Gender Perspectives on the Information Society
South Asia Pre-WSIS Seminar 2005

18th – 19th April
Bangalore

COMMUNITY MEDIA AND WOMEN: FORGING SUBALTERN COUNTERPUBLICS

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IT for Change
with Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
and Centre for Public Policy, Indian Institute of Management - Bangalore
supported by UNIFEM and UNDP-APDIP

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Introduction
Participatory communication for development envisages, among other things, democratised and decentralized media systems as key agents of empowerment for those who have traditionally been marginalized socially, culturally, economically and politically. Feminist activists and women's movements have argued that the conventional ideology of male superiority and the control of productive resources by men have affected women's options and opportunities for a better life. "Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women" is one of the core *Millennium Development Goals* stated in the *Millennium Declaration* adopted by all 189-member states of the UN General Assembly in 2000. This paper, through case studies of ongoing experiments with community media by civil society organizations in India, attempts to analyse if these community-driven media initiatives have helped in creating new mediated discourses that amplify the voices and concerns of marginalized women and serve as a platform for expression of alternative development strategies? It also seeks to examine the manner in which management, control and ownership of media technologies by community self-help groups of women has initiated a process of transformation of power relationships at the village-level and provided rural women access to decision making in the practice of participatory development.

The paper begins by examining the intersections of development frameworks and feminist theorizing, and how they have been influenced by debates and critiques of globalisation. The two main feminist development frameworks -- Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) -- are analysed to highlight the gender mainstreaming practices stirred by them, especially those that address issues of regional and cultural differences. The second part of the paper discusses how the recent approaches to development have moved away from their preoccupation with top-down economic growth and towards social and participatory development practices that are more inclusive. The aim of these approaches seems to be enlargement of people's choices and human capabilities.

The two powerful movements, of gender and of participation, have generated major implications for the role of communication in transforming the rhetoric of local level development into reality. The relationship, intersections, paradoxes and synergies among the discourses originating in development, communication and feminist scholarships offer insights into a new agenda for empowerment of women, which is discussed in part three of the paper. The theoretical and conceptual framework derived from the above discussions is then applied to analyse gender as an analytical category in the following case studies of community radio and participatory video initiatives at the grassroots level:
1. Community Radio project of Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS), Gujarat
2. Community Radio project of Alternative for India Development (AID), Daltongunj, Jharkhand
3. Community Radio and Participatory Video projects of Deccan Development Society (DDS), Pastapur, Andhra Pradesh
4. Community Radio project of Voices, at Budhikote, Karnataka
5. Participatory Video project of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

It is the argument of this paper that community media initiatives, such as the ones to be discussed here, perceive women as producers and contributors of media content and not solely as 'consumers'. They help in activating women's alternatives for fostering social change by building capacities of discursive interaction for collective action and forging what Nancy Fraser has called *subaltern counterpublics*.

Gender and Development: Theoretical Perspectives

"Look at the world through women's eyes," proclaimed a poster at the venue of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. In the context of development, this is an indispensable tenet even today, as it calls for redefining the existing approaches to development and making them gender responsive. The *Beijing Declaration* as well as the *Platform for Action* (1995) and the *Outcome Document* adopted by the UN General Assembly Session on Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st century, have identified several critical areas that must be addressed for achieving the advancement and empowerment of women. These include:

- Unequal access to education and training
- Violence against women
- Violation of the rights of the girl child
- Inequality in access to economic resources
- Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels
- Inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media

Although in the past decades, the status of women has improved in some important respects, there still exist major barriers of inequality that hinder women's participation in the decision-making processes, their access to key resources and sharing of power. Unless a feminist perspective is unambiguously integrated in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all existing and prospective development initiatives, their outcome will rarely enhance gender equality or lead to empowerment of women. A sustained effort by feminist activists and theorists, women's movements and poor women's grassroots organizations to mainstream gender in development discourses is playing a crucial role in challenging oppressive structures of patriarchy, introducing alternative practices and redefining the goals of development (Abbot, 1997; SinghaRoy, 2000).

Until the end of the 1960s, the role of women in development projects of modernization was limited to being recipients of welfare and development messages. They were considered reproducers while men, who were identified as producers, were given access to information, training, technology, credit and decision-making. This exclusion along with the sex-role stereotyping and patriarchal biases led to women's increased marginalization as the 'benefits' of development never 'trickled down' to reach them. Ester Boserup's book, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970) highlighted how the development planners and policy makers had failed to acknowledge the productive roles performed by women especially in agriculture and to involve women in development activities as

contributors to the economy. This resulted around the mid-1970s, in women getting increased attention globally through the Women in Development (WID) project (Blumberg, 1989; Melkote, 2001). WID sought to provide greater visibility to the role of women in development and several agencies worked to secure the benefits of modernization for them by integrating women into the mainstream of economic development through limited, stereotypical, 'traditional' work roles (Bhasin, 2000; Humble, 1998).

The WID approach was criticized by feminist theorists for subscribing to the dominant modernisation and Marxist models and failing to question structures of patriarchy that limited women's access to resources and power (Humble, 1998; Melkote, 2001). The liberal conception of the public-private dichotomy that views the household as being isolated in the 'private' sphere and distinct from the public sphere of market economy was challenged. It was pointed out that the gender-blind categories of conventional economic development excluded household work, caretaker roles, childbearing and childrearing from the purview of productivity (Knobloch, 2002; Verma, 2004). "An unequal division of labour within the family presents obstacles to women in their lives outside the family; and these inequalities are often supported by social traditions and expectations" (Nussbaum, 1992:3/12). The role of the 'universal caregiver' and the 'invisible' work meant solely for household consumption restricts the full-wage work opportunities available to women outside and sustain the notion that women are dependents. This curbs women's entitlements to land, credit and control over physical resources (Knobloch, 2002; Verma, 2004).

Feminist interventions also contested the contentions of the WID advocates that women's participation in labour force and enhancement of their 'productive' potential is a necessary condition for improving their social status. The dominant development theories assumed that higher productivity and improved standards of living would resolve individual conflicts over resources (Parpart et al, 2000; Verma, 2004). These theories, preoccupied with economic growth, failed to acknowledge that the factors determining women's status might be culturally specific and related to traditional work roles. An analysis of the internal economy of the household, the sexual division of labour within it and the hierarchical relations that it generates between members of the household was deemed essential to understand the implications of domestic economy for the distribution of benefits and burdens of development (Blumberg, 1989; Verma, 2004).

Feminist activists and women's movements in the developing world also questioned the hegemonic Western feminist theories and their universal definition of modernity that was central to liberal feminism. They objected to the WID approach as it ignored the issue of cultural relativism. They called for dismissing value judgments about traditions by the West and developing sensitivity to distinctive worldviews and the complex material and multi-layered cultural realities of women in the non-Western world (Parpart et al 2000). Depicting 'Third World' women as a homogenous group of acknowledged victims of oppressive norms was contested as it misrepresented the lived experiences of women in specific socio-cultural and local/regional contexts. Feminist scholars in the Third World pointed out that while the ethical universalism of Western feminist theories of justice had suitably condemned gender-based dominations and obsolete customs that subject women to physical and mental abuse, the ideology of possessive individualism of the women's rights approach totally overlooked the cultural

membership of women in their community (Verma, 2004). This has led to adverse consequences especially for women from poor and rural households because of their dependence on village commons - forests, pastures, gram-sabha lands for basic necessities (Aggarwal 1997). It was proposed that without falling into the trap of idealisation of tradition and blindness to local power structures, an alternative set of theories must focus on human-centred development that recognizes the centrality of women and nature, respects indigenous knowledge systems and gives people greater access to and control over their natural resources (Shiva, 1988; Verma, 2004).

The mid-1980s thus saw Gender and Development (GAD) approach questioning the prevailing socio-cultural, economic and political structures that generated and underpinned a disadvantageous status for women relative to men. The focus of this empowerment agenda was not on women alone, but on relationships between women and men. The GAD framework emerged from the grassroots experiences and writings of Third World feminists and was articulated lucidly by Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), formally launched at the 1985 Nairobi international NGO forum (held parallel to the official World Conference on Women) (Parpart et al 2000). GAD theory recognized that both the ideology of male superiority (patriarchal ideology) and the control of material and productive resources by men at the global, national, community and household levels have affected women's options and opportunities for a better life (Humble, 1998; Melkote, 2001). An urgent need to redefine socially constructed gender patterns in the three spheres - economy, home and the community and to redress power imbalances in gender relations was articulated by women's movements.

Women experience oppression differently, according to their class, caste, colonial history, culture, and position in the global economies (Moser 1993). Third World scholars stressed the need to adopt a more democratic and pluralistic approach to women's issues and on the need to ground solutions to women's problems in the spatially and culturally specific realities and experiences of women. This focus on context and on recovering women's silenced voices and knowledge resulted in an increasing importance of identity and difference (Parpart et al, 2000). Feminist critiques of development asked for the use of women's experience as a resource for any programmes or policies that fundamentally affect their lives and stressed that knowledge based mainly on male experience represents a partial and distorted perception of reality. GAD scholars and activists thus emphasized that while gender-sensitive policies must be specific to the country, region, and locality, they must also reflect an understanding that the needs and interests of women and men who belong to the same country, caste, and/or social class may also be in conflict with each other, despite their intersecting life experiences (Kabeer, 1994).

Gender Issues in Participatory Development
During the past two decades, concepts like 'participation', 'community-based action', 'empowerment' and their varied interpretations have also been transforming the discourses, frameworks and practices of development (Chambers, 1997; Gujit and Shah, 1998; Cornwall, 2000; Parpart et al, 2000). In the context of globalisation and resurgence of grassroots movements, conventional development strategies are giving way to more participatory approaches that are recognizing the involvement of those who have suffered systematic and systemic inequalities and deprivations as 'partners' in development. The processes of genuine participation

with their goals of social inclusion and societal transformation essentially aim at handing over the control of natural and shared resources to the marginalized people and empowering them with skills and confidence to have a say in decision-making over their circumstances (Chambers, 1997; Gujit and Shah, 1998). This paradigmatic shift towards participatory development appears to offer prospects of giving everyone who has a stake a voice and a choice. In reality, the legacy of a highly unequal and hierarchical society, the embedded notions of gender and power and the ideology of male superiority affects women's options to intervene in discussions or participate in any decision making process (Cornwall, 2000).

'Community' has usually been perceived and dealt with as a harmonious collective with equitable internal dynamics. Too often the prevalent hierarchies, differences and conflicts, that are crucial to positive outcomes, are overlooked. It has been observed in numerous cases that community-driven development is not gender-sensitive, and "the language and practice of 'participation' often obscures women's worlds, needs and contributions to development making equitable participatory development an elusive goal" (Guijt and Kaul Shah, 1998). For any participatory development approach to be gender responsive, it ought to provide women with the enabling resources which will allow them to take greater control of their own lives, and to devise the strategies and alliances that help them to choose the kinds of gender relations they want to live within (Kabeer, 1994). It is only by integrating Gender and Development (GAD) philosophy into participatory development practices that the slippage between 'involving women' and 'addressing gender' may be redeemed thus enabling women to gain a voice and subsequent representation and agency in development initiatives (Humble, 1998; Cornwall, 2000).

However, participatory processes aimed at producing consensus and identifying a common set of priorities for action, can work both to enable different voices to be heard and to mask dissent. Context sensitivity could easily turn into communitarian relativism leading to acceptance of too many local norms and cultural traditions that maintain women's subordination within the family and the community. Feminist theories of social justice informed by notions of pluralism warn against acceptance of local traditions and practices that violate a woman's individual agency to pursue a way of life that she affirms as good. Martha C. Nussbaum (2005) defends a liberal feminist position, even as she displays sensitivity to cultural differences and religious liberty, when she stresses that there should be an ethical consensus around ideas of human dignity. She maintains that it is the prerogative of people to sustain a religious view or any cultural outlook that gives their life meaning, but respecting the freedom of religion should not grant a select number of religious leaders "limitless license to perpetuate human misery" (Nussbaum 2000). In her book *Women and Human Development: the Capabilities Approach* she lists various "central human capabilities" that members of any particular culture ought to possess i.e. "what a person is in a position to do and be." She identifies ten of these capabilities as essential to human dignity - those that ascertain the "threshold level of capabilities beneath which truly human functioning is not available." The list of central human capabilities includes, the ability to live a normal life span, bodily health, to be secure against violent assault, the use of senses, to imagine, think and reason to play, to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature and to make economic and political choices (Nussbaum, 2000:78-80). Nussbaum considers this list as open-ended and subject to ongoing revision through cross-cultural dialogical reflection among

people with different conceptions of the good. Nussbaum advocates this latest version of her capabilities approach as an alternative to the human rights discourse that could provide a basis for governments as well as development actors to provide people, especially the poor and disadvantaged women, with the required conditions for actualising these central human capabilities.

Gender, Media and Participatory Development

The two powerful movements of gender and of participation, discussed in the previous sections, are seeking to appropriate communication avenues, and specifically media for the advancement and empowerment of women especially at the grassroots level. In this section we seek to contextualise the use of democratised communication spaces and community media by women for identity articulation and as counter-hegemony to the patriarchal structures of the media as well as the negative forces of media globalisation (Pavarala and Kumar, 2002). There is an increasing consensus amongst communication and feminist scholars and organizations that media and new technologies of communication informed by a gender perspective have an immense potential to strategically promote agendas that advance the status of women in society and support women's empowerment. They can be harnessed as indispensable tools for reversal of women's marginalisation by generating spaces for expression of women's issues; dissemination and exchange of authentic information and images about women; enhancing women's equal participation in civil and public life; activating women's representation in development; and facilitating women's alternatives for designing solidarity campaigns and collaborative actions for their own futures.

Women's organisations and gender workers who participated in the first-ever international conference on women and communication held in Bangkok in 1994 explain that having women "empowered" by communication is not enough, and declared their commitment "to communication that is enriched by women's perspectives, and whose structures are responsive to women's participation" (WACC, 2005). The participants of the conference put together the Bangkok Declaration that outlines a vision shared by gender and media activists worldwide even today.

It is essential to promote forms of communication that not only challenge the patriarchal nature of media but strive to decentralise and democratise them; to create media that encourage dialogue and debate, media that advance women's and peoples' creativity, media that reaffirm women's wisdom and knowledge, and that make people into subjects rather than objects or targets of communication, media which are responsive to peoples needs (Bangkok Declaration, 1994).

Women's media concerns and the role communication technologies can play in enhancing gender equality and equity have been debated in several international conventions of women working in the information and communication sector (Frankson, 2000). In most countries, media are overwhelmingly male-controlled and women still lack the power to determine the nature and shape of media content or to influence media policy. Documents produced at these important conventions urged media enterprises, professionals, international and national governmental and non-governmental organizations, educational and media training institutions, to dispel gender disparity and encourage greater involvement of women in the

technical, decision-making, and agenda-setting activities of communication and media. They also point towards the need for creating new opportunities to "promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media." The *Toronto Platform for Action* (1995) specifically advocates the following among several other measures as essential:

- To increase women's access to expression in and through the media, (Paragraph 1.1)
- To increase women's access to and participation in decision-making and management of the media, so as to encourage media to promote women's positive contributions to society, (Paragraph 1.2)
- To use communication as a driving force in the promotion of women's active and equal participation in development in a context of peace and equality, while preserving freedom of expression and freedom of the press, (Paragraph 1.3)
- To recognize the importance of women's media networks worldwide, both those that supply news in women's activities and concerns to media outlets, and those that utilize alternative media channels to reach women and women's groups with information that assists and supports them in their personal, family and community development activities, (Paragraph 1.4)
- To recognize the rights of all women to have access to expression and participation in the media, in particular those from discriminated groups such as other-abled, indigenous, women of colour and women of diverse sexual orientation, (Paragraph 1.5)
- To recognize women as authoritative information sources, experts, and opinion makers, therefore news sources on any issue and not confine women to the role of speaking only on "women's issues," (Paragraph 2.5)
- To include women on a parity basis in government reform committees, parliamentary, advisory, policy-making and other regulatory bodies that consider advertising and communications policy, (Paragraph 5.1)
- To introduce, support and extend community radio stations as a way of increasing women's participation and contribution to the media and local economic development, especially in areas of high illiteracy, (Paragraph 6.4)
- To conduct research into various alternative, traditional, local, and folk forms, as well as new communications technologies used by women, (Paragraph 6.12)

Pilar Riano (1994b) argues that feminist scholars and media campaigners have in the last two decades raised issues of lack of women's representation in communication channels including news and current affairs and of sexist portrayal of women in mainstream media. They have also highlighted the disadvantageous position of women with respect to access and control of communication technologies. Feminist works in communication studies have confirmed that women's role as "communicative subjects and producers of communication" is still being disregarded in mainstream media. She further indicates that all these demands for women's equity in representation and against negative portrayal have not been met with far-reaching changes in communication policy or the structures of media industries. The situation has worsened due to the unrestricted operations of transnational media enterprises. But Riano and a growing school of scholars and practitioners feel that the gender specialists attending international conferences and focusing on publications and presentations have ignored the contribution being

made to democratisation of communication by women's social movements. They are involved in building new communication alternatives for change at the grassroots level (Nair & White, 1987; Kidd, 1992; Riano, 1994; Gujit and Shah, 1998).

For those who have traditionally been unacknowledged and silenced, socially and culturally, the opportunity to have one's voice heard can be an imposing experience of self-worth. In bell hooks' (1989:9) words:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject - the liberated voice.

A significant contribution is being made to the gender and communication movement by the growing numbers of coalitions at the grassroots level that are constructing democratic "we" spaces for women to develop their own narratives, "voice their concerns, name who they are, share and build projects of change" (Riano, 1994:xi). Women, through interpersonal communication networks and as bare-foot journalists, independent film makers, alternative press owners, community radio reporters, process video producers, radical song writers, people's theatre activists, communication facilitators and participatory researchers are organising themselves across differences or around the commonalities of gender, class, caste and culture as subjects of struggle and transformation (Riano, 1994b).

Pilar Riano (1994a) provides a typology of women's participation in communication based on various analytical frameworks that address the relationship among women, participation and communication. This typology (See Table 1) identifies the principles and approaches of four basic frameworks, i.e. development communication (women as subjects of information); participatory communication (women as participants); alternative communication (women as subjects of change); and feminist communication (women as producers of meaning). Riano clarifies that while all these types of communication have been used by women's groups to achieve their development goals, development communication and, to some extent, participatory communication frameworks seek consent and support and are adopted by the state and development institutions. Alternative communication and feminist communication identify with social movements and respond to the logic of social projects that seek out shared reality and new culture for all aspects of life (Riano 1994a). Riano's typology takes into account distinct interpretations of 'participation' and the differences in 'perceptions of women', 'goals', 'societal contexts' and conceptions of 'empowerment' that distinguish each of the four frameworks and introduce us to the message development processes in the four types of communication. This typology offers researchers a reference framework to connect the observations, experiences and responses emerging in the field to the discourses originating in development, communication and feminist scholarship with a view to evaluate gender as an analytical dimension in grassroots communication initiatives.

Table 1 Typology of Women, Participation and Communication (Adapted from Riano, 1994a)

Type	Perception of women	Objectives	Societal context	Participation	Empowerment	Communication Process
Development Communication	As subjects of information originating from outside the control of the community	To encourage women to change certain key practices, elicit active support, mobilize community	National/international development projects; Development-support communication agenda, Extension work, Social marketing	Defined as cooperation with planners, administrators, and power elites and a willingness to adopt new ways, feedback	Little scope for strategies aimed at empowering people to control the programs; Through acquiring information	One way; people do not use communication equipment or formulate messages, media act as loudspeakers to reinforce project messages
Participatory Communication	As participants in development, leading to self-reliance	To enable women to take control of their own lives, develop confidence through learning, encourage socio-cultural change, influence public policies	Critique of diffusionist and one-way models of development, Participatory approaches to development, Policy making	Practiced as transaction between receivers and information source	Process through which individuals acquire knowledge, and skills to take control of their lives, Capacity to benefit from involvement	Interface of top-down and bottom-up information flow; participatory message development
Alternative Communication	As subjects of struggle and change	To support social struggles, awaken women's consciousness to their subordination, advocate and defend rights, promote group reflection and popular communication	Development of alternatives to commercial media and to one-way communication system, Social movements	Viewed both as a dimension of and a condition for social change, a measure of control over the process of development	Developing individual and collective capacities to struggle for rights and impact change	Multidimensional, cyclical flow of messages, alternative communication strategies based on community access to media production and decision-making.

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Feminist Communication	As producers of meaning	To speak about gender, race, class and other oppressions, negotiate fair representations and equal participation, build identity, produce alternative meanings	Feminist politics and advocacy; Formation of independent women's communication networks, grassroots communication alternatives	Conceived as ownership, inclusion and accountability that acknowledges differences of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, Identity articulation	Involves the transformation of women as social subjects of struggle and as active producers of meaning, Breaking Silence	Communication as exchange, Networks of meanings and development of messages as a project of naming their own experiences and identities

Community Media for Empowerment: the Gender Dimension

Gender is a significant dimension in community radio and participatory video initiatives launched by community-based organizations that are seeking to deploy communication technologies for social change in general and empowerment of women in particular. Three of the five community media initiatives discussed here carry out their developmental activities through women-only self-help groups. Women in these organizations use community media to talk about their issues and concerns and to augment their own developmental activities. Community media help to build the capacities of discursive interaction of women and also their media competencies.   Equipped with the confidence that their voices and lived experiences would not be disregarded, more and more women are participating in producing programmes that are locally relevant and gender sensitive.

The Deccan Development Society (DDS), a non-governmental organization working with poor, rural, dalit women in the Pastapur area of Medak district, A.P. set up a community radio station over a decade ago with assistance from UNESCO. A couple of young dalit women from the area produce programmes and manage the station. As their request for a license to broadcast has not yet been acceded, the DDS women take the audiotapes of their programmes for narrowcasting in the villages. DDS started its participatory video initiative in 1998 by training about 10 non-literate and poor women. These women are now producing programmes pertaining to local problems and indigenous farming practices, which would never have been accommodated in the mainstream media. The video women of Pastapur have travelled to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka and shared their technological aptitudes, farming practices and other concerns with NGOs and marginalized women there.

The Kutch Mahila Vikas Sanghatan (KMVS) in Gujarat operates on a different model of community radio from that of the above initiative. The organization built on its long presence in the area of doing development work with women and trained some of them to be community reporters for a radio programme. In 1999 the group started airing a 30-minute programme made by them in the Kutchi language on All India Radio's Bhuj station by purchasing a commercial slot and they are still on air with new innovative programming like *Kutch Log Ji Bani* (KLJB). Broadly modelled after the KMVS project, *Chala Ho Gaon Mein* is a community radio programme supported by the National Foundation for India and produced by community representatives of Alternative for India Development (AID), an NGO (see Pavarala, 2003). The programme is broadcast once a week on AIR Daltonganj in the Palamau district of Jharkhand. The Bangalore-based media advocacy group, Voices started an audio production centre, *Namma Dhwani* (Our Voice) in 2001 at Budikote in the Kolar district of Karnataka and has been narrowcasting programmes made by rural men and women trained in basics of radio production.

SEWA, (Self Employed Women's Association) as the name suggests, is an organization that works with poor self-employed women in the unorganised labour sector. SEWA has its headquarters in Ahmedabad and operates through cooperatives and sangathans at the village level. SEWA trained about 20 women to start the video initiative in 1984. It is aimed at building communication capacities of women that help to enhance their self-esteem and to produce programmes that would benefit other women in their community to be self-employed. Through comprehensive case studies of these initiatives and an analysis of the responses

collected by us through focus group discussion and interviews with women engaged in community media production and reception, we present some of our findings here that reflect women's involvement at various stages of the project, their participation in the programmes and enhancement in their capabilities to communicate and develop messages. Some of the questions to which answers were sought from field experiences included:

1. Are women engaging actively in critical reception of community radio and participatory video programmes?

2. To what extent is women's participation discernible in the various stages of the initiative? Do women's issues and indigenous ideas get transformed into radio programmes? What is the media competency among women?

3. What is the manner in which management, control and ownership of media technologies by self-help groups of marginalized women has initiated a process of transformation of power relationships at the village-level?

4. Have community-driven media initiatives helped in amplifying the voice of rural women and served as a platform for expression of alternative development strategies?

5. How and to what extent are women in grassroots communication creating avenues for democratic communication and fostering social change? What role is communication playing in activating women's alternatives to support their social struggles?

Reception of the programmes

KMVS and AID community radio programmes are aired through the local All India Radio station on fixed days and at a particular time. The habit of group listening by men, with friends or neighbours, as well as the domestic division of labour ensures that women rarely get an environment conducive for listening to radio at home. As a result, many women said that they are not able to listen to the community radio broadcast attentively (*dhyan se nahi sun paate*) and during the focus group discussions it was obvious that this has not only affected their ability to recall the content of the programme, but also rendered them incapable of stating any benefits from the programmes. Women wish to be regular radio listeners, and do listen to radio "when men are not around," the preferences of programmes being *bhajans* and folk songs. Women confess that they do not listen attentively to community radio programmes, "*roti banate hue sunte hain*" and even if they do listen, they forget what was said, "*yaad nahin rahata,*" some attributing it to the fact that they are uneducated. One woman said that they would start listening only when there is some benefit (*faida*) to the village.

There are exceptions to the above cases among women who are keenly involved in *mahila mandal* or *sangathan* activities or those who have participated either in the programmes or in the *panchayats*. Many women interviewed for the study felt that women's groups or collectives in the village provide a more conducive environment for reception of radio and also for video. A woman in a SEWA village frankly stated that for suitable reception of the programmes produced

by the video women, two TV sets must be used, otherwise the physical spaces are monopolised by men. The cultural constraints on women almost make it impossible for them to sit in the midst of all the men and watch the programme attentively. In DDS villages, the supervisors of the women *sanghams* carry audiotapes of programmes produced by their women and play it on the cassette players in the monthly meeting. This listening session is followed by discussions and the feedback is carried back to the radio committee which then takes necessary action to produce new content and improve programming.

Women in the village Raipally (DDS) find useful those programmes that give information specific to their agricultural needs and about indigenous knowledge systems, health and hygiene, food security, gender justice and the narrative traditions of song and drama. "We are illiterate and poor people. We cannot follow writing material. We thought it is better to listen to these programmes and learn more about issues that affect our lives so intimately." At Rajhara village (AID), Sonamati, an articulate middle-aged woman, who was involved in *van samitis* (forest protection committees) was enthusiastic about the role of the radio programme in various development efforts in the region. She represented for us the potential for building participation of women in radio production where there was some amount of prior mobilization and conscientization of women. Listenership among women also seems to be tied in to their participation in programme production -- in discussions, drama, *lok geet* (folk songs), etc. Older women seemed alienated from the radio programme while younger women in Jharkhand demonstrated a high recall and insisted that the community radio programme has many benefits. Most women identified with the language as it gave them a feeling that programmes were their own, "Also, because it talks about our daily problems and issues, "*Hamari baat radio par aati hai*."

Degree of Participation in Programme Production

Perhaps the one aspect that all community media initiatives can boast of is their team of community radio reporters and video makers. Significant capacity building efforts have enhanced the abilities of these rural women who had negligible exposure to media production prior to their involvement in these projects. 'General' Narsamma of Pastapur village in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh and Mangala Gowri of Budikote in Kolar District of Karnataka are young, rural women, matriculate, and belong to poor daily-wage earner families. Over the years they have joined *sanghams/sanghas* (self-help groups) and have been trained in radio production as part of the community radio initiatives by these groups. Shy and hesitant once upon a time, today they proficiently manage audio studios in their villages along with a few other women and volunteers and produce programmes in the local dialect that they feel would "benefit their community." 'General' and Mangala carry out programme planning, and recording, and doing voiceovers, mixing, editing and production of programmes.

Vijayaben, a middle-aged woman with formal education till class four, who covers the Mohaldi and Abdasa talukas for the KMVS community radio programme explains how she had attended conscientization, confidence-building and technical training workshops as also one on the art of seeking *mahiti* (information) and community participation. She and her fellow reporters are aware that theirs is a *bhagidari wala radio* (participatory radio) and that they have to go to the people and not like All India Radio that asks people to come to their studio for recordings

all the time. Most of the KMVS reporters, whether it is an unmarried Muslim or Patel woman or a housewife from a conservative family, had never dreamt of working, as it was not the common thing in their communities. Now, they are now not afraid even to question *sarkari* (government) officials. Shilwanti Biranchi, the dynamic reporter at Bhalmanda village in Jharkhand, says that she made her own family members participate in plays and other programmes for *Chala Ho Gaon Mein* before others could be convinced that it was not only useful, but could also be fun. Surendra Thakur, the AID reporter for Harsangra village, among others, narrated his experiences with mobilizing women's participation in radio plays:

> Recording a radio drama involves a lot of practice and rehearsals. Some plays require women to play the roles of wives. They would say 'how can we become some strange man's wife' and hesitate to come forward to take on such roles. So we persuaded women members (*didi log*) of our own group to take the lead and show the other women that there is nothing wrong. Gradually some women started feeling that if this programme is being made for the good of our village, then they too should participate.

Many women felt that participation could be further enhanced in programme production if the amount of woman-centred programming on issues such as, dowry, child marriage, literacy, reproductive health, etc. was increased and women other than reporters were given opportunities to participate in discussions. Twenty one-year year old Sanjukta Devi, who is an active member of the self-help group in village Cheri (AID) states, "We women were earlier very inhibited. When the men used to sit outside for discussions, we used to sit inside. Today, after this programme, we feel we too have a voice and are confident to come out of the house to even take part in processions."

Management, Control and Ownership

P.V. Satheesh, Director, DDS, says, "For us, a community radio is total control of the communities over the radio. And that includes everything, it includes the language, it includes the format, it includes the expression and entire sequence of what will come there." He recalls the answer that the women gave when they rejected the offer of a slot on AIR to air their programmes. They said, "look, that is a kind of a continuous chain of broadcast and within that they will give us a particular position. And we don't know what comes before that and what comes after that. Like for example, we are all talking about organic agriculture and may be there is a pesticide advertisement before that and then our organic agriculture comes, after that somebody from an agricultural university may give a talk about hybrid seeds. So, we don't want our programmes to be positioned in a radio channel where that positioning may be very awkward for us." He quotes Chilukapalli Anasuyamma from Pastapur, a 30-year old non-literate dalit single woman, when she asked to suggest what could we do with our own radio,

> In our *sanghams* (village associations of dalit women), we are carrying on a number of tasks that used to be done by men. Our men are doing a number of tasks, which were only being preserved for women. This way we have been able to erase the boundaries between man's work and woman's work.

> The mainstream radio is still steeped in the traditional gender roles. If we depend on it, we have to go back in time. All that we have done in our

sanghams will come to a nought. If we have our own radio it can help us continue this progress we have made on gender issues.

Although the radio reporters of Bhuj and the community radio representatives of Palamau have negotiated with the contemporary state policy for airing their programmes, their voices harmonize with those in Budhikote and Pastapur for demanding a radio of their own. All of them believe that in order to deploy radio as a tool of empowerment, participation of people is not enough. The ownership, control and management of the radio station must be in the hands of the community for it to function as an autonomous media space open to the need for self-expression by the socially and culturally marginalized sections of society, especially women. The media unit of KMVS that wholly handles its community radio production, though centralized at Bhuj headquarters, aims at being a training ground for the community radio reporters to equip them to start media activity for *sangathans* in their respective villages. The DDS Community Media Trust has eight radio and video women as trustees and its preamble reads that it was formed, "in fulfilment of the wishes of thousands of women from DDS *sanghams* who wish to have their unrecognised voices heard and recognised by the world outside." SEWA's video initiative is now a cooperative with women as the controlling executives.

<u>Addressing Women's Issues & Forging Solidarities</u>
Identifying KMVS community radio broadcasts as the only programmes that talk of their problems, most women respondents in the villages of Kutch had a good recall of the issues like water, panchayat, literacy, alcoholism, mid-day meal, problem of doctors, mid-wife etc. taken up in KLJB. Everyone mentioned *pardafash*, the investigative journalism segment of KLJB and were all praise for its efforts to expose corrupt practices of the officials. "DDS recognises that people have more knowledge than we have credited them with, and more appropriate technologies than we can think of. Therefore, the DDS programmes have evolved into three principles: gender justice, environmental-soundness and people's knowledge," says P.V. Satheesh. According to 'General', the programming content of the station seeks to serve the information, education, and cultural needs of the women in the region and includes themes like agricultural needs of semi-arid regions, public health and hygiene, environmental and ecological issues, biodiversity and food security, local/indigenous knowledge systems and local cultures, with emphasis on the narrative traditions of song and drama.
The DDS video experiment was launched to train the women to communicate their problems, raise their issues and find solutions through video. The women have not only been making films for themselves, but also for some mainstream television channels such as Doordarshan and Eenadu TV. Shakuntala (DDS) explains, "This is our video. We make programmes on our lives and on issues affecting our lives - agriculture, animal husbandry, health, playschools, etc." DDS women, using video as an alternative to the writing medium, made a comparative study between BT and non-BT cotton grown in their Telangana area. This video was widely acclaimed and was dubbed into English and French. Non-literate women are thus recognizing the potential of video as an alternative tool for research and documentation.

Mollamma, a dalit video woman (DDS) recalls, "When we started using the video, the men folk at home and in the village laughed at us. But when we started playing back our finished programmes and they were aired on Doordarshan and

ETV, they started recognizing our potentials and respecting us. Today when we go to field for shooting, men come forward to facilitate our work by carrying tripod and other accessories." Kavita, another video woman adds, "If we are shooting and go home late in the night, our men now look after the kids, feed them, and put them to sleep." Humnapur Laxmamma, a senior video woman narrates her experience at the Patel's (upper cast landlord) residence to elucidate the change in status that she perceived after being trained as a media producer.

> One day we decided to make a video on the Dassara festival rituals. We contacted the local Patel and asked him if we could shoot the Dassara rituals at his house. To our surprise, he instantly welcomed the proposition. We were taken into the *puja* room for shooting. You see generally we Dalits would not have access even into the main entrance of the houses of upper caste people. When we were shooting, the Patel was watching some TV programme, and the TV's audio was disturbing audio recording of prayer rituals. On bringing this to his notice, he immediately switched off the TV set and extended his cooperation for shooting whatever we wanted.

The community media projects have also contributed in creating awareness about social problems that perpetuate women's subordination to men. The tradition of *tilak/dahej* (dowry) is quite deeply rooted in the culture of the Jharkhand region and it is unrealistic to expect that the AID radio programme would make a dent in that so soon. However, it is apparent that the programme has managed to put the issue firmly on the agenda and that people are at least discussing the problem. Thirty-year old Kamoda Devi, the only literate woman in the focus group we assembled in Bhalmanda village (AID), hoped that the programme would make a difference.

> If I take dowry for my son now, I will realize the problem later when my son has a daughter and he has to give dowry. So it is important to stop this practice. If this can be done through the programme, it will be good for society.

Adolescent girls at the Nawadih village (AID) also condemned the practice as a blot on society and hoped that the radio programme can address the issue. Many people during focus group discussions demonstrated considerable recall of the major issues such as alcoholism, dowry problem, superstition, bribery, literacy, and child marriage on which the programme had been made. The fact that many came up with an inventory of additional issues, on which radio programmes should be made, shows that people have tremendous amount of faith in the medium to solve their problems. At village Cheri (AID), 19-year old Chintamani said confidently that *Chala Ho* was already beginning to make a difference in the thinking of women about the need for collective action, "Prior to the radio programme, we girls were never even allowed to go outside the home, leave alone participating in meetings. After this programme started, we got together and formed a young women's group. Now we all sing together, attend meetings, and discuss issues. A lot of change has come in our attitudes." Surendra Thakur, one of the community reporters, offered an example of a specific outcome of *Chala Ho Gaon Mein* in the area of gender equity:

> Before this radio programme started, people used to send only their sons to school and make their daughters work at home. However, after this

programme started talking about treating sons and daughters equally, many parents came forward and, with our help, enrolled their daughters in school.

Video SEWA team produces programmes for the overall development of women, informs Manjulaben, a video woman, "We make programmes on agriculture, animal husbandry, savings, insurance, embroidery, watershed development, drinking water, and labour issues related to women." Nelamben Dave, Coordinator, Video SEWA project explains, "Before women came to SEWA, their capacities were low. They would not even utter the name of their husbands. Basic video training, self-evaluation and the confidence that they could also speak, be seen, and heard on video transformed their image of themselves and today they are a picture of self-worth." An aged non-literate vegetable vendor, Leelaben Dantain, with video camera in her hands is a source of inspiration for the SEWA women. Her film on pulling down of shops by municipal authorities at Manek Chowk in 2004 was used for advocacy and legal evidence and eventually moved the bureaucracy as well as the Supreme Court to review the problem. Her video *Ek Nal Our 500 Degada* about water problem in a slum area resulted in getting water connections to each house. There are many such examples where films about their own lives have helped SEWA women to seek redressal for their troubles and build confidence of others to take control of their day-to-day lives.

The programmes of community radio and participatory video production have enabled women to radically change accepted 'media languages' by providing them with a space and a process for expressing ideas and issues linked to their unique experiences. Women are central to development and women's media production competencies help them to develop their capacities as socio-political actors and spearhead popular movements. For women media producers, the first tough task is to adequately address the concerns of their own village/community and have a *"pahchan"* - identity that imparts other women with faith in them and the potential of the medium to bring about *sudhar* – improvement and prompts them to participate in media activities.

Forging Subaltern Counter Publics

Community media may be seen as providing to the women an arena, outside the state apparatus, that may be used as a potent instrument for democratic deliberations and negotiations. Such an institutionalised space for discursive interaction and for political participation through the medium of talk could be looked at as an alternative post-bourgeois model of public sphere that Habermas stops short of developing in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* after he declares the decline of the bourgeois public sphere in the context of advanced industrial capitalism and the social welfare state of mass democracy.

While Habermas's idea of the public sphere is indispensable to the understanding of democratic political practices, certain assumptions underlying the concept are problematic. His assumptions that proliferation of other forms of public discourse and activity necessarily weakens the democratic attributes of the single all-inclusive public sphere or that it is possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status differentials and deliberate as if they are social equals are farfetched in stratified unequal societies. Also, his bourgeois conception of the public sphere stresses its claim to be open and accessible to all but in practice women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation on the

basis of gender status while plebeian men were formally excluded by property qualification.

Nancy Fraser too critiques the singularity of Habermas' public sphere and argues that arrangements that accommodate contestations among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive overarching public. She claims that such a public sphere tends to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and renders subordinate social groups less able to articulate and defend their interests. She proposes the forging of what she calls *subaltern counterpublics*, spheres parallel to that of the dominant social category where "members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs." She claims that *subaltern counterpublics* on one hand, function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; and on the other they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. This dialectic enables *subaltern counterpublics* partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups. Our research on community media initiatives suggests that if we could forge *subaltern counterpublics* through a process of shifting control of media technologies to those excluded and marginalized from the dominant public sphere, they help expand the discursive space, which could eventually facilitate collective action and offer a realistic emancipatory potential.

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