

AMIC Seminar on New Communication
Technologies, Democracy and Women in Asia :
Singapore, Aug 25-27, 1997 : [welcome address]

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1997

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/92761>

Paper No. 2

NCT, Democracy and Women in Asia

Welcome Address by Vijay Menon, Secretary General, AMIC, 24 August 1997

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you, on behalf of AMIC, to this seminar on New Communication Technologies, Democracy and Women in Asia. With 12 countries and over 20 participants this is a compact yet representative group discussing a topic of concern to the region.

Almost two decades ago, the MacBride Commission noted that "Access to certain professions (especially in the world of technology), to higher paid jobs, and to senior management positions is far from equal." And added "The world of communication reflects this inequality." The report was subtitled "Towards a new, more just and more efficient world information and communication order." The search for justice and efficiency that underlay the MacBride Report is not over.

The origins of this workshop may be traced to a seminar we organized ten years ago on the topic Women and the Media. One of the many useful recommendations made by the participants was that a research project should be undertaken to study the access of women to communication education and employment. This study, *Access of Asian Women to Communication Education and Work*, was carried out in six countries in 1989. The study showed that in many countries female students in communication programmes often outnumbered the males 6:4 or even 7:3. But this was not reflected in the gender balance in the media, especially at the higher levels.

Our study, in 1991, in collaboration with UNESCO, of the impact of New Communication Technologies on women as consumers and producers of communication in India and Singapore did not reveal any dramatic benefits or change in status.

But the general situation appears to be showing signs of change. John Naisbitt in his book *Megatrends Asia* mentions that millions of "affluent Asian women will enter the 21st Century as a force the entire world must reckon with" (1996). He points out that:

- In China, women make up 25% of all entrepreneurs
- In Japan, nearly all currency traders are now women
- 20% of all management jobs in Hong Kong are held by women
- Female managers in Singapore have tripled in the last 10 years

The *Asia Magazine*, in an article entitled *Feminine Force*, voiced similar sentiments: "Rising educational levels and new opportunities in the marketplace have spawned a new breed of Asian women ... The female voice is louder and clearer today and, in the context of Asia's burgeoning economy, the climate seems ideal for more "iron butterflies" to take wing."

The present time is singularly appropriate for this project which involves, as you have been informed, a research study, this seminar and a book. We are grateful to the

Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for having agreed to support the project in its entirety.

For the benefit of those unfamiliar with AMIC, I would like to briefly explain that we are a non-profit, non-government organization which seeks to foster an exchange of ideas, information and experience and to aid in the development of skills so that the potential of communication for socioeconomic development is realized by all the countries in the region. AMIC was founded in 1971 with the support of the Government of Singapore and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, an independent foundation in Germany. What is most gratifying to us is the support we are privileged to receive from the region and outside, from institutions and as well as from individuals. We are grateful to all of you, and to your institutions, for responding to our invitation, some at short notice, and for giving us the benefit of your time and thoughts, so that this meeting may be productive.

I would like to leave you with two thoughts from a seminar on a similar topic we had organized two years ago:

- i. Promotion of women's participation in the democratic process is not an easy task, when the prevalent societal attitude, particularly that of women themselves, is that politics is the business of men.
- ii. If we want to harness new communication technologies and use them to improve the situation of women as well as to promote the concept and practice of democracy in our countries, we must simultaneously work to create the necessary political, economic, social and cultural climate that will enable the benign use of these technologies for the public good.