

CONFERENCE REVIEW

Gendering Media: Beyond 'HIS' Stories

(A Compilation of the conversations in the Round

Table 2 held as part of

**International Seminar held on March 16 & 17,
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Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India)**

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The session, ‘Gendering Media: Beyond 'HIS' Stories,’ which was the culminating event of the two-day international seminar, 'Media and Communication in the Networked World: New Perspectives on History, Culture, and Development' organized by The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Mar Ivanios College, Thiruvananthapuram, is a small but significant effort to contribute in the discussions on the topic. The distinguished panel of women journalists were Former Dy. Director of The Hindu, Kalpana Sharma; Ammu Joseph, independent journalist and author; and Ms. K.K. Shahina, Senior Editor, Outlook Magazine.

In an era of rapid transformation within the media industry, it becomes even more crucial to acknowledge the unique challenges that women face in their pursuit of truth and their efforts to provide diverse perspectives. Women journalists have long played a pivotal role in breaking news stories and conducting in-depth features that shed light on important issues. Their contributions go beyond mere reporting; they bring a distinct perspective to their storytelling that reflects the full spectrum of human experiences. By amplifying voices that may otherwise be marginalized or overlooked, women journalists contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the world.

Kalpana Sharma, talking at the panel, calls herself a journalist from the typewriter generation; a journalist, whose experience is limited to print. Although she writes for digital platforms, she admits that she does not know

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what is required to run a digital platform. Currently, she writes a column on media called 'Broken News' in the digital platform, News Laundry. "Any time is a good time to talk about gender and media. There is no time where that subject will not be relevant," said Ms. Sharma.

In the 1990s, Ms. Sharma and Ammu Joseph conducted a study on how the media covered women's issues, focusing not only on the content but also on the placement of such stories in print media. So a newspaper, for instance, even if they carried news about women's issues, the way it was placed ensured that it was buried. Hardly anyone would read it, by placing it, say, in the left hand corner of a left hand page at the bottom without a photograph, and often with a broken headline. Even if a reporter had worked very hard to do a good story, the way in which it is managed by those who run that particular media, ensures that it is practically not there. However, editors, if they consider some news as very important, can ensure that it gets the kind of placement that everybody would read.

Ms. Sharma pointed out that language and representation also played a significant role in shaping media narratives. In the past, many professions were automatically 'He'. All doctors were 'he' and all engineers were automatically men. In journalism, often in the copy, it was "newsmen", irrespective of the many women journalists in the field. Also in the headlines, women were often referred to as 'Eves', an antiquated and stupid term. However, progress has been made in eliminating such gender biases from media language.

Similarly, cartoons were extremely sexist at one point in time. The way women were drawn and portrayed as the subject of those cartoons, in that too you would find blatant sexism. In those days there was the third editorial, which was a quirky, funny editorial, but often the joke would be made at the expense of women. Much of that also is gone in today's media.

Ms. Sharma stressed the importance of including women's voices in reporting, regardless of the subject matter. However, it is not integrated into the routine reporting style. From Ms. Sharma's experience as a journalist, by seeking out and speaking to women, particularly in rural areas where they may not easily come forward, journalists gain a different perspective on various issues. She provided the example of the 1993 Latur earthquake and how it disproportionately affected the women due to societal expectations and roles. In that earthquake, "more women died, because they were sleeping inside. It was felt better for the women and children to be inside the house and the men stepped outside. And because these were the old stone houses, it just gave way and they fell inwards crushing the women and children...the society decides

where women should sleep, what is danger for them etc.. But in this case, the outside was safe.” The other thing that Ms. Sharma found that post-disasters, like earthquakes or floods, when it comes to rehabilitation or rebuilding, the women are not consulted.

Ms. Sharma also discussed the impact of unemployment in the country on women. She aptly noted that the women are often pushed out of high-paying jobs, while men occupy those positions. This loss of economic autonomy can lead to additional problems within households.

Additionally, Ms. Sharma emphasized the importance of understanding the impact of communalism on women. She shared examples from the 1992-1993 Mumbai communal riots, where some women played peacemaking roles while others supported violent actions. There is also a class factor in play in the Mumbai riots. The women living in the pavements and the slums in Mumbai were the most vulnerable. “However, their point of view never came out in the media because nobody bothered to talk to them. And yet when you talk to them, you realize the whole way in which the city works and how when something like the riot takes place, the vulnerability that they already face is exacerbated so many times more. Even a simple thing of trying to hide your son, say, from the police; how do you hide your son in a little makeshift, just a tarpaulin, against the wall,” asked Ms. Sharma. Amongst the middle classes, the attitudes were very different, of both men and women. The visible face of the rioter was of course always the male, but there were many women, whose husbands were in the Shiv Sena, who egged on their men into violence, because they felt that it was legitimate.

Much has changed in the media both in terms of who owns the media, who dictates what goes in the media, and the technology that is used in the media. She appealed to the journalists to integrate an understanding of women’s issues into their reporting, considering it an essential part of their profession. By seeking out diverse perspectives and incorporating them into their work, journalists can provide more comprehensive and effective coverage.

Ammu Joseph talked about the several controversies involving the BBC. The one that received the most attention in India was, of course, the two-part documentary “The Modi Question.” The most recent controversy involved is the suspension of the staff reporter and programme presenter, Gary Lineker, a decision that the BBC management was forced to quickly reverse due to pressure from fellow presenters, other staff and the public. However, she delved into the details about the headline used by the BBC for its report on the

sudden and somewhat shocking resignation of the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern.

While reporting the news most international media outlets highlighted her leadership of her country in major disasters, including a deadly terror attack as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. But the BBC's report carried the headline, "Jacinda Ardern resigned: Can Women Really have it All?" This headline sparked public outrage as it suggested that Ardern's resignation was due to her inability to handle the pressures of leadership as a woman. "In a way the headline suggested that women can't really have it all. They can't balance professional paid work along with their unpaid labor of taking care of their families and households - The infamous triple burden that many women carry through much of their adult lives," said Ms. Joseph.

Accused of being inaccurate, archaic, reductionist, sexist, misogynistic and so on, the BBC responded by quickly changing the headline to "Jacinda Ardern Resigns: Departure Reveals Unique Pressures on PM." The well known international broadcaster also admitted that the earlier headline was not "suitable".

The incident surrounding Ardern's headline raised questions about persistent gender biases and stereotypes. It questioned the notion that women can successfully balance professional careers with their responsibilities at home. An article in British Vogue magazine emphasized that such discussions detract from more important issues like discrimination, parental leave, equal pay, and childcare support. The repetition of these tired ideas prevents meaningful discussions on resolving the challenges faced by working parents.

Ms. Joseph pointed out that gender-related issues in media are not limited to the UK but are prevalent in India as well, even in supposedly modern and global cities. The lack of diversity in Indian media organizations is a concern, with reports indicating that only 5% of newsroom leadership positions were held by women. Furthermore, marginalized caste groups and Dalits are grossly underrepresented in leadership positions, predominantly occupied by upper caste groups.

Ms. Joseph also emphasized the significance of audience response in shaping media narratives. The public outcry against the inappropriate headline about Ardern prompted the BBC to make a quick change. Ms. Joseph urged academics and media students to play an active role in critiquing and highlighting inappropriate media content, as audience reactions can be instrumental in effecting change.

Acknowledging the relevance of gender and media discussions, Ms. Joseph agreed with Ms. Sharma's earlier statement that this topic would remain significant in the foreseeable future. Despite some progress, gender equality cannot be taken for granted in 2023. Joseph hoped for a journalism landscape that prioritizes gender equality but recognized the need for continued efforts to challenge prevailing biases and stereotypes.

Ms. Shahina commented that the gender and media is an over-discussed topic. She also noted that more men should be included in a discussion about gender and media. It is often convenient for cisgender men to exclude themselves from conversations about gender, leaving women to bear the burden of addressing these issues. This situation is prevalent in the Malayalam media scenario, where studies and research have focused primarily on the underrepresentation of women in newsroom hierarchies, but the majority of these studies have been conducted in English and Hindi.

Interestingly, there have been very few studies conducted on gender and media in the Malayalam language. This lack of research indicates a gap in understanding the experiences of women journalists in Kerala. During the 1980s, it was a rarity to see a woman journalist in Kerala, and the history of Kerala media does not shed much light on the contributions of women journalists, editors, and publishers.

One such remarkable figure is Haleema Beevi, who served as the editor of four magazines and one newspaper in Malayalam during the 1930s. However, information about her is scarce, and most of what is known comes from word of mouth rather than from libraries or archives. This example highlights the challenges in uncovering the history of women journalists and their groundbreaking work in Kerala.

In Kerala, journalism is still predominantly perceived as a man's business, which is reflected in the treatment of women journalists during the Shabarimala protest in 2019. The focus of news coverage shifted towards questioning why women journalists were sent to cover the story, rather than addressing the violence they faced while reporting. This incident sparked discussions on social media, emphasizing the prevailing societal perception that journalism is not suitable for women.

Despite these challenges, women journalists have made significant contributions in the Kerala media landscape. Many women working in international media outlets are stationed in India, and their presence is

undeniable. However, the general perception in Kerala society remains that journalism is a male-dominated field.

Kerala, known for its paradoxes, boasts high literacy rates and a relatively higher level of education for women. However, it also exhibits conservative and patriarchal tendencies. Women journalists face various forms of harassment and discrimination in their professional lives, which further highlights the need for greater gender inclusivity and representation in the media.

Ms. Sharma recalls the challenges faced by women journalists when she started her career. At that time, there were very few women in the field, and their presence was often overlooked and undervalued. In press conferences, senior male journalists occupied the front chairs and had privileged access to politicians, while women struggled to be recognized and given a chance to ask questions. Despite these obstacles, Ms. Sharma emphasizes that the number of women in the media has increased, especially with the emergence of television and digital platforms.

However, certain biases and stereotypes still persist. One common issue is the assignment of "soft beats" to women journalists, while men are given the "hard beats." Ms. Sharma challenges this notion, highlighting that reporting on topics like the environment requires significant fieldwork and can involve risks. Ironically, during the pandemic, women journalists, who were often assigned the health beat considered soft, became the most equipped to cover the crisis. These gendered assignments and expectations persist, reinforcing the need for women to prove themselves and work harder.

Another persistent challenge is the perception that women in senior positions achieve their success through connections or favors, rather than their own merit. Ms. Sharma personally experienced this speculation when she joined a national newspaper as an assistant editor. The assumption that women must have had special contacts or political support to reach such positions is rarely applied to men. However, the increasing numbers of women succeeding in journalism are slowly changing this perception, as their competence and dedication become evident.

Additionally, Ms. Sharma notes that gender representation at the top does not automatically guarantee gender sensitivity. Some women who have reached senior positions may adhere to traditional male values and norms. On the other hand, women who advocate for human rights, justice, equality, and diversity

in their organizations often face resistance and are perceived as deviating from the norm.

Despite these challenges, the evolving media landscape provides more options and empowerment for women journalists. They no longer have to endure insufferable situations and can explore diverse avenues within the industry. The availability of different media platforms has opened up opportunities for women to express their perspectives and contribute to journalism in unique ways.

Ms. Joseph opined that very little work is being done on LGBTQI categories. But she thinks News Minute has brought out a stylebook to talk about the categories that are unnamed because they were brushed under the carpet. Ms. Joseph believes that things are going to change; trans-people are being more assertive and they cannot be ignored anymore. There is more willingness, at least on the part of progressive people, to recognize that it is another form of gender.

Many women journalists came through the magazine route and then ventured into other areas. There is a tendency to think magazines as less important or less serious, but Ms. Joseph feels that is a notion that needs to be dispelled. Magazine journalism is as important as news reporting. Those kinds of hierarchies within the media need to be broken as well.

In terms of soft and hard news, it is often much more difficult to cover the so called soft news/beats. Much is made about political journalism as the area of journalism that is highly difficult to do. The women journalist that Ms. Joseph had interviewed said that they did not think that political journalism is the pinnacle of journalism.

There are some advantages to being a woman reporter and very often that is the reason why some of the writing by women, even in the news category, is exceptional. It is because they get to talk to women more. Many of them make it a point to talk to women. And in rural areas, it is easier to access women to get their perspective.

However, the way gender based news is covered is testimonial of the gender bias that is there in the Indian media. Crime beat is often called the lowest beat and the newbie reporter is often sent to cover it. Middle class crimes take a horrendous space in a newspaper. "Crime sells." There is a hierarchy in the coverage of crime stories. It is the crime that gets the attention of the newspaper's market that gets the most coverage. Sexual assault on woman, for

instance, rape, its always the women who are based in the city. Those are the ones that come to focus. However, if a Dalit girl is rape a few kilometers from the city, it is hardly ever mentioned. To understand the preoccupation of our media and how gender insensitive they continue to be, look at how the crime stories are published.

The controversies involving the BBC, particularly the Ardern headline incident, serve as reminders of the ongoing challenges surrounding gender and media. They highlight the need for greater gender equality within media organizations, the importance of audience response in demanding change, and the continued relevance of discussions on gender and media in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society. While the number of women in journalism has increased over the years, persistent biases and stereotypes continue to shape their experiences. Women journalists still face hurdles such as gendered assignments, doubts about their qualifications, and the pressure to conform to male norms. However, the growing presence of women in the field and the changing media landscape offer hope for greater gender equality and diversity in journalism.