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Japanese Women In Media

By

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&

Yomiuri Shimbun

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This is a time of transition for Japanese women in the media.

Until recently, the field of journalism was limited to men, with women playing a negligible role. There are a number of reasons for this, and a number of reasons why it is changing.

First, as is well known, Japanese society -- business and politics -- is dominated by men. It was generally felt that journalism was a man's domain. Many people, women as well as men, felt that it was not appropriate for women -- especially married women -- to be journalists.

Second, in a society that places great importance on personal relationships, it was not believed that women could establish contacts which would lead to information so vital for reporters to conduct their daily activity. In many cases, that is indeed true; women are at a disadvantage in many cases in developing reliable and important news sources.

Third, a very serious problem was that Japanese law kept women from working after 9 p.m., with few exceptions such as for telephone operators and waitresses. As journalists tend to keep late hours in order to hit the morning editions with the most up-to-date news, to bar women from working late hours effectively kept them from doing their job. This labor law, however, was changed in April of 1986, and is now not a problem.

A change is also taking place within the newspaper companies themselves. They are increasingly aware of themselves not only as reporters of the news, but also as opinion leaders and setters of examples. This rise of social responsibility for equality has been reflected not only in editorials, but also in the hiring and promotion of women reporters.

An important trend is that many women reporters are being transferred out of the beats which were regarded as appropriate for women, such as fashion, an into beats for which their sex has no relevance. Requests for writing "from a woman's angle" are becoming less frequent. This, I think, is the most significant recent development -- when women reporters are assigned according to the same standards which men reporters are; experience, skill, and professional development.
As in any country going through such social changes, it has been necessary for women to be better than men at the same field to get recognition and promotions. This was true in Japan for women reporters as well, but the situation is improving. As the number of women journalists increases, we lose our uniqueness and are accepted on the basis of professionalism. There is considerable progress in this area. Many Japanese women reporters are advancing not because they are women, but because they do their jobs well.

Analysis of the Portrayal of Women in the Japanese Media

With the great majority of newspaper articles written and edited by men, they reflect the man's concept of how women should be. And it is well known how Japanese men believe Japanese women should be.

Some recent examples of this are appropriate. When the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), one of the most powerful governmental organizations, promoted a career bureaucrat, Mrs. Harumi Sakamoto, to be the first woman bureau chief position, the Japanese press carried her profile. Japan has five major general dailies with national circulations in the millions, and men wrote Mrs. Sakamoto's profile in each. One of these started with: "She says proudly that when she hangs her family's washing out to dry under the morning sun, she feels the greatest happiness...." Thus the theme was not that she was a successful senior government official, but rather that she was a successful wife and mother. It is obviously true that it is difficult to have two roles, home maker and government policy maker, but between the lines there can be found an opinion of the writer -- that in Japanese society, a woman's primary role is that of wife and mother. Even if she is a professional at other matters, to be a true success, the woman must also perform her household duties well. Obviously, nobody cares if a successful businessman can cook well, and the subject is never even considered in writing his profile.

Editorial policy tends to be from a man's viewpoint. I covered the Los Angeles Olympic Games for my paper, which has a national morning circulation of nine million. My assignment was to work on a full page special of photogenic female athletes. As half of our readers are women, I recommended that we carry a half of the page on photogenic female athletes and half on photogenic male athletes. I think that I caught my paper a little off guard with this suggestion, and it was not accepted.
I do not oppose contests such as Miss Universe and Miss World, as people indeed enjoy watching them. Likewise, however, I feel that it is appropriate to show attractive men as well as beautiful women.

Last year Miss Takako Doi became the first leader of a major Japanese political party, the Socialist Party. The media gave this enormous coverage, approaching that of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. Having suffered a major setback in the recent election, the Socialist Party attempted to soften its image, and Miss Doi's election had the desired immediate impact. But after she was elected, the media continued to play up her personality rather than her policy. The press apparently got bored with this approach, and has since started criticizing her for not being smart enough and for not forming a clear new policy.

Japanese media coverage of Miss Doi has been from the angle of "an era of women" rather than from the political philosophy viewpoint. The press wants to write about women, but only from the man's standpoint.

We are seeing a rise in coverage of token women economists as well. When gathering comments on economics, the press will often ask a woman economist her views, not based on her expertise but rather on her sex. It is obviously not very much progress when women are interviewed merely because they are women.

The male-dominated Japanese media therefore does not treat women in the same way as men are treated. In some cases women are ignored, and in other cases they are covered not because of their knowledge, but because they are women.

Access of Japanese Women to Journalism and Communication Education

Whereas there is indeed unequal opportunity for women to enter journalism, communication education, academically, is equal. A brief explanation of the Japanese system is needed.

Lifetime employment at major Japanese companies is the rule, and the publishing industry is no exception. The seniority system is just as strong in journalism as it is in other Japanese industries such as manufacturing. Publications employ fresh graduates from undergraduate or post graduate schools, and more or less guarantee employment until they reach retirement age. And there is almost no mobility in newspaper companies -- it is unthinkable that a journalist would or could move to a rival publication. Knowing that the employee will be with the publication a long time, it is in the company's best interest to provide considerable on-the-job training by working under senior writers.
Therefore, publications prefer to recruit graduates with academic backgrounds in subjects other than journalism and teach them how to write rather than hiring young people with journalistic skills and teach them everything else. The system is therefore quite different from that of the United States and other countries.

With demand low, supply is also low. There are no journalism schools on the level of those in the West. A few universities have departments of journalism, but they usually teach history of the media rather than practical skills. Even after taking the courses, the student is no further along in going into journalism and no better prepared. In fact, private journalism schools exist not to train reporters on journalism, but on how to pass the examination and interviews to enter a publishing company. Most of the people who are successful in entering journalism have attended this sort of private school in addition to their normal university courses.

There is no sexual discrimination in these courses, nor in the Japanese education system. However, women are at a disadvantage in entering journalism. Until about five years ago, some publications and wire services had a clearly stated policy of hiring women only for secretarial posts, not as reporters. Others would hire only one woman journalist every several years.

Due to social pressure and a more liberal tide, however, these formal barriers started coming down. And the equal opportunity law which passed last April made Japanese companies legally obligated to open their doors to women and treat them as equals to men. Although the number of qualified women is increasing, there are obviously quotas.

Managers would admit that if they were to hire only on the basis of examination results, more than one third of their new staff would be women. At present, the newspaper company which employs the greatest number of women journalists has about 25 percent of new recruits women.
Status of Women in Japanese Media

There are no national-circulation newspapers with women managing chief editors, and only a few women have risen to the editor position. There are five women editorial writers among 159 researched by the Japan Newspaper Association. Even so, it should not be assumed that there is considerable discrimination against women in promotion. Actually, there has not been enough time since women were first allowed to become reporters to judge if there is discrimination in promotion.

Managing chief editors usually come from the political, economic, metropolitan or international news departments, but there have been hardly any women in these "hard line" news departments. In addition, as women were effectively barred from late-night work until the law changed last April, women reporters did not have the opportunity to compete on equal footing. The myth that women could not stand the late-night or "hard line" beats has been broken, and the opportunity to prove oneself now exists.

In my case, even before the law changed, I worked as late as was required to finish the story. In Japan, this means 1:30 a.m. for the morning edition deadline. If I didn't do this, I would have been unable to do my job, and would have been transferred from the economic news beat.

There is a growing tendency to put women in the "hard line" news beat, and the new labor law indeed helps. Newspapers are finding that having women on such beats is not only good for their public images, but that women can indeed perform well under the pressure.

Some women will be transferred to positions which are less physically demanding, but others will succeed and advance.

We are approaching an era where Japanese women journalists who have a strong attitude and passion to perform will be promoted to senior ranks. There is the possibility of women chief editors in the future, although there are some major obstacles to overcome.

Japanese companies have not been particularly good at establishing day care centers for children of employees. For women to succeed in newspaper companies, the companies will have to go one step further and provide night care centers. Japanese society may not be ready for that.
Japanese society will also have to change, to make access to information sources as easy for women as for men, based on credentials, publication and relationships which do not take gender into account.