

Chapter 8: Media Power

In retrospect, I realize how much of my perception about women in war was influenced by the media. The incessant images of desperation and victimization tell only part of the story. The other part, the strength, courage and resilience, is rarely captured.

Rafeuddin Ahmed

Chef de Cabinet to UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim

Like millions of people around the world, we stared riveted at the television screen on 11 September 2001. Calling family and friends from our Kinshasa hotel, we sometimes heard in the background the same news story we were listening to, thousands of miles away. For days, we were consumed by the tragedy of lost lives in New York, Washington DC and Pennsylvania. Tragedies cannot be compared – there is no competition – but as we watched the Twin Towers fall over and over again, we wished that the ongoing tragedy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has become a slaughterhouse claiming 2.5 million lives since 1998,¹ would get the same international news coverage and arouse similar sympathy.

The visit to the DRC was one of the hardest parts of our journey, due to the carnage and brutality of the war and the desperate poverty in this rich country the size of western Europe. To be in such a broken place on 11 September added to our grief and despair, allowing us to see at first hand how terror is a daily experience for so many around the world. But we also saw that people survive, exhibiting a kind of strength, hope and resilience that defies the imagination. We wondered why the media rarely presented this part of the story.

The power of the media in warfare is formidable. It can be a mediator or an interpreter or even a facilitator of conflict, if only by editing away facts that do not fit the demands of air time or print space. Hardly a soul on earth is beyond the reach of some form of modern media, be it television, movies, radio, newspapers, posters, audio and videotapes or the World Wide Web. Almost no-one, therefore, is free from the reach of those who control it – whether government, opposition or private sector groups who own, manage or otherwise influence its operation.

Because these political and commercial influences have such a powerful impact, Women and Media was identified as one of 12 critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA).² In ascribing to the PFA, 189 nations made a commitment to increase women's participation in and access to media, and to promote balanced and non-stereotyped images of women. However, we have seen little change in the mainstream media; the perspectives on women are rarely nuanced, especially in conflict situations. When women appear, they are often portrayed as victims rather than as activists or analysts.³ They are shown huddling pathetically in doorways, crying and cradling their injured children in their arms. Ironically these images, designed to evoke sympathy, make it easier to objectify the women who survive and the horrors they have lived through. In addition an insensitive interview can cause secondary trauma, which is compounded if a woman's story is misrepresented or sensationalized. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina journalists swarmed around rape victims, sometimes requesting interviews only with those who had been gang-raped.⁴ Apart from sexual violence and victimization,

the mainstream media rarely considers women newsworthy in their varied roles in the peacekeeping and conflict resolution processes.

The dearth of women's voices and perspectives has disturbing policy implications. The so-called CNN Effect – the way in which CNN's coverage can define a story – has become so pervasive that former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali called CNN the "16th member of the Security Council".⁵ Richard Holbrooke, former US Ambassador to the UN, also acknowledged the network's role at a 1999 conference:

"Bosnia had a story line, a very clear story line, and as a result of that story line the press, led by the *New York Times* and CNN, had an amazing impact on policy in the United States. ... the reason the West finally, belatedly intervened was heavily related to media coverage. The reason Rwanda did not get the same kind of attention was heavily related to media coverage – or the lack thereof. Just a week ago, I was on a panel at the Museum of Broadcasting in New York where Christiane Amanpour was challenged by a panelist who said, 'You did a great job in Bosnia, why didn't you go to Rwanda where far more people died?' Her answer was astonishing: politely, but firmly, 'I was in Rwanda. I did cover it. I knew what was happening but the O.J. Simpson trial was on and I couldn't get on the air for CNN.'"⁶

In recent years media ownership has become centralized in the hands of just 10 multinational media companies, whose power extends far beyond their countries of origin.⁷ Although they cover the news, their business is primarily entertainment, and they influence the world through movies, TV and radio shows, comic strips and music videos, most of which portray women in stereotypical ways.

According to a 1995 UNESCO study, women constitute only 3 per cent of the staff of media organizations worldwide.⁸ The Annenberg Public Policy Center reported in 2002 that women made up only 14 per cent of top US media, telecom and e-company executives, and 13 per cent of their boards of directors.⁹ This is part of the reason why women worldwide are the subject of only 7 per cent of stories on politics and government, and in the US are only 18 per cent of those interviewed for such stories.¹⁰

The relative shortage of women at all levels in journalism, but especially in war coverage, can have a profound effect on the type of news that is produced and disseminated. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a US-based organization that monitors the media, conducted a survey of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* op-ed pages for the three weeks after the 11 September attacks, and found a striking gender imbalance. At the *Post* only seven of 107 op-ed pieces were written by women, while at the *Times* eight out of 79 were written by women.¹¹

A conference sponsored by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) illuminated the ways in which women's presence can alter the news: "The change in the reports from the field was instantly noticeable," observed a Russian participant at the conference. After women emerged as war correspondents in the era of perestroika and glasnost, "it had a remarkable impact on politicians, editors and the public. Women showed not only the quantity of people killed, but the impact on civilians caught in the battlegrounds." Another participant in the conference, from the Philippines, said that in her experience, "Men tend to concentrate on quotes from government officials and focus on conflicts, while women tend to look at the impact on the greatest number of people or sectors."¹² According to the Institute for Media Policy and Civil Society

(IMPACS), “Media in the hands of women often produces a different kind of intervention.”¹³

Propaganda and Censorship

When hate is spread along airwaves, across television screens and on the Internet, calls for violence against women become part of war propaganda. In 1994 prior to the genocide in Rwanda, journalists at government-owned Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines broadcast messages inciting genocide and encouraging Hutus to rape Tutsi women and then either to kill them or leave some alive to bear so-called Hutu children. In the massacre that enveloped the country, “almost all females who survived the genocide were direct victims of rape or other sexual violence, or were profoundly affected by it.”¹⁴ It is estimated that at least 250,000 women were raped. Afterwards the UN commander in Rwanda in 1994, General Romeo Dallaire, was quoted as saying that “Simply jamming Hutu broadcasts and replacing them with messages of peace and reconciliation would have had a significant impact on the course of events in Rwanda.”¹⁵ Article 3 of the Genocide Convention states that direct and public incitement to commit genocide is a punishable offense. This article was the basis upon which the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) sentenced Georges Ruggiu, a Belgian citizen, to two concurrent 12-year prison sentences after he pled guilty to broadcasting hate messages over the government-owned radio station.

In the former Yugoslavia neighbours raped and killed neighbours “with the help of the state media, national radio and TV and the newspapers with the largest circulation and the greatest privileges, which convinced people they could no longer live together, that they were threatened by their neighbours with whom they had had perfect relations for decades,” said Sasa Mirkovic, the general manager of Radio B92 in Belgrade.¹⁶ In Bosnia, Serb soldiers reportedly used sophisticated modern methods, props and dubbed dialogue to videotaped women being raped and then sold the material as pornography.¹⁷

Although the right of freedom of expression is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the problem of hate speech has led human rights advocates to re-examine whether limits need to be established. South Africa became one of the first countries in the world to constitutionally ban hate speech when its post-apartheid constitution forbade speech that incites hatred of a person because of race, religion, gender or sexual preference.

Truth is often considered the first casualty of war, whether owing to propaganda and hate speech or to censorship. According to IMPACS, when governments impose overt media censorship, it is often a sign of potentially violent conflict. The crackdown on the independent press and journalists in Liberia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe are just a few examples. Practices have evolved since the 1970s to exclude media from war coverage altogether, as the US did during the invasion of Grenada; to make them totally dependent upon the military for their safety, transport and communications, as the UK did in the Falklands; or to both of these tactics, as the US did in Desert Storm/Desert Shield.¹⁸ Speaking of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel of the Project on Excellence in Journalism said, “As the war moved abroad, the Pentagon made access to soldiers and the battlefield more difficult than it has ever been.”¹⁹

In the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE) organized a women's 'peacecast' to make up for the absence of women's voices in the mainstream media. Peggy Antrobus, a feminist economist from the Caribbean, told the audience, "Since most mainstream media presented a partial focus on news about the attacks, censoring other analysis, it was only the Internet where I was able to find other interpretations."²⁰ According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, four months into the war on terrorism, fact-based reporting in the US had dropped from 75 per cent to 63 per cent, as the media shifted to opinion, analysis and speculation.²¹ In May 2002 US news anchor Dan Rather told a BBC interviewer that fear of being branded unpatriotic had constrained journalists: "What we are talking about here – whether one wants to recognize it or not, or call it by its proper name or not – is a form of self-censorship."²²

When reporters go into situations where governments will not or cannot protect them, they face grave risks. Women correspondents face the same dangers as men – abduction, robbery, murder – but, in addition, they are in danger of gender-based violence. As Kathleen Currie, deputy director of the IWMF, has noted, "the threat of rape and sexual assault is always looming in these dangerous locales."²³ Those journalists who do try to tell the story despite censorship face retribution. On World Press Day in May 2002 UN Deputy-Secretary-General Louise Fréchette reported that 118 journalists were in jail. Numerous others have lost their lives.

Maria Cristina Caballero, a prize-winning journalist from Colombia was almost one of them. In 1999 fearing for her life, she fled Colombia where she had been covering the war for several years. "I published pieces about abuses from all the factions, about the business of the guerrillas and about the forced recruitment of peasants. I had been exposing the massacres of peasants, such as the one committed in Mapiripan, where the paramilitaries tortured and killed people over the course of five days," she said. Eventually she realized that all sides were looking for her. "I was in a small jungle town, where I had gone to cover a story related to a guerrilla kidnapping. The guerrillas were all over the road and they were looking for me. I had to lie on the floor of a cart and some people of the town covered me with potatoes so that I could get out. I escaped by a miracle."

A number of statements, resolutions and sections of treaties already exist on the media's role in peace and security. Equally important, journalists and media organizations are reflecting more on their roles and responsibilities, establishing voluntary guidelines, conducting workshops on eliminating bias from reporting and taking other steps to enhance media professionalism. Tools such as "Reporting the World: A Practical Checklist for the Ethical Reporting of Conflicts in the 21st Century"²⁴ are particularly useful for journalists reporting from war zones. Media Action International, a non-governmental organization (NGO), bridges the gap between journalism and humanitarian, post-conflict and development activities, and is helping to develop strategies to utilize mass media as a tool in fighting illiteracy, poverty and disease.²⁵

International Statements, Resolutions and Sections of Treaties on the Media

- ? Resolution 110 of the General Assembly (GA), adopted in 1947, condemned “all forms of propaganda, in whatsoever country conducted, which is either designated or likely to provoke or encourage any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression.”
- ? Resolution 127 of the GA, adopted in 1947, invites Member States to “take measures within the limits of constitutional procedures, to combat the diffusion of false and distorted reports likely to injure friendly relations between States, as well as the other resolutions of the General Assembly concerning the mass media and their contribution to the strengthening of peace, trust and friendly relations among States.”
- ? Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression,; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”
- ? Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1976 states that “any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.”
- ? In 1978 the General Conference of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) issued a Declaration of Fundamental Principles, the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racialism, Apartheid and Incitement to War.
- ? The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation on equality between women and men in the media in 1984. Many other regional organizations have addressed a broad range of issues on the media.
- ? Article 4 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination declares that “all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial discrimination ... and all other propaganda activities, which promote and incite racial discrimination ... [are] punishable by law.”

A Different Story

Women are increasingly learning to use the media to tell their own story, to document human rights violations and to report on peace-building. Everywhere we went we saw women using media in creative ways to build peace. Everything from comic books to call-in radio shows, from street theatre to videos to traditional story telling is being utilized. Barely one month after the fall of the Taliban, five women pooled their own money to create *Seerat*, Afghanistan's first independent weekly newspaper run by and for women. They printed 500 copies of their handwritten publication, which included articles that urged the government to provide day care for its female employees, encouraged women to refuse to sit at the back of buses and depicted the miserable conditions for returning refugee women. For an upcoming issue, *Seerat's* editor, Aeen, said she planned to “expose the new government's refusal to play the music of female singers and musicians on state-run television and radio.”²⁶

Of the different types of media – government-owned, privately-owned, independent and community-based – women’s media and information networks have

tended to focus on the community level, where they can communicate in a local language about issues of local importance. Mirna Cunningham, an indigenous woman from Nicaragua and director of the University of the Atlantic there, notes the importance of community media during conflict: "It is precisely when some media begins using language of intolerance that community media becomes even more crucial. It gives a voice to the marginalized people who are being targeted. It contributes to building bridges of understanding through the use of simple language where we all have a voice. It also provides for a more informed and critical audience that will not so easily fall prey to the hate messages."²⁷

In the Middle East women's groups in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories have initiated a public media correspondence. Each month, one organization publishes a letter in the sister organization's newspaper. The Jerusalem Centre for Women, a Palestinian women's group, wrote in its first letter, "It is a good start ... we should give credit to those women who dare to speak out loudly during these times of abyss. The [Israeli women's] letter addresses Palestinian people on the day that marks 35 years of Israeli military occupation of 22 per cent of historical Palestine on which we, Palestinians, strive to build our independent viable state beside Israel." Terri Greenblatt of Bat Shalom, an Israeli women's peace group participating in the dialogue, has described the process as "our joint attempt to provide an alternative voice in the media that allows women on each side to publicly claim that only mutual recognition and respect for each other's individual and collective rights will pave the way for peace-making, as well as to challenge the notion that political partnerships are impossible at this time."²⁸

Many activists are calling for community media to be considered as a vital part of post-conflict infrastructure alongside housing and water. The Kampala Declaration from the Know How Conference in Uganda in 2002 noted the importance of media, "especially early warning systems, so that women in conflict zones can reach out and get the support needed quickly."²⁹ The Women's Caucus of the World Summit on the Information Society will be holding meetings in 2003 in Geneva and 2005 in Tunis, and will endeavour to take proposals about women's access to information and communications technology to the World Summit.

The majority of the world's 960 million illiterate people are women. They turn to radio – not print – to receive and create information. Radio is a perfect medium for reaching large numbers of people, especially during conflict when small transistors may be the only source of information for uprooted populations. According to FIRE, radio in Latin America is the most democratic medium and has a greater diversity of voices and ownership than other media. Since the cost of purchasing time on radio is relatively inexpensive, social groups can use even commercial radio to get their message out.³⁰

In Tanzania in May 1999, more than 300 women from 50 countries met at the first Pan-African Women's Conference for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence and called for a pan-African radio programme on gender and peace. National and regional initiatives are now building towards this vision. In the Great Lakes region of Africa, the NGO Search for Common Ground uses radio to educate children about prejudice and conflict resolution. It has established Burundi's first independent radio station, Ijambo, which reaches an estimated 12 million people throughout the region. One of Ijambo's most successful programmes is a radio drama, 'Umubanyi Niwe Muryango' (Our Neighbours,

Ourselves), about the friendship between a Hutu and a Tutsi family. In a survey conducted in 2002, an estimated 87 per cent of Burundians said they listened to the drama, and 82 per cent of those surveyed believed that Ijambo's programmes greatly helped reconciliation.³¹

Bosnian women are using talk shows on Resolution Radio to teach conflict resolution skills. "The wounds are deep, and we need lots of time to heal," said Edita Pecenkovic, one of the hosts of the new women's network, Radio Jednostavno Zena (Simply Women). In Somalia, where over 85 per cent of the population listens to the BBC, the station's World Service Trust and the Africa Educational Trust have developed radio literacy programmes for the extremely high numbers – some estimates cite nearly 98 per cent – of girls who do not go to school. The programmes are transmitted all over Somalia and in the neighbouring countries of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen, where many displaced Somalis live.

Radio has been used in several ways in the East Timor peace process. Radio programmes used various methods to encourage people to vote and to get women to participate as candidates, voters and election monitors. A song, 'Please Decide', was composed for the 1999 elections and broadcast nationwide. The East Timorese Women's Communications Forum (Fokupers), an NGO that promotes women's human rights, currently runs two radio programmes that address issues like violence against women and women's leadership.

At the opposite end of the technology spectrum, women are finding that digital communication offers another kind of grassroots access. Although its reach is not nearly as broad as that of radio, the impact of the Internet in peace-building has been powerful, thanks to the 'personal' interaction that takes place. In the occupied Palestinian territories at least 15 Internet cafes operated in Ramallah before the second Intifada. Many managed to remain open until 2002 when buildings and the electrical infrastructure were destroyed. The Love and Peace Station Internet Cafe, which is for women only, was the first of its kind. In 2001 the 106 women members, who were free to take off their headscarves in the cafe, were mostly young college-educated professionals who had been isolated by the Intifada and found the Internet a relatively cheap way to communicate with friends and family in other villages and countries. "I write my feelings. I feel better when I talk with another person about the people killed," said Ehaf Hassan, a 24-year-old nurse who paid just over a dollar an hour to chat on the computers.

The Internet has also become a powerful organizing tool. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), inspired by the process that led to the Security Council's adoption of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, has created a website called 'PeaceWomen.Org' to "nurture communication among a diversity of women's organizations by providing an accessible and accurate information exchange between peace women around the world and the UN system."

One of the largest of the women's international information and communication networks is the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC), established in 1976 following the UN International Women's Year World Conference in Mexico City. IWTC, whose constituency exceeds 25,000 women in 150 countries (94 per cent in the Global South) is widely recognized for its innovative, pioneering efforts to link women and the means of communication.

Many people – members of the media included – say we have entered an ‘information era’. Whether this is true or not, there is no doubt that the information the media spreads around the world affects war and peace as never before. We need to put women into the picture – both as producers of media information and as subjects of it. Otherwise, women’s role in peace-building will continue to be ignored, and the primary images we get from conflict zones will be ones of despair.

On Media and Communications the Experts call for:

- 1. Increased donor resources and access for women to media and communications technology**, so that gender perspectives, women’s expertise and women’s media can influence public discourse and decision-making on peace and security.
- 2. UN, government, private and independent media to provide public information and education** on the gender dimensions of peace processes, security, reconciliation, disarmament and human rights.
- 3. Hate media, under any circumstances and particularly when used for direct and public incitement to commit crimes against women, to be prosecuted by national and international courts.**
- 4. Donors and agencies to support the training of editors and journalists to eliminate gender bias in reporting and investigative journalism in conflict and post-conflict situations, and to promote gender equality and perspectives.**
- 5. A panel of experts to undertake an assessment of the relevance and adequacy of standards** on the military use of ‘psychological and information warfare’ and its impact on women.
- 6. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression of the Commission on Human Rights to carry out a study on gender, media and conflict.**