WHY IT'S NOT OK TO CALL A FEMALE DIRECTOR 'FLUFFY':

The impact of negative female stereotypes in the television industry and strategies for change

Melanie Gray outlines existing and evolving research around discrimination against women in UK television

Female Discrimination in the Television Industry

Globally, the UK television industry is upheld as being progressive, leading the response to the rapid changes in broadcasting that have been brought about by converging technology and changing consumer habits. However, although innovative on many fronts, when viewed through the lens of gender discrimination, we have to question whether the industry is progressive enough.

Even with apparent legal protection from the *Equality Act*, 2010, female discrimination in the workplace still appears to be prevalent, with millions of women in employment being affected by different forms of sexual discrimination (Margolis et al. 2015) and gender discrimination, costing the global economy up to £9 trillion annually in wasted potential (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). In 2015, the UK television industry did not seem to be bucking this trend, with *The Observer* reporting that 99% of women working in this industry have experienced sexism (2015). Although not a reason to rejoice, headline figures such as these have meant that female discrimination in the UK television industry has received much wider attention and support in recent years, from both in- and outside the industry. This is partially due to high profile cases, such as the BBC's 2017 publication of its on-air high earners, and the criticism it received about the huge disparity between its male and female presenters, but also from organisations such as Directors UK and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, who are campaigning for gender balance change. Ofcom, the UK television industry's regulator, is trying to hold the television broadcast industry to account through its work on Diversity and Equal Opportunities (Ofcom 2020), and it can be argued that there does seem to be some positive progress being made here, with the proportion of women employed in the industry now closely reflecting the UK working age population more generally (47% of which is female). However, women are still significantly under-represented at senior levels throughout the industry (Ofcom 2020). Outside of the industry, female discrimination has an even wider stage. In this regard, the work of the United Nations and its Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), has shed important light on the significant harm caused by gender stereotypes and the impact that gender stereotyping has on society at large. The work of these different mechanisms and organisations has helped to propel the issue of gender stereotyping onto a much broader and more public stage, yet we require further understanding and corrective action.

To date, academic research looking at the television industry has largely focused on the representation of females in front of the camera (Mulvey, 1999; Wedel, 2003 Oliver, 2017; Nassif & Gunter, 2008; Saz-Rubio, 2018), with the voices of those behind the screen still being relatively hidden. However, it is these female voices from behind

the screen that can have so much impact on what we see on the screen. For example, a report by *Common Sense*, in 2017, demonstrates the power of television in shaping how children learn about gender, influencing how boys and girls look, think, and behave. *Common Sense* (2017) identified that the depictions of gender roles in the media affect children at all stages of their development. Through their analysis, media messages were seen to influence children in relation to a variety of aspects, including their own feeling of self-worth and how they value others, and to what they think about career aspirations. If those behind the screen are influencing television content, and if the gender stereotypes being experienced by those women are prohibiting women from progressing to more influential roles, then this negatively impacts on them, and on society at large. Negative female stereotypes behind the screen in the UK television industry are holding us back — politically, economically, and socially.

Whilst acknowledging that there does appear to be an awareness and appetite for change in combating the negative female stereotypes in the television industry, this paper seeks to explore what we know about the female discrimination that is being experienced by those who work behind the television screen. It then attempts to move beyond the problem by discussing strategies that are taking place to make change happen, and considers what else could be done. In order to explore this, we must first look at understanding what the female stereotype is, and why it is problematic.

The Female Stereotype: Characteristics and Harmful Nature

According to the United Nations (2013), harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping are some of the root causes for discrimination, and can lead to violations of a wide array

These ingrained characteristics, which together create a stereotype, make people and society perceive the stereotype as normal, and people are then categorised and judged accordingly.

of human rights. By reflecting on female stereotypes, looking at how they are formed and why they continue to prevail, this provides a starting point from which to understand

female discrimination in the TV industry, even before action can be taken to overcome it. A useful definition of what constitutes a stereotype is provided by Ashmore and Del Boca (1981), who suggest that stereotypes are "a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people" and, accordingly, female stereotypes are a set of beliefs about the attributes of women. This set of beliefs has led to normalised views on the roles that should be performed by women (Haines, Deaux & Lofaro, 2016), for example, they see that child care responsibilities are the responsibility of females, and often lead to harmful or narrow perceptions of woman. In the workplace, these female stereotypes are harmful if they limit or inhibit professional careers (Heilman 2012). The practice of ascribing specific attributes or roles that are based only on an individual's inclusion within a specific group, is gender stereotyping, and it is this practice which fundamentally leads to female discrimination in the workplace (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Harmful female stereotyping in the workplace can be both hostile, e,g., seeing a female as irrational, or benign, e.g., seeing females as caring. Unfortunately, gender stereotypes and the discrimination that results, are compounded by other stereotypes, for example, those relating to religion or disability, which have a disproportionately negative impact on women (United Nations, 2020).

These beliefs, and therefore the stereotypical portrayals of women, are linked to the cultural, social, and

hegemonic norms of society, which are ingrained in daily lives over a prolonged period of time. These patterns of thinking are reflected in the meaning that people attach to various aspects of life, and they are played out in the institutions of a society, such as workplaces. According to Hofstede's cultural characteristics (2003), gender stereotypes are closely aligned with the culture of the country. The UK has been identified as being a relatively highly masculine culture, scoring 66% on Hofstede's masculinity dimension; valuing attributes such as assertiveness and the drive for success. These cultural attributes can be deemed to translate into the gender stereotypes that are prevalent in the UK and in other societies, which are then transposed into workplaces that identify success and drive as male characteristics. These ingrained characteristics, which together create a stereotype, make people and society perceive the stereotype to be normal, and people are then categorised and judged accordingly. Lester and Ross (2003) argue that gender stereotypes in society create female discrimination in employment, as the categorisation, inference and judgment placed on females leads to an inability to see the individual beyond the stereotype.

When looking at what constitutes the female stereotype, research uses adjectives such as 'weaker', 'timid' and 'passive'. Bernd and Thomas (1991) state that the female stereotype is less assertive and less active than the male stereotype, yet females are also more communal, understanding and caring when compared

to men; so, the stereotyping potentially contributes to the different treatments of males and females. The stereotypical attributes defining masculine and feminine qualities can be argued to be why more males are to be found in the more senior positions, if compared to females, as males are associated with the managerial qualities of being assertive in their careers and thus are considered more prone to success. The perception of females as the weaker and more subservient sex reinforces the misconception that they are incapable of accessing more dominant roles in both society and the workplace. Females in senior roles face being further undermined, as they are perceived to be 'tokens' (Kanter 1997), rather than as having justifiably achieved the same roles as their male counterparts. With fewer woman in more senior roles, and those that are there often being viewed with mirth, then this symbolises the continued presence and reinforcement of female discrimination.

In addition, as well as not being perceived as being equally capable in the more powerful roles, the sexualised view of women has severe negative consequences. If woman are first and foremost seen as sexual beings then, in the workplace, women are being perceived as sex objects, even when they are successful in their careers (Thio &Taylor, 2012; Gill & Baker, 2019).

Negative Female Stereotypes Behind the Television Screen: Type and Impact

As already highlighted, there has been limited research to date that specifically explores the gender bias that exists behind the screen in the UK television industry.

Research conducted by Bournemouth University, in 2020, into the experiences of women who work in production and directing roles within UK television aimed to provide richer insights into those females behind the screen. By interviewing a number of females in production, directing and writing roles, more is understood about the gender stereotyping which occurs and the impact this can have. The research has provided a rich understanding of the type of gender bias which occurs behind the TV screen due to negative female stereotypes, highlighting the explicit behaviour and feelings that occur due to an unconscious bias. The women we spoke to experienced a lack of humanity and respect within the workplace.

"males have made comments about female directors, being woolly-headed, or fluffy, or, scatty."

"one of my nicknames was pedantic Pippa. I don't think they'd have a pedantic Paul."

The women from the sample also identified that no matter what the quality of a female's work was, women were automatically remembered with negative stereotypical impressions.

"If a woman is making a lot of demands they are seen as being difficult, but for a man it's not frowned upon."

This makes it harder for females to reach the same professional levels as males, thus reinforcing the gender gap between males and females, and enhancing the glass ceiling effect. The Bournemouth University research identified that people are unconsciously prioritising males over females, based on stereotypes and their gender, with the ingrained perceptions of females creating explicit discrimination.

 "People who work in the industry unconsciously have a set of beliefs or ideas about women that influence the way that they treat them."

What was also experienced by those women who were interviewed as part of the Bournemouth University research, was that women were seen as sexual beings, rather than as whole persons, as professional persons, who just happen to be female.

"I had a boss... he said, I had this dream about you last night and you did this and you did that, and all this other stuff."

And the more subtle comments about appearance and the way a female looks:

"Constant comments about your appearance… I think appearance is the first thing people commented on. So that was the forefront of their mind… you wouldn't immediately comment on a guy's appearance."

This objectification demonstrates the reinforcement of the sexualised female negative stereotype, concurring with Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), who argued that a universal theme running

through all forms of female discrimination is that women are treated as a body, an entity that is valued predominantly for its use by others.

The focus on, and the reinforcement of, these negative female stereotypes has far reaching implications for those women who are working behind the screen in the UK television industry, and for the influence of their work.

In Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, (2013), females are identified as having lower self-confidence, and this is due to female discrimination, and lower self-esteem creates further internal barriers, which hold them back even further from being considered equal to their male counterparts. The Bournemouth University work supports this, with the sample of women identifying that females who work behind the screen in the UK TV industry are emotionally impacted upon by female discrimination in a way which lowers self-esteem and provokes negative feelings about themselves and their value as professionals:

"I didn't feel competent enough, even though I had that 30 years experience. I still didn't have the confidence."

It is not only negative emotional feelings that result from the continuous discrimination caused by female stereotypes, but there are some very real financial and career implications. Margolis et al. (2015) argue that the most covert female discrimination occurs when a woman does not get a job, a decision that is based purely on her gender.

This is also supported by the Bournemouth University research:

"Males who aren't as experienced, or who haven't been there as long as women, have been given opportunities over other females."

Females who work in what can be perceived to be 'non-traditional' jobs, such as those in the TV industry, are consistently looking for ways to overcome stereotypes that define what females can and cannot do. According to Margolis et al. (2015), the glass ceiling for females exists, and it is extremely restrictive on the progression of women. Research by Ross and Padovani (2017), supported by a comprehensive review of the American media industry by McKinsey (2020), provides evidence of this, highlighting that although females hold many of the media-related careers, the powerful executive positions remain male-dominated. Women who enter the media industry are leaving at a higher rate than their male counterparts, with every step on the career ladder having fewer and fewer women on it. This is neatly summarised in the *McKinsey Report* (2020), which states:

"A woman graduating with a degree in mass communications or journalism will walk across a stage where six out of every ten students are women. If she's hired into the industry, her entry-level class will consist of five women in every ten hires. Further up the corporate ladder, at the transition from senior manager to vice president, one woman from this group, on average, will drop out of the pipeline. This gets even worse towards the top, with fewer than three of every ten executives being a woman."

The key reason that has been identified for this is the culture of negative stereotypes, of biased behaviour that detrimentally affects women's day-to-day experiences in the workplace. The *McKinsey Report* also highlighted that 27% of the women surveyed say that gender has played a role in their missing out on a rise in pay, a promotion, or a chance to get ahead, as opposed to only 7% of men. What's more, 35% of women identified that they expect their gender to make it harder to get a pay rise or promotion in the future.

When we consider that what appears on television is greatly influenced by those from behind the screen, the impact of negative female stereotypes within the TV industry can be felt well beyond the workplace. If women are feeling discriminated against, and are either not able to have their voice heard, or are choosing to leave the industry, then it will be men who are in those senior positions which shape the content we see. Ofcom (2020) identified that people want programmes that authentically portray life across the UK, but we cannot expect TV broadcasters to represent women authentically if women are not truly represented as employees in the TV industry. This leads to a further perpetuation of the female stereotype, instead of helping to push boundaries by creating aspirational, non-stereotypical characters, television too often falls back on tired gender stereotypes.

Comprehensive research by *Common Sense* shows that children who are exposed to gender stereotypes have their behaviour and attitudes shaped for years. The effects on children of these biased gendered portrayals include:

girls becoming focused on their appearance; more tolerant views of sexual harassment; and career choices that are limited by gender norms. One of the most consistent themes of Western media is that women are valued primarily for their bodies, and that they primarily exist as sexual objects for others' sexual use (American Psychological Association, 2007). It's not surprising, therefore, that older adolescents who watch TV that is saturated with such themes agree with this notion that women are sexual objects. This can be seen in a study by Peter and Valkenburg (2007), and their work with Dutch teens, which identified that teens who watched sexually explicit media endorsed views that women were sexual objects. Further research looking at adolescent girls' and young-adult women's exposure to sitcoms and soap operas (Ex et al., 2002) reinforced the traditional view of women as mothers, and the belief that a mother should devote herself to her family and her children. From this insight, girls may therefore learn from television that women's most important job is as a mother, and to be a mother requires an unrivalled focus on the family, rather than on a career.

It appears that we are in a circle of on-going discrimination. As we have seen, cultural and societal norms lead to stereotypes and negative stereotypical practices, which, in turn, lead to female discrimination behind the screen in the TV industry, and, ultimately, this leads to dominant and negative norms being portrayed on the screen, and then the circle continues, as the society's beliefs are reinforced by what is seen on TV.

It is clear that the reinforcement of negative female stereotypes is a key problem for those working within, and wanting to progress in, the UK TV industry, and for society as a whole. By furthering this understanding, we are moving towards the strategies that might be adopted to change this cycle of negativity..

Strategies to Change the Cycle of Negative Female Stereotyping

There are many obstacles for women who work behind the screen in the UK television industry, but the two biggest challenges appear to be the culture of stereotypically biased behaviour and the lack of female representation in senior positions. These challenges negatively affect women's day-to-day experiences in the workplace, leading to detrimental personal and career experiences, as well as worrying repercussions for society. Moving beyond the recognition of the problems that are associated with negative gender stereotyping leads to the need for meaningful progress in addressing these harmful stereotypes and negative practices. This requires commitment and action by legal bodies, the TV regulator Ofcom, campaigning organisations, further and higher education, the media and the TV organisations themselves. Each needs to give this issue the serious attention it deserves. Until the time is reached when gender bias

and inequality are eliminated in the television industry, there will still be the need for campaign groups to advocate and fight for change. Campaigning groups, such as Directors UK, who, in their 2014 report, identified both the chronic lack of women directing UK programming and the narrow range of subgenres in which they were getting the opportunity to direct, have been actively campaigning to improve the gender balance across the industry. There are tangible ways that UK TV companies can help to both tackle discrimination and to level the field for women's careers. If companies are truly committed to diversity and gender parity, the issue needs to be a top priority for senior leadership. Ofcom recognises that for television broadcasting to truly resonate and provide genuine positive reflections of society, the programmes that are commissioned for broadcasting are crucial. As it is the commissioning team that plays a key role in deciding which programmes are made, the content that is included, who makes it, and who appears in it, then that team, and the commissioning process, need to genuinely include women and must avoid the negative stereotyping of gender. Ofcom are therefore pushing for this to happen, for the channel controllers, commissioning editors and their teams, to be more representative and inclusive of women. UK TV broadcasters need to commit to making cultural change, to actively look at ways to increase the number of women in powerful roles, as well as to address the underlying cultural bias. Bringing more women into senior positions can help to

ensure greater gender parity, as they can help to draw up and implement visible diversity principles within decision making, for example, by advocating gender targets in recruitment. By making gender diversity and inclusivity top level commitments, change can happen. The BBC's 50:50 Project provides a good example of this. The BBC set a target of having at least 50% of contributions coming from women. In April, 2018, only 36% of the teams associated with the 50:50 Project reported having at least 50% female contributors. By March, 2021, the number of teams with 50% female contributors had increased to 70% (BBC 2021). The BBC also challenged the teams involved in the 50:50 project to maintain equal representation over a longer period of time, in an attempt to really cause cultural change. For the six months from October, 2020, to March, 2021, teams were asked to feature 50% women contributors for at least three months, and not to drop below 45% women contributors. 40% of the teams succeeded, an increase from 18% in March, 2019. The 50:50 project began in London in 2017, but has now expanded to involve 670 BBC teams and more than 100 partner organisations in 26 countries. All are committed to continuing to improve women's representation.

Likewise, ITV has adopted a range of initiatives to improve its inclusion and representation of women. For example, the new diversity criteria in their commissioning strategy, which requires two on-screen and off-screen

measures that are intended to drive diversity and inclusivity. ITV have also set a requirement for any returning series with more than one writer to have female representation. This is in addition to initiatives to support creative diversity, such as Comedy 50:50, which aims to increase the numbers of female writing talents across its comedy genre output.

Attitudes derived from negative stereotypes may be deeply held, so one-off initiatives will not be enough to change behaviours around female stereotypes. True change will require a structured and committed programme of diversity training, communication, leadership modelling and support. Enveloping this in a constant space for dialogue, allowing unacceptable behaviour to be called out and dealt with, as well as generating new ideas and initiatives, are what may lead to the cultural change required. Ofcom recognises this, and is encouraging the television broadcasters to have systematic and explicit programmes and practices in place to tackle this gender bias.

By reflecting on current research and looking at new

and evolving insights which explore the negative female stereotypes that occur behind the scenes in the television industry, it is clear that gender discrimination is still very much an issue that impacts upon the industry, and on society as a whole. The culture of gender biased behaviour, and the lack of women behind the screen who are in senior positions, are receiving greater attention and action, but it is argued that much more still needs to be done. Until it is, we will continue to see women creating their own strategies in order to cope. There are those who work longer hours than their male counterparts, or who create work personas in order to avoid the stereotypes, so females are doing what they can to navigate female discrimination. Without change leading to an end to female gender discrimination in the UK television industry, the industry will continue to fail its female workforce and society.

Represententology takeaways

Challenging gender discrimination in television plays an important role in encouraging wider societal change

- Senior leadership matters, and addressing women's significant under-representation at commissioning editor and channel controller level is of paramount importance
- Regulatory and legal bodies should working with educational and campaigning institutions to tackle workplace gender stereotyping
- Initiatives aimed at bringing more women into the industry behind the scenes need to be amplified and praised.