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Media And The Women In Pakistan

By

Sharif al Mujahid
MEDIA AND THE WOMEN IN PAKISTAN

by Prof. Sharif al Mujahid

The present paper seeks to (a) examine access of women to journalism and communication education; (b) look at the status of women in the media; (c) determine the skills development needs of women in the different media; and (d) analyse the portrayal of women in the media.

In order to look at these four specific aspects in meaningful terms, one would have to deal with the environment which determines the status of women in the media, their portrayal, their access to Journalism/Communication education and their skills development needs in different Media. The environment is in turn shaped by the demographic, socio-economic, cultural and religious factors. Let us, therefore, have a close look at these factors which provide the contextual background for the delineation and discussion of "Women and the Media".

I. THE ENVIRONMENT

a) Demographic Factors. Pakistan had a population of 84.3 million (1981 Census), of which 40.02 million (about 47%) were female. It had an urban population of 28.3% of which about 67% lived in 28 cities with a 100,000-plus population. Literacy was about 26%, with females being only about 15.99% literates, the figure dropping to a mere 1% in some regions. Of the 13 million
literates, about 46% have passed primary education, the ratio
between male and female literates being 69:31. The ratio decreases
as we go up the literacy ladder, with only 25% of the 1% graduate
student population (0.13 million) being female.
b) Economic Factors: Pakistan falls within the middle range
income countries in the Third World. In mid-1984, it had a labour
force of 28.3 million in 1985 — i.e., about 27.57% of the
population, or about 40.2% of the population aged ten and above.
Of this, 53% was in agriculture while 14% each in industries
and personal services. About 45% of population live in a one-room
house units while only 0.8% in 5-plus room units. Its per capita
income is about US$ 350 at current prices.
c) Religious, Cultural and Social Factors. There are two
legacies Pakistan is heir to: (i) religious; and (ii) socio-economic.
Pakistan is predominantly Muslim, and the religious variable
impinges rather deeply not only on the religious life of her
people but also on her socio-economic life. Islam gives certain
rights and privileges to women, including the right to education,
to inherit property, and to seek divorce if need be. Marriage is
a social contract in Islam, and despite the age long practice of
marriages being arranged by the elders, no marriage can be contract
without the consent of the bride. One result of the emancipation
of women under Islam was that during mediaeval times women had
some time become rulers, even while the male members in the family
were alive. During the independence movement, and especially during 1940s, Muslim women had organized protest marches and even filled in jails. After independence Miss Fatima Jinnah, the sister of the Founder of Pakistan, took upon herself the role of an opposition leader from 1954 till her death in 1967; she was also nominated as the Combined Opposition Party's candidate to fight the presidential elections of 1965 against President Ayub Khan. Women have voting rights; they have been ministers, ambassadors, and civil servants. Both the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) and the Women's Action Front (WAF) have been active and articulate in the promotion and defence of women's rights. All this indicates that the religious variable does not by itself preclude women from participation in public or life, 

taking to a career.

What however, does is the traditional purdah system which was adopted by Muslims when they settled down in the sub-continent and which at one time was considered a status symbol. The purdah system, in turn, nurtured the belief, quite entrenched in the pre-independence period, that women should confine themselves to the four corners of the house and should avoid outdoor activities. Since independence, however, the veil has been torn asunder, and women have begun participating in public life in ever increasing numbers. Even so, that tradition persists by and large, and there are certain conservative circles which would
like to see the womenfolk confined to the household. Although essentially a socio-cultural institution, the purdah system is sought to be justified on religious grounds.

While the purdah system had been a deliberating factor in the life of women in the urban areas, the feudal legacy has crippled/in the rural areas. Under feudalism not only are land, wealth and cattle owned, but also women. This has been the case in some parts of Pakistan where feudalism, though in a constricted form, still reigns supreme. Industrialization and successive land reforms have, of course, broken the feudal power to a considerable extent; yet the feudal mentality persists, especially in the rural areas.

It may thus be seen that the demographic, socio-economic and cultural variables are by and large weighted against women taking to a career, whether in the media or in any other field. However, better education facilities in recent years, the tearing of the veil, the trend towards a nuclear family, employment opportunities, rising costs and the passion for a decent living (forcing women to seek employment with a view to boosting up their household income) — these factors have served as incentives to women to opt out for a career.

These two divergent but juxtaposed sets of variables, interacting with one another, have, in the ultimate analysis, determined the status of women in Pakistan. They also help us to understand why their status is what it is and how far it could be
II. MEDIA SIZE AND AUDIENCE

The media in Pakistan comprise 118 dailies (English 12; Urdu 106), 297 weeklies, 106 fortnightlies, 491 monthlies, and 146 quarterlies in the print media sector; about 10 million radio sets and 3 million TV sets in the electronic sector; and 550 cinema halls. The circulation of dailies is about 1.5 million, and readership about 7.5 million (with 5 readers for a daily), and the total audience for the print media (including dailies and other regularly printed media) is estimated at 10 million which is about 12% of the total population. Radio broadcasting, which covers almost the entire country areas-wise, reaches about 60 million people (about 66% pop.), while TV claims an audience of about 18 million. On the basis of 700 seats per hall, three shows a day and an average attendance of 40% of the total seats, the estimated daily attendance in the cinema halls is about 500,000.

III. WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

a) Access to Journalism/Communication Schools: Over the years, female enrolment in schools, colleges and universities has shown an upward trend. In the middle 1950s about one-third of the total enrolment in metropolitan areas comprised female students. Since enrolment of the middle 1970s, female students at the colleges' and universities have become comparable to male students. At the University of Karachi, women students comprise about 53% of student population. Though an exception, it yet provides an index to the general trend towards greater female education in the country.
Female enrolment in Journalism/Mass Communication courses reveal the same pattern. In 1955 when a Diploma course in Journalism was instituted at the Karachi University, there were only five girl students in a class of 33. In 1965, female students comprised about one-fourth of the total enrolment, and at present there are 67 (51%) girls students to 64 male students at the Department of Mass Communication at Karachi. In the Punjab University as well, the proportion of girl students is comparable with that of the male scholars. This, however, is not the case at the other three Journalism/Mass Communication schools, Sind, Gomal and Peshawar universities — where male students predominate.

As the situation stands, more girl students go in for Psychology, English literature, and International Relations courses — in the first two subjects because they offer better job opportunities, and in the last one because it offers girls a certain measure of glamour and poise to move about in social gatherings.

For some time now women have also entered the Journalism/Mass Communication education field. There are two female teachers out of 8 teachers at Karachi, three out of 7 at Sind University, and one each at the Punjab and Gomal universities.

b) Status of Women in the Media. Although one-half of Journalism/Mass Communication students are females, only a small percentage goes into the profession. For one thing, women as a general rule
prefer day-time jobs, and such jobs are available only in the magazine and editorial writing sections of the dailies. And since jobs in these sections are filled in by senior and experienced personnel, fresh journalism graduates have little chance of being employed in these sections. For another, most girls take to the newspaper career only till they stay unmarried. However, the trend towards employing women in various editorial/managerial and other positions has been strengthened during the past two decades. For instance, a total of thirty women "man" some of the senior and important positions in the DAWN group of newspapers. As editors, journalists, general managers, artists, and research officers, they have, to quote Hameed Haroon, Deputy Chief Executive, President, DAWN, "demonstrated their worth in a man's world and excelled the work of most men".

Women are in much greater proportion in magazines and periodical journalism. Several periodicals, both in English and Urdu, are primarily manned by them — e.g., Herald, TV Times and Akhbar-i-Khawateen. In such magazines, they hold editorial, executive, technical and creative positions, and have done extremely well. They have especially shown a flair for doing and writing on features, interviews, youth problems, cultural topics and human-interest articles. A listing of articles published in Dawn (Karachi) in November 1986 showed that 56 out of 265 articles (i.e., 21%) had a female by-line.
Women are also in sizeable proportion in Pakistan Television Corporation, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation and Press Information Department, but one of them at the chief executive level. They work as programme producers, newscasters, telecasters, announcers, compères, script writers and in similar other positions. It is, however, a measure of the developing trend towards greater participation of women in various facets of TV programmes and of production that women bagged 11 out of 36 PTV awards for 1986.

It is estimated that only about 1 to 2 per cent of the media is owned by women; but they comprise about 10% of 2,000 specialists working in some 100 advertising agencies.

c) **Skills Development.** Four universities in Pakistan offer degree courses and one university a Diploma course in Journalism/Mass Communication. Students are admitted to these courses on the basis of merit, and despite the fact that most of the Journalism/Mass Communication female graduates do not go in for the profession (for reasons enumerated elsewhere), there is no discrimination against admission of girls to these courses. Actually, the girl students excel the male students, and often carry away the top positions. The Institute of Business Administration offers courses in Management and Advertising, admission to which is equally open to girl students on the basis of merit. These courses have been found extremely helpful in preparing candidates for executive positions in Advertising.
d) **Portrayal of Women.** Portrayal of women in the Pakistani media has often been criticized both on qualitative and quantitative grounds. Women and their activities, we are told, are not covered adequately, and what is portrayed is not usually true to life. Although women comprise 47% of the population, a content analysis of textbooks shows that of the 3189 human characters featured in them, only 19% were female as against 81% males. An analysis of supplementary books confirms the same pattern: 86 females of 577 characters.

About the qualitative aspect of the portrayal of women, I feel, women commentators seem to exaggerate the situation somewhat. Thus, Dr. Sabeeha Hafeez would have believed that a woman in Pakistan is considered "ideal or deviant, she is not real". She feels that the portrayal of women in the media is based more on fantasy than on facts. In the TV programmes, for example, most women are portrayed as urban and rich while most women in Pakistan are rural and poor. They are portrayed as emotional, irrational and fatalistic while the situation as it exists today in Pakistan is that not to speak of the educated women who are usually rational and achievement-oriented, even the uneducated acquire, by sheer experience, endurance, empathy, and analytical abilities to deal with their day to day problems. It has also been contended that the portrayal of women, especially on the mini screen, is more negative than positive — nagging housewives instead of mature and understanding partners; sedate, quiet mothers; girls interested only in
clothes and ornaments, waiting to be married away to a well-to-do young man. The Pakistani cinema has likewise depicted the women in the strait jacket of a loving mother who can do no wrong and the stereotyped role of the pretty heroine and a sexy vamp whose life revolve around a hero.

The Zia regime has tried to bring in some sort of a balance in the portrayal of a woman. The government has prohibited presentation of woman as objects of commerce and industry in ads, or done without taste and aesthetic values in films. In the result, the film censors are now more careful, working their scissors more diligently to cut out violence and abuse against woman in the Punjabi films. However, because of box office constraints and imperatives, a realistic Pakistani women cannot possibly replace the singing and dancing heroine in the Pakistani films.

To assess the portrayal of woman in ads in the media, we have selected for content analysis three issues each of a monthly (Herald, Karachi) and a weekly (MAG, Karachi). Nine out of the 19 staffers listed in the Herald are women who hold senior positions (Editor, Senior Editors, Assistant Editors and Business Manager). Thus, it is a monthly which is largely manned by women, but which, except for a section on trends in fashion, offers a general fare and is meant for both male and female audiences, albeit of the upper classes. During the three months (October–December 1986)
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