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Spotlight interview with Parul Sharma (NBEU-India)

"We should not wait for discrimination to be wiped out before we take our place."

Brussels, 27 March 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Combining journalism and trade unionism in a spirit of optimism and openness towards others, Parul Sharma talks to us about the evolution of a woman's place in the field of journalism in India. A member of the Indo-European women's network set up by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), she highlights the difficulties surrounding certain mentalities, especially in rural areas, and in the media market, which uses the image of women as a commodity.

A project called Building Paths to Equality in Journalism was launched in India in September 2005, with the aim of promoting ethical and quality journalism, as well as gender equality in the media. With 22 years of experience in the field, Parul Sharma is the project coordinator. The rest of her time is spent at the Jansatta newspaper where she is in charge of co-ordinating the various editions.

According to Parul Sharma, her commitment as a unionist has always coexisted with her commitment to her job. The former actually goes back farther since, as she explains: "My involvement dates back to my college days. I'm from a well-educated family and did my studies in one of the most respected girls' colleges in India. I was discovering the world around me, and my family, my teachers and the people around me encouraged me. That was when I was elected for the first time to represent others on the College board of governors. The others encouraged me, telling me how well I spoke and that I had the qualities needed to represent them as well as the courage and the capacity to motivate people and work as part of a team. Their encouragement coupled with my own outlook on things were the two driving forces behind my trade union involvement. It helped me gain both confidence and awareness," she adds. The project coordinator's self-confidence is perceptible in the way she tells us about her experience, using clear, concise and direct language.

Later, but still very young, Parul Sharma entered the world of work, aged 21. "At that age one still has a great deal to learn about society, about working life," she admits. Yet there too she felt it was her role to listen to people, including female journalists talking about their situation, to intervene when it was necessary, to approach the managers: "I had a positive approach, people placed their trust in me and the editors would listen to me."

No change in approach

Today, Parul's 22 years of journalistic experience spans a wide range of areas, including women's issues, social issues and political journalism. She is still active as a unionist at the Bangalore Newspaper Employees Union (NBEU). Listening to her, it would seem that in India, unlike many other countries, being a female journalist does not necessarily mean being confined to specifically female themes. "Women," she adds, "are slowly gaining access to all sectors of information. There is, however, a marked difference between the big cities and rural communities or small towns. Whilst women appear to be gaining ground in the former, their prospects remain limited elsewhere, in other regions."

Parul Sharma insists that no hard-and-fast distinction can be made between men and women. "Whether in trade unionism or in journalism, the differences have less to do with being a man or a woman than the temperament of each individual. We define ourselves first and foremost as journalists. As women, there is no difference in our approach, in our stance with respect to the topics we cover." Although women have traditionally leant more towards the written press, things are changing, as more and more women are

turning towards television. In India, being a female journalist does not pose a real cultural problem, unlike in other parts of the world, where taking the initiative of contacting strangers still raises a few eyebrows.

According to Parul Sharma, the same applies to the world of work: "The female journalists enjoy the same conditions as their male counterparts. They obtain promotions and rewards, and are encouraged... Things are taking a positive turn". The same goes for trade unions, where, regardless of whether you are a man or a woman, "to be assigned responsibilities, one must first prove that he or she is capable of yielding results. It really depends on how you act, your ability to mobilize people, to work together... One needs to be polite, diplomatic, and have self-discipline, to show that you are there to serve the people."

Parul Sharma's positive attitude is vindicated by her conviction that "we should not wait for discrimination to be wiped out before we take our place. Quite the contrary, it is by taking up positions that women are able to bring about change". Meanwhile, the regional press is faced with a different reality: discrimination is still commonplace. The women outside the major cities are faced with many more problems "because the society they are part of is not open, rather than because of any specific male attitudes", she adds.

An image made to sell

The fact remains that the female image as portrayed in the media driven by competition can hardly be said to promote respect. "That image is above all determined by market values," explains Ms Parul, who is also the coordinator of a gender-based project. "Press companies are increasingly seeking to sell at any cost, even by using degrading images of women. Journalism is a profession that requires a great deal of individual commitment, but one that is also subjected to market values." From what she says, it would appear that in modern-day India, the latter constitutes an even greater obstacle to freedom of the press than the political powers." For the moment, she concludes, "There is freedom of the press in India, but the government is currently thinking about regulating it."

Interview by André Linard (InfoSud).

A project with multiple targets...

The Building Paths to Equality in Journalism project is being led under the aegis of the International Federation of Journalists, with the support of the European Union. It aims to achieve its objectives by acting simultaneously on the organisation of the media (the position and working conditions of women workers in press companies), on the end product (the ethical rules influencing the female image portrayed in the media), and on the consideration of women's interests within trade union organisations. This implies that journalists should be able to practice their profession without being subjected to political or commercial constraints.

One of the approaches used to this end has been the creation of an India-Europe network of female journalists. Thanks to this initiative, in February, ten Indian journalists were able to meet their counterparts in Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom.

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