



Pioneering Women's Voices

A Celebration of Women's Journalism across the Globe

International Women's Day, 8th March 2007

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Celebrating Women's Day: A bittersweet taste

The enjoyment of article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not only a practical imperative but also has strategic implications for women in securing the respect of their right to political representation. How can we reasonably hope for more women in politics without ensuring their fundamental right to express themselves and access the information they need to participate in public debates?

Freedom of expression and access to information are an untouched ideal rather than a reality for a number of women journalists with whom ARTICLE 19 has collaborated over the last twenty years. Women journalists are killed, imprisoned, censored, denied access to information or ridiculed. They are discriminated against, and underpaid. Gender-based censorship all too often remains a dominant characteristic of the news room and of reporting altogether. These are some of the experiences that four accomplished and courageous women journalists have generously shared with ARTICLE 19 on the occasion of 2007 International Women's Day.

Claudia, Rebecca, Bushra and Jacqueline also tell us that there is not one single women's experience in journalism, but many, reflecting the political and cultural spaces within which they operate. Women are more represented in the media than they were just a decade ago: they are international correspondents, decision-makers, news anchors, editors and ministers of information. Their participation in today's journalism is unequivocally complementing our understanding of current events. As Claudia, Rebecca, Bushra and Jacqueline demonstrate: age, race, class, religion and political affiliation are some of the many dimensions of women's identities which impact on their capacity to carry their journalistic work without constraint.

From Sudan to Malaysia, Guatemala to Iraq, their stories are fascinating and important. Their messages are clear: women's voices must be heard. Here are their recommendations:

For better and stronger news reporting and news rooms, they call for:

- Protecting women and men journalists against killings, attacks and threats
- Defending and respecting women's rights and gender equity, including in the newsroom
- Investing in strengthening the capacity of young women journalists, including on such issues as journalist ethics and peace reporting.

And again, and again, they recommend:

- Campaigning against legislation and policies that violate the right of the media and of freedom of expression
- Preventing self-censorship and censorship from restricting women's journalism
- Fighting for the right to report on all beats, including those that are considered the preserve of men
- Calling attention to women's issues that don't fit the news. Fighting for, and finding space to air these issues
- Reporting in a gender sensitive way by being inclusive in the search for information, placing topics on the agenda that address the problems that women face, giving them a human rights focus and above all, using appropriate language
- Fighting for better working conditions including equal male-female salaries and the abolition of gender discrimination in the news room
- Using all opportunities possible to learn and to mentor and train younger colleagues

Sudan: Rebecca Okwaci

It takes courage to find one's voice and use it for a good service. Rebecca Okwaci found her courage and voice early on and she has been using it to make a difference as one of South Sudan's leading radio journalists and women's rights activist. After more than three decades in the trenches, Rebecca Okwaci is enjoying success as the executive producer of the Educational Development Center at Sudan Radio Service broadcasting out of Nairobi, Kenya. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that settled the long-drawn out war in Sudan being considered too fragile to move operations home.

Okwaci cut her journalistic teeth in South Sudan's liberation struggle. One month to her wedding day, she became a part of the liberation. At a time when most women would have been on honeymoon, Okwaci and her freedom fighter husband opted out of domestic bliss to become card carrying members of Sudan People's Liberation Movement and to fight for their country. Separation was inevitable with her husband dispatched to the frontline. Okwaci was assigned to tell stories of aspiration and success at the Movement's underground radio station, the Voice of Sudan.

In the Movement, obedience was essential. Rebecca Okwaci didn't exactly set out to be a journalist. But with a degree in linguistics and classical Arabic language and literature from Alexandria University in Egypt, plus versatility in English, Shilluk and various other Sudanese languages, the profession seemed to choose her. In the struggle "you don't have a choice about what you do, you're sent where you're needed most." "During the liberation struggle it wasn't easy. You had to do everything yourself. You're trucked or bussed into the bush. You interviewed, recorded, translated and presented the information; it was very difficult." The Voice of the (Sudan People's Liberation Army) SPLA was then based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a far cry from the modern building that houses her current organisation Sudan Radio Service in the suburbs of Nairobi, Kenya.

She credits her parents for her courage and self-confidence. Growing up in Malakal, South Sudan, she was allowed to participate in sports and trusted to be in the company of boys. She learned that there were gender differences alright, but being female presented no barrier to her chances of progress. As one of two girls in her school group of twenty Sudanese students at the University in Alexandria, Egypt, she had always been with men as colleagues. Even after the University, when she worked as a translator for a couple of years before



getting married, she found that "as long as I conducted myself professionally, men showed me the respect I deserved."

Upon entering the journalism profession, she found that "it felt right" for her. And it was fitting to be the one relaying the challenges and gains of a people's quest for self-determination, translating, producing and broadcasting information into Sudan.

The years of toil and sacrifice have paid off both politically and professionally. The liberation journalist is now executive producer of a major private news service, and her husband, the foreign minister of the Government of National Unity in Sudan. While it was her language skills that steered her into radio journalism, it is skill and hard work that has kept

her growing. She received training in journalism at the Berlin School of Journalism in Germany and later on the job as a presenter, producer and manager at the BBC World Service for more than five years.

Rebecca Okwaci is an unusual executive. She keeps her own name as if to underscore her independence. “I like to be respected and don’t like to be labelled.” More important, she doesn’t want any special treatment asserting that you don’t toil in the liberation movement for so long to come away less than self-assured. She’ll have none of the “pretensions” that being the wife of the foreign minister of Sudan might have conferred on her in an African setting. “My husband is a very accomplished man,” she said, flashing a smile through dazzling white teeth, the first in more than twenty minutes of conversation, “and so am I,” she added, the smile vanishing from her face as quickly as it appeared. Her demeanour is rather serious though not stern.

As a journalist in a leadership position at Sudan Radio Service, Okwaci says she’s committed to building professionalism among her staff. “Women who take journalism seriously as a profession have done well.” But out of her core staff of eight, only two are women. She’s cognisant of the disparity “if you can call it that.” She has several young women in training and expects that in time, many of them will rise to managerial and leadership positions. “We’re a society in transition and skilled people are in demand.” She says training is a major need” and given the resources, she would invest in capacity for young women on journalism ethics and peace reporting.

Rebecca Okwaci’s concerns about the journalism profession are also about issues within the profession. “As journalists, both women and men have to guard against self-censorship.” She believes more and more journalists are self-censoring. Women could be more vulnerable to that especially at the entry level, “reporting and writing what they’re asked to keep from being harassed.” She would encourage every journalist, man and woman rather to be principled and uphold the tenets of good journalism.

Rebecca Okwaci is not resting on any laurels. “I still work very hard, though things are much easier than they used to be.” She manages a large staff of reporters and producers of educational and news programs broadcast daily into South Sudan. She is most proud of the two women themed shows, *Women’s Corner* and *Our voices*, that she presents as well as produces “to bring attention on those aspects of women’s lives in a post-conflict setting that don’t make the news.”

While there are many positive changes taking place in South Sudan, “the women in my country still have a long way to go before things change for them.” And it is in the area of women’s welfare that Okwaci feels she can continue to make a difference both as a radio journalist and an activist “I will always find time to produce a woman’s program and mentor young women in the newsroom.” As the executive producer, Okwaci has the authority to place women’s issues in the mainstream of news and she does.

As a founding member of the non-governmental organisation, Women’s Action for development, Okwaci believes there are concerns Sudanese women have in the homes and communities that don’t fit the news, necessitating special productions to call attention to them. She cites the example of disadvantaged women who suffer abuse and violation who are now returning home from refugee camps in neighbouring countries. “You can see that women are being abused by members of their families, their brothers and husbands. These women have special information needs.” She believes there has to be a place for them to find that information and she takes it upon herself to help them meet these challenges in the home, communities and even in the public space, “and special radio programmes offer that space to air these issues”.

The women's themed programmes she produces raise the transitional tribulations of women and children in post-conflict south Sudan. "For example, most of our widows and orphans come not as a result of HIV/AIDS, but from war and displacement, but we haven't had much outcry and social support for the women and children in that predicament." She says many of the reports and discussions on *Women's Corner and Our Voices* programmes highlight how "to alleviate the disadvantages facing refugee women returning home. They "raise the issues around the trauma of women after the war and how to support widows and orphans."

She also talked of efforts by women to change their life and help develop their communities in the new Sudan. Women were critical to peace-building. They played their role alongside men as negotiators of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement which has brought relative stability to South Sudan. The Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) includes women in many critical positions such as health, social welfare, anticorruption committees and human rights. Quite a few women are ambassadors, and many civil society organisations in south Sudan are headed by women. Okwaci foresees a rapid change in the condition of women in her country because "we have very good women leaders."

Guatemala: Claudia Navas

Claudia Navas is Director of *La Nana*, a pro-children and pro-youth news agency, part of the Latin American Andi network. She is also a columnist for the evening newspaper *La Hora* and the electronic magazine, *Albedrío* and a member of the Editorial Council of the feminist newspaper *La Cuerda* and the magazine, *Sala de Redacción*.



In my personal case, it has not been difficult to be a journalist in my country. It was easy to enter the media because I was referred by my university. In the sections in

which I have worked, there have not been any major complications, in terms of feeling threatened or frightened as I have carried out my work. The only occasion I remember in which I felt in danger was during a report about tourism in Totonicapán, taking photos in a protected area. We saw some people cutting trees that pursued us and threw stones, but luckily, nothing happened to us.

It is possible to report in a gender sensitive way by being inclusive in the search for information, placing topics on the agenda that address the problems that women face, giving them a human rights focus and above all, using appropriate language.

As far as I know, there aren't laws restricting the freedom of expression of women in Guatemala but customs, maybe yes, because we are a *machista* country. For example, in Guatemala, there are many women in the media, maybe more than men, but not in management roles. No print media is directed by women, also in the area of photography there are very few women and they are often not sent to cover certain topics because the director or editor consider it dangerous.

I do have one anecdote which illustrates some issues that have affected my daily life as a woman journalist which pertains to the discrimination that exists against women. Working for *Prensa Libre*, now as a publisher, I questioned the chief editor and the head of human resources because my salary was exactly the same as a male colleague who was an editor. We had begun work on the same day and year but I had more responsibility, editing two publications (supplements), coordinating the design of the respective electronic additions and

also, writing for these supplements. Measuring the unequal quantity of work and responsibility I objected that it didn't seem fair. To which they responded that his higher salary was justified because he was a man and needed to maintain his family. Their absurd answer was a clear form of discrimination, and a telling example of how the value of women's work is overlooked.

I think that such discrimination still occurs because we allow it. We ought to learn to defend our rights and make men respect our work. For example, now that I am a columnist, I utilise appropriate language and incorporate topics that reclaim women's rights and that often are not included on the agenda. I defend these issues. Women are perfectly capable of doing everything and when, for example, mothers need to take some time off, we must also demand it, because it is a right. As Henry Miller said: *"If we turn to a larger reality, it is the woman who would have to show us the path. The macho hegemony has reached its end. It has lost touch with the earth."*

Iraq: Bushra Yousif

With an insatiable drive to produce a magazine dedicated to promote women's rights in Iraq and a passion that refuses to be quenched, Bushra Yousif, editor at *Noon* magazine, emerges as one of the many defiant Iraqi voices still sounding in spite of the dangers and hardships faced.

With the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Yousif was one of many journalists who looked forward to the birth of a free media in Iraq. Yet as she recalled the glimpse of freedom that witnessed a mushrooming of media organisations, Yousif lamented the near impossibility of protecting women journalists in Iraq today and acknowledged the thorny road to establishing a media policy that enshrines objectivity.

"The space of freedom was wide and the Iraqi media moved from its traditional role as a government mouthpiece to a venue of free expression...but, soon after my colleagues, women and men alike, began falling one after the other." Indeed the deterioration of the situation in Iraq has made journalists in Iraq a prime target claiming the life of nearly 64 journalists in 2006 alone.

Yousif often reported and attended workshops and training sessions organised by human rights organisations. She also frequently reported on women's issues which lead to many dubbing her the "women's organisation's journalist." The deterioration of the situation forced Bushra into narrower avenues.

Unfortunately, relying heavily on the internet and phone and asking her husband to accompany her to the printers proved to be insufficient.



Soon enough, the owner of the printer where *Noon* was published was kidnapped and blackmailed and then Yousif herself received a death threat.

"As I was leaving the house one morning to go to work, I discovered a letter slipped under my door warning that my life and those of my family were at risk if I continued writing. A number of subsequent terrorising messages that almost cost the life of my son were the final straw," she said.

“It was either my dreams and ambitions or my family...and I chose my family.” With that, Yousif left Iraq with copies of *Noon* in her suitcase. But Yousif refused to stop writing and continues to work with *Noon* in spite of the distance.

“Founding a women’s magazine has always been a dream of mine”, continued Yousif who helped found the magazine with the Independent Iraqi Women’s Gathering headed by MP Maysoun al-Damluji in March 2004.

Twenty issues later the magazine is still battling to raise awareness of women’s rights and issues and to assert that the rights Iraqi women have enjoyed for decades are respected in the new constitution and laws. Indeed, the magazine appears to be giving a voice to the scores of women who have suffered for years from incessant wars, economic and social hardships and now a surge of extremism.

It is the unending violations to women’s rights that have lead Yousif to refuse marking International Women’s Day this March. “How can I celebrate this day with Atwar and Souhad killed, Reem abducted, Lamia arrested, Nawal, Nermeen and Nidal escaping Iraq and numerous death threats...and these are but a few,” she asked.

“How can I celebrate that day when women’s rights are abused daily?” she concluded.

Malaysia: Jacqueline Ann Surin



Eloquent and vibrant with a passion for the realisation of civil liberties in her country, Jacqueline Ann Surin, Assistant News Editor for the Malaysian daily, *theSun*, exudes hope for and commitment to the future of women’s rights in Malaysia.

Jacqueline first discovered the power of expression through writing when as a child she would sometimes write letters on behalf of her mother who wasn’t keen on writing. It wasn’t long before she began to discover their potency and impact. “One day” explains Jacqueline, “an Australian family friend told of how in times of despair, she would often take out the letter I had written to her expressing our family’s concern and support for her son who was suffering from a brain tumour. It seemed it had provided her with a great deal of solace”. Attracted in parallel by the “empowering quality of journalism to bring about change”, Jacqueline found herself drawn to a career in journalism.

Despite her recognition of journalism as a tool for freedom of expression, Jacqueline admits that in her 13-years as a journalist, she has experienced occasions when she or her newspaper has had to self-censor. Harsh legislation and policies such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act “impel unyielding curbs on both women and men journalists alike”. Jacqueline cites the constant fear of being shut down without legal recourse while reminders to “take it easy” or “remember, two steps back so we can take one step forward” are common

in the newsroom. Discussion of subjects deemed “sensitive” such as race relations or how Islam is used politically are treated with caution. Malaysia is a society in which relations between the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities can sometimes be contentious. “Our Constitution is being ‘rewritten’ so that the Constitutional privileges accorded to the dominant majority Malay-Muslim community are now being promoted as rights that cannot be reviewed or questioned even if they are being abused and no longer meet their original purpose.”

“But,” says Jacqueline “the media needs to talk about these things. It’s only by talking about it that we can find solutions”. It is in this spirit that Jacqueline often uses her bi-weekly column “Shape of a Pocket” to explore and debate Islam and race relations from a gender-sensitive perspective. As a non-Muslim woman, however, she often has to contend with the challenge of not being viewed as a credible and legitimate voice that speaks for and on Islam.

Paradoxically, however, she notes that at one media training workshop for women journalists, it was the Muslim participants who said they “could not” debate and raise questions publicly about how Islam is wrongly used to discriminate against women because they were “compelled by culture and upbringing not to question God’s law”.

“Being a woman journalist in Malaysia is getting easier,” states Jacqueline. “When, I first started out, women weren’t encouraged to report on certain beats such as crime or disasters...things are improving.” Although she admits that she still sometimes experiences sexual harassment from colleagues and news sources, newspaper employers are increasingly aware and understanding when such incidents occur and editors certainly “can’t get away with the kind of gender stereotyping that used to take place 13 years ago”. “Perhaps one of the key agents of change in this”, she adds, “has been the fact that the media themselves highlight women’s issues more frequently, and women’s organisations are increasingly finding space to voice their concerns in the media”.

Among Jacqueline’s strongest concerns for the future of freedom of expression in Malaysia are that “structures which control the press (such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act) remain in place”. However, she is firm in her hope that such harsh legislation will eventually be repealed and in the interim, she envisions that “groups and individuals, be they journalists or NGOs, will get together and empower each other to navigate contentious issues”.

Although Malaysia is not the easiest of countries to be a woman journalist, Jacqueline continues to reclaim space for women’s freedom of expression through journalism. It is therefore clear that hope for the future of women’s freedom of expression is alive and sprinting.