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Finding a Voice:

Challenges and Opportunities for Women in the Pakistani Media

The Context

Pakistan enjoys a vibrant and growing media industry. The last decade has witnessed a notable increase in the size, strength and reach of the media, and rapid development in infrastructure and communication technology. The role media plays in any society is far richer than a mere dispenser of information and entertainment – media is subliminally regarded as a moral standard, a reflection of priorities and values, a purveyor of social commentary and connections, an authority. In the Pakistani context of low literacy rates and under-developed rural areas, the media exerts even more power on public consciousness.

However, there is much to be desired when it comes to regulation and the institutionalization of best practices in the media industry. Pakistan lacks a consistent media policy, and most media companies (including newspapers, magazines, television channels and radio stations) do not implement a commonly accepted code of ethics. With the media's scope of influence in shaping societal values and beliefs, and new media's dissemination of dynamic platforms for interaction and debate, it is imperative that such policies and codes be developed and implemented on a national level.

This paper addresses policy concerns specifically in the area of gender equality and portrayal in the media. In light of the status of women and its impact on Pakistan's society and economy, of Pakistan's explicit commitment to international covenants to improve the status of women, and of the media's immense power as a means of social change, the development and implementation of appropri-

ate media and gender policies will be of great national benefit.

The Bad News

Pakistan has a critically low international standing with respect to the status of women, which is both a serious human rights issue and an impediment to economic development. Pakistan ranks 132nd out of 134 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2010 Global Gender Gap Index. A mere 36% of Pakistani women are literate, and only 20% are members of the workforce.

In keeping with this trend, and despite large numbers of female students of media and mass communications, women are extremely under-represented in the Pakistani media industry and all but non-existent in top management and decision-making positions. In news networks (which have overtaken entertainment networks in popularity), men outnumber women nearly 5:1. Women comprise a mere 3.8% of senior management, and mostly occupy roles at the junior level (15.5%). Women are most noticeably absent from senior ranks at mass-circulation Urdu-language dailies, which wield the most influence in shaping societal attitudes.

This marginalization of women negatively impacts the quality of media content, such that women's voices remain muted in the presentation of news and issues, and women continue to be portrayed largely in negative stereotypes. Women often have a unique perspective on,

and investment in, matters ranging from social issues and current affairs, to national security, management of resources, conflict and violence. Omitting this voice from public discourse weakens the integrity of the dialogue and is a disservice to the entire audience.

Factors Inhibiting Female Participation and Leadership

Unwelcoming environment: Men greatly outnumber women in media houses, especially in top management. This skews the work environment greatly in favour of men and causes women to face discrimination and a stark absence of basic amenities, such as adequate work spaces and seating arrangements, women's toilets, transportation in the case of late working hours, etc. In addition, few companies have adequate policies in place for gender equity, maternity and childcare, and sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a huge concern for women entering the media field. Many media houses have harassment policies in place, but women often face pressure or resistance when trying to report harassment.

Discrimination in pay: women receive less money for the same job performed by their male counterparts, most notably at the senior management level. This is not only a discriminatory practise but also de-incentivizes women from seeking top level management positions in the media industry.

Professional roadblocks: There is an absence of training and capacity-building for women. Men can enhance their on-the-job learning by networking and shadowing their more experienced counterparts, but, in the absence of female mentors, social stigmas and sexual harassment prevent women from doing the same. Additionally, gender division of news beats is biased in favour of men. 'Hard issues' such as politics and the economy are assigned to men, and it is coverage on these topics that in turn provides opportunities for displaying journalistic excellence and garnering promotions. Senior editors tend to assign women to 'women's issues', (mostly fashion and culture). In addition, there is gender-based insubordination from male employees to women who supervise or manage them. All these factors combine to produce a glass ceiling for women in media.

Cultural restrictions: Mainstream Pakistani culture has not traditionally approved of women working in the media industry, and while these attitudes might be shifting, a lot of women face opposition from their families. Long working hours, traveling, and returning home late, especially in the company of men, are all frowned upon. The force of such cultural restrictions gets amplified by the prevalence of sexist work envi-

ronments and a lack of gender equity policies as mentioned.

At the same time, the dearth of women in media houses helps perpetuate problematic portrayals of women in the media, which inform societal views, and thus exists a vicious cycle.

News reportage tends to ignore women or relegate them to 'women's pages' or lower-priority segments. This has the worst effect on older women and women belonging to the working class and minority communities. When women do get reported on, it is often gender-insensitive, does not feature the voices of women as sources or experts, and tends to focus on stories of women as helpless victims or sexual objects, while ignoring crucial issues such as gender-based violence and legal discrimination, as well as notable achievements by women in various aspects of personal and professional life. There is a large incidence of derogatory and judgmental language when reporting on women. A particularly troubling example of this is crime reportage, where gender-based violence, especially rape, is reported in a misogynistic manner which blames the victim.

In the political sphere, where women have a relatively healthier presence and influence, the media's sexist reporting tendencies persist and focus on women more as political object than for political substance. In entertainment and advertisements, women are sexually objectified, commodified, and portrayed in limiting stereotypes. The most common portrayal of feminine identity is in relation to a man, whereas female individuality is discouraged or disparaged.

Clearly, to break this cycle of missing women decision-makers and prevailing negative portrayals of women, an intervention is in order.

The Good News

Despite the obstacles, there are some policies in existence and some trends in the recent past that signal positive advances toward gender equity and ethical standards.

Within the media industry, there has been an improvement in the presence and image of women: currently, some of the most prominent and popular anchors and analysts are women. This bodes well for changes in media content and policy, as well as societal perceptions of women in media. Also, more than half the women in the news industry are reported to have full-time jobs with benefits, as opposed to part-time or contractual employment, and salaries for men and women are comparable at the lower pay range. In ad-

dition, there is a fairly large representation of women in governance of news establishments, which presents potentially fertile ground for progressive gender policy design and implementation.

On the policy front, Pakistan has several longstanding international commitments that protect basic human rights and gender equality. Some that are longstanding reaffirm fundamental human rights and equality, and include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), ILO Labour Standards (1948), ILO Discrimination in Employment and Occupation (1958), and Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985). The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees equality between men and women: it has provisions for affirmative action, prohibits discrimination against women, and provides for the full participation of women in all spheres of life. Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) also has similar provisions in its Code of Conduct for Broadcasters.

More recently, Pakistan acceded to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA, 1995), the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1996) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As follow-up to the BDPA, the government launched a National Plan of Action (NPA, 1998) for the empowerment of women, which has outlined key strategies to address the gender gap and negative portrayal of women in media. Other milestones include the establishment of the Ministry of Women Development (MOWD, 1998) and the government-sponsored National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW, 2000).

In addition, there have been some achievements in the civilian and NGO world that are worthy of mention for their groundbreaking policy and awareness-building work. AASHA (Alliance Against Sexual Harassment) partnered with MOWD in 2002 to develop a Code of Conduct on gender relations in the workplace and the passage of a law requiring all public and private organizations to adopt and implement the Code. This effort has seen slow but steady progress, with the result that for the first time in the history of Pakistan, sexual harassment was defined in the law and declared a crime, both at workplace and at other places through the following bills:

i) Protection Against Harassment at Workplace Bill 2009 – All organizations in Pakistan to adopt and implement the Code of Conduct for Gender Justice (signed into law 9 March 2010.)

ii) Code of Criminal Procedure Amendment Bill 2009 – Sexual harassment became a cognizable offense anywhere in the country, as per an amendment to the Pakistan Penal Code (signed into law January 2010).

A federal ombudsperson has been appointed, the Code of Conduct has been adopted by government organisations, and committees have been set up to address complaints of harassment at the workplace.

These are noteworthy achievements made possible by the growth of civilian taskforces and their partnership with the government. Other examples of cross-sector movement-building in this area include:

The Committee for Affirmative Action to advance the presence of women and gender fairness in media establishments.

Uks, a research, resource and publication centre that advocates for gender equality and provides sensitization workshops and training.

Women Media Center Pakistan
Pakistani Women's Media Network

Media watch groups such as Media Watch and National Implementation Watch Committee.

The Way Forward

Although the last decade has seen clear signs of progress, there is still a lot of work to be done to bring gender equity to the media institution. Real results will require a strong national media policy and continued partnerships between the government, the private sector, NGOs and international rights organizations.

Policy

Pakistan needs a comprehensive national media policy with a code of ethics and best practices. This policy needs to be enforced and observed by all media houses. To this end, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has just announced that a new media policy is being formulated and will be completed by June. Members of the parliamentary committees on information and broadcasting, representatives of the electronic media, civil society and all stakeholders will be asked for their input in devising the new policy. This is a key opportunity to ensure that the policy has provisions for gender fairness in the media industry, both as a workplace and as a disseminator of information and entertainment.

Implementation

It is imperative to ensure strict implementation to the Code of Conduct by media establishments, including advertisers. The government, in partnership with civilian organizations, should support the formation of media policy implementation boards in each major

town or district, in which at least half the members (preferably including the Chairperson) must be women. These boards must have legal powers to enforce policies and impose fines or other coercive measures to hold violators accountable. Such boards can ensure that the media policy (hopefully with gender equity and fairness provisions) and the recent sexual harassment legislation are being implemented.

Regulation

PEMRA's role as a regulatory body would be greatly strengthened if it was autonomous (as per worldwide practices) and not subject to changing agendas of the party in power. PEMRA needs to be empowered to play a proactive regulatory role, instead of responding to complaints.

In addition, the government should support the growth and participation of regulatory bodies, both governmental and civilian, that hold public and corporate players accountable for their national and international commitments.

Key recommendations

Affirmative action. Women should be recruited and represented at all programming, planning and policy-making levels. Generally, a minimum quota of 30% is considered sufficient to bring a difference in environment. For Pakistan, it is recommended that regional and cultural nuances be taken into consideration to determine culturally competent affirmative action policies for different media markets, with a commitment to continue to increase the representation of women over time.

Annual gender audits. This has been undertaken by ILO and the government of Pakistan in 1998. With the partnership of organizations such as Uks, the audit can be implemented in the media industry to regularly evaluate systems, processes and activities through a gender lens. Under the new media policy, it should be mandatory for all media institutions to conduct an annual gender audit in order to assess and address gender opportunities and gaps, as well as measure compliance with national gender policies and laws.

Gender fair work environment. The new media policy should require media institutions to have a clearly stated gender equity and sexual harassment policy, as compliant with national legislation and international commitments. Media houses should be mandated to create a congenial workplace for women, with equitable salaries, opportunities and facilities. Implementation boards or committees should monitor work environments and be available for complaints or

guidance.

Education and capacity building. Media departments in all educational institutions should be required to analyze and remove institutionalized gender biases, including curriculum, staffing and enrolment. In addition, media institutions should be encouraged to provide internships, mentorship and capacity-building for women.

Equitable gender portrayal. Set up committees to develop guidelines for equitable gender portrayal in the media. Committees (in collaboration with media watchdogs and regulatory bodies) should monitor gender portrayal across media, nationally. In addition, gender sensitization trainings should be mandated for both men and women in media establishments, as well as for students of media and mass communications.

Media space for gender issues. The government should ensure that gender issues are getting their fair space in the male-dominated media landscape. State media could have mandatory priority space allocated for highlighting gender issues, women's empowerment, and the negative impact of gender inequity, and the same could be incentivized for privately owned media houses.

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