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Role of New Communication Technologies in Enhancing Women's Political Awareness

By Rehana Hakim

Two women voters turned up at a women's polling station in a constituency in Khairpur in the last elections in Pakistan. They were handed the ballot paper and the rubber stamp and asked to go into the polling booth, stamp the election symbol of the candidate of their choice and cast the vote in the ballot box.

The two women looked a bit frazzled, tore up the ballot paper and refused to go inside the booth. They said they would only stamp an actual tractor as their husbands had ordered them to vote for the tractor – the election symbol of one of the candidates.

Obviously, the husband forgot to tell them to stamp a tractor on the ballot paper.

In Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) which voted in the 1997 elections for the first time, the men had an unwritten understanding among themselves that their womenfolk would not vote. They threatened to burn down the houses of those women who did. When pressurised by some women NGOs, the tribal elders agreed to let them vote on the condition that their maiden names would not appear on the electoral roll and that they would be listed as wife/daughter/mother/sister of Mr Afridi/Mr Imran Khan or whoever.

In a lot of villages in my province, Sindh, women took along with them the identity cards of several women voters which listed them as the second wife or the third sister or the sixth daughter of Mr Soomro etcetera.

What all this boils down to is a) that women are nameless, faceless entities b) they are casting what would essentially amount to proxy votes for men.

And that's not all. Women, who constitute 42.7% of the population, are excluded from the tribal and feudal power that function as a springboard for much of our political leadership. Neither do they figure on the agenda of the industrialist and business classes who have made a grand entry into electoral politics. Women seldom have the resources to contest elections. Also, "Self serving notions of male honour and female shame have been used systematically to keep women out of all public spaces," says a women activist.

The leading political parties of the country tried to present a politically correct image of themselves by devoting a section of their manifestos to highlighting what they proposed to do to ameliorate the plight of the women. But when it came to fielding
women candidates, they shied way. Even a party like PPP, which had a woman as its chairperson, Ms Benazir Bhutto, fielded only 8 candidates. PML, the party which is now in power, trailed behind with 5 women. According to one activist of a women's NGO, “Most of the political parties fielded candidates from those constituencies where they were sure to lose.”

At the end of the day the total number of women who were returned to the parliament totalled six. In 1947, the year Pakistan got its independence, 2 women were in the legislature. This is a net increase, of less than one woman per decade.

So where does one go from here?

At least one women's NGO in Pakistan, Aurat Foundation, made a concerted effort towards raising the political awareness among women during the last two elections by launching a political education programme. It trained at least 500 persons from NGOs, trade unions, political parties and the media who then went into the villages and towns of Pakistan's four provinces distributing election literature. And one of the things they gave away free was an audio cassette of songs sung by women exhorting the women to vote and impressing among them the responsibility of a) casting a vote and b) casting it wisely. In villages in the Punjab, tractors are fitted with cassette players and loudspeakers. So each tractor owner was given a cassette to play, the idea being to make the male members of the family receptive to the idea of women voting in the elections. A clever move, given the fact that a radio cum cassette player, the most widespread symbol of technology in Pakistan, is generally the companion of the male in villages, autaqs, tea shops, lorries, buses. And what better way to get the message across than through this channel. In fact, parties headed by women candidates like Ms Benazir Bhutto and her sister-in-law Ghinwa Bhutto, used audio cassettes extensively as part of their campaign. A song, “Jiye Bhutto” (“Long live Bhutto”), almost became a national anthem, when Ms Bhutto contested elections the first time round and was played in every vehicle and tea shop in Pakistan. The Aurat Foundation also ran 30-second spots on television spotlighting the fact that without the participation of women, democracy was meaningless. These spots were aired on prime time free of cost as public service ads by NTM, a partly independent channel but the national network, PTV, which is now on satellite refused to show it. So unfortunately, the message managed to reach only those sections of the population which are covered by boosters – which was unfortunate because satellite television is racing ahead as the symbol of information technology.
TV and Thatched Roofs

Villages without electricity, proper roads and clean drinking water are sporting a TV antenna on their thatched roofs and, according to one estimate, at least 70% of the Pakistani households have a TV set.

In a country where female literacy levels stand at an abysmal 27%, television is the most woman-friendly medium that technology has offered to date – and the most potent force, on account of its visual impact. Pakistani politicians were quick to cash in on the potential of this medium – and the Pakistan Television Corporation in turn, which was running in the red following the Cricket World Cup, was quick to cash in on this fact. In the general elections this year, TV was the medium most widely used by the candidates and for the first time in the history of Pakistan Television, politicians were allowed to buy time, at exorbitant costs. So besides the usual interviews, each political party came up with their own songs highlighting the goodies that were in store for the voters. And every party made sure they had clips of women. People’s Party had shots of Ms. Bhutto calling on a woman who had been battered by her husband. Tehrik-i-Insaaf had clips of cricket hero Imran Khan with a girl child being treated in his cancer hospital and Pakistan Muslim League had clips of Nawaz Sharif visiting the village of a rape victim.

The contestants obviously knew the potential of the women’s vote bank. Even the Indian network, Zee, available on dish went on the election trail in Pakistan and their interviewers asked questions which the Pakistani channels were too shy to ask, for instance why Imran Khan was being such a hypocrite and hiding his love child from Sita White. If a Pakistani woman voter was wondering why she should or shouldn’t vote for her heartthrob, probably the manner in which Imran Khan fielded the question helped decide the vote.

Pakistan television like radio is still state-owned and state-controlled. And male-dominated. This bias is obviously reflected in the programmes. Women producers have produced programmes dealing with women’s issues, the most popular among them being ‘Hawwa Kay Naam’ (Addressed to Eve) which dealt with sensitive issues like rape, wife battering and the low participation of women in public and political life. The programme drew a lot of hate mail from men (and a few women) who felt the producer was trying the corrupt the innocent women of Pakistan.

An Islamabad-based NGO attempted to gender-sensitive men and women in the electronic media by inviting them to a workshop, but while the women attended in large members, most men gave it a slip.
The Newest Dish In Town

Satellite television has opened up a whole new world for women, who have access to the outside world even while still confined to the chadar and chardwari by their husbands. Satellite viewing is growing at a much faster speed than other technologies and because of the regional language programmes (Hindi, Urdu Tamil, Punjabi), it has the potential to reach a very wide audience.

By and large, the Pakistani public in general, and women in particular have gained much from the access to satellite TV. With the constant news coverage beamed in from all over the world, they have become informed of the social and political realities of other societies, thereby raising their expectations of what they demand from their own governments.

Road Show

Mobile film units are a popular form of dissemination of information on the issues of population, health and sanitation, and are extensively used by both the government and NGOs. The Pakistan Women Lawyers Association, for instance, an NGO which provides legal aid free of cost to women has a mobile film unit which arranges for film shows cum discussion sessions in schools, colleges and dispensaries in low-income localities. At these shows, they screen a set of docudramas, starring well known television stars, and providing information on marriage deeds and divorce laws, inheritance and property laws, child custody cases and related issues. At the end of the screening, a lawyer answers any questions that the viewers may have. This is a very popular and useful tool for the majority of the Pakistan women, even the urban ones, who have no knowledge of their legal rights. So mobile film units could be one of the most important tools of communicating with women on political issues.

Women Watch

A 24-hour Asian Women’s TV Channel would be an excellent link-up, and a meeting ground for women. There is a commonality of interests, and issues in the region and one can draw from each other’s experience. India is currently lobbying for one-third seats in parliament. Pakistan can learn from the Indian experience. Earlier, Pakistani women had 20 reserved seats in parliament but all they did was bolster the strength of the ruling party in parliament, having little political clout and no constituency of their own.

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The Day of the Mobile

Cellular phones are a great boon in developing countries where telephone breakdowns are a common feature of life and you can go insane trying to get your telephone connection restored.

And just what purpose they can serve, politically speaking, is obvious from just one example in Pakistan, where cellular phones were shut down for nearly two years because they were allegedly being used by a political party to keep in touch with its militant elements who had gone underground following the government’s crackdown on them. The party is now a partner in the government, but its leader is still in exile in London. And every once in a while, he addresses his cadre and supporters long distance on the phone. And among his listeners are hundreds of women who attend public meetings, addressed by him.

However, cellular phones are a luxury item, and an expensive proposition. Once again, the users are primarily business corporations. But a lot of career women too maintain mobile phones.

The On-line Revolution

In the urban centres of Pakistan, computer education has caught on in a big way. And computer training institutes have mushroomed in the major urban centres where girls are also acquiring training. So hopefully, a sizeable percentage of the urban population of women will be computer literate at the turn of the century.

Communication technologies such as e-mail, faxes etc are gaining popularity among the educated elite, mostly in the urban centres of the country. Employed by both men and women in their workplaces and homes, they have allowed the intelligentsia to gain access to an international supply of information and communicate with an international audience. As these sophisticated technologies are costly and not widespread; they are limited to a certain class of society, who employ them for business and entertainment purposes. Their scarcity consequently limits their viability as a means of political awareness at the moment. But they will proliferate by the turn of the century.

And the country’s leading political parties do not want to be left out of the picture when that happens. So every political party of some consequence, from Ms. Bhutto’s People’s Party to the current ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League, have websites. Obviously, the Internet gives them worldwide exposure and access to Pakistanis abroad. But in Pakistan, the Internet is currently accessible only to big business houses,
multinationals, the urban elite, students, and some NGOs.

But in time, its audience would multiply. Since Pakistan has a thriving NGO population dealing in women's issues, it would not be a bad idea for all such NGOs to come together to create a website for Pakistani women which could then be utilised for generating political debate and devising consciousness-raising techniques. This could also be used as a forum for creating a pool of women who could in the future be likely candidates in the elections. Women, as a whole, need the support of women in great numbers because contesting elections in Pakistan is still difficult without financial clout. These lists could then be circulated via faxes or e-mail for onward distribution to those who do not have access to such information. The reason I advocate such lists is that in a country such as ours normally political parties pretend that potential women candidates do not exist.

Revolution? Yes, but...

Admittedly, the newest information technologies have brought the world to your doorstep and opened up an entire range of debate. But Pakistan with its low literacy rate (47% for men and 27% for women), high poverty levels, and its feudal and tribal structure, which puts women at a distinct disadvantage, is yet to reap the full benefit of this information revolution. Until these issues are addressed, a meaningful participation of women in the democratic process will remain a distant dream.

Before Pakistan undertakes a technological revolution of sorts it will have to embark on a grassroots level movement to sow the seeds of democratisation in order to co-opt women into the political process.