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Challenges Facing Malaysian Women Journalists And
The Difficulties And Frustrations Encountered

By

Ratna Melan
CHALLENGES FACING MALAYSIAN WOMEN JOURNALISTS AND THE DIFFICULTIES AND PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED by Ratna Melan of Bernama, Malaysia.


In Malaysia, women in both the print and electronic media have achieved a status of which they can be proud. As news reporters and writers of articles and features, women have been given the chance to show their capability in all fields, including crime, sports, military, economic and political news, formerly the exclusive domain of the male journalists. There are also women sub-editors including chief sub-editors now and Newsdesk executives exercising the functions of news editors.

So what's the beef? A closer look at the placing of women journalists will reveal that despite the warm tributes heaped on their role in helping to develop society and the country, the road to their true advancement is still long and full of twists and turns. The glowing commendation extended for their competency and professionalism all fall flat when it is realised this somehow failed to get translated into concrete terms. In other words, though having enough confidence in the women journalists, the very recipients of such intensive praise, to appoint them to the top posts in the media.

It seems that the success achieved is good for only up to a certain level and the promotional opportunities made available will never go beyond a certain point. Mohamed Hamdan Adnan, former head of the School of Mass Communication of the Mara Institute of Technology, in a study found that the position of women in the Malaysian mass media is "not too favourable." Though a number do hold senior positions, those in top ones are rare.

The discrepancy between open acknowledgement and genuine acceptance of the capabilities of women journalists is very subtle but manifests itself in various ways. Some newspapers still prefer to take in male journalists and confine that few women journalists they have to covering the women's affairs beat. Chances for covering news of international level, visiting other countries and attending courses, all on company expense, are wider for the men.
The most glaring anomaly is in promotional prospects and appointments to positions involving exercise of power and supervision over others. Promotion is faster for the men. There are very few women in the senior management level despite the fact that in Malaysia, the number of women winning journalism awards is about the same as men, and in a situation where there are about two-thirds more men than women — which appears to give the impression that quality is on the side of the women and quantity, the men.

Yet there is no woman Editor-in-Chief of any newspaper anywhere in Malaysia. In the electronic media, both the official Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) and the private network TV3, no woman is holding the top level position. At middle management level, their number is limited. An RTM broadcaster, in a working paper presented at a mass media seminar, said there is no sex discrimination as to intake requirement, pay and opportunities in RTM. He went on to say that the profession is sexless, that theoretically, there is no limit to the heights a woman broadcaster can reach.

But no woman has yet reached these heights. Why? Even PERTAMA, the Malaysian Women Journalists Association, feels that there is no deliberate policy to bar women from reaching top posts of becoming chief editors in the print or electronic media.

The reluctance to give women journalists equal opportunities is attributed not so much to doubts about their abilities but to several notions and prejudices prevalent or inbred in society, including women themselves. Such such, women should not be sent on overseas assignments because of "danger" to their safety, women are not physically hardy, not willing to work hard and long hours, women give greater priority to their family and home than to their career, women are just not "boss material" due to their "temperamental" nature.
It is difficult to separate fact from fiction in such thinking because of the sweeping generalisations. To be fair, there is some truth to these beliefs while other fears leading to lack of confidence in women as bosses are groundless.

The RTM broadcaster, in his paper, felt society largely, and in Asia particularly, has not yet begun to accept the idea of a woman as a person with equal skills, abilities and potential, despite the world having seen sixteen women Prime Ministers and Presidents.

According to the broadcaster, one major obstacle to the progress of women in achieving the status of equality in Malaysia is the inbred attitude in society that femininity connotes weakness — both physical and mental. He thinks society tends to feel and to perpetuate the notion of feminine weakness and limitations. In education for example, some parents still feel higher education is more important for the son than the daughter. After all, the daughter can always marry a man who can support her. In broadcasting, mention a woman broadcaster and everyone automatically thinks of women’s or children’s programmes. The impression is that women are fit for only this kind of work.

In the print media, it is generally felt that married women journalists are not as mobile as their male counterparts, especially when the women also have children. An official in a journalists’ union believes that how far women can go in the mass media depends on their own talent and initiative. But he also believes women nevertheless could still be hampered by many factors, especially family commitments, which “immobilise” them and affect their chances of promotion.
Chief editors do not question the ability of women journalists. To them, the question is one of the women's full utility, especially when they are married and have children. A number of editors have complained that some women journalists are not willing to work late and would rather go home immediately after work then stay around to look for stories. Also, they are difficult to transfer around. Hence there is no woman state bureau chief in newspapers in Malaysia. It is also the policy of some news organisations not to have women working night shifts. Because of all these constraints, media organisations are more prone to promoting the men to positions of responsibility like editors, according to a study.

A leading woman journalist in Malaysia, in talking about problems faced by women journalists, has asked them to carry out a critical self-examination. She wonders if women journalists themselves are perpetuating the prejudices against them by asking for special treatment such as exemption from a difficult assignment on grounds of their feminity, yet wanting equal opportunities. She also commented that Malaysian women journalists generally lack confidence and are sometimes "too shy." She feels they should be more confident and persuasive in their job.

The above problems may be true of some but not all women journalists. However, for as long as the some considered the whole, women journalists will continue to face problems and frustrations in their attempts and efforts to enhance their role.

**How to enhance the status of women journalists to play a bigger role**

The first order of the day therefore is to resolve the problems hampering the career advancement of women journalists. It calls for correction of the misconceptions and elimination of the shortcomings and constraints, whether real, apparent or self-made.
The major handicap perceived, as mentioned earlier, is their lack of
mobility and lack of time for the office when they get married. This is
a thorny issue, as it involves questions of family obligations and
society's attitude to arts, and perception of, the role of women as
working wives and mothers. These women are expected to do a juggling
feat between their family commitments and their career responsibilities
and sometimes the whole act comes crashing down when an equilibrium
between the two is not reached. A working husband and father does not
face the pressure of the expectations placed on a working woman who is
also a wife and mother. For many such women, fulfilling the demands of
the home can constitute another career by itself where chances of
promotion are almost nil and demotion a daily probability. Perhaps
communication training institutes can organise courses in effective
family management for their female students to enable them to cope with
their multi-dimensional role as wife, mother and a full-fledged
professional, as suggested by Mohamed Adnan, who incidentally, is a male.

They could also help develop self-confidence among their female students
by giving them more exposure to the reality of the working environment.
Motivational courses, courses on psychology, public speaking and human
relations could be included.

The safety factor as an occupational hazard for women in journalism
meanwhile may not be troublesome after all. In this hard and fact-paced
modern world, personal safety as a consideration applies to almost all
other professions including bus driving. Even a pedestrian who is not a
woman and not a journalist, that more suffering the double blow of being
both, can have his safety jeopardised when a mugger is on the prowl.
Provided reasonable care and precautions are taken, this apparent
limitation of women journalists does not really have basis.

Also for women's temperament ruling out women as being unfit to be bosses,
there is felt to be more superstition than science in this belief.
That leaves the remaining constraint -- lack of genuine acceptance of, and lack of confidence in, the capability and potential of women to hold top positions of responsibility. This problem again is not unique to journalism but exists in almost all other professions as well. To overcome the problem, a mental revolution in society is needed to eliminate negative attitudes and social conventions and the concept of allotting stereotype roles to not just women but also men. In the meantime, women journalists should work on consolidating the gains they have already made and strive out to greater progress and a greater role in the national life.