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Women And Newspaper Management In India

By

Kalpana Sharma
Women and newspaper management in India
by Ms. Kalpana Sharma

There is certainly no written rule in India prohibiting women from entering the newspaper profession. On the contrary, a notable aspect of the last 10 years or so is the increase in the number of women journalists in both daily newspapers and magazines.

There are several important reasons for this. The profession of journalism has itself found a new respectability. The proliferation of magazines has forced up salaries; wage boards have set reasonable salaries that newspaper proprietors must pay their staff. A young person wanting to earn enough to be independent can now contemplate a career in journalism. In the past a stint as a reporter or a sub was often followed by a better paid job in public relations or advertising. Of course if you entered the profession at a senior level, you did not have to face such financial straits, or if you were lucky enough to join the one or two well-paying establishments.

Apart from better pay, journalism has become livelier. The declaration of a state of emergency in 1975, followed by press censorship for the first time in India's post-independence history, marked a turning point for Indian journalism. The relationship between the press and the government went through a marked change. Whereas in the post-Independence years, the leading newspapers maintained a generally supportive attitude towards the government, now some of them became openly adversarial. Editors were willing to take chances to expose the establishment. With the widespread suppression of human rights during the Emergency, human rights reporting gained acceptance. A corrupt and ineffectual system was exposed by enterprising young journalists who wrote about police atrocities, jail conditions, bonded labour etc. Suddenly the news pages had come alive.
no more were they limited to rewritten handouts, or reports on statements and speeches by politicians. Investigative journalism had found a firm foothold.

What did this change in the tone of Indian journalism mean for women? In the sixties, women who entered the profession were either hired as subs and writers in women's and general interest magazines, or on the Sunday sections of daily newspapers which had more regular working hours than the daily paper. There were few women reporters, most were writing features and that too in the "soft" areas.

Although some may have done this out of choice -- the more regular working hours solved the problems of transport and the responsibilities at home -- for many it was a forced choice. There was a definite bias against women in reporting. How could women go out in strife torn areas? How could they travel to remote areas? Should the paper take responsibility for women? Didn't having them on the staff involve greater expense and problems for the management?

A similar bias operated in recruiting women on the desk in daily newspapers. It still does. It was argued that if women are recruited, they should be prepared to do the night shift. But that also means the management has to give them rest room facilities, somewhere to sleep once the shift is over and/or transport as travelling at night in most metropolitan cities, leave aside smaller towns, is far from safe for women. Rather than incurring this additional expense and burden, managements have assiduously turned away women even when the top qualifiers in any entrance test for the positions of sub editors have been women. Only recently has some change occurred in this regard in a few newspapers but by and large the same attitude prevails.
Given these biases, even if women wanted to pursue a career in the "hard" areas of journalism and not be restricted to magazines, they had to overcome many more hurdles than their male counterparts.

A combination of the enhanced remuneration in journalism and thereby the respectability that it attained, and the sheer number of women who decided to enter the field, left some newspaper managements with no option but to hire women. One Delhi newspaper found that women topped the list of all those competing for jobs as reporters. It was left with no choice but to recruit them, thereby for the first time having half its reporting staff positions filled by women.

Perhaps because of the struggle they have to put up to enter the profession, by and large the average woman journalist is more serious about her job. Consequently many women have gained high visibility within a short time in journalism. For instance, of the six recipients of the annual People's Union for Civil Liberties award for human rights reporting, four have been women. Women reporters are entering all the traditional male domains - politics, economics, crime reporting, science, defence.

I must qualify what I have written by pointing out that my observations are based on the experience of women journalists in the English-language press. The experience of those working in the regional languages is likely to be no different and if anything it will be worse. There are noticeably fewer women in most regional language publications. For example, in the Bombay edition of the "Indian Express", the largest multi-edition English language newspaper in India, has six women reporters and five women subs. Its sister publication, Loksatta in Marathi, has no women reporters and only two women subs and its Gujarati publication, Samakaleen has no woman reporter or sub, only one woman who looks after the Sunday section. The same pattern in varying degrees...
prevails in other regional language publications.

Although the number of women in reporting and sub­
editing are gradually increasing, the pyramid tapers dras­
tically when one looks at the higher echelons. The senior
editorial staff of all the leading newspapers are almost
entirely all male clubs with perhaps a token woman here
and there. The "Indian Express" and "The Statesman" are
the only two daily newspapers with Women Assistant Editors
who write edits. The "Times of India" has a woman in the
position of Senior Assistant Editor, but she looks after
the Sunday magazine section.

There is not a single woman editor of a daily
newspaper in India nor of a political English language
weekly or fortnightly.

There was a telling instance recently of the attitude
of managements towards senior women journalists. A woman
who had been a news editor and then deputy editor of a
Sunday paper, was recommended by the outgoing editor of
the paper to be appointed to the top position. The mana­
gement resisted, despite the editor's (he was the founding
editor and thus had considerable clout) recommendation and
the support of the entire editorial staff. After approach­
ing several other editors, all men and most with less
experience in this area than the concerned woman, the
management finally agreed to appoint her. But at the
last minute they imposed unacceptable conditions which would
have made her little less than an assistant to the pro­
prietor who would have been de facto editor of the paper.
Naturally she could not accept and had to resign before she
had even started. Within days the management found a more
amenable and pliable male editor who had no qualms about
management interfering with the editorial side.
Even those women who make it to political reporting often face the problem of younger and less experienced male colleagues being given the choice assignments. It is automatically assumed that they will be able to handle certain areas better; the women are not even given a chance. Those who break through this bias are the ones fortunate enough to work under an enlightened editor.

As far as skills are concerned, the question is really an academic one. For senior positions, the question of skill or experience is not the main concern of proprietors. People from outside the profession have been appointed to top positions. Often younger men, with less experience are entrusted with senior jobs while serious-minded, competent, older, more experienced women journalists are completely overlooked for the same positions. Therefore, in this context, the question of skill becomes redundant.

This is not to argue that women should not acquire the skill but merely to state that their having the requisite qualifications does not automatically lead to higher appointments. That is the reality on the ground.

Apart from senior editorial positions, newspaper managements are also entirely male. The few women who are in such positions are wives or sisters of proprietors. In some smaller publications professionally qualified women do run the marketing or advertising sections but they are exceptions to the rule.

So in conclusion, the opportunities for women in journalism are vast and ever increasing. By sheer persistence, the women already in journalism have opened up areas which were earlier closed to them. But subtle biases still persist making it difficult for anyone but the most
determined to survive. Women are constrained by the taboos prevalent in society -- it prevents them, for instance, from nurturing "contacts", who are often male. They can't take them out for a drink or have them over to their homes quite as easily as can men. Furthermore, they have the double burden of home and work, common to all professional women.

To get past these societal hurdles and biases and still get ahead in the profession will need not skill, but a change in the ideology that governs the status of women in the country.