

‘Women in Media: Fighting Stereotype – Identity and Gender’

Goa, July 19th-20th, 2008

I welcome you all on behalf of MICCI. It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be here amongst you all for the seminar on ‘Women in Media: Fighting Stereotype – Identity and Gender’. As usual it is a pleasure to be in Goa again. I look forward to coming here, always.

Since most of us are journalists sitting here, we all know that journalism is not an easy profession. There is tremendous hard work and deadlines to be met. There is also constant pressure from somewhere or someone always. And on top of that, if you are a woman journalist, all these problems get compounded.

The “Status of Women Journalists in India” report, commissioned by the National Commission for Women presents a very disturbing picture. Disturbing also, because out of 3,500 women working in 141 newspapers and publications, including regional and language dailies and magazines, who were approached, only a meager 410 responded to the making of this report.. There was total non-cooperation in filling the questionnaire, especially by journalists from the English language national media. Why is it that we women are so laidback in our approach especially when it comes to our own welfare?

One of the most disturbing facts that emerged from the report, and I shall be quoting extensively from it, was that many women journalists, even from established newspapers, work as daily wage labourers, without an appointment letter, signing a muster roll at the end of the month to get Rs. 1,500 to 3000/- as their take home pay. In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where there are media giants like Dainik Bhaskar and Nai Duniya, there is no woman journalist who has a permanent job. The ‘lucky’ ones are those on contract for two to three years. If a journalist has to be sacked, it is most often a woman. In fact the study group which prepared the report noticed a pattern in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand, that women aged 30 and above, were the first to lose their jobs. Tactics for sacking women ranged from ‘can you justify what you have been doing for the last six months?’ to ‘the edition is not doing well, we need to downsize’.

Women journalists across the country are also rarely promoted. There is an invisible glass-ceiling for them. The only woman, I know of, who shattered this glass-ceiling was Mrinal Pande, when she became Editor –in –Chief of Dainik Hindustan, a multi-edition Hindi newspaper, published from Delhi, part of the Hindustan Times group. Some women go without promotion for decades and when they are promoted, they face rebellion from male colleagues. According to a woman journalist, this is because there is no ‘bar-room’ bonding’ for them as there is for their male colleagues. You just have to walk into the Press Club in Delhi, at any time of the day to know what she means! Also male bosses instead of praising women for their professionalism, say they are exploiting their gender to get promotions. According to the figures in the survey, 45.5 % felt that discrimination was due to sex as well as age. In fact a majority of women were forced to leave their jobs due to this. In the north-east where there are a total of 35 women journalists in all the seven states, only 35% are full-time employees, out of which 40% say they have never been promoted. The ‘secret contract system’, in which none of the journalists know what the others are getting is often used to play one journalist against the other.

Child care facilities and maternity leave, two major concerns for women journalists, are still not a right in most media organizations. In fact women face this dilemma of childcare v/s

profession regularly, because fortunately or unfortunately and I quote, “a woman’s most productive years are also her most reproductive years”. Having children also has an impact on their career and promotion as there is a general perception that they will not work late hours or be totally committed to their work. To be very frank, I feel this perception is correct to a certain degree, because it is very difficult to juggle a career and children simultaneously. Though most of the women do not defer marriage or pregnancy, only 56.% of those with children had availed of maternity leave, according to the survey. Reasons for this varied from no provision for maternity leave, job insecurity and strangely enough, leave not given despite requesting. An astonishing 17.5% were not aware that any such facility existed in their organisation.

Sexual harassment at work place is another major concern. It was there 30 years ago despite tougher laws. When women journalists were asked whether they had to put up with sexist remarks or gestures, 27 % said that they had been sexually harassed, out of which most of them said that it had seriously undermined their confidence and affected their work. Strangely enough only 15% of them reported this matter to the authorities! But the majority said it had no affect. I think we women are far more resilient from years of hard experience.

Coming to salaries, etc, sadly enough, there is a divide between the English and regional language press over this. Women working for dailies in English get a better deal in terms of salaries, job security, facilities and choice of assignments. This differential treatment is very apparent when the same management brings out both the English and local language daily. In most parts of the country, as I had mentioned earlier, women are still hired like contract labourers on daily wages. This again I feel, is because the level of awareness is very low for regional language women journalists on some key issues like equal employment policy, a formal appeal procedure for handling grievances, a formal training programme or even superannuation schemes in their organisation.

Along with this they also have to fight some stereotype reactions like, and I quote, “Newspapers are high pressure environments where male gender, talent and hustle are the only tickets to success”.

--“Women are sometimes hampered because they refuse to assimilate into the work culture. They should be more aggressive”

According to World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), women represent 52 percent of the world’s population. However, they constitute mere 21 percent of people featured in the news. Women journalists are grossly neglected or underrepresented in both print and electronic media. As per WACC findings, in radio they are only 17 percent of news subjects compared with 22 percent on TV and 21 percent in newspapers.

Media has developed a sense of apathy towards women in general. Their views and voices are marginalized in news media. As the society is male dominated, so also they have strong dominance in media. Men are the majority of news subjects in all story topics. Men dominate as spokespersons and experts. 86% of all people featured in news stories as spokes people are men. Men also make up 83% of all experts. Women are much less likely to be considered experts in media coverage. This shows that there is a gender bias in media though many women have already come up in several other walks of life.

News is still mainly reported and presented by men. The only exception are among television presenters. 57% of television news stories are presented by women, probably because

women – particularly young- are considered more presentable from the male point of view. Elsewhere women are a minority. This imbalance is mostly evident in newspapers where only 29% of newspaper items are written by female reporters. For newspapers, the study took byline stories as the base for gender identification.

Female reporters are more likely to cover soft news. Men tend to cover the hard topics- news that is perceived as serious. Only 32% of stories on politics and government are reported by female journalists compared with 40% of stories on social issues such as education or family relations. But the question, who decides on what the female reporters cover-whether it is their own choice or that of their superiors?, is kept out of the scope of the study.

More female news subjects are found in stories reported by female journalists. In stories reported by women, 25% of news subjects are women compared with 20 % of news subjects in stories reported by men.

Despite the boom, women journalists remain a minority in this sector. Only 15 per cent of print journalists in Assam are women. Guwahati has only 50 full-time women scribes, of whom just 20 work as reporters, and five young freelance photojournalists. Barely 10 exist in the rest of Assam.

“Newspaper proprietors prefer not to hire women journalists. If appointed, they are assigned mostly to desk jobs. Young girls, hired as reported, are eventually transferred to the news desk after they get married,” Jullie Barua, a Guwahati-based photojournalist says. Proprietors do not want to hire women reporters because they think women cannot cover the conflict- hit areas. Though there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of women journalists in the country, many women in the profession continue to get a raw deal.

Women journalists across the country rarely get promoted: some go without a promotion for decades. Where women have been promoted, they have faced trouble and rebellion from male colleagues. A Trivandrum- based journalist says promotion don't come to them because there's no “bar-room bonding” for them as there is for their male colleagues. Another said; “women journalists are conscientious, diligent and people relate more easily to us. However, male bosses do not give credit for professionalism instead they speak of women exploiting their gender.

Statement of the Network of Women in the Media-India

The National Workshop on Women in Journalism held in New Delhi (January 28-30, 2002) brought together more than 100 women journalists from 16 centres across the country.

The following issues of concern were identified:

1. Globalization has adversely impacted issues of social and gender justice.
2. In conjunction with increased commercialization of the media, this has enhanced job insecurity.
3. Though the number of women in the media across the country has increased, their working conditions have actually deteriorated.
4. In addition, women face varying forms of harassment and exploitation.
5. Change in labour laws, the shift towards contractual employment and the overall shrinkage of employment benefits, including maternity benefits.

6. The condition of regional language journalists and those in the small and independent press is comparatively worse.
7. The decline in accountability and responsibility of media organisations towards their workforce and towards society in general is another area of concern.

Some of the steps they believe should be urgently taken are:

- Media organizations must incorporate gender justice and equity in all organizational policies
- All benefits and employment rights of women journalists must be protected.
- The Supreme Court directive on sexual harassment (Vishakha case) must be implemented by media organizations.
- Media should increase coverage of gender and developmental issues.
- Media organizations and journalists should evolve and observe an appropriate code of ethics.
- Organizations that protect the rights of media workers and institutions that uphold the independence and integrity of the media must be strengthened.

Some of the recommendations made at MICCI seminars were:-

1. Jobs should be advertised and proper selection and interview procedures introduced
2. There should be provision of training about equal employment opportunity and gender issues for their male colleagues
3. There should be transparency in terms and conditions of contract system of employment
4. Childcare facilities should be provided
5. Maternity leave given
6. There should be an insurance cover
7. There should be an elected not nominated body for redressal of grievances
8. Basic facilities like canteen and toilets for women should be provided and packed food or food facility should be given for those doing night shift or overtime, since women cannot go out and eat in hotels and dhabas at night, especially in small towns.
9. There should be uniform conditions for leave as well as wage increase for both men and women
10. Women journalists should have their own elected body in major cities and states like the Women's Press Corps in Delhi, to take up their cause with the management
11. Finally some national body like the National Women's Commission should run campaigns on sexual harassment, by inviting leading lawyers and having interactive sessions with media managements and women journalists.

Notwithstanding all this, I feel women journalists have clearly made great advances in the last two decades. They are not restricted to fashion, cookery, art and culture but are reporting from battlefields, the stockmarket and Parliament. In fact they are radically changing the media and giving it a broader base by mainstreaming health, environment, social and women's issues with their sensitive and insightful reporting. The two major strengths of women journalists, if I may say so. Though some women may still adopt a 'victim stance', I feel there is a level playing field for all now, with more and more women getting into this profession, as their first choice.

I shall conclude by just saying that hard work, a supportive management and a positive attitude can be the keys to success. After all the battle is not lost if one has not given up the fight.

Before I end I would like to express my sincere thanks to Mr. Rajeshwar Dyal of FES for supporting MICCI in holding the seminar, Mr. Rajaratnam for agreeing to let us hold it in ICG, Mr.Arjun Harlankar and his team for the excellent ground work and organisation. Our guests from Mumbai, who especially flew down for this seminar and all the participants for sparing their valuable time to be with us here today. Thank you very much.
