



# Gender in the Belarusian Media Landscape

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# СЧАСТЛИВАЯ

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ТОЛОКА  
ЗВЕЗДЫ:

ИЛЬЯ  
АВЕРБУХ  
ТЕОНА  
ДОЛЬНИКОВ

**SERGE  
DANKO**

Глава Россельхознадзора  
пикетирова

ПРЕЗИДЕНТ РФ  
ПРОБЛЕМЫ БЕЛ  
ВСЯКОГО ТАКТА  
РОССЕЛЬХОЗНАД

## НАРЯДЫ ДЛЯ КОРПОРАТИВА

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взять годовых  
банке



## Table of contents

5	Foreword
6	Acknowledgment/Author
7	Executive summary
9	Country profile in brief
11	Gender profile in brief
16	Industry overview
19	Methodology
21	Main results
21	The representation of women, including women in decision-making roles
26	Gender equity and working conditions
27	Gender equality in the workplace
34	Equality in the field of education
36	Media representation of different sexes
39	Analysis
44	Recommendations
45	Bibliography





Photo: Elena Jersdeva



*Dear reader,*

Belittling stereotypes that hinder advancement, problems to combine work and family life, gender biased distribution of beats and a general feminization of the industry, (with declining wages and significant male drop out), are some of the challenges facing female journalists in Belarus who want to make themselves a career in the media industry.

Unique research conducted by Fojo and its partners in Belarus show how gender bias is built into the power structures of media organisations and how women are the ones losing out. The research was carried out on a national basis in 2016 and consisted of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and an on-line questionnaire, totalling more than 120 respondents.

Women are well represented in the Belarusian media industry, with an estimated 70 per cent of the journalist corps. On the other hand, men are overrepresented, when it comes to managerial positions in the media, especially on higher levels.<sup>1</sup> The Belarusian study shows that the reasons for this imbalance are plenty fold, however contempt for and prejudice against women or girls (misogyny) ingrained in the society seems to be at core. Respondents shared ideas such as: “a woman can’t be a competent leader/manager” (women are “hysterics”), “women might be talented journalists but are not for leadership” etc.

Interestingly enough, in response to the question whether gender discrimination prevail in the media business, most respondents – both men and women – decline. The fact that men to a certain extent have higher salaries seem to depend on level of seniority (management positions), but might also be partly topic bound. Women are more likely to cover “soft” issues, such as culture and health care, whereas men more often report on business and economics, areas of coverage that are traditionally better paid.

Another important area of concern is the image of women in the media. The research shows there is a tendency to depict women focusing on outer appearance and not on professional achievements. Also, female journalists contribute to preserving these stereotypes, by letting conservative ideas about social roles of women and men be reflected in media content. However, a new generation of Belarusian media professionals challenging traditional gender norms is emerging, especially in on-line and social media.

In summary, there is still a long way to go for Belarusian media to become gender aware and fulfil their democratic obligation to feature multiple voices, representing different needs and interests. In order to motivate change processes in the local media industries, much more research needs to be done to get a fuller picture. Referring to international data and experience is not enough, only when there is reliable local data to relate to awareness will be raised and change will (hopefully) come about.



Agneta Söderberg Jacobson,  
*Gender Advisor, Fojo Media Institute*

1. The data from the study indicate that such gender bias is likely to prevail throughout the industry.

## GENDER LINGUISTICS IN THE REPORT

In Russian, as with many other languages, nouns are assigned gender. There are three genders in Russian: masculine, feminine and neuter (neutral). The feminine form of nouns is more common in roles that are traditionally considered to be female, such as acting (актриса) or secretary (секретарша). They are seldom used for nouns that are related to power and traditionally expected to be male, such as director (директор) and scientist (ученый). In this report, we have chosen to reconsider the role of gender linguistics (in Russian) as a way of highlighting the power of language and stimulating debate. The representation of gender in language is important when understanding gender identities and practices. Reading words like “авторка” (author with a feminine ending) or

“экспертка” (journalist with a feminine ending) probably feels uncomfortable for some readers, but might be commonplace in the not too distant future. One might ask: Why bother changing these gendered forms? What difference does it make? It is difficult to say what impact “language activism” will have on societal development. However, the obvious gender bias in the structure of Russian that preserves wider power structures needs to be addressed. Modern science has taught us that language reflects and shapes the world around us. Therefore, dealing with gender linguistics is a way of challenging the representation of gender in language and uncovers gender power structures, discrimination and stereotypes.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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The study was lead by Agneta Söderberg Jacobson, Project Manager for the Fojo Media Institute, Sweden.

We are grateful to our partners, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) and Press Club Belarus, for working with us to complete this important report.



Elena Jerzdeva

Photo: Margit Freitag

## AUTHOR

Elena Jerzdeva studied journalism in Minsk (Belarus) and completed a postgraduate Master's degree “Media and Intercultural Communication” at the Europa-University Viadrina in Germany and the St. Kliment-Ohridski University in Sofia (Bulgaria). She has worked as a freelance journalist for radio-stations with the main focus on the subjects politics and media politics in Germany. She is initiator of projects in media, education and gender fields in Belarus, Germany and the Ukraine. She is coordinating the program “Journalists International” at the Journalism-College of the Free University in Berlin.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report on “Gender in the Belarusian Media Landscape” was undertaken to inform actors in the local media industry of the current status on gender equality in Belarus media and to shed light on the relative position of women in the industry. Furthermore, the study examines gender representation in media networks and other professional bodies, as well as the level of gender sensitivity in media content.

### This research collected data in the following ways:

- A questionnaire completed by 94 people working in the media, of which 60 percent were women
- 4 gender mixed focus groups in different regions of the country
- 10 in-depth interviews with both male and female journalists

### The main issues of the research were:

- The representation of women in the media, including in leading positions
- The problems in combining work and family obligations
- Providing gender equality in the workplace
- Sexual harassment and threats in the workplace
- Possibilities for education and career
- The media representation of different genders

## Key findings

■ In Belarus more than 70 percent of those working in the media are women. The number of women producing media content is increasing.

■ Women are well represented in middle management positions, but men still dominate positions at the highest level, with the highest wages.

■ Journalism is a low-income profession in Belarus. Many journalists, both men and women, must take on extra jobs in order to provide the necessities for their families.

■ Journalism is not considered a prestigious profession – wages are low and it is difficult to realize ambitions. This is why men are leaving this area; journalism is becoming an industry in which mostly women work.



Photo: Nataliya Rublevskaya

■ In Belarus, both men and women have equal possibilities to study journalism. However, it is women who mainly study journalism, further promoting the feminization of the profession.

■ Due to the patriarchal nature of family structures, it is difficult for female journalists to acquire leading positions in the media due to the necessity in combining family and work responsibilities. This means women are working “double or triple”, as they try to balance family demands whilst simultaneously pursuing a full-time career.

■ Belarus legislation supports the merging of family and work obligations, but is proving much harder in practice. Social conventions provide many obstacles in putting this lifestyle into full effect, with the lack of paternity leave being one such example.

- Whilst the average wage for men and women in Belarus is the same, women mostly acquire low-income jobs. Instead, male journalists attain the well-paid jobs due to social structures impacting equal gender opportunities.
- Only 22 percent of female journalists consider their chances of employment and career “good”.
- Pregnancy and maternity leave are not obstacles for a career. Many women continue to work at home, reducing job hours. 60 percent of female journalists said that their employer helps them “well” or “very well” when they return to work after maternity leave.
- Gender discrimination is forbidden in Belarus. However, when applying for jobs female journalists with children are discriminated against more than male applicants with children. This is due to women being considered the primary caretakers of children.
- More than 20 percent of the female journalists were subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace. The culprits were mostly people the journalist had come into contact with whilst carrying out their professional duties.
- More than 90 percent of the editorial offices lack policies that counteract sexual harassment, or provide channels to report it.
- Both women and men are well represented in the trade unions.
- More than half of the interviewees claim that the media environment they work in does not have a gender policy.
- Addressing various social, cultural, educational and environmental problems are the most common topics covered by female journalists.
- However, the share of content produced by female journalists that deals with politics and economics is starting to increase.
- Women are seldom portrayed as experts on economics and politics in the news.
- The images of men and women in Belarusian mass media encourage the preservation of gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms in family life.
- In the media women are often either referred to in sexual terms or as mothers, as the “custodians of the family hearth”.
- Belarusian media mostly describe gender identity and family dynamics in a normative manner. The society of LGBTIQ is rarely portrayed in the media. On those few occasions, portrayals are often deeply embedded with prejudice.
- The language in Belarusian media (and in the Belarusian society in general) is male-oriented.
- Many journalists are themselves ingrained with different stereotypical characteristics which are likely to be projected into media content.
- Misogynistic statements were common also among female participants in the focus groups, this indicates that also female media professionals carry harmful gendered stereotypes that might affect the media content.
- Many of the interviewees think there are no gender problems in Belarus, or that gender problems exist but are not as critical as the current economic or political problems the Belarusian society face.
- Most of the female and male journalists take part in professional training activities. Almost 80 percent of the interviewees underline the fact their employers give them the possibility to take courses or improve their knowledge. These possibilities are equal for both female and male journalists.
- Training courses mainly concern journalist skills. Only 20 percent of the interviewees have attended training concerning gender problems and many had not heard of such courses.
- Most of the participants from the focus groups think that training concerning gender sensitive content is important and useful.





The main square in Minsk with Lenin Monument. Photo: Matthias Quidenus

## BELARUS – A SHORT BACKGROUND

The Republic of Belarus has a population of 9.5 million and became independent in 1990, leaving the USSR after 70 years. It was declared a Parliamentary Republic and during the first years of independence acquired its own currency and armed forces, as well as ratified the UN agreement on civil and political rights. In 1994 Belarus adopted a new constitution and became a presidential constitutional republic. Due to a populist campaign against corruption, 39 year-old Alexandr Lukashenko came into power, chairman of one of the “sovhoses”.<sup>2</sup> During his first two years in power, Lukashenko instigated two referendums. This meant it was possible to make amendments and changes to the constitution, as well as substantially enhance presidential power. However, the wider global community, such as OSCE, the European Council and the EU did not recognize the outcome of the

referendums’ due to the fraudulent nature of the elections. Belarus carried out another referendum in 2004 that was yet again not recognized by the international community. The result saw the constitution change again, in a way that enables the reelection of the same president without limits to term. Alexandr Lukashenko has been president in Belarus for 22 years.

Belarus is a member of the UN and OSCE, but the Council of Ministers of Europe has denied the country membership due to the fraudulent elections and referendums mentioned above. Belarus has lost its position as a specially invited member to the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council. Instead, a 20-year conflict with member states of the EU has taken place due to the lack of conformity between the electoral rules and democratic standards of electoral procedure. This period has been characterized by violations of human rights and freedoms;

2. State-run collective farms during the Soviet-era.

including persecution of the political opposition, dispersals of demonstrations and the repression of the free press.<sup>3</sup>

Belarus is the only state in Europe that has capital punishment.<sup>4</sup>

During the last few years the number of people condemned to capital punishment has decreased. In 1998, 47 people were executed, but only 4 people were executed in 2016.

Belarus is applying forced membership with the state trade unions and pro-government organizations, whereas repressive measures are used against those who want to become members of the independent trade unions.

Political parties are not represented in political institutions and organizations in power: elections in Belarus are held in single member districts, but not according to party lists.

The strengthening and development of civil society is difficult. NGOs (non-government organizations) are restricted by harsh legislation. Human rights activists face refusals and obstacles when trying to register NGOs. The existing NGOs are under constant control as the state attempts to limit their activities.

Some of the presidential orders prohibit business activities for NGOs and criminal charges will be filed against NGOs who use gratuitous financial help. NGOs cannot open banking accounts abroad,

and from 2011, NGOs are prohibited to engage in educational and training activities.

Since 2015 Belarus has been a member of the Bologna Process and is considered to be a country with a high level of education. The main problems for the educational system in Belarus are: old fashioned methods of education, low teacher wages leading to a decrease in the quality and status of the profession, and ultimately deteriorating the quality of education.

There are two official languages in Belarus: Belarus language and Russian. 85 percent of the population speaks Russian. A policy of Russification was carried out during the 70 years of Soviet rule. Many people in small towns and provinces speak so called "trasyanka", which is a mixture of Belarusian and Russian. Belarusian is mainly used by national intellectuals and by people of culture and art. It is becoming more popular among critical and active young people. Russian is mainly used in mass media. In 2015, 135 magazines out of 960 were published in Belarusian, and 185 newspapers out of 585.<sup>5</sup>

In Belarus 85 percent of the population belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church, 11 percent are Catholics. Only 6 percent go to church.<sup>6</sup> There are small Jewish, Muslim and Protestant congregations in Belarus.

Belarus depends on Russia both economically and politically. First and foremost, Belarus is dependent on energy supplies, as well as for exporting agricultural and engineering products. Russia and Belarus are co-founders of The Union State and Customs Organization. Despite official anti-western policies, most of the population wants good political and economical ties with both Russia and the European Union.



Street View Minsk. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

3. [www.baj.by/](http://www.baj.by/)

4. [www.refworld.org.ru/category/COI,,,BLR,573f13c04,0.html](http://www.refworld.org.ru/category/COI,,,BLR,573f13c04,0.html)

5. [www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public\\_compilation/index\\_6316/3](http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public_compilation/index_6316/3).

[www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public\\_compilation/index\\_6316/](http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/publications/izdania/public_compilation/index_6316/)

6. [www.nationmaster.com/country-info/profiles/Belarus/Religion](http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/profiles/Belarus/Religion)





Market in Minsk. Photo: Andreas Heitker

## GENDER EQUALITY

The situation on gender inequality in Belarus remains unclear. On one hand, the country has signed a number of international documents aimed at protecting women's rights, such as the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). While on the other hand, society has built family relationships based upon patriarchal norms, which hinders the simultaneous pursuit of a family and career for women.

Since independence, Belarus has signed a number of laws aimed at improving the situation for women: the programme "Women of the Republic of Belarus" (1996), "The programme of governmental support of small business in the Republic of Belarus" (1997) are two such examples. The latter included special measures to support women's entrepreneurship were included. In 2000, the National Council on Gender Policy was created under the Council of Ministers of Belarus. A national plan of action aimed at address-

ing gender inequality is currently being developed.

However, even if progressive laws aimed at tackling gender inequality are implemented, they are seldom put into practice, for instance, in 2014 the Labour Code of Belarus introduced a ban on discrimination in employment on the grounds of sex. However, no compensation for moral damage is provided. Equally, from a judicial perspective, it is often hard to prove if someone has been dismissed or denied employment or promotion on the grounds of gender discrimination.

According to the legislation, mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers may take up to three years of parental leave. However, according to statistics, only one percent of men (including grandfathers) take leave in order to care for a child. Currently, the issue of mandatory social leave for fathers at the birth of the child is being discussed, which should contribute to a higher presence of female leaders in the

workplace. However, this idea is not popular among either men or women.

In another move aimed at enabling citizens to combine work and family responsibilities, the Labour code has introduced the right to one day paid leave every month for those who work and have two minor children. Those who work and have three children can work four days a week with full pay. In practice these privileges remains unclaimed due to the demanding nature of editorial work.

According to gender inequality index (GII 2014)<sup>7</sup> Belarus occupies the 31st place among the 187 countries of the world. The difference in life expectancy between men and women in Belarus is about ten years.

Women in Belarus are active in the labour market – this is a kind of continuation of traditions from the Soviet society, where regardless of sex, work was the responsibility of citizens. The number of economically active women in the country is equal to the number of active men. 34 percent of working-women have higher education, and 25 percent among men.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, women's salary is 76 percent of that of men, since women are mainly employed in low wage sectors of the economy: education, culture, mass media, service and health care,<sup>9</sup> However, even in professional areas where women play an increasingly dominant role, men continue to occupy most of the leading roles and positions within the industry. Imbalance in the power structure is evident. The government of Belarus consists of 42 ministers, of which only two are female ministers: the Minister of Information and the Minister of Labour and Social Protection.

In general, female leaders are still not popular among either men or women. In the collective mind there is a division between “male” and “female” working spheres, which is closely connected to the traditional roles of men and women. These roles are particularly evident in the family. The man is the one who provides for the family and the woman is at the family centre taking care of the children. It should be noted that the majority of publications in the media and in advertising support these normative gender roles. In society, it is widely believed that women do not work because of a desire of being economically independent, but out of a need for social activity and interaction.



**Women spend 45 minutes per day less on their paid work than men, but spend twice as much time on housekeeping and childcare – three times more than men.**

The myth of equality between men and women is still very much alive and dates back to the Soviet Union. These gendered myths exist at the expense of women's position in society. The situation for women in Belarus is characterized by “double and triple work”. Women spend 45 minutes per day less on their paid work than men, but spend twice as much time on housekeeping and childcare – three times more than men.<sup>10</sup>

Prevailing harmful patriarchal norms and family relations contribute to domestic violence and sexual harassment in Belarusian society. 77 percent of men and women have witnessed domestic violence, and 30 percent are or have been subjected to physical violence. Men perpetrate 90 percent of the offenses committed within the family.<sup>11</sup> Every fourth suicide committed by a woman is a consequence of domestic violence. Behavioural patterns account for twelve percent of the causes of violence in Belarusian families.<sup>12</sup> A law preventing domestic violence in Belarus is being developed. Current Belarusian laws do not protect women and girls from domestic and sexual violence, which remains a very serious problem for the country.

7. [www.hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII](http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII)

8. [www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/447/447a94be748ee550411f1fc4931c3b4b.zip](http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/447/447a94be748ee550411f1fc4931c3b4b.zip)

9. The Belarus healthcare system works differently from many other European countries, as it is work intensive with low wages (Author's remark)

10. [www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/447/447a94be748ee550411f1fc4931c3b4b.zip](http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/447/447a94be748ee550411f1fc4931c3b4b.zip)

11. [webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Otzqws4C9qEJ:unfpa.by/filedownload.php+per+cent3D2370+&cd=1&hl=de&ct=clnk&gl=de&client=firefox-b-ab](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Otzqws4C9qEJ:unfpa.by/filedownload.php+per+cent3D2370+&cd=1&hl=de&ct=clnk&gl=de&client=firefox-b-ab)

12. [www.nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5438.html](http://www.nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5438.html)





Street scene in Brest. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

Among European countries, Belarus ranks 43 out of 49 in the index of homophobia of the European International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association (ILGA)<sup>13</sup>. Homosexual relations were decriminalized in 1994, but no other law concerning sexual identity has been adopted since. The Republic of Belarus does not have a special legislation guaranteeing the rights and interests of homosexuals. Until today the country has not registered any organization belonging to LGBTIQI. State authorities do not issue any permits for the LGBTIQI community to hold meetings and demonstrations. The intolerance towards homosexuality in Belarusian society is very high and is supported by government and educational institutions. In Belarus, there is a cruel attitude toward homosexuals: insults, beatings and assault on life are common.<sup>14</sup> The general attitude towards homosexuals is partly supported by both state controlled and some private media.

The country has a rather liberal law on the changing of sex<sup>15</sup>. Medical surgery to change sex is free. During a 20-year span, more than 70 people changed sex. However, the socialization of transgender people

is difficult due to society's hostile attitude and limited gender education.

Presently, Belarus does not have a united women's movement. The country has a pro-government "Belarusian Women's Union", which was initiated by the state. There are also numerous active and independent women's organizations and initiatives that deal with a wide range of issues and services, such as helping victims of domestic violence.

Higher education does not help inform or equip specialists or experts on gender equality. Despite Belarus adopting the Code of Education in 2011, which defines "gender education" as one of the priorities of educational work. In practice, it is "replaced by a sex-role approach that uncritically reproduces the traditional understanding of male and female roles".<sup>16</sup>

13. [www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking](http://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking)

14. In 2015 Mikhail Pischevskij dies, after having been brutally beaten when leaving a gay party. (author's remark).

15. [www.t-ema.org.ua/Fasting\\_Ministry\\_of\\_Health\\_of\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Belarus.html](http://www.t-ema.org.ua/Fasting_Ministry_of_Health_of_the_Republic_of_Belarus.html)

16. [www.ampby.org/2013/12/20/35246/](http://www.ampby.org/2013/12/20/35246/)

# Interview Olga Radiuk

Olga Radiuk (46) is a philologist. She has worked for 27 years as a teacher in Russian and Belarusian studies at the Department of Philology at the University of Medicine in Vitebsk. She is also teaching Belarusian and Russian language.

When Olga was 42 years old, she decided to change her profession drastically – she started working at the newspaper “Vitebsk Courier”. “Teachers often get so called ‘burned out’ syndrome. Working at the university was no longer interesting for me, I wanted to get other qualifications in order to develop myself. Earlier on in my career I worked as a freelance correspondent for different papers. So, I was already acquainted with journalism. To get a better income was not the main reason I decided to change jobs. My professional development was the most important”.

Olga’s 21 year old daughter Anastasia was working as a pharmacist until she decided to start writing for the newspaper “Vitebsk Courier” and served as an example for Olga. Olga adds, “I decided to apply for a job as an issuing editor myself, but I was really afraid I would not be able to do the job since I had no education in journalism. But I succeeded. When I started my job, our website was not very successful, with few visitors. Now we have a high number of visitors. This makes me happy and encourages me to develop the site and myself further”.

Olga Radiuk’s friends and colleagues at the university were negative towards her change of



profession: “They think that a stable job is better, and still did not understand why I changed my job. I tried to explain how the university does not give any possibilities for personal development, that it is boring to work there and that I wanted to change my life. Very few people in our society have the courage to do this. Our people live in their small compartments. They do not like their jobs, and they have very low salaries. Despite all this, they still do not want to change their lives. I think if a man had done what I did, they would have been less surprised or more understanding.”

The change of profession drastically influenced Olga’s family. Her husband left her. It was not due to Olga working 12-hour days but because “I started to earn more money than my former husband. Our men do not like to live with a woman who earns more money and wants to develop. They are afraid of such women. This doesn’t

just happen in my generation. Such infantilism is also widely spread among young men.”

Olga edits and leads the collective of “Vitebsk Courier” from home. The editorial does not have an office and so all the employees work from home. Olga is not only editor-in-chief, but also a correspondent and proof-reader. However, Olga has not completely left her job as a teacher at the university. For the first four years she had two jobs: “There were financial and psychological reasons as to why I didn’t leave my work at the university. I understood my development would be better if I worked only for our website, but if I left the university entirely I would only earn a third of what I did before.”

Out of ten people working at “Vitebsk Courier”, only one is a man. When Olga started working there it was more balance in the editorial office: “Men could not compete with women. This problem worries me very much. I am looking for male journalists who can work with women on an equal basis and according to our demands. But I can’t find them”.

The most important qualities for Olga are creativity, high levels of self-organization and communication. These qualities are mostly found among the female staff. “Our men have difficulty being creative and have communication problems. They are more afraid than women and prefer to stay in their “comfort zone”.

In “Vitebsk Courier” everybody has a fixed salary. There is a minimum wage for everyone. Those



who write more, create interesting content and are more widely read, receive more than the minimum. According to Olga, that is why many men left the paper. “People read your articles when they are interesting. However, our male colleagues think that their articles should be read because they are the writers. That is why they earn less. For example, one male colleague who left our paper, earned less than his female colleague. Her publications were interesting and during her free time she developed professionally, which her male colleague did not”.

According to Olga, the dominance of women at the paper does not influence the topics chosen or their format. However, you can tell if the writer is a woman just by the style and the headlines of the article. Gender imbalance in editorial office’s and in society as a whole worries Olga: “Yes, our society does protect women, but the political leaders are all men. This is a problem, as society relies on active women but they are not represented”.

“Vitebsk Courier” is one of the very few publications in Belarus where training for employees is conducted on a regular basis. This initiative was started by the founder of this paper, Olga Karach, who herself deals with gender issues and introduced this type of training. The training not only concerns the practice of journalism but also gender problems in general. According to Olga “readers for sure notice that our publication is different from others, but this only increases the number of those who visit our site”.



**I do my best to find male journalists who can work together with women on an equal level and according to our demands. But I can’t find them.**

Olga Radiuk thinks that it is difficult to write about gender: “We know that if we publish such an article, there will be a lot of comments and many will be negative. People have a very negative attitude towards this topic. Stories on LGBT always get a negative response. All articles published covering this theme were commented upon in a negative way. There are also a lot of negative comments on articles concerning sex”.

At “Vitebsk Courier” the editorial office carries out psychological training on how to handle and react correctly to negative commentaries. Olga adds, “This helps us withstand the psychological stress. When I started to work as an editor, the situation was very difficult. Colleagues were worried, they wept and wanted to leave. During training, we learned how to get rid of that psychological stress. If the situation is particularly difficult and there are too many dirty comments, I will answer myself. I try to protect my colleagues”.

During these four years, Olga Radiuk has not only managed to create a new collective but also attract more people to their site. She has also become a respected professional in the sphere of journalism. Now she is ready to

deal with new topics: “I am interested in politics, during these four years my knowledge in politics has increased. I want to deal with politics in our paper”. She has no regrets about changing profession: “I like to be a leader and my future will definitely be connected to journalism. I think that there is a lot that can be changed for the better. This publication is very dear to me and I would like to do a lot for its development.”

#### **FACTS**

The online paper “Vitebsk Courier” – is an independent internet-portal in the Vitebsk region and has been operating in this new form since 2009. Founder – Olga Karach. The average number of visitors per month is about: 170,000 [www.vkurier.by](http://www.vkurier.by)

Vitebsk is a regional center in the North-West of Belarus.  
Inhabitants: 376,000

The conversation with Olga Radiuk took place on the 23rd September, 2016 in Irina Jaskevich’s office. Irina Jaskevich is from the movement “Women against falsifications” in Vitebsk.

## SURVEY OF MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

The media environment in Belarus is very unique, especially when compared with other European and post-Soviet countries. This is due to the systematic abuse on freedom of speech and the persecution of independent journalists. According to Freedom House, in 2015 Belarus was among the ten worst countries regarding freedom of press<sup>17</sup>. Even though there has been no severe persecution against the free press in the last few years (such as arrests and closure of newspapers and radio channels), the mass media still have to fight against a difficult legal and economic situation.

There are two influential news agencies in Belarus, Belta which is government controlled and BelaPAN<sup>1</sup> which is independent from the government. There are two professional unions for those who work in mass media. The first is the pro-government Belarusian Union of Journalist (BUJ), which

was organized during the Soviet era and has more than 2000 members. The second is the non-government union Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), which was founded in 1995 and has approximately 1200 members. The latter association not only monitors mass media and legislation concerning the media, but it also helps its members with legal and consultative advice.

According to the Constitution and the law, Belarus prohibits censorship and the monopolization of mass media. The most popular newspaper is Belarus Today, which was founded by the presidential administration and has a circulation of 400 000 copies.

The total circulation of non-government (public – political) newspapers and magazines is not more than 70 000. Television de facto belongs to the most influential state-owned media holding company (Belteleradiocompany). 85 percent of Belarusians receive information about Belarus and foreign countries from TV programs.<sup>18</sup>

The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Relations refuses to accredit any male and female freelance journalists working for Belsat, or for the radio channel Radye Racyja, which also broadcasts from Poland. These journalists are thus working illegally. As they do not have accreditations, many of them have been arrested, searched and fined.

State printing media enjoy the most favourable financial conditions and their situation cannot be compared with non-government, independent media: government media receive funding from the state, which is distributed through the state mechanism. Furthermore, subscriptions to government publications is mandatory for both state and private organizations.

In comparison with the privileged government media, non-state media are in a very difficult financial position. Their situation has become even more severe due to the economic crisis. As a result, advertising has fallen sharply.



Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

17. [www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015](http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015)

18. [www.nmnby.eu/yearbook/2014/page14.html](http://www.nmnby.eu/yearbook/2014/page14.html)





Newspapers are forced to shorten the working week or cut the number of pages. Some of the non-government mass media agencies now only publish online.

During the last few years the amount of non-government online publications with public and cultural content has increased. These projects contain new themes for mass media in the country: multiculturalism, urban state, gender and environment. In 2015, new amendments were adopted to the legislation concerning mass media. These amendments have made the new non-state online publications equivalent to traditional mass media, which means that on-line media also have to register and is regulated in the same way as other media. The representative from OSCE concerned with free mass media, Dunja



**The limitations for the state media is a big problem, they live with restrictions on what to write and not to write. This in turn creates a society that places little trust in media.**

Mijatovich, called these amendments a big threat to freedom of speech, adding, that they “give the state the possibility to create obstacles for any kind of information that was published on the Internet. They also impose a quasi-censorship on those who distribute information”.<sup>19</sup>

The limitations for the state media is a big problem, they live with restrictions on what to write and not to write. This in turn creates a society that places little trust in media. Non-government mass media agencies that do not receive “donations” practice self-censorship, as they are afraid of financial pressures from government institutions and organisations.

The fact that wages for journalists are low has made the field a predominantly female profession, where more than 70 percent of those working in mass media are women. Thus, there is currently an on-going feminization of the profession. However, it is still an industry that sees the upper management positions occupied by men. In practise, the profession is losing its prestige.



Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

19. [www.osce.org/fom/132866](http://www.osce.org/fom/132866)





A focus group in Brest. Photo: Maxim Khliabets

## METHODOLOGY

Three data collection methods were used in order to conduct the research on “Gender in the Belarusian media-landscape”: A questionnaire, four focus groups and ten in-depth interviews with those who work in mass media.

The questionnaire used in this study was based on the UNESCO Gender Sensitive Indicators for the media<sup>20</sup> that promote gender equality within media organisations and in media content.

The questionnaire was adapted to the social, political and cultural peculiarities in Belarus. The language of this questionnaire was also adapted according to gender linguistics. It was distributed in Russian due to the fact most media outlets in Belarus are writing in Russian. An online questionnaire was also distributed through organisations such as BAJ and Press Club Belarus.

The research included in total 129 respondents<sup>21</sup>, of which approximately two thirds were women. This percentage approximately reflects the gender representation of women working in mass media in Belarus.



The research included in total 129 respondents, of which approximately two thirds were women

### The questionnaire was divided into 7 sections:

- general information about participants, man/woman
- information about employer
- gender equality at the workplace
- terms of employment
- education and career possibilities
- membership in organization (trade unions and other professional organizations)
- image of women in mass media

20. [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002178/217831.e.pdf](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002178/217831.e.pdf)

21. In total 25 focus group participants, 94 questionnaire respondents and 10 interviewees (in-depth).

This questionnaire was employed in order to obtain answers to the following key issues:

1. Representation of women in mass media including leading positions.
2. Providing gender equality at work.
3. Terms of employment and employment policy.
4. Possibilities for education and career for female journalists.
5. Female membership in trade unions and organizations.
6. Image of women in media content.

### Focus-groups

During the course of this research, we had four focus-group meetings. Two of them were held in Minsk – the capital of Belarus, which has a population of two million. Furthermore, most of Belarus' mass media agencies are concentrated around the capital, which is why Minsk was an obvious location Vitebsk.



A focus-group in Brest. Photo: Maxim Khliabets

The first focus group in Minsk met in November 2015. One male journalist and four female journalists took part in the meeting. Two women worked in government mass media outlets, two women were independent journalists, and the male journalist was a freelancer. All in all, representatives from two news agencies, one online portal and a national newspaper took part in this focus group.

The second focus group in Minsk took place in October 2016. Eight people participated; three men and five women. With one exception, this focus group consisted of representatives from non-government mass media. The journalists respectively worked in print media, online publications, TV and for the homepage of a local CSO. Two female journalists were also students from the Institute for Journalism at the Belarusian State University.

The third focus group took place in Brest in June 2016. Brest has a population of 340,000 and is located in the southwest of Belarus, near the borders of Ukraine and Poland. Ten people took part in this meeting. Three of the participants were men; this ratio corresponds with the broader representation of sexes in Belarusian mass media. Both government and non-government mass media, print, radio, TV and online publications were represented in this focus group.

The fourth focus group took place in Vitebsk in September 2016. Vitebsk lies in the Northeast of the country, on the border with Russia. Twelve people took part in this meeting, four of them were men and eight were women. All the participants worked in non-government mass media, print, radio or on-line publications.

### Main points of discussion in the focus groups

- Women's representation in mass media, including leading positions.
- Problems with combining work and family obligations.
- Education and career.
- Media representation of different sexes

The meetings lasted for one and a half, to two hours. During the focus groups in Brest, Vitebsk and Minsk (October 2016) mind-mapping was used to discuss two issues: "What is gender equality?" and "The image of women and men in the content of Belarusian



mass media”. The answers were anonymous and presented in written form.

## In-Depth Interviews

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted as the final data collection method in this report on “Gender in the Belarusian Media Landscape”. Both male and female journalists took part. Six interviews took place with female journalists and four interviews with male journalists. One third of the participants worked in government mass media and the rest came from non-government media. One journalist worked for a TV channel that was broadcasting from abroad. The selected participants represented TV, print and on-line publications. With the exception of the one journalist working from abroad, the rest worked in Minsk, Brest and Vitebsk.

One interview took place with gender expert Irina Sidorskaya, who is head of the Department of Technology in Communication at the Institute for Journalism at Belarusian State University.

The main themes for the in-depth interviews were:

- Choice of profession
- Possibilities for career
- Possibilities to combine work with family
- Discrimination at work
- Gender sensitivity in media content

These interviews created an information-rich story surrounding each of the journalists, giving clear insight into the subjective contexts of the respective female and male journalists working in Belarus. Some of the interviews are published in this research paper in order to help create better understanding on how the mass media functions in Belarus and to help shed light on to the current gender situation in the mass media and the wider society.

## MAIN RESULTS

### Representation of women in mass media including in leading posts

The majority of participants considered equal opportunity for women and men to obtain leadership positions as a key indicator of gender equality. Approximately 70 percent of those employed in the mass media are women. However, access to well-paid executive positions for women in the media is hin-



A focus-group in Minsk. Photo Elena Jerzdeva

dered and it is men who predominantly work at the higher decision-making positions.

One explanation for this phenomenon offered by the participants of the focus groups is the limited opportunities for women to combine family responsibilities with the pursuit of leadership positions in the media. Belarus has a number of laws aimed at facilitating the merging of family and work responsibilities for women. However, in practice these laws are not easily applicable. For example, the law states a journalist with children may take one day off a week, but in practice this privilege remains unclaimed because of the intensity of the editorial work.

Many women would like to have shorter or flexible working hours but these wishes are negatively received. Flexible working hours are considered incompatible with senior positions. Child-care leave in Belarus lasts up to three years, but is taken mainly by women, despite men enjoying the same opportunity.

The focus groups explained how government and

national publications often choose men as chief editors. In regional press (mainly government) you mostly find women, both as reporters and at the head of the editorial board. This is explained by the lower salaries in regional press agencies in comparison to the well-paid executive positions in national press agencies.

In state-owned publications women work at mid-level positions, while in non-governmental agencies women can be seen in higher executive positions. However, according to the focus group participants this is a significant positive change from the Soviet era. One participant said: “In the Soviet times, rules were tough: the editor should be a man. When our newspaper searched for a chief editor, female candidacies were ruled out immediately”.

Participants from the focus groups in Minsk and Vitebsk noted that in many workplaces your career depends not only on your level of professionalism, but also on your contacts. Some of the female journalists did not want a high position “because the responsibility is greater then. Especially for women this means that you will have less time to spend with your family.” Most of the participants mentioned that if a leading position becomes vacant, a man would be appointed, this is due to men being considered more competent than women.

The number of women in Belarus involved in news journalism is growing. In 2010 59 percent<sup>22</sup> of the reporters in Belarus were women. By 2015 this figure grew to 79 percent.<sup>23</sup> These figures also reflect the feminization of the profession. Salaries in the media are low; it is a female profession losing prestige. News journalism is an industry men are happy not to compete in due to the lower salaries, thus creating more opportunity and entry points for women.

86 percent of the female respondents and 69 per-

cent of the male respondents gave positive answers to the question: Are there any women in a leading position at your organization? Interestingly, 27 percent of the male respondents said that less than 10 percent of the people working in their media environment are women. Whereas only 2 percent of the female respondents gave the same answer. 31 percent of the male respondents and 67 percent of the female respondents answered that women make up more than half of the staff within their media environment. These answers indicate that women tend to be employed in workplaces where mostly other women are employed too.

At the same time, 14 percent of the male respondents said that more than 50 percent of the women in their media workplaces have leading positions. That figure is twice as high as the female respondents figure of 29 percent. This indicates that in media related workplaces; women have managerial positions in agencies where mostly women work.

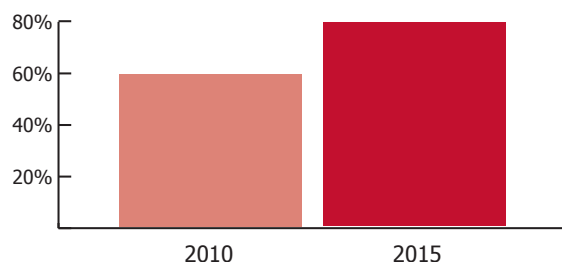
7 percent of the men were not able to estimate how many women can be found in senior positions at their workplace. Of the women, only 2 percent were unable to do so. Indicating this problem is of greater importance for women than for men.

According to the participants in the focus groups, women are underrepresented in senior positions not only because of the low salaries in journalism, but also because of the negative image of women in leading positions. Images and opinions that shape these stereotypes include beliefs that a woman cannot be as competent a leader because she is “hysterical”, or that she may be “a talented journalist but not a leader”, or that “a woman in a leading position is not a woman, but a man in a skirt”. These are common statements made about female journalists and demonstrate the level of misogyny that still exists in the media industry.

This stereotype of women being largely inferior to men creates discriminatory gender attitudes and affects unequal opportunities in the professional sphere.

However, the focus groups found that neither female nor male journalists thought that having more female leaders in the media could affect positive change for this wider social issue.

**Female reporters in Belarus**



22. [www.cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports\\_2010/national/Belarus.pdf](http://www.cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports_2010/national/Belarus.pdf)

23. [www.cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports\\_2015/national/Belarus.pdf](http://www.cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports_2015/national/Belarus.pdf)







# Interview

## Natalia Maltseva

Natalia Maltseva has been the editor of the weekly state-owned newspaper “Prystalitja” for four years. During this time, she has not only changed the design of the paper drastically but has also introduced new headings. Natalia is now trying to find advertisers in order to be able to sell the paper in kiosks.

Working at “Prystalitja” was Natalia’s first job after returning from maternity leave. “The previous editor retired and the position was offered to me. I had little time to think it over, but I was also aware that I didn’t have any experience as an editor-in-chief. However, once I had a look at the paper I realized immediately that it needed a change. Besides, I knew it was impossible to make the paper any worse; it could only improve. That’s why I agreed.”

Natalia’s working day starts at 08.15, after dropping her seven-year-old daughters at school. At 17.00 she collects them on her way home. Although, sometimes her husband does it. Natalia does not think her job interferes with family life or vice versa: “I love my job. I try not to bring it home, I have enough time here in the office to do it. If I need to go on a business trip my husband takes care of the children.”

Natalia explains how it was not by chance she went into journalism. In eighth grade, she began working with her hometown paper in the region of Grodno. She wrote about school problems and about artists who visited the town. So, the decision to study at the Faculty of Journalism came naturally. She interned at the National Press Centre of the Republic of Belarus for a few years too.

After graduating, Natalia worked at one of the state institutions. She was a columnist at the magazine “Planet”. Then she went on maternity leave. In Belarus, parental

During maternity leave Natalia not only raised her children, but also gave lectures about the basics of journalism to high school students at the school located in the courtyard of her house. “One year we had a nanny come and help for an hour a day, two or three times a week. I would then spend time with the high school students creating a High-school paper. I did not earn much money and it went straight to



**Natalia Maltseva**  
The main director of the weekly magazine  
“Prystalitja”. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva.

leave lasts up to three years and can be taken by mothers, fathers and grandparents.

However, “in Belarus, mothers don’t want the fathers to take care of the children”, says Natalia. “I had four years of maternity leave since I had twins and it was a great time. When they were two years old the children went to kindergarten but were often ill. I chose not to go back to work since I knew I would constantly need to stay at home to look after them. My husband at the time had a well-paid job and we could afford to enjoy family life 100 percent.”

paying the nanny. However, I wanted to change the situation. My husband was very positive about this too. He has always supported my development and encouraged me to pursue my interests.”

According to Natalia, most chief editors of local papers are women, some of them are mothers with many children. “In the local press women are the “bosses”. They decide everything, while the chief editors of national papers are mostly men. I think this is due to the status that comes with working at the national papers being superior to that of local papers.





In Belarus the editors of local newspapers are mostly women. They are in charge and decide everything.

It is assumed that men should be the main breadwinner of the family. Therefore, they should acquire more prestigious jobs in order to get a good salary, although of course everything is relative.”

Natalia adds, women working in the media get an average salary: “We can feed ourselves and a child on our salary but not a husband as well. However, the country is faced with a difficult economic situation at the moment. A lot of men are unemployed because they can’t find jobs or they demand too high of a salary. Initially women worked in the editorial offices out of interest and their job was never the main source of family income. However, this is now changing because so many men are unemployed.”

A career in the media is heavily influenced by the amount of vacancies. Natalia explains the rather unique situation: “There is a national database for replacements where you can find new projects and awards. In some databases I can be found, but of course there is no guarantee that a job will be offered to you.” More encouragingly, Natalia claims that salary does not depend on your sex: “There are fixed rates depending on your position, not on your sex”. In ten years time Natalia would like to be at the head of a major international news agency: “But this will probably remain a

dream”, she says. Now she is planning a completely different project: a school for young reporters based with her paper. “This has been a dream of mine since I was at school. I had free education and people helped me in many different situations for no apparent reason. I had no prerequisites for moving so quickly through life. I come from a simple family. Therefore, I think I should pay my debts and help others – and do so for free.”

#### FACTS

Prystalitja is a weekly state newspaper in the region of Minsk and is published on Saturdays. It is distributed by subscription and not sold on the market. It was first published in 1935. There are 12 employees of whom three are journalists, two female and one male. Circulation: 5,388 copies.

[www.pristalica.by](http://www.pristalica.by)  
The Minsk district is the administrative part of Minsk.  
Population: 210,000

The interview with Natalia Maltseva took place in the editorial office of “Prystalitja” on the 24th October, 2016.

## Problems with Combining Work and Family Obligations

Both female and male participants from the focus groups think that the unequal possibilities for women at acquiring leading positions in the mass media, are closely related to the problem of combining work with family. “Redistributing family obligations” is considered a very urgent problem for female journalists in Belarus.

Most families have a patriarchal nature, which means that women do all the work at home and taking care of the children and their education. Female journalists did not describe the situation as being “double work” (housekeeping), but instead as “triple work” (also bringing up children). Another common belief is that women should always “look good”. Members of the focus groups underline that this accounts for a lot of time and money. It is also very expensive for female journalists to use house-

hold services when the average salary is 300 USD.

Although the participants from the focus groups think men should help raise the children and work at home more, women should still “be at the heart of the family” and take care of the small children. Men should be the breadwinners and “make money” for the family. Female respondents, both young and middle-aged agree with the opinion expressed above.

Many female journalists confirmed they often do not have enough time for their families. They have to go on business trips, and are forced to work in the evenings and on weekends.

One participant from the focus group in Vitebsk shared that her son has a proverb: “if the mother is a journalist – there is disaster in the family”. To combine a demanding job with being an “exemplary wife” is difficult in the patriarchal society. Many female journalists are divorced and bring up their children alone. There was not one single divorced man among the participants in the survey, while 17 percent of the female journalists were divorced. 50 percent of both the female and male journalists have children, while 10 percent of the women supported their children alone.

One participant from a focus group in Minsk, spoke of how many female journalists bring their children to work once day-care and kindergarten close at 5 p.m. The female journalists use the longer working hours to their advantage as one solution for combining work and family responsibilities.

According to the legislation fathers are entitled to paternity leave too, but is mostly used by women. Most female journalists are of the opinion that men are not able to do this. Only two female participants from the focus groups acknowledge how paternity leave can help women acquire leading positions.

Due to this division of labour, very few female journalists have the possibility of being promoted. Women who reach senior positions have either support from their partners, support from other family members or have grown-up children.



A couple in the streets of Vitebsk. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva





Participants in the focus group in Vitebsk. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

## Equality in the workplace

### Salaries

Discussing gender discrimination is mostly viewed negatively in editorial offices. One point repeated throughout the focus group meetings was the argument on salary equality for journalists and how it is often met with responses such as: “The salary does not depend on gender but on performance.”<sup>24</sup> However, results from the survey indicated that 50 percent of the female journalists shared this opinion, while 70 percent of the male journalists did.

According to the survey, 37 percent of the women indicated that their work is low-paid (up to 200 USD per month), while only 23 percent of the men indicated the same. An equal number of women and men said they have the average journalism salary of 300 USD per month. Only 14 percent of women will ever earn a figure over that average earning salary, while men are twice as likely to. Many partici-

pants in the focus groups noted that their colleagues employed by state-owned media at a national level, get twice as much compared to their colleagues who work in independent media.

63 percent of the women are employed full-time or have a contract, compared to 43 percent of the men. This is due to 49 percent of the men work as freelancers, while women make up for about one third of that number.

According to the survey, approximately the same number of men and women (32 percent and 28 percent) indicated their salary is not enough to cover their maintenance and/or that of their families. In order to raise their income, 80 percent of the male

24. Salaries in Belarusian media houses are often based on a fixed monthly rate, with an additional bonus based on performance.



Street scene in Vitebsk. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

interviewees would need to work extra and 40 percent of the women would need to. Almost half of the women do additional work in journalism, while only 32 percent of the men do so. 16 percent of women find extra work within education sectors, which is consequently the second most popular place for extra work. Nonetheless, it is another low-income job and feminized sector in Belarus. The second most popular field for men to find extra work is through entrepreneurial means (16 percent).

Another theme noted from the focus groups, were the inequalities of performance based salaries for those working for TV, where women often get low-paid assignments while their male colleagues are well paid. It was suggested that this imbalance is related to the stereotype of men needing to earn more in order to fulfil their responsibility of providing for their families. Among the respondents 45 percent of the male journalists were of the opinion their experiences gave them “good” chances of getting a job and having a career. While only half as many female journalists saw these possibilities, even when possessing the same degree of experience,

Twice as many women deemed their opportunities for career growth as “insufficient” or “non-existent” compared to men.

One participant from the focus groups pointed out that having a career in state television, where wages are higher than in print or online media, “does not depend on gender or ability, but only on links and protection”. Another participant from a different region reinforced this further by stating: “When I was working in television, we were only two employees with higher education. The bosses appointed their own relatives. There was one woman with an education of 8th grade.” These facts indicate a degree of corruption at workplaces with high incomes.

### Parental leave

Parental leave and leave for childcare lasts up to 3 years in Belarus. According to the participants in the focus groups, this is not detrimental to a woman’s career. After three years of leave, ordinary journalists can continue their work in the editorial office without any problems. The possibility to work from home plays an important role in enabling this lifestyle. Many mothers miss their work and are beginning to write and submit material online, helping them reintegrate quickly when they return from maternity leave. Furthermore, during maternity leave they can continue cooperating with the editorial office working, 25 percent, or work from home on a fee. According to the questionnaire survey, 60 percent of the female journalists and 45 percent of the male journalists – both those who have children and those who do not - believe that the employer facilitates a “good or very good” transition back to work after maternity leave. At the same time, participants in the focus groups think that combining a managerial position and having maternal leave, or leave for child care is not possible.

The majority of the participants in the focus groups noted that despite equal qualifications, women with children are subject to more discrimination when applying for a job than men with children. Newly married, young, female journalists are subjected to the same kind of discrimination. In these cases, the employer assumes that these women will soon become pregnant and will retreat from work. These reasons for refusal are not spoken of as such, since law in Belarus forbids sex discrimination. To prove this kind of discrimination is difficult too. There is



a silent agreement through society and among the journalists themselves: “Well you should know very well... What do you expect with two children?”

Two men in the focus groups said they know of cases where a woman has not got a job solely because she is a woman. In one instance, the main editor was purposely looking for a man because he thought, “women do not know how to write and work”. However, both journalists believe these cases are not the rule, but rather an exception.

One journalist who took part in the focus group recalls a time when the male chief editor appointed a man and said: “This will be my deputy”.

### Social protection and trade unions

Benefits for men and women are equal in social security. They do not depend on gender, but instead on the kind of publications the journalist works for. Among the respondents, 16 percent of the men and women were denied allowances. Both sexes have equal rights to vacation, sick leave and childcare. Most of the interviewees indicate safety in the working place, separate toilets and transportation after night shifts.

82 percent of the male interviewees and 68 percent of the female interviewees are members of the trade unions.

The representation of women in these associations is 65 percent. Only 12 percent of the women see this as acceptable, while 89 percent are content with this representation. More than half the respondents of both sexes do not know whether their trade union protects the rights of female journalists. Membership to the pro-government ‘Belarusian Union of Journalists’ is required for those working in the government media. However, as noted by participants of the focus groups, protecting journalists is something “only written on paper”. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (uniting mainly non-state media workers) provides its members with legal assistance.

### Self-determination in the workplace

Despite the fact most content of all media in Belarus is created by women, only 20 percent of women can “always” decide the content of their work. For their male colleagues that number is more than twice as high. This is probably due to the fact that almost 50 percent of the men work as freelancers.

12 percent of the female participants claimed



**There is a silent agreement through society and among the journalists themselves: “Well you should know very well... What do you expect with two children?”**

they cannot influence news coverage or opinion in the media they work in, whereas none of the male respondents claimed to share this issue.<sup>25</sup>

15 percent of the female respondents have no possibility at choosing the theme of their journalistic content, while their male counterparts think they always have this opportunity.

### Most male journalists work in the following thematic areas (in order of precedence):

1. Human Rights<sup>26</sup>
2. Culture and Art
3. Politics and Administrative Issues
4. Economics and Business

### For women this ranking is as follows:

1. Culture and Art<sup>27</sup>
2. Education
3. Environment and climate changes
4. Human rights

The participants in the focus groups pointed out that although it is believed women mostly cover social issues, in recent years more women are writing about politics and economics. In small publications, journalists (regardless of sex) are involved in all subjects. Many women also write about sports in Belarus. When addressing the typical female

25. If the participation of government and non-government media in the survey had been even, the results would have been different as there are several themes that government media do not deal with.

26. This result is somewhat misleading, since most male journalists taking part in the survey are members of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) and deal with issues concerning freedom of the press and human rights. In the state-owned media these themes are commonly not dealt with.

27. Since there were few interviewees from the government press this result might also differ from an average ranking.

professions, participants in the focus groups said: “You will never find a male accountant on the editorial board and all the proofreading is done by women”. 4 percent of female journalists write about new technologies, which is half compared to men.

One journalist taking part in the focus group from Brest considered it to be ‘positive discrimination’ when male colleagues are sent to cover protests instead of women. Due to there being a risk of violence. On the other hand, a female journalist from Vitebsk stressed that sending women to cover events where they could be exposed to high risk, would not be an appropriate act to impose gender balance.

## Harassment and threats in the working field

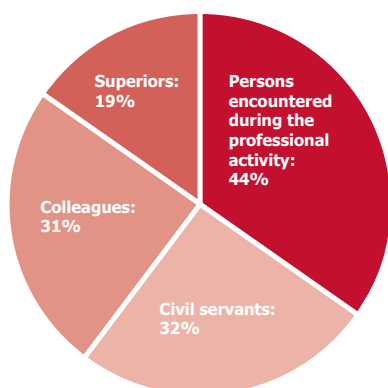
Half of the interviewed men and women face harassment and threats in their professional work. How often and from whom is presented in following charts:

PER CENT OF THE INTERVIEWED:	MEN	WOMEN
Have encountered harassment “often”	7%	6%
Encountered harassment “sometimes”	27%	20%
Connected this with their sex	0%	24%
Had witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace	15%	20%
Had been subjected to sexual harassment	0%*	22%

\*Men noted that they had been insulted, but that the insults were not of a sexual nature

(The research included in total 129 respondents, of which approximately two thirds were women)

**The perpetrators of sexual harassment towards female journalists were:**



More than half of the female journalists did not report the abuse. Of those who did, 56 percent told a friend about what happened and 33 percent told a colleague or superior at work. None of the interviewees turned to the trade union or the police. Only 6 percent of the respondents said their publications have a policy on sexual harassment and a system for grievances.

*The female journalists listed the most effective measures to combat sexual harassment in the workplace:*

- Better information on sexual harassments among women
- Strict laws and to raise awareness among men (were of equal priority)

*Male journalists answered the following way:*

- Better information among women
- Strict laws
- Systems for reporting, disciplining and adjudicating all sexual harassment claims

The participants from the focus groups indicated that they had not met “direct” sexual harassment at their workplace. They explained this to be because those working within the media are “intelligent people with high education”. However, they still believe women are more vulnerable sexually than men.

Many of the interviewees, especially female journalists, expressed “it is necessary to conduct oneself and dress in such a way that the superior does not molest you sexually”. This is an example of the current misogynistic environment, where women have themselves to blame for the violence committed against them.

One journalist said she was subjected to sexual harassment when returning from work one evening. Another indicated that incorrect statements about gender from both men and women annoyed her. Yet another participant stated she often faced problems when conducting interviews in the offices of officials: “As soon as they see that a woman is there, they start flirting or they don’t accept you as a full-fledged conversation partner. I even had to ask once ‘Do you think that I am not able to answer or explain my thoughts just because I am a woman?’”

One journalist pointed out that it is also very difficult to prove harassment in Belarus. Especially if the culprit is a superior to an ordinary employee.





Focus-group in Vitebsk. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

### Ways to promote gender equality

52 percent of the female journalists who responded to the questionnaire thought their workplace did not have any gender policies, while 39 percent of the male journalists agreed. Moreover, 57 percent of the female journalists believed gender policies can promote gender equality in media workplaces, compared to the 32 percent of male journalists. 62 percent of all the respondents believed that the media environment in which they work promotes gender diversity and equality.

### The most effective strategies in promoting gender equality in the workplace are (in order of priority):

1. Control of labour protection.
2. Encouraging checks on compliance to gender policies in organizations.
3. Flexible working hours.

The participants from the focus groups believed that controlling the implementation and enforcement of gender policies in employment is necessary. Additionally, they think that there should be a systematic approach to gender issue and that “the media by themselves will not solve the problem”. The majority of participants were of the opinion that there is a need for education on gender equality.

# Interview

## Sergei Rusetskii

Sergei Rusetskii (33) has been a freelance correspondent for the independent TV channel Belsat<sup>1</sup> in Vitebsk for about a year. His educational background lies in history and ethnology.

Before moving to Vitebsk, Sergei lived in Minsk and taught ten different disciplines at the Belarusian State Academy of Arts. Along with history and ethnology, his subjects included political science, law and intellectual property. At the same time as teaching, Sergei also worked with several NGOs and human rights organizations. Sergei has been working with Belarusian websites for many years as a freelance journalist. He started moonlighting as a journalist in order to increase his income as his salary at the Academy of Arts was only about 300 US dollars a month.

“Despite working in this field for many years I do not consider myself a journalist. I work in journalism for the money, and for a change of scenery and occupation. Our country’s education system is in a deep crisis. The education system is very ideological in nature. There was no place for my political views in this system, which ultimately rejected me. The job offer at Belsat came at the right time”, says Sergei.

Previously, Sergei mostly wrote about opera and cultural and social themes. “For example, I wrote an article about home birth. I chose the topic myself because I am an ethnographer, and hold gender/

family issues close to my heart. At the time this was a new theme for Belarus”, Sergei recollects.

Sergei contributes to Belsat mainly by providing news stories. However, he would prefer to deal with very different issues: “I am interested in human stories. If I could choose, I would focus only people, their problems, their lives, their fortunes, rather than the official events I cover for the Belsat. Human interest stories help focus on major problems, including social ones.”



Sergei is not surprised gender stereotypes are common among his fellow Belarusian journalists and in the state media.

“Such views and stereotypes cannot be changed solely by administrative methods in the editorial office. However, social consciousness can be changed through positive state policies and the activities of public and educational organizations. Of course, properly implemented gender-related educational pro-

grammes in editorial offices may contribute to solving this problem”.

Sergei provides an example of the editor-in-chief of one state newspaper, who “suddenly began writing detrimental articles on the LGBTI community under pseudonyms: to ban, segregate and send them to concentration camps”. When it became known that a man in one of the villages from the region changed his gender, “the editor ruined the life of that man, despite the fact that all ordinary villagers knew about it and always got along well with him.”

These publications created a big debate about the ethical standards of journalism in non-government mass media and whether journalists’ are responsible for the possible consequences of their publications.

“This example exposes not only the state of our media, but also the state of our society. However, every year the Belarusian society becomes more progressive and tolerant on gender issues. First and foremost are the youth. So, this has nothing to do with state policy not providing gender education. Today, thanks to modern technologies, everyone has access to all kinds of information. People travel abroad. The Western wind is felt now more and more”.

Sergei claims the role of women in Belarusian society is very complex and ambiguous. Many women cannot create their own identity, he says: “Women’s emancipation in the country originates from the Soviet era. My mother did not have a husband when she gave birth to me and was being convinced that she would cope alone managing both

1. Belsat is an independent TV channel with headquarters in Warsaw, one of the EU capitals.

childcare and her job. In this country, women used to work as miners, tractor drivers and pilots. That being said, at the national level women do not take part in political decision-making. Whilst on the one hand our society is highly feminized, on the other it is very patriarchal. It is not clear whether women ascended the throne or are oppressed. I think women are the stronger gender: their life is harder. They surpass men in many ways”.

Women make up most of the employees in the Belarusian mass media and girls dominate among students at the Faculty of Journalism. However, the majority of top managers in the mass media are still men. This is not due to a difference in professional qualifications, says Sergei: “In mass media women and men are equally qualified, regardless of their gender. Yet men predominantly occupy senior positions while women work as rank and file journalists. This is not an indicator of different qualifications, but an indicator of the power structures”.

In recent years, the image of women in the Belarusian mass media has changed. Sergei adds, “We have a lot of successful women and these examples are shown in the media. The image of a successful woman is now very popular. Many women now choose a career and money. Therefore, I do not think Belarus is a nation lagging and everything needs to be so dramatic. The only thing we have too much of here, are patriarchal attitudes. However, as we can see, even these do not interfere with activities of the enlightened and progressive thinking people”.



The Belarusian mass media like to position themselves as European, but are staffed with people that carry a huge number of stereotypes, including gender ones.

#### FACTS

Belsat TV is the first independent TV channel and broadcasts in Belarusian to a primarily Belarusian audience. It started broadcasting in 2007. The headquarters are located in Warsaw. The TV channel is run under the aegis of a Polish state-run television company and headed by the Polish journalist Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy. [www.belsat.eu/en/](http://www.belsat.eu/en/)

Vitebsk is a regional centre in the northeast of Belarus.  
Population: 376,000 people.

This interview with Sergei Rusetskii took place at a hotel in Vitebsk on the 23rd September 2016.





Photo: Sergey Nikonovich

## EQUALITY IN EDUCATION JOURNALISM TRAINING

Both the female and male participants from the focus groups think that men and women in Belarus have equal rights to journalism education and equal rights to develop professionalism.

Higher education is considered important for both men and women in Belarus. However, it is mostly women who study journalism at university. There are two reasons for this phenomenon. The first was voiced during a meeting from the focus group in Minsk, where it was noted that one reason why mostly women choose journalism as a career is because it is not difficult to study. For many women, the most important element is to acquire a higher education irrelevant of subject. After that, “it is very important to get married and become a mother; one’s career is not that important”. It should be mentioned that 75 percent of all those who graduate

from the faculty of journalism do not work as journalists.

The second reason is that journalism is not a well-paid job in Belarus, which is why men are becoming less interested in the profession.

During the Soviet era journalism was a well-paid job and a profession mostly occupied by men. Since then there has been a gender shift in the field. However, despite the qualifications of female and male journalists often being equal, men still attain leading positions in the profession. One participant from a focus group in Brest said: “In the political power structure, mostly men are represented, this is reflected also in the positions of editor-in-chief in state mass media, as these positions are appointed by the government”.

A survey carried out during our research showed

60 percent of those working in mass media have higher education or higher journalism education. The level of education for men and women working in mass media is equal.

The focus groups showed that most of the female and male journalists had taken part in professional training courses. They thought there was no gender discrimination concerning which participants were chosen for the courses. However, some of the participants thought that an age limitation takes place quite often, which they considered discriminatory. Most of the further training courses available for those who work in mass media are devoted to improving journalism skills. Usually various NGOs and foundations organize these training courses, as well as the Belarusian Union of Journalists and Belarusian Association of Journalists.

Nearly 80 percent of the interviewees pointed out that their employers give them the opportunity to study or develop their skills. 90 percent of the interviewees have taken part in training organized by their employer, journalist union or NGOs. Only 4 percent of respondents think that women and men do not have equal rights at participating in training. 15 percent of women were refused training or promotion due to their sex, while men did not have such experiences at all.

During the last 12 months, only 5 percent of the interviewees have not taken part in any training.

Two thirds of the interviewees took part in training that concerned techniques for professional safety. However, the employer organized only 12 percent of such training.

The issue of providing training on gender problems provoked some very unusual reactions during the various focus group meetings. In Brest, the question provoked laughter. In other focus groups there were moments of irony. The participants pointed out that gender concerns are not an important issue for them personally or for the country, let alone in the mass media. They have more important problems such as freedom of speech and low salaries. Most participants viewed such training as not a priority. That if they had the time to take part in some form of training it should be concerning “practical journalism”. One female participant added “maybe it is good such programmes on gender education do not exist. that means that not everything is bad in our society”.



**The focus groups showed that most of the female and male journalists had taken part in professional training courses. They thought there was no gender discrimination concerning which participants were chosen for the courses.**

The focus groups showed that gender training on a regular basis is only given in one of the papers in Vitebsk and is organized by the owner of the newspaper. This is a unique example in Belarusian mass media and clearly depends on the owner's personal interest in gender problems. She (Olga Karach), as editor-in-chief, thinks that such training is important for developing gender sensitivity in the editorial office, and ultimately to shape local opinion. During the focus group meeting in Minsk, one female journalist said that she once took part in training concerning gender sensitivity.

The survey showed that 76 percent of the interviewees had not attended training concerning gender problems. Journalist unions and organizations carried out 44 percent of the gender-training courses, while 33 percent of these courses were organized by NGOs and international organizations. Employer's only organized 11 percent of these courses. Opinions concerning gender-training courses for journalists were divided: 25 percent think that there is no need for such training, 32 percent think that such training helps improve the working environment. 25 percent think that such training makes media content better.

Participants from focus groups in Minsk and Vitebsk think that it is not possible to solve the wider gender issues with gender-training in the mass media. Education concerning gender equality should start in school.



## Gender representation in Media

An important part of this research concerns gender representation in Belarusian media. The media plays an important role in supporting or challenging existing gendered stereotypes in Belarus. The questionnaire was employed to investigate the representations of women in the news. The focus groups investigated and discussed images of different gendered stereotypes present in Belarusian mass media. The discussion revealed that both male and female interviewees think that women in the news are portrayed as "negative stereotypes". It was also stated that women are seldom portrayed in media as experts or leaders. Male interviewees commented that women are often portrayed as "someone who demands and deserves constant help".

In order to promote gender equality in the news, both men and women believe editorial offices need:

- More female journalists and editors
- More women in leading positions
- More gender sensitive male journalists

“

We do have female experts, but they do not want to comment, they do not want to take part in public discussions. Women are less ambitious than men.

According to the Global Media Monitoring (GMMP) and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), 79 percent of all the reporters in Belarus are women. Additionally, women produce 74 percent of all journalism content. In spite of so many women working in the creation of media content, media content continues to be unbalanced when it comes to gender representation. Very seldom are women presented as experts on important themes such as politics and economics. Women are mostly represented by their "socio-natural" functions as a mother.

Mind maps were created during the different focus group to discuss various portraits and descriptions of women in the mass media. All focus groups described the stereotypes of men and women in Belarusian mass media in more or less the same way. It was noted that women are mostly represented in a sexual nature, as housewives, mothers or housekeepers who are in need of help from a man or depend on a man. Men are shown as leaders, politicians or officials. The man is portrayed as someone who defends and "makes money". The more negative images of men connote them as being alcoholic and idle.

Women are seldom represented as experts in Belarusian mass media. They are only portrayed as experts in fields that concern education, culture, social issues and family themes. The overriding opinion from the focus groups was: "We do have female experts, but they do not want to comment, they do not want to take part in public discussions. Women are less ambitious than men".

Participants from the focus groups noticed that during the last five years, more programmes about women who are successful in business and family have been made. However, most of these positive



Photo: Elena Jerzdeva







## Gender stereotypes presented in the mass media play an important role in supporting the present patriarchal structures of gendered roles in the families.

programs are connected to the stereotype of “the modern woman is successful in everything”. These programmes are mostly published in non-government press. In state-owned press, the “mother cult” image is still widely spread.

Many programmes on TV portray women with social problems, as drug addicts, criminals, or women who abandon their children. There is a very popular programme that features girls looking for “men, who are a little older, with money”. One “cult” programme on YouTube called “Mad Mashka” shows how women teach each other “to get money from men”. The mass media create gender ideals and project examples of gender behaviour. Consequently, gender stereotypes presented in the mass media play

an important role in supporting the present patriarchal structures of gendered roles in the families.

One young participant from a focus group noticed that society expects too much from men and that these expectations are present in the content of the majority of mass media. Men are expected to earn more money, support a family and not show emotions. “All of this is a heavy burden on men”, whereas on the other hand “a woman should be a mother, she should get married and give birth to a child”.

Normative gender identities and traditional families are presented at the forefront of mass media. Many acknowledged the discriminative language used to describe women as sex “objects” or with lower intellectual capability than men. Some of the interviewees noticed the stigmatization of LGBTQI<sup>28</sup> communities and the obvious hostile language used during such coverage too.

The language of Belarusian mass media is male-centred.<sup>29</sup> The masculine form is still used while describing any sex, which in itself is a form of discrimination against women. In permitting the masculine form to prevail when naming a profession, the mass media continue to create a reality where men are given the active role and women are not.

Only recently has a more democratic media started to raise questions about gender language.

All focus groups had the task of creating mind maps in order to address different gender representations in the mass media. The results show nearly all participants agreeing on the mass media supporting existing gendered stereotypes. Additionally, it can be concluded that the mass media creates an inaccurate image of the roles carried out by men and women in Belarus today. Before the mind-maps the participants from the focus groups insisted there were no gender problems. However, the participants came to the conclusion that they themselves should re-evaluate the gender content they create. Self-reflection and educational training in gender ethical content will promote this.



Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

28.LGBTQI stands for Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and Intersexual

29.Not only the language in mass media is male-centered, but in almost all spheres of the Belarusian society. Although, a trend can now be seen with individuals and organisations that are challenging this norm by using modern gender linguistics.





Summarising the focus group in Minsk. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva

## ANALYSIS

Approximately 70 percent of professionals in the mass media of Belarus are women, and the number of women involved in the creation of media content is growing. Women work successfully at a middle management level. However, access to well-paid, high-ranking positions in this field is difficult for women, and most well-paid senior management positions are occupied by men.

Consequently, careers in the media are losing prestige and journalism is becoming a “female profession” due to its increasing accessibility. However, men still constitute approximately one third of the media professionals in Belarus. According to the survey, men are either in well-paid senior positions or find additional work to generate extra income. As discussed previously, the average salary for a journalist is only 300 USD, which often requires an extra income to make ends meet. This in turn makes it difficult for women to find financial independence and

opportunities to fulfil professional ambitions when their other job is to take care of the children and household.

Men and women have equal possibilities to study journalism, so this is not a cause of the gender imbalance in senior positions. One reason for this imbalance may be the negative perception of female leaders widely spread in Belarus, particularly within the media. One common opinion that circulated during the focus groups and interviews was that “a female leader is not a woman but a man in a skirt”. Interestingly enough this was expressed more often by the female journalists than their male counterparts. This demonstrates how such views are spread among journalists and might shape general opinion.

The respondents claimed men are considered more competent than women; therefore, men are more likely to receive a promotion. It became clear that in Belarus your career depends on your contacts and

your level of “protection” as well as your level of professionalism. This expose some of the corrupt tendencies still present in the employment process.

One of the main reasons for the low representation of women in senior positions is the impossible task of combining family and career responsibilities. A task made more challenging as the workload and responsibility increases with each promotion. Most families have patriarchal structures, which means almost all the housework and child-caring is carried out by women. The myth about equal relations between men and women goes back to the Soviet Union and is upheld today at the expense of women. Where the situation of working mothers can be described as “double and triple work”. Due to the patriarchal division of labour, female journalists have fewer opportunities to occupy senior positions. As a rule, women who have reached these positions either have the support of a partner, other family members or have grown-up children.

There are many laws in Belarus aimed at enabling mothers to combine family and work responsibilities. However, in reality these laws are either seldom applied or the social conventions of family traditions hinder the reality of these progressive laws. Hence paternity leave for fathers is rarely utilized.

In Belarus, maternity leave can last up to 3 years and for ordinary journalists, maternity leave does not become an obstacle in their career. People can continue working part-time or from home on a fee basis.

60 percent of the female journalists claimed their employer supports their return to work after maternity leave. Other social security benefits such as sick leave, child allowance and so on, are positively viewed.

Journalism is a low-income profession in Belarus. Roughly an equal number of men and women receive the average salary of USD 300. Mostly female journalists earn below the average, while male journalists earn above. Due to the difficulties in feeding a family on this salary, 80 percent of the male journalists and 40 percent of the female journalists have secondary incomes. Salaries in the media have decreased over the last year due to the economic crisis in the country, particularly for non-government outlets that do not receive subsidies. For female journalists, this is a significant loss of economic independence. Simultaneously, an outflow of

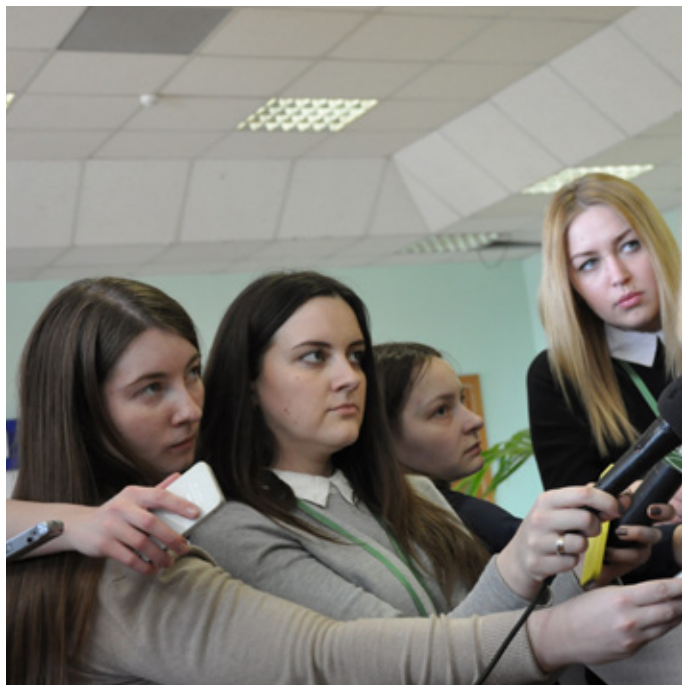


Photo: Nataliya Rublevskaya

male journalists seeking other professions with higher wages has taken place; another factor contributing to the feminization of the profession.

### Discrimination and harassments

Gender-based discrimination is forbidden in Belarus by law. However, newly married female journalists and mothers are subjected to more discrimination, especially when looking for jobs or promotion. This is based on the assumption women will inevitably become less dedicated to their work. To prove such forms of discrimination is difficult and the social norm (for women) is to accept such circumstances.

Female journalists also have difficulties in proving instances of sexual harassment.

More than 20 percent of the interviewed journalists have experienced sexual harassment in their workplace and almost 15 percent of male journalists have witnessed such harassments. In most cases the culprits were people the victims had encountered during the course of their professional duties.

There are no official policies on preventing, reporting and disciplining cases of sexual harassment in more than 90 percent of the editorial offices. In addition, many journalists do not have sufficient knowledge on what defines verbal forms of harassments.

Despite the fact that most of the media content in Belarus is produced by women, 80 percent of female journalists say they have limited influence over the content of their work.<sup>30</sup> This is explained by both format and editorial policies, but also by the restrictions and censorship of themes in government media. Even though female journalists traditionally write on social and cultural issues, recently an increasing number of female writers deal with politics and economics. This is due to the majority of the media workforce in editorial offices are women. However, only half as many female authors write about new technologies in Belarus than men.

However, even large numbers of women involved in the production of media content can alter the wider gender imbalance in the media. Women rarely act as experts on important topics such as politics and economics, but more often in fields of culture, education, social and family life – areas traditionally defined as “female”.

The images of men and women portrayed in mass media generally maintain gender stereotypes and patriarchy. Women are portrayed as either sex objects or as mothers and wives who are mostly supported by men. Men are represented as competent leaders and breadwinners. The media actively promotes these stories of “male” and “female” roles, which reinforces more traditional views on what these roles should entail. As a result, the media construct a reality in which women become invisible and men more active. The images created by Belarusian mass media are far removed from reality.

Mainly normative gender identities and traditional families are portrayed on the pages of Belarusian mass media. Furthermore, the media have supported the stigmatization of the LGBTQI community carried out by the state. The language used to cover this topic in particular can be characterized as hostile.

Many female journalists lend support to misogynistic inclinations when they too support notions of “a female leader is not a woman but a man in a skirt” or that women “have themselves to blame”.

If women have suffered forms of sexual harassment it is because “we need to behave and dress in such a way that the manager at work will not harass us”. These points of view act as a platform for discriminatory attitudes and contribute to the inequality



**The media actively promotes these stories of “male” and “female” roles, which reinforces more traditional views on what these roles should entail. As a result, the media construct a reality in which women become invisible and men more active.**

ties seen within the profession. When these opinions are conveyed by the media and by other women, it legitimizes misogynistic attitudes and becomes a normative indicator of how women should be perceived and treated.

Training programmes among media professionals are organised by employers, trade unions and NGOs and are equally available to men and women. This form of training mainly deals with journalism practice. There is feeble training on gender issues. Some journalists and reporters have never heard about such training and only about 25 percent of the respondents have had any training on gender issues.

The study revealed a discrepancy in the presence of gender issues in the country. On one hand, those who work in the media believe there to be no gender issues in Belarus and issues that do prevail are not serious. With many believing these problems are artificially constructed by international institutions and NGOs to create internal instability. While on the other hand, everyone recognizes there are not enough women employed in senior positions, including the media industry. The discussion on gendered images portrayed in the media proved fruitful. It “opened the eyes” of the journalists and showed them that they need to rethink the gender content they produce. Processes of self-reflection and educational training would help support these changes further.

More than half of both the male and female journalists claim their employment institutions do not have any policies addressing gender issues.

30. 52 percent of the male journalists claimed the same.



# Interview

## Marina Kornieva\*

Marina (27) works as a journalist for a weekly news paper in the culture department. Her educational background is in Philology. Initially she worked at the newspaper as a proof-reader.

 "In parallel I began to write and that's how I became a journalist. A friend of mine said she could not imagine me in any other profession. Although I never thought I would ever work in journalism", Marina says.

Marina enjoys writing about cultural issues. She comments that, "writing in this area requires a lot of knowledge that needs to be constantly updated". Understandably, Marina was ambivalent when the chief-editor proposed she'd start covering economic and political issues: "I find these topics very interesting, but you need a deep knowledge in order to understand them. I did not have the qualifications to become immediately well versed in economics. Although, the fellow who used to cover these topics in my opinion was not very proficient in these matters, still he wrote about them. I think it is not in a man's nature to feel diffident about their competence". Yet Marina has already begun writing about the economy: "Writing about politics requires abandoning my favourite cultural topics because being a political observer is very complex and time-consuming".

Except for the chief editor, the photographer and the two people who deal with the layout, all the editorial office employees are women. This is typical for Belarus.

Marina explains: "In my opinion the problem is that currently journalism is considered a woman's job. Men do not stay long in this profession because the wages are low. It is believed that women do not need to provide for the family, so they can be paid less. Working in mass media gives little opportunity at seizing professional ambitions due to the political situation in the country, where journalism as the fourth estate has been heavily compromised. Plus, men want to earn more and have a prestigious job".

In recent years, the economic crisis in Belarus has provoked a major crisis in independent mass media (state-run media are subsidized by the state). The advertising market has been reduced to a minimum. Consequently, many editorial offices of independent newspapers have introduced a 4-day working week and reduced the size of newspapers. Like the majority of her colleagues from the editorial office, Marina has a salary of about 150 USD per month. Salaries for journalists from the state-run media are known to be much higher.

"I like my job very much, but my salary is too small. I make ends meet only because I live with my parents. I cannot afford to rent a flat with my salary. I am a grown-up woman and want to be independent. That's why I wish I could change

my job. When I told a colleague about it, she said: "Maybe you'd better find a "papik"?"

"Papik" implies a man, often older who supports a young woman. This phenomenon is quite common in Belarus. "Many, including my female colleagues, do not understand that this is not a normal relationship. They do not realize that they insult both themselves and me. Unfortunately, sexism, racism and homophobia are normal features in our editorial offices" says Marina.

Marina is the only person at the editorial office who reflects on the issue of gender equality and expresses her opinion. "I am the only one who is trying to somehow analyse content from a gender perspective. For example, this may be about maintaining a balance of male and female characters in our articles, but it is very difficult and often impossible". There are no local experts on gender equality in Brest and it's extremely difficult to publish material on gender issues. There isn't any training on these topics in editorial offices either: "Tracking media content by gender criteria is my personal initiative, not an editorial policy. If there are colleagues in other media outlets who too follow these problems, it is due to their erudition and personal interest", she says.

Marina notices that even when articles discussing this new phenomenon of non-traditional gender roles appear, they usually contain a lot of stereotypes. For example, she mentions an article about single fathers: "On one hand it's good such topics are raised and exemplify the men who take on

parenting responsibilities. But whilst these reporters describe these single fathers as hero's they do not write a huge number of articles on single mothers, who often have a dubious reputation. This is because they believe this is the norm and nobody is interested in normal".

Staff at the newspaper consists mainly of either unmarried or divorced women. Marina wishes she could have a partner and family, but "I would like to have a partner who would understand the conditions of my job and that I often work in the evenings. It is also clear that if we have children, we should spend equal time looking after the children. Unfortunately, there are very few men (almost none) who are ready to equally share the responsibilities of the household and children with women. I also do not want three-years of maternity leave, which means three years of isolation from society. Of course, that would affect my career".

Indeed, equal partnership in a family is uncommon even among Marina's peers. "Even if a woman has a leadership position and earns more, she still bears all household and childcare responsibilities". This perception of gender roles is reflected in media content, Marina adds: "If a successful woman is interviewed, she is bound to be asked how she manages to combine family and business. Men do not receive such questions".

Marina does not have high hopes for her career in Brest mass media. "Moving to another publisher will not advance my carer or financial



I am the only one who is trying to somehow analyse the content from a gender perspective.

situation", she says. In mass media, men occupy the great majority of leadership positions: "...being subordinated to a woman is considered inappropriate. It immediately raises the question of professional competence. Women

are more likely to be perceived as homemakers, as someone who must raise the children. A man's opinion is considered to be more important than a woman's. This is because Belarus is quite a patriarchal society".



Street scene in Vitebsk. Photo: Elena Jerzdeva



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### (1) Media Houses/Industry:

- Create an independent institution to monitor content produced in the mass media on issues concerning gender ethics. This organization could have the following tasks:
- Consult mass media on how to promote gender-sensitive content.
- Receive and solve complaints against sexist content and commercials.
- Criticize mass media using sexism or gender stereotypes.
- Publish a list of female experts in all fields on a permanent basis, especially in politics and economics. This list should be forwarded to the editorial offices.
- Promote permanent trainings courses on gender-sensitive content in editorial offices in order to eliminate gender stereotypes in mass media
- Provide antidiscrimination training concerning LGBTQI in editorial offices.
- Create editorial rules or improve the existing rules aimed at promoting gender equality in editorial offices. An ethics catalogue on gender-sensitive content should be created.
- Establish an institute of ombudsman/ombuds-woman to control and defend the rights of female and male journalists in trade unions and in editorial offices of more than 50 people. Special attention should be given to women with children during the procedure of employment.
- Start a women's organization in the trade unions or independently from them, in order to lobby group for the interests of women at the editorial offices and governmental structures.
- Recommend all editorial offices have a special policy concerning sexual harassment and create channels for disciplining and reporting concerns, threats or acts of sexual harassment.
- Organise targeted campaigns among male students to attract men to the profession and create a balance of sexes in journalism.
- Recommend that employers create a flexible working timetable so employees can combine work with family obligations.
- Create special programmes on radio, TV and sections of newspapers to cover gender themes.
- Form a working group consisting of female and male specialists in philology and journalism to develop a catalogue on gender linguistics and feminist/feminine expressions in the Russian and Belarusian languages.

### (2) Journalism Education/Training:

- Develop training concerning gender equality, with a critical approach to the traditional understanding of male and female roles. Implement this training at all levels of education, starting at kindergarden and schools.
- Introduce mandatory courses on gender equality in higher education, regardless of their profile.
- Develop and include mandatory courses on gender-sensitivity for those studying journalism and pedagogics.
- Create training programmes at institutes/universities on gender equality for specialists. For example, media pedagogues should be given additional specialization in gender ethics.
- Prepare and publish manuals on gender equality for all levels of education.



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ТО ЭТО ПРАВДА

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