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Women journalists numerous but still stymied by stereotypes

By

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Journalists at work in the news room of Myanmar Times weekly journal, Yangon, Myanmar. Photo: Lynn Bo Bo/EPA

Women are strongly represented in Myanmar newsrooms but few reach decision-making levels, reflecting the many obstacles they face in advancing in their professions. In Yangon, professional opportunities are growing and society is receptive to women in many media occupations, but for those working in the states and regions, options are severely limited by traditional attitudes about women's roles and fears about personal safety.

The findings were included in a report presented last week in Yangon at the 5th Media Development Conference by Agneta Soderberg-Jacobson, a senior gender advisor with Sweden's Fojo Media Institute.

The report, "Gender in the Myanmar Media Landscape", is the product of research in the past year with 298 respondents working in Myanmar print, online and broadcast media. Fojo conducted the research by surveys and focus groups with support from International Media Support (IMS). The respondents, more half of them women, were journalists, senior editors, media managers, and representatives of media organizations. They worked in Yangon, Kayin and Shan states, and the Sagaing region.

Mothers not wanted

Of the 2,000 accredited journalists in Myanmar today, 60% are women. However, even in Yangon, the majority hold low-ranking and mid-level positions in the media industry with men dominating decision making.

The few women holding higher-ranking positions are working in English-language media or have family connections to company management, according to the report. "Women also tend to report on 'soft' issues such as health, education and family," Soderberg-Jacobson said. Women are also paid less than men performing the same work.

Soderberg-Jacobson attributed the low status of Myanmar women journalists to discrimination, as well as to a lack of both social and parental support. A major barrier to advancement, emphasized by panelists at the conference and members of the audience, is the expectation by employers and Myanmar society that women not return to work after giving birth. "A majority of women journalists' careers appeared to end with marriage or childbirth," the report concluded.

"We need a policy on maternity leave. Some media houses provide one month or three but there are not clear guidelines. Another issue safety when covering news or in a conflict area," said Eaint Khine Oo, a panelist and former political prisoner now

freelancing for Voice of America.

Homemakers and sex workers

The report also examined portrayals of gender in Myanmar media. Even when women are in charge of content geared to women, women and girls tend to be depicted “as family figures/homemakers or as victims, reinforcing women’s traditional roles in society, while failing to capture the diverse roles women already play ...in Myanmar society,” the report noted.

Panelist Thin Thin Tar, executive member of the Myanmar Journalist Union, noted that her first article was published in 1995 as a response to a cartoon depicting women hotel staff as sex workers. She was working as a hotel accountant and her female co-workers were saddened by the cartoon. “We can see from that example how society sees women.”

In the focus groups conducted for the report, women said that stereotypes regularly influenced not just content but also newsroom culture. According to the report, “Given that the female body and appearance seem to have a price tag, senior women journalists said it was impossible to convince male editors of the unsuitability of random uses of women’s photography, often portraying them as sexual objects.”

Physical and verbal harassment

Most women working in media in Yangon claimed they never encountered sexual harassment but among those working beyond the capital area, more than half said they had experienced sexual harassment in their workplaces, sometimes from their news sources.

“The general understanding of sexual harassment is low in the states and regions. People there have few opportunities for training, unlike in Yangon,” commented panelist Nan Paw Gay, chief editor of the Kayin Information Center. She added: “Harassment can be physical and verbal. When we want to interview men, sometimes they want to meet in private. There are stereotypes and misconceptions about women working in certain industries ...According to my experience, we are weak in self-confidence and family members are not willing to allow women to work as journalist. We need more training and enlightenment.”

In Kayin State and other areas of the country subject to violent conflicts, women journalists are prevented from reporting on such incidents due to protective attitudes. “In my experience, the female journalists are very scared. The community criticizes women who are outside the home too much,” Nan Paw Gay said.

“Sometimes we have to stay overnight in a village,” said panelist Gracy Siang Hlei Dim of Chinland Post TV. “I often feel unsafe and I don’t have any female colleagues who can accompany me. If I had female colleagues around me, I think I would feel more comfortable working among men.”

Not yet Sweden

Women that participated in the Fojo research study said that Myanmar media unions are focused on threats, arrests and assaults on journalists and have no focus on gender issues or policies. Eighty percent of the respondents favoured a women-only trade union to address issues such harassment.

Eaint Khine Oo said she helped found the new Myanmar Women Journalist Society, because “as long as gender base discrimination is there, we need to exist. If our country had conditions like Sweden, maybe we wouldn’t need a women journalists organization.” In the workshops run by the Society, she said participants principally raise three problems: sexual discrimination, lack of maternity leave, and security.

As for training needs, she said the women media workers most often request training in “investigative reporting, safety and gender. We also need to invite men to the gender training.”

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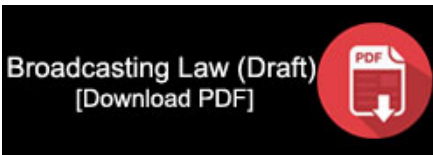
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