

# Recognizing Power Relation in Journalism: Principles of Gender Sensitive and Respectful Reporting

## I. Who Controls the Media?

“Today, the majority of media companies world-wide are managed by men. While some women have advanced into media leadership, men make most of the decisions about what does and does not constitute as news. In addition, women are not moving into leadership positions in the media in numbers that reflect their numbers in society.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, women can be found in newsrooms everywhere. They work in print, broadcasting and on-line media; they cover every issue from education to war and their numbers in journalism continue to rise. According to the International Federation of Journalists (June, 2001) women comprise 40% of the journalists world-wide. However, they only make up 3% - 5% of editors, heads of departments or directors. The list of obstacles faced by women who want to get ahead in journalism is long and it is the same whether in Asia Pacific, the Americas, Africa or Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Among the media workforce in Asia, there are only 21% women. However it varies very much from country to country. In Nepal, only 6% of women are represented in the media workforce. Japan has 8% and India 12%. On the bright side, in Thailand, 50% of all the journalists are women (IWMMF, 2000).

From these figures we can easily say, mainstream media is controlled by men mostly coming from the upper class. Since in today's globalised world, majority of the mainstream media networks are owned by less than ten global media conglomerate, we can also say that majority are owned by white men.

## II. What is News

Today, not much has changed in media. Women's lives are still the untold stories. “Journalists and media organisations may, with varying degrees of success, disavow responsibility for the non- and misrepresentation of women. This issue is but one aspect of the general debate about quality of content in media. There is little doubt that media professionals, whether they own the newspapers and broadcast media or whether they are employed to gather, edit, and disseminate information have an urgent need to articulate principles of better performance and make themselves ethically accountable in a transparent and public manner. That should go for challenging media stereotypes of women as much as it applies to intolerance or hate speech.”<sup>3</sup>

“Analysing the media reports after the Tsunami in December 2004, media argue natural disaster such as this one, obviously affected all those who happened to be in the path of the massive waves

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<sup>1</sup> “Leading in a Different Language: Will Women Change the News Media?” A report by International Women's Media Foundation, 2001

<sup>2</sup> “Equality and Quality: Setting Standards for Women in Journalism” IFJ Survey on the Status of Women Journalists, 2001

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

– men, women and children. The fact is, that natural disasters are natural only in their causation. Their effects are socially determined and transmitted through mechanisms and arrangements which are the creation of societies and governments. Gender, along with other socio-economic variables such as class and caste, race or ethnicity, age and health status, does influence people's experience of the events themselves, as well as their access to subsequent help in coping with the consequences and rebuilding their lives."<sup>4</sup>

This is not only true for 'natural' disasters but also for man made disasters such as war and armed conflict. When I see TV News reports from Iraq today, it always strikes me that there are not women seen in the streets, markets or rallies. If so they are crying mothers. But they are never asked their opinion what is needed most to rebuild the country?

### **a) Where are the Women in the News?**

A study published by FAIR – Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting – looks at the sources of information at the three major television news programs in the USA in 2001: 85 % of all interview sources in the evening news were men. Only 15 % were women. And from these 15 %, every second woman was interviewed as an 'ordinary American' and not in her capacity as a professional or political resource person. Women are more often seen on so called soft news, society and entertainment; but not in the hard news. As professionals or politicians, women made up only 9 % of all the interviews versus 91 % men. George W. Bush alone made up 9% of all the interviewees in 2001.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, suddenly all the experts on security, terrorism, war, peace and democracy were and still are men. Women disappeared from the media as experts despite the fact that we have contributed a lot to these discourses.

### **b) Where are Women in Media?**

So where do women appear if they hardly appear as resource persons and in politics? Women appear in entertainment to laugh at, in commercials as sex objects related to cars and beer, caring mothers, good housewives, and consumers of so called beauty products. In the news they appear in relation to sex and crimes. In show business we find women as dancers to spice up the show, beauty queens, celebrities, pop stars - less often than man - but still more often than in politics.

Even if women writers take up political issues, their articles are likely to be published in the culture, society or entertainment section of the news paper but not under national, foreign or business news. For example, Arundati Roys article on globalisation in a major daily in Switzerland.

In the news here in the Philippines, women often become objects of sensationalism such as victims of rape, robbery, kidnapping, war and armed conflict, or disaster. The tendency of media to focus on events rather than on processes often results in the neglect of women being portrayed as active members of society. For example, thousands of women elected into local governments in India or the peace initiatives initiated by women in Mindanao, Philippines.

## **III. How to make the Difference**

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4 "Gender, media and tsunami" by Annu Joseph, India Together, February 2005

Following a few suggestions how to report differently about women when it comes to interviews, research, music and the perspective we take and the view we want to open to our audience. This might imply more work for us as men are more likely to give an interview. Information by men is easier to spot and music by women is harder to find, but it is worth the effort as our reports become more accurate and women listeners are more likely to identify with what they hear.

### **a) Reporting from a Woman's Point of View**

The media is missing a huge chance to improve their coverage: "The media – and media professionals – stand to gain by recognising that there is a gender dimension to virtually every event, process, institution and/or individual experience covered by the media, including disasters and conflicts. And that women, including poor and illiterate women, have information, knowledge and opinions on practically everything. Failure to tap women – including those now attempting to resume life after the disaster (tsunami) – as sources and resources can only impoverish media coverage and diminish our understanding of the post-tsunami scenario, as well as many other similar situations."<sup>5</sup>

So we can actually improve our reporting by taking a gender lens or a women perspective from the very beginning, as early as selecting the angle of the story. One way of reporting about evacuation camps for example could be to interview the women who live there as main source of information regarding their situation.

### **b) Research and Interviews**

Researching a topic, we look for materials written by women. In some cities there are women's libraries, women's documentation centres such as Isis International-Manila, and the Internet gives us a wide variety of sources by and about women. Some universities have women's studies departments. Another important source of information are women NGOs and very important, the affected and concerned women themselves of course.

We can specifically look for women talents for our interviews. Sometimes women are shy or not used to give an interview. We should try to convince them that their voice is important. If we interview them carefully, they might feel more secure next time they are confronted with the media.

While researching, we also have to be careful to differentiate depending on the other social factors that determine women's life. Different women are differently affected; a law can have a different impact on women in the city compared to women in the countryside or on mothers, single women, lesbians and older women, differently abled women, tribal women, academe women and workers.

### **c) Music in our Programs**

Try to make it a point that the music in your program is by women. Sung by women and if possible written and composed by women. The music industry is not different from the rest of society. They

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5 Ibid.

promote more men than women. If they promote women it is usually the kind of domesticated and submissive songs such as 'I cannot live without you ....'

Women who compose and write their own songs have an especially difficult time to get into the music industry. Therefore we should promote them and play their songs in our programs. You will soon find out there is great music by women.

#### **d) Don't Victimise Women - We are strong!**

Just because women's situations are reported does not make it feminist radio. We have to be careful not to fall into the same trap as mainstream journalism - to stereotype women into helpless victims, naïve beauties. We have to always ask ourselves what picture do we create in the minds of our listeners if we talk about victims?

We have to keep in mind that women live under terrible circumstances, deprived of their basic rights but they are not helpless nor weak. Surviving all they have been through and they still have to power to go on indicates that they are very strong. The picture I have when I hear the word victim does not apply to these women. I therefore hardly ever use the word victim to describe a woman who has survived a traumatic experience.

#### **e) Violence against Women**

Never describe a rape survivor as passive or helpless. There have been many instances where women fought back against the rapist. But we do not learn about them because the police and media reports only mention the actions of the man. Even if the woman has been able to defeat the rapist, the reports talk about "frustrated rape" instead of "When she was attacked by the rapist, she fought back. She broke his arm and forced him to escape." Sometimes media declares the incident not news worthy because it was not a "real rape", instead of making the success story of the woman public. Which would for once change the picture we get from the media about women.

One reason why this male dominated society makes women to appear weak is because then men (and other women) can pity the poor women and to pity someone always implies to look down on the person. The same I would say can be observed with upper class women towards lower class women or with women coming from so called industrialised countries towards women from the South or women from the city towards rural or tribal women.

The same applies when we discuss the hardship of women refugees or poor women. We should report from the perspective of women who have become active and who have tried to change their situation. Almost everywhere you find women who work for change.

Moreover it is depressing for our women listeners to hear all these horrible stories of women becoming victims of sexual violence and harassment. It can discourage women not to go out any more because they are afraid. We also have to talk about the success-stories of women who fight against violence, whether as an individual or as a group in a rally or forum.

#### **f) Gender Fairness as Media Agenda**

As journalists, we are thought to always be impartial and objective. But what is impartiality or objectivity in such an unjust society? The 'objectivity' always depends on the perspective or point of view. The majority of radio and TV stations, newspapers and other media are controlled by commercial enterprises or governments and are in the hands of men - including progressive media. The 'objectivity' they talk of is a male one that serves the interest of the upper and middle class. But which neglects grassroots women.

It is pointless to discuss what is objective and what is not. In feminist broadcasting, it is our responsibility to take the side of the women. We take affirmative action for women, while mainstream media is mostly siding with men. This does not mean that we aren't critical any more. Not everything that comes from women is perfect or correct. After all, we should not expect women to be better human beings than men. That will lead to disappointment as being a women is not yet a program for change. An excellent example is the present president of the Philippines Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. So let's keep in mind that while we are taking the women's point of view, we should remain critical and ready to research and question the information we receive.

## **IV. The Power of Language**

### **a) Language Creates Value**

Language carries values in our society. Some words carry a negative charge and others carry a positive charge. For example: generous is positive, greedy is negative. But we could also say extravagant instead of generous, which gives a negative connotation, or use economical instead of greedy, which gives a positive connotation. There are hardly any words that are free of charge. We have to be careful how we use words, in what context, and what picture they create.

By immersing ourselves in a certain culture, language and context, you can find out which words carry negative or positive implications. (For examples in your local languages)

### **b) Describing Women through Language**

Media portrayal of women is very important, especially when it comes to how the media portrays women: A woman lawyer wins an important case in court. In the media, it is often referred to as: "Ms Smith won the case" or "the woman won the case" instead of "Attorney Smith won the case." Very often women are referred to by the first name: Maggie instead of Margaret Thatcher or Indira instead of Indira Ghandi or Gloria instead of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. While men are more often referred to by their last name: Bush, Ramos, Matahari or Marcos. When media talk about women politicians, they often comment on her outfit or hairdos. On the other hand, news commentator never talk about the tie or the hair cut of male politicians.

### **c) Generalisation Excludes**

We have to be very careful with generalisation. Media have a tendency to generalise people from other cultures, religions, regions, or sexual orientations. Generalisations can discriminate against people who are different, such as Africans who do not like to dance, or Asians who do not eat rice with every meal. In the long run, generalisations hide the diversity of peoples and can be used to incite hate speech and armed conflicts, as we have experienced it in Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia.

#### **d) Non-Discriminatory and Gender-Fair Language**

Gender-sensitive language is very important in making a difference. This depends very much on the language. English is not as gender-segregated as Spanish. In English, we usually have the same word for male and female professionals, or other words that refer to human beings. With some exceptions such as actress, chairperson, anchorwomen and some pronouns such as she/he or his/her. "Who left his lipstick in the ladies comfort room?" "Everyone needs to bring his own towel". (their/his or her) People would argue that actors include the actresses, or if he is used in a general sense, that it stands for he and she. Women need to be visible. If you read or hear the word actor or chairman, what do you see in your mind? A woman or man? Unless we name women, they are not made visible.

Does your language make distinctions between male and female? If so, search for alternatives to make your language on radio inclusive and gender-fair.

### **V. Power Relation between the Portrayer and Portrayed One**

#### **a) Our Power as Journalists**

As radio broadcasters, we take the role of journalists. We have the power to select on what we report or/and on what not and how we report about it. We are reporting about the lives of other women; their experiences, situations, activities and status in society. However the listener, as well as the women we are reporting on, usually learn very little about us – the journalists.

This creates an uneven relationship between us and the women we report on. We, journalists, are the 'portrayers' and they are the 'portrayed ones'.

Usually journalists do not or cannot do much about what happens to the people they have portrayed, after the broadcast. They are only interested in spectacular and adventurous stories that pay well. But sometimes telling their experiences over the radio has a big impact on the lives of the 'portrayed ones'. Everyone can listen to the radio. We have no control. The military, policemen, men who batter their wife/girlfriend, fathers who abuse their children, bosses, neighbours, community and family members may also be listening and we need to always keep this in mind.

#### **b) Feminist and Responsible Broadcasters**

We cannot protect the women from what might happen to them after the radio broadcast. Therefore, we have to be responsible in advance; sometimes the 'portrayed ones' are not aware of the possible risks they run by telling their story over the radio. It is our task to inform them and tell them and take precautions.

#### **c) How to Protect the Portrayed Ones**

- Always ask the 'portrayed one' how she wants to be introduced on the air or tell her how you intend to introduce her and ask her permission.
- When it comes to personal experiences, especially violence against women, propose to the 'portrayed one' to use an invented name. Never mention her address or other information that makes it easy to identify her.
- If you discuss prostitution, child prostitution, sex tourism or trafficking, never mention the places or give directions how to get there. Always keep in mind that possible customers might listen as well.
- If you report about a rape case do not go into details of the actual rape. It might give ideas to other men.
- If you discuss a labour dispute, do not mention the real names of the women workers you interview unless they want it. They might lose their job.
- Sometimes, it might be necessary to change the voice of the interviewee, because it is dangerous for her if certain people recognise her voice (husband, relatives, authorities) or in the case of women who cannot talk for themselves over the microphone, you can make them tell you their story and you can recount it as a narrator.
- Before your program ask the women what they do not want to discuss and what they want to discuss, make sure you did not miss the most important point for the 'portrayed women'. Your last question in a pre-recorded interview can be "is there anything you want to add that was left out?" It is easy to edit the answer to this question into the appropriate place before you air the interview.
- In a live program, have music ready in case the woman starts to cry. Immediately take her off the microphone. No one should have to cry in public. It is humiliating. Generally, I recommend, if you have the possibility, pre-record emotional traumatic interviews instead of doing it live. By taking these precautions, we prevent too much exposure of the portrayed women that might have a negative impact on their life. As I said earlier we cannot protect the portrayed ones after the broadcast. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

#### **d) Success goes to the Journalist**

Another factor that shows the power relations between the journalist and the portrayed one is success. If a journalist makes a good story, she becomes well known, gets complimented and is offered better paying jobs. The women she portrayed on the other hand – urban poor, refugees, sex workers, would often still live in the same misery. However, it was only because of them that the journalist was able to produce good stories and gain success

#### **e) So what can we do?**

We cannot completely avoid these power relations but we always have to be conscious and keep them in mind. We should never use our power over the women whom we portray and always report respectfully about them.

One way of partly overcoming this power relation is through participatory radio. Let the 'portrayed women' participate as much as possible in your programme. Discuss the format with them beforehand and ask for their ideas and suggestions. Try to incorporate them as much as possible in the program.

Another possibility is to ask them to come up with their own program. Lend them your skills. Advise them on format and content. Assist them technically and then give them free reign to produce their own program. They will like it. At the end of the program make sure everyone who contributed to this very special program is credited.

Community radio is based on that principle of participation. That is our chance for women's empowerment and to challenge the existing dominant stereotypes in mainstream media. By engendering the media, we can make a difference.

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