

WOMEN'S ROLE IN MEDIA: BUILDING TOWARD AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

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STATUS OF WOMEN IN U.S. NEWSROOMS

Over the course of a long career in newspapers, radio and television, I've seen many changes for women in the newsroom. Women are present in much greater numbers than when I began my journalism career four decades ago. About 40 percent of television staffs and 37 percent of newspaper staffs in the United States are women. At the top levels, there are still many more men than women. The top job in a broadcast newsroom is the news director. About 30 percent of television news directors and 27 percent of radio news directors are women. At newspapers, women are about 35 percent of all supervisors, a category which includes editors, managing editors, desk editors and others.

There have been some very visible breakthroughs. Until five years ago, no woman had ever anchored one of the three American network evening newscasts. Those anchor jobs are the most prominent journalism jobs in the country. Then Katie Couric went to CBS and Diane Sawyer to ABC and suddenly Brian Williams at NBC was the minority male. But all has changed again as Scott Pelley, a man, takes over for Katie Couric, whose tenure was a relatively brief five years. Until quite recently, there had been no woman president of a network news division or woman editor of the New York Times or Washington Post or Associated Press. That changed in June 2011, when the New York Times promoted its managing editor, Jill Abramson, to the top job of executive editor.

The world economic crisis hasn't helped matters. During the recession, the percentage of women in newsrooms and in leadership roles declined slightly, one or two points in all categories. This comes at a time when the number of newsroom jobs is shrinking rapidly, so women are losing ground at a greater rate. These declines have hit ethnic minorities even harder. The American Society of News Editors reported that although newspaper employment halted a three-year decline in 2010, minority employment dropped by another half of a percentage point.

IWMF GLOBAL REPORT AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN EASTERN EUROPEAN MEDIA

Throughout the past 40 years, women in media have banded together to make their case. In the early '70s, women not only agitated to get into press clubs, they fought to win equity in the work place and to remove sexist language from news coverage. Almost 20 years later, the Berlin wall fell and another opportunity arose. As democracy and press freedom spread throughout Eastern Europe, many American journalists reached out to encourage their colleagues in the east.

I was among the women who attended the first international conference of women in media in 1990. That conference led to the creation of the International Women's Media Foundation. The IWMF is dedicated to strengthening the role of women in the media world-wide as a means to further freedom of the press. Our belief is that no press can be truly free unless women have an equal voice.

This spring (2011), the IWMF held its third international conference, gathering 75 top women media executives from around the world. At the conference we presented a ground-breaking global report on the status of women in news media. The report examined more than 500 companies in nearly 60 countries. It found that men occupy the vast majority of management jobs and news-gathering positions in most of the nations included in the study. Researchers found that 73 percent of top management jobs are held by men and 27 percent by women. Men have about two-thirds of reporting jobs. Among senior professionals, women are doing better, holding 41 percent of news-gathering, editing and writing jobs. The study illuminated the very real problems still facing women in media around the world. Women in every region face barriers, whether it is lower pay than their male counterparts or lack of access to decision-making jobs in the newsroom.

Two regions stood out as areas where women enjoy greater equality in access to jobs and in salary. One is Nordic Europe, the nations of Scandinavia. The other is Eastern Europe. Researchers found that women in Eastern Europe hold more than half of the jobs in junior and senior professional categories. Women hold 59.9 percent of junior reporting and editorial jobs and 56.4 percent of senior jobs. Women hold a high percentage of support jobs, such as sales, finance and human resources – about 69.4 percent. In technical and creative roles, women are underrepresented, holding only 37.3 percent of jobs as scene designers, photographers, video editors and camera and sound specialists. In most job categories at most levels, men and women earn about the same. Men earn slightly more in senior and top-level management jobs. Women in Eastern Europe enjoy excellent job security, with nearly half of full-time jobs held by women. But women are more likely than men to hold the jobs with least security. Of the one-quarter of the workforce holding part-time, contract or freelance positions, two-thirds of those are women. The companies surveyed have adopted policies on maternity and paternity leave and on returning women to the same jobs after maternity leave. Most companies offer educational training for women. But few companies have policies on gender equality or childcare.

The IWMF researchers noted that as media in Eastern Europe moved away from strict state control, journalists took on a new role as advocates for independence of media and for social and political reform. Women played strong roles in reshaping the profession. Also, the researchers said, under the old regimes, nations espoused gender and ethnic equality, with women having access to education and encouraged to work outside the home. Yet, the researchers said, gender inequalities became hidden, and women's status is yet to be addressed in most Eastern European countries.

BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT

What are the factors that keep women from advancing in media? The IWMF research found some patterns. One is simply the difficulty of getting in the door. The survey found that in 44 percent of the 59 countries surveyed, women were underrepresented in over-all employment, a pattern that doesn't apply to Eastern Europe. The next most common pattern was the glass ceiling, finding that women who are well-represented in lower levels

don't make it into the top professional and managerial levels. The least common pattern was parity. In only one-fifth of the nations surveyed could women be said to have achieved fairly equal numbers in news employment.

Even if women do make it through the door and into the newsroom, they still face the social pressures of family and home. The news business has unpredictable hours and demands. We have to work weekends and holidays. And in the United States there is not a lot of support in the workplace. Women are still on their own to arrange childcare. Some decide to leave for jobs with more regular hours.

As for the glass ceiling, training opportunities could be a factor. Journalism is notoriously lax about providing professional development opportunities, especially management training, for journalists of either gender. Stereotypes about women as leaders and a lack of role models may make the absence of management training more of a hindrance for women.

A new obstacle may be emerging from the digital revolution. The online world seems to be dominated by men and engineering expertise is at a premium. This knowledge base is becoming essential to holding a job or getting a promotion in media. Women need to make sure they are conversant with so-called new media if they expect to advance in the future. Arianna Huffington has made a success of her Huffington Post, but she is a singular example in the digital world.

IMPACT OF NEWSROOM DIVERSITY ON CONTENT

So far, we've focused gender inside the newsroom. But what is the impact on the content of the news product? And why does that matter, anyway?

While it's difficult to measure, it's a matter of common sense that having greater diversity in the newsroom will affect the content of your news product. Newsrooms that reflect the makeup of the communities they serve are more likely to find stories that others miss. As an Asian American news producer said, "people from different communities, in their neighborhoods, in their families, in their churches, in their spouse's workplace, they hear things. They talk to people and they bring different things into the newsroom."

If the greatest responsibility of a journalist is to seek and report the truth, then reflecting diversity in content is a matter of accuracy. In fact, that's a quote from a report to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, an American philanthropy that supports journalism. The report said, "if your newspaper or your broadcast or your online edition gives a view of a community that's whiter, older, more male, better educated, richer or less religious than your community truly is, you aren't reflecting your community accurately." Another scholar once jokingly observed that women living in New York must enjoy extraordinary good health and longevity. After all, the scholar said, if you look at the obituary pages of the New York Times, it's clear that the only people who die in New York every day are men.

Different people react to news stories differently. We've seen that quite recently with in the reactions to the arrest of Dominique Strauss-Kahn and the disclosures about Arnold Schwarzenegger's fathering a child with the family housekeeper. As more women have come into the newsroom and news organizations have tried harder to appeal to female news consumers, the news agenda has changed. Stories about politics, war and the economy now appear next to stories about education, food and health. In my opinion, this broader news agenda is much more representative of life today.

There are good business reasons for wanting to reflect the range of people living in your community. In the United States, women are credited with making 80 percent of the decisions about consumer purchases. Globally, it has been calculated that women control or influence \$12 trillion of \$18.2 trillion in consumer spending. Advertisers looking for ways to reach women are going to look for media that is consumed by women.

In the United States, media executives are also looking for ways to reach a population that is growing more diverse ethnically. The Hispanic population is growing five times as fast as the population as a whole. The Asian American population is growing eight times as fast. The combined buying power of African-Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans is estimated at \$900 billion annually. This is an audience media executives want to attract.

SOLUTIONS

Where are the solutions to gender inequity?

The IWMF international conference of women media leaders adopted a declaration of principles that called for a world in which men and women have equal opportunity to work in news media, to be assigned to any story or beat, to be promoted to leadership positions, to be paid equally, to work under equal terms and conditions, to have access to training and to be free from harassment.

To achieve this requires the adoption of equitable gender policies at the organizational level and possibly at the state level. Women's success can't depend solely on their own individual initiative, or luck. News organizations must declare affirmatively that they will work for gender equity. This means that news organizations should adopt policies guaranteeing gender equality and prohibiting sexual harassment. They should address all aspects of staffing – recruiting, retention and advancement.

This means searching for women candidates and giving them an equal shot at an opening. It means assuring that pay, assignments and training are equitably distributed. It means looking for women candidates for promotion and giving them the kind of experience they need to succeed.

There is a role for journalism education to play. In U.S. journalism schools, 60 to 70 percent of students are female. They need to receive the kind of technical and business training that journalists will need in the future to succeed. In the past, journalism students didn't want to know about the business side of things. "I just want to write," they would say, or, "I just want to be on TV." That will never be enough in a digital world where journalists may need to become entrepreneurs advancing their own brand to make a living.

To diversify content, news organizations should analyze and broaden their search for sources. The ombudsman – or should I say ombudswoman – for National Public Radio in the U.S. studied how many women were used as news sources and commentators. She found only 25 to 30 percent of news sources were women, and women accounted for less than 35 percent of commentators on all but one of the regular broadcasts. Said the ombudswoman, "when listeners don't hear women as sources and commentators on the air, they get the impression that women aren't smart, aren't experts and aren't authoritative. That's just not true."

CONCLUSION

In the 40 years since I started my journalism career, I've seen a lot of progress and experienced it myself. In the 20 years since the first IWMF conference, I've seen a thrilling growth in press freedom and a broadening of the role that women are playing in the media of countries where free expression used to be stifled.

Women now cover the top levels of government and courageously report from battlefields. They investigate corruption and wrongdoing and put themselves at risk to uncover the truth. I know this because for 20 years IWMF has recognized brave women journalists from all over the globe with its Courage in Journalism Award.

One of those women was Anna Politkovskaya. Two years after receiving the Courage in Journalism Award, Anna Politkovskaya was gunned down in Moscow. Her murderers have still not been punished. Even though she knew she faced great danger, she was determined to continue her work as a journalist. "People sometimes pay with their lives for saying aloud what they think. One can even get killed for giving me information. I am not the only one in danger. In fact, I've got examples to prove it," she said. Anna Politkovskaya enriched our world with her reporting. Her gender didn't matter, though it's easy to see why her sources trusted her. What mattered was that she was a courageous journalist. Her example shows the kind of contribution women make all around the world to truthful, courageous journalism. Her story can be taught to the many women going through university journalism programs. And she can inspire all of us to strive toward a global media environment in which women play an equal role.