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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Chatterjee, Julie.</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2200">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2200</a></td>
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Women Journalists in SE Asia: Trends, Opportunities And Issues

By

Julie Chatterjee
WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN SE ASIA: TRENDS, OPPORTUNITIES AND ISSUES

Trends, Opportunities and issues, all three subjects are governed by attitudes and perceptions. At a recent meeting of women communicators in South East Asia, in Vietnam, I heard a funny story. May be some of you may already know this story.

• Story of Bill and Hilary Clinton. Gee Hilary, to think you could have married that cab driver. to which Hilary replied: Gee Bill, and he could hav been President.

Things are changing in our arena as women journalists, albeit slowly.

Once perceived the bastion of mostly males, politics, business and social issues is being tackled with a far more aggressive stance than before.

TRENDS: More women are in the newsroom. In Singapore at least the newsroom is a 50-50 breakdown. Women in business journalism head top positions in newspapers like Business Times— Margaret Thomas.

The two best political and economic reporters of the Straits Times desk are Sumiko Tan and Bertha Henson.

Opportunities are many. 10 years ago, when I worked in Australia as a journalist in Sydney and Canberra, we looked up at Jane Ford from The Australian as some sort of pioneering hero. And so she was. She was respected and rare because she was the only woman journalist who would be breaking the biggest stories in business, science and technology.

Today, all over Asia and the Pacific rim, there are many Jane Fords who are striding large upon the shores of big business and politics, making their mark.

As the standard of education increases and old role models of women as inferior workhorses are broken down, women are perceived as equally intelligent as men.

In Vietnam, I was happily surprised to find the 85% literacy rate had helped my garnering interviews at every bureaucrats office and cutting through red tape as easy as pie. Mayor of Ho Chi Minh city was ready to discuss the increase in prostitution in his city, although he was a trifle embarrassed.

In India, women have always enjoyed a particular status with political stalwarts. Says a male editor in India,"It's a fact that male politicians have preference for women journalists. Possibly because they don't feel
threatened." That's an advantage that we could be
cashing in on.

The Telegraph's Delhi bureau, once headed by a man
with 6 women journalists working on it. They were
always scooping their male counterparts in other
newspapers.

In Cambodia, the Press Information Section, which
handles the foreign journalists, has some fine women
officers and journalists.

But having said that of course, one mustn't lose
sight of the fact that very few women have become chief
editors in dailies not just in Asia but on a global scale.

Sociologists say it has something to do with home-
making and that sort of blah, but I think this is a
question we can address at the end of our observations.

The only difficulties of course are typical
omes:

SAFETY ASPECT: talk about Angkor. So, you feel
sometimes a little in danger. But by the same token, the
same thing could happen to a male journalist too. But
sometimes I feel risks must be taken if you feel strongly
enough about a good story.

Inform someone of your whereabouts, particularly
if its a danger zone.

• Young rookies: Home and Decor magazine has
learnt that when there's a married man's home, she's
going to suss out for a photo shoot, she always asks that
his wife be there.

Another young reporter who's doing a story on the
ten great sports in Singapore reported about how an old
diving instructor came out and told her five times in the
course of the interview that "You'll look great in a diving
suit underwater. When will you come for a scuba class?"

• In Australia, on one of my first assignments I
faced real male chauvinism. Perceived as a "SHEILAH"
most women journalists have to learn to be tough
talking in order to be respected.

ISSUES: Telling it from the women's perspective:

As a features editor of a women's magazine, I think
most of our social issue-oriented stories are generated
from the feedback we get from readers. Particularly in
our HELPLINE column which I run.

Hence the stories on Teen Prostitution and Battered
teens and mothers. Although a balanced presentation is
very necessary under the social climate in Asia, I believe
it is our business as women journalists to tell the story sometimes from the women's perspective on social issues. This is because few male journalists tell it from our point of view.

For instance, the government's stress on family values is commendable and I feel must be supported because of its beneficial nature, but there's no reason why we cannot stress that to keep a family together men have just as much responsibility as women.

Eg, AIDS story, Divorce due to male adultery, Teen Prostitution. Exploitation of women: women must understand that they will have to empower themselves. This is the most valuable lesson they can learn and it depends on us, how we present this aspect of news as women journalists.

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