

Depicting and Enhancing Women Media's Role in Social Transformation and Action

by Tess Raposas¹

Townsville International Women's Conference - AUSTRALIA



3 - 7 July 2002 ~ James Cook University
"Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights:
...Setting a Global Agenda"

This international conference is for all who care passionately about improving women's position in the world, who demand justice and full human rights for women everywhere and who believe that a feminist analysis is essential to defining a fairer globalised world.

¹ Tess Raposas is a freelance writer/journalist in the Philippines. She is also a gender and development and media and development consultant.

Depicting and Enhancing Women Media's Role in Social Transformation and Action by Tess Raposas¹

Introduction

My topic as you can see has a broad scope and because of this, I shall focus the depiction of women media in two episodes: The EDSA Revolutions in the Philippines and the 9-11 incident. Later on, I will move on to possible collaboration points between media practitioners and social development advocates.

Virginia Woolf's statement carries with it a principle that any woman journalist, and any woman for that matter, will surely identify with. It was a firebrand statement that has made a prominent space among feminist activists. She said, "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world. This cry for a globalized agenda of causes also made its way to the hearts and minds of many women media practitioners. This is not to say however that the local agenda is not carried out just as well. Thus the adage, "Think globally, Act locally."

This paper will try to depict women media's role using the two episodes as examples, and will try to bring to fore recommendations for a more effective role of gender-oriented media institutions in advancing women and development efforts worldwide.

Media as the 4th State

The watchdog function of the press as the Fourth Estate is premised on the need for citizens to have enough information, as well as to make a range of choices for them in a supposedly "free market of ideas". This function is discharged through critical reporting, providing citizens the information they need to form opinions and to make intelligent decisions on public issues. Professional issues in media include adequacy of coverage, accuracy, contextualization, fairness, balance, documentation, and backgrounding while ethical issues include sensationalism, corruption, trial by publicity, and invasion of privacy with different variations and gradations in each country.

In conflict situations between communities or countries throughout the world, issues tend to gravitate towards risks to life, restriction of movements and mobility, news black-out, and other blatant human rights violations. A photojournalist cited an instance where members of the international press were shot and held at gunpoint and prevented from taking any photographs of footage and it was described as a situation where "we

¹ Tess Raposas is a freelance writer/journalist in the Philippines. She is also a gender and development and media and development consultant.

don't have reporters who have studied military, or are even physically fit enough to defend themselves in these critical times ”.

There were also cases of kidnappings where journalists were held at ransom and were used as messengers, not on their own volition, to transmit messages. These threats, restrictions, and violations in covering conflict situations apply to both men and women members of the press even if admittedly, there are more restrictions imposed on women, some of these, self-imposed.

The Case of the EDSA Revolutions

There have been 2 EDSA Revolutions in the Philippines (ouster of Marcos, and Estrada). The supposedly EDSA 3 is not legitimate considering that those who staged it, are believed to have received money from ousted president and subject of an impeachment case, Joseph Estrada. It was a foiled attempt to save Estrada's neck.

The first EDSA Revolution has not been extensively covered by media because of the restricted press during Marcos' time. Thus the limited media coverage. It was during the EDSA 2 Revolution (ouster of Estrada) where media has more democratic space and freedom in reportage. This ushered in to an equally significant participation among women media practitioners in the reportage of the events. Investigative reporting that precipitated the EDSA 2 uprising was crucial in raising public consciousness about presidential excesses and in providing the initial evidence of the impeachment charges and Estrada's eventual ouster.

Public affairs programs that exposed Estrada enjoyed unprecedented viewership, while news and magazine formats that were found more credible were those that aired exposes. The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) reported about Estrada's unexplained wealth. The Pinoy Times, a paper created for the purpose of exposing Extrada was a publishing phenomenon. After the EDSA 2 Revolution, Pinoy Times folded up as if to say, it's mission has been accomplished and so there is no need to continue its publication. The PCIJ reported that the Philippine press educated and informed the public about the government's abuse of power. Papers and periodicals provided analysis and commentaries. The press made the presidency a subject of public scrutiny.

Women media practitioners reported and wrote about stories that triggered the EDSA 2 uprising. They covered events as they happened and monitored developments. Luz Rimban of the PCIJ together with Mike Leonen of Business World received a media award for their investigative story on Estrada's wealth that did cast a shadow of doubt on the decency of the presidency.

During a rally of Estrada supporters, Connie Sison of the TV network ABS-CBN was reported to have crawled under a wire fence to escape an angry mob. This exemplifies some of the threats and physical harm that women media practitioners are

faced with. Violent rallies are hazards that come with the job. One media practitioner recounted how as an aftermath of the EDSA 2 Revolution, pro Estrada ralliers clashed with anti-riot policemen. Many reporters and photographers were caught in the crossfire. They were mistaken to be members of the demonstrating crowd and were chased and clubbed by anti-riot policemen. In the dispersal operation, they were also targets of teargas or Molotov bomb explosions. There were also cases of looting and overturning their vehicles and setting these on fire.

Ed Lingao, an Executive Producer of a TV network posed a question directed to both women and men journalists which came out in the Newsbreak magazine. “Is a story a story because it was convenient for journalists to get the facts? Does it become a non-story the moment the coverage gets uncomfortable? If that were the case, it would be easier to rationalize the failure of some journalists to cover rallies, mass actions, riots, war tragedies, and every event that cuts deep into the human soul and lies there buried and unrecognized. Footage of a wide-eyed child staring from the middle of a bomb crater speaks more of the horrors of war than a luncheon press conference by all the ulama in the country. Would you rather cover the ulama?” he asks.

For Ed and the many journalists in the country, a story is a story because of its news value and the importance it has on our daily lives. “It is not a story because it is more comfortable and safer to cover. Otherwise, let’s just sit on our butts and surf the net and hope that we get more reliable gossips.” Ed contends.

In the case of the EDSA Revolutions, women journalists didn’t just sit on their butts (and when can a woman ever?). They are covering the stories and they didn’t have to be in war zones to produce meaningful and life-altering stories. Still many of them would rather not subscribe to the ideology and reasoning of war. Meanwhile, there are stories to cover and the calling of the profession prods their presence in battlefields. It is a dilemma for many of them to be there and yet despise what’s taking place at the same time. Because they don’t make wars. They and the children are in fact most often the victims in war. It is they who gets raped and mutilated in the name of destructive aggression.

The Philippine media environment

The media environment in the Philippines is conducive to investigative reporting because we have a relatively free press. This makes for a healthy competition in the industry and could be used as a leverage to raise the standards of journalism.

But there are also constraints. There is the lack of editorial support and incentives, the lack of skills training, to name just a few. These can be addressed if there is greater understanding of the situation by editors and publishers.

A media survey report noted that the EDSA revolutions were also opportunities for consolidation. Some publishers and network managers became more open to

innovative approaches in reporting and the readers became more and more critical to news reporting. This also accounts for the growing number of women joining the profession.

This is not to say that women in the profession enjoy the same status as their male counterpart. There is a lot of changing to be done. Journalism is by and large still a predominantly patriarchal field with male bosses dominating the profession and women practitioners are discriminated in a large number of ways. Low wages, marginalization, unfair labor practices, and sexual harassment are only some of the issues that confront the women members of the press. But with much effort, and in the right direction, we are hopefully getting there.

The 9-11 tragedy

The 9-11 tragedy introduced dramatic changes to media reportage. CNN Reporter Maria Raesi was quoted as saying “new themes of reportage have come afore and those unheard are now speaking”.

“Terrorism” and media as new area of journalistic concern became a more conscious reference for many practitioners. There is a quotation mark in the word terrorism because there is no universal definition of the term yet and as such, we can categorically say its universal acceptance as a term is at question. Furthermore, it has been introduced as a subject of debate by a significant segment of society. I shall however use it in this article for want of an alternative term.

Terrorism reporting is a recently introduced beat for coverages although there has been no sustained program on it that may be noted so far. Other practitioners speak of terrorism as a threat to democratic processes because of censorship, and dangers to lives. Many of the media people kidnapped while on assignment are women. The media is known as a powerful force in confrontations between those believed to be terrorist groups and governments of countries and hence is a key instrument in addressing terrorism as a problem.

A good number of journalistic coverages in the 9-11 incident were works of women. One of the more notable works was that of Nancy Gibbs which came out in the September 11 Special issue of the Time Magazine. Notable is the fact that while women have rigorously reported on the incident, many of them have also become peace advocates.

Robin Morgan, editor-in-chief of the former Ms. Magazine wrote about the relationship of media and terrorism and how some things get buried somewhere and are not reported. She said and I quote, “probably your TV coverage shows the chain-link fences aflutter with yellow ribbons, the makeshift shrines of candles, flowers, scribbled notes of mourning or of praise for the rescue workers that have sprung up everywhere especially in front of the firehouses, police stations, hospitals. What TV doesn’t show you

is that near the Ground Zero, the streets for blocks around are still, a week later, adrift in bits of paper-singed, torn sodden pages: stock reports, trading print-outs, shreds of appointment calendars, half of “To Do list”. What TV doesn’t show you are scores of tiny charred corpses now swept into the gutters. Sparrows, Finches. They fly higher than pigeons, so they would have exploded outward, caught midair in a rush of flame, wings on fire as they fell. Who could have imagined it: the birds were burning.” This scenario of course can be said of all war situations in any part of the world. That’s why, we all must and should say no to war and all forms of violence.

It’s not easy to talk about the 9-11 without striking a lot of raw nerves because of its heavy impact on lives of people worldwide and on the global economy. But Morgan’s writing to advocate piece was an exercise in caution and is not indiscriminate in its reportage.

Morgan describes the ensuing actions. “The sirens have lessened. But the drums have started. Funeral drums. War drums. The Justice department is seeking increased authority for wider surveillance, broader detention powers, more wiretapping of persons, and stringent press restrictions on military reporting. Petitions worldwide have begun for justice not vengeance, for reasoned response and against escalating retaliatory violence. For vigilance about civil liberties. For the rights of innocent Muslims throughout the world, for bombing Afghanistan not with firepower but with something that could help them.”

Morgan also underscored the importance of media work to get campaigns and messages across. “Those of us who have access to the media have been trying to get a different voice but ours are complete messages with long term solutions – and this is a moment when people yearn for simplicity and short term. Still, I urge all of you to write letters to the editors of newspapers, call in to talk radio shows, and for those of you who have media access as activists, community leaders, elected or appointed officials, academic experts, whatever it is that you do, get to as many interviews and TV programs as you can. Use the tool of the internet. Talk about the root causes of terrorism, about the need to diminish or eliminate this daily climate of patriarchal violence surrounding us in its state-sanctioned normalcy, the need to arouse empathy for others, the need to eliminate hideous economic and political injustices, the need to comprehend that violence differs in degree but is related in kind, that it thrives along a spectrum.”

Through all the accounts of women members of the media, it is clear that there is restricted access to war zones. We can only surmise on the extent of destruction that has been going on but surely what has been reported is meant to give us a glimpse of the actual magnitude of the situation.

The frequent advocacy line taken up by the women media is not about siding with anyone or any one group. It is about peace and respect for human life. Arudhati Roy, a media person and activist said, “We have the beauty of human civilization - our art, our music, our literature. The issue is not about what is good or evil, or Islam vs. Christianity as much as it is about space. About how to accommodate diversity, how to contain the

impulse towards hegemony – every kind of hegemony, economic, military, linguistic, religious, and cultural. Any ecologist will tell you how fragile monoculture is.”

Gains of women in media

Despite its limitations and weaknesses, media institutions can be our great allies. If only we provide each other enough access to information crucial to the work that we do and if we keep communication lines open. There is this seeming wall between media practitioners and their sources. At times, media is seen as indifferent to social causes if not using story opportunities to arrive at sensational pieces meant for profit and marketing leverage, rather than for social change and development.

Let us review this impression. After a number of development milestones for women such as the Beijing Conference, the Cairo Meeting, the CEDAW Declaration, and other international instruments, the media is hungry for good and empowering women and development stories. The Platform for Action approved during the 4th Conference on Women included a separate area of concern in Platform Section J and that is - that mass media and advertising organizations must be developed consistent with freedom of expression, professional guidelines, and codes of conduct to promote the presentation of nonstereotyped images of women.

The reality now among established international and national news institutions is that development stories is always a win-win story that often gets printed rather than sidelined. With the advent of public and civic journalism, journalists are more conscious of their codes of ethics and can no longer afford to take just the side of powerholders or powerbrokers. There is a widespread realization that anybody can be a good source of story and has as much right to be heard as the next person. The objective/subjective divide has ceased to be an issue of debate in development stories. Where one draws the line is the fact that we are women, mothers, residents of a locality, citizens of a country and the world before we are journalists. And where women’s human rights is threatened, or community or social advancement is at stake, we can be subjective if we must.

It is in fact a good number of women media practitioners who are at the helm of these development in media. In the Philippines for example, the Women’s Feature Service (WFS) was conceptualized by a woman and has a woman president. WFS is a news and feature service of views and analyses of women in their societies and their perception of local, national, and international developments. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR), an organization that monitors the mainstream media to raise the level of competency of practitioners is managed by a woman. Isis International is an all women team based in Manila that produces publications on women empowerment, while the Women’s Media Circle which has a woman activist behind its existence, is another media-based NGO in Manila that advocates for a better status of women in media. There are similar efforts in other countries but while many countries may be enjoying a free and democratic press environment, other countries are not that fortunate.

How then can we maximize the mainstream media as a tool for education and information and as such, a tool for women empowerment? Linking and coordinating with women advocates in media would certainly facilitate the spread of awareness raising and information dissemination as well as the promotion of non-stereotyped portrayal of women in media. It is sensible to organize press conferences and calls for action. This way, you can let the public know about your programs for a more effective call for advocacy. Keep a directory of media institutions and their staff, and identify your most devout allies in media, keep them in your directory and maintain the connection. Feel free to invite women media practitioners in your activities and not just in organized press conferences. You'll be surprised of the fervent response because they too want to be informed and updated on the trends and the course that social development is taking in different localities.

The Citizen's Bill of Journalism Rights emphasizes the need for a demonstrated effort among journalists to understand and reflect the whole community. This entails a broad presentation of views and values, of failures as well as successes, and for the public to expect relevant and proportional news.

For many women journalists, lobbying for women's rights and empowerment in their work is a given personal crusade. After all, women's issues and concerns are so much a part of their existence. So far, I have not heard of any opposition to women media practitioners who carry this advocacy line, not even to the few male journalists who also do. The whole world has legitimized the reality of gender issues, and who's complaining? (even if there are complaints, we can expect that some degree of futility in the discourse).

But there's so much to be done because recognition is not the be it and end all of our crusade. Victimization of women abound and the forms it's taking is getting more sinister, insidious, oppressive, and exploitative by the day - as long as women and children are easy targets for personal gains, sexual violence, war violence, discrimination and marginalization. Surely, women media practitioners have as much stake in this cause as the next self-proclaimed feminist activist around.

What media mileage is about

Media exposure is not about selling one's self or one's organization in so much as promoting ideas or campaigns that a group espouse. Media mileage could spell for you that much needed boost in a project or advocacy. In my country, it has helped topple two dictatorships and in many instances, any mass action without media coverage is bound to fail.

Let us however bear in mind that a certain readiness must be achieved on the part of those seeking media mileage and exposure. First, it would be helpful for your group to level-off on how a message may be effectively packaged for public consumption or your group ends up issuing different if not contrasting statements or stands. This is not in any way a semblance of fact-distortion. Far from that. There are many ways to package a

story but choose one that gets your audience's attention and support more effectively. Another tip is to be prepared of the outcome of going public. Make a scenario-setting and anticipate possible outcomes. Come up with a media plan that incorporates how to deal with possible results if possible.

Media is an outlet or tool for information. Going public is appealing in many cases. But media does not operate in a vacuum. It is a continuum that carries with it certain responsibilities. Some of the journalistic practice you could subscribe to include speaking off the record if you are not sure of going public (just so the media person you're talking to would get a clear picture of the story on hand). However, if you are torn between sharing some sensitive information to yourself and letting the public know about your identity, you can share the information but not be named by the journalist. These are only some of the practice that are observed in the field, and must be respected at all times. It is unethical professional practice and is a breach of trust to break it.

I do hope that I was able to contribute some input to a level of understanding that is hinged on the processes of the mainstream media and the concerns of women media practitioners. This could lead to the creation of a media plan on your part or identify collaboration points between your group and your local media outfits. That is if you don't already have one yet.

In behalf of women colleagues

On a final note, I would like to thank the many many impassioned women media practitioners (some of them I have mentioned in this paper), whose bodies of works serve as inspiration to others like myself. They are slowly but surely feminizing the mainstream media and introducing much needed practical and strategic reforms that are much needed in the field. I would also like to mention colleagues everywhere in the world who are at this time maybe collecting materials for their stories whether in air-conditioned offices or in the most inaccessible of locations just to be able to get to their news sources. I salute (not in the militaristic sense) your indomitable spirit in making your tiny bit of contribution to social change and development.

We all know how tension ridden this profession is, and are aware of the haywire that we live with everyday to feed an important story in our locality and to the world. We all know how our works are sometimes misunderstood. Yet, we understand the little pleasures we get when a small story makes such an important impact on a child's well being, a woman's life, a community's progress, or to world betterment and peace. And with every story, we all hope that the impact we create is always for the better not for the worse. These, despite the threats, the dangers that lurk in our work, our own personal struggles. Someday I'm going to embark on a survey – the average life span of a woman journalist. Well, you guessed the point right.

I have to stop here. Thank you for choosing to listen to my presentation. I feel so honored and privileged that you have to travel far and wide to have this exchange right

now. I hope you are not disappointed. Please feel free to make comments or ask questions.

(END)