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Gender in/and the news in the UK and Republic of Ireland: Slow but (un)steady progress?

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Abstract

For the half-century or so in which the relationship between women and news has been researched, two of the key themes have been the underrepresentation and marginalisation of women as both subjects/sources and journalists. The latest Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) iteration – the largest international collaborative study of women and news, running since 1995 – found the pace of change regarding women's visibility across the news landscape to be painfully slow. Focusing on the 2020 data from the UK and Ireland, this article asks how visible are women in the news and how has this changed over time? It documents how women remain overshadowed as sources and subjects: for every two women seen or heard, there are five men. While the number of women journalists is gradually increasing, they are still less likely to cover prestigious beats such as politics and have the strongest showing as news anchors and presenters. In this article, we also use news about politics and COVID-19 as vignettes to illustrate how in times of crisis or when authoritative voices are sought, journalists are often drawn to those male sources who are already more present than women in positions of power. This contributes to the marginalisation of women's voices in the most prominent news stories and undermines their right to full participation in democratic society.

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Introduction

Understanding women's presence in the news is a crucial means through which their participation and representation in society can be explored, but recording this data is conceptually and methodologically challenging. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is an international study of news media that monitors how women feature in and report the news around the world. It is the largest and lengthiest longitudinal study of gender and news, providing a snapshot every 5 years since 1995. There is some evidence of improvement over 25 years: the overall proportion of women appearing as news subjects and sources in newspaper, television and radio news globally has increased from 17% in 1995 to 25% in 2020 (Macharia, 2021: 17). The pace of change is, however, disappointingly slow: a mere 8% over 25 years, a period which has witnessed a significant increase in women's participation in all aspects of cultural, political and economic life. With such depressing familiarity in the 2020 findings, it might be argued that it is time for researchers and activists to turn their attention to different subjects and methods. However, as Bruce et al. (2010: 128) argue in their content analysis of Olympic sportswomen, this kind of "tedious documentation" remains strategically important. As feminist academics invested in producing *usable* research, GMMP can – and does – help lobby for change in our work with media organisations, offering an important opportunity for longitudinal and international comparisons due to the relative stability of its methodology across time and place.

In this article, we outline the broader landscape of women's representation in the news before detailing the GMMP methodological approach and its operationalisation by the UK and Republic of Ireland (RoI) teams in 2020. The results are presented first by examining women as sources and subjects in the news, followed by women as journalists. Politics and the COVID-19 pandemic are then used as vignettes to further explore the findings.

Why representation matters

The GMMP is part of a long tradition of scholarship focused on women's representation and inclusion, both in newsrooms and media content output. The landmark UN Commission on the Status of Women conference in 1995 – GMMP's first year – identified the need for balanced, non-stereotypical portrayals of women in media. Two decades on, the European Parliament (2018) raised ongoing concerns, highlighting how women are less visible on certain news beats such as sport, politics and economy, noting that women's visibility here is crucial "not only for representations but also for reasons of equal opportunities and the full recognition of their expertise and knowledge". Invisibility – across both content and production – has been well documented in scholarly work, often anchored to Gaye Tuchman's (1977) "symbolic annihilation" hypothesis, whereby women

are repeatedly omitted, trivialised and condemned in the news. Ultimately, there are societal repercussions if men – particularly elite men – continue to define coverage: Zoch and Turk (1998: 771) suggest such coverage presents a world in which attention is directed away from women's activities, and audiences are instead led to believe that "news is made and information controlled almost exclusively by men acting in some official capacity, with official status". Such patterns, they argue, "would have audiences and consumers believe that women are virtually without power and thus have no access to information that would be of use to the public".

Despite broad societal progress in women's rights (for example, RoI's legalisation of abortion in 2018) and increasing awareness around issues such as sexual assault, media representations can still lag: coverage of #MeToo has been found to reinforce a de-politicisation of the feminism involved and emphasise White, wealthy celebrities (De Benedictis, S. et al., 2019). Such findings reiterate the need for ongoing studies capturing the complexity of how women are represented in news, and why this might be the case. GMMP's approach captures two core pillars by recording both content and journalists. The results raise familiar questions about whether the problem is a broad societal one whereby journalists simply reflect the imbalances or prejudices of its society, or whether it is a journalistic, newsroom-level problem – or a combination of the two. A content analysis can never provide a definitive answer but can shed valuable light on the patterns. Therefore, in this study, we ask: how visible are women in the news in Ireland and the UK, and how has this changed over time?

Where are the women in news content?

Previous research has documented the marginalisation of women-oriented subjects, whilst women continue to be significantly underrepresented as sources (Ross et al., 2018; Shor et al., 2015), despite their increasingly visible public role. The prevailing mar-ginalisation of women's voices is especially notable in the most valued news genres such as political reporting (Humprecht and Esser, 2017; Santia et al., 2024). For example, a large-scale study of COVID-19 news coverage across the UK, Australia and US found that for every mention of a woman politician, there were five mentions of a man politician; even when references to political leaders were excluded, the ratio remained 1:4 (Jones, 2020). Of course, politics and government are themselves male-dominated, though to different degrees in the five nations sampled in this GMMP analysis: in 2020, two of the five nations (Scotland and NI) had women leaders and in two (NI and RoI), the main opposition parties were led by women. Yet while party leadership is one useful indicator, overall membership of parliament is arguably equally as significant: in the 2019 (UK) and 2020 (RoI) elections, just 34% and 22% respectively of parliamentarians were women. The cabinet positions after these elections saw 7/23 positions go to women in the UK, and 4/15 positions to women in RoI. Such overarching male dominance resonates with the central question identified above, regarding whether the problem with journalism's gender imbalance is rooted at the societal or newsroom level, or both; given the well-documented reliance on official and elite sources in news reporting, it is perhaps unsurprising – although not justifiable – that women's voices end up on the margins. As Shor et al. (2015:

978) noted, "as long as the real-world glass ceiling remains resistant to change, the paper ceiling of newspaper coverage is likely to remain in place". Although they focused on print, there is little evidence to suggest online news dynamics fundamentally alter women's presence (Humprecht and Esser 2017).

In addition to research on politicians, concern exists with the gendered *function* of news sources. Previous studies – including prior iterations of GMMP – have found that women are often called upon to speak from personal experience rather than expertise (Ross et al., 2018; Wheatley 2020). However, not all women are invited to comment in this way: a recent Scottish study suggests that women of colour are not routinely invited to speak from personal experience (Boyle et al., 2024). When it comes to experts, studies in the UK and RoI point to the continued dominance of men (Howell and Singer, 2017) and White men in particular (Boyle et al., 2024). This tendency is heightened in relation to particular topics: Jones' (2020) UK study of COVID-19 news stories found that for every mention of a woman STEM expert, there were 19 mentions of men; with economic expertise, the ratio was 1:5. Furthermore, even when women are called upon for their expertise, they may still be expected to divulge personal experiences in professional contexts in ways their male counterparts are not (Boyle 2022). This reflects findings from studies focused on other sectors, including health, where 'ordinary' women are used to provide "victimised coverage", emphasising vulnerability and emotion (Wheatley 2020).

Where are the women making the news?

Looking at the gender dynamics around news production, there is considerable evidence highlighting ways in which employment patterns and experiences are gendered. In RoI, there is a clear trajectory towards gender balance in a previously male-dominated field: 44% of journalists are women, compared with 30% in the mid-1990s (Rafter and Wheatley 2023). Meanwhile, in the UK, women now comprise 53% of the journalism workforce (Spilsbury, 2021: 2) and, in the UK, as elsewhere, women also comprise the majority of journalism students (Josephi and Oller Alonso, 2023). Nevertheless, across Europe, women's media career aspirations are stalling, and they are scarcely visible in senior managerial and leadership roles (Robertson et al., 2021), while a persistent gender pay gap is another enduring feature of the wider media industry (Brogi et al., 2020: 89). Horizontal segregation also persists with sports (Women in Journalism Scotland, 2022) and business beats (Feller, 2018) remaining particularly male-dominated. In the press, women are less likely than men to find their by-lines on front pages (Mills et al., 2017) and the continuing intersection of sexism and ageism experienced by women over 50 regarding front-of-camera roles is well documented (Ross 2024). The overrepresentation of White men reporting the lead news stories was similarly identified in a recent study of Scottish news (Boyle et al., 2024). Concerns around media work, therefore, extend beyond gender, with race, ethnicity and socio-economic status among the additional barriers, demonstrating the ongoing struggle to achieve reporting that better reflects the diverse public that journalism should serve.

One ongoing question regarding women's influence on news content relates to whether women journalists are more likely to include women in their reporting; this is often

deemed overly simplistic (Van Zoonen, 1988), because of the reliance on elites who are typically male (Shor et al., 2015), alongside the inherently masculine socialised nature of news production environments (Lobo et al., 2017). However, previous research has found that women may be more likely to include women as sources (Zoch and Turk, 1998), albeit modestly and within a dominant news culture in which male sources and subjects prevail as the foremost voices. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that women may bring different values and practices to a newsroom. For example, among Irish journalists, women are more committed to "speaking on behalf of the marginalised" and "advocating for social change" than men, while men place a higher value than women on "attracting the largest audience", all of which may shape their work in some way (Rafter and Wheatley 2023).

Coding the day's news: A global methodology

The GMMP is designed to provide a "snapshot" of the world's news – across television, radio, print, online and twitter – on an "ordinary" news day. In 2020, teams in 116 countries coded 30,172 news stories from 2,251 media outlets, using the same methodology on the same date: Tuesday September 29, 2020 (Macharia, 2021: 4). An original April 2020 date was rescheduled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the new September date was selected, in May 2020, in consultation with regional co-ordinators.

In the UK and RoI, we coded 1,095 stories from 81 media outlets, identified according to the GMMP density guidance, which gave each country a minimum target number of outlets to analyse, determined by the overall number of media in each country. The exact outlets included were based on popularity, with country co-ordinators deciding based on available metrics and audience data. One implication of this in the UK/RoI is that our sample included very little material in Welsh and none in Gaelic or Irish, although emerging research suggests that minority-language media in the UK *may* have a different gender profile than English-language media (Ramon and Haynes, 2019). The UK and RoI media outlets were similar to GMMP 2015 (Ross et al., 2018) with three main differences: the involvement of a Northern Irish team; additional twitter feeds; and the addition of the main evening news programme on BBC Scotland (launched in 2019). The full list of outlets is included in Table 1.

Although we refer to the "nations" at different points, it is important to note that there is no English national news media (and no English parliament) since content produced in England is distributed more broadly around the UK. In print, we coded both the London-based *Daily Mail, The Sun,* and *The Mirror* and the Scottish and Irish editions produced by the same media groups. While the Scottish and Irish editions include nation-specific content, particularly around politics, there is also shared content, although stories are often nuanced to reflect the different national contexts. Broadcasters tend to refer to the "nations and regions" with *national* programming for Scotland, NI and Wales, whilst England is split into regions.

GMMP guidelines require five formats: print, radio, television, internet (websites) and twitter. Cross-pollination of content meant there was some repetition between, for

Table 1. The news media monitored across the five countries.

Newspapers (*n* = 23)	Radio (*n* = 11)	TV (*n* = 17)
Daily Express	BBC Radio 4 (morning, *Today*)	BBC1 (morning)
Daily Mail	BBC Radio 4 (early evening)	BBC1 (early evening)
Daily Mirror	Radio 5 live	ITV (lunchtime)
Sun	BBC Radio Ulster (*Good Morning Ulster*)	Channel 4 (evening)
Guardian	BBC Radio Scotland (*Good Morning*)	BBC1 (evening, *Newsnight*)
Times	BBC Radio Scotland (*Drivetime*)	Channel 5 (early evening)
Telegraph	BBC Radio Cymru (Wales)	BBC1 NI Newsline (Northern Ireland)
Belfast Telegraph (Northern Ireland)	BBC Radio Wales (*Breakfast*)	UTV Live (evening, Northern Ireland)
Derry Journal (Northern Ireland)	RTÉ Radio One (RoI, *News@ One*, 6pm bulletin)	STV News (evening, Scotland)
Herald (Scotland)	Newstalk (RoI, *The Hard Shoulder*, 10pm bulletin)	BBC1 (*Reporting Scotland*, evening)
Scotsman	Today FM (RoI, *The Last Word*, 9am bulletin)	BBC Scotland (*The Nine*, 9pm)
National (Scotland)		BBC Wales (*Today*)
Scottish Daily Mail		S4C (*Newyddion*, Wales)
Scottish Sun		ITV Wales
Daily Record (Scotland)		RTÉ One (1pm bulletin, 6pm bulletin)
Western Mail (Wales)		RTÉ Two (News2Day)
Daily Post (Wales)		Virgin Media News (8pm bulletin)
Golwg (Wales)		
Irish Times		
Irish Independent		
Irish Daily Mail		
Irish Daily Mirror		
Irish Sun		

Online (*n* = 17)	Twitter (*n* = 13)
Mirror	Guardian
Times	Times
Guardian	Independent
Mail	BBC news
BBC news	Herald (Scotland)
Belfast Live (Northern Ireland)	Scottish national
Scotsman	Daily record (Scotland)
National (Scotland)	Scottish Sun
Scottish Sun	BBC Scotland news
BBC cymru Fyw (Wales)	RTÉ news (RoI)
Golwg 360 (Wales)	TheJournal.ie (RoI)
Wales Online	BreakingNews.ie (RoI)
BBC news Wales	Irish Independent (RoI)
Irish Times.com	
RTÉ (RoI)	
TheJournal.ie (RoI)	
BreakingNews.ie (RoI)	

Table 2. Main methodological points for five formats, and the composition of the 1095 total stories by format.

Format	# Stories	Main methodological points
Print	353	Code 12-14 stories on main news pages in each publication, starting on pg1. Code regular news stories only - not editorials, commentaries, letters to the editor, advertising
TV	101	Code all the stories in the newscasts as individual items and complete the full bulletin (unless a longer news show, then just code first 30 min). Do not code scrolling "breaking news" text, or preview "coming up" teasers
Radio	185	Code all the stories in the newscasts as individual items and complete the full bulletin (unless a longer news show, then just code first 30 min). Do not code sport, weather, etc if separate segment. Do not code preview "coming up" teasers
Internet	228	Code 12-14 stories or online news content on the home page. Click through to code each full story. Code regular news items only, not editorials, commentaries, readers' feedback
Twitter	228	Code every third tweet time stamped 6.30 p.m. or earlier up to $15 - 20$ tweets. Click on the tweet preview to see the whole tweet – click on links only to identify reporters. Do not code anything else in the links

example, a newspaper brand's print edition, website, and twitter feed. However, there were efforts to address this, such as the twitter posts being taken later in the day at 6.30 pm so, although they were reliant on what was published and available on the website, it was not necessarily identical stories selected to be coded. Furthermore, attempts were made to avoid complete overlap between the two categories of "online" and "twitter": as Table 1 outlines, eight outlets appears in both categories, but 14 others appears in either "online" or "twitter" only. The full methodology is published (GMMP, 2020), but Table 2 outlines key points for each format.

Within each media type, our coding focused on news reporting (editorial content, commentary, advertisements and specialist sections such as business and sport were all excluded) with an emphasis on the most *prominent* stories as GMMP required. This meant that we started from the front of newspapers (to reach 12-14 per publication) and internet homepages, and we coded the entirety of main bulletin news reports on TV/radio or the first 30 min of longer programmes.

In addition to basic story-level information (including topic and scope), the gender of all people appearing – as journalists, reporters or anchors, or as news subjects/sources – was coded. For subjects/sources, additional information including occupation, story function, whether they were photographed or directly quoted, and (estimated) age was also recorded.

Content analysis relies on coding the patterns in media texts, meaning assumptions and interpretations must be made. Following the GMMP methodology, individuals were coded as male/female using only information available in the story (e.g. pronouns or

gendered terms such as "spokeswoman"); the category "other" was used for trans, gender-nonconforming and non-binary individuals *only* if explicitly identified in that way. In total in the UK/RoI data, no journalists were coded as "other", and only 1 subject/source. In the overall international data, gender minorities comprised <0.2% of all subjects/sources across all formats (0.2% on radio, 0.1% of those on television and news websites, .07% in print, .05% in news media tweets). Given these small numbers overall, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the presence of minority gender identities, highlighting the constraints of using general news samples to explore representations of statistically small communities, where qualitative approaches can be more fruitful (see Capuzza, 2019).

GMMP provided extensive standardised training materials and a detailed codebook which country co-ordinators used to guide their coding team. The UK/RoI team organised an online training session where volunteers received guidance on coding and categorising stories, and co-ordinators responded to classification queries post-coding day. Overall, 41 volunteers were involved in the coding, but it was not possible to carry out intercoder reliability tests.

Limitations of the method

Whilst GMMP's focus on a single day allows for comparability across nations, news's inherent unpredictability means there is always a risk that major stories or prominent individuals impact results. Whilst no one story dominated on the 2020 coding day in any of the five nations, the coronavirus pandemic is, of course, noteworthy. As part of the global GMMP 2020 methodology, a preliminary question asked if a story was about COVID-19, and national teams answered this (yes/no) before then going on to also code the underlying story topic. Covid-related articles comprised 40% of the sample, but all these stories were still coded as another topic, so not all stories about COVID-19 were coded as "science and health". For example, if a story was about the post-lockdown return of university students, the story was coded as both "yes-Covid-19" and also "education". Overall, GMMP provided 58 potential story topics, categorised into seven larger categories: politics and government; economy; science and health; social and legal; crime and violence; gender and related; celebrity, arts and media, sports. No stories were recorded in the "gender and related" category so – although a notable finding in itself – it is excluded from the results presented here. Each story could just be coded as one single topic (alongside its yes/no classification regarding COVID-19).

Another caveat relates to recording journalists at work, which only captures women involved in the most prominent stories, and in the most visible roles, so cannot be considered a comprehensive review of the industry workforce. Furthermore, the emphasis on the "most popular" media in a country is logical for a wide-ranging international study but may feel somewhat dated given how little younger audiences engage with mainstream formats and outlets, as they increasingly consume more fragmented news diets, customised to niche interests which may or may not include more diverse voices.

There are many elements the GMMP framework cannot capture which are nuanced and worth exploring but beyond the project's scope, such as social class. Efforts were made to record data on race/ethnicity but much of the complexity gets lost in the strictures

of any coding sheet (but we note that we recorded 6% of sources/subjects being from an ethnic minority based on story details or on appearance but acknowledge that as a somewhat subjective measure and beyond this article's scope). Similarly, while age was a recent addition to GMMP methodology, its subjectivity renders it only partially useful as a reliable and accurate datapoint.

For the purposes of the global GMMP methodology, data from the four UK nations are composited, whilst RoI is treated separately (Macharia, 2021), but we primarily discuss the aggregated findings across the five nations except where national differences warrant consideration, for example, politics. However, given the relatively limited sample size from each nation, our findings can only be *suggestive* and highlight the need for further, national-focused research. Some of this more in-depth analysis is already underway, with GMMP tools being adapted for larger-scale national studies (e.g. Boyle et al., 2024).

Findings

Women as sources and voices in the news

Across all five media and 1095 stories, we coded 2040 sources comprised 29% of all sources and subjects. Print afforded the most space for women (32% of sources were women), followed by TV (31%), twitter (28%), internet (27%), with radio lagging behind (23%).

As Table 3 shows, the subject areas with the lowest representation of women were politics and government (23%) and economy (26%), while celebrity, arts, media and sport (referred to as "celebrity" for the remainder of this article) had the highest proportion of women (39%).

Table 3. The number of stories per major topic across all formats, the number of sources recorded across these stories, and the percentage of sources that were women. The 'Other' category was a diverse mixture of stories, such as animal rescues and preparation for stormy weather.

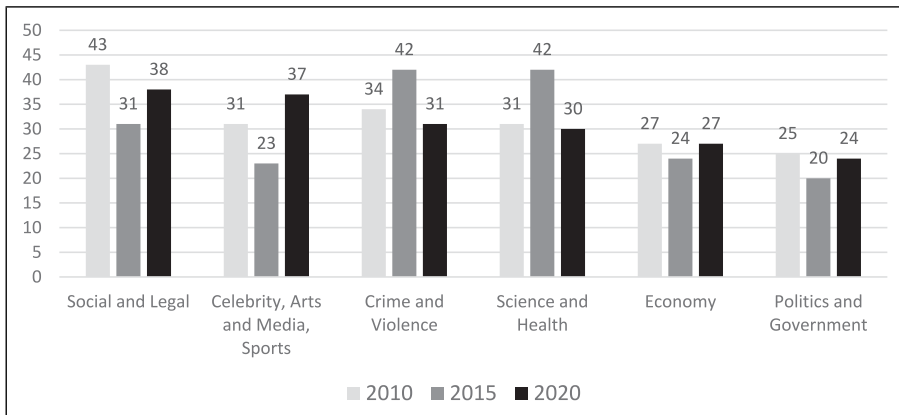|	Total number of stories	Total number of sources recorded	Proportion of sources who were women (%)
Politics and government	197	452	23
Economy	158	250	26
Science and health	247	414	31
Social and legal	182	328	31
Crime and violence	130	292	28
Celebrity, arts and media, sports	157	278	39
Other	24	26	46
TOTAL	**1095**	**2040**	**29**

Figure 1. The percentage of sources who were women, broken down by major story category, across legacy formats (print, radio, TV) between 2010 and 2020.

Figure 1 compares the women's presence in these topics over time (using the legacy TV, radio and print formats). There are fluctuations across some categories, but "celebrity" is the only one in which 2020 marks the highest point. Interestingly, women's representation in science/health stories has *decreased* despite COVID-19 being the backdrop: 30% in 2020 compared with 2015 (42%) and 2010 (31%). Other notable results include the consistent patterns evident across the three periods in both politics and government (20%–25%) and economy (24%–27%).

At this point it is useful to contextualise the UK/RoI results internationally, focusing on the legacy categories of print, radio and TV. The headline figure of 31% women sources in our five-nation sample is above the overall international average of 25%, and European average of 28%, and almost double the Middle Eastern average of 17% (the lowest regional result). When broken down by story topic, we can see that UK/RoI lags behind the European average in key areas of economy and science and health stories in print/broadcast yet lies above the European average in celebrity/entertainment stories, raising questions about the substance of roles afforded to women in the news here.

Professional roles and functions

Alongside the proportion of women and topics in which they appear, is also essential to analyse the roles women fulfil in the news. Firstly, Table 4 outlines the occupations of the sources present in the news on monitoring day across legacy formats (print, radio and TV). It shows the number of occurrences of each profession, and the percentage who were women: politicians were the most visible with 409 occurrences, with less than one in four (24%) being women. There are six categories where women reached 50% or higher, but three of those (retired person/pensioner; homemaker/parent; villager or resident) totalled just 14 appearances combined. The other three in which women had equal or higher presence were more substantial: student, pupil,

Table 4. The occupation/professional role of sources in legacy formats (TV, radio, print), showing the number of occurrences and the percentage who were women. The percentage change from 2015 is included where available.

Occupation (legacy formats)	n	% women (change on 2015, where data is available)
Politician/member of parliament, …	409	24% (+2)
Government employee, public servant, spokesperson, etc.	91	14%
Business person, exec, manager, stock broker…	70	21% (+8)
Academic expert, lecturer, teacher	59	40% (+25)
Celebrity, artist, actor, writer, singer, TV personality	83	51%
Activist or worker in civil society org., NGO, trade union	44	45%
Doctor, dentist, health specialist	44	25%
Student, pupil, schoolchild	34	50% (−34)
Police, military, para-military, militia, fire officer	32	19%
Lawyer, judge, magistrate, legal advocate, etc.	29	27% (+9)
Media professional, journalist, film-maker, etc.	28	43%
Sportsperson, athlete, player, coach, referee	24	8%
Health worker, social worker, childcare worker	21	31% (−57)
Child, young person no other occupation given	20	65%
Royalty, monarch, deposed monarch, etc.	18	38% (−29)
Science/technology professional, engineer, etc.	17	7% (−3)
Office or service worker, non-management worker	10	20% (−47)
Homemaker, parent	9	66% (+8)
Retired person, pensioner	3	67%
Villager or resident	2	50%

schoolchild (n = 34); celebrity, artist, actor, writer singer or TV personality (n = 83); and child, young person (n = 20). Against the backdrop of the pandemic, it is notable that the "health worker, social worker, childcare worker" saw a substantial gender swing since 2015, down from 88% being women in 2015 to 37% in 2020. Several occupational codes returned 0 for women including tradesperson/labourer, religious figure, sex worker and criminal suspect.

Every source had their key function in the news report recorded and the results show that, when present, women were most frequently represented in personalised roles (sharing personal experience, eyewitness or voice of public opinion, such as a vox pop) and were less evident as the authority or focus. Figure 2 shows how this pattern has remained largely consistent over time, and in 2020 we continued to see women less visible as the sole focus of a news report, with only around one in four experts or commentators across legacy formats being women, and a similar number acting as a spokesperson.
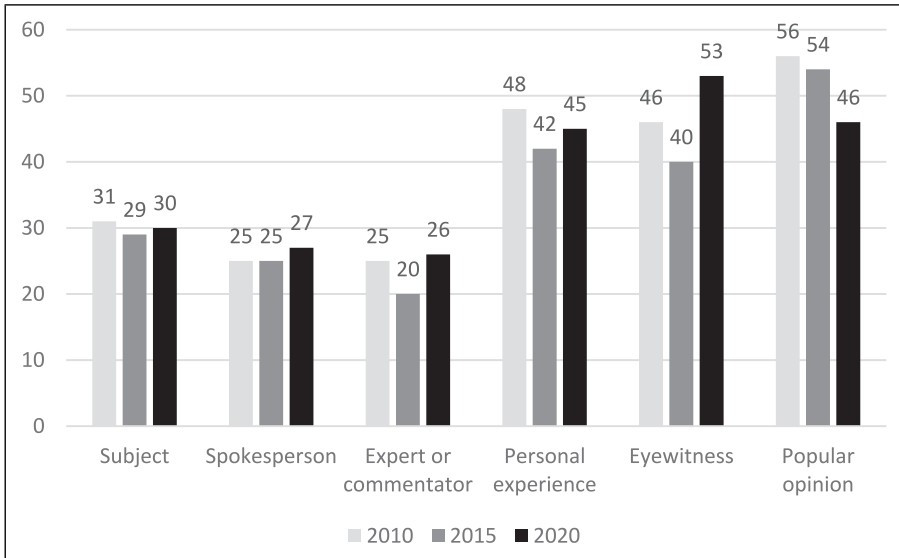
Figure 2. The percentage of each function category who were women (legacy formats) 2010-2020.
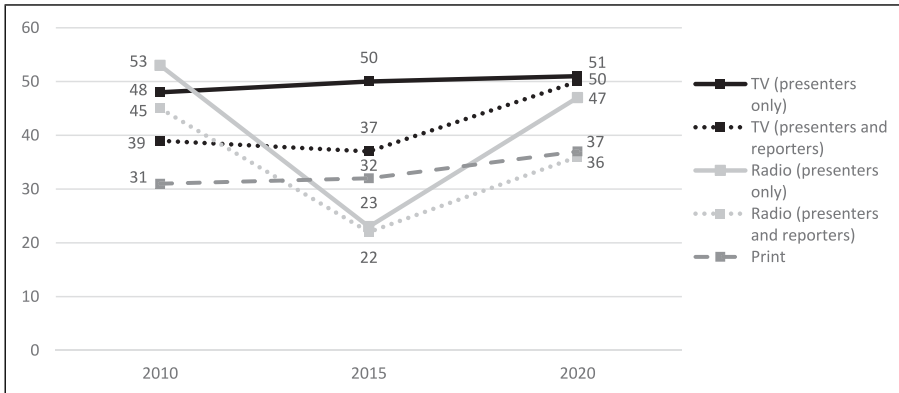

Figure 3. The percentage of journalists who were women, by legacy format, 2010-2020.

Overall, 30% of the subjects in news reports are women, reinforcing men as the dominant focus of most reporting.

Women in news: seen or heard?

We looked at the extent to which sources or subjects were quoted, photographed, or had their family status mentioned; there were minor variations between the five nations but

patterns were generally consistent. When they *were* included, across all five formats, women were more likely than men to be directly quoted, varying by region: in the UK, 87% of women sources were quoted, compared with 78% of men, while it was 65% of women in RoI and 75% of men. While this inclusion of quotes from women can be viewed positively as giving women voice, it may be tied to their function in the story: acting as human-interest contributor or eyewitness lends itself to direct quotes. Furthermore, this finding should also be understood in the context that women are still in the minority and men remain the dominant contributors: we still hear/see many more quotes from men overall.

Women were more likely to be photographed in the stories in which they appeared, indicating that they serve an important visual role in news reporting (Jia et al., 2016). Yet questions remain about *all* women's visibility: across print, TV and the internet, we coded for age where possible (by eye and/or if the story mentioned age), and found that as sources got older, women were less and less evident across all media. For example, in print media, women comprised 43% of the 35-49 age group, 31% of those aged 50-64 and only 13% in the 65-79 category. The results for TV were 32%, 25% and 15%. The number of sources in our sample aged 80+ was too small ($n = 15$) to enable us to draw meaningful conclusions about this group. Finally, regarding women's societal or family role, across all formats news stories were more than twice as likely to mention the family status of women subjects/sources in stories than men, regardless of whether the journalist was a woman or a man.

Women journalists at work

Shifting attention to the journalists across RoI and the UK, we again see only incremental change. Across all five formats we coded a total of 893 identifiable journalists, reporters and presenters, 41% of whom were women, up from 32% in 2015. Figure 3 shows the direction over the past decade across legacy media: the most substantial increase has been in TV where the combined percentage for women in reporting and presenting/anchoring roles is now 50%, whereas the radio and print increase has been rather less dramatic: radio actually remains lower now than a decade ago. It is worth noting that presenter roles across both television and radio have a higher proportion of women than reporting roles on those formats. Elsewhere, women have been carving out spaces for themselves across the digital media landscape where 41% of online and 51% of twitter stories were attributed to women.

Regarding the major topics, we noted that women and men are allocated quite different beats. Figure 4 compares the reporting of the major topics by the % of stories reported by women, in 2010 (print) and 2020 (print, radio and television). The results paint a broadly consistent pattern: a slight increase in politics and government – albeit a low base – while economics remains the same (31% reported by women). Celebrity remains the only category that breaks 50%, in which more women than men report. This pattern was even evident among the COVID-19 stories, where women wrote 30% of 'Covid + politics' stories but 61% of 'Covid + celebrity' stories.
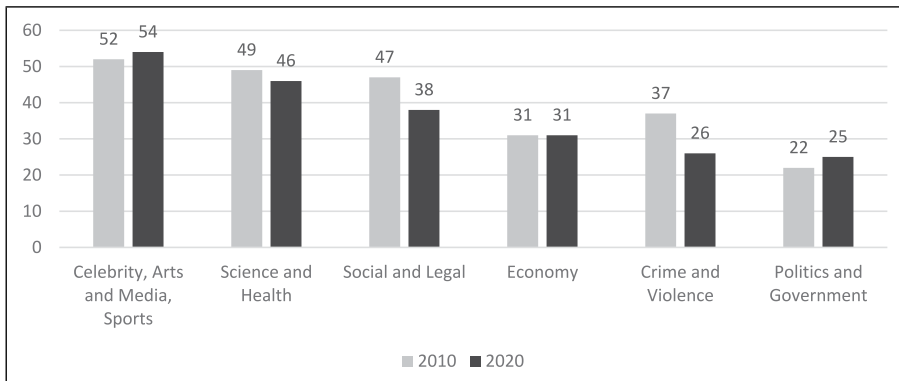
Figure 4. Major topics by the percentage of women reporting 2010 Vs 2020. The figures are based on 2010's print figures compared with 2020's print/TV/radio figures.

Finally, one long-running question in gender and journalism studies is the extent to which having more women in newsrooms alters content, increasing the number of women in stories. GMMP has consistently found that globally, women journalists include between 5%–7% more women subjects and sources in their stories than men (Macharia, 2021: 7). For example, across all formats, we found 27% of sources/subjects included in stories written by men were women, but this increased to 32% in stories written by women.

Discussion: Making sense of women's roles in news

Politics as a window into wider patterns

Considering politicians are the most dominant source in the sample, it is worth paying special attention to some of the dynamics of women politicians in the news, especially in the context of the study's five individual countries. As noted in Table 4, 24% of legacy format story sources coded as "politician" across the five nations were women, but there were interesting variations. The percentage in the UK and RoI news stories are very similar (25% and 24%) but it rose to 33% in the Scottish data (part of UK sample). What is notable about comparing the UK data with RoI is that, although the percentage of women politicians in stories is effectively the same, women comprise 34% of the UK parliament and 22% of the RoI parliament, Dáil Éireann. As shown in Table 5, whilst the proportion of women politicians in the news lagged behind political representation in the UK, Wales and Scottish samples, this was not the case in NI or RoI. This suggests Irish media are more willing to give their women politicians a voice, however, it highlights some of the contradictions and limitations of quantification as we know the *what* but we don't know the *why*. In the RoI context, the main opposition leader, Sinn Féin's Mary-Lou McDonald, was the dominant woman politician on monitoring day. Thus, heavy media attention granted to one individual can influence results and may not equate with enhanced

Table 5. Women politicians in the news and in parliament on Monitoring Day in September 2020.

Nation	% of women in parliament	% of politicians coded as women	Prime minister or equivalent	Opposition leader
Overall 5 nations	N/A	24	N/A	N/A
England* (in Westminster, all UK nations represented)	34%	19	Man	Man
Scotland	35%	31	Woman	Man
Wales	45%	13	Man	Man
Northern Ireland	33%	45	Woman	Woman
Republic of Ireland	22%	24	Man	Woman

visibility or reflect a meaningful diversity of women in political roles. Simultaneously, the presence of a woman leader *in itself* does not seem to be enough to guarantee news coverage, as the Scottish data suggests. Moreover, when we expand our discussion of political sources to consider the related category of "government employee, public servant, spokesperson" ($n = 91$), it is notable that the proportion of women is lower still (just 14%).

These data reflect similar patterns to those we have seen not only in previous GMMP iterations but across decades of research showing the routine marginalisation of women politicians in news. Partly, this can be explained by their status and position in their parties, the portfolios they hold and thus their relative newsworthiness, but we argue it is also a consequence of party decisions about who to field as spokespeople. Notably, women comprised only 27% of spokespeople in legacy formats, suggesting not only that journalistic practices need to evolve, but political parties and public bodies need to review their decision-making processes. Marginalising women's contributions as political actors and health experts raises questions about democratic legitimacy if such institutions are ultimately reinforcing gendered inequalities.

COVID-19, experts and domestic roles

Covid-related articles comprised 40% of the sample across all formats and the influence of the pandemic on the news agenda is clear. It is important to note we do not suggest that women's marginalisation in stories at this time is solely a consequence of journalistic bias, and the pandemic can actually help illuminate *why* women may be overlooked as journalists pursue the elite definers of newsworthy topics. For example, the regular COVID-19 briefings from Downing Street were led exclusively by men for 6 months (Walker, 2020); nearly half (43%) of the daily press conferences for Westminster's significant Covid announcements featured an all-man line-up with no woman politician or expert present, and only a third (92 of the 274) of members on COVID-19 advisory boards were women (Smith, 2020). Very few women occupied high-status positions within the health domain which would lead to them being of interest to journalists (exceptions were

Dr Jenny Harries, deputy chief medical officer and Jeane Freeman, cabinet secretary for health and sport in Scotland). In RoI, the Taoiseach (prime minister), health minister, chief medical officer and deputy, and chief executive of the HSE (health service) were all men, and all to the fore of daily coverage. Nevertheless, the dominance of these (male) characters in authoritative positions effectively "crowd out" space for women, yet concurrently raises important questions as to why key actors in the elite spheres continually capture such extensive journalistic attention. Such familiar patterns, echoed across many historical and contemporary studies, contribute to the perception that news is ultimately about, and under the remit of, "men acting in some official capacity" (Zoch and Turk, 1998:771).

Elsewhere, beyond the political arena, the impact of the pandemic is clear when we compare the frequency of science/health topics in legacy formats – which may have included stories about Covid symptoms or the virus itself – in 2020 (23%) with 2015 (8%). Yet familiar patterns appear: Figure 1 earlier showed a 12-percentage point drop in women appearing in science and health stories between 2015 and 2020. Among science/health articles, women were more likely to speak from personal experience (64%) than as experts (27%), and 25% of health specialist sources we coded were women.

That the presence of women has *decreased* whilst the importance and prominence of science/health stories has *increased* reiterates how women are least prominent in the most important stories. We suggest that the relatively low presence of women in science and health stories, when compared with their domination of health as an occupational domain (OECD, 2019), is a consequence both of their scarcity in senior roles, the potential reluctance of some women experts to make media appearances (Howell and Singer 2017), as well as journalists' preference to source women in human interest stories to leverage their emotional value with the audience. Women's domestic focus in health policy stories has previously been shown in RoI (Wheatley 2020), where the only source category in which women were more prevalent than men was "ordinary people", such as concerned mothers fighting for healthcare access, or women as victims of poor services sharing their own experiences.

Related to this, but beyond pandemic or political stories, what is striking about the professions in Table 4 is that none of the six roles in which women reached or exceeded 50% as contributors – retired person/pensioner; homemaker/parent; villager or resident; student, pupil, schoolchild; celebrity – are within the traditional professional sphere. Instead, we see attention granted to women in domestic roles, as entertainment figures, or girls as juvenile contributors. This trivialisation or sidelining of women's activities is evident across many results: for example, the more frequent inclusion of personal family details about women further narrows portrayals. Emphasising personal details reinforces domesticated, homemaker connotations, rather than recognising women's expertise and professional occupation: the trivialisation, stereotyping and marginalisation prevail (Tuchman, 1977). Furthermore, the fact women are more likely to be photographed than men reflects the more superficial, aesthetic roles afforded to women in media, supporting previous work regarding the tendency for women to be seen, not heard (Jie et al., 2016). The increasing invisibility of older women, based on estimated ages of sources, is also concerning, consistent with studies showing how women effectively fall off the edge of the media landscape at middle age (Ross 2024; White, 2020).

Women journalists and "prestigious" beats

While issues of women's representation within news content remain problematic, the number of women working as journalists and presenters across all parts of the media landscape has been increasing. However, women are still less likely to work the more prestigious political and economic beats. They do achieve gender parity as presenters and anchors, positions often considered less serious than "formal" reporters. That women are more visible as TV announcers than any other role is likely associated with the "feminisation" or "intimisation" of news, where scholars note that news is often fronted by an attractive young-ish woman, sometimes paired with an older, authoritative man, whose "friendly" persona is regarded as more appropriate for delivering news-as-infotainment (Ofcom, 2019; Wolfe and Mitra, 2012).

Elsewhere, although a long-standing debate, our results demonstrate that women journalists were more likely to include women in their reporting, giving some credence to the view that women journalists *can* make a difference to story content. Of course, broader patterns of male domination prevail, with men still comprising the majority of those featured, but our data shine a small light of hope on gender's impact on journalistic practice.

Conclusion

The results and analysis demonstrate a frustratingly familiar set of findings: women in the news remain outnumbered by men's voices and perspectives, are least likely to feature in the most "valued" news content and are disproportionately asked to provide personal insights rather than function as active participants, experts or professionals shaping events. Results of most content analyses of mainstream news typically find a heavy reliance on elite actors, politicians, professional experts and official spokespeople, raising familiar echoes around the "rationale" for women's relative exclusion being the insufficient number of women in high-level public roles which could make them newsworthy. However, in an era in which many social institutions are actively working towards increasing diversity and gender equality, we argue that there seems to be something of a gender credibility gap and time lag in newsrooms and news output, a tendency highlighted in the UK media regulator's own reports (see Ofcom, 2019).

One criticism of GMMP is its reliance on one "ordinary" news day every five years and thus vulnerable to being extra/ordinary because of a major event that could skew datasets. However, it is that very unpredictability which lies at the heart of the news industry, and which has produced a set of routines, practices and norms underpinning how journalists function and deal with unexpected events. A snapshot methodology is better than no picture at all and GMMP's longitudinal, international and standardised approach ensures its place as a valuable tool for exploring how gender is implicated in news discourse.

Finally, while issues of women's representation in news content continue to be problematic, the number of women working as journalists and presenters across all parts of the media landscape has been increasing. However, by focusing on the most prominent news stories, GMMP reveals that women are still less likely to be working in the more

prestigious beats of politics and the economy. Where they do achieve gender parity is as presenters and anchors, positions often considered less serious than the role of "formal" reporter or journalist. Although quantifying data by gender can tell part of the story, to fully understand what longitudinal trends mean and what they signify, it is necessary to comprehend the why and the how of the process, not just the outcome. Using both the COVID-19 pandemic and the political news beat reporting as vignettes demonstrates how, particularly in times of crisis and when official voices are sought by journalists, the tendency to rely on male sources is still ultimately reinforced.

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