

WOMEN JOURNALISTS DOING INTERNATIONAL NEWS

by Ma. Ceres P. Doyo

I regularly receive *IWMF Wire*, the International Women's Media Foundation's quarterly which come out with news and developments concerning women journalists on this planet.

I got the latest issue this Women's Week. It features the 1996 Courage in Journalism awardees and Part 1 of the results of a survey conducted on women in the field of international news.

The IWMF has been giving the Courage awards (plus cash) since 1990. The awards, as IWMF puts it, recognize women journalists who have risked their lives to practice their craft and women who have been pioneers in the field of journalism. A friend, Marites Vitug, was one of the 1991 awardees for her investigative report and a book on illegal logging.

The IWMF survey result is in three parts: statistics, cultural constraints, women's special contribution to international news. The survey, funded by the Ford Foundation, examined the status of women in international news reporting, the special challenges they face, and how women affect the way international news is reported.

The respondents were 166 women from 32 countries who hold a variety of positions in companies of varying sizes and who cover a wide range of topics. They expressed their frustrations at not being taken seriously, of struggling for and often being denied the most important assignments, and of making sacrifices in their personal lives that their male colleagues did not have to make. They also noted the special and unique qualities that women bring to the field of international news, which is the capacity to see stories from a different and deeper perspective. Of course, they also spoke of satisfaction derived from the job they love.

More than half of the respondents (mostly from Africa, Asia and the Middle East) said that less than 25

percent of the reporters in their companies are women; 53 percent said that women account for less than 10 percent of the decision-making positions in their companies. The situation in television is even worse.

Said a correspondent in France: "To advance, women must work more and be alert to dynamics. They must be smarter than their male colleagues to deal with office politics." From a Zambian: "Employers are afraid of promoting women because they are afraid of the unknown. Employers just don't leave positions available to women."

Now I wonder what IWMF would think of our 11-year old *Inquirer*, which was born in the heat of the People's Power Revolution. This paper's founder is a woman, its chair of the board is a woman, its editor-in-chief is a woman.

IWMF's 1996 Courage awardees are a courageous bunch. Lucy Sichone, a legal columnist of the Post in Zambia, wrote pieces that criticized the government. To avoid detention and risk to her baby, she went into hiding. Said she: "This award is a gift to my children in recognition of all the terrors and uncertainties that they have had to endure because of the kind of vocation I have given to myself." What a great thing to say.

From Saida Ramadan, a Sudanese who writes in exile for the Egyptian paper *Al Alam Al Youm*: "My 13-year-old daughter didn't expect that my articles, which are written with a pen, would be answered by people who communicate with guns."

Turkish freelance journalist Aysel Onal has been writing on the Turkish Mafia, Turkish politics as well as the Middle East conflict for 11 years. She was detained in Iraq while covering the Gulf War, had been threatened by Islamic fundamentalists and was put on the death list of the revolutionary left. "It really helps," she said, "to know there are people in other parts of the

world who are aware of our existence and who are together with (us) in (our) fight."

Recipient of the lifetime achievement award was Meg Greenfield, the *Washington Post's* editorial page editor, who said: "I hail women from the generation that has come along after mine who figured out what was wrong about women's role in our business and set about to do it."

(By the way, there's a Filipino journalist many of us know who deserves international recognition for her courage in the field of newspapering and many other things besides. And she is still at it until now.)

Three women received special tributes: Veronica Guerin, noted Irish crime reporter killed by assassins last June; two former Courage awardees—Pakistan's Razia Bhatti, *Newsline* editor-in-chief who died last year, and Nigeria's Christine Anyanwu, editor in chief of *The Sunday Magazine*, in prison for almost a year.

IWMF will soon open the African Women's Media Center in Senegal to address the needs of journalists in the continent. Here's one reason why. "Women are the foot soldiers and everything but the generals," said Bessie Tugwana of South Africa, "even though we are more qualified sometimes, more than committed and, God knows, more than capable to manage and run massive publications read by both men and women."

I sense justified anger in what all these women had to say. And I compare our own experiences as Filipino women writers during the long, dark, dangerous years of martial rule. We cried over the dead, we trembled, we hid, even as we wrote. We were interrogated and brought to court. But because there's something about us Filipinos, we also laughed a lot.

Source: *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 13 March 1997