

Jurnal Komunikasi Massa
Vol. 1, No. 1, Juli 2007, 1-7

The Lucky Few: Female Graduates of Communication Studies in the Media Industry

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Background

It is not an exaggeration to say that young women who graduate from communication studies and get a job in media must be regarded as 'the lucky few' in the media job opportunities. Firstly, it is known throughout the world that women are not advantaged in the media workforce. In terms of quantity they comprises only 30% of media workforce (Creedon, 1993, p.43), and in terms of quality they are segregated in certain program making areas only. They are largely absent from technical jobs and they do not show up in senior management (Gallagher, 1987, p.13). Secondly, a formal licensing does not exist for the communications profession (unlike lawyer, doctors and some other professionals). Media employers are under no obligation to hire communication graduates rather than individuals with college preparation in other fields. It means to join the media work force graduated female students of communication do not only need to compete with male graduates from their own discipline but also with male and female graduates from other discipline as well.

In Indonesia the ratio of female to male students enrolled in communication studies is about 7:3 (Lock, 1991, p.10), and there are over fifty higher education institutions with communications programs (Mariani, 1990, p.21). However, the number of women holding positions in the media industry is minimal. For example, Jawa Post, the newspaper with the biggest coverage in East java, only recruited eleven female journalist in seven years (1991-1997) compared to twenty four men. Suara Merdeka, which has the

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widest coverage in central java, had only twelve female journalist from a total of 113. (Siregar et al., p.19) data obtained from PWI (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia, the Association of Indonesian Journalist) further illustrates the unequal proportions of male and female journalist. Of 5532 members, female journalist number only 755 (13.6%) (Soemandoyo, 1999, p.127). Given these difficult employment conditions, it is relevant to see how female graduates from communication studies perceive problems and difficulties related to their career paths in media industries.

Gender Theorising

To examine the career experiences of female alumnae of communication studies as media workers, three aspects of gender as an analytic category have emerged as central investigative issues. They are gender structure, gender identity and gender symbolism (Harding, 1986). Cockburn and Ormrod (1993, p.6) claims that if one or another of these facets of gender is ignored, women may fail in their problem solving strategies. We can apply this logic to the study of female communication graduates in media jobs. They have to carefully consider their gendered position within the organization, and take steps to maximize their opportunities.

In general the workplace takes gender inequality for granted for those who are involved in it, namely women. The structure and system in the labor market implies that women must be sacrificed. They may become victims in the process (Fakih, 1997, p.12). Various external and internal factors related to gender emerge as problems for the women there, as follow:

- The prevalent definitions of masculinity and femininity decree with types of work unsuitable for women or men (Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993)
- The formation of gendered work cultures make difficult for women to cross over in territory that is categorized as belonging to the opposite sex (Maddox and Perkins 1994, Lucio and Noon, 2002)
- The 'imposer syndrome' such as feeling lack of power, lack of influence, little support from home as well from colleagues, and the burden of home responsibility causes women to downplay or dismiss their accomplishment (Grunig, 1993).

It has been established that in the career experience of women as media workers the following identified gender problematic phenomena often emerge:

- Generally women have marginal and subordinate positions in media organizations (Siregar, et al., 1999)
- Generally women in media work face stereotyping, both social and cultural, as well as stigmatized labelling that places them in non-beneficial positions (Cramer, 1993; Tomagola, 1996)

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- Often women have a double burden in their media industry tasks (Cramer, 1993)
- Women suffer from a lack of empowerment in media industries (Gallagher, 1995, 2001).

Experiences in the Media Recruitment Process

In the media job recruitment process women sometimes had directly or indirectly experienced discrimination related to their gender. In the particular cases they felt that some of media employment policies explained to them by media employers in the interview process was highly gender discriminatory. Mariani (2000, p.75) says even women's participation in the labor market has significantly increased, working women still face discrimination.

Utari study (2004, p.125) explains how in the interview process the media employer had warned women interviewee that media institutions in question had a policy that if their female workers got married or had a family, they might be shifted from their original position to another positions. Media employers demonstrated overtly gender differentiated treatment of male and female applicants. For female applicants they asked some discriminatory questions about their plans for marriage. Young married women were judged as potential mothers who would not be able to devote themselves to their jobs as men usually. In this case a married woman was not regarded as having maximum capacity to conduct the media's job.

Competencies Acquired from the Degree

One of the important issues that emerged in relation to examining the status and role of young women in the media industry was the relevance of their undergraduate course content to current media jobs. When asked about the competencies acquired from communication studies that were useful for work task in the media, sometimes female graduates were extremely negative (Utari, p.128). A certain number claimed that the communications and the media competencies they got in formal qualification are not, and never have been, either necessary or sufficient to obtain employment, or to succeed in the media or communication professions (see Teichler 1999, p.172). In part this is because tasks in media and communications jobs can not be reduced to a simple set of core competencies that can be rote-learned. Learning to be a reporter, for example, is not the same as learning to be a dressmaker or stenographer (see Lafky, 1993, p.93). Usually it is enough just to get knowledge through learning by formal education. Instead a combination of talents is needed for success, including a certain facility for writing, and abiding good health.

Because many young women felt that the competencies acquired from communication studies were not enough to be useful in media tasks, emerged awareness to add to and sharpen their professional capacities. In a way this is inevitable. The media industries already show a great diversity of employment opportunities and types of work, and it is impossible to train students for every kind of task they might be required to do. In any profession, on-the-job training is an important component of the skill base.

Experiences in Media Work

The experiences of young women as media workers form an important part of the discussion in this paper. Exploring those experiences can help us understand to what extent young women were received or rejected in a world of media work that is often described as a “man's world” in terms of gender symbolism. Accordingly, organizational cultures were identified as the first focus of analysis. The sense of organizational culture was centered on gendered practices in the process of work in organizations. Some researchers explain this as 'organizational sexuality' (Riangle, 1989; Hearn et al., 1989). Others have identified the masculine imagery of particular kinds of work such as engineering (Cockburn, 1985).

Men's Culture

Reserachers have identified male defined rules of the game that determine media culture, and the customs and practices prevail within the media profession (Baehr, 1981; Gallagher,2001). There is a powerful gender symbolis operating in media organizations. Gender is “a fundamental category within which meaning and value are assigned to everything in the worl” (Harding, 1986, p.57), so that the whole materials and discursive world can be divided into masculine and feminine sets of symbols. In media jobs then, women's workmust be conducted and valued by male standards and performance criteria.

It is not surprising, therefore, that women's work tends to be judged by masculine work preferences that reflect a dynamic of media working conditions including 'hard work' and 'full of challenges'. Media jobs are usually explained as professional activities that need high mobility, tight pressures from deadlines, no time boundaries of working hours, and full of social nad technological challenges and risks. Women workrs who are involved in the media industries, whether they like or dislike it, must adapt to this masculine culture of work.

The Assignment of Work

The gender driven assignment of work is the major problem of gender discrimination in media workplaces, especially journalism. Studies conducted by Romano (1999) show that there is persistently gender-based

segregation in the allocation of work assignment. The effect of gender as a determinant of role is evident in the proportions of female reporters associated with the various news topics. Stereotyped attitude impinge on women journalists in the assignment of news collecting work. Gallagher (2001, p.64) explains that in some countries in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa women are still directed towards topics that traditionally have had less status and occupy the human-interest pages. Robinson and Saint-Jean depict this as 'beat' assignment (1998, p.335) routine and mundane. Gender stereotyping is also evident in terms of the smaller total number of subject areas that woman can report on. In Indonesia, female reporters cover areas like lifestyle features, consumer affairs, religion and social welfare closely associated to women's traditional kodrat.

Resistance to Men's Culture

In gendered work practice women tend to be locked into stereotypical gender positions by the male gaze. They are categorized as 'nice girls', 'seducers' or even 'beautiful' (Katila & Merilainen, 2002). These are not neutral observations in the profession of media workers. The movement, expression, thought, interpretations, images, symbols, experiences and feelings of female workers in media organizations are often read by men in highly gendered and sexualised terms. Women adopt different strategies to resist this. Some have found it necessary to fit into dominant culture by silencing their complaints, surrendering their identities and adopting the dominant culture to gain legitimacy (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996, p.58). Other routes to survival explained by Katila and Merilainen (2002, p.339) are: acceptance of organizational status quo, or rejection and challenging of this status quo. The multiple ways in which women in media industries can resist as explained by De Francisco (1997, p.50) include using silence, reclaiming 'trivial' discourse, responding to verbal harassment, telling the truth, utilizing creative code, switching in language, and developing women's presses.

Conclusion

Female communications graduates who obtained media jobs certainly were the 'lucky few' considering problems facing related to the degree and media jobs available for them. Holding a communication degree does not always convince media employers to employ them because the communications degree program itself had not adequately addressed their specific need as future female media workers, especially development of necessary procedural knowledge and professional capacity. Furthermore employers were frequently reluctant to employ female graduates because they believed women were inherently not suitable for media job, or because women not be reliable employees.

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To overcome those problems, it was needed to build an awareness among female communications graduates of media job realities before and during their years as students. They should gain accurate information about the reality of positions occupied by women, and gendered practices in media organizations. This might encourage them to make realistic long-range plans for effective media careers.

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