

Media reform experiences in Cambodia

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Working in gender lobbying and the media in Cambodia is not easy, and people in the media sector are not the most receptive of audiences when they think you are trying to change their behaviour. The author of the following article discusses the six years it took her to make them understand the aims of her project and to make a difference to the presentation of women in the media. Nevertheless, its success might offer a model for similar work in other countries.

During their time in power in Cambodia in the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge killed more than a million people, especially highly educated people including journalists. Very few professional journalists survived after the ousting of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, and under the subsequent Vietnamese rule the media basically acted as a government tool for disseminating information and party propaganda.

The arrival of the United Nation Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) prior to the elections was accompanied by an explosion in the number of print and broadcast media outlets. As of today, there are 125 newspapers, 6 television stations and 13 radio stations in Cambodia. This number may seem high for a population of 12 million but the statistics can be misleading. Only 20 to 30 newspapers publish on a regular basis and very few publish their newspapers every week. Due to a lack of funds, most only print issues for special occasions such as birthdays or holidays.

The print media are not that popular in Cambodia, as they cannot reach people who live in remote areas and there is the ongoing problem of illiteracy. Television still does not broadcast nationwide, although coverage is on the increase. It is popular and an effective tool for transmitting knowledge but most people still cannot afford to purchase a television. Radio, on the other hand, remains the most accessible form of mass media. It is not expensive to purchase and it runs cheaply with batteries where there is no electricity. Yet another advantage is that the radio is portable so people can listen to it while they are working outdoors. According to a study commissioned by Forum Syd and SIDA in 2000, the Women's Media Centre of Cambodia (WMC) radio station, FM 102, is the only radio station generally considered to be independent.

Another study, in September 2000 on the 'Attitudes to Media Coverage of Women and Social Issues' (IMIC) found that: 57% of the population owns or has access to a television set; radio stations broadcast for an average of 18 hours per day; 62% of the population listens to the radio regularly. Rates are highest in rural areas where literacy rates and television ownership are lowest.

The number of media organisations in Cambodia reflects a certain freedom, which is associated with democratic media. But what about freedom of expression? There is a close link between politics and the media in Cambodia. The broadcast media in Cambodia are dominated by the current ruling political party, the Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP). Opposition newspapers do write articles which openly criticise the government and its politics, but employees are often unwilling to give out the addresses of the newspapers offices as they fear for their safety.

One example comes to mind: a few years ago before Radio FM102, WMC aired its programmes on a local radio station, and they advised us that they were not willing to air programmes on any topics related to politics. Even today we often find that television stations or other media refuse to broadcast our programmes on any topics which might be seen as controversial politically. This once again demonstrates the media's fear and concern for their security.

Women in the media

It is widely accepted that the media are an extremely powerful and influential tool. However, the media in Cambodia do not represent women adequately or in a balanced way. The results of the Women's Media Centre three-year monitoring of the portrayal of women in the media in Cambodia from 1996 to 1998 found that Cambodian newspapers and television violate, threaten, oppress and incite further violence and disrespect towards women. We found that:

- One quarter of all print articles about women in Cambodia were pornographic.

- Over 80% of drawings of women were obscene.

- Women as victims was the most common category of article in newspapers.

- Women were threatened if they do not behave in the way which tradition dictates.

- Newspapers condoned domestic violence.

- Television oppressed women by restricting them to traditional roles of wife, mother, lover, sex object and entertainment.

As a result we felt that the media oppressed and enforced a stereotype of women that they are objects for entertainment and decoration for the house. An opinion poll which WMC conducted in December 1997 showed that 80% of respondents considered pornography in the newspapers to be a problem. Media did not reflect the reality that women had been contributing strongly to the development of the country in all fields.

We tried to find the reasons for such a distortion, and concluded that:

- Law and codes of ethics are not well respected
- There is not enough journalism training. Most reporters have not been trained before being recruited.
- There is great competition to attract readers, pressure on sales figures (the number of print media outlets is very high for the number of readers).
- There are few female journalists.

Journalism in Cambodia is a male dominated occupation. There are no female editors-in-chief for any of the newspapers or television stations in the country. The Women's Media Centre is the exception, for obvious reasons, and it plays an important role in shaping the identity of Cambodian female journalists. The only radio station run by women is FM 102 at the Women's Media Centre. The Forum Syd and SIDA study in 2000 stated that:

'...Few women are attracted to the media due to women's role in Cambodian society. At the University a number of students claimed it was difficult for women students to follow the curriculum, which requires field trips to the provinces... it is seen as improper said one male student... Some claimed that women don't have the right coverage to do the job. The female journalists interviewed refuted this and claimed that they were prepared to fight tradition.'

At the Journalists Section of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the dropout rate for women is much higher than men. Some believe this is due to the fact that women, in general, work more than the male students outside their studies and that families sometimes refuse to let female students join in field trips outside of Phnom Penh.

Women's Media Centre of Cambodia (WMC):

WMC was born from a movement to increase the participation of women in democratic processes during the UN-sponsored elections of 1993. This process included radio and video productions promoting women's rights in the elections and in the constitution. Some members of this movement decided to take this idea further and went on to become the founders of the Women's Media Centre of Cambodia. Officially established in January 1995, WMC has since grown from an initial staff of five to over 40 women working in media-production, lobbying, networking and service providing.

The Centre is managed by five female co-directors, who take collective responsibility for running the organisation. Each of these directors is also responsible for one of the five departments within WMC. These departments conduct various media-related activities and include gender advocacy in all their programmes.

The main aims of the Centre are firstly to raise the awareness of social issues from the unique perspective of Cambodian women, i.e. to work directly in the broadcast media to educate and inform the people. We also hope that our programming will have a secondary media education effect, showing the people what socially and gender conscious media can produce.

Secondly we strive to improve women's status by means of promoting socially conscious television, video and radio programmes through workshops, forum discussions and lobbying. This takes the form of both media education and media reform work.

Thirdly we try to increase women's participation in the mainstream media, and by this we hope to improve gender sensitivity within the media through greater active participation of women.

Educating society on gender issues

Radio Station. The radio station is the biggest department among five. The aim of the station is to raise awareness about development issues in Cambodia. Radio WMC is on the air seven days a week, from 6am to 9pm. It produces educational and entertainment programs and provides airtime for NGOs to publicise their activities.

Television Department. Through the WMC's television programming, all members of society will have a better understanding of women's issues and their perception of women will be more positive. The TV department produces a weekly TV series exploring women's issues in Cambodia. The programs are broadcast on national and provincial stations and the series includes drama, comedy and documentaries.

Media Campaign department. The team co-operates with local and international NGOs to produce television and radio campaigns on social issues in Cambodia. They also initiate WMC campaigns on selected social issues. The department's purpose is to strengthen the relationship with NGOs and institutions so as to better serve the cause of women in radio and television.

Service Centre. The purpose of the centre is to generate income to contribute to the funding of the entire organisation. The activities of this department are hiring out video and audio equipment, marketing, video subtitling, dubbing and copying. The Service Centre also works with TVE (Television Trust for the Environment) on language versioning and distributing their productions in Cambodia.

The Networking Department:

Our team is not directly involved in the production of video and radio programmes. Rather, the department's purpose is to work with the media as an information and educational tool, with the aim that society will have a better insight of women's issues and will begin to change their attitudes and beliefs about the traditional roles of women.

The projects undertaken by the Networking Department are in the areas of direct education of the people on social and gender issues, media education, and primarily media reform. This is done through working directly with the media and through education and lobbying the government and other NGOs. The projects we are currently working on are:

Education on social and gender issues. The direct education side of the Networking Department's work includes the setting up of mobile broadcasting teams in two provinces in

2002. These teams travel around the provinces showing WMC productions to the villagers who would otherwise not have access to television. Also an article solicitation programme was set up in 2001 by the Networking team. Listeners of radio WMC were invited to write and send in articles related to various gender issues. The qualified articles were selected and published in the most popular newspaper, Rasmey Kampuchea. Recently our Media Monitoring Group has suggested widening the audience by airing selected articles on our radio.

Media education. This is not the primary aim of any of the Networking Department's projects, but we believe that WMC broadcasting throughout the country sets a standard and an example to the people as to what they can expect from socially and gender conscious media productions, and hopefully makes them re-examine the other popular media from this viewpoint. We also encourage school visits, and since 2001 have run an internship programme, where we give girls from different Universities the opportunity to study practical media work at our Centre. We hope that through these programs the younger generation will better understand the role of the media in shaping social attitudes.

Media reform. Here the WMC works on many projects. We have an ongoing media monitoring programme to find out how the media portray women. After four years monitoring the portrayal of women in the media, we moved to the creation of the 'Gender Equity Media Awards' which were held in early 2002. The awards encourage writers and editors-in-chief of all kinds of media to mainstream gender in their articles or productions. We also organise workshops and discussion forums with journalists and editors, to talk about gender conscious media and to listen to their views. We host a solidarity dinner three or four times a year, with editors-in-chief of all kinds of media and journalist associations, to allow informal discussion on gender issues and to build links with the mainstream media. As well as this, I have attended a meeting of the Journalist Association, to suggest to them strengthening the existing press code of ethics specifically to include guidelines on the portrayal of women in the media.

Results of our work

Media education is a long-term goal, and it is difficult to see concrete results resulting from our work. We believe that we have had a positive impact on media education in Cambodia. WMC's innovative video productions have from year to year become recognised as some of the highest quality broadcast media in the country, and so our styles and production methods are often used as examples by other media organisations. We feel that being at the cutting edge of technology and production in the country helps our productions gain further attention and respect, and helps to counter any negative stereotypes of women working in the media. We also believe in showing people that gender and socially conscious media productions can be entertaining, and through this to increase the public awareness and demand for such entertainment.

We are aided by some TV stations airing our programmes free of charge or for a reduced fee, agreements which show that WMC productions are considered both educational and entertaining.

We also believe that our efforts to encourage women and society in general to participate and learn about the media through our school visits, internship programme and our article solicitation will encourage more discussion and assessment of the role of the media in society and the effects of the media's portrayal of women.

Media reform comprises the major part of the work of the Networking Department, and after four years of working very hard on monitoring the portrayal of women in the media I am very happy to say that there are no more pornographic articles in any newspaper in Cambodia. The attitude of the editors has changed dramatically over this time, and they have often ended up creating columns for educational articles on women or society as a replacement.

The 'Gender Equality Media Awards' was one of our most successful projects. Having a solidarity dinner with editor-in-chiefs of all kind of media including journalists associations is useful. It strengthens WMC's relationship with them and makes them feel that WMC is not against them. We are sure that editor-in-chiefs are the key people in making media gender sensitive, as they are the decision makers who have direct influence on what the reporters write about.

Article solicitation was supported and encouraged by readers. The Networking Department received numerous articles during its selection campaign. They originated from cities and provinces and were written by people from all levels including students, state and private workers, soldiers, monks, etc. This demonstrated that a lot of people are very interested in women's issues. An informal survey of the ten people, undertaken by the WMC, found that articles published in the newspaper were valued and were said to increase the public's awareness of women's issues and their contribution to Cambodian society. Most surveyed stated they enjoyed reading such articles and believe that this type of materials will contribute to the reduction of problems that many women must face today.

The internship and student visit programs have the long-term aim of increasing women's participation in the media, but already have had positive results. Some of our previous interns now work for the WMC, and some are doing freelance work with other media organisations in Cambodia. Most are still continuing their studies, but we hope that we will see further progress in the future.

Difficulties and future plans

When I started the monitoring project, many friends said that I was crazy to run this project as they thought that I would be interfering in the business of the media companies who write for sales, and there would be nothing I could do to change that. Some editors-in-chiefs said WMC

could do what it wants because it has donors. Some felt that WMC works against journalists, and that WMC always blames journalists.

Most editors don't like to listen to lecture or theory but they like brainstorming, sharing ideas or discussions. A feedback on articles solicitation said there should not be too many educational articles. Once the Ministry of Information closed a magazine that presented women in a pornographic manner, but then allowed it to reopen shortly after. Some criticised WMC as a group that provokes or encourages women to divorce.

Our three-year strategic plan (2002-2004) identifies several goals for the Networking Department.

- To organize workshops to educate media workers, NGOs and other organisations on gender in the media, women and the media, hot issues in the country and other issues suggested by journalists. This is to increase the awareness of the media workers and participants and to improve the way media present women.

- To extend to more provinces the mobile broadcasting teams to improve gender and media education for the people who do not have access to the information.

- To conduct a national survey to find out and compare to the previous survey the participation and portrayal of women in the media. This would be most extensive such survey in Cambodia.

- To continue our internship program to increase women's participation and contribution in media work.

- To organise the second gender equality media awards which was so positively supported by journalists.

From my point of view, media reform strategies will vary with the situation of each place or country. In a country such as Cambodia, media reform can be a long and difficult struggle. There are many misconceptions and attitudes that are hard to change. But progress can be made, especially when working with the media organisations rather than adopting a confrontational approach. The Women's Media Centre of Cambodia is looking forward to continuing its mission

to improve the situation of Cambodia and its women through media in the future. n

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