

## The Gender Gap in Journalism. Characteristics and Perception

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**Abstract.** Journalism is an activity that does not escape the gender gap. Despite progress in equality in recent decades, the analysis of women in media newsrooms show data even today that prove differences between men and women. Within this context, this study aims, on one hand, to characterise the main indicators revealing the gender gap in the profession and, on the other, to discover the opinions of acting professionals in this regard. To this end, a survey was conducted with 522 workers in news media in the Basque Country. Firstly, the results corroborate the existence of a wage gap and a significant difference in holding positions of responsibility in the media. Furthermore, the data collected indicate a second gap, the perception of the influence of gender in developing a professional career. In general terms, this concerns professional women to a much greater extent than men, a concern that is reaffirmed by how the data on the professional situation corroborate these perceptions.

**Keywords:** Gender gap; Journalism; Women; News media; Equality; Journalist profession

### [es] La brecha de género en la profesión periodística. Características y percepción

**Resumen.** A pesar del avance hacia la paridad experimentado durante las últimas décadas, la profesión periodística es una actividad que no escapa a la brecha de género. El objetivo de este estudio es, por un

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lado, caracterizar los principales indicadores que revelan la existencia de esta brecha en la profesión y, por otro, conocer las opiniones de los profesionales en ejercicio al respecto. Para ello, se ha realizado una encuesta a 522 trabajadores de los medios de comunicación del País Vasco. Los resultados corroboran, en primer lugar, la existencia de una brecha salarial y una significativa diferencia en la presencia en puestos de responsabilidad en los medios. Asimismo, los datos indican también una importante diferencia en la percepción del desarrollo de la carrera profesional, que en términos generales preocupa en mucho mayor medida a las mujeres profesionales que a los hombres.

**Palabras clave:** Brecha de género; Periodismo; Mujeres; Medios de comunicación; Igualdad; Profesión periodística

**Summary.** 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 3. Results. 3.1. Characteristics of the gender gap. 3.2. Perception on how gender influences practice of the profession. 4. Conclusions and discussion. 5. References.

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## 1. Introduction

For decades, journalism has been making progress toward a situation of equality, increasing the presence of women as professionals in press, radio, television, and internet newsrooms (International Women's Media Foundation, 2011; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015; Global Media Monitoring Project, 2015; Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid [Madrid Press Association], 2019; etc.)

With it all, journalism today is an activity not free from the gender gap, already detected by pioneering studies in the 1980s. One of the most noteworthy, a study by Rush et al. (1982), *A Global Hypothesis for Women in Journalism and Mass Communications*, pointed out discrimination in relation to women on the news agenda, as well as in relation to corporate decisions within news media. Thus, as stated by De Bruin (2000) and Correa and Harp (2011), we can observe the pre-eminence of a journalistic culture and organizational identity based on masculine values. From feminist theory, Linda Steiner (1998) indicates that the lack of rationality historically associated with the female gender relegated them to drawing up soft news. In this line, some authors go further in their analyses, and David Gauntlett (2004) reminds us that newsrooms consist of a variety of identities and that forming new identities or other gender systems is a requirement.

Currently, the “pseudo-feminisation” of journalism to which Soriano, Cantón and Díez (2005) referred almost two decades ago, i.e. “the appearance of a change that is not taking place” is ongoing. In fact, the gender gap in journalism continues to be significant (Amado, 2017; Retegui, 2019), while it is true that data have improved, at least within Spain (De Miguel et al., 2019). In this line, existing studies especially reveal family-work life balance issues for journalist women, also showing that they have the highest professional abandonment rate, and that their professional careers are marked by changes toward less-visible professional spaces that are more compatible with their private lives. According to the Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas en España (Federation of Journalist Associations in Spain) (FAPE,

2013), the insufficiency of family-work balance policies is what leads to higher rates of unemployed women and fewer opportunities for employment, training, and access to positions of responsibility.

In contrast, figures on access to university studies in journalism continue to reveal progressive feminisation (Rivero et al., 2015). In this regard, certain changes are still necessary to make the positive correlation between the proportion of women studying journalism and equal access to the journalist profession a reality, described decades ago in the first UNESCO *World Communication Report* (1989). Around that same time, the work by Beasley and Theus (1988) spoke in hopeful terms of a “new majority” and examined the implications for women professionals of the pre-eminence of women in Journalism Faculties.

The most recent studies confirm a few determinant realities, such as the perpetuation of the glass ceiling, meaning the invisible barrier that makes it difficult to professionally promote women to positions of responsibility (Caro-González et al., 2007). Women journalists tend to hold positions of lesser responsibility and are also more present in sectors considered peripheral or with lesser social influence. The European Institute for Gender Equality (2015) corroborated this a few years ago. According to their report, there are still determinant gender differences in newsrooms at important media organisations, such as the segregation of women and men by duties, status, or prestige level, and/or skills, which also means a majority presence of men in the highest positions of the profession and positions of intermediate responsibility. Excluding women from quality news spaces and including them in entertainment components of the news media is, in fact, one of the most firmly-rooted theories amongst those who study this sphere (Van Zoonen, 1994).

This all translates to a higher percentage of women in positions or with duties with a lower salary. This reality is corroborated by different recent studies, such as the *Gender Equality in the Media Sector*, drawn up by the European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (2018). This report places women in a situation of professional disadvantage in the media, in line with several previous reports (Gallagher, 2001; *Global Media Monitoring Project*, 2015; Berganza and Herrero, 2016; APM, 2019; etc.).

According to Galletero-Campos et al. (2019), these reports confirm that the glass ceiling and wage gap for women journalists are still in force today (De Miguel et al., 2017; García-Saiz, 2018), as previous research has noted (Canel et al., 2000; Alonso, 2004; Caro et al., 2007; Ufarte-Ruiz, 2007; Gómez-Aguilar, 2009; Roses, 2011). In this regard, different feminist analyses have drawn attention to the importance of women having access to executive positions to create real change in the newsroom and in media representation (Beam and DiCicco, 2010; Steiner, 2012).

Within the Spanish context, specifically, the most recent reports on the journalist profession conducted by the Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid (Madrid Press Association) (APM, 2019; 2020) confirm these data, at least in terms of distribution of the profession by gender that is a bit more balanced. In general, this report confirms that the number of freelance women and women in charge of press offices and communications agencies is higher than men. With it all, according to this same association (APM, 2019), journalism and communication in Spain continue to be professions that discriminate against women, as a result of the persistence of factors that mainly take shape in segregation when hiring for executive positions.

This report also states the existence of different accounts (the accounts given by women and the accounts given by men) when rating this discrimination: 74% of journalist women, as opposed to 34% of journalist men, consider that higher skills are required of women. This double account between men and women is especially striking in relation to perception of wage discrimination: for a high percentage of male journalists, this difference does not differ from other professions. This opinion is not shared by the majority of women surveyed (APM, 2019). In line with this aspect, we might mention that, after the economic crisis and closure of journalism companies (Galletero-Campos, 2018), data on unemployment in the profession indicate a sharper uptick in unemployment for women journalists (APM, 2019).

The study by De Miguel et al. (2017) provides an in-depth analysis of all these inequalities. According to this report, within the segment of the most qualified journalists with university degrees, precariousness (net monthly income less than 1,000 euros) is focused on women, who account for 85% of this group. Moreover, this research indicates that men occupy three-quarters of top-management positions and two-thirds of content decision-making positions.

In conclusion to this contextual section, we might mention that the “feminisation hypothesis” (Soriano et al., 2005) of the profession referenced at the beginning refers not only to the issue of women accessing the profession and their increased presence in newsrooms, but also to changes in media contents based on handling news in a way that demonstrates increased awareness of issues affecting the female gender (wage gap, employment discrimination, discrimination in spheres such as sport, family-work balance, caring for dependents, sexual exploitation, etc.).

In any event, the data examined on women’s socio-employment conditions in the profession, also in this cast, advise prudence when speaking positively about feminisation processes that may indicate deep-rooted changes in media content. The accounts given by the different genders also differ on this issue. For women journalists, the image of women in the news media is mainly related to their appearance as victims of gender violence, as an object of sexual desire, or in derogatory terms due to lack of acknowledgement of their professional skills. For the majority of men, the image projected is an accurate reflection of the plural reality of women (APM, 2019).

Within this context, this article seeks to characterise the gender gap in journalism and analyse how it is perceived by journalist professionals.

## 2. Methodology

The methodological instrument used in this study was a survey in which 522 journalists from the Basque Country participated. The survey was based on different studies on the profession, such as the *Informe Anual de la Profesión Periodística* (Annual Journalist Profession Report) (2019) and the *The American Journalist in the Digital Age* (Weaver et al., 2019).

To determine the sample, the starting point was the Basque Government’s Open Communication Guide<sup>8</sup>, which includes a complete list of the news media that con-

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<sup>8</sup> <https://gida.irekia.euskadi.eus>

duct their activity in the Basque Country, as well as their managers. The sample of people interviewed was completed with the collaboration of the Asociación Vasca de Periodistas (Basque Journalist Association), which informed its members and associates and contacted reporters and representatives from the news media to explain the project and encourage them to participate.

The research was interrupted by the health emergency situation and the population's confinement, declared by the Basque Government the 14<sup>th</sup> of March to tackle the pandemic. This meant that the methodological strategy used for the study was an online survey with telephone support. Within this exceptional context, participants were often contacted indirectly with the aid of those running the telephones, sending personalised invitations to carry out the survey.

The sample of interviewed parties also sought balance between men ( $n=312$  and 60.3% of those surveyed) and women ( $n=205$  and 39.7%), and also between the different news media (written press, radio, TV, online, etc.).

Questions were grouped into two large categories. On one hand, to characterise the gender gap, the surveyed parties were asked about professional characteristics: age, contract type, position with the outlet, and annual income. The second group of questions focused on the professionals' perception of how gender influences professional development: wage inequality, employment promotion, workload, requirement for skill, professional stability, responsibility in the outlet, professional stability, access to the job, and schedule flexibility.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Characteristics of the gender gap

Firstly, one of the characteristics of the gender gap indicated by professional profiles is that women journalists are younger than men. 63.3% of women ( $n=136$ ) working in Basque news media are younger than 45, as opposed to 54.1% ( $n=169$ ) of men. This figure shows that women joined newsrooms in the past twenty years, although at a lower percentage than their presence in university classrooms in Journalism studies. If we look at the data in the older age segment, only 2% of the women surveyed ( $n=4$ ) were 60 years or older, as opposed to 5.1% of men ( $n=16$ ). This may be due to a lesser total presence of women in newsrooms in previous periods, but also earlier abandonment of the profession.

The gender gap is also confirmed in terms of positions of responsibility, where we observe a significant deviation. 27.5% of women ( $n=56$ ) hold some sort of position of responsibility in the outlet where they work (director, chief editor, section head, etc.) as opposed to 40.1% of men ( $n=125$ ). By age segments, the data show that the gap expands with age. For those under 30 years of age, there are no significant differences in terms of positions with decision-making capacity. However, for those between 31 and 45, the difference increases to 9 points, and between 46 and 60, 15 points. For the most senior active journalists, those over 60, 56.3% of men ( $n=16$ ) hold some position of responsibility, as opposed to no women out of those surveyed.

We can also confirm a wage gap, particularly at the two extremes of income scales. 42.5% ( $n=79$ ) of women receive less than twenty thousand euros per year,

as opposed to 31.4% (n=85) of men, a gender gap of more than eleven points. If, on the other hand, we observe the high end of annual income, 15.6% (n=29) of women earn more than forty thousand euros per year, as opposed to 23.2% (n=63) of men. Just like with positions of responsibility, age is an important factor when defining the wage gap in terms of gender. With professionals under 30 years of age, global professional precariousness is important, with 63.2% of workers who annually earn less than twenty thousand euros, but there are no significant differences between men and women, with a scant difference of 2.9%. On the other hand, the greater the age, the greater the gap, going from 9.1% between 31 and 45 to 9.7% between 46 and 60, and 18.8% for workers over 60 years.

Lastly, professional stability offers paradoxical results. Proportionately, the women surveyed had greater professional stability than men, at 70.2% (n=144) as opposed to 65.1% (n=203). However, if we cross these data with wage scale and responsibility-level scales in the outlet, we can conclude that this stabilisation occurs in positions that are more precarious than those held by their male newsroom colleagues.



Figure 1. Characteristics of the gender gap

### 3.2. Perceptions on how gender influences practice of the profession

In addition to data on employment conditions offered by the surveyed parties, perceptions of the gender gap amongst professionals are added. And their responses also display differences between journalist men and women, which in some cases are relevant, as to the perception of the gender gap.

Access to the profession verifies this divergence in perspective. Although in global terms almost three out of every four professionals consider that gender does not influence the training required of professionals (74.6%) or access to jobs (70.6%), there are significant differences in opinions between men and women. Thus, 35.6%

of journalists (n=58) believe that they are required to have greater education, and 39.9% (n=65) believe that gender conditions access to a job position, which is double the number of male colleagues who hold the same opinion (14.8% and 19.6%, respectively).

Also as a majority, news media workers as a whole do not perceive that gender influences their professional development. The majority believe that it does not affect their workload (76%) nor, to a lesser extent, the income they receive (68.2%). Also in this section, the discrepancy between men and women's opinions is significant. 34.9% (n=57) of women consider that gender influences the workload given to them, as opposed to 14% of men (n=35). And the discrepancy is greater in terms of income, given that 41.1% (n=67) of women consider that gender influences the wage they receive, approximately twice as much as men (22% and n=55).

Logically, these differences have an impact on perception of how women and men may make progress in their professional career, meaning their expectations of positions of greater responsibility and, therefore, greater influence. Although in general terms, general data indicate that gender does not influence the professional career (63.3%), the gender gap is striking in professional perceptions. Thus, although with a narrow margin, half of women (50.3%, n=82) believe that gender influences professional promotion, and 52.8% (n=86) believe that it has consequences on the degree of responsibility they can achieve at the outlet. This is in stark contrast with their male colleagues' opinion. Only one out of four of them share this opinion, at 23.6% (n=59) and 26.4 (n=66), respectively. A greater number of men in positions of responsibility has effects on many other matters, such as the topics used. For example, when asked if their superiors allowed them to develop their ideas, 55.2% of men (n=171) responded "almost always," as opposed to 39.7% of women (n=81).

Another symptom of employment precariousness and the gender gap that might be mentioned is employment stability which, in general terms, is perceived as an element upon which gender has no influence (65.1%). Once again, the percentage of women who believe that this has a negative influence is twice that of men, at 44.8% (n=73) as opposed to 24.8% (=62). Along these same lines, employment flexibility is also perceived differently through the eyes of each gender. 64.2% of those surveyed believe that gender does not influence on work-family life balance opportunities. The percentage here is also greater amongst women, at 40.5% (n=66), than amongst men, at 26.4% (n=76).

Moreover, the degree of satisfaction was practically identical between women and men when asked whether their current position offered them good terms for work-family life balance (caring for minor children, caring for dependents and household tasks, being a father or mother, or caring for others). 45.4% of women (n=74) and 45.6% of men (n=114) believe that their work offers them this possibility.

Lastly, despite their critical view of the gender gap in newsrooms, journalists' global satisfaction with their work is high. 90.2% of women (n=185) and 87% of men (n=262) state that they are satisfied with the work that they do.

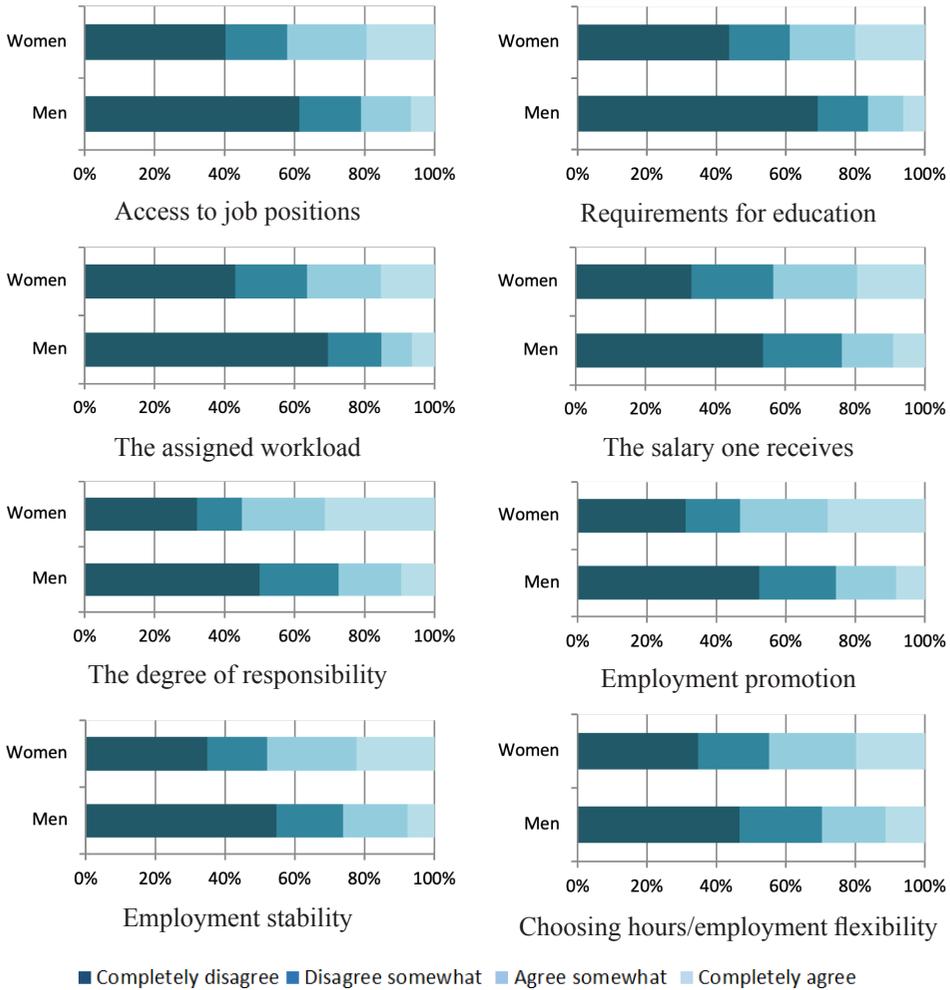


Figure 2. “Gender influences...”

#### 4. Conclusions and discussion

The results of the 522 surveys given to active communication professionals corroborate the presence of a double-gap in terms of gender. The first of them has to do with employment conditions and the profile of the journalists working in the news media. In this section, the data collected identify a clear wage gap and a significant difference in presence between women and men in positions of responsibility in the media. We also find a generational difference, where the percentage of women increases with younger professionals, which gradually brings part of the feminisation we have seen for 25 years in university classrooms to newsrooms (Rivero et al., 2015). These data also corroborate the gender gap already identified in other recent studies on the journalist profession (Amado, 2017; De Miguel et al., 2017; García-Saiz, 2018; Ga-

lletero-Campos et al., 2019; De Miguel et al., 2019; Blanco-Herrero et al., 2020) and in reports from different professional associations (APM, 2019;).

The second gap, on the other hand, is found in the differences between the perceptions of women and men who work in the news media on gender's influence in their professional activity. Even though, if we take all workers as a whole, we might consider that gender has a moderate influence, the study shows a significant discrepancy between the opinion of women and men on both issues. In general terms, opinions by gender display a great disparity on issues such as access to the job position and the education required, the assigned workload and the salary received, employment promotion and the degree of responsibility which they might reach, and employment stability and possibilities for family-work life balance. In all of them, the percentage of women with a negative opinion is twice that of men, in some cases with a negative majority, such as with employment promotion or the degree of responsibility they might reach in the outlet.

Thirdly, we can also state that there is a correlation between these perceptions of journalists on the influence of gender on the profession and the data on their professional situation, which confirm the existence of a gender gap in many relevant aspects. With it all, the study by age segments provides a glimpse of a certain progress toward parity in the journalistic profession, and spots improvement in fundamental aspects such as wage equality, employment stability, the assigned workload, opportunities for promotion, and work-family life balance options in younger age segments. In the near future, we must observe whether this trend continues, aided by work-family life balance policies or, if on the contrary, there continues to be a more premature abandonment of the profession and greater precariousness amongst women, especially halfway through the professional career (FAPE, 2013).

This study bears certain limitations. Since it was conducted by contacting through news media headquarters, the sample contains a greater proportion of self-employed workers and with greater employment stability, which may influence certain aspects of characterising the gender gap, but not in the perceptions of the professionals.

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