

# **GENDER EQUITY IN THE NEWS MEDIA**

**Analysis and Recommendations  
for Newsroom Leaders**

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ON OCTOBER 25, 2019, THE FORD FOUNDATION IS HOSTING *In It to Win It: Gender Equity in Newsrooms*, a high-level gathering of journalism and media leaders working to advance gender equity in American newsrooms. The convening will be presented in partnership with the Harvard Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy Program and the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy.

In my role as the Ford Foundation's journalism program officer—and a longtime reporter, radio host, and commentator with firsthand experience of gender-based power inequities in the newsroom—I'm excited to bring industry insiders together with leading experts, including keynote speaker Iris Bohnet, academic dean at Harvard Kennedy School and the author of *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*.

This will be a forward-looking, solution-oriented conference, focused on the tools and tactics needed to build an equitable future, rich with evidence-based research and case-study-driven learning. Commissioned for the event, this report is just one of the resources we'll be providing to help attendees grasp the depth of the issue and identify ways they can effectively address it.

Advancing women's leadership in newsrooms has never been more crucial. With five female candidates running for president, and many powerful institutions still dealing with the aftermath of #MeToo incidents, women's stories are leading the headlines. Any newsroom seeking relevance to its readers or viewers—and that wants to be around for the long term—needs to reflect the audience it seeks to serve.

More diverse teams will bring a broader range of experiences and views to reporting at this time of unprecedented disruption, declining readership/viewership, and eroding advertising revenues for most news media outlets. This means that they have no time to waste in making sure that their organizational gender equity processes serve their highest editorial and business goals—and their audiences.

Many thanks to Hannah Riley Bowles of Harvard's Kennedy School, who asked two participants in her Gender and Policy (GAP) seminar to take this deeper look at challenges female journalists are facing and offer recommendations for industry leaders seeking to address inequities. The report's authors, Ariel Skeath and Lisa Macpherson, will join us at the gathering to discuss their findings, along with Jessica Clark of Dot Connector Studio, whose team provided research and editorial support.

We look forward to this conversation, and the solutions that are sure to flow from it.

Farai Chideya  
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# Executive Summary

October 2019 marks two years since the #MeToo movement exploded into the public debate—a turning point for holding sexual abusers and harassers in the workplace to account. Notably, leading journalists and news executives were among the most visible perpetrators. But now that the dust is settling, what are the remedies for addressing gender inequity in newsrooms—not only in regard to abuse but also to the less visible but still corrosive effects of discrimination and bias?

To inform this discussion, two researchers at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government (HKS)—Ariel Skeath, a master of public policy candidate, and Lisa Macpherson, a fellow in the Advanced Leadership Initiative—took a deep dive into gender equity in the news media. They wrote this paper in May 2019 as a client project for the Ford Foundation for a Gender and Policy (GAP) Seminar on promoting gender equality at work, supervised by Hannah Riley Bowles—the Roy E. Larsen Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and Management at HKS, co-director of the HKS Women and Public Policy Program, and faculty chair of the Women and Power executive program.

Spoiler alert: The news industry is generally inequitable and often downright hostile to women. Thankfully, Skeath and Macpherson provide tactical recommendations for industry leaders working to change this discriminatory culture.

## **Why should news industry leaders care about gender equity?**

Skeath and Macpherson found a lack of longitudinal data about gender equity in the news industry, but drawing upon research from other industries, they posit that improving gender diversity in the news media industry can improve business performance by broadening the talent pool, increasing access to new markets, and potentially boosting financial returns. It can also increase trust in media. Even those industry executives who choose to ignore the moral case for improving equity in the newsroom should be moved to action by the *business* case.

## **What are the main challenges for women in the news media industry?**

The researchers identified two main challenges women in the news industry face:

1. There are significant gender gaps among content creators and those who make decisions about coverage.
2. Despite a strong talent pipeline, progress toward increasing women's representation in leadership roles has been slow.

Progress has been slow for a multitude of reasons, including significant and pernicious barriers to entry. These include:

- a general lack of work flexibility
- a lack of effective support to retain talent during motherhood

- an “always-on” culture that discourages caring for personal or family needs
- ambiguous evaluation and promotion practices
- gender bias and lack of transparency in compensation practices
- an appearance-focused culture that places additional burden on women, particularly in TV news
- internal and external harassment
- challenges with the industry structure, including both historical legacies and recent pressures

Many of these issues are being raised within industry discourse and in the broader press. The public conversation around #MeToo, including the outing of many high-profile male journalists as sexual abusers, has contributed to a growing reckoning around the entrenched inequities in the industry. Last year, reporters at the New York Times found that out of more than 200 disgraced men who were ousted from leadership positions across industries, nearly half of their replacements have been women. One-third of these changes took place within news media. And, more recently, the books *She Said* and *Catch and Kill* have explored how journalists cover the #MeToo era, including in journalism.

The struggles of mothers within the news industry are also becoming harder for news executives to ignore. Katherine Goldstein, creator and host of *The Double Shift* podcast, recently followed up on a 2017 piece she wrote for Nieman Reports, “Where Are the Mothers?” which outlines the many barriers mothers in the journalism industry find themselves up against. Writing for Poynter Institute, she argues that “mothers aren’t broken, it’s the system,” and pushes for changes to newsroom culture to improve the experience for mothers—and improve business, in general. She writes:

*[I]f news organizations are operating a 1950s-style office environment that acts like everyone is a white dude with no caretaking responsibilities, that’s exactly who they are going to get working in the newsroom. Organizations will be missing out on diverse ideas and the creative thinking that we desperately need in media companies today.*

Similarly, in OpenNews’ SOURCE, journalists Emily Goligoski and Marisa Mazria Katz push for the journalism industry to invest in childcare, particularly so that working parents can attend conferences. They write:

*Investments in caregiving will enable a more diverse set of practitioners to engage in critical issues—encouraging a set of often marginalized voices to take their rightful place at the table. If only people of means can attend, it limits the substantive change that might come from the conversations that happen.*

### **So, how do we make a change?**

Clearly, the news industry still has a lot of work to do. Skeath and Macpherson outline suggestions that both senior organizational leaders and leaders at the newsroom level can act on to begin to address inequities. For instance, senior organizational leaders can:

- step up and take a strong, public stand for equity
- assess the value and efficacy of existing programs to address diversity and sexual harassment
- appoint organizational catalysts to spur change
- create incentives to inspire and sustain progress

Crucially, they can also focus on modernizing HR practices, as critics have noted that human resources departments have previously prioritized protecting companies from lawsuits over combatting sexual harassment and helping women advance. Smaller newsrooms may have to start from the ground up, as many of them don't have human resources departments at all. (In fact, an investigation by The Intercept revealed that several prominent progressive news organizations didn't have actual HR departments when #MeToo abuses occurred.)

For newsroom leaders, changes can start with modeling transparency and problem solving; measuring existing patterns and gaps; monitoring the unintended consequences of diversity interventions, as they often fail to inspire change and sometimes backfire; and gathering employee feedback for any immediate small fixes (such as setting a comfortable room temperature for women). Finally, newsroom leaders don't have to reinvent the wheel—they can turn to existing resources, such as the many professional development and advocacy organizations that support women in media, for help.

# Introduction

this paper analyzes the state of gender equity in the American news media industry today. Sadly, many of the challenges we will describe are not new. In fact, the disservice done to society by the exclusion of women from the reporting of news was raised as early as the 18th century by women suffragists and women's rights activists in North America as well as Europe. Women first brought a gendered analysis of the mass media to the global stage in the 1970s, when a multipart critique was presented at the 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico City, which opened the UN Decade for Women. Conference speakers stressed the importance of the global mass communications media to “change stereotyped attitudes of men and women” and “eliminate discrimination against women,” and the published report exhorted the mass communication media to “inform the population about new roles for women and their struggle for equity with men” (United Nations, 1975).

We begin by acknowledging the challenges and limitations of such an analysis, given the lack of industry-provided data. We reaffirm the continued need for gender equity in news and its potential value for both the news media industry and broader societal goals—thereby placing the news media's role in context within the broader push for gender equity. We summarize existing research on the state of gender equity in news media today, diagnose its root causes, and hypothesize how unique industry characteristics may make it particularly challenging for the news media industry to create gender equity. As a starting point to an action plan, we highlight potentially scalable strategies and tactics being used to promote gender equity in the news media industry today; contemporary practices being used in other settings that may translate to the news media industry; and potential practices based on behavioral and psychological experiments in academic settings. Finally, we put forward recommendations and a call to action for newsroom leaders for additional data-gathering and remedies.

For the purposes of this report, we chose to focus on news media due to its critical role in social and political discourse. Specifically, this report explores gender inequity across four types of news organizations: legacy newspaper companies, radio, TV, and digital. We have made every effort to ensure our analysis, conclusions, and recommendations address the needs of both traditional and digital media organizations at every scale, from start-up to multinational enterprise.

## Data on Gender Equity in the Media

Any assessment of the state of gender equity in news media must begin by acknowledging a substantial challenge: the lack of longitudinal data for gender representation in news media from news media companies themselves. Despite the critical role of data as an enabler in designing, implementing, and refining strategies to realize the benefits of opportunities identified below, leading news media organizations have made limited efforts to track and share gender-related metrics. Last September, the American Society of News Editors announced a historically low 17% participation rate among the 1,700 newsrooms invited to participate in the organization's annual Newsroom Employment Diversity Survey (ASNE, 2018). This low response rate creates the risk that newsrooms with positive trends or more diverse representation, including 100 online-only outlets, skewed the data to the positive. This challenge is compounded by the entry of new industry players, representing a range of business models, whose current scale would preclude being included in industry surveys.

The lack of proactive or transparent measurement and assessment does not reflect well on the news media industry. Late last fall Press Forward, an organization committed to changing culture and getting more women in the news industry, referred in a press release to “the opacity of the problem,” noting that many research organizations and women's groups have tried to produce a complete picture of the state of women in American newsrooms, but they've been “met with resistance” from news organizations. As a result, Press Forward announced that it is partnering with McKinsey and LeanIn.org to recruit American news organizations to LeanIn's annual Women in the Workplace study in 2019. Their goal is to produce “an industry-wide study on the state of women in American newsrooms” and “unique recommendations unique to the news business” (Press Forward, 2018). The news media industry may be better off producing its own transparent reporting rather than having watchdogs such as Press Forward managing the messaging on representation.

It should also be noted that there are important exceptions to the lack of measurement and transparency in diversity representation. For example, ProPublica prepares an annual report on the breakdown of its staff and how they're working to create a more diverse newsroom and inclusive journalism community (Groeger, Sharp, Wei & Engelberg, 2019). In 2017, the New York Times began publicly sharing data on the composition of its staff and the steps they are taking to improve its representation (New York Times, 2018).

## Opportunities for Gender Equity in News Media

Changing population demographics, combined with an evolution to less hierarchical organizational structures that make greater use of work groups and teams, imply that

managing a more diverse workforce is table stakes for most businesses today. There is also the moral imperative to reduce discrimination and increase access to career opportunities. But we also want to highlight some opportunities that may accrue specifically to news organizations. These are framed as propositions, given the lack of longitudinal data for gender equity in this industry.

#### PROPOSITION ONE

### Increasing diversity can enhance trust in media

In a recent Knight Commission report, 69% of US adults indicate that their trust in the news media has decreased over the past decade. Proliferation of news sources, media disintermediation, confusion between news and opinion, the spread of mis- and dis-information, the decline of local news, and the politicized criticism of the media have all played a part in reducing the public's trust in media to historic lows. The commission also asserts that:

*When newsrooms do not reflect the demographic and economic diversity of their communities, the distance between the journalist and the reader grows, and can diminish trust...this crisis of trust demands bold action and major investments into the practice of journalism at all levels.*

(Knight Commission, 2019)

In order to restore trust, the commissioners call on news media organizations to diversify newsrooms and establish transparency in their coverage decision-making and, by extension, the news media's role in the objective information dissemination essential to a well-functioning democracy. The commissioners urge both legacy and digital news organizations to better reflect their entire reader communities in their news stories and news feeds—while recognizing that to do so, it is critical that news leaders “build a news and information ecosystem that reflects the diversity of individual communities and our nation.” More diverse teams that bring a more diverse range of histories, experiences and views to their reporting can ensure the relevance, comprehensiveness, and accuracy of news coverage. At a time of unprecedented disruption, declining readership, and eroding advertising revenue for many legacy news media outlets, and financial underperformance by many digital news media outlets, compounded by even more rapidly changing US demographics, any newsroom seeking relevance to its readers or viewers needs to be as diverse as the audience it seeks to serve. That depends, in part, on having both content creators and content decision-makers who themselves represent a comprehensive (or at least broad and moderately representative) array of backgrounds and perspectives (Women's Media Center, 2019).

Audiences are increasingly demanding more representative content: The rapidly growing #SeeHer gender equity campaign is predicated on leveraging the power of media

exposure to address the dearth of positive role models currently portrayed for girls and women (#SeeHer, 2019). Although #SeeHer initially focused on advertising media, it has been extended to published content to address the analogous challenge in lack of role models—and, by implication, opportunity to address that lack through more balanced gender reporting in news decision-making and actual coverage—that exists in news media as well.

The findings of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) further elaborate the critical role that the news media plays in perpetuating—or mitigating—societal inequalities, gendered and otherwise: “[M]edia remain the major and most influential source of information. Who and what appears in the news, and how people and events are portrayed matters. Who is left out and what is not covered are equally important. The cultural underpinnings of gender are reinforced through media” (GMMP, 2015). Gender equity represents a critical opportunity to rebuild trust in both at the societal level and the level of individual news organizations.

#### PROPOSITION TWO

### Greater gender parity can improve business performance

Research indicates that gender diversity can improve business performance in two ways: increased innovation and expanded market access. Some studies have also examined the relationship between gender diversity and profitability, though evidence to date is mixed and warrants further study.

#### **Gender diversity boosts innovation by broadening the talent pool**

Given the degree of disruption in the media industry today, innovation has never been more critical—and a broader talent pool directly enhances any organization’s capacity to innovate. Diversity in teams can create constructive conflict and debate, which in turn leads to creativity, innovation, and improved problem solving (Mannix & Neale, 2005). Forward-looking organizations would be wise to pay particular attention to the newest crop of talent—millennials—and their new attitudes about the role of work. Millennials now make up more than one-third of the US workforce, and they are at or entering a critical early- to mid-30s life shift. By 2016, the number of millennial women (those born between 1981 and 1996) who had become mothers was more than 17MM; they accounted for 82% of US births (Livingston, 2018). And they’re more upfront about their parenting realities, more vocal about family-friendly policies, more mindful about the social (and environmental) policies of their potential employers, and more willing to work outside the confines of a structured work week and office environment than any generation of workers in history.

Realizing the benefits of diversity, however, means going beyond recruiting targets or even policies on paper—an organization must also address the actual process of creating

and leading diverse teams. Without the appropriate leadership, diversity can actually have negative effects on social integration, communication, and conflict in groups, and can result in poorer performance and lowered satisfaction for group members. Groups must have both the ability and the willingness to exchange information, engage in constructive, task-focused conflict, and integrate their divergent perspectives. They must also resist the natural tendency to drive out distinctiveness and move toward similarity in order to reduce the conflict (Mannix and Neale, 2005).

There are concrete practices leaders can adopt to ensure teams overcome the disruptive effects of their differences or avoid the tendencies to similarity, so they can engage in creative problem solving:

- Attend to the type of tasks and goals diverse teams are assigned: Focus on “exploration” tasks that benefit from the creation and expression of divergent perspectives, rather than “exploitation” tasks that benefit from homogeneity and efficiency.
- Find ways to “bridge” diverse team members through connections such as social ties, common values or identity, superordinate goals, or culture within the team: Without an environment that sees divergent perspectives as contributing to a shared goal or set of values, those with unique perspectives may be unwilling to pay the social and psychological costs necessary to share their viewpoints.
- Enhance the influence of minority team members through differentiation, persistence, and coalitions: Support from the team leader helps confer status and adds legitimacy. Insisting on a group norm of openness and learning encourages all voices to be expressed and heard.

### **Gender diversity enhances access to new markets**

An organization whose employees represent a greater diversity of backgrounds and experiences is better positioned to identify and effectively tap into a correspondingly diverse swath of customer segments. Thomas and Ely (2016) describe how hiring an employee from a previously underrepresented group can unlock new ideas and approaches for engaging members of that group as clients or consumers. In media organizations, gender diversity of both content creators and coverage decision-makers creates opportunities to more effectively engage a correspondingly broader set of readers. In a time of unprecedented challenges to the media industry, the future health of newsrooms, legacy or digital, will depend in no small measure on their ability to attract and retain a more diverse range of employees than ever before. Consequently, gender equity is vital to both “legacy organizations, hungry for journalists with 21st-century skills, and [new media] startups with nascent HR policies” (Goldstein, 2017).

### **Gender diversity may be associated with financial performance, though evidence is mixed**

Regarding the relationship between gender diversity and financial performance, studies to date have been mixed. This lack of conclusive evidence in peer-reviewed

meta-studies suggests that whatever benefits might be in fact causally attributed—or even correlated—with diversity, realizing those benefits is not a simple task, and clearly much more than simply “hitting the numbers.” In particular, two meta-analyses of peer-reviewed studies show no strong correlation between board gender diversity and financial performance as measured by ROA, ROE, and Tobin’s Q. Post and Byron (2015) found a weak correlation between gender diversity and firm accounting performance, though the large sample size meant the correlation was statistically significant despite its small magnitude. However, in a second meta-analysis, Pletzer et al. (2015) did not find a statistically significant correlation. Moreover, it is important to note that none of these studies address causation. That is, even in the case of analyses that imply that companies with more diverse boards display stronger accounting performance, the studies do not illuminate if or how board diversity actually causes either result.

Wharton Professor Katherine Klein advances several hypotheses to explain the mixed evidence on gender diversity and financial performance. First, women who do manage to rise to the top on corporate boards may be more similar to men if they are selected with “male-typed” criteria, and thus they do not provide the benefit of increased cognitive variety that one would normally anticipate with the addition of a diverse team member. Klein defines cognitive variety as “knowledge, experiences, and values...[t]he greater a board’s cognitive variety, the theory goes, the more options it is likely to consider and the more deeply it is likely to debate those options” (Klein, 2015). Even supposing cognitive variety does exist, female board members might be limited in their ability to materially influence board decisions: “[M]inorities, tokens, or outliers often self-censor, holding back from expressing beliefs and opinions that run counter to the beliefs and opinions of the majority...even when [they] speak up, the majority group members may discount their views” (Klein, 2015). And beyond internal company dynamics, market biases may play a role: If financial analysts regard male boards as higher-performing, then market returns may not show benefits from gender diversity even if accounting performance does (Klein, 2015). In fact, it is worth noting that this split in market performance (no correlation with gender diversity) versus financial performance (some correlation with gender diversity) is exactly what the Post and Byron meta-study found.

#### CHALLENGE ONE

## Gender Equity in Media Today: Two Diversity Challenges

The Global Media Monitoring Report, which monitors media (newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and Twitter) globally on a single day each year, reports that “women’s points of view are rarely heard in the topics that dominate the news agenda” (WACC, 2015). In the United States on March 25, 2015 (the most current report available), women represented 38% of reporters overall: 40% of reporters in print/newspapers, 67% of reporters in radio, and 32% of reporters in television. The proportion of women drops still further in higher-visibility roles (presenters, who actually convey the news): Women represented 32% on television and just 12% on radio.

The 2019 report from the Women’s Media Center, which includes both original and aggregated data from almost a hundred studies, shows that “the role of women is significantly smaller than that of men in every part of news...and digital media.” Their own annual study of prime-time broadcast news programs, print publications, wire services, and online news sites shows:

- Across all media platforms, men receive 63% of bylines and credits; women receive only 37%.
- 69% of news wire bylines (AP and Reuters) are snagged by men, 31% by women—by far the biggest gender gap in news media.
- 63% of prime-time TV news broadcasts feature male anchors and correspondents; 37% feature women.
- 60% of online news is written by men, 40% by women.
- 59% of print news is written by men, 41% by women.

On the business side, the Women’s Media Center reports data from the Columbia Journalism Review which shows that editors of the nation’s 135 most widely distributed newspapers were overwhelmingly male (73%). The imbalance in gender of both editorial decision-makers and content creators translates, perhaps unsurprisingly, into a similar imbalance in content itself: regardless of the gender of the reporter, women made up 38% of subjects and sources in news stories.

#### CHALLENGE TWO

## Slow progress in overall women’s representation, despite strong pipeline

According to a recent article by the Poynter Institute, women now account for more than two-thirds of university journalism graduates. Whatever the obstacles to gender equity in media may be, the talent pipeline—long a favorite scapegoat—is not one of them. Yet progress in actual representation in newsrooms has been slower to follow. While women now make up roughly 42% of newsroom employees and newsroom managers, 18 years of ASNE surveys business side, the Women’s Media Center reports data from the Columbia Journalism Review show an average increase of only 3.7% in the representation of women in newsrooms. Furthermore, officers from both the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and National Association of Black Journalists cite both the low response rate and the option for newsrooms to go unnamed in the report as problematic symbols of a lack of commitment to diversity (Women’s Media Center, 2019). Importantly, and unfortunately, in multiple reports and surveys representation of women of color is lower—often far lower—than representation of women overall.

## Barriers to Gender Equity in Media

Despite the majority-female class of journalism graduates exiting universities each year, women's representation drops precipitously as one goes higher up the ranks of news media, particularly in well-established organizations (York, 2015). So if the pipeline is full but we are left with mere droplets at the peak, what can research tell us about the probable "leaks"?

### **Lack of work flexibility and timing options**

According to economist Claudia Goldin, two characteristics distinguish industries with high gender inequity: a disproportionate reward for long hours, and reward for hours worked at specific times. Goldin explains, "Individuals in some occupations work 70 hours a week and receive far more than twice the earnings of those who work 35 hours a week. But in other occupations they do not...when earnings are linear with respect to time worked the gender gap is low; when there is nonlinearity the gender gap is higher." Goldin illustrates how disproportionate penalties for schedule flexibility can affect pay: "The employee who is around when others are as well may be rewarded more than the employee who leaves at 11 AM for two hours but is hard at work for two additional hours in the evening." Goldin's research identifies the cost of taking workplace flexibility (i.e., behaviors more compatible with having a family) as a driving factor in the gender pay gap (Goldin & Katz, 2011). At the same time, primary caregivers—more often women than men—who attempt to eschew flexibility to advance in their careers but still shoulder family caregiving burdens are likely to experience burnout and ultimately leave their fields. In a 2014 study, Reinardy found that female journalists experienced higher rates of burnout than their male counterparts (Reinardy, 2014).

Pecuniary penalties have diminished in some occupation types, most notably technology and the sciences. However, these penalties—and the inflexibility that drives them—have remained in other occupations, notably business and finance. While Goldin and Katz did not examine media occupations per se, it is reasonable to hypothesize that a similar mechanism links the unpredictability and inflexibility present in many media occupations to a pecuniary penalty for women who do opt for more flexible work arrangements.

### **Lack of effective support to retain talent during motherhood**

As an extension of challenges with workplace flexibility, the juncture of motherhood in particular is one where the news media industry lacks adequate support structures to retain talent. In a 2018 article for *The Atlantic*, former Washington bureau chief for ABC News Robin Sproul remarked that managers may unconsciously choose not to assign mothers to more high-profile assignments out of fear they may not be able to deliver or might make demands for accommodations. Moreover, news media is an industry in which many professionals, especially on-air talent, work contract to contract—meaning that most working moms lack the power to make family-friendly demands when they see their next set of contract negotiations around the corner (Goldman, 2018).

### **“Always-on” culture**

Reinforcing the challenges presented by the structure of the work itself, many newsrooms embody and value an always-on culture, where journalists think of their role as a calling and willingly work around the clock to break news, deliver remarkable stories, and shape the next news cycle. This may even tip over into a “macho” culture, in which people stay up all night to file a story, hop on a plane at a moment’s notice to track a story, or refuse to take time off at night or on the weekend because they fear missing the next big story (Ruiz, 2017). These cultural elements reinforce the barriers identified earlier regarding workplace flexibility and retention of mothers.

### **Ambiguous evaluation and promotion practices**

For many roles in news organizations, there may be a subjective basis of performance evaluation, in which perceptions of raw talent, industriousness, and personal relationships may determine whether a journalist will climb the career ladder. According to studies in behavioral economics, subjective evaluations leave decision-makers vulnerable to unconscious bias, which can result in less favorable evaluation of members of historically underrepresented groups as compared to members of a dominant group, even when controlling for competence and track record (Castilla, 2008; Castilla, 2016; Bohnet, 2016). Strikingly, research demonstrates that as long as subjectivity persists in performance assessment practices, even a general meritocratic culture is insufficient to address gender gaps. In fact, one study showed that managers in a meritocratic culture actually produced more biased decisions than those in a non-meritocratic culture, likely because they ascribed greater confidence to their discretionary judgment when in fact they remained affected by unconscious biases. Specifically, Castilla found that managers in a meritocratic organization were more likely to exhibit performance reward bias or differentially compensate otherwise equally well-performing male versus female employees (Castilla, 2008). These challenges are compounded in new or start-up organizations, which reward scrappy industriousness and may not have any professional human resources practices in place at all.

### **Gender bias and opacity in compensation practices**

According to Harvard Business Review, women are less likely than men to get what they want when they ask for a raise; research indicates that when women negotiate, they are seen as less likable (Bowles et al., 2007). While pay gaps may originate in biased decisions, it persists because of lack of transparency. In fact, in recognition of the powerful role pay secrecy plays in perpetuating gender and racial pay gaps, some states have passed laws prohibiting it (Wong, 2019).

### **Appearance-focused culture places additional burden on women**

Especially in TV news, there is a focus on “image metrics” such as appearance, race, body type, and age, which may narrow the range of acceptable paths to success and the career lifespan of female presenters (Cavendish, 2019). Former CNN anchor and NBC News White House correspondent Campbell Brown remarked, “Even if it’s unspoken, there is

a very clear expectation that you will maintain a certain appearance if you're a woman" (Goldman, 2018).

### **Internal and external harassment**

Within the news media industry, ongoing harassment—sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle—may result in emotional stress, threaten employment and safety, and require legal and technological remedies to mitigate the damage to journalists' identity and reputation. Externally, misogynistic and racist attacks can create a chilling effect that silences their voices online and creates a deterrent to freedom of expression that ultimately erodes the freedom of the press (Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018). Recent research by TrollBusters and the International Women's Media Foundation shows a global increase in online threats, with more than 30% of women having considered leaving the profession as a result of online attacks (FAMU, 2018). Even those who do not contemplate leaving may consider shifting to less visible positions to protect themselves, but likely at the cost of advancement opportunities. The real impact of cumulative exposure to stressors such as harassment has been well-established in public health. Arlene Geronimus first coined the term "weathering" to describe the long-term deleterious health effects of discrimination and racism on the well-being of African American women (Geronimus, 1996); it is not unreasonable to posit that a similar "weathering" effect may occur for women of all races who are subject to discrimination and harassment at work.

### **Industry structure: historical legacies, recent pressures**

Lastly, the continued lack of diversity in news media may simply reflect a lack of focus on the part of the industry. The lack of measurement and transparency about actions to address diversity and inclusion may reflect the highly competitive and defensive nature of the industry and the largely white, male leadership structure that followed its professionalization. Additionally, "news media power has historically accrued slowly, over the course of generations, which is one reason it tends to be concentrated in dynastic families" (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019).

## **Tactics to Get Started**

To close our report, we'd like to offer an immediate call to action for organizational and newsroom leaders. It's not our goal to offer a one-size-fits-all set of solutions; frankly, there is no universal model of gender equity that accounts for the complexity and diversity of organizations. Instead, we offer tactical approaches that can help news organizations construct internal processes that go beyond compliance with legal requirements and actually improve the organization's capacity to address these broad problems involving complex relationships. Ultimately, leaders must call for systems of conflict resolution and problem solving that address their particular culture, power dynamics, and patterns of daily interaction that contribute to inequality (Sturm, 2001). We offer tactical approaches that may need to be sponsored at the level of

the whole organization, as well as some that can be executed at the level of the individual newsroom.

## Approaches for senior organizational leaders

### **Take ownership**

Like any organizational priority, leadership starts at the top. Establishing gender equity as a priority, setting metrics for the entire organization, and monitoring their achievement as part of the leadership team's regular agenda is the first critical step in any change initiative. Leaders must take a strong public and internal stand against workplace discrimination and harassment, be the first in line for training and other initiatives, and chair the committees tasked with solving the problem. Leaders should also carefully manage the signals sent by diversity and inclusion initiatives to avoid creating negative unintended consequences (see below).

### **Appoint organizational catalysts**

Most organizational change initiatives that require top-down and bottom-up change benefit from catalysts: individuals with knowledge, influence, and credibility in positions where they can mobilize change. Organizational catalysts usually occupy positions at the convergence of different domains; they functionally or naturally cut across silos that may not otherwise interact. These are individuals in institutional roles, which enable them to enlist people with social capital and knowledge to act as change agents. They have legitimacy and power within the various areas of the organization that determine the background rules and make the many decisions that accumulate to define professional growth. They can speak the language in the currency of the community. These individuals derive their influence not from their formal position, but from their ability to link individual and systemic problem solving (Sturm, 2009).

### **Modernize HR practices**

Virtually every human resources practice—in organizations that have them—needs to be updated in order to create and lead a diverse workforce. Expand recruitment, hiring, and retention practices that increase the diversity of staff. Promote talented and deserving women into leadership ranks, which may have a double benefit of improving gender equity: Newsrooms with female leadership tend to have more women on staff (though this is based on the ASNE data that may have a positive skew). Develop mentoring and training programs that can help enlist, retain, and promote women and journalists of color. And support the inclusion of candidates from diminished socioeconomic means through alternative pay incentives, flexible work schedules, and public transportation subsidies (Knight Commission, 2019).

### **Create incentives**

As you've read, there are substantial arguments for diversifying work groups and

organizations, including through gender equity. These include addressing the injustice of discrimination and exclusion, increasing creativity and innovation, accessing new markets, and increasing the chances for positive financial returns. However, none of these theoretical justifications may be sufficient to influence individuals' behavior in complex everyday organizational contexts. Organizations and their leaders must be part of the diversity solution by encouraging and rewarding change. Both extrinsic and intrinsic incentives are likely to be needed to motivate real sustained change (Mannix & Neale, 2005).

### **Assess current programs**

As gender equity has risen in importance, the number and type of “programs” to address discrimination and sexual harassment has exploded; at last count, 99% of Fortune 500 companies had formal programs in place. For many companies, that means a next step is to inventory and assess the impact of current diversity and inclusion programs, many of which may have had compliance with regulatory requirements as their primary objective. For example, diversity programs based on “policing” may actually be activating bias by causing resentment among the very employees they are intended to influence. Similarly, some types of harassment training and grievance procedures have unintended effects, such as likely offenders becoming even more likely to harass, and accused employees retaliating against their accusers. Second-generation discrimination requires second-generation solutions. Some successful strategies have been replacing grievance systems with ombudsmen, independent investigators, or “escrowed” reporting systems that cumulate complaints against perpetrators; expanding bystander training to deter harassment before it happens; and hiring processes that favor managers with a demonstrated track record of working to eradicate discrimination and harassment (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017).

## **Approaches for newsroom leaders**

### **Model problem solving**

In most organizations today, gender discrimination takes the subtle form of cognitive bias, structures of decision-making, informal norms, and patterns of interaction, rather than the smoking guns of deliberate racism and sexism. This is “second-generation discrimination”—it occurs among groups, over time, and may be unconscious, but it ultimately has the same discriminatory impact. As such, second-generation discrimination is not suited to a fixed code of specific rules or commands that establish clear boundaries governing conduct. Instead, it requires a different process, namely problem solving (Sturm, 2001). In fact, it's constructive to think of gender equity as a business problem to be solved collaboratively. A problem-solving framework provides the structure to identify the context and dimensions of the problem, define the legal and organizational dimensions, gather and share relevant information, research and evaluate best practices, and design and evaluate solutions that involve the employees

who participate in the day-to-day patterns that produce bias and exclusion. Legal remedies may also be required, but they are invariably after the fact and do little to develop collective capability within organizations.

### **Start measuring**

In addition to setting and sharing metrics for the representation of women in news stories and the newsroom, leaders should apply a focused, data-driven approach to measure relationships among variables and detect patterns and trends, and inform interventions (Bohnet, 2016). This may include more granular reviews of dynamics such as performance support bias: Are female journalists being assigned less attractive, less impactful, or gender-stereotyped topics? Or, is there performance reward bias: Are even identical ratings more likely to translate into promotions for males (especially for positions of leadership and authority)?

### **Model transparency**

Newsroom leaders should create a culture of transparency and accountability, both inside and outside the organization. This entails not only measuring but releasing diversity numbers at the level of the organization, and contributing actively to industry surveys and studies as a means of demonstrating commitment to equity and representation in journalism. The marketplace is expecting progress, not perfection, and the industry should be able to tell its own story. Also consider pay transparency as a means of deterring gender and racial discrimination, since it provides visibility to managers' employment decisions and may nudge them into the desired behavior.

### **Monitor unintended consequences**

Unfortunately, like any effort to create change in complex social systems, diversity initiatives aimed at improving the experiences and outcomes of target groups, including women and people of color, can have unintended consequences. Approaches sincerely intended to decrease bias in decision-making, increase support and opportunity for target groups, and provide monitoring of managers' behavior have mixed results in research (Leslie, 2019). For example, efforts to monitor employees' behaviors can backfire, creating resentment that may exacerbate negative attitudes about target groups. Or, leaders may see false progress on surveys and other measures if there are excessive incentives or performance rewards to change behavior.

These outcomes are highly dependent on the signals employees receive about the motivations for diversity initiatives. Communication should focus on creating an understanding of the situational barriers women face in the organization, not on the ideas that women need help to succeed, that women should succeed more than men, or that progress on diversity goals is so highly valued that employees should take shortcuts to drive results.

### **Fix the little things**

While it can be daunting to tackle the major systemic issues facing working women, leaders can signal their own intent and commitment by addressing the little things that create inequity and keep every employee from doing their best work. Consider using employee surveys to understand things like: Are there sufficient lactation rooms for new mothers? Is the dress code, uniform, or safety gear expected of women comfortable and truly safe, given their smaller average height and weight? Are temperature settings in the workplace comfortable for all (most workplaces are calibrated to men's metabolic rates)? The work of addressing inequity can be complex and lengthy, but these represent ways to signal interest and intent and simply get started (Porges, 2019).

### **Get help**

News organizations needn't feel that they must start from scratch on assessing and addressing the structural, operational, and cultural dimensions of gender inequity. A number of professional groups, research and advocacy groups, nonprofits, and consulting organizations offer resources and best practices for increasing diversity and equity, many of them specifically focused on representation and depictions of women in the media. Many are cited in this paper, including the #SeeHer gender equity campaign led by the Association of National Advertisers. Their mission is to change the way women are depicted throughout the media, by increasing diversity across criteria ranging from age to race to body type. They offer a Gender Equity Measure (GEM) scoring system, which quantifies consumer reactions to ads and content.

## **Conclusion**

We hope we've made a case for the substantial societal and industry benefits of making gender equity a high-priority agenda item for the news industry, and suggested some of the unique challenges newsroom leaders may face in bringing about structural and cultural change. We have offered both long-term structural solutions and short-term, actionable tactics to create gender equity in newsrooms. There is still an enormous opportunity, and need, for the news media to answer the United Nations call in 1975 to "change stereotyped attitudes of men and women," eliminate discrimination against women," and "inform the population about new roles for women and their struggle for equity with men."

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