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Welcome Address

By

Vijay Menon
. Seminar on “New Communication Technologies, Women and Democracy”
Bangkok, October 19-21, 1995

Welcome Address by Mr Vijay Menon, Secretary-General, AMIC

I am delighted to welcome all of you to this seminar on “New Communication Technologies, Women and Democracy”, organized by AMIC and Bangkok University.

The theme of this seminar sees the intertwining of three different strands: women, democracy and new communication technologies. Each one of these has been the subject of a separate AMIC activity in the past. The time is now opportune to view them collectively, to examine the consequences of their interaction.

The explosive growth of new communication technologies (NCT) is transforming the way people live and relate to one another. The new technologies shape information and education, facilitate contact and communication, arouse expectation and provide motivation.

But there are those who believe that the new communication technologies are more likely to deepen economic, social and political inequities. The privileged, they feel, will use the new technologies to perpetuate their dominance. The underprivileged, lacking knowledge, skills and resources, will remain bystanders rather than beneficiaries.

Today, there is a growing symbiosis between the government and the media. Political institutions need and use the media. On the other hand, the media are no longer content to passively report decisions and developments. They play an active role in shaping the political agenda. The new communication technologies may be expected to strengthen this interdependence.

It is in this context that the relationship between gender and the new communication technologies assumes significance.

A study carried out by AMIC on Access of Women to Education and Employment in Journalism and Communication in 7 Asian countries revealed an increasing enrolment of women students in communication education institutions in most countries. But the number of women holding senior management positions in communication organizations was very small. Likewise, few women were employed in technical positions.

Another AMIC study, supported by UNESCO, was on The Impact of New Communication Technologies on Women as Producers and Consumers of Communication. It revealed that women did not appear to have benefited significantly from new communication technologies. The first beneficiaries are usually men. Prejudices about the ability of women to acquire and apply technology persist, hampering their access to technologically oriented assignments.
In the context of the interdependence between communication and political institutions, the negligible number of women in positions of authority in the media is disturbing. It implies the marginalization of women's issues and their possible exclusion from the political agenda — and under-representation of women in the political arena. As a recent issue of Asiaweek (Sept. 1, 1995) pointed out, the percentage of women in legislatures ranges from a little over 1% in Korea and Pakistan, to 8% in Indonesia and Malaysia, and 11% in Bangladesh and India. Thailand has 6%. Only China has over 20%.

We felt that it would be useful to conduct a study to examine the effects of new communication technologies on women in the democratization process. It might then be possible to consider how the new technologies might be harnessed to provide greater benefits to women. This seminar is designed to precede the study, to clarify the issues involved.

For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with AMIC, I would like to briefly explain that the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre was established in 1971, with the support of the Government of Singapore and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung of Germany, as a non-profit organization dedicated to the development of mass communication in the region. AMIC's activities include documentation, publications, research, seminars and training and consultancy services.

A special word of thanks is due today to DANIDA whose generous support has enabled us to organize this seminar. We are also grateful to UNESCO for its contribution, which helped to widen the scope of participation, and to Bangkok University which, as our local partner, has provided vital support to the seminar. We would also like to convey our appreciation to our Chief Guest and our Keynote Speaker, our local organizing Committee headed by Dr. Laksana, ably assisted by Dr. Sudarat, and to all of you who have joined us here to give us the benefit of your time and thoughts so that this meeting might be fruitful.