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Problems Faced By Women Journalists: Nepal

By

Sumeeta Rai
PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN JOURNALISTS

NEPAL

--SUMEETA RAI

Before going on to the problems faced by the women journalists in Nepal I would first like to throw light on the status of women and the role of the media in the country.

The status of women in Nepal is much like in the rest of the Third World. Although there is growing awareness of the rights of women as individuals and as a community they remain oppressed in many ways. A lot is to be done yet to eliminate the social evils that give women a status inferior to that of the men.

Traditionally regarded as inferior and denied their due rights in society women have remained backward in many ways. Their role in society has been limited to rearing families, gathering fodder and firewood, tilling the land, fetching water and doing the daily chores in the house.

In the past three decades since Nepal started the process of planned development it has been able to achieve remarkable success in the field of education. Literacy rate has climbed from less than twelve percent to around thirtyfive at present.

However, the enrolment of girls in schools is very low, with no female students in the remotest parts of the country. Dropouts among female students is the highest, especially in the primary and lower secondary levels. Female enrolment in campuses is also relatively low.

Presently, the mass media has not been able to play an effective role in the education and motivation of the broad masses of people in Nepal. With literacy rate put at 35% there are about seven million people in Nepal that are able to read and write. Only eighteen percent are women. But, neither the print nor the broadcast media are able to reach the vast majority of these non literates in the country.

In the past few years the number of newspapers and periodicals has grown from about 10 to 400. But this unprecedented growth in the number of periodicals has meant little to the rural masses where hardly any newspaper reaches. The print media cannot, therefore, be considered a dependable medium for social and economic changes among 95% of the population that live in the thousands of Nepalese villages.

Similarly, radio listenership is still very low because the number of receivers in the rural areas is very small. Although there has still not been a dependable survey to determine the number of radio sets in the country it is considered to be small, affecting only a very small portion of the population. This is rather sad because for a difficult mountainous country like Nepal radio can be the only effective medium of mass communication. Television, has just reached Nepal in five years. It's viewers are limited to the capital, Kathmandu and some of the urban centers. The number of TV sets is cut to around 30,000 most of them in the rich and middle class homes. What is heartening is that Nepal TV has started to introduce community viewing centre in a number of villages.
Although print journalism was introduced in the world in 1440 AD, in Nepal it entered only in 1899. The first journal in the history of Nepalese journalism was Sudhasagar (monthly) published in 1899.

Women’s participation in journalism was very poor to begin with, although we cannot say that their participation was nil. There has not been much change even today for at present there are not more than fifteen women journalists. However, while studying the history of women’s participation in Nepalese journalism, I would like to mention some journalistic writings of female writers during the early period. There has been articles entitled ‘Five Honest Servants of the Spirit’, ‘Female Education’, ‘Brave Life’s Journey’, all outstanding articles written by women.

First woman editor was Mrs Koti Devi of a magazine in Nepali language. The monthly was Saraswati published from Kathmandu in 1947. The other magazines edited by women were also published outside Nepal.

Only after 1951, since the advent of Panchayat system, women in Nepal started to step into the world of journalism with increasing interest. The first such entry was ‘Mahila’ (Women) a monthly edited by Kumari Kamakshi and Sahana Pradhan who can be introduced as the first women journalists of the country. Then followed about five other journals. Nepal women’s Organisation then published a magazine ‘Mahila Bolchhin’ edited by women editor.

During this period women journalists were limited to the publication of magazines only. No female journalists were involved in the publication of newspapers. Because of their limited involvement, we cannot say that their participation in journalism was satisfactory. On the other hand, all of these magazines, except ‘Mahila Bolchhin’ do not exist today. This shows the weaker side of women’s participation in the journalism of that time.

Today, since the situation of women has changed in many respects, journalism also has become a matter of interest and a field for involvement for today’s women. There are twenty-five women registered in the names of women journalists. This shows that about six percent of newspapers are being handled by the women journalists today which is a positive sign.

The number of women journalists engaged in the editing and publishing of various periodicals is also increasing steadily. Many women are also doing freelance writings in newspapers and magazines. Nepal Press Institute has trained nine women in the field of journalism. Tribhuvan University’s Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus is producing a number of female journalism graduates every year. In this manner, we can say there is a bright future for women’s participation in journalism. A newly published quarterly magazine, Kamala, is edited by a man editor and most of its articles are written by women journalists.

However, there is still a hesitation among the women in entering this field even though they take journalism courses, very few pursue the field further. This has been mainly a cause of the fear in stepping into the field dominated by men. Another reason being that, it is an untraditional field for women especially in our society.
The first problem every woman journalist in Nepal has felt is the discouraging attitudes of male colleagues or other people they come across while pursuing a story. They are in the first place not taken seriously. They are discouraged by remarks like journalism is a field where toughness of men is required.

In Nepal it is unusual for a woman to work alone, to live alone or to come home late at night. People do not like a woman to ride motorbikes with a man other than a relative. Women who go to see a movie or go to visit stores and restaurants all by themselves are considered 'oversmart'. Late night assignments for women reporters are disapproved both by family and the editors.

So the women themselves are apprehensive about entering this field. No matter how serious a woman journalist may be about her career and even if she has broken the first barrier of getting out of their home, she still will not be allowed to go to remote places all by herself. She has to wait for her brother or male relative to accompany her for her security, that's if she is allowed in the first place by her family and editors. In situations where something violent activity is involved then the assignment will never be hers and the family too will not be of sending her to a place like that. So this concern for a woman journalist's safety which comes both from the editor and family becomes a hazard.

After marriage many working women leave their jobs because there is no sharing of household chores between husband and wives in our society, since joint family system still prevails in Nepal, work load falls on the married women entirely.

Like in every other workplace where men and women work in same position and department the women has to work more hard than her male counterpart to be considered capable, this applies in journalism too. Challenging assignments are given to men reporters and women reporters are sent for topics that involve women issues like health, women organizations of women etc.

Women writers are expected to stick to issues considered women issues, the editors are very encouraging about covering matters related to women and especially in xxx writing a fashion or beauty column.

On the whole women in journalism are not taken very seriously, till recently in Nepal and it has been left to the women themselves to prove their orth by taking this attitude as a motivator. Male counterparts do not see the women journalists as a challenge or threat, so it has been left totally to the women journalists to either take this attitude of their male counterparts as a daunting force and work to take everybody by surprise. Or else take this attitude as a daunting force and eventually perish.