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Reinforcing Women's Social Consciousness and Identity through Modern Media Technologies in Sri Lanka

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In Sri Lanka, one of the most popular television serials in the country feature women endlessly bickering about property rights. Most often, the drama is greeted with cynical smiles by its viewers and a rejoinder is tossed carelessly into the conversation “What more can you expect from such viragos? Women are all like this anyway”

The television serial titled “Doo Daruwo” (Sons and Daughters) is not alone in setting Sri Lankan women in sexist media moulds. If fingers are sought to be pointed at those responsible for representing women in stereotyped images, the mass media would be the first to stand indicted. Advertising continues to portray women in the exclusive role of carers, happily engaged in a continual washing, cooking and cleaning for their families or as beauty objects for the selling of their various products. Rarely are issues such as problems within marriage, the plight of the battered wife, or the various institutional inequalities affecting women treated in a balanced and indepth manner.

Not a comforting comment to carry about a country that prides itself on being more gender conscious than its neighbours in the South Asian sub continent. While formal and theoretical equality exists to a great extent in a number of national and international laws to which Sri Lanka has committed herself, what does such commitment translate to in terms of practical reality? It is a depressing but nevertheless true fact that gender equality laws, such as they exist, affect only a minority of the privileged English speaking elite, leaving the vast majority of women staggering under heavy burdens. Granted, Sri Lankan women do not have to contend with female foeticide, dowry death or sati, but there is a more subtle discrimination that they face in many aspects of their life. Ironically, by being more subtle the issues have been more difficult to deal with. Many Sri Lankan men and women, when confronted with the question of gender problems are likely to respond with a glassy eyed stare and a query of their own “What problems?”

So, the question deserves some space. What is the social consciousness and identity of women that is sought to be reinforced through modern media technologies, in the context of my country?

To my mind, what is meant by social consciousness and identity of women is very simple. It means the informed choice of every woman to decide how to live her own life. This means in the first instance that a woman choosing to be a homemaker should be equally supported as the woman who opts for a career. In both cases, gender biased obstacles facing a true fulfillment of these objectives ought to be highlighted, and media technologies ought to help minimize such problems.

A brief socio political outline of my country might perhaps be appropriate at this moment. In Sri Lanka, while the positions of the Prime Minister and the President are held by women, this does not reflect an overall high representation of women in formal political life or in positions that necessitate substantial public activity. Not only are there extremely
few women in Parliament but also, female representation in provincial councils, local councils and the executive rungs of state departments are low, whatever positions held not being authoritative. The Government appears to be considering a proposal to provide a quota for female representation in the national assembly by law, but no specific promises have been made. On the positive side, the numbers of women who go in for higher education is encouraging. This has to be looked at in the context of the high literacy rate in Sri Lanka estimated at 83%. Here again however, when it comes to employment, the ratio drops dramatically, leading one to come to the conclusion that there are large numbers of educated women who are unemployed due to force of circumstances.

Sri Lankan women are subject to the laws of their respective communities in areas such as marriage, divorce, child custody and maintenance. These local laws have significant effect in preventing reform of existing conditions that are often unfair to women. Recently, several amendments were introduced to the Penal Code which gave women some protection against marital rape and sexual harassment. However, similar reforms that liberalised abortion laws had to be dropped due to strong Muslim and Catholic lobbying. As a result, abortion still remains illegal in all circumstances, even where the woman has become pregnant as a result of rape. There are large numbers of poor women who opt for backstreet abortions, while the more affluent can afford posh clinics and safe operations.

Meanwhile, family structures have been radically affected by the conflict that has gripped the country over the past decade. A vicious war rages in the north of the country where Tamil terrorists are fighting to carve out a separate state, while traumatic after effects are still apparent from a Marxist style rebellion that arose in the south a few years back. No documented study has been done of the situation in the north due to security considerations, but surveys conducted in the southern areas show that an alarmingly 96% of the women were compelled to assume the role of breadwinner due following the killing or disabling of their men. Overall, the country saw an increase of female headed households, with statistics estimating this number as high as 1/5 of all households. Additionally, as women migrate to the Middle East for jobs to support their families back at home, drastic familial changes occur, resulting in many dysfunctional family units.

When it comes to women workers in my country, it could be justly said that they continue to face considerable challenges in the workplace, precisely because they are women. Women have equal pay laws but in reality, they continue to be denied this right. Many of them do not speak out fearing that they would lose their jobs. Sexual harassment continues to be a severe problem facing the working woman. Here again, a law provides that offenders be brought to order by a stiff punishment, but up to date no case has come up before the courts.

Again, one of the most horrendous problems at present facing activists are the vast majorities of women working in garment factories in the Free Trade Zone who are severely exploited, having to work for long hours on inadequate pay and bad working conditions. For many years, social workers have been agitating for enforcement of minimum standards required for industrial labour including overtime, leave, the right to organize and to work in conditions that ensure physical safety.
This gap between the law and reality has become one of the most challenging problems facing Sri Lankan women. As the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy who is herself a Sri Lankan, commented “Women prefer to travel to Kataragama (a local place of pilgrimage) and pray before Goddess Kali to help alleviate their sorrows rather than approach the courts”. The reason for this nonactivism is two fold On the one hand, the Sri Lankan judiciary is still conservative and is apt to shy away from laying down bold pronouncements on gender equality. On the other hand, it is a regrettable fact that women’s rights groups in Sri Lanka have not been as activist as they should be in taking gender issues to court, and though women lawyers are a visible force in the profession, many of them are not sufficiently gender sensitised themselves to take up cases. The result is an effective marginalising of the law as an avenue of relief for a woman victimised at home or exploited in the workplace.

In brief, these are some of the most pressing gender concerns confronting the country at present. The question then becomes whether the spread of New Communication Technologies (NCTs) in the country has helped awaken social consciences of both men and women to these concerns?

Use of NCTs have indeed become fairly widespread in the metros, with little distinction being made about whether it is men or women who use them. Cellular phones, pagers and PCs are used by city based Sri Lankans as a matter of everyday use. Meanwhile, Internet cafes have been set up in Colombo, and computer courses continue to mushroom in bewildering numbers. Success stories abound in business circles. One of the high profile Colombo based companies offering office computerization packages to business establishments is headed by a woman. Another woman quit the corporate world to start her own company that has now become Sri Lanka’s only PR company to represent a global communications agency located in London, with offices in Tokyo, Munich and Osaka. Among her clients are multinationals, corporates and brand leaders. She balances her home demands and career concerns with the help of modern technologies. “I work hard at my PC, after my family goes to sleep,” she says “All my achievements would have been impossible if I did not have these modern aids to help me.” she adds. Professionals have been similarly benefited. Speaking from the personal standpoint of a lawyer and a journalist, I can definitely say that NCTs have made my work much easier. For women lawyers, one obstacle to their carving out a good practice for themselves has always been the necessity to keep late hours, very often at their senior’s chambers. With the proliferation of NCTs, this has no longer become necessary, as drafting of papers can be done at home and sent over on Email. The cost of having these facilities is daily on the decrease due to the competitiveness of packages offered and many middle class families have invested in NCTs.

Meanwhile, at the paper where I work, both the creative and the technical aspects of the production of the newspaper have long been computerized, and all major newspapers in the country have access to Internet. Inevitably, this has made networking easier, with all the added advantages. One perceptible gain has been that obtaining information on issues in the region has been made much easier. Previously, while it was comparatively simple to access information from the West due to the sophistication of their communication methodologies, the same could not be said of the Asian region. Sending and receiving a fax in the South Asian subcontinent alone was a nightmare, besides being prohibitively...
expensive. This problem has been remedied by Email and Internet facilities. One such instance where NCTs were of tremendous help occurred recently when The Sunday Times was planning on giving column space to the question whether the divorce laws of the country ought to be liberalised. We had sufficient material with us by Western based writers who argued for a relaxing of the laws so that the woman could break away from an unhappy marriage with the minimum of trauma. But it was only after accessing the Internet and tapping into surveys done by our neighbouring countries that we realised that some thought should also be given to the question whether such a liberalization would not actually benefit an undutifull male, who wished to free himself as soon as possible. It was found that some women surveyed actually wished for strict laws, believing that this was the only way that they could tie their spouse down to some form of accountability. In the absence of a sufficiently activist social welfare system and a dynamic judiciary, this was the only recourse available to them. A consequent article was therefore written with more sensitivity to the Eastern context and reality.

All this is well and good. But, NCTs continue to be an impossible dream to the vast majorities of Sri Lanka’s marginalised lower class who continue to struggle with more fundamental problems than activating a PC. Even among the upper classes, where as remarked earlier, NCTs have made considerable difference in the quality of life, gender prejudices hamper a full blooming of the social consciousness of women. And the media is little help. As was pointed out at the start of this paper, the media that includes the press, television and radio have not been conscious of their role in steering change. As a result, the messages that they disseminate to the public has perpertrated the patriachial ethos, rather than awakened both men and women to a full understanding of their roles. This indeed has had a more dangerous impact than is apparent at first. The reason for this is that television is a comparatively new phenomenon in the villages, and the mix of highly Westernized programmes with their inevitable component of violence together with conservative local productions have not been a particularly healthy dose for Sri Lankan villagers to swallow. Social analysts have expressed concern about this, pointing out that indigestion could lead to increased gender violence, already a social problem of some magnitude in the villages.

Taken on the whole, some TV programmes do focus on empowerment, the Young Asia Television being one notable example. Here, youngsters engage in a lively debate on gender issues in a nonconfrontational manner. Unfortunately, the programmes are aimed at an English educated minority, and tend to have limited effect as a result. Radio programmes have been no better than television, tending to focus on sensationalized stories of rape and abduction rather than foster an indepth gender focussed dialogue. In short, the media has failed and failed quite significently to address the social consciousnes of women in a serious manner. This is doubly tragic, considering the fact that large numbers of women belong to the media world in my country. This brings me back to the point that I wish to emphasize if we are to truly speak of NCTs making a difference, and that too not only in the context of helping women of a certain class to become upwardly mobile, then those who access NCTs have to be made more aware of their social responsibilities. And that goes for the women as well as the men.

One recent development in my country does hold out some hope for a better and brighter future. The attention of the Sri Lankan public was caught some months back by a
captivating story that highlighted what tremendous effect NCTs could have in improving the lot of the marginalised woman. Eluned Hurn, an enterprising Welsh woman was on a mission to Sri Lanka in an affort to popularize the using of computers for community based rather than commercial applications. The BBC had called her a visionary in the world of computer communications, a woman who could rise above her time. Back in her native Wales, she had worked to make a novel concept acceptable to her people. Her Honey Tree network tries to pass on valuable information to rural folk in the simple everyday matters of working and earning. “If you had a PC, a modem and a telephone, then there is this gold mine of information that you could avail yourself of” she told Sri Lankans. “In the Honey Tree network, besides educational data we even have information about growing fruit and there were various tips on good farming techniques. This was all absolutely fascinating for the villagers and slowly they began to realise the vast potential in this.” she said. She hoped to start a similar network in Sri Lanka and was exploring the possibilities in the country. “It can be a paradise partnership between Sri Lanka and Wales” she added. Gender balanced issues was one topic that she specially wished to concentrate on. To me, Eluned Hurn remains the best example of the manner in which NCTs could be effectively used to help marginalised women in developing countries. Such a pioneering spirit is badly needed in my country, where the use of NCTs do not really filter down to the vast majorities of the people, tragically those who need it the most.