

Responsible Reporting on Gender based issues in Media

A key note Address
at the Dept. of Forensic Medicine 'Faculty of Medicine
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Dear academics, students, media personals and friends,

I am very much happy to be here to share some thoughts on the topic we discuss today: 'Responsible reporting on gender issues on Media'. First of all I am thankful to Dr Jean Perera, my friend, who invited me to be a part of this panel.

This topic has been an increasingly important topic not only in Sri Lankan setting but also a global phenomenon in media studies as well as in medical sciences. Many research and studies have been conducted worldwide in exploring the nature of how media has been behaving and reporting gender related issues. As I know, there are two aspects in reporting gender related issues. One aspect of this topic is that when women are being subjected to gender related discrimination it has been identified that they are reluctant to report what has happened to them. In other words, women who have been exploited through gender violence, they are very much reluctant to talk about what has happened to them in public domains. The other factor is that when media report gender violence and gender related issues, it is evident that these reporting have been heavily charged with gender bias and patriarchal.

Let me first talk about the current situation on how women report gender violence and what key features we could identify in reporting gender issues in public. A research conducted and data collected from 280 women of 24 countries in 2004 – 2011 has demonstrated that in many developing countries including Africa and Asia, women are very much reluctant to report or talk about their experiences of gender violence issues. Tia Palermo et al argue that gender related issues are an increasingly developing global issue and have been producing serious health issues. Yet this tendency has never adequately been exposed or outspoken publicly (Palermo, T.. et al 2013, p. 602). This paper reveals that gender based violence (GBV) is increasingly becoming a global phenomenon. Further 30% of the ever-partnered women aged 15 years and older have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV). Due to these tendencies it has been identified many adversary health effects among women including sexually transmitted diseases, mental health issues, physical disability and so on. Palermo et al argue that there are three key reasons they have identified why women do not want to report what they have experienced in GBV. They are as follows: 1. The most common reason for not reporting gender based violence is 'embarrassment' (25% in Bolivia / 41% in Cambodia). 2. Second reason seems to be that 'there is no use in reporting (47% in Cameroon / 30% in Mali). 3. Third reason is 'violence is a common thing in life and women must bear them' to protect the well being of others, especially family).

What I have indicated here is a little summary of how women are actively engaged to speak out what they have experienced with their intimate partners. It is evident that reporting intimate partner violence and gender based violence are still being a hidden phenomenon in the global scale. Now it is my intension to briefly discuss about how media institutions take on these issues and report as a way of communicating gender based violence in the societies.

The second factor I want to talk about is related to how media report sensitive issues related to women's sexual and other exploitations. As we all know, today media is not all about radio or press. Media has been again an increasingly developing mode of communication and World Wide Web is at its utmost development we experience today. Once a new item is released onto the web, within a few seconds this new item is widespread among social media and beyond. Once a new item or a story is created and being released to the media it becomes a hot topic among various communities and further becomes a global news item. Even though this new item is created by a recognised new agency or a reporter in another stage this news item becomes a material for masses who could manipulate and make comments on it in various ways. Common masses have a hidden authority to edit or comment on the new item and at the end of the day this news item becomes a co-authored or multiple authored text. People could manipulate, change, interpret and further add their commentaries on a particular story they read and they become editors of the globally circulated new productions.

As I indicated above, sensitive media reporting on various matters related to women's sex abuse and harassments have been globally problematic due to these conditions. The media has been developing as global communication tools which is known as International communication (IC). However, the media that is operated in locally or globally has been a dominant opinion maker and these opinions have adversely affected on people's conceptions and the ways they behave. In Sri Lanka the role of the media is significant in creating public opinions whether they affect the public domains adversely or not. In general as I have observed, our media dominates male gaze and male supremacy in reporting news and other information. The majority of the media institutions and major media personals are male and their perspectives on certain issues and topics have been significantly male dominated and gender bias. What I mean by gender bias here? Let me explain this.

As we all know media institutions are operated on the basis of economic profit. Although theoretically we assume that media governs the state, in practice this is not that so. In developing countries such as Sri Lanka and other Asian countries, media has a less power to change public opinion as the state has a power and manipulatory hand of how and in what ways the media should work and behave. Thus media in our country has a hidden link between the government and their institutions. It is evident that owners of media are general supporters of existing governments and more or less they represent what the government wants them to say about them and others. Within this context my problem is how an individual reporter or a writer could maintain her/his own freedom to write and convey what they want. On the other hand, some media has been heavily controlled or censored by some regulatory bodies and they have a very limited access to the truth they want to bring out to the public. Furthermore one of the key issues pertaining to our media is that it is clearly demonstrated that news or media productions that have been produced are largely male dominant and patriarchy. What I mean by patriarchy. Let me explain this idea briefly.

People, male or female, who are working in media institutions, are knowingly or unknowingly been patriarchal which means they represent male dominant ideologies on certain issues and ideas they produce. I want to make this claim because over the past few decades, this has been the major issue in our media. Whether you are a female reporter, writer or a male writer, you are representing male dominant discourse prevailing in the public domains. As humans we are brought up within male dominant societies and our school

systems and other institutions have made us like that in order to represent patriarchal ideologies. As Simone De Bouvare stated many years back that “women are not borne they are produced”. V. Geetha, feminist writer argues that “the human body is schooled, acting, designing, expressing and controlling its movements in a certain way through a range of institutions and agents as well as ideas and beliefs” (Geetha, V., 2002, p. 105). Furthermore philosopher Michel Foucault also argues that these disciplinary institutions such as educational institutions, prisons, military institutions, and so on are the regulatory apparatuses in which human bodies are continually being trained and disciplined. It is clearly evident in our daily rhetoric that when we discuss about schooling, majority of the parent need their children to be disciplinary bodies as they always claim that we need to find good schools in which our kids are disciplined. In other sense, they say that “this school is very good because discipline is good”. But we rarely know what we mean by “discipline”. However what we do is that we let our kids be subjected bodies in certain ideological institutions where they are brought up through those value systems. When you translate these so called disciplinary regulations into gender what you get is nothing but norms of “male and female beauty, norms of sexuality, motherhood, and norms of control” (ibid, p. 106). Media personals who are working in our media and reporting gender based issues are the sons and daughters or the product of our educational systems. Therefore it is not an easy task to get rid of such ideological apparatuses within which their thinking and bodies are being trained and habituated.

Let me discuss about this idea of patriarchy within our social milieu. The idea of patriarchy is related to sexual politics. Sexual politics is the daily politics we perform in macro level to be able to relate and communicate with others. This macro politics may sometimes be visible in our behavioural patterns; in our speech acts and the ways we interact and engage with others. As Kate Millett points out, sexual politics is the most ‘pervasive ideology’ of our culture and further it provides the most fundamental form of ‘power’ (Millett, 1972, p. 24). As anthropologists argue our civilizations have been very much patriarchal. There are some glimpses of matriarchy in the history of civilization but scholars further argue that these matriarchy are simply ‘channel the power held by males through female descents’(ibid, p. 25). Let me quote Millet here once:

The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, medicine, political office and finance-in short every avenue of power within the society, [...] is entirely in male hands (Millett, 1972, p. 25).

Therefore as T. S. Eliot stated “our civilisation is ‘male manufacture’”. As Millett further observe there are two ways that the patriarchy functions in our societies: one mode seems to be that the ‘male should dominate female’ and secondly ‘elderly male should dominate younger’. If you take a look at our media institutions and how they function, you can clearly see how the power structures are set and operated within those institutions. This is also visible in our university institutions as male dominant administrations. Youngers being controlled by elders is also a prominent feature in educational settings. As such, patriarchal systems are in place in our institutions and we act according to the rules, norms and regulations imposed by those ideologies. These patriarchal operations are not visible to human eyes but one can observe its consequences through how human act in certain situations and how they talk and behave. Patriarchy is an ideology, an ideology which is a false consciousness created through institutional regimes and they are hidden within our cultural value systems. Those things we

identify as “cultural value systems” are mainly corresponding with those patriarchal systems governed in the society.

As I discussed so far, patriarchal setting in media operation is also a very much visible phenomenon. Thus media personal who work within those institutions cannot get rid of such values or norms but represent these value systems in their reporting and writing. This is the problem that we discuss today. If researchers have identified that majority of media reporting on gender issues are charged with male supremacy or female subjugation it is because these news items are produced by people who have been disciplined as male thinkers.

At this juncture, we could possibly think of how our media personals can be trained or educated towards gender sensitive reporting. First of all we need to think about the ways that our media institutions could be democratized and formed towards the better working atmospheres to be able to work independently. Furthermore, it is our challenge today to educate young journalists to be able to talk and write balanced story telling with gender sensitivity. As argued, early communication theorists such as Wilber Schramm and Daniel Lerner have convinced that developing countries could be moved towards modern societies through mass media developments. Furthermore world institutions such as UNESCO, World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) believed that providing infrastructure for developing countries to develop their mass media industries would increase their developments towards modern societies similar to other developed countries. But this is not the case. What happened in those under developed countries was that instead of transforming themselves as modern societies these societies have been transformed as westernised societies. Because these development strategies have been failed world leaders thought about alternative means to achieve their target by introducing local community participation in development process and so on. As a report released on ‘Gender Sensitive communication Plicies for women’s Development’ it is argues that

In the 1970s and 1980s countries including China, India, and Tanzania developed alternative development paradigms that recognized the use of cultural media to effectively meet communications efforts for development, particularly in rural areas. Alternative development communication widely used folk media that were seen as familiar, culturally sensitive, participatory, and cost-effective media to promote social change, adult literacy, population and health, women’ issues, and rural development (Prasad K., P. 75).

In this situation, we can learn a lot from Indian experiences about how we could bypass such discriminations and subjugations happening in media and elsewhere in our society through implementing different educational and legal frameworks allowing women and marginalised communities to represent and play a role in the media. In India, communication policies have been incorporated into national development policies, professional code of ethics, constitution and operational rules of particular communication institutions based on self-regulation by journalists (Ibid, p. 76). Further, India has implemented ‘National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001)’ focussing ‘on gender-sensitization measures through training personnel in the executive, legislative, and judicial wings of the state, with a special emphasis on policy and program framers, implementation and development agencies, law enforcement machinery and the judiciary, as well as nongovernmental organizations’ (ibid, p. 77). Hence these policy frameworks are in place to reduce the degrading and negative image of women and further use the media to uplift the human dignity. One point seems to be that you cannot make

changes in this field unless otherwise you allow women to take part and play key roles in media and policy desks. Therefore it is argued that if we really want to see changes in the current media and how they portray and report gender sensitive issues, it is needed that women are given equal opportunities and access in mass media. In this ways these kinds of policy changes encourage us to rethink about new code of conducts, professional guidelines, and other self regulatory mechanisms to remove gender stereotypes (ibid, p77).

Today our media envisage two types of womanhood in digital and social media. One is corresponding with the idea of 'archetypical, traditional womanhood. Secondly media assumes modernity and womanhood as modern. Our sisters and young adolescents in their daily life are forced to play such dichotomous roles in portraying womanhood in their social groups. Media thus play a key role in creating such roles and promoting modern ideal of womanhood and how this woman functions within certain social contexts. This is what we call "image trap". The extent of the discrimination taking place in portraying womanhood in social and other media is not only confined to the sexual abuse or exploitations but also the way that how media conceptualises and creates images of ideal woman in advertising, global market and fashion industry. Therefore it is time for us to take immediate actions in resolving these issues and working towards implementing measures and self-regulatory frameworks within which our next generation of journalists could be sustained and work for a better media culture.

Thank you,

Dr Saumya Liyanage

04/12/2016