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Working, Watching And Waiting. Women And Issues Of Access, Employment And Decision-Making In The Media In India

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[*] *The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.*

INTRODUCTION

- On 14 October 2002, the top story on the front page of a multi-edition Indian newspaper, datelined Baghdad, was by the political editor of the English daily, reporting "from inside Iraq." She happens to be a woman.

- This time last year, women were conspicuous by their presence in the Indian media, covering the events of "9/11" and thereafter, and analyzing their implications – as correspondents and commentators, editors and anchors, interviewers and hosts of current affairs programmes, especially on some high profile television news channels and in the indigenous English-language press.

- Earlier this year, women played an active role in covering the "communal" conflagration in the Indian state of Gujarat. As the media provided on-the-spot reports from the internal battle-front, female bylines were very much in evidence in several newspapers and newsmagazines, and female broadcasters regularly appeared on a number of television news and current affairs programmes, focussing public attention on the sectarian violence and its aftermath. Women were also prominent as media commentators analyzing developments in Gujarat as they unfolded. Like a number of their male colleagues, some women reporters were threatened and at least one was physically attacked in the course of doing their jobs under difficult circumstances.

These recent examples of women journalists covering conflict tell one side of the story of women in the Indian media. There are obviously many other aspects to the question of the "participation and access of women to the media and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women" in the context of South Asia. This paper attempts to describe the complex reality of the media and women in India, to highlight the challenges and opportunities presented by the prevailing situation, and to discuss some of the measures and strategies currently being essayed to enhance the potential of media to tackle gender-based disparities within the media and in society, as well as to empower women both as professionals and as citizens.

The Indian experience may be relevant beyond the country, and even the region, in view of the growing trend towards the globalization of media and communication, and the fact that recent international collaborations and exchanges on gender and media matters have revealed more commonalities than differences in the state of affairs in different parts of the world in this respect.

SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

The apocryphal story about six blind persons and their descriptions of an elephant, based on the part of the animal they were able to touch and feel, comes to mind in the course of any endeavour to represent any aspect of India. The sub-continental nation is, arguably, the mother of all elephants and the Indian media certainly constitute one of her sizeable pachydermatous progeny. Both defy definitive description.

Under the circumstances this paper will merely provide glimpses of the whole, highlighting some issues concerning access, employment and decision-making through examples from different sections of the media in India:

- The range of issues that confront mediawomen in India and require attention from media professionals as well as managements will be presented through a summary of the situation, experiences and perspectives of women journalists working in the print media.[1]

- The limitations of the add-women-and-stir formula that is often expected to correct gender imbalances in media personnel and content will be demonstrated with examples of the mixed signals emerging from television.

- The need for official policies to enable more women, especially from disadvantaged communities, to exercise their right to access and participate in media and communication will be highlighted through the experiences of women involved in community media initiatives.

- The possibility of effecting positive change through media education and networking will be presented through two examples among the many initiatives under way in India.

- And, finally, some ideas on policies and strategies that could help remove the remaining stumbling blocks in the path to women's effective access to and participation in the media will be listed for discussion and possible action.

I. WOMEN IN JOURNALISM: PRINT MEDIA

The Indian print media currently include over 46,000 newspapers and periodicals; among them are more than 5000 dailies, nearly 17,000 weeklies and 13,000 monthlies, and about 6000 fortnightlies and 3000 quarterlies. These are published in as many as 101 languages and dialects. The largest number of publications is in Hindi (nearly 19,000), followed by English (nearly 7000) and Urdu (nearly 3000). Forty-one Indian newspapers still being published in various languages are a century or more old.[2]

Daily newspapers in India are believed to enjoy a total circulation of 130 million copies, of which a lion's share is accounted for by 200 big dailies. According to recent reports, the 350 largest newspapers are estimated to employ a total of about 5000 reporters, 2000 full-time correspondents, 5000 stringers and 5000 editorial staff.[3]

Appearance vs. reality

There is no current, credible, comprehensive data on all journalists in India, let alone on women in the Indian media. However, there is little doubt that the number of Indian women in the "mainstream" press had reached an unprecedented high by the dawn of the new millennium.

Female bylines have become commonplace over the past decade, not only in magazines and features sections but also on the news and editorial pages of dailies, including the front page.

Apart from a large number of female staff reporters and sub-editors (or copy-editors), the Indian press currently boasts many women who are senior editors (including editors in charge of single editions of multi-edition dailies, political editors and financial editors), chief reporters, chiefs of bureaux, special and foreign correspondents, business journalists, sports reporters, and columnists, not to mention magazine editors and feature writers. It also harbours some female photojournalists and even one or two female cartoonists.

Women journalists in India now write on a wide range of current events and issues, spanning a broad spectrum of subjects, including high-profile topics such as politics, business and economics, international relations and what is euphemistically known as defence. A number of women have managed to storm the citadel of hard news coverage. Many are recognized for their reportage from various areas of conflict in and around the country, having broken exclusive stories and secured rare interviews with leaders of militant organizations operating in these hot spots. Several have been associated with some of the most sensational scoops of recent years, including financial scams. Quite a few have also made names for themselves in the prestigious field of political reporting or analysis or both.

However, the exciting opportunities now available to a growing number of women journalists are not enjoyed by all or even most women in the profession. There are significant differences in the situation of women journalists across the country and the press. For instance, the growing number of women in the metropolitan media workforce has created the impression that the barriers that once restricted women's entry into the press have been overcome. But resistance to the recruitment of women still persists in many places and in certain sections of the press.

Similarly, the increasing visibility of women on television and in the indigenous English-language print media – generally known as the mainstream, national press because of its unique reach and influence – suggests that there are no more impediments in women's path to the top of the editorial pyramid. But many female journalists still experience slow and limited progress, if not total stagnation, in their careers. And the existence of a glass ceiling, which currently keeps women from occupying the very top spots in the editorial hierarchy (of newspapers in particular), is widely acknowledged, even by women who have reached relatively high positions within their news organizations.

The spectacular success of a number of women in a wide range of high profile areas of journalism, hitherto assumed to be male terrain, implies that there is nothing to stop competent and determined women from fulfilling their professional dreams. However, the tendency to relegate women to particular functions and beats within the press has not completely disappeared. And many women allege that they are not given a chance to demonstrate their capabilities, especially in what is commonly, if erroneously, seen as hardcore, mainstream journalism.

Special problem areas

1. In terms of access and employment, gender-based problems are particularly acute in sections of the Indian language press, which reaches a much larger proportion of the country's

reading public than the more conspicuous English press. Commenting on "the place of women in genuine journalist roles in Indian-language newspapers," media scholar Robin Jeffrey concluded: "their numbers … were scant, the jobs few and the prejudices against them formidable."[4]

Acknowledging that women's presence in what is generally known as "the language press" had registered some growth in recent years, he proposed that opportunities for women journalists could open up further, thanks to the increasing recognition that newspapers had to cultivate women readers. However, since the new interest in female audiences derives largely from women's role as consumers and their potential as targets of advertisements for a wide range of products, the job opportunities it generates tend to be limited in both scope and potential.

2. Another factor that bears consideration in the context of access and employment is the reality of minorities within minorities. If race piggybacks on gender, and vice versa, in some parts of the world, in India class, caste, creed and ethnicity often play a critical role in determining who, even among women, gains entry into the media and has the opportunity to rise in the profession.

   There is at present no data on the socio-economic and cultural composition of the Indian press corps, let alone that of its female component. However, circumstantial evidence suggests that the representation of scheduled castes and tribes[5] in the media workforce is not only minimal but completely disproportionate to their presence in the population. As Jeffrey put it, "…on the overwhelming majority of Indian newspapers in the 1990s there simply were no Dalits." With gender compounding the disadvantages of caste, women from Dalit – not to mention Adivasi – communities clearly have even less access to media employment.

   Similarly, the representation in the media of some of India's numerous religious minorities – notably Muslims – appears to be marginal. Here, again, women from these communities are undoubtedly doubly disadvantaged.

Common obstacles

Many of the issues confronting Indian women in journalism are similar to those faced by mediawomen in other parts of the world, while others are more closely linked to specific social and cultural norms prevalent in Indian society.

Thus, for example, while women's perennial struggle to reconcile the conflicting demands of work and family is clearly a universal – almost existential – reality, women in India face particular problems due to family structures and expectations, as well as social attitudes. The long, late and irregular hours and the erratic, unpredictable work schedules that characterise the profession, and the mobility it often requires, exacerbate the situation, especially for women from conservative families or communities and/or those who cannot afford to hire full-time domestic help.

The continuing controversy over women and night work exemplifies the dilemma of women who opt for a non-traditional career in what remains a tradition-bound society for all but a relatively small percentage of the urban population. If, on the one hand, women have to deal with objections or disapproval from families and communities, on the other they have to contend with employers who would be only too happy not to hire women or to relegate them to dead-end jobs.

For instance, a number of media establishments try to evade statutory responsibilities towards female employees (such as night transport or dormitory facilities) by either "excusing" women from the night shift or using the "problem" of night duty to justify not hiring women. Although many women journalists have successfully fought for the right to work on all shifts and believe that such parity is critical to professional advancement, others are ambivalent about the issue, mainly because of real anxieties about safety, domestic responsibilities, and family or social censure. A number of women seem to feel that they are damned if they do work at night and damned if they do not.

Some of the other obstacles many women journalists in India – admittedly not all – still face are more or less the same as those reported from elsewhere in the world. Among these are:

- Multiple pressures arising from the fact that the male remains the norm both within the profession and in the wider society in which media professionals operate.

- Negative social attitudes that are not only reflected but often reinforced in the workplace, with the attitudes and behaviour of male colleagues cited by many women as a major impediment to their well-being and progress within the media.

- Stereotypical, gender-based attitudes and behaviours resulting in professional norms that are uncomfortable for women or inimical to their interests – for example, certain aspects of the work environment, certain patterns in work assignment and certain conditions and conventions of work – and lead to a high rate of attrition as many women opt out of full-time employment.

- Lack of institutional support to enable women to handle their productive and reproductive roles without prejudice to either, which also forces many women out of full-time employment.

- Differential remuneration which, where it exists, results not from stated policy but from established practice rooted in gendered perceptions regarding women's careers and financial needs which are, in turn, strengthened by gender-based socialisation processes that leave many women unable or unwilling to negotiate better deals for themselves.

- Absence of professional associations of mediawomen which could help improve access, employment and career advancement through the sharing of information and resources, training, and more intangible processes such as mentoring, lobbying and advocacy.

- Paucity of role models, especially within the language press.

Impact

There is little doubt that women journalists have contributed significantly to broadening the scope of press coverage to include more and better reporting on and analysis of social issues in general and what are known as women's issues in particular. It is widely acknowledged within the media that they have played an important role in highlighting a wide range of issues related to human development and rights, social and economic justice, culture, and other vital aspects of life and society that were earlier neglected by a press traditionally preoccupied with politics (in the narrow sense) and government. Women have been noted for their coverage of social trends. They are also credited with having introduced more human interest in the media, even while covering hard news.

At the same time, it is difficult to state categorically that the presence and rise of women in the Indian media has had a perceptible, positive impact on mainstream journalism and media coverage as a whole. Women's capacity to influence the agenda, practice and output of the media is currently limited by several factors.

- For one, the number of women in key decision-making positions is still relatively small.

- For another, many successful mediawomen tend to adopt or, at least, adapt to the prevailing values and norms of the profession, like the majority of their counterparts elsewhere – in the media as well as in other professions. At present such conformity does appear to be an effective strategy for career advancement, since those who retain an alternative worldview seem to come up against the glass ceiling sooner rather than later.

- A third inhibiting factor is the apparent shift in the Indian media's priorities and preoccupations over the past decade, thanks to a number of developments – especially within the economy – that have affected many aspects of society, including the media. The increasingly market-driven nature of the media today has had a major impact on their priorities and preoccupations which, in turn, is reflected in their content. Influential sections of the media – including some quality broadsheets – now seem obsessed with the lives of the bold and the beautiful, the rich and the famous, the pampered and the powerful, and consequently less receptive to the interests and concerns of those who do not belong to this charmed circle. In this altered media environment there is obviously less time and space for in-depth coverage of serious issues, including many relating to gender.

- The rise of celebrity and lifestyle journalism through the 1990s and into the new millennium and its spread from glossy magazines into some mainstream newspapers appears to have special implications for women in the profession. While it has certainly increased job opportunities and professional visibility, it seems in some ways to have led to a backslide. Young women entering the field over the past decade have found that they are more prone to be assigned to the 90s equivalent of the "ladies' beat" of yore than their male colleagues. Rubbing shoulders with the glitterati can be a heady experience, especially for novices, until they discover that it may not pave the way to meaningful journalism – nor, indeed, to the higher reaches of the profession.

- Finally, the Indian press, like the media everywhere, has a predilection for events, especially dramatic ones that involve or threaten violence or conflict. As a result, the gender-related issues that routinely receive the most media attention are those that fit into dominant perceptions of what constitutes news.[6] Among these are violent atrocities, such as rape and dowry-related murder, and political hot potatoes, like the threat last year by a militant organization in Kashmir to disfigure or kill girls and women who ignore its edict on the wearing of the *burqa*. Women in decision-making positions within the media have not been able or willing to make an appreciable difference to definitions of news and hierarchies of news values.

  The media's continuing tendency to focus on events rather than processes often results in the neglect of many important issues concerning women – for example, the combination of chronic malnutrition and overwork that threatens the health of millions of women, and the initiation into public life of thousands of rural women elected to institutions of local governance from the mid-1990s onwards. Nevertheless, when such issues do get covered, it is thanks to women in the media, more often than not.

Rationale for change

As in most parts of the world, the structures and systems of Indian media organizations, not to mention society, have yet to be sufficiently transformed to enable women's full, free, fearless and unfettered participation in the profession across the board.

Such transformation is a prerequisite not only for equal rights in media employment (important as that is) but also for the sake of fresh perspectives on and interpretations of current events and issues, and more diversity in the images and messages conveyed by the media. These developments are not just desirable ends in themselves but also critical for democratization within the media and, thereby, for more effective democracy and justice in society. Each one of these universal goals assumes special importance and urgency in the context of India: a huge country indelibly marked by diversity in every aspect of life – natural, social, cultural, economic and political.

The necessary changes that may in turn bring about such far-reaching, positive transformation, require action at different levels of the profession: media managements, professional bodies and associations, media education institutes, and networks of mediawomen themselves.

II. WOMEN EFFECTING CHANGE: TELEVISION

The audio-visual media in India remained state enterprises until a decade ago, with the monopolistic public broadcasters – Akashvani (All India Radio) and Doordarshan (the national television network) – traditionally and tightly controlled by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The advent of satellite television in the early 1990s totally altered the Indian media scene, as foreign and indigenous private television channels began to beam programmes into homes across the country. Today over 100 television channels in different languages are

estimated to be available within the country, with some also reaching audiences in other South Asian countries.

According to recent reports, Doordarshan has 19,000 employees, of which about 4000 are in production and news, while AIR employs 24,000 people including 4,500 in news production. Private networks reportedly employ an average of about 1700 people, although only about 500 are directly involved in production and news (outsourcing is a common practice).[7]

Presence

There has been little documentation of women's involvement and experiences in radio and television and there is little data on their employment in these media. However, as in most parts of the world, women in India seem to have found it relatively easier to break into broadcasting than into the press, especially newspapers.

Thanks to official personnel policies, women found employment in the state broadcasting organizations from a relatively early stage. The satellite channels have further boosted women's visibility on the small screen, with women becoming increasingly conspicuous even in news programmes, as both anchors and correspondents based in different parts of the country.

Of the 21 young reporters recently recruited by Doordarshan, as part of its effort to revamp its news services, 16 were women.[8] However, senior positions are still overwhelmingly held by men. For example, within DD News, New Delhi, men currently occupy the top post as well as the five posts of Director (News). Of the 10 News Editors, only three are women; similarly, there are just three women among the 12 Assistant News Editors. The Executive and Chief Producers (News & Current Affairs) are both male. And there are no women among the 12 Programme Executives. Women are under-represented in technical jobs, too, with none among the eight Video Editors and only three among the 33 Camerapersons (the official designation is still Cameraman).[9]

The private channels are less forthcoming with statistics on personnel. However, women are highly visible on most of them and at least some also have women in decision-making positions. For example, the managing director of the most high profile, bi-lingual, private Indian 24-hour news channel is a woman, women often present its sports and business news (besides general news), and a woman journalist hosts two of its weekend current affairs programmes. The Chief Executive Officer of the Indian operations of a foreign television company, which plans to launch its own 24-hour news channel in 2003, is an Indian woman.

Some of the more prominent female television journalists and personalities have already become public icons and there is no dearth of role models for girls aspiring to pursue careers in the media. Further, despite the difficulty of correlating content with staff in the absence of proper substantiation, it certainly appears that at least some types of gender-related issues make it into news and current affairs programmes more often now than in the past, even if the treatment is sometimes somewhat superficial.

Women are active in the entertainment side of television, too, as writers and directors, hosts of talk, game and music shows, and of course as actors. The relatively recent rise of women as creators of popular television serials (especially programmes belonging to the soap opera and sitcom genres) raises critical questions about the impact of the participation and access of women to the media on the use of media as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women. The questions assume particular relevance and significance in view of the fact that women seem to constitute the primary target audience of TV serials.

Representation

"A great deal of the debate about satellite television has been about its influence on women," stated media practitioners and scholars David Page and William Crawley.[10] This is partly because women – at least in urban and semi-urban areas – are believed to be more "regular" in TV viewing than men, to view TV for longer periods, to be more committed to programmes they like, and to be heavier consumers of cable television (through which satellite channels reach Indian homes). Also, a number of popular serials are not only made by women but revolve around female characters.

The recent proliferation of female-centred entertainment programming is clearly linked the need to attract the middle-class female audience that advertisers and sponsors are interested in reaching. "Channels all over the country are deep focusing on the housewife. And the afternoon is the time to get her undivided attention… Suddenly the plain housewife is the cynosure of all eyes… …the housewife is actually the one with the potential to be the darling of the advertisers…" said a recent special report, titled "For women viewers, it's siesta fiesta," on a website focussing on Indian television.[11]

As a result, continued the report, three-hour "women's blocks" were appearing "not only on mainstream Hindi channels with their daily supply of tear-jerker soaps" but also on channels in other (regional) Indian languages and even on some foreign channels. According to Harsha Joshi, a senior director of Madison India quoted in the report, "…tear-jerking women saga *(sic)* works very well with housewives."

The story lines of many of the current crop of prime time and afternoon satellite TV serials feature women who do not fit comfortably into the traditional roles of wife, mother and home maker. Many of them are peopled with working women and deal with "modern" issues such as divorce, extra-marital relationships, sexual harassment, rape and abortion. According to Page and Crawley, "With their depiction of the 'new bold woman,' they have offered a variety of role models to the urban middle class and provoked much controversy in the process."

Some of this controversy relates to the attitudes and behaviour of female characters, especially with regard to extra-marital relationships, which recur as a dominant theme in several serials, with viewers responding to them differently in accordance with their own social and cultural locations. But, beyond that, there are differing views on the ideology of these programmes, the messages they convey and the impact they have. Many of these are briefly discussed by Page and Crawley in their book.

Some critics suggest that television has helped to make the middle class working woman a more acceptable feature of modern Indian life. They believe that many TV programmes have also contributed to changing the moral climate of at least urban India, as evidenced by the fact that viewers have not rejected serials with female characters who walk out of marriages, get involved with married men or even have children out of wedlock. Some believe that the franker treatment of sexuality in these serials is "definitely opening up doors." They suggest that the airing of problematic issues of modern life and relationships through serials and talk shows has enabled women viewers to see the possibility of questioning and resistance and to even envision some level of revolt.

At the same time, others argue that the transformatory potential of the new serials, with their apparently bold themes, may be limited since they do not raise any fundamental questions about gender roles, relationships or sexuality as they exist within a patriarchal society. Some suggest that while women are now more visible on the screen and issues of concern to them are getting more space, the stereotypical representation of their problems actually subverts women's fight for political emancipation. They propose that the greater self-awareness promoted by these programmes may be achieved at the expense of economic and political awareness, as well as of the crucial capacity to critique reality. According to sociologist Sharmila Rege, "In this media society…I just can't imagine the anti-price-rise movement (launched by women) in the 1970s."[12]

Those who are sceptical about the progressive credentials of satellite TV suggest that, while the apparently bold images and themes may influence behaviour, fashion and language at a superficial level, they are unlikely to lead to any serious appraisal, let alone metamorphosis, of gender relations. "The sustaining of a very conventional ideological position is very evident from a comparison of infidelity on the part of men and…of women," according to historian and media analyst Uma Chakravarti,[13] analyzing two popular serials made by a successful director-actress who is known for having been unconventional in her own personal life.

It is worth noting, in this context, that a popular serial which aroused public controversy a few months ago because it seemed to legitimise, if not justify, the use of sex determination or sex selection techniques to identify and eliminate female foetuses was also made by a successful mediawoman.

"There is competitive regressiveness in story lines these days," wrote media critic Sevanti Ninan recently, commenting on a new serial on a private satellite channel in Hindi. "(This) protagonist is even worse than the *Sati Savitris* currently on air – she lets herself be pushed into marriage with a difficult customer but has her goddess as her constant point of reference, hoping to survive with her help."[14]

"What worries me is that so many women are coming into television as directors and writers and there is still no change (in the stereotyping of women in popular television serials)," said activist-actress Shabana Azmi in a recent interview. "This is because they are coming with a different agenda, propelled not by women's empowerment but by market forces."[15] And therein, clearly, lies the rub.

In this context, it is perhaps significant that it is Doordarshan, the national television network, which has in recent times broadcast at least a couple of serials portraying women fighting for their rights rather than merely exploring new personal relationships. Interestingly, studies quoted by Page and Crawley suggest that husbands are dissuading or even forbidding wives from watching such serials. The depiction of a strong woman struggling against injustice, like the heroine of one of these popular serials of the 1990s, is reminiscent of Doordarshan's affirmative action on women's issues in the 1980s.

In an analysis of the implications of the public broadcaster's efforts "towards the affirmation of women's concerns" during that earlier period, film-maker and media critic Deepa Dhanraj had written, "Doordarshan had to respond to pressures to achieve the stated national objective of raising the status of women exerted by other government departments. It also could not ignore the contemporary Indian women's movement which, by the end of the women's decade (1975-85), had established itself as a vocal and visible lobby."[16] Even though Dhanraj was sceptical about the effectiveness of "these token attempts of the 'add women and stir' formula" emerging from "the traditional model of 'integrating women into development,'" the 1980s now look like a golden era. Doordarshan then telecast an average of two or three prime-time women-oriented serials every week in what was obviously a conscious attempt to refurbish its traditional image as a "purveyor of male elite interests."[17]

Asked whether television would ever become a resource for empowering women, Azmi said: "It will not happen unless we make a public broadcasting service of the highest quality. We cannot expect privately owned channels to do this – they are here to make money, not change society. So if we want television programmes that are entertaining yet meaningful, they have to come from the government – not in the form of half-baked changes, but by ensuring that the right individuals people these spaces" and are able to work "single-mindedly and autonomously."[18]

As a young journalist said a few years ago, "Not all women (in the media) necessarily have a gender angle in their work. Even if they are aware of their own rights – to equality, dignity, privacy, and so on – they don't necessarily identify with the community of women."[19] Clearly if women's increased access to and participation in the media are to make a difference in terms of the advancement and empowerment of women in society, simultaneous processes are required to help generate greater sensitivity to and improved understanding of gender among mediawomen.

III. WOMEN ACCESSING MEDIA: COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

In most discussions of the media in India, the focus is on middle and upper class, urban sections of the population. There is little information about media reach and consumption in the rural areas and among the socially and economically disadvantaged, urban or rural. This can be attributed at least partly to the fact that the two annual all-India audience surveys which generate media-related data cater primarily to the needs of commercial users of the media. The fragmented information that does exist provide only glimpses of the significant class and location specific differences in media access and participation.

For example, according to the Indian Readership Survey 2002, media reach in the rural areas reverses the trend in the urban areas, with public television (Doordarshan) topping the list (nearly 32 per cent), followed by dailies (21.5 per cent) and radio (about 15 per cent). According to the National Readership Survey 2002, 248 million Indian adults who are literate do not read any publication; however, there are nearly as many rural readers as urban readers. Of the 180 million readers of print media in India, the NRS '02 estimates that nearly half (48 per cent) are from approximately 600,000 villages scattered across the country.[20]

According to the NRS '02, television now reaches more than 81 per cent of Indian homes, and access to cable and satellite (C&S) is currently enjoyed by 40 million homes, with C&S subscription reported from 50 per cent of all homes with TV. Access to the Internet is far less widespread, with six million reported by the NRS '02, which pegs the growth of web connectivity at a modest two million per annum.

Data disaggregated by gender is even more scarce, with the little that exists clearly meant for advertisers. For example, the NRS '02 reported that newspapers had expanded their reach to the urban housewife/FMCG decision-maker (i.e., those exercising choice in the purchase of what are known as fast-moving consumer goods), with approximately 25 million of them believed to be reading a daily newspaper. According to the NRS '02, this increase in newspaper readership has probably been at the cost of magazines – "considered the staple diet for most women" – which have registered a downturn in readership.

Deficit

The broad-brush pictures painted by such surveys not only obscure the realities on the ground but reveal almost nothing about the media and women as a whole, let alone those from disadvantaged sections of the population.

In one of the few Indian studies to focus some attention on the access of poor, rural women to the media (classified as a public resource),[21] conducted in the mid-1990s, barely 15 per cent of the 1171 women respondents from representative parts of Karnataka state reported regularly reading newspapers or magazines. About 55 per cent reported listening to the radio and 27 per cent said they watched TV programmes at least occasionally. Interestingly, nearly half of those who reported watching TV (14 per cent) said their families did not own a TV set; the phenomenon of access without ownership suggests that they watch programmes in a place other than their own home. Of those with access to TV, nearly 60 per cent said they were able to watch programmes only occasionally (every couple of months), while 21 per cent reported watching once every third day or so.

The study also found that women saw television primarily as a medium of entertainment even though it had been originally and officially hailed in India as a means of mass education and awareness building. According to the researchers, while almost all the women with access to TV watched films, and two-thirds watched serials, just over half viewed news and educational programmes. When the programme-wise distribution of viewers was placed against the entire female survey population, the proportion of those viewing news shows and information/ education programmes dipped even lower, to about 15 per cent. This is obviously more a

comment on the quality, relevance and viewer-friendliness of such programmes (and, of course, on actual accessibility) than on women's attitudes to information and education, especially in view of the enthusiastic participation of village women in adult literacy programmes designed with their interests and needs in mind.

Bridging the gap

In such a scenario, special efforts are clearly required to increase women's access to and participation in relevant and meaningful media and communication. A few decades ago there was considerable official interest and action with regard to the challenging task of harnessing the potential of mass media and communications technology for rural development. But such efforts have become less focussed and frequent over the years and most recent or ongoing initiatives have remained experimental and marginal.[22]

However, a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and some quasi-governmental entities have initiated community media and communication projects in order to serve the interests and needs of those who are unreachable or poorly served by the mainstream media. Such initiatives received a boost from a landmark judgement of the Supreme Court of India in February 1995 which declared that the airwaves were public property, ought to be free from state monopoly and control, and were to be used to promote the public interest in a pluralistic society. Although the judgement has been interpreted primarily as an argument in favour of private sector involvement in the broadcast media, NGOs have been trying to demonstrate that it is and should be seen as an affirmation of the right of the wider public to access, create and run such media.

The following examples provide a flavour of the many, varied efforts currently under way to enable members of the disadvantaged majority, especially women, to access, participate in and make decisions regarding media and communications:

- "Last year Chinna Narsamma, a 25-year-old farm worker, stood in ankle-deep water and reported on camera about the destruction of *bajra* and *jowar* (millet) crops." The story was aired on the Telugu language channel of Doordarshan as well as on a private satellite channel in the local language. Narsamma is one of seven Dalit women of Pastapur (Medak district, Andhra Pradesh state) involved in a community radio project which grew out of the efforts of the Hyderabad-based Deccan Development Society (DDS) to train women in the use of video. The project now has a full-fledged FM radio station at Machnoor village, equipped with a 100 watts transmitter that has a reach of approximately 30 kilometres. Programme content is determined by Narsamma and her team, with inputs from the target audience, all of them members of rural communities within the project area. More than 100 hours of interviews, field reports, group discussions, songs and dramas relating to community specific needs and issues had been recorded by the women by 2000, and the tapes circulated for use in the villages covered by the project.[23]

- "Groups of men and women of this sunflower-draped village flash their newly acquired contraption – Murphy radios – and get engrossed in listening to the programmes…packed with village-centred news, views, plays and folk songs, all in their local idiom…broadcast on

'Mana Radio' (Our Radio)," a new community radio station set up in Orvakal village in Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh, by a women's self-help group, under the auspices of the Velugu project of the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP). Run by members of the Orvakal Mandal Samakhya, who have made all the decisions about programme content and schedules as well as broadcast timings, Mana Radio was field tested on 2 October 2002. According to Zubeida Bi, president of the women's bank which has also been launched by the project, "Earlier I thought that in radio the machine did all the work. Now I realize that we are the machines that make the programmes!"[24]

- The Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS), a group working towards the empowerment and education of rural women in Bhuj district, Gujarat state, runs a community radio project producing half-hour weekly programmes that are broadcast by All India Radio, Bhuj. The programmes, recorded in the local Kutchhi dialect, deal with a variety of issues of concern to women in the area, especially in the context of the roles and responsibilities of *panchayats* (institutions of local self-governance). They became the talk of the district within a few months of their launch.[25]

- Video SEWA, established in 1984 by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union of self-employed women engaged in a variety of activities, uses the visual medium to motivate, mobilise, organize and train its members and to strengthen their organizations. For women workers who are members of the union, as well as the cooperatives that have emerged from it, Video SEWA tapes are a source of information as well as inspiration. For example, when *chikan* embroidery workers of Lucknow saw how their counterparts in Ahmedabad had taken to the streets to press for minimum wages, they planned a rally of their own. SEWA also uses the videos for advocacy. For instance, when leaders of its Water Campaign met with the state Minister for Water Supply and showed him footage of their work on water harvesting he apparently proposed that more such conservation activities be taken up under the leadership of women.

- The Video SEWA team includes eight full-time video camerapersons and producers and another 20 part-time members who produce videos on a wide range of issues. They have produced more than 200 tapes, of which many copies have been sold. They also undertake work for other organizations. Among the team members are informal sector workers such as head loaders, vegetable vendors and home-based workers who have undergone technical training in the use of video and now also function as trainers. Video SEWA members formally registered their cooperative, the "Shri Gujarat Mahila Video Sewa Mahiti Communication Sahakari Mandali Limited," in 2002.[26]

- SEWA also uses satellite communications to meet the demand for training among its members scattered across Gujarat in areas such as organization building, *panchayati raj* (decentralized governance), and issues related to forestry and water. They have found that satcom talkback programmes help maximise the reach of its training team, enabling it to serve the needs of a large number of groups in rural communities within a limited period and thereby increase the organization's outreach capacity for awareness raising, experience sharing and learning.[27]

- In addition, SEWA has taken the initiative to optimally utilise 'new economy' tools for increasing the efficiency and output of the organization as well as the activities of its members. The SEWA ICT Cell, a recently initiated small unit, has rapidly expanded its reach to impact a wide range of the organization's activities. SEWA hopes to substantially improve the efficiency, efficacy and output of its family of 101 women's co-operatives and associations through the proper deployment of information and communications technologies placed in the hands of the poor through its cadre of grassroots leaders.[28]

- "A village woman walks into a centre and asks for some health-related information. She is given all the details about her particular ailment and the name of a doctor who can attend to her…" These Village Knowledge Centres were launched in 1998 in Vellianur and four other neighbouring villages in Pondicherry state by the Chennai-based M.S. Swaminathan Foundation as part of a project aiming to bring information technology to grassroots villages. The centres are run by trained volunteers, including women, drawn from the rural communities they serve.[29]

- Ujala Chhadi (literally wand of light) is a monthly newspaper published from Jaipur, Rajasthan, whose purpose is to serve the needs of those who get left out of the mass media market. The newspaper, priced at Rs. 2 (which is, incidentally, the price of many mainstream, commercial Indian newspapers, too), has 3000 subscribers in the rural areas it serves; in addition it is read out to many others who cannot read or write. It emerged out of the government-initiated Adult Literacy Programme and Women's Development Programme in the state but has been published since 1993 by Vividha, a women's rights organization with a special interest in media. The decision to launch "a people's paper" was taken because "even regional language papers often do not serve all the needs of rural readers. Their definition of news leaves out much of what people in villages want and need to know about their own surroundings. Their style of presentation is also often not suitable for the person who can barely read." According to the editors, "We do not claim neutrality, we are on the side of the deprived segments of society – the lower castes, women, minorities – and committed to supporting all struggles for social justice." Many neo-literate readers of Ujala Chhadi have also become news gatherers, thus advancing the editors' commitment to participatory journalism.[30]

While these and other such initiatives are obviously exciting and promising, the flip side is that, in the absence of enabling policies, they are doomed to remain small experiments with limited reach and utility, especially in the context of the country's vast area and population. This is especially true of attempts to make audio-visual media more accessible and participatory. There is little doubt that the time, effort and funds spent on infrastructure and training, as well as on creating the programmes – not to mention the enthusiasm they have generated – could be put to far greater use with official support.

For instance, the government's recent initiative to open up the community radio sector is unlikely to benefit the radio projects mentioned above. Its proposal, currently awaiting clearance by the cabinet of ministers, stipulates not only that educational institutions alone would be eligible to apply for licenses but that the power of the transmitters cannot exceed 50 watts. These conditions appear to immediately rule out the possibility of the Pastapur project being

granted a license because DDS is not a university, college or school and its transmitter is too powerful. As a result, the radio programmes eagerly produced by women will have to continue to be used for 'narrowcasting,' a process where the audio cassettes are played to concerned relevant groups.[31]

The Velugu and KMVS projects also seem doomed under this dispensation because neither is, technically, an educational institution. The newly launched Mana Radio currently circumvents the licensing problem because its range (400 metres) but its broadcasts are consequently limited to the confines of one village. The KMVS currently pays commercial rates to the licensed public radio station in order to broadcast public interest programmes within its catchment area.

Clearly this not the way to make optimal use of financial or media/communication resources. Further, the absence of official support in terms of policy and practice effectively prevents real access to and participation in media and communication by the very women who need information and education, as well as entertainment, the most. Ironically, FM radio licenses have been issued over the past few years to private, commercial media establishments serving the entertainment needs of the urban elite in metropolitan cities. Now educational institutions may join the ranks of those allowed to run radio stations. But women who are currently producing radio programmes for their communities are no closer to being empowered to broadcast them even to their existing audiences.

Another aspect of the government's new proposal is also likely to limit the scope of local, participatory broadcasting: even licensed community radio stations will not be allowed to broadcast news or current affairs programmes. If the definition of news and current affairs covers reports on matters of critical importance to local communities, such as Chinna Narsamma's on the loss of crops in her little corner of the country, the purpose and utility of community radio would obviously be diminished.

These are issues that the government of India needs to address as it prepares to finally open up the community radio sector and thereby move towards the implementation of the Supreme Court's seven-year-old judgement freeing the airwaves for the public.

IV. PROFESSIONAL RESPONSES

The many, complex issues relating to the "participation and access of women to the media and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women" in the Indian, and South Asian, contexts clearly require a variety of responses at many different levels. A number of efforts are already under way to improve the situation. Two relatively recent initiatives – involving media education and networking – which seem to have the potential to effect change from within are described below. These processes are highlighted, despite the fact that they are still evolving, partly because they are relatively new to India and therefore exciting, but mainly because they may eventually be able to address a variety of issues of concern regarding the media and women.

Reaching the young

Interventions among young people are generally believed to be more effective and sustainable than efforts to change attitudes and behaviour in people at later stages of life. Media training institutes seem to be appropriate sites for strategies to bring about desirable changes in the media workforce – and thereby in the media workplace, media content and, eventually perhaps, even in media policy.

Institutions offering journalism education in India are currently attracting as many bright young people as they can accommodate. Some even have a few international students, often from other developing countries. Most now have an equal number of male and female students; some have more women than men applying and qualifying for admission; in addition, a number of women's colleges offer communications courses at the undergraduate level. The majority of the professional institutions focus on helping students develop the skills necessary for media jobs.

However, in a conscious effort to sensitize young people undergoing training for careers in the media to important subjects that require but do not always receive media attention, a college of journalism in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, has introduced some courses that seek to increase students' awareness and understanding of a range of issues, including those affecting various disadvantaged sections of society, such as women.

One of these courses focuses on gender. It is based on the premise that holistic, quality coverage of gender-related issues is an integral part of the media's role in a democratic society and that awareness of gender as a major force in society is a professional asset for all aspiring journalists, irrespective of the branch of journalism they choose to perch on. The course attempts to establish that there is a gender dimension to virtually every event, process, institution and/or individual experience covered by the media. It also highlights the fact that some of the most interesting and innovative work emerging from different fields of knowledge, creativity and action are informed by gender awareness.

The course seeks to demonstrate that issues of gender – popularly but somewhat inaccurately known as women's issues – should be of concern to both women and men because they affect everyone. It questions the tendency in the media to ghettoise gender and related issues, and highlights the growing recognition that all issues are women's issues, that women's issues are human issues, and that women's rights are human rights. It aims to challenge the traditional, artificial duality of "hard" and "soft" news/stories in the media which privileges the former and relegates gender, among other equally vital issues, to the margins of the latter.

It attempts to promote the integration of gender consciousness into media coverage across the board through an exploration of gender issues in the context of some key areas of standard journalistic coverage, such as violence, politics, economics and culture. It also seeks to demonstrate that human development in general and women's development in particular need to be on the agenda of the media. It tackles common myths and misconceptions about gender, patriarchy, feminism and women's movements. In addition, the course includes critical analyzes of the media and gender.

The response from the young people has been encouraging – with not just those who opt for the elective course but a number of other students, too, keen to work on gender-related stories and projects. A recent introductory lecture on gender to a new crop of students was titled: "Does Gender Matter?" Those who replied with an emphatic "yes" seemed to outnumber the nay-sayers as well as the fence-sitters – and, significantly and encouragingly, several young men were vocal in their affirmation of gender as an important issue for future journalists to be aware of and sensitive to.

The introduction of such courses into the curriculum of media training institutes may be one way to ensure that gender-related and other important issues, including those of particular relevance to socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the population, are integrated into mainstream media coverage – to the extent possible in the increasingly market-driven media environment. By providing the time and space for young, aspiring journalists to explore such issues, and also examine their own attitudes and behaviour, such courses may help new entrants into the media to make decisions that could help foster positive changes in the media workplace as well as in media content. They can also create opportunities for informal mentoring by gender-conscious faculty, which may be helpful to young mediawomen, especially during the early stages of their careers.

Joining hands

Networking and mentoring have been identified the world over as key strategies to empower women in the media and help them to overcome the obstacles in their career paths. The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI), launched in January 2002 at the end of a national workshop preceded by a prolonged process of consultation and consensus-building, represents one attempt to employ those strategies in the Indian context.

The network-building process began with a series of three regional workshops held over a period of 10 months in 2000-2001, which enabled women journalists from different parts of India, working in a number of languages and various sections and levels of the press, to gather together to discuss issues of common concern and to explore the possibility of building professional networks at the local, state, regional and national levels.

There was broad agreement among workshop participants on the need for multi-layered, informal networks of women journalists that could serve multiple purposes, both professional and societal. Apart from the obvious purpose of providing a forum for addressing issues related to the workplace, it was felt that such networks could facilitate career advancement through training and professional enrichment programmes, as well as mentoring. In addition, it was agreed that platforms of this kind could help highlight ethical issues related to the media, as well as the vital role of the media in society, especially in a democratic and diverse country like India.

In the wake of the regional workshops, women journalists began getting together at the local and, in some cases, state levels to address common issues and interests and to take forward the process of network-building. In the few places where such groups were already in existence, the process provided the possibility of establishing links with mediawomen in other parts of the

country. Groups in different centres (currently about a dozen) determine their own agendas based on local context, priorities and needs.

The programme for the national workshop was drawn up in consultation with women journalists across the country. The founding principles, aims and objectives of the national network were determined through a process of intense discussion and debate among participants at the national workshop. The effort throughout has been to ensure that the network evolved through a collective, bottom-up process, responding to felt needs as they arose and/or were articulated by members.

Meanwhile, local groups have been engaged in a number of activities aimed at broadening the horizons of mediapersons and reflecting their varied concerns, especially with regard to gender, the media and society. Many of these activities, initiated and organized by mediawomen, have attracted participation from journalists and other professionals of both sexes.

Technology is being utilised to facilitate communication among members of the local and national networks. Some local groups have established e-groups or listserves to share information and resources, exchange ideas and opinions, as well as to plan and organize events. An NWMI website is currently being developed by an editorial team scattered across the country. It is expected to be launched in the near future and will probably provide a boost to the network-building process at the national level.

Through its evolution over the past couple of years the NWMI has helped bridge many existing gaps and divisions within the profession – between journalists working in different parts of the country in different languages and media, from different generations and at different levels of the profession. As it grows and matures it is expected to improve its capacity to address a wide range of issues relating to the media and gender, including but not only those concerning access, employment and decision-making.

V. CONCLUSION

Much is happening but much remains to be done with regard to the "participation and access of women to the media and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women" in India.

Of vital importance for further progress in this respect is more widespread awareness and acceptance about the relevance of the issue. At present there is little recognition – in official quarters or within media and related establishments – of the need for a gender perspective in media matters.

For example, the Working Paper on a National Media Policy, submitted to the government in 1996 by a sub-committee of the consultative committee set up by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, made no specific recommendations relating to women as consumers of and participants in the media or in terms of media representations of women. Similarly, in a section on “manpower needs” in a privately circulated discussion paper on media policy, there was no mention of gender as a factor to be taken into account while planning

training for media professionals. A media-related study commissioned by a UN agency discussed strategies to reach younger viewers but made no mention of female audiences. In a national survey of media audiences the breakdown of occupations by gender categorised more than 77 per cent of women as "non-working or retired," whereas only 15 per cent of men were placed in that category.[32]

Decision-makers who influence media policy, plan training and other interventions, determine the parametres of data collection, and so on, clearly need to be more aware of gender as a significant factor that impacts many aspects of in society and the media.

Secondly, there is an obvious and urgent need for official policies to strengthen the role and use of media as instruments for the advancement and empowerment of women. The public broadcasters, which have come up with knee-jerk reactions to competition from private channels over the past decade, require a renewed mandate for public interest broadcasting in general and the promotion of women's interests through the media in particular. In addition, in the era of decentralized governance, the Supreme Court's directive on the airwaves as a public resource should be urgently implemented through the grant of licenses to community media initiatives that serve the information, communication and entertainment needs of disadvantaged sections of the population, and enable members of local communities – especially women – to access and participate in the media.

Thirdly, the sensitization of mediapersons in both the public and the private sector, including those involved in entertainment programmes, to gender and other such issues may help tackle the confusing and conflicting signals currently emerging from the media. Both institutes of media education and professional networks of mediawomen can help move this process forward.

Finally, the situation of women in journalism requires attention and action from a number of players. Some of the points below, which relate to the press, may also be applicable in the broadcast and Internet-based media.

Media managements

The Indian print media are almost entirely owned and managed by private companies, the bulk of them family-owned business enterprises. The potential for governmental intervention in the personnel policies of private media houses is minimal and, in fact, fast reducing as media managements increasingly side-step the recommendations of the officially appointed wage boards which periodically prescribe salary structures for media employees in different categories of media establishments. In any case, most journalists – of both sexes – would balk at the prospect of official interference in media matters lest it compromise editorial independence. Self-examination and introspection leading to transformation from within would, therefore, be a more widely acceptable route to change.

Among the issues that may bear consideration by those who run media organizations are:

- The desirability of stated policies and transparent procedures with regard to recruitment, remuneration, promotion, work assignment, and other matters that affect professional access, employment and advancement, in keeping with essential principles of gender justice and equity.

- The need to institute measures and mechanisms to counter or minimise the effect of negative gender-based attitudes and behaviours within media organizations, including implementation of the directives of the Supreme Court of India with regard to sexual harassment in the workplace.

- The possibility of systemic and structural adjustments in work schedules, not as a special concession to women, but in recognition of the need for all human beings to achieve a healthy balance between professional and personal life which would, in turn, enhance both productivity and creativity.

- The practicability of institutional support to women – beyond the mandatory maternity leave – during particular periods in their lives when it would make a crucial difference to their ability to cope with the often conflicting demands of work and family. This would help to ensure that women's current and potential contributions to the field are not frittered away through the neglect of their felt needs and real problems, especially since many of these are rooted not in individual, personal foibles but in societal biases and inequalities, and in view of the fact that flexibility is now entirely feasible thanks to technological innovations.

Journalists' organizations

Associations and/or unions representing journalists of both sexes can also play a role in ensuring gender justice and equity within media organizations by advocating or supporting initiatives and changes in policies and procedures, as well as measures and mechanisms, to ensure the elimination of gender-based disparities and disadvantages in access, employment and advancement (in addition to highlighting and countering problems of access and employment due other factors such as caste, class, religion and ethnicity).

Mediawomen's organizations

Organizations, associations and/or networks of women in the media can call attention to the need for change through research and documentation, dissemination of information, discussion and debate, advocacy and lobbying. They can also initiate mutually supportive strategies – such as sharing of resources, training and mentoring – to enhance women's confidence, capabilities and potential for advancement within the media. In addition, they can address the problems of access to media employment faced by women from disadvantaged communities through special programmes aimed at enabling and empowering them.

Journalism institutes

Institutions involved in media education can contribute to the process of transformation by sensitizing students to the importance of gender awareness, equality and equity in all aspects

of life, including professional life. They can further contribute to democratising the media by introducing policies that will encourage women, as well as men, from disadvantaged communities to access journalism education.

Hope for the future

Meanwhile, it is a matter of some comfort that awareness and concern about gender-related issues are very much alive and kicking among a cross-section of mediawomen today, including young professionals. According to one young journalist, this is not just because they are women but because they consider such issues inherently important, involving a section of the citizenry that does not easily find a voice in the media. "Our generation has little idealism left," said another. "But the little that remains seems to be with the women."[33]

ENDNOTES

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