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Policy Approaches As Enabling Frameworks

Sonia Gill*

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No matter what the forum or the individual agendas held by the discussants, any discussion on introducing and sustaining improved policies begins with the recognition that policy reform is a very difficult business. As Grindle and Thomas have observed, “because policy changes often impinge on the interests of important groups in society or the self interests of [those] who must adopt them, many... analysts have been pessimistic about the possibilities for policy reform.”¹

In this instance the impetus for trying to formulate and implement improved policies is provided by the Platform for Action (PfA) adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 which notes that “everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women” (PfA, para.234).

However, the hoped for positive contribution by the media to women’s advancement will only take place in the context of a framework which does what is expected of every good policy framework:

- clearly and practically defining the policy objectives
- mapping out the actions and decisions which comprise the particular policy
- defining the minimum standards to be met by all participants in the policy process, and
- providing mechanisms for assessing progress towards the policy objectives.

For the technique of using policy approaches as enabling frameworks to succeed all concerned will have to begin “on the ground”.

Firstly, the work will have to start at the most fundamental level in the sense that there is a dearth of policies in existence. This is true whether the search is on for policy at the state level, where this phenomenon is most often expressed as legislation and institutional arrangements, or at the level of media organizations which order their operations by policies and systems, or even at the level of professional associations and groupings, whose members usually subscribe to codes of practice and accepted guidelines.

The anecdotal evidence supplied during the September 2002 UNDAW online discussion on this topic is unlikely to be proven wrong even by a more scientific assessment. As stated in the discussion summary, the main finding “was that there are (sic) no reference to gender in existing media policies, guidelines and codes of conduct.”

Interaction with media and communication policy-makers

Secondly, and just as importantly there must be serious groundwork for building relevant policies through consultation and collaboration with those responsible for policy formulation and implementation, as much as with the other stakeholders affected. Too often the discussion about the absence of necessary policies takes place in the absence of legislators, regulators, top state administrators, managers and front-line professionals, the policy-makers themselves.

Recommendation 1

Ensure the involvement of those responsible for policy-making as a matter of course in the discussion on the use of policy approaches as enabling frameworks to encourage the greater participation and access of women to the media. For example, the International Institute of Communications (IIC) brings together policy-makers and media regulatory bodies for regular meetings. The IIC has fora for internal communication such as its quarterly magazine, which provide a wealth of opportunity for policy discussion and development. Such policy-level groupings should be targeted as part of the effort to place gender-fairness and the use of the media for the advancement of women on the agenda.

Integration of gender into all state-level policy-making

Race, class and gender are the main axes of “social differentiation”² with gender being the most recently recognised perspective for academic investigation including policy studies. However, gender still receives little recognition in the analysis and formulation of policy of all types particularly at the state level. Because of the economic hardships suffered by many developing countries in the 1970s and 1980s, governments had to change their development focuses and their state policies in order to redress the shortage of foreign exchange available to service debts. But structural adjustment policies re-directed “resources away from programmes which are people-centred to those which are profit-centred.”³ Women were hit hardest by the redirection of resources made necessary by structural adjustment. Therefore, as in other areas of policy, it is useful to conduct gender-focussed analyses of what impact there has been on the “process of creating, allocating and using communication resources...to achieve the goals of the system.”

Recommendation 2

In response to the absence of gender from the majority of policy-making in all areas, including communication and media policy, is the development of mechanisms for mainstreaming gender within the policy-making process. One engine for such activity is national entities whose mandate includes relating to and monitoring existing policy-making centres. In Jamaica, during the run-up to General Elections in October 2002, there were renewed calls for the establishment of the long promised Gender and Social Equity Commission.⁴ (Article 15 CEDAW; Article 19 (1) of the CRC)

Recommendation 3

There is a need for new research that moves beyond the existing pattern of gendered media studies, which are largely limited to descriptive assessments of the portrayal of women. In future studies need to relate the issues such as problematic portrayals of gender to national media policy in a way that provides for recommendations for feasible policy amendment.

Inclusion of gender concerns in existing regulatory policy

An examination of the history of the media reveals continuous efforts to control and limit the sources, nature and volume of content disseminated through print or electronic avenues. These efforts have been less or more successful at different stages and in different contexts. However, a framework for regulation, particularly of the broadcast media is well established even in the societies that tend towards libertarianism.

This existing framework of regulation is an extremely useful point of intervention for consideration and possibly even integration of gender-consideration into policy-making.

Recommendation 4

Lobbying groups and other activist agencies concerned with gender-equity should open dialogue with national regulatory bodies on including in their regular work the setting of and the monitoring of compliance with standards that speak to the gender awareness of media entities that are part of the regulatory regime. One specific standard should be that media organizations must formulate and document gender policies that speak to recruitment and employment practices, content standards, and on-the-job training. The regulatory body would not dictate what would be the content of these policies, only require that proof of their existence and regular consideration by the media houses is provided on an annual basis, as well as whenever licences are to be granted or renewed.

Integration of gender consideration in licensing policy

The national policy on which individuals and groups might have access to the means of production and dissemination inherent in owning and operating media enterprises is usually expressed in the licensing policy. The licensing policy sets out the criteria for eligibility for licences, the application process, the standards for evaluation and the method for grant or revocation of licences.

There are a number of unspoken but critical assumptions inherent in any licensing policy. Particularly, in these times of communication liberalisation and denationalisation it is assumed that applications will originate primarily in the private sector and that applicants will be driven by a financial objective. Therefore the eligibility criteria are likely to be biased towards facilitating the establishment and operation of media houses as profit motive driven businesses.

But, there are a number of other rationales that could inform the licensing process. In developing countries, one of the most important could be increasing the number of opportunities for voiceless sectors of society to contribute to discussions on topics that affect them, especially as it affects the allocation of national resources, and the setting of the agenda for legislators. There is also a dearth of avenues for dissemination of information that can improve the lot of marginalised groups e.g. agricultural and fishing communities, as well as women.

Recommendation 5

Lobbying directly with agencies responsible for formulating and administering licensing regimes for them to make the process sensitive to the needs of social groups outside of the business sector. In particular licensing the process should be improved so that it facilitates the participation in the media sector of a broader set of constituencies.

Inclusion of gender concerns in organizational policies

With the growth in size and number of media organizations into economically dominant transnationals has come an increased academic specialisation in organization theory and behaviour as it relates to the media. This trend is also part of the recognition that just like any other organization, media entities are driven and maintained by operational systems that determine effectiveness, production levels, efficiency and ultimately viability/profitability.

Particularly in the current context of intense media competition the nature of content to be produced for dissemination and the impact of that material on the organizations' public profiles is a matter of daily review within most media houses. Whether described as the content standards policy, the stylebook, or even the in-house code, these policies determine what will be the media entities' output.

A number of factors, other than profit, are also taken into consideration in the construction of these operational systems and policies. There are regulatory requirements with which an entity must comply to prevent running afoul of the authorities. But, there is also often an interest in subscribing to values such as national interest, social development and recognition of the needs of vulnerable groups e.g. children.

Recommendation 6

Lobbying of media organizations directly for their production policies to take cognisance of and respond to gender issues as part of their business strategy as well as their civic responsibility.

Inclusion of gender concerns in professional codes of practice

Modern history is replete with examples of efforts by the powerful in society to restrict the media through the use of so-called regulatory mechanisms that set limits on who may publish and what they may publish. In most instances these regulatory activities have been thinly veiled attempts to impinge on freedom of expression. Quite rightly media professionals have staunchly resisted such efforts.

However, the potential for abuse of the regulatory process has meant that unlike medicine or law there is usually no consistent standard for practice of the media professions, especially

journalists. This situation presents a real difficulty for efforts to use regulation to require media professionals to comply with individual codes of practice.

However, media houses, again driven by intense competition and a need to distinguish their product from that of others in the marketplace are extremely interested in the given by recognition of their employees individual performance. In addition media workers associations are driven by an interest in generating public respect for the profession.

Recommendation 7

Organizations focussed on gender equity should, in partnership with willing private sector entities, sponsor awards for media professionals whose work best exemplifies the recognition and promotion of gender issues while demonstrating the highest professional quality of work.

Strengthening of lobbying capacity of gender-focussed activists

The main body of gender-advocates sprang from the women's movement that in large part was located in non-governmental and community-based organizations interested in promoting the advancement of women. The ongoing endeavour to have a gender impact on policy development and formulation requires different kinds of skills than traditionally has been found in these activist groups.

The specialist capacities that these lobbyists now require include the ability to understand and analyse policy-making structures, and assist policy-makers with the formulation of policies that encompass gender concerns.

Recommendation 8

There needs to be increased networking at national regional and international levels among such entities to allow for development and sharing of such skills and successful experiences in positively affecting and developing gender-sensitive policy affecting the media.

Policy approaches can only be successful as enabling frameworks if it is understood that policy-making is a deliberate process comprised of a web of decision-making and actions. Policies will not spring up automatically to fill the existing vacuum, just upon the recognition of their absence. Rather, the same kind of deliberate effort that has fostered over time the generation of the current level of awareness of the existence of gender issues also will be required.

However, the gender-advocacy movement has shown itself ready for this challenge by its willingness to examine where its current strategies need to be bolstered by adoption of new and exciting approaches to encouraging the media to participate in the advancement of women.

ENDNOTES

¹ Grindle, M.S. & J.W. Thomas. *Public Choices and Policy Change: The Political Economy of Reform in Developing Countries*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore: 1991

² Mills, C. W. "A Comment on Class, Race and Gender - The Unholy Trinity." In Race, Class and Gender in the Future of the Caribbean. Ed. J. Edward Greene, 111-114. Kingston, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1993. P. 111

³ Antrobus, P. Crisis, Challenge and the Experience of Caribbean Women." Caribbean Quarterly. 35, 1 and 2: (June 1989) P. 25-26

⁴ Women's Manifesto Committee 2002. Healing the Nation: Women's Manifesto for the Prevention of Sexual Injustice. Action Point No. 8