

**CHAPTER-1**  
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY –**  
**STATUS OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN THE PRINT MEDIA**

*By Pamela Bhagat*

**INTRODUCTION**

The project on the 'Status of Women Journalists in the Print Media' was initiated by the National Commission for Women to look into issues affecting the role of women working in the print media. As part of a broader study on working women in India, it was executed by the Press Institute of India (PII), through empirical data that was collected from almost all the States and Union Territories of the country.

The objective of the research was to examine the problems and issues confronting women working in the media, to gauge the extent of direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace and to identify contemporary issues that need to be addressed.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research was coordinated by me with the support of media representatives from various regions - Linda Chhakchhuak from Shillong, Rajashri Dasgupta from Calcutta, Sushmita Malaviya from Bhopal, R. Akhileshwari from Hyderabad and Surekha Sule from Mumbai - who together formed a National Study Group. The National Study Group assisted with the design and implementation of the 20-page questionnaire. Usha Rai, Deputy Director, Press Institute of India, guided and steered the group.

A brain storming session with a focus group of women journalists in Delhi preceded the study, to ensure that the questionnaire was suitable and that critical aspects were addressed. The questionnaire was then pilot tested to iron out discrepancies and ambiguities. Experiences from the field surveys are outlined later in the report.

**SAMPLING AND RESPONSE RATE**

A total of 410 women working in the print media responded. Although there are no definite figures on the number of questionnaires distributed, estimates put the sample size at approximately 3500. This means the response rate was approximately 11.5 per cent. This was one of the most disappointing aspects of the study. There was total non-cooperation in filling in the questionnaire, especially by journalists from the English language national media.

Some of them had even attended the brain storming session at the NCW. They kept reassuring us that they would complete the questionnaire, but never got down to it. Some respondents said the questionnaire was too long and would require too much time to fill up. Most of the data collected was through personal interaction, which though time - consuming, gave many great quotes and observations that women were hesitant to put on paper.

A hundred and ninety respondents from the regional press and 220 from the English press were surveyed. Ten were above 50 years while the rest were between 20 and 40. An overwhelming number were employed on contract – 239, while only 60 were on wage board scales. Forty were freelancers and a few were casual employees.

## **ORGANISATIONS COVERED**

### **ANDHRA PRADESH**

Vipula Chatura (Magazine, Eenadu)  
Eenadu Daily (News Today Pvt. Ltd.)  
Andhra Jyothi  
News Today  
Vasundhra Publications – Eenadu  
Newstime (Now shut down)  
The Times of India  
The Hindu

### **BIHAR**

Hindusthan  
Rajparivar (monthly)  
The Hindustan Times  
Indian Express  
The Times of India  
Sarvottam Nari Kalyan Samiti  
Dainik Jagran  
Haribhoomi  
Prabhat Khabar  
UNI

### **CHHATTISGARH**

The Hindustan Times  
The Hitavada

Nav Bharat  
Jansatta  
Haribhumi  
Sandhya Danik Jagran  
Desh Bandhu  
Dainik Bhaskar

#### **DELHI**

Indian Express  
Women's Feature Service  
Deutsche Presse-Agentur, dpa  
Business Standard

#### **GUJARAT**

The Asian Age  
Gujarat Samachar  
Indian Express  
The Times of India  
Stree Sandesh  
Navchetan  
Financial Express

#### **JAMMU & KASHMIR**

Kashmir Times  
Daily Sandesh

#### **JHARKHAND**

Prabhat Khabar  
Ranchi Express  
Janhul  
The Times of India  
The Hindustan Times

#### **KARNATAKA**

Deccan Herald  
Vijaya Karnataka  
Udayavani  
Karmaveera (weekly)

**KERALA**

Kairali News  
Malyalam Daily  
Matrubhumi  
Malyalam Manorama  
Deepika  
Deshabhimani  
Indian Express  
Hindu

**MADHYA PRADESH**

Dainik Bhaskar  
Nai Duniya  
Desh Bandhu  
Nav Bharat  
Free Press  
Central Chronicle  
The Hindustan Times  
The Times of India

**MAHARASHTRA**

The Dayview. A Gavakari Group Publication.  
Indian Express  
Lokmat (Daily Lokmat/Lokmat Times)  
The Economic Times  
Navakal  
Dainik Lokmat  
Kesari (Daily Kesari)  
Maharashtra Times  
Loksatta  
Pundhari (Daily Pundhari)  
Tarun Bharat  
Navbharat Times  
The Times of India

Magna Publishing (magazine)  
The Hitavada  
The Hindu Businessman Line  
Business Standard  
One India One People (magazine)  
The Economic Times  
Mid Day

#### **NORTH EAST**

GL Publications  
Shillong Times  
The Assam Tribune  
ABP Limited  
The Telegraph  
The Sentinel  
The Imphal Free Press  
Aji (Ramdhenu Publications Pvt. Ltd.)  
Asomiya Pratidin  
Nongsain Hima

#### **ORISSA**

Sambad  
Dhariti  
New India Express

#### **PUNJAB**

Danik Jagran  
Hind Samachar (Magazine section)  
Naritva (Magazine)  
Jag Bani (Hind Samachar group newspaper)  
The Pioneer  
The Hindustan Times  
Indian Express  
The Times of India

**RAJASTHAN**

Hindustan Dainik (Hindustan Times –Hindi)  
Rajasthan Patrika  
The Hindustan Times  
Dainik Bhaskar  
Indian Express  
Deccan Herald  
Vanijya Setu (weekly)

**TAMIL NADU**

Businessline (Hindu group)  
Ananada Vikatam  
Indian Express  
Kumudam Snehidhi  
Dinamani (IE)  
Vikatam

**UTTARANCHAL**

Dainik Jagran  
UNI  
Himachal Times

**UTTAR PRADESH**

The Hindustan Times  
Swatantra Bharat  
Dainik Jagran  
Rashtra Bhasha Sandesh  
Kranti Navyug  
The Times of India  
PTI  
Northern India Patrika  
Lucknow Times (Times of India)  
Jansatta

## **WEST BENGAL**

The Statesman  
Business Standard  
United News of India  
The Telegraph  
Aajkaal  
The Times of India  
Ananda Bazar (Anand Bazar Patrika)  
The Asian Age  
The Hindustan Times  
Bartman  
PTI  
Pratidin  
Satjug  
Jan Sansar (fortnightly)  
Akbar-E-Mashriq  
Khoj Ekhan (magazine)  
Aajkaal (newspaper)  
Business India Magazine

### **The Survey**

The primary input of the study was issues and concerns that emerged from a 'Brain Storming Session' of women journalists from the print media. The questionnaire included 11 parameters, 86 sets of indices, 27 variables and was in three languages – English, Hindi and Urdu.

The survey took into account a wide range of issues: from recruitment and job segregation to promotions and work conditions; training and development to childcare and maternity facilities; sexual harassment, union involvement, superannuation and freelancing.

The maze of data under so many different heads with further sub-divisions into specific indices, initially seemed easy to read but proved arduous to analyse. Consequently, all the information was tabulated into more comprehensive nuggets of pie charts and bar charts and also aggregated, both state-wise and at the national level.

The size of the respondent sample (410) and the fact that we had to depend on questionnaires filled and did not necessarily have a representative cross section of journalists, places some limitations on the data. However, the results are important indicators of the

views and perceptions of women journalists, especially since their impact on various issues in the newsroom is steadily increasing as their numbers expand.

Even where the numbers are low, as in the regional press, and discrimination between male and female employees is a reality, the study shows that women journalists still infuse their careers with a hopeful and positive attitude. Many of them are committed to contributing to the industry, often against all odds and far beyond the expectations of managements and co-workers. In fact women report that, too many times, their goals are stifled long before they even have a chance to flourish. Despite this the growing number of women entering the media profession and continuing to pursue careers, demonstrates their determination to keep voices of women alive.

As Preeti Misra from Hindustan Times in Jharkhand says, "Though women are well represented in the media their voices are largely unheard. They are supposed to report on the predicaments of society at large but when it comes to themselves, they are seldom heard."

From a historical perspective, women journalists clearly have made great advances in the last two decades – their share of jobs in all media has increased, they are not restricted to fashion, cookery, art and culture but are also reporting from the battlefields, stock market and the Parliament's press gallery. In fact women journalists are radically changing the media and giving it a broader base by mainstreaming health, environment, social concerns and women's issues.

Sudha Menon of the Hindu Businessline says that though she has experienced a fair deal of "fulfillment and professional dignity", her counterparts in other organisations have not been so privileged. "Women journalists are often overworked, underpaid and have very little access to equal employment. In fact a large number of organisations often deny women promotions on the flimsy excuse that they cannot do night duty. Childcare, flexi-hours, a more sensitive approach to the limitations she faces when she is in the child-rearing phase can do wonders for both – the organisation and women employees."

In many cases they have built their careers on the premise that they have to be 'twice as good' as their male counterparts just to get their foot in the door. Others report that the stress of working hard to keep up standards, and to forestall any negative expectations, can be debilitating. Alka Kshirsagar from Pune had a similar concern – "Women journalists have to work twice as hard as male colleagues and have to constantly battle suggestions or perceptions that we are using sexuality to get ahead in our careers. We are more vulnerable than male colleagues to gossip, to promotion prospects; and age too is a factor for discrimination."

In the same vein Rashme Sehgal from Delhi said, "After spending so many years in journalism, I've found that no matter how many awards I win, and how productive I am, my talents will be recognised only to a certain extent. In addition, news organisations prefer hiring younger girls. It's frustrating because once one has acquired the skills and experience, one is too old or over qualified".

Most of the senior journalists believe they have given their best effort to an industry that simply doesn't quite know how to utilize their talents, or refuses to allow them to be as outspoken or proactive as their male colleagues. The survey team frequently met women journalists who were working far below their capacities, who may have started off strong but wind up stalling in their careers. Senior Delhi-based journalist Vichitra Sharma said: "I no longer look forward to career advancement as a reporter or network correspondent, something that satisfied me in my thirties. One needs to grow in one's profession, but if the institution doesn't give the opportunities needed to satisfy your growth, then you have to look elsewhere."

Observers may conclude that women journalists are still adopting a 'victim stance', refusing to acknowledge the many gains they have made because that might mean having to admit there is an even playing field for all journalists. The fact is that there are also those who have developed a tangible strategy for negotiating their careers. They say they are determined to concentrate on their goals, to not walk into every setting expecting to be harassed or discriminated against, and to stay focussed on career advancement. Latika Shyam shares her philosophy on taking advantage of the opportunities that one finds: "You are what you make of yourself. Take responsibility and be answerable first and foremost to yourself. The industry is more prepared for women moving all the way to the top than it has been ever before. Take advantage of it and go after what you want to do." On the lack of advancement among women journalists, a stronger comment came from a veteran: "Some just believe they are entitled to better opportunities than the rest of the staff and they become disenchanted when they do not move fast enough".

Major concerns that emerged from the study were job insecurity because journalists were employed like daily wage labour, signing a muster at the end of the month to get a pittance of Rs 1500 to Rs 3000 as wages; contract system of employment; neglect of maternity and child-care provisions and sexual harassment. Other issues raised by respondents were:

- "More women are employed in the media now since they are available at lower salaries on the contract system. In such circumstances gender fair reporting and practices are more difficult to promote."
- "After initial resistance, even women journalists start justifying organisational insensitivity. They are instrumental in perpetuating lack of recognition of women's special needs and functions in society – childbirth, childcare, confinement, security after night duty etc. Many believe the myth that women journalists have limitations within organisations since they cannot do night shifts."
- "Regular dilemma is childcare vs. profession. Effect of work on marital relations differ between male journalists and women journalists."
- "Longer maternity leave is important since confinement and childcare are very demanding on health and emotions. This would usually be required once or twice in all working life so no big deal."

- "Women's most productive years are also their reproductive years."
- "Women journalists are conscientious, diligent and people relate more easily to us. However, male bosses do not give credit for professionalism instead they speak of women exploiting their gender."
- "As a profession, very satisfying and stimulating but work environment needs to be egalitarian and encouraging. At present enthusiasm often watered down by unresponsive organisations that are not sensitive to gender specific requirements which are often viewed as liabilities – transport, maternity leave, childcare facilities, rest rooms etc."
- "There is no transparency in policy matters – entitlements, rights and promotion criteria".

An astounding 20.5 per cent of respondents said that women were discriminated against for promotion. 45.5 per cent felt it was because of their sex, some felt it was because of age and a large proportion refused to comment – 21.2 per cent. In fact 8.4 per cent were forced to leave a media organisation due to promotion discrimination.

Evidence also emerged that having children has an impact on women's work in the media: 29.2 per cent of all respondents were sure that having children affects promotion and 37.8 per cent felt that this was because of the perception that having children affects women's ability to put in late hours.

Though most of the respondents had not deferred marriage or pregnancy due to job insecurity, only 56.7 per cent of those with children had availed of maternity leave and a further 10.6 per cent had availed of unpaid or part maternity leave. Reasons for this varied from no such provision, job insecurity and even, not given despite requesting. An astonishing 17.5 per cent were not aware of any such facility in their organisation and of those without children, 54.2 per cent said that they would avail of maternity benefits in the future if such a provision existed.

During personal interaction sexual harassment emerged as a major concern of most respondents. But when asked whether they had to put up with sexist remarks / gestures or if they had been sexually harassed in any way at their workplace or in association with their work, 22.7 per cent said they had, 8 per cent said they were 'not sure' and many others had either denied or refused to comment. An interesting finding is that, of those who had experienced sexual harassment, 31.5 per cent said it had 'seriously' undermined their confidence and affected their work, 24 per cent said it had 'mildly' but an alarming 41.3 per cent said it had had 'no affect'.

These findings show sexual harassment is part of work culture in media organisations in India but women either do not know how or for a wide variety of reasons, choose not to

do anything about it. Only 15.2 per cent of women who experienced sexual harassment had made a formal complaint.

In regards to working conditions, the overwhelming majority of women (76.2 per cent) believe their working conditions are similar to their male colleagues. 10.8 per cent said they were better, while 3 percent said they were worse. However, the level of awareness of basic working conditions is very low on some key issues:

- 31 per cent were not aware if any equal employment policy existed in their organisation.
- 29 per cent did not know if women were targeted for filling vacancies in their organisations.
- 19.5 per cent did not know whether formal appeal procedures or mechanisms for handling grievances existed in their organisation while 50.7 per cent were sure of no such facility.
- 10 percent are not aware of any formal training programme in their organisation while 42.3 said that no such facility was provided.
- 87.6 percent are not aware of any superannuation scheme or believe that it does not apply to them.

Job segregation was an issue of significance for many of the respondents. 24.7 per cent feel that they do not have access to all areas of work and that lifestyle, arts, gender, fashion and education are traditional areas reserved for women. But 87.3 per cent believe that women have capability in all areas of journalism.

The changes that women want in their workplace include:

- Positions advertised and proper selection and interview procedures introduced;
- Provision of training about equal employment opportunity and gender issues for their male colleagues;
- Transparency in terms and conditions of contract system of employment;
- Childcare facilities;
- Maternity leave;
- Insurance;
- An elected (not nominated) body for redressal of grievances.

Interestingly, childcare at work place and insurance cover emerged as the most required facilities. 54.4 per cent thought that there had been no development (permanent part-time,

flexibility of working hours, special leave, childcare facilities, study leave etc.) at their workplace in the interest of women generally. Only 29.4 per cent of the respondents felt that their employers were responsible for changes that had taken place. Most of these were perceived to have been brought about in response to individual demands.

Notwithstanding this, women journalists say they are making the most of what career opportunities they find, while conceding that they may not have the opportunity to reach the kind of high profile beats that male journalists attain. Often, this is because they are "left out of the loop" for various reasons – not available for night shifts as a consequence of which not assigned important beats that often results in being buttonholed into accepting a lesser deal. Or they say that while they might be very successful as assistant editors, a shot at the top job may not come their way because they are not considered 'management material'.

Just what are the barriers to opportunities for women journalists?

- "Newspapers are high pressure environments where male gender, talent and hustle are incontrovertible tickets to success."
- "Women are sometimes hampered because they refuse to assimilate into the work culture. We need to be more aggressive to promote our work."
- "Women journalists face daunting stereotypes about their abilities."

The survey has demonstrated that comments from women journalists portray resilience bred from years of experience. They have learnt that hard work, a supportive management, and a positive attitude can be keys to success, but they have also learned that within the newsroom, resentment, exclusion and hostility are flip sides of those coins. By and large, women journalists have a positive perspective and believe that advancement opportunities in the industry have improved over the last few years.

## CHAPTER-2

### 'GLAMOROUS' INDUSTRY FAILS TO LOOK AFTER ITS OWN

*By Sushmita Malaviya*

(Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand)

Like in the rest of the country, in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand though the number of women in the media is steadily increasing, it continues to remain a male dominated field, one in which women have to struggle to create their own identity. In these four states, journalism itself has yet to establish professional norms. The status of women journalists in the region is fraught with daily struggle.

They are constantly battling discrimination at the workplace in terms of salary, promotions, amenities, benefits, areas of work allotted to them and sexual harassment.

In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh the concept of women journalists with permanent jobs still does not exist. While the 'lucky' ones are those on contracts with a measure of job security for two to three years, most women work without appointment letters or designations and are hired and fired on the whims of the management.

The method of payment for both men and women is a bit like that for daily wage labour on muster rolls. They are verbally asked to begin work on a hazy work profile and at the end of the month sign a muster roll. Should there be any reason for either party to terminate the 'understanding,' the final settlement is made on a voucher. In some cases the journalists sign for a lump sum amount, payment for several months, on a voucher.

Most young journalists begin their careers in these states on Rs 1500 as against the starting wage of Rs 7000 to Rs 8000 in the Delhi newspapers. If a journalist has to be axed, it is most often a woman who is asked to leave. The management's reason for easing out women could range from the whimsical 'can you justify what you have been doing for the last few months,' to demoralising her by saying her work is not up to the mark without qualifying it or – the edition is not doing well and we have to downsize.

Along with gender specific problems the women journalists face, they also face area-specific problems. Working conditions in urban areas differ to those in the rural areas and each has its own set of problems. While in Bihar, the All-Bihar Women Journalists' Forum has been formed and is quite active in helping women journalists with their work-related problems, in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh the union movement is weak.

Despite the fact that women journalists in the region do not have the scope and facilities of those working in the bigger metropolitan cities they have still contributed to broadening press coverage, including reporting on a much neglected field - social issues. They have played a major role in highlighting development issues and introducing human interest in the media. Despite this, the number of women in decision-making capacities is almost negligible.

Work began by contacting editors of regional local newspapers. The response was mixed. Some cooperated and allowed us to meet journalists while others were not so helpful. After the initial visits to Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand, few people were assigned specific responsibility. For Chhattisgarh – **Sapna Giri**, for Bihar – **Nivedita Jha**, for Jharkhand – **Vasavi**, and for Indore – **Archana Pillai**. This effort was necessary because journalists in this region did not have easy access to the Internet.

The experiences in filling in the questionnaires too have been mixed. In Rajya ki Nai Dunia, Bhopal there was just one woman reporter who readily filled the questionnaire and was open to an interview too. However, in Dainik Bhaskar, Bhopal, which has a good number of women journalists, many of them stalled filling the questionnaires on the pretext of a heavy workload.

In another local daily, Central Chronicle, women journalists refused to fill the questionnaire saying the management would not allow them and might take action against them if they did so. There was some tangible pressure on the employees, therefore, we did not insist. In their sister organisation, Nava-Bharat, reporters and sub-editors filled the questionnaires without hesitation.

In Deshbandhu, the lone woman sub-editor said she would not be able to fill questionnaires because of work pressure. In few small newspapers like Swadesh and Dainik Nai Dunia, no women journalists were employed. When people working there were asked why there were no women, they said the payment was not lucrative and the management found it easier to employ men who could do multiple jobs - report, work on the desk, do night shifts. They said many women refused to go out into the field and work nights, forcing the management to give preference to men.

Some journalists who had left newspapers and had moved into the electronic media were curious to know if the questionnaires would translate into action that would benefit women journalists. Few journalists hinted that they had tough professional lives but did not reveal their stories for fear of losing their jobs. In Bhopal most journalists claimed they did not have the time to fill the long questionnaire and agreed only after many requests.

In Chhattisgarh, journalists were directly contacted in their offices and homes. They were very cooperative and every journalist spoke of her struggle to stay afloat in the profession. All of them wanted an improvement in their working conditions. Even responding to the

questionnaire seemed to remove some of their frustrations and they wanted a follow up to the survey.

For Bihar and Jharkhand, Nivedita Jha and Vasavi followed up the questionnaires with personal interviews. Since Nivedita Jha has been actively involved in the All-Bihar Women Journalists' Forum she was able to co-ordinate the filling of questionnaires even at the district level. The survey included journalists from the electronic media, some of who had moved from the print to the electronic media.

It has not been possible to get a proper estimate of the actual number of women journalists because many of them, both in Hindi and English newspapers, either refused to fill the forms or did not have the time to do so. Many of them were afraid of the management's reaction, were insecure and in some cases they were just indifferent.

In Madhya Pradesh, 16 women responded — eight each from the Hindi and English language media. Most of them are in their early twenties. Two were between 40 to 44 and there was none below the age of 20. Two were freelancers. None had permanent full-time jobs. All were on contracts and many were on the voucher system which meant they are not entitled to provident fund, gratuity and other benefits. There was not a single woman journalist in a senior position—the highest being a sub-editor. Though most of them are post-graduates and had field experience, the average monthly salary is below Rs 10,000.

In Chhattisgarh too the 12 respondents, nine from the Hindi and three from the English language media, were all post-graduates, most of them below 35 years but none was earning over Rs 10,000 a month. The highest position they had was that of a sub-editor and none of them was a permanent full-time employee. All are on contracts or worse still, as in Madhya Pradesh, on the voucher system.

In Bihar, of the 18 respondents, 11 were from the Hindi and seven from the English language media. Here too most of the women were on contracts. Five, however, were permanent full time employees and five were freelancers. As in MP and Chattisgarh most of them were below 35 years and their average monthly salary below Rs 10,000. Five, however, were earning up to Rs 15,000 a month and one more than that. One was a bureau chief and eight are sub-editors. Most of them were post-graduates and some were graduates and almost all of them have been through a course in journalism.

There were nine respondents from Jharkhand, four from the Hindi and five from the English language media. Most of them were below 35 years. Three were freelancers, four on contracts and there was only one permanent full-time employee. Most of them worked for newspapers, one worked for a magazine, and none of them was in the senior echelons. Most of them were post-graduates and their average monthly salary was between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 15,000. Most of them had done courses in journalism or served as apprentice journalists.

## **CHAPTER-3**

### **POORLY PAID, INSECURE IN NORTH EAST**

*By Linda Chhakchhuak*

(Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura)

#### **Summary**

Of the 35 questionnaires handed out, which was about the total number of women working in the print media in the North East - 22 women responded. There were six respondents from the regional press and 16 from the English media. The age group of the 22 women who responded was between 20 to 40. Only three were above 40.

**The major area of concern that emerged out of the survey was job security, low pay and lack of prospects.**

- **Only 35 per cent worked as permanent full time employees. The rest worked as permanent part timers or on contract basis.**
- **None of the respondents were in senior positions, the highest being a senior reporter and sub editor**
- **72 per cent of them got salaries ranging between Rs.1500-Rs.5000. Of this 7 per cent received salaries below Rs.1500.**
- **40 per cent said that they had never been promoted, while 31 per cent said that they had been promoted once.**
- **There was no mechanism for addressing grievances or making appeals and even where there was such a mechanism it was inadequate.**
- **Only 27 per cent were members of some superannuation scheme.**

#### **North East, a World Apart**

The number of women in the field of journalism in the states of north-east – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura is minuscule. Not more than 35 women scribes work in the region, a majority of them at the desk. This is not surprising as journalism in general is still at a nascent stage in most parts of the region, barring Assam where its premier English daily, The Assam Tribune, is more than a century old.

The survey showed that most of the newspapers of the region are in the tiny scale (1000-10,000) and small sector and organised in an ad hoc manner. The bigger newspaper houses are based mainly in Assam. There are four of them and they do not have anything substantially better to offer to the journalists in general, leave alone women journalists. Barring one House implementing the Bachawat Award, none of the others are implementing the wage board recommendations. Even among those media houses 'partially' implementing the wage board recommendations, the management have a structure which divides journalists into two categories: one section of the few who are shown on the official records as permanent staff getting all the recommended benefits of the wage board and the other section of workers who are not shown on the official employees rolls, but are maintained separately as some kind of semi-permanent-temporary workers, not given the wage board recommended salaries, though they may have worked in the same media house for several years.

Metropolitan newspapers (some call them 'national newspapers'), such as The Telegraph, The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, The Asian Age etc which have their headquarters outside the region either in Delhi, Kolkata or Mumbai, have a multiple (based on the place of recruitment) employment policy. The northeast editions of these newspapers recruit journalists locally in the states on a yearly contract with a consolidated take-home pay. In some other cases the journalist works without a contract of any kind as a stringer for a small, consolidated monthly payment, which keeps the journalists on tenterhooks. In many cases there is no system of getting reimbursements for telephone bills, transport used for reporting etc. These newspapers maintain their regional bureau offices at Guwahati where they have built up good infrastructure. However, the outstation reporters and correspondents, functioning from the other states of the region, work on a measly consolidated payment from which they are supposed to meet their living expenses as well as workrelated expenses such as use of phone, emailing, transport, stationery etc. This is an important reason for the big struggle for most journalists.

In some cases, if the journalists had a 'good' relationship with the 'manager' (who is usually a senior journalist) at the bureau headquarters, the payment of the phone bills, transport and other expenses could be negotiated. But these are not available to the journalist worker as a matter of job expenses. There are examples of the management not clearing the bills of their correspondents for covering important happenings, which they had been assigned to cover. One of them had been asked to cover the last Lok Sabha elections in Garo Hills, Meghalaya. The expenses incurred during the field trip including hotel bills, travel, hiring vehicles etc are yet to be reimbursed and the correspondent has given up in disgust. This is not to speak of the amount of money already spent on telephoning the head office for clearing these bills. But all the reports filed from the location were published prominently by the daily.

The wage board recommendations, as far as these newspapers are concerned, are applicable only to workers recruited at the head office of the newspaper wherever that may

be, whether Delhi, Kolkata or elsewhere. This has led to a clear differentiation between staffers on the one hand and contract workers and stringers, based in the region.

Moreover, the contracts signed with a local manager of the edition, and these contracts remain confidential so that none of the journalists knows what the other person is being paid. The 'secret' contract system is used to play up one journalist against the other and this was experienced in many of the newspapers houses of the region. During the survey journalists said that this was highly discriminatory, promoting sycophancy, creating an unhealthy working atmosphere and heightening job insecurity. Journalists interviewed said this chaotic and unfair system of employment is at the root of the lackadaisical journalistic culture.

The survey showed that journalism was a low option as a long-term career. The pay packet is extraordinarily small. It ranges largely between Rs.1500-Rs. 3000 even for those who had worked for more than two years. Another journalist, from the same organisation, who had worked for 15 years as a permanent staffer was receiving a salary ranging between Rs.10,000 to Rs.15,000. The survey showed that there was no upward mobility both in terms of promotion and pay scales. As for special facilities for women journalists in terms of maternity leave etc, they are non-existent in most cases.

Journalists are underpaid and most of the time work on undignified terms and conditions. They can be fired at the whim and fancy of the proprietor. In some of the 'better'' newspaper houses journalists work on a one year contract basis, "temporary permanent," while in most others they are not even issued proper appointment letters outlining their job, pay scale etc.

Chayamoni Bhuyan illustrates the problem of journalists in general. In her mid-twenties Chayamoni, worked for a Guwahati-based Assamese daily, claimed to be the highest circulated daily. She had been working there for about three years when she was chosen along with nine other journalists of the country to cover the September 11 anniversary functions in the USA under a United States Information Service programme. She found to her dismay when she returned home that she was out of job. She was refused her salary for the month when she was on tour on the ground that she was "absent' from work. It did not make any difference to the management that she had filed more than a dozen stories from the various locations they had visited all of which were carried prominently in her newspaper. The newspaper management did not even think it necessary to reimburse the amount she had spent getting her stories faxed from the various locations in the US to her newspaper. Moreover, when she stood up for her rights she was given the cold shoulder by the management and had to quit.

There was no mechanism for any kind of redressal or compensation. She did not have any appointment letter but had been working in good faith that all these would be provided sooner or later. She had joined a new daily, launched around that time, where it was clear that a proper salary could not be expected for a long time to come. But despite all the drawbacks in working conditions and lack of recognition, she is not prepared to leave the profession, which she has grown to love and respect.

All the women journalists interviewed were graduates or post-graduates, with several of them holding diplomas or professional degrees in journalism and mass communication. However, despite holding high degrees and having experience in the media their pay scales were not commensurate with their qualifications.

While most of the journalists said that there was no gender discrimination at the work place, there was a general feeling that the existing general male bias in the larger society was all-pervasive. These are manifested in various ways such as the kind of beats women are traditionally assigned to cover. Some newspaper houses have an unwritten policy not to employ women reporters as they bring 'lot of trouble' in the sense that they do not want to do night shifts, need to be dropped home at night, need special rest rooms, and so on.

Most of the women interviewed did not consider their gender a handicap, but definitely felt that the general view that women were handicapped because of their gender hampered their aspirations. But of far more concern was the lack of training, exposure and hope for better employment opportunities which continued to be a major drawback for them as well as for their male colleagues.

#### **Experience during the survey**

All the journalists were very happy that such a survey was being undertaken. They hoped that it would help better their professional lives. However, almost all of them found the questionnaire "inadequate" or 'confusing' and some of them said that the "questions did not apply to them." The paucity of funds hampered travel as transport is costly in the north eastern states. Added to this is the time consuming nature of hill travel as all transport is by road. Several times appointments fixed were put off as the interviewees had to rush off to cover a spot story. About fifty questionnaires were distributed but few were returned.

It is also to be noted since the questionnaire did not correspond to their prevailing situation; the interviewer took the liberty of doing the survey through question and answer sessions with the journalists.

#### **Journalism in the North-East Region:**

It is important to remember that the growth of journalism in the region has taken off at a somewhat different tangent from the way the news business has grown in other parts of the country or even the world. Because of its peculiar history and experience, the region is one of the high-intensity conflict zones not only within the country but globally. There are more than 300 different tribes and communities inhabiting the region scattered across state and international boundaries. Scores of tribal and ethnic armies fighting for homelands based on the theory of self-determination, preserving their identity etc. against each other and with the Government in a tangled web of discords. All these have made the region a zone of strife where journalism has been spawned in the fires of activism for these various causes. One of the many questions, which were raised during the survey, was how the style of reporting and

the intense focus on sensational scoops in such a scenario could be contributing to the strife in the region.

The journalist reporting in the region has a tough task of maintaining some semblance of journalistic ethics and objectivity amidst this cacophony of conflicting causes and still manage to write the 'news as it happens.' Therefore besides the need for general training, special capacity building for conflict reporting is an urgent requirement here.

The total readership has grown by leaps and bounds over the years. So has the number of newspapers hitting the stands. But this has not meant better working conditions for the journalists.

Another aspect of the growth of the newspaper industry in the region is that while there is a market boom, with four metropolitan newspapers often referred to as 'national newspapers' setting up north-east or Guwahati Editions, the northeast editions of these newspapers sold in the seven states are 50 to 100 % costlier than the other editions sold in other parts of the country. Paradoxically there is no reflection of this prosperity in the working conditions of the journalists in these newspapers, nor is there wider information flow as is to be expected. In fact, the finding of this survey is that these media houses have looked upon the north-east region purely from the market point of view, casting aside their social responsibility i.e. disseminating information. The information generated from north-east correspondents is published only in these north-east editions, leading to a situation where the northeast is effectively blacked out in their 'national' editions. The alienation of the people of the region, and the ignorance of the rest of the nation about the region, has only been compounded by this market-based media policy.

A study could be made on the advertisement policy of these newspapers which garner advertisements for all-India publications from the north-east governments under the garb of being "nationally circulated newspapers," at exorbitant rates. This 'unfair' trade practice is slowly strangling the local newspaper houses which are finding it difficult to compete with the slick production and unabashed market strategy of these "north-east editions".

At another tangent reflecting the diversity of culture and languages in the region, there is a proliferation of tiny scale newspapers all over the region to serve the reading needs of these diverse populations. These newspapers are usually far from economically viable but have a powerful role to play in society.

## **CHAPTER-4**

### **PRESS IN THE SOUTH**

*By Akhileshwari*

(Andhra, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu)

In the regional language journalism in the four southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, only Kannada has two women journalist-editors who reached the top from the ranks, one each for a daily and a magazine. There is also a woman assistant editor in a Kannada daily. In Tamil, a 'working journalist' is the editor of a Tamil magazine while there are none in the Telugu and Malayalam press. Although there are women at senior positions (exactly one in Telugu and one in Malayalam) in other languages, there are no women editors.

Reporting remains a male preserve although youngsters are breaching it in all the four languages. Women might be reporting and interviewing people for articles, but it is only occasionally and out of personal interest. They are basically appointed to the desk and are full time sub editors. While there are no women journalists outside the metropolitan cities or state capitals, in Kannada one finds women as district correspondents. In Telugu although there are newspapers that publish editions from the district headquarters, women are absent in editorial areas.

Telugu and Kannada journalism have at least a 30-year history of recruiting women journalists even if they have been very few. While Kannada women journalists did election surveys, in Andhra women journalists as far back as the mid-70s were doing the night shift. The mainstream Malayalam press had an unwritten law on not recruiting women while the ideological dailies did employ a few, all of them on the desk. Even today the Tamil press has the least number of women in comparison to the other languages in the south.

The language dailies have followed the English press in recruiting women for their features desk as most have a daily a supplement. The opportunities in "soft writing" have opened up the newspapers to women since they are believed to be good in writing features. This also involves reporting, mostly on non-political issues. While this is true of the Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam press, the strong presence of magazines in Tamil has prevented the Tamil dailies from providing space for feature pages and colour supplements and thus opportunities for women in newspapers are very few.

In total contrast to the situation in the regional press, English language press is literally teeming with women especially in Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad where papers like Times of India, Deccan Herald (of Bangalore), The Hindu, The New Indian Express and Deccan Chronicle (of Hyderabad) have a strong presence. In Trivandrum, the Malayalam press dominates and the circulation of English papers is comparatively small. In Bangalore and Hyderabad the English newspapers employ women in large numbers and they occupy important positions such as editor, chief reporter, chief sub editor. Generally women are concentrated in features and Sunday magazine sections. Occasionally women are reporters on the crime beat but rarely do they do politics and legislature reporting. There are half dozen women correspondents of outstation English papers in all the capital cities in the south and they invariably cover politics too. They have been appointed because of their seniority and at times because they work for news magazines which requires feature writing too and so the preference for women.

### **Women in English Press**

Women in the English language press do not have the same problems as their sisters in the language press. They are better paid, and even if on contract, have better facilities at workplace, have toilets and washrooms, get transport back home after night shift, get maternity leave and various perks and privileges. (Andhra Jyoti, a Telugu daily of Andhra, has a common toilet for men and women while Malayalam Manorama had to find space to build toilets for women when they began to recruit women a few years ago).

There are several women at mid-level and senior level in The Hindu — women who worked themselves up from the ranks to the position of deputy editors, special correspondents, chief sub editors and so on. The Indian Express has had a long tradition of employing women as reporters many of whom have risen to the position of chief reporter. So also in Deccan Herald of Bangalore where women have been assistant editors, chief reporters, foreign correspondent, special correspondent, chief sub editor. Deccan Chronicle has a woman editor while Times of India has a woman bureau chief in Bangalore.

Nirmala Laxman, Associate Editor of The Hindu, said there had been a 25-30 per cent increase in women's intake in the organisation but she believes there has to be a concerted effort to recruit women.

Quite a few women believe there is no discrimination and no glass ceiling in major English language papers. However, there is a tendency to push women into feature writing and even non-serious writing such as reporting parties and social events. The feature desks in The Hindu and Deccan Chronicle and Deccan Herald are all-women affairs. Some women believe this "ghettoisation" of women, and keeping them out of "mainstream" 'newspapering' does no good for their future in journalism. Ammu Joseph for instance points out that an acknowledged tendency among girls is to focus on serious issues but with more jobs in non-serious journalism, the girls tend to be herded into celebrity and lifestyle journalism. Like the

women's columns or women's clubs of earlier times, women tend to get bogged down in their features sections.

Sudha Ramachandran, former Assistant Editor of Deccan Herald, who is perhaps the only woman who writes on a regular basis from home for DH even after quitting it, believes that women should get into the mainstream of the paper. "Let them stop sitting in the supplements; politics is the core of the newspaper; they should do more politics," she says. Also she says women should insist on a level playing field because whenever women play wimpy they damage other women's cause.

Women journalists in English newspapers believe that they are at a disadvantage compared to men because they do not politick or network. They are not "glass-mates" nor do they have "bar-room bonding." So they lose out in terms of promotions and prized assignments. Even when in senior positions, women lose out in power struggles because they do not or cannot use their power as they are not used to it. Another reason why women in senior and decision making positions admit they do not use their power is because the system does not enable or empower women.

Being emotional too they get easily upset and so prefer to avoid any kind of confrontation as it impacts upon their performance. This kind of being loners, keeping away from others' concerns also makes women indifferent to standing by their colleagues or friends during times of crisis like sexual or personal harassment. They prefer not to get embroiled because they are fearful of the consequences. In two instances of sexual harassment in Deccan Chronicle of Hyderabad, women colleagues of the women harassed did not support them. Nor did the women colleagues stand by a senior woman in Praja Vani, a Kannada daily from Bangalore when she was personally harassed for more than a year forcing her to resign. If there is a network or a group or greater camaraderie then they could develop enough mental strength to fight for a cause. Another solution could be to get more and more women on a newspaper's rolls so that there would be strength in numbers.

### **Wages and Contract System**

Women might have been well off in the English language press in terms of salaries and other perks compared to the regional language press but with the contract system becoming a norm now, women seem to be getting short-changed. They do not know how to read a contract, or how to negotiate. They have no idea of the benefits they can get or perks they should demand. They tend to accept what is offered and end up getting less than their male colleagues who are junior to them or do not get normal benefits like leave, reimbursements, Provident Fund and so on.

In the regional press, especially in Telugu newspapers, no pay scales are prevalent, neither for women nor men. They are paid consolidated amounts, even in vouchers in some cases. In the case of leading newspaper groups like Eenadu, differential scales are given for

employees working in different magazines. Only a handful of senior people get the Wage Board pay scales. Gradually all the newspapers are opting for the contract system for new recruits. In Andhra Jyoti, a Telugu daily, that changed hands and was revived a year ago after closure for a few years, every person negotiates salary personally. Almost all the 12/14 women took what was offered to them. At least half of them work for less than what they were earning earlier or less than their male colleagues who are junior to them in the profession.

The situation seems better in other languages in the south but the contract system is seen as a bane in the English newspapers. The Hindu seems to be the only organisation that continues to recruit people on Wage Board scales. Women are not clear about the implications of the contract system, what to ask and what to expect as they are being pressurised to move to the contract system. In fact, a senior woman journalist wondered if the substantial number of women in senior positions in English newspapers was due to the fact that the managements got them cheap!

### **Marriage, Maternity and Domestic Responsibilities**

The biggest burden on women in journalism is their domestic responsibilities as wife, mother and daughter-in-law. The brightest and most successful journalists have left a bright career to settle down in matrimony or have moved to less demanding jobs when children arrive. For women, almost invariably, the home comes first. A T Jayanti editor of Deccan Chronicle, believes that as home is always a woman's responsibility it naturally affects her work. "I have no problem with any girl until she marries," she says. For most of them, home comes first whatever the concessions given, says Jayanti.

Most girls, even in the middle class, urban, educated families, fettered by conventions and customs of society, find it difficult to break out of constraints imposed on them. Women editors both in English and language press have admitted to being extra considerate and going the extra mile to retain women on their rolls especially the brighter ones but often they fail because the girls are hesitant to break out of the mould into which they have been cast. The biggest problem they believe is that the girls have no clear picture of what they want, of what their dreams are for themselves or where their future lies. So they get pressurised by their parents to opt for marriage or by in-laws and husbands to quit the newspapers and opt for 'routine' jobs where they will have regular timings, no pressures of deadlines and no great expectations of them.

Women across the four states said they were "successful" when backed by cooperative husbands or kind mothers-in-law. Others depended on their mothers to help them out when office pressures increased.

Vasantalakshmi, features editor of Andhra Jyoti, says that before marriage girls take great interest in their work, even moving house near the office or ask parents or brothers to pick them up after late shift. However, once they marry and have children, they shift to other

departments or drop out of the profession because of the responsibility they feel for their children. They feel guilty and this affects their self-esteem. If women can afford it financially, they prefer to opt out of the profession. Some do want to return after the children grow up but there are not many opportunities.

Quite a few women especially in the English language press have put off having children in favour of their careers. Most women who took a break to bring up children or even those who stayed home for a few months to have children believe they lost out on growth and promotions. Some women even lose their jobs as maternity leave is not available to them. Quite a few women especially in the English language press put off marriage and children either to stabilise professionally or because of the demands of the job.

Some organisations go out of the way to be considerate to women with young children but mostly women are on their own where children are concerned. Young mothers would like child care facilities in their workplace so that they can concentrate on their work instead of worrying about leaving the kid with an unreliable maid or a crèche. Some suggested that organisations should consider having child care facilities not just for women employees but also for men as it would go a long way in building an enabling atmosphere for new and young mothers and fathers.

### **Promotions**

Promotions are rare in both the English language and the regional press and no newspaper organisation has any transparent system of assessing performance. The result is that promotions are arbitrary and capricious, giving rise to frustration. There are instances of women not having been promoted even in 10-15 years or being promoted only once in a career of 20 years. There is no policy of promotion in any organisation. While The Hindu promotes everyone across the line every few years, its financial daily has introduced a system of performance assessment wherein two best stories of the day are rated. While this is expected to give instant recognition and reward to the staffers and encourage them, some believe that it does not take into consideration that stories depend on the kind of beat one is given. Also this system ignores the performance of the desk. In organisations where women are in good numbers they say there is equal opportunity in writing and reporting assignments but not in promotions. In fact while a woman journalist said "discrimination" against women was an "archaic" thing, K H Savitri, editor of the Kannada magazine Karmaveera said it will take at least 20 years for the regional press to match the facilities and opportunities for women in the English language press.

Nirmala Lakshman of The Hindu believes there is hope for women in journalism. "But the biggest hope for us is the younger generation of men who are more gender-sensitive," she said.

## CHAPTER-5

### BUTTERFLIES NO MORE

*By Rajashri Dasgupta*

(West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Orissa)

The pursuit of equality is not just some grand feminist design. It is a matter of human rights, as much in the media as in the other spheres of life journalists routinely report on. With women increasingly joining the media, it has been a long way that women journalists as a group have travelled in the profession. Certainly a long way since the day the patriarch of West Bengal's most well-known media group commented in mock-horror when he spotted the first batch of women in the news room: "What are these butterflies doing here?"

The study of how these women in the media perceive their position was conducted in four states: West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal and Orissa among women journalists from both English and regional media. It revealed, sometimes, glaringly different perspectives between the two, whether in terms of the attitude among journalists and the management, or in opportunities and facilities available to the staffers.

#### **No night duty please, they are ladies**

Media houses like the *Bartaman* in Kolkata would still like to believe that women journalists are like butterflies — fragile, to be protected. Women are not given duty after 7 pm, as a result of which even experienced journalists are denied responsible decision-making positions and challenging assignments, and also forced to forego promotions. Though they agree on the one hand, that the management's concern for their safety has led to a friendly work atmosphere, on the other, its paternal preoccupation with their security has shackled their progress as professionals.

In sharp contrast, it was way back in 1981 when *Aajkal's* founder editor, Gour Kishore Ghosh was the first, in both the English and Bengali media, to actively encourage women to take up night shifts. He was far sighted enough to realise that if they avoided it, it would be the basis of discrimination against them in the organisation. He provided for a healthy atmosphere, say women staffers appreciatively, by assuring them that 'misbehaviour' by male colleagues would not be tolerated in the workplace. The largest Bengali daily, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, was to follow suit and go even one step further to facilitate women journalists in their professions by providing for car lifts for both the evening and night shifts.

### **Mixed response from the management**

But many regional media houses like *Amar Ujjala* in Dehradun, the second largest Hindi daily, don't even employ a woman journalist in the organisation. "They are difficult to get," commented the editor. Yet he showed great interest when informed about the study, quizzed the interviewer about the trends emerging among Hindi journalists and immediately published a short report in his newspaper.

Other media managements in UP and in Orissa are said to be keen to promote women journalists. A senior editor of a Hindi newspaper in Lucknow \* enthusiastically asked his women staffers to cooperate with the study and confided, "They are very backward, they need greater exposure to women's issues." While there was some truth in his observation, it was, nevertheless, patronising to imply that male employees are abreast of the situation and do not need to develop awareness of the issues.

However, the scenario was quite different among women journalists of *Dharitri*, a new Oriya newspaper. They spoke glowingly of the editor who encourages them to overcome hurdles and opt for reporting. While actively promoting equal opportunities in the media house, the management combines it with commercial interest. It is perhaps the only one in the country to celebrate March 8 as International Women's Day — in a swanky city hotel — sponsored by the beauty industry.

### **Gender is not an issue?**

If media managements are grappling - willy-nilly - to keep up with the times, some women journalists themselves would not like to perceive the issue through a gender lens. A few refused to participate in the study and objected to the prefix 'women' journalists voicing the apprehension it would go against them professionally, which implied that the prefix has a negative nuance.

One journalist in Kolkata withdrew her response to the interview when it came to the section on sexual harassment, outraged that such a question should even be asked of journalists who belong to a 'respectable and educated' profession. "It does not happen among people like us", she maintained. "To even accept that such an incident could happen is to spit on one's own face."

On the other hand, while enthusiastically participating in the study, Sunita Araon, resident editor of *Hindustan Times*, Lucknow correctly cautioned, "Don't make gender an issue to shirk work or bargain for special favours. This goes against us. There is of course need and scope to improve the mechanics of the system."

However, the hostility shown by many journalists in being classified shows a level of confidence and coming-of-age in the profession. Yet it could also imply a tacit acceptance of the prevalent false notion — that being professional and assertive is a male thing. By denying

one's gender, argue some, is to be defensive about an essential part of one's identity and follow norms and culture set by men so as to be part of the *baradiri* or brotherhood.

It could be a coincidence that those who questioned the separate study on the group were senior journalists from the English language media, as also those who were given the questionnaire in the four states but withheld participation in the study, despite numerous reminders and counter-promises. Even the occasional curtness encountered while conducting the study was by colleagues from the English language media.

### **"The questionnaire itself was a learning process"**

To the majority of the interviewees, answering the questionnaire itself — though all complained of the cumbersome length! — was a process of learning, debating and becoming aware of issues they had not registered earlier or given much importance. Whether it was on matters of appointment, job assignment or office atmosphere, many said they had to confront questions closely related to their professional life for the first time, before they could commit an answer.

For example, when a senior journalist in Uttar Pradesh maintained that facilities for both men and women journalists were the "same," little did the interviewer realise that she meant it literally when she was directed to the 'common' toilet for both men and women staffers. Only when she refused to use the toilet and was led to an abandoned rooftop did the journalist understand the incongruity of the situation she had unwittingly accepted for years!

When some women journalists lamented they had never tried reporting or were limited to a few 'feminine' beats, they came to realise that in most instances it was not their lack of competence but the absence of opportunity, editor's lack of trust in their ability or bias in the department that allows male reporters to unquestioningly bag plum assignments.

Though the majority of the English language journalists expressed no aversion or discomfort with the study on 'women' journalists, in general it was the journalists of the regional press who were more enthusiastic and less cynical about the study.

First, they showed more curiosity about other media houses in the country and progress by women journalists and were keen to discuss the recent trends in journalism. Second, the journalists in the regional media seemed to work harder than their English-language counterparts. This is perhaps because they have to make do with fewer office facilities, job opportunities in the market and their relatively less "polished" academic background. Personal conversations revealed the struggle against bias many had to undergo both in the family and the work place to earn grudging acceptance of their livelihood.

### **Networking is power**

The interviews in Orissa, for example, were easier facilitated because of the banding together of women journalists into an organisation, however fledgling, which is part of the

newly formed Network of Women in Media, India. Low budget but safe accommodation in a new city and facilitating networking and interviews all within a span of one-and-a-half days were possible perhaps, due to the network's guidance and help.

Though some have questioned the need for a segregated professional body, many have felt the need for a support group and a special space to share and exchange. When informed of the initiative during the interviews, journalists especially in Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal showed keen interest and in Kolkata a few even joined the Bengal Network (part of NWMI). But it was also only in Kolkata that a few journalists who could not get over their obsession with politics probed whether the study or the network had any "party connections".

### **Poor pay, poor quality**

The good news is that compared to the English media, there is a phenomenal rise in the circulation of regional language print media in the country. The bad news is this does not translate into higher quality of news content in the pages. The strides made by the Hindi press are, says editor of *Amar Ujjala*, because of the multiple editions of a newspaper with the front page dealing with local news in contrast to English newspapers whose claim to being 'national' make them obsessed with Delhi for the lead.

Media observers in Lucknow say that the phenomenon of hiring contract workers in the multiple editions of Hindi newspapers has adversely affected the quality of journalism. The sense of insecurity among journalists due to lack of labour laws and poor pay sometimes as low as Rs 1,000 –2000 a month has led to the best brains seeking other professions. "As a result we now have poorly educated journalists who can't even write a straight sentence in Hindi," said a senior editor of Dainik Jagaran, the largest selling Hindi daily. She could be talking of other regions too.

The media managements in the states surveyed are today increasingly 'expecting' journalists especially in the districts to procure advertisements for the organisation along with news, thereby compromising their professional ethics as it becomes a quid pro quo relationship with the firms obliging. As a result, editors complain, on the one hand, about spurious news with no means to cross check. People in the area on the other hand, accuse the mushrooming journalists, which newspapers are increasingly depending on, of becoming centres of power, using the press card as a tool to threaten and spread fear if they do not comply. This phenomenon of 'stringers' is largely restricted to the men as women are unable to find a foothold in the toughness that the job requires.

### **Breaking boundaries**

The media has thrown up many women who are making progress by leaps and bounds. Whether it is Sunita Aron, resident editor in UP or Jaskiran Chopra heading the UNI bureau of the newly-formed Uttaranchal state, or Gouri Chatterjee, editor of the most popular feature

section of The Telegraph, they have impacted the media and their respective organisations with their consummate capabilities and astute insights.

Still others are inching forward, working capably in the most difficult situations. Archana whizzes around in her two-wheeler wherever there is news in the making and does not allow the absence of safety and transport in Bhubaneswar to deter her. Suman of Ghaziabad has never missed an event in volatile Ayodhya, however high the political tempers on the *mandir/masjid* issue.

Then there are those who have penetrated the 'male bastions' like Madhumita Bose, the first business reporter in Kolkata, Elora Sen who heads a Sports desk, Mitali Ghosh covers cricket in the fields and Seema edits a Hindi weekly Science page. Today these women journalists are breaking grounds in their demanding profession, and breaking free at last from being fossilised butterflies.

## CHAPTER-6

### **“WE DEDICATED THE WOMEN’S PAGE TO RAPE”**

*By Pamela Bhagat*

(Punjab and Jammu)

Data collection for the study was amazingly revealing, interesting but also exasperating when response rates to the formatted questionnaires were not exactly gratifying.

I travelled to Chandigarh, Jullundur, Amritsar and Jammu where I met some interesting women journalists. But most revealing was the meeting with Mr Hari Jaisingh, former editor of Tribune, who more than underlined the attitude to women not only in media organisations but also in Indian society.

“We don’t discriminate here – work conditions for women are more than fair. We provide transport at night and even have an all women team in the magazine section. I sent Ruchika (a young reporter) to cover the Gujarat earthquake for 12 days and Aditi (another young reporter) for 17 days to cover elections and this despite both being better looking than Barkha Dutt!

“Maternity leave in my view, upsets the balance of work schedules and creates the practical problem of leave. Do you know this is the only Chandigarh paper with a weekly women’s page? You can understand my commitment to women’s issues by the fact that last week we dedicated that page to rape.

“As a policy we do not publish revealing pictures or offensive language. In fact we even edit Khushwant Singh.”

Looking for broad-based inputs, interviews were conducted with Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and English writers of different seniority. In Jullundur, Vandana Walia Bali of Punjab Kesri spoke about being denied seniority after maternity leave and about the moral dilemma of leaving a new-born child to pursue her career – “that was the toughest period of my life when I was filled with self-doubt, guilt, hate and cried all the time.”

Three young journalists from Hindustan Times, Indian Express and Dainik Jagran spoke about the sexual harassment by seniors within their organisations and their extreme vulnerability since “no one wants women as colleagues in the first place”. All complaints are countered by, “we told you so. This is no place for women”. All of them had followed a sister, brother, father or husband into the profession.

In Amritsar the small Indian Express office was very basic and even lacked a separate washroom. The group I met were from Indian Express and Hindustan Times with a well thought out list of requirements which were similar to those demanded by most, irrespective of small town papers or of metros. They believed that training is required not only for value addition but also for self-esteem; that contract system plays havoc with ability to hold organisations accountable for work conditions and facilities.

They faced various vexing problems at their workplace. Colleagues and subordinate staff view blue films and porn sites on their computers, which are left to embarrass them on start up. Another irritating ploy was to carry on loud embarrassing personal and private conversations on the telephone. Male bosses indulged in blatant professional cheating (plagiarising stories) for projecting themselves at the cost of the careers of the young journalists.

What they wanted to know was how to address such problems and whom to approach for advocacy and redressal.

In Chandigarh, senior columnist Rita Sharma made some very revealing observations. According to her, when she joined the profession 20 years ago, sexual harassment was not an issue since the feudal mindset of men here made them protective but at the same time they did not acknowledge women as professionals. They insisted that her husband was her ghostwriter. But now with increasing numbers and growing visibility of women, things are different. Women journalists are almost like trophies to be displayed – “my daughter-in-law is a journalist” – so it puts greater pressure on young journalists who despite adverse conditions, cannot quit.

At the level of sources, from personal experience she noticed that after the Shivani Bhatnagar episode, people were scared to meet a woman journalist alone. Rita has been instrumental in highlighting women’s concerns in her capacity as Chairperson of the Women Journalists Committee of the Chandigarh Press Club. “Our young women too need to be more aware”, she says, while narrating an incident where she told a group of young women journalists that they could benefit from becoming members of the Press Club. They retorted– “But we don’t believe in clubbing!”

Echoing her observations is Donna Suri. “Here you cannot appeal to what is the law or what is ethically right. It is the grand patriarchal view that is more easily acceptable.” Her reference is to an episode that took place while she was with the Tribune. The editor announced withdrawal of transport facilities for her. She confronted him with, “how would you feel if your daughter had to travel alone at odd hours?” Transport was restored.

Donna Suri moved to India from USA after she married her “brown man in a funny hat”. Since then, for the last 22 years, she has been part of the journalism scene in Chandigarh. “Back then this place was full of *kakas and beebas* and the environment was very stuffy”. In 1982 she was the first woman to join the Tribune where she was allocated a small, isolated room, “almost as if I was in *purdah*”. She quickly removed all illusions by wandering into

newsrooms and shaking hands with everyone. The response was – “Foreigners are like this. Very nice! She has adjusted well.”

Donna has lived through some trying times. She spoke about a certain editor who would often extract money and sexual favours for approving bylines. Prem Bhatia’s (the boss) attitude to such people was – “every good journalist is a bit of a crook”. Donna did not consider reporting against the sexual-favours seeker since she was quite sure that she would be victimised.

In another instance, on joining a new organisation, her remuneration commiserate to her experience, happened to be more than that of several male assistant editors. They were up in arms because she was a woman. The editor requested her to voluntarily take a pay cut. Donna refused and also walked out because, “I didn’t want to work in an environment where the editor couldn’t stand up to his staff.”

Though very confident about the abilities of young women journalists who she says are clued to opportunities, constantly seeking stimulation, committed to themselves and do push for more professionally; she warns against continued desk work where “zombification is rapid”.

She insists that in her experience, the best strategy for women is to believe in themselves and that the best line of defence is always your own.

Ironically, in Jammu, while the Daily Excelsior, an English daily, has a policy against employing women journalists, an Urdu daily has been headed by Begum Imrana Samnani for the last 30 years. “Initially I was a rarity and the attitude to my presence in press-conferences and other media happenings was negative. But my attitude was - I’m here to stay so you have got to accept me.”

Data collection was particularly frustrating in the nation’s capital. Journalists were contacted on email, by personal interaction, individually, collectively at the Indian Women’s Press Corps and also through friends of friends. But the response was very poor - indifferent and apathetic.

It was also poignant that a PII (Press Institute of India) peon on an errand to deliver 35 sets of responses in hard copy was mugged. The incident resulted in the loss of data, his precious Rs 75/- and a lot of legwork for PII staff who lodged an FIR, but to no avail.

In all the dialogue and discussions with women journalists, one common strain was the concern about the threat to stability in their private lives that the profession seemingly poses. In almost all cases, conversation veered to domestic life and wherever there was no problem, women didn’t see it as a normal situation but one for which they had to be grateful to the spouse/mother-in-law/parents.

Having it all, according to most, is fiction. Women can either have successful, satisfying careers with either broken relationships or guilt-ridden motherhood or dysfunctional families. But most of the time they opt for satisfying family lives and compromise on their careers.

## CHAPTER-7

### “WOMEN JOURNALIST: NO BIG DEAL”

*By Surekha Sule*

(Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa and Rajasthan)

The women journalists survey personally has been an enriching experience. I enjoyed meeting fellow journalists in so many cities and states and speaking diverse languages. But for this survey, I would never have visited various media houses. The memories of these meetings range from very many happy ones to some unpleasant ones.

I was allotted four states – Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat and Rajasthan. Maharashtra is relatively more progressive with women journalists being represented even in the Marathi newspapers of smaller towns. In Gujarat, however, metro cities like Baroda and Ahmedabad too do not have women journalists except two women proprietor journalists and three women journalists in Ahmedabad. In contrast, Rajasthan, almost similar to Gujarat in its socio-cultural traditions, has a sizeable number of women journalists in Hindi newspapers in Jaipur. In Jodhpur and Udaipur there were one and three respectively. In Maharashtra, the metro cities, Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur, as well as smaller cities like Kolhapur, Nashik, Aurangabad and Solapur have at least half a dozen women writing in Marathi.

By and large, in metro cities like Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur, Jaipur, Baroda, Ahmedabad and Panaji women journalists are well represented in the English media. Places like Mumbai– and the Pune Indian Express in particular, have more women than men and they often joke with their women bosses to “Get a male for a change”.

Women journalists in the English press, by and large, come from a progressive atmosphere– middle or higher class families and society – and work among people from similar socio-cultural background. Hence they do not have to face conservative, traditional outlook towards women. Again these women have empowered themselves – intrinsically they appear strong willed and are women of substance. Most of them seem to have developed a defence shield around themselves with a stern, no-nonsense personality – a barrier difficult to break. The same is true about women in Marathi media in Mumbai and to some extent in Pune, Nashik and Nagpur. Even the women in Jaipur’s Hindi media are strong women. The female Hindi journalist from Jodhpur is an epitome of courage.

In contrast, women in vernacular media in smaller cities like Sangli, Kolhapur, Solapur, Aurangabad, Jaipur, Udaipur are pretty vulnerable and do not seem to be taken seriously.

While some take their work as a mere job and accept they have limitations as women, others are ambitious but are not given opportunities to prove their calibre. The condition of these women in the vernacular media is largely due to the socio-cultural background of their colleagues and the local people with whom they have to interact.

The condition and image of women journalists is a reflection of society. While metros have an open environment and people are used to seeing women in all walks of life, in smaller cities like Kolhapur women remain within the confines of their homes and people are not used to seeing women in offices or in public life.

#### **RESPONSE OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS'**

<b>Centre</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Vernacular</b>	<b>%age of Vernacular to Total No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Total No. of WJ Contacted</b>	<b>%age of Respondents to Total No. of WJ Contacted</b>
Mumbai	40	18	45	200	20
Pune	18	2	11	61	30
Nashik	2	1	50	14	14
Nagpur	15	5	33	37	41
Aurangabad	1	1	100	7	14
Kolhapur	0	0	0	5	0
Solapur	2	2	100	4	50
Satara	1	1	100	1	100
Sangli	5	5	100	5	100
Ahmedabad	27	6	22	33	82
Vadodara	4	0	0	12	33
Jaipur	28	20	71	37	76
Jodhpur	1	1	100	1	100
Udaipur	3	3	100	4	75
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>421</b>	<b>35</b>

The table above reveals the response at various centres. Of the women journalists I contacted, Rajasthan, Ahmedabad, Sangli responded readily and cooperated during my short visit of one or two days. English journalists in Pune responded well but Marathi did not. In Nashik and Aurangabad too there was a similar response. Only 20 percent of 200 women journalists in Mumbai, that I contacted umpteen times, responded. Most of them promised to send e-forms but never did.

So out of 421 women journalists that I contacted personally, and also followed up through phone calls and e-mails, only a third responded and filled the forms. Many of them—almost all 7 in Aurangabad, 14 in Nashik, 5 in Kolhapur promised they would send the forms but did not do so, making my trips to these centres futile.

I must have called Mumbai journalists at least half a dozen times and sent as many e-mails to follow up and remind but just 20 per cent took the survey seriously. I called Jayshree Khadilkar-Pande the jailed editor of Navakal (Marathi) in Mumbai five times every day for over a week before finally getting her response over the phone and filling up her form on the phone.

But there were many instances of excellent cooperation and help in contacting others in the same town. Sangeeta Pranvendra from HT, Jaipur; Sudha Menon from Businessline in Pune, Sarita Kaushik from HT and Varsha Patil from Lokmat in Nagpur, Preeti Mehra from IE, Mumbai, Lata Raje, who has retired from Loksatta, Mumbai , were extremely helpful.

Women in smaller cities were very enthusiastic, they listened and responded readily, often taking time out from their busy hours. They also gave priority to a meeting for filling questionnaires since only a day or two could be spent in each town. The response from the Marathi media women journalists from Sangli was very good. They were grateful that there was someone to hear their grievances and were keen to interact with their counterparts in Mumbai and Pune. They desired a state level women journalists meeting be held in Mumbai or Pune.

In contrast, women journalists from the English media in Mumbai had to be chased. Being in Mumbai and in journalism for over 25 years, I knew a lot of them especially my contemporaries in almost all media houses. Their response surprised me. The stock excuse, even from colleagues with whom one had worked for 25 years in the Times and Express group, was "Oh I am so busy, I will certainly keep the form ready next time you come." And that next time never came. A major reason for not filling the form was that it was too long and cumbersome. Often you had to sit with the respondents and help them fill up the forms.

Young women journalists, especially in Indian Express, Mumbai, waved away the questionnaire with a contemptuous "Oh I have no problem" or "No big deal to be a woman journalist" or "Woman in journalism? Wack! What has being a woman got to do with being in some profession?" Or "OK, tell me fast what it is, I do not have time" or many such variants of total apathy to the issues of women in journalism. Yet these very women write stories of human interest without proper awareness about women's issues. Some very active members of the Network of Women Journalists, Mumbai, and senior journalists too did not cooperate, indicating their disenchantment with the survey. Perhaps, some of them felt there was no need for yet another survey after Ammu Joseph's book, 'Women in Journalism – Making News.'

Of course, there were very good respondents like Amrita Shah, Pranati Mehra, Sucheta Dalal, Sudha Menon, Gauri Deshpande, Anupama Katakam, Kumud Chaware and others who personally had no problem in either being women journalists or responding to the questionnaire. Empowered and successful, they were aware of issues that affect many of their fellow women journalists.

The problems that a few retired Marathi women journalists of Mumbai confronted 25 years ago are being faced by women journalists in Sangli, Kolhapur, Aurangabad today. According to them, there has been a tremendous change in outlook towards women journalists in mainstream Marathi media. The English media has always been way ahead of regional media in offering women a fair and non-discriminatory work atmosphere. The man-woman divide in English media is subtle and on a different plane all together. As Shubha Khandekar of The Economic Times, Mumbai puts it "men colleagues find it difficult to accept mistakes pointed out or suggestions made by their women colleagues. The same coming from their own buddy is taken seriously." This shows that even today women are not seen as equal in the minds of men

## **CHAPTER-8**

### **WOMEN IN JOURNALISM – THEN AND NOW**

*By Usha Rai*

In the sixties there were very few women in daily newspapers (English as well as regional), either on the desk or as reporters. Most papers did not even have a single woman. The few who got entry stood out ... fortunately not as sore thumbs... but as bright eyed, educated young women trying to storm into a male bastion. They were gawked at and there was a lot of speculation as to how long they would survive in the taxing profession. Probably their biggest qualification was that they could write well. They contributed greatly to the feature sections of the newspapers.

Several newspapers had an unwritten law that they would not admit women into what was considered a male domain. They had to struggle to push open doors. A classic example is that of the late Prabha Dutt (nee Bahl) who graduated from the Chandigarh School of Journalism with honours and did her inhouse training with Hindustan Times, Delhi in 1964. When she asked for a job at the end of the training, the editor, Mr Mulgaonkar said the paper did not employ women. Prabha left only after a written assurance from the editor that if he ever employed a woman, she would be considered.

A few months later when he employed a young woman on the desk, who had done her degree in journalism from the US, she barged into his office and got herself a job. A highly competent journalist she rose to become the first woman chief reporter of a national daily.

The only woman in the editorial of the Times of India (TOI), Delhi in the midsixties, I was called into the cabin of the editor and told by Mr Girilal Jain that a newspaper was no place for a woman. What provoked him to make such a statement is not clear but he did not repeat the statement. Subsequently his own daughter became a journalist.

There were very few women in newspapers in the early sixties and they were not allowed to do night duty. According to the labour laws, there should be at least two women on a night shift. The office also has to provide transport back home after night duty. So this important shift, which brings out the newspaper, was devoid of women till the mid-seventies. While several news editors and editors used this pretext of the 'law' to keep women out of the desk in newspapers, there were a few women, who quoted the law, to avoid the night shift. When the first woman to get on the desk in the Times of India, Delhi, refused to do night duty, sighting labour laws, the management's back was up against employing women on the desk.

Subsequently, this young woman left to join the Indian Administrative Service. It was much later that a gutsy woman called Suchitra Behl opted to do night duty even if there was no other female support on the desk.

Kamla Mankekar, a veteran journalist who worked for the Times of India and the Indian Express in the fifties and sixties, says that the Statesman, Delhi, was one of the first newspapers to employ a fulltime sub editor in the fifties. Raj Chawla, was an extremely competent sub editor who wielded the pen with a flourish that could make or mar a story. However, she did not do night duty and Pran Chopra, the editor of Statesman, used it as the reason for keeping out Razia Ismail when she approached him for a job. "You will not do night duty or work late evenings," he said and did not give her a chance to prove him wrong.

In the reporting side too there were so few women that no one was asked to do night duty. Coomi Kapoor of the Indian Express recalls that she was one of the first women who volunteered for night duty. This won her immediate acceptance by her male colleagues.

I was the only woman in the editorial section of the TOI, Delhi, for close to eight years from 1964. The other women were working as receptionists and telephone operators. There was no toilet for women in the editorial floor, so I had to go to the ground floor and share the toilet with the telephone operators. Fortunately there was a woman, Maya Sharma, in the Sunday section of Navbharat Times, the sister Hindi publication, with whom I could share problems and exchange confidences.

In 1969 when I was expecting my first child I asked for maternity leave and was told by the personnel department that there was no such provision. When I pointed out that this was my right and not a personal favour, I was allowed to take the leave. Coomi Kapoor recalls that in the old days the three months maternity leave was split – six weeks had to be taken before the birth of the baby and six after. Now there is no such rule and women can come to work till the day the baby is born and take all three months leave after its birth so that they have more time with the baby.

Our study shows that in the regional press there is still reluctance to employ young women in the reproductive age group because they may take maternity leave or because they fear her home will receive greater priority, especially if she has children. So a lot of young women journalists are putting off marriage and if they do marry, postpone having a child. In the old days, when promotion for reporters were few and far between, the upwardly mobility was doubly difficult for women. Coomi recalls that in the long but necessary absence from work because of maternity, her seniority was overlooked and a male was made chief reporter. Vandana Walia Bali of Punjab Kesri too spoke about being denied seniority after maternity leave.

To be taken seriously, women journalists of yesteryears had to look grown up. They wore saris and *salwar kameez* to work. No one dared to come to work in trousers or skirts. A senior

journalist recalls her great dilemma as to whether to clutch her male colleague while riding pillion on a two wheeler from Teez Hazari courts to the office of the Municipal Corporation or just balance as best as she could, lest she provoke gossip. Today, mainstream national newspapers are teeming with women, a lot of them wearing jeans and even skirts.

But the biggest challenge for the early women to get into mainstream newspapers was the kind of work assigned to them. They were literally given the crumbs from the newspaper table. Senior male colleagues hogged the prime beats — political parties, Parliament, Prime Minister's office, important ministries like Home, Commerce, Finance and Foreign Office. Women were initially asked to cover flower shows, fashion shows, health and education – all considered soft beats. Till the seventies there may have been just one woman in each newspaper and two or three on the news desks in the English national dailies of the Capital. The picture was much bleaker for the regional press. In fact even today you hardly find any women working as special correspondents or even as reporters in the language press in the Capital. It is much worse in other parts of the country. S .H Savitri, executive editor of Kannada magazine Kannaveera, points out it will take at least 20 years for the regional press to match the facilities and opportunities enjoyed by women in the English language press.

From the eighties the scene began to change dramatically. In the English language national newspapers of the Capital, it was as if the floodgates had opened. As women topped in the journalism courses of the country and their writing skills got recognition, they began to storm the male bastion. By mid-eighties, on some days you could see an all woman shift bringing out the early editions of the Delhi Times of India. The appointment of the first women chief sub, actually bringing out the newspaper, was a landmark in the same newspaper. The news editor is one of the most powerful persons on a newspaper and currently the Statesman in New Delhi has Usha Mahadevan as its news editor. Gauri Chatterji was news editor in the Anand Bazar Patrika before moving to the Telegraph as features editor. At the Indian Express, Delhi, TOI –Delhi and Mumbai, Hindustan Times-Lucknow, women are currently resident editors.

In the regional press women are more visible but they are largely on the desk or in the Sunday sections of newspapers. A lot of them write for the supplements. They write about social gossip, party circuits, films and celebrities. There are very few women reporters and special correspondents. However, the regional press bureaus in Delhi do have a few women who do city reporting and even cover Parliament.

The scene in the English national newspaper offices is vastly different. Newspapers are teeming with young women journalists. They are covering economic and business news, politics, the CBI, the foreign office, sports and even the stock market. They are a talented and educated lot and extremely ambitious. There is cut throat competition to get to the top. In the old days there was a lot of bonding among journalists. News from different beats was often shared, but no longer. Today, the more successful male and women journalists are those

closest to the management/the newspaper owners. Many young women, like their sisters in the regional press, are writing "tittle tattle" for the glossy, coloured supplements.

In the old days women were secure in their jobs. Most of them were on wage board scales and promotions were few and far between. This is no longer so, in the national or the regional press. Most journalists are on contracts, or worse still, on the voucher system. At the end of the month, like daily wage labour, they sign vouchers and get a pittance that could vary from Rs 1500 to Rs 3000 in the regional press. Contracts, even in the national press, are for two and three years, so you are always at the mercy of the management. There is arm twisting of journalists on wage board scales to compel them to accept the contract system. They are transferred to other states and distant places, even if they have a family at their place of work. In the process many of them opt out of journalism or have to look for jobs elsewhere. In the absence of wage board scales in most newspapers, there is tremendous variation in the earnings of the journalists. While many journalists in senior positions earn between Rs 30,000 to Rs 50,000, others in the regional press are barely able to keep body and soul together on the monthly salary of Rs 1500 to Rs 3000.

In the old days when there were few women in newspapers, there was a tendency to be protective towards them by the national press and the *bhadraloks*. While this was very 'nice,' it did not always work in the professional interest of the journalist. I remember how two of my male colleagues were sent to rescue me when, as an eight months pregnant journalist, I was covering a price rise demonstration outside the Super Bazar in Delhi and there was tear gassing. There was sheer panic in my office till the police control room and the magistrate on duty confirmed I was "safe." In the Statesman, Delhi, when Tavleen Singh, a bright, independent journalist, insisted that she would drive home in her own car after night duty instead of taking the office car, a chauffeur driven office car was sent as escort behind her. Over protection hampers a woman professionally.

**CHAPTER-9**

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT – ‘AN INCURABLE MALE DISORDER’  
OR AN ‘ETERNAL INSTRUMENT OF SUBORDINATION’?**

*By Pamela Bhagat*

One of the most provocative survey results was the relativity in the perception of what comprises sexual harassment amongst media women. On a more optimistic note - after articulately expressing their concerns, most believe in the legal instruments that by and large have not been enforced. However, the most revealing was a certain readiness to justify the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment, often blaming it on the interpersonal dynamics of a work environment that includes women and men from a variety of economic, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds.

*“Though I work in a male dominated atmosphere I am fortunate nothing ever has happened to me. But I know of many women who have been sexually harassed. My office colleagues are very protective about me and I have full faith in them. The problem begins where outsiders are concerned, it’s the ‘outside’ circuit that takes advantage.”*

*“Technically, women can go to the department head with their complaint. In practice it does not happen. Most women do not want to talk about the incident because they are afraid of what others will say. In fact even if it is a minor discretion, like a man grabbing a woman’s hand, the moment the woman complains people suspect there is something more to it.”*

*“While it may not amount to sexual harassment, often bawdy jokes are cracked in front of women. This can be uncomfortable, but personally I have never really been harassed on this count. It depends on how you conduct yourself.”*

*“I even thought of leaving my job but I was dissuaded by my male colleagues. Later, they protected me from my boss. My colleagues approached my boss and spoke to him. My husband was also very supportive. He advised me to ignore the incident. The accused was the senior editor, nothing happened to him. He did not harass me any further and in fact behaved very well with me.”*

*“Women are receiving more opportunities than before but it is also true that women who can build personal rapport with the male boss receive the best facilities and get promoted even if they are undeserving. Those who are skilled but refuse to bow down or establish personal contacts are ignored. I have experienced this myself and am a sufferer. I was even prepared*

***to take my boss to court but I withdrew when he admitted he was wrong, apologised and gave me the promotion due to me."***

It was mostly during personal interaction that sexual harassment emerged as a major concern of most respondents. But when asked whether they had to put up with sexist remarks/gestures or if they had been sexually harassed in any way at their workplace or in association with their work, 22.7 per cent said they had, 8 per cent said they were 'not sure' and many others either denied or refused to comment. An interesting finding is that, of those who had experienced sexual harassment, 31.5 per cent said it had 'seriously' undermined their confidence and affected their work, 24 per cent said it had 'mildly.' An alarming 41.3 per cent said it had 'no affect'.

These findings show sexual harassment is part of work culture in media organisations in India but women either do not know how or, for a wide variety of reasons, choose not to do anything about it. Only 15.2 per cent of women who experienced sexual harassment had made a formal complaint. 10.8 per cent of those who did not make a formal complaint did not do so for fear of intimidation, victimisation or losing their job. A significant number (40.2 per cent) did not complain because they felt sexual harassment is not taken seriously in their workplace or that their complaint would seem trivial or over-reacting. Many respondents (22.8 per cent) believe sexual harassment is an accepted part of their organisation's culture and tolerated in the workplace, while others (14.1 per cent) had no confidence in the management's ability to take action.

Sexual harassment at the workplace is not only a gross violation of women's right to a safe and supportive work environment but also, more fundamentally, of their basic right to livelihood. The Supreme Court ruling of 1977, commonly referred to as the Vishakha Guidelines, is quite explicit about the range of behaviours that the apex court views as sexual harassment under the law. Any contact, demand or request for sexual favours, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography are all considered forms of sexual abuse. The Court included unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal sexual conduct, leering, dirty jokes and comments about a person's body. It also places the onus on employers to make this definition known to all employees, male or female, so that everyone is aware of the various behaviours that are both socially and legally unacceptable. In addition, it mandates the setting up of sexual harassment complaints and redressal committees within the workplace that include at least one member external to the organisation with relevant knowledge and experience in dealing with such matters.

It also specifies that it is the responsibility of the employer to recognize sexual harassment as a serious offence. The organisation is responsible for any sexual abuse by its employees and the management. Employers are not necessarily shielded from this liability because they were not aware of the incident. If one is abused while on an assignment, it is still the duty of the employer to take action.

While these guidelines exist, they are seldom implemented, enforced or even known. As Usha Turanga, formerly of the *Indian Express* observed, women at times don't even know they are being harassed and have no orientation to assert their rights. This is borne out by the experience of a journalist from Kolkata – "As a woman journalist I have to face indecent behaviour from my senior colleagues. They pretended to be 'fatherly', gained my trust and then harassed me sexually." The contract system is making things more difficult for women since vulnerabilities increase with job insecurity and there is no forum or union for redressal because under the present system, unions too have by and large lost their relevance.

Character assassination and slandering is a common ploy to increase women's insecurities and impair professional accomplishments. For example, with success comes the assumption that a special relationship exists between the woman journalist and her superiors or between her and the source. Since most of the time these superiors and interviewees are men, people believe that female journalists carry out sexual favours.

Moreover, women in the media are vulnerable to harassment from colleagues who come drunk for night shift and the night staff leaving pornographic pictures and messages on their computers. Making sexist, vulgar comments is common in the editorial rooms of newspapers as also so-called humorous or snide remarks on women colleagues' work. Most women hesitate to speak of sexual harassment, but are more than willing to speak of the sexist remarks they are subjected to at the workplace.

Sexual harassment is prevalent but very few admit to being victims, instead women speak of experiences of friends and colleagues. They also speak of 'managing' such experiences/ environments rather than dealing with it squarely or seeking redressal within the organisation. "This is not a compromise but a survival strategy since we should not leave the job", says S H Savitri, editor of *Karmaveera* in Bangalore.

A senior Malayalam journalist who spoke of the harassment of women both sexually and professionally put it succinctly: "A woman works alone and suffers alone...she finds no support either at home or at office. Men on the other hand, when faced with allegations, close ranks and stand by their colleagues."

This lack of support among women for their harassed women colleagues has been uniformly reported across all states. No colleague raised her voice in support of a cancer-afflicted senior sub in a Kannada daily when she was harassed for two long years by her editor. No woman journalist expressed support for two women in Hyderabad who were traumatized by the sexual harassment by their colleagues. Women empathise only to some extent and the attitude generally, according to a *Deccan Chronicle* journalist is – "We are concerned about our jobs and have our own problems. Why bother about others?"

Sexual harassment may be verbal or physical and could be from seniors, colleagues or from people that have to be met in the line of duty but the fact remains that complaints

continue to be viewed as overreacting and the fault is often placed upon the victim. News organisations clearly have not made the investment necessary to ensure that women journalists are provided a safe work environment to achieve their full potential. In fact sexual harassment within media organisations has been a means to control and exclude women from occupying key positions in the industry.

The issue of sexual harassment requires institutional attention and also enforcement of the Vishakha Guidelines by a regulatory body. But before anything else, women in the media need to unconditionally identify, condemn and take action against all forms and incidences of sexual harassment. It is indeed ironic that those who report on such issues in society actually suffer it in their own workplaces.

The **Sabita Lakhar** case in Assam is the first and only case of sexual harassment to come out into the public arena in the North East Sabita Lakhar, Chief Sub-Editor of Amar Asom, a popular daily in Assamese held a press conference on September 12 ,2003 at the Guwahati Press Club where she accused the editor of the newspaper, Homen Borgahain, a revered old Assamese write and author, of sexually harassing her since 2000. She said that she had managed to work for the past two years, as there was an executive editor who she dealt with for work lessening the need to take orders directly from the editor. However, recently, the executive editor had left, and she had to again work directly under Mr Homen Borgahain.

When he went back to his old tricks she wrote a protest letter to the Managing Editor, Managing Director and other top functionaries of the media house for their intervention, and gave a copy to the Editor. What she got in return was a note from the management that until she submitted a clearance, certified by the Banks, her salary and other dues would be withheld by the Management. In effect she was being shown the door. A protest meeting organized by the Journalists Union of Assam was held at the Guwahati Press Club. The Editor has filed a defamation case against Lakhar supported by the media house, G L Publications, Guwahati. The journalists of Assam are organising themselves to support Lakhar, but so far nothing concrete has been done in her favour. Meanwhile, as happens to women who decide to blow the whistle on harassment, Sabita has been suffering. She finds herself without a job and other media houses too have shown little sympathy or support.

It is pertinent to point out that in response to the questions on sexual harassment in the questionnaire, late in 2002 Sabita Lakhar had said she was being harassed by a man in a senior position.

### **Shankuntala Saruparia**

(Stringer, Hindustan Dainik, Udaipur, Rajasthan)

Shankuntala Saruparia worked in Jai Rajasthan Hindi daily in Jaipur in 1984-88. Her father Dr Bhanwar Surana, ex-bureau chief of Hindustan Times (Hindi), Delhi, inspired her to join journalism. After marriage there was a break in career and shifting from Jaipur to

Udaipur, she worked as a casual employee in Dainik Bhaskar from 1996 till 2000. Though she worked full time and produced many stories that were applauded, she was not made permanent. While she kept getting awards, instituted internally through monthly assessment of stories and work, the then editor suddenly found Shankuntala did not write “well”. This outcome was the culmination of three years of sexual harassment by this editor and his crony. She narrated how this editor invited himself for dinners at her place or asked her to entertain his wife/mother when they visited him in Udaipur. He and his crony would tell her “why do you come to the work, you write from home, we will pick up your stories” – thus hinting at sexual favours. Shankuntala tried to handle the situation diplomatically for the fear of losing her job but at some point she had to put her foot down. This irked the editor and he gave the excuse that she did not write well. Shankuntala left the job. Surprisingly these men knew very well that Shakuntala’s father, Dr Surana, was a respected senior journalist. Shankuntala felt if she discussed the issue with either father or husband they would dissuade her from work. She also described how this editor scared away an aspiring young girl by taking her out for dinner and making direct suggestions. The girl never came back. The editor is now one of the top officials of a Delhi-based TV company.

Shakuntala made a representation to the Dainik Bhaskar head office with proof of her work and appreciation. After looking into the matter, Dainik Bhaskar directed its next editor in Udaipur to reinstate her. In the meantime, Mrinal Pande, editor of Hindustan, appointed her as stringer on Rs 2000. Shankuntala preferred this independent work to going back to Dainik Bhaskar as a full timer on Rs 2500.

### **Vineeta Banerjee**

(Lokmat Times, Nagpur, Maharashtra)

Vineeta Banerjee from Lokmat Times (English) in Nagpur has a strong grievance against her boss who has been sexually harassing her for quite some time. Vineeta says it is verbal—using obscene language. While talking to her, he keeps open a magazine exhibiting nudes. Harassed by his advances, Vineeta lodged a complaint with the management.

Other women colleagues did not seem to complain against this man nor did they show much support for Vineeta’s woes. Perhaps she was the only target. The interviewer efforts to bring women journalists together and make recommendations to editors in Nagpur met with a lot of resistance. Journalists were reluctant to do so fearing victimisation. This may be a reason for Vineeta not getting support.

### **Varsha Patil**

(Dainik Lokmat, Nagpur, Maharashtra)

Varsha Patil from Dainik Lokmat (Marathi) in Nagpur narrated how a male colleague used to harass women colleagues by standing in their way so that they were forced to brush

past him or he would elbow them. This was his habit for any and every woman. Varsha retaliated by elbowing him. Everybody noticed it and there was a lot of gossip. It reached the management and Varsha was called. She told them boldly that the man had been trying his dirty trick for too long and someone had to retaliate in a language he would understand. The management agreed and supported her and other women colleagues. This man was summoned and reprimanded about his misbehaviour. Since then he has been behaving himself.

## **CHAPTER-10**

### **TAKING ON THE MIGHTY TOI**

*In Her Own Words By Sabina Inderjit*

It was all over in just one stroke. Making me sit back and think — Is a career journalist and a trade unionist a good combination? At the end, the answer was a no. If one is ambitious and wants to do justice to the job undertaken, it has to be one of the two. Particularly, when there is an undercurrent of gender bias and lack of group support in both fields.

On 1 December 1998, I was given a transfer order by my employers. Instead of doing the rounds as a journalist looking for a scoop, I found myself in lawyers' offices and courts. A special correspondent in the New Delhi bureau of the Times of India, Delhi, and vice-president of the workers' union, I was told to pack my bags and leave for Guwahati.

The order was vicious, vindictive and malafide. It was to harass me for my union and related activities, primarily in the Press Council of India. There were no two opinions. Pushed against the wall one had to fight and seek justice. The battle has been on since. For how long is anybody's guess. It could, however, be over say tomorrow. All one has to do is simply withdraw the case as a journalist and a unionist.

"You've made your point. Now get on with your life," is an advice oft heard from friends. It sounds simple. But, can one compromise on certain basic values & principles? Should one let the newspaper magnet trample upon the reputation and self-respect of its employees? How can one simply forget five years of sheer harassment, of a career taking a nosedive, of trade unionism existing? Above all, can one give up the hope — perhaps there will be justice!

"Emotional and typically feminine", is a response that caught my fancy. There are no clear answers, but one thing is for certain: The transfer order had nothing to do with my being a woman. But, the way it was handled, by the union and others, may have something to do with it.

December 1, 1998 was the beginning of the end of my journalist career with the Times of India. I eventually lost the vice-president's post in its Union but made inroads into international union movement.

My career as a journalist began as a trainee, way back in August 1983 in Mumbai. Somewhere down the line I got involved in plant union activities. On both fronts there was no looking back. Trade unionism saw me as an executive committee member of the Bennett, Coleman & Co. Employees Union to its vice-president, to ex-committee member of the Indian Journalists' Union (IJU), to the Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) vice-president, to becoming a second-term member of the Press Council of India (PCI) representing the working journalists and to the executive committee of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) as adviser, South Asia.

But journalism as a career came first always. I aspired to make a name and worked hard for it, for I am the third generation of journalists in the family. My performance was judged against this background. I remember being introduced as his daughter/grand-daughter. I was proud of it. But it also meant higher expectations. One had to do better than others, putting in long hours and taking up challenges. It was worth all of it, for the profession became a passion.

Unlike most women sub-editors those days, I wanted to be a "hot-shot" reporter. As a trainee, opportunities came and were grabbed. It was rewarding to hear something as simple as "well done", especially when the tone suggested it wasn't expected from a 'woman' trainee.

After a year's stay in Bombay, which I still cherish as I felt like an individual rather than a female, I came to Delhi all set to be confirmed as a reporter. A letter for a sub-editor's post was handed instead! "Gender bias," I consoled myself but could do little else. I wasn't wrong. I still vividly remember that uncanny feeling of heads turning when a few of us young jeans-clad women went about the Delhi office!

Of course, it is now something of the past. Graduating as the "first woman sub-editor to bring out the Delhi edition" (thanks to both the chief and his number two having fallen sick) to being offered the chief sub's post. But, I preferred to give up five years of seniority to be a reporter. Sheer stupidity, felt some. But with journalism in my blood, the field is where I belonged.

There are no regrets. The profession has meant what it should be — a mission. I have enjoyed every moment, barring initial routine assignments of re-writing releases, covering dharnas, seminars etc. The sheer thrill of looking for stories, of a sense of satisfaction of stories making a difference, forcing authorities to sit-up, prompting a change etc, kept me in office longer than I thought. I spent most of my time working and as a result my social and family life took a nosedive. "Don't wait, keep dinner for me," was a perpetual phone call I would make to my parents! I guess I could afford to put in whatever time I wanted as one didn't have the responsibility of looking after husband, kids and running a home!

While being a woman journalist didn't bother me, it did have its minuses, such as late night assignments kept my mother awake, outstation assignments had the usual question "how many other girls are going?" or deciding what to wear to make it appropriate for an assignment, avoiding male politicians in the evenings for stories etc.

Being a woman 'union leader' or "*netaji*" is a lot more intriguing. I recall I was first approached to contest union elections from the editorial section for the executive committee as there were no takers. A cake walk, I was told. It was. I found myself contesting elections thereafter. It became a part of my Times of India life. I realized that I had got terribly involved despite it being dirty at times. Perhaps, a sense of commitment and being single may have been factors. I didn't have to rush home and could devote after office hours for union matters.

Of course there were ups and downs. Losing the President's election and winning the vice-president's post thrice! Getting the management to agree to some demands and failing on other counts. It was all part of the game. But, one aspect always bothered me: no matter how good and honest one was, at the end of the day, I could never get into the inner circle—that group of two-or-three 'men' who planned strategies and took final decisions.

At times, I felt I was being naïve, it wasn't a place for me and that I should get out of it before the politics got the better of me. It did eventually. Politics allowed the management to issue a transfer order. And it also allowed it to use time-tested skills to ensure there was no pressure on it from the Union to withdraw it either. Someone in my Union got "purchased" and I was made a "sacrificial goat."

"Let the court decide...she is single, comes from a well-to-do family and will manage..." was an excuse offered not only by those who had made the deal but fellow union members for whom I had staked my career! That's life. A bitter lesson one learns. But it cannot be wished away. Well, if I was married and had kids, a second salary being important, perhaps I may not have taken union responsibility in the first place.

Looking back I remember how my Union electioneering took me into a different world of the newspaper industry. A journalist had perhaps never stepped into the maintenance, the bundle, the plate-making, the transport departments, or the printing press etc in the Times House. And, a woman's presence at these places, at times late at night when fellowmen would normally be under the influence of liquor, was awkward for them too.

Even though I insisted that being a woman shouldn't come in the way of my being active, it didn't change mindsets. Many would be amused to see me join my colleagues' playing cards during a strike/dharna, or shouting slogans and leading a protest, or sitting in the *dhaba* sharing food etc. Why? Perhaps, an advice by an elderly colleague during a month-long strike outside Times House is a clue: "*Aaj theek lag rahi ho... salwar kameez pehena karo*

*in dino...*" It took me by surprise, I tried to argue with him but deep down I knew this is reality, no matter what.

Fortunately, at no stage did I encounter sexual overtures or advances in the long years of my association with both journalist and Union colleagues. I guess it also has a lot to do with how one conduct's oneself. At the international level it has been different, but that's another story, for another time. Today, instead of a journalist I am seen more as a trade unionist – something that was never on my agenda.

## **CHAPTER-11**

### **HINDI, A LEVELLING OF THE PLAYING FIELD**

*By Mrinal Pande*

At the end of the year 2003, both middle class urban women and vernacular languages seem poised for a breakthrough in India. Both can boast of decreased resistance from the market and increased visibility. Both have acquired a remarkable centrality in India's electoral politics and the media. But their sudden eminence has also posed formidable challenges before women in the media, particularly in the vernacular media.

Unlike women in the English media, women workers in the Hindi media, have traditionally remained largely desk-bound. Most of them come from small towns and have studied in Hindi medium colleges where one does not make friends with the power pack. The media organisations they work in, with very few exceptions, are owner (read male) driven, preoccupied with profit margins and politically ambitious at all levels. Most groups prefer men in key positions as they can be used to gather and present news while also pushing for ads and political favours, in a way women cannot.

Few women in Hindi media can afford their own transport; take off time to fraternize at the Press Clubs or media centres (that their English language female colleagues enjoy and benefit from). It's a distant dream for them. The middle class, small town communities these girls hail from, usually pressure them to opt for arranged marriages after which their continuation in this high risk, long hours profession becomes rather tenuous. Those that survive these social pressures face another hurdle when they get pregnant. Women's productive and reproductive years being the same, and many media outfits frowning on maternity leave and benefits, getting married and having a baby becomes if not the end of the road, certainly a guarantee for stagnation at the desk, for most of them.

It is not as though women in the Hindi media do not feel disquiet at the rise in communalism, violence against women and the trivialising effects of market driven media policies. But since most papers do not have enough women to form a critical mass, and because even women's issues must, under the guidance of a very male supremacist editorial, be regularly trivialised, the more sensitive either quit or become sullen non-workers whereas the less intelligent ones become all full of passionate and inane ideas as they write about *Stree Vimarsh*, *Naree Ka Shoshan* (women's issues and female oppression) without making a difference either to their own lives or that of others'.

As the data from the National Readership Study (NRS) 2003 rolls in, it is clear there is a new trend in media growth. Globalisation with its symbiotic twin, urbanisation, has effectively levelled the playing field in the English language media, accounting for despair among magazines (down almost by 22%), dismay among general interest/film and entertainment journals, and wild celebration among major Hindi dailies .

While the two major English language dailies fight over their ranking, the list of top ten dailies in India includes only one English language daily and that too right at the bottom of the heap. Hindustan's circulation is up by 10.9% on an all India basis, Navbharat Times by 4% and Punjab Kesri by 7.8%. There is more good news. The survey also shows that over the last two years, the reader base in India has also grown from 163 million to 180 million, most of it in the Hindi belt (given the population increase patterns), and of these almost half the growth has been in the rural areas.

Another study by the National Readership Studies Council (NRSC) has highlighted two key shifts recorded by the decadal Census of India 2001. Our towns are becoming larger and attracting masses from smaller towns and villages. As a result the number of towns with more than a million people, has grown from 23 to 35. Of these Delhi alone has registered a growth of a mind-boggling 52% in the last decade. According to Rhoda Mehta, Chairperson of the Technical Committee of NRSC, Delhi and Mumbai media are going to be at a huge advantage from the shift in population. In the coming years this interesting cross-pollination of our *kasbah* and rural population's tastes with that of those in towns, is going to impact and dictate media consumption trends in a big way. Already it is visible in the success of movies and TV serials that peddle small town traditional family values, in the popularity ratings of a *bhenji* serial, *Jassi*. *Mems* from South Delhi and Jor Bagh sport the ethnic Indian look upon ramps and in parties.

In fact, the socio cultural scene has got so mixed up that even our Media Marketing and Research *Pundits* may soon find that they are sampling a town for rural estimates. One may write reams about the decadent aspects of this situation but to media practitioners it also heralds a change in look and outlook that is sweeping the increasingly youthful population of our readers.

It is not just the profile of your average citizen that has changed. Sex ratios too are changing and impacting trends in media and product usage. Several socio cultural regions for example, that share the same kind of high income and literacy patterns, language and dialects have revealed that women are switching to reading vernacular papers from magazines considered a ladies' special so far. Working women, married or otherwise are decision makers who decide what media products the family will buy. Since most of our women are more comfortable in their mother tongues, with less than 5% knowing enough English for reading, it is clear to see the scope for growth for intelligent, women-friendly papers.

The feminist approach to Hindi papers is usually that of blanket rejection. There has been little research in the media about the inter-linkages between women's personal lives and the politics of language in the Indian media where English writers are the Brahmins and shall neither sup nor fraternize with women and men from the vernacular media. Some walls were broken by the electronic media when high visibility, high salary positions became available to vernacular journalists in private news channels. But the print media has been slower to change. Since even at the news channels, a western style smartness, and young people are preferred as anchors, older women from the vernacular media find it hard to compete for these jobs. This not only deprives the visual media of mature women journalists, it also reconfirms prejudices about women in the media being a frivolous and dumb lot.

The loss of old style media industry may at times irritate some old timers in the vernacular media. They have had no problems in accepting the unquestioned supremacy of men or the English publications in that order, but they are dismissive of a new pre eminence of women in the media. Some of them sneer at their effect upon the younger women and their sudden assumption of a militant feminist stance over issues like equal wages and childcare facilities at workplace. They blame English and western culture for this confusion of values and predict that this is going to result in a whole scale rejection of tradition by small town Indians.

Question is what can be done? The answer is plenty. As a first step let the more powerful and eminent women in the English media, shed their socio linguistic snobberies and try and see the media scene from the view point of a vernacular journalist. We are still a vibrant and functional democracy with a growing literacy rate especially in the Hindi areas. Can those of us who write reams about equality and fraternity, also not support the women to increase their visibility and their clout, to demand better working conditions and help improve the general quality of the vernacular media establishments, making them more woman friendly and less hostile to the English language and western thought?

It is basically a part of a backlash politics that sees women making inroads in all areas of excellence as inviting doom. Blaming women journalists' self confidence on the decadent West reminds me how when Brazil had won the 1994 World Cup, some fans in Boston grumbled that Brazil had won because its coach had imposed a style on his team that was too defensive, too European.

**(Mrinal Pande is the first woman editor of a national daily-Hindustan)**

## **CHAPTER-12**

### **LANGUAGE MEDIA Vs ENGLISH MEDIA**

*By R. Akhileshwari*

Women journalists are worse off in the regional language media compared to those in the English press. All women journalists put together in the four languages of the south, that is Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam will not equal the number of women in the English language press in the south. They are often paid less than men, have no job security, are restricted to desk jobs, have no job mobility, have less opportunities, and face more sexual harassment than their sisters in the English language media.

Women journalists in the English media get better salaries, have better conditions of work, more prestige and more opportunities. Regional press will take at least 20 more years to reach the level of English press in recruiting media women, according to a woman editor of a Kannada magazine. A Telugu language journalist said women in the regional/language media have two options: either fight and assert their rights or prepare to be sidelined. The struggle continues even today as the stereotyping and discrimination continues. Equality for women especially in the regional/language media is still a distant goal.

In all the four states, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar, the status of women journalists is the same. Unlike women journalists in the national dailies, those working in the regional press are faced with a range of problems beginning from an entry to the industry, placement in the industry, designation and proper remuneration, promotions, leave etc. While many of the women join the industry full of enthusiasm at a young age, only a few stay on. While some opt for 'government jobs,' others move out of the industry into matrimony. Many newspapers in the region use the fact that girls are unlikely to stay 'because they will get married' to keep them at low salaries, without designation and facilities.

The differential conditions of pay, working conditions, opportunities and even social interaction between women journalists working for English language media and the regional media seems to be a reflection of the social values and the status of the 'vernacular' press. This is reflected even in payments to freelancers and contributors. Those writing for the English media are paid more. The same writer, writing for the group's language paper gets paid less. All women working in the language press believe women in English language media have far greater opportunities, are paid better salaries and have better working conditions. They believe that English newspapers and periodicals are read by policy makers, and the

language media by the common man. However, public opinion is largely reflected in the regional press.

Regional language women journalists are underpaid and exploited, treated as "B" or even "C" class citizens by newspaper managements. Belonging to the same newspaper group does not mean that women in both the English and language papers have similar working conditions and opportunities. This differential treatment is apparent even when the same management brings out both the English and a local language daily. Women in particular are affected in opportunities available to them for their professional growth. The Chennai based New Indian Express-Dinamani group, the Bangalore-based Deccan Herald-Prajavani group, the Hyderabad-based Eenadu-Newstime and Hyderabad-based Deccan Chronicle-Andhra Bhoomi group have this bias.

To a large extent there is equality in the English newspapers in terms of opportunities, tasks assigned, promotions, and salaries. Women occupy senior positions, they travel abroad on assignments, do political and crime reporting, write editorials. Some newspaper groups that have a tradition of encouraging women, such as Deccan Herald and Indian Express, have created history in terms of having women assistant editors, chief reporters, foreign correspondents and chief sub editors. Both groups have a tradition of women reaching the top, being decision-makers. But their language counterparts even today have no full-time women reporters. Seemingly, most of the progressive and equal opportunity policies do not apply to their sister language publications.

Women have been chief reporters and bureau chiefs in the Madras edition of Indian Express for close to three decades. Yet, Dinamani, its Tamil language sister daily, did not recruit women to the editorial till five years ago. Even today there is only one woman reporter and she is not allowed to do night shift.

In Deccan Herald, almost every section with the exception of the general desk is headed by women: the Sunday magazine, the science and technology supplement, the features section and even the reporting unit. DH had posted a woman reporter to Washington DC for four years; it has had two women assistant editors who commented on politics and international affairs. Several state correspondents of DH are women. Yet in total contrast, women have been few in Prajavani, the group's Kannada daily and these women have no access to political reporting. There is only one full-fledged woman reporter in Prajavani and she has been there just a couple of years. Prajavani has been transferring women subs to district headquarters for starting editions from there, which basically means the women can now do reporting, a job that was out of bounds for them earlier.

A similar situation prevails in the Eenadu Group of Andhra Pradesh. Its English daily Newstime, which has closed recently, had women on the desk, in reporting and in the features section. Within the organisation they were given position and power. But in the Telugu daily,

Eenadu, the contrast is stark. Women are few, they are languishing without promotion, and are not encouraged to do anything other than the routine.

Deccan Chronicle of Hyderabad is headed by a woman; the features section is an all-women affair. Women reporters have reported on almost everything including crime but not politics. However, its sister Telugu daily Andhra Bhoomi has a couple of women journalists who are on the desk and who work in similar conditions as all other women journalists in other Telugu dailies. Women in Trivandrum's edition of The Hindu believe they are a pampered lot because they get transport, have regular hours as they work on the Metro supplement and face none of the hassles, like transfer, faced by women in other newspapers. "We never have to ask for anything," said a senior reporter.

On the other hand, no woman will give up her job even if she faces discrimination or is given no promotion. The financial need overrides such considerations. Some women have, however, opted for other jobs due to the inconvenient timings in a newspaper.

According to Loganayiki, editor of Snehidhi, a Tamil magazine, there is a divide between regional and English media professionals just as there is between students of English and regional language medium schools. English language journalists, both men and women are better paid, have different lifestyle. However, she believes, the regional language journalists are better informed and English language journalists often take their help in doing their stories. This divide is not there among the younger women and new entrants to the profession.

In several places now women can no longer be ignored and also the old tradition of keeping women out of the workplace has been set aside by the younger generation of newspaper owners. This has happened in Malayala Manorama. Fifteen years ago, women were not allowed to write the entrance test for recruitment to Malayala Manorama. In those days even receptionists in the organisation were men. Today there are women in almost all departments, the change brought by the second generation owners and their spouses.

### **Wages and Working Conditions**

Almost all women in language media felt that women are not recognised as professionally competent even today. This leads to widespread discrimination—in salary, promotions and the work assigned making it very difficult for women to survive in the field. Besides newspaper managements practise the "hire and fire" policy especially with regard to women and more so in the regional media. Women of the leading Telugu daily Eenadu are paid consolidated salaries rather than wageboard scales. They all hang on to their jobs because even that small-salary job is not available outside. In the Telugu daily Andhra Jyoti, every single person negotiates his or her salary. Almost all the 12-14 women have taken what was offered to them, half of them taking less than what they were earning earlier or lesser than their male juniors. Invariably women are paid less than men and now with the contract system women are at a greater disadvantage as they are unable to negotiate.

When a young woman asked her news editor in a Tamil newspaper why she was paid less than her male colleague he said it was because men have to take greater risks in the job. Her question is why "Why do they protect us and then do injustice to us?" She would like to do serious writing but being in a magazine she has to do all kinds of other work. "See here, see what I am doing. Drawing rangoli and editing recipes. Is this why I joined the profession?" she asks. A senior journalist in a Kannada daily draws a salary that is paid to her male colleagues who has half her experience in the profession.

She said she accepted a position in the features section as "managements assume women cannot be news editors." In a Chennai-based English daily, half the reporters are women. While there is no job segregation or discrimination, in terms of salary, men seem to be getting more as all the employees are being slowly moved into the contract system. "There is parity in position but no parity in pay," a young female reporter said.

A beginner in a Telugu daily faced discrimination from the day of appointment itself. She was paid less than other men appointed along with her. After a year she along with the other trainees wrote a test to qualify and be made permanent. She passed the test, scoring more marks than many of the men, but was not made permanent. When questioned, the management informed her it was because she could not do the night shift.

Though Kerala is seen as being very progressive, it is in fact very conservative, say women working in the state. A reporter who had worked in an English daily, relocated to her home town in Trivandrum, and found to her dismay that news sources would not interact with her when she went to interview them. They preferred to speak to her photographer. Another woman said, they become the story if they persist in pursuing male news sources.

### **Discrimination and harassment**

Discrimination and harassment by the male superiors is common for women journalists in the regional media while women in English language media have not as many complaints. Apparently women are seen as vulnerable, and those harassed have often borne it without complaining perhaps believing they are powerless to do anything about it. A trend that should worry all, especially women, is that women in distress get no support from their female colleagues, either in the organisation or from those in the profession. Empowerment of women journalists either in the regional or English language media is not such that they will fight for the rights of other women. Time and again, both in cases of sexual harassment and personal harassment, men rally in support of their male colleagues but among women there is no such support.

A S Padmavati, a journalist with two decades in the profession, believes "there is very little space for women. With whom do you fight? The enemy is invisible," she said of the discrimination and harassment media women have to put up with.

Kusuma Shanbhag, who worked for Prajavani for two decades, was harassed by her editor to the extent that she had to resign. She was suffering from cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy when the harassment began. First she was put on continuous night shift, then denied work. She was taunted and even denied a seat at her workplace after she was transferred to a magazine, following a representation to the management. Kusuma says none of her female colleagues stood by her during her harassment. They were afraid they too would be victimised if they supported her. They could be transferred or denied promotion. "They were all my friends. We worked together for several years but none came to help me when I was in trouble" she said.

### **Facilities, discrimination, personal harassment**

At the workplace, it is a daily struggle for the women especially when they are beginners. A young girl sub editor in a Telugu daily said her male colleagues tended to blame her for any mistakes in the copy. They try to suppress the girls professionally constantly finding fault or criticising her performance. She quit after three years. If the girls get emotionally involved with their male colleagues they face humiliation daily.

Maternity leave is still an issue women have to grapple with in the regional media. Women go on maternity leave but are not sure if they will continue to have the job when they return. Several women lost their jobs while on maternity leave.

Women in senior positions like Jayanti of Deccan Chronicle and Vasantalaxmi of Andhra Jyoti believe that domestic responsibilities are a major hurdle for women, whether working in English or regional media. Before marriage, the girls work zealously, even two shifts, take a house near the workplace or ask parents or brothers to pick them up after night duty or if working late hours. Once they marry and have children, they either prefer to shift to other departments if there are opportunities or drop out of the profession. Some would like to return after the children have grown up but there are not many opportunities. If women can financially afford it, they prefer to opt out of the profession because of the irregular hours, pressures of a deadline and the burden of domestic responsibilities. The women are not yet ready to put profession ahead of their social/domestic priorities.

Women are also vulnerable to being exploited. They are given work like doing a survey of readership habits or a research project or even asked to work on trial. Payments, if made, are meagre and delayed. One girl had to approach the managing editor of a Telugu daily to get the payments due to her. In another instance two girls were recruited to carry out a survey of readers and were promised a job at the end of it. They were neither paid nor given the promised job. One of them simply stopped asking for her payment. The other made an issue of it, represented to the higher ups and was finally recruited.

Ammu Joseph who has researched women journalists across the country says women in regional language newspapers face problems such as scandal mongering unlike women in

English newspapers where an average person, whether male or female is socially more free. "It is a socio-cultural divide," she says of the differential working conditions and the distance between women journalists in English and language media.

### **Promotions**

There is no policy regarding promotions in most organisations whether regional or English. Promotions for most are irregular, non-transparent and whimsical. With women it is worse. On an average a woman journalist seems to have been promoted once in a decade. Some have not been promoted even once. Also promotions seem to be tied up with reporting. Since women are almost always sub editors they are not promoted. The performance of a sub editor is assessed for his/her ability to bring out an edition during the night, which is a test of the journalist's news values, judgement and efficiency. Since most women do not do night shifts and therefore have no experience in bringing out editions, they are overlooked for promotions. A crucial factor in the regional media is the command over English since most news and articles are in English. Interestingly enough in this area also women are at a disadvantage as they are not proficient in it.

Where women have been promoted they have also faced trouble and rebellion from their male colleagues. A senior journalist in a Malayalam daily got her first promotion after 13 years; then she was made a senior sub, then news editor (NE). When her male colleagues revolted she was put in charge of production. To appease the rebels a man was also appointed news editor and they were rotated every month. When this arrangement did not find favour with the new NE, the management solved the issue by transferring her to a supplement, her rival to another edition and appointed a neutral man as the NE.

A Trivandrum-based correspondent of a national newspaper attributes lack of promotions for women to the lack of 'bar-room bonding and bonhomie' that men journalists have and women don't. Invariably the "glass-mates" are promoted, she says. Not that they are hostile to me or that I don't network or that I skip cocktail parties. I am simply not one of them."

### **Women in English Language Press**

Today it is much easier for women to enter and succeed in English language journalism partly because of greater acceptance, larger numbers and also because senior journalists walked a path for them as pioneering journalists several decades ahead of the regional language media. Some believe there is no discrimination and no glass ceiling in major English language papers. The large influx of women into English media has been diverted to the features sections across the country with the result these sections in both English and language papers have become an all-women's section, creating a newspaper within a newspaper, divorced from the mainstream. Ammu Joseph feels women are getting ghettoised. Like the women's columns or women's clubs of earlier times, women are being relegated into 'softer' areas, getting bogged down in features sections. While women would like to do serious, issue-

oriented writing they are being "herded" into non-serious writing of celebrity and lifestyle journalism, she says.

### **Performance and punishment**

Most women reported jealousies, petty rivalry and slandering arising from their bylines and special reports, mostly from their male colleagues and bosses and sometimes from female colleagues too. Seniors get back in their own way at women. For example the woman sub editor of a Kannada daily whose byline for an edit page article was dropped "by mistake."

A pioneering woman journalist with an English daily recalled how if her special story got her praise from the editor, her immediate superior would promptly shift her to the court beat or some other such beat where there can be no exclusive stories. A journalist in a Telugu newspaper said snide remarks in the form of humour, gossip and slights are common whenever they shine. The men find it difficult to acknowledge her performance but are quick to point mistakes. They accept the mountains of work a woman does but do not give recognition. As a woman bitterly pointed out, why speak of male colleagues, even the husband finds it difficult to accept the wife's competence. Such behaviour seriously erodes the women's confidence and her self esteem.

Yet, performance has not always been punished as in the instance of Jeyarani working with an established newspaper in Chennai. Although regional press and their establishments are tradition-bound and conservative she had set some trends. She travels alone, learnt photography on her own so as to illustrate her stories without having to depend on a photographer. So impressive was her performance that she was confirmed in her job in two years. It normally takes three to five years for women to get confirmed. Asked if being a Dalit working in a predominantly upper caste establishment was a problem, she said "I gave a jolt to all with my performance. No one now talks of caste; none can reject me." Her formula for success: self-confidence, build on talent, become multi-skilled, be bold and learn to deal with people and situations.

While women have become editors of magazines both in English and language media, women editors of newspapers are rare although there are several deputy editors. A woman deputy editor explained that this was because nowadays editors do a lot of chores for managements, wheeling and dealing with politicians and bureaucrats in power. Women cannot or will not do it, so they cannot occupy the highest chair.

## CHAPTER-13

### NO RUBBER STAMP WOMEN

*(Editor – Proprietors)*

The going is far from easy for the few women who are active in the business of press management. They too have had to prove to their colleagues and employees - many unaccustomed to taking orders from women - that they are serious, full-time professionals who care for their work as much as they do.

Most of these women publisher-proprietors in India have entered the business through the family route. They have either inherited the family business, like the well-known duo Nirmala Lakshman and Malini Parthasarathy of *The Hindu*, or used family resources to launch new media products. Whether it is press business or journalism, these women learnt hands-on the tricks of the trade and when the opportunity arose, they grabbed the right moment to showcase their skills and over the years, earn the respect of their colleagues.

Imrana Samnani taught herself Urdu and took over the control of her father-in-law's newspaper, Kashmir-based *Sandesh* after his death. So did Surubhi Surjan from *Deshbandu* when her father fell ill. She used her management training to encourage and improve the status of women journalists in her organisation.

Despite the family connections, it was not smooth sailing for these women. Imrana experienced a stiff resistance to her presence in the newsroom but persevered to gain acceptance. It is said that Nalini Gera, who got involved in the management of the *Maharashtra Herald*, would wear only saris to office to project a serious image and at the same time, sub copies so that her staff would accept her.

It takes guts and grits to carry on in this profession, especially in regions where conflict and turbulence is a way of life. Both Imrana and Valley Rose, editor of *Aja* newspaper from Manipur, have faced a barrage of threats and letters dictating to them what they are to publish in their newspapers, whether in Kashmir or in Manipur. For years they have been caught in the crossfire between various insurgent groups advocating causes and the Indian army trying to curb their activities. But, stresses Imrana, she has never shut down her newspaper for a single day or asked the army for personal security.

Nor did Jaysree Khadilkar-Pande, editor of *Navakal*, buckle under pressure of a different kind in a busy metropolis like Mumbai. She was perhaps the first woman-editor to serve a jail

sentence for contempt of court. But she used this to her advantage and turned the tables by writing extensively and sympathetically about women undertrial prisoners. However, not all have taken advantage of their position to improve the conditions for women and one such is Reeta Patel, who sees no point employing women even in a busy city like Ahmedabad because she feels there is very little scope for them in Gujarati journalism.

By and large, however, these women have proved that they are most definitely not the rubber stamp variety, whose sole interests lie in being ornamental after fortuitously landing their jobs. Mrs Lapang, for example, had no particular interest in journalism, but found herself managing the Khasi newspaper her husband started in Meghalaya when he decided to join politics. Keeping in mind the fate of her employees, Mrs Lapang has not taken the easy way out by closing down but continues to run the paper successfully. While these women may not have had to struggle like other women in the media to enter the profession, they nevertheless had to work hard to learn their job, to prove their worth, and most important, to multitask so that they are equal to handling any aspect of running a newspaper.

### **Surubhi Surjan**

Armed with a diploma in management from Moscow State University Surabhi Surjan today is in an elite league. In Chhattisgarh, Surabhi is probably the only woman journalist, who has not only has been working successfully for the last 10 years but also has the additional responsibility of being the proprietor of Deshbandu.

After completing her masters degree in history, her diploma in management along with a certificate in Russian language, today as Managing Editor of Deshbandhu, Chhattisgarh, it is almost as if Surabhi was initiated into the profession right from birth.

Earlier, her father ably handled the paper as a proprietor. Although she had been exposed to the industry early in life, she was dabbling in management, when fate forced her to make a final decision. While she was studying in Moscow, her father fell ill and Surabhi put her interests aside to take up her father's responsibility. Even though she was raised among journalists and journalism right from her young days, and many would say she inherited the skill of writing, today she has put into use her management skills.

With her father's guidance, Surabhi may have never faced professional struggles in the industry but she says she is committed to improve the conditions and image of women journalists in the State. She says to do so she tries to give equal responsibilities to both women and men in her organisation. But she admits that there are very few women who are able to face challenges of the profession and underscores the need to encourage women to match their status with their male colleagues. In this endeavour, she has tried to provide a healthy atmosphere for her employees and says that many of them have admitted that they are satisfied with the changes in the organisation.

An effective communicator, eight years ago, she reported on a poor polio affected girl. Surabhi says that she especially remembers this story because her report was able to create a ripple and helped the girl enter the education system. As a proprietor she is not a rubber stamp and plays an active part in the day to day functioning of the paper. Having proved her competence as a manager she now wants to report on politics. She feels that the electronic media has given women in journalism a better avenue and helped bring in a new generation of confident young women.

### **Vineeta Shrivastava**

Following her father and brother's footsteps, Vineeta Shrivastava completed her LLB but an interest in journalism saw her enter a vocation that she now realizes is 'showy and sparkles from the surface. A person can understand the realities in journalism only after entering the profession, she says. Caught in an environment with no work culture, frustration got the better of her forcing her to leave the newspaper industry to strike it on her own.

For the last 10 years she has worked with a number of newspapers— as a sub-editor in 'Chautha Sansar', 'Swadesh' and finally joined Nava-Bharat (Bhopal) in the hope of 'making a career with a big banner'. However, the attraction of the big organisation soon wore off as she faced 'cold and competitive' colleagues, management indifference and what she calls 'mental torture'. After having worked there for five years managing the women's magazine and the children's page, she left Nava-Bharat in frustration.

After the death of her father, a writer, and her brother, a journalist, she has left the 'glamorous' news industry and struck out on her own to run her own magazine – Tulika. She has also taken on the responsibility of looking after the family.

### **Jayshree Khadilkar-Pande**

Jayshree Khadilkar-Pande shot into fame when she served a six days jail sentence on charges of contempt of court in Mumbai. Jayshree has an executive editor's responsibility for the Marathi newspaper, Navakal, while her father Nilkanth Khadilkar is the editor/proprietor of the newspaper published from Mumbai. Mr Khadilkar had commented in his editorial on the Srikrishna Commission report on the communal riots in Bombay after the blasts of 1992-93. Finding the report pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim he had lambasted it and commented on the justice of Srikrishna. The Mumbai High Court on its own filed a contempt of court petition objecting to the reference 'Justice.' The editor of Navakal was sentenced to a week's jail. Jayshree preferred to accept the court verdict, maintaining that they respect the judiciary and since Srikrishna happened to be a Justice, he was referred to in that way.

She was the first editor to go to jail and she became a celebrity. She used the opportunity to see the jail conditions and talk to the women undertrials and wrote 11 stories on their plight.

Jayshree along with her sisters, Vasanti and Rohini, was a chess champion. She was the first woman international master in chess from India. The daughters were groomed into the family business of running the paper. Vasanti looks after administration, Jayshree is the editor of Navakal and Rohini is the editor of the evening, *Sandhya Kal*. Their mother has been looking after the finance. The father has the responsibility for all their publications and writes the edits, which are popular among the masses. Navakal has a tradition of carrying editorials on the front page. Khadilkars consider Navakal as the voice of the downtrodden and the working class.

Because of her progressive upbringing, Jayshree says she never felt the difference of being a woman. It never mattered. Her father always dissuaded them from wasting time in the kitchen. Yet she is aware that the women from all other walks of life do have problems. With this sensitivity, she specifically writes on women's issues. She also encourages her women staffers to develop themselves as also gives them fair chance to prove their abilities. While she is considerate towards their genuine problems, she also remains vigilant that women do not take undue advantage of the leniency shown to them. She has three women in the 15-member editorial team and one of them is a crime reporter going out in the middle of the night, if need be, for a story.

Navakal's stand on hot socio-political and communal issues is indeed debated and there are staunch supporters as well as vehement opponents. Jayshree believes and follows her father and takes pride in their strong convictions as also in their tradition of the family business of running a newspaper started by her great grandfather.

### **Reeta Patel**

Reeta Patel, editor of *Stree* - a Gujarati magazine from Ahmedabad - is daughter of Chimanbhai Patel, owner of the famous *Sandesh* group of publications in Gujarat. *Stree* was the first woman's magazine started by Reeta's mother Leelaben Patel in 1963. Reeta took over the magazine after her mother and simultaneously helps her father run the newspaper business. After her BA (English), Reeta started work with her parents.

Four journalists, two men and two women, help Reeta bring out *Stree*. She says she protects her 'girls' and does not allow them to go out for interview etc. Instead she sends the men for outdoor work. Feeling particularly responsible for the girls, she sends them out only when she is confident of their security. While a woman journalist has been with the magazine since 1975, the other joined 4-5 years ago.

Reeta feels that there is not much scope in Gujarati journalism for women. The main paper *Sandesh* prefers men and has no women journalists. Even today, when women journalists are in scores in other vernacular papers, the *Sandesh* group does not employ women and maintains Gujarati journalism has no place for women.

Compare Ahmedabad to Mumbai and *Sandesh* to *Maharashtra Times*. There are at least a dozen women journalists in *Maharashtra Times* in Mumbai, whereas *Sandesh* has none even in Ahmedabad, forget other towns.

### **BEGUM IMRANA SAMNANI**

(Proprietor and effective, functioning editor)

Begum Imrana Samnani, Proprietor and Editor-in-chief of the Urdu daily '*Sandesh*', has nurtured the paper "like the child I never had", since 1973 when her father-in-law entrusted her with it.

Imrana inherited a daily that had started off as a weekly '*Naya Kashmir*'. In 1952 '*Sandesh*' began its life as a daily and was published simultaneously from Jammu and Srinagar till the Indo-Pak war of 1965 when publication was suspended for a short period. The Jammu office was soon operative but the Srinagar edition has never been revived.

Born in July 1947, Imrana's life has been turbulent, in fact even before she was born. While her mother was in confinement at her parents place in Delhi, her father the erstwhile Nawab of Sirsa, along with thousands of his Muslim tenants took shelter with his '*pagdi-brother*', the Maharaja of Bikaner, for a month. When it became too dangerous to wait any longer for his wife and new born daughter to join him, the group left for Pakistan. After six months of uncertainty, Imrana's mother was informed about the departure of her husband and his subjects and was promised safe passage. She refused and instead stayed back to take care of their properties.

After a few years the property was taken over by the government and Imrana was supported by the 'Court of Wards'. Her maternal family was of liberal educated women. The grandmother was a doctor and her mother, the principal of a school. Imrana studied in Mussorie, Lucknow and at the Trinity College, London. She returned to work in the Tourism Department and was prevailed upon by her mother to visit her father in Pakistan.

"By now my father had married twice and I had many half brothers and sisters. He was very eager that I marry and settle down in Pakistan but I had been brought up in a broad, cosmopolitan environment and could not imagine living in a religion dominated country."

She moved to Jammu in 1966 after her marriage into the Samnani family of politicians and intellectuals. Her father-in-law, Sayyed Nazir Hussain Samnani, had started the paper and was a great proponent of and spokesperson for small newspapers. Though not very comfortable with Urdu, she taught herself and soon started writing for *Sandesh*. After his sudden demise in 1973, in accordance with his wishes, she assumed control of the paper.

"Printing an Urdu daily was a tedious process of *kitabab* where everything had to be handwritten. Ours was the first Urdu daily to be computerised in 1997. Sticking it out throughout the militancy period was tough since threats and letters dictating contents were frequent but

I did not buckle and never asked for security. I did not stop press even for a single day. Mine is a moderate paper that upholds democracy and the Indian nation state"

Imrana functions with a strength of 24, which includes eight journalists, three of them women. Some of 33,000 copies of *Sandesh* are sold, mainly in J&K, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab. "Initially I was a rarity and the attitude to my presence in press-conferences and other media happenings was negative. But my attitude was - I'm here to stay so you have got to accept me. Mr Saraf, a senior journalist, was a huge source of courage and encouragement, she says. "

"The attitude to the Urdu press is negative here," she maintains. We are not informed about important conferences, briefings and are often excluded from schemes to help the media in functioning efficiently. As President of the Jammu wing of the All India Urdu Editors Conference she once asked Dr Farooq Abdullah, when he was the Chief Minister, if there was a conspiracy to close down the Urdu press. All he said was - "Yes there is." A memorandum was given to the Ministry of Information but no action was taken.

"Just guts and confidence don't work", observed Imrana who is founder-member of the Jammu Press Club and now part of" its executive committee. "Assertiveness is a prerequisite for women journalists," says Imrana.

#### **Valley Rose H Hungyo:**

Valley Rose H Hungyo, Editor of 'Aja' an English-Tangkhul bilingual daily published from Imphal, Manipur, is a fiery Naga activist in her mid forties. She makes no bones about the fact that the daily newspaper she started in 1992 is an extension of her activism. The paper has a circulation of 5000.

In Manipur where every facet of life revolves around the chaotic ethnic/tribal identity politics, having a newspaper where you can publish your 'own point of view' is very important, specially, if one side feels that 'their' side of the story is not being covered by the other newspapers, which are under the control of other groups. Valley Rose believes that the newspaper is an important tool to further the cause that is being espoused.

She runs the daily with the help of four assistants, including her husband who is the joint editor. Valley Rose does most of the writing and the reporting, including the editorials for the two-page daily. She ensures she maintains a level of ethical objectivity, a must for every editor over and above the 'cause'.

Valley Rose also found that being a 'press person' is a source of strength for the people in her area, caught in the crossfire between various insurgent groups, advocating various causes, and the Indian army trying to curb their activities. Being a journalist gave her the passport to cross various levels of social and tribal boundaries, ask questions, raise issues and interact with the high and the mighty as well as the disadvantaged. There are disadvantages

at times though, when she finds that the credibility of her reports may be questioned. " For example, during a communal situation being a Naga, even if I write something that is true and shows Nagas in a positive light, people will think that my report is biased," she said.

In Manipur, Valley Rose is the only woman journalist at press conferences and workshops dominated by men. There are several young women entering journalism but they are confined to the desk or column writings and are yet to step into the tough field of reporting, she says.

### **A L Lapang:**

In her sixties, Amythest Lynda Lapang, popularly known as Mrs Lapang, is the first woman to hold editorship of a Khasi newspaper in Meghalaya. Like other women heading their newspapers, Mrs Lapang also took over the newspaper, *The Pietngor*, started in 1972 by her husband, veteran politician and chief minister D D Lapang and Dr H W Sten, a Khasi author and educationist. It is one of the oldest newspapers in the state. Mrs Lapang said that they handed over the management of the newspaper to her when Mr Lapang decided to join politics in 1980. A month later, Dr Sten also decided to leave and she was left holding the nascent newspaper.

"I had no real interest in journalism and no training either, but began to do the work somehow," she said. Eventually, with a helper she learnt to manage the newspaper, which was then a weekly. She controlled the newspaper as the editor-proprietor till 1997 when an editor was appointed. Mrs Lapang said that the Khasi newspapers had grown in readership and circulation but still lacked quality.

She said that most newspapers, including her own are barely managing to keep financially afloat. The newspapers are unable to pay the journalists and other staff adequately and are unable to attract qualified and trained people. In fact, many a time she had felt that it would be wiser to shut down the paper, but had stopped short because of the ten people employed in the unit. The newspaper has a circulation between 5000-8000.

**(Rajashri Dasgupta with inputs from all)**

## **CHAPTER-14**

### **WE CAME TO STAY**

There is simply nothing - absolutely nothing - to stop competent and motivated women from achieving their goals. This is proved by their very success in journalism, a demanding profession long considered a typical male bastion. Their success in reaching the top rungs of journalism and their growing number in the media workforce suggest that the barriers restricting women's entry into the profession have started to crumble. Though perhaps not pioneers in this field, women journalists in the print media are continuously expanding and redefining the scope of journalism in India.

The two areas of journalism most profoundly influenced by the hardworking and ambitious women are organisational culture and media quality. Heading the growing breed of women journalists, a pioneer in fact, is the indomitable 84-year-old Vidya Munsli, who still continues to impact on editorial policies of her newspaper with her incisive understanding and wisdom—whether it is on reservations for women in Parliament or minority rights - all from a wheelchair at home. Gutsy Mrinal Pande uses her position as editor-in-chief to take affirmative action, increasing the participation of women journalists in her organisation because she believes that there is a valid "woman's angle to everything." Few high-ranking individuals have displayed Pande's sheer audacity, allowing the career woman to bring her emotional and personal baggage into the workplace simply because of her firm conviction that denial would be counter-productive, both for the organisation and the individual.

If some journalists like Pande deeply believe that rejecting the gender that plays a major part in one's identity reflects not only insecurity but is disabling for women in her career, others like Sunita Aaron of HT or Savitri, editor of Karmaveera, think that the categorisation itself is demeaning and trivialises their status as hard-core professionals, implying special attention and opportunities in their workplace. Whatever the differences in attitude may be about the gender issue, there is no denying the heightened self-esteem of women journalists today regarding their role in the profession. They have arrived - and have doggedly stayed on.

With the situation radically changing since the early 80s, when women did not figure in any organisational concerns, Shagufta Shirin's frustrations with a biased management that lack faith in women's work would strike a chord in the experience of many journalists. Even after decades, there is pressure on women to prove themselves in a profession still considered a male domain. Male colleagues are still ill at ease with women professionals who sometimes face ridicule or even sexual harassment.

Moreover, with women shouldering the additional responsibility of household work and children, they have to struggle to balance the conflicting demands of home and work place. For women journalists in particular, the universal problem of balancing housework and career is further aggravated with irregular hours and unpredictable work schedules, which are the hallmarks of this profession. As Pande points out astutely, "Women's most productive years are also their reproductive years," and they are, therefore, missing out from decision-making positions in the industry.

Further, despite its burgeoning numbers, the industry can boast of only modest gains on the issue of diversity, since the upper class-upper-caste network continues to dominate women who have entered the profession. Despite being a diverse and complex nation like India, women from minority communities and from the underprivileged sections of society are missing from the pressroom. As one senior editor said, the goal to induct journalists from minority and ethnic communities is not just a move towards political correctness; it upholds journalism's primary responsibility "to mirror accurately the complexities of the community as a whole." The stories told by the media today are therefore, in a sense, limited in perspective, incomplete and inaccurate. Without the complete picture, in a nutshell, it is just not good journalism.

Yet the women in the media have certainly taken journalism to new heights. As they simultaneously endure police beatings and danger alongside their male colleagues on the one hand and on the other, deal with gender-related innuendos, they bring a new sense of tenacity, dedication and sensitivity to a profession well known for its cynicism.

#### **Sangeeta Thakur: No special favours**

At a closed door meeting with other journalists from around the country Sangeeta Thakur never hesitates to raise a hand to clear a doubt in her mind. Speaking slowly, one could easily miss the lisp and it is only when she takes a helping hand from neighbours she makes known that something is amiss.

However, any questions about her condition and how it affects her profession are quickly brushed aside. 'If you want to speak to me, speak to me as a working journalist.' Taking the cue there is no mention of her condition, muscle atrophy, as she speaks of her love for journalism.

Sangeeta has been working with the Hindustan Times, Patna for a few years now and her attitude to work is simple. "I do not seek special favours. I am good at my work and equal to anyone. As for my condition I do not consider it a disability, but a challenge."

#### **Sunita Aaron: gender is not an issue**

Years ago, Khuswant Singh, the then editor of Hindustan Times, in his inimitable style had remarked, "I didn't know babies are born in three months." He was referring to one of his reporter's giving birth immediately after she joined HT in Lucknow. During the job interview,

Singh had no clue that the young applicant was already six months pregnant. "I had hidden my pregnancy fearing I would not get the job. I desperately wanted to be a reporter," said Sunita Aaron.

It is this passion that stood by her as she worked her way up to become one of the most well-respected political reporters of UP. Today, she is the first resident editor in the whole of North India. In taking up the challenge, she asserts, not once has she taken advantage of the fact that she is a woman.

She has covered the worst communal riots, caste massacres, interviewed dreaded dacoits and has never let go of an opportunity to pursue a story. In 1992 when the editor didn't let her go to Ayodhya to cover the Babri Masjid because of 'security' reasons, she put her foot down and threw a tantrum. When her ambassador car could not make it through rugged terrain in UP to reach a troubled spot she did not bat an eye to avail of a police jeep. "Journalism is not about glamour, it's all about challenges," says Sunita.

Though it's been taxing to maintain both hearth and work, once in the field she is totally engrossed and doesn't worry about her children. "I never flaunted my family responsibilities or my kids as an excuse not to do an assignment," she says. "I don't mix my family responsibilities with my work. Not even when my child fell sick." She argues that since her editors never discriminated against her and instead gave her reports fair display, she could not but keep her part of the deal.

It is this commitment that Sunita feels that is necessary to be a good journalist, a quality that has seen her through her long years in journalism from a staff reporter, to a special correspondent to the chief of Bureau to taking up the challenge of a Resident Editor when the Lucknow edition was launched. The other quality she stresses is credibility, without which a reporter has no standing and one that compromises your whole work. In a profession where salaries are sometimes poor, the temptations are great. "But once you say no' to a temptation, you have won," she says. "But the lure is tremendous".

Though there are no regrets, Sunita says the fight to rise and establish herself as RE and a good reporter has not been easy. She was uncertain how her staff would accept her, one of their own colleagues, as their boss. She maintains if one is professional, concentrates on work and stops gossiping sooner or later people grudgingly accept your contribution. Sunita says the profession has changed her. To survive she has grown to be aggressive and domineering – but also confident. "You can't be reporting behind a *ghunghat*, or be a docile, soft spoken woman."

### **Seema Javed: time management is the key**

When Seema Javed began her career as a research associate in a well-known science institute in Lucknow little did she dream that one day she would become an established science journalist, writing and editing single-handed the popular weekly science page, *Jharuka*

(window) in Jansatta. The thematic science weekly is targeted at the layman, says Seema. This she does by demystifying science to her readers in simple language, while writing in-depth on important issues related to everyday life whether it is about pollution, food adulteration or health problems.

A single mother of two young children her life changed radically in 1998 when her husband was killed in an accident while working as reporter for Rashtriya Sahara. When the media house offered her a job, she was taken aback. She had been working as scientist for years on cancer-causing chemicals but had no clue about journalism. Since the job offered was a permanent one, she took it up and started at the beginning, a staff reporter – reporting on a subject she knew best—science. When Jansatta offered her a job, she took it and began writing edits and translating special science stories from Hindi to English for the Indian Express group.

The shift to the press room from the laboratory, from writing routine stories to break into page one with special news, to editing a weekly science page and writing editorials in one of the leading Hindi dailies, to taking care of the children's every need including the household chores was not an easy journey for Seema. She laughs she is not a superwoman. What she holds as her biggest asset is her training as a scientist. "I am very organised and systematic and have a good sense of time management, I plan many steps ahead", says Seema.

So whether it is planning for the children's dinner (a special item every night on the menu), or attending parents-teacher's meeting or planning for the next day's edit or fixing an appointment with a scientist for an interview, she has it all chalked out and time planned. After dropping the children to school, she is found every morning between 10 am 2 pm at the laboratories talking to the scientists, research fellows and experts understanding their views and the latest in the field of science. Her strength was her association with science and fellow researchers and scientists. Now she creatively takes their work across to readers.

What Seema does is to 'articulate' their works since they are not good communicators. "They use scientific jargon leaving the readers flabbergasted," she says. Seema liberally uses illustrations, diagrams and photos with her article. So a story on winter will have related stories on its effects on the health of those with asthma and arthritis.

Seema laments the low wages in the profession and the absence of qualified science journalists. But it is an exciting field and mainstream newspapers are yet to treat the subject with the seriousness it deserves. Bits of information on health and exercise cannot be passed off as science reports, she maintains.

#### **Vidya Munshi: commitment to a cause**

It was her activism that led her to be a journalist. As a representative of the All India Students Federation in Paris in the forties, Vidya Munshi then Kanuga began her career as a journalist by regularly sending reports for the English fortnightly, *The Student*.

She was later to join the Indian Journalist Association (IJA) in 1953 to become possibly the first woman journalist in Calcutta. In 1954 the first Pay Commission for working journalists was set up. When the IJA set up a five-member committee, Munsii was among them looking into the family budgets of 200 working journalists in Kolkata's daily newspapers.

Today at the age of 84, Vidya di's (as she is popularly called) love for journalism has not waned. She was for long a member of the Editorial Board looking after the weekly women's page 'Meyeder Dunia' (women's world) and continues to write regularly a column in Kalantar, the mouth piece of the Communist Party of India, West Bengal. "She takes active interest in the editorial content of the paper and discusses and debates with us our position on various vexatious issues," says Bela Bandopadhyay, a close comrade.

Vidyadi went to study medicine in England and became a Communist. On her return in 1947, Munsii began to work for *The Student* and married its editor. In 1952 when she moved to Calcutta she was a correspondent in the Mumbai -based weekly Blitz and began with writing a weekly column on labour issues from Kolkata but did not stop at that.

She later went on to report political news and cover the Assembly proceedings, the only woman journalist in those days in Calcutta to do so. She remembers one of the most challenging assignments was in the fifties when she went to cover the historical teacher's strike. Thousands of teachers were on dharna at the Esplanade when she and other journalists were chased by the police and had to jump a 8 feet wall to evade arrest by the police!

The highpoint in her career was investigative journalism, a genre of journalism Blitz pioneered. Her wide network of contacts in the trade unions and political party helped, colleagues passed on valuable information which she worked on to write powerful stories whether on companies duplicating account books or violation of human rights or dropping of smuggled gold in the Sundarbans by foreign pilots. In the early 60s when 300 miners were killed in the Chinakuri mine disaster (on which Utpal Dutt based his powerful play *Angar*), young mine engineers provided the data and showed her around the area where the tragedy occurred. Blitz's sales shot up and the editor published all her reports.

Munsii pulls out a well-maintained photograph of the "Group of 16" as she points out her old colleagues with nostalgia. In 1953 during the agitation against the one paisa hike in tram fare at the Shahid Minar, the police beat up the journalists covering the event, broke their cameras, arrested them and took them to the police headquarters in Lal Bazar and accused them of attacking the police! "Times have not changed much," she guffaws, " at least where the police are concerned."

### **Mrinal Pande: Reaching the top**

Probably the best recognised woman journalist in India, Mrinal Pande shattered the glass ceiling when she became the editor-in-chief of Dainik Hindustan - a multi-edition Hindi newspaper. Throughout her career, of more than two decades, Mrinal has stood by her

ideologies with determination and courage. Strong, intelligent, disarmingly affable, she speaks candidly about what it means to be a trail blazer and more importantly, what it means to be a woman journalist.

"When I joined the Times of India in early 80s, women did not figure in any organisational concerns. Chairs were too high, there were no rest rooms and the general attitude was - why is she here and not in Femina? Since then huge changes have taken place even as I was reluctantly accepted as part of the fraternity.

"Hindi media too has transformed even beyond my imagination. When I took over as Chief Editor of Hindustan in April 2001, circulation was 64,000. Since then it has climbed steadily to now register 350,000 for the Delhi edition alone. Last year ad revenue was in lakhs. Now in one year it is in crores.

"There is a new respect for the vernacular editor", said Mrinal, as she went on to further analyse this broadening readership. "The main reason for this is that women are a growing segment of newspaper consumers and have got registered as such. In small towns Hindi papers are targeting women readers by focussing on women and development issues. Hindi and women are both marketable now.

"There is also a visible consciousness and sensitivity to representation of women which often borders on schizophrenia - most papers are easily shamed and want to be seen as sensitive. For example there will be a very progressive edit piece and on another page in the same paper, there will be a lewd caption to an equally bawdy visual.

"Earlier Hindi newspapers were small town publications brought out with specific political ideologies and money did not go into salaries and news gathering. But now with revenues climbing, salaries are good, state of the art technology is available and there is increased investment in brand image."

While recognising such progress in the press, she is sceptical about the progress of women journalists per se and motivated by her own experience is innovative in responding to special needs of woman journalist. "In my organisation I have increased the participation of women journalists because I feel that there is a woman's angle to everything, which should not be ignored. I have generated this consciousness by recognising and responding to women journalists. When I wanted a certain correspondent to move to Raipur, I not only helped her with the logistics but also with her son's school admission. She is a good journalist and I did not want her to lose out on opportunities due to family commitments, as is the case with most of us. Male editors will never respond like this, don't even expect men to make these concessions."

While upholding the need for a supportive environment, she is critical of those with less than a professional attitude - "the other side of the coin is women's own perception about their worth and women's issues. When I advised a certain woman journalist to take on the

women's cell instead of city reporting for which she did not display any particular aptitude, she viewed it as a demotion. She was more eager to be in the bureau than in the women's cell."

She is unequivocal in her opinion of the media as "intellectually stimulating and great for personal growth but at a price". According to her, women are negligible in decision-making positions primarily because their productive years are also their reproductive years. "Women experience extreme stress as they juggle work along with marriage, personal lives, children and almost all of us end up with terminal guilt. It is an acknowledged fact that women are more predictable and reliable; do not create intrigue but rather encourage a more civilized work environment. I am an advocate of women being allowed to bring their personal baggage along because denial is counter productive both for organisations and individuals. The reality of women's lives should be factored in."

And, if there is one thing that Mrinal is disparaging about, it is the attitude of refusing to identify with the 'sisterhood'. "I believe that when you acknowledge this reality, you come into your own and it also becomes your USP. Rejecting this bond or identity is disabling. Never run yourself down", she advised.

"As compared to the visual media", observes Mrinal having straddled both, the print and visual media, "the print is infinitely kinder to women. Ours is still not a mature visual media so it puts a lot of pressure on women to look glamorous, often sacrificing believability and conviction. This obsession with physical appearance often trivialises news and deviates from focussing on issues, resulting in general superficiality". Not exactly known for impetuosity yet she agrees that it was "on an impulse that I gave up my contract with *Doordarshan* to return to the print media. The print media is not perfect. It also has its fair share of ignorance and meanness but by and large it respects professionalism, maturity and wisdom".

While reminiscing about her inspirational career graph, she spoke about her dogged determination that helped her to overcome the bane of all working women – "During the course of my career I too have had uncomfortable moments of unsolicited attention but my generation was brought up to keep a dead pan expression and ignore. Once, along with a few others at the Indian Women's Press Corps (IWPC), we had pursued a sexual harassment case but there was very little justice and lots of embarrassment. In fact I have often seen that whenever managements have taken action it is usually a situation of using such incidents as opportunities to sack an employee against whom they already have a case. Lofty ideals of justice and prevention are seldom the motivation."

Even as she acknowledges the problems of women in the media, she has a strong sense of women's abilities. "We (women) radicalise later but we radicalise firmer", said Mrinal, referring to women's convictions and was probably speaking about herself when she ended on an upbeat note - "We now have a voice beyond gender".

### **Loganayiki: A female boss**

Loganayiki, Editor, *Kumudam Snehidhi*, Tamil periodical for women published by the Kumudam group, that publishes 10 magazines including Telugu and Hindi from Chennai. She has put in 16 years in the profession, starting out as a reporter when women in media were a rarity. The challenges she faced in the earlier days were no less than those she faces now, even though she is editor of a leading woman's magazine. That is because, she says, society's perceptions of women and its attitude towards them has not changed. Her male colleagues and her male subordinates question her, albeit silently, in terms of knowledge, and constantly feel aggrieved for getting less salary and holding a lower position. "Now they know me better but still the male ego is hurt; men always believe women are inferior." So naturally being the boss gets difficult at times.

She believes there is a divide between regional and English media professionals just as there is between students of English and regional language medium schools. English language journalists are better paid, have different lifestyle but the regional language journalists are better informed and English language journalists often take their help in doing stories.

Domestic and family responsibilities are the main reason for women leaving the profession. Even when women join the media, they soon opt out because of domestic responsibilities. Mothers in the profession need a support system; they will go a long way if the family and husband are supportive. Fortunately there are many more opportunities today for aspiring journalists. There are also role models from whom they can get motivation and inspiration.

### **R.Poornima: setting a trend**

R. Poornima, Editor, *Udayavani*, a Kannada daily from Bangalore has a doctorate in Kannada literature. She is the first woman editor of a Kannada mainstream daily newspaper and the first one to have come up from the ranks. She joined Prajavani in the late 1970s when women in Kannada media were a rarity. During her 15 years in Prajavani, she and a woman colleague, re-wrote rules of journalism, doing night duty, reporting issues like elections, that a woman had never done before and writing on issues that were rarely written about. As the first-generation women journalists, they faced huge challenges and societal biases.

Women have to fight to get their due; it is not enough to have talent or even prove your worth with hard work. "No one took us lightly because we were not merely assertive but exceptional in our work and efficient hands on the desk," says Poornima. She, however, admits that as the trend-setters, the first generation has to suffer more, ploughing the path for others to follow. "We created the opportunities and it is easy for others to follow," she said. She won several awards. When she was offered News Editor's post in Udayavani, she accepted it without hesitation. A year later she was offered the Editor's post. She accepted it and made history.

### **Rasheeda Bhagat: On top but not complacent**

Rasheeda Bhagat: deputy editor, *Businessline*, has been in the profession for the past 25 years and finds the present job a great change. She had to fight all along for assignments, bylines, opportunities and so on. But today she no longer has to fight. *Businessline* perhaps is the only paper to have 50 per cent of its editorial room female and also the only financial paper to have a woman at the top.

Rasheeda was one of the first women reporters for a major daily in South India and it has been a difficult climb to the top. Today, she says, it is much easier for women to enter journalism and succeed too partly because of numbers, greater acceptance and also because we as pioneering journalists walked a path for the future generations. A high level of "mortality" among women journalists has ensured that no senior has been left to take the positions now when they are available. Then women acquired a reputation through dint of sheer hard work but since they were given no position, led to their exodus from the profession. She admits women in media need flexibility but not perennially. The biggest challenge she faces is to remain motivated; to push herself; and also be self-critical. There is always the danger of getting comfortable and getting lax, she says.

### **Jeyarani: breaking barriers**

Jeyarani: Reporter, *Ananda Vikatan*, Tamil magazine from Chennai. Sheer determination has made it possible for a woman from an underprivileged background and from a remote and backward district to make it to journalism. She had to fight tooth and nail to do the Mass Communication course in Tirunelveli University. Her family, who wanted her to become a teacher, cut her off. She moved to Chennai when she got the job in the magazine. Only after her byline began to appear in the prestigious *Ananda Vikatan* did her family re-establish links with her. Although the regional press and their establishments are tradition-bound and conservative she has set some trends. She travels alone on assignment, learnt photography to add to her skills and take pictures to illustrate her stories. It takes three to five years to get confirmed in a job but she was confirmed in two years and became the newspaper's first female reporter.

She is among the few Dalit journalists of India. Because of the family social and economic situation, she had no access to a newspaper in her childhood. She believes everyone has the power to change things around them. "Everything is in the mind," she says. Every woman should develop confidence in her talent, be multi-skilled and bold. "I can handle any problem, whether in the office or outside," says Jeyarani.

### **A T Jayanti: No concessions because I am a woman**

A T Jayanti, editor, *Deccan Chronicle*, the largest circulated English daily of Andhra Pradesh, is the only woman editor of a mainstream English daily. At the top for nine years,

she has changed the personality and image of DC from a paper revelling in brash, spicy and sensational reporting to a paper that is taken seriously and whose credibility has improved tremendously.

Jayanti began her career as a film journalist She got her break into mainstream journalism with the Illustrated Weekly of India, then moved to the Sunday Observer and to the Asian Age, Mumbai as Bureau Chief.

Deccan Chronicle employs a large number of women journalists. Jayanti believes no woman journalist need get any concession because of her gender. "Because I am a woman...." is an excuse that will not override performance on the job. Jayanti believes the biggest burden on a woman journalist is her domestic responsibilities. "Home is always a first priority for a woman and so it naturally affects her work," says Jayanti. Women should dream for themselves and not try and live those of others for her, whether it is parents, spouse or society.

She believes she got her biggest break because she's single, she can work all hours and can go to any place that offers an opportunity. She has no constraints of personal life and this has been her biggest advantage, she says. Women today have better opportunities and better environment than ever before. "We have to use them.

#### **K H Savitri: gender bender**

K.H. Savitri, editor of Karmaveera, a Kannada periodical from the Samyukta Karnataka group is one of the three women journalists in Kannada journalism to have worked to the top from the bottom rung. She has been in the profession for 20 years.

She says there should be no gender issue in media. It can stop women from getting their due. "If you are capable, the opportunities will come," she says. Otherwise the women could create opportunities for themselves, take up challenges and prove themselves. "The only thing is women have to exert their 100 per cent to go anywhere in the profession...whereas men have to give only 10 per cent of their effort. Yet it can be done," she says. Karmaveera is a very orthodox establishment and yet gave her the opportunity unlike Prajavani, the local Kannada giant of an institution, which has a reputation for being progressive. She pointed out that Prajavani has not had a woman editor or even a chief reporter in its 55 years of history. Regional press will take at least 20 more years to reach the level of English media in recruiting women despite the visibility of women journalists through TV. Even if one is at the top position, recruitment is a management policy and nothing much can be done to change it. In other words, change should come from the management. The long and irregular hours of work involved in the profession force women to opt out as they have domestic compulsions, being a wife and mother. Also compared to other professions, salaries here are a pittance the situation being worse in the regional press. English language journalists get better wages, have better conditions of work, more prestige and more opportunities. Savitri attributes her sticking to the profession to a "good" mother-in-law who took care of her home and children.

Although she faced difficult times, she never said no to an assignment. My profession comes first. Every thing else comes later." As a reporter she covered every thing from "crime to prime minister".

Her advice to upcoming women journalists: don't stop learning, cultivate the right attitude, learn to network, be quick in decision taking and practice patience.

**Anuradha Sharma Pujari: A Writer-journalist**

She is the first and only woman editor in Assam. She runs the popular Assamese daily *Sadin*, and is considered one of the few women who have made it in the male dominated world of print journalism. A post graduate in literature and already a recognized writer in Assamese, she started her career as a sub editor in one of the dailies of the G L Publications which publishes two English dailies, an Assamese and Hindi daily along with some weeklies.

Even with her background in writing, she was started on a take home salary of Rs.3000 per month, which she describes as very low for a senior sub editor. The job had no status as the newspaper house did not have a proper structure and people were shunted in and out at the whims of the proprietors. A lot of people were leaving the organisation as the jobs were not attractive for the talented journalists. "Journalism is not a paying profession," she laments.

People do not encourage women to join the newspaper industry. She said that the company she worked for, considered one of the bigger ones in the state, there are only three women. "This industry is not so open to women, not yet," she said. Many women are interested in journalism but if the husband is not a journalist, he would not understand the late hours, the rush and the need to be at many places in search of news." After a few months of seeing their daughters hectic work schedule, many families advice them to do some 'better' job like teaching or working as a receptionist. Pujari said that she was 'lucky' as she was married to an "understanding" husband when she got into the profession.

However, Pujari, a well-known novelist, is yet to make an impact as an editor through her writings in the male dominated newspaper-world of Assam. But as she said, it is still too early to gauge how powerful a newspaper edited by a woman can really be.

**(Rajashri Dasgupta with inputs from all)**

## **CHAPTER-15**

### **FREELANCING – NOT OUT OF CHOICE**

*By Pamela Bhagat*

The freelance woman journalist is not necessarily a professionally independent worker who chooses to stand alone in journalism. Instead, as the survey showed, many do not choose to freelance but are forced to take casual work or short term work due to various reasons – conflicting family and career demands; or a sabbatical for value addition; maybe for maternal responsibilities; sometimes due to volatility of media job market and also as a temporary alternative till a full-time job arises. Sometimes it never does.

Often it is the result of an unresponsive media organisation, which did not consider such needs as valid enough for taking a break, with or without pay. For those who give up full-time work it means giving up benefits, pension rights, seniority, job security and any hope of advancement. Moreover, such tradeoffs are only part of the problem because freelance work is viewed by most as work of the unemployed or, as in the case of women, more as a hobby than a serious profession.

Whatever the reasons, for a freelance journalist there is no 'typical day.' A good chunk of the day is spent in sending and receiving mail, chasing dues, doing on-line research and often interviewing or meeting sources, who are not even convinced about your credentials in the first place.

A freelance journalist might have a regular contract with a particular publication but when the circulation figures dip, the first saving will be on freelance budgets – this was quite apparent during the website boom when many mainstream journalists left to freelance for web-sites but were soon without jobs.

A freelancer's job is tough, very competitive and does not make for self-sufficiency. Financial burden includes phone bills, administrative costs, tax and insurance and also travel, health and holidays.

Further, with the corporate culture of the media today, space available for freelancers is shrinking while the contract system of employment has contributed to an increase in freelance journalists. Increasing numbers of those whose contracts are not extended are women because they continue to be viewed as people with special needs and unnecessary investments – maternity leave, security and transport for night shift, rest rooms etc. When

Rashme Sehgal's contract was ended abruptly by the Times of India, no reasons were offered. "You can do what you like but your contract will not be extended," said the HRD manager.

For most women journalists, despite being established and recognised names, freelancing does not translate into economic self-sufficiency. "You are offered only a pittance" said another senior journalist who had to supplement her income by writing for corporate house journals. In fact it is quite revealing that during the survey, many of the full-time journalists spoke of preferring freelance or even flexi-time work provided the opportunity and conditions for freelancers would improve in the Indian media.

With an ever-increasing number of journalists chasing fewer assignments, many are tempted to accept terms and conditions, which are too poor and inadequate to protect their professional interests. In doing so and in such a situation they not only get stuck in an unhappy deal but also jeopardise conditions for other freelancers. Self-employment, as it is, is characterised by lower levels of protection – both in terms of legal regulations and collective bargaining power. Because of this, one major problem that all freelance journalists spoke of was the inability to not only negotiate a good deal but also to get paid after having been published. As a journalist from Kolkata said, "A great disappointment is payments: some, including at least one frontline publication, pay so little, that it is only the love of the medium that keeps one going. Chasing cheques becomes a part-time job".

In such circumstances, where there is perpetual insecurity and exploitation of all kinds. Sarvesh, a freelance photojournalist in New Delhi says, "Go as a needy journalist and then see how people come across and what they offer." Her reference is to the demand for sexual favours by those in a position to commission work. "It was at Navbharat Times that I was propositioned. The moment I spurned such a request, they didn't need my work anymore. But that was not a rarity. I have had numerous such experiences, especially when they learn that I live and work alone."

The complete lack of ethics while dealing with freelance journalists emerged as a common concern "...unprofessional work ethics among regular journalists who do not respond in time or often; and sometimes do not respond at all to email and phone calls." Another journalist from West Bengal said, "Being freelance writers one puts in the best of efforts and all that you get to hear at the end of it is that you are a mere contributor, a freelancer who cannot step in to the office. Dignity of work is severely lacking."

The situation is further aggravated in the regional press, - "Local language dailies and regional editions of national dailies published in Orissa have a different rate of payment – much less than what is offered by the main paper. As a result, it is extremely difficult for a woman journalist to sustain on freelancing alone. In fact, freelance women journalists are seen as daughters or wives of well off parents."

While one could argue that you cannot have it all because freelancing does offer women journalists the opportunity to combine child-care, the house and work; or in a freelancer's words, "...there is great advantage in reserving the right to say, 'NO' to an assignment and also the freedom to write on new issues," but the fact remains that there is nothing weaker than the feeble strength of being just one person battling it out alone. Exchange of experience and mutual support is crucial, especially for women since the currency of this limited economy is clips and connections.

Most freelance women journalists feel that there is need for solidarity among freelancers and also for an organisation through which they could negotiate – "I think freelancers need to have a common voice, form a body that can address such problems," said one. A standard contract could be drafted, laying down terms and conditions for assignments and also a structure could be designed for regular meetings and joint activities between freelance and staff journalists. Other needs like press cards, cheaper training programmes and legal advice could also be worked out.

A proactive approach would not only reduce the vulnerability of freelance women journalists but also maximise their potential.

### **Sarvesh**

(New Delhi based photo journalist)

Sarvesh took to professional photography after she opted out of an abusive marriage. Alone, helpless and insecure, she sought shelter with *SAHELI*, while discovering her talent behind the lens through a friend who not only introduced her to the world of photography but also encouraged her.

She was 32 years old when she started her career as a professional press photographer. "I had to struggle for professional space since I had no backing from anywhere, no source, no approach. Money, time and 'junoon' (*obsession*) are what one needs initially and I had two of the three!" She started with freelance assignments, hoping to land a job soon. But it is 14 years now and she insists that she has never been able to find regular employment, despite lots of assignments, accolades and awards.

She is cynical about possibilities for freelance journalists in the prevalent environment – "I have no confidence in any system. In fact there is no system to protect the interests of freelance journalists. How does one prove one's abilities when non-professional criteria are used for judging your work?"

"I have dropped many assignments because sexual favours were demanded for printing my work. On one occasion my work was approved and printed yet I was not paid and further humiliated when I demanded my due. In another instance when the commissioning editor came to know that I lived alone, he would invariably insist on coming to my house to see my work.

"If I had complained about every guy who misbehaved, no one would have ever given me work. No group comes together to help in such cases whereas they should be condemned and confronted unconditionally."

Despite the vulnerability and insecurity that Sarvesh has experienced as a freelance photojournalist, she insists that she wouldn't exchange the profession for any other. "My USP is that I am able to go to places where men are denied access. Actually my singular successes have been my photo features about women. Adivasis, tribals, Muslim women in purdah – have all been my willing subjects and maybe because I am able to identify with them, it shows in my work.

"Many photo editors now realise my worth but it has taken a lifetime to get such recognition. Insecurity however, is an integral part of being a freelancer."

### **Profile of a Freelancer in the Tamil Press**

**A S Padmavathi** is a freelancer with a regular column. She also makes documentary films, teaches, researches, writes scripts, publishes a magazine and is also into theatre. She has worked 20 years as a freelance journalist, but her bread comes from making videos. She writes to remain visible in the media, maintain her contacts and uphold her commitment to her beliefs. She has written scores of articles in almost all major Tamil magazines.

She worked periodically with Ananda Vikatan till they refused to renew her contract saying she was critical of other writers. Having been a freelancer for several years now she says freelancers cannot survive as they are paid very little, if at all anything. One is lucky if get paid Rs 200 for an article on which one would have spent a couple of days. In Tamil Nadu, freelancers are surviving because of electronic media and the film industry, which generate opportunities for creative writing. It is impossible to survive only by freelancing for the media. "We write in newspapers and magazines only for name not money," she says.

Space for social issues in the print media has got so restricted that Padmavathi feels she is espousing a lost cause. "I have no energy now to negotiate for space...what can we say when our article (on a social issue) is dismissed in one page (in the magazine) while an interview with a film star is spread over four pages?" she says. Nowadays she prefers to do research/consultancy for NGOs where she is in greater demand. While there are many people writing for magazines there are not many consultants to NGOs. She finds fulfilment in encouraging younger journalists to write, suggesting ideas, using her contacts to help them get into print.

Even getting fellowships is tough for freelancers. They are unable to fulfil conditions laid down such as references and commitment to publish the stories at the end of the fellowship. Padmavathi points out the same set of individuals get various fellowships year after year. The criteria needs to be changed to make fellowships more accessible for freelancers.

## CHAPTER-16

### MATERNITY LEAVE & CHILD CARE

**Such hue & cry over just once in a lifetime issue**

*Surekha Sule*

The issue of women bearing children and spending next few years in rearing them is blown out of proportion. Most women in journalism know their job responsibilities and do not seek undue favours under the guise of children. Yet it is mostly the apprehension that they will be away and unavailable for odd hours of work that keeps them at the lower levels in their career. Maternity leave is a facility not alone for the mother but for the family, the society and the nation who is to benefit from the future human resource. But the entire burden and blame is placed on the woman. Seeking maternity leave is a policy decision with attitudes still remaining hard about women seeking leave to have a child.

Though most women journalists took the full benefit of maternity leave, many have sordid tales to tell. A senior woman journalist in Bihar still remembers, that the day she returned from maternity leave she was told that she had been demoted at work. Another journalist in Madhya Pradesh recalls her financial dues from the newspaper being settled when she left to have her first child. When she was due for her second child, the organisation 'broke' its tradition of no leave, to put her on leave without pay for three months, the period of her maternity leave.

In Mumbai, a woman journalist with an impeccable record of service, whose work had been amply appreciated through increments and promotions over ten years, was denied increment/promotion for the year she took maternity leave. Her so-called progressive editor justified the employer's action saying that she was away for six months (on maternity and breast-feeding leave) and was 'likely' to remain absent for another few months (to look after the infant during sickness etc). Her decade of excellent service for the newspaper was forgotten. Would a male journalist be denied an increment or promotion if he is absent from work for six months on health ground or if hospitalised after an accident? How often is one going to remain on maternity leave in a lifetime and that too in an era of single child parenting? These are the questions that women journalists are raising to point out that maternity leave is being unfairly held against a woman when it comes to appointments, promotions and giving them important beats.

A workaholic woman journalist from a reputed national English magazine had a depressing experience after she had a child. Before marriage, Lekha was the one on whom work could be thrust any time and she would do justice without a murmur. She got married and was away on maternity leave and the impression was she could not be 'relied' on as much as before childbearing. Her desire to do well in her career went against her although she put in her normal quota of work. She was almost hounded out of her job.

Jyoti Bhatnagar now in Financial Express, Ahmedabad had a similar experience in her previous employment in Delhi. Her maternity leave went against her and she suffered in her career. Half of the respondents have the facility of maternity benefits in their organisation, while 48 (12 per cent) do not have this facility and 71 (18 per cent) are not aware of it. More than half of the respondents said that they would avail of the provision for maternity benefits if they got an opportunity to do so in the future.

Fiftyfive per cent of respondents did not take maternity leave, as most of them do not have children, or their children were born before they started working. Six respondents said there was no provision for maternity leave in their organisations. Most of the respondents took paid maternity leave, while nine took unpaid leave and six took partially paid leave. Most of the respondents have not deferred marriage or pregnancy due to job insecurity. Twentyeight, however, had to do so.

Most of the respondents have not left their jobs despite childcare responsibilities, though 14 have done so. Most of the respondents were away from work for less than six months and rejoined the same organisation at the same salary.

### **Child Care: No dilemma like this**

Most of the women journalists appeared in a dilemma over balancing office work and home responsibilities especially with young children. Yet, the majority believed that having children does not affect their ability to put in adequate work. Many had taken the family's help in looking after the children. And there are quite a number of women journalists who have voluntarily dropped out of the profession to do justice to their responsibility as mothers. Women especially in metros with very bright journalistic careers are out of the profession and this does seem a national waste. In smaller cities, the family still helps and there are mothers/mother-in-laws or relatives to look after the child.

A young journalist in Nagpur had to rush home around the time her child came home from the school to give him lunch and leave him at the neighbour's to study and play till she or her husband came back in the evening. This put tremendous emotional and physical pressure on her but her colleagues were supportive, she says.

Another young mother in Lokmat Times in Nagpur leaves her child with her aging father-in-law. Since her husband has a touring job, she has to rush home by 9 – 9.30 pm because the child by then feels sleepy and wants the parents. She feels guilty if she gets

home late. So she hastens the pace of her work and completes her copy by 7.30-8 pm. But often the superior would not clear the copy or deliberately give her copies late or ask her to help others complete their work as she has finished her work. This, she feels, is just a ploy to stop her from going earlier than others, especially the male journalists who loiter in the office spending time in chatting and smoking. She feels this is unfair when her work record is good and she is not compromising on quality to run home earlier.

A little flexibility and cooperation from colleagues and bosses would have made life easier for her. There have been instances where young women journalists were deliberately held up even after their quota of work was over as their male colleagues felt it is unfair that women leave earlier. Women argue that they hasten the pace of work so as to go home in time where as men tend to take it easy by taking frequent breaks for a smoke or tea because they do not have the same compulsions for getting home at the earliest.

While some women journalists felt there should be child care facility at work but with distances in cities, it is not an a good solution especially in Mumbai where women cannot take their infant children in crowded trains. It is only with family support, crèche facilities and understanding from the employers, bosses and colleagues that women journalists can balance their responsibilities to home, work and childcare. However, women in senior positions warn that women should not use this as an excuse to shun work and run home earlier.

## **CHAPTER-17**

### **WORK CONDITIONS – AS BAD AS FOR MEN**

*Surekha Sule*

“If the men’s toilets stink, women’s toilets too stink,” sums up a respondent about the working conditions prevailing in small town newspapers. Except few mainstream media houses in metros, most of the print media offices do not provide proper working conditions in terms of office premises, furniture, equipments, canteen, toilets & rest facilities to their employees irrespective of gender. Some of the editorial offices are congested, dusty, badly ventilated with inadequate /improper seating arrangements. Women journalists share with their male colleagues whatever inadequate infrastructure is provided by their employers. By and large, there is no consideration for providing any basic facilities for women. Often you come across separate toilets for men, women and officers, but within officers’ there is no division of men and women which implies officers are expected to be only male.

At a local press in Solapur, Aparna received me at the entrance of the editorial office, a small space measuring not more than 200 sq ft. Some 15 members of the editorial team was crammed into this room. Since there was no place for me to even stand, we left immediately to settle in a nearby restaurant to talk. The editorial staff sits under a tin shed though there is a huge hall at the Lokmat office in Solapur.

The Mumbai office of a leading daily did not have as many computers and workstations as journalists. They had to literally grab a chair and if one gets up to take a phone call, the seat is gone. Some women journalists suffered from urinary problems as they were reluctant to get up to go to the toilets for fear of losing the computer. The place was so badly infested with cockroaches that if you start pressing keys on the keyboards, the chances are that tiny cockroaches will come up and creep on your fingers. Those on night shift had rodents for company. The staff suffered on and off from respiratory problems because of poor ventilation, the terrible state of the carpets and dust all over the place. The chairs are often badly designed leading to backaches.

The main problem has been transport after late night work. In Mumbai, the local trains ply till 1pm but women need male escorts to travel so late. Sometimes parents do not approve of male escorts so women have to get home earlier and this tells on their careers. Several respondents felt that the office should provide safe transport to facilitate women’s work.

Varsha from Lokmat, Nagpur narrates her experience of her late night drive back home. Some hooligans on two wheelers chased her. Finally she put her scooter across the road and her pursuers, also on a scooter, dashed against it and fell. She then picked up her scooter and rode off. But quick thinking and gutsy responses are rare. Fortunately such incidences are also not very common. In towns like Pune, Nagpur, Jaipur etc, women are quite used to riding two wheelers late night. Nevertheless, transport by the press is a basic facility and needs to be provided. Men are also equally at risk during late night travel.

The majority of respondents feel that women have the same working conditions as men. Very few respondents felt that working conditions for women are worse than the generally bad common facility. By and large, transport facility is inadequate and some women journalists felt that they can work late night shifts only if the transport is provided.

As for permanent part-time and flexible working hours, most of the respondents felt that the nature of work in media is such that a part-time work appointment would invariably result in near fulltime work. So why accept less pay and work full time.

The respondents feel that a few benefits such as insurance cover, childcare facilities, sick leave, study leave and special leave could be added to increase their efficiency as well as security. However, in Mumbai women journalists who have to travel long distance in crowded trains said it would be difficult to bring a child along and did not favour child care facility at their workplace. Some respondents even felt that proximity to the child may disturb their work. Women are getting senior positions but the process has been slow.

### **Promotion? But you are a woman...**

Rising up the ladder has been rather slow for women journalists. Promotions have not been as frequent as for male journalists. There have been cases where women have been promoted only once or twice during a service of over 20 years. About a third of the respondents had never been promoted, 90 (22 per cent) have been promoted once and 50 (12 per cent) twice. Just ten respondents had been promoted more than six times. Most of the respondents say there is equal opportunity for promotion, while 83 (20 per cent) say there is no equal opportunity, and 78 (19 per cent) are not sure. At the junior level, the respondents felt that there is an equal opportunity to promotions where as at the senior level, many women journalists felt they were not given the opportunity because they, as women, are considered less competent than men by their bosses/employers. There have been cases where senior women journalists functioned as editor/news editors without getting those designations.

A classic case of not granting editorship to the most senior and most deserving candidate is that of Bhagyashree in Nashik. She is functioning virtually as an editor and has over 22 years of service but her designation is still senior sub editor. She is a very well known and respected journalist but her own organisation does not consider her worthy of the recognition as editor or deputy editor or assistant editor just because she is a woman. Even male colleagues

find it difficult to take instructions from or deal with a senior woman, she feels. For example, a peon would bring a paper to the desk and though she was senior, he would give it in the hands of a male subordinate clearly the reflection of a male dominated society.

At the time of selection for the editor's post, a Marathi magazine in Mumbai overlooked years of seniority and professional achievement of a woman journalist and appointed a much junior male member. Politics is conventionally considered as most requisite on the ladder to the top of the profession. The woman had two decades experience in covering politics and was known for her political analysis and 'inside' stories but was not considered for the post. To prove her competence, she even offered to function as editor without designation for six months.

Though there are cases of discrimination in promotion, there are many women journalists who have scaled up to higher positions but they are largely in the English press. In the regional press and even to some extent in the English press, women themselves limit their field and remain satisfied with just doing 'good stories' and sticking to their areas of specialisation.

However, the main reason for discrimination is felt to be sex, followed by race or ethnicity, age, religion and disability. Favouritism and 'relationships' are also other reasons for discrimination. Some senior women journalists felt that their age was held against them since young journalists are available for much less pay.

Very few respondents accepted the argument that women cannot work at odd hours and hence have to accept the reality of getting discriminated. Many challenged this notion saying that even if she cannot stay till midnight, she compensates by putting in twice or thrice the average work with commendable results. Most respondents feel that women's inability to stay till late at night has been just an excuse to keep them away from promotions even when they have proved their mettle by working during the day. For instance, a woman journalist in Aurangabad introduced new sections and handled them so well that the circulation increased owing to higher readership for these sections, a fact openly acknowledged by the senior management in the staff meeting. Yet when it came to promotion, she was not considered because she may not be able to do night duty.

Most of the respondents felt that having a child does not affect their ability to work, yet it does affect the promotion as the decision makers feel that women with children will not be able to put in as much work as men. 118 (30 per cent) respondents were sure that having children does affect promotions, 138 (35 per cent) said it did not, while 108 (26 per cent) were not sure. Most of the respondents have not left a job due to promotion discrimination, though 34 have done so.

### **Unions – Collective bargaining is dead**

The fact that only 25 percent of the respondents are members of any Union reflects that collective strength of journalists has diminished considerably. While fresh recruitments in

English press are on contract basis, those in the language press, even if on the wage board, feel too vulnerable to join Unions. Most respondents are not members of any union. Twenty respondents are office bearers, while 22 are committee members. Most of the respondents have not contacted a union for assistance, though 21 have done so. The response ranged from very poor to good. The specific response varied from helpful advice and support to failure to take up professional issues and no awareness of gender issues. Most of the respondents feel that a union is a source of information and advice, collective action, protection and promotion of working conditions and professional representation. Respondents felt that the drawback of union membership is that non-members are given unfair benefits. They feel that unions should take up professional issues such as equal employment policies, flexible working conditions, contracts, recruitment, childcare etc.

Women journalists in Nagpur came together as a formal group last year and held a workshop under the aegis of the Nagpur Press Club. While the office bearers of the Press Club supported the activity, some male members opposed the meeting as well as sending their recommendations to the proprietors and editors. Sarita of Hindustan Times in Nagpur worked very hard to list all the women journalists in Nagpur, contact them and held the event. But ultimately this activity was almost abandoned as all, including women, backed out under pressure from a small bunch of vociferous men.

On the other hand, a women journalists' group in Jaipur has found a foothold in the Jaipur Press Club. In Pune, Sudha Menon informs about an informal group of few women journalists who meet once in while to discuss professional issues and support each other professionally. In Mumbai as well as other metros – Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai, Bangalore etc, the Network of Women in Media (NWM) brings together women journalists in informal ways. Basically these are e-groups and communicate and exchange professionally helpful issues as also organise events on current topics.

However, formal union activity is almost over. There is not enough opposition to contract recruitment. Like in any other sector, job insecurity has come to stay in journalism too and women are the first in the line of fire.

## **CHAPTER-18**

### **STEPPING IN – ACCESSING JOBS & APPOINTMENTS**

#### **Still a male bastion in language press**

*Surekha Sule*

Journalism is no longer a male bastion in the English press though it still remains so in the language press. In fact women journalists are increasingly being recruited by English newspapers and in certain establishments they outnumber their male colleagues. At the Pune office of an English newspaper, women journalists jokingly ask their woman editor to recruit 'a guy for a change'. However, it is not so in language media. Here women are generally discouraged from taking up this profession by raising the boogey of odd hours and late night work. In the language press, especially in smaller cities, preference is given to male candidate over a better female candidate.

Recalls Jayshree, now a freelance journalist in Mumbai that when she and a male candidate were considered for recruitment in Loksatta some years ago, the then editor told her that though she scores over the guy, the job goes to him because he is a 'male'. The renowned editor of Maharashtra Times had also similarly discouraged her saying this (journalism) was not the field for women. But she proved to be one of the best political and crime reporter of Mumbai. She penetrated the dangerous bastions of the underworld in Mumbai and covered the Bombay blasts from the close range, thus disproving the notions of male domination in journalism. However, she adds that now the situation in metros is different, though the same kind of discrimination continues in smaller cities in the regional press.

The story of fresh women-journalist recruits in Jaipur reveals more than just discrimination. Even after a good start in Rajasthan Patrika, two of the three entrants dropped out because of family pressure that it is not safe for their daughters to be away 'at odd hours' and 'meet all sorts of people'. The sole survivor among these three women survived because she married a fellow colleague. Another set of new women recruits in Dainik Bhaskar feel that they are not wanted. The male colleagues are not used to having women around and hence these 'girls' are bunched together into a room. They have to put up with lecherous stares and discomfort. However, the editor is in favour of giving these young women the opportunity to work. Yet the beats given are 'feminine' e.g. Lehariya (A kind of tie & dye saree) Day at a Socialite gathering etc. In a newspaper office in Udaipur, the then editor would ask the new woman recruit to join him for dinner and many dropped out of the profession afraid of the consequences.

The woman-editor of a magazine printed by a leading publishing house in Ahmedabad told with conviction that the group did not recruit women journalists in the main paper as 'we are very strict about male behaviour'. So for the fear of male misbehaviour with women colleagues, non-recruitment of women is considered the best policy.

Women journalists in the regional press in cities are under pressure from the families as well as from their colleagues and proprietors to first access and then sustain the jobs. The drop out rate is very high and often women entrants to this field come for a "time pass" till they get married. Bhagyashree Pandit from Tarun Bharat (Marathi daily) from Satara says that each year almost 75-80 girls graduate from the journalism course. Bhagyashree wonders where they all go as she is still the only woman journalist in whole of Satara a big city of Maharashtra. The course in journalism is just some post-graduate educational activity for these girls till they get married.

### **Survey Outcome**

The survey revealed that the posts or vacancies are not always advertised. Only about a fourth out of a total 410 respondents, said that vacancies were widely advertised. About half or 188 said they were advertised sometimes, just 10 per cent said that vacancies are never advertised, and the rest did not know. While 57 or 14 per cent respondents said that they were never given written job descriptions, 110 or 28 per cent said sometimes they were, 123 or 30 per cent said always they were given written job description and the remaining respondents did not know. The majority of the respondents felt that it is necessary to have a written job description, though a few felt that it was not necessary.

All the respondents from the Hindi media felt that women are under represented, while those from the English media felt they are well represented. 129 or 32 per cent of respondents felt that there was an equal employment policy, 74 or 18 per cent said that there was no equal employment policy, 125 or 30 per cent were not aware of it. That 68 per cent respondents did not confirm equal opportunity indicates stark unawareness of the issue itself.

172 or 43 per cent respondents felt that women were not being targeted to fill vacancies, 63 (15 per cent) felt they were, while rest did not know. 74 (18 per cent) respondents said they did not know if selection panels included women, 47 (11 per cent) said they always did, 129 (32 per cent) said they never included women, with rest saying that they sometimes did.

The respondents feel that women should be integrated into senior positions, and there should be regular review and assessment of their work and a proper appeal procedure should be introduced so that there is redressal of grievances.

Most of the respondents had a preference for a particular area of work when they entered the profession. 86 (21 per cent) did not have a preference and 71 (18) had no preference. The preference that the respondents had when they began their careers has not

changed for the majority. A fifth of the respondents did not have any formal training in journalism.

However when it comes to hiring, women are not the first choice but when it comes to firing, women are the first targets.

### **Shattering hopes and aspirations**

For Namrata (name changed), 17 years in journalism have taken her through various different paths- some good, some bad. For the 21-year-old graduate from Kerala, a search for a career in the 80s in Bhopal led her to the then Madhya Pradesh Chronicle. After an initial interview she was inducted into the organisation as a proof-reader. After years of working as a proof-reader she was promoted as sub editor. This meant moving into the newsroom without any monetary benefit. As was expected, she faced several challenges to fit in with 'journalists' and it took her a while to settle in. However, she continued working and her job profile involved working on 'printer pages' - editing agency copy and producing three pages- two nation pages and one world page.

The status quo with regard to her salary remained and work continued. Only after a long wait was she given an increase, but the management gave her additional charge of the magazines. Namrata says, although she was not aware of it at that time, these were actually indirect threats to her. She realised that the burden of work was increasing as the management was continuously downsizing editorial staff. Little did she know what was in store. After getting rid of many of her colleagues one day Namrata says her editor asked her to "produce a better page". In all honesty, she requested him to suggest how the page could be improved given the facilities available. She was only suggesting that with limited copy, limited pictures etc, she had no scope to improvise. The editor however, was not happy with her reply and asked her to change the page or leave – she opted for the latter.

Although subsequently the newspaper's management had a change of heart and asked her to return to work, she decided to accept a monetary settlement and leave for Kerala, where she is working in a medical college as an administrator.

Covering a region that is notorious for its male biases, Namrata's story covers almost every aspect of exploitation in the regional press. Recruited to do a task that is not defined on paper- without an appointment letter, paid on casual basis, not made permanent for 17 years, the list is unending. With payments being abysmally low, most regional newspapers tend to opt for a 'floating' group of young girls – particularly students — to tide over the pressure of the features section and news production. But women will not be taken in the news section to report hard political stories! Another significant but never mentioned issue is the recruitment of the spouse/children of well connected IAS/IPS officers with no background in journalism.

## **CHAPTER-19**

### **LONELY, LONG STRUGGLE**

*In Her Own Words by Ira Jha*

I was a chief sub editor with Navbharat Times, one of the leading Hindi newspapers from the Capital and the only woman to head the news desk in the 50 year long history of this premier newspaper. This naturally caused considerable envy among my male colleagues including the editor and the news editor. I was promoted to this post in January 1994 although I was heading the shifts since 1989. My colleagues, especially the news editor, tried to humiliate me by deliberately denying me the opportunity to produce the newspaper on crucial days when the budget was being presented or the election results announced. Every time I asked for leave, even if it was just for a day, there would be rude remarks about my being a woman and needing leave.

Even on the day of my marriage I had to attend office because I was in charge of a shift. I started doing night shifts when my child was only two months, depriving him the right to be breast-fed. Despite this sincerity and commitment to the job I was harassed to prove that I was not fit for the post. But by sheer hard work and good behaviour with my subordinates I tried to prove them wrong.

On several occasions I tried to register my protest orally as well as in writing but the editor bluntly refused to acknowledge these protests. The situation worsened in 1999 when deliberately my shift was changed from evening to morning on the budget day. A junior colleague was asked to handle the shift I normally handled. The move humiliated me and sought to promote him. As soon as I protested about this unjust step, all hell broke loose. I was warned of dire consequences, including suspension, by the news editor and the editor, Mr Ramkripal Singh. I did not relent. I was allowed to come on duty but not allowed to sit on the chief sub's chair. In my presence a colleague was asked to handle the edition. That was only the beginning. The harassment and humiliation continued. On May 13, 2001, I was on night duty and reached the office a little late because of a traffic jam. I had literally to walk a distance of two, three kms because the buses were not moving. I walked into the editor's office to apologise and he shouted and passed rude remarks that led to my storming out shouting and protesting. Two days later I was suspended from the service of Bennett Coleman & Co. Ltd.

It was just the beginning of my incarceration. All my pleas were dismissed by the management, as well as the courts. I even filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court, sighting the Visakha case. Nobody cared for either the circumstantial evidence or my excellent and unblemished service record.

An inquiry was conducted by the Management's women's committee and the personnel department to prove I was at fault and also to expedite the termination of my services which was finally put to effect in March 2001, without giving me the termination letter till date.

The company formed a women's committee ignoring all norms set by the Supreme Court in the Vishakha vs. Rajasthan govt. case. The Committee denied the principle of natural justice because they did not care to talk to me.

Even in the departmental enquiry, the management's enquiry officer passed ugly, sexually coloured remarks and was not willing to register my protest despite my periodic boycott to protest the same. I was a candidate for departmental representative in the employees union elections but not allowed to participate in the counting. Despite that, when I got elected I was not allowed to attend a single meeting of the Union.

During the domestic enquiry, the management left no opportunity to harass me. I was called in 44 degrees temperature for daily attendance through dirty and dangerous back road at the labour gate. They did not even provide me a glass of water & I was not permitted to use the ladies toilet. I had to either go to the Express Building or the Pioneer office to use the loo. They always addressed me scornfully, "ye aurat."

They also did not provide me the subsistence allowance mandated by the labour laws. Once they wrote, 'chief sub editor suspended,' on the envelope sent to me to demoralize and demean me. Even my termination intimation was published in the newspaper for which I toiled so hard, but it was not delivered to me.

It seems the Courts did not bother to go through my special leave petition otherwise, I feel, the decision would have been different. Strangely every agency seemed to be powerless before the label of the Times of India.

Even in the labour courts, the conciliation officers kept on extending dates. The police wound up my FIR against the editor's indecent behaviour without taking my statement. When I went for a criminal prosecution to a lower court the attitude of the magistrate was no different. Either he would not turn up on the appointed date or the police counsel would ask for time on one pretext or the other. I ended up wasting money and time on the lawyers and conveyance. Demoralised, I stopped attending the court. But I am still fighting my case in the labour court.

My case is an eye opener for all those people and organisations keen to ensure an equal, just and dignified treatment at the work place for women. There is still a huge gap

between the law and its implementation when it comes to ensuring dignity and fair play for women in the profession.

But there is always scope for a new beginning I got an opportunity to prove myself in July 2003 when the Dainik Hindustan editor Mrinal Pande asked me to work for her newspaper from Raipur and report the forthcoming assembly elections. I am confident I have not belied her faith in me.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Gender sensitisation**

- Gender sensitisation both for men and women. This can be done through the Press Academy in Hyderabad in collaboration with the NCW and PII for other parts of the country.
- Introduction of gender writing in journalism courses with a three-fold objective- to view language, understand issues concerned and to help journalists' to learn to deal with gender issues. NCW could work with the University Grants Commission to deal with this issue
- Gender-sensitisation courses especially at under-graduate level
- There should be uniform conditions for leave, wage increase for men and women
- A difference can be made to media output by giving thought to gender differentiation and bringing equity to the workplace.

### **Training**

- Enthusiasm often watered down by unresponsive organisations that are not sensitive to gender specific requirements which are often viewed as liabilities
- A male journalist is often given guidance by an experienced senior male colleague on entering the profession. Women journalists have no such apprenticeship.
- Training and information sessions are a must to confidently operate in the environment and also to change mindsets
- Women journalists should be trained on how to negotiate contracts, this can be done by the NUJ/DUJ etc so that women journalists know what they are entitled to. There should be transparency in policy matters
- Periodic upgradation of skills, knowledge and technology
- Encourage people to take sabbaticals
- Encourage more lateral movement and recognise contribution to check stagnation
- Regional press should encourage women into hard reporting – politics, mainstream, production etc so that promotions are easier

- Regular training, re-orientation
- Efforts to combat frustration on the desk
- Zero tolerance should become the norm, pushed by organisations
- Performance based promotions based on periodic appraisal

### **Working conditions**

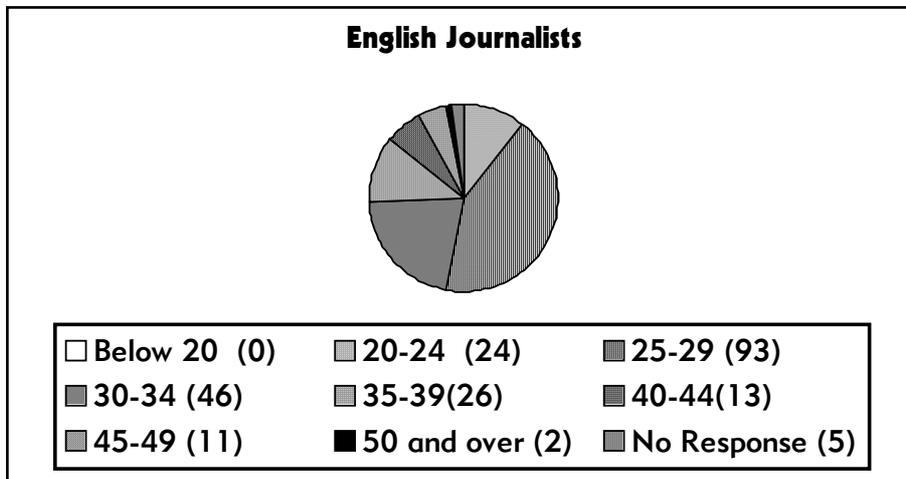
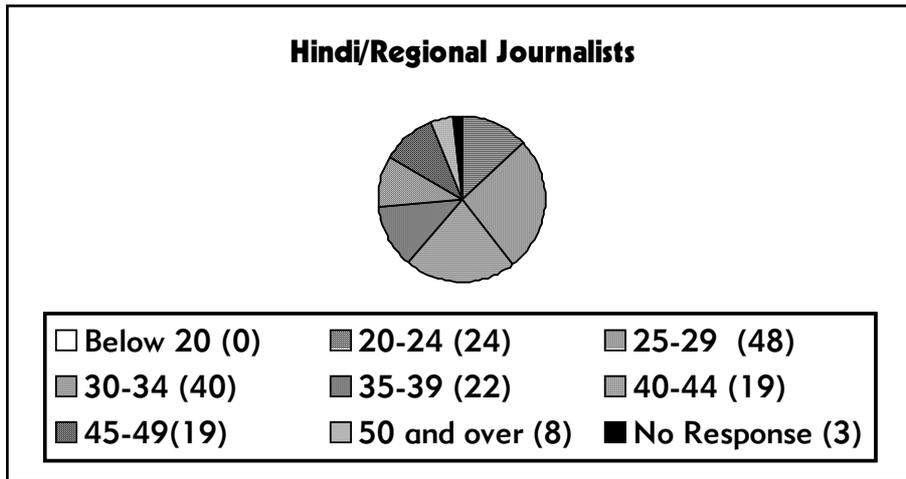
- Basic facilities should be provided in offices as per requirements of women employees, especially toilets and canteen
- Women should be appointed at the top level management, they might be able to help other women
- There should be some rules and regulations to maintain discipline in organisations
- Transfers should not be used to victimise women journalists
- Food facilities should be provided during overtime, or night shift because women are unable to go out and have dinner at hotel/dhabas in the night
- Packed dinner should be served on night shifts.

### **Sexual harassment**

- NCW should run campaigns on sexual harassment. NCW could have an interactive session with media managements on how to identify sexual harassment cases
- A complaint box could be introduced in view of the Supreme Court decision on the Vishaka case. While each organisation should have its own box, others could have a box at their respective press academies- where they exist.
- Since cells have not been set up in most newspaper organisations the Government should re-issue the circular
- Newspaper organisations should report to the NCW on the progress of setting up these cells
- NCW should ask all newspaper organisations to report about the formation and constitution of the cells and list out its members
- Ombudsperson to look into sexual harassment cases
- Could a cell be set up in the Press Council to hear specifically about issues related to women journalists- such as their transfers, promotions, night shifts, maternity leave, special needs and sexual harassment etc.

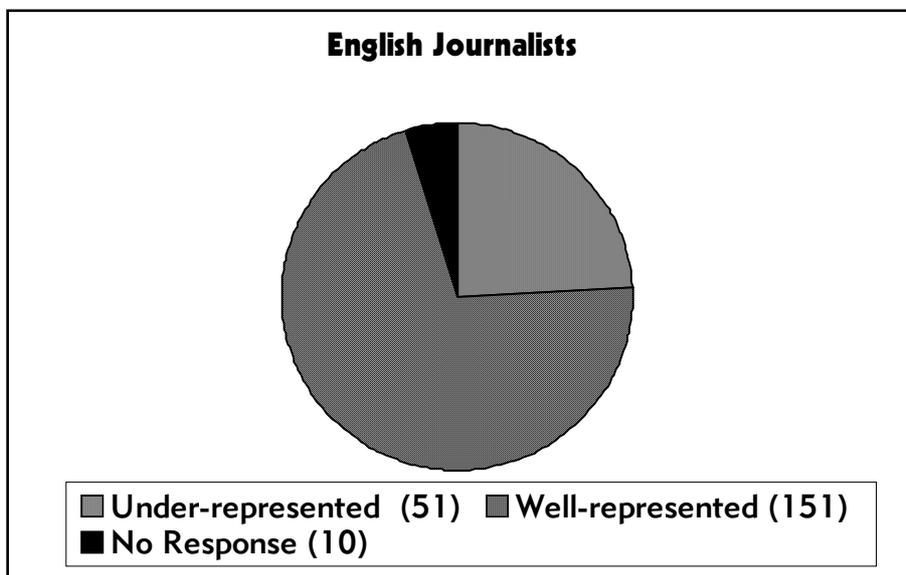
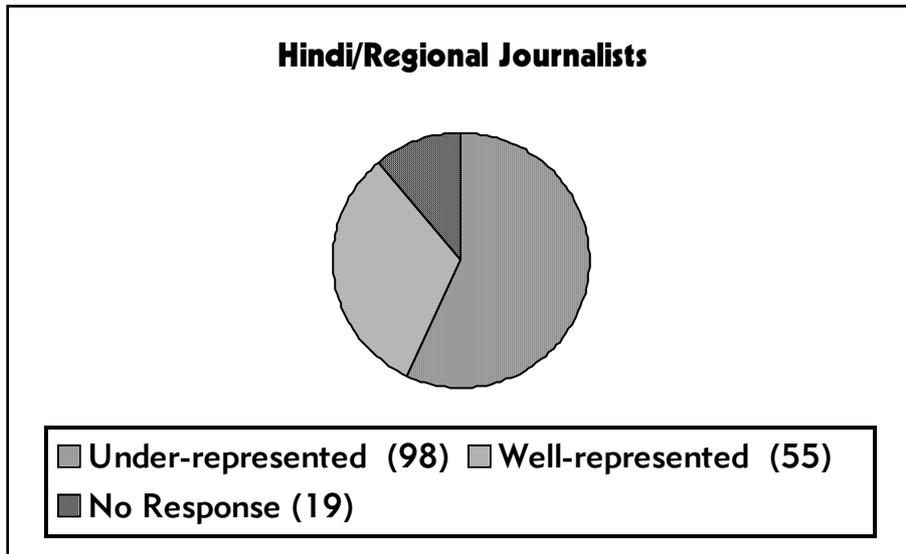
### General Information

A total of 184 respondents from the Regional media and 220 from the English media were surveyed. None of the respondents were below the age of 20, with only ten being above 50, and the rest of them below the age of 40.



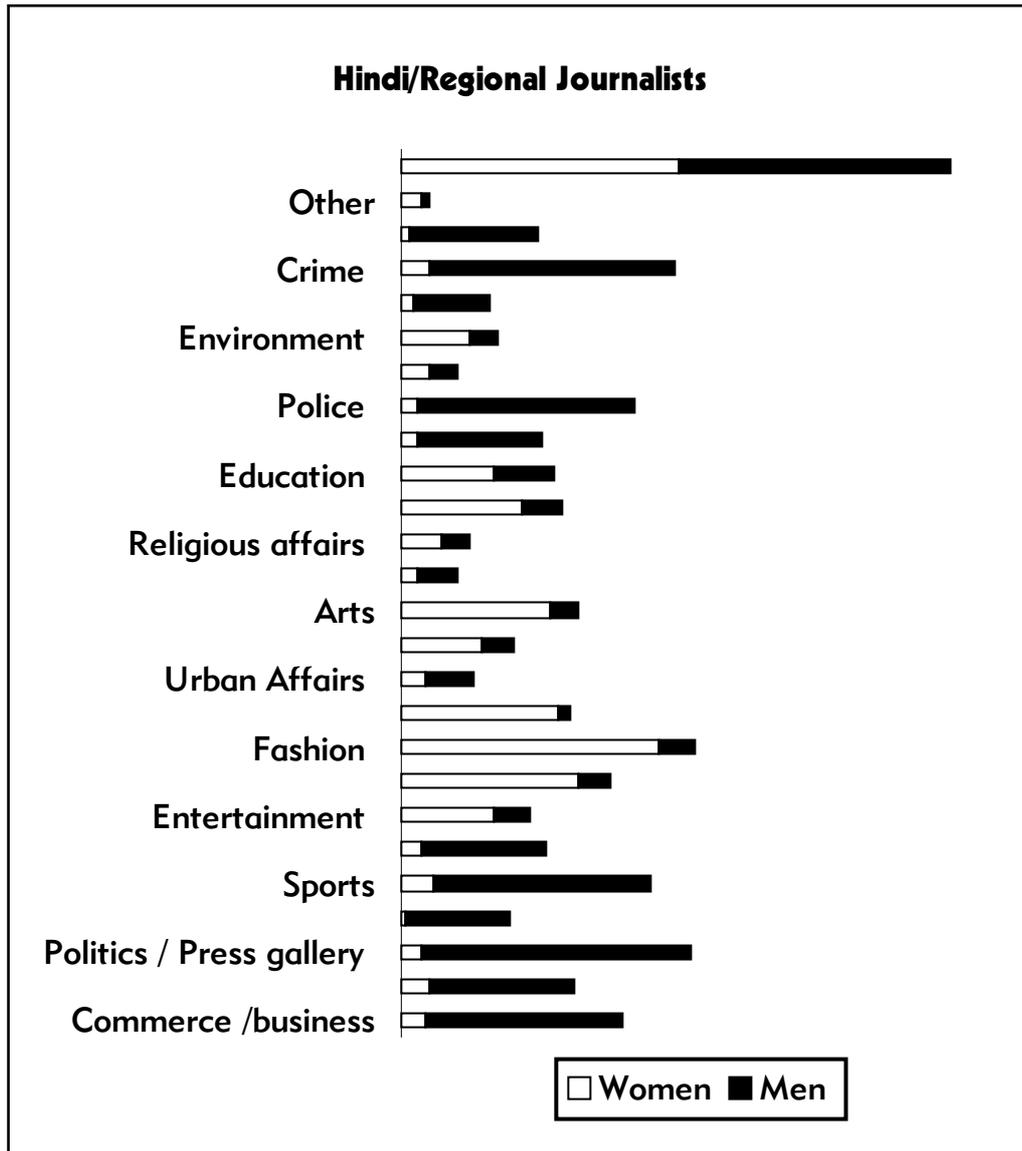
**Women's position**

All the respondents from the Hindi media felt that women are under represented, while those from the English media felt they are well represented.

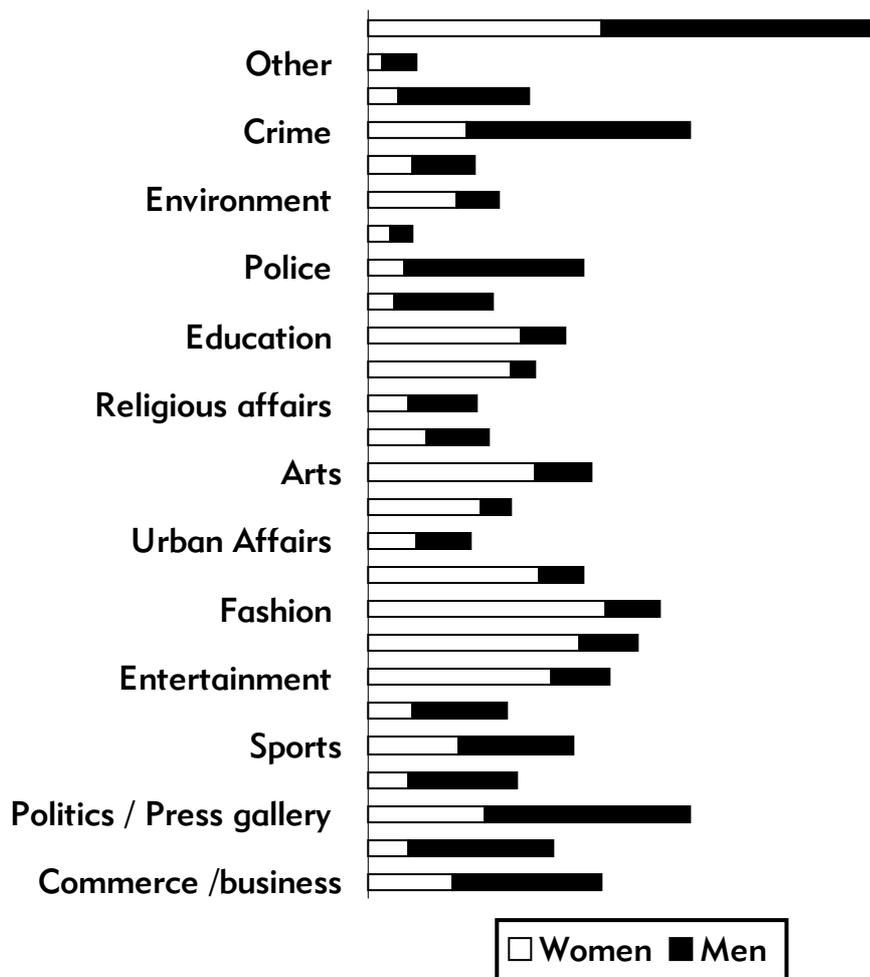


**Traditional areas**

Though no areas are supposed to be reserved on the basis of gender, Lifestyle, Arts, Gender, Fashion, Education are traditional areas women are pushed into, while Politics, Parliament Coverage, Crime, Sports, Foreign Affairs, Police, Commerce, Business are the traditional areas of work for men.

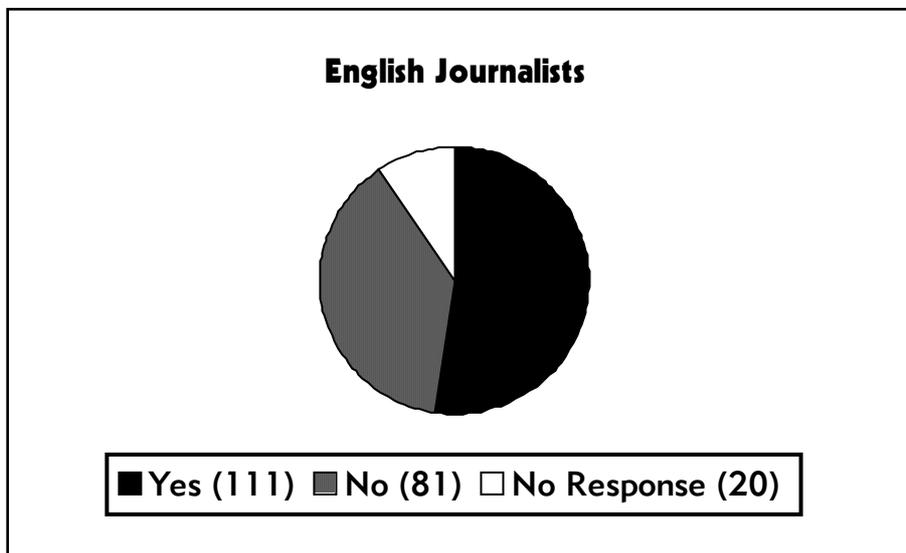
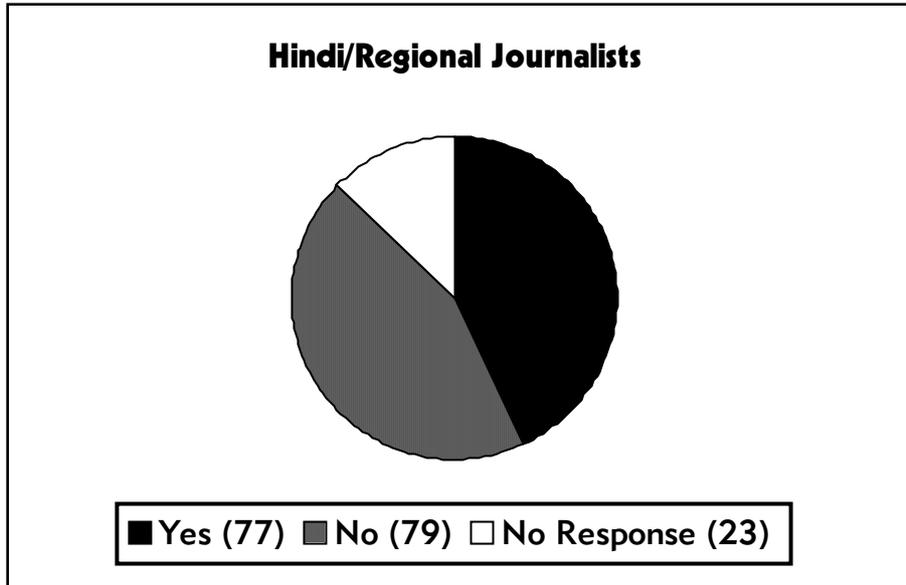


### English Journalists



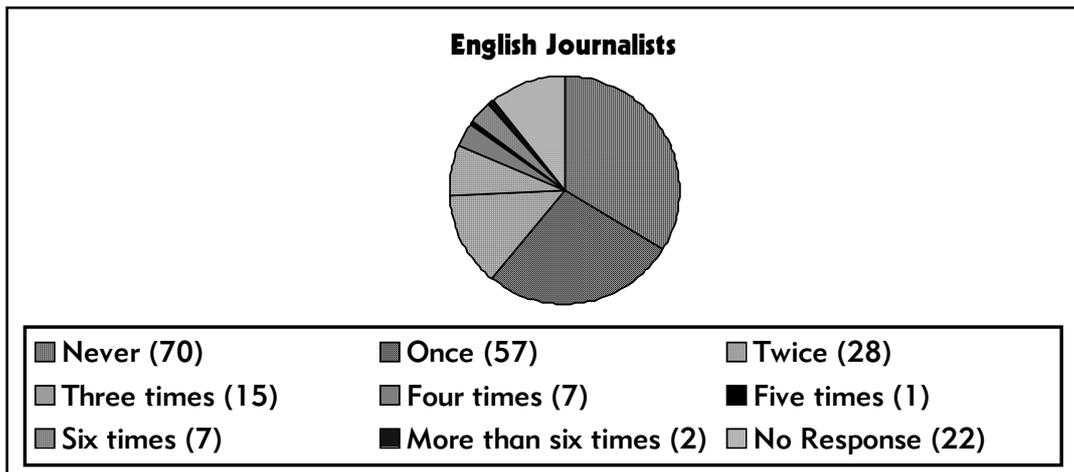
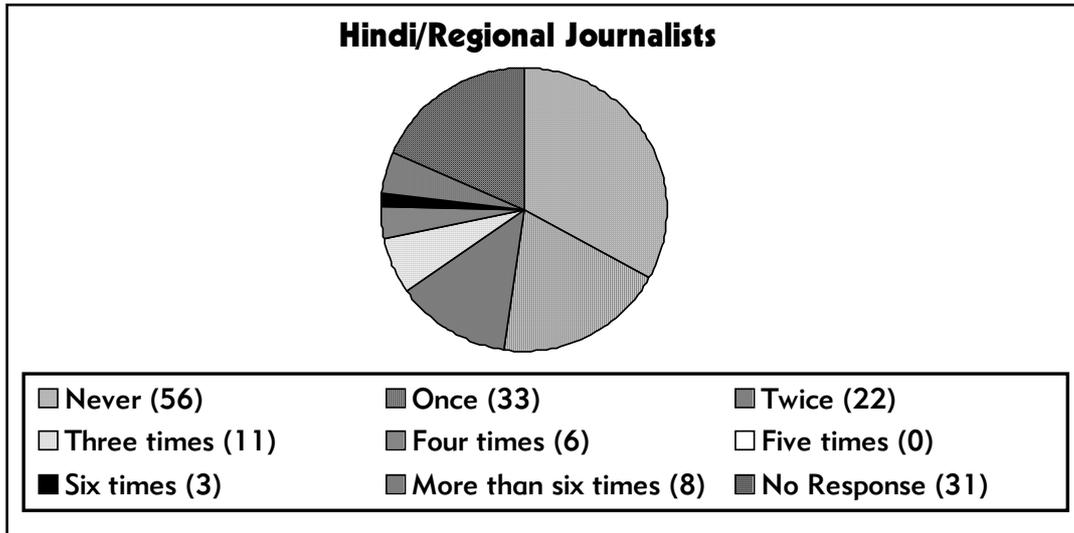
### Access to all Levels of Management

Most of the respondents feel that they have access to all levels of management, while 160 feel this is not so.



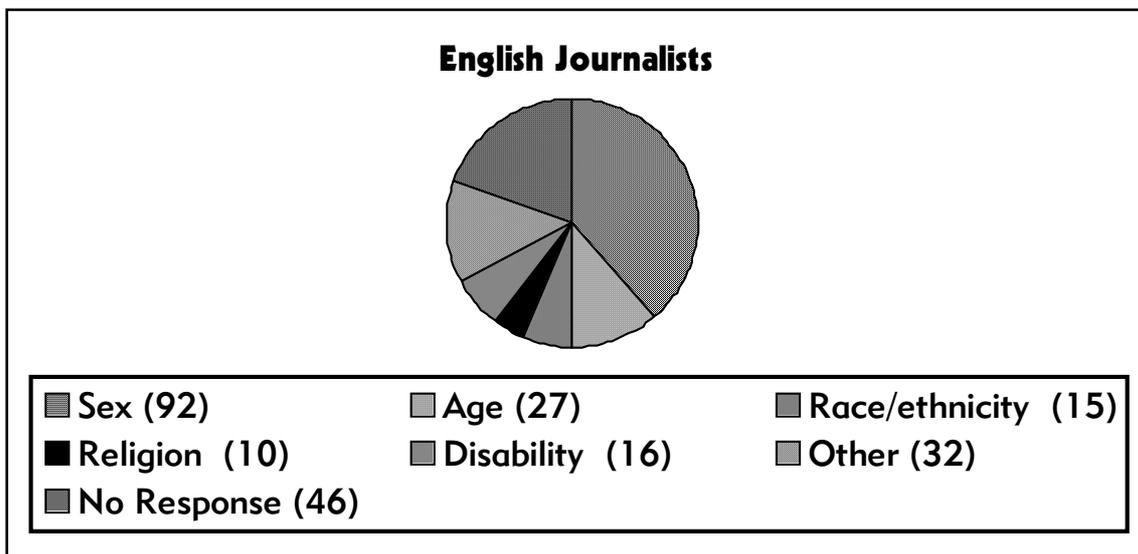
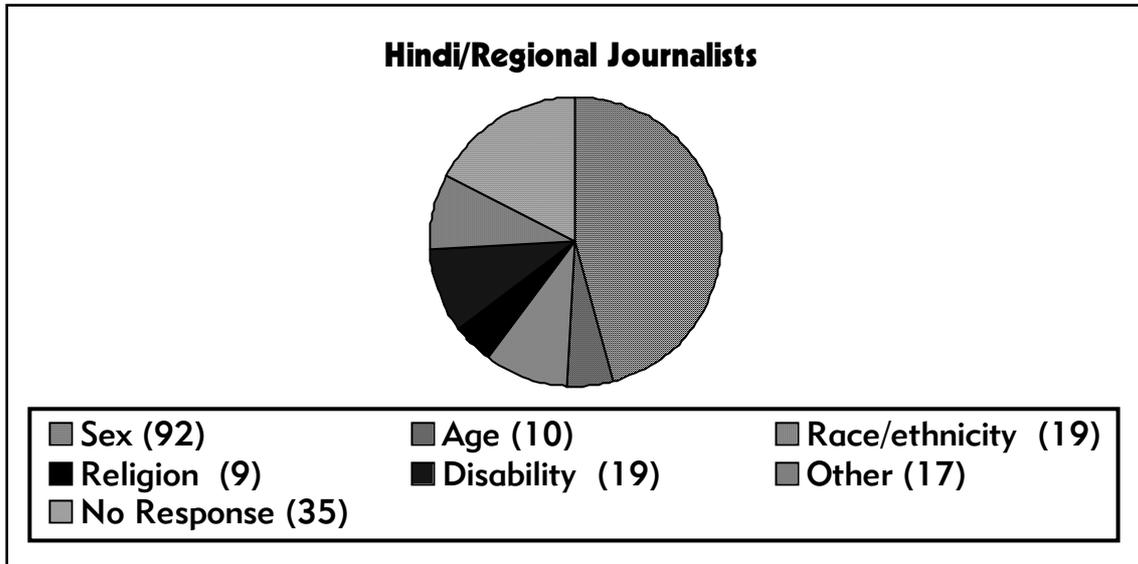
## Promotion

One hundred twenty six respondents have never been promoted, 90 have been promoted once and 50, twice. Ten respondents have been promoted more than six times.



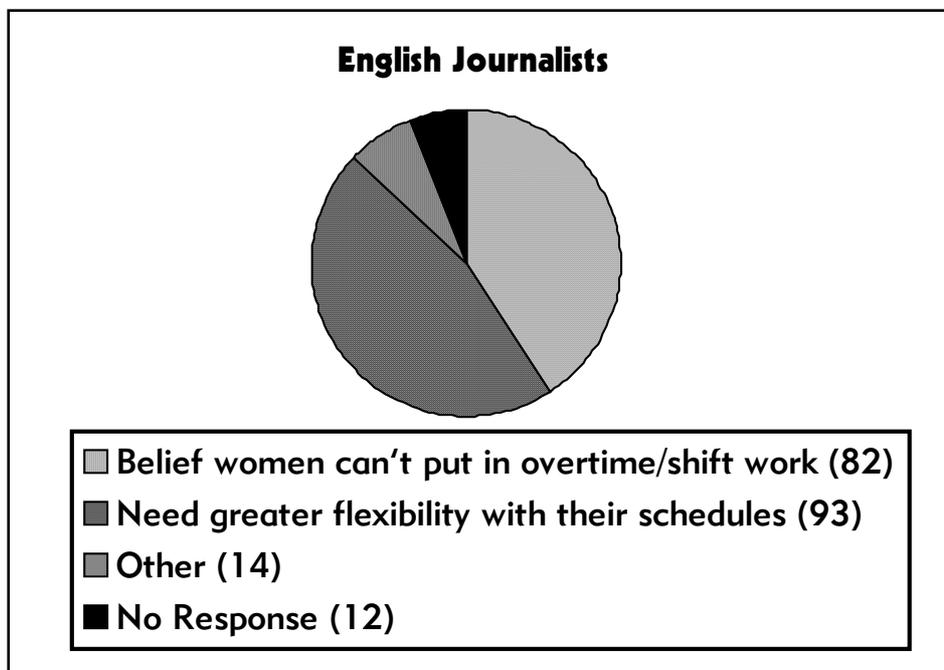
### Reason for Discrimination

The main reason for discrimination is felt to be sex, followed by race or ethnicity, age, religion and disability. Favouritism and relationships are also other causes of discrimination.



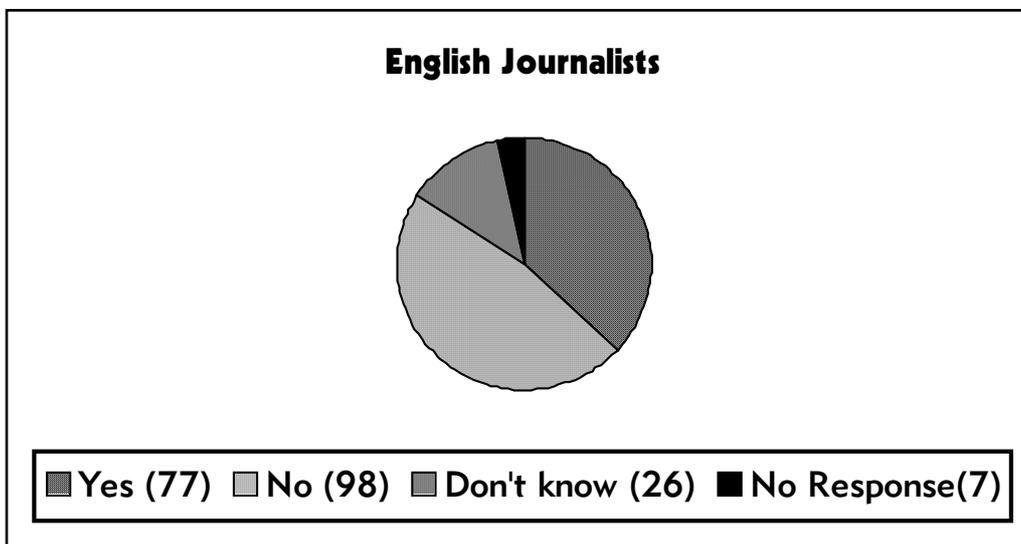
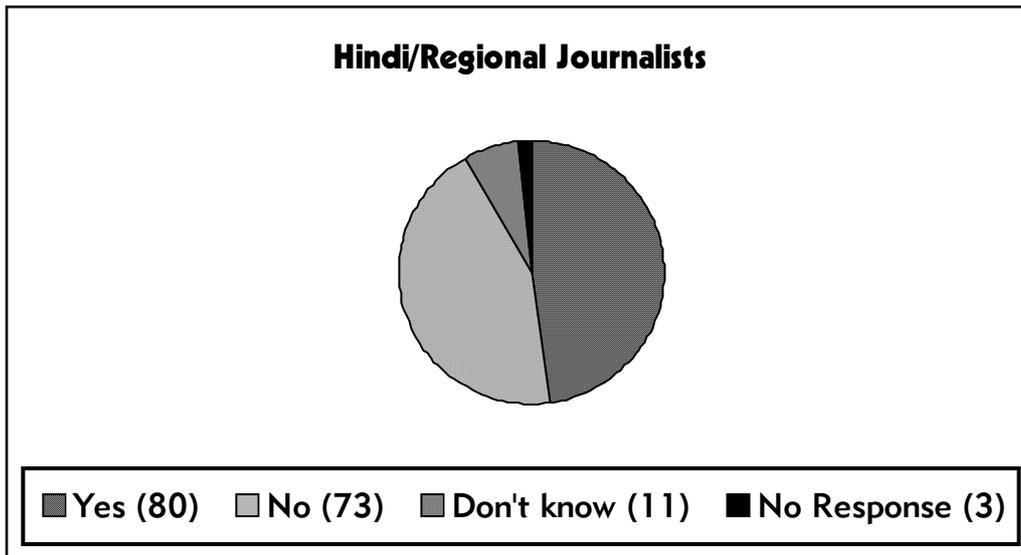
### Reasons Affecting Promotions

The respondents felt that there is a perception that having children affects the ability to put in overtime and devote adequate time for work.



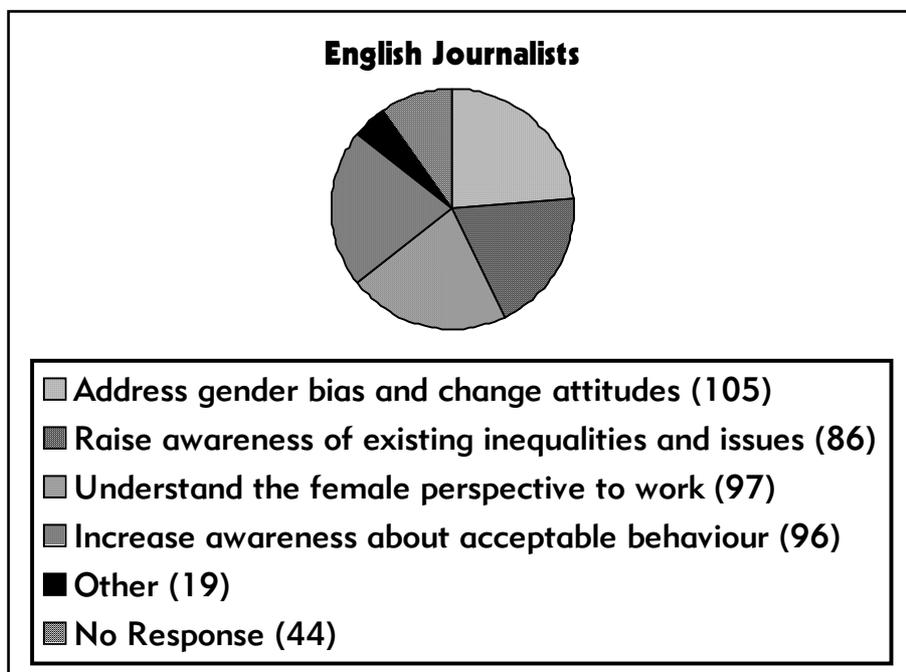
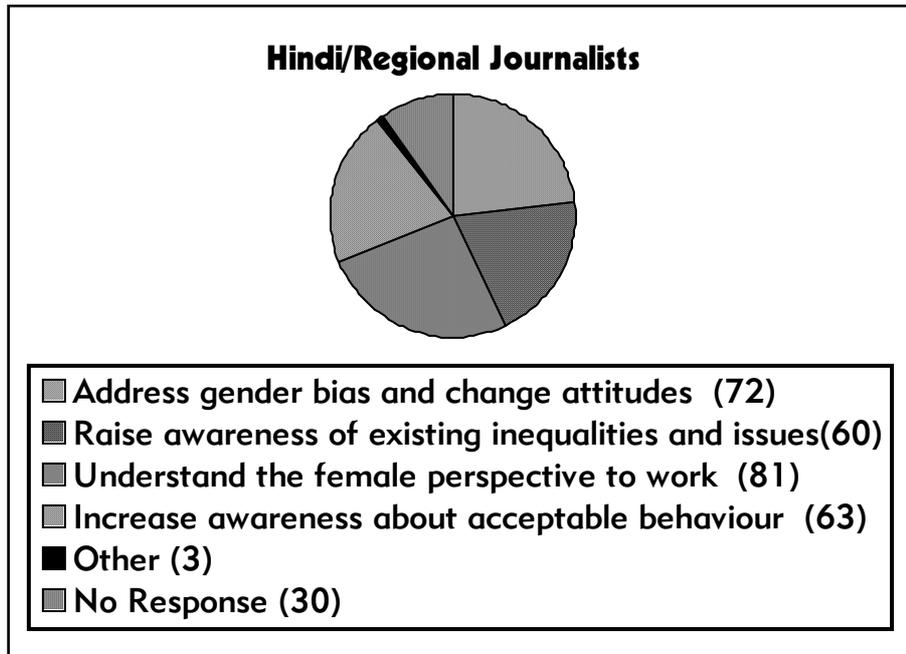
### Formal Training Programmes/Courses in Organisation

One hundred fifty seven respondents said that their organisation has formal training programmes, while 171 said their organisations did not and 37 did not know.



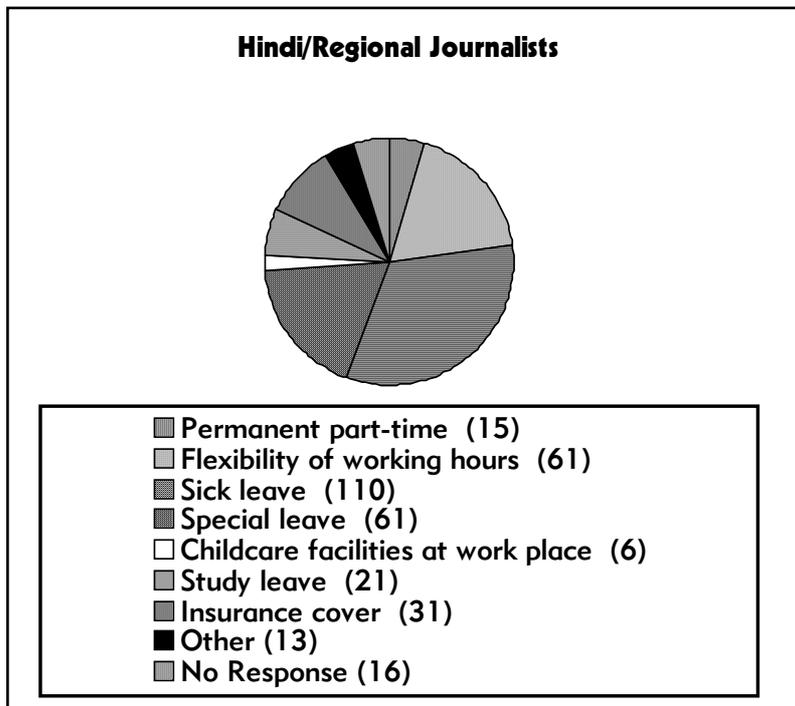
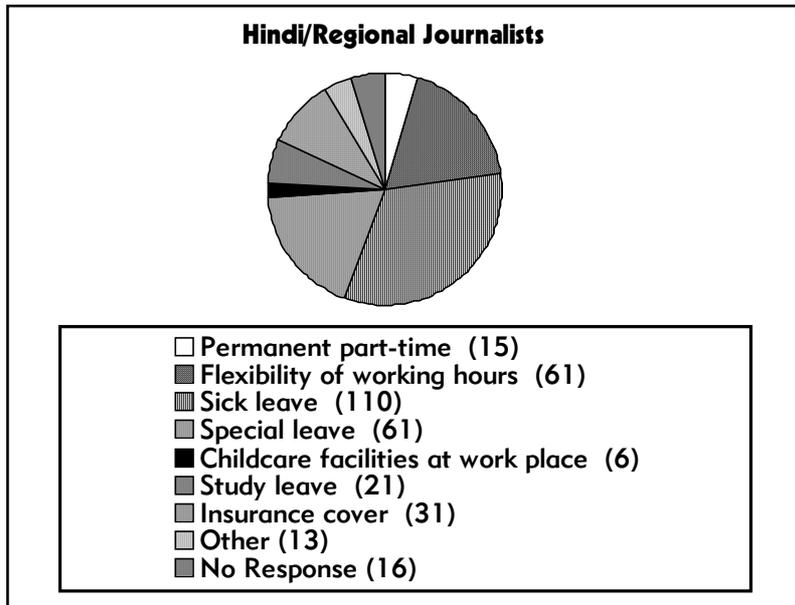
### Men Require Gender Training

Most felt that men require gender training to understand the female perspective to work, to address the gender bias, increase awareness about acceptable behaviour and change their attitudes.



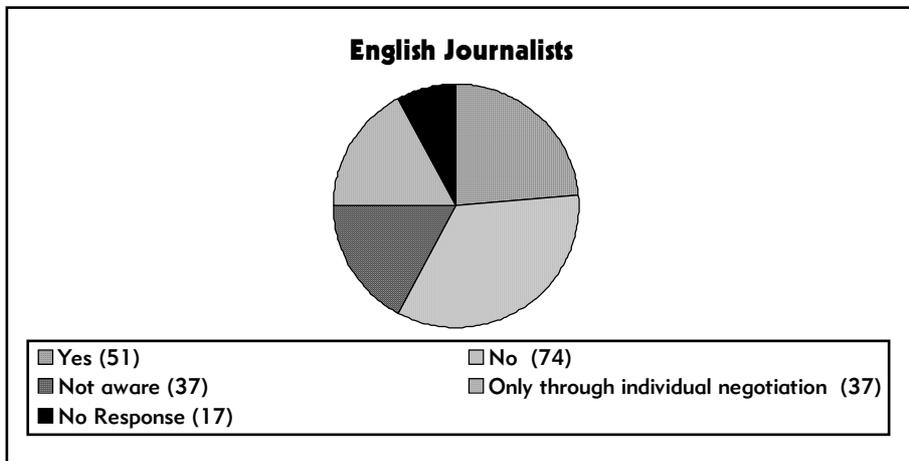
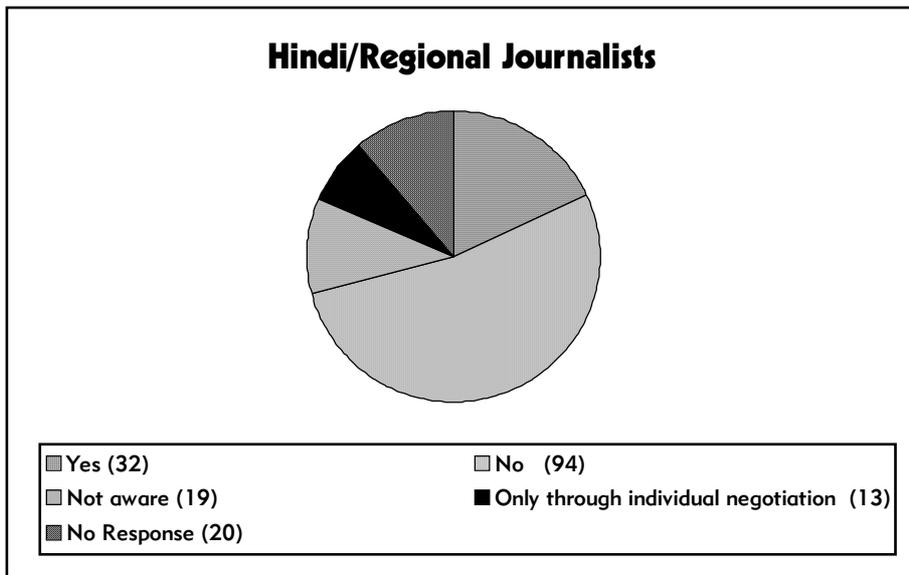
### Job benefits Allowed

Most of the respondents said that permanent part-time, flexibility of working hours, sick leave and special leave are allowed, among other facilities.



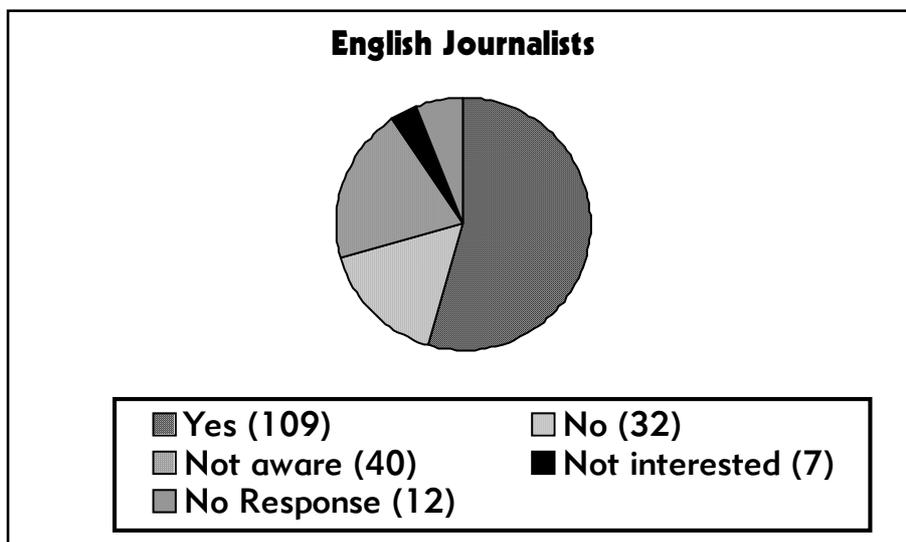
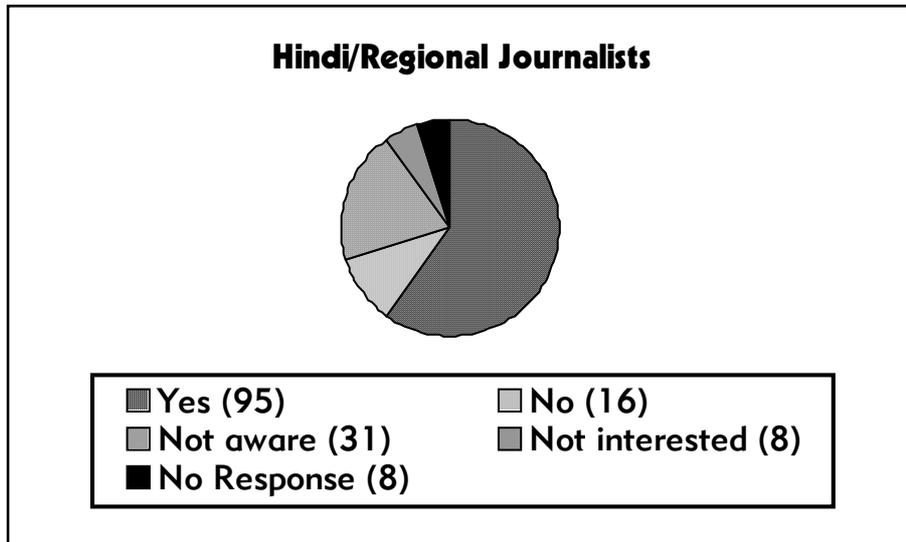
### Developments in the Interests of Women

Eighty three respondents feel there has been a change in the interest of women, while 164 feel there has been no change and 56 are not aware of any change.



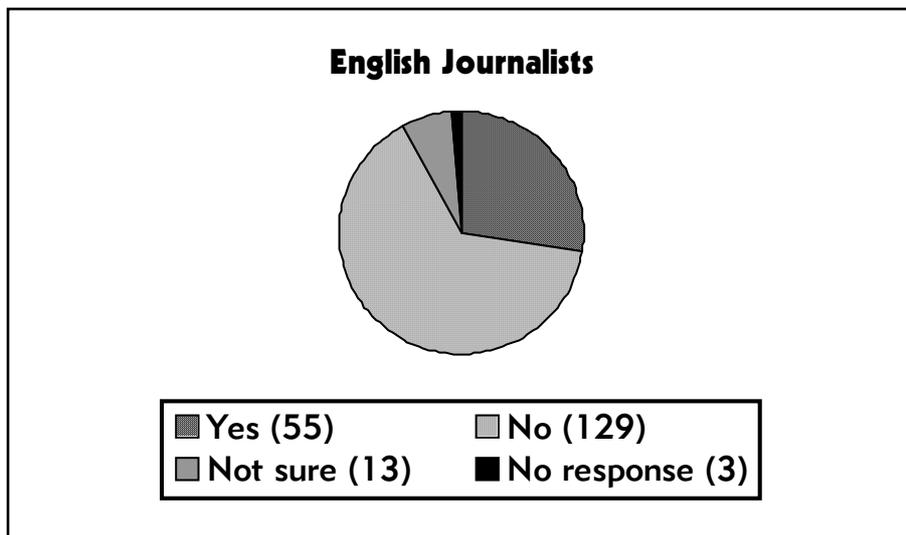
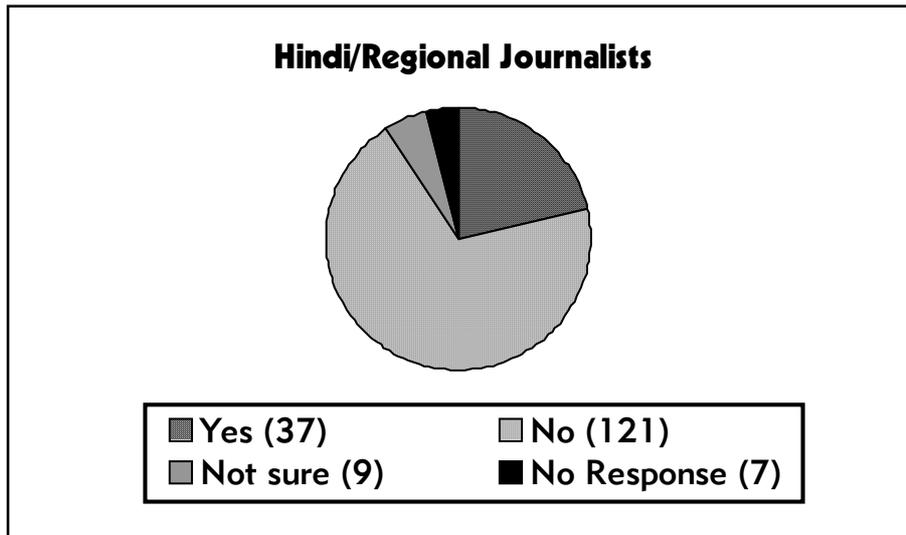
### Maternity Leave and Childcare provisions

Two hundred four respondents have the facility of maternity benefits while 48 do not have this facility and 71 are not aware of it



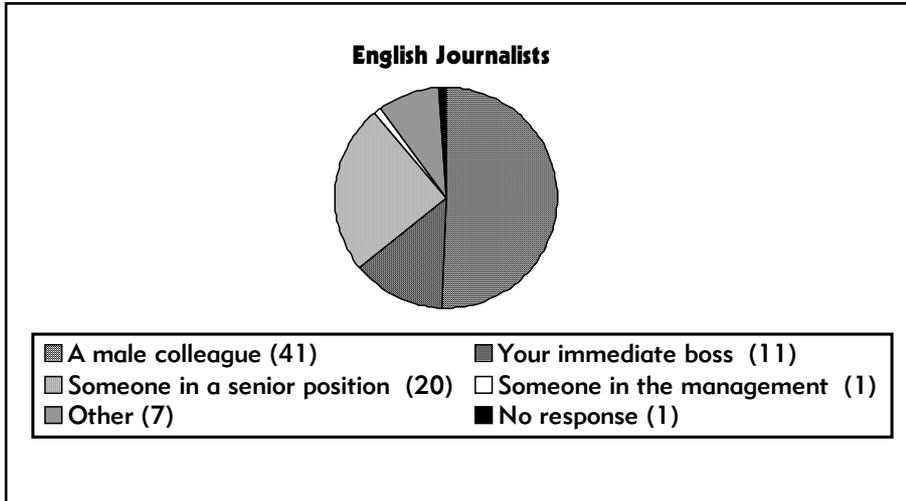
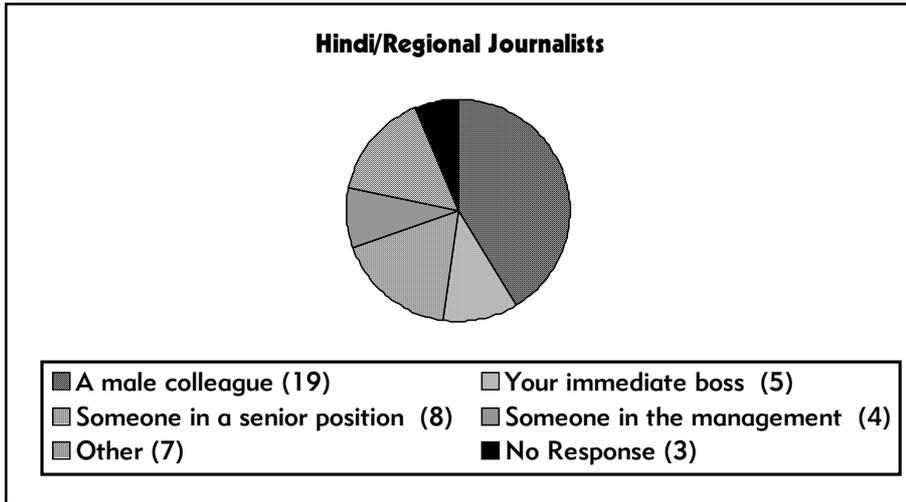
**Sexual harassment**

Put up with Sexist Remarks/Gestures/Sexually Harassed  
92 respondents in media have had to put up with sexual harassment.



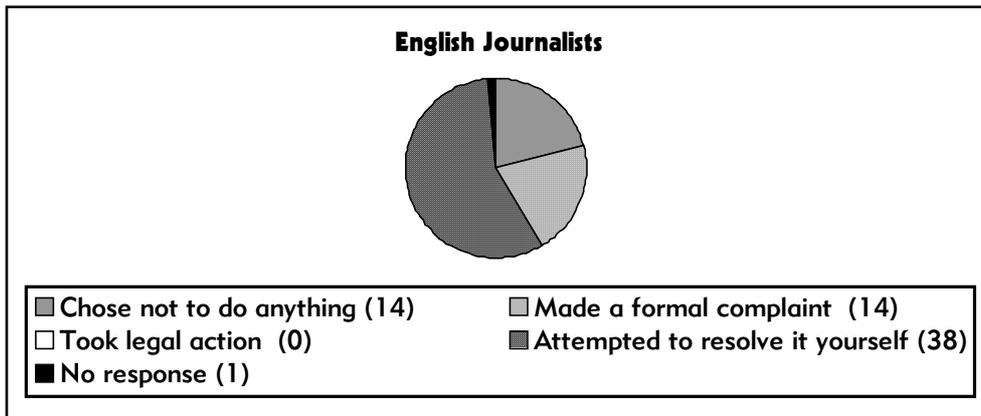
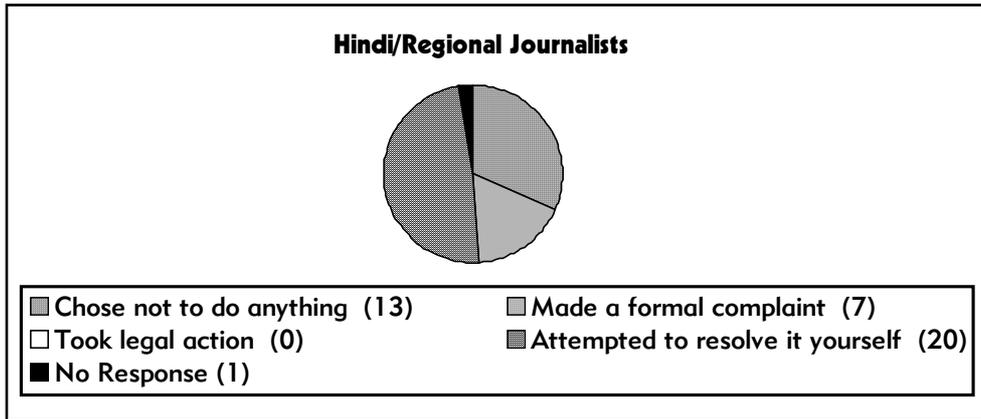
**Sexually harassed by**

The respondents were sexually harassed by a male colleague, someone in a senior position.



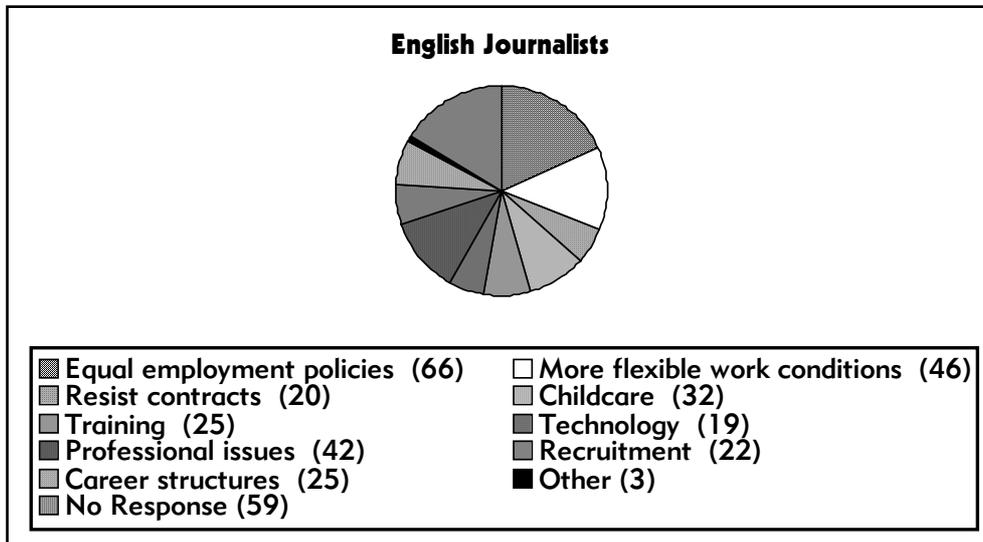
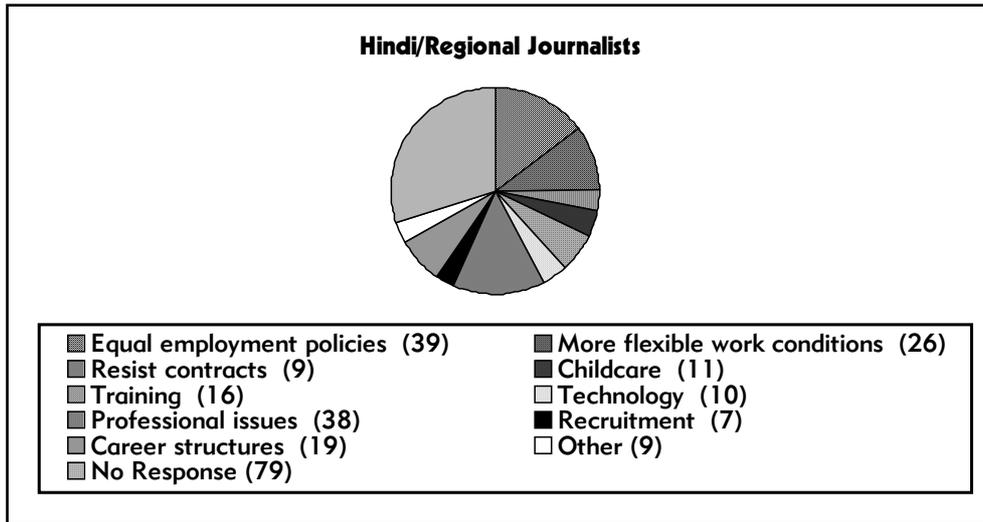
## Action Taken

Most attempted to resolve it themselves or choose not to do anything, while the 14 respondents made a formal complaint.



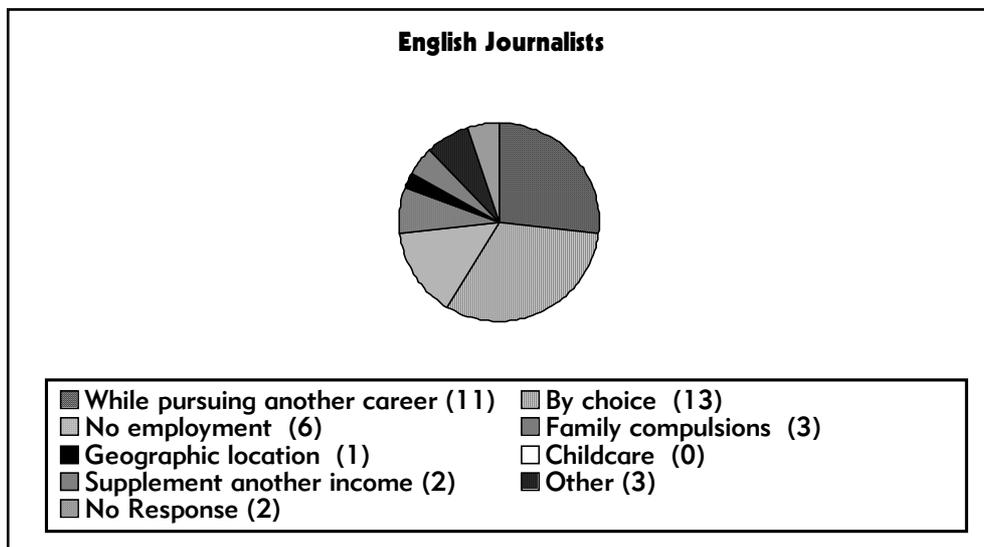
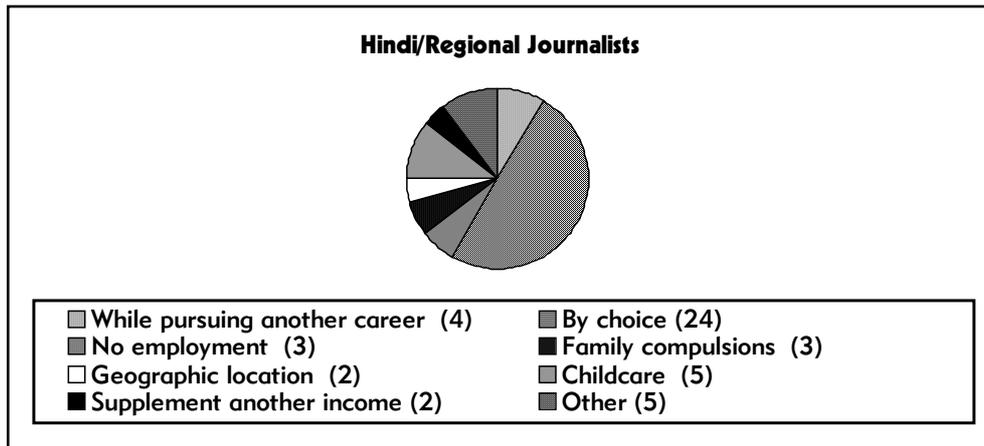
**Priorities for Union Action**

The respondents feel that unions should take up professional issues such as equal employment policies, flexible working conditions, contracts, recruitment, childcare and the like.



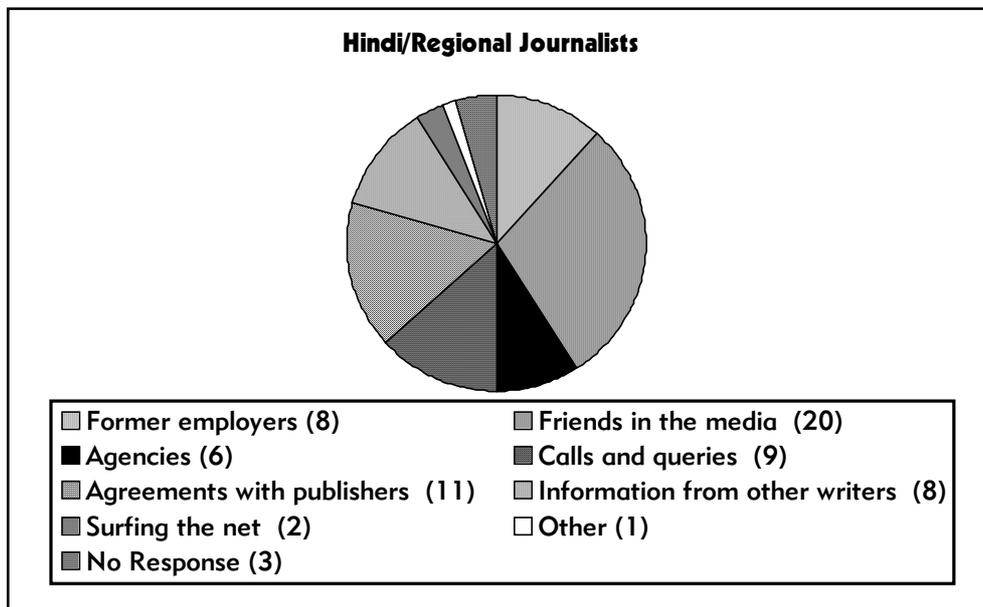
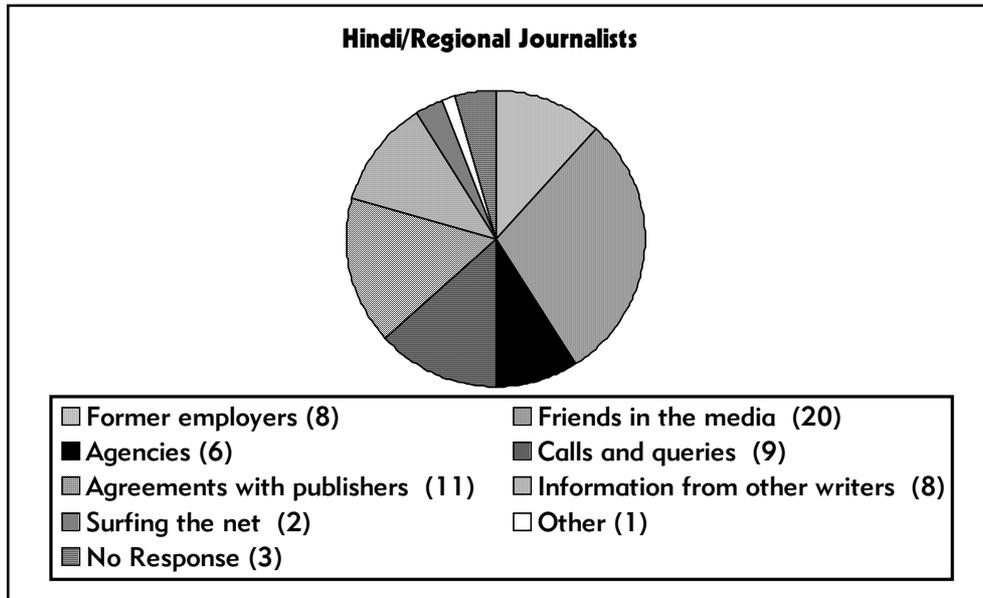
## Freelancing

Most of the respondents are freelancing by choice, while some are doing it to supplement another income or for other reasons.



### Assignments/Work Received from

The respondents said that they get work through friends in the media, agencies, agreements with publishers, former employers, information from other writers and calls and queries.



# **STATUS OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA**

*By*

Press Institute of India



**NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR WOMEN**

**NEW DELHI**



## **FOREWORD**

Despite the many positive developments in securing women's rights, patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system, denying the majority of women the choice to decide how they live. The media has a significant role in spreading awareness, promoting alternative, empowered images of women, breaking down stereotypes and shaping mindsets.

The National Commission for Women has been working with the media in spearheading the women's movement, and interacting with activists from the media to push the frontiers of the empowerment agenda.

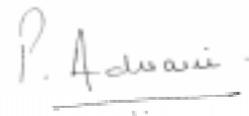
When the Commission looks at the media it includes the print as well as electronic media, films, advertisement and theatre. The Commission has organized several workshops and seminars to analyse current trends in the media commodifying women and portraying them in a derogatory manner. All this was done with the objective of improving the status of women.

A Media Watch Group has been set up that can recommend specific cases that the Commission could take up with the Government and the Press Council of India. The Commission is also looking into problems faced by the administrative mechanism in implementing the existing laws and acts related to the media. The long term objective is to gender sensitize the media.

A study was conducted on people's perceptions about obscenity and violence on television. Another was commissioned on the extent and type of coverage of women's issues by the print media. The study showed that though women's issues were getting wider coverage, very few articles were investigative, analytical or educational in their approach. Generally sensational news items like rape and other incidents reflecting women as the inferior sex were reported. As a sequel to the study a meeting was organised with editors of newspapers and magazines. It was recommended that more space and coverage should be given to women on a range of issues and the quality of reporting should be improved.

It is in the same spirit of forging closer links with the media that the Press Institute of India was commissioned to do this study on the status of women journalists. While we are constantly harping on the lack of gender sensitivity in the way media reports, what is the status of women journalists themselves? In fact this is the first of a two-part study on women in media. With so many women entering the electronic media, it was felt that there should be a separate detailed study on the women in the electronic media. This will follow soon.

It is hoped that the present study will help in empowering women journalists themselves who will in turn act as beacons of a gender just society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Advani', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**Dr. Poornima Advani**

## **PREFACE**

After a national conference of women journalists, organised by the Central Social Welfare Board and Women Networks in 2002, where they spoke of their travails, lack of mobility and basic facilities in most media organisations, Dr Poornima Advani, chairperson of the National Commission for Women, decided to undertake a proper study on the status of women journalists in the country. The task was entrusted to the Press Institute of India, a non-profit, independent organisation that has been training journalists and watching trends in the media over the last 40 years.

A brain storming session was held at the NCW with about 20 journalists and members of the Commission to chart out areas of concern that need special attention. It was decided to limit this survey to the print media and, if necessary, the NCW could commission another survey on women in the electronic media. A comprehensive questionnaire seeking information on a gamut of issues, was prepared and six researchers, all of them well known journalists, appointed to do the report. The questionnaires were distributed in three languages to journalists across the country, from Punjab and Shillong in North and North East India to Kanyakumari in the South and from Calcutta in the East to Kotah in the West.

There were two basic assumptions when the survey was started. First that journalists could be contacted on email and second that they would respond to the long questionnaire. Both assumptions were wrong. In fact inter-net and email facilities, a basic professional necessity, have not reached all newspapers and magazines in smaller towns, leave alone women in these cities. So our journalist-researchers had to travel extensively and buttonhole women individually to fill the questionnaires. Several journalists were interviewed indepth. Some 3500 questionnaires were distributed and just 410 were filled and returned despite a lot of phone calls and follow-ups. Some journalists were too scared to fill the questionnaires and there were others who refused to fill it because they were 'journalists' and did not like being viewed as 'women journalists.'

We were also keen that the report should reflect the positive trend of phenomenal increase in the number of women journalists, most obvious in the English language newspapers in the big metros. To encourage women in the print media, who are

still struggling to establish themselves, we decided to carry profiles of outstanding women journalists—those who had reached the top as well as newspaper owners in editorial positions. There were several of them and in all parts of the country.

We looked in particular at basic facilities that are vital for women to come out in large numbers and work in the media – facilities like transport, maternity leave, childcare or crèches. Was their inequality in wages, sexual harassment at work? Did women join trade unions to get their demands? How aware are they of their rights?

The study reveals that women in the regional, vernacular press are lagging far behind their colleagues in the English language press. There is a vast difference in the wages earned by those in English national newspapers and those in the regional media. It was shocking to find that in the regional press in several parts of the country, men and women are hired like contract labour on daily wages. At the end of a month they are paid on a voucher system, an amount that varies from Rs 1500 to Rs 3000. They are extremely insecure, living from month to month and when the establishment decides it does not need so many hands, it is invariably the women that are the first to be axed. The majority of women surveyed were on contracts for two or three years and at the end of the period there was no guarantee that the contract would be renewed.

The survey also revealed that several newspapers are reluctant to employ women because they would take maternity leave or have to be provided transport after night duty. Sexual harassment at work is a reality and despite the Supreme Court ruling that there should be a permanent committee in every organization to look into complaints of sexual harassment, respondents said no such committees existed.

This report is quite different from Ammu Joseph's study 'Women in the Media—Making News,' published as a book by Konark Publishers in 2000. This study is the combined effort of several journalists; it is based on an extensive questionnaire, looks closely at the status of women journalists in the regional press and has several profiles of women who have made it. Two women journalists who lost their jobs in the Times of India tell their own stories of battling the establishment.

Despite this being an indepth study, it has been written in a lucid, readable style and is not just a narration of facts and figures.

**USHA RAI**

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