

ATTITUDES TO WOMEN IN THE BBC IN THE 1970S – NOT SO MUCH A GLASS CEILING AS ONE OF REINFORCED CONCRETE

Suzanne Franks

The BBC was in its earliest days considered an ‘enlightened’ employer of women. By the early 1970s, when feminist aspirations had led to wider awareness of workplace equality issues, the BBC was no longer in the vanguard of change. A confidential internal report on the position of female staff in the corporation highlighted very limited scope for advancement and the widespread discrimination and hostile attitudes towards women. Yet despite repeated analysis of the problem over subsequent years there was little progress towards meaningful opportunities for women. A sea change was taking place in the expectations of younger women, yet within the corporation complacent attitudes about the process needed for any real change abounded among senior management. Despite some piecemeal adjustments it took another decade after the initial report on the limitations for women in the BBC before any serious engagement with the problem became evident.

KEYWORDS: BBC, crèche, employment, female voice, Sims Report, women

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Early Days

The trajectory of women's achievements and progress in the BBC has never been a straight path towards enlightenment.¹ It is full of the unexpected and of paradoxes. Even in the earliest days there were women in surprisingly prominent roles (Murphy, n.d.). However, despite these initially encouraging attitudes, during the post-war period things started to change. By the 1970s, when legislation was passed to promote greater equality at work, it became clear that the BBC was lagging behind in its treatment of women. Moreover even though this disparity was recognized by internal reports, this article demonstrates that there was a lack of will to engage with the problem. It took over ten years before a more proactive approach towards promoting greater chances for women was adopted by senior management at the corporation.

In the earliest years of the BBC a number of women had played a significant and prominent role. Hilda Matheson (who became in 1927 Director of Talks) set up the first news service in 1926 and several other women worked on these early bulletins. The first BBC political series was *The Week in Parliament* (later renamed *The Week in Westminster* – and still in the Radio 4 schedules today). This programme was devised originally for a female audience under the editorship of Margarey Wace. It was first broadcast in 1929, the year after women were given the vote and Matheson's intention was to provide something that could explain politics to the newly enfranchised. She wrote to Nancy Astor one of the earliest female MPs (to whom Matheson had previously been political secretary):

We are plunging into a new experiment this autumn by having a woman MP to give a simple explanatory talk on the week in Parliament every Wednesday morning at 10.45 – the time most busy working women can listen best, when they have their cup of tea. (Murphy, 2002)²

For the first 18 months the programme used only women MPs and, even when men were included from 1931, it was still aimed at a female audience. So there were prominent women right from the start of the BBC both in front of the microphone and behind. One of the first five governors – following the granting of the royal charter in 1927 – was a woman (Ethel Snowden). Indeed Lord Reith himself acknowledged that women's potential and abilities should be recognized, when he sent a memo to all station directors in 1926:

I think we have been wrong in our attitude to the women on our staff not taking sufficient interest in or a broad enough view of their responsibilities ... they should be as eligible as men for promotion. There is no reason why a woman should not be a station director, though, of course, I realise that it would be extraordinarily difficult to find one suitable. (BBC, 1926)

A study published in 1971, *Women in Top Jobs* (Fogarty and Allen, 1971), confirmed this view that the BBC had been unusual in its treatment of women right from the start. Beyond the examples cited above of prominent opportunities for women in the corporation, this was also evident in specific employment policies. For example in these earliest days, the BBC had more progressive policies than the civil service in its employment of married women. It was also unusual in that it established from the outset the principle (at least in theory) of equal pay between men and women.

In the period prior to the war, when the economic outlook was grim, the BBC eventually followed other public sector institutions by introducing a marriage bar in 1932 (Murphy, 2007). This obviously impeded the progress of women in the corporation, although single women continued to find interesting work and some married women managed to circumvent it. But as with other institutions (Summerfield, 1984) it was the war which brought a range of wider opportunities for women, including the first accredited war correspondent in 1944. And it was not just that individuals flourished during these years; there was institutional recognition that structures were needed to help women in the workplace. A BBC crèche was established near to BBC Caversham. Sonning Manor hostel for children opened in 1943 – but was promptly shut down again at the end of the war. It would take another 30 years before the BBC again agreed to open a workplace nursery. Opportunities for women declined in the post-war period and did not start to really improve again until thirty years later (Wilson, 1980). It is interesting that while the BBC appeared progressive and enlightened, and indeed ahead of other areas of British society in its attitude towards the employment of women in the 1920s, the archives demonstrate that by the 1970s, despite superficial engagement, it was actually lagging behind other institutions in its record on women's employment prospects (Murphy, 2002). Indeed the *Women in Top Jobs* report (Fogarty and Allen, 1971) confirmed that by 1969 the civil service had overtaken the BBC for the first time in its employment of women at senior levels.

Entering the 1970s

By the start of the 1970s the world had begun to change for women in the UK (Nitsche, 2007). Against a background of the pill, changing social attitudes and the growing awareness of feminism, there were landmark developments in legislation, with the passage of the Equal Pay and Sexual Discrimination Acts. The so-called 'second wave' of feminism had placed employment rights and public attitudes towards women on the mainstream agenda (Cochrane, 2010). Along with many other institutions, the BBC was starting to feel the need to 'do' something about women.

Already in 1968 Peggy Jay, a member of the BBC General Advisory Council:

requested information about the recruitment and promotion of women. 'She thought it was possible that although women were recruited on an equal basis with men, there might be a tendency after some years for women to fall behind in respect of promotions to senior posts.' Confidential memos in response to this query showed that BBC management were embarrassed by the reality of the situation with only five women in top jobs at that time. But Mrs Jay was firmly assured that the BBC was definitely still an equal opportunities employer. (Murphy, 2002)³

Yet despite these assurances there is evidence that the experiences of women at this time reflected the concerns that Peggy Jay had voiced. Jenny Abramsky joined the BBC as a trainee studio manager in 1969 and recalls that, for the first time, 50 percent of the course were young women (interview with author, 2008). Yet Abramsky along with others discovered that once the training was over, the practical impediments and hidebound social attitudes towards women (especially those with family responsibilities) within the corporation were still monumental. More women were entering broadcasting, hence the greater numbers of trainees, but their rising expectations were not being met as they attempted to progress further in the organization (BBC, 2006).

In response to the findings of the *Women in Top Jobs* report and against this background of social and legislative change, the BBC management took the formal step of enquiring into the obstacles facing women within the institution. In 1973 there was the first of a number of BBC internal reports which highlighted the absence of women – both on screen and in front of the microphone as well as in managerial and production roles. Douglas Moran, Chief Assistant in the Appointments Department, was asked by the Board of Management to investigate the reasons 'why women did not find themselves in full equality with men in terms of appointment and promotion'. His report was entitled *Limitations to the Recruitment and Advancement of Women in the BBC* (BBC, 1973). It noted, among other things, that women constituted less than 5 percent of those in senior roles on the MP5 scale and above – and there were no women at Controller or Board level. The report gave a long list of difficulties (41 pages plus appendices), with page after page of prejudiced and hostile quotes revealing attitudes towards women (or girls as they were frequently referred to) by senior managers throughout radio and television covering a variety of topics including: 'Physical factors ... tough situations ... disinterest in electronics/male prejudice'. Numerous reasons were given in defence of the decision not to employ or promote women into responsible or serious roles in the BBC and the report quotes a wide range of senior (male) managers.

One of the many objections raised to employing women was the nature of the female voice, where the report observes that:

to large numbers of listeners and viewers a female voice is considered to lack authority in news reading and reporting. According to the Head of TV presentation 'a woman's voice attracts too much attention. Announcing', he thinks, 'represents the supreme authority and a man's voice is suited to all occasions by tradition, whereas a woman's voice is more characteristic, but acceptable in the Open University context.' ... women broadcasters 'tend to sound as though they come from Cheltenham Ladies College. What is needed is classless voices ... and [there is] the problem of women having unsuitable 'Lah-di-dah' voices ... On the subject of microphone performance, (head of Radio LE [Light Entertainment]), thinks the pitch of the female voice makes it inappropriate for the opening and closing announcements of his programmes. (BBC, 1973)

But apparently it was not just women's voices that hindered their progress. The feelings of the Editor of Radio News, according to the report, was that:

although he had interviewed many women for reporters jobs he had 'never found any woman with the remotest chance of working in that capacity'... he believes that women are simply not able to do hard news stories as they 'see themselves as experts on women's features'. (BBC, 1973)

He agreed that he would like to have recruited women as that would give a spread of knowledge in the Newsroom:

A huge percentage of the audience is female and journalists of their sex are qualified to identify interesting stories on their behalf. When a woman is married her knowledge of the subjects that interest women is thereby increased but of course marriage makes it more difficult for women to work on shift. (BBC, 1973)

He goes on, however (in contradiction), to say that he would anyway want to limit the proportion of women saying: 'Those who are dedicated ... are not really women with valuable instincts but become like men.'

In some places the 1973 report recorded outright prejudice. For example the Head of Television Light Entertainment:

considers his artistes up-tight and his comedians neurotic. The Production Assistant⁴ in the studio has to be a chopping block on whom the artiste can vent his spleen, although both can share a beer in the bar afterwards. It has become known to him that performers find it difficult to deal with female PAs on the studio floor and he, personally, does not like to see trousered girls charging about the studio in a sexless way. (BBC, 1973)

And the 1973 report discovered similar attitudes towards women in Radio Light Entertainment:

women are not seen by the Head and Assistant Head of LE as natural dealers in humour. They also point out that the Producer occasionally has to invite a Ken Dodd to lunch and believes that a female Producer would find this difficult. (BBC, 1973)

And departments like Outside Broadcasts offered the insight from the Head of Department who claimed that women were not suited to many roles, for example:

his producer's jobs are characterized by the stress that comes of continuous concentration, and ... the direction of 6 cameras requires the ability to think and to cope at the same time. This throws a great strain on the nervous system and the body. (BBC, 1973)

And in terms of attitudes there was the observation from the Head of Sport that:

Producer's Assistants (P's As) are acceptable to the world of sport in the social sense. Admitted to the Board Room for tea or drinks they are often the only women present. None of them, it is said, has ever expressed any desire for advancement. (BBC, 1973)

Numbers and Attachments

A number of women who were employed in the BBC at that time reported that there was a received wisdom that because the broadcaster was in touch with audiences and prevailing social changes, somehow it therefore reflected these in its own employment practices – yet the reality was rather different (BBC, 2006). Susannah Simons who joined the BBC (as a studio manager) at the start of the 1970s observed that, paradoxically, it was evident that in terms of its policies towards women 'the BBC in theory was, through its work, in touch with the world outside but was in fact slow to change itself'. She herself left her presenting role in BBC radio during the 1980s and went to work in the newly emerging commercial radio, where she found much more enlightened attitudes (BBC, 2006). Caroline Millington joined the BBC in 1970 as a (rare female) news trainee and eventually rose over the next 20 years to become a senior figure in BBC Radio. She recalls that the BBC 'was ahead in equal pay but strangely backward in other ways' (BBC, 2006). Ellie Updale was also a news trainee, joining the BBC in October 1975, when the Head of News Personnel announced on the first day that in view of the recent Equal Opportunity legislation the BBC had appointed two instead of just one woman to the prestigious trainee

scheme that year. (The group included ten men.) And the two women were reminded that they would have to do their share of drinking (interview with the author, 2006).

A generation of women with changing expectations and assumptions about working life was gradually emerging and new legislation was recognizing the developing role of women in the workplace (Pilcher, 1999), yet within institutions such as the BBC there was considerable resistance. The repeated findings in the 1973 report indicate that, despite evidence of changing social perceptions of women's role, the BBC was still a bastion of extremely prejudiced views. This attitude is reflected both in quantitative and qualitative terms. It is evident in the straightforward paucity of numbers of women in any kind of responsible role in the early 1970s and the unabashed hostility that was expressed by the wide range of BBC (male) managers interviewed for the 1973 report.

Following the presentation of this first confidential report to the (entirely male) Board of Management, two important decisions emerged; in future there was to be regular compilation of statistics, which would monitor women's progress. This 'Analysis of Female Staff' was to be drawn from the regular staff survey and would form part of regular reporting on the state of women in the BBC. Furthermore, a decision was taken that henceforth all jobs would (at least in theory) be open to both men and women. The report was confidential but the contents appeared in the *Daily Mail* (11 May 1973), which wrote that 'Women's lib has won a major victory at the BBC. The corporation's 8,000 women workers have been promised the same chance as men of getting to the top.'

Opportunities in theory did not translate into any real change. In 1974 when there was a follow up report *Women in the BBC – One Year Later* (BBC, 1974) the Director of Personnel (DP) noted that there had been little progress and there was still an 'unduly small percentage of women in senior posts'. Regarding the causes of this he observed that the problem was the low proportion of women in the middle management sub-layer, concluding that 'only time can supply the remedy', by allowing the increasing number of women at lower levels to work their way up. He continued, 'The war-time wave is all but spent and the succeeding new wave is still, it seems, gathering energy.' It is interesting that he refers to the wartime success of women without realizing that there were specific institutional reasons which gave women opportunities in that period. This complacent attitude, which failed to take account of the real impediments to women's progress, was only replaced by a more proactive approach towards women's employment nearly ten years later with the Sims Report in 1985 (see below).

However the DP did make an interesting observation when he noted how significant the distinctive BBC attachment system was for women – helping them to progress in careers. He noted that they had a comparatively high rate of success in applications. This practice of allowing staff to apply for internal attachments

was a cornerstone of BBC personnel policy – in effect a safe way to ‘have a go’ at something new and gain valuable experience for future applications. Many individual women over the years have remarked that their initial career progress was helped by going on attachment where they were ‘tried out’ for something new. This is probably because there was institutional resistance to giving them a job or promotion, whereas with the attachment arrangement there was little risk for the host department. Going on attachment meant that the posting was funded centrally (an important consideration) and at the end of the period it could be terminated, so the department did not have to commit itself until the candidate had already proved her worth (over months and sometimes years). Francesca Kirby-Green, who became a successful producer in Current Affairs TV in the mid 1970s said:

Attachments provided me with opportunities to learn new skills as well as a chance to move on in the BBC. My first attachment took me out of the *Panorama* cutting rooms, where I was a film editor, to join the staff of *24 Hours* (as a Producer). It was a pivotal experience. (interview with author, June 2006)

She went on to have several more successful attachments to Music and Arts and to BBC Manchester. ‘They provided a unique opportunity to distil the best on offer in another department and try putting it into practice. There was always something to be learned.’ Francesca was one of a very small group of women who reached the producer grade in that period, and one of the negligible number of female producers to work on *Panorama*, the elite programme in TV current affairs which was always seen as a macho bastion. (Lindley, 2002). She believes that attachments were key to her success and were also an invaluable way for the BBC to refresh itself as an institution:

Attachments provide a chance to meet different audiences. Stuck in one department, it is easy to believe that everybody likes a certain sort of programme. In Current Affairs, we were obsessed with the view from Westminster. Things looked different from Music and Arts. (interview with author, June 2006)

Angela Holdsworth in the 1980s was to become a distinguished documentary producer responsible for the landmark series about women *Out of the Doll’s House*. She attributes her progress in the 1970s to using bridges and ladders, moving sideways and upwards to avoid being overlooked. Attachments were an ideal vehicle for this and managers were prepared to take more of a risk with accepting a woman on attachment than giving them a fully fledged staff promotion. On one occasion in 1976 Holdsworth applied for an internal promotion. When she was turned down and asked for an explanation she was told that she could not

be considered for the promotion because she would be distracted, in view of her forthcoming wedding (BBC, 2006).

Other women reported similar experiences, attributing their progress in the BBC to the flexibility and opportunities of the innovative attachment system. Anna Carragher, who eventually climbed the ladder to become the first woman Controller of Northern Ireland, started in 1970 as a Studio Manager and made her way up through an attachment as a producer on *Newsbeat*. She had originally wanted an attachment with the *World at One* but, having found she was pregnant, she made the mistake of telling her editor and, as a result, she was promptly taken off the list of those recommended for the attachment. Carragher went on to have three children and to forge a highly successful BBC career.

This practice of advancement by attachments was important to women across the corporation. Frances Hill is one of a very rare group of women who succeeded as a BBC engineer in this period and she too attributes her progress to having a sympathetic mentor and to the experience of being 'tried out' on attachments. Hill joined the BBC aged 16 and was one of very few women in a department of over 500 men:

My friends remarked how lucky you are – but I said not if you saw the men. It was as if they never knew how to look at you. After all the only women they saw were secretaries, daughters or wives. I was pretty shapely then and men either looked at my chest or at the floor, not wanting to get caught looking at your chest.

(BBC, 2006)

Slow Progress

Despite some individual success by women in obtaining attachments, which had been endorsed by the reports on women in the BBC, there was no wider willingness by the Director of Personnel and the Board of Management to introduce measures to help women advance within the corporation. The Equal Opportunities Commission (set up after the implementation of the Equal Opportunity Legislation in 1975) was promoting a range of policies to encourage employers in assisting women in the workplace (Bruley, 1999). Its first deputy chair, Lady Elspeth Howe, was well aware of the paucity of women in senior BBC posts and was tireless in pursuing the senior management to adopt more female-friendly policies and improve their record on promoting women. She regularly lunched with members of the Board of Management and had a vigorous correspondence with senior management, including Alasdair Milne, Ian Trethowan and the heads of personnel on ways that the BBC could help to ensure women's advancement – suggesting a range of concrete policies such as more flexi-time and part-time working, wider advertising of jobs, special management training and crèche facilities.⁵ Interestingly these were many of the proposals that were eventually included in the Sims Report (Sims,

1985) in the mid 1980s, but in the 1970s the BBC management did not accept that this kind of proactive approach was a key ingredient in changing the outlook for women.

The BBC continued to survey and report on the position of women – but the figures in the annual surveys hardly changed. In the 1975 report to Board of Management, *Women in the BBC* (BBC, 1975) the proportion of women in top jobs (at MP5 and above) had crept up to 6.2 percent and it was again noticed that they were doing better at getting attachments. In External Broadcasting, the 1975 report noted, there were now four women on the World Service news reading rota:

Since the sex barrier was lifted in 1973 there has been some antipathy among sections of the Worldwide audience, as expected . The reaction however seems to be diminishing. Tests to examine the claim that female voices are particularly vulnerable to short wave interference have been inconclusive ... (BBC, 1975)

The 1975 report also mentioned ‘toilet facilities and moral danger’ as reasons to limit women in certain areas and it noted that there were:

lingering pockets of resistance to complete equality of opportunity for women. In some place within the BBC where shift working and some degree of isolation is to be found, there is a management belief that it would be wrong to have mixed sex shifts.

The 1975 report recognized how little change there had been in the intervening two years and queried whether the various reports had changed much in the advancement of women, concluding that ‘normal evolution may have been hastened a little’. But again the report did not consider taking a more interventionist or positive role.

These reports continued to be produced each year, counting the numbers of women in senior jobs – yet demonstrating very limited progress. By 1981 the report showed that, at the end of 1980, of a total of 816 Band 5 posts (equivalent to the renamed senior producer MP5 grade), 54 were held by women, 32 of whom were in TV and of those 11 were in children’s or schools programmes (BBC, 1981).

More disappointingly, in 1981 there were 150 jobs across the BBC above Band 5 on so-called discretionary scales – but only two were held by women – Sheila Innes, Head of Continuing Education Television and Monica Sims, Controller of Radio 4. Progress was indeed slow – or perhaps it was even going backwards: in 1962 there had been a correspondence in *The Times* (21 March 1962) when Thelma Cazalet-Keir, a former governor, wrote to ask why women occupied only four of the top 150 BBC posts. Twenty years later that figure had halved.

The paltry statistics of women's progress within the institution were reinforced by women's everyday experiences. The few women who did reach more senior roles in the organization found the experience lonely and sometimes hostile. Jenny Abramsky, appointed as editor of Radio 4's *PM* programme in the late 1970s, recalls there was a man on the programme staff who refused to work for her, on the grounds that she was a woman (interview with the author, June 2006). Sandra Chalmers describes being the first woman to manage a local radio station. When she arrived at Radio Stoke there was only one other woman in the newsroom and she recalls being undermined by a (male) colleague and an environment of 'management by piss-up' (BBC, 2006). Thena Henschel joined the BBC as a radio producer in 1964, specializing in medical programmes and she also started some of the disability programming such as *Does He Take Sugar?*. When she had children in the early 1970s and, quite unusually, returned to work after maternity leave, she found it a struggle to manage and tried to request part-time working. Initially she was turned down but after she exerted considerable pressure the management agreed – but she had to accept a substantial demotion and was henceforth excluded from the BBC pension scheme (interview with the author, 2006).

In parallel to the cautious and sometimes complacent reports on women's progress by BBC management there were also reports on women in broadcasting issued by the unions. These had a quite different tone. *Patterns of Discrimination* (ACTT, 1975)⁶ published by the Association of Cinematograph and Television Technicians (ACTT) and presented at its 1975 annual conference, painted a bleak picture of women's employment in the broadcasting industries, concluding that women in the 1970s faced worse discrimination than ever. The union produced 62 pages calling for a more radical approach to tackle the problem of women's advancement. Their demands seemed hopelessly unrealistic, calling for 26 weeks paid maternity leave (which by the end of the century was standard), 4 weeks paternity leave and workplace child care facilities where 5 or more people wanted them, with the capital cost borne by the employers. The report fell upon stony ground.

From within the BBC there were more radical stirrings. The Association of Broadcasting Staff (ABS; an internal BBC union) promoted the campaign for a crèche and the publication of *Groundswell* – a regular newsletter focused around the crèche campaign arising from the atmosphere of consciousness raising in the women's movement of the early 1970s.⁷ There was also the group Women in Media, which included a range of articulate BBC women and others from the print media and ITV (including Shirley Conran and Mary Stott). They lobbied for anti-discrimination measures and in favour of more women on screen.

Women on Air

One significant breakthrough in the mid 1970s period was the gradual acceptance of women on air, in particular as news readers. The 1973 report exposed the misogynist attitudes (see above) asserting that women's voices 'lacked authority'. Hylda Bamber, the first woman newsreader on Radio 4, was axed after six months in 1972. Nevertheless two years later Sheila Tracy became the first successful female newsreader on Radio 4 – followed soon by her younger colleague Pauline Bushnell. Interestingly, the 'problem' with women's voices at this time did not extend to other networks. Patricia Hughes had been an announcer on the Third Service (later renamed Radio 3) since the 1960s and she had also read the news – but somehow that had not been noticed or highlighted as a problem.

There was also considerable progress at this point in the opportunities for women broadcasters on the external services. Meryl O'Keefe, who became a presenter on World Service News from 1975, recalls that previously it had been as if:

there was an undisputed truth that women's voices would not carry on short wave; that they lacked authority – so the news would therefore be weakened in impact on the listener ... women were 'too emotional' and would be unable to maintain the impartiality of tone of male newsreaders; a woman would certainly not be able to announce for example the death of the Queen without breaking down on air. Later there were other objections, including to an educated voice articulating clearly as 'too posh' and a concern that women would have to be up-graded too and this would cost more ... (interview with the author, 2006)

Again it is interesting to contrast all the prejudice in the 1970s to the realities of the 1940s. As in so many other areas of life during the war it was a case of needs must – women had been everywhere (Summerfield, 1984) – and radio announcers were no exception. There were numerous women announcers and news readers on both domestic and overseas services, including seven female presenters on the forces radio where they had even been allowed to spin discs (Murphy, 2002).

On Radio 1 Anne Nightingale was recruited in 1970 as the first ever female presenter. But the most significant innovation was the arrival on 18 April 1975 of Angela Rippon as the first woman to read the main evening BBC 1 9 p.m. bulletin. The Director of Television commented later on Rippon's arrival that: 'Barriers crashed, taboos lay shattered and Lord Reith probably stirred and muttered in his private Valhalla.' And Rippon herself remarked in an interview that 'I knew if I made a hash of it no woman be allowed another chance for at least 5 years.'⁸

Angela Holdsworth, who was one of the first female TV documentary producers in the 1970s, based at Kensington House, recalls that there was a deputation in 1974 by a group of women to the Heads of News and Current Affairs to lobby them about getting a woman to read the news on television:

the Newsroom and serious current affairs programmes were at that time male bastions. We were told very firmly it was out of the question, how could a woman possibly break news of wars, genocide, rail disasters? She wouldn't be taken seriously; people would be looking at her ear-rings or hair-do. (interview with the author, 2006)

Nevertheless, within a year Angela Rippon was reading the news – indicating that some attitudes did change quite quickly at that time – which was also the year that the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts were implemented.

By the end of the 1970s women were not just acceptable as newsreaders but as presenters of news and current affairs programmes – who could not only read news scripts but also conduct heavyweight interviews. This was another key breakthrough when first Susannah Simons in 1977 and a year later Joan Bakewell joined the presentation team on *PM*. It is significant that it took the first female editor of a mainstream news programme, Jenny Abramsky, to make the innovation of employing a female presenter. It was another five years before the *Today* programme (considered the jewel in the crown of Radio Current Affairs) was to employ Sue MacGregor on a permanent basis. Years later she discovered that she was paid £20,000 less than her male presenting colleagues (Donovan, 1997). Joan Bakewell, the only female presenter on BBC 2's *Late Night Line Up*, was also paid less than the three male presenters, something she too was quite unaware of. Moreover when the programme eventually was taken off the air in 1972 and she confessed to David Attenborough (Director of Programmes) that she was worried about what she might do next, his reply was that 'Don't worry Joan, you only do it for the pin money' (interview with the author, 2008).

Meanwhile television current affairs lagged still further behind. The only exception was Esther Rantzen, but her show *That's Life*, despite its huge audiences, was not considered a real heavyweight programme. So, for example, when *Newsnight* started in 1980 the senior production staff was entirely male, as were the four lead presenters. The news was usually read by a woman – but that was a minor role and involved reading out autocue for a couple of minutes.⁹ This was a typical pattern of serious heavyweight male presenter and a supporting role for an attractive, younger female counterpart, known as the 'programme wife' (interview with the author, 2008). It was sometime later that this pattern was broken, with women eventually being given more substantial roles in interviewing and presenting on television current affairs. The start of the *Six O Clock News* on BBC 1 in 1984 marked a breakthrough because Sue Lawley was the elder and more experienced presenter, and for the first time a woman was the senior figure of the presenting duo; 'the older woman and the toy boy' as one producer described it.

Recruiting women to read the news was an area where change came suddenly in

this period – in response to a new awareness. However there is a contrast between making a few appointments in this high-profile area and the complex institutional changes necessary to provide structures for women to advance to senior production and managerial roles across the corporation.

Childcare and Crèches

The BBC crèche campaign was an important milestone in improving the position of women within the organization. It is significant in that nearly all the women who succeeded in the BBC until then had been childless (and often unmarried). This pattern was still true by the late 1970s, when there were only rare exceptions of women who had managed to carry on working after having children. Both Monica Sims and Sheila Innes, the two most senior women in the BBC in the mid 1970s, were unmarried and childless. Similarly, other senior women across the BBC at that time, such as Biddy Baxter, the formidable *Blue Peter* editor or Yvonne Littlewood, the first woman producer in Light Entertainment were all childless. It was during the 1970s that women were entering the corporation who could foresee a possibility of ‘having it all’, that is, not having to forgo family life in order to succeed in broadcasting. The prospect of a workplace crèche was seen as a touchstone of commitment by the corporation that would acknowledge the reality of women’s lives and help them to deal with childcare in a practical way.

There had of course been workplace nurseries during the war and then in 1974 the BBC opened one at the Pebble Mill premises in Birmingham, after lobbying by the ABS union. However, after a year there was not sufficient demand for places and the Pebble Mill nursery was shut down, leading to considerable acrimony between management and unions – with the latter being accused of ‘overstating the need’ (Murphy, 2002).

In 1977 the Annan Report, which led to the establishment of Channel 4, called for the introduction of workplace nurseries in broadcasting institutions and a more flexible approach to enable women with children to continue to work (Annan Report, 1977). The *Groundswell* campaign for a BBC crèche began in 1978 and developed into a energetic focus, uniting women and some men across the corporation.¹⁰ The crèche was promoted as a way of confronting the de facto discrimination against women, shown in the employment figures. Nevertheless, despite this lively campaign, it was not until 1990 that the BBC finally agreed (in the wake of the Sims Report) to open a nursery at Woodlands – opposite TV Centre in White City and at other BBC regional premises.

Beginnings of Real Change

The official annual reports on women in the BBC continued – but the approach and tone of them remained distinctly passive, simply recording the statistics about women within the corporation, but not seeking to make any proactive changes. It was only when the Sims Report was commissioned in 1984 that the slow progress of women in the BBC was addressed in any meaningful way.

Monica Sims was one of the very few women who had reached a senior position in the 1970s. She had begun in 1953 as a producer on *Woman's Hour* and risen to become its editor in 1964. In 1967 she was Head of Children's Programmes Television and became controller of Radio 4 in 1974. Upon her retirement in 1984 she was asked by the Board of Governors to study and report on 'the shortage of women applicants for top jobs in the BBC'.

Sims herself recalls what it was like always to be the only woman round the table in meetings such as the weekly Programme Review. She also remembers her disappointment when she was Controller of Radio 4 and sitting on appointment boards for new trainees how 'the men were more employable than the women ... who were tongue-tied and diffident ... women feeling that they would automatically come second and men's assumption that they would come first ...' (in BBC, 2006). Caroline Millington recalls that the problem was obvious at more than appointment boards – it was also evident in BBC management courses, where there were few women and those who did attend were ten years older than the men (in BBC, 2006).

The governors commissioned Sims because there was a recognition that the dearth of women in senior roles, observed in the various reports, did not seem to be changing. The previous assumptions that women would somehow advance through the system were clearly not working (as Peggy Jay had observed in 1968) and there was an acknowledgement that more proactive policies might be needed. Jenny Abramsky commented that:

the impact of Monica's report cannot be underestimated [sic], the sense of liberation that the questions were being asked. There were great expectations after publication and inevitably a sense of disappointment, but it was very important in setting a framework for change ... (in BBC, 2006)

The report, published in 1985 and entitled *Women in BBC Management* was based upon surveys and in-depth interviews with 89 women throughout the BBC (Sims, 1985). Her introduction included a reference to the work of the social scientists who had produced the *Women in Top Jobs* reports. Sims emphasized how despite 'the changing social climate expressed by the equal pay and sex discrimination legislation of the 1970s', 'little has actually been done to translate ideology into action at the down-to-earth level of the organization and its

management', and highlights the *Women on Top Jobs*' call for 'a new accent on practical measures of implementation'. Some years later another report on women in top jobs recognized that the Sims Report revealed how, hitherto in the BBC, 'policy statements and exhortation ... had failed to overcome barriers' (Hansard Society, 1990). As a result of this completely different emphasis, many of the Sims recommendations, including the appointment of an equal opportunities officer, women-only management courses (addressing Caroline Millington's point), more career guidance for women and the encouragement of part-time work and job sharing, were slowly implemented. Over the years they made a difference to the atmosphere and working conditions for women in the BBC. Cherry Ehrlich was the first BBC Equal Opportunities officer appointed in the wake of Sims and she reported in 1987 on a plan of action to improve the position of women in the corporation. Her recommendations were accepted by the Board of Management and as a result equal opportunity officers were appointed throughout the BBC.

To conclude, the Sims Report was significant as a sign of changing attitudes, even though in fact many of its 19 key recommendations were not actually taken up, or at least not for some years. What was important was, as Jenny Abramsky emphasized, the way that it changed attitudes and brought the subject of women's advancement onto the mainstream BBC agenda. Equally important was that, during the 1980s, there was the slow build-up of a critical mass of competent and assertive women who were able to take advantage of the new policies and eventually change the status quo.

Many BBC employees from around this time refer to this awareness that by the early 1980s women were developing the confidence to expect and ask for more than the traditional roles (BBC, 2006). They were anticipating long-term careers in the BBC – a sizeable number were now on staff rather than facing the insecurity of short-term contracts, and they were able to assert themselves, requesting maternity rights, job sharing, wider opportunities, which were all the themes that the Sims Report had highlighted.

Nevertheless, it was apparent that in the subsequent period, despite this change in attitudes, there were still instances where women in the BBC faced prejudice and equality policies on paper were not being translated into practice. An obvious example of this is the reverse in the trend towards more long-term staff appointments. Women on short-term and freelance contracts, which are part of wider contemporary employment patterns (Wilkinson et al., 2007) are in a more precarious position when it comes to securing better conditions, especially in the area of childcare and maternity rights. Furthermore, discriminatory attitudes towards women have also surfaced in several high-profile examples right up to the present time, especially in the case of women on screen. A number of presenters, including Selina Scott (*Mail Online*, 2008), Anna Ford (Martin, 2007) and Moira Stuart (Alleyne, 2007) claimed they were sidelined because of such attitudes. And in January 2011 there was a landmark legal

victory when Miriam O'Reilly argued that she was unfairly removed from presenting the BBC 1 show *Countryfile* because she was considered to look too old (Martinson, 2011) despite frequent examples of much older men on screen.

It is noteworthy that while the wider cultural changes are perceived to have happened in the 1960s, it took many years for these to translate into real advancement in women's lives and daily experiences within the workplace. It could be argued that the expectations of the 1960s only arrived in legislation by the mid 1970s, and only arrived in the workplace reality for women in the BBC by the late 1980s. Even though it was influential, the Sims Report did not herald a perfect world for women in the BBC, who continued in subsequent years to face instances of discrimination.

1. This article is based upon access to documents at the BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC) obtained as part of the research for volume 6 of the *BBC Official History (1974–87) Breaking the Waves*, forthcoming, Profile Books. It also uses the proceedings of a witness seminar conducted for the *Official History* which assembled a wide range of women employed in the BBC in that period (BBC, 2006). The interviews mentioned in this article were conducted as part of the Official History project.

2. Page number was not accessible for this detail.

3. Page number was not accessible for this detail.

4. This is a key distinction. At this point a PA (Production Assistant) was effectively an assistant producer – a predominantly male grade and a recognised part of a career structure leading to producer and senior producer grades. This should not be confused with a P's A (Producer's Assistant), who was a female assistant – basically secretary – to a producer. This was entirely a female grade. At the start of the 1980s there was a reclassification and P's A became a PA – while a PA became an AP (Assistant Producer). The unions, especially during the 1970s, were critical of the P's A grade as a dead-end female post, which was described as a 'wife at work' (interview with Suzanne Davies, 2007). Others described the P's A role as 'keeping the (all-male) camera crew happy and supplying them with sweets' (see BBC, 1973).

5. BBC WAC R 78/3 984/1.

6. While the majority of BBC staff were members of the 'in-house' union the ABS (Association of Broadcasting Staff) and the ACTT predominantly represented ITV and freelancers, a minority of BBC staff were also members of the ACTT.

7. The Ruskin conference in 1970, which was a key moment in second wave feminism, placed childcare facilities, along with employment opportunities, as one of its central demands.

8. BBC WAC R 78/2 257/1.

9. Early newsreaders on *Newsnight* were Fran Morrison, Linda Alexander and occasionally Kate Adie. Later Jenny Murray joined the programme.

10. Editions of *Groundswell* available at BBC WAC.

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