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Challenges Facing Chinese Women Journalists

By

Shang Rongguang
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by Shang Rongguang

It was my dream to be a journalist. But when I graduated from Shijian Experimental Middle School, the top girls' school in Beijing, in 1963, no journalism department in Chinese universities admitted any middle school graduates.

During those years when class struggle was emphasized, journalism was considered as a special area inseparably connected with politics. Girls and boys who were freshly out of school didn't have any political experience and could not obtain a proper understanding of the essence of journalism. The authorities thought. Journalism departments in universities were mainly for adults who were either working for a newspaper or magazine already or who used to be workers or armymen but were chosen to change their profession to become reporters because of their merits at their previous posts.

Over the past two decades, dramatic progress has been made in Chinese society. Politics is no longer a field shrouded in mystery, nor is journalism. Students can choose to enroll in a journalism department as long as they pass the entrance exams. And after many twists, my dream came true. As an editor of the Beijing Review's north American edition, I proudly take it as my profession to tell people what is going on in China, what is happening between China and other countries, and to help Chinese and people in other countries.
Know each other and understand each other’s culture so as to work together for a peaceful, harmonious and prosperous world.

However, I have to admit, while the general environment for journalism is improving in China, we women journalists are facing many challenges, and some of them are very serious.

I won’t say there is sex discrimination in China, because our Constitution says men and women are equal politically and economically, and it is true that a woman reporter gets the same pay as her male colleagues at the same level.

But traces of inequality can be seen from the very beginning when a girl makes up her mind to be a journalist. To enroll in a journalism department, she must get higher grades than a boy in the national university entrance exams. Most of the Chinese schools prefer boy students to girl students.

When the girl student graduates, again, there are problems for her in finding a job as a reporter. Boys have more choices because they won’t have maternity leaves and are supposed to be free from housework. So people think they are more promising in the journalism profession.

Life is really hard for married women journalists. As a mother of two girls, I know too much about this. I often work longer hours and have to go out in the evening. Sometimes, I cannot even spend much time with the family during holidays and festivals. Of course, it is impossible for me to do as much housework as other mothers and wives do. My husband, a Portuguese translator, is very helpful. When I am busy, he does most of the housework, including shopping, cleaning.
cooking and laundry. But, as a man, he often feels wronged. When there is too much pressure from both work and housework, he sometimes complains. That hurts me and brings troubles to the family. I often find myself in a dilemma between my marriage and career. It is the fact that quite a few women journalists have divorced in order to forge ahead in their professions.

Another problem is that a female journalist's talent, especially her ability in administration, cannot be easily recognized. I remember one of my girl friends, an intelligent editor, once told me that she believes that most of the women are brighter and more capable than men. "Despite all the physical pains and troubles they suffer and the unequal treatment they receive in society, many women have obtained remarkable achievements," she said. "What if they could get rid of all these unfavorable factors?"

However, while many of the top leaders of magazines and newspapers admit that women reporters and editors form the backbone of their staffs, they are reluctant to promote a woman to a leading position, no matter how talented she has proven herself. What is even worse is that a woman journalist who has shown more capabilities usually draws more envy and misunderstanding from her colleagues, male and female. A woman should not be ambitious and her natural role, according to traditional ideas, is in the family, not in society or in any academic area. As Chinese slang says, "Being unintelligent is the virtue of a woman."
At the Beijing Review, there is only one woman among the five top leaders, despite the fact that almost 50 percent of the reporters and editors are women.

The most unreasonable thing is that although facts and statistics have shown that women have longer average lives than men, women journalists have to retire five years younger than their male colleagues. The age for retirement is 60 for men, but 55 for women. That reality is cruel for many senior career women who are facing the problem of retirement. A senior editor of the Beijing Review told me a week ago that she will be required to retire very soon because she had just celebrated her 55th birthday. "It's unfair," she said. "Why do I have to leave while my male colleagues are still working, though they are older than I, and are in no way more intelligent. It seems that right at the time I've become more experienced and am ready to contribute more, they tell me that I'm no longer needed."

On the other side, there are some women journalists who are not devoted enough to their careers because the work is too hard and the pay is too low. Some have turned to high-salary posts such as being a secretary at a joint venture or trade company. There are also others who themselves are the victims of the old idea that women are inferior to men. Their independence and talents are thus limited, and it is even worse -- they help confirm the wrong ideas, downgrading the value of career women and limiting opportunities for all women journalists.
What shall we do in the face of these problems? Shall we wait until the government help to solve them? No. We should rely on our own salvation and face the challenge bravely. To struggle for the equality and the real emancipation of women journalists is a long, persevering task. First of all, we must respect our dignity and be proud of our roles as wives, mothers and journalists. We'll work more creatively and more confidently so as to make full play of our talents and let the world know who we are.

Secondly, we must unite. Traditional ideas are deep-rooted and only a powerful strength can uproot them. Unity is the source of this powerful strength. Let the women journalists of different countries keep close contacts with each other, understand each other and support each other.

Thirdly, we should make good use of the profession we are taking — to apply all means of mass media to expose unfairness and other unfair matters and help women journalists unite and recognize their own value.

Finally, we should not separate ourselves from our male counterparts and men in society as a whole. Instead, we should be united with them, cooperate with them, and win over their sympathy and support for the struggle for a better future for women journalists.