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Women And The Media In Bangladesh

By

A B M Musa
PART ONE

Before independence in 1971 not many women in Bangladesh opted for journalism as a career. For that matter not many women sought jobs in any profession except the selected few such as doctors, nurses and teachers.

In the conservative Muslim family in Bangladesh, educating girls meant a better prospect of marriage. Most of the graduates from the colleges and universities ended up in being a housewife. The scope for jobs for women was also limited. The economic situation was not that bad as to necessitate supplementary income by the better half in the family.

Only after independence, women took up other professions for two reasons. First, liberalisation in the attitude of the society and secondly, economic necessity. For the first time in early seventies, the women came forward to become advertising models, secretaries, business entrepreneurs, engineers, architects and therefore journalists.

Before independence, the number of women in the media could be counted on fingers at about four or five, that too as part-time editors of feature pages in the daily newspaper writing on cookery or fashions. Only in recent years, women started taking up journalism as a full-time profession. There are more than two dozen full-time women journalists working in newspapers, radio and television and also in public relations. There are two reasons for this manifold increase in the number. More girls sought admission to and received degree from the Department of Journalism of Dhaka University. During the last decade about 50 girls out of about three hundred students had their Bachelor and Masters degree from the University. Those who really wished for it, landed a job in the media or as PR-persons. However about half of them did not pursue any profession at all.
PART TWO

In the newspapers and news agencies there are about a dozen women working as sub-editors, assistant editors, feature writers. This can be comparable to about three hundred total figure working in print media. Not a single women journalist is working as reporter or photographer. None is in free-lancing. There are contributors who write regularly on different topics - but mostly on problems relating to women. A few write on national or international topics.

Media establishments have reservations about employment of women. First, they cannot be put on night shift, secondly, they cannot be sent to outdoor assignments. The conservative family attitude and social atmosphere stand in the way of their outside work. There had not been any attempt on the part of the media nor the women employee themselves to overcome this hurdle. Television, however, has one or two broadcasters who venture out on special occasions. In the daily newspapers, out of about a dozen women journalists, only one in Daily Sangbad work on night shift in the news desk and none in reporting. Though some of the newspapers and news agencies do provide transport at night, the situation is not yet congenial to night duty, at least the women journalists think so.

There is no discrimination in real sense in recruiting women by the newspaper establishments, nor are they looked down by their female colleagues. The real reason are lack of response from women in joining the profession has yet to be found out. On a cursory glance, it can be said that women prefer a profession which needs less outdoor work, is less hazardous and leaves enough time for household work and does not interfere with her role as a housewife.

A newspaper editor who has employed a few women journalists has complained about frequent absences by them due to "domestic problems". But he has no complaint about the working ability.

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Moreover, some employees tend to think that women employees are more disciplined. Another interesting point is only those women who have real knack and interest for journalism join the profession.

PART THREE

In spite of the above fact except for electronic media, not many women are presently coming into the fore. One main reason is that opening is limited both for men and women. Moreover, it has been found out some women who are showing interest in the media job think electronic media to be more glamorous. This seems to be true when, a recent survey by Press Institute of Bangladesh revealed that during the last three years, there had been about a dozen new entrants in radio and television as programmers, producers and newscasters, another dozen in modelling, about half a dozen in public relations and only one in newspapers. Better pay and preference by the employers to have women in the job and convenient office hours have lured many of the graduates of journalism department and a few women journalists to public relations.

There has however been a new opening for women graduates from journalism department in the information service of the government, Ministry of Information employed about twenty women as information officers who passed through public service commission and encadred in Bangladesh civil service (information).

Most of media women in newspapers, radio and television have however has in-service training. This is more visible in the cases of radio and television producers. Some have later been trained in National Broadcasting Academy sent on deputation by the radio and television. Both radio and television also have their own programmes for training. On the whole as for access to the profession, both in print and electronic media, there is equal opportunity and no obvious discrimination. The skill development needs and opportunity are same

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for both men and women. During the last two years outside training opportunities were availed more by women journalists than men. Six women journalists attended training programmes and seminars organised by Commonwealth Press Union, Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies, Press Foundation of Asia, AIBD, and other organisations. In fact, international organisations, it appears, tend to give preference to women journalists.

PART FOUR

Though number of women journalists in the profession is quite insignificant, problems relating to women occupy a significant space in the newspapers and electronic media. Oppression of women and dowry make oft and on deadlines and invite editorial comments. There had been special magazine programmes, presented ironically by male producers, in the radio and television on these problems. The general reaction had been that men present it better than a woman could do so in the present social perspective. It may be mentioned in this respect that Bangladeshis are less fanatic so far as Islamic fundamentalism is concerned and this liberal attitude is reflected in the media while dealing with women's problems. On the other hand, women journalists appear to be self-content with the limited scope of duty in the media. Their male counterparts complains about lack of initiative to take up other varied professional functions. It is, however, interesting to note that though their number is insignificant, a few women journalists are holding posts in the journalists' unions or other related professional organisations.

On the whole, it can be said women journalists in Bangladesh are making their presence felt. As late-comer they are yet to significant positions. But they are definitely progressing towards that though the scope is limited.

In conclusion, reference should be made to women who have been working in non-journalistic jobs in the media. There are many compositors, photo-typesetters, business representatives and office-assistants in the media who played a significant role in overcoming the taboo-opening up the media world to the women in Bangladesh.

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