

Gender in the Information Society

Emerging issues

Edited by

**Anita Gurumurthy, Parminder Jeet Singh,
Anu Mundkur and Mridula Swamy**



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For more information please contact:
 UNDP ASIA-PACIFIC DEVELOPMENT INFORMATION PROGRAMME
 Regional Centre in Bangkok
 3rd Floor, United Nations Service Building
 Rajdamnern Nok Avenue
 Bangkok 10200, Thailand
 Tel: +66 2 288 1234
 Fax: +66 2 280 0556
 Email: info@apdip.net
 Website: <http://www.apdip.net>



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Indian Reprint ISBN-13: 978-81-312-0632-4
 Indian Reprint ISBN-10: 81-312-0632-7

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Academic Press, Butterworth-Heinemann, Digital Press, Elsevier, Focal Press, Morgan Kauffman, North Holland, Pergamon are the Science and Technology Imprints of Elsevier.

Printed and bound at Solar Print Process Pvt. Ltd.

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Community Media and Women: Transforming Silence into Speech

—Vinod Pavarala, Kanchan K. Malik and Janardhan Rao Cheeli

Participatory communication for development envisages, among other things, democratized and decentralized media systems as key agents of empowerment for those who have traditionally been socially, culturally, economically and politically marginalized. Feminist activists and women's movements have argued that the conventional ideology of male superiority and the control of productive resources by men have affected women's options and opportunities for a better life. "Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women" is one of the core MDGs stated in the Millennium Declaration adopted by all 189-member states of the UN General Assembly in 2000. This paper, through case studies of ongoing experiments with community media by civil society organizations in India, attempts to reflect on women's involvement at various stages of the project, their participation in the programmes and enhancement in their capabilities to communicate and develop messages. Some of the questions to which answers were sought from field experiences include:

- Are women engaging actively in critical reception of community radio and participatory video programmes?
- To what extent is women's participation discernible in the various stages of the initiative? Do women's issues and indigenous ideas get transformed into radio programmes? What is the media competency among women?
- Have community-driven media initiatives helped in creating new mediated discourses that amplify the voices and concerns of marginalized rural women and serve as a platform for expression of alternative development strategies?
- How and to what extent are women in grass-roots communication creating avenues for democratic communication and fostering social change? What role is communication playing in activating women's alternatives to support their social struggles?

The paper begins by examining the intersections of development frameworks and feminist theorizing, and how they have been influenced by debates and critiques of globalization. The two main feminist development frameworks – WID and GAD – have stirred gender mainstreaming practices, many of which address issues of regional and cultural differences. This part also discusses how the recent approaches to development have moved away from their preoccupation with top-down economic growth and towards social and participatory

development practices that are more inclusive. The aim of these approaches seems to be enlargement of people's choices and human capabilities.

The two powerful movements, of gender and of participation, have generated major implications for the role of communication in transforming the rhetoric of local level development into reality. The relationship, intersections, paradoxes and synergies among the discourses originating in development, communication and feminist scholarships offer insights into a new agenda for empowerment of women, which is discussed in part two of the paper. The theoretical and conceptual framework derived from these discussions is then applied to examine gender as an analytical category in the following case studies of community radio and participatory video initiatives at the grass-roots level from different states of India:

- Community radio project of Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS), Gujarat
- Community radio project of Alternative for India Development (AID), Daltongunj, Jharkhand
- Community radio and participatory video projects of Deccan Development Society (DDS), Pastapur, Andhra Pradesh
- Community radio project of Voices, at Budhikote, Karnataka
- Participatory video project of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Gender and Participatory Development

"Look at the world through women's eyes," proclaimed a poster at the venue of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. In the context of development, this is an indispensable tenet even today, as it calls for redefining the existing approaches to development and making them gender responsive. The 'Beijing Declaration' as well as the 'Platform for Action'² and the 'Outcome Document' adopted by the UN General Assembly Session on Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st century, have identified several critical areas that must be addressed for achieving the advancement and empowerment of women. These include:

- Unequal access to education and training.
- Violence against women.
- Violation of the rights of the girl child.
- Inequality in access to economic resources.
- Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels.
- Inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media.

Although, in the past decades, the status of women has improved in some important respects, there still exist major barriers of inequality that hinder women's participation in decision-making

² Toronto Platform For Action (1995). "International Symposium on Women and the Media: Access to Expression and Decision-Making", Final Declaration, UNESCO.

processes, their access to key resources and the sharing of power. A sustained effort by feminist activists and theorists, women's movements and poor women's grass-roots organizations to mainstream gender in development discourses is playing a crucial role in challenging oppressive structures of patriarchy, introducing alternative practices and redefining the goals of development.³

Until the end of the 1960s, the role of women in development projects of modernization was limited to being recipients of welfare and development messages. They were considered reproducers while men, identified as producers, were given access to information, training, technology, credit and decision-making. Around the mid-1970s, women started getting increased attention globally through the WID project.⁴ WID sought to provide greater visibility to the role of women in development and several agencies worked to secure the benefits of modernization for them by integrating women into the mainstream of economic development.⁵

The WID approach was criticized by feminist theorists for subscribing to the dominant modernization and Marxist models and failing to question structures of patriarchy that limited women's access to resources and power.⁶ These theories, preoccupied with economic growth, failed to acknowledge that the factors determining women's status might be culturally-specific and related to traditional work roles. The mid-1980s thus saw the GAD approach questioning the prevailing socio-cultural, economic and political structures that generated and underpinned the disadvantageous status of women relative to men. The focus of this empowerment agenda was not on women alone, but on relationships between women and men. An urgent need to redefine socially-constructed gender patterns in the three spheres – economy, home and the community – and to redress power imbalances in gender relations was articulated by women's movements.

During the past two decades, concepts like 'participation', 'community-based action', 'empowerment' and their varied interpretations have also been transforming the discourses, frameworks and practices of development.⁷ In the context of globalization and resurgence of grass-roots movements, conventional development strategies are giving way to more

participatory approaches that are recognizing the involvement of those who have suffered systematic and systemic inequalities and deprivations as 'partners' in development. This paradigmatic shift towards participatory development appears to offer prospects of giving everyone who has a stake a voice and a choice. In reality, the legacy of a highly unequal and hierarchical society, the embedded notions of gender and power and the ideology of male superiority affects women's options to intervene in discussions or participate in any decision-making process.⁸

Martha C. Nussbaum⁹ defends a liberal feminist position, even as she displays sensitivity to cultural differences and religious liberty, when she stresses that there should be an ethical consensus around ideas of human dignity. She maintains that it is the prerogative of people to sustain a religious view or any cultural outlook that gives their life meaning, but respecting the freedom of religion should not grant a select number of religious leaders "limitless license to perpetuate human misery".¹⁰ In her book *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, she lists various "central human capabilities" that members of any particular culture ought to possess, that is, "what a person is in a position to do and be". She identifies 10 of these capabilities as essential to human dignity – those that ascertain the "threshold level of capabilities beneath which truly human functioning is not available".

Gender, Media and Participatory Development

The two powerful movements of gender and of participation discussed in the previous sections are seeking to appropriate communication avenues, and specifically media, for the advancement and empowerment of women especially at the grass-roots level. In this section we seek to contextualize the use of democratized communication spaces and community media by women for identity articulation and as counter-hegemony to the patriarchal structures of the media as well as the negative forces of media globalization.¹¹ There is an increasing consensus amongst communication and feminist scholars and organizations that media and new technologies of communication, informed by a gender perspective, have an immense potential to strategically promote agendas that advance the status of women in society and support women's empowerment.

Women's media concerns and the role communication technologies can play in enhancing gender equality and equity have been debated in several international conventions of women working in the information and communication sector. Pilar Riano¹² argues that feminist scholars and media campaigners have, in the last two decades, raised issues of lack of women's representation in communication channels including news and current affairs and of sexist portrayal of women in mainstream media. They have also highlighted the disadvantageous position of women with respect to access and control of communication technologies. Feminist

³ Abbot, Dina (1997). "Who Else Will Support Us? How Poor Women Organize the Unorganizable in India," In *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 3, July. SinghaRoy, D.K (2001). (ed.) *Social Development and the Empowerment of Marginalized Groups: Perspectives and Strategies*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

⁴ Blumberg, Rae Lesser (1989) *Toward a Feminist Theory of Development*, In Wallace, Ruth A. (ed) *Feminism and Sociological Theory*. Newbury Park/London: Sage Publications. Melkote, S.R. and Steeves, H.L. (2001). *Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory and Practice for empowerment*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

⁵ Bhasin, Kamla (2000). *Understanding Gender*, New Delhi: Kali for Women. Humble, Morag (1998). "Assessing PRA for implementing Gender and Development" In Guijt, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah (eds.), *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

⁶ Humble, Morag (1998). "Assessing PRA for implementing Gender and Development" In Guijt, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah (eds.), *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications. Melkote, S.R. and Steeves, H.L. (2001). *Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory and Practice for Empowerment*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

⁷ Chambers, Robert (1997). *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat. Guijt, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah (1998). "Waking up to power, conflict and process," In Guijt, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah (eds.), *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications. Parpart, Jane L., M. Patricia Connelly, and V. Eudine Barribeau (2000). "Feminism and Development: Theoretical Perspectives," In *Theoretical Perspectives On Gender And Development*, Ottawa, Canada: International Development Research Centre.

⁸ Cornwall, Andrea (2000). "Making a Difference? Gender and Participatory Development," University of Sussex: Institute of Development Studies, Discussion Paper 378.

⁹ Nussbaum (2005) Date: 06/02/2005: <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2005/02/06/stories/2005020600490300.htm>

¹⁰ Nussbaum, Martha. (2000). *Women and Human Development: the Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Pavarala, Vinod and Malik, Kanchan K. (2002). "Civil Society Responses to Media Globalization: A Study of Community Radio Initiatives in India," *Social Action*, vol.52, no.1, January-March 2002, pp 74-88.

¹² Riano, P. (ed.) (1994). *Women in Grassroots Communication*. USA/UK/India: Sage Publications.

works in communication studies have confirmed that women's role as "communicative subjects and producers of communication" is still being disregarded in mainstream media. She further indicates that all these demands for women's equity in representation and against negative portrayal have not been met with far-reaching changes in communication policy or the structures of media industries. The situation has worsened due to the unrestricted operations of transnational media enterprises.

But Riano and a growing school of scholars and practitioners feel that the gender specialists attending international conferences and focusing on publications and presentations have ignored the contribution being made to democratization of communication by women's social movements. These movements are involved in building new communication alternatives for change at the grass-roots level.¹³ A significant contribution is being made to the gender and communication movement by the growing numbers of coalitions at the grass-roots level that are constructing democratic "we" spaces for women to develop their own narratives, "voice their concerns, name who they are, share and build projects of change."¹⁴ Women, through interpersonal communication networks and as bare-foot journalists, independent film makers, alternative press owners, community radio reporters, process video producers, radical song writers, people's theatre activists, communication facilitators and participatory researchers are organizing themselves across differences or around the commonalities of gender, class, caste and culture as subjects of struggle and transformation.¹⁵

Riano provides a typology of women's participation in communication based on various analytical frameworks that address the relationship among women, participation and communication. This typology (See Table 1) identifies the principles and approaches of four basic frameworks, that is, development communication (women as subjects of information); participatory communication (women as participants); alternative communication (women as subjects of change); and feminist communication (women as producers of meaning). Riano clarifies that all these types of communication have been used by women's groups to achieve their development goals. Development communication and, to some extent, participatory communication frameworks seek consent and support and are adopted by the State and development institutions. Alternative communication and feminist communication identify with social movements and respond to the logic of social projects that seek out shared reality and new culture for all aspects of life.

Riano's typology takes into account distinct interpretations of 'participation' and the differences in 'perceptions of women', 'goals', 'societal contexts' and conceptions of 'empowerment' that distinguish each of the four frameworks and introduce us to the message development processes in the four types of communication. This typology offers researchers a reference framework to connect the observations, experiences and responses emerging in the field to

¹³ Nair, K. and White, S. (1987). "Participation is the key to Development Communication," in Media and Development, 3. Riano, P. (ed.) (1994). *Women in Grassroots Communication*. USA/UK/India: Sage Publications. Kidd, D. (1992). "Alternate Media, Critical Consciousness And Action: The Beginnings Of A Conversation About Women And Grassroots Media," Unpublished manuscript. Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada. Guijt, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah (1998). "Waking up to power, conflict and process," In Guijt, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah (eds.), *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

¹⁴ Riano, P. (ed.) (1994). *Women in Grassroots Communication*. USA/UK/India: Sage Publications.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Table 1. Typology of Women, Participation and Communication*

Type	Perception of Women	Objectives	Societal Context	Empowerment	Communication Process
Development Communication	As subjects of information originating from outside the control of the community	To encourage women to change certain key practices, elicit active support, mobilize community	National/international development projects; development-support communication agenda, extension work, social marketing	Little scope for strategies aimed at empowering people to control the programmes; through acquiring information	One way; people do not use communication equipment or formulate messages; media act as loudspeakers to reinforce project messages
Participatory Communication	As participants in development, leading to self-reliance	To enable women to take control of their own lives, develop confidence through learning, encourage socio-cultural change, influence public policies	Critique of diffusionist and one-way models of development, participatory approaches to development, policy-making	Process through which individuals acquire knowledge, and skills to take control of their lives, capacity to benefit from involvement	Interface of top-down and bottom-up information flow; participatory message development
Alternative Communication	As subjects of struggle and change	To support social struggles, awaken women's consciousness to their subordination, advocate and defend rights, promote group reflection and popular communication	Development of alternatives to commercial media and to one-way communication system, social movements	Developing individual and collective capacities to struggle for rights and impact change	Multidimensional, cyclical flow of messages, alternative communication strategies based on community access to media production and decision-making
Feminist Communication	As producers of meaning	To speak about gender, race, class and other oppressions, negotiate fair representations and equal participation, build identity, produce alternative meanings	Feminist politics and advocacy; formation of independent women's communication networks, grass-roots communication alternatives	Involves the transformation of women as social subjects of struggle and as active producers of meaning, breaking silence	Communication as exchange, networks of meanings and development of messages as a project of naming their own experiences and identities

*Adapted from Riano, 1994a.

the discourses originating in development, communication and feminist scholarship with a view to evaluate gender as an analytical dimension in grass-roots communication initiatives.

Community Media for Empowerment: the Gender Dimension

Gender is a significant dimension in community radio and participatory video initiatives launched by community-based organizations that seek to deploy communication technologies for social change, in general, and empowerment of women, in particular. Three of the five community media initiatives discussed here carry out their developmental activities through women-only self-help groups. Women in these organizations use community media to talk about their issues and concerns and to augment their own developmental activities. Community media help build the capacities of discursive interaction of women and also their media competencies. Equipped with the confidence that their voices and lived experiences would not be disregarded, more and more women are participating in producing programmes that are locally relevant and gender sensitive.

The DDS, an NGO working with poor, rural, *dalit*¹⁶ women in the Pastapur area of Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, set up a community radio station over a decade ago with assistance from UNESCO. A couple of young *dalit* women from the area produce programmes and manage the station. As their request for a license to broadcast has not yet been acceded, the DDS women take the audiotapes of their programmes for narrowcasting in the villages. DDS started its participatory video initiative in 1998 by training about 10 non-literate and poor women. These women are now producing programmes pertaining to local problems and indigenous farming practices, which would never have been accommodated in the mainstream media. The video women of Pastapur have traveled to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka and shared their technological aptitudes, farming practices and other concerns with NGOs and marginalized women there.

The KMVS in Gujarat operates on a different model of community radio from that of the above initiative. The organization built on its long presence in the area of doing development work with women and trained some of them to be community reporters for a radio programme. In 1999 the group started airing a 30-minute programme made by them in the Kutchi language on All India Radio's¹⁷ Bhuj station by purchasing a commercial slot and they are still on air with new innovative programming like *Kutch Log Ji Bani* (The Voice of Kutch, henceforth abbreviated as KLJB). Broadly modeled after the KMVS project, *Chala Ho Gaon Mein* (Let's go to the Village) is a community radio programme supported by the National Foundation for India and produced by community representatives of the NGO, AID.¹⁸ The programme is broadcast once a week on All India Radio, Daltonganj, in the Palamau district of Jharkhand. The Bangalore-based media advocacy group, Voices, started an audio production centre, *Namma Dhwani* (Our Voice) in 2001 at Budikote in the Kolar district of Karnataka and has been narrowcasting programmes made by rural men and women trained in the basics of radio production.

¹⁶ Castes considered as lowest in the traditional social hierarchy in India.

¹⁷ India's National Public Service Broadcaster.

¹⁸ Pavarala, Vinod (2003). "Building Solidarities: A Case of Community Radio in Jharkhand," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 May.

SEWA, as the name suggests, is an organization that works with poor self-employed women in the unorganized labour sector. SEWA has its headquarters in Ahmedabad and operates through cooperatives and *sangathans* (collectives) at the village level. SEWA trained about 20 women to start the video initiative in 1984. It is aimed at building communication capacities of women that help enhance their self-esteem and produce programmes that would benefit other women in their community so that they can be self-employed. Presented here are some of our findings based on comprehensive case studies of these initiatives and an analysis of the responses collected by us through focus group discussions and interviews with women engaged in community media production and reception.

Reception of the Programmes

KMVS and AID community radio programmes are aired through the local All India Radio station on fixed days and at a particular time. The habit of group listening by men with friends or neighbours, as well as the domestic division of labour, ensures that women are rarely able to get an environment conducive for listening to radio at home. As a result, many women said that they were not able to listen to the community radio broadcast attentively and during the focus group discussions it was obvious that this has not only affected their ability to recall the content of the programme, but it has also rendered them incapable of stating any benefits from the programmes. Women wish to be regular radio listeners and do listen to radio "when men are not around", the preferences of programmes being *bhajans*¹⁹ and folk songs. Women confess that they do not listen attentively to community radio programmes, "*roti banate hue sunte hain*" (we listen while we cook) and even if they do listen, they forget what was said, "*yaad nahin rahata*," (we forget) some attributing it to the fact that they are uneducated. One woman said that they would start listening only when there is some benefit to the village.

There are exceptions to the above cases among women who are keenly involved in *mahila mandal* or *sangathan* (women's collectives) activities or those who have participated either in the programmes or in the panchayats (local self-governing bodies). Many women interviewed for the study felt that women's groups or collectives in the village provide a more conducive environment for reception of radio and also for video. A woman in a SEWA village frankly stated that for suitable reception of the programmes produced by the video women, two TV sets must be used, otherwise the physical spaces are monopolized by men. The cultural constraints on women make it almost impossible for them to sit in the midst of all the men and watch the programme attentively. In DDS villages, the supervisors of the women *sanghams* (self-help groups) carry audiotapes of programmes produced by their women and play it on cassette players in the monthly meeting. This listening session is followed by discussions and the feedback is carried back to the radio committee which then takes necessary action to produce new content and improve programming.

Women in the village of Raipally (DDS) find those programmes useful that give information specific to their agricultural needs and about indigenous knowledge systems, health and hygiene, food security, gender justice and the narrative traditions of song and drama.

¹⁹ Devotional songs.

"We are illiterate and poor people. We cannot follow writing material. We thought it is better to listen to these programmes and learn more about issues that affect our lives so intimately."

At Rajhara village (AID), Sonamati, an articulate middle-aged woman, who was involved in *van samitis* (forest protection committees), was enthusiastic about the role of the radio programme in various development efforts in the region. She represents for us the potential for building the participation of women in radio production where there is some amount of prior mobilization and conscientization of women. Listenership among women also seems to be tied to their participation in programme production – in discussions, drama, folk songs, etc. Older women seemed alienated from the radio programme while younger women in Jharkhand demonstrated high recall and insisted that the community radio programme has many benefits. Most women identified with the language as it gave them a feeling that programmes were their own and as it talked about their daily problems and issues.

Degree of Participation in Programme Production

Perhaps, the one aspect that all community media initiatives can boast of is their team of community radio reporters and video makers. Significant capacity building efforts have enhanced the abilities of these rural women who have negligible exposure to media production prior to their involvement in these projects. 'General' Narsamma of Pastapur village in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh and Mangala Gowri of Budikote in Kolar District of Karnataka are young, rural women, matriculate, and belonging to poor daily-wage earner families. Over the years, they have joined *sanghams/sanghas* (self-help groups) and have been trained in radio production as part of the community radio initiatives by these groups. Shy and hesitant once upon a time, today they proficiently manage audio studios in their villages along with a few other women and volunteers, and produce programmes in the local dialect that they feel would "benefit their community". 'General' and Mangala carry out programme planning, and recording, and doing voiceovers, mixing, editing and production of programmes.²⁰

Vijayaben, a middle-aged woman with formal education till class four, who covers the Mohaldi and Abdasa talukas for the KMVS community radio programme explains how she had attended workshops on conscientization, confidence-building and technical training and also one on the art of seeking *mahiti* (information) and community participation. She and her fellow reporters are aware that theirs is a *bhagidari wala radio* (participatory radio) and that they have to go to the people unlike All India Radio that asks people to come to its studio for recordings all the time. Most KMVS reporters, whether it is an unmarried Muslim or Patel woman or a housewife from a conservative family, had never dreamt of working, as it was not the common practice in their communities. Now, they are not afraid even to question *sarkari* (government) officials. Shilwanti Biranchi, the dynamic reporter at Bhalmanda village in Jharkhand, says that she made her own family members participate in plays and other programmes for *Chala Ho Gaon Mein* before others could be convinced that it was not only useful, but could also be fun. Surendra Thakur, the AID reporter for Harsangra village, among others, narrated his experiences with mobilizing women's participation in radio plays:

"Recording a radio drama involves a lot of practice and rehearsals. Some plays require women to play the roles of wives. They would say 'how can we become some strange man's wife' and hesitate to come forward to take on such roles. So we persuaded women members (*didi log*) of our own group to take the lead and show the other women that there is nothing wrong. Gradually some women started feeling that if this programme is being made for the good of our village, then they too should participate."

Many women felt that participation could be further enhanced in programme production if the amount of woman-centred programming on issues such as, dowry, child marriage, literacy, reproductive health, etc., was increased and women other than the reporters were given opportunities to participate in discussions. Twenty one-year-old Sanjukta Devi, who is an active member of the self-help group in village Cheri (AID), states,

"We women were earlier very inhibited. When the men used to sit outside for discussions, we used to sit inside. Today, after this programme, we feel we too have a voice and are confident to come out of the house to even take part in processions."

Management, Control and Ownership

P.V. Satheesh, Director, DDS, says,

"For us, a community radio is total control of the communities over the radio. And that includes everything, it includes the language, it includes the format, it includes the expression and entire sequence of what will come there."

He recalls the answer that the women gave when they rejected the offer of a slot on All India Radio to air their programmes. They said,

"Look, that is a kind of a continuous chain of broadcast and within that they will give us a particular position. And we don't know what comes before that and what comes after that. Like for example, we are all talking about organic agriculture and may be there is a pesticide advertisement before that and then our organic agriculture comes, after that somebody from an agricultural university may give a talk about hybrid seeds. So, we don't want our programmes to be positioned in a radio channel where that positioning may be very awkward for us."

He quotes Chilukapalli Anasuyamma from Pastapur, a 30-year-old single non-literate *dalit* woman, when asked to suggest what we could do with our own radio,

"In our *sanghams* (village associations of *dalit* women), we are carrying on a number of tasks that used to be done by men. Our men are doing a

²⁰ Kumar, Kanchan (2004). "Community Radio Waiting to go On Air," In *Grassroots* Vol 5, No. 2, February.

number of tasks which were only being preserved for women. This way we have been able to erase the boundaries between man's work and woman's work.

The mainstream radio is still steeped in traditional gender roles. If we depend on it, we have to go back in time. All that we have done in our *sanghams* will come to a nought. If we have our own radio it can help us continue this progress we have made on gender issues."

Although the radio reporters of Bhuj and the community radio representatives of Palamau have negotiated with the contemporary State policy for airing their programmes, their voices harmonize with those in Budhikote and Pastapur for demanding a radio of their own. All of them believe that to deploy radio as a tool of empowerment, the participation of people is not enough. The ownership, control and management of the radio station must be in the hands of the community for it to function as an autonomous media space, open to the need for self-expression by the socially and culturally marginalized sections of society, especially women. The media unit of KMVS that wholly handles its community radio production, though centralized at Bhuj headquarters, aims at being a training ground for community radio reporters to equip them to start media activity for *sangathans* in their respective villages. The DDS Community Media Trust has eight radio and video women as trustees and its preamble reads that it was formed, "in fulfilment of the wishes of thousands of women from DDS *sanghams* who wish to have their unrecognized voices heard and recognized by the world outside." SEWA's video initiative is now a cooperative with women as the controlling executives.

Addressing Women's Issues and Forging Solidarities

Identifying KMVS community radio broadcasts as the only programmes that talk of their problems, most women respondents in the villages of Kutch had a good recollection of issues like water, panchayat, literacy, alcoholism, mid-day meal, problem of doctors, mid-wife, etc., taken up in KLJB. Everyone mentioned *pardafash*, the investigative journalism segment of KLJB, and were all praise for its efforts to expose corrupt practices of the officials. Says P.V. Sathesh,

"DDS recognizes that people have more knowledge than we have credited them with, and more appropriate technologies than we can think of. Therefore, the DDS programmes have evolved into three principles: gender justice, environmental-soundness and people's knowledge."

According to 'General', the programming content of the station seeks to serve the information, education and cultural needs of the women in the region and includes themes like agricultural needs of semi-arid regions, public health and hygiene, environmental and ecological issues, biodiversity and food security, and local/indigenous knowledge systems and local cultures, with emphasis on the narrative traditions of song and drama.

The DDS video experiment was launched to train women to communicate their problems, raise their issues and find solutions through video. Women have not only been making films

for themselves, but also for some mainstream television channels such as Doordarshan and Eenadu TV. Shakuntala (DDS) explains,

"This is our video. We make programmes on our lives and on issues affecting our lives – agriculture, animal husbandry, health, playschools, etc."

DDS women, using video as an alternative to the writing medium, made a comparative study between BT and non-BT cotton²¹ grown in their Telangana area. This video was widely acclaimed and was dubbed in English and French. Non-literate women are thus recognizing the potential of video as an alternative tool for research and documentation.

Mollamma, a *dalit* video woman (DDS), recalls,

"When we started using the video, the men folk at home and in the village laughed at us. But when we started playing back our finished programmes and they were aired on Doordarshan and ETV, they started recognizing our potentials and respecting us. Today when we go to field for shooting, men come forward to facilitate our work by carrying the tripod and other accessories."

Kavita, another video woman, adds,

"If we are shooting and go home late in the night, our men now look after the kids, feed them, and put them to bed."

Humnapur Laxmamma, a senior video woman, narrates her experience at the Patel's (upper cast landlord) residence to elucidate the change in status that she perceived after being trained as a media producer,

"One day we decided to make a video on the Dassara festival rituals. We contacted the local Patel and asked him if we could shoot the Dassara rituals at his house. To our surprise, he instantly welcomed the proposition. We were taken into the *puja* room for shooting. You see, generally we *dalits* would not have access even into the main entrance of the houses of upper caste people. When we were shooting, the Patel was watching some TV programme, and the TV's audio was disturbing audio recording of prayer rituals. On bringing this to his notice, he immediately switched off the TV set and extended his cooperation for shooting whatever we wanted."

The community media projects have also contributed in creating awareness about social problems that perpetuate women's subordination to men. The tradition of *tilak/dahej* (dowry) is quite deeply rooted in the culture of the Jharkhand region and it is unrealistic to expect that

²¹ BT cotton is a variety of cotton that is genetically modified to make it pest resistant.

the AID radio programme would make a dent in this practice so soon. However, it is apparent that the programme has managed to put the issue so firmly on the agenda and that people are at least discussing the problem. Thirty-year-old Kamoda Devi, the only literate woman in the focus group we assembled in Bhalmanda village (AID), hoped that the programme would make a difference,

"If I take dowry for my son now, I will realize the problem later when my son has a daughter and he has to give dowry. So it is important to stop this practice. If this can be done through the programme, it will be good for society."

Adolescent girls at the Nawadih village (AID) also condemned the practice as a blot on society and hoped that the radio programme can address the issue. Many people during focus group discussions demonstrated considerable recall of major issues such as alcoholism, dowry problem, superstition, bribery, literacy and child marriage on which programmes had been made. The fact that many came up with an inventory of additional issues, on which radio programmes should be made, shows that people have tremendous faith in the medium to solve their problems. At village Cheri (AID), 19-year-old Chintamani said confidently that the *Chala Ho Gaon Mein* programme was already beginning to make a difference in the thinking of women about the need for collective action,

"Prior to the radio programme, we girls were never even allowed to go outside the home, leave alone participate in meetings. After this programme started, we got together and formed a young women's group. Now we all sing together, attend meetings, and discuss issues. A lot of change has come in our attitudes."

Surendra Thakur, one of the community reporters, offered an example of a specific outcome of *Chala Ho Gaon Mein* in the area of gender equity:

"Before this radio programme started, people used to send only their sons to school and make their daughters work at home. However, after this programme started talking about treating sons and daughters equally, many parents came forward and, with our help, enrolled their daughters in school."

The Video SEWA team produces programmes for the overall development of women, says Manjulaben, a video woman,

"We make programmes on agriculture, animal husbandry, savings, insurance, embroidery, watershed development, drinking water, and labour issues related to women."

Nelamben Dave, Coordinator, Video SEWA project, explains,

"Before women came to SEWA, their capacities were low. They would not even utter the names of their husbands. Basic video training, self-evaluation and the confidence that they could also speak, be seen, and heard on video transformed their image of themselves and today they are a picture of self-worth."

Conclusion

Community media initiatives, such as those discussed here, perceive women as producers and contributors of media content and not solely as 'consumers'. Community media thus encourage greater involvement of women in the technical, decision-making, and agenda-setting activities and have the potential to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. The programmes of community radio and participatory video production have enabled women to radically change accepted 'media languages' by providing them with a space and a process for expressing ideas and issues linked to their unique experiences. Women are central to development and women's media production competencies help them develop their capacities as socio-political actors and spearhead popular movements. They help in activating women's alternatives for fostering social change by building capacities of discursive interaction for collective action. For women media producers, the first tough task is to adequately address the concerns of their own village/community and have a "*pahchan*" (identity) that imparts faith in other women, highlights the potential of the medium to bring about *sudhar* (improvement) and prompts them to participate in media activities.

Community radio may be seen as providing an arena outside the State apparatus to women that may be used as a potent instrument for democratic deliberations and negotiations. For those who have traditionally been unacknowledged and silenced, socially and culturally, the opportunity to have one's voice heard can be a very strong experience of self-worth. In Bell Hooks²² words:

"Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech of "talking back", that is no mere gesture of empty words that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice."

²² Hooks, Bell (1989). *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Boston, MA: South End Press. p 9.