

Broadcasting in the 1990s: competition, choice and inequality?

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During the past 20 years the United Kingdom television industry has undergone a process of rapid organizational restructuring, driven by both regulatory and technological change. Technological advances allowing 'channel proliferation', a loosening of the regulatory framework, and legislation designed to stimulate competition among programme-makers have resulted in substantial change to the structures, working practices and contractual arrangements of the industry. Increased competition has resulted in uncertainty in the market for television programming and downward pressure on production costs, forcing broadcasters to substantially reduce the number of permanent employees and make increased use of short-term contracts. At the same time, the industry has experienced rapid growth in the largely unstable independent production sector, where small companies compete to supply broadcasters with programming. An emerging body of literature has begun to investigate the effect of these changes on the working lives of those involved in television production. Yet, despite enormous academic interest in the portrayal of women in the media, and its importance, for example, in the formation of identities and attitudes, little attention has been paid to the effects of industrial restructuring on equal opportunities in the television industry.

Using both documentary evidence and qualitative data, this article sets out to explore the impact of a casualized working relationship on gender equality in the UK television industry. Those concerned with equal opportunities have drawn attention to the need for a centralized department to take overall responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of policy throughout the organization (Blakemore and Drake, 1996). A proliferation of small production companies and a casualized employment

relationship have made it increasingly difficult to identify where and with whom the responsibility for equal opportunities lies. Yet the shift to short-term contracting was greeted with optimism by some women in television who saw an opportunity to escape from the large broadcasters and regain a degree of control over the organization of their working lives. The discussion below highlights ways in which a casualized labour market has allowed new forms of discretionary decision-making in the television industry, and suggests that a number of issues addressed by equal opportunity initiatives in the late 1970s and early 1980s have re-emerged in the context of short-term contracting.

Background to industrial restructuring

In the immediate post-war period the UK television industry was organized as a vertically integrated monopoly, with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) taking sole responsibility for making and broadcasting all programmes. The BBC's monopoly was succeeded in 1955 by a duopoly in which both the BBC and Independent Television (ITV) produced and broadcast programmes and competed for television audiences. Both organizations displayed a high degree of vertical integration, producing and broadcasting their own programmes, owning studios and employing predominantly salaried staff on permanent contracts.

ITV operated a 'closed shop' policy with all staff obliged to join the Association of Cinematograph and Television Technicians (ACTT) trade union. The BBC was less highly unionized, but operated a rigid grading system with fixed wage scales based on the pay and career structure of the Civil Service. Although the BBC and ITV competed with each other for television audiences, ITV operated in a monopoly market for the sale of television advertising, while the BBC received a guaranteed income from the licence fee. Both ITV and the BBC thus enjoyed financial security and stable demand for their programming. The period was later to be referred to as the 'cosy duopoly' (Peacock Committee, 1986).

Channel Four, established under the 1981 Broadcasting Act, represented the first of several steps taken by the Conservative government to dismantle the 'cosy duopoly' (Saundry, 1995a). Guided by neoliberal arguments stressing the efficiency of competition and minimum state intervention, the 1981 Broadcasting Act sought to introduce competition by allowing numerous firms to compete with each other to supply programming. To this end Channel Four was to operate as a publisher/broadcaster, producing no programmes itself but buying or commissioning all of its output from outside sources. This radical new organizational structure meant that Channel Four did not own any studios or production facilities, and employed only a small number of staff, however, it did stimulate demand

for independently produced programming and led to rapid growth in the independent production sector of the UK television industry. By 1986 Channel Four was commissioning some 974 hours of programming from 236 different independent producers (*Broadcast*, 2001).

Further competition was introduced following the report of the Peacock Committee into the financing of the BBC and subsequent 1990 Broadcasting Act. The 1990 Act imposed a quota system under which both the BBC and ITV were required to purchase 25 percent of their programming from independent producers. Shortly afterwards, in 1991, an internal market was introduced at the BBC under the 'Producer Choice' initiative. Producer Choice made individual producers responsible for programme budgets and allowed them to purchase resources such as studio time, dubbing or editing facilities, and labour from outside the BBC, if this proved to be more efficient.

From the early 1980s onwards, an important consequence of industrial fragmentation for television production workers in the UK has been a casualization of the employment relationship. Between 1979 and 1990 the BBC is estimated to have shed some 12,000 permanent jobs (Goodwin, 1998), with a further 19 percent reduction in the number of permanent workers between 1900 and 1993 (Saundry, 1995b). Of course these job losses must be set against a rise in employment opportunities in the independent production sector and increased use of freelance labour by broadcasters. However, the process of casualization signalled a shift from long-term, stable employment, to short-term, project-based working. By 1995 it was estimated that 50 percent of workers in the UK television industry were employed on short-term contracts (Woolf and Holly, 1994a).

Women's employment in the UK television industry: the not-so-cosy duopoly

While much research has tended to portray the years of the 'cosy duopoly' as a time of secure employment and well-structured careers, for women working in television it encompassed a period of gender discrimination and a struggle for equality. While the industry developed rapidly during the 1950s and 1960s, following the introduction of ITV in 1955 and BBC2 in 1964, women remained barred from a range of technical positions (Kustow, 1972). At the same time, many women hoping to pursue a career in television production were routinely recruited into secretarial or administrative roles, with only vague promises of promotion in the future (Baehr, 1981). Of course the television industry was not unique in this respect, and to a large extent reflected gendered divisions in the workforce nationally at the time, with women concentrated in lower-paid, lower-status occupations than their male counterparts (Baehr, 1981). However, for women hoping to

build a career in television production, the problem with the situation was that clerical and administrative posts were not integrated into the career structures of the broadcasting organizations. Many women thus became marginalized in jobs that rarely led to promotion, and in which the salary was lower than the equivalent technical grade.

The first coordinated investigation into the position of women in British television resulted from the inclusion of the BBC among a number of case studies, designed to assess the position of women in senior management roles in the public and private sectors. The research, conducted by the organization that subsequently became the Policy Studies Institute, was published in 1971 under the title *Women in Top Jobs* (Fogerty et al., 1971). *Women in Top Jobs* concluded that while there were a number of females in senior positions within the BBC, they had gained promotion during the Second World War, when there was considerably less competition from male colleagues. Failure to promote women in the post-war years meant that there were no obvious successors to these women managers when they retired (Fogerty et al., 1971).

With gender equality high on the political agenda in the early 1970s, the BBC Board of Management issued a statement in 1973 commenting on the position of women in the Corporation. Importantly, it stated that the Corporation was committed to taking action to make all areas of production open to applicants of either sex. In addition women were to be positively encouraged to apply, through the programme of attachments, for positions in areas where they were under-represented, and 'steps were to be taken to ensure that women's potential was as positively encouraged and developed as that of their male colleagues' (quoted in Gallagher, 1985: 124).

Given that no equality legislation had been introduced at the time, and phrases such as 'positive action' were yet to gain common currency, the response of the BBC appears progressive. However, the measures were later criticized by the ACTT union for being vague and unspecific, for leaving the implementation of anti-discriminatory policies in the hands of individual managers and for failing to examine the causes of discrimination and the structure of employment at the BBC (ACTT, 1975). Moreover, Gallagher (1985) argues that there were conflicting forces at work within the BBC at the time. While one or two key individuals had progressive ideas and a genuine commitment to equality, subsequent annual reviews suggest considerable resistance to the presence of women in technical areas and engineering. Furthermore, 29 percent of the 'top jobs' continued to be filled without advertising, demonstrating the Corporation's lack of commitment to open competition (Gallagher, 1985: 125)

At the same time, pressure to investigate the position of women in the ITV companies was growing among members of the ACTT. A resolution to establish an Equality Committee with the task of performing the review was passed at the 1973 annual conference. The report *Patterns of*

Discrimination Against Women in the Film and Television Industries was published in 1975, the year that the Sex Discrimination Act received the Royal Assent.

Patterns of Discrimination against Women in the Film and Television Industries (ACTT, 1975) was wide-reaching and highly critical of both the ITV companies and the BBC. It reported incidents of 'blatant discrimination' against women, especially production assistants in the ITV companies who were typecast as 'glorified secretaries' and regularly passed over for promotion, and female applicants for the post of floor manager, which, the report noted, was regarded as a male preserve by almost all managers at ITV despite women having the basic skills necessary for the job (ACTT, 1975).

Moreover, the report noted that gendered patterns of job segregation resulted in 'female' occupations being undervalued. Again, the job of production assistant at ITV was highlighted, and also that of vision mixer which, in 1975, was increasingly becoming a 'women's job' in which the career structure and pay had failed to keep pace with the rest of the industry. The situation was found to be much the same at the BBC, where predominantly female occupations such as producer's secretary had no recognized career structure. Added to this there was evidence of horizontal segregation, with women making up over half of the staff in the children's and education departments at ITV.

Patterns of Discrimination in the Film and Television Industries concluded that two separate hierarchies existed within the television industry, one for men and one for women. Within this dual structure, jobs that were regarded as 'careers in themselves' for women were not integrated into the career structure and women were therefore encouraged to compare themselves only with other women and not with men. In 1975 it was estimated that only 8 percent of producers and directors at ITV were female, while two-thirds of women working in television production were employed in jobs that had few, if any, career prospects (ACTT, 1975).

Positive action

The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 ensured that equal opportunities remained high on the political agenda. Although the Act did not allow for 'positive discrimination' in favour of women, Section 48 of the Act did allow for positive action to encourage women to train and apply for jobs in areas where they were currently under-represented. One such scheme was established at Thames Television following publication of a damning report by barrister Sadie Robarts (1981) that highlighted gender inequality within the organization. Robarts identified sexist language, gendered occupational segregation and poor management practices. The report concluded by recommending that a programme of positive action be established at

Thames Television to remedy the direct and indirect discrimination that had been identified.

The 'Thames Project', originally designed to last for five years has been described as 'one of the most important moments in the brief history of equal opportunities for women in British television' (Gallagher, 1985:140). Rather than placing responsibility for equal opportunities with individual managers, an equality officer was appointed within the personnel department to oversee the implementation of equal opportunity policies throughout the organization. Statistics detailing the numbers of men and women both applying for, and being appointed to, positions within the company were kept for the first time. Training courses in technology and science were run for applicants, mainly women, who wanted to apply for technical posts but lacked qualifications, and financial assistance with the cost of childcare was introduced together with improved maternity leave. Thames later introduced a crèche in central London that it shared with London Weekend Television.

By 1981 the BBC had established an Equal Opportunities Committee. Via this committee, plans for a programme of positive action to encourage women to apply for jobs in areas where they were under-represented were put forward by the trade unions at the BBC. In response the BBC commissioned Monica Sims to report on the position of women in senior, management positions. *Women in BBC Management* (Sims, 1985) was published in 1985 and quickly became known as the Sims Report. The Sims Report noted that although the numbers of women recruited to the Corporation had increased in recent years, this was not reflected in the numbers of women in managerial grades. Moreover, while the report focused on women in managerial grades, it also highlighted the absence of women in technical occupations, a situation it suggested was a traditional feature of the BBC. Sims famously drew attention to the 'clubby' atmosphere of the BBC, where men regularly drank after work, and noted that, although no crèche facilities were provided, the Corporation did provide a 'bar in every building, providing a large debilitating drinking pool subsidized for the ill-health of employees' (Sims, 1985 quoted in Nylin, 1988: 4).

Publication of the Sims Report led to a number of positive action initiatives at the BBC. An equal opportunities officer was appointed, with a brief to develop initiatives for women, ethnic minorities and the disabled. Several women-only management training courses were established and a series of operational awareness initiatives, designed to give women working in administration the opportunity to experience camera operating, vision mixing (unlike at ITV, vision mixing was a male-dominated occupation at the BBC) and sound recording, were put into place.

Both the Thames project and the BBC initiatives had some limited success in promoting a few women to technical and engineering positions

(Ehrlich 1990; Loach 1987). However, the Thames project was a landmark for women in television because it represented a commitment to a project grounded in specific support mechanisms, where responsibility of equal opportunities was placed within a centralized department, rather than a vague promise to ensure equality with no one taking overall responsibility for the implementation of equal opportunity policies. Moreover, the principles of equal opportunity were promoted as principles of good management rather than idealist and progressive notions (Gallagher, 1985).

Channel Four

It is, perhaps, difficult for young women embarking on a career in television today to imagine that when Channel Four began broadcasting in 1982, restrictions on the posts that women could apply for in television production had only been lifted for around ten years. It is little surprise, therefore, that Channel Four, a new organization without the entrenched patterns of gendered job segregation of the old broadcasters, was seen by many women in television as an opportunity to re-shape the values and working practices of the industry. In terms of both its programming and employment practices the organization made a public commitment to women (Gallagher, 1985).

In a widely publicized move, Channel Four gave contracts to two all-female production companies, Broadside and Twenty-twenty Vision. However, the move was regarded by some within the industry as flawed because it served to define female production companies as deviating from the male 'norm', producing programmes to appeal to a minority rather than a mainstream audience (Gallagher, 1985). Despite an initial commitment to equality, a report commissioned by the Women's Film Television and Video Network (WFTVN) in 1986 found that women's involvement in programme-making at Channel Four was decreasing over time and that, where women were commissioned to make programmes, it tended to be for one-off rather than ongoing projects (WFTVN, 1986). Further criticism of the working practices of Channel Four focused on the lack of formal mechanisms for ensuring equal opportunity. Policies relied solely on the attitudes of individual commissioning editors, who would invariably be replaced in time (Gallagher, 1985), in fact the same criticisms that the ACTT had directed at the BBC back in 1975.

Much of the campaigning to get equal opportunities on the agenda at Channel Four had been conducted by senior women in television. For this reason, the organization focused on the concerns of senior women and failed to address the issues affecting women in lower-status occupations (Loach, 1987). Thus attention was focused on the commissioning process and the visibility of female producers, while concerns about working hours

and childcare were largely ignored. Moreover, Channel Four was established as a publisher/broadcaster employing mainly administrative staff on a permanent basis. Thus industry statistics showing that over 50 percent of the organization's employees were (and continue to be) women actually reflect the number of women in *administrative* and not *programme-making* positions.

Independent production: *plus ça change* . . .

To summarize the period of the 'cosy duopoly' as one of structured careers with prospects of promotion is to adopt an essentially 'gender-blind' perspective. By the time the 1990 Broadcasting Act received the Royal Assent, women in the UK television industry were only just beginning to win some of the battles that would allow them the same opportunities as men. The objectives of the 1990 Act appear contradictory in terms of gender equality. On the one hand the Act placed a statutory obligation on broadcasters to promote equal opportunities, while on the other hand it was designed to further dismantle the duopoly and stimulate growth in the independent production sector. The resulting large-scale redundancies have vastly reduced the number of individuals employed on a permanent basis by broadcasters and produced a shift to short-term, project-based employment, where independent producers are likely to have varying interpretations of, and commitment to, equal opportunities.

Yet, given the degree of occupational segregation within broadcasting organizations, it is easy to understand why many women greeted fragmentation of the industry and casualization of the employment relationship with optimism. That optimism was summed up by Margaret Gallagher in her address to the 1990 European Broadcasting Union Conference:

The big organization has its strong points. But it is sometimes an institution that looks on itself as the guardian of the heritage and of the traditional values and for that very reason this involves a measure of conservatism . . . [the independent sector and satellite channels] recruit people who are different, either dissatisfied with their condition or marginalized. Women often fit this profile. (Gallagher, 1991: 8)

The theme of the conference was 'Equality in the 1990s?' and the tone was overwhelmingly positive. A number of high-profile women from the television industry spoke of the advantages that the informality and flexibility of independent production offered, for example the possibility of negotiating working hours and periods of maternity leave on an individual basis (Haslam, 1990).

However, by 1993 a somewhat different interpretation of the impact of independent production on equal opportunities was being presented by the

Women's Broadcasting Committee, a group founded in 1992 to campaign for 24 hours of programmes made by women to be broadcast each International Women's Day. One of the first projects undertaken by the group was to analyse the credits of television programmes broadcast over the period of one week, in order to investigate any gender bias. Their report drew attention to continuing gendered occupational segregation, with few women receiving credits for technical work such as sound engineering or camera operating. Moreover, the percentage of programmes produced or directed by women was lowest at Channel Four, an organization that commissioned a majority of its programming from the independent sector (Women's Broadcasting Committee, 1993). The report concluded that a more thorough investigation into equality in the independent production sector was necessary. Some insight into the attitude at Channel Four was offered two years later when Channel Four commissioning editor Sara Ramsden announced at the 1995 Edinburgh Television Festival that she: 'did not know how it is possible to be 100 per cent committed to the project and have children at the same time' (quoted in Jones, 1997: 222).

By 1993, concern was also being expressed about the impact of short-term contracting on equal opportunities at the BBC. Writing about the impact of Producer Choice, Murrell (1993) warned that the change to a more casualized employment relationship may be positive for women if it disrupts the existing patterns of employment that favour men, but it could equally replace one inequitable system with another.

Central to Murrell's concerns were the economic costs of maintaining equal opportunity policies. The principal objectives of Producer Choice were to provide transparent costing and to reduce production costs by introducing competition with outside suppliers, including freelance labour. Speed and efficiency, therefore, were priorities, and downward pressure on both costs and time meant that producers often required their production teams to work long and unsocial hours. Moreover, fragmentation of the recruitment process, with workers handpicked by producers and often employed only for the duration of a project, made monitoring of the workforce difficult. Murrell concluded that the emphasis on costs and efficiency inherent in Producer Choice placed it at odds with equal opportunity policies that require both effort and money.

Further concerns about the effects of industrial restructuring on occupational segregation in the television industry were raised by Skillset, a television training organization. In 1994, Skillset published a report that set out to estimate the size and composition of the freelance workforce in the television industry (Woolf and Holly, 1994a). Evidence from this general investigation into freelance workers indicated significant gender differences in the sector and a supplementary report focusing on women freelancers was produced (Woolf and Holly, 1994b). Gendered patterns of occupational segregation among freelance workers were found to mirror those

identified more than two decades earlier in broadcasting organizations. Around two-thirds of freelance producers and directors in 1994 were men, while two-thirds of those working in production support roles were women, calling into question the optimism of those who predicted that short-term projects and less rigid organizational structures would reduce gender inequalities in the television industry.

Progress towards equality opportunities in the television industry since the days of the 'cosy duopoly' has thus been at best ambiguous. As Tunstall (2001) suggests women in television seem to have taken two steps forward and one step back. On the one hand legislative change means that blatantly sexist language in job advertisements has disappeared and there is little overt discrimination in the rules and regulations that govern working practices. Yet, on the other hand, concerns first voiced in the 1970s about monitoring of the workforce, lack of a coordinated approach to equal opportunities policies and gendered job segregation, have re-emerged in the context of a casualized labour market.

Discretionary decision-making: producers as employers

While overt discrimination presented women in television with a focus for their campaigning in the 1960s and 1970s, the absence of overt discrimination makes it difficult for women campaigning for equality in the 1990s to know where they should concentrate their action (Gallagher, 1987). Fragmentation of the industry and a shift to casualized, project-based employment has resulted in many of the functions previously performed by management and trade unions being taken over by producers (Tunstall, 1993). Indeed, now the producer is now effectively the employer, taking responsibility for recruiting workers for projects and exercising considerable autonomy in the organization of work schedules. Restructuring has, therefore, placed responsibility for both recruitment and the organization of work in the hands of individual producers, permitting them a great deal of discretionary power (Dex and Willis, 1999). Under these conditions, organizational cultures and gendered stereotyping may take on added significance.

In her study of the implementation of family-friendly policies in three organizations, Lewis (1997) found that where organizational cultures serve to perpetuate inequality they were often rooted in perceptions of the 'ideal worker' based around a 'male model' of work, whereby full-time continuous employment without concessions to family commitments is regarded as the norm, and employees who fail to conform to the model are defined as uncommitted.

A corollary of the 'male' model of work is the 'long hours' culture, typically rooted in discourses that define time and commitment as finite

commodities that can be expended on *either* work *or* family. Thus commitments outside work must necessarily reduce a worker's commitment to their job, and family and work are viewed as competing spheres (Lewis, 1997). In defining time as a commodity, those who work long hours are constructed as committed and productive and hence more highly valued than those who seek to reduce or modify their working hours. Under these conditions, modifications to working schedules may be viewed as a privilege rather than a right, restricting an individual's sense of entitlement to flexibility in the organization of their working life and leading to an acceptance of established working practices (Lewis and Lewis, 1996).

To understand how organizational cultures in the television industry and discretionary decision-making on the part of producers can impact on the working lives and careers of women in television the next section of the article draws on interview data collected from a sample of 15 television production workers between January 2000 and July 2001. An initial sample was recruited via the electronic noticeboard of an ITV company. The sample size was increased by means of snowball sampling, whereby respondents offered contact details of colleagues they thought may be interested. While clearly not a scientific sample, care was taken to ensure that interviewees were representative of the range of ages, occupations and contractual statuses in the industry.

Invisible barriers to women's participation in programme-making

While there was unanimous agreement among the interviewees that working in television production involved very long and unpredictable hours, attitudes towards this way of working were divided. The 'long hours' culture was viewed as a problem by many interviewees who wished to pursue interests outside television, or who had to arrange for childcare. For others, the camaraderie that was established during late-night working was not only an important part of their social life, but also provided an opportunity for creative and dynamic thinking in an atmosphere of total commitment to the programme. Carole, a young researcher working for an ITV company, described the satisfaction she got from working late at night:

. . . if you're working unpredictable hours, you're caring more about what you're doing. . . . If people are there 'til ten o'clock at night you have this sort of camaraderie together and the programme's coming before everything else in your life and that's something that I get a real kick out of. . . . You might be completely knackered but you think, God I'm so lucky to work in this kind of environment . . . (Carole, researcher, ITV company, single, no children)

Carole clearly views commitment and productivity in terms of hours spent at work and considers herself lucky to be part of that culture. However, a different perspective on the 'long hours' culture was offered by Barbara, a young researcher working an average of 70 hours per week in the current affairs department of an ITV company

I mean it's an ethos, it's an ethos of the kind of department. . . . Anyone who goes home early or gets their work done quickly. . . . I mean we can all sit round and say 'Gosh it's terrible that you signed away the 48-hour rule' but nobody does anything about it because, well that's just the way it is, how TV is, it kind of creates a culture of acceptability for working practices and behaviour that in a lot of places would just be completely unacceptable. . . . I'm talking about cultures like staying late and the kind of 'we work hard, we play hard'. (Barbara, researcher, ITV company, single, no children)

Although they express different attitudes towards the 'long hours' culture, both Carole and Barbara highlight the way in which cultures that may present barriers to women's participation in programme-making remain unchallenged in the television industry. For women with domestic responsibilities, the need to be visible in the workplace, together with a willingness to socialize after a long working day, can be problematic, yet the image of the ideal worker remains that of someone who is willing and able to give priority to their work over and above any family responsibilities.

Although broadcasters have a legal obligation to promote equal opportunities, interviewees felt that little was being done to overcome the organizational cultures that served to limit opportunities for those with family responsibilities. The situation was summed up by Gail, a BBC producer who described how, despite a commitment to promoting the work/life balance, the working practices and culture of the Corporation still demand total commitment:

When you've got someone who actually maybe does want to have a life outside, or you know has got other things going on that they need to be able to commit to, then there is no kind of flexibility in the system, it's a real . . . you're priority must be your work. (Gail, producer, BBC, single, no children)

The assumption that commitment to work must be placed ahead of any outside obligations can serve to define those workers with family responsibilities as 'unusual' or as having 'special needs', despite the fact that, as Margaret, an experienced freelance producer, pointed out, having a family is in fact the norm:

You see a lot of people do see the family as an enemy, as something that. . . . If you're committed to your family you can't be committed to your job, you have to choose between one or the other. Whereas I think . . . you should be able to do both comfortably and not be sacrificing one for the other. . . . Having a family is the next stage of life and television cannot operate just using people from stage one. (Margaret, self-employed freelance producer, single parent)

Rather than modify working practices, a traditional approach to equal opportunity policies has been to provide facilities such as on-site childcare to help workers with family responsibilities meet the existing demands of the workplace and more closely resemble the 'ideal worker' (Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996; Lewis, 1997). None of the interviewees were aware of any workplace childcare provision; however, Margaret remembered a scheme at the BBC that had allowed her to pay her mother to care for her young daughter:

. . . the BBC would pay your childcare if you worked overtime . . . and they'd pay your mother as well, it didn't have to be a registered childminder or anything. . . I think they still do it. . . It causes resentment though from the other people . . . (Margaret, self-employed freelance producer, single parent)

The resentment noted by Margaret highlights the way in which equal opportunity policies can be defined as a 'perk', creating feelings of low entitlement among those who benefit from them and resentment among those who do not. The perception that women with childcare responsibilities are in some sense 'unusual' and have 'special needs' can present a formidable barrier to women pursuing a career in an industry organized largely around the discretionary decision-making of individual producers.

Yet, by its very nature, television will never be a nine-to-five job, and for many interviewees this was part of the attraction. However, informality and discretionary decisions made by individual producers about the organization of work were problematic for a number of workers with family responsibilities. The informal way in which working hours are often organized was described by one head of an ITV department:

I mean there's no sort of structure to it but I tend to say to my staff that if we work very late on a programme, say we do a programme that goes out at eleven thirty, and everybody's been in all day and all evening and we don't get off air until one o'clock in the morning, I tend to say to them well come in at lunch-time tomorrow, but even then somebody'll have to come in earlier to sort out the news stories . . . (Alan, head of department, ITV company)

This level of unpredictability and discretionary decision-making was highly problematic for interviewees with responsibility for young children. Jane, a female sound engineer described the difficulties she regularly encountered in organizing childcare when she had no real idea of when her working day might end. Despite having a place at a full-time nursery for her young son, childcare was a constant source of worry to Jane:

I would know I was working tomorrow but I wouldn't necessarily know the length of the working day . . . major problems. . . If I'm meant to finish at seven o'clock, and I don't, say I don't finish 'til nine, childcare stops at six. I'm fortunate I've got a good family network and friends that cover for me . . . but that's my major hassle, the one thing I wake up every morning thinking about

and the last thing I think about when I go to bed: who's looking after my son the next day? (Jane, sound engineer, ITV company, married, one child)

Yet, for some women with families, scope for discretionary decision-making had enabled them to negotiate working arrangements to suit their needs. One assistant producer explained the deal that she negotiated with her head of department after her application for voluntary redundancy following the birth of her son was rejected:

I remain eternally grateful for this, how long it will last I don't know . . . but what they agreed, and this is completely a one-off, is that, they said perhaps you could have time off during your little boy's school holidays. . . . We initially agreed I would have an extra five weeks unpaid leave, and mostly since then I've been assigned to [name of programme] and we're always in studio at the end of June, so it just wouldn't have been fair to take the Whit holidays, so for the past two years I think, I've sort of had all those school holidays barring Whit, and obviously not the half term holiday. . . . I've been very lucky I think. It's unpaid of course, so I think in some ways it does work both ways, they're getting me a little bit cheaper, but that's absolutely fine as far as I'm concerned. (Linda, assistant producer, ITV company, single parent)

Linda considers herself to be 'lucky' and is 'eternally grateful' to be allowed five weeks unpaid leave, despite the fact that she still has to arrange childcare for the Whitsun holiday and half-term breaks. However, as she remarks, her working arrangements are a one-off. This low sense of entitlement is echoed by Fiona, who had been successful in negotiating a part-time researcher's post on a weekly programme:

To be fair [current programme] have been very good and they've accommodated me, but most things, if you ring up for information about a job, if you say you want to work three days then they just don't want to know. . . . They don't want to accommodate it. (Fiona, part-time researcher, ITV company, married, one child)

Again Fiona regards the fact that she works part-time as a perk, and although she is willing to voice her need to modify working practices to meet her family commitments, she has little expectation that these needs will be met. Experienced producer Margaret had successfully negotiated reduced working hours previously, but still dreaded asking for part-time work:

. . . the BBC recently advertised for a development executive and I thought I might go for that . . . and I thought at the end of the interview I'm going to say 'and I want to do this job part-time', the bit I always hate because they never advertise a part-time job, and I've been successful on three or four occasions in making it part-time to suit me, and I couldn't make myself do that, I didn't apply. (Margaret, self-employed freelance producer, single parent)

Taken together the previous three extracts highlight the way in which organizational cultures in the television industry can serve to define

modifications to working practices as a perk rather than a right, and those seeking them as deviating from the norm. Importantly, any modifications were at the discretion of the producer, and while there was some evidence of informal flexibility to accommodate caring responsibilities, short-term contracts meant that these arrangements had to be negotiated time and again. Not surprisingly, women like Margaret became tired of the process and lacked the motivation to begin negotiating again.

Women such as Linda and Fiona are grateful to have found a niche – albeit a temporary one – where modifications to their working lives to accommodate childcare are accepted. Their experiences demonstrate how the leadership of a project or department can determine the working environment (Fogerty et al., 1971).

However, as Jones (1997) notes, in general employers in the television industry pay little attention to the needs of workers with caring responsibilities. BBC producer Gail believed that the working arrangements on her present weekly consumer affairs programme would exclude anyone with family commitments, but had heard from colleagues at the BBC that things were ‘much more reasonable in education’. While Barbara, a researcher in the male-dominated environment of current affairs, explained that nobody in her office had children and that, ‘you wouldn’t get anybody with any sort of outside commitment’ working on the weekly current affairs programme that she was involved with.

While some of the women had been successful in negotiating modifications to their working arrangements, they were aware that such modifications were likely to have an adverse effect on their careers. Fiona explained how her restricted working hours were defined as ‘unfair’ to her co-workers, with the result that she no longer directs programmes but works as a researcher:

. . . it’s the long hours, having to travel round and that kind of thing. And now because I can’t do that sort of thing . . . they don’t want me to direct because I can’t have the flexibility and they think it’s unfair. . . . There’s two directors on [current programme] and they don’t want one part-time and one full-time because they say it’s unfair to the full-time person, even though all through last year, since I came back from my maternity leave, I was doing the same amount of work in three days as someone was doing in five. (Fiona, researcher, ITV company, one child)

Elaine, a producer working for an ITV company explained that, while she is willing to alter work schedules, she is aware that she also restricts the career opportunities of workers who make such demands:

I’ve got someone who works for me . . . she’s got a child and she does have difficulties. . . . She has to go home at six o’clock and I’m aware . . . well, I’m very aware that she has to go home early and so I don’t give her opportunities that I might give other people. (Elaine, producer, ITV company, single, no children)

The point is taken up by both Margaret and Linda. Linda, an assistant producer and single parent, explained that she had remained as an assistant producer on the same programme for several years because of their willingness to give her unpaid leave, rather than look for work as a producer elsewhere. Experienced producer Margaret, described how she is resigned to her limited career opportunities since the birth of her child:

. . . I've taken loads of demotion, all the time ever since I had the baby. You know, when I went freelance I had to take an assistant producer's job because I wouldn't do the work for [ITV company in a different region] or in London that would be a producer's job but would take me away from home. (Margaret, self-employed, freelance producer, single parent)

Discussion

Commentators have typically taken the 1980s as a starting point for research into changes in the labour market for television production workers, summarizing the period prior to restructuring as one of secure employment and structured careers. Yet, to understand the present position of women in television, it is necessary to locate patterns of employment in the industry in a wider context. The early history of the BBC and ITV companies is one of gendered and hierarchical organizations where women were routinely excluded from positions of power and confined to secretarial and administrative roles that placed them outside the career structures of the broadcasting organizations. The women's movement of the 1960s prompted a number of women in television to campaign for change, and equality legislation in the 1970s forced employers to remove formal barriers to women's employment in occupations previously reserved for men. Equal opportunity initiatives in the 1980s went further and introduced programmes of 'positive action' designed to remedy past gender inequalities in the industry. Restructuring of the television industry in the UK therefore took place at a time when equal opportunities were high on the agenda and broadcasters were beginning to address issues of gender inequality.

Within this context of past discrimination, a number of women in television viewed industrial restructuring as an opportunity to advance their careers away from large bureaucratic organizations, in an independent production sector that they regarded as less rigid and more egalitarian, believing that a casualized employment relationship offered the potential to regain control over the timing and organization of their working lives.

Yet evidence from this small sample suggests that power to shape working conditions lies not with workers, but with producers. For those with caring responsibilities, such decisions could be vital in deciding whether or not they were able to work on a programme. While some

women had succeeded in negotiating reduced working hours that enabled them to combine working in television with caring for a family, this was always at the discretion of the producer and was necessarily short term. Negotiations had to be repeated with each new project, and the women had little expectation that their needs would be met in the future.

Unpredictable and long working hours, together with organizational cultures that equate visibility at work and a lack of outside responsibilities with commitment to work, present formidable barriers to women's employment in the television industry. These barriers to women are compounded by informal working practices that provide scope for individual producers, with varying interpretations of and support for equal opportunities to act on their biases and presumptions.

Casualization of the employment relationship in the television industry has permitted widespread discretionary decision-making on the part of producers in the organization of work. In doing so, it has allowed many of the organizational practices and gendered patterns of occupational segregation that characterized broadcasting organizations in the 1970s to be reproduced. Thus, to some extent women in television are faced with fighting over again battles they fought in the 1970s. More research is needed to identify ways in which these invisible barriers are to be overcome. There is already evidence of groups such as Women in Film and Television forming their own networking clubs. The effectiveness of such initiatives will need to be assessed. However, in doing so it is important that future research does not concentrate solely on the careers of highly visible and well-connected women, but also on the everyday needs of the majority of women who wish to pursue a career in television production.

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