On October 5, 2017, the New York Times broke the news of Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein’s sexual assaults against women. More than 40 women have accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct spanning nearly three decades, and the New York Times found he had reached at least eight settlements with female accusers. Once published, the Weinstein scandal sent shockwaves through the media, setting the stage for an avalanche of sexual harassment claims against powerful men. Though the mass media has previously reported on sexual harassment in recent years – most notably accusations against Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, and Bill O’Reilly – Harvey Weinstein’s fall from grace marked a pivotal moment in the history of sexual harassment at work. The #MeToo campaign emerged, and the ripple effect spread into TV news itself. Four powerful male broadcasters were exposed for inappropriate workplace behavior in the two months following the ousting of Harvey Weinstein. The national reckoning on sexual harassment created an opportunity for networks and newsrooms to examine these issues within their own industry. For one female executive at a network bureau, it showed her how gender bias in journalism is alive and well.

It hit me with Weinstein. It really hit me while I was on video conference call, and some of our bosses in New York were saying, ‘So you think this is a west coast problem? You think it’s just a Hollywood thing? Is that why it’s called the casting couch?’ And then one of them said, ‘I wonder if that’s happened to any woman in
this room.’ I just stared at him in shock for a moment, and said, ‘Ask the woman to your left. Ask the woman to your right.’

At a time when sexual harassment in newsrooms has become topical, I conducted anonymous interviews with nine women and men working in television and digital news in Washington about their experiences with gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the profession. My findings paint a picture of an industry in flux that still has gender discrimination ingrained in its culture. Don’t get me wrong: positive strides toward gender equality are being made. Young journalists with less experience in the industry are optimistic about being seen and treated as professionals, regardless of gender.

Yet on a daily basis, simply for being female, women still have to overcome workplace hurdles that men do not face. Female journalists experience discrimination based on perceptions about female abilities. They experience sexual harassment ranging from comments about physical attributes to overt physical contact. The majority of the men I spoke to generally did not notice discrimination against women, or they thought that it did not exist anymore in the workplace. Though there appear to be more women in entry-level positions than in the past, the numbers dwindle as women try to crack the glass ceiling and enter higher management and executive levels. A boys’ club culture persists and still has the power to exclude women from professional opportunities. However, there is potential for a more collaborative work culture to emerge as television news evolves. The men and women I spoke to are hopeful that diversity and equality will prevail as the television news industry adapts in response to viewers who consume news in new non-traditional ways.

The five women and four men that I interviewed hold a variety of different positions in TV and digital news in the Washington, D.C. area, with experience in the
industry ranging from less than two years to more than thirty years. African-Americans, Asians, Caucasians and Hispanics are represented. Of the women, I spoke to a 23-year-old researcher at a network, a 23-year-old associate producer in D.C. local news, a 23-year-old political digital producer at a network, a 28-year-old political reporter at a network, and a 49-year-old network bureau executive. Of the men, I spoke to a 26-year-old White House digital journalist at a network, a 27-year-old researcher at a network, a 28-year-old political journalist at a digital broadcast news outlet, and a 49-year-old video editor at a network. Five different news organizations are represented. All interviews were conducted after news of the Harvey Weinstein scandal broke.

**Us versus Them: Gender Roles at Play in the Newsroom**

Each person I interviewed agreed that there are plenty of women working in broadcast journalism, especially in the physical newsroom. They all have had female managers, work closely with women on a day-to-day basis, and one even works on an all-female team. They felt the ratio of female journalists to men, for the most part, was fairly even. According to the female political digital producer, “When I was a news assistant, I felt we were very female-dominated. In my experience, a lot of the entry-level positions are always more girls than guys.” In theory, the perception of female abundance nowadays in broadcast newsrooms makes sense, considering that women make up more than two-thirds of graduates with journalism or mass communications degrees. But perception is not reality. A [2017 report](#) from the Women’s Media Center found that at ABC, CBS, and NBC combined, men report *three times* as much of the news as women do. Among producers, men produce 55 percent of the news, and women produce 45
percent. Across all news platforms men outnumbered women, yet the TV gender gap is the starkest.

For the most part, the young women I spoke to felt like equal players in the newsroom, and did not harp on gender defining them professionally. As a woman pointed out, “I think it’s really important for me to start out by saying I don’t really classify myself in the workplace as a woman first and then as a digital producer. I see myself as a digital producer.” However, every woman I spoke to could recall examples in which women were treated a certain way based on gender, or were held to different standards on account of being female. The men reported no instances of personally experiencing or observing gender discrimination.

For one female political reporter, the overemphasis on female appearance takes a toll. “When I wake up in the morning, especially on the campaign trail, I need an extra 20 minutes, maybe 30 minutes if I have to do my hair, set aside for just getting ready. Especially in an industry where you’re up late at night and up early in the morning, those 30 minutes can often be the difference between burning out or not.” A male researcher echoed this double-standard. “People talk about females’ looks more, for sure,” he said. “Especially in broadcast, that’s often the first thing others say when they mention a female anchor or reporter.” Also, every person I interviewed commented on the underrepresentation of female anchors the three flagship news networks.

None of the broadcast network flagship evening news programs are anchored by women. Every person I interviewed agreed that the makeup of the evening nightly news anchors clearly demonstrates the gender bias in broadcast journalism. “I would love to see more women leading the evening newscasts because right now women are really only
leading the midday newscasts,” the female political digital producer explained. “At night, it’s all men.”

When it comes to differences between men and women who have the same job title, the female bureau executive offered an example when it comes to the perception of young journalists starting out as off-air digital journalists who have on-air ambitions. “When the male producers have on-air ambitions, everybody thinks ‘oh that’s really great.’ When the women have on air ambitions, they think, ‘Oh she just wants to be on TV.’ There’s a different feel in how people feel about women and men wanting to be in front of the camera.” The male digital political reporter also noticed how cable hosts are expected to ask different questions based on their gender. “For men, it’s like, ‘What are the facts? What’s the historical context?’ For women, cable hosts are always like, ‘Well, how did the voters feel? When the president said that to you, how did that make you feel?’”

The three youngest women described instances in which they felt at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts, especially when just starting out in the industry. The political digital journalist mused, “I think as a young woman it was really hard for me to speak up and voice my opinions when I was in my entry level job.” The researcher noted that she has a tendency to say “sorry” and take blame for things that aren’t her fault, a trait she feels is uniquely female, in all industries. “I notice that guys that are exactly at my same level will not admit fault for those same things, it’s like they want to project the blame and won’t take responsibility if it could be traced back to them,” she said.
The 23-year-old female associate producer in local news described how she is stereotyped at work based on her age and her gender. It is a common occurrence for male colleagues to see her hyphenated last name and assume she’s married. Her male reporter will argue when she asks him to tape something for her show. One older male colleague in particular talks to her like a child, never using a stern voice. “I’m like, ‘Why don’t you use the same talking voice you use while talking to a man?’ That bothers me,” she said.

At first, as a 23-year-old producer, she assumed the discrimination she experienced was age-driven, not gender-driven. But she developed a method to discern between the two.

This is what I do – I always imagine myself as a six-foot white man. An attractive one, who has broad shoulders, the same age as I am. I’ll come into a situation and ask myself, “Is this a gender thing?” I’ll ask myself, “Well if a man has a hyphenated last name – as a six-foot white man – would he get the same question? As a six-foot white man would this be happening to me? If I asked someone to tape a tag, would I be getting pushback?” I don’t think so.

What Men Don’t See: Sexual Misconduct and Harassment

Women in broadcast journalism are harassed, sexually and non-sexually, on a regular basis. The Harvey Weinstein scandal has yielded a cascade of newly reported instances of sexual harassment in news organizations, publically exposing Mark Halperin, Michael Oreskes, Glenn Thrush, Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer for their inappropriate behavior. However, most female journalists I spoke to are unlikely to speak publicly about their personal experiences with sexual harassment. In fact, the women I spoke to who experience harassment regularly said they have internalized it as normal. Sexual misconduct and harassment has long been considered among women in the industry as “too common to report,” or something they “have to endure” because it is part of the job.
The four men I spoke to acknowledge that sexual misconduct does occur, yet none of them had personally experienced or witnessed sexual harassment, or harassment at all, in the workplace. As the male researcher described, “I assume girls have to worry more about creepy guys at the office, and guys saying inappropriate things to them. As a male, I don’t think I have to worry about that nearly as much. But that’s just a guess.”

Sexual harassment or misconduct can be overt, or it can subtle. The 23-year-old female political digital producer described experiencing subtle misconduct in her first news job as guest-greeter, interacting with many high-profile congressmen and journalists. “They would make innocent comments like ‘Oh, you look so pretty today.’ They were very innocent, but in a professional realm there are things you say and there are things you don’t say,” she said. “I mean as a woman I micro-analyze, and when you get 20 micro aggressions, you analyze everything to the core.”

The 27-year-old female political reporter, on the other hand, experiences sexual and non-sexual harassment on a nearly daily basis. From a reporter’s perspective, sexual harassment is just another aspect of the job at hand. Reporters need scoops, and people do not usually give out information sitting at a desk. They give it to reporters at a bar over drinks, in social settings. According to the political reporter, her relationship with male sources is often quite precarious. “It’s not weird to get calls late at night in the journalism industry, but it is weird when the person on the other end of the phone is like, ‘You know, my hotel is a mile from where you are right now,’ and you have to be like, ‘No, I’m not interested in that,’” she explained. Another part of the job is developing tactics to prevent the possibility of sexual harassment. She described,

I tend to wear a diamond ring on my middle finger usually when I’m out so that if I feel uncomfortable I can quickly flip it to my engagement finger, because as
much as I resent the idea that a man will stop hitting on you when he knows you are owned by another man, I still think it’s better than having the awkward conversation of, “Hey, listen, this is a work thing, not an otherwise thing.”

For this political reporter, expectations and pressure from her network force her to navigate the hyper sexuality of these precarious situations. She believes women journalists more often have to navigate their male source relationships more carefully than their female ones. She also believes it’s something men don’t have to think about at all.

Yet the vilest attacks she has received come from internet harassment. While on the campaign trail, she received a series of death and rape threats on Facebook and Twitter. “They were pretty graphic, things like, ‘You’ll look good in a body bag, or ‘I hope someone throws your body in a pigsty,’” she described. As horrific as those attacks were, she emphasizes how disappointed she was in how her network handled the situation. Her male boss essentially told her to shrug it off and stay off Twitter for a few days. In contrast, her boyfriend (a political reporter for a competing network) received a long anti-Semitic email, and his network put him on a Sunday show to talk about it. Her boyfriend’s experience with harassment ended up being as a professional advantage for him. She analyzed,

Women rape allegation, women rape threats? Standard. A man experiences anti-Semitism? Goes on a Sunday show and talks about what it’s like to cover Trump while being Jewish. It was just one of those moments where I was like, hmm, OK. We’ve accepted it as normal that women have to deal with death and rape threats, the answer being maybe stay off Twitter for a while. A platform I use because it is my job. So, stay off your job for a little while, versus going on a Sunday show to talk about how unfair the harassment was. Unacceptable.

In addition to her personal experiences with harassment, the political journalist expressed frustration about the press seemingly still turning a blind eye to coverage of
sexual assault allegations. Shortly after the Harvey Weinstein story broke, she recalled an hour-long press briefing with President Trump, in which it took 30 minutes for anyone to ask the President about Summer Zervos’ sexual assault lawsuit against him. “To me it was such a moment of the implicit gender bias because so many of the men that were called on were not talking about it,” she lamented. “No one was asking Donald Trump the President of the United States about sexual assault, Harvey Weinstein, #MeToo, any of that. It was nuts.”

Like the 28-year-old political reporter, the 49-year-old network bureau executive also detailed her extensive experience with sexual harassment. By extensive, she meant that she experienced sexual harassment hundreds of times spanning her nearly 30-year career. It was so prevalent, she described a man rubbing his penis against her as a “regular hello” in her career. “It wouldn’t even have occurred to me to report that because it was so prevalent when I was younger,” she said. “Thank God it hasn’t happened to me lately, but it could.”

The network bureau executive expressed frustration with men in the industry who appear to turn a blind eye to the prevalence of sexual harassment against women, or men who don’t see it happening at all. She explained,

I think guys just don’t see it. But then they also say, “If I haven’t seen it it’s not happening.” And it’s like, you wouldn’t see it. People don’t usually assault women in public. You get assaulted in the edit room when you’re alone with the editor, and he starts rubbing your shoulders and then rubbing himself into you. That happens. He doesn’t come up and massage the shoulders of his male producer. The male cameraman doesn’t go rub the shoulders of the male producer who is standing at the live shot with him. They have no problem doing that to a woman.

Fighting the Glass Ceiling and Resisting the Boys’ Clubs
The fear of eventually hitting the glass ceiling looms over women in broadcast journalism who are climbing the industry ladder. Nevertheless, among the youngest batch of journalists I spoke to, the glass ceiling represented a metaphorical concept too far away to fully grasp how it would affect them personally. Though they acknowledged that they believed the glass ceiling did exist for women in the industry, they didn’t elaborate on how they saw it influencing their career trajectories. When the female associate producer in local news worked in network news, she observed men in her news associate program being promoted before the women, even though the women outnumbered the men. The male digital White House journalist I spoke to did not feel like there was a glass ceiling at all. “The women I work with have big career ambitions just like most of our other colleagues do, I don’t think that they see any limits on what they’re going to be able to do,” he said.

Yet the only woman I spoke to with high-level management experience told a different story. For the network bureau executive, the glass ceiling is very real, and she is very close to hitting it. From her observations, women think they will continue to rise up in the company, but they eventually hit an absolute cap, despite the growing number of women in the newsroom. “The newsrooms are run by women,” she said.

Women are really good organizers, really good executors, really good managers of people. And the men think big thoughts. It frustrates me so much because when I look at say the corporate boards or the executive boards of news divisions, you’ve got your CFO, you’ve got your news president, you’ve got your senior vice president of news gathering, your senior vice president of news programming… They’re all men. Why? Because we hire people who are like us.

Mentorship plays a huge role in the cyclical nature of appointing people to executive leadership. Male executives begin to mentor and nurture their male protégés early on, prepping the younger men for a succession plan. According to the network
bureau executive, “As you start mentoring people you pull each other up. And when you get that high, the oxygen gets very thin for women.”

The male political reporter at the digital news outlet also expressed dismay at the lack of women at the executive level. He asked, “If you look at the cable landscape or the networks in the traditional media, how many women are in charge? I’m not talking about the Andrea Mitchells or the Katy Turs, I’m talking about people who are actually running the networks.” He observed that big network decisions are made by straight white cisgender men. “They have experiences that matter, and they bring a certain something to the table. But the world doesn’t look like that.”

All the women I spoke to emphasized the positive influence female mentors have had in their early careers. Multiple women praised their strong relationships with their female bosses, and some even said they do not think they would have gotten their jobs if a woman had not hired them. As the 28-year-old political reporter observed, “The true moments where I’ve been able to stretch outside the box of what my job actually is, learn new skills, get new opportunities, those experiences have come under women managers.”

Though the women I spoke to have benefitted greatly from their female mentors, the network bureau executive painted a grim picture of female camaraderie as fewer and fewer women arrive at the glass ceilings limits. “At the round table of executives, there are probably ten executives and two of them are women, usually representing HR or PR,” she explained. “Women push down other women because there is only room for two.” The “boys’ club” culture persists, making it harder for women to breach the glass ceiling and join the executive ranks. She recalled a network executive retreat she went on to the
Bahamas. Two events were offered: you could play golf or go get massages at the spa.

She explained,

Where are those friendships made? Those kind of networking moments where you find somebody who you didn’t know before and think, “Oh! You could be very valuable to me and my career.” You create that relationship while you’re playing golf and drinking beer and having a good time together. And the next time you have a question, you pick up the phone and it is easy to call them. Well, the women over in the spa getting their massages will never have that relationship and never be able to pick up the phone and call that person. And that’s a very typical thing that still happens on executive retreats.

At the point when she became a network bureau executive, all of her bosses became men, and the reality of her situation hit her. “I probably have one more level I can go and not feel like I’ve totally hit the glass ceiling,” she said. “In some ways, I think it will be my last job.”

The Future of Women in Broadcast Journalism: Hopeful Progress in the Digital Age

The structure of broadcast journalism is rapidly changing in response to technological advances and the rise of the internet. The male video editor said, “Broadcast television news is going to change dramatically when 100 percent of the people get the news off their phones as opposed to a nightly newscast.” As television news evolves in order to stay relevant and competitive with digital news platforms, the majority of the journalists I interviewed are at least somewhat hopeful that the restructuring of broadcast journalism will foster diversity in the industry. The 28-year-old female political reporter said, “I think women are equipped for that shift because there’s a creativity and a collaborative nature to being female that I think newsrooms can benefit from, and certainly you need to continue to push newsroom to continue diversifying.”

The male political reporter who worked for a digital news outlet echoed this point of view, describing his newsroom as female-driven. “From my experience, the company
culture never feels loaded with all of the history of old boys’ clubs because it wasn’t built like that,” he explained. “The company was built by a woman in charge, so she sets a tone of ‘we don’t play like that.’ It makes it very easy because I think women set a different tone of what’s acceptable, and also what the culture is like, than what a man would do. And this is coming from a man.”

Also, the male political reporter’s digital news outlet is made up almost entirely of journalists of the millennial generation, which he believes greatly influences the inclusivity of the company culture. “Everyone feels like they have a voice, and that’s something that’s very explicit when we hire people,” he described. “That we all have a voice and we want to hear what you have to say.” He envisions a more racially diverse, more female-driven future of broadcast journalism in the digital sphere that is changing to reflect how the nation has changed. After all, “Journalism has to change with the people who are watching it.”

In sum, the Harvey Weinstein scandal created a ripple effect in the broadcast journalism industry that opened the door for women to speak more openly about the discrimination and harassment they face. Men and women are optimistic that more public attention on the issue will foster positive change in the industry’s professional culture. However, the female network bureau executive raised a sobering point about the state of female broadcast journalists in 2017. She believes female journalist still have not publicly said enough to demand equality in the broadcast news industry, but there’s a catch-22. Even in the age of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, women who speak up for gender equality are susceptible to professional backlash that could damage their careers beyond repair. In her words,
We as women know it’s a problem and we haven’t done enough. We haven’t done our #MeToo. We haven’t said enough. And what’s holding me back is I’m a divorced single mother of two boys. I can’t jeopardize my children’s future by walking away from this job. So, I’m going to bite my tongue. I’m going to keep my mouth shut because I want to be present when those jobs open up. I want to fight for them.
References

