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Problems Faced By Women Journalists In China Today

By

Chen Shan Shan
PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN CHINA TODAY

Journalists are those involved in gathering, writing, editing, and publishing or disseminating news. Since my experience is with Women of China magazine, this paper will focus on magazine and newspaper journalists.

In China women have only been in the profession of journalism for about 70 years, however, we comprise about one-third of the total number of journalists today.

Generally speaking, women journalists are between the ages of 25 and 60. They are usually working in urban areas, especially in large cities. The majority are university graduates and at least half have had some training or at least a course in journalism. Women journalism schools have been set up and courses offered to give on-the-job training.

As China opens up, all of us journalists, not only women, need training in order to continually improve our articles and expertise for local and national publications. The need is even more urgent for international publications published in China for foreign readership.

Women's sensitivity, creative nature, and social awareness enable us to be competitive with men in this profession. In China at present, perhaps women have a better chance for advancement with a career in journalism than in most other professions.

The major problems a woman faces as a journalist in China are the double burden of family and career; the dynastic, feudalistic idea that women are inferior; discrimination of sex in hiring and in promotion; and working conditions. Some of these problems are common to all professional women, not just journalists.

The majority of women over 26 are married, and most married women have a child. Women journalists, with few exceptions, are in a double bind. They must be able to maintain a balance between their careers and their private lives; they must be good mothers and good wives as well. So every woman journalist who wishes to remain competitive has to
do her share at work while shouldering a heavy responsibility in raising children, taking care of old relatives living at home, and keeping the house -- which predominantly falls on her shoulders and consumes a substantial portion of her time and energy.

Nowadays, although electrical appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines are becoming available and affordable, housework is still extremely time consuming. Electricity is still critical in China; few washing machines are fully automatic; and cooking is usually done on a one or maximum two-burner coal or gas cooker. The majority of couples' combined salaries could hardly afford to hire a full-time housekeeper. Even if they could, it's difficult to find one. In Beijing, for example, 80,000 families -- or one in every twenty -- needs help in child care or housekeeping.

In addition to the physical effort involved is the still-revelen idea that raising children, taking care of the husband, and doing housework are the duty and natural inclination of women. Many people, especially husbands, still hold to this notion. Hence wives often have guilt feelings.

Inside every woman who gets ahead in her career, there's a mother in conflict! She wants to have her career in the big world and at the same time remain in the small world of her husband and children. She expects her husband to understand her ambitions and capabilities, her economic and social contribution. Fortunately, more and more "enlightened" husbands are coming around to understand their wives. Some
are starting to realize that together with their wives, they can pursue the ideal for themselves and each other in terms of doing fulfilling work, contributing to society, educating the children, and sharing the work of the household.

Washing, cooking, and taking care of the children should be the duties of both of them. Some are now willing to learn to do household chores from their wives, and to take more time to be good fathers -- thus helping their wives to successfully combine career and family.

For a woman it does not have to mean -- not having a family -- just not being tied down. Perhaps with the help and support of husbands, greater understanding from society and development of service industry, women may realize their full potential!

Apart from the common problems mentioned above that are shared by working mothers, journalists have specific difficulties on the job, to cope with: irregular hours, additional hours at deadlines, and often no regular meals.

When they go into remote and backward areas to gather material or conduct interviews, they usually encounter more problems and additional hardships. In some places the living condition is so bad that a women even could not find a separate bedroom in a hostel comprised solely of men's dormitories! Thus after making a long journey and working for the whole day, she might not be able to get a good rest.

However, these difficulties have never stopped women journalists. Together with their colleagues, they have left their footprints in mountain areas, in grasslands; from the far Northwest in Tibet, to the Northeastern Province of Heilongjing. As a result, women journalists in China on the whole, enjoy people's admiration and respect.

As the drive for reform deepens in China, many changes have happened. Early in 1987, the State Education Commission declared that the job assignment system for university graduates could be reformed. The state introduced a 'mutual choice' option whereby students can look for jobs themselves with the prospective employer's and applicants free to accept or reject each other. In practice the result has been that the 'option' has provided work units the chance to discriminate against women.

Many work units reject job applicants, saying that women are more troublesome than men. Without regard for a woman's ability, they consider instead practical issues: losses incurred by maternity leave, and time off needed when her child is ill, or to cope with household-related problems that interfere with her work. Even though these issues often don't affect a woman's work performance, the prejudice is so great that now many units have said that they would rather hire young men with low scores than women with high scores.

In recruiting university graduates, almost all the news units prefer to have male graduates. They argue that when asked to do assignments, men can start at once, while women have to take responsibilities into account first. Women university graduates who want to be journalists are now finding it harder to attain their goals. For example, Zhu Hong, a graduate in journalism from the class of 1987, sought employment in over 50 mass media organizations without success. In most cases she lost out to a man.

Recently it is more difficult for women to find employment; however, it has always been difficult for women to attain top posts, except in women's organizations. Today we find very few women journalists in top cadre or management positions. Even though women are as capable and are often equally qualified, men are more readily promoted over women.

The roots of sex discrimination are deep. For example, women have only been able to receive public schooling since the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. Since women's liberation movements against bound feet; the May 4th Movement by the students in 1919; and the establishment of the Communist Party in 1921, women have begun to receive recognition as individuals and be allowed human rights. Under the feudalistic practices women couldn't even take part in social activities in public.

Because of its long history, the impact of this feudalistic idea that men are superior is so strong that even today few women are prepared psychologically to compete with men. They regard themselves inferior to men in the high levels of leadership. In addition to this, many women don't want to take on more responsibility and are often content to stay at the same job. Therefore, not only does society expect them to be good mothers and good wives, first, many women themselves expect it of themselves! This situation can't be changed overnight.
In China today, some traditional prejudices remain and continue to be a principal obstacle in its modernization program. That means women must make a greater effort to catch up with men's position in society by exploring new avenues, and society should work with them to solve their problems.

With modernization, international exchange, and China's newly developing world role, journalism will play an increasingly important part not only in stimulating the process, but in implementing as well. Journalists are now able to use more originality and creativity and realism in reporting than ever before. On the national scene, there is also a domestic challenge for journalism. Due to the numerous remote areas in China and the reduced, but still considerable number of illiterates, publications have not yet reached their potential!