

## **Advancing Gender Equality in Media Ownership, Management, and Leadership**

A FOJO-CIMA Project  
Carolyn M. Byerly  
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### **Focus of this abstract:**

- How to advance gender equality in media ownership, management, and leadership

### **Main questions:**

- What are the gender equality dimensions of media ownership, management, and leadership?
- What are the key features of regulation that advance gender equality in media ownership, management, and leadership?

### **Gender Equality and the Media Landscape**

It is easy to think of “gender equality in the news” in terms of representation—in other words, whether there are equal numbers of men and women in television newscasts, or whether the news has abandoned stereotypes of men and women. These matter, of course. But, in fact, gender equality is much more than representation. While similar concerns relate to all forms of media, this discussion focuses on the news business, which represents a primary source of information for people the world over, as well as a major employer for millions.

Fairness and equality in practice are determined by who owns, leads, and otherwise controls media companies and production processes. Therefore, there is value in exploring these leadership levels of the news industry since those in them have the power to establish a value system, strategy for operations, policies, and practices that guide personnel in their management of companies, as well as the production of content that we, as consumers, see and hear. It is also helpful to begin with a working definition of gender equality, as well as an overview of structural shifts in the news media industries that affect the gender-related policies and practices of individual companies.

Gender equality is best thought of comprehensively, both in terms of equal numbers of men and women at varied occupational levels as well as in other aspects of a company, such as gender-sensitive workplace design, availability of training and advancement mechanisms, parity in salaries, and an overall environment of inclusion that allows those of all genders to feel affirmed and valued for their competencies and experience. If all these are in place, all employees will be able to perform at the highest standards of excellence.

The vision and policies that lead to these progressive pro-equality advancements arise from the direction of those who control and lead within the news business. News companies are part of broader media systems, of course—systems that are made up of small and large companies that operate various forms of communication—newspapers, radio and television stations and networks, cinema, book publishing, and a vast world of internet sites. These represent different media platforms and formats, which converge through digital technology today, in both developed and developing nations. Convergence allows those who gather and produce news to disseminate their content on several platforms, e.g., in both print form and on websites. However, it is the ownership and leadership of both smaller companies and larger operations, such as media conglomerates, that determine gender relations.

The term “gender relations” refers to questions of equality between men and women in terms of status and participation in the various occupational roles in news companies. For example, does the company have a stated vision that incorporates diversity in all occupational levels and media performance? What are the percentages of men and women on a company’s board of directors, in executive positions, or in mid-management ranks? Do men and women receive similar or equal salaries? Do companies have policies and practices guiding equality standards in relation to employment, sexual harassment, and other gender equality issues? Are there clear and stated remedies for discrimination? Do companies provide training, mentorship, and other mechanisms for advancement to both men and women? And how does gender equality in news compare with that in other industries?

### **Patterns of Inequality**

Many industries continue to marginalize women’s leadership. The World Economic Forum has reported that women account for less than 2 percent of the chief executive officers (CEOs) and less than 20 percent of executive board members in the banking industry worldwide.<sup>1</sup> One of the largest grossing industries in the world, pharmaceuticals, shows women grossly underrepresented in senior roles, with only about 10 percent at both community<sup>2</sup> and company levels.<sup>3</sup> The global Bloomberg Gender Equality Index allows news and other corporations to score themselves across five pillars: percentage of female leadership, pay parity, gender-inclusive culture, anti-sexual harassment policies, and having a pro-woman brand. Bloomberg’s 2022 report noted that out of 418 companies in 45 countries reporting, only 7.5 percent of the CEOs, 23 percent of the executives, 29 percent of senior management, 38 percent of middle management, and 50 percent of entry-level positions were filled by women.<sup>4</sup>

In relation to news, these figures are in line with what was found over a decade ago in the 2011 *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media*. That report, sponsored by the International Women’s Media Foundation, found women in governance (i.e., ownership and board) positions to be at around 25 percent globally,<sup>5</sup> though this varied some by nation and region. That same report found that gender disparities also existed in senior reporting, editing, and production roles in all nations surveyed except some in Nordic and Eastern Europe and in South Africa. The point to be emphasized here is that there has been little change in terms of gender representation in administrative positions within news organizations over the past decade, when comparing recent and earlier data.

Significantly, the commercial sector is where the greatest structural shifts have occurred since the 1970s, when many nations adopted policies of deregulation allowing larger, better financed companies to buy out (or merge with) smaller ones. In the news media, this process resulted in the rise of a few very economically and politically strong news and media conglomerates. For example, in Brazil, which has an extensive commercial media system but no laws or regulations limiting how many companies a single parent corporation can own, there has been rampant conglomeration since the mid-1990s, with

10 conglomerates controlling the majority of the nation's media companies with few women at the top. Indeed, media conglomeration has been shown to be associated with women's marginalization in the commercial media sector, in terms of employment, advancement, and equal representation in content. One reason is that those in leadership positions tend to hire others like them; therefore, it follows that male executives lean toward hiring other men to fill positions rather than women (this has also shown to be the case with race, ethnicity, and religion).

Male domination in news is widespread. In 2022, AT&T, reputed to be the largest and wealthiest telecommunications corporation in the world and the co-owner of the CNN (Cable News Network) Group, reported that women made up only about a third of its global workforce; just over a third (37 percent) of its top managers; and only 2 out of 10 (20 percent) of its board of directors.<sup>6</sup> Similar patterns exist in many nations. In Brazil, family-owned and strongly male-dominated news companies characterize the news business, the largest being Organizações Globo, which controls the television market—the most important media platform in Brazil, reaching 98 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup> Women in journalism in Brazil have fared poorly in advancing into leadership, both on governing boards (10 percent) and in top management (26 percent).<sup>8</sup>

Confronted with half a century of women's liberation and greater participation in the workplace, news organizations are challenged not only to survive in today's dynamic business environment, but also to achieve gender equality.

### **Signs of Progress**

If owners and executive leaders are forward-thinking and committed to gender equality, the entire company will reflect and benefit from this. Such efforts are going on worldwide and are worthy of discussion. Some of these are being led by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), in cooperation with intergovernmental organizations. For example, in 1992, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) adopted a gender equality protocol and has since provided guidance to news (and other) companies on its implementation. The South Africa-based group Gender Links, which coordinates the gender equality component for SADC, also monitors progress in the 15 nations of southern Africa. In 2018, Gender Links reported that its survey among 24 companies found that women held 36 percent of the positions in governance in the region's news companies, and 46 percent of the positions in senior management, but only 19 percent of the positions on boards of directors. The same report found a widening gap between men's and women's salaries.<sup>9</sup> Another NGO monitoring group, Free Press Unlimited, based in the Netherlands, has also examined gender equality progress in a number of African news companies and in 2020, the group identified only 10 of the 21 news companies it reviewed in Mali as having met its standards for gender equality. The 21 standards include having a policy on gender equality, at least 30 percent female board members, and comparable salaries for men and women serving in similar positions, among other things.<sup>10</sup>

Both of these examples from Africa demonstrate the value of monitoring gender advancement in news organizations. In fact, the practice of international monitoring dates to the 1970s when UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) funded a series of monitoring projects in various parts of the world to track women's participation in news, advertising, and other media. Monitoring allows for systematic assessment over time, and the collection of data, which are enormously valuable to those who advocate greater roles for women in the making of news.<sup>11</sup> The greatest example is perhaps the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), launched in 1995 in a few dozen nations. The

GMMP, conducted every five years mainly to determine the presence and participation of women in mainstream news content, also reveals the number of stories with a gender lens written by women reporters vis-à-vis those written by men reporters, among other things. In its last round, 116 nations participated.

Periodic industry reports can also be very useful. For example, Credit Suisse Research Institute's most recent report on gender equality shows that globally, there is an upward trend for women in senior executive positions and boardrooms, and that within those organizations where women advance, so does stock performance. The greatest progress has been in France and the United Kingdom; however, women have also advanced in company leadership in Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia.<sup>12</sup> These developments in the larger global business environment provide a context for those in news companies to take cues as to their own practices around gender balance.

Statutory mechanisms (laws) provide the surest and most uniform infrastructure for gender equality within corporations. In 2021, the nation of Morocco became the first in the Middle East and North Africa region to take the bold step of passing a law requiring public-limited companies to have 30 percent women's representation on boards by 2024 and 40 percent by 2027.<sup>13</sup> Only a few other countries—e.g., France, Norway, Italy, Belgium—have adopted similar approaches using quotas. To extend this requirement uniformly across its member states, the European Union issued a directive in October 2022 requiring states to pass national laws requiring that at least 40 percent of *non-executive director* positions in listed companies be held by members of the underrepresented sex by 2026. If member states choose to apply the new rules to both *executive* and *non-executive directors*, the target would be 33 percent of all director positions by 2026. Companies that do not achieve the objectives will need to adjust their selection process to meet the goals.<sup>14</sup>

### **Factors that Enable Equality**

There should be ample incentive for media owners, managers, and others in leadership positions to enact gender equality measures. In addition to specific professional skills that women bring to a job, they also possess knowledge and ways of working, acquired through their lived experiences, that can foster a work environment in which other women feel welcome, comfortable, and supported. Studies affirm this, showing a positive correlation between companies' adoption of gender-equality strategies like mentoring, skills training, leadership programs, and promotional opportunities, and the number of women who are hired and advanced into positions of authority.

As the Credit Suisse Research Institute report shows, when women increase in number on boards of directors and in executive-level positions, so do a company's profits. In other words, equality-oriented policies and practices appear to be key to raising gender equality within companies, and there is evidence that these also contribute to a company's financial health. The study by the Credit Suisse Research Institute examined 2,360 companies globally and found that companies with one or more women on their boards had better average growth and higher price/book value multiples over a six-year period. Fortune 500 companies with women on their boards also tend to be more profitable than those without women. Research also shows that a higher proportion of women on boards typically exhibits a higher degree of organization, above-average operating margins, and greater valuations.<sup>15</sup>

A report by the European AKAS organization released in November 2022 found that data from news organizations examined in six nations suggest that by closing gender and racial diversity gaps by even

one percentage point per year, new women audiences could generate \$11 billion over 5 years and \$38 billion over 10 years. This presupposes that once hired, these new women hires will have the freedom to expand news content to reach expanded women's audiences. One editor interviewed said, "The news model is broken in so many ways, and inclusion is one of the ways to survive."<sup>16</sup> My own cross-national research on women in news also affirms women journalists' greater ability to influence and increase media content about women as they near parity in news organizations.<sup>17</sup>

These important measures can be adopted by company owners and leaders through their own initiative, yet there is also an argument for statutory intervention at the societal level, as shown in the last section. Broader structural measures, such as national laws and government employment regulations, provide a legal framework for gender equality policies to be developed more uniformly by media and other organizations. Regional and international bodies can also create mandates and blueprints for equality. Various regional guidelines for gender equality, for example, have been adopted by the Council of the European Union since the 1990s, including a Gender Equality Index in 2017. These measures have targeted the elimination of gender stereotypes in media content, as well as the promotion of gender equality in professional media employment. However, research sponsored by the European Institute for Gender Equality found that companies responded unevenly to these directives across the European Union's 28 member states.<sup>18</sup>

Media companies owned and managed by women tend to be smaller in scale in terms of assets and number of employees yet provide the maximum possibilities for women to achieve leadership status. In 2020, Women Who Tech reported that women's information technology businesses grew at twice the rate of men's in that timeframe, and that they succeeded well financially. Still, one anonymous survey among those in the business found that nearly half of the founders said they had been harassed, mostly by investors in their companies, and that they had a more difficult time securing capital for expansion.<sup>19</sup> Such attitudes and behavior by men toward women have been documented in cross-national research since the 1980s—a definite problem for women since it suggests that, as the digital media sector grows, women may continue to own and control only a small share of it. Women's gender gap in telecommunication wealth will widen, in this case.

### **The Role of Trade Unions and Social Activism**

Trade unions for media and communication professionals, long the bastion of male dominance, began to address discrimination of women in journalism and other media professions in the 1970s, but more actively after women turned to them in greater numbers and began to assert themselves in leadership roles within those unions. In the mid-1990s, the National Union of Journalists in the United States established an equality council, but it seemed to have little impact on women's promotions. Ten years later, the International Federation of Journalists took on the problem in a region-by-region campaign to address attitudes toward women in the profession. Similar moves by Canadian and European unions have helped expand women's employment generally in news roles. Organized labor in the entertainment industry in the United States has led strikes that have forced better pay and work conditions, and women have risen into producer and other creative roles. Yet research shows women and racial minorities still fall behind in terms of numbers in top positions and in ownership. One study found that the percentages of women journalists in unions were relatively low internationally, suggesting that they do not benefit from the potential advantages that union membership can bring in terms of better pay and working conditions. However, in nations where women's leadership within trade unions is highest, women have also come to fill the highest percentages in media company decision-making roles. This is particularly true for nations

where the journalism profession has become feminized—i.e., where women’s representation in the profession surpasses men’s as a result of poor remuneration, among other things. Examples of this are found in Lithuania, Estonia, and Bulgaria. Conversely, in nations with the lowest representation of women in trade union leadership, women also hold the fewest positions in media management and governance.<sup>20</sup>

Feminist movements have seen the formation of support and advocacy groups for women in media professions like the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI); International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT); and Gender Links, based in South Africa. And, as mentioned earlier, the 16 nations belonging to the Southern African Development Community have adopted binding policy agreements to establish gender equality measures in employment practices and media content. Although the glass ceiling persists for women in media professions and company hierarchies the world over, women continue to push for egalitarian policies and workplaces, at the organizational, national, and regional policy-making levels.

In reflecting on how movements for gender equality have risen to reshape national and international political agendas since the 1970s, we can expect these to continue to influence the media landscape in multiple ways. This essay has focused primarily on the macro level of ownership and leadership at the top, with some lesser attention to activism and advocacy, which represent forces for change outside the formal structures. Legal challenges resulting in court rulings, massive demonstrations and worker strikes, and women’s formal lobbying for news laws and policies are additional factors that will impact gender relations in the media. These more confrontational measures can be avoided, however, when companies take their own voluntary initiative to adopt policies and practices that bring about gender equality and diversity.

### **Springboard for Action!**

The following are two examples of companies whose research and experiences show the effects of leadership’s commitment to advancing gender equality.

**Example #1: SembraMedia** conducts periodic research on 25 digital news start-up companies each in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico that launched with very little capital (most \$10,000 or less). Gender equality was central to most companies from the outset and in their business models. Research revealed that 62 percent had at least one woman among the founders and women in executive and management teams—especially significant in these male-dominant cultures. Some of the companies were feminist in their orientation, producing news specifically relevant to women, such as on wage disparity, domestic violence, and voting patterns. Without ties to either government or wealthy elites, others focused on what they call “insurgent reporting”—especially the concerns of young voters and social activism. For example, a story in Brazil’s *Justificando* revealed that anti-feminist and homophobic comments made by a judge candidate for the Brazilian Supreme Court had led the country’s president to rescind his support, resulting in the candidate’s withdrawal.<sup>21</sup>

**Example #2: Netflix**, the global streaming company based in California, started as a two-man partnership in 1997 with the commitment to be inclusive in its hiring of women, racial minorities, and others of diverse identity. The company has a business model that also encourages decision-making by employees and that “avoids rules,” focusing on a flexible workplace structure. Netflix’s 2021 annual report showed that women were 51.7 percent of its 10,000-member global workforce, and that included nearly half of

the directors and the company's female CEO. The company's workforce is also racially diverse, with more than a third of the Netflix workforce non-white.<sup>22</sup> These demonstrations of diversity and inclusion, which are highly relevant in reaching diverse audiences around the world, are subsequently also seen in the company's films and other products, which represent a range of languages, cultures, races, and topics. Netflix's business model was launched by two men, but they had a commitment to the principles of inclusivity in relation to gender, culture, and interest, both in the workplace and in their films and other products.<sup>23</sup>

## **Workshop Recommendations**

### **For media professionals/organizations:**

1. Adopt equality mechanisms.
  - Promote audience engagement by having reporters meet with members of the audience to discuss the content of TV news and other matters to build rapport between organization and audience.
  - Conduct audience surveys periodically to determine female interest and readership/viewership. This can affirm the kind of news and program content the company is creating for the female audience. (Example: In the United Kingdom, the BBC surveys audience members about how they understand news and what they need from news.)
  - Adopt newsroom policies for gender equality in work conditions and in content. Negotiate these with employees.
2. Increase profitability through women's leadership.
  - Hire and promote more women into leadership positions and allow them to bring gender sensitivity into newsmaking.
  - Adopt newsroom policies on content to expand the female audience, e.g., more gender angles in regular news and occasional "niche" stories for women, as well as better gender balance in content.
  - Develop innovative strategies for attracting a female audience, e.g., using Facebook or other social media.
3. Hold managers accountable for diversifying the newsroom and the newsmaking process.
  - Hold managers responsible for implementing labor laws governing women's rights.
  - Adopt newsroom-specific policies on gender equality in employment and news content. (Example: In Spain, companies with more than a certain number of employees must have an equality plan.)
  - Adopt management practices that are less hierarchical, e.g., avoid male-led editorial meetings.
  - Hold trainings for managers to raise consciousness about gender equality.
  - Expand investigative journalism into subjects that are traditionally (and wrongly) considered to be "soft" (or labeled "women's issues").

### **For civil society advocacy organizations:**

1. Promote regulatory models.
  - Use the Beijing Platform for Action (Section J) as a roadmap to develop strategies for convincing governments and news organizations to adopt equality measures.
  - Push for protective laws to stop violence against women journalists in traditional and digital media. (Example: In Mexico, there is a proposed co-regulatory model to address better coverage of femicide and protection of women journalists who report on it.)

- Push for requirements for quotas to increase the number of women in leadership within news organizations.
2. Build coalitions to advocate for equality demands and change in news organizations.
  3. Develop monitoring mechanisms to track change within newsrooms and news content. Use findings to build advocacy campaigns.

**For researchers:**

1. Investigate the female news audience regarding their attitudes to and consumption of news.
2. Examine news media ownership in terms of gender and the extent to which gender makes a difference in news operations and content.
3. Investigate whether women who are listed as “owners” of news media companies actually run them.
4. Investigate the gender dimensions of media capture (i.e., when media owners provide supportive news coverage to political leaders in exchange for favorable government treatment of their business interests).
5. Investigate whether having women leaders in newsrooms changes the culture of those newsrooms.
6. Examine reasons for feminization of news companies in some nations (e.g., Armenia, Bulgaria, Lithuania) and whether that influences news content.
7. Investigate whether and how the personalization of news content on social media attracts more women to the audience.
8. Explore whether journalism associations and unions have a role to play in setting new norms and standards for gender equality in newsrooms.
9. Explore whether and how social class/caste is involved for women who advance within news companies.
10. Investigate what constitutes a productive working relationship between news organizations and civil society advocacy groups.

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<sup>1</sup> See the World Economic Forum website for this report: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/women-in-banking-finance-an-economic-case-for-gender-equality/>.

<sup>2</sup> Community pharmacies provide pharmaceutical services to particular groups or regions.

<sup>3</sup> See the Vercida website for this report: <https://employerblog.vercida.com/gender-diversity-in-pharmaceutical-industry>.

<sup>4</sup> “Bloomberg’s 2022 Gender-Equality Index Shows Companies Increasingly Committed to Reporting ESG Data,” Bloomberg, Press Announcement, January 26, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/company/press/bloomberg-2022-gei/>.

<sup>5</sup> The *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* contained data from 522 companies in 59 nations in all regions of the world. See *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* (Washington, DC: International Women’s Media Foundation, 2011), <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” AT&T, 2022, <https://sustainability.att.com/priority-topics/diversity-equity-inclusion>.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Brazil’s news situation, see “The Communications Landscape in Brazil,” Jeffrey Group, n.d., <https://www.jeffreygroup.com/agency-perspectives/the-communications-landscape-in-brazil-our-perspective/>, accessed October 2022.

<sup>8</sup> For a more complete discussion of women in journalism, see Thais de Mendonca Jorge and Zelia Leal Adghirini, “Brazil: Need for National Debate on Women in Journalism,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism*, ed. Carolyn M. Byerly (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 211-225.



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- <sup>9</sup> For a fuller view of Gender Links' findings, see *Glass Ceilings: Women in South African Media Houses 2018* (Johannesburg: Gender Links, 2018), <https://genderlinks.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/GLASS-CEILING-FS-2018.pdf>.
- <sup>10</sup> "Ten Malian Media Organisations Receive Quality Label for Gender Equality," Free Press Unlimited, January 29, 2020, <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/current/ten-malian-media-organisations-receive-quality-label-gender-equality>.
- <sup>11</sup> UNESCO's periodic reports, *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development*, can be found at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends>.
- <sup>12</sup> For more highlights from the Credit Suisse Research Institute's latest Gender 3000 report, see "Credit Suisse Gender 3000 Report Shows Women Hold Almost a Quarter of Board Room Positions Globally," Credit Suisse Research Institute, Press Release, September 28, 2021, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us-news/en/articles/media-releases/credit-suisse-gender-3000-report-shows-women-hold-almost-a-quart-202109.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> Samia Moline, Onur Ozlu, and Lucas Herzog, "A Big Step Forward for Women's Leadership," *World Bank Blogs*, January 19, 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/big-step-forward-womens-leadership-morocco>.
- <sup>14</sup> European Union, "Council Approves EU Law to Improve Gender Balance on Company Boards," October 17, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/17/council-approves-eu-law-to-improve-gender-balance-on-company-boards/>.
- <sup>15</sup> See Carolyn M. Byerly and Katherine A. McGraw, "Axes of Power: Examining Women's Access to Leadership Positions in the News Media," in *Gender Equality in the Media*, eds. M. Djerff-Pierre and M. Edstrom (Gothenburg, Sweden: Nordicom, 2020), <https://www.nordicom.gu.se/sv/publikationer/comparing-gender-and-media-equality-across-globe>, 191-232.
- <sup>16</sup> Luba Kassova, *From Outrage to Opportunity: How to Include the Missing Perspectives of Women of All Colors in News Leadership and Coverage* (AKAS, November 2022), <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Outrage-Report-FINAL.pdf>, 222.
- <sup>17</sup> Carolyn M. Byerly, ed., *The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- <sup>18</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality, *Advancing Gender Equality in Decision-Making in Media Organisations* (European Institute for Gender Equality, June 2013), <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/advancing-gender-equality-decision-making-media-organisations-report>.
- <sup>19</sup> "The State of Women in Tech and Startups," Women Who Tech, 2020, <https://womenwhotech.com/data-and-resources/state-women-tech-and-startups>.
- <sup>20</sup> See Carolyn M. Byerly and Sharifa Simon-Roberts, "Women, Journalism and Labor Unions," in *Journalism, Gender, and Power*, eds. C. Carter, L. Steiner, and S. Allen (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2019).
- <sup>21</sup> See *Inflection Point: Impact, Threats, and Sustainability: A Study of Latin American Digital Media Entrepreneurs* (SembraMedia, 2017), <https://data.sembramedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Inflection-Point-SembraMedia-eng-7-20.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> Vernā Myers, "Our Progress on Inclusion: 2021 Update," Netflix, February 10, 2022, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/our-progress-on-inclusion-2021-update>.
- <sup>23</sup> See more about the company: "Netflix Culture—The Best Work of Our Lives," Netflix, n.d., <https://jobs.netflix.com/culture>, accessed October 2022.