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Women Power in Media

Are there women in media? Yes, lots of them. The media, especially the new branches of media do not differentiate on the basis of gender. Yes, is there women power in media? I don't know. How much power do women exert in media? What is power? Power is authority. Power is the ability to make an impact, to make changes. How successful are women in doing all this? It is a difficult question to answer.

In a book about to be published called "Women in Journalism Making News." By Ammu Joseph, she points out that the nineties has been an eventful one for the media in India. Among the most significant developments in this last decade of the millenium, is the growth in numbers, and the very obvious visibility of Indian media women. The other most important development is the arrival of the satellite television in the country. Women are everywhere on these channels particularly in news and current affairs. They not only appear on television but are also involved in every aspect of the visual medium.

The print medium played an important role in the freedom struggle. Although a largely illiterate country, the press, the news-
papers came to be identified with the educated and the opinion makers. The leaders of the national movement most importantly of course Mahatma Gandhi used the press most effectively. Although the Mahatma invited the women to work shoulder to shoulder with the men and many women responded to this call, they had very little to do with media. There are hardly any examples of fiery writing by women, while men were openly defiant of the repressive British press laws. Journalism was not a profession women chose. It was a little different with Cinema which was emerging as a very powerful medium. Legends like M.S. Subbulakshmi and Durga Khote did nationalist films and proved to be an inspiration for many.

Women emerging as a force in media is really a 70's phenomenon. This was true for the West as well. Women columnists in America thirty years ago wrote about home and family concerns, and their writing was relegated to the women's pages. Then in the early seventies as the women's movement caught on, the women's section went through a transformation. Traditional barriers on women's writing began to dissolve. Today women write about politics, government, finance, investment and also about home and family.

This has happened in India as well. For some reason, after the turbulence of the freedom struggle, the post independent press became a very polite one. Writer James Cameron described the Indian press as a cooperative one. There was a cozy relationship between the government and the press. National interest came first... especially in foreign affairs. The writing style was
polite and so on. This was to change in 1975 when Mrs Gandhi imposed the emergency and there was true press censorship for the first time.

The mainstream press except for a few honourable exceptions, proved quite compliant. However, may be as a reaction, the post emergency period saw a different kind of journalism emerge. Suddenly it was the era of investigative journalism. As Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma point out from their research, a more aggressive brand of newsgathering and writing became common. Many taboos and inhibitions were being broken. Women became reporters. They started covering politics and finance and technology. No longer were they assigned to just desk jobs. Magazines of the seventies like India Today, Sunday, and Business India were quite willing to hire women and not make any gender based differences.

Sunday particularly encouraged women to take on many frontline assignments. Anita Pratap of Sunday was willing to take a boat to Sri Lanka and take all kinds of risks to cover the civil war there in the early eighties. India Today and Business India's marketing heads were women. Prabha Dutt became the first woman bureau chief of Hindustan Times. There were role models emerging like Anees Jung, Dina Vakil, Bachi Karkaria and Tavleen Singh. Another important development during this period is the entry of women from the families which own the publications. No longer young women shareholders content to be spectators. They have begun to play a major role in decision making.
During the same time there was also greater coverage of human rights issues and the conditions of marginalised sections of society. As it happened elsewhere in the world this was the moment when the women's movement gained ground in India. Women's groups all over the country merged together to demand changes in laws of special concerns to women. Issues like dowry, rape, and controversies over Roop Kanwar the young Rajasthani woman who allegedly committed Sati, the famous Shah Bano case and so on started receiving wide and prominent coverage in the press. Did the larger numbers of women in media finally help in empowering women at large? That may not have happened. But what did happen is that it opened up communication between the press and women's groups. A lot of women journalists were certainly sympathetic to women's movements and causes and they were senior enough to let the women's point of view get prominence.

Black and white television came to most Indians in the early seventies. It went colour in the eighties. Television was introduced to the country with lofty ideals. It was meant to be the tool for rural poor. It was meant for education, community upliftment, to serve the interest of women and children and so on. Even in the early years of state television the Committee on the Status of Women observed that the mass media has not been an effective instrument to inform and prepare women to play their new roles in society. Ten years later another seminar on Doordarshan's role in Women's Equality and Development made two
interesting points.

That there is a very wide distance between national policy objectives vis-a-vis women's equality and development and Doordarshan's present role and programming... and the general tenor of Doordarshan's programme counter its stray efforts to be purposive on women's behalf. There have been hundreds of seminars and studies and papers on the subject. All this at a time when television was completely controlled by government. At the end of it all the reality is TV in India is irrevocably commercialised.

Doordarshan the state owned channel started accepting commercials in 1976. With the conversion to colour and the increase in transmitters and wider coverage, advertising revenue became most lucrative. A completely contradictory situation has developed here. Television has really and truly opened up new avenues for women. They have become successful producers of software. They dominate in areas like documentaries. Even in the regional channels which are much more male dominated there are a lot of women producers. Indian women have done better than some of their Western counterparts.

According to an article on Working Women in Contemporary Germany, in 1991 when the anchor of a most popular nightly newscasts stepped down many viewers hoped that the number two moderator, a woman, would move into the top position. But Germany being Germany the job went to a man. Although there is an ever increasing number of women in front of cameras, equality in media goes
In India satellite and cable television is really a medium of the nineties. It is really barrierless. It is also a product of true globalisation. One can argue forever whether this should have been allowed to happen. I don't want to go into it except to say that it is an unstoppable process.

The TV serials which are the mainstay of entertainment channels, are now trying very hard to depict women in what they think in a positive light. From a somewhat superficial research one can see that these serials have career women, women who run their own business, women who are divorced or widowed and discover themselves, women who actually have affairs and so on. However on the flip side you have the commercials. And the skimpy clad girls of MTV and channel V. And the total commercial exploitation of women. Again this is a vast separate subject and I can't go into it now. The multiplying number of channels require massive advertising support. The Government really has no control over either programming or the commercials.

Here is the contradiction. Women are playing a major role in the electronic medium. They are high powered executives, makers of programmes, in short decision makers. But they also allow themselves to be used as commodities. The fact is the power of the medium is growing. So is its commercial nature.

By mid eighties women had got into all areas of print journalism.
Today there are possibly more women reporters in mainline newspapers than men. The women achievers in media no longer standout as they did in the earlier decades. There are no more male bastions. The most sensational financial scandal of the decade was exposed by a woman journalist in 1992. Women are bureau chiefs, resident editors, columnists, editors of special sections, Sunday editions and so on, while they have made it to two the number two positions, they are still not editors. Yes, they are editors of women's magazines, of special niche magazines, but not of mainline media. This is true in the West too. New York Times does not have a women editor. The Economist hasn't had a woman editor. It is still to be tested how a woman would cope with the position of editor in chief of a publication like, say, Times of India.

The nineties are different. With women taking on more and more challenging assignments they do not see themselves as women journalists. They want to get ahead in their jobs, and do not want to be labelled. The women's movement also is not so strident and campaign based and it has changed its pace. It concentrates more on regional grass route problems. These organisations are also more involved in environmental issues and ecology. We do tend to follow the fashions of the West.

This is also the decade where politics is still an obsession in the newspapers. With the opening up of the economy which happened in 1991 financial features and exposes have become important. Women's issues of course get reported. But it is getting increasingly event based. A young college girl getting teased by hooli-
gans and getting killed receives wide coverage. But there is no time or inclination to follow up or go into the root of this very real problem in the Indian cities. A celebrated rape case which became politicised in Tamilnadu again was widely reported. But rape as an issue does not get serious attention. The 30 percent reservation of seats for women in parliament has still not been properly discussed in the media. In spite of so many women in the media. The reason is women themselves are mixed up about reservation for women. As they are about being called women journalists.

Under the circumstances how does one offer special training for women in media? In India even men don't get properly trained. Every university and self financing institution offers courses in journalism. Some of the major newspapers have their own training schools. With a few exceptions the quality of training offered is varied. There are more women signing up for these courses than men. Again whatever courses are offered for TV - there are more girls rushing to join. The point is today journalists think alike, whether they are men or women. It is the profession which provides the bond and not gender.

Having said that women still do have special problems. An often repeated cliche, but which is true is that they do not have wives. Women journalists need to network. They are the ones who have to worry about children, late working hours, families, the need to travel and many other things. They have to take decisions on their priorities. Today you have all the courageous women
reporters who are in all war zones. Can women with families choose to go to Kargil? If you want to take up assignments which keep you away from home for months, can you combine it with husband and children.

All this discussion just might become academic as we go into cyberspace. Internet is going to rule the future. It is going to be new websites and web magazines. Gender doesn't come into it. It will be all skill and savvy. But still the future may just belong to women. In a recent book, The First Sex, the author Helen Fisher says, woman is particularly well designed to predominate in the 21st century's knowledge based economy, thanks to the distinctive qualities of the female mind. She backs up her statement with lots of studies showing that women more so than men, tend to gather disparate facts, consider all the options, and place issues in a broad context. All the skills to be successful in media.
NEW GENERATION INTERNET

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