

Lend us your Ears

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

Radio is a potent vehicle in ventilating women's issues and concerns
It is a means of mobilising action towards social transformation

Manivanh works her rice paddies solitarily. But she doesn't seem to mind. Her transistor radio keeps her company. Occasionally, Manivanh nods her head and utters a few words, as if intently talking to someone. After weeding, she goes to check her water buffalo, which she left grazing on the hilly part of her farm. Holding the radio in one hand, she loosely ties the beast to a mango tree under which she also slumps, presumably to take a short rest and have her breakfast. But eat, she does not. She brings out instead a stub of a pencil and a nearly tattered notebook. She writes as she listens intently to her radio. We later learn that Manivanh is "attending" the school on the air over Lao National Radio.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Manivanh is just one of the many women we met while researching on women's radio programs, the latest of Isis' media projects. The research is actually part of the 3-year research and training project on women's radio programming in Asia and the Pacific that Isis is conducting. Funded by the Australian Agency for International Development through the Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad, Inc. and carried out in 10 countries in the region, the project aims to:

- ◆ Examine how women's groups



Hiromi Minamoto (seated), the leading force behind *Tiruru*, the longest-running women's radio program in Japan with Suzuyo Takazato, a member of Naha City Assembly and a noted women's rights activist

in the region make use of radio as a tool of communication and consequently as a tool for empowerment

- ◆ Assess the needs of women's groups in the region in so far as radio projects are concerned
- ◆ Develop training modules on radio production, broadcasting (core broadcasting skills that include researching, scripting, editing and interviewing) and radio program marketing and

management

- ◆ Upgrade the skills of Asia-Pacific women working in radio projects
- ◆ Identify areas of intervention to promote radio programs/projects with a feminist content, and
- ◆ Develop concrete strategies to promote the sustainability of women's radio projects in the region.

WHY RADIO?

The most common question we encountered, from the time we first broached the idea of a radio project to some of our networks up to the time when we were already gathering data was *why radio?* when there's a lot of other communication media to look into. There's television, which seems to exert the greatest influence in the thinking process of today's youth, and of course there's print which Isis has been concentrating on in the past two decades. Well, the decision did not come out of the blue. It has a very solid foundation and a very clear framework.

Of all forms of media, radio has the widest reach and is one of the most powerful medium for information dissemination and education. This, despite the upsurge in communication technology, whether the information superhighway or the expansion of satellite broadcasting. As a matter of fact,

some groups contend that the shift toward high technology communication and information systems has only served to further widen the gap in technological resources, skills and capabilities among countries. Moreover, in most parts of the Asia-Pacific region, the habit of reading is not as established as listening, more so for groups who come from low-income communities and do not have a high degree of literacy. Thus, there is still a great need for information-sharing and communication initiatives that are not print-based and could be easily accessed.

The research is based on the principle that mass media is an established social institution, with its own distinctive set of norms and practices but with the scope of its activities subject to definition and limitation by the wider society. Mass media is a primary mover of social change and is often driven forward by developments in communication technology. It is a development tool and a primary means of transmission and source of information.

Radio is a form of mass media that serves its functions based on the above premise. Apart from being a vehicle for disseminating vital information essential to most societies, radio provides an arena where many affairs of public life are played out. It is also a major source of definitions and images of social reality and, consequently, a venue where the changing culture and values of societies and groups are constructed, stored and expressed. Moreover, radio is one of the most effective means of entertainment and, for many public figures, a primary key to fame and celebrity status.

Radio in the context of the women's movement in Asia and

the Pacific is more than just an information tool. It plays more than just a supporting role. It is a potent vehicle in ventilating women's issues and concerns. It is a means of mobilising action toward social transformation.

Isis' Women in Radio Research Project is an applied research. It is designed to find answers to questions that have come up in the process of making immediate practical decisions. In addition, this study hopes to be able to describe the radio environment in Asia and the Pacific. It also aims to compare and contrast the methods and approaches that women's groups in the region use in working in this medium.

In addition, the research is a feminist research as it looks at women's participation in this particular broadcast medium, and its ultimate objective is to promote radio programming with a feminist content. Moreover, it is carried out by women who, in varying degrees, are involved in the feminist movement. In the data-gathering phase, the qualitative method of semi-structured interviewing was used where there was a dialogic and free interaction between the researcher and the interviewee.

The research also made use of case study as part of its design, particularly on community radio in the Philippines and the experience of Women's Aid Organisation in Malaysia, both of which present experiences that shed light on general processes in the broadcast industry in the Philippines and in Malaysia but are not generalisable in the context of the Asia and Pacific region.

In so far as quantitative methodology is concerned, the research makes use of census to

be able to accurately describe the radio environment in each country included in the research. The research includes the following sectors:

- ♦ radio programs run by women's groups
- ♦ radio-related projects run by women's groups (e.g. syndication, dispatches) and
- ♦ community radio projects participated in by women's groups.

The need to look into the status of women's radio programming in the region was first expressed when Isis co-organised the Women Empowering Communication Conference (WECC) in Bangkok, Thailand in February 1994, attended by over four hundred women communicators working

in media organisations and networks around the world. A number of participants to the WECC who were involved in radio projects noted that, so far, no comprehensive study has

ever been conducted with regard the status of women's radio projects in Asia and the Pacific. Moreover, while there are already existing networks of women in media and communications, most of these are focused on print. The WECC participants also pointed out that since there have been only a few training conducted for women in radio, there is a great need to upgrade the skills of women working in this field. Another thing that needs to be evaluated is the feminist content, if there is any at all, of existing radio programs. In addition, the participants also expressed a great need to come up with a sustainable networking program for women in this field. These concerns were further validated by consultations with other women's groups and Isis' involvement with



the Task Force Media and Communications of the Asia-Pacific NGO Working Group for the World Conference on Women and the Women's Resource and Information Centers (WRICs) networking project.

COMMONALITIES

The data gathered from 10 countries namely, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan,

their actual involvement in campaigns, they also would not have enough material for broadcast.

Add to this the question of language. Despite the reality that only a handful of countries in Asia and the Pacific speak English, most of the materials received by radio networks are in English. The national radio Voice of Vietnam is addressing this by providing English language train-

ing conference that will be held in November 1999.

The training is a bit tricky. We are looking here at a very diverse range of not only issues but also technology. From the very basic 20-watt transmitter of a community radio station in the Philippines to ASTRO, the digital satellite radio of Malaysia, and from reel-to-reel recording to computer-based editing. The issues can also be very unwieldy if



Isis photobank

The author during her radio production training in Australia



Chandra Suriya, anchor person of the Tamil women's program over Radio 6 in Kuala Lumpur

Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and New Caledonia, reveal some very telling commonalities. First, is the need to address the question of sustainability. The scarcity of resources, particularly financial resources to cover production costs, that confronts women broadcasters in Cambodia is also experienced, albeit to a different extent, by the radio producer in Japan. Next to funding, the other oft-repeated problem is lack of information. Being in the information business, this one struck us quite strongly. This is as real in Indo-China as it is in the Philippines. Philippine-based GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action, a national coalition of women's organisations), which produces a long-running radio program for women attests to this. According to them, if not for

ing for their broadcasters. The other concern in all of the 10 countries is the lack of training opportunities for women broadcasters.

TESTING

On the second year of the project, Isis will be testing a training module that was developed after my training in radio production in Australia. The pilot training will be conducted in two batches. The first one, which is slated for November 1998, will be held in the Philippines with participants coming from at least three countries in Southeast Asia. The second one, which is taking place in December, will be in Fiji with participants coming from different island nations in the Pacific. The feedback from this module testing training will help finalise the module for the

we will not be circumspect. Imagine the whole gamut—from military violence against women to women's political participation and from women's health and reproductive rights to family planning and home management.

OUTSTANDING EXPERIENCES

Tiruru (a word in the Okinawan dialect that means women shining out), at present a 10-minute daily show aired over Radio Okinawa, is one of the longest running women's radio shows in the region. It evolved from a program in the early '70s, titled *Women Space* (translated from Nippongo), that focused on providing homemaking tips to women. It has also survived threats of sponsorship withdrawals and sporadic changes in time slot.

Despite the very limited time

slot, *Tiruru* is able to tackle cutting-edge issues concerning Okinawan women. Some of these are: military violence against women, health and reproductive rights, prostitution and teen-age pregnancy. The gradual changes in the program content of *Women Space* may be attributed to the exposure of the anchor person to other issues confronted by Japanese women in general. During the interview for this research, the anchor person, who has since been promoted to over-

Voice, a live daily talk show financed and owned by Magic Productions, a company that has a long history in publishing magazines and has only recently ventured into radio production. *Women's Voice* breaks away from traditional Thai radio programmes for women that tackle lifestyle, fashion, entertainment or show business and housekeeping.

The show's stated objective is to project a non-traditional image of Thai women. However, in the course of its programming,

terests of women in society, as pointed out by Lilian S. Mercado Carreon, Isis' Communication Program Manager, in her report on Thailand's radio environment, these efforts are at this stage fragile and need to be complemented by efforts from other sectors of society, most especially from NGOs and peoples' organisations (POs).

But the more critical and strategic intervention would be in the area of helping national and community organisations in the

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all program director, cited her experiences as a news reporter and her coverage of the 1985 Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya as two of the most significant factors that contributed to her deeper understanding of women's issues.

The other impressive experience is that of the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), a Malaysian women's NGO that works on the issue of domestic violence. WAO was approached by Sony Music Corporation, and offered to sponsor a radio show for them. The program that aired for five consecutive weeks is part of WAO's public awareness campaign on the issue of domestic violence. Proceeds from the sale of some 200 pieces of CDs were donated to WAO. In return, WAO had to play the song "How Come How Long" by American recording artist Babyface at the start and at the end of the program. The song deals with the issue of domestic violence and how it is ignored by society. Airtime was provided free by Radio Television Malaysia, a government-owned media network.

In Thailand, one groundbreaking effort is that of *Women's*

it is also able to make public issues that are traditionally thought of as private issues such as rape. Apart from this, *Women's Voice* also take up other social, economic and even political issues and provides a women's perspective on current and national events, especially those that have a great impact on women.


However, the production staff of *Women's Voice* were quick to add that their program is not for women only. Its target audience includes working females and males. Come to think of it, this idea really makes sense. If we want more people to understand the women's cause, then it is just right that we target as broad a range of an audience as possible without losing focus on the content of the program.

NEED FOR SUPPORT

At this point, it can be said that recent efforts to produce women's programs in the region that highlight the role of women in social development and challenge the patriarchal nature of media come from women working in radio. However, while these efforts are positive and contribute greatly in advancing the in-

region develop their appreciation of radio as a communication tool. The need at present is for NGOs and POs to understand and recognise the potential of radio as a tool and integrate this in developing their communication strategies. After all, radio remains the most powerful and widely available form of mass medium across the region.

But then again, I would like to stress that much of radio's effectiveness as a broadcast medium is attributed to women. In the Philippines, for example, a listenership survey indicates that there are more female listeners than male: 58.5 percent vs 41.5 percent. This makes it all the more imperative to improve the content of radio programs so as to make this medium a real tool in advancing women's status. The task now is for women's groups like us who work with and in the media to continue challenging the patriarchal nature of mass media and build more democratic and empowering forms of communication.

Good morning Asia and the Pacific. This is radio Isis...

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