

fighting

For 20 years, operating in various parts of the world, they have been producing and selling stories with a women's perspective to major dailies, or radio and TV programs.

Giving the voices and views of women greater access to the world's media is the goal of the Women's Feature Service (WFS) which counts on a network of 120 women journalists from 60 countries. The aim is to inform the public and influence policy-makers on various issues that shape women's lives.

Existing since 1978 originally as the women's desk of the Inter Press Service (IPS) and since 1991 as an independent agency, WFS produces two features per day per bureau or over 400 per year. Its New Delhi office also produces radio programs for airing over All-India Radio and TV programs for a television network.

IPS, on the other hand, remains faithful through its 35 years of existence, to "giving voice to developing countries." In the last three years, it has been incorporating the gender perspective in all its stories. It has a network of 134 stringers and correspondents, 38 percent of them women, operating in North America, Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. Each of the 30 stories they produce every day tries to bring in the voices of men as well as women.

"All issues are women's issues," says Olivia Tripon, WFS Philippine bureau chief. Half of the population are women, but like the poor, they are not normally interviewed in the mainstream media. Many events concerning women in the Philippines are not covered either, she observes.

MARKETING WOMEN'S STORIES

The Manila-based bureau chief says that while she does not force the woman's pers-

pective in each issue, she only has one criterion in going through a story: that the woman's voice be reflected in each one. "We are prejudiced," she confesses. "But we also interview the men. We balance." A story is not necessarily labeled a woman's story. This is a good marketing strategy since most editors are men.

Johanna Son, IPS-Asia's regional editor, says that IPS used to label a woman's story by putting the word "women" before its heading. (Women used to be treated as a topic under the theme code: population. Other theme codes include human rights, development, environment, health, education, labor, culture, international finance/trade and others.)

But during last year's regional meeting, the editors agreed that if IPS was to introduce a gender approach across all its stories, then it should stop compartmentalising them into whether they are women's stories or not. "If women make up half of this world then their views on whatever issue are as important as anybody else's," Son explains.

She values the presence of women in each story. "A story that has something from a woman improves its quality and gives it a more rounded viewpoint," she maintains. Editors from the other regions also realise that often, they find "nuggets in the quotes that come from the women," she relates.

The typical actor in the IPS English service is still male, according to a 1997 IPS report. But the number of women actors mentioned in the English service has been climbing steadily in recent years, from about five percent in the early 1990s to 10 percent in 1995 to 14 percent in 1996. In 1997, women constituted a "record-breaking" 16 percent of the actors mentioned in the sample of reports from the 1997 IPS English service. "The figures suggest that IPS is paying close attention to the need

for Space

by Leti Boniol

Two alternative news services have been mainstreaming women's issues into the media. But with increasing competition for space and the Asian financial crisis, they face the greatest challenge to their existence: **sustainability**.

for greater gender equity in news coverage," it said. IPS has instituted a system of gender coordinators in each region which try to review the gender stories and give feedback.

Stringers are oriented on the gender component in stories, but a factor for the lack of gender balance in stories submitted by stringers in Asia has to do with "operational reasons," Son says.

Stories about the effects of globalisation and the financial crisis on women are some of the features that both WFS and IPS produce and which find space in the mainstream media. Both agencies also covered and produced features on various international conferences such as the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the Food Summit in Rome.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which initiated the WFS project 20 years ago said in 1989 that the pick-up rate for WFS was 80 percent from the IPS wires. The Philippines has one of the highest marketing records among all WFS offices. In 1995, 168 features were published in 15 mainstream publications, two of them in international magazines.

Not only the mainstream media uses the stories of these news services. A frequent user from a nongovernmental organisation says that "it is only through the women's alternative wires where you get stories of women empowerment and victimisation from all over the world that are not written by either the mainstream media

or the NGO publications." The items are "fresh and come in various forms, and most of all, the point of view is different," she opines.

PROBLEM OF SURVIVAL

But, "while women's stories are a very rich source of material for the mainstream media or NGO publications, they have not been appreciated because of the expense in accessing these stories through the E-mail or the Internet," she claims.

Each story must be sold five times at least just to get back what WFS pays each writer, according to Tripon. But some editors don't want to pay, claiming that it should be enough compensation for the writer that her article was published.

An aggressive marketing strategy is thus imperative in order to survive. What WFS does is to talk to editors who have open minds.

Then there's the competition from other news agencies as well as the mainstream media itself. Tripon says WFS finds it difficult to market its stories because other mainstream news agencies such as Reuters and the media itself such as the *New York Times*, have now been producing women stories themselves which they did not use to do. "We used to be the only ones doing it. Now the newspapers themselves have started writing stories on women."

The difficulty in selling women's and other alternative stories has been compounded by the financial crisis that has plagued the media

industry. "Some papers have chosen to drop us, which is sad," says Son who considers the IPS service "very cheap."

Funding for such initiatives by donor agencies has also gone down. Tripon says that WFS headquarters "used to provide us with all the funding that we needed to operate. But after Beijing, it became hard to get funding because donors said that the funds are now in the regions."

Similarly, IPS has suffered drastic budget

even if it's not maximum. At least you get read by some local communities."

The budget cuts could affect editorial policy. Son says that IPS used to entertain the idea of doing more spot news but decided against it. "If the niche is to do news analysis and features, then we should stick to it and try to develop better stories rather than competing to the last seconds [with the one] who puts something out first."

Since IPS cannot survive solely on sales, it has undertaken special projects with UN agencies, including one for the International Criminal Court. For the annual AIDS conference, IPS tries to put out more AIDS-related stories.

"The last two years have not been easy. You have to cut, at the same time, not to cut so much that it affects your editorial mission. So people have had to do more than the usual," she says.



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Amplifying women's noises. IPS-Asia's Johanna Son (left) and WFS Philippine Bureau Chief Olivia Tripon

cuts in the last two years. "Our budget is almost half of what it used to be. So that has meant streamlining," Son reveals. There have been a few cuts in the quotas of regions other than Asia. In Latin America, which has a very big network, those who used to work fulltime became "associated correspondents."

"I suppose everybody gets hit. Even papers in Indonesia and Thailand cut their pages by half or had to let go of staff," she adds.

Actually, IPS' main clientele and information source has been the NGOs and not mainstream media. It has also been trying to go beyond the English-language, urban-based press. Although the IPS daily service is in English and Spanish, articles are translated worldwide: into Finnish, Dutch, Norwegian, German, Portuguese and French in Europe; and in Asia, into Bahasa, Thai, Mandarin, Nepali, Hindi, Bengali and Tamil.

"We try to reach the local-language papers even if it means getting a pittance sometimes," Son reveals. For example, in China, IPS agrees to have its stories translated by an official service which then distribute these to various local papers. "So you get some sort of reach

PERSPECTIVES

WFS has been restructuring to keep costs low. New initiatives in radio broadcasting in India are also being promoted. One example is a series on women's health to be broadcast in Hindi on the commercial channel of All-India Radio.

IPS, on the other hand, has a plan for IPS 2000. It wants to be the leading provider of information on "global human security." It wants to look at subjects not only from the geographical point of view but more thematically. The aim is to do more regional stories not only because they get picked up more, but they give a better picture of the trends in the region. The gender aims will continue.

New communication technologies are speeding up the circulation of so much information worldwide today that the small media, or those calling themselves alternative, must cope successfully or be swallowed up. ♪

Leti Boniol also writes for the Philippine News and Features (PNF), another alternative news agency.