



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# Behind the lens: Recruiting & retaining women in the news camera department

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# Preface

This report was prepared by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News Camera/Editor Maxine Collins. It is the product of a three-month industry-sponsored fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by the BBC.

Maxine has been filming international network news for the past 30 years – 20 of those for the BBC.

*“Without a wide range of backgrounds, perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of working, we immediately limit our creative capacity.” - BBC Diversity and inclusion plan 2021-2023*

# Introduction

When making a news story for broadcast, teams of two or three people work together in the field. The cameraperson makes decisions of shot choice and perspective. In addition, they may also discuss the story, scripting and carry out the edit.

The camera and equipment can be intimidating or collaborative: it matters who is behind it, their inherent beliefs and assumptions, and how they connect with the interviewee and the team.

Variously referred to “camera crews”, “shoot/edits” “camera/editors” or “camera operators”, BBC News employs around 150 people in this role worldwide but, as of December 2023, only about 5% are women.

While television news viewers see the reporter in front of the camera delivering the news, these statistics mean that major news events reported on UK television are almost always being framed by a male camera operator.

Other British international news networks have similar statistics: of the news cameras operated by Sky News and Independent Television News (ITN), (who employ camera operators making news for ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5), only 7% of the camera crews are women according to figures compiled in December 2023.<sup>1</sup>

I have been filming international network news for the past 30 years – 20 of those at the BBC. I have used my fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism to take a snapshot of the situation on the ground, collate feedback, and offer new ideas to improve this gender imbalance.

To do so, I spoke to more than 20 of my camera department colleagues of all genders, interviewed women who left the department, as well as those who chose not to join it – despite having the relevant skills. I also talked to at least 10 colleagues working in management, the BBC apprentice training scheme, and in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) team. Finally, I consulted with thought leaders, media researchers and managers at related news organisations.

What I found was that, although the number of women in the BBC camera department has not been increasing, earnest work is being done to address the gender imbalance. Can we identify why there is a disconnect between action and

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<sup>1</sup> These are figures that were collated for the first time for this project, and I will continue to collect them annually so that progress can be mapped.

results? Are there additional steps that could be taken – both in recruitment and retention – to fill this gap and effect change?

It's been well-documented that diversity is not just “nice to have”: it increases [innovation](#) in teams, helps [prevent group-think](#) and [stereotyping](#), and [improves our journalism](#) by providing the opportunity to better connect with interviewees and audiences.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

There are other demographics to consider when it comes to the BBC's newsgathering camera operators: our age skews over 40 and, while socio-economically diverse, staff are mostly white. Diversity of all kinds is needed and while this project will focus on gender, I hope the recommendations will encourage diversity of all kinds in the department.

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<sup>2</sup> Østergaard, et al. *Does a different view create something new? The effect of employee diversity on innovation*, Research Policy, Volume 40, Issue 3, 2011, pp 500-509

<sup>3</sup> Kamalnath, A. (2017). *Gender diversity as the antidote to “groupthink” on corporate boards*. Deakin Law Review, 22, 85–106. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.361435134502026>

<sup>4</sup> Price, K H et al. *Time, teams, and task performance: changing effects of surface- and deep-level diversity on group functioning*. The Academy of Management journal. 45.5 (2002): 1029–1045. Web.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/11/the-moral-case-for-diversity-in-newsrooms-also-makes-good-business-sense/>

## What is the current situation?

The news industry has long struggled with gender diversity. The BBC has celebrated its success in addressing this and is moving towards [50:50](#) male-to-female representation on screen.<sup>6</sup> But behind the camera, things are very different.

We know the person behind the camera can have an outsized influence on both the final story and interviewee. So who is behind the camera in BBC Newsgathering?

As of December 2023, women accounted for approximately 5% of BBC Newsgathering camera crews worldwide, including the UK. Among BBC Newsgathering camera crews employed in foreign bureaus, approximately 4% are women. Only one freelance female camera operator is employed in BBC Newsgathering in the UK.

The figures have not changed for several years, despite increased gender equality in other areas of the news industry and technological advancements that have resulted in lighter equipment that lessen the physical demands of the job.

The camera department has low staff turnover, leaving a lower number of entry points for new talent. When young people (including women and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds), do join the department – the majority via the apprentice scheme – they are often not retained for long.

Every team benefits from a range of viewpoints and creative input when a diversity of backgrounds is brought to bear on how we frame our stories.

### Benefits of change in summary

- Better connect with audiences through range and approach to stories.
- Increased creative capacity in a team with different perspectives.
- Reduced risk of stereotyping and blind spots.
- Fulfilling the BBC goals and obligations of diverse staffing.
- Change itself can be a catalyst for the retention and recruitment of more women and diverse candidates.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/5050>

# What is currently being done to include more women?

Existing BBC efforts to promote the inclusion of more women in this role can be categorised in three broad groups: recruitment, training, and retention (via improvements of policy and environment).

## Recruitment

Paul Maguire has been an Operations Manager of BBC News Camera Crews for close to 10 years. Speaking about the BBC's recruitment efforts, he told me: "Upon bringing you into the team we will move heaven and earth to get you trained up on whichever of your skills need developing, we'll also bring you up to speed on BBC workflows and nurture/mentor you while you're here, whatever your background."

### An overview of recruitment efforts

- Care is taken over the wording of job advertisements, following best practices of inclusive language.
- Flexible working hours mentioned in job advertisements.
- There is an emphasis on lighter kit in job advertisements to avoid perception that physicality may be a barrier to the job.
- Job interviews are conducted by panels of mixed gender and race.
- Value-based and behaviour-based interviews are conducted – meaning candidates are asked questions that assess their alignment with BBC values, culture, and mission, as well as past behaviours and experiences. Both approaches are known to produce a fairer assessment of competencies, reduce stereotyping, and reduce unconscious bias.
- Prospective candidates complete a practical shoot test and an edit test to ensure fair selection and promotion practices, based on merit.
- Applicants with less experience who nonetheless fit value and behaviour criteria may be offered a short contract and BBC specific training to improve candidate experience and perceptions of BBC and encourage talented people.

## Training

The [Broadcast Technical Operator apprenticeship](#) is promoted in schools and attracts several hundred candidates from a range of diverse backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [https://careers.bbc.co.uk/content/EC\\_Advanced/?locale=en\\_GB](https://careers.bbc.co.uk/content/EC_Advanced/?locale=en_GB)



The process is reported to be thoughtfully orchestrated and produces a diverse cohort with much potential.

Emma Bentley, (shoot/edit 2019-2022) who came to the BBC via the programme, told me: “I wanted to join the BBC from about the age 15. They advertised these BBC ‘Get in’ days through the academy. So from that age, I’d go to those, and I’d introduce myself to the scheme managers. So when it did come to applying, they were like, ‘Oh, that’s that annoying girl who keeps coming and pestering us! And they gave me a chance’”

### **An overview of apprenticeships**

- Outreach is made to schools in a range of socioeconomic areas, and workshops are held in collaboration with RISE Gender in Media organisation.
- Care is taken over promotional wording to follow best practices of inclusive language.
- The support and guidance available to apprentices is stressed on the programme website and technical knowledge deemphasised.
- Salary and benefits are communicated clearly on website.
- Careful attention is given to visuals used on the academy website where roles are advertised: pictures feature women and diverse apprentices.
- Applicant selection goes through several stages, but assessors are not looking for memorized knowledge. Instead, care is taken to identify candidates with potential, passion, and situational judgement through strength-based interviews.
- Creative task tests are completed over a specified time period, away from the interview to avoid stress-based responses.
- Interviews are conducted by mixed gender panels.

# What else could be done?

While many individuals and departments are doing great work, the overarching reason for the absence of change in the gender balance in the camera department appears to be a lack of cohesive focus and priority given to it.

In a department with such an acute imbalance, all measures that can reasonably be taken should be deployed. Feedback should be acted upon with a readiness for change, taking into account that what works for the existing department may not be effective in retaining younger and more diverse staff.

In the interviews that I undertook, including with women who had left the department, many additional ideas were suggested. I summarise some of their suggestions, along with ideas from my research across the industry, in four broad categories below.

## 1. Reinforce recruitment efforts

Increase the focus on recruiting qualified women when jobs are available: instead of waiting for women to apply, in order to correct the gender imbalance, the BBC should proactively seek out skilled female candidates (from inside and outside of the BBC) and remove barriers to their recruitment.

### How to reinforce recruitment efforts

- **Go and find candidates** Identify talented female candidates and invite them to apply when jobs are advertised – including potential candidates from Nations and Regions, Video Journalists, apprentices, and women working outside the BBC. This should not only apply to full-time UK positions: actively recruit female freelance camera operators and foreign bureau staff.
- Require that women be among candidates shortlisted for jobs before carrying out interviews.
- **Make HR policy clear to candidates** The [BBC Supporting Working Lives policy](#) includes provisions for parents and caregivers. It should be displayed on job advertisements and discussed with all applicants at interview to counter misconceptions that women can't continue to do the job after having children or that men will need wives at home in order to have children. Multiple women mentioned unclear parental policy as a deterrent to the role.
- **Consider positive action** [Positive action](#) is a set of government measures to “improve equality of opportunity” by providing “specified ways to recruit or promote candidates”. It allows employers to legally choose a female candidate if two equally qualified candidates are identified.
- **Flexible working policies** should be put into practice fairly for all roles, and especially those roles that have traditionally not been done flexibly. Flexibility

should be trialled and tested, to help create a culture where flexible working is encouraged.

- **Management accountability** During management’s performance appraisals make “progress towards diversity of the department” a factor that is part of the evaluation.

## 2. Make pathways for in-house talent

Image and intimidation can be barriers to entry to the camera department for female internal candidates. Shoot/edit Kat Werner told me: “It took a long time to make the switch from producing because I found it quite intimidating to actually march into the crew room and ask for help. Once I did, everyone was *beyond* supportive and helpful. But, from the producer side, the crew world seemed to be its own little bubble. Maybe that has to do with there not being many women.”

Video journalists (VJs) are a department within BBC News who combine the skills of journalism, shooting and editing to produce their own stories or collaborate with others. More than 65% women staff the department. While most are keen to preserve their combination of editorial and operational skills, those wanting to spend time in the camera department could be enabled to do so through the introduction of a formal rotation.

“I was interested in doing an attachment [to camera crewing],” VJ Laura Foster told me. “Although many people like me are very passionate about being a journalist who films and not losing the editorial side of the role, [a short crew attachment] would confirm if crewing is something I’d like to do more of or not at all [...] and at the very least it would improve my skills.”

Pairing VJs with crews could also lead to new ways of working. While some attachments are under way, formalising the opportunity could help. Other job roles at the BBC (such as editors with camera training) could also be invited to take advantage of the programme.

### How to make pathways for in-house talent

- **Create a Video Journalist rotation scheme** where each Video Journalist or edit/shoot is offered an attachment in the camera department, with relevant pay and training for the attachment period as needed.
- **Extend a formal rotation structure to employees** interested in camera work from other departments – an opportunity to shadow and then a commitment from both sides to a period of training.
- **Pilot a skills-based scheme** where a Video Journalist and a camera crew are paired together with a correspondent on a story. One would produce and edit the

story, while the other would gather footage and shoot lives with roles adjusted depending on story need.

### 3. Take steps to retain apprentices

The BBC Academy successfully recruits a diverse group of talent to the Technical Operator apprenticeship with at least 50% per year being female. Retention beyond the training period and immediate years after is problematic.

Most of the apprentices who specialised in camerawork since the apprentice program began in 2015 have now left national newsgathering camera crewing.

The following steps to help retain them could also be applied to the retention of any younger camera crews.

#### Steps to retain apprentices

- **Focus on key junctions where recruits need more support** Many people mentioned the end of the apprentice scheme and entry into the camera department as a time when more structured support is needed.
- **Mentors** Formalise a mentorship programme, including training for future mentors. New recruits should receive mentors as soon as they join the department with regular rostered check-ins. Care take over the choice of the mentor, ideally two – one just above the employee in the career structure and one senior camera crew.
- **Workshops** Increase opportunities for training by established camera operators while on the apprenticeship and after. Schedule workshops to share skills and best practice, and make time to attend them.
- Increase **job shadowing** opportunities. This is part of the apprentice programme, but it should continue once employment has started. For example: deliberately sending two-person teams on complex jobs to create opportunity for support and training for more junior camera operators.
- **Increase travel** During shadowing/training to give a deeper learning experience and more support before embarking on challenging deployments alone. Once on foreign assignments, start with a less challenging role (like a static live camera), and/or overlap with another camera crew on location so they can gain local knowledge and best practice.
- **Pay attention to the interests of the individual** and needs of younger staff and offer attachments on story teams, digital, social media.
- **Pay** Ensure that salaries for entry level camera operators are competitive with other news organisations and provide a clear structure for salary progression based on increased experience and responsibility.
- **Aim older** Some of my interviewees suggested taking people a few years older than school leavers into the camera department, rather than straight from

apprenticeship to allow time for familiarization with other departments first before working in the field.

#### 4. Create a more inclusive workplace

As we've seen and heard in multiple industries around the world, workplace demands are changing, and some parts of the department's organisation may need to be re-imagined in order to retain the next generation of recruits.

Research by [McKinsey](#) and the [Reuters Institute](#) show Gen Z (born 1997-2012) choose workplaces where they can see opportunities for personal development, flexibility, and meaningful work.

Camera operators at the BBC tend to work in a shift pattern, which, some reported, can contribute to a sense of isolation, and makes it difficult to maintain work-life balance.

More than this, young people also want a workplace that's inclusive and promotes the wellbeing of employees. The women I interviewed for this project raised red flags in this area.

One woman who used to work as a crew but switched to a VJ role told me she was repeatedly asked if she wanted to have children, and whether it would be possible to crew and have a family. "I was told I probably couldn't do it all," she said.

"I've only ever really thrived with certain management and been totally written off by [others] before I've eventually proved myself," one female camera operator told me. "To be trusted to be able to do the job is exhausting at times."

Another said: "As a woman, I feel like everyone doubts you by default and you have to work that much harder and come off that much more confident to show you can do even the basics of the job. If I show an ounce of questioning, it's seen automatically as not knowing what I'm doing [instead of me wanting to discuss our options]. I've learned to not ask for advice and just do my thing."

#### How to create a more inclusive workplace

- **Create a female camera champion role.** This person would highlight opportunities and raise issues with management, liaise with internal or external partners on best practice, and locate female camera talent for available jobs.
- **Gender neutral job titles** Opt for terms like camera crew, shoot/edit, camera operator etc rather than cameraman/woman. This is in practice in recruitment but not followed through on the job.

- **Be clear about benefits** Transparently outline parental leave allowances and other workplace benefits to address the concerns candidates may have related to family planning.
- **Schedule regular 1:1s** Check-ins with managers or supervisors should be built into the system: a chance to listen, hear about challenges, and adapt where possible when things aren't working.
- **Exit interviews** These should be carried out and acted upon.

To quote Dr Jill Armstrong, lead researcher on [\*Women collaborating with men\*](#):  
“People create culture, and people – individually and collaboratively – can change culture by creating a work environment [that] facilitates opportunities to succeed for diverse groups. [...] Inclusive cultures will not simply arrive on their own; we all have to do something differently.”

## Conclusion

Despite our efforts in recruitment, training, and retention, the gender balance among BBC News camera crews has remained stagnant for several years.

This is not a problem unique to the BBC – our 5% figure is not far behind Sky News or ITN at 7%.

We know the importance of diversity, not only as a moral imperative but also for its potential to enhance innovation, prevent groupthink, and improve journalistic storytelling. My interviewees underscored for me how diverse perspectives in news teams will lead to more nuanced and powerful storytelling.

It's been clear to me throughout this project that the organisation has talented people working hard to hire and retain diverse staff, but in order to progress, a cohesive push coupled with management accountability needs to be undertaken to close gaps, remove barriers, listen to feedback, and adapt operational practices.

Strategies proposed here include proactive recruitment of qualified women, formal rotations for staff in other departments into camera crewing and addressing workplace challenges such as shift patterns and cultural issues. The importance of mentorship, clear pay structures, regular training and exit interviews are also emphasized as crucial components of a comprehensive approach to improving gender diversity.

Gender parity behind the camera is a necessary next step for the BBC if we are to reflect and represent the full range of perspectives that our charter requires. By implementing these recommendations, the BBC can not only address the immediate gender disparity but also create a more inclusive and dynamic department that fosters the growth and retention of diverse talent into the future.