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Sharing My Experience

By

Betty L Khoo
I became a journalist in 1971, which is 16 years ago. I didn't realise it then; but today, looking back, it was the beginning of a decade of growth opportunities for women in journalism. Before then, there were women journalists but their numbers were few and they were mainly responsible for the women's pages.

Two factors accounted for the big intake of women into the newspapers (I speak here only for the English press because I really do not know enough about the Chinese papers) but as English is the official language, you can imagine the importance of the English papers.

I think that the first factor was the start of National service for males in 1967. This meant the suddenly there was a shortage of fresh male graduates coming into the job market and as a happy result, we women graduates were much in demand.

What is also interesting is that, at about that time, the English newspapers were in keen competition. Besides the Straits Times which was the leading English daily, there was also the dynamic and feisty Singapore Herald, also a morning daily. And there was also the Eastern Sun, another English daily. This not only brought about a bigger demand for journalists but also an awareness that the better paper may also be the one who had more mature, more highly educated journalists.

It was in this exciting climate that I made the move, from my job in the tourist industry, to a job as feature writer in the then hardly one-year-old New Nation, an Afternoon English daily, also published by the Straits Times Press. Although by the time I joined both the Eastern Sun and the Singapore Herald had just been shut down. Still, the fledging New Nation and the large, established Straits Times could not only absorb all the good journalists but recruit totally inexperienced ones, like myself.
I had decided to get into journalism because I had always been keen on writing. In fact, before I entered the University of Singapore where I majored in Pol Science, I had toyed with the idea of going to journalism school. But I was advised to "just go and get a degree, which will give you more options, and then, if you still want to be a journalist, you can join the newspapers."

That was sound advice. In fact, that advice still holds true today for there is probably only a handful, out of the ...... journalists in the Straits Times Group, who are journalism graduates.

Most of the women graduates who joined the papers (or should I say that almost all, with the exception of maybe one or two), were liberal arts graduates, majoring in either English, Political Science or Sociology or Philosophy. But the newspapers also continued to recruit those who had A levels and even those with only 0 levels, if their English was exceptional.

I am very glad to say that journalism is one profession where you can go as far as you want to; it all depends on your ability and your stamina. It doesn't matter if you're a woman, and it doesn't matter if you haven't got a degree. Of course you can't be a maverick or too bloody-minded about your political learnings, you'll not only survive, but you'll prosper.

I chose to be a feature writer, delving into the social issues of the day and writing touristy, hostorical stuff. But I could, if I had wanted to also gone into business or political writing. Of course how successful I'd be is quite another matter. But, one of my varsity classmates made a name for herself as a political commentator and she was also a Newsweek stringer. Another female colleague headed the business desk of the Straits Times and when the Straits Times launched Business Times 10 years ago, she was appointed its Editor, just like that. She didn't have to fight to get the job, she was the best person for it; so she was appointed.
I believe that women journalists in many countries, even in the developed western countries have had to fight long and hard to get into male dominated areas of journalism, like sports and politics, or should I say, especially in those two fields. This has not been our experience. We have been rather fortunate. We worked hard, not because we had to prove that we women could do the job as well as any man; but we worked hard because we were committed.

I spoke to my former editor in New Nation the other day and he confirms that he and other senior editors did not typecast women recruits. We were given every opportunity in any area of journalism that we cared to venture. If we were prepared to work the same long hours, the graveyard shifts as night sub-editors, we were most welcome to the job. And of course our pay, our perks and the training journalist are given, have been the same as that of the men.

I think, we women journalists owe a lot to enlightened editors in the 1970s who gave us the opportunities. But we were also, as I said, earlier on, fortunate because there was this big demand for journalists and as we women were ready, willing and able, we were taken on.

I moved from feature writing on social issues to taking charge of the women's and leisure pages. I was given my own column with a photo byline where I was free to comment on the social issues of the day.

I was asked to take charge of these pages, not because I was a woman but I had shown a keen interest in fashion and decor. I wrote, edited and laid out the pages.

Then, in 1976 I was asked to take on the editorship of an ailing woman's magazine, Her World, which is also published by the STP. Although I was very happy in New Nation, I decided to accept the job and the challenge it presented. Today, 10 years on. I am the editor of Her World but I also overseeer the other magazines in the Times Periodicals stable.
Although we are market leaders in the field of magazine publishing, we have a lot of competitors to keep us on our toes.

In the newspaper field, there is at present only one morning English Language daily and that is of course the Straits Times, but it is still a growing paper (in terms of circulation) and both the Straits Times and its sister publication, Business Times, are continuously looking for good journalists; so the opportunities are there for both men and women.

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