

*Why are most of the best  
jobs on Irish radio and TV  
still the preserve of men?*

by Nigel Ryan

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## **Why are most of the best jobs on Irish radio and TV still the preserve of men? Nigel Ryan**

TV3's relatively recent decision to follow the ITV lead and install an all-female panel on its own lunchtime chat show *Midday* may strike some as a belated attempt at gender balancing or even positive discrimination a step too far. Originally co-hosted by evening news anchors Colette Fitzpatrick and Alan Cantwell, the show soon became a girls-only zone with regular panellists such as Mary O'Rourke and Nora Owen joined by a variety of female journalists and celebrities to discuss the issues of the moment.

And while *Midday* trumpeted its man-free status as a novelty, by accident or design it wasn't the first of the station's shows to follow the same route. When the showbiz oriented *Xposé* sought a replacement for original host Lorraine Keane, winning candidate Sean Musanje had to trump the opposition and evidently the odds by landing the job and becoming the show's newest presenter; his five female co-hosts were amongst the first with the congratulations. Furthermore, the trend for employing increasing numbers of female TV presenters is clearly not a phenomenon confined to the private broadcasting sector.

RTÉ may characteristically be less overt in highlighting the reality of its own female presenter dominance for its light entertainment programming, but since the departure of one-time *Afternoon Show* co-host Joe O'Shea, it's mostly been a case of sisters doing it for themselves at Montrose as well. Indeed, the phrase even extended to the literal when Grainne and Sile hosted the short lived *Seoige* for one well-received season on RTÉ One.

However, despite increased prominence on Irish TV's light entertainment schedules and notwithstanding Miriam O'Callaghan on Prime Time and a marked presence amongst news reading staff, Irish current affairs programming is statistically far less likely to be fronted by a female. It seems that for every Aine Lawlor that bucks the trend, there's the conspicuous loss of an Ursula Halligan fronting a programme in the traditional male domains of politics and business related broadcasting.

Yet while Irish TV has some clear gender biases, it's the country's radio sector that provides overwhelming evidence that the Irish airwaves continue to remain indisputably more of a man's world. The fact is that even a cursory glance at the scheduling of three of the most prominent stations' output proves sufficient to defend such a statement against accusations of hyperbole.

Interestingly, both talk-based RTÉ Radio One and PPI Station of the Year *Newstalk 106* begin the day on a bright note equality-wise with the aforementioned Aine Lawlor and Clare Byrne co-presenting respective shows on their stations' morning roster.

However, a broader analysis of stations' scheduling thereafter proves this to be no more than a curious anomaly, for between *Morning Ireland* and the Mary Wilson presented *Drivetime* a gap of seven and a half hours passes on Radio One. While over at Digges Lane it's Byrne's turn again to end an incredible nine and a half hour weekday drought of female presenters on *Newstalk's* current affairs and sports dominated roster.

It's quite a turnaround for the latter station in particular, as it was once something of an industry pioneer in providing opportunities for female presenters on its daytime schedule; before the arrival of Eamon Keane and Tom Dunne, Orla Barry's *Life* was followed by Brenda Power presenting *Your Call*.

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Yet this progression proved short-lived when both of the latter shows fell victim to a scheduling shake-up that saw Power step back from presenting altogether and the accomplished Barry joining former BBC presenter Karen Coleman on Newstalk's weekend shift.

A parallel in that regard is also apparent at RTÉ where Marian Finucane and Rachel English present their own programmes but now only as part of Radio One's weekend output. Notably both regularly take positions in the top ten shows assessed by listenership and are similarly often the subject of critics' praise for their efforts on the medium. Yet it seems it's only when the lads take their time-off from the serious weekday broadcasting business that the airwaves are more accommodating to the idea of women presenting their own shows.

Music driven stations potentially offer an alternative to the status quo of jobs for the boys, yet Today FM can only boast one full-time solo presenter in Alison Curtis, while 2 FM fares best of all with just four female full-time DJs amongst its staff.

It's not just in scheduling where a gender-based disparity is discernible either. Pay and conditions also reflect an obvious gender based difference in Irish broadcasting. The latest RTÉ figures were similar to the last in that the highest earners were predominately male. Granted eyebrows were raised at Miriam O'Callaghan and Marian Finucane's generous remuneration, yet there is scant reason to believe that a glass ceiling has comprehensively been breached in general. After all, differences between staff and contract wage levels hardly explain why *Drivetime's* Mary Wilson's ability to attract an average three hundred thousand listeners doesn't translate into a pay packet or TV profile commensurate to a station counterpart like Gerry Ryan. And given differences exist at the avowedly equal opportunity conscious RTÉ, it would seem safe to speculate that such a similar status quo applies in the private sector, quite probably even more so.

Of course no-one could argue that Today FM, RTÉ or Newstalk don't value the contributions of their female staff; Jenny and Mairead co-host the very popular *Ray Darcy show*, *The Last Word* has a female producer and an episode of *Today with Pat Kenny* seems somehow incomplete without a contribution from roving reporter Valerie Cox. It's just that there's an obvious asymmetry between the numbers of female assistants, researchers and other valuable back room staff and access to the hot seat of the presenter's chair.

With the influence of radio reflected in recent figures showing a daily audience of millions and women amongst the medium's most enthusiastic adherents, it's surely time to question why the sexes are not represented in equal numbers behind the microphones. It may also be time for the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland to impose gender quotas as a criterion for the award of future licences.

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