

Obstacles women Journalists face in the interwar year and how a few overcome them.

The interwar years were from 1919 to 1938 (Sparknotes.com, 2019). Prior to the war, women were subjected to the domestic housewife role. However, when their husbands and men went to war, women were allowed to participate in more public spheres of the working world in society however when their husbands returned, they “were expected to fit seamlessly back into their earlier subordinate positions” (McCombs, 2019). When women were in employment, they were mostly likely to be teachers or nurses (Striking-women.org, 2019). In the Journalism world in the interwar years, there was a huge disproportionate number of men in the field in contrast to women, as women were viewed inadequate to report the news (Fanks, 2013) and speak on political issues. As a result, many barriers were put in place so they could not attain a respected job in this industry.

Nonetheless, some determined, women defied the patriarchal norm in society and persevered, becoming renowned Journalists. The proposed arguments will explore how education, social class, Colour bar and marriage law were used as a tool to prevent women from being Journalists. It will also highlight how only a small number were able to be successful and make it in the industry and of the few, a large number of the women were from a middle-class bracket or had a high role in society. That said, when some overcame the initial challenges of inadequate education, they were mainly employed by women magazines, confined to the ‘women’s page or earned significantly less than their male journalist counterparts (Lonsdale, 2020).

The Education Act 1918, raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14 and abolished state elementary school fees, allowing girls to be better educated and “widened the provision of medical inspection, nursery schools, and special needs education” (UK Parliament, 2021). Nonetheless, there were many restrictions to their education as the teaching for girls primarily focused on domestic skills (Hughes, 2006), preparing them to be subservient to men and know their place – rather than teach vital maths and literacy skills. As a result of this, Journalism in the interwar years was almost exclusively a profession for those who were middle-class, who were able to be privately educated, have a tutor or pay for training with the money they had (Holloway 2005: 9).

In 1894, The Society of Women of Journalists was founded and within the first couple of months over 200 women joined (Clay, 2013). With this society, aspiring women journalist were able to go to lectures and have training in type writing, shorthand and develop writing techniques (Kent 2009). This allowed those who did not have the best education or the means to pay for tutors, to access some of the skills needed as a Journalists.

The Society’s bimonthly Journal, ‘Woman Journalists’ began in 1910 but decline and closed in 1921 (Kent, 2009). This showed to be another of many hurdles in the way of aspiring women Journalists. However, with perseverance it began again in 1923 with numbers remaining around 200 throughout the twenties and thirties (Clay, 2013). Of those within the society, members mainly wrote fictional pieces in the early interwar years. British journalist and author, Rebecca West launched her career through magazine Time and Tide. Most women without support of wealthy family or other sources could not rely on contributions to this to earn a living (Hall 1976: 93), as time and tide articles were exceptionally paid and were not able to pay as much as the daily mail (Woman Journalist, 1923).

Living in a patriarchal society, fathers and men in general had much control over what women did (All answers, 2018). However, for pioneer Journalist Sheila Grant Duff, she was not subjected to this as her father was killed in the war in 1914 (Cherness, 2004) and her brother killed in ww2. As a result of this, she used her freedom to travel around dangerous parts of Europe and report of her findings. “Many pioneer women were striving to get a toehold in the masculine world of

journalism during 20s and 30s – often using ingenious, dangerous or devious methods to participate” (Lonsdale, 2020). Sheila travelling on her own as young women at the time, was seen as an unsafe thing to do, and it goes against what their role in society was. Women who challenged their stereotype were often criticised (Colpus, 2018).

Sheila Grant Duff faced endless amounts of rejection trying to get into the industry. Duff’s close male University companions, Rees and Jay, “walked effortlessly into jobs at the Manchester Guardian and The Times retrospectively” (Grant Duff, 1982: 66). Meanwhile, this was the opposite case for her – following the interview Sheila was rejected by editor Geoffrey Dawson, and in the letter stated that she would be unfit to work in their office as a woman “The conditions of work in this office are such as to make it awkward to accept women as foreign subeditors ...” (Lonsdale, 2020 pp5) and suggested she should focus more on women things such as making fashion notes instead. Not letting this stop her in her tracks, she used a private income of £3 a week and went to Paris (Grant Duff, 1982). Grant Duff worked as an unpaid assistant in office of Edgar Ansel Mowrer. Not only was Sheila not getting paid for her work, but she also received letters from Mowrer which included sexist assumptions and stereotypes of women being correspondents, telling her to behave in a ‘more feminine way’ and to only listen and not speak on political matters (Mowrer, 1970). However, she decided to not listen to this and strived through the battles of the masculine world, gaining employment at The Observer (Wikipedia, 2020).

Across the board, for those who gained employment in the industry were hired by women owned magazines. On women ran magazines as they did not have the funds to pay as much as big newspapers such as the daily mail so were paid significantly less (The Woman Journalist, 1927). On papers such as the daily mail they were still paid significantly less than other male journalists’ pieces on other pages when their pages attracted more customers and earned the paper more money. But on women magazines it was even lower than that.

As a lot of women were the main bread winner of the family (Lonsdale 2016), they were faced with having to choose the decision of either: only writing about women related issues only and get a slightly better income or having more freedom on what write but paid less, possibly leading into financial hardship.

Furthermore, the British media often stereotyped women Journalists, suggesting that they are only care to write about feminine topics and babies (Peel, 1933). This is evidenced through a ‘how to’ manual which at the time was hugely popular amongst the readers – it encouraged women journalists to write about topics that could attract advertising and things that did this were topics about children and fashion (Bingham 2004: 18).

Although, numbers of females in the industry were sparse, they were still faced with backlash from males, arguing that women have ‘womanised the press’ (Fortnightly review, 1920). Editor of the Daily Telegraph, Sir John Le Sage was asked if he expected women Journalists to advance in Fleet Street, his response was: “...Where I see the greatest scope for their work is in relation to domestic interests ... education, the care of the sick and well-being of children.” (Woman Journalist Jan 1923: 10–11). This was the attitude across the board at the time toward women’s work.

To create more struggles, the Union of Journalists, who’s power was significantly increasing, restricted the number of girls allowed to be accepted on newspaper training schemes, limited access to newsrooms and enforced informal marriage bar (Gopsill and Neale 2007: 36–40). The introduction ‘marriage bar’ at the BBC was used as an instrument to stop women, especially those in

marriages from entering the industry, with the idea that the unsocial working hours would not be suitable for the demands of a wife (Murphy, 2014).

Nonetheless, middle-class wives, overcame this obstacle as they were able to free-lance from their homes and writing was often seen as a past time for them, while still being able to earn an income (Ferguson 1958: 118).

Pioneer and courageous writer, Una Marson was met with twin obstructions on her journey to Journalism (Lonsdale, 2020). As a black woman in trying to break through in this industry, she faced double as many than a white woman did because the colour of her skin. She arrived in England in 1932 with a passion for shining a light on the struggles the black community face (Eglen, n.d.). In London she was presented with the Colour bar and sexist patriarchy, which prevented her from finding work. Subsequently, Marson joined the League of Colour and campaigned about the racism in England (Eglen, n.d.). She overcome the obstacles she faced as a black journalist in England by expressing it poems, with one of the most recalled being 'Nigger' (Ford-Smith, 1988). In 1938, after travelling back to Jamaica then back to England, Una became the first black broadcaster to work at the BBC, after they employed her as a script writer (The National Library of Jamaica, 2017).

For twenty years, from 1919 to 1939 London university ran a small newspaper diploma and in the latter years, women began to outnumber men as students on the course (Mar 1926: 13), But nearly all men found jobs and only about half of women successful in entering the industry according to newspaper society representative.

When the second World War, women accounted for 20% of Journalists in Britain and by the end of the nineteenth century every national newspaper employed a minimum of one female writer (Hall 1976: 96). This shows that as society moved forward it acknowledged that women were adequate and an all-round Journalists, however it still shows a lack in numbers.

In conclusion, women Journalists received uncountable blockades thrown their way and much of the Journalism produced by women in the interwar years was domestically focused or restricted to the women's page. While only a sprinkle of lionhearted ladies was able to charge through the obstacles and overcome them with the means of money.