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By

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REPORT

PROBLEMS FACING WOMEN IN MEDIA - SRI LANKA

The oldest English newspaper in Sri Lanka, the 'Observer' celebrated its 150th anniversary 2 years ago. The oldest Tamil daily still in publication, the UDAYA TARAKAI (Morning Star) was started in 1841. DINAKINA (Sun) the oldest extant Sinhala daily was started in 1912.

Television is comparatively new to Sri Lanka, having been started in 1962 but broadcasting was started in the early thirties.

It is surprising that despite their long history, women working in these two media - press and broadcasting - are comparatively few in number and the top decision - making posts are still beyond the reach of women.

This is all the more surprising because Sri Lanka has one of the highest literacy rates in Asia, has enjoyed the franchise since 1931, and has the unique distinction of producing the world's first woman Prime Minister.

After the introduction of free education from the kindergarten to the university in 1945, girls from families that could not afford to educate their daughters, not only stayed on in school to complete their secondary education, but entered the university too.

As more and more women graduates passed out of the country's eight universities, they took to careers other than the traditional ones of teaching, nursing, and stenography. In 1965, the administrative service hitherto a male preserve, was opened to women.

Now women are working as Directors and commissioners of government departments, Chairpersons of corporations, engineers, professors physicians, surgeons, lawyers and entrepreneurs. Today 30% of all employed persons are women.

What is surprising is that although women by their efficiency have gone up the ladder in government service, in the private sector, and in the universities, women in the media are still in subordinate positions.

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It was in the late 40's that women were appointed to the permanent staff of newspapers. About the same time in or about 1949, 1950, women were appointed to the then Broadcasting Dept., as news readers and announcers. The number increased with the commencement of commercial broadcasting in the early fifties and the opening of regional broadcasting stations in the late 70's, Periodicals in the fifties and sixties, saw more women taking to journalism.

There are at present 10 national dailies in Sinhala, Tamil and English a number of political party papers, and a large number of periodicals devoted to special fields and directed at a particular readership. The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon for which I work publishes 9 weeklies one each on cinema, astrology and health, sports a weekly on religion, a weekly each for children and women, and Youth and a periodical devoted only to cartoons.

Yet despite the number and variety of publications the number of women actively engaged in journalism is small and they have not gone very far in their respective fields - reporting, editing, advertising, production.

There are only a handful of women reporters working for the national dailies or for Radio and TV. However a woman newspaper reporter of the fifties and early sixties, was so efficient that she was held in awe by many of her male colleagues. She had a nose for news and was quick to get at it. Recently, a woman has been appointed 'lobby correspondent' for the first time and the general opinion is that her reporting of parliament is far superior to that of other lobby correspondents today.

These are but two examples of media women who have not only made the grade but have proved that they can do better than men.

These are not women who have had any special training in reporting or any other field in journalism. One of the Universities has a Dept of mass Communication in operation for nearly a decade, but hardly any graduate of that department has made a mark in the media. This may be due to the training being only academic with no practical training in a newspaper office in broadcasting or television.

So far only one woman has held the post of Editor of a national paper, and that too of a Sunday paper, for a brief period. There have been and there are at present, women editors of periodicals, but again there is discrimination. They edit women's weeklies or children's newspapers.

In broadcasting and television women have been appointed sectional heads - viz Director School Service - Director Music and one of the directors on the board of Rupavahini (TV) is a woman.

But in the newspaper world, women are conspicuous by their absence among the managers and in directorates. A woman held the post of director of a newspaper company from 1967 to 73, but she was there by virtue of family connections, being the daughter of the founder chairman of the company and the sister of the then chairman. No women have held managerial posts in the departments of advertising, circulation, and production, in newspaper companies.

In Sri Lanka as I believe in many other developing countries, a woman who chooses journalism, broadcasting or television, as a career, faces many obstacles. First and foremost are the attitudes and prejudices of the males who dominate the media.

There is a belief among some males, who are the decision makers

1. That a female news-reader, is not capable of promoting confidence in the news she reads.
2. That women are not good news commentators.
3. That women are incapable of dealing with subjects such as politics, international affairs, science, hence they are assigned the women's and children's pages of newspapers and occasionally cultural supplements etc. ~~Not~~ hard core news and features.

Society's attitudes to women working late hours and away from home influence editors. They are reluctant to send women to report an event that may involve nights out, late nights, or events wrought with danger like political or ethnic disturbances.

Women themselves are sometimes reluctant to go on these assignments, partly because of commitments at home and partly because of society's attitudes and prejudices.

Night Shifts - Even though the labour laws were changed recently to permit women to work at night, Editors are reluctant to assign women sub-editors to night shifts, But some women do work even beyond mid-night. This is by choice and transport home is provided.

The recent change in the law, granting women 3 months maternity leave is also surfacing as an obstacle to women in employment in the media, as it is in the commercial world and even government corporations.

A working mother with infants is, say some male directors, a liability. She gets absent frequently when children are ill or no one to look after them.

These are not proven facts, and maternity leave for 3 months is granted only for the first two child-births.

Certain women with a deep awareness of issues affecting women, feel that the dailies and even the conventional women's weeklies do not give these issues and women news sufficient coverage. They have therefore started small publications with names like Voice of Women (in English and Sinhala) Gemi Katha (Rural Woman Sinhala) Kantha Marga (Women's Way - Sinhala). Some are quarterlies and some have only 2 publications per year, They all have only a limited circulation.

Most working journalists and those working in broadcasting and television both men and women have had no formal training in the work they are engaged in now. They have learned the work on the job by trial and error.

A few have had the opportunity to follow short courses conducted by specialists in their fields, here or abroad like the Thomson Foundation Training Course in Wales. The beneficiaries of scholarships abroad for training have been by and large men.

Fluency in English has in many cases been a criterion for selection for these courses.