

BACKGROUND

Though radio listener ship in Pakistan was steadily diminishing till a decade ago, the arrival of private FM channels in the mid 90s provided a considerable boost to this trend. Currently there are numerous private radio stations operating from throughout the country attracting mostly the younger generation with their heavy focus on entertainment and music based programming. However, one must acknowledge initiatives of some channels that are airing programmes aimed towards providing an alternative to other women's programmes, which usually portray women in stereotypical.

Generally issue-based programmes have failed to capture the attention of the young and the casual listeners of FM channels. But these programmes in Urdu that claim to be high quality, non-sexist and rights-based are said to have given women a chance to express themselves through case studies, oral testimonies and given greater visibility to women achievers as well as sufferers. These programmes cover whole variety of themes including HIV/AIDS, women trafficking, prostitution, drug abuse and reproductive health which in a conservative society like Pakistan's are considered taboo topics despite the pressing urgency for an open discussion aimed towards empowering women and sensitising men towards a gender just society.

This paper focuses on the main argument of *if and how* radio FM channels can be an effective instrument in putting forward the true face of Pakistani women's empowerment and will look at the issue of 'Local Media and Women's Identity Articulation' through these questions:

- What are the scope and limitations of these channels' given the fact that they are urban-based?
- Who and what determines their policies with special reference to commercialism versus professionalism?
- What is their performance vis a vis Pakistani women's portrayal and projection?
- How these channels are (or are not) reinforcing stereotypical images of women.
- What is the feed back mechanism to gauge listeners' responses and examine any attitudinal changes?
- Are there any initiatives to increase the access of public, specially women to these programmes through Internet or women's listening groups?

INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to note the changes in Pakistan's media scenario since consultations on PRSP began. In the past few years, as quoted by 'Aurora', a leading marketing magazine (Media Houses: the right place and the right time, September-October 2004), "Pakistan has moved from being a low media-consuming nation to one with active and interactive media consumers. Here are some examples of how far we have moved:

- From one channel to an average of 40.
- From one movie a week to about 15 a day.
- From three dramas a week to about three a day, on every Pakistani channel.
- From one music program a week to 24-hour music channels.
- From mass broadcast to niche broadcast (Discovery, National Geographic, BBC Food, Star Movies, Comedy Channel, Sailing etc.).
- From the news at 9 o'clock to a 24-hour news channel.
- From one major newspaper and two or three magazine to countless number of publications.
- From morning papers only to afternoon/evening papers.
- From AM to FM radio stations.
- From captive to 'in-control'
- From email to Internet broadcast

Coming back to radio, for nearly 20 years radio has been gradually losing audience in the country to television, initially in the urban areas and subsequently in the rural areas as well. But even then, it enjoys a sizable listener base. According to an estimate radio had an audience base of 23 million in 2002, 18 million adults and 5 million children.

The introduction of FM radio in Pakistan in the 1990s gave a new face to this medium in the country and opened up new avenues to it to reengineer itself. The private radio channel FM 100, transmitting from three major cities, has built up a sizable listenership of around 2 million. The public-sector FM 101 channel, owned by the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation has similarly done well and is estimated to command nearly one-third share in FM radio audience. However, the FM radio market in the country is all set for a complete new turn due to a number of licenses issued by the Authority in 2002-2003 for establishing FM radio stations in the private sector in various cities.

THE STORY BEGINS

The agonising, yet powerful sounds of a wailing mother whose young daughter and niece had been killed on the pretext of honour is how this programme on Karo kari (Honour Killing) begins. The feature goes on to the details of this crime and includes interviews of other females of the family. It also has an interview of a feudal lord who hold regular courts to decide the fate of these men and women who have been declared 'kara or kari' by the

villagers. Ironically, this feudal male also happens to be a minister with the provincial assembly. It is a very touching story, but what stays with the audience is the wailing of the mother, it really brings tears to your eyes. And this is how a new group of women radio producers is trying to bring in the voices and concerns of majority of Pakistani women on to the air waves. Most of the programmes being based in rural and in some cases real far flung areas, voices of rural Pakistan has been brought to the urban listeners. "Pakistan's radio industry is flourishing adding new spices and flavour to radio programming," remarked a radio broadcasting trainer when she and her trainees returned to office from a field trip. This is what radio should be all about, telling many stories, creating pictures with sound, and giving a voice to many different types of people including those who go unheard. And this is what the new breed of radio programmes is exploring and experimenting: to mix sounds, ideas and commitment in a radio package.

Yes, I am referring to Uks radio project, the first women's radio project in Pakistan that started off with Meri Awaz Sunno and is now producing issue-based commissioned programmes that include a 10-programme series on 'Poverty, Peace and Justice', HIV/AIDS and Us and Women and MDGs. Unique in many ways, this programme has been welcomed by some FM radio channels in the country who agreed to broadcast them as a public service message. (Others are too entertainment-focused to even consider the airing of any kind of serious programmes). FM radio channels are a good option for awareness raising on women issues, but they have their own limitations. The foremost being the total take over of commercialism leading programmes that would earn good revenues. Most of the time, these are through music-based programmes with some information and a few slots for features and stories. Some of the channels are also available on-line thus broadening the horizon and impact of the programmes.

The channels that play Uks's programmes have given excellent feed back. According to Mr. Baseer Naved of Mast FM103, these programmes, specially the 15-minute series on 'Poverty, peace and justice' has been so well received by the public that they had to increase the time to one-hour in order to include live discussion on the issue of the day. Dr. Shahjehan Syed of FM107, campus radio, Peshawar said, 'through these thought-provoking programmes, we have been able to bring women's issues on our agenda and now we hope that it will be taken up by concerned authorities.'

Research and data collection for this paper was made possible through a month-long monitoring of daily transmissions of two radio FM channels Campus Radio FM 107 (Peshawar) and Mast FM 103 (Karachi) for their contents on women and listeners feed back collected from various sources including emails, phone-ins and FGDs.

The following are the responses, reactions and impressions:

- Creating awareness on social issues with a gender perspective. These programmes have brought to light the hitherto un addressed gender perspective to different social issues which in turn have largely been overlooked like HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, prostitution, human

trafficking etc. Research into such challenging topics has added to the team's individual learning curve and heightened their own levels of awareness. The programme take up many issues that are of interest to women in Pakistan including those that are important but unconventional and which in a conservative society like Pakistan's are considered taboo topics despite the pressing urgency for an open discussion.

- Bring about attitudinal changes in men and women. Though the team cannot claim to have achieved, what is in essence, a long-term undertaking, yet these productions have tried to challenge stereotypical perception of various issues. That such issues are covered by an all women team (barring a few exceptions), in itself a unique initiative, says a lot about how it challenged the particular mindset concerning gender roles in our society. The radio project provides an alternative to other women's programmes, which usually portray women in stereotypical ways.
- The programme makes use of different segments, namely, interviews, features, discussions and vox pops to provide a developmental perspective to issues that aim at information-dissemination and empowerment of women.
- Despite the challenges of working in the field (particularly regarding programmes dealing with the red light area in Lahore or human trafficking in the South of the country) as well as the various constraints faced by women journalists, the team comes up with programmes that are novel in their concepts and thoroughly professional in their handling of sensitive issues.
- Another highlight of the programme and indeed the team is their proficiency at working in different capacities. The team successfully handles the many different aspects of broadcast journalism from concept creation to scriptwriting, presenting, research, editing and the handling of all technical features.
- The team has also provides in house trainings to the producers of upcoming radio stations to give them insight for doing gender-balanced reporting.
- Raising Women's Profile in Broadcast Journalism. The project is an attempt to rectify conditions arising from the abysmally low percentage of women journalists in the country standing at a mere 3%, as well as infuse a culture of investigative reporting, hitherto largely missing from local journalistic traditions. The Uks team comprises an all female team who are responsible for all aspects of programming from the conception to research, script writing, narration, recording and compiling the finished product.

- *Training of women radio producers*
Uks, is now the only Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Pakistan, which owns its own production house. The production facility also complements Uks efforts in fostering awareness rising in the print media as well. One of the major reasons for stereotypical and derogatory projection of women in the Pakistani media is the extreme under representation of women in the media as journalists and broadcasters. By training a team of women journalists and heading an all female production house, Uks has contributed in its own way to rectifying the under representation of women and hopes that this trend catches on.

- The programmes highlight issues of local and current relevance. Individually as well in their entirety, poverty, peace and justice are issues of pressing concern particularly in the current national scenario. Today, more than ever, emphasis is being laid on the need for peaceful coexistence with our neighbours with renewed negotiations and efforts to resolve conflicts through peaceful dialogue. On the other hand with the premiership of the nation in the hands of a former finance minister, there are growing expectations that the menace of poverty might yet be dealt with effectively. In the given context the programme aims to highlight these issues as well as highlight their human aspect while making them locally relevant to listeners throughout the country. Most importantly they take up the issue that poverty hits women more and steps need to be taken to take this seriously.

- **Gender equilibrium is an important feature of the programmes. Deliberate effort is made to include a male producer and sensitise him on different issues. As things turned out, a male producer received his fair share of sensitisation. One of his features had a question-answer session, which as is the tradition, started with male voices and bringing in female voices only towards the end. Gently he was told to reverse the order and also explained why: to give weightage and prominence to women's views. It is hoped that now when ever he is making a programmes, he would remember to start with female voices followed by male, not the other way round. Maximum caution was exercised to include the opinions of both sexes in the programme. Moreover women's voices were heard on a variety of complex issues, generally regarded as being outside their areas of interest, namely beauty, fashion and housekeeping.**

- These tools and technologies coupled with the power of knowledge can enable women in developing countries to join the battle for economic, social and political empowerment.

- Women who have not ventured out of their homes due to socio-cultural pressures compounded by religious fundamentalism, claustrophobic

existence, and restricted movements find relief in these programmes that give them a chance to express themselves and at times provides a platform to amplify women's voices and concerns.

WAY FORWARD: THIS STORY MUST NEVER END

The issues of women have to be fought by the women themselves and that too by those who are affected. The process of change must penetrate all levels of society.

Radio has been an effective instrument to bring together women from varied backgrounds. More of these high quality, non-sexist, rights-based programmes in Urdu and other languages must be produced to help achieve the following:

- Linking communications through Networking of FM channels
- Empowering women and sensitising men towards a gender just society
- Giving voices to case studies, oral testimonies of struggles and achievements of women
- Greater visibility of women achievers as well as sufferers
- Localizing appropriate communication network and information.
- Bridging the existing gaps between reality and myth
- Helping develop a sensitive attitude towards the issues of women development
- Working towards their rights as well as broader struggle for social justice.
- Putting forward the true face of women empowerment
- Removing Gender imbalances in our society
- Giving a Gender dimension to all issues
- Exploring Global communication networks
- Empowering women through ICT

