

# Women In The Newsroom: Acheiving At Least 30% Decision Making Participation

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## Abstract

A study by the International Federation of Journalists' report (2001), illustrated that even though globally women represent more than a third of working journalists, yet the percentage of women editors, heads of departments or media owners is only 0.6%. Therefore this research explores Malaysian women's involvement within the journalism field, specifically in the newsroom, the challenges they face in reaching to the level of independent decision makers and persons of authority. In this study the researchers explored several areas related to women in the Malaysian mainstream media, specifically English newspapers - the general view of the women's status in the media and how balanced it is; the various types of challenges and problems women in the media face and may be facing in the path of their career; and whether or not they have equal decision making power in the newsroom.

Based on intensive interviews of samples from three mainstream English newspapers, the findings although not generalized to all press in Malaysia revealed the level of women's involvement in the decision-making role and the types of struggles they face in the editorial room. The data from the interviews are presented in comparison with some of the related studies and researchers done by scholars around the world. The findings also showed that with all the advancement of time and technology, the media scenario does not have significant transformation in terms of women's challenges in rising higher and their positions in the decision making strata despite governments call for equality and 30% quota set for women in decision making. With this in mind it is also evident that more women should be given a bigger responsibility in making decisions in the news room. The under representation of women often reflects

the gender insensitiveness of the media, country and society thus demonstrating ineffectiveness in implementation of government's policy and a 'democratic deficit', for equality is the basis of human rights. It is recommended that not only women learnt o break this glass ceiling but men too need to be educated and made aware of the needs for women to move along the flows of a changing society. The findings show that the respondents autonomy. It is strongly felt that the Malaysian media is certainly 'not there yet'. The Malaysian media and the public sector are not even halfway through and the plan remains a plan. Although in most cases their decisions are usually respected and accepted because their superiors trust their works and ability in decision making; the researchers' recommend that women be given a chance to prove that they are as as capable as men in making a decision as they are in other aspects of life.

In August 2004, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced the policy of at least 30% participation of women at the decision making level in all sectors of the work force and this was incorporated in the 9th Malaysia Plan. Following this In the National Media Monitoring Survey (2006) conducted by All Women's Action Society Malaysia (AWAM) and the International Federation of Journalists' showed that despite the 30% quota set for women in decision making positions (9th Malaysian Plan), there were still a minority in the senior managerial posts in Malaysian media. It also showed that there are still many obstacles keeping female journalists from progressing further in the field. The National Media Monitoring Survey (NMMS) 2006 report also shows that women made up a majority of 63.8% of reporters and journalists identifiable by gender in Malaysia. However it states that "despite the numbers, women's voices are still acutely underrepresented in the media. The number of women journalists may not be reflected in the actual decision-makers within the newsroom, such as the editors" (AWAM, 2006).

A recent study by the International Federation of Journalists (2001) also uncovered that even though more than a third of today's journalists are women, overall they comprise less than 3% of media decision-makers. The study showed that female journalists still have to overcome many barriers if they want to reach their full potential in the journalism world. This signals that although the world is moving forward and women are contributing to its development, they are not given equal opportunity when it comes to leading an organisation or making decisions in an organisation. One of the very common barriers is firstly stereotypes where people are immune in their cultural attitudes expecting women to still remain subordinate and subservient has directly and indirectly contributed to their negative attitudes towards women journalists; secondly employment conditions where sexual harassment, age discrimination, and inequality in pay, promotion and access to decision-making positions; and thirdly social and personal obstacles like conflicting family and career demands, lack of support facilities, and lack of self-esteem, all have become like speed-breakers in their journey (IFJ, 2001).

At the same time, the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) reported that women are still facing enormous obstacles to equal employment

and equal treatment, despite more women attending journalism schools, a greater awareness about discrimination and efforts at increasing diversity in the workplace (cited in Hernandez, 1996). Cultural attitudes expecting women to be subordinate and subservient and negative attitudes towards women journalists; Employment conditions: lack of equal pay, lack of access to further training, lack of fair promotion procedures, lack of access to decision-making positions, sexual harassment, age discrimination, and job segregation; Social and personal obstacles: conflicting family and career demands, lack of support facilities, and lack of self-esteem. (Peter, 2001, p.97) are all reasons in some way or another which influence women from moving to the top or becoming stagnant.

Ng who is now Group Editorial/Education Adviser to Star Publications (Malaysia) Bhd and a prominent woman in Malaysian media who holds a senior position stated,

*"There was also the perception that women had limitations that they could not be sent out to cover an assignment in the middle of the night and would not be able to work the long hours."*

[http://www.jpw.gov.my/panel/upload/glassceiling36\\_37.pdf](http://www.jpw.gov.my/panel/upload/glassceiling36_37.pdf)

It is surprising then that women everywhere are equally pacing in all types of industries and are contributing to the socio-economic growth in their countries. Many have, over the years struggled to voice out countless issues pertaining to women and discriminations towards them. These outcries have turned many to form organisations and impose laws to educate, protect and empower women from all over the world. However problems surrounding women still exist in a big scale. Many still indulge their mind in the typical stereotype that women make bad leaders as their decisions will be influenced by their emotions and therefore would not make rational judgements. Some are restricted by beliefs of religion which forbids women to be independent or to be a leader. Women struggle to make their voices heard in societies that are deeply ingrained in their socio-cultural customs. Amongst them are women working in the media, particularly journalism, who face a rigid working environment. (Ross, 2001; Shetty, 2006). As what Chambers, Steiner and Fleming (2004) stated, "while maleness is rendered neutral and male journalists are treated largely as professionals, women journalists are signified as *gendered*. Their work is routinely defined and judged by their femininity."

With all that is going on in the Malaysian media the question remains where the women were. In the 1970's women were a rare breed in Malaysian journalism. There were very few women who held editorial management positions as seen in Cheryl Doral the only woman's Sports Editor in the New Straits Times in the early 1980's. Today as of yesterday women are competing for a place in a male dominated industry although there are more women in journalism courses today than was yesterday (Fernandez, 2008). Malaysia inherited the press system left by the British upon independence in 1957. This included inheriting press laws created during colonization. Today 61 years later, press laws are important factors in establishing the running of Malaysian press as well as the fact that

the ownership and control of the press by individuals or groups associated with the ruling party (Hashim, 1996) is an important and interesting factor in viewing the function and development of the Malaysian press. Anuar (2002) described the mass media as playing an important role in supplying the people a platform where they can obtain information, exchange views and at the same time give their feedback to the ruling elite. Malaysian press is peculiar in terms of the various laws that govern the multiracial, multi-religious facets of the country and the press. Sensitivities are left on the backburner and journalists are made aware of what can and cannot be written for the 'good of one and all' for the stability of the social, economic and political scenario. Because most, if not all the press in Malaysia are somewhat associated to the ruling party, the editor is a political appointee and therefore information churned out from the newspapers intend in some ways to have a slant or a particular bias (Nadeswaran, 2008).

Thus showing a clear cut scenario of the 'big' number of women involved in the media yet there is still few of them representing 'big' posts in the media itself – proving the under-representation of women in the media, which if left unattended to would reflect on “democratic deficit” and the acceptance of the concept of glass ceiling and glass cliff's.

It is interesting to note that there is very little research conducted on female journalists in Malaysia and their decision making, although it is assumed that there are more women in journalism as a whole (newspapers and magazines) than their male counterparts. Most journalists, male and female enter the journalism field hoping that it will be a stepping stone to other greater things in life. Some enter journalism with a preconceived notion of it being glamorous and comfortable, both of which are untrue most of the time. Most of them enter journalism not hoping to climb the ladder and look at being a journalist as a source of income rather than a profession (Nadeswaran, 2008).

## **DECISION MAKING IN THE ORGANIZATION**

The International Federation of Journalists' study (2001) among four major continents states that “although more than a third of today's journalists are women, they only comprise less than 3% of media decision-makers. Female journalists still have to triumph over many barriers and boundaries to reach their full prospective in the profession.” Peters' (2001) study states that women who make up more than a third of the world's journalists work in newspapers and magazines, in broadcasting and on-line media and cover issues ranging from education to war. However she states that women are still very far from the commanding heights of equality with men, who dominate the executive class of modern media. The IFJ survey (2001) which consists of unions from 40 countries, representing some 300,000 journalists, also found that only 0.6% of women get into decision-making posts in media. Journalists' unions have been more successful in getting women into top positions where 17% of the union leaders are women. (Peters, 2001)

"There is not a single country in the world today where women have the same opportunities as men, and although progress has been made in some areas in recent years, women are still disadvantaged in economic and political life." Stating that the opportunities available to men and women are unequal worldwide and almost 70% of the world's poor are women. ([http://www.socialwatch.org/en/noticias/noticia\\_117.htm](http://www.socialwatch.org/en/noticias/noticia_117.htm))

According to Ng Poh Tip (2006), most women remain in the minority, however, as most women venture no further than becoming heads of departments within the company. "It's not that there are not enough able women. There are just not that many chances to get to the top if you are a woman" ([http://www.jpw.gov.my/panel/upload/glassceiling36\\_37.pdf](http://www.jpw.gov.my/panel/upload/glassceiling36_37.pdf))

The former Malaysian Women, Family and Development Minister Dato' Sri Shahrizat Jalil was quoted saying that "although women were doing well in Malaysian society, their numbers at the decision-making level remained low." In politics, Shahrizat pointed out that only 9.4% of federal ministers and 7.7% of deputy ministers are women. "In the Dewan Rakyat, only 9.6% of the members are women. As for state legislative assemblies, the numbers are dismal and appalling," Malaysia's 11th General Elections (2004) saw an increase in the number of female candidates both Parliamentary and State seats, from 20 (10.4%) of the 193 to 23 (10.5%) of the 219 Members of Parliament were women (The Star, 2007). In comparison, today in the new cabinet line up, women have 10.81% of the 222 parliamentary seats and 7.92% of the 505 state seats, but this is only about 1% more than in the 2004 polls, and far from the 30% target set in the Ninth Malaysia Plan. "While the world average women's participation in politics is 16% (NST, 2008)

Dr. Shanthi Thambiah, associate professor of the gender studies department at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Universiti Malaya stated that "the pace of change is (still) too slow". (NST, 2008). This shows that though women constitute almost half of registered voters, yet currently only less than 10% of all MPs in Parliament are women.

Women who make up more than half of the world's population, are grossly under represented in political parties, government posts, decision-making positions in private companies or in public life in general. (Peters, 1995) In Malaysia, women at different levels of decision making in the public sectors - Secretary General, 14.8% of women compared to 85.9% of men; Director General only 11.8% of women while men hold 88.2%; and for Chief Executive for all Federal Statutory Bodies, women only make 14.1% while men make 85.9%. Whereas in the corporate sectors women in among members of Board of Directors are 5.3% in 2007 and about 24% in the President, Vice-President, Managing Director, Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operation Officer, Senior General Manager and General Manager positions ([http://www.kpwkm.gov.my/panel/Upload/T7.8\\_07.pdf](http://www.kpwkm.gov.my/panel/Upload/T7.8_07.pdf))

Therefore it is evident that women are far even from half of the target set by the government in the 9th Malaysia Plan. Although women provide corporate companies with "comparative advantage when they hold management roles because they represent the needs of their female consumers or stockholders" (Byanyima, 2007) many organisations still do not see the difference women make and do not value their output as much.

Reeds (2002), urges other women to use their reporting skills to document gender discrepancies in their newsrooms. She found that there is little in-depth coverage of gender discrimination and sexual harassment issues in the workplace, and very little talk about women's issues even within news organizations, compared to previous years and mentions that women have helped to change the content of news pages using material of particular interest to women, which used to be ignored and which is now spread throughout the paper. Even when women select the same news content as men, they write it in a different manner.

Therefore, in conclusion, the gender imbalance in the media is not just a phenomenon here in Malaysia but is a global crisis differing in the degree of how bad the situation is. Over the years many studies have been done worldwide (Gallagher, 1995; Thompson, 1998; Peters, 2001; Ross, 2001; Chambers, Steiner, Fleming, 2004; Shetty, 2006; AWAM, 2007) on the status, perception, portrayal and the involvement of women in the media industry but there is so far no thorough studies done on women in the media and their decision making roles in Malaysian media.

In this study the researchers will explore several areas related to women in the Malaysian mainstream media, specifically English newspapers - the general view of the women's status in the media and how balanced it is; the various types of challenges and problems women in the media face and may be facing in the path of their career; and whether or not they have equal decision making power in the newsroom. But before that can be discussed it also appropriate to understand the concept of 'glass ceiling'.

## **GLASS CEILING**

Glass ceiling is another major hurdle which many women in the media struggle to cross. According to the Wall Street Journal (1987) this phenomenon is an invisible but seemingly unbreakable barrier preventing women from breaking through to the top echelons of industry and business. As what Dupe Ayayi-Gbadebo (n.d.), a Nigerian newspaper editor-in-chief said:

*"Women journalists are cracking the glass ceiling, but we must remember that when you break glass you may get scratches from the splinters. Women must be ready to take power in the newsroom; don't wait for the men to give it to you."*

Thompson (1998) mentions in her study of quotes from some females in the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) as saying that there were few people in the newspapers. Although women were making inroads into newsroom management there was still a long way to go. It was also mentioned that women are entering newsrooms with greater ease. A majority of journalism graduates are women. But the glass ceiling is real, the flexibility for families elusive.

Some who've made the climb wonder whether the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon has its roots in historic male bias or in the goals and limitations set by newspaperwomen themselves. The business is demanding, Howell observes, "and if you can't commit yourself beyond a certain point it is very difficult to take these jobs." (Thompson, 1998, p.43)

This is yet another evidence to show that large proportion of women entering into the journalism industry with yet fewer in senior managerial roles. It also explicitly states that the women have push through the still traditional male-biased perception which shadows the media industry in most places to make way for their career advancement. With the persistent existence of this invisible barrier in almost all sectors of public or private organisations, women would be unable to express their share of leadership and decision making and further establish themselves in career and life. Juggling career and family is just not a trouble-free accomplishment, thus many face a crossroad to either choose one and leave the other or remain in their current position and not seek for advancement for with progress comes more responsibility and commitments. That is why many women still sit on sidelines although rare opportunities for top jobs arrive at their doorstep.

Around the world, about 38% of all working journalists are women. Studies conducted by Canadian researchers Gertrude Robinson and Armande Saint-Jean have found that 28% of newspaper editors are female (IFJ, 2001). Martha Lauzen (2001) said that 24% of American television producers, writers, and directors are women while a study in Canada, showed 28 percent of newspaper journalists and 37% of television journalists are women. (as quoted in IFJ, 2001). The survey resulted in most of the women agreeing "that more women in decision-making positions would have a positive impact on developing a more women-friendly news agenda although there were significant ambiguities about the salience of gender in determining a specifically en-gendered journalistic practice." (Ross, 2001) Shetty (2006) argues that for the media to serve its purpose effectively "they need to represent not only all manner of information and opinion, but also the constituents who represent this diversity."

According to Ng, women who do enter the industry have shown that they are more than just capable of earning a university degree:

*"In order to succeed in this industry, you have to be willing to sacrifice your time and do more work than is required of you. Women have proven that they are just as capable, confident and resourceful as anybody else. It's not an old boy's club anymore."*

(Joseph, 2004)

Ng pointed out that women are now making “their presence felt in every niche of the media industry, including traditionally male areas such as sports and crime reporting” and “with greater access to higher education, there is a bigger pool of female talent with the right skills to penetrate the Malaysian media.” ([http://www.jpw.gov.my/panel/upload/glassceiling36\\_37.pdf](http://www.jpw.gov.my/panel/upload/glassceiling36_37.pdf)).

Ng (Joseph, 2004) mentioned that “there is ‘a lot more right than wrong’ now than when she joined the media as a reporter in 1971. She said that the glass ceiling has been removed in Malaysia and women can be found on every rung of the ladder and in every area of media work; among them are a couple of editors in chief, some managing/executive/senior editors, several section heads and bureau chiefs - and even a woman war correspondent. But these are just some. While the overall picture appears positive, Ng mentioned that when it comes to numbers there are just too few women at the top. The minorities that fill up the quota is yet to be seen and yet to risky to make decisions at the top.

Ross (2001) also mentions this as the case in Europe and the United States that “women have been making steady progress as entrants into the sector although they do not occupy senior positions in any great number.” Van Zoonen (1998) states, the belief that more women in the media will lead to different news agenda based on two assumptions. Firstly, by being able to operate on ways that are not the common newsroom culture and by practising a feminist news practice almost all together because gender is their principal form of personal or political identification.

In a survey by IWWMF (2000), the respondents agreed that most women who make it into decision-making positions feel they have the responsibility to support and guide other women seeking to walk up the same ladder. The survey reported that the respondents believe 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” (quoted in Hernandez, 1996). The majority of 84% of respondents say that their opportunities for progression have improved in the last five years though there is no significant difference in the challenges they face. “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.” (IWWMF, 2000)

Christmas (1997, p. 52) believes that “there has been a discernible expansion of topics now regarded as legitimately ‘newsworthy’ and the way in which issues are covered, as a consequence of women’s incursions into decision-making positions.” (cited in Ross, 2001)

The All Women’s Action Society (AWAM) who conducted a National Media Monitoring Survey in 2007 which showed that although fair number women have joined the workforce, they are still underrepresented in the senior positions. Women in the Western media generally have been making stable advancement into the sector although they do not occupy senior positions in large numbers.



In Finland, for instance, women working in media industries outnumber men (Zilliacus-Tikkanen, 1997) but similar to other cases, this progress continues to be hindered by the ever present glass ceiling. (cited in Ross, 2001)

In the US and Canada, the volume indicators are broadly the same (cited in Norris, 1997) with increasing numbers of women entering the industry but few achieving very senior positions within their particular area of work. As Norris (1997) states one long-standing criticism of the media involves the barriers to entry and promotion which women have faced in newsrooms, as correspondents, reporters, editors, broadcast anchors, commentators, producers, news executives, managers and publishers. Women's organisations within and outside the media have pressured communications organisations to employ more women, especially in decision-making and management positions. By the 1990s some of the barriers have diminished, as women journalists have increased their presence (Mills, 1990; Lont, 1995; Beasley and Gibbons, 1993; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991). Nevertheless, as in other spheres of employment, the proportion of women diminishes at the higher levels of decision-making. Vertical and horizontal occupational segregation continues (Beasley and Gibbons, 1993; Marzoff 1977; Lont, 1995).

Therefore through this we understand that subsequently women are being empowered to pursue a career oriented life, thus leading to large recruitments of women employees in various sectors. The large entrants of women into media industry have somewhat influenced the way newsroom operates and also in the coverage and presentation of news itself. However, though gender does influence in changing both culture and content, women's presence in newsroom contexts is limited by the practices that are deeply rooted in the traditional male perspective. Almost all researchers seemed to agree that women are majority in the news media but minority in the decision making position. Thus the researcher believes that women's presence does bring about changes and changes are important for the newsroom culture as it has been too long been monopolised by the mindset of the opposite gender. So increasing the number of women decision-makers would certainly bring about a better check and balance in the newsroom practice and standards and also in the presentation of news which would significantly appeal to the women news consumers.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings although not generalized to all press in Malaysia revealed the level of women's involvement in the decision-making role and the types of struggles they face in the editorial room. The data from the interviews are presented in comparison with some of the related studies and researchers done by scholars around the world. This is to examine if the study's result is relevant to Malaysian context and how different or similar they are.

## Backgrounders of Interviewees

The six subjects used as samples in this research are from three different English newspapers, all female and aged between 35 – 50 years. They are all in the editorial decision-making posts in their respective newspapers. Editor A, 48, has been working in the print journalism field for 21 years and is currently the Features Desk Editor. Editor B, 44, who is the editor for Entertainment Desk, has had about 20 years of working experience in the field. Editor C, 48 and Editor D, 47, both hold the Executive Editor post and have a good 24 years of experience working in the journalism industry while Editor E, 37, and Editor F, 36 hold the Assistant News Editor post and both have 13 years of experience working in the print journalism. All of them have passed through the different stages of decision-making and have many different types of exposures from the industry. These samples are all either single or not married except for Editor C and D who are married with children.

## STEREOTYPES AND STRUGGLES OF WOMEN IN JOURNALISM

Among the problems encompassing women in the media found were lack of workplace support and flexible work hours for mothers with young families; sexism in the office and work environment; and the lack of a proper mechanism to deal with issues of sexual harassment and discrimination from contacts, colleagues and superiors are present.

All respondents agreed in one accord that the industry is still male-dominated, their views however varied in the stereotypes of women in the media. There was gender bias and marital status were some things faced by the respondents.

Comments like *“Women should not cover the crime beat because they squeamish and can’t stand the sight of blood”*; *“They are the best people to cover ‘soft’ news like fashion, human interest, education”*; *“She can do late night shifts because she is single”*; *“Sports and crime beat are meant for men”*. These are some of the common stereotypes faced by women in the journalism career in Malaysian media, as per stated by some of the respondents. Editor E stated that in her former newsroom, *“sometimes, a particular woman journalist would be called a ‘secret weapon’ to disarm a source and get information.”* While some stated that this depends on the individuals’ interest and preference and it is not because of stereotypes. They argued that they have not come across such stereotypes themselves in their long years in the field. These respondents also agreed that in their experience they received better treatment from their superiors and others compared to that of their male colleagues just because they are women.

Marital status was yet another factor which superiors were hesitant in promoting their female counterparts in their progression at work. Editor D and C stated that although they were qualified to be promoted to Bureau Chiefs (Bureau

works are outstation works), their editor hesitated because they were married and therefore not suitable for heavier responsibilities in the line like Bureau Chiefs. The respondents think that to a certain degree, it may be more difficult for married women to pursue the career but she does not believe that it is only the mother's responsibility in family care-taking; "it should be both" men and women's alike. Unfortunately she stated that *"in many countries including this one,"* she says *"the expectation is that it's still the women's responsibility."*

Marriage too to a certain extent be a factor in the pursuit of journalism as a career. Thus the perceptions and practices of the media are still pretty much male-dominated and the women's advancement path is still filled with many thorns which are clearly why women still find it hard to rise. Along the lines of being sidelined because of being married there were also times where the element of prejudice was present for instance overseas assignments. Editor C recalled one incident when one of her colleagues, an Environmental specialist, wanted to cover a conference in South America and the then group editor-in-chief was hesitant to send a woman because the city was deemed 'not safe for women'. However, she said, the news editor and some of the other colleagues fought for her, and was allowed to go, because she was the specialist after all, *"So when it comes to safety they would prefer to send a man"* Editor C.

When it comes to certain job scopes a majority of the informants agreed that although their newspapers have women crime reporters yet the percentage is far from half of the total crime reporters in their respective newsrooms. Nevertheless the informants did not think that this is underutilising the workforce but rather a type of segregation according to a "gender-news" classification. Likewise more often than not when it comes to a women's event, the newspapers in general would send their female journalists to cover it and less likely to send a male reporter. All the informants nodded in affirmation to this statement.

Editor A, B and E think that the reason women are still facing the barriers in their advancement is *"because it's still a very much male-dominated mentality that rules the work place"*, and probably because *"whoever is making the rules in the newsroom is not a woman"* and probably because of traditional perceptions that are passed on. Editor F blames it on the existence of gender discrimination, crime and the employer's inability or unwillingness to provide flexible work arrangements for women in the media.

While Editor C and D both said that their newsroom has no evident gender discrimination and when it comes to specialisation in the separate newsbeats, they said that it was up to the reporters on their interest and preferences actually. *"Male or female if they show equal performance then them both would be qualified for a particular task,"* said Editor D.

Through this, the researcher could make out that the traditional stereotypes has not vanished but are still prevalent in some aspects of the newsroom and journalistic practice. This is because of the ineffectiveness of the newsroom

policies which has long adapted to the male-dominated mentality and is not easily changeable. It also seems that when it comes to safety and security, majority agrees that it is okay to refrain or restrain women in the media from doing certain things like going to crime scenes and working late nights. What was also surprising was that some of the respondents were comfortable in their zones and did not find any misgivings to any biasness or stereotypes.

## EDITORIAL DECISION MAKING

Despite having more women in journalism, they are still significantly less in the decision making posts. Editor A is of opinion that it is a phenomenon across the board in different occupations - in universities, for example, where there is higher percentage of women yet fewer in the decision-making, and not just in the media.

The informants decision making powers centred mostly in deciding what stories to commission or publish; assigning reporters for their assignments; discuss possible angles for stories and its placement in the newspaper; attending meetings to discuss which stories goes in for print on the next day; editing, managing and coordinating certain sections or projects assigned or designated to them of which most of the time they have almost full autonomy. To a certain extent, some of the editors would clear a copy and work with the reporters on how to improve their copy while editing their work.

However they are expected to keep their superiors like Group Chief Editor (GCE) or Executive Editor informed on their decisions. The interesting word which caught the researchers' attention is "him". Almost all the informants stated almost similar lines that they would either "consult him", "inform him" or "suggest to him" about whatever decision they are ought to make in the editorial.

The informants also mentioned that in most of the cases, they would confer with "him" if there is any story which can be controversial or might attract government's restriction. Editor B stated that, "We always try to work by consensus." The informants agreed that they have sufficient power or say in the decision making process. However some said that "decisions such as angle and story placement are not unilateral decisions but a collective decision by the editors at meetings". They argued that it is a way of making sure there is check and balance through thorough discussions of views for the best decision for that particular situation. All informants were unanimous on the point where their suggestions were taken into consideration very often during decision making. The informants answer bore huge contrast when three of the informants stated that although a 30% quota has been set for women in decision making positions, the ratio did not increase in the last 10 years. However two informants stated it had. The distinction is again blurred because one respondent declined to comment on this matter, making the researcher unsure if she agreed or disagreed.

Through this, the researchers understand that although the women in the newsroom hold senior management positions, they are still underrepresented and though they possess some decision making power, they still have to report to the "him" figure – who is most likely their superior, and obviously a man.

## GLASS CEILING

Almost all informants agreed with a firm "Yes" to the existence of glass ceiling except for Editor C and D who strongly believe that the glass ceiling has been removed from their news organisation, and Editor F said she had not been bypassed for promotion because of her gender and since she also had worked with several women senior editors, she cannot say she has any first-hand experience with the glass ceiling. With many women still struggling to further their advancements in their career, it is surprising that there are people who say they are "happy to be where they are" and "do not want to go any higher."

Editor A's response was certainly shocking;

*"But if I have those ambitions, I would be very surprised if I could ever go higher than this; I don't think we've even had a woman executive editor. If I had those ambitions, I would be frustrated because I know that it is unlikely to get higher."*

These responses trigger several questions in the researcher's mind. One of them is "How did she get this far without self-confidence?" This shows that either the editor does not have high ambitions or no confidence in her achievements, which would be contradictory of herself, for without self-confidence she would not be where she is right now; or that she knows for a fact, that it is most unlikely for a woman to move higher than where she currently is. To justify which she said "*It could just be because the top decision makers are men.*" However one thing is clear; the glass ceiling has only been cracked a little but not fully shattered.

Among the criteria listed by the informants, though not necessarily always, were academic qualification and years of working experience in the industry, besides the basic journalistic skills –reporting and editing, for someone to be qualified for any senior managerial position in the newsroom. However there is much more to it than just plain experience, qualification and writing and reporting skills. The journalists should reflect management ability in their works and able to manage staff. They must have proven themselves at different levels in the newsroom and of course possess good leadership skills.

Editor E highlighted that "*nepotism and cronyism can also play a role but that would hold true for a man, too.*" Editor F stated that "*one needs experience in ability and achievement rather than just the number of years and creativity in facing new challenges in the profession*". Editor A had a different opinion. To her years of experience or personal details like marital status did not matter in

choosing a candidate. *"I had just hired somebody who had no writing experience for the features desk. I don't even know if she's married. This doesn't make a difference,"* she said.

A person who is believed to go far is the person who has done the different sections in the news and types of assignments and writing – from parliament to court, features, entertainment and crime if possible. Editor C explained that *"along the way, the management realised that not everyone can be multi-talented. So some people go up the way to deputy editor but they do not do anything at the desk or clear stories. They do reporting."*

The requirements to be promoted for senior positions seem simple yet not all journalist with excellent language and reporting skills are able to become an editor. Likewise though years of working experience is looked into yet there are many senior reporters who remain as reporters. For example Annie Frieda D'Cruz of NST who has more than 15 years of working in the industry and is also known for her good work does not hold any decision making position. Thus the researcher thinks that though many women may have stayed long in the field and possesses good journalistic values and skills, they are not guaranteed a progress in their career life.

## **OVERCOMING STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES**

In overcoming those problems mentioned earlier, Editor E suggested that *"by constantly speaking up and pushing for the right thing to be done"* women in journalism can start making ways to move upwards. She said that silence means compliance or consent to whatever that is happening. Academic credentials and professionalism as well as *"by developing a social support system within and without the office"* would helpful in defeating troubles.

Editor F listed some useful ways to overcome the hurdles: by learning how to handle sexual harassment (information easily accessible in the Internet) and by raising gender sensitivity in the newsroom through informal chats and workshops. Avoiding late assignments in quiet places alone and instead arranging appointments at a more conducive work hour, in a safe environment would definitely ward off possible dangers. Lobbying for flexi-hour at work with the editors and Human Resource Department if the journalists face problem in that area could also help improve situation.

While Editor A commented on the glass ceiling which is one of the major barriers. She admits and believes that *"an attitudinal change"* needs to improve through the generations as this was a great problem in her time. When the question arises on the fairness of the Malaysian law for women working in the media, majority of the sample agreed that it is except for Editor E who argued that:

*"For so long as we don't have a Sexual Harassment Act and family-friendly company policies, the working environment is unfair to women, no matter in which field."*

The suggestions listed by the respondents does bear clear cut solutions to each problem stated but have so far strongly proposed on any action to increase the number of women decision-makers. The researcher thinks that if all women working in the media takes these suggestions seriously and practices them in times of crisis, they could at least solve some areas of their struggles.

## **WOMEN'S FUTURE IN MALAYSIAN JOURNALISM**

The media today is at the state of flux and most of the samples stated that in any election year, there will be more restrictions than ordinary times and there is a lot to learn and improve from its outcome. With the new media evolving and growing rapidly in the industry, the media population are experiencing changes.

All the respondents strongly believe Journalism is a suitable field of career for women and there are a lot of opening for them in the industry but as mentioned earlier, many agree that there is a glass ceiling and shockingly women seeking for career advancement in this line would just have to wait with fingers-crossed and continue working diligently and efficiently.

Editor A said that *"If you're entering journalism and hoping one day to be the group editor I think it would be a very long time before that happens,"* she said. She believes that women have a very strong presence except right at the top, and she thinks that it is a field suited to them because generally *"women are better in language skills than men."*

Many confidently stated that women are naturally better in socialising with people; they tend to write better than men and are more meticulous and committed in whatever they undertake, thus making them very suitable for the job. Editor E shows optimism about the future of women in the industry when she said, *"It will continue to improve"* and describes the women in the media as *"a resilient lot."* While Editor C boldly stated that *"I think we make better reporters."* Having said that, some are yet still sceptical of whether women would really manage to breakthrough the glass ceiling and the ever dominant stereotype – 'women's major role is to be a family caretaker.' Editor B said *"I don't know if there will be any future breakthroughs but if there is it will be gradual."* She believes that the traditional view that woman come with the baggage of family, children and etc will not go away (so) soon.

In a separate interview Deputy Editor of Special Reporting Terrance Fernandez mentioned that women make better decision makers as they were thorough and meticulous even though this made them *"less popular"*. Nevertheless he mentioned that *"there should not be a gender requirement in journalism as*

*everyone should be given equal opportunity as long as they are not political appointees*". The future is unpredictable and though time does change people in many ways, but mindsets that have been passed on from generations to generations would not easily change without a good fight to prove it wrong. However with constant awareness created amongst women and men alike and with ardent fight for their rights, women can change things. When Editor E describes women as a resilient lot, it means that women have toughened themselves to face whatever challenges may come and are pushing for change in many ways – one obvious way is through their writings and training cub reporters to do the same.

The first thing that strikes the old-timers very often than not is that Journalism is not a field for women or a field not suitable for women because of the working hours and the job scope which is deemed to be risky. Although this statement may somewhat be true then, today things are changing and many believe that why shouldn't Journalism be a women's career when there is clear majority of them in the profession and is increasing as time goes worldwide.

Besides that, women in the media face narrow-mindedness in the assignments they receive. The most common ones are that there is high tendency in assigning women to more 'soft' news events coverage while "*men tend to grab a take*" (Editor A) in the hard news beats. There is still a certain degree of gender segregation in the newsroom in terms of assignments where men reporters are rarely assigned to events meant for women or conducted by women's organisation. Journalists are meant to report and write news objectively and not be influenced by his or her gender identity. Thus the researchers feel that this sort of 'gender-based-assignments' should not take place at all. In fact, it is all the better for male reporters to be assigned to women's events because through such events they would be exposed to higher awareness on challenges faced by women and understand their struggles; acknowledge their achievements and change the traditional male-dominated perceptions in newsroom. Through this there is chances of reaching out to male news consumers and create the same awareness through their writings.

Another 'gender-biased-assignments' are like crime and war reporting where the journalists safety could be at stake. The researchers found out that many think it is acceptable for women to be refrained from covering certain news due to their safety. Although the researcher agrees that safety is extremely important in this case yet the researcher highlights the ironic situation where more often than not, women face various dangers from men themselves – harassment, abuse, rape etc. Therefore even in this matter, there is a tendency of men standing in the way of women's progress.

The researchers also identified other problems faced by women in the media are lack of work-place support for mothers with young families and non-flexible work-hours which often be the reasons women journalists do not stay long in the field thus standing a very low chance of progressing further. Therefore marriage



too to a certain extent be a factor in the pursuit of journalism as a career, however it is not for men. Thus the perceptions and practices of the media are still pretty much male-dominated and the women's advancement path is still filled with many thorns which are clearly why women still find it hard to rise.

Even if the women do feature in higher positions the findings very clearly point out that there is a problem in accepting women in the top decision-making position. For in every senior post a woman holds, there definitely is a man above her, holding a higher post. It is still difficult to see women in top decision-making roles with only a few men among them.

Glass ceiling is another major hurdle which many women in the media struggle to cross. Though Ng (in Joseph, 2004), states that the glass ceiling has been removed in Malaysia and women can be found in every area of media work, the undeniable bitter truth is that the glass ceiling still exists in Malaysian media of all types and languages.

Thus although things have changed along with technological and cultural advancement, yet to a certain degree the setting of the media is still under the shadow of male domination and their perceptions. Thorough analysis of the problem faced by many women in the media all over the country. Although in Malaysia, the scenario is not as worse, yet there is still more room for change and improvement. This shows that the obvious and most significant discrimination women in the media face is the lack of women's representation in the senior managerial positions or decision-making roles. What is more shocking is that nothing much has been done to improve the situation where the findings and analysis showed that the situation was more or less similar about 20 years ago to what is now. However it is a fact known to all that debates and discussions on the issues on gender or anything related will never see a possible end. However solutions can be sought and implemented to mend the situation. Many scholars and studies have clearly characterised the nature of a newsroom in the journalism world in this era and of the past. However the recurring of similar situations shows the failure of the country's policies and the weakness of its implementation.

It was found that all the respondents agreed that journalism is a suitable field for women and asked "why shouldn't it be?" This is evident women know what they want in the industry and they are changing the 'male-dominated' phrase in the newsroom. The researcher feels that today, when they say it is male-dominated, it is not so much of the number of male journalists there are, because it is an obvious thing that overall women outnumber the men in journalism, but it is very much the culture, mindset and perceptions in journalism that truly is 'male-dominated'. Many of the respondents felt that there should definitely be more women in the top posts and this advancement is somewhat blocked by the still existing glass ceiling, that which creates the problem in women rising to higher positions, though some say that it is not.

The other major barrier is when it comes to safety and security of women who are out at field. It is true that there are many dangers and risks for women in the industry, in fact in any industry and people cannot run away from that because that is reality. However the researcher realised that more often than not the risks and dangers posed to women in general comes from the men – violence against women; sexual harassment, ‘flashers’, rape, snatch thefts, murder and so on. There should not just be policy to change the male-dominating culture and perception but there should be serious law that clearly sets the platform for women to progress smoother in the industry with no stereotypical and conservative perceptions.

The findings show that the respondents’ autonomy is quite narrow where most of the time propose their ideas to superiors first and then collaboratively decide on a particular matter. There has been no case or examples recorded in the findings where the respondents bear full autonomy in making the desired decision without having to inform or update the other members of the senior positions. It is strongly felt that the Malaysian media is certainly ‘not there yet’. The Malaysian media and also many other public sector are not even halfway through and the plan remains a plan. Although in most cases the samples their decisions are usually respected and accepted because their superiors trust their works and ability in decision making; the researcher’s question here is why should there always be a superior for these women decision makers and must it be a “him”, regardless of whether their decision is accepted or not? The researcher thinks that women are as capable as men in making a decision as they are in other aspects of life.

Women should be brave and confident in voicing out and taking their place. They should not just wait for their promotion but push for it in a way where their talents in writing, journalistic skills and leadership qualities will be noticed by their superiors. As the general message of this study, women in the media cannot be complacent or happy about their status or position just because there are some women in the senior managerial positions but acknowledge the deficits and demand more for what is rightfully theirs. This way, they do not just fight for their rights and demonstrate good journalism but also make way for themselves and the generations to come to proceed further in the industry. The mindset of following the social definition of what ought to be or is a suitable job for women should be completely erased from our culture.

However it was the boldness of some women who constantly fought for change and other groups of interest who helped are their voice, which have change or improved the traditional scenario thus far. In short, women in the media should be encouraged to seek management jobs through the proper guidelines by mentors for cub reporters. The news organisation should enhance their journalistic skills and leadership traits through training in managing people; give them important production responsibilities or beats to coordinate; be sensitive to cultural differences and leadership styles and re-examine the current newsroom

culture and evaluate the changes or improvements that have taken place. With this in mind there could also be a possibility of future understanding of newsroom culture where women are considered and to identify possible leadership differences in elevating women to the top.

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