

From Learners to Contest Judges - is gender balance being achieved in ringing?

Why is it that there is an even gender balance amongst ringers in the early stages of ringing, but the gender distribution changes at more “advanced levels”?

Answering this question is the purpose of our working group, “Achieving Gender Balance in Ringing”. Initiated by the President of the Central Council, Simon Linford, and headed by Julia Cater, we have been busy planning and working on how we go about proving, answering and addressing this question over the last few weeks. This is the first of a series of articles, in which we will present data surrounding this issue, as well as exploring gender balance in a variety of areas within ringing.

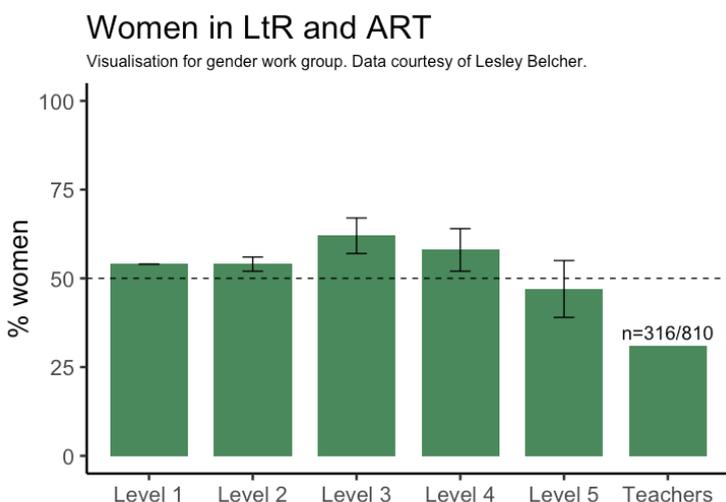
Our initial step was to demonstrate if the claim above is correct - that we start off with a near even gender split in the early stages of ringing which changes as the level progresses. We have collected and analysed data from a range of sources, and this article will examine data from three sources representing three distinct “levels” of ringing experience:

- Enrollment and progression in the Learn to Ring scheme, and certification of ART teachers
- Participation in the Ringing World National Youth Contest
- Participation in the National 12-Bell Striking Contest

There are many different skills involved in ringing and therefore many different ways to assess the “skill” or “level” of a ringer - we are not suggesting that participation in the National 12 Bell Striking Contest is the ultimate arbiter of skill! However, these sources provided a useful starting place to explore the question posed, with up to date and readily available data.

Learning the Ropes and Association of Ringing Teachers Data

This data was kindly provided by Lesley Belcher, Chair of the Association of Ringing Teachers. A



count up of Learning the Ropes initiative's new ringers (totalling 6102) shows a distribution of 54% female ringers on recruitment. The bar chart shows the percentage of female ringers in the progression through the Learning the Ropes levels (1 to 5, with level 1 being learning to handle a bell and level 5 including ringing touches of plain bob minor and calling a 120 of a doubles method). We don't see any significant changes in the gender distribution through these stages (at a 95% confidence level), except a slight increase in the percentage of female ringers at level 3 (which includes learning to cover and plain hunt). This levels out again by levels 4 and 5. To conclude, this

shows that there is a near-equal gender distribution at the stage of recruitment, which doesn't seem to change by the stage of learning to ring and conduct simple methods.

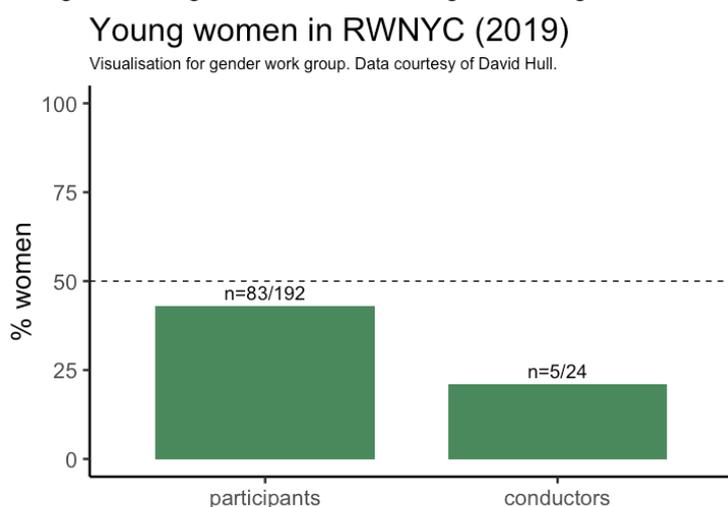
Lesley also kindly shared with us the gender distribution of members of the Association of Ringing Teachers. Of ART's 810 members, 39% are female. This suggests a female drop off at a later stage in ringing, or potentially less representation in leadership and mentoring positions (this will be explored in a later article).

Ringling World National Youth Contest Data

The Ringing World National Youth Contest has been running annually since 2011. At each contest, teams of eight ringers, all aged younger than 19, partake in a striking contest in either call changes or simple methods (a touch of triples or major). They are judged each year by a chief judge, assisted by a team of younger judges. The contest venues are typically light, easy going rings of eight.

David Hull, RWNYC organiser, and archivist for the National 12-bell Competition, kindly provided data for the 2019 contest, showing the proportion of female team members and conductors, as well as where in the circle female participants rang. 43.2% of participants were female (there was no significant difference in this between method ringing and call change teams, of which 43.8% and 41.6% of members were female, respectively). The largest occurrence of female ringers in a team was 6 (of which there were three teams). There were three teams that were all-male.

Looking at conducting, 20.8% of conductors were female. Of the 5 teams conducted by women, 4 rang call changes, and the remaining team rang Grandsire Triples.



In total 24 females rang in the back half of the circle (bells 5-8) - just 28.9% of the participating females in the contest. This is well below the 50% you would expect with randomised allocation, and means that female ringers only accounted for 25% of participants ringing in the back half of the band. It is worth bearing in mind that 6 bands had more than 4 female members, so these teams had to have at least some of their back four bells rung by female ringers.

We also have data of the contest's judges, from 2011-2019, excluding years 2014 and 2015 (unfortunately

this data could not easily be found online). This excluded the Chief Judges as they tend to change every few years, as opposed to every year like the younger judges. Of a total of 26 judges, 38% were female.

So we can see that at the contest stage of ringing, with a higher expectation of striking ability and execution of call changes and simple methods on eight, the proportion of female ringers has started to slide. As we break this down further and examine specific skills – ringing round the back, conducting, and judging – female participation dips further.

National 12 Bell Striking Contest Data

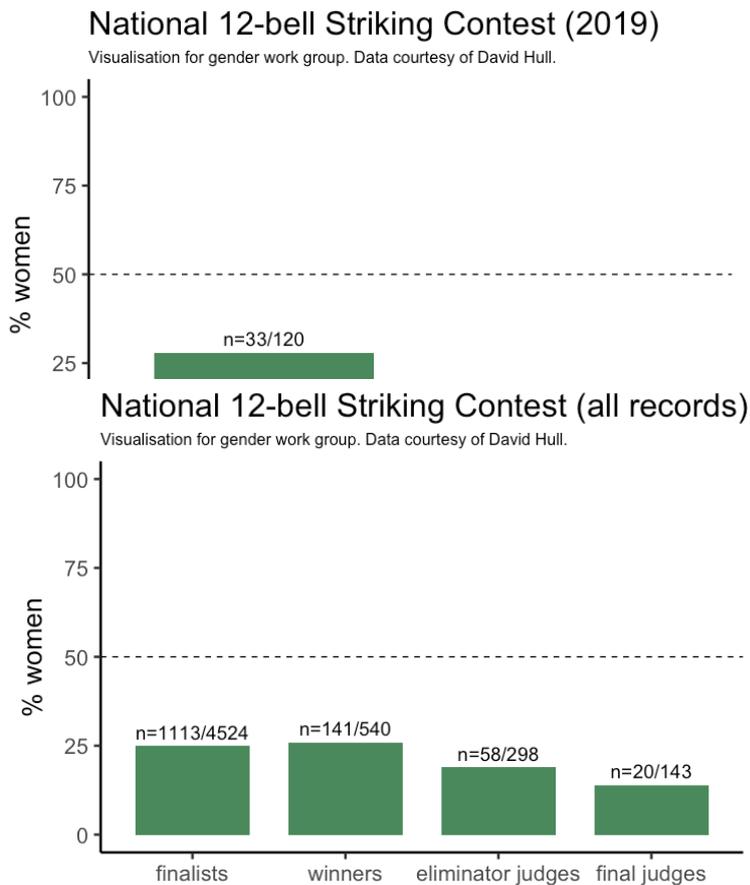
Thanks again to David Hull for providing us with data from the annual National 12 Bell Striking Contest. Run each year, with 3 eliminator contests in March and the final in June, this competition has been established since 1975 and venues have included a variety of rings of twelve (or more!) bells, ranging in size from Surfleet to Exeter Cathedral.

The data provided is from the 2019 final at Exeter Cathedral. Of 120 contestants, 27.5% were female (this is slightly higher than the average proportion of female participants in the final since the contest started, which is 25%). This ranged between two and five members of individual teams being female.

Only 3 females in the final rang in the back half of the circle (bells 7-12), accounting for just 5% of the ringers placed on one of these bells, and just 9.1% of the total female participants. This was also the case at the 2018 final at Cambridge, so cannot be solely attributed to the challenging size of Exeter

Cathedral's bells.

There were no female conductors in the 2019 final. Since the contest's start, only 5.1% of all test pieces in the final with known conductors (this information is missing for a couple of finals) have been conducted by women. Of the 125 distinct conductors that have appeared in finals, 6.4% are female.



Data of the judges of the 12 bell contest was analysed by Dorothy Hall. There have been 143 judging positions at the finals since the contest began (this data isn't counting the number of distinct judges – if someone has judged 2 finals, they will be counted twice). Of these, 20 positions (14%) have been held by women. There have been 298 eliminator judges (the same caveat applies), of which 58 (19%) have been female roles. Looking at individual judges (both finals and eliminators included), 20.3% have been women.

From this data, we can see another drop off at this higher level of contest ringing, and the decreasing percentage of female participation as we examine other skills is even more extreme than in the RWNYC data.

One consideration for the data from the 12 bell, is that for a lot of the bands that frequently appear in the final, their teams and band placements are often relatively fixed.

This results in a significant number of ringers ringing in the same position, or at least the same part of the circle, year on year. As a result, trends or change in this data may take longer to spot compared with bands that change more frequently, such as those in the youth contest.

Summary

Following these data sources, we can see that at the level of recruitment, there is a near-even gender split. Looking at the participation of female ringers specifically in the role of contest ringing, we see a drop off, emphasised further in the National 12 Bell Striking Contest than in the Ringing World National Youth Contest. As we break this data down further, we see women being underrepresented in conducting, judging and back bell ringing in both contests.

Other data we have examined so far, including that of quarter peal and peal ringing (both tower and handbells) and of conducting and back bell ringing, also supports a similar pattern. This data will be discussed in a later article.

The criteria used in organising and placing a team for a striking contest is very different to how this might be done for other types of ringing, such as practice night touches or peals. The touches used are often simple, the emphasis of the conductor's role being on providing striking advice as opposed to transposing complicated coursing orders or sorting out large method errors. Band placement is based on optimising individuals' ability to achieve accuracy and consistency on a given bell rather than endurance, or perhaps the ability to keep right and strike confidently whilst coursing through a

range of different bells. It is interesting to see a similar pattern in contest ringing to that seen in longer performances.

Our suspicion is that the “drop off” we are seeing occurs somewhere before the level of participation in the 12 bell, resulting in only a small pool of female ringers for selection for teams and judging. If women are generally overrepresented in ringing in the front half of the circle, this introduces a bottle neck for places within 12 bell teams - the majority of women would effectively be competing for a spot on one of maybe six or seven appropriate bells. We will explore the “where in the circle” element more in a later article.

The use of these three data sources as a progression of ringing skill is an oversimplification, as would be implying that progression in ringing is linear. There may well be some small overlap between some of the data used, for example young ringers partaking both in the RWNYC and the 12 bell contest. However, they do demonstrate the trend voiced in the question at the start of this article, and importantly this is being shown to be the case in younger ringers too - there is work to be done in younger generations.

This is important for many reasons – greater diversity throughout our hobby can only be beneficial, and this links in directly with the Central Council’s initiative that there should be no barriers to progression. In the next article we will be examining data from Bellboard for peals and quarter peals, in both tower and hand.

If you have any experiences, observations or thoughts you would like to share on this topic, please visit <https://www.womeninringing.info/> and share your story. Both you and any ringers mentioned in your submission will be anonymous when published, and there is an option to share your story with the gender working group without it being published.

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