

The Philippines:

Media and Women in the South

By Anna Leah Sarabia*

The role of television and other forms of public media is very important in the Philippines as seen by the viewing figures which can be as high as 95% of the seventy four million strong population watching television every other day. Despite the Philippines being a very poor country, it comes second only to Hong Kong in the number of regular TV viewers. The geographical dispersity of its seven thousand islands means that the role of television becomes even more important due to the difficulties of face to face communication.

Some years ago, in 1996, the Secretary of Education himself made the statement:

"More than 70% of the education of Filipino children comes from the media and television, not from schools, not from the family and not from the church"

something which has very serious implications, especially taking into account the opinions of the various columnists as regards television. One very respected columnist commented that:

"The enemy of education is TV. Along with TV, computers are creating a visual culture that is generally unhelpful to reading and writing."

However, we must try to understand what is being said: each of the top ten television programmes in the Philippines is a situation comedy or a soap opera. There is no system of public television or public radio and everything is left to the private businessman, which is understandably extremely problematic. Two further quotations must be cited:

"Our TV and movie producers have not enhanced our collective tastes or elevated our understanding of life. This is because these people conspire to keep us thinking like morons."

Another columnist said,

"Cynical and predatory television breeds a cynical and predatory public. Networks that routinely feature the bizarre and the violent and aspire this in their daily repertoire of what is significant, is for me, an abuse of their power"

and who sees more and more every day that violence against women is becoming part of a "normal society". I don't wonder why, for instance, that the average age of a rape victim today



Anna Leah Sarabia is the founder and executive director of the initiative called „Women's Media Circle“, based in Manila, Philippines since 1985. The initiative is a non-stock, non governmental organisation of professional women dedicated to the empowerment of Philippine women through direct use of mainstream and alternative media as well as through the arts.



in the Philippines has gone down from sixteen years old to eleven and a half. This is a huge problem for us.

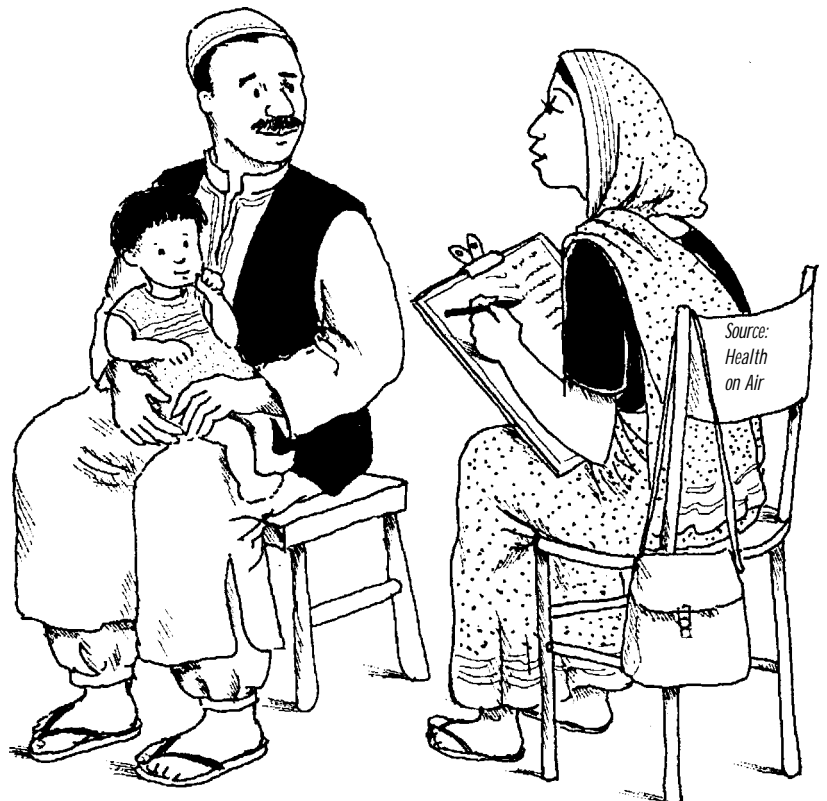
So how does one go about trying to change this? More than 70% of the people are poor and more than 60% of those poor are women. We have to try to find out who makes these programmes, who runs the networks, and what we can do to change all of this. As a small NGO¹ (Non Governmental Organisation) we don't own any networks so we try to use our own small connections to those who do own the networks and those who write the programmes by lobbying and by networking. We talk to the various producers or the

leading performers of these programmes who could perhaps integrate the issues into their own work. At the same time we look for the means or resources to create alternative programmes that give a different choice. We have to create prototypes of programmes that are both issue-oriented and issue-friendly but are entertaining enough to be competitive. If the programmes are so serious that nobody watches them, then they are almost useless and counter-productive.

One of the channels with the highest rating at the moment is MTV. Therefore, we have to create some kind of programme that is similar to MTV but which deals with women's or social issues, which are also being discussed by young people. However, as with all such initiatives funding is necessary because many people tend to claim, rather negatively, that our programmes will die and of course, when the programme does die, they gloat over our misfortune. They always like to tell us how '...an issue-oriented programme will never last'. We try to disprove the theory that our programmes will die quickly, by being creative and finding the support.

During Martial Law and after the overthrow of the Marcos government we had five TV channels and we could get a television programme on the air, for an hour a week, the production of which was paid for by the government station. This was in 1986. In 1999 there are seven TV channels, five UHF channels and 80 cable channels but our TV programme has now been reduced to once every two weeks, so instead of improving, the situation has worsened. This is particularly due to the Asian financial crisis: it's very difficult to get advertising if you don't show skimpily clad women who are talking about fashion, which means of course, in the stereotype roles.

So, what can be done when only a little money and very few sponsors are available? Furthermore what can there be in the media for the poor women and the children of these poor women? One way to do it is by simply producing. We try to discover where we can fit in, so if we don't have the funds to make our own TV programmes, we approach a producer to make the programmes for us. We suggest to them the





Source: ERBOL, Estrategia de comunicación educativa 1995

possibility of talking about violence in one programme or perhaps of doing another programme on girls in sport and so on and so forth in order to ensure that women's issues are discussed. However, at the same time we try our best to find people who are willing to support us. We were recently given free air-time on a large radio station for our programme on violence against women and we continue using this type of partnership with mainstream media. We also have, for instance, articles in some of the highest circulation magazines in our country. For example, I was able to ask for four pages from one particular magazine and two pages from another, both of which gave us the pages free of charge. They are very happy as they are presented with new, camera ready material free of charge. This is the way for us to take. We're well aware that they would have to pay about 200 000 Pesos for four pages of material, which is about 50 000 per page. However, by giving them something interesting, we get our messages out, which is very useful for us.

The slogan of the Women's Media Circle is 'No voice, no choice, no power'. If women don't have the chance to speak out and to receive information, they won't be able to make informed decisions about what to do with their lives. The same applies if they don't have the right to express themselves or if they don't even know that they have the right to seek justice for harm inflicted on them. When they don't know what to do when they have a problem, we give them different choices which means that they won't always accept that suffering is the way to live. It is true to say that sometimes one has to suffer in order to understand life but to be in constant suffering and pain is another matter; and something we have to try to change. People being empowered is the result of being able to make intelligent choices in their lives. We want women to have this power, to have the strength to come together and to make a world according to their own vision, according to their own needs. Women also need the power to be leaders in society; not giving women the opportunity to be productive is like a butterfly with one wing: both wings are necessary to achieve peace and justice.

We see that the media for women, as a rule, is to connect women with each other so that they understand that they have common needs as well as differences across borders and races, across cultural and historical backgrounds and across differences in economic styles and opportunities. We believe that women should understand each other due to having been, for many centuries, strangers to themselves. Women still don't really know what is occurring

around them or how to develop their full potential. Whilst under Martial Law, all media was censored and it was forbidden to gather in groups of more than three. Because of this, the skill of public speaking had to be relearnt after we won democracy and the media has been helping women to do this. Media can connect women with the mechanisms for their own social, political and economical development and when women are able to do this they can change and improve and develop the next generation of people. Media can help women achieve their own potential so that they can contribute to social class formation and we believe that women, when educated, when articulate, when able to express themselves, are a very powerful force. Before Islam and Christianity came to the Philippines, women held high positions in our society. In fact, before the eleventh century, the priests in the Philippines were women, very few of the priests were men. However, this all occurred under the old religion. I'm not aware of many women priests nowadays but it goes to show that the past contributions of women have been neglected. We are trying to make people remember and media can be a powerful tool for stirring people's memories.

We have already had people from China, from Thailand, from Malaysia and we will hopefully, in the future, have representatives from Indonesia, coming to our offices and looking at what we've been doing. We've also held one or two exchange conferences on how we can use the media. The media has always been traditionally an enemy of women, of women who want to improve themselves, because of the stereotypes and impressions constantly promoted by advertisers. However, we realise that we should also take advantage of the advertising companies. We like to look at their strategies and see what they are trying to do and what techniques they are using, we want to find out if we can use some of the techniques for our own issues. The rich and powerful are not the only ones who can be smart, anyone can see what these people are doing and be smart themselves by using all of these modern advertising techniques, the tools of the media, to give power and hope to women. We are of the opinion that, instead of allowing women to become annoyed and angry to the point of revolt, that the media can actually guide the development and empowerment of women in the right direction so that they can undergo a more peaceful transformation towards justice and peace.

