Ploughing Championships.

The focus of Women on Air is the promotion of female voices as on-air contributors, though it is worth noting that the UK Government Equalities Office found that stories by women reporters are more likely to challenge gender stereotypes than those filed by male reporters.

Amongst the groups trained by Women on Air to date are the women behind the 'Waking the Feminists' movement, who went on to influence policy change; newly elected politicians from across the political divide; the Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA); women on both sides of the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Referendum; and women involved in sport, science, charities, direct provision, minority groups, law, business and finance. A recent recipient of training, who went on to take part in a host of media opportunities, and consequently inspire women across the country on many levels - is aspiring astronaut Nora Patten.

## **The importance of achieving gender equality on the airwaves**

It would be fair to assume that gender balance on the highly influential Irish airwaves would contribute generally to gender equality in Ireland.

Gender balance on the airwaves is of particular importance in Ireland, given that engagement with broadcast media is high and that social policy is often influenced, and indeed changed, by views expressed on broadcast media. Radio listenership in Ireland is exceptionally high so it should be of deep concern to society as a whole that it is dominated by male voices.

The serious underrepresentation of women on the airwaves does a disservice to women and to society in general. Whilst women's voices remain the minority, they will remain the 'other' and will not be regarded as usual or mainstream. It is interesting to note the many derogatory terms that are still attached to women's voices, "shrill", "high-pitched", "emotional"; men's voices tend to be described as "deep" and "authoritative". Fascinatingly, a number of studies have found that women's voices are becoming deeper, seemingly because they understand that a deeper voice is associated with power and authority. Were women's voices heard more regularly that bias could change.

Women on Air strongly contests the tendency to conflate gender inequality with diversity concerns. It is obviously of concern that minority groups are under-represented on Irish broadcast media and that also needed to be addressed, they are two separate issues - women are the majority in Irish society. The classification of gender inequality under the moniker of diversity allows the issue to be downplayed by treating it as one of many inequalities rather than a specific one affecting the majority of the population. And of course, women may be doubly discriminated against by being 'female and a member of the travelling community', for example.

### **Myths and excuses**

There are a number of common assumptions in the broadcasting milieu that tend towards undermining the case for gender balance on the airwaves.

A [House of Lords report](#) in 2014/2015 said there was a view from broadcasters that the underrepresentation of women on broadcast current affairs media was a reflection of the underrepresentation of women in British public life. Of course, this is at least partially dependent on what constitutes news and who decides. A male centred world view will result in a traditional and conservative view of what should be covered in current affairs; a world view that will tend to exclude women. Other witnesses to the House of Lords committee said that there was a lack of female experts, that women were "not expert enough". Again, this depends on who decides what expertise is needed and who is an expert; there is a strong, and understandable, tendency in broadcast media to stick with the "tried and trusted" guest, but this mitigates against female contributors whose expertise may be just as good or offer a different dimension. Expertise or merit is generally set by the dominant culture.

### **Establishing a baseline**

Unlike other European countries, there has been little in-depth research in Ireland to determine how uneven the representation of women in the media actually is, it is the elephant in the room. It is of the utmost urgency that we establish how low the base actually is. However, the limited. And somewhat dated, data that does exist suggests the problem of female representation on the airwaves is considerable and not unique to Ireland.

- In 2015, the National Women's Council's "[Hearing Women's Voices?](#)" study found that women continue to be underrepresented across news and current affairs across all Irish radio stations monitored. The overall figure was 72% for men, 28% for women.
- The [House of Lords report](#) in 2014-2015 refers to the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 study that found that only 26% of experts and contributors to UK radio and TV were women.
- In 2018, the [EPRA](#) (the European platform of regulatory authorities) noted the disparities between the representation of men and women both on and off screen and that women were typically subject to more stereotypical and degrading portrayal than men.

- In its [Gender Action Plan of April 2018](#), the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland identified data collection and publication as a key area in promoting gender equality.
- In 2013, the Economic and Social Research Council surveyed 10 countries such as the US, Australia and the UK and found that news coverage was heavily weighted towards male news sources, with women only interviewed or cited in 30% of TV news stories. In all 10 countries, female sources tended to appear in longer news items and softer news topics such as family and lifestyle.

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

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

We are convinced of the need for more research into the many and complex issues surrounding gender imbalance on our airwaves. More information will help to shift perceptions and the need for radical rebalancing will become more apparent.

### **Recommended actions**

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

The Hearing Women’s Voices? study suggests that the BAI set minimum gender quotas for guests/experts of 30/70 over a three-year period; it also suggests they should highlight programmes that achieve a 40/60 balance and challenge those who do not.

The experience of the [BBC’s Outside Source](#) is enlightening and indicates the importance of also dealing with the issue at the programme level. Its presenter Ros Atkins made a commitment to on air gender equality. They started off with 39% in January 2017 and with considerable effort they managed to increase their average to 52% by that summer. And the programme increased its viewership by 25%; the initiative proved so successful that the BBC has adopted it across the organisation. The movement has spread, and many other organisations are now committed to this 50:50 plan and many broadcast organisations in other European countries have taken the BBC’s lead with its 50/50 programme, an opt-in as opposed to an obligatory quota-based process. Programme teams voluntarily sign up to the 50/50 programme and aspire to reach the target.

- WOA is advocating for **compulsory quotas** for broadcast media where it is possible to require them. We point to the success of quotas for the election of women to the Dáil, particularly in the 2016 election. We accept there are challenges but do not consider them insurmountable. In the meantime, there needs at least to be measurable targets, and effective monitoring.

During Irish elections, broadcasters already allocate set amounts of time to different political parties. Allocating certain amounts of time along gender lines would be a far easier task, willingness to engage with the necessity is clearly the imperative needed.

- There is much discussion at Government level about a **transition from the TV licence fee**, to another revenue raising mechanism for public service media. There are also discussions about the requirement for the **Broadcasting Act 2009** to be revised in light of the changed media landscape and the establishment of a new '**Media Commission**'. The establishment of conditions that support gender equality on our airwaves must be considered as part of **all** policy decisions relating to the broadcasting sector. Provisions should be provided for that ensures that the required measurement, monitoring and evaluation tools are put in place, and we suggest that any public funding – BAI or TV Licence - is linked to reaching targets set down.

## Summary

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

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

**Women on Air**

**W:** <https://womenonair.ie/>