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Summary Of Proceedings

By

Virgilio Labrador
SEMINAR ON "NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES, WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY"
19-21 October, 1995
Bangkok, Thailand

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the seminar on "New Communication Technologies, Women and Democracy," held in Bangkok from October 19-21, 1995. The seminar was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) and Bangkok University with support from DANIDA and UNESCO. The three-day seminar focused on the challenges and opportunities facing women in Asia with the introduction of the new communication technologies and the need for a democratisation of access and control of these NCTs.

The objectives of the seminar were to assess the impact of new communication technologies (NCT) on women in Asia; to examine the relationship between NCT and democracy and to formulate actionable recommendations on key issues identified during the seminar.

Thirty journalists, communication educators and representatives from government and non-government organisations from 14 countries participated in the seminar. The seminar was a mix of panel discussions and working group sessions. Recommendations were formulated based on the deliberations during the seminar.

(See Appendix A for the seminar programme and Appendix B for the list of participants)

Day One, Thursday, October 19, 1995

The inaugural session was chaired by Dr Sudarat Dissayawattana, AMIC representative for Thailand and Dean, School of Communication Arts, Bangkok University.

In his opening remarks, Dr Thanu Kulachol, President, Bangkok University, drew attention to the role of education in ending the centuries-old exploitation of women and labour. The new communication technologies and the media had a major role to play in expediting this social awakening.

In his welcome address, Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary-General of AMIC, stressed the growing symbiosis between media and government and the need for harnessing NCTs to usher in greater democratisation and gender equity in Asia. "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," he said.
It is in this context that the relationship between gender and the new communication technologies assumed significance, he pointed out, quoting from an AMIC study which highlighted the fact that women had benefited only marginally from these technologies. "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," said Mr. Menon.

In her keynote address, Ms. Delia Torrijos, UNESCO regional adviser, in her keynote address, emphasised the need to view the dizzying changes in communication technology against the backdrop of the triangular relationship between development, peace and democracy, to ensure its sustainability. "This means development will not occur, if there is no peace, and peace will not prosper if it is not anchored in a system where the principles of justice, equity, solidarity and freedom, which democracy, are present so that human beings can participate in the life of their communities." NCTs could be an effective tool in furthering this triangular interaction, she said. And women, making up half the human population, have to be key players and participants in the process of sustainable development of society, she stressed.

Session I: New Communications Technologies: Potentials and Pitfalls for Women and Development

The panel discussion on "New Communication Technologies: Potentials and Pitfalls for Women and Development," was chaired by Mr. Virgilio S. Labrador, Head, Seminars and Institutional Development, AMIC.

In her presentation, Ms. Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan, from the Asian Network of Women in Communication, India, highlighted the absence of any reference to the gender dimension in all the debates on media issues, starting with the Sean MacBride Report. Even the first three conferences on women failed to discuss the issue of women in the media. It was only in the fourth conference that media was included in the debate for the first time, she pointed out. When it came to the issue of communication technologies, access to information was always routed through science and not projected as the right to inform, she said. This had dangerous implications in an age when media images become ubiquitous thanks to the worldwide networking and accessibility afforded by the new communication technologies. It was unfortunate, she pointed out, that NCTs like Internet and e-mail, widely known as the global free space for information sharing, were not well understood by women users. Ultimately, the issue of accessibility centres around the question: access for whom? Only a small elite group of women have access to these technologies, because of their access to the keyboard, the modem, the English language and literacy, according to Ms. Balakrishnan.

Ms. Maria Victoria Cabrera-Balleza of Isis International, Manila, presented a more optimistic scenario for women. She recounted the story of Vijaya, a reproductive health worker from Bangalore, who by mastering the new technologies like e-mail, managed to maintain links with her counterparts all over the world, and thereby received the encouragement and information inputs she needed in the most inexpensive and effective manner. Many voluntary workers like Vijaya where thus able to prepare themselves for the Cairo UN population conference by accessing the Internet and e-mail.

Similarly, in Thailand, a group of NGOs, a number of them women's organisations, formed a
cooperative to share an e-mail box with assistance from the Computer Communication Access for NGOs. In the Philippines, whose archipelagic natures aggravates the problem of communication, the establishment of an E-mail Centre that makes use of a single dial-up computer connection a couple of years ago, has helped 12 national women's groups to exchange information on-line, Ms. Cabrera-Balleza pointed out.

In her presentation, Ms. Stephanie Sim, editor, Siren magazine, Singapore, which will soon be available in print as well as on Internet, began her presentation with a background on the injustices that women have been subjected to over the ages, in society as well as in the media. "The New Communication Technology talks of great gain and progress. However, we should remember that one person's gain is another's loss," she pointed out. This new age of communications has cost women dearly, she felt. "While it is now possible to enjoy 24-hour television, pictures of the moon and Mars, surf the Internet, it is still more of the same in the sense that the media has only continued to disseminate the dominant view, spreading sexism and misogyny more effectively." she pointed out. However, Sim ended on a positive note, and reaffirmed that NCTs could help in ushering in a more equitable and just world order.

Dr. Rahmah Hashim of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, focussed more specifically on the situation in her own country, Malaysia. Pointing to the great strides made by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed in transforming Malaysia into an information-rich society, she outlined the agenda of the National Telecommunication Policy 1994, formulated to develop Malaysia's telecommunications industry in the next century. At the same time, Dr Rahmah also quoted deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's cautionary speech warning of the "barbarism of specialisation" which focusses merely on technological competence ignoring the true values of society. "The availability of an electronic superhighway or multimedia super-corridor will be meaningless without human resources which are able to use it for social and economic development," she said.

During the discussion, several speakers pointed to the dominance of new communication technologies by Western programmes and perspectives, which often distorted the Asian reality. This was specially evident in satellite television. For instance several channels were clogged with inane soaps projecting Western lifestyles. On the other hand, even news programmes, such as the CNN coverage of the Beijing conference on women, was aimed more at scoring a political point over China than at projecting the real issues discussed.

But the gung-ho attitude of the Asian media practitioners, researchers and planners preempted any questioning of the situation. Instead of highlighting the complex realities, the media in Asian countries sometimes tends to be indifferent, thus forestalling change. Examples were thrown up from the Philippines and Singapore. The Pakistan media, which had played an important part in the fight for democracy, was seen to be something of an exception to this culture of passivity.

Session II: Electronic Democracy: Between the Vision and Reality"

The panel discussion on "Electronic Democracy: Between the Vision and Reality" was chaired by Asst. Prof. Churairat Chandhamrong, dean of the Women Studies Programme of Thammasat University.
The first contribution was by Dr Helen Lopez, director of information, University of the Philippines System, who focussed on the tremendous potential NCTs offered to transform the lives of women in a positive way. "They can free women from isolation from their communities and the world beyond their homes...They can thus have a fairer chance to compete to obtain employment or partake in other income generating activities," she said. However, she also emphasised that in a situation where 53 per cent rural and 16 per cent urban households don't even have electricity, until the communication infrastructure in the country becomes more egalitarian, and ordinary women are able to access the new technologies, the vision will never be translated into reality.

Another important point Dr Lopez focussed on was that care must be taken to ensure that "technological progress is not simplistically equated with democracy because there are mediating factors that prevent it from being diffused uniformly and therefore may only perpetuate existing patterns of power and privilege."

In her presentation, Ms. Ammu Joseph, a media analyst from India, related the concept of electronic democracy to developments in her own country, culling out two events which were specially significant: the liberalisation of the economy, accompanied by globalization and growing privatisation of the electronic media, and the long-delayed implementation of panchayat raj -- or local self-government. Her contention was that while acknowledging the empowering potential of communication, enhanced by NCTs, "recent trends in the economy, society an media in India do not augur well for the promotion of real, meaningful democracy.”

To illustrate, Ms. Joseph pointed to the example of television, which had subverted its original ideal of being a medium of education and community development into a commercial medium whose entertainment content has begun to far outweigh its educational inputs, and which was increasingly promoting a consumerist lifestyle that left the majority of rural Indian population out in the cold.

Ms. Zafrin J. Chowdhury, Lecturer, Mass Communications, in Rajshahi University, Bangladesh, presentation focussed on the low level of development of media technology in her country. She cited the subversion of NCTs in Bangladesh to relay heavily entertainment oriented programmes rather than provide educational inputs. She placed this underdevelopment in the context of the economic stagnation that had overtaken Bangladesh, and pointed out that unless rules and regulations are redesigned to encourage private ownership in telecommunications, investors will continue to prefer quick returns and avail of low risk opportunities which may not enhance the quality of life of the population at large.

While there was little disagreement with the argument that the world was undergoing an enormous change with the emergence of digital, computerised communication, questions remained over whether the information transformation represented a democratic revolution, according to Mr. Peter Thomson, Lecturer, Bangkok University. The way a transnational corporation might perceive the huge business potential of the information superhighway would for instance be quite at variance with the perspective of an NGO working to develop educational opportunities with the information superhighway as a valuable source of academic material for advancing its cause.
An interesting facet of Mr. Thomson's paper was his focus on how NCTs have been used in recent times for democratic ends. For instance, the pro-democracy protests in Bangkok in May 1992 saw popular activism circumnavigate censorship and news blackouts by using mobile phones and pagers to coordinate action and disseminate information. The recent e-mail anti-nuclear test chain-letter was another noteworthy example.

The discussion brought up several factors which impinged on the free access to NCTs. With privatisation of the telecom industry, Western magnates were setting the agenda in Asian countries and subverting the satellite networks, felt many speakers. The so-called global and free flow of information was thus often one-sided. The question was raised: who has sovereignty over information channels? Unless these channels were politicised NCTs could not be truly democratised, it was felt. But then this was easier said than done. These were complex times, calling for complex strategies, since the gatekeepers who controlled the media were constantly assuming new identities.

Session III: Case Studies on Using New Communication Technologies to Promote Women's Participation in Democratic Processes

The panel discussion on “Case Studies on Using New Communication Technologies to Promote Women's Participation in Democratic Processes,” was chaired by Ms. Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan.

The case-study by Prabha Thacker representing the NGO, Manushi, of Nepal, highlighted the double-edged aspect of NCTs. For instance, she pointed out, new electronic and communication devices can be used advantageously in combatting crime, but they can also create opportunities for new crimes and even make crime a glamorous and adventurous proposition. Similarly, while it benefits education, journalism and commerce, it could also aggravate social unrest by widening the gap between expectation and possibility.

The dichotomy is emphasised in the use of TV in Nepal, she said, to reflect women's conventional roles. In contrast, western serials depicted women as modern and highly materialistic. But there was no programme which presented an authentic picture of the Nepalese woman, she said.

Like in Nepal, despite a few inroads, communication technologies in Pakistan also were largely in the hands of men, pointed out Ms. Sameena Ibrahim, Contributing Editor of the news magazine, Newsline. Television, perhaps the most widespread and woman-friendly technology in the country, was largely confined to urban viewers and upper class rural women. As for fax, computer, Internet, they were accessible only to a few professional women. However, video films on women's status and some of the programmes on Zee TV exposed Pakistani women to problems faced by their counterparts in the region, she admitted. However, the potential of these technologies in enhancing the status of women was yet to be adequately tapped, she felt.

Ms. Gantiowati Soerdirdjo of Lembaga Konsumen, Indonesia, regretted that despite women's seminal role in the family and in society, they were often overlooked for technical jobs. Women's experiences and perspectives have not been adequately taken into account in drawing up development programmes, she felt. These perspectives needed to be communicated widely to institutions worldwide if women are to be granted their rightful place in society. The new communication technologies could aid in this endeavour.
One of the most important areas in which women participate in the democratic process is politics. Yet the percentage of Thai women participating in the political process was much too low, said Dr. Suteera Thomson of the Gender and Development Research Institute, Thailand. In the past six elections since 1983, the number of female candidates has been less than 10 per cent compared to the number of male candidates. On average, about five percentage of female candidates were elected members of parliament. Yet Thai women were increasingly vocal in expressing their political opinion through radio programmes, newspaper articles and seminars and public meetings. This dichotomy needed to be addressing by using NCTs as a tool, she suggested.

The ensuing discussion focussed on several crucial issues. One was the double-edged nature of NCTs. Internet, for instance was a democratic medium. But governments could also control access and use it as a channel to control people, by monitoring their mail, etc. Another concept which was discussed extensively was the existence of male spaces, a term used by the Pakistani speaker, Sameena Ibrahim, in her paper. How could such spaces be reappropriated by women?

Day 2, Friday, October 20, 1995

Session IV: New Communication Technologies and Women: Perspectives from the Media

The first session of the second day, on New Communication Technologies and Women: Perspectives from the Media, was chaired by Ms. Ammu Joseph.

The first speaker, Ms. Moneeza Hashmi, producer, Pakistan Television Corporation, gave a video presentation on the condition of women in Pakistan since 1947. Titled ‘A Brief Journey of Women of Pakistan,’ the film was a critique of the male-oriented system of governance and society in the country. However, Hashmi rounded off her presentation with an affirmation of hope that new communication media like video could be an effective medium in organising and awakening the women of Pakistan to their exploitation and could be a powerful aid in the ongoing process of democratisation, which included enhancement of the status of women.

Ms. Raine Wickrematunga, features editor of Sunday Leader, Sri Lanka, pointed to the degrading projection of women in Sri Lankan media, “not because men need it, but because of economic, competitive, and circulation imperatives.” However, as far as women's share of the technological pie was concerned, the situation was fairly satisfactory, especially in the media, she said, although in the top managerial rung, the ratio was weighed against them at 11:214.

During the ensuing discussion, the question of access was again raised. How could NCTs be made more accessible to the underprivileged and marginalised sections? Only by widening the gap between rich and poor, between men and women, between urban and rural -- was the alternative offered by several speakers. There were wide differences in the role of women in the media organisations within Asia. Unlike the Sri Lankan media, in Cambodia, as its delegate pointed out, most media outfits were controlled by men.

The limitations of the English language and print media were discussed. The electronic media, which had the potential to reach the widest number of people, was seen to have the maximum impact. It was felt that this channel would be the most effective medium through which the right messages could be beamed.
Session V: Case Studies: Using the New Communication Technologies to Improve the Status of Women

The second session on “Case Studies: Using the New Communication Technologies to Improve the Status of Women,” was chaired by Ms. Prabha Thacker.

Unlike Moneeza Hashmi’s film, which was in English, the short documentary by Ms. Lipy Dhumi, of Banchte Shekha, Bangladesh, was in Bengali. It depicted the exploitation of women in the unorganised sector in Bangladesh, who, according to the UNDP report, work 10 times as hard as men. It underscored the need for media attention and education to create greater awareness of their problems.

The degrading projection of women in media advertisements was the focus of the presentation by Ms. Susan Siew, of People’s Trans-Actions, a consumer rights organisation in Malaysia. With a display of ads dating back to 13 years ago, she pointed out that although women have made great strides in Malaysian society, their depiction in ads, soap operas, etc. continues to be stereotypical and unchanged. In order to break through this conundrum, Siew suggested a multi-pronged strategy of identifying existing resources, infiltrating mainstream media, using consumer programmes on radio, pressuring the government, and using the already existing advertising code as also helping it acquire more teeth.

Ms. Santhini Jayawardena of the Intermediate Technology Development Group, Sri Lanka, was also concerned with alternative strategies to resolve the gender hiatus in society and the media. She sought to draw the connection between communication technology and intermediate technology, the latter being an area which her NGO was preoccupied with. Like the latter, which was used as a tool to reduce the vulnerability of people, NCTs could also be made more women-friendly and help in creating an equitable social order, she felt.

In her case study, Ms. Tan Li-Anne, of Engender, Singapore, reiterated the points made by earlier speakers that when speaking of NCTs, the role of the hardware as well as the software must be considered. So also the question of accessibility. She then listed examples culled from her own country to show how women with the same educational qualifications as men were still earning about 70-75 per cent of what men were earning. There were other inequities too with relation to the employment of men and women. Her conclusion was that the women's movement by itself could not bring about positive changes in women's status, in the absence of the political will of the government. NCTs can help greatly in catalysing this process, she pointed out. The Singapore Association of Women Lawyers (SAWL), for instance, were planning to put out material on laws affecting women on the Internet. Such networking could play a significant role in enhancing the status of women and ushering in greater democratisation in society.

In the discussion that followed, several new questions were raised. One related to the role of women in positions of power. Did they facilitate the process of women's empowerment or retard it? This led to a heated discussion, where several speakers pointed to the way women leaders in Asia spoke the 'male' language when they assumed political power. To transform this 'internationalisation of gender stereotypes' would call for an attitudinal change, it was felt.

Another perception that emerged that it was not enough to talk of gender sensitivity. What was
needed was a transformation of the political and economic process in which such stereotypes were rooted. The event orientation of news in the print and electronic media needed to be replaced by something more meaningful and of more immediate concern to women.

Much concern was also expressed about the retreat on progressive practices and legislation in some Asian countries, thanks to the dominance of the bottom line. For instance, it was pointed out, India had a progressive advertising code, but this was being given the go-by by the media in the race to amass more circulation and thereby more revenue.

In the afternoon, the participants went on a field trip to Shinawatra Satellite station in Nonthaburi, Thailand (about one hour and a half drive from the seminar venue). At the Satellite station, the participants were briefed by the staff of Shinawatra Satellite on how satellites are being used for educational purposes in Thailand. The field trip also included a tour of the facilities, where the technology of satellite uplinking and downlinking was explained.

Day 3, Saturday, October 21, 1995

The concluding day of the seminar, October 21, was devoted to the drafting of recommendations culling insights that had emerged during the two-day debate. For this purpose, the participants were divided into two working groups, the first, chaired by Moneeza Hashmi, focusing on 'Promoting Women's Access to New Communication Technologies' and the second, chaired by Susan Siew, on 'Maximising the Potential of New Communication Technologies for Development.'

The two lists of recommendations were presented and debated during a session chaired by Mr. Vijay Menon, after which a consensus draft was drawn up, outlining workable strategies to make NCTs more gender-sensitive, more accessible to women, and more responsive to the need to create an equitable social and political world order. The seminar recommendations were then fused into a single document adopted by all the participants in the seminar (see Appendix D for the full text of the seminar recommendations).

Evaluation

Overall, the participants rated the quality of the programme very highly. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, 25 percent gave it a 5, 56 percent rated the programme with a 4, percent and 19 percent gave it a 3. No rating of 1 or 2 was given. The seminars sessions overall, obtained a rating of between 4 and 5. Likewise the participants rated the relevance of the seminar to their work and the opportunities for exchange of between 4 and 5. In addition most of the participants suggested follow-up seminars and training courses.

Conclusion

On the whole, the seminar achieved the objectives it set. In-depth discussion on very important issues of concern to the region was realised and actionable recommendations were generated from the working group discussions. Follow-up activities were identified for action with the proper agencies.