

# Levelling the Playing Field

by Sonia Randhawa

*Community radio<sup>1</sup> can have the potential to empower disenfranchised communities. Yet like other communication tools, community radio may also further disenfranchise the most marginalised within communities. For example, it's been hard to find female participants for trainings that I've conducted with indigenous communities in Malaysia. This is not surprising considering the multiple roles women play in their daily lives. They can't easily travel to a central location for these trainings as they would need to organise child-care, find someone to cook for the family, and sometimes, even seek permission from their husbands or fathers. In this context, it's so much easier to just work with men – perpetuating and strengthening imbalances of power within the communities.*

**This problem** was brought to the attention of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) Asia-Pacific by women from Lao PDR. Their government wanted to work with people from one of the poorest of the country to set up a community radio station<sup>2</sup>. One of the principles behind the creation of Khoun Radio is a commitment to gender equality, but the women were finding it hard to see this commitment put into practice. As such, they had asked for some guidelines they could refer to. They approached Bianca Miglioretto, Women's International Network (WIN) representative of AMARC Asia-Pacific,

and community radio officer at Isis International and thus began a consultative process on the formulation of concrete gender policy guidelines for community radio. The consultation process lasted for a year and involved people from three continents.

However, it wasn't just the approach from Lao's Khoun radio that drove the formulation of a gender policy for community radio. First, the media has obligations under international conventions to portray women in their diversity. One of the key documents is the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) the outcome document of the United Nations 4th World Conference on

Women held in Beijing 1995. Section J of the BPFA consists of two parts – increasing the participation of women in media and promoting a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. To achieve this goal, the women’s movements must work in close partnership with the media. However, fifteen years after Beijing, most of the world’s media have been slow in taking up the challenge. On the other hand, community media should be at the forefront of promoting these goals, given the movement’s commitment to participatory

stations”) employed only women, which skewed the statistics towards higher representation of women. Interestingly, although some stations that responded to the questionnaire had no female staff or volunteers, they did not consider themselves “men’s” stations. But the biggest driver towards formulating a gender policy was that a majority of respondents wanted change, they wanted to improve access to the station – that this change was not materialising indicated that they perhaps needed help and guidelines on what needed to be done.

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and empowering forms of communication. The natural synergy between the goals of the women’s movement and those of community media gives ground to the necessity of ensuring that women have voice, and that there is equal participation between women and men in community radio. This in turn may serve as a stepping stone towards transforming the way other forms of communication treat women and gender issues.

Another reason that the AMARC Asia-Pacific WIN committed itself to taking the lead on the gender policy was a research conducted on women in community radio stations in the region. It found an absence of women in decision-making in community radio even when women are far better represented in community radio than in other forms of media. Women occupied just over a quarter of leadership positions, despite being 45% of staff and volunteers. Just under a third of technical staff were women – a much higher percentage than we’d have anticipated but still far from parity. These figures also hide that some stations (designated as “women’s

In December 2007, AMARC WIN Asia-Pacific met as a response to the pressing need for a gender policy in community radio. The meeting centered around discussion on what the gender policy was for and how it would work in practice. Given the diversity of experiences across the region, it was decided that instead of a strict set of rules that needed implementation, there is a need for a general set of principles and ideas that could be modified and adapted by stations to suit their needs and the concerns of women in their communities.

The result of the meeting was the creation of six key areas where policy was needed. First, there needs to be equal access to the airwaves. The overall aim here is to create an affirmative environment for women’s equal participation. And key to that is training – women must have equal opportunity to access training. This does not mean that places are reserved for women in each and every training (though it might initially mean that a system such as establishing quotas to encourage their participation must be put in place). But because of the barriers women face, equal place doesn’t necessarily mean equal opportunity. Women also need to have the space to produce programs – and not just women’s programmes. Women should be an integral part of all production teams because women’s concerns are the community’s concerns.

Women’s access also means a safe, secure environment in which to produce programmes. An important part of this is an anti-sexual harassment policy that clearly states how

## Gender Policy for Community Radio in East Timor

by Cristina Ximenes

The Rakambia Radio manager Mr. Eurico Pereira emphasized that “gender policy for community radio is a valuable guideline and reference for community radio practitioners, especially in East Timor. It is an essential tool in ensuring the participation of all members of the community, especially women, on the airwaves. It has helped raise awareness and educate women and the community about the importance of including women’s voices in broadcast media. It has also helped families to understand the necessity of allowing women to access and participate on the airwaves at any time of day.”

Rakambia Radio operates from the capital of Dili City and broadcasts nationally. It has a limited number of women in their staff, especially for programmes scheduled at night. This is because there is no available transportation at night to ensure women’s safety and security.

In response, volunteer journalists, have mobilised on their own so that they can participate in the programmes scheduled at night, and use their own transportation. According to Mr. Pereira, they have four female volunteers in their staff who are involved in night programmes.

“The Gender Policy is positive for us to implement in our organisation, but we need time to adapt it slowly in the context of East Timor and our working conditions; disseminating information through our website and news broadcast.

This information is most important for community media and will support the radio management, as well as increase knowledge for all people” Mr. Eurico said.

Dulce da Costa Silva, a reporter from Boa-Ventura Community Radio Manufahi District said, “I think this gender policy is important to implement in the community media to change negative images of women in media, such as victims and sex objects in pornography. Those negative stereotypes have adverse effects for women, the community and young generations in the future. Community media should tackle these important issues, to care for our mothers, sisters and brothers should decrease for these attitudes that happen right now.”

The women who experienced sexual violence and abuse find that nobody helps them. And some time when they report to the police station it takes a long time and it is difficult to get help.

The community media should create a mechanism or should establish a women’s association to pay attention to those issues.” Dulce said.

Mr. Pedro do Asuncao Goncalves, Coffee Radio Manager from Ermera District said, “I think the gender policy gives benefit to our community media especially women’s participation in the community radio. This is an extremely positive step because community media does not only meet the problem or information that related with man only but a lot of information have relation with the women’s lives. It is important to involve women themselves in the community media and become the leader liaison.”

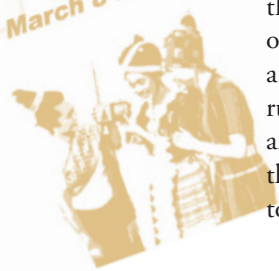
complaints are handled and specifies the person responsible for handling these cases. It means zero tolerance for violence against women, not just in terms of what happens off-air but also in the programme content (including in the music!). This also means being aware of threats both inside and outside the station, as well as helping women negotiate these threats. For instance, in one station, this means that women are only allowed in the station until a certain time of night – while men have access to the station much later. This is far from ideal – a more creative solution might be to have people on duty to walk women home after a late shift, or working with other organisations to provide a mini-van on night service. In other stations, they encourage women to take part in self-defence classes to help them in case of an attack. What works in one station may be inappropriate elsewhere. The key is to discuss with both men and women what changes are needed, and have a women’s officer or a women’s desk to ensure that the changes are made.

The second key area aims to ensure the representation of women’s diversity on air. Women are not a single homogenous body. Some women are more likely than others to have access to the commercial or state airwaves, and it is important to ensure that those most likely to be marginalised are heard on community stations. One way of ensuring this is to make sure that nobody feels discriminated against by content on the station – regardless of class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or whether a person is disabled. Neither men nor women should be constrained into particular roles: men can cook, women can chop wood. Stereotypes should not be reproduced in programming. While women should not be confined to special programming, there should be special programming reserved for women. However, this doesn’t address the sources that are used, for example, in making current affairs programmes. A women’s directory of experts can help to ensure that women’s voices are heard on air.

The third key area deals with the special needs of women. The aim of this is to address discrimination – to right the wrongs that

# Gender Policy for Community Radio

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currently exist in terms of women's representation in the media and their access to the airwaves. To do this, women who are marginalised for reasons in apart from their gender (their sexuality, caste or race for example) should be given priority in community radio. Spaces, both physically and on-air, should be created for those who suffer from oppression, whether from the State or from others in the community. And to ensure that these needs are met, special training or other assistance may be required. An example is a station that is looking at having a programme run by short-statured people – which requires an audit of all equipment and facilities to ensure that they have the same infrastructure available to them as all other programmers.

(FOSS). FOSS is more likely to be accessible to women, and community radio stations because it is free and its open source nature makes it easier to manipulate to make readily accessible to marginalised people in the community. It fits in with the ethos of community radio – community ownership, participation and empowerment. Moreover, appropriate technology also means technology that is being used appropriately. Some studios are set up in a manner that suits larger men, but which is both intimidating and too large for smaller-framed women. Lastly technology and trainings need to be in an appropriate language, whether this means translation into the local language or materials for people who are unable to read and write.

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Section four deals with women's representation in management. After much discussion and consultation, the gender policy recommends quotas of at least 30% for women's participation at all levels of station management. This has been the most controversial of the points within the policy, and it is important that it be read in conjunction with the points on training. If it is believed that there are "no capable women", the reasons behind this need to be addressed through capacity-building and training. Other obstacles to women's participation at the management level need to be addressed as well, whether this means child care or a child-friendly policy at the station.

The final section is on the financial resources and capacity building to implement the gender policy in the respective community radio station. The implementation of a gender policy for community radio can not be realised unless there is funding available for it. This could mean that a percentage of the money raised through subscriptions is set aside to achieve the objectives set by the gender policy. It could also mean that special funding must be sought for women's programming and implementation of gender policy. However, talking about capacity must move beyond talking about money. To achieve gender parity, both men and women in the station should benefit from gender training. More importantly, it should be recognised that though men may not have considered the problems or obstacles experienced by women, they must be treated as creative partners towards the implementation of gender policy. Lastly, capacity also means monitoring what is being done and whether initiatives are doing what they're supposed to do.

Section five is on appropriate technology. It recognises that there is a digital divide, that not only runs along class and economic lines, but also along lines of gender. One response to this issue is by using free, open source software

The gender policy, with these six sections, has been translated into 18 different languages and approved by the General Assembly of AMARC Asia Pacific, AMARC-WIN, the board of AMARC Europe, the Community Radio Forum of South Africa. It has been circulated to community radio stations and activists across the



world. Though it has reached a wide audience, issues about its implementation still needs to be addressed.

It is crucial to gain the support of the station and this could be done by initiating dialogues with those in positions of authority. It could likewise mean conducting gender sensitivity training for all staff and volunteers.

It is also important to have the policy adopted by the highest decision-making body in the station. The reason behind this is that the policy needs all the clout it can have. It should be treated as an authoritative document that is mandated by the entire station. The gender policy guideline can not be relegated to second priority and seen either as a “women’s thing” or merely something to be referred to once a year on March 8. Only when it gains the support of management and when it is prioritised will changes begin to happen.

It is also necessary to conduct a needs assessment which may yield startling results. For example, one station that boasts of high

participation of women in their staff and managing committee found that women were badly under-represented on-air. Conducting a needs assessment allows stations to identify and respond to problems that are not obvious or visible.

Funding has always been crucial. For the gender policy to be fully implemented funds must be allocated for it. And then get the money to implement the changes needed to have more women involved in and contributing towards the station.

Community radio can be, and is, a great tool for the empowerment and development of marginalised sectors of society. But it plays this role best when it is critical and self-aware – the gender policy is a tool for helping community radio be the best radio it can be. ♦

**Sonia Randhawa** was part of the AMARC Asia-Pacific drafting committee for the Gender Policy, and at the time was AMARC Asia-Pacific Deputy President. She produces a radio show, *Accent of Women*, a feminist programme broadcast across Australia, and available as a podcast at [www.3cr.org.au](http://www.3cr.org.au).

**Endnotes:**

- 1 *Much of this article was directed by a presentation by Bianca Miglioretto, though any mistakes or omissions are solely the responsibility of the author.*
- 2 *The station is community-operated, but not community-owned, and was initiated by the Government, so is, strictly speaking, not a community radio station, but the principles discussed here are still applicable!*