

Country Report: “Media and Gender in Nepal”

Part of the IFJ Media and Gender in Asia-Pacific Research Project





Media and Gender in the Asia Pacific Region

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Introduction to IFJ gender and media research

This report has been prepared as part of the “Research Study on Media and Gender in Asia-Pacific” project undertaken by the IFJ and supported by UNESCO in partnership with UN Women. In line with UNESCO’s Communication and Information Programme for 2014 to 2017, the project comprises research on gender and media conducted in partnership with national stakeholders in seven countries in the Asia-Pacific region (South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific): Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vanuatu.

This report includes an overall analysis of women in the Nepali media and explores the challenges they face. It compares the status and roles of men and women journalists in similar contexts to better understand differentiation based on gender (if any) in the media industry.

Recommendations emerging from the findings of the research seek to encourage the media community, at the national level, to work with the government, media organisations and unions to address the problems that currently exist and closing the gender divide.

The research presented in this report has been obtained through a survey and interviews conducted by the author between September and December 2014.

Evolving media in a new democracy

The publication of the Nepali language *Gorkhapatra* as a weekly newspaper in 1901 gave birth to the media industry in Nepal. More than a century has passed and Nepal’s media industry remains largely traditional.

Today, most media houses continue to be situated in Kathmandu. The country’s media has faced the challenge of covering a ten-year long armed conflict between the Maoists and the government of Nepal launched in 1996; witnessed the overthrow of the monarchy and weathered states of emergency, repressive laws and straightened times, and survived despite an economy in shambles.

The beginning of the peace process in 2006 has given way to the mushrooming of vibrant media houses with a diversity of voices in this newly democratic climate. The constitution, which is in the process of being re-written, promises equal representation of all castes, ethnic groups, genders and regions in *Naya* (“new”) Nepal.

But there are still challenges for all industries in Nepal – including the media, according to some like Montessori Rajbhandari, director of Ujyalo FM Network: “The root cause of the deterioration ... is the unstable political environment in the country.”

Rajbhandari believes the confusion and contradictions of the peace process have led to the gradual closure of industries and businesses which has in turn had a negative impact on the country’s economy. The economic instability has not left the media untouched. Since the government has no clear media policy, there is no official recognition of the essential pre-requisites for independent media to flourish.

Under the circumstances, some media houses in Nepal today are run by politically aligned individuals and operate as mouth-pieces of particular political parties. The fact that the communications ministry has failed to introduce clear policies to enhance the quality of media



houses is no doubt due to such political interests in the media industry. Political intervention in the media sector has also led to the non-implementation of minimum wage regulations.

The Gender Inequality Index unveiled by World Economic Forum shows that Nepal has moved forward in eliminating gender disparity this year. Nepal has been ranked at 112th place from last year's 21st position among 136 countries in terms of gender gap.

Nepal's ten year long conflict and people's struggle has that set the tone for the new political era in the country and has been attributed as leading the movement in securing women's' place in Nepal's political history. The comprehensive peace accord and the interim constitution has since ensured 33 percent women participation in every entity of the state.

In terms of women in journalism in Nepal, it took almost 50 years for women-centric journalism to strike roots from the opening of the first media outlet. Nepal was, and still is, a patriarchal society where men are expected to be the bread earners of the family and women are told to remain at home and look after the family.

The launch of the magazine *Mahila* ("Woman") in 1952, allowed gender-related issues and women's stories to come to the forefront of society and gave women journalists a forum where their voices could be heard for the first time. Playing a singular role as a women's magazine, *Mahila* became a platform to disseminate information on gender-related issues and made way for more women to take up journalism and share their stories. Almost 60 years since *Mahila's* launch, there have been some advancement in the conditions for women journalists, but there is much room for improvement.

Today, the media industry in Nepal is overwhelmingly male. Based on research done in Kathmandu, only 24 percent of journalists are women. The top level management of most media organisations is dominated by men. Almost all editors and owners of media houses are men. For example, editors in major news organisations such as *The Kathmandu Post* and *Republica* are all men.

There are very few women at top decision-making roles; women are generally confined to roles within middle and lower management. The environment and policies of media workplaces are not yet conducive for women to advance in their professional careers.

With few women editors, women at junior levels also lack role models. It is clear that when women are missing at senior management levels, basic facilities like maternal leave, childcare services, flexible working hours and transport services also tend to be neglected. In addition, with men more likely to be seen as the sole family breadwinners, male salaries tend to be higher than those of their women colleagues in similar positions or with similar responsibilities. There is also a divide in the types of stories assigned to men and women journalists, with male journalists typically reporting on politics and business and women generally covering entertainment and lifestyle.

Policies promoting gender equality have been adopted only by some media organisations. But even there implementation is often weak, if not non-existent. Most organisations do not have policies to combat sexual harassment or proper mechanisms for filing complaints. Where such mechanisms are in place, women find it difficult report harassment for fear of how such a step will affect their image and career.



This report highlights the ordeals experienced by women journalists who have broken the silence about sexual harassment.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

Of the 103 individuals currently working in Nepal who responded to the questionnaire, 97.08 percent were Nepalese, one each were Cambodian and Indian and the remaining self-identified as ‘other.’

Most of the respondents (71.84 percent) were women and 27.18 percent were men. One person identified themselves as ‘other’ gender. Respondents largely came from Kathmandu and Bhaktapur but a range of Nepalese regions/provinces were represented.

The data on ages suggests that Nepal’s media industry is, by and large, young. Most respondents (79.61 percent) were under 35 years of age: 50.48 percent in the 26-35 age group, and another 29.12 percent in the 18-25 age group. None of the survey participants were aged over 55.

| What is your age? | Total | Female | Male | Other |
|-------------------|-------|--------|------|-------|
| 18 – 25 | 30 | 29 | 1 | 0 |
| 26 – 35 | 52 | 36 | 16 | 0 |
| 36 – 45 | 15 | 6 | 8 | 1 |
| 46 – 55 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Grand Total | 103 | 74 | 28 | 1 |

Almost a fifth (19.42 percent) said they belonged to an ethnic/religious minority. The greatest proportions (35 percent each) said they belonged to an ethnic minority or indigenous community.

Most (89.32 percent) were Hindu, 7.77 percent were Buddhist and the remainder were ‘other’, describing as atheist and Sanatan Vedic.

All participants in the survey had completed some form of formal education. Most (54.37 percent) had post-graduate education and a little more than a third (36.89 percent) had under-graduate qualifications. A minority (10.68 percent) had only completed secondary school.

More women (41.89 percent) had obtained only undergraduate qualifications than men (25 percent), however more men (75 percent) obtained post-graduate qualifications than women (45.94 percent). A small number had also completed professional courses.

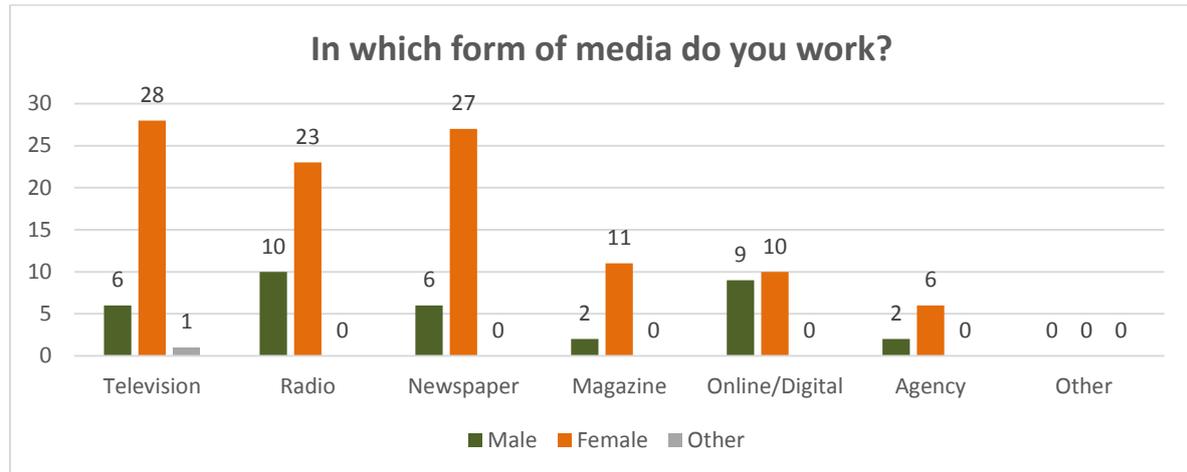
Women front a ‘big boys club’ at work

Interestingly, there was a gender divide in the reasons cited by respondents for choosing journalism as a career. Respondents could choose from a selection of responses as to their motivations. Two thirds (67 percent) said ‘love of journalism’ was a primary motivation. However, more men (78.57 percent) selected this option than women (63.51 percent).



A significant proportion of women (35.13 percent) chose ‘fame/glamour/opportunity/prestige’ and another 29.73 percent chose ‘make a difference/call the powerful to account’. In contrast only 14.29 percent and 25 percent of men selected these answer respectively.

Most respondents (58.25 percent), both men (53.57 percent) and women (60.81 percent), reported their families as being ‘supportive’ when they joined the profession, with only a small number (5.82 percent) reporting that their families were against the move or ‘negative’. Just over a third (35.92 percent) described their family response as ‘neutral’.



Interestingly, 33.98 percent of respondents work in television, closely followed by 32.04 percent working in radio and newspaper each. Respondents could select multiple media in this question so with 141 responses from 103, would suggest that some people are working in more than one type of medium.

Of the three, radio had a stronger male response with 35.71 percent of the men surveyed and 31.08 percent from women. Women surveyed were marginally more strongly represented in television (37.83 percent), which is due to the high number of women presenters in news programs and newspapers had 36.48 percent of the women. Men dominate the online medium, with 32.14 percent of men compared with 13.51 percent from females. It is clear from the data that more women work across a number of media in Nepal than men.

When asked about their area of work in the profession, most (59.22 percent) described themselves as a reporter – this was virtually equal across genders. The next highest category response was editor (31.06 percent), followed by anchor/newsreaders (30.09 percent). Producers comprised 28.15 percent of all respondents and sub or copy editors comprised 20.38 percent.

Again, the numbers clarified the clear gender distinction in television presenting with 33.78 percent of women saying they were anchors/presenters, compared to 21.42 percent of men surveyed. A greater proportion of women (22.97 percent) said they were sub-editors than men (14.29 percent). Respondents in this question were again able to select a number of options. With more than double the response rate than the group size would suggest journalists are performing multiple duties in their roles.

Most respondents (73.78 percent) used Nepali as their primary language at work. Almost a quarter (24.27 percent) used English.



The situation for employment reflected that most respondents (69.90 percent) were engaged in full-time regular work. More women were in full-time contract work (10.81 percent) than men (3.57 percent). Another 13.51 percent of women were engaged as part-time regular or freelance however no men were engaged this way.

Of respondents who answered the question on media organisation size, just over half (52.94 percent) said they worked in an organisation employing 100-1500 people. Just over a third (34.11 percent) were working in organisations of less than 100 employees.

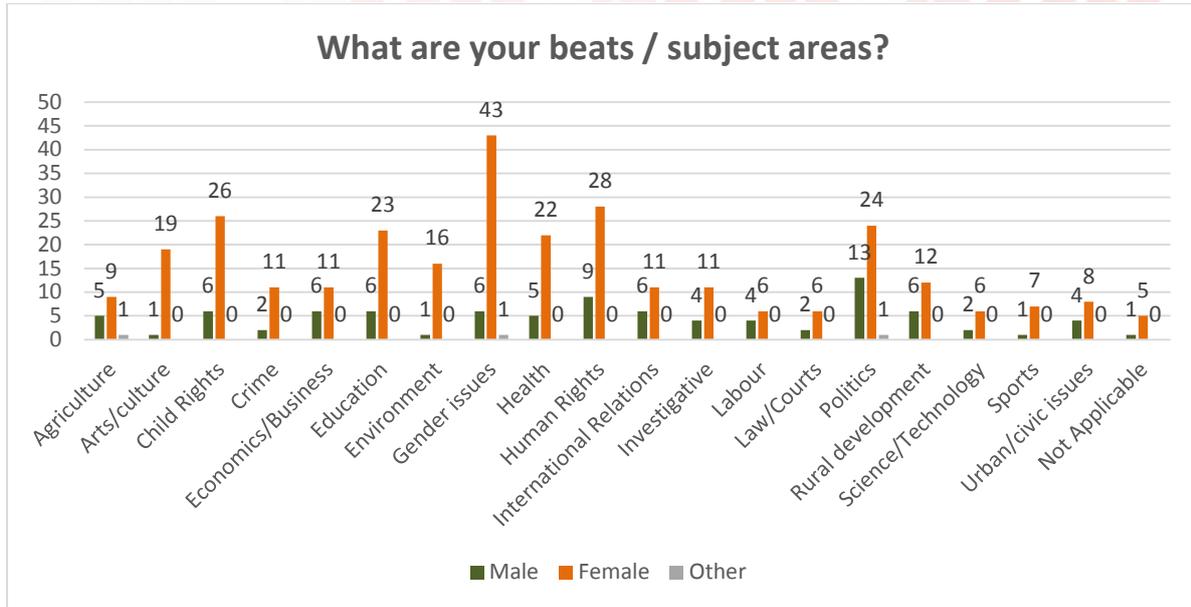
The greatest proportion of respondents (41.74 percent) had been in the industry 10 or more years. Another 37.86 percent had worked 3-10 years and 20.38 percent had been in the industry less than 3 years. More women (25.68 percent) seemed to have entered the industry in the past three years than men (just 7.14 percent) and proportionately there were more women (41.89 percent) than men (25 percent) in the next bracket with experience of 3-10 years. But the numbers of women in the industry dwindled out after 10 years (or maybe they weren't there in the first place) after 10 years. Men strongly outnumbered women here 67.86 percent to 32.43 percent.

When it comes to career status within Nepal's media, more than half the male respondents (53.57 percent) described themselves as 'senior' to only a quarter of the women (25.67 percent). More women (56.75 percent) said they were 'mid-level'. At 'junior' level were 14.86 of women and 3.57 of men.

While more than half (51.46 percent) said they had been given the opportunity to choose their beats, broken down between genders this comprised 75 percent of men yet only 41.89 percent of women. A third of women (32.43 percent) said they were able to choose 'to some extent'.

When it comes to beats and subject areas there were some clear gender distinctions. Women were more likely to cover (from most popular down) gender issues, human rights, child rights, politics, education and health. Men (from most popular) were more likely to cover politics, human rights followed by (all equal in responses) child rights, education, gender issues, international relations and rural development.

The beats with the largest gender gap were gender issues with 58.10 percent of women covering this area compared to 21.42 percent of men; and politics which was covered by 46.43 percent of men compared to 32.43 percent of women. It is evident from the data that respondents are covering a number of beats in their work, with men on average covering more than 3 beats, while women are covering more than 4 beats.



Half of the men surveyed (50 percent) said they could ‘always’ determine the content of their work, compared to 30 percent of women. Over a third of both men and women said they could determine the content of their work ‘most of the time’ while more women (27 percent) said they could only do this ‘to some extent’ compared to 14 percent of men. The one person described as ‘other’ said they could ‘always’ determine the content of their work.

A similar gender gap was revealed in response to the question on how far they were able to influence coverage of news and views in their media outlets: 43 percent of men said they were ‘always’ able to influence coverage whereas less than a quarter (23 percent) women had that confidence. Interestingly, however, a larger proportion of women (38 percent) than men (21 percent) said they were able to influence coverage of news and views in their media outlets ‘most of the time.’

Interestingly, going by survey findings, men seem to have more say in the content of their work and tend to face fewer obstacles while performing their professional tasks. One reason for this may be the fact that fewer women are in decision-making roles within media organisations and, therefore, have less influence over the workings of the company.

With a larger network of men at the higher levels of media organisations, women have to contend with the so-called ‘Big Boy’s Club’ which tends to underestimate them and to not recognise or value their work and opinions. When asked about the percentage of women media workers in their department, most respondents (55.34 percent) said women comprised between 5-20 percent. Another 14.56 percent said the proportion was less than 5 percent.



| What is the percentage of woman media workers in your department? | Total | Female | Male | Other |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Less than 5% | 15 | 11 | 4 | 0 |
| 5% - 20% | 57 | 43 | 14 | 0 |
| 21% - 50% | 11 | 6 | 5 | 0 |
| 51% - 75% | 9 | 5 | 3 | 1 |
| 76% - 100% | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Not applicable | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Grand Total | 94 | 67 | 26 | 1 |

Peace in Rolpa brings a brighter dawn for women

Devi Gurung was just 14 years old when she got married. Rolpa is a district known for being among the lowest placed on the Human Development Index and when her family decided she should get married in the seventh grade, this was not considered unusual.

Like marriage, pregnancy was also not of her choice. Things got more complex when, at the age of 16, she gave birth to a baby girl. That was during the time when the Maoist insurgency was at its peak and Rolpa was the epicentre of the conflict.

But Gurun’s life improved when she encountered Radio Jaljala, the first FM radio station of the district which was established in 2008. After getting an opportunity for training, she pursued a career in media.

While she started work as a volunteer, today 27-year-old Gurung is an associate editor in Radio Jaljala, stationed at Liwang, the district headquarters of Rolpa. While her husband is in Malaysia as a migrant worker, she attempts to maintain a balance between her family and her career.

Garun resumed her education after the birth of her baby and is currently pursuing a degree in Liwang, majoring in Nepali and sociology. Even though her daughter is only in the sixth grade now, Gurung dreams of helping her becoming an educated and empowered woman.

The participation of Maoists in the peace process in 2006 brought a brighter dawn for women journalists in Rolpa. It also made the establishment of radio and print media possible.

Although a few local, weekly newspapers existed during the insurgency, they tended to focus on promoting the activities of the Maoists. According to Manisha Shreshta, the news editor of Radio Jaljala, the peace process opened the door for credible journalism in the area for the first time.

The latest statistics of the Rolpa chapter of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) show a total of 28 women journalists from the district have joined the FNJ and other journalists’ unions.

“The number is really encouraging,” says Ishwari GM, Secretary of the district’s FNJ chapter. “While there were almost no women journalists during the civil war, now women feel safe to travel around the district for reporting. Some of the women also hold leading positions in the journalists’ union.”



However, job opportunities for women journalists from Rolpa in mainstream media houses at the national level are still very few. “Only one woman journalist from here has got a job in mainstream media,” says Gurung.

Radio Jaljala’s Shreshta is the only woman journalist of the district to have got an opening in the national media: she is currently the Rolpa correspondent for ABC Television, one of the country’s leading Nepali language channels. However, another journalist, Kavita Upadhyay, has moved to Rolpa from her home district of Dang in pursuit of a journalism career.

According to Gurung, newspapers and local FMs provide a fair amount of space for issues concerning women. The leading national weekly newspaper of the district, *Sunstar*, where she holds the additional position of associate editor, provides a full page for women’s issues, where topics relating to gender-based violence, child marriage, girls’ education, reproductive health issues, and so on, are explored.

Men staffers at FM stations ensure that their women colleagues do not have to work late hours since the way home is unsafe at night. Radio Rolpa, Radio Jaljala and Radio Holy Reaction are the three FM stations in the district. Asha Magar and Uma KC are among the active journalists of Radio Rolpa.

The women journalists of Rolpa have a complaint about the organisers of media/journalism training programmes, asking why they are held only in the capital city, Kathmandu. According to them, they get few opportunities for skill development, with trainers from Kathmandu reaching them only once in a long while.

“Although we undergo district-based training on a rotation basis, we hardly have access to training by the bigger organisations from Kathmandu,” says Shreshta, who has a small baby. According to her, since most women working in the media have small children, training opportunities that would allow them to bring children along would help them develop their skills and outreach.

With regard to the implementation of the law relating to minimum daily wages for journalists and the access of women journalists to such wages, they point out that, unlike the financially weak print media, the radio sector provides minimum wages, enabling its workers to become self-sufficient.”

Although Gurung believes they deserve twice the salary they currently receive, she is also conscious of the precarious finances of media houses across the country and believes she cannot depend solely on her earning as a journalist in the future.

“Radio is doing well at the moment but, going by the situation of several media houses even in Kathmandu, it would be wrong to conclude that it will thrive here in the longer term,” she said.

Nevertheless, journalism has so far provided her with unprecedented opportunities to script her own career path.

Decision-makers overwhelmingly male

As already outlined, Nepal’s media industry remains overwhelmingly male. Based on research done in Kathmandu for the IFJ project, only 24 percent of journalists are women. The top level



management of most media organisations is dominated by men. Almost all editors and owners of media houses are men. For example, editors in major news organisations such as *The Kathmandu Post* and *Republica* are all men.

Women are clearly not represented in decision-making roles within media organisations in Nepal. This is evident from the survey data as well as interviews with media professionals in Nepal. While more than a third of respondents (37.86 percent) said women were represented at executive level in their organisations in some way, the numbers were not strong. Nearly half (43.69 percent) said women at top level (eg board, executive, chief financial officer, general manager etc) represented less than 10 per cent of individuals at this level.

In the case of decision-making roles within the senior editorial team, 52.42 percent of respondents put the percentage of women in these roles below 10 percent, while 21.36 percent put it at 10-25 percent. A minimal number of respondents (7.77 percent) said women made up more than 50 percent of their decision-making positions within the management.

At middle level editorial positions such as senior editors, chief of correspondents, feature and foreign editor level, the numbers were still poor with 39.8 percent of all respondents saying the proportion of women in these positions was less than 10 percent. Another 35.92 percent put the figure at 10-25 percent. Just 5.82 percent put it over 50 percent.

According to Montessori Rajbhandari of Ujyalo FM Network, the work environment can become more gender-friendly if there are more women in leadership positions who are able to influence policies. In her opinion, a media house managed by a woman is more likely to promote gender equity than one managed by men. She also thinks the gender inequality women face on a daily basis results in low self-esteem and self-confidence among many of them.

Rajbhandari suggests that this could explain the fact that women are often reluctant to take up political, economic or crime reporting, assuming that they are less competent than their male counterparts. News organisations are not helping to improve the situation, with many often not believing that women journalists can adequately perform their jobs and instead sending a male colleague to do the job.

“I have seen that women journalists fulfil all their responsibilities whereas male journalists spend more time networking and building contacts than actually working, but the latter are still preferred by their bosses,” observes Rajbhandari.

Rajbhandari’s comments about the beats women work are supported by the data gathered through the survey. Beyond the ability to control and influence content, the room for growth and development within media organisations is unfairly distributed between the sexes.

Of those respondents who answered a question on recruitment and advancement, half the male respondents (50 percent) reported ‘good’ experiences whereas just over a third of women (36 percent) said the same. Considerably more women (21 percent) than men (15 percent) reported ‘poor’ experiences with recruitment and career opportunities.

One conclusion that can be drawn from these responses is that media organisations have still not developed policies that enable women staff to grow and develop. As one media worker put it, “When I was pregnant I wanted to work until I was not physically able to, but that is not what



happened.”

Far from providing adequate maternity leave and job security, she was compelled to quit or face being fired. Clearly media organisations in Nepal have yet to create the necessary congenial working environment that can help women journalists to grow and prosper within the profession.

The opening up of independent radio in Nepal has provided plenty of career opportunities to young journalists, especially women. Take the case of Gorkha, one of the historical mid-hill districts of Nepal.

Altogether eight media outlets are in operation in Gorkha (six radio stations and two newspapers) with FM radio dominating the media sector. There are in total five FM stations: RadioGorkha, Manasulu FM, Gorakhkali, Choice FM and Radio Matribhumi are based in Gorkha town; Radio Harmi is the only exception. Choice FM, Gorakhkali, and Matribhumi FM are the commercially run stations whereas the other three stations are recognised as community radios. The district also has two Nepali daily newspapers: *Daraudi* and *Suruwat*.

Despite the wide range of media organisations in the district, women’s participation is very low in both newspapers and private as well as community-owned radios. About two dozen women communicators are currently working for local media in Gorkha but only a few of them are journalists. The district has a branch of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), with 31 members. While only three of the members are women journalists, one of them is the secretary of the branch.

The Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (ACORAB), an umbrella organisation of community radio operators, has a gender policy that member stations are supposed to follow. Sadly, the policy has not been effectively implemented and even journalists and other media personnel working at the stations are not familiar with the policy. Most Nepali media houses do not have gender policies of their own.

Choice FM 90.4 MHZ is relatively new FM station, established in 2012. Of the 16 staff members of Choice FM, only five are women. Two of the women are in decision-making positions: Anupama Khanal heads the reporting bureau and Punam Shrestha is the chief of the technical department. The other three work as presenters in information and entertainment related programs.

She agrees that poor working conditions and low salaries are causing large numbers of women to leave the profession in her district but maintains that her organisation does not have a problem with salary payment and uses the same salary scale for men and women, with salary based on position not gender. However, she says, other organisations in the region are not the same.

Khanal, who is also the secretary of the Gorkha branch of the FNJ, said the absence of a gender-friendly working environments and low salaries are the major factors that have caused women to opt out of the profession. Like many media outlets at the district level, Choice FM does not have a separate toilet for women. She said women journalists at the district level also tend to feel lonely because of the paucity of women colleagues in the field. Besides these practical difficulties faced on a daily basis, women journalists are also compelled to leave the profession due to family pressure, the lack of sharing domestic responsibilities and other social factors.



"Family members do not encourage women to work in this profession because it demands long hours of work and involves irregular work schedules," said Khanal. The fact that staff do not get a weekly day off obviously makes the situation worse. "It is not easy for a woman to simultaneously be a daughter or daughter-in-law at home and a journalist at the office. Most women have to devote considerable time to household-related work. That ultimately hampers their capacity to generate quality output at work. As a result, we cannot produce good, investigative stories compared to men colleagues."

Salaries are lower at the district level than in the capital. In addition, some women journalists complain of discrimination in payment, especially in terms of allowances and other facilities. Despite their qualifications, women face discrimination in reporting assignments, with key areas such as politics and business considered out of bounds for them.

Khanal, who has been able to work on any beat she was keen on, admits that there is evident lack of trust in women when work responsibilities are assigned. However, she also thinks there is some lack of confidence in women themselves. She does her bit to encourage younger women.

The station manager claims that the organisation does not discriminate against women in reporting assignments and beat allocations. Colleagues also encourage them by helping them with reporting and writing news stories. According to Khanal, if women presenters and journalists have to work on programmes aired at night, the station enables them to record them during the day. Whenever women staffers have to work at night, other colleagues accompany them home.

Choice FM station manager Kiran Lohani, said even though it does not have specific gender policy, the station gave "priority" to women-related programs. "We have been trying to encourage the long-term involvement of women journalists and other women staffers in the media," he said. "Since it is not very convenient for them to work the night shift, for various reasons, we give priority to them for the day-time schedule."

But it is clear from the research that many women media personnel still do not get respect from society. Since they have to travel and work with men colleagues, patriarchal society also tends to raise questions about their character. This is a major reason why it is difficult for women to stay on in the media sector, especially in small towns like Gorkha. Most generally quit the profession once they get married. If they continue to work, they usually look for better opportunities in other sectors because they feel they cannot survive for long in the local media.

Reforms must begin at home

Rastriya Samachar Samiti (RSS), the national news agency of Nepal, is the country's only government-owned news agency and has been in operation for over four decades.

A brief study of the RSS newsroom reveals that the government's own news organisation does not pay adequate attention to gender friendliness and opportunities for women journalists to pursue long-term careers in the journalism sector.

The reality is there are very few women journalists in the RSS. While the agency has district correspondents in all 75 districts, women journalists are present in only five of districts.



Despite the fact that the government has said it will make the entire media sector inclusive by creating jobs for members of backward communities and reserving one third (33 percent) of all jobs for women, the news agency appears to have failed to implement this.

A total of 15 women journalists currently work in the RSS, and only five of these have permanent jobs. Three of the latter work at junior assistant level; another is at the assistant level, and only one can be found at a senior level, holding the position of Deputy General Manager.

One observed trend is that the RSS continues to appoint stringers even though media houses are supposed to start the process of providing permanent status to journalists after they have worked for 240 days. The Minimum Wage Fixation Committee (2011) stipulates that Kathmandu Valley-based journalists must be paid salaries amounting to NR10,800 (USD 108.94) per month and those working outside the valley must be paid monthly salaries of NR7,800. Despite this, stringers are paid only NR150-200 per news report and NR600 for longer feature articles.

Senior journalists as well as the managerial team admit that the nominal amount allocated for stringers has discouraged journalists, including women, from working with RSS.

Although the five women with permanent employment in the agency have no complaints about salaries, those in temporary positions clearly have a difficult time. All five of those deployed in districts have been hired and retained as stringers who are paid only if and when their stories are accepted for publication. Whether they are men or women, the management is aware that no stringer can completely depend upon their RSS pay cheques.

Although there are around 100 reporters attached to the RSS, those filed by stringers are used only occasionally, if at all. As a result, the monthly income of most stringers is often far less than the official minimum wage. In the decades-long history of the RSS, the agency has failed to increase women's exposure to career opportunities at the international level. Some women have reported that while women journalists in the RSS do get opportunities to participate in media training programs within Nepal, none of them has been recommended by the organisation for participation in international programs.

Nirmala Acharya is one of the exceptions. She has served in the RSS for the last 21 years. Beginning her career as a junior reporter, she handled the post of chief reporter for six years before she became deputy general manager. Acharya is among the few women who entered the print media despite all the odds. As a woman, she encourages "minority" reporters in the newsroom to pitch story ideas and do justice to them.

"While working as chief reporter, I always pushed proposals to appoint women journalists in districts," Acharya said. "Now that I am in a managerial position, I am looking forward to ensuring their inputs as much as possible," she added.

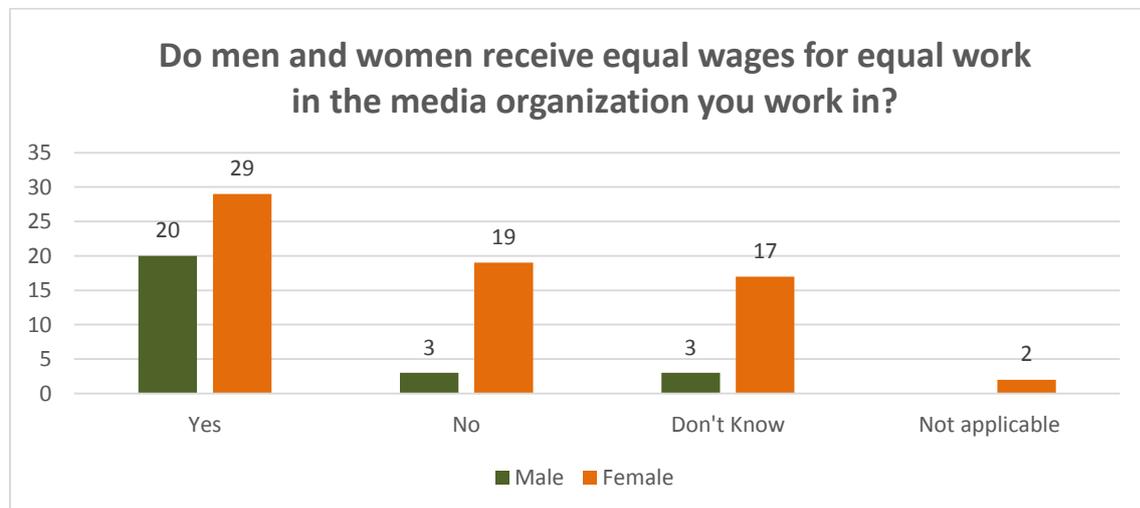
A need to address the gender pay gap

Low salaries evident in the lower echelons of media organisations are a major obstacle facing women journalists in Nepal. What is more, there appears to be a gender-based pay gap.



All but one of the 22 respondents who said they were paid less than US\$80 per month were women (29.72 percent). There were considerably more women among the 49.51 percent of respondents who said they were paid between US\$80-250 per month – 51.35 percent of women and 46.43 percent of men. Men were three times more represented in the next bracket with more men (32.14 percent) earning US\$251-400 compared to just 12.16 percent of women. Men were ahead in all increasing categories comparatively. In the highest pay bracket, more than US\$800 per month, of the 3 respondents, 2 were women and 1 was a man but this balanced in the gender percentage breakdown.

The gender gap in Nepal extends beyond pay. Interestingly, in response to the question about whether or not men and women receive equal wages for equal work in their organisations, 77 percent of the male respondents said ‘yes’ compared to just 43 percent of women. A greater proportion of women (25 percent) said they didn’t know, than men, just 12 percent.



Employee benefits appear to be a challenging area for Nepalese journalists and while most journalists were employed full-time regular, the benefits did not flow for all.

The benefits more frequently paid to all appear to be annual pay increases, annual bonuses, employee provident funds, travel allowances, life insurance and accident insurance. But even the highest of these – annual pay increases – were only paid to a third of respondents (33 percent), which reflected evening among men and women. The remaining benefits were given in much lower quantities. Other benefits such as pension/superannuation, housing or rent allowances, health insurance and insurance for covering conflict were given to fewer than 15 percent of all respondents.

Equally disturbing is the finding that more women (9.45 percent) than men (7.14 percent) have been denied benefits. Respondents highlighted some of the following reasons for the denial:

- *Annual Bonuses, They had promised to provide but they don't provide and changed staff policy – Male*
- *Denied payment for extra duty during election – Female*
- *I have not been given annual pay increments. Similarly the office has not been providing our provident fund since many years despite deducting 10 per cent of my salary every month – Female*
- *Overtime during special events - Female*



Media organisations appear to be providing adequate facilities for their employees but some key challenges remain. More than half respondents (65 percent) said they had separate toilets for men and women at their workplace, 43.69 percent had security and 42.71 percent had transport after late shifts. More women (48.64 percent of respondents) said they had transport after late shifts than men (28.57 of all respondents).

Only 10.68 percent had a staff lounge and disturbingly only 2.91 percent of respondents said they had access to childcare services. Only 1 percent said they had access to a prayer room. Safety equipment is also rarely provided to men or women journalists, with just 5 percent (10.71 percent of men and 6.75 percent of women), which is another cause for concern, given the continuing political instability and lawlessness that the media must cover.



The leave policies of media organisations in Nepal also leave considerable room for improvement and gender gaps also arose in the distribution of these. Respondents could select all leave entitlements they had access to but even the highest of these, annual leave, was only granted to 38.83 percent of all respondents.

More men (53.57 percent) had access to annual leave than women (32.43 percent). So too, more men had access to sick leave (57.14 percent) than women (52.70 percent). Maternity leave provisions were equal but only available to around 39 percent of respondents.

More men (57.14 percent) had access to casual leave than women (44.59 percent). Only 2.91 percent of respondents said they had been denied paid leave they were entitled to, include 1 female, 1 male and 1 other.

Although the Labour Act of 1992 makes maternity leave mandatory, at present there is no fixed policy on maternity leave in many organisations. When asked to describe the leave and re-entry for women after childbirth in their organisation, more than half (55.33 percent) described it as 'good' or 'acceptable'. The result almost evenly divided. A small percentage (13.59 percent) described it as 'excellent'. These responses followed through generally in the gender breakdowns.



Although the data reveals that 39.18 percent of women respondents were entitled to maternity leave, case studies revealed that a number of women have lost their jobs after availing maternity leave. For example, Anju Neupane, a newsreader with Mountain Television in Kathmandu, was dismissed without notice after two months of maternity leave. Unwilling to take such unfair treatment, she lodged a formal complaint against the station with the Lalitpur branch of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), her local union.

According to Neupane, the 45 days maternity leave she was offered was insufficient for post-natal recovery. The law mandates maternity leave of at least 45 days, but Neupane argued that the minimum period needed to be increased to three months.

Similarly, although Uttam Phuyal, Head, administrative department of Mountain Television mentioned that staff could extend their post natal leave upon request, Anju's two month approved leave didn't go through as the leave application was not forwarded to the administration.

Rojina Thapa, a reporter with Mountain Television, has taken it upon herself to help Neupane secure justice. Despite the threat that her job would also be terminated, she assisted Neupane in lodging the complaint against the television channel with the FNJ.

"We may also have to face the same situation in the future," Thapa explains. "If we stand for justice for others we, too, will get justice in return."

While media organisations across Nepal work to curb gender inequality within the workplace, it is clear that professional development and safety training are among the key strategies.

Trainings are necessary for individuals to broaden their knowledge and develop new skills. Less than half of all respondents who answered this question (45.74 percent) said that their workplace offered training and professional development, and there was a minimal gender gap for this response, with 44.77 percent of women and 50 percent of men.

Interestingly, 84.46 percent of respondents said they had participated in a training or professional development, with 82.43 percent of women and 92.85 percent of men selecting this answer.

When asked who provided training, almost half of those who responded to this question (47.70 percent) undertook training with NGOs, followed by 25 percent with their employer and then 19 percent with the union.

The gender breakdown across these responses saw a largely equal response for NGO and union trainings, however for employers comprised 30 percent of men compared with 23 percent of women. Similarly for the small 8 percent who received training with the IFJ, it comprised 13 percent of men compared with 6 percent of women. For those who haven't participated in trainings, the following reasons were given:

After first round of orientation level training there has been none to enhance skills. I think office policy might not have considered contract staffs for this- Female

Lack of proper human resources – Male

Management level thinks they don't need training – Other

No training are organised for our level – Female

There are no provision to offer training to a contract worker – Male



We don't have this kind of culture. Once selected for work just work and work not other activities – Female



The majority of all respondents (58.25 percent) placed women’s participation in training programs below 25 percent. Half of these, said women comprised less than 10 percent of the training group. Only 6.79 percent of all respondents placed women’s participation above 50 percent and women made up 85 percent of these respondents.

Safety training is evidently not yet commonly provided to journalists in Nepal, with 74 percent of survey participants saying they had never undergone safety training and this was evenly distributed between men and women. More men (35.71 percent) had been given safety training than women (22.97 percent). Among those respondents that had received training, it was provided mainly by NGOs (42.42 percent) and the union (30.30 percent).

Gender equity training is seen as an important strategy to improve gender equity across the media industry.

Most agreed (67.96 percent) that gender equity training ‘could improve the working environment for men and women’ and that it ‘would help people better understand the issue’ (65 percent). Almost half of all respondents (48.54 percent) said it ‘is something I would participate in’. Interestingly, men participating in the survey were strongly supportive of gender equity training, with half the men respondents saying they would attend such trainings.

Around 10 percent of survey participants – 17.85 percent of men and 8 percent of women – said gender equity training ‘is not needed because women already have equal rights’. Another 9.7 percent of respond admitted it was ‘not something I have ever thought about’.



| Gender equity training: (select all that apply) | Is not needed because women already have equal rights | Is not something I have ever thought about | Would help people better understand the issue | Is something that I would participate in | Could improve the working environment for men and women |
|--|---|--|---|--|---|
| Male | 5 | 5 | 18 | 13 | 17 |
| Female | 6 | 5 | 48 | 37 | 52 |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 11 | 10 | 67 | 50 | 70 |

Taking affirmative action on gender balance and equality

Over three quarters (74.75 percent) of the respondents were members of national unions or associations - 71.62 percent of women and 82.14 percent of men surveyed. Interestingly, more than half the women (50.94 percent) said they were officials or office bearers of a local or national union. More men (78.26 percent) said they were officials or office bearers at local or national level. Note: The high level of union respondents for this question is clearly indicative of the IFJ survey being distributed through the union’s network.

Half of all respondents said that women did not have enough visibility or representation in unions. A majority (77.67 percent) of respondents said they supported quotas for women in unions and/or proportional representation in union leadership.

In the past in Nepal, the so called higher class used to dominate among women in state organs in the absence of inclusiveness. But now, not only are women included but there is also a policy of giving priority to Dalit and Janajati women. For this, the Federation of Nepali Journalist (FNJ), an umbrella organisation of journalists in Nepal, has also played significant role in improving women’s inclusion in Nepal’s political movements.

Over recent years, FNJ has been introducing the agenda of ensuring 33 percent women participation in all its programs and has been “successful” in making its working committee “fully inclusive”. Journalist Anita Bindu currently sits in the coveted post of Vice President.

FNJ also makes provision for one compulsory quota for female secretary, Sangita Khadka; one Janajati women is in the working committee, Nilipha Subba; and the other female members of the working committee are Pawan Barsha Shah, Radhika Dhakal, Ranjana Poudel and Sushma Poudel. There is a total of 49 in the working group, including seven women journalists.

FNJ currently has 10,077 members — 8,214 men and 1,613 women. Distribution of members is as follows region-wise.



| Region | No. Of Members | Male | Female |
|--------------------|----------------|------|--------|
| Eastern | 1444 | 1198 | 246 |
| Central region | 1587 | 1320 | 267 |
| Western Region | 1402 | 1170 | 232 |
| Mid-western | 1411 | 1143 | 217 |
| Far-western | 666 | 586 | 80 |
| Cooperative Branch | 1583 | 1159 | 271 |
| Kathmandu Valley | 1484 | 1182 | 256 |
| Associate | 500 | 456 | 44 |

President of FNJ, Dr Mahendra Bista, said: “Leadership roles embraced by the professional alliance and the effect of the change brought about by the movement of 2062/63 have been attributed to the organisation’s(FNJ’s) inclusive organisational structure. Media news room, their contents and organisational structure should reflect the country’s existing pluralism and sovereign society.”

Having fully implemented the policy of inclusiveness, the Federation of Nepali Journalist FNJ’s role and action plan has not become weak but further strengthened, Dr Bistra said.

Only 36.89 percent of respondents said they were members of workers unions in their media organisation. Between the genders, 32.43 percent of women were union members compared to 50 percent of men.

Close to a quarter (23.3 percent) seemed to think that unions should work with media employers on joint strategies to bring about gender equity, while nearly a fifth (19.41 percent) appeared to believe that unions should lobby the government for strong gender equity legislation. Significantly, 18.44 percent seemed to feel that unions could improve their work on issues relating to gender equity.

| Unions and journalism organizations in my country | Total | Female | Male | Other |
|---|-------|--------|------|-------|
| Already promote diversity and equity | 14 | 7 | 7 | 0 |
| Could improve their work on gender equity | 19 | 13 | 5 | 1 |
| No fixed view | 14 | 10 | 4 | 0 |
| Should adopt a national gender equity policy | 12 | 7 | 5 | 0 |
| Should lobby government for stronger gender equity legislation | 20 | 17 | 3 | 0 |
| Should work with media employers on joint strategies on gender equity | 24 | 20 | 4 | 0 |
| Grand Total | 103 | 74 | 28 | 1 |

A culture of impunity around sexual harrassment

When asked about sexual harassment in the workplace, less than a quarter (22.3 percent) of the survey respondents said they had witnessed sexual harassment, the majority of them (87.5 percent) women. Almost a third of women (31 percent) said they had experienced harassment but it was not sexual in nature.



All those who said they had personally experienced sexual harassment were women – which comprised 13.51 percent of women surveyed.

The perpetrator was most likely to be a colleague (56.25 percent), followed by a superior (25 percent), an interview subject (12.5 percent) or a member of the public (6.25 percent). So in terms of sexual harassment, women are most at risk in the office than out of it.

When asked if they told anyone about it, half said they did not. Those that did were most likely to confide to a friend. One told a colleague, another told a superior. None told a gender committee, their union or police.

Those that didn't report were asked why. Worryingly, 37.5 percent and 25 percent of the respondents said their reason for not reporting harassment was because 'it wasn't a big deal' or they were 'worried about negative repercussions'.

The survey data reveals the sense of insecurity among women in media organisations that prevents them from reporting sexual harassment.

In Nepal, like elsewhere in the world, the woman victim is often persecuted more than the perpetrator. People tend to be suspicious about the veracity of her complaint and often blame the victim, suggesting that she may have had a hand in provoking the incident. The focus is on her character or clothes rather than on the perpetrator's behaviour. With victims invariably having to bear the brunt of such accusations, and in the absence of a supportive atmosphere, most sexual harassment victims choose to keep quiet or, at least, keep their complaints anonymous for fear of retaliation.

One of the ways sexual harassment can be combated is by putting in place an official complaints cell or enacting a policy against sexual harassment in the office. However, such measures seem to be almost entirely missing in Nepal.

Less than ten percent (9.7 percent) of the respondents reported that their organisations had an official complaints cell or a policy against sexual harassment in their office. More than two thirds (63.11 percent) said their workplaces did not have such policies or mechanisms and another quarter (24.27 percent) did not know of any such initiatives in their offices.

Of course, even when complaints cells and policies do exist, there are cases where journalists are forced to withdraw their complaints in the face of pressures and threats of various kinds.

Respondents were asked to nominate one or a selection of measures that they thought could effectively combat sexual harassment. The largest proportion of all respondents (43.68 percent), agreed that stronger laws would be the best way to combat workplace sexual harassment. Awareness-raising among women (30.09 percent), effective complaints mechanisms (28.15 percent) and punitive measures (27.18 percent) were also seen as possibly effective options. Interestingly, awareness raising with men scored lowest (18.44 percent).



| What measures can effectively combat sexual harassment? | Female | Male | Other | Total |
|---|------------|-----------|----------|------------|
| Awareness-raising among women | 23 | 7 | 1 | 31 |
| Awareness-raising with men | 15 | 4 | 0 | 19 |
| Effective complaints mechanism | 24 | 5 | 0 | 29 |
| Punitive measures | 23 | 5 | 0 | 28 |
| Stronger laws | 33 | 12 | 0 | 45 |
| Total | 118 | 33 | 1 | 152 |

Although much needs to be done to counter the culture of impunity surrounding sexual harassment in media workplaces in Nepal, some changes are already taking place. For example, the Ujyalo FM Network recently introduced a new provision under its human resources policy that allows employees to report workplace harassment, both sexual and non-sexual, and prescribes punishment for culprits.

Sancharika Samuha: Pioneering advocacy for women

Sancharika Samuha (the women communicators' forum) is a pioneering association of women journalists and communicators in Nepal.

The forum was established in 1996 with the objective of promoting a healthier and more gender-sensitive media environment. It has been engaged in media advocacy on gender equality and gender-based violence, as well as on other violations of human rights. The organisation also produces weekly radio and television programmes, besides publishing the Sancharika feature service (a monthly feature bulletin), and Sancharika online (a news portal).

According to Nirmala Sharma, president of Sancharika, the organisation plays a catalytic role linking the women's movement and the media, and attempting to bridge differences and promote better understanding between the two. Its work involves safeguarding the rights of women in general and women journalists in particular. Through its activities the organisation also highlights the need for inclusion, equality and the meaningful participation of women in different fields of social life.

According to Sharma, the organisation designs programmes in a way that helps to build the capacity of women in the journalism sector through improvement of their professional skills and their access to Nepali media. It comprises 13 board members, four regional coordinators and about 300 general members. It currently has 11 regular staff members, including three men. In addition, a significant number of volunteers and short-term consultants have also been associated with Sancharika on different projects.

"Since the majority of the staff is women and we work mainly on women's issues, any form of violence against women is forbidden in this organisation," says Sharma. "We have very few men on the staff and they are very sensitive about gender issues. I myself am always aware of the need to make sure that women staff do not have to go through any kind of harassment."

Sancharika also deals with issues women journalists face in their work places. It has been working with and providing counselling to several women journalists, both formally and informally.



Although only a few complaints are formally lodged, Sharma claims that Sancharika has been extending moral support to victims of harassment, apart from counselling and facilitating legal support for them. Sometimes, she says, members also ask for support while going through family problems, especially in married relationships.

Women who have suffered harassment sometimes give up the legal fight because of excessive pressure from the offender, the management, and/or political parties, she says. "Last year, we received a formal letter from a woman journalist working with a television channel, Nepal 1, who was repeatedly harassed by a senior male colleague at work," says Nitu Pandit, General Secretary of Sancharika. "We identified a woman lawyer to help her with the legal process and issued a press release in support of her." However, the victim eventually withdrew the complaint letter lodged with the Kathmandu police office. "I had to ... since both my livelihood and my life were under threat," said Malina (not her real name).

Sometimes victims do not get support even from women colleagues and bosses. In Malina's case, the main boss was a woman and a renowned journalist of her time. But she was not willing to support her when she wanted the management to take action against the perpetrator who was harassing her both mentally and physically at work.

"I wanted to move forward with the case, but didn't get support from my colleagues and management," Malina said. Eventually, she had to leave Nepal 1 and now works with a different organisation outside the media industry. She does not want to talk about the case any longer.

In most cases, victims do not want to complain formally either because of prevailing social norms or possible threats to physical and job security.

"In such situations, it is difficult to deal with their issues in a formal way," Sharma says. "But I have personally been helping them in various other ways: we issue press releases, accompany them to the police office to demonstrate solidarity; and even, if required, talk to managements of concerned media houses to address the problems faced by the victim."

Most of the cases brought to Sancharika relate to sexual harassment, although they have also dealt with a few cases concerning relationships between spouses and job security.

More women in decision-making roles

More than half the respondents (55.32 percent) who answered the question on workplace gender policies, reported that such policies do not exist in their organisation. Only 19.15 percent said they did exist.

| Does your organization have a gender policy? | Total | Female | Male | Other |
|--|-------|--------|------|-------|
| Yes | 18 | 12 | 6 | 0 |
| No | 52 | 36 | 15 | 1 |
| Don't know | 24 | 19 | 5 | 0 |
| Grand Total | 94 | 67 | 26 | 1 |



It is encouraging that well over half the respondents (65.95 percent) were of the opinion that having a gender policy in place in their organisations would ‘contribute to gender equity’. This notion was well supported by male and female respondents with 61.53 percent and 67.16 percent respectively.

In response to the question of what strategies were likely to be most effective in improving gender equity in the media or workplace, respondents were asked to rank their responses from highest to lowest with 47.57 percent of respondents choosing an ‘equal opportunity or gender equity policy’ as the way to go. This was followed by ‘dignity at work policy’, then equally, ‘ILO maternity/paternity leave conventions’ and ‘sexual harassment policy’.

| What strategies or provisions do you think would improve gender equality in your media or workplace? | Female | Male | Other | Total |
|--|------------|-----------|----------|------------|
| ILO maternity/paternity leave conventions | 12 | 8 | 0 | 20 |
| Dignity at work policy | 20 | 5 | 0 | 25 |
| Pay audits | 5 | 4 | 0 | 9 |
| Health and safety audits | 9 | 3 | 0 | 12 |
| Flexible work options | 13 | 2 | 0 | 15 |
| Sexual harassment policy | 16 | 4 | 0 | 20 |
| Equal opportunity or gender equity policy | 39 | 9 | 1 | 49 |
| Total | 114 | 35 | 1 | 150 |

Survey respondents were asked to rank their response to strategies that they felt would make a difference to gender equity issues such as portrayal of women, career advancement etc.

The largest proportion of survey respondents (32.38 percent) said that having ‘more women in decision-making roles’ was the best strategy. This was followed by ‘more family-friendly work conditions’ (22.85 percent), ‘affirmative employment strategies’ (17.14 percent), ‘having gender sensitive men in the media at every level’ (14.28 percent) and ‘more women in the media at every level’ (13.33 percent).

Like many other media and FM stations in particular, Choice FM does not have gender equity policy. "In the absence of a gender policy, we have been sorting out issues by consensus," said Anupama Khanal. "We are considering the introduction of a new gender policy for our organisation."

Reporting exposes victims

Although the number of women journalists in Nepal continues to grow, the number of women appearing in the news as sources and/or experts remains relatively low.

Only a small section of respondents (13.59 percent) were of the opinion that women make up more than 30 percent of sources/experts in the news. Nearly half (46.6 percent) of respondents said the representation was less than that (10-30 percent), while nearly 39.8 percent put women’s representation at below 10 percent.



However, with Anuradha Koirala of Maiti Nepal and Pushpa Basnet of Early Childhood Development Center winning the CNN Hero of the Year award over two consecutive years, the portrayal of Nepali women in the local as well as international media is changing.

More prominent figures are also addressing issues of gender discrimination and raising awareness that it is important to look beyond women’s appearance to focus on their talents, capabilities and strengths.

The manner in which women are most often depicted in news content highlighted interesting trends. In terms of depictions in the media and the use of old gender stereotypes, the most commonly agreed depiction by both men and women respondents (from a top choice of four) was that of women as ‘family figures’. This was followed by experts/leaders, victims, and weak and timid.

The lowest proportion, saw women’s depictions as ‘defying stereotypes’.

| In your opinion, women in news content are most often depicted as: (please select your top 4 answers) | Male | Female | Total |
|---|------------|------------|------------|
| Family figures | 50 | 24 | 74 |
| Sexual objects | 15 | 19 | 34 |
| Experts / leaders | 39 | 24 | 63 |
| Victims | 34 | 27 | 61 |
| Survivors | 19 | 15 | 34 |
| Negatively stereotyped | 18 | 15 | 33 |
| Defying stereotypes | 6 | 8 | 14 |
| Equal citizens | 24 | 18 | 42 |
| Heroes | 11 | 13 | 24 |
| Weak and timid | 28 | 17 | 45 |
| Grand Total | 244 | 180 | 424 |

The issues of depiction and reporting have been raised at places like RSS in Nepal. Senior journalists in the agency say they have internalised the tendency to highlight incidents of violence, murder and rape, which are prone to make headlines, just like colleagues in other media houses. In terms of sensitive handling of stories of sexual violence, copy editors tend to religiously follow the rule about concealing the identity of the victims of such crimes. However, by often making public the names of the accused or the guilty and even the names of villages where the crimes occurred, they sometimes indirectly expose the victims’ identities.

Media reports that present the accused as guilty, based on information from the Nepal Police, can also increase the vulnerability of victims and the chances of their identities being revealed.

When asked what measures would promote gender equity in news content, most respondents (36.89 percent) said ‘more women in decision-making roles in media’.

Interestingly, among survey respondents, over a third of women (39.56 percent) felt that having women in decision-making roles will promote gender equity in news content. This compared with 9.25 percent of men.



| What measures do you think would promote gender equity in news content? | Female | Male | other | Total |
|---|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|
| More women journalists and editors | 20 | 7 | 0 | 27 |
| More gender-sensitive male journalists and editors | 18 | 4 | 1 | 23 |
| Enforcement of guidelines on gender equity | 17 | 8 | 0 | 25 |
| More women in decision-making roles in media | 36 | 2 | 0 | 38 |
| Total | 91 | 21 | 1 | 113 |

Asmita: A women’s magazine struggles and thrives

Asmita, the first publication representing the voices of women in Nepal, was registered in 1988, two years before democracy was restored in the country.

Founding members of the *Asmita* team included media enthusiasts Anju Chhetry and Susan Maskey, along with several men supporters. The magazine’s name was recommended by the legendary Nepali literary figure, Parijat. The word *Asmita* means pride.

In the late 1980s, literacy rates in Nepal were very low: 39 percent among men and only 13 percent among women. The situation has since improved and today male literacy now above 70 percent, while female literacy sits above 50 percent.

From then to now, *Asmita*, a magazine for and by women, has never moved away from its primary motivation: advocating gender equality, including the representation of women in both governmental and non-governmental bodies, and campaigning against gender-based violence.

Manju Thapa, the current editor of the magazine, joined the team in 1993, five years after it was established. Reviewing her journey as a woman journalist over the years, Thapa believes there is remarkable openness and acceptance toward women working in this sector.

“*Asmita* introduced a feminist approach at a time when educated Nepali women were used to the contents of traditional Indian women’s magazines in Hindi, like *Sarita*, *Manorama* and *Griha Shobha*, which portrayed women in a conventional manner,” Thapa says.

The idea that politics, economics, laws and many other aspects of life and society were equally relevant to women was revealed and validated by the magazine for the first time in Nepal. The magazine has received a number of awards for its work in highlighting and generating public debate on gender issues, such as the Pandora Award from the International Organization of Women in Publishing in 1994 and the Nepali National Social Service Award in 1997.

Asmita conducted a survey on women’s presence in the media in the early 1990s, presenting the findings in the 19th edition of the magazine. According to Thapa, since no women journalists were known to be working in other parts of the country, the survey was restricted to the capital city, Kathmandu, but still accepted as ‘national’.



The survey data showed that in the early 1990s, only 12 percent of the total number of journalists in Nepal were women. Most of them were in the new, private print media, and the public service broadcasters, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television.

According to Thapa, reporting was a challenge for women at that time, since most sources tended to trust and share information only with men journalists. In the late 1990s, *Asmita* dedicated an edition to promoting the concept that women are competent to work in areas such as the bureaucracy and politics.

After the major political change brought about by the people’s democratic movement in 2006, ending the decade-long civil war and bringing in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, more women have entered the field of journalism. According to Thapa, this is a positive trend in terms of quantity but the quality of their participation in the media needs improvement.

After 20 years of existence, in the absence of adequate financial support, the publication of *Asmita* was suspended in 2008. But the magazine was re-launched in 2014, as a bi-monthly.

Although the magazine does not have a large staff, many veteran women journalists contribute articles. Over the years *Asmita* has worked with Sancharika Samuha, Working Women Journalists (WWJ) and other organisations that deal with women’s issues in Nepal, on various projects, including media research, training for women journalists and even agenda-setting at the policy level and in the Constituent Assembly.

While it is not part of the “mainstream,” *Asmita* is a source of strength for women journalists working in the mainstream media because of the way it raises issues and covers them from different perspectives. Born again after a six-year gap, it represents the pride, strength and resolve of women, determined to succeed despite the odds.

Conclusion

The insights gained through the survey, interviews and case studies brought together in this research study suggest that the media industry in Nepal still has a long way to go before it ensures equality among men and women journalists.

Although more women are joining the media workforce, the working environment within media organisations does not seem congenial enough to enable them to grow and progress easily. Women are not taken as seriously as their male colleagues and they feel their contributions are not as valued. Additionally, they are subjected to discrimination and harassment from within as well as outside their organisations.

However, there is now more awareness now about gender discrimination and ways to eradicate it. People are beginning to understand the importance of gender policies to guide organisations and are beginning to show signs of implementing them seriously.

There is also some recognition of the fact that workplaces need to be more conducive to women’s career advancement so that there are more women in decision-making positions. Having a higher proportion of women in executive positions is expected to bridge the gender divide.



International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

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Along with a change in policies, there must be a change in attitudes, too. There is need for a shift from a conservative patriarchal society to a more open-minded, gender-friendly society. Men and women deserve equal treatment and a favourable environment where their professional growth is related to their competencies and not their gender.

Human resources departments in media organisations need to formulate and implement gender-friendly policies and institute mechanisms to deal with sexual harassment cases or incidents of gender bias.

It is true that gender inequality is a national problem and not just in the media industry. Women need to feel more empowered to speak out when they face injustice instead of remaining silent. Similarly, men need to be motivated to fight against injustice on behalf of women. It is only when men are equally involved in the fight for women's rights that change will finally be seen.