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FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIA

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One of the most significant breakthroughs in the last century was the globalisation of the feminist agenda. In this connection the event that caught the maximum world attention was the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995. The conference established a strong international consensus to promote women and girls rights as the key to development everywhere. In many ways it forced several government leaders to re-visit their national landscape for women's concerns. The forum also recognized the critical role media plays in the portrayal of the image of women in society.

The Beijing Platform for Action specified plans and strategies that would make it possible for the advances in information technology to facilitate the empowerment and development of women all around the world. It noted that continuous projecting of negative and degrading images of women in media electronic, print, visual and audio and called for action so that the media would be a part of the scenario of change.

Thus, the women's movement and the use of media got further impetus after the Beijing Conference in 1995. Many women's organisations then began to voice their concern against the negative portrayal of women as a commodity and second class citizens through both private and government controlled print and electronic media and the need for encouraging women to join the profession.

Drawing inspiration from the Beijing Conference we established a Women's Media Forum called Sancharika Samuha in Nepal in April 1996. The objective of the Forum is two fold – one to empower the women working within the media and secondly to use the potential of the media to promote and advocate for women's issues and rights. The forum faced a lot of hardship during the initial stage trying to gain recognition from government and professional media institutions that were not too eager to see a secular women's media group. They preferred rather that we function as a sub wing under the bigger political media associations. However, today almost nine years after its inception, the forum has been successful in gaining an equal voice in national and regional forums. It has been relevantly successful in promoting the issue of gender and media through advocacy, training, public outreach campaigns and use of mainstream and alternative media. Last year the forum in collaboration with the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA) hosted the first South Asia Regional Workshop on Gender and Media. This paper is on a major part based on some of the key perspectives on media, drawn from the

regional workshop and the experiences of Sancharika Samuha in working in the sector of gender and media.

Traditionally, the media world has been male-dominated, globally as well as nationally. Men design and define media policies, priorities and agendas including how women are portrayed and presented. It is most often men who make decisions about hiring staff. The ratio of male-female workers in the media is heavily imbalanced in favor of men. It is no wonder, then, that the media is biased against women in many areas. This bias affects images of women in the media, and in turn has a negative effect on women's development in a society.

In examining gender patterns in South Asia we need to analyze the participation and position of women in the media, and the impact of these positions, on women's development. By this we mean women's right to participate in public debates and to have their views heard, and the right to see themselves portrayed in the media in ways that accurately represent the complexities of their lives.

Portrayal

Up to now leadership paradigm has been generally based on male models, as men tend to dominate decision-making positions all over the world. The media in our region I think is very much influenced by this trend. The media fails to understand that there is an enormous range of visions in this world, and how differently people practice and perceive leadership to bring about fundamental positive changes. Most journalists even female journalists tend to think that only the perception of men is important when dealing with issues such as governance, politics, decision making in civil service, etc. Women have made significant strides in many areas but the media has been slow to recognize these gains. It does not sufficiently search out the terrain to be able to find women in new roles.

With increased voices and protests from active women's groups some of media's negative portrayal and representation of women have become quite subtle and insidious in the last few years. However it is still rare that the media present women as contributors to the development process or as professionals in their own field. The patriarchal culture of societies is very much reflected in the various media reports and presentations. The lack of a truly gender-sensitive appreciation and analysis of women's issues by both men and women in media has allowed exploitative and derogatory images of women in media to continue These images of women are deeply rooted in traditional social practices and interpretation that help the media in constructing these representations.

In Pakistan there is a marked increase in women's magazines that are home, kitchen and fashion-based. These magazines are focusing heavily on the domestic side of women and trying to prove that every woman needs to be a perfect cook, a tailor, and housekeeper and also be beautiful. Women's abilities as equal partners in development are lost between cooking oils and fairness creams. This is a dangerous trend especially because the clientele are across board. The same trend can be witnessed in the ever increasing numbers of teleplays that focus on women being the focal point of domestic peace and harmony in most of South Asia countries.

In Srilanka most of the daily newspapers have discreetly dropped the inclusion of women's pages. However, by no means does this indicate that sexism has been eliminated if one looks at the images of women that appear repeatedly and in greatest numbers in newspapers. In the absence of positive or empowering images of women elsewhere, the overall effect of this preponderance of fashion-and-society images is to associate women with social frippery.   Hence the overall impact is sexist.

In India Cricket news occupies nearly 20% more space than women's issues. Female presence is more through advertisements, news of crime and social events Women's representation has moved beyond female images of the family and home to personal care as dictated by the market agenda in a predominant patriarchy. The subtle stereotyping is more insidious as it is relatively more invisible but nonetheless demeaning and patronizing.

Participation (Gender Balance)

The convergence of new media technologies and influx of private media organizations in the last decade has increased the number of women working in both print and electronic media. However, women have not gained parity with men in terms of participation and decision-making. Top management is still entirely male-dominated and patriarchal with only a negligible number of women holding senior positions. Although women have become more visible particularly in radio and television as presenters, announcers and reporters, the gender division of labor is highly pronounced in production, creative and technical departments, which are male dominated. The many, up coming private television and radio channels have no doubt employed many young women as reporters and DJs, but this is where it all stops. The presence of women is also largely absent in official commissions, boards or committees formed for formulating policies or monitoring the media.

Thus, very few women journalists whether it is from print or electronic media have made it to the top ladder. For example, in the 54-year history of Pakistan, no woman has ever been editor of an Urdu newspaper and only one woman has been editor of an English daily. The state-controlled Pakistan Television Corporation has had one woman reaching the top position of Managing Director and another woman that of Director of Programs. But state-owned Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation has never had a woman as Director General. In Nepal no woman has ever been an editor of Nepali or English daily though there are a few women editors of Nepali weeklies and magazines. The electronic media is still worse but recently one woman has been promoted as chief editor in the state owned television. In Srilanka, which is expected to be more progressive, there is something like a 50-50 balance of men and women at the level of reporters and sub editors. But there is not a single woman editor in the mainstream press. In most of the Bangladesh dailies women either are working in the feature sections or in the desks. In India too a look at the disaggregated data reveals that women as broadcasters and on desk jobs have a higher representation than as correspondents

Not surprisingly women are under-represented at the higher management and decision-making levels in the mainstream press throughout the region. Thus the general newsroom culture continues to be overwhelmingly male chauvinist. Women's exclusion from and by media systems leads to apathetic attitudes to women.

Division of Labor

Where earlier it was almost impossible to find a woman reporting on politics and economy now few young women have emerged who are reporting on such hard core issues as well. However, the gender division of labor is still very much evident in the way coverage of stories is assigned in most media organizations. Women still predominantly tend to be assigned to "soft issues" such as culture, art, and lifestyle while men are assigned to political and economic stories, which are considered more as "real issues." Denying women the right to cover hard news discourages them from pursuing careers in journalism. Media instead of eliminating the problems ensures security of its female members by keeping them away from competitive beats. They remain, obviously isolated from availing corresponding opportunity and thus cannot grow into the profession as such.

Although the number of women entering media is increasing, stereotyped attitudes, sexual harassment, unfair treatment in assignments and

promotions, traditional gender hierarchies, lack of support mechanisms for working women pose as obstacles that hinder women from joining the media or assuming decision-making positions. The late working hours required in journalism still carry a social stigma for women. In addition media offices fail to provide a congenial atmosphere to female journalists. Though there has been no authentic research to justify the fact many have felt that the widespread cases of sexual harassment within media organizations has been a means to control and exclude women from occupying key positions in the industry.

Most media organizations still harbor the idea that women have less working ability, are weak and might not be able to carry out the responsibility they are assigned. So they are discouraged to take up challenging tasks and assignments resulting in their lack of confidence. Women are thus typecast in traditional feminine roles that they are still playing and arguing about today.

Content

There has been little progress in the transformation of media content since 1995. The Global Media Monitoring Project that year showed that 17% of news sources were women. By 2000 this had increased to a mere 18%. About half of these are related to sex, prostitution, glamour, entertainment and crime. Certain categories of women such as poor, disabled or older omen or those belonging to ethnic minorities are almost invisible. At the same time some other categories of women, especially the young, are more visible as their sexualized images are exploited to promote the commercial interests of media and other enterprises.

In Nepal in the past few years there has been a comparatively improved and increased reportage of issues related to women in the media particularly in the print. News related to women though still marginal has started to occasionally occupy important slots like the editorial, feature news, front-page news etc. However, women's visibility in the news is still dominated by sensational stories of glamour, sex, domestic violence and other forms of violence. Stories like women coping with adversity or building their lives are largely missing. Also missing are the changing and professional roles of women and their contribution to nation development. Freedom of expression implies that women's voices, as well as men's deserve to be heard. However, what we see and hear in the media represents a severely limited range of voices. Many studies have established that when women appear in the news, they are mostly projected as passive victims or passive reactors to public events in news media. They hardly appear as speakers or participants in public event.

This calls into question the extent to which women's rights and freedom of expression are currently respected in media output.

Though the media carries out coverage of women's issues, yet aspects, which promote and create awareness for gender empowerment among the citizens, are tranquil. In fact the problems are sometimes further perpetuated by mainstream (male stream) media with portrayals that have only served to reinforce rather than challenge men's suppression of women. For instance, the arrival of new commercial cable and satellite television channels and the privatization of old state-run media have led to more market oriented content in several countries of the region. This, in turn has introduced new tensions and conflicts in the representation of women. Similarly, with media structures and hierarchies still dominated by men, content continues to reflect a masculine vision of the world and of what is important. As a result, issues that are particularly crucial to women's lives feature low down in the scale of what is regarded as newsworthy. At a time media simply concentrates on event-coverage sidetracking other pressing needs. For example such issues get a natural highlight in the media only during the observation of specific events like international Women's Day.

Apart from few random concessions to the subject of gender, it is evident that issues relating to women in all their complexity are not sufficiently explored in the media. Gender related issues need to be dealt with more thoroughly in the general news and feature pages of mainstream newspapers, and not merely in columns or pages dedicated to women. Most women's issues have something to do with patriarchal attitudes or behavior, and problems can be traced to male-dominated bureaucracies and environments of one kind or another.

Media Advocacy

In spite of the dismal picture there have been several successful media advocacy initiatives that have helped in bringing about policy reforms. Women's Feature Service is one such example. In Nepal too we have been taking out a monthly Sancharika Feature Service every month on issues related to women with the objective of mainstreaming gender issues. The articles from the feature service are given considerable importance by the daily and weekly papers. Publication comprising of articles from the feature are being used as educational as well as advocacy tool.

Some interventions in creating alternative media spaces for the expression of women's perspectives have been successful in bringing about policy reforms. The media campaigns conducted in Nepal helped a

lot in the promulgation of legislation on equal property rights for women and abortion rights. After a launch of a video program featuring different forms of violence against women the government minister present publicly committed to appoint the first woman representative in the planning commission and the cabinet did so after eighteen days. After a two week intensive media campaign targeted to empower migrant women workers the Government came up with a twelve point program agenda that included issues that had been raised by the media and also lifted the ban on women to go to gulf countries for employment.

The web has also expanded women's world, primarily in terms of creating strong online communities. Sancharika Samuha has made effort to act as bridges through its website program (Mahilaweb) to unconnected groups in the community either be packaging their information and feeding it on the web or by repackaging information found online and sharing it through other communications channels and in local languages. Although there have been some public service and community media organizations that tend to recognize the need to reflect diversity and to serve the public interest, they are also under thereat from the intensification of market-oriented media systems, or their sustainability is in question due to there high dependability on donor funding.

Policies

Almost all the countries of the region have a national plan of action based on the strategic objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action. These action plans have stated actions to be undertaken to promote gender and media and how to utilize the media for advocacy and policy. But no significant effort to implement these policies has been observed. In most of the countries media policies have like all other state-policies, always been determined by the party or agency in power. Thus, states have failed to come up with a consistent media policy. They vary from mild liberalism to rigid orthodoxy from time to time.

Very few communication policies take gender issues into consideration. But this absence of gender-sensitive policy is generally unnoticed by policy makers themselves. A fundamental concern is therefore the need to build awareness among decision-makers and policy-makers about eh significance of gender and its impact, and about the need for a gender dimension within policy frameworks. Parallel to this is the need for more women in decision-making positions within the policy making process.

In the absence of defined and institutionalized policies, procedures and mechanisms guided by gender just concerns and the messages conveyed

fall in the realm of individual attribution of meaning. In India the lack of formalized structure allows the media to selectively appropriate and represent gender issues contextually in conjunction with the dominant socio-political norms. Thus gender representation in the media is open to the influence of competing tendencies, be it the market, cultural capital, communalism, electoral politics or women's empowerment articulations.

Thus the occasional attention of the women issues suffers due to the absence and sustainability of appropriate policy guideline. In order for the media to reflect gender rights in a sustained and coherent manner, gender sensitive guidelines and mechanisms have to be evolved. The media must respond to historical and socio-cultural forms of gender differentiation taking into consideration Asian multiculturalism and its associated peculiarities, recognition of gender differences and women's special interests, thereby addressing issues of humanity through universalism and gender interests through particularizes. While adherence to principals of equality can be lauded, procedures and systems evolved to promote empowerment must be screened through assumption of gender rights. Gender diversity within the media is an effective strategy only when supported by gender sensitivity, competitive gender capacities and institutionalization of gender just norms.

Enabling policies and mechanisms assume particular importance at a time when control of mass media networks- including radio, television, films, newspapers, magazines, cable, satellite, internet and telecommunications – is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few media conglomerates, many of them resource-rich and powerful transnational entities. There is a need for research that analyses gender aspects of media content and media performance in relation to existing legislation, policies and codes, with a view to making recommendations for change or for the development of new policy that take account of gender considerations.

Challenges posed by ICT – Key Concerns

The growth of new information and communication technologies has many conflicting facets. On one hand the electronic highway system created by satellite, cable and the Internet provide existing media giants with vast global markets for their information and entertainment products and create a new communication and cultural environment. This development introduces major new concerns in relation to media freedom. They have been a primary means for corporate expansion globally, built upon existing unequal terms to trade relations and on persistent socio-economic inequalities within societies. On the other hand the arrival of digital media technologies provides the means for individuals, small groups and

previously marginalized communities to express their views. Many Women's NGOs say they have benefited by gaining more visibility through Web sites, having access to donor assistance, and information especially of international and regional activities, relating to the women's movement. There also have been increased opportunities for wider dissemination of women generated news through low–cost newsletters or in some cases, short wave radio. In that sense the new technologies offer potentially important new audiences, access to a wider range of sources of material, and rapid means of information exchange on issue of professional or political concern.

Yet despite the unprecedented gains, there are more women on the other side of the digital divide without access or the know how to take benefit from technology. Access to this new medium is particularly difficult for women in poorer and less urbanized areas where telecommunications infrastructures are poor and unaffordable. Lack of skills, literacy and education, training, techno phobia, language, time, cost, geographical location of facilities, social and cultural norms also serve as major deterrents. A World Bank report has noted that there is evidence that in high- income countries skilled workers have benefited the most from information and communications technologies. In fact the internet has the potential to be a stronger force for generating inequality than earlier communications technologies because it is expensive, requires a high level of education and skill to operate, uses languages not widely spoken by the poor, and needs skilled personnel, electricity and a critical mass of users to make it sustainable (World Bank 2002) In the context of these obstacles the barriers against women in rural communities using ICTs are likely to be even more pronounced.

There is also a growing concern that the information revolution is creating a new world communications order that is being shaped and dominated by big transnational corporations that care more about profit than public service. What is worse is that it has opened up new ways of exploitation and exposed women and girls to new risks and vulnerabilities. The Internet, for example, has been instrumental in encouraging traffickers and paedophiles to establish interest-networks that lure young women and girls.

Fears have been expressed that the commercialization of media could lead to the marginalization, even death, of small, indigenous media outfits that cater to voiceless sectors, including women. While ICTs are assumed to enhance the work of professionals employed in traditional media, here too the notorious digital divide is likely to be compounded by a gender

divide unless special efforts are made to equip women in the media to take advantage of the opportunities made available by technology.

Furthermore the patterns of gender segregation that are well known in the established media industries are worse in the field of ICTs. Women are virtually absent form senior decision-making and politically influential positions in the ICT sector. Therefore women have benefited less from, and been disadvantaged more by, technological advances. Women, therefore need to be actively involved in the definition, design and development of new technologies. Otherwise, the information revolution will completely bypass women or continue to produce adverse effect on their lives. Relevant and useful resources about women will not appear unless women work to create them.

In spite of the concerns we have to acknowledge that ICTs does have immense potential to transform unequal power relations. However, this recognition has to include an awareness of the limits of ICTs - that in and of themselves, ICTs cannot create gender equality, or end poverty, but that they can be tools for social action and positive social change. They must be a part of a wider campaign for a more just world order. If ICTs offer a more effective way of generating income, securing education and training, and getting critical information related to health and well being, women will find time to incorporate these into their lives. ICTS can then facilitate life-long learning for women if the right policies and partnerships are in place.

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