

Sisters in Sexism

by Sanitsuda Ekachai

What do you do when your mom refuses to get back together with your estranged dad? Thai children recently learned from the popular TV soap opera *Father the Flirt* that it is perfectly okay to drug mom and let dad rape her.

In another soapie, *Sor Sam Sai*, about the love rivalry between brothers, the hero raped the heroine after a heated argument. Acting as reconciliator, the young woman's mother said that rape would not be possible without her daughter's consent.

The powerful engines of the Thai mass media are roaring non-stop to transmit values which subjugate women of the younger generation. But the phenomenon is not unique to Thailand.

Karaoke tapes featuring semi-nude women are common in China. Japanese comics, which are widely read in Asia, are full of graphic sex scenes. The Korean media glorified a Korean-born nude model for *Penthouse* magazine as a national heroine. A Malaysian sports car ad attracts male buyers by featuring a sexy woman purring, "I'm all yours."

Asian diversity defies generalization. But when it comes to gender discrimination and sexual double standards, Asian women—from war-torn Cambodia to capitalistic Japan or communist China—find themselves sharing the same lot. And they are blaming the mass media for perpetuating sexist stereotypes and violence against women.

If not portrayed as sex tigresses, Asian women appear in the media mainly as wives and mothers. Even in the country where women "hold up half of the sky." One study reveals that one-third of sexist TV ads in China, where gender equality is a state policy, portray women as homemakers despite the fact that the number of Chinese male and female professionals is nearly equal. The problem is often worse in other Asian countries where gender equality is a non-issue.

The print media in Asia do not fare much better. Across the continent, rapes are reported like sex thrillers, and the identities of the victims are often revealed. Women make the news mainly as victims of sensational crimes, not as authoritative news sources. Sexist language is widespread.

It is feared that increasing access to global electronic media will only worsen the situation through “flash floods” of images of women as sex objects on satellite TV, computer and video games, and pornography and prostitution on the Internet.

FIGHTING BACK

A group of media activists and academics from China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Australia and Thailand met in the Philippines recently to gauge the extent of the problem and map out policy solutions. The conference was co-organized by the London-based World Association for Christian Communication and Isis International, a Manila-based feminist organization.

“Sex role stereotyping is so deeply ingrained and glorified in the media that even women become desensitized to their own inferior portrayal,” said Prof. Kyung-Ja Lee, dean of Journalism and Mass Communication at Kyung Hee University in Korea.

She summed up the study which reverberates throughout Asia: “Women are highly visible in soap operas, but the portrayals of women are stereotypical and unequal to men.”

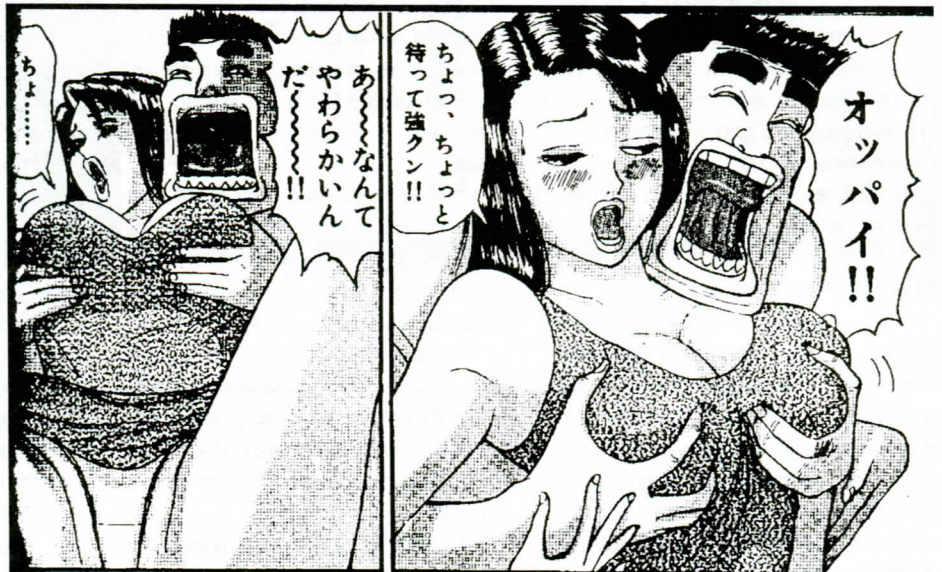
“In advertising, women are devalued and dehumanized as commodities for sale.”

“The news, meanwhile, remains the province of power elites. Women are thus ignored and alienated.”

Media regulation policies on women range from politically correct in China, impotent in Thailand, to non-existent in Mongolia. Policies notwithstanding, women

in all countries suffer sexist and stereotypical portrayal, violence, and under-representation in the media.

A 1995 media monitor on women’s participation in the news in 14 Asian countries including Thailand confirms that the media remain a men’s fortress. This may explain why the media are not questioning the portrayal of women as sex objects and housewives. The findings show women’s low impact on the media:



In Japan, these pornographic cartoons are readily accessible, even for children.

- ◆ They accounted for only 20 percent of news reporters and 14 percent of newsmakers, and they are much younger than their male counterparts.
- ◆ Women were less quoted, appeared in low-status roles and they were dramatically over-represented as victims in the news.
- ◆ Both as journalists and newsmakers, women appear less in news stories on politics, economics and national defense, reflecting sex-role segregation.
- ◆ Only 7 percent of the coverage was on issues of women’s concerns. But the percentage is higher for newspapers and very low for television.

In Thailand, women account for 17 percent of journalists in newspapers, Korea 16 percent, Cambodia 10 percent, and Japan 8 percent. The situation is not much better in other Asian countries.

Given such low numbers of women media workers, many women’s groups hope that intervention by law or self-regulated codes of conduct can improve the situation.

Reality however, shows cul-

tural values are more powerful than law and regulations.

Despite China’s state mandate on gender equality, for example, the media still portray women mainly as homemakers, although less as sex objects than in other Asian countries. India has the Indecent Representation of Women Act. And Korea even has a law to protect children from “damaging” environments fostered by the media. But the portrayal of women there is still far from satisfactory.

Most Asian countries have media laws to protect “public decency,” but they are largely impotent. Thailand’s anti-pornography law is a case in point.

Similar to other countries, the definition of what is obscene is vague and slippery, open to the subjective interpretation of individual officials. In addition, the punishment is light and enforcement is sporadic.

In Thailand, the maximum fine for those involved in the pornography business is only 6,000 baht and/or maximum of three years' imprisonment. "Without proper action, laws and policies are nothing more than empty rhetoric," said Prof. Kyung-Ja Lee.

Success, if it is achieved at all, tends to be brief. In more liberal Australia, the advertising industry withdrew its gender sensitivity guidelines in 1995 on grounds that they worked against free competition in the market.

POSITIVE PORTRAYAL

Ironically, calls by women's groups for more positive portrayals in the media put them in an awkward situation. By condemning the sex-object image and demanding more regulations, they find themselves in the same camp as conservatives and religious fundamentalists and their traditions which subjugate the women.

Meanwhile, the media insist on the sacred tenet of freedom of expression to resist any restrictions, whereas the existence of media monitoring organizations to counter violations is an exception rather than a rule.

Will the increasing number of female media workers and the development of codes of conduct on media ethics help improve the situation?

Some critics say the commercialization of both the national and international media will work against efforts to turn the media into allies for women's social development. But women media activists still believe that it is important to have more women

working in the media as well as better regulations.

They also continue to push for a greater diversity of images, besides homemakers and sex objects, to reflect the realities of women's lives.

Resistance to change, particularly among the print media, goes beyond mere business profits, said Melinda Quintos de Jesus of the Manila-based Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility.

Change is difficult if media workers do not see how their professional news criteria are gender-biased, she stressed. Traditional news criteria, for a start, do not favor the coverage of women's news.

"News criteria favor those already accredited by the media as newsworthy, a group of individual newsmakers who are mostly men," said the former journalist.

"Immediacy, broad interest from known newsmakers, out-of-the-ordinary elements, conflicts—these criteria rule out the wide participation of women in news stories.

"News is also traditionally event-oriented. But much of what happens in the areas of women's concerns has to do with social change and the political process which are difficult to capture in the standard news story," she added.

And even in news stories which directly deal with women, such as those about the informal economic sector where women are in the majority, their views are often absent due to business reporters' lack of gender perspective. "These gaps are, in themselves, professional failings because a story without context is incomplete," she said.

Despite a need for training in gender issues in reporting, many media workers remain resistant to what they see as advocacy journalism.

Making the media see gender stereotyping and violence against women as part of social injustices. Lobbying for policy change. Media monitoring. Networking between women groups and media workers and researchers. These are among the measures the conference participants believe could help dig the media out its deeply entrenched bias.

But new scenarios are complicating their efforts. According to Sylvia Spring of Media Watch Canada, the problem of the negative portrayal of women has become more subtle; naked woman are out, but sex-role stereotypes remain insulting.

"More women are working in the media. But many media women are not conscious of gender issues, mimicking traditional male roles instead," she said.

New communications technology such as satellite broadcasting and the Internet have also made the media harder to control and monitor.

But there is still hope. According to Prof. Kyung-Ja Lee of Korea, the key to change is educating consumers not to passively accept the media messages but to be more critical and selective.

Media literacy, she said, can help scrub off the effects of gender-discriminatory media images, and selective media use by consumers can eventually help improve the quality of the media.

"The media do not only inform or entertain, they shape how we see ourselves," said Dr. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak from Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Communication Arts.

"When girls and women realize this and start to question the media, change is inevitable."

Source: *Bangkok Post*, 23 August, 1997.