

Leading in a Different Language: Will Women Change the News Media?

Condensed from the report published by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF)

If there was ever any doubt about the power of the press, consider the experiences of Peruvian journalist Cecilia Valenzuela. In the last decade, Valenzuela has been arrested, fired from several jobs and has received countless death threats, some from her own government.

Valenzuela's offense has been her steadfast reports on politics and the military in her country.

Most recently, in September 2000, this 1993 IWMF Courage in Journalism Award winner published a report charging the Peruvian national intelligence service with trafficking in drugs and weapons. Her reward for careful investigative reporting was a physical assault.

Valenzuela has become a lightning rod because her reports are substantial, documented and, most important, have the power to sway public opinion.

Still, she is not the only reporter to suffer reprisals for telling the truth. And though many editors stand behind crusading reporters, others—

including some who fired Valenzuela in an effort to silence her—are controlling the news.

Though this may be a stark example of the power that media leaders have to shape the news, it is still instructive. Whoever controls assignments, whoever decides how a story is going to be covered, whoever decides what placement that story gets in a newspaper or over the airwaves, is not only shaping content of news, but is deciding what readers and listeners know and how they know it. Media leaders are not just industry leaders, they have the power to shape society's attitudes.

And in most newsrooms around the world, most media leaders are men. Though women are more than half the world's population, men routinely decide what news they should hear and read. What is the impact on women when the news is constantly reported from a male point of view?

To explore what happens in the news when women are absent from decision-making positions, the IWMF brought together 100 of the top women in the news media from 60 countries in May 2000. The forum also provided the opportunity for dis-

cussions on the status of women in the media, the role of women as media leaders and the potential of women managers to influence news content and news audiences.

WHERE WOMEN STAND

The overall number of women journalists employed in the media around the world has decreased by two percent in the last five years, according to a recent study by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). Today, women are 41 percent of working journalists; they were 43 percent in 1995.

For all women employed in the media—which includes those working in administrative and support positions—the figures are even lower. The only international analysis of women's employment in the news media was conducted in 1995 by Margaret Gallagher for UNESCO. Gallagher's report, *An Unfinished Story: Gender Patterns in Media Employment*, found that in all regions of the world, women are not a significant part of the media workforce. In Asia, women are 21 percent of the total media workforce.

In Latin America, they are 25 percent. In Southern Africa, they are 27

percent. In Western Europe and the United States, they are 35 percent. In some countries, the figures for women in the media are astonishingly low. A Nepalese journalist speaking at the UN Beijing Plus 5 Conference in New York in June 2000 said that in her country, women are only six percent of media workers. According to UNESCO figures, in Japan women are only eight percent of media employees; in India and Malawi they are 12 percent; and in Argentina and Mozambique women are 16 percent of the media workforce.

Worldwide, women are 79 percent of all part-time workers in the news media, wrote Gallagher in the 1995 report. Since part-time work is seldom an avenue to promotion, women in these positions rarely transition to full-time positions, much less leadership posts.

A majority (nearly 60 percent) of the women journalists from around the world who responded to a 1997 IWMF survey said that not even one out of 10 decision-makers in their companies were women. The figure was even higher (79 percent) for respondents from Asia. These findings support Gallagher's 1995 UNESCO report which found that women lead only three percent (8 out of 239) of



Linda Wambokah, assistant editor, *The Monitor*, Kampala, Uganda; Reihana Hakim, editor, *Newsline*, Karachi, Pakistan; Beema Sarwar, editor, *The News on Sunday*, Lahore, Pakistan

all photos courtesy of International Women's Media Foundation

the media organisations polled and hold a mere 12 percent of the top posts in those companies.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

A majority of the women journalists who responded to an informal IWMF survey conducted prior to the May 2000 gathering of women media leaders in Washington, DC think the news would be different if more women held leadership positions in media companies.

A significant majority (92 percent) of respondents to the survey said that women bring a different, more human perspective to the news, at least some of the time. In addition, some 60 percent of respondents to a 1997 IWMF survey said that women have different approaches to covering international news, both in the way

they select topics and the angles from which they choose to cover those topics.

This supports findings from a 1995 IWMF report in which women journalists said that once greater equality for women is reached in the media and in society as a whole, women will demand to see and hear various images of themselves and issues of importance to them. The journalists also agreed that if women held higher positions in the media, portrayals of women in the media would change for the better.

News with a Human Dimension

Journalists completing the 2000 IWMF survey felt strongly that women bring a more human dimension to the news. A senior editor from the Philippines commented, "Men

tend to concentrate on quotes from government officials and focus on conflicts, while women tend to look at impact on the greatest number of people or sectors.”

Ruthie Blum, editor of *The Jerusalem Post Magazine* in Israel, told colleagues at the IWFMF conference in May that she finds “the biggest difference between men and women as editors and journalists is that women seem to consider the reader.” She feels that men think about what would impress colleagues or influential politicians, rather than thinking about what the average reader or viewer wants.

An editor from Russia agreed, explaining that it has only been since the era of perestroika and glasnost that women have emerged as war correspondents. The change in reports from the field was instantly noticeable, she said, and had a remarkable impact on politicians, editors, and the public. “Women showed not only the quantity of people killed,” but the impact on civilians caught in the battlegrounds.

Portrayal of Women

A recent report by the WACC found that women were only 18 percent of people interviewed for stories around the world. This is just a slight increase over 1995 results, when women were 17 percent of interview subjects. Even more telling, current figures show that women are the focus in only seven percent of stories on politics and government, as com-

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pared to 26 percent in entertainment and the arts. Responding to a 1995 IWFMF survey, 72 percent of women journalists polled said that women are misrepresented in the news media. Some 73 percent said that women leaders are simply disregarded in the news media. A U.S.-based journalist explained the reason for this: “There is so little coverage of women outside of sensationalism,” she said. “The media often disregard women as leaders and portray women as individuals, not groups; victims, not heroines; sexual figures, not thinkers!”

A 1997 survey of Romanian newspapers by The Policy Project, a Washington, DC-based programme of The Futures Group International that focuses on reproductive health, found that women are often portrayed

in a sexual manner, including in serious news stories. “There is even sexist sensationalism in the hard news,” a Romanian journalism trainer told an IWFMF seminar in 1999, referring to her country’s media. “As an example, a lawyer who won an important case would be featured as a woman who just won a case instead of a lawyer, as if to say, ‘Isn’t that curious? A successful woman.’ It confirms the audience’s stereotypes.”

Does the News Have Gender?

Many women journalists assert that the news is not defined by gender. “The news is the news,” they say, whether it is reported by a woman or a man. They argue that standards of accuracy, fairness and ethics apply equally to all journalists, regardless of gender.

But could women journalists simply be taking their lead from male journalists who have set the atmosphere and standards of behavior in newsrooms? One editor from the United States thinks so. “Often, women are conditioned to respond to news in a ‘male’ pattern. It’s how many of us avoid being labeled ‘too soft’ and get the positions we have,” she said. Women who want to cover politics and economics say they must follow the avenues set by their male colleagues or risk being assigned to soft news.

Still, the majority of women journalists say that their presence in newsrooms makes a difference in how news is selected and how it is presented.

WOMEN AS MEDIA LEADERS

Qualities Women Bring to Leadership

Most women journalists tell the IWMF that women bring significant talents to leadership, but that women's leadership qualities differ from those of men. Respondents to the IWMF survey in March 2000 indicated that the most important qualities a leader can bring to management include clear vision, communication skills, creativity and flexibility.

Yet, when asked which qualities women bring to their careers, clear vision was low on the list for the survey respondents. Cynthia Tucker, editorial page editor of *The Atlanta Constitution* and IWMF co-chair, suggested that this contradiction may arise from a "conflict between this idea that one of the most important things for a leader to do is articulate a clear vision and the idea that one of the strengths of women is that we are collaborative."

Tucker explained that in editorial meetings her style is to ask for contributions and ideas from her team, while her male colleagues often give directions and make assignments without asking for input. As Tucker said, this difference in management style could lead to a perception that men articulate vision more clearly than women. It does not mean that women do not have vision, however. Results from the 2000 IWMF survey corroborate this view. The journalists said that women leaders make them-

selves available to subordinates more often than men, a key to an open and cooperative work style.

According to the survey respondents, women leaders excel at communication (68 percent) and flexibility (63 percent). Women understand how to make things happen, tend to build relationships and are more apt to share information with colleagues, they said. Women are also adept at juggling many tasks and priorities and often deal with a number of crises simultaneously—both in the office and at home. As a senior editor from the United States summed up, "I think women are often better organised. Nothing beats the organisational skills of a busy editor with a family."

Most journalists completing the survey also agreed that each individual should create her own personal style of leadership rather than conforming to practices and philosophies that are part of a male-dominated system.

Role and Responsibility

Most women who make it into decision-making positions feel they have the responsibility to open doors and support other women seeking to travel similar paths, according to respondents to the 2000 IWMF survey. They said that some of the most important obligations of women in management are to support junior women for promotions, serve as role models to other women and engage in mentoring relationships.

Emily Nwankwo, general manager of the Nation Media Group in Kenya, articulated a point of view held by many participants in the IWMF conference. "I realised that if I don't push a woman, no man is going to be looking back saying, 'This woman is good, let's promote her,'" she said.

Support for other women does not necessarily have to be overt. Women role models also give guidance—sometimes subliminally—to younger women journalists on how to approach issues and how to tackle problems.

Mentors can also provide one-on-one, personal advice, from how to research a particular topic, to navigating the intricacies of a media company, to preparing an application for promotion. Of the women journalists completing the 2000 IWMF survey, a majority (85 percent) felt that having a mentor was at least somewhat important to women aspiring to move up.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

In the 2000 IWMF survey, a clear majority of respondents (98 percent) said that women journalists face professional barriers that their male colleagues do not, at least some of the time. An overwhelming majority of women journalists—more than 75 percent—completing a 1997 IWMF survey agreed. What makes this even more of a challenge, they said, is that their male colleagues do not believe this to be true.

Cultural and Social Obstacles

Perhaps the most substantial obstacles women face stem from the cultural and social stereotypes about what roles are and are not appropriate for women.

The most difficult of these challenges to overcome is that women should not work outside the home. Women who do take on professional positions must often confront preconceptions of how a job should be done or what qualities are necessary for a specific position, notions established by decades of male-dominance in the profession.

Respondents to the 1995 IWMF survey consistently said that they felt they had to work harder or take on more assignments in order to prove they could do their jobs. In the last five years, not much has changed.

More than half of the respondents (62 percent) to the IWMF's survey in March 2000 agreed that the top obstacle for women in management is continually proving abilities to colleagues and supervisors. A typical comment came from a Brazilian editor. "Women still need to work harder "to demonstrate that they are the equal of their male peers," she said.

Even when women do forge opportunities for themselves in the media, the challenge is far from over. The climate of the newsroom can sometimes turn hostile when women achieve top posts. At an IWMF pro-

As women attempt to move into management, they must fight to gain acceptance in a new professional role and, at the same time, create an acceptable balance for themselves between their lives at work and at home

gramme in Johannesburg in 1998, Zubeida Jaffer, group parliamentary editor of *Independent Newspapers* in South Africa, described the day top management informed the all-male staff of her promotion. "I was sitting in this room with only men. "No one came up and congratulated me. For me that was such a shock." Jaffer recounted this story more than six months after her promotion, but her colleagues' lack of acceptance was still fresh for her.

Inhospitable environments can mean that some women skip informal gatherings with colleagues. This can lead to missed opportunities, because social gatherings are often where professional relationships are strengthened and where co-workers share information about training opportunities, job openings, important assignments and fellowships. These out-of-the-workplace contacts can be crucial for journalists seeking to advance in the profession.

Balancing Work and Family

While these obstacles alone might be enough to keep some women from moving up in their profession, time after time women journalists tell the IWMF that one of the most daunting barriers that women journalists face is the dual challenge of balancing work and home responsibilities.

In the 1995 IWMF report, it was the leading obstacle reported by women journalists from 44 countries and in the 2000 IWMF survey, 64 percent of respondents said balancing work and family is the top obstacle they face.

Only African women journalists did not rank balancing work and family life as a major obstacle to their success as journalists. This may be because African woman can rely on a network of extended family for support, explained Emily Nwankwo, general manager of the Nation Media Group in Kenya. "You don't marry one person, you marry into a family. We have an instant support system that we can draw on."

While extended families may be the answer for African women, women from other regions note continual problems with juggling these responsibilities. As women attempt to move into management, they must fight to gain acceptance in a new professional role and, at the same time, create an acceptable balance for themselves between their lives at work and at home. In facing this ongoing di-

lemma, women consider the beliefs of their families and their communities, as well as their own personal beliefs about the responsibilities of a wife or mother.

A Sri Lankan journalist told the



Ropafadzo Mapimhidze, deputy chief sub editor, *The Herald*, Harare, Zimbabwe

IWMF that she is unable “to work long hours due to pressures from family and society.” And a South Korean editor-in-chief who attended an IWMF programme in the Philippines in 1998 said that she works twice as hard as her male colleagues in order to combat the prejudice that “women are reluctant to sacrifice their family life for their career.”

The Glass Ceiling

The news media are not exempt from the glass ceiling recognised in so many industries. Lamees Al-Hadidi, managing editor of *Al-Yam Al-Youm* in Egypt, explains: “We [women journalists] are stuck in middle management. We never go up to the top and in my society it’s even harder. We have all of these traditions

that hold us back.”

As Al-Hadidi implies, women might have trouble reaching the top rungs of a journalism career because people in their societies believe that women do not have the capacity for leadership, cannot make tough decisions, and cannot form visions for and inspire the people they lead. A Bangladeshi journalist put it this way: “The social taboo is that women are not the proper persons to depend on for the right news or the proper opinion.”

In some countries, women have been able to make small strides. In the

Philippines, for example, three of the 10 major daily newspapers are run by women. Many other women journalists are still struggling. For example, an editor from Zimbabwe told the IWMF that when she received a promotion to deputy chief sub editor at her paper, she was the first black woman to be named to such a high post at a major English-language daily in her country.

Lack of Training Opportunities

In order to advance their careers at most media companies, journalists need to take advantage of professional training opportunities. Still, women journalists who have responded to IWMF polls and those who have attended IWMF programmes have consistently said that they must struggle

to gain access to leadership and career development training.

Many women journalists have also reported that the type of assignments they receive inhibits their advancement potential. Respondents to the March 2000 IWMF survey identified lack of access to high visibility projects as one of the top five obstacles they face in advancing their careers. They said that men are directed toward careers covering hard news stories in politics, finance and technology, all of which carry respect and significance in the newsroom. Women are assigned to soft topics—social affairs, culture and arts reporting.

A journalist from Ghana reports: “Bosses tend to create the impression that women are incapable for certain assignments.” A colleague from Slovakia agrees that there is “the perception that women should stick with family and women’s affairs and not be involved in social issues at important levels.”

A Zambian journalist described to the IWMF what happened while she was sitting in her newsroom and the report of a major airplane crash came over the wire. Senior government officials had been traveling on board the plane, making the disaster a top news story. The female journalist had just wrapped up a report, so she was available to rush to the scene. Still, her editor looked right past her and pulled another reporter—a man—off an ongoing assignment and told

him to run to get the story.

In journalism, getting good assignments goes hand in hand with career advancement. Covering hard news stories provides journalists with important career credentials—not to mention the exposure and recognition, that can come with having a byline on the year's hottest story. So if women are continually relegated to beats with less visibility, does that mean women are being denied equal opportunity?

Lack of Support Mechanisms

In the IWMF's 2000 survey, there was an even split between those who said many women take steps to help other women (36 percent) and those who said that only a few women take such steps (38 percent). While many women journalists said they should support other women at work, there is a gap between what women journalists said they should do and what they actually do.

Some women talk of feeling alienated by other women once they have been promoted. Others mention female supervisors who do little to help female colleagues gain the skills they need to move ahead. Women journalists might want to engage in support of and for other women, but often cannot realistically take on such a role. For those dealing with the pressures of a decision-making post on top of continuing to prove themselves, taking the time to work on behalf of others is another demand on their schedule.

Yet, women journalists aspiring to leadership can become easily discouraged without the example of other women journalists who have reached management. Nearly half of the women journalists under the age of 30 who responded to the IWMF survey earlier this year indicated that a lack of role models is a major obstacle to their advancement.

The idea that some women resent others who are successful at work sets women against each other, argued Gail Evans, executive vice president of CNN, speaking at the 2000 IWMF conference. Evans also identified another dangerous myth: that there are certain "reserved" women's places. If there are "six seats at the [management] table, and five of them are held by men, and one is held by a woman, every other woman in the organisation thinks there is one seat open," she said. "There isn't. There are six seats open. We pit ourselves against each other because we only see that one seat." Women themselves are responsible for challenging and changing these assumptions, she said.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Supporting Other Women

A collective voice is much stronger than a lone call for change. Respondents to a September 2000 IWMF survey of women in the Latin American media found that one of the most effective ways to benefit

women journalists would be to have more women in leadership and management. Dagmar Engel, head of news for Deutsche Welle Television in Germany, is an activist for women in the media. "I am promoting women wherever I find them, because I think, 'If I don't do it, who will?'" she told delegates to the May 2000 IWMF conference.

"A story conference changes when half the participants are female," wrote former Los Angeles Times reporter Kay Mills in her 1988 book, *A Place in the News: From the Women's Pages to the Front Page*. "There is indeed security in numbers. Women are more willing to speak up...about a story they know concerns many readers, to assert their own ideas...or to raise a question that elicits a new line of thought."

The idea that a critical mass of women journalists will make a difference in the profession is not a new one.

In the 1970's women working at



Dagmar Engel, head of news, Deutsche Welle Television, Berlin

public broadcasting stations in the United States established an informal network to support one another and to learn about other women journalists whom they could then promote. And the idea is still in force today. Women journalists writing to the IWMF prior to a recent programme in Namibia said that a primary reason they wanted to move into management positions was to help other women by supporting, mentoring and promoting capable colleagues.

Emily Nwankwo, general manager of the Nation Media Group in Kenya, points out the correlation between mentoring and success for women. "Building confidence in professional women is a part of mentoring. Often when women are tapped for a position they ask if they can do it not because they lack the skills, but because thus far they have not received encouragement and there is no one pushing them forward."

Women should not shrug off having a mentor even after reaching leadership positions, advises Bachi Karkaria, group editorial director of Mid-Day Publications in India. "If we stop learning, I think we do a big disservice to ourselves."

Influencing the Next Generation

Many women currently in news media leadership have taken up the charge of creating a more balanced image of women in the news media.

In an effort to ensure women appear in a more positive light, Sarah Akrofi-Quarcoo, assistant chief editor of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, conducts seminars on the portrayal of women in the media for her journalism colleagues. On the other side of the world, when Pennie Azarcon-dela Cruz, associate editor at the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, speaks to communications students, she tells them how harmful negative portrayals of women can be for all of society.

Sylvia Vollenhoven, executive producer with the South African Broadcasting Company, pushes to have respected female sources included in news reports. This measure, she said, not only changes attitudes about women in the newsrooms, but it changes attitudes about women in the whole of society. Manuela Kessler, head of the foreign desk of *Tages-Anzeiger* in Zurich, Switzerland, agrees. "Having female voices in the newspaper also helps advance a different kind of perception about women generally," she said.

Networking

The IWMF has found that women journalists around the world value the opportunity to get to know one another and build contacts. One of the requests of women journalists who attended the IWMF programme last May was that they be able to stay



Norah Appolus, controller of news, Namibian Broadcasting Company, Windhoek, Namibia

in touch with one another once they returned home. To help them, the IWMF established a cyber community for the delegates, using the Internet to establish a private E-mail "listserv" that goes out simultaneously to everyone who attended the conference.

The journalists have used the forum to share experiences, information and strategies, to provide support and encouragement to one another, and to continue building connections established during the programme. In fact, several have asked new colleagues to write for their publications, broadening the impact of the new network.

The value of this connection was underscored more than once during its first few months after the programme. Women in the network rallied around a news editor in Namibia facing a demotion from her management post, offered support to a colleague in Bulgaria coping with an unexpected dismissal from her position and encouraged an editor in Zimbabwe after the only "female friendly" boss she'd ever known was fired.

THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN MEDIA LEADERSHIP

The majority of respondents—84 percent—to the IWMF survey in March 2000 say that their opportunities for advancement have improved in the last five years. And despite the challenges women journalists around the world face each day, they are optimistic about women's contributions to the future of the media and the resulting positive changes that women in the media will bring to all of society.

IWMF board member Barbara Cochran, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association in the United States, predicts that the new era of technology and globalisation will throw professional doors wide open for women. Tara Sonenshine, president of WomensNewsLink.com, told the IWMF conference in May 2000, "There is power where women, news and the Internet come together." Without doubt, many women journalists are looking to the Internet as a new professional outlet and as another opportunity to establish professional credibility.

For example, the crusading Valenzuela has been fired from several publications because of her investigative reports. Earlier this year, she found a new means to publish critical stories on political events in her country: The World Wide Web. Her Internet news service—<http://www.imediaperu.com>—helps her

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maintain her independence and her journalistic integrity.

But if women want to take advantage of opportunities offered by the new technology, they must act quickly. Already in many areas of the world, men control the content on the web. Speaking at the UN Beijing Plus 5 Conference in New York in June 2000, Wenke Eriksen of the Norwegian Broadcasting Company, warned that even in her country, where more than half of the journalists are women, men dominate the Internet. "Young guys produce all the websites of Norway's major newspapers," she said.

The rise in new technology means that journalists should broaden their skills and develop expertise in several different types of media, advised Michael Bloomberg, founder and CEO of Bloomberg Financial Markets, speaking to the IWMF conference in May. "Technology and economics are not going to

allow you to specialise in one thing," he said.

With media globalisation, collaborative partnerships between international and local media companies will be the norm, predicted Karen Elliott House. Working with global companies will require good communication skills, flexibility and team work, skills which women already bring to management.

Will women change the news media of the future? The debate is still open, but most women journalists feel that they can and will influence the industry once women reach a critical mass in decision-making positions. In her response to the 2000 IWMF survey, a U.S. journalist summed it up: Women working together and supporting one another to reach the highest levels in the media, "will have great impact in making their publications more useful, relevant, and accessible" to society as a whole.

For the report's full copy, visit the Website: <http://www.iwmf.org> or contact:

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