

# Culture, Censorship and Voice

Conflict between the sexes may be as old as time. At certain times in certain places the struggle may be for equal pay and equal rights, at others, it may have to do with life and death. WACC has long been committed to supporting communication and advocacy programmes that promote gender justice, hence the Congress plenary 'From Criticism to Dialogue: Waging Change'.

In her presentation 'Culture, Censorship and Voice' based on a WACC supported project exploring the gendered nature of censorship in India, Ritu Menon pointed out the irony of analysing censorship in the 'information age'. Cyber space has guaranteed free flow and access to information and yet censorship continues to flourish in the 21st century.

Censorship, said Ritu, is not to stop people from reading, but to prevent them writing in the first place. This became evident at a series of workshops in India in which about 180 women writers from different parts of the country participated. The workshops brought out some core issues related to censorship.

'The concept of freedom of expression is abstract. Though there is no official censorship in India, in fact women encounter certain social, cultural and familial constraints that result most often in self-censorship.

'These, in turn, influence women in what they do and don't write about. To write honestly about family or cultural issues is impossible so there is a disconnection between what they write and what they experience.

'This informal censorship is, in a way, a process of marginalising women's expression. It is a systematic method of exclusion that ensures women's silence.

'This also leads one to ask whether men and women are censored differently.

It is to counter this marginalisation that feminist publishing emerged as part of the feminist movement and was very successful. Unfortunately over the years, the mainstream publishing houses have appropriated this as a market strategy. In this age of global markets, the concept of publishing for social change, as a movement, has also been marginalised.

Continuing the argument Margaret Gallagher asserted that the pattern of exclusion is so widespread that it is not even noticed. This came out clearly in the results of the Global Media Monitoring Project 2000, organised by WACC. Several groups have continued the monitoring exercise on a limited scale in their own regions. One of the things that became evident from these experiences is that generalised criticism, from a position completely outside the media, brings only limited results. Therefore, interaction and dialogue between gender specialists and media professionals is the best way forward.

In this search for a pathway to break the stereotype mind sets, projects like GMMP contribute well-documented arguments about gender representation in media. At the same time, the actual process of monitoring and the sheer scale of gender differences in news content have been an educational experience for many.

But there are limitations in applying quantitative methods to analyse complex media content. It is also relatively weak in presenting strategies for change in media content. Monitoring data can only be a starting point. 'The reality is that media practitioners work within a particular framework of ideas, routines and assumptions', explained Margaret. 'This framework reflects both professional and cultural values. And the relationship between professional and cultural frameworks is continually changing, in relation to both economic and ethical determinants.

But within the overall media scene one thing is constant - and that is the search for novelty, and the need to reach new markets. Looked at pessimistically, this often leads to excess and sensationalism. But looked at optimistically, it can open up a space for dialogue. If we can find

ways of drawing media professionals into this admittedly small space, discussion and auto critique may result in real, grounded change?.

She concluded that ?to bring about change, persistence and curiosity are essential.?

#### Regional perspectives and strategies

A discussion group followed the women and media plenary session, focusing on regional perspectives and exploring strategies for change in relation to gender patterns in the media.

There were brief interventions by five participants from different regions followed by discussion and a final summation of recommended strategies. Melanie Cishecki of MediaWatch Canada, gave an overview of their activities in altering the stereotypical portrayal of women and also in diversifying their status in media through monitoring, lobbying and policy initiatives.

Media monitoring has continued since the 1995 Global Media Monitoring Project organised by MediaWatch and recently this monitoring has included the internet along with daily scanning of newspapers, periodic analysis of magazines and television content. This monitoring provides hard empirical data for lobbying and policy initiatives and also material for training volunteers.

MediaWatch has made several lobbying efforts, mainly with the regulatory agency CRTC of Canada. CRTC holds formal public consultations and Media Watch has intervened effectively in curtailing some of the blatantly sexist television programmes and has also given a brief note about regulating the Internet. These interventions have been positive in that they have argued for a women?s television network and have facilitated public complaints to other regulatory agencies such as the Advertising Council.

In policy initiatives the primary concern is that existing pro-active policies are enforced. One recent issue that MediaWatch has been engaged in is self- regulation. Most media industries claim to follow self-regulatory measures, but these are not transparent and not accountable to the public. MediaWatch has therefore recommended co-regulation whereby a public institution would work closely with the organisation that implements the regulations. It is still in the initial stages of discussion and progress will depend on the involvement of more women?s groups and media activists.

During group discussion, the question was raised as to how to handle the trans-border flow of data in the globalised media environment. Many countries have to address this issue now, but Canada has always had to deal with media programmes which originated in the USA, and their experience would therefore be helpful to other members of the discussion group. Melanie acknowledged that images from across the border have always been a problem, and Canadian regulations have never made any provision to block them. The problem has been exacerbated since the development of new technologies that appear to be immune to any regulations. Recognising this, it was felt that media literacy programmes were a solution.

Stella Chinyere Okunna from Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Nigeria felt that Melanie?s suggestion of media literacy should be translated into more formal training at all levels. She said that she found the experience of the Global Media Monitoring Project 2000 very rewarding as a researcher, and as Lecturer in Communication she has had the opportunity of initiating some new approaches in curriculum development that include gender issues in media. Her own research and participation in GMMP gave her some insights in developing these courses and she felt it has made a difference in the attitude of the graduating journalists who were more sensitive in handling gender issues. She also mentioned that several working professional journalists also came to attend the course and she felt encouraged to initiate more media watch programmes in future.

Koila Costello from the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECREA) in Fiji agreed that GMMP was a rewarding experience and the group has since modified the grid used in GMMP for continuing local media monitoring. She pointed out that women have been

most affected by the 2000 coup in terms of increased violence, and that the media doesn't help by portraying violence against women in a highly sensationalised manner. ECREA has organised a workshop and media watch sessions for journalists and this year has begun a research programme on gender issues. The group has also attempted to bring grassroots women's voices into mainstream media through a series of documentary stories.

Following these two presentations, there were some comments from participants. Melanie Cishecki observed that the traditional focus on portrayal had been replaced by a focus on women's human rights and that this was only logical considering that the two are interlinked.

María Elena Hermosilla, Director of Communications at SERNAM in Chile, raised doubt about developing strategies for change, however, by pointing out that perspectives of equality differ from country to country. Dorothy Munyakho, of the Interlink Rural Information Service in Kenya felt that training and workshops for journalists seemed an excellent approach. In her view, it was equally important that working journalists, particularly male journalists, should be exposed to more gender monitoring exercises and workshops. She also pointed out that it was rather disturbing that only two male colleagues had participated in the discussion group and that this highlighted the fact that gender equality in media is such a lonely struggle.

Midori Suzuki, of Ritsumeikan University in Japan, argued that gender equality is not just a woman's issue, but a question of discrimination in general and also a human rights issue. In her view media literacy was one approach and an effective response to the unequal representation of women in media. In a media-saturated society such as Japan, it is possible to organise media literacy workshops throughout the country at several women's centres and the research group in the university, members of FCT, and local government co-operated as facilitators to design and conduct the media literacy programme. Their experiences have been compiled in the form of a resource book for trainers which is being used in several communication centres in the country and the progress has been very satisfactory.

María Elena Hermosilla gave a very positive and optimistic view of the situation in Chile. She traced the involvement of women in the movement for democracy in the country and therefore the greater stake they had in formulating media policies. Because of the political context, media and gender issues are highly political and there is the advantage that most of the work is done in association with the government, so there is abundant resources and budgets are no constraint. For example when they wanted to distribute information about women's rights, and to build leadership among women, they flooded the country with over 20 million pamphlets. They have also instituted an award for a television programme that has the best portrayal of women. Women's issues are raised and debated in public fora and at press conferences and it is ensured that they get their fair share of coverage in the media. However, SERNAM is a governmental organisation and María Elena said that it was important to have more NGOs and women's groups on board as well as the involvement of civil society in media watch activities.

Following these presentations Teresita Hermano, Director of WACC's Women's Programme, summarised the main points raised by the participants. In essence there was a feeling for more interaction and networking among the participants and other groups, the need for formal and periodic workshops to provide training in gender monitoring, and to sensitise male media colleagues in media and gender issues. From the several suggestions emerging from the discussion, it was decided that some specific follow-up strategies could be drawn out from the deliberations including:

?more networking among monitoring groups, researchers and media professionals.

?online networking

?awards for positive media presentation of women's issues

?greater emphasis to be given to training young women

?continue media monitoring projects, and joint research projects.

From a report by Leela Rao, Manipal Institute of Communication, Mangalore, India, and co-ordinator of the Asian Network for Women in Communication. First published in media and gender monitor 9/2001.