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Women In Media : Trends And Opportunities

By

Aishah Ali
WOMEN IN MEDIA – TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

By
Aishah Ali
Editor, Women's Desk
New Straits Times, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
I would like to discuss the subject of women in media on two levels:

1. Women's image in the Media; and
2. Women as Media professionals.

I think it is only after we can agree on common concerns about the images of women in Media, can we look at the direction we women Media practitioners can take in order to affect change.

First, I would like you to view this video clip. (10 minutes)

Media not only informs, it influences. Every message we see or hear shapes the way we see ourselves, our understanding of the world, of issues, of what and who is important. Since media is a most effective agent of change, it can either be used for social development or to reinforce prejudicial stereotypes.

But what is causing concern is that women have limited access in the media. Women's images are often stereotyped and do not reflect their contributions to society.

An ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) report on Women and Media in Asia notes that the "image of women is shown mainly by their absence". Many reports done by media researchers like Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi (Britain) and George Gerbner (USA) suggest that women are still sidelined into stereotyped roles. The NOS Portrayal Department in the Netherlands found that twice as many men as women appeared on Dutch television and three times as many on radio.

In the print media, women have limited access unless they are in positions of power. Since the prevailing definition of news values seem to be based on prominence and those in positions of authority, women are largely invisible since few are, except when they are victims of rape, murder, robbery or as cheesecake models. Stories concerning women are often over-sensationalised, trivialised or distorted.

It is generally found that women's perspectives on current and social issues are conspicuously absent. For instance, reaction to environmental problems, budget report or consumer issues seldom include women. Most women's magazines seem to focus mainly on fashion, beauty and cookery.

Women's participation in television is limited unless they are celebrities. Again, panel discussions on topical issues seldom include women. In dramas, women always end up playing stereotyped roles that make them appear emotional, petty and stupid. Game and magic shows always have women assistants in skimpy outfits.

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brings us to the other set of concerns -- the narrowness of range of representations of women in media. The complaints of sexism in dramas, films and advertisements have been brought up time and again for the last several years.

The media seems bent on degrading women and portraying them as objects of male gaze, male sexuality and male violence.

In dramas, the women usually appears as the homemaker confined to household chores, the wife who is a door-mat, the materialistic girlfriend who enjoys receiving gifts, the nurse who takes orders from the male doctor or the maid who is a nincompoop. In short, women are confined to a subordinate status, their only valuable asset being physical beauty and their aim, to please men.

Let's take a look at these ads. (Video clip of Bufori and overheads - about 8 minutes).

Heroism in films often reinforces male-dominated values and accelerate violence and sexism in media messages. The stronger the men as the hero, the weaker the women. Some films which have rape scenes might even have the woman falling in love with her assailant.

The degradation of women's images such as these is recognised universally as an obstacle to women's development. The danger is, if accepted as reality, these images can create psychological or attitudinal barrier to women's progress.

And now, satellite and cable television have brought on an era of information globalisation in which new images reach into the far corners of the world in a flash. One of the negative effects of this is that Asian countries have become a convenient market for American and European companies to target their products.

Media business is now a major commercial venture with emphasis, sadly, being placed more on its entertainment value than its potential for educating and informing. Within this transnational commercial media environment, women's images are used more frequently as a commodity to facilitate the sale of products. It is important to understand that what this means to economically and politically powerless people including women.

Kamala Bhasin, a prominent Indian activist in women and media issues, argues strongly:

"...Globalisation means CNN and BBC interpreting the world events for me and my children..."

"...it means sexism of the worst kind..."

"... it means they (multi-nationals) defining for me what is good, and what is bad..."
Amidst this trend of globalisation, women are forced to be passive audiences and consumers of these messages, she says.

Being positively represented in the media is important for women because women are part of development. They have families and live in tribes and communities. Women’s knowledge can help everyone. Women are concerned with the needs of societies, with creation of life and the preservation of environment. "If women's interests are met, the interests of all humanities will also be satisfied." (Bangkok Declaration, 1994).

The significance of media for women is that it can help to set the social and political agendas of the crucial issues of the day, focus attention on issues of significance to women and include women's voice and perspectives. Media can initiate debates on development and on human rights, including women's rights, and the position of women in society.

The question is, how can women ensure that the information and images they receive through the media serve their needs and interests? Further, can these needs be understood, recognised and given priority since few women are found at decision-making positions of most media organisations? Therein lies the second part of our discussion -- which is the way ahead for women in media?

There is certainly an urgent need to raise awareness among women practitioners to give a feminist perspective to the industry. If the media industry is patriarchal because of a majority of males at the top, it then follows that in order to feminise the present structure, there must be more women.

But number does not necessarily guarantee improvement. Having created a critical mass, they must also be sensitive to gender issues and strive to increase their number at the top. This is vital because for as long as there are more men than women in control, women journalists would be constrained to reflect ideas, values and priorities that are important to men. It is also important for the men in the media and media management to be gender-sensitive.

For example, it was only after women journalists, like Maggie O’Kane of the British Guardian and many more went to cover the war zones like Bosnia-Herzegovina that the horrors of rape of women and children were revealed. In some countries, situations have improved because of the positive images projected. For example, women journalists and editors in many countries have been the ones responsible for the removal of sexist advertisements or images of women in the media.

When the Bufori car ad first appeared in Malaysia (a sexist ad featuring Malaysia's first national sports car), we published letters from irate readers, initiated people-on-the-street interviews condemning the ad and put our opinions in personal columns.
The TV ad featured four women telling a match-making agency what they wanted in a man. The last woman, said "I don't care who he is or what he looks like. If he drives a Bufori, I'm all his." Viewers saw this as blatant degradation of women.

The print ad which appeared in major newspapers the next day was even worse. It described the car as having a "cute rear end, topless too...everything you want in a lover...without having to throw out the garbage. Having said that my wife will probably not let me in...wanna spin in my Bufori?"

The furor it sparked forced the car company to withdraw the ad. I must say here that this would not have been possible had the women at the helm of the various newspapers not been sensitive or did not have some decision-making powers. It is heartening to note that women media professionals in Asia and other regions of the world, have networked to devise strategies to begin to shift the media and society in a direction that is more developmental and gender equitable.

Generally, the number of women working in the media -- print, advertising and broadcast -- have increased significantly over the past decade. Unfortunately, however, they appear not to make headway in their careers, stagnating at mid-management levels, allowing, instead their male colleagues unchallenged access to the top.

Statistics show that at the tertiary level of education, both girls and boys have equal opportunity to enrol for courses in mass communications. But, as demonstrated by a Malaysian study, more male graduates climb the corporate ladder faster than female graduates. A cursory glance of women in managerial positions of the media in some Asia countries demonstrates this quite clearly: Thailand - 25%; Indonesia - 35%; Malaysia - 20%; China - 5%; Japan - 8%; and the Philippines - 30%.

Globally we see a low percentage of women working in the media, as seen in this chart taken from UNESCO Communications Division: Africa - 21%; Asia - 11%; Europe - 30%; North America - 32%; and South America - 25%.

Although there is a sense of things "opening up" for women at the ground level because of their increase at the entry level of the various media professions, the above data suggests the level of effort still needed to correct the imbalance which favours men.

Even where women have begun to move into higher status jobs, their isolation has made it difficult for them to introduce changes without risk to their positions. In the highly competitive media world, the old adage that a woman is compelled to prove that she is even better than her male counterpart in order to be accepted in the same job is still quoted.
For this reason the World Conference on Women in Beijing this September which will discuss issues affecting women -- poverty, education, environment, health, law and family development -- will also discuss media on a more serious note.

It stems from the realisation that plans of action or messages to be taken to empower women in future, will only be effective if they are communicated effectively and responsibly.

The objective is to increase women's access to and use of the media and information. Secondly, it is also necessary to increase women's participation in the management of the media to promote women's positive contribution to society.

However, there are obstacles to their ascend to the top which media women must recognise and overcome. One of the preparatory meetings for Beijing was the recent symposium for women media practitioners from all over the world, held in Toronto. It discussed women's access to expression and decision-making and examined the reasons for women's slow rise to top managerial positions. The symposium also drew strategies to rectify the situation.

One of the reasons cited for women not making it to the top is the contrary pulls of professional and family life. Women do not rise to senior positions because of family responsibilities which hinder mobility and promotion opportunities. As the absence of strong support system (childcare) in most media organisations has contributed to a high drop-out rate among women who are forced to leave, there must be efforts to have them installed. These women could easily have been those decision-makers lost to the industry.

Cultural barriers and traditional attitudes which both men and women have internalised as accepted norms and values keep women locked in traditional roles even within the professions. Women tend to hold back and not assert themselves.

The assumption that women are to put family before job or that they are supplementary income earners has caused many women to be denied of training or postings abroad. It is for this reason that you do not find many female bureau chiefs.

When asked, male bosses do not deny the ability of women professionals to perform as well, if not better than men. Their rationale is purely utilitarian -- women, especially when married, have many distractions. Women journalists, they say, were not willing to work long hours, were not happy to be on-call for breaking-stories, were not mobile and thus cannot be transferred.

This is regardless of whether women themselves are willing. It is also the most typical excuse repeated by male bosses, oblivious to the number of hard working, competent, single women who are increasingly available these days.
Other invisible barriers include attitudes, biases and presumptions that are not helping women propel upwards. For instance, some men believe that deep-seated notion that women's comprehension and empathy for technology is suspect and, as a result, they are overlooked for technical jobs.

It is here that women have to strive doubly hard to prove their mettle and men are spared. This widespread belief has affected women themselves who become unwilling to venture into these areas fearing that they may not perform as well. Consequently, we have found that women are confined to the "softer" side of media professions. These "female ghettos" are normally lifestyle, leisure, literary, entertainment and education.

Finally, and tragically, the presence of women at the helm does not guarantee women the kind of mobility necessary to ensure that more women reach the managerial level. The "Queen Bee syndrome", as this is known, is common to all cultures. But this attitude has to change. Instead, women should be encouraged to groom potential female workers for top management positions.

By way of conclusion, I agree with a researcher who said in "Many Voices, One World," that the media is "not the fundamental cause of subordinate status of women nor can it be remedied by the media alone. The causes are deeply rooted in social economic and political structures."

But it is within the power of the media to either allow things to remain status quo or initiate change. The two approaches adopted by most women media professionals at regional and international meetings are equity and empowerment.

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