

## Women Journalists of Color: Present Without Power

### Executive Summary

In March 1999, the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) conducted a nationwide study on the obstacles and opportunities for women of color in the United States media. The IWMF found that women journalists of color and their managers see the newsroom through very different lenses. A major communications breach seems to threaten the advancement of diversity goals and career advancement for journalists and journalism organizations.

The IWMF study indicates that a majority of women of color working for the media say the progress of their career is hampered by lingering racial stereotypes and subtle discrimination. Women journalists of color still face substantial obstacles to full participation in the newsroom—particularly in terms of promotion opportunities. They still find that their strengths as journalists, and the value that their presence brings, are consistently being ignored and downplayed.

Still, even where their numbers are low and discrimination remains a reality, there are positive observations to note. Many women journalists of color have had fulfilling careers and have reached heights of which their foremothers never dreamed. In addition, there appears to be a general agreement between managers and women journalists that women of color bring unique and important perspectives to the news.

Yet there remains a significant gap in how women of color and newsroom managers see the work environment, the effectiveness of training and promotion programs, and the obstacles which women of color face. The IWMF study makes an important first effort to expose that gap and to open the dialogue necessary to begin moving forward.

### Major Findings:

\* While 60 percent of journalists say they are satisfied with their job accomplishments, only 15 percent say they are satisfied with upper management's investment in staff. A mere 15 percent also are satisfied with the frequency of promotions and 28 percent are satisfied with their overall career advancement opportunities.

\* Although the majority of the women respondents say they do not face insurmountable obstacles based on the color of their skin and ethnic heritage, 61 percent of them believe they still face barriers to advancement that their white and male counterparts do not. Fifty-one percent also say they suspect that discrimination in promotion has hampered their professional advancement.

\* Women journalists of color and newsroom managers disagree on whether their newsrooms reflect the diversity of the community. Only 22 percent of the women journalists say their newsrooms mirror the diversity of the market, yet 53 percent of the managers believe they do. And while 25 percent of minority women surveyed believe the news produced by their organization reflects the diversity of the markets they serve, 69 percent of managers say it does.

\* There is a large disparity in how women of color and managers see the newsroom environment. The vast majority of managers—82 percent—say that management respects cultural differences in the newsroom, but only 32 percent of the women journalist respondents agree. Likewise, 77 percent of the managers believe that co-workers respect cultural differences, but just 40 percent of the women consider that to be the case.

\* Forty-seven percent of respondents say that not having a mentor has been a barrier to their professional advancement. More specifically, 44 percent say that not having a mentor of the same race/ethnic group has been a problem. These findings, coupled with the lack of access to high visibility assignments (47 percent) and discrimination in promotions (51 percent) were the greatest obstacles faced by women of color.

\* While both groups rate the effectiveness of retention and promotion programs poorly-in cases where such programs are even offered-female journalists find these programs to be fundamentally ineffective. Arguably, this results in the 76 percent of journalists who say former coworkers have left to pursue new opportunities and challenges. Once they leave, it is not always clear to the managers why. While only 17 percent of managers surveyed believe that barriers to advancement are the main reason women journalists leave their jobs, 54 percent of women journalists of color say those barriers are most likely to make them quit.

Conclusions: The mainstream media in the United States is grappling with enormous challenges-struggling with a new cultural mix in newsrooms, and at the same time, attempting to offer a news product relevant to the community. While there is a general understanding of the contributions women of color can make to that process, there is a lack of understanding of how to ensure they are an integral part of the newsroom at all levels.

Many of the women surveyed in this study are fully committed and prepared to contribute to the industry, often against the odds and far beyond the expectations of some managers and coworkers. Women journalists of color believe that, too many times, their goals are stifled long before they have had a chance to flourish. If newsroom executives are committed to reaching diversity goals and accurately reflecting their communities, they must address these perceptions as expressed by women journalists of color.

Armed with this information, both managers and journalists can take the important first steps in opening the lines of communication and share their thoughts on how to reach common ground. Initial steps include:

\* Managers and women of color committing to more focused-and non-defensive-dialogue about the barriers to retaining and promoting journalists of color.

\* Managers re-evaluating the effectiveness of their organization's diversity programs and actively engaging women journalists of color in creating more effective, beneficial initiatives.

\* Women journalists of color being more aggressive in forming mentoring relationships, which play an important role in job satisfaction and retention. These women should also continually build on a support network with their colleagues.

\* Managers re-evaluating the skills and strengths of their current minority female employees to determine whether they are being used to their fullest potential.

\* Educators exposing students to the management track, preparing them sooner for obtaining crucial, decision-making positions.

\* Managers making training workshops and seminars more accessible to staff and more aggressively promoting such programs.

The IWWMF study is an important first step in bridging the substantial perception gaps that lie between what managers think is happening in their newsrooms and the first-hand experiences of women journalists of color. Not only will these women thrive once their voices are heard and concerns are addressed, but the news organization that responds with a consistent and fervent investment in diversity will flourish as well.