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Report

By

Narendra Aggarwal
Seminar on Women and Media in Asia
Singapore, January 7-9, 1987

REPORT

The Seminar, AMIC's first programme for 1987, was organised with the support of the Commonwealth Media Development Fund of the Commonwealth Secretariat in London. The Seminar was designed as a major forum with the view to review the position of women in the Asian media. More specifically, it

(a) examined the access of women to journalism and communication education;
(b) looked at the status of women in the media;
(c) determined the skills development needs of women in different media; and
(d) analysed the portrayal of women in the media.

The majority of the participants were women, and similarly, the majority of the participants came from Commonwealth countries. Altogether, there were nineteen participants, nine of which were women. Eleven participants came from Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth countries represented at the Seminar were Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Singapore. The other countries which participated in the Seminar were Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. The lists of Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth participants are included in this document.
In keeping with the objective of the Seminar to focus on the role of women in the media, Ms Betty Khoo, Editor, Her World Magazine, Singapore, was invited to be the Chief Guest on the opening day. She spoke of her experience as a woman journalist. Her address is included in this document.

With a view to providing a common basis for the Seminar deliberations, guidelines were provided to all the participants from the twelve participating countries for the preparation of their papers. A copy of the guidelines is included in this document. Thirteen papers were presented during the Seminar, including two each from India and Malaysia.

The programme was well structured and was divided into four sessions. In the first session, the participants looked at the portrayal of women in the media. Session two was devoted to considering the access of women to journalism and communication education; session three to skills development needs of women in different media; and session four to look at the status of women in media.

In the session on the portrayal of women in media, most participants felt that the coverage of women's issues was largely devoted to traditional women's subjects. However, of late, women's magazines as well as the mainstream media had begun to look at the larger issues relating to women's status in society and national life. But still, mostly the issues concerning the educated and urban women were being aired. There was hardly any coverage of the rural women, who still represent a sizeable portion of the population in many developing Asian countries.
The participants, both men and women, said that in most of their countries, women were assigned a decorative role in advertising. It was felt that in many ads, the featuring of women was uncalled for as the photograph and copy were often unrelated to the product or service sought to be promoted.

In the session on the access of women to journalism and communication education, it was broadly felt that in recent years, with the steady opening of new journalism and mass communications schools in various countries, the opportunities for women to enrol in journalism and mass communication courses had generally increased. In fact, some of the participants said that in their countries, there was no discrimination between men and women when enrolling students in journalism and mass communication courses. Further, the experience of some countries was that more women than men were enrolling for such courses. It was also pointed out that as and when the monetary rewards in media jobs in various countries went up, more and more women are likely to enrol in the journalism and mass communication courses.

Beginning with the premise that journalists may be born, that they also need to be made in the sense of constantly updating their skills, the session on the skills development needs of women in different media threw up quite a few serious needs which the participants felt should be taken into account during training, recruitment and polishing the skills of women already in the media.
In the newspapers and magazines, skills mentioned as indispensible began with the basics like typing, shorthand, the ability to take a decent photograph, a foreign language or two and the more important ones like having a very sound background of content courses which touch upon the historical, social, economic and political situations of the country where the journalists work and also knowledge of international issues, plus, the ability to think critically both on these and on issues of immediate concern to the publication or section in which the journalist was employed. Also emphasized was the need of continued experience and exposure through refresher courses, summer workshops, or any other "meets" which helped in onward efficiency.

In the television media, the ability to spot news, the ability to deal with the equipment one handles and enough knowledge to prevent being duped in a strange location, the desire to know more and the guts to go to strange places in search of stories, the ability to interview and interface with various people and particularly with the members of her immediate unit who may not be female, were mentioned.

In broadcasting, the ability to go into the interior of the working area and draw out normal everyday heroines to highlight a social issue rather than rely on the findings of academic workshops was mentioned as indispensible to lend life to a programme.
Participants also touched upon the invaluable effects of sending women journalists for short stints abroad to have work experience on a similar publication.

Almost all participants mentioned the need for training in finance management and people management as soon as women in media reached a position of responsibility where they had to not only produce work but monitor the work of a team.

The objective of the fourth session devoted to considering the status of women in media was to examine the levels of seniority that women had reached and to offer tangible suggestions for training and research to facilitate further advancement.

After session four, the participants were divided into two working groups. Group I was assigned to look more closely at the access of women to journalism and communication education and to make recommendations in this regard. Group II looked at skills development needs of women in different media and made some proposals. The reports of the two working groups are included in this document.

After meeting in working group sessions, all the participants reconvened for the plenary session at which the recommendations and proposals were approved.

NARENDRA AGGARWAL

Senior Programme Specialist

Singapore, 15 January 1987