



The following article was first published in *Media Development* 4/2013.

Return to Bangkok: Two decades of civil society interventions on gender and media

Sarah Macharia

Almost twenty years after the Women Empowering Communication 1994 conference,¹ communicators return to Bangkok in December 2013 to consider questions about gender equality and women's empowerment in and through the media. This year's meeting, dubbed the Global Forum on Gender and Media and convened by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in partnership with others, is expected to result in the establishment of a Global Alliance on Media and Gender to coordinate systematic follow-up to Critical Area "J" of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on "Women and the Media".²

The profile of participants in the 2013 conference is significantly broader than the 1994 meeting, drawn from the media industry, government and civil society organisations. The configuration of convenors is also different, led by a multilateral body in partnership with others, including civil society, while the earlier conference was primarily a civil society event. Nevertheless, the symbolism of this return to Bangkok, however coincidental, should not be overlooked.

It presents an opening to take stock of progress, or lack thereof, during the intervening two decades. To what extent have the aspirations voiced at the 1994 conference and subsequently immortalized in the Bangkok Declaration adopted by participants been met? Does the evidence point to greater awareness and responsiveness to identified gender issues in media? What does civil society have to show for two decades of work on gender equality in and through the media?

Flashback to 1994: Women Empowering Communication

Teresita Hermanto explained the impetus behind the Women Empowering Communication conference:

"After sponsoring and organizing numerous regional and national consultations on women and the media, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) proposed a global women's conference to reassess the communication developments and strategies of the last decade and plan new lines of action for the future."³

WACC approached the New York-based International Women's Tribune Centre and ISIS-International Manila to partner in convening the conference. The usual conference fare of plenary presentations, workshops, resource displays and field trips was programmed in the four-day event. What set this global conference apart however was the preponderance of

women as participants and the markedly different atmosphere in contrast to other global conferences at that historic moment. Keynote speaker Kamla Bhasin summed up the conference as “a much needed stopover” for women like her who often worked in isolation.⁴

Out of the conference emerged a remarkable document, the Bangkok Declaration, a statement of resolutions by 40 working groups that immortalized participants’ aspirations. The Declaration affirmed the need to:

“Promote forms of communication that not only challenge the patriarchal nature of media but strive to decentralise and democratise them: to create media that encourage dialogue and debate; media that advance women and peoples’ creativity; media that reaffirm women’s wisdom and knowledge, and that make people into subjects rather than objects or targets of communication. Media which are responsive to people’s needs”.⁵

At the same time the Declaration recognized an imperative to hold mainstream media accountable to women. It exhorted the conference convenors to “organize one day at the start of 1995 for the monitoring of all media and use data as the basis for an analysis of where women are.” Thus, the idea of the Global Media Monitoring Project was mooted.

The Global Media Monitoring Project

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is designed to provide a one-day snapshot of women’s presence and participation in the news, gender bias, stereotyping and other gender-in-media indicators. The snapshot is taken every five years since 1995 through media monitoring research carried out by teams of volunteers in several countries worldwide on the same day. The GMMP is a multi-faceted initiative whose process is just as important as the media monitoring findings and the follow-up actions.

The process seeks to build skills in critical media literacy of the broad base of volunteers, increasing knowledge on how to apply a gender lens to read, understand and analyze media content. The monitoring findings offer the tangible evidence necessary to demonstrate gender gaps in media output and suggest directions for redress. Follow-up actions present a platform for fostering active citizenship, building productive media-audience relations and shaping a more inclusive public sphere.

The GMMP media monitoring findings are comprehensively documented in the report *Who makes the news? The global media monitoring project*. However, I evoke here a few illustrative results. The 4th GMMP monitoring research revealed that while the rate of increase in women’s presence in the news has remained constant since 2005 (at 3 percentage points every five years), gross gender imbalances remain. Women comprise only 24% of persons seen, heard or mentioned in the news, in contrast to the real world in which at least 50% of the population is female.

The research evidenced a welcome increase in news media content that challenges gender stereotypes: from only 3% of stories in 2005 to 6% in 2010. A pilot monitoring of internet news websites found that gender biases became even more acute as content moved from traditional mediums onto digital platforms; this was true for all indicators monitored, from women’s presence in the news, to gender portrayal in audiovisual multimedia accompanying stories and to gender stereotyping.⁷

That differently located stakeholders participate in the GMMP monitoring is an asset that becomes clear in the follow-up actions. Stakeholders located in the academy make invaluable contributions to furthering the analysis in a way that is not technically feasible at the global one-day snapshot level. In France for instance, in-depth qualitative analysis of news articles monitored in the 4th GMMP concluded that media manufacture, rather than reflect reality.⁸

Marlène Coulomb-Gully asserts that, “the feminists were not wrong when in the sixties they put a finger on the media, denouncing media conservatism and pointing to media’s responsibility in maintaining women in traditional roles assuring the continuation of masculine

domination and patriarchal society.”⁹. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.¹⁰

As technologies of power, media now more than ever participate in the process of gender socialization, locking in place unequal gender power relations of feminine subordination and masculine dominance. By interrogating not only media’s portrayal and representation of women, but also that of men, the symbolic construction of the masculine as the “norm”, and the feminine as “deviant”, is revealed.

The GMMP has inspired innumerable initiatives the world over, from further research to document the status of women in media in Pakistan,¹¹ to building critical media literacy skills of grassroots women in Nepal,¹² and to informing content development in media education resources in the U.K.¹³ In November 2012, Argentinean high-level State officials discussing gender-related clauses in the new audiovisual communication law cited GMMP monitoring findings to underscore the imperative for gender-responsive public media.¹⁴

Civil society interventions and analytical contributions

Kamla Bhasin’s assertion at the Bangkok 1994 conference that communication alternatives need to emerge from feminist critiques of the present world order and vision for the future remains true today. Feminists are not just concerned about how women are portrayed in the media or how many women work in the media – they are concerned about what kind of lives women lead, women’s status and the kind of society that prevails.¹⁵ An analysis that draws the links between media portrayal to material realities and gender inequalities and inequities in people’s lived experiences is necessary.

Such an analysis is perhaps one of the most significant contributions made by civil society organisations, whose critiques underscore the tendency in media portrayal and representation to separate women from their social, historic and political-economic contexts, with dire consequences for gender relations. To illustrate, the prevailing critique in Latin America about media portrayal of women in politics asserts that media discourse is often characterized by a simplistic narrative that fails to acknowledge the rootedness of female political leaders in a broader context, their paths into politics through social movements, unions, community organisations or professional associations.

Civil society has broached the problem from the angle of media professional ethics, underscoring gender-just portrayal as a requirement of professional practice if “gender” is understood as cutting across the basic elements of ethical codes such as balance, accuracy, objectivity and fairness. This recourse to media professional ethics to encourage media output that is responsive to critiques of sexism, objectification of women, trivialization of issues of concern to women, etc. is made necessary by the neoliberal capitalist profit-oriented context in which media operate. Notwithstanding, definitive transformational change is likely to remain elusive until the male-centric assumptions – of a fictitious predominantly male audience for instance – underlying the modus operandi of factual media are understood and overturned.

Various national, regional and international instruments have provided a basis for civil society activism to compel states and other actors to take action on rights violations. In recent years, civil society actors have turned to instruments on freedom of expression to lobby for media accountability to *all* publics, women included. (See for instance the General Assembly resolution on the role of freedom of opinion and expression in women’s empowerment.)¹⁶

Civil society actors call for a journalism that recognizes multiple axes of vulnerability or marginalization. Further, they insist on an adoption of language that is not only non-sexist but also rights-oriented and supports social justice efforts.¹⁷

They trace the links between on the one hand, media sexism and objectification of women and on the other hand, all forms of violence women suffer, where violence is defined as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or

psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹⁸

Gender-just media proponents in civil society exhort journalists to build their knowledge on the topics they cover, to guard against superficial reporting and deepen the narrative with statistics and voices from women’s and community organisations. It would be impractical to expect journalistic expert knowledge of every issue. However the civil society message is for media professionals to develop depth in their understanding of the issues they cover, in addition to seeking multiple perspectives from state and civil society experts.

There is a striking boldness in Latin American civil society critiques of gender dimensions in media policy and practice not readily visible elsewhere. Evidence from several countries in the region points to a clear articulation of the problem – beyond questions of professional ethics to questions about trampling upon women’s rights. The analysis leads to a response that demands an approach to journalism in which issues are articulated from a human rights perspective.

Insights from Argentinean civil society reveal that journalism with a human rights approach springs from an understanding of people as subjects with rights and the power to demand the rights, not as objects with needs. Such journalism chooses to speak in terms of promoting human rights and not about satisfying needs. It articulates the persons as beings entitled to rights claims.¹⁹

It points out, for instance, that women are *entitled* to social protection because they are holders of rights enshrined in a State’s Constitution or other legal frameworks, and steers clear of presenting the women as objects *worthy of support*. Human rights-oriented journalism is rich in possibilities, with potential to increase civil society and state consciousness and action, incorporating the views of citizens on issues that affect them.

Such journalism keeps issues in the public limelight, continuously reiterating the rights claims for the public to check if a response from the State is obtained and if this response is consistent with the magnitude of the problem.

A panoramic view of lessons and good practices emerging from civil society interventions to encourage gender-responsive media is provided in the *Learning Resource Kit for Gender-Ethical Journalism and Media House Policy*.²⁰

Return to Bangkok

Two decades after the Women Empowering Communication conference, a critical mass has been established around gender and media concerns. The GMMP is responsible for drawing together grassroots groups, national-level civil society organisations, media professional associations, unions and academia into one formidable “gender justice in and through media” movement spanning more than 100 countries. Over two decades the initiative has become the connective tissue linking otherwise isolated stakeholders engaged in particular and distinct ways on gender and media work, whether research, critical media literacy training, media capacity building or activism.

Civil society engagement has contributed to advances in deepening the analysis from predominantly technical questions on portrayal and representation, towards troubling the normative base on which mainstream media policy and practice are founded. It is likely that the unwavering commitment has played a significant role in broadening the base of actors now readying for return to Bangkok.

Civil society groups attending an international consultative meeting earlier this year emphatically declared the need for a 5th GMMP in view of the initiative’s value in building solidarity and generating empirical evidence to support our collective efforts. Convening a fifth global monitoring exercise becomes even more important in view of lessons from feminist calls that incessant vigilance is necessary to ensure that issues remain salient and alive in the relevant spaces.²¹ The need to hasten the snail’s pace rate of change towards media that support gender-justice objectives remains.

The varied interventions may have laid the groundwork necessary for the planned broad-based global alliance on media and gender to flourish, an alliance that in turn could catalyze the emergence of the type of media described in the Bangkok Declaration.

Notes

1. Convened by the London-based World Association for Christian Communication, the New York-based International Women's Tribune Centre and ISIS-Manila, the conference brought together 430 participants to "reassess the communication developments and strategies of the last decade and plan new lines of action for the future" (Teresita Hermano, in *Media Development*, 2/1994).
2. See Forum website at www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/crosscutting-priorities/gender-and-media/global-forum-on-media-and-gender/homepage/
3. Hermano in *Media Development*, 2/1994.
4. Ibid.
5. *The Bangkok Declaration*, Women Empowering Communication conference, 12-17 February, 1994. www.whomakesthenews.org/images/documents/bangkok%20declaration.pdf
6. Defined as the years in which the monitoring is undertaken and/or the results published. 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010.
7. See global, regional and country reports at www.whomakesthenews.org/index.php/gmmp-2010/reports.
8. Coulomb-Gully, Marlène (coord.). *Médias : La fabrique du genre* Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2012:83 w3.pum.univ-tlse2.fr/~no-83-Medias-La-fabrique-du-genre~.html
9. Ibid.
10. Beauvoir, Simone, 1971. *The Second Sex*. Alfred A. Knopf.
11. Uks Research Centre, 2013. *Who's telling our story? A situation analysis of women's portrayal and representation in media in Pakistan*. http://www.ukresearch.com/PublicationsPDFs/1_3_2IN1.pdf
12. ASMITA Women's Publishing House, Media and Resource Organisation has over several years worked to build the capacity of rural women to "read" and respond to media content with a gender lens.
13. See Firth, Lisa. (ed.), 2011. *The Media, Issues*; v.210, a series by Independence Educational Publishers Cambridge published for students in the U.K. The section on 'who makes the news' exposing gender trends in news media is informed by GMMP 2010 monitoring findings.
14. See video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJwFvY5V0lc#t=43
15. Kamla Bhasin, in *Media Development*, 2/1994.
16. United Nations, 2013. *The role of freedom of opinion and expression in women's empowerment*, A/HRC/RES/23/2, Adopted by the General Assembly, Human Rights Council, 24 June 2013.
17. See for instance: Asociación Civil de la Azotea, 2012. *Manual hacia un periodismo conciencia de género: creando buenas prácticas*; Equipo Latinoamericano de Justicia y Género, 2013. *Mejorar la comunicación para expandir los derechos – Herramientas para incorporar el enfoque de derechos en las coberturas periodistas*.
18. United Nations, 1993. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, A/48/629. Resolution 48/104, Adopted by the General Assembly on the report of the Third Committee. www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/48/104.
19. Equipo Latinoamericano de Justicia y Género, 2013. *Mejorar la comunicación para expandir los derechos – Herramientas para incorporar el enfoque de derechos en las coberturas periodistas*.
20. Macharia, Sarah & Pamela Morinière (eds.), 2012. *Learning resource kit for gender-ethical journalism and media House policy*. Book 1-Conceptual Issues. Book 2-Practical Resources. Toronto: World Association for Christian Communication & Brussels: International Federation of Journalists. www.whomakesthenews.org/index.php/resource-kit
21. Drawing from Annabelle Sreberny in *Media Development*, 3/2005. www.waccglobal.org/en/20053-women-reclaim-media/539-Why-Sis!-Gender-WSIS-and-Tunis.html