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Women And The Media In India

By

Sima Sharma
WOMEN AND THE MEDIA IN INDIA

By Sima Sharma
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I. INTRODUCTION

Most third world societies have developed cultures, with values and processes that have endured over time. In some of these societies, which have strong oral traditions, women's presence in the media was taken for granted; this presence is still active wherever it is people rather than techniques that carry the message through song, story, folk theatre. Their role in shaping the content of the message was, and is, indeed circumscribed—but by a set of circumstances quite different from the ones operating in the world of modern mass communications. The stereotypes of the one are indeed different from the stereotypes of the other.

The media does, in all cases, reflect the status of women in society on the one hand; and on the other, plays its role of intervention in social change by its intrinsic bias or lack of it. The modern press, radio and T.V., products of technology developed in modern societies were not culturally neutral anywhere. The assimilation of these technologies, along with their accompanying concepts, some in conflict with the established modes and values, often throw up incongruencies.

For Asian women, the conflict is real. The family is the centre of the universe and the perception of social inequities far less sharp than in many other parts of the world. In reality, the question of media impact on women and vice versa concerns largely the Western educated urban high-society women. The rural, illiterate and low-income sector of womanhood is as remote from the access of the media as the media is from her reach. One would like to stress that a great many decisions and deliberations affecting social change have little relevance to rural women, just as decisions made in the male-dominated media world have ignored the needs of women. And 80 per cent of Indian women live in the villages.

The question of access to the media is an important one since "communication can be an instrument of power" as Sean McBride put it. More than 80 per cent of all modern media resources are vested in industrially advanced countries where only 36 per cent of the world's population lives. Within the third world societies, again, the access to media differs sharply between urban and rural sections. In 1979, India with a population of over 650 million, had a newspaper circulation of 13 million, 20 million radio receivers and 1.1 million
T.V. sets. Women in the rural areas rarely read the newspaper (only 1 per cent read it regularly, while only 3.6 per cent listened to the radio regularly) The television with its tremendous potential, has yet to consolidate its constituency being still beyond the reach of the average village community. Women form only 2 per cent of the country's journalists with Bombay and Delhi leading with 10 per cent women in the media. The situation in the rest of the country's obvious.

The sensitized section of the media audience belongs predominantly to the upper-class urban male society whose members actually exercise control over the media.

II. ACCESS TO MEDIA AND MEDIA TRAINING

Women's entry into modern journalism in India began only in the 60s along with enrolment in the few institutions for journalism training that existed then. Over the decades, there has been a significant rise both in the number of journalism schools and in the number of women entrants.

In 1962, we were 4 women students in the journalism department of Nagpur University, in a class of 16. In 1964, in the Times of India's apprenticeship scheme for journalists, the first of its kind in the country, we were 3 women among the 10 entrants. Some 20 years later, in 1985, the class of 26 I taught at the Times Research Foundation Institute's School of Social Journalism, had 13 girls along with 13 boys!

The picture is not very different in other institutions, most of them located in the bigger cities, drawing upon the cosmopolitan families whose well educated daughters do not have to support a family with their income. In fact, the competence of the women candidates makes it difficult for most trainers and employers to hold the balance from tilting too much against the male aspirants to journalism.

This optimistic picture does, however, need to be seen in a certain perspective. Most of the training programmes, located as they are in the larger cities, rarely provide convenient, inexpensive and safe accommodation, thus practically eliminating the girls from outside the city. As journalism education is being increasingly taken up by universities, with their resources to provide hostel facilities, the picture is gradually changing. The shift to the hinterland and the regional languages, barely perceptible, is nevertheless beginning. For instance, the Department of Journalism of Poona University which has fairly evenly balanced sex-ratio both in its faculty as well as among students, provides training in the Marathi languages, which is the language that reaches
farthest into the villages. The strengthening of journalism in the regional languages may counteract the pull of urban centres among the women entering the profession.

The access of women to journalism education has to be examined against two questions: how many of the women graduates will enter the profession? And what kind of newspaper or magazine will they join? The presence of women journalists is insignificant in smaller publications located outside metropolitan cities.

There is no doubt that today more and more young women are putting themselves through journalism training of varying degrees of excellence. The next stage, namely that of securing jobs in media, is beset with many obstacles. It is, however, only further on, as working journalists, that women face the toughest challenge to a continuing career.

In 1966, as a junior sub-editor in Link news magazine, a lone woman among journalists in the establishment, I scanned the horizon for senior women in the field. There were only isolated figures: Kamala Mankekar, Shanta Rangachari, Amita Malik, Promilla Kalkhan. This despite the fact that a few stellar personalities had blazed trails as editors of thought-provoking journals even before the turn of the century. Bharat Mahila a women’s magazine, had taken up contentious issues under the editorship of Sarayu Bala Dutt over 80 years ago. They, however, worked from a room of their own, no less than Virginia Wolfe in distant England.

Two decades later, I was back in the same publishing house as Assistant Editor of Patriot daily. The reporters room had women’s handbags slung behind half the chairs, two women sub-editors worked at the news desk and two at Link in my old place. All down the road in the offices of the national newspapers, the presence of women is clearly visible, mostly young and unmarried but some young mothers and wives too. Will they be in journalism ten years hence?

III. STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIA

The media reflects the power distribution pattern in society. There is little doubt that the media is dominated by men from the urban elite who are themselves products of western dominance of the media. Moreover, a change in the sex-ratio in favour of women does not necessarily mean that the media will shift its concern towards the goals of feminism which, in the largest sense, is but humanism.

The success of woman journalists today, and there are quite a
few, depends on their ability to better men's performance on strictly male terms. The awareness of this dilemma is not lacking among the women in the profession today, but it does not alter the real need to cast aside their identities as women in order to make their way in a highly competitive profession. The dice is already loaded too heavily against women.

A survey conducted this year by the Women and Media Group, Bombay, on women in journalism, reveals only a marginal shift in the self-perception of women journalists themselves. Twenty years ago, few aspiring women journalists would willingly accept posting to a women's magazine or "Women's beat" (consisting of the cultural and social round). Today, a number of the same women who have risen in the profession choose to confine themselves to women's issues and the related "soft" areas of journalism such as environment, children, human rights, health and basic needs.

More than any other institution, it is the government that has accounted for the largest number of women entrants into journalism. The government owned radio and television in India has more women in senior positions than in the press. It is here that women have continued in their careers while many of their contemporaries in the press have dropped out. In fact, the declared national policy has, in this sector, provided women with the opportunity that is overtly or covertly denied to them in many of the privately controlled publishing houses.

The Indian press, vibrant and free, has seen a tremendous growth in recent years, far outstripping the rate of literacy growth. Whereas there were 8161 publications in the country in 1965, today the figure has reached 20,000 with new publications flowering continuously. The combined circulation figure for these is around 50.0 million, which means a much higher real leadership. The media, therefore, is powerful. The participation of women in this sector, however, has remained marginal, at a mere 2 per cent as mentioned earlier.

A study of the situation as it exists in the southern states of the country (by Gita Aravamudan of Trivandrum) shows the continued resistance to employing women journalists. Malayala Manoroma the largest circulated daily of Kerala with a circulation of over 6.5 lakhs, does not employ women. Kerala Kamudi does not employ women. The handful of women journalists who work in the Malayalam press hold desk jobs or work for women's magazines. Kerala is known to be the State with the highest percentage of female literacy and a tradition of equal status for women. The government controlled Radio and TV in Kerala, however, have a far larger/percentage of women
employees among presenters, artistes, engineers and has even a woman Assistant Station Director. The picture cannot be different in any other States, if one sets apart the four largest cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and Madras as areas with special circumstances of their own. Indeed the Press Commission after a study of women journalists in South India, concluded that 99 per cent of the newspapers discriminate against women who formed a bare 3 per cent of people in the profession although four times their number were trained professionally.

The bias against employing women is only obliquely offset by the point that most of the young women will sooner or later leave their positions - a welcome turn around. This calculation is reinforced by another, that women tend to work harder at their jobs, have little time for union activities, are less liable to push for promotion and are more pliable in their ideologies. The status of women in the profession is circumscribed by these considerations and the few who rose to become Assistant Editors, Chief Reporters or Senior Correspondents did so as exceptions rather than the rule. No woman has yet taken charge of a national daily newspaper or newsmagazine, though the Sunday magazine sections of several dailies are being run by women. Media leadership still remains far from the reach of women journalists.

It is in the women's magazines where the female staff has really made an impact, calling in the change from recipes, fashions, and society gossip to serious scrutiny of societal concerns. The staff of these magazines interact with feminist groups with greater understanding and often spark off women colleagues in the mainstream of the profession. A highly motivated feminist journal like Manushi from Delhi, for instance, is very much the journalists' journal too, in opening up new areas of enquiry. The Varna, a women's magazine in Hindi, is in every sense a pathbreaker in this language which has lagged behind Marathi, Bengali and Malayalam, the languages of regions where women's education and emancipation began a hundred years ago. But for the large number of women's magazines, many issues would never have been raised. And many women would never have made their presence felt.

The presence of women in the media can be contrasted with that in primary education. Both fields saw rapid expansion after the end of colonial rule. But whereas the absorption of women in the teaching profession, for several reasons, became an integral part of its growth, journalism still remains a counter stereotype job for women. Women teachers are also found to be more integrated with their professions.
An interesting study, comparing women journalists and women teachers, made by Dr. N. Hutnik and A. Sachdeva, concludes that media organisations have not been able to create or maintain within their female employees a sense of being one with the institution. "In their perception, the pre-deadline syndrome round which media work revolves, is more often a symptom of editorial inefficiency and not an inevitable characteristic of a media job. As deadline approaches, the "good employee" is seen not as the one who works regularly and consistently but as the one who stays in the office late into the night ... The image of the good employee be it male or female, is detrimental to the very institution of marriage". Not all media jobs are essentially tied to late breaking news, avers the study.

It is indeed the subtle nuances and inbuilt norms of organizational behaviour that operate against the mid career woman journalist more than any lack of chivalry on the part of the colleagues. They all "love" her and are most sympathetic to her "domestic commitments" (their own commitments apparently do not lie there) and her children's problems. These all add up to a tacit agreement to keep her out of responsible positions or challenging assignments. I have often advised younger women colleagues "Don't talk of your child being sick, just hint at 'pressing personal work' With luck, they will think you too are playing the stock market". A woman's reputation as a professional journalist is too fragile to admit preoccupations of motherhood.

In reality, even the most progressive of media organizations who have had women working with them for many years have done little to adapt the organisational culture to accommodate the needs of their women employees. When physical facilities like toilets and lunch rooms are far from adequate, it would be unrealistic to talk of day-care centres, transport or restricted schedules.

The toughest challenges in a working woman's life are the years when her children are very young. A journalist's lot is certainly difficult. Instead of making an effort to retain the employee by making adjustments, most private media organizations are happy to part company, as she decides to drop out of the race. It is not that the same organization would not be humane enough reassign an employee who has a heart problem, failing eyesight or a temporary setback to his health. The question is simply not considered in the context of parenthood.

Journalists in India in general, have very little opportunity for upgrading skills or undertaking special study. No
management has thought seriously of introducing the concept of study and research leave for media persons although the technological changes are already pressing for newer skills, greater specialization and extensive research for women, either at entry level or mid-career.

The most valuable cog in the entire media machine is a reliable and sensitive sub-editor. There are few publications who are not in dire need of these professionals. Yet the position of the sub-editor remains a lowly one in the profession and, consequently, open to women entrants. Once the sub-editor is in place at the desk, however, nobody takes any more note of him or her until she decides to shift to a better paid job in advertising. If organizations could think of ways of utilizing the writer in the sub-editor, as some editors have done in the past, the copy desk would not be in the derelict condition it is in, today, in most papers.

New experiments to utilize the same journalist both at the desk and in the field have, however, already begun. The Sunday Observer, with an open policy towards bright young journalists, both men and women, has already set the pace with several young women excelling in both areas, setting the pace for their male colleagues.

The status of women employed in the media is similar to that in most industries. They are better off in government undertakings which are governed by national policies more effectively. They face covert and overt discrimination on account of their sex and are kept from advancement. Their special problems, far from being viewed as requiring constructive solutions, elicit a hardened attitude towards continuing them in employment. (Transport and day-care are two examples). They are not fairly represented in trade unions nor are cases of discrimination taken up by unions with the management. Discrimination is less visible at junior levels in the organization and begins to loom large as a woman employee nears her turn for a promotion or for a preferred posting. The work culture in organizations has been shaped by certain so-called masculine values, such as aggressiveness, ruthlessness, an ongoing sense of crisis management and lack of order, to such an extent that many women, and even some men, do indeed feel handicapped by their more "genteel" upbringing and their sense of discipline.

On the other side of the picture, however, are the slow but sure signs of change in organizational culture as well as media treatment of women's issues and the feminist point of view. There is no doubt that this can be attributed to the increasing presence of women in the media, albeit mainly in the larger English newspapers and magazines.
IV. PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

Coverage of women, women's issues and the women's point of view suffer from three deficiencies. 1) They are ignored by the media with the result that coverage is absent or worse, very casual. 2) They are vitiated by biased social attitudes, creating false stereotypes. 3) Blatant sensationalism where the commercial interests are promoted by exploiting womanhood and sex.

The news media is largely guilty of ignoring women and the women's point of view in issues. A protracted strike in the textile industry may, for instance, be covered without ever considering the thousands of women workers involved, not to mention the families of male workers. Another example is the coverage of "development", seen persistently in quantitative terms, leaving out the women's point of view or questions that concern women the most.

According to the Press Commission, the coverage given to women's issues is a mere 4 to 5 per cent in English papers, rising to 6 to 7 per cent in the language papers and 10 per cent in the Urdu press. There is, however, an "awakening" seen in very recent times, to the presence of women in the readership and hence a larger coverage of so-called women's interests. The larger coverage can easily be seen as a response to what is seen as consumer demand.

By and large women make news on two specific beats of the news media - the crime beat and the culture beat. Woman as a victim has always held special appeal for media men who are not slow in publishing pictures of women in distress to illustrate a catastrophe story. Unfortunately, the interest in the woman's angle stops there. Woman are used only for evoking pity.

There has been a welcome rise in reporting crimes against women such as dowry murders, rape, suicides and molestation. The accent, however, is still very much on sensationalizing sex crime or trivializing injury as the very term "eve teasing" for sexual harassment indicates.

The other media fixation is to regard woman as a thing of beauty. Lighting lamps or garlanding public personages, they lend colour to the drab page. They set the mood for festive occasions and are seen but never heard. The culture page hunts high and low for photogenic females for that is the page for reader entertainment.

The front page and the news pages deal with serious matters like ministerial pronouncement, and there is no way in which
the gentlemen of the press can see any implication for women in them. A recent example is the revision of office hours for government servants to adjust to the new five day week. Although a fairly large section of employees happened to be women, the media hardly highlighted the special problems of a mother in adjusting to longer hours along with the hazards of insufficient transport. The arithmetic of working hours and productivity failed to look at the social dimension of this as in many other issues.

The commercialisation of the media has been largely responsible for stereotypes both old as well as new, that have done immense harm to the perception of women in society. The older stereotype is that of the submissive, house-bound woman interested in nothing beyond her daily toils and foibles. The new stereotype is the sex-object, most responsive to new consumer products, projecting a new lifestyle that all but denigrates those with less purchasing power. Unfortunately whether vamp or victim, the image does not remain in the imaginary world of film or advertising but impinges directly on the women in society including the media women. The norms which creep in insidiously affect the woman journalists' perceptions too, bending them towards conformity or provoking a reaction that is harmful to a balanced perception of truth.