We need more female journalists in Nepal

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Tagged with: **Nepal**, **Asia**, **women**, **International Women's Day**

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Bidhya Chapagain sits in the centre of the studio surrounded by a cluster of bright lights, cables and cameras. She is preparing for an episode of Sajha Sawal, our 'Question Time' style debate TV and radio programme, discussing senior citizen rights.

The participants gather in a semi-circle around her on the set and she calmly chats with audience members to help them feel at ease. All the while she is mentally steeling herself to ask tough questions to a panel of policy-makers and officials.

There's nothing out of the ordinary about Bidhya's pre-show routine, yet her mere presence is noteworthy. ***Sajha Sawal*** is the only show in Nepal on governance and politics, presented entirely by a woman.

Role models

In a recent episode of **BojuBajai**, a podcast run by two Nepali women, they described Chapagain as a role model for the way she tackles important issues. Podcaster and journalist Bhrikuti Rai said that she looks up to (or as she puts it "fan-girls") the presenter because of 'the way she conducts herself in Sajha Sawal', because she 'acts as the bridge between people and the authorities' and 'challenges people who need to be challenged'.

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The number of women registered with the Federation of Nepalese Journalists is 1,613, out of a total of 10,077– just 16%. All newsrooms in Nepal are headed by men. During interactions between women journalists, challenges they face because of their gender is often the centre of discussion.

“The number of females working in the media has increased, but it’s only quantitative growth,” says Poonam Poudel, a broadcaster of 20 years. “In Nepali society, where a woman has to constantly prove herself as daughter-in-law and wife, women find it difficult to continue jobs that demand their time 24/7. She has to compete with men, who don’t face the same kind of social challenges.”

Mentoring

“I think women across all newsrooms, online, print and broadcast need good mentorship from the beginning,” says the podcast blogger, Bhrikuti, on the issue of retaining more female journalists.

When women are hired as reporters, many are handed beats like ‘women and children’ and ‘lifestyle’. Yet if women are given a chance to lead the effect is powerful.

The impact on the social milieu of having a woman presenter for a political debate show is subtle but important. When Bidhya talks to women across the country, she instantly puts them at ease and encourages them to speak their mind. Moreover, when you have a woman in an influential editorial role, it makes other women feel that having a voice isn’t entirely impossible. That’s what makes Bidhya a role model for many women and girls around the country.

Having strong female role models outside mainstream media is important too.

“We see our podcast as a way to start a more uninhibited conversation around Nepali feminism and an uninhibited sharing and shaming of the misogyny in Nepali media,” said Itisha Giri, also of *BojuBajai*.

If we are to achieve a more gender-balanced media, the only way to do it is to encourage young female journalists to get out there, find and tell stories across every available channel.

Tips for aspiring female journalists

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