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How Filipina Journalists Fare In The Philippines

By

Zenaida Aberia-Roy

"HOW FILIPINA JOURNALISTS FARE IN THE PHILIPPINES"

by Zenaida Aberia-Roy
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IN THIS AGE of computers, fax machines, Cory Aquinos toppling Marcos dictatorships and Benazir Bhuttos doing Cory Aquinos, women journalists no longer have to be classified as second-class media citizens. At least in the Philippines where the Chief Executive of the land is a widowed mother of five.

While there are still a few constraints faced by women journalists in the Philippines, they generally get equal treatment in news coverages and, in certain beats, even outnumber their male counterparts.

One very good illustration of the fact that Filipina journalists no longer are discriminated against nowadays is this: the defense press corps, traditionally a bastion of back-slapping, ready-to-go-anywhere, beer-drinking male buddies, now has a female press corps president who has access to top-level defense and military officials and who even gets a free ride now and then in military vehicles (such as helicopters) to cover dangerous newsy events.

Also toppling the myth that women journalists should not, or cannot, be in the front line of news coverages where they are liable to get physically injured was the recent gutsy

reporting by two women TV journalists of the military siege on Camp Cawa-Cawa in Zamboanga del Sur (Southern Philippines) where a general and his right-hand man, a lieutenant colonel, were held hostage and then killed by a policeman turned outlaw and his followers.

Both of these TV reporters were sent to Zamboanga, approximately two hours away from Manila by plane, on very short notice and as a consequence were not able to bring along any extra clothes or personal things. They had to borrow shirts from their gracious hosts during their close-to-three-days stay in the area. (Due to the military siege, all stores were closed, including business establishments and hotels.)

The above-mentioned instances just go to show that Filipina journalists have come of age. They no longer raise eyebrows or arouse curiosity in a country steeped in 300 years of Spanish domination where, in decades past, it was unthinkable for a lady to earn a living alongside male colleagues. Then, her place was at the home, nurturing her children and keeping house for her man. Now, her place is anywhere she wants to be.

Nonetheless, as has been said earlier, a few constraints do hinder a Filipina journalist in her work now and then.

Some of these constraints, though, are due to cultural prejudices which should have been swept away long ago when women began to get education in formal institutions of learning and started to show that they were as adept at various fields of work as their male counterparts.

For instance, when I covered the energy beat a few years ago, I was told that women were banned in oil-drilling installations because they brought bad luck. The presence of women - especially women having their "monthly periods" - was believed to be a bad omen to the oil drillers as they (the women) were supposed to hinder the oil from flowing out. And that, dear reader, happened within the decade of the eighties.

Although most people profess to practice equality in their treatment of others (one seldom hears somebody saying he or she does not subscribe to the idea of equality between the sexes), this is not always so, particularly with respect to news sources who seem to have been trapped in mores and values of yesteryears.

In my current beat, which is banking and finance, I often have to interview very senior bankers and finance executives, whether in the hushed atmosphere of their offices or in the noisy lobbies, corridors or ballrooms of hotels after meetings or conferences amidst a motley of other reporters, these executives' revered amigos in business, and the rest of the crowd that

usually make up a convention .

During these times, I find it quite surprising when a senior banker would dodge a lady reporter's questions with the usual banter about such issues being confidential and yet would not hesitate to reveal details of the very same issues to a male journalist. Perhaps it is because of their feeling (of course, not all news sources are like this) that talking with a newsman is just like talking to "one of them" while divulging business plans to a lady journalist is entirely a different thing. I don't really know. The logical explanation for this escapes me.

In cocktails, when many of these bankers or finance executives are in attendance, one will note that when talking with women journalists, these executives speak of general topics of interest (e.g. the weather, hobbies, political trends) but when talking with male journalists, they are freer and less guarded and generally tend to answer directly questions on their business plans, operations, strategies, etc.

Maybe there is this certain bond, or camaraderie, between men which has been there since time immemorial, which is not the same camaraderie that men have when they are relating with women. Maybe these men are of the opinion that it is not "masculine" to reveal business details to women. Even though

I was a psychology major in college and practiced my profession for a few years prior to entering the world of media, the underlying reason for this behavior is a gray area to me.

(This subtle difference in the treatment of male and female journalists is not always there, though. The trick is to go around this handicap through various means, the telling of which should be in another article.)

Another constraint that bars women journalists in the Philippines is that relating to the manner of gathering news stories during after-office hours. In certain beats, one would get more stories from his or her regular sources by treating the source to a drink or two in a hotel bar or a restaurant or a coffee shop. Such an arrangement, while a perfectly natural means of getting a story for a male journalist, would be a little uncomfortable to get into if you are a lady journalist. Even though it's a free country, Filipinas are not just thought to be that way as yet, save for maybe the very liberated ones who grew up and were educated in the West. Imagine the things that would go through the mind of your source's secretary if you were to ask for an appointment with Mr. A in the coffee shop of the Hotel Intercontinental!

In the newsroom, women journalists have also advanced a long way. However, in the Philippines, I still have to see

a female editor-in-chief of a daily newspaper, or even just a female business editor. True, there are women in other sensitive positions; managing editor, publisher, columnist, city editor; but there have been no women yet (so far as I know) who occupied the editor-in-chief's seat in a Philippine daily newspaper.

The powerful seat of the president of the National Press Club, the country's premier journalists organization, has also been occupied only by the masculine of the species. Maybe the politicking one has to do to get that position is not too palatable to the sensitivities of a ^{Filipina} woman journalist. Or maybe Filipina journalists aren't that politically ambitious as yet. Or perhaps they may just be biding their time, who knows.

Certainly, as in any other society in the world, women journalists of the Philippines also have to suffer that perennial problem of the modern -age woman: how to juggle time between your work and the responsibilities attached to being a wife and mother.

A basic problem in the Philippines faced by women journalists is the lack of adequate maternity benefits that one can avail herself of when circumstances so require. Although reporters who have been granted "regular" or "permanent" status in their

firms can look forward to a 45-day leave with pay, and a modest cash benefit from the Social Security System, when they give birth, a correspondent (who is paid by her paper only for news stories that see print) does not enjoy the same privileges. If she is due for delivery at a time when her status is still that of a correspondent and not a regular reporter, she would have to go through her 45-day leave without pay, and no SSS benefits either.

Also, unlike in highly-industrialized countries where most women employees enjoy free day-care privileges for their children while at work, women journalists in the Philippines either have to woo some relatives to stay at home with them to care for small children or hire expensive "yayas" or nannies to take care of the children. If you don't have the means to choose the latter option, you have no recourse but to maybe leave your kids with your parents (you're in luck if they live next door; tough if they're in another section of the metropolis) or neighbor or any close kin.

The problem is compounded when one of your kids get sick, and you have to absent yourself from work. Some newspaper firms are so strict with sick leaves that they require the certification of your own doctor that you got sick to charge your absence from your sick leave. This leaves you with the prospect

of incurring salary deductions due to unauthorized absences.

Other than what has already been mentioned, there isn't much that can hinder a Filipina journalist from being as efficient as her male colleagues.

As has been shown time and again anywhere in the world, women are as good as men in any work they choose to do, if only they are dedicated to their work and consider it not merely as a means of generating income but also as a means of self-development.

There have been a good number of female journalists who have made their mark in Philippine media, and who are a shining example to us unknowns, that despite of ^{the} problems that beset a lady writer, one can still reach one's ambitions as long as one is diligent enough to work for it.

Echoing an ad for cigarettes, I would say that for Filipina journalists, "you've come a long way, baby."