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New Communication Technologies And Women: Perspectives From The Media

By

Moneeza Hashmi
NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND WOMEN:
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MEDIA.

PRESENTED BY
MONEEZA HASHMI
PAKISTAN.
This paper has been divided into three parts.

(i) Talking from the Pakistani perspective, I will take you through a brief journey with the women of Pakistan, of their past, present and future. This visual presentation has been prepared keeping two main objectives in mind. Firstly it will serve as a background reference for those of us who are not familiar with the past and present status of democracy and women in Pakistan and secondly to highlight specifically the areas where immense work still needs to be done and how the media can effectively play this role in improving these conditions.

(ii) The second part will briefly identify the obstacles that are blocking women's development in Pakistan.

(iii) The third part will present concrete suggestions on how media can resolve some or part of these issues and also prove to be a loyal aid in the process of democratization and a champion of women's programmes and development.

The Journey of the women of Pakistan

The women of Pakistan have always been closely involved in the struggle for freedom and national development. The freedom struggle brought out of segregation women who had never before participated in public life. They understood that for their lives to improve there had to be national development. And for that colonial rule had to be ended. Women suffered some of the worst horrors of the process that created Pakistan. Special camps had to be set up for women who had been lost, abandoned, widowed, raped, abducted, made pregnant and left destitute.

The women who had struggled for freedom had good reason to hope for a better future. Their situation at Independence was bleak. In 1947 there were roughly 15 million Pakistani women and only 500 primary schools for girls. Out of these 15 million women, only 7,000 had been to high school. In health care, the picture was even more grim. There were only 91 Maternal and Child Health Centres throughout the country. Participation in the Independence struggle had led to increased awareness and consciousness among the women of Pakistan. Soon after Independence a few women’s associations were formed. The first was the Democratic Women’s Association with a clearly progressive political platform. APWA, the All Pakistan Women’s Association was formed in 1949 and had primarily a social welfare focus. In the past, women were always represented in the country’s legislatures. The first legislature, the Constituent Assembly, had two outstanding women members: Begum Jehan Ara Shah Nawaz and Begum Shaista Ikramullah. The dynamic Jehan Ara Shah Nawaz pushed through two laws recognizing women’s right to own and inherit property, including agricultural land. This was a major achievement against the customary practice of denying Muslim women control over their inheritance despite the Quranic injunction which clearly ordains it. Begum Jehan Ara Shah Nawaz also drafted the 1954 Charter of Women’s Rights which was passed unanimously by the Constituent Assembly.
But not all approved of these gains. The highly popular Pakistan Women’s National Guard and Women’s Naval Reserve Forces were disbanded after only five years, in 1954. When the newspapers published photographs of women boldly parading with guns, the small but vocal and influential religious orthodoxy felt threatened.

By the late 1950s it was clear that while Pakistan’s economy had begun to develop, women’s basic social, economic, legal and political problems were being ignored by policy-makers, especially those of women in the rural areas. Thus women’s organizations, political parties, trade unions, lawyers, and other progressives joined hands to demand legal guarantees to women’s rights. Many demonstrations took place. This movement was the first large-scale united effort to force the Government to improve women’s status. It eventually led to the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961, promulgated by the then President, General Ayub Khan, revolutionizing women’s personal rights in Pakistan. Before the Ordinance, it was not compulsory to officially register marriages. A dead man’s relatives could deny his wife and children their rightful inheritance by refusing to recognize them. After the ordinance was passed, widows and orphans could not be threatened with destitution. The new law also laid down certain procedures (admittedly with loopholes) for a man to obtain his wife’s permission if he wanted to contract a second marriage. A women’s right to the custody of her children (albeit gravely circumscribed) was recognized. Divorce was also regulated and women’s limited right to divorce was codified.

It is officially an unrecognized fact, but without the contribution of the tens of millions of so-called ‘ordinary women’, Pakistan’s economy would not have developed as it has.

Imagine for a minute if the entire women population of the country went on strike for one single day. Whole families would go hungry; babies would cry to be loved and fed; mountains of dirty dishes and clothes would pile up. In the rural areas, animals would roam unattended; no water, fodder, or firewood would be collected or butter made; no roofs repaired; sowing and harvesting work in the fields would slow down. In the cities, many factories would cease function and hospitals, schools and many offices would also have to close down. Construction work would dramatically slow down, cottage industries and micro enterprises would come to a halt. And yet the Pakistan Population Census of 1981 states that only 3 percent of these builders of the nation are what the Government defines as ‘working’ women. This is a gross distortion of women’s actual economic contribution to national productivity.

Pakistan women’s work is in actual fact, a triple burden, productive, reproductive and domestic. But the problem is that their role has been consistently ignored and undervalued by both the Government and society at large. Since their economic productivity is not officially recognized, the benefits and facilities for working women are almost non-existent, particularly in the sector of agriculture and non-formal industry. This places an immense strain on women and their families.

The 1973 Constitution for the first time guaranteed women equality before the law and protection against discrimination. The Government also officially observed the
rapes, with the victims publicly accusing the law-enforcing agencies of direct complicity. Women have been raped during police interrogation, while remanded in police custody. There is the practice of revenge rapes between warring feudal families. There are increasingly reported cases of suspicious "stove blasts" whose victims are almost always young married women of the middle to low income group.

At the end of 1988 Pakistan elected its first democratic Government in over a decade. There was hope that an elected Government headed by a woman would at last give the women of Pakistan due recognition, and their rightful place in society and national development. Women had finally entered the political arena.

Although headed by a woman, the 1988-1990 PPP Government failed to renew or safeguard the law creating reserved seats for women in Parliament, which lapsed in 1990. In September 1993 however steps were initiated to restore women's reserved seats. Currently there are only 4 women elected to the National Assembly on the general seats and one woman nominated to the Senate.

Disillusioned with the political mainstream, women have begun to organize themselves. These groups are just a small beginning, but their success is growing: women are increasingly realizing that only they can help themselves. The women of Pakistan are no longer waiting for political promises to come true: they have taken on the challenge and have started the process themselves.

What needs to be done is clear. Women need to be asked - not told - what kind of changes they need and want. During the 1993 general election women's issues were brought to the forefront and the major political parties included them in their manifestos. The women of Pakistan again have a reason to be optimistic for a better tomorrow for themselves and their children. The women of Pakistan have come a long way in the past years since Independence. But they still have a long way to go. An awakening from centuries of forced slumber is already occurring. The women of Pakistan are now much more aware of what needs to be done and have taken the first steps in that direction by beginning to realize their strength and organizing themselves at individual and collective levels.

II OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S PROGRESS.

In Pakistan as indeed in many countries of the world education and unequal access to education and information is perhaps one of the main obstacles to the progress of women. A status report entitled "Women's economic participation in Pakistan" researched and written for UNICEF by Shirkatgah states that only 30% Pakistanis aged ten and above, are literate. Though female literacy has progressed from 7.4% in 1961 to 16% in 1981 and which is now officially cited in the economic survey 1990–91 at 20.9% it is still one of the lowest in the world. Twice as many boys as girls enroll in primary school (fifth grade) and the drop out rate for girls is higher than that of boys (upto 58%). Another major problem is rural education. Female urban literacy is 5.1 times as high as female rural literacy. (7.33%) There are
two distinct sets of reasons, says this report for the current situation.
One springing from the general attitude adopted by the policymakers towards education and the other rooted in societal perceptions of women which includes tribalism, feudalism, traditional and cultural biases as well as inadequate support and attention from within the social framework. The first results in shortage of schools and teachers as inappropriate teaching materials and educational aids. The second results in preventing girls from physically attending school and supporting the motivation to better their lives through education. This lack of unequal access to education then places our women in an extremely vulnerable situation. They can become victims of violence and suffer gruesome fates or become entirely dependent for their very existence on the whims and fancy of their men thereby suffering awful deprivations, primarily that of being financially destitute. High rates of illiteracy block women’s access to information and knowledge regarding technology, facilities and opportunities, thus depriving them of their share of the labour market resources open to men. The economically active millions of women and girls in the agricultural or rural sectors are never taken into account and their contributions are neither recognized nor renumerated. In the informal sector where women work as piece workers, in family enterprises as domestic servants, in workshops, in construction or even as vendors or as small shopkeepers, they are denied the protection of labour laws, exploited by these employers and middle men and more than often exposed to health hazards. Therefore inequality of access to and lack of participation of women in economic policies, structures and the production process itself is another major obstacle.

The third major block in Pakistan can be termed as gender bias on gender insensitivities to women’s rights and the status of women. The portrayal of girls and women in our text books, in our media, in our laws, in our entire social frame work retards their very image, as an individual capable of contributing to the progress and process of democracy. In the text books she is illustrated and portrayed as dependent, weak, emotional, quarrelsome or simply absent and not mentioned. In the media she is shown as the stereotyped glamorous face and figure or the suffering submissive door mat or the aggressive cruel dictating witch. If she is a professional, she is shown as neglecting her domestic duties. The Hudood Laws passed during the Martial Law regime still exist to date and have been misused time and time again against defenceless women and even if the litigant takes her tale of woe to court, she is still up against a court full of men, presided over by men. Even though our religion Islam is benevolent and most supportive of a woman, be she a daughter a wife or a sister, it is the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the Quranic teachings from the fundamentalists propagating these teachings that women have been reduced to their present status.

And lastly as cited in the ten basic areas of concern for the platform of action of the fourth world conference on women held in Beijing in September this year, it is the insufficient use of the media in many parts of the world to emphasize the positive contributions of women to society
that has suppressed them for generations which brings me to the third and final part of my presentation.

III SUGGESTIONS / STRATEGIES.

Education is partly the responsibility of the state and therefore of the state controlled media in Pakistan. Radio and Television must perform their roles effectively in transmitting of their public service programmes. Literacy programmes need to be enhanced and encouraged. Promotion of these programmes by the media itself is equally important. Other public awareness programmes covering health, human rights legal aspects and a host of other related issues also need to be propagated by and through the media.

Income generating series discussing entrepreneurship, credit, micro and macro businesses banking etc. all have to be made a part of media broadcasts, targeting audiences of both males and females. Political awareness and how the political process of democracy needs to be nurtured and straightened also has to be a core message of reaching out to our women through the media. Due to absence of regular elections, political awareness among women has not developed and needs a conscious effort.

Regarding the text books the NGO’s in Pakistan are doing a tremendous job in identifying such areas and plugging the gaps at the grass root level but they are a drop in the vast ocean of taboo, bias and cultural barriers. More support needs to be given to them so that they can reach out more effectively to change the social scene. Keeping in mind the rural scene of Pakistan and some places where direct media linkages have yet to be installed due to lack of an electric supply system, mobile units equipped with audio and visual materials can be made available. Community based organizations can form vital networks for NGO’s working in the area using multi media materials. Information about improved technology is not generally accessible to women. If this could be remedied in the rural areas, traditional time consuming techniques could be done away with and the drudgery of specific tasks could be reduced. Women outputs would increase in leaps and bounds resulting in overall benefits for both family and community. The state machinery must be supportive of the NGO initiatives and the NGO activities must work in harmony with the democratic forces of the country. Only then can we hope to achieve the uplift of our women in all spheres of national life.