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Contents

Gender, Development and Society <i>Elizabeth Mathew</i>	1
What Differentiate Women-headed Households from Men-headed Counterparts in Kerala? An Application of Discriminant Function Analysis <i>V. Shinju</i>	20
Woman and Power: A Note on Conceptualisation <i>Sobha P.V.</i>	30
Fading out of Screen: The Drain of Women Media Persons in Malayalam Television <i>Shilujas M.</i>	48 ✓
Educational and Economic Independence among Scheduled Caste Women in Kerala <i>Olivia Catherine Noronha</i>	60
Schooling and Reproduction of Gender Differences <i>Aswathi Kunjumon</i>	74
Health Status and Health Needs among the Aged Population in Kerala <i>Sudha Raj V.</i>	83
Educational Status of Scheduled Castes in Kerala with Special Reference to Women <i>Grishma A.</i>	96

Fading out of Screen: The Drain of Women Media Persons in Malayalam Television

Shilujas M.

This piece of research intends to find out reasons behind the varying ratio in male and female media professionals and to discuss the reasons why the women are compelled to leave media and opt for other professions. Young female media professionals, who come in with full enthusiasm, are found to have been leaving media, within 2- 3 years. This trend has been going on for quite some time. When compared to the print and sound media, it is comparatively high in the visual media. 10 major Malayalam channels are taken into consideration to analyse the case. This study is done after discussions, interviews either directly or telephonic, with the media professionals who were associated and who continue to be associated with TV channels based at Trivandrum, Kochi and Kozhikode and with a fragrance of biography of the author.

Keywords: Visual Media, Women journalist, News Channel, Muslim women, Media profession.

Introduction

To understand a society, it is much important to know well about its various segments. Media in their various forms play a major role by functioning as the channels of cultural communication. It is easy to enter into a society with less effort through the various forms of the media; the press, the radio, the

television or the film. So it is viewed that media is a critical and significant force in the discourse on social formation or transformation.

The television in India is the medium of mass communication with extreme importance and consequences to the society in general and, to women, in particular. The area of its influence and the reach of course is very wide. It occupies the private and the personal space of the home, conventionally regarded as the domain of women. As a form of entertainment and education television provides a high degree of access to women. It is easily accessible for women whether she is a housewife, student or a person working outside home. Here economic compulsions, social norms, communal consideration or gender do not hinder her from viewing TV in any way (Vellat 2004). But in contrast to this, as compared to the number of males, the representation of females in media is too less. This study is to make a search behind this big gap between women viewers of visual media and women participation in it.

Kerala has remained in the forefront of the developing countries in the matter of socio-political awareness and development for the past several decades. But the so-called educational attainment and a limited degree of economic freedom do not seem to have conferred on Kerala women a high degree social freedom. With the passage of time, and in spite of 'progress' on several fronts, her safety in the work place or places outside home remains an issue of concern. Apart from being physically vulnerable, social taboos weakens her in the time of need. Though, the sure beneficiary of her financial support, the society imposes heavy controls on her movements and activities in the name of maintaining the so-called morality and family values. She always becomes a victim of double standards taken by a male dominated society even she is educated and employed. Her educational achievements or job status do not seem to command little respect in the society. She remains as much the victim of male gaze as her counterparts who stay homebound (Ibid.).

The Problem and the Context

So many studies have been done in the areas of female attitude of television viewing in Kerala or on their behaviour as consumers. Studies are also conducted how the women are themselves being projected in television programming like serials, mega serials, advertisements and other TV softwares including news. Visual representation of womanhood is also analysed (Joseph 2000). This inquiry is an attempt to find out the varying ratio in male and female media professionals, particularly in Malayalam television industry

and the reasons why the women are compelled to leave media and opt for other professions.

Young female media professionals, who come in with full enthusiasm, are found to have been leaving media, within 2- 3 years. This trend has been going on for quite some time (Rasheed 2008; Raghavayya 2009; Seema 2009). When compared to the print and radio media, it is high in the visual media. As Vellat (2004) mentioned in her study on Gender in the Malayalam Small Screen, women have a ubiquitous presence as an anchor, presenter or reader and reporter, but her own voice is not heard much. Though formally educated, she is depicted as a docile and meek person. On the screen, as well as beyond, in the society she gets little opportunity to form her views. Her role on screen and off- screen is passive and undefined. In her insecurity and inhibition she often forgets even the fact that she could have an option of her own and the ability to voice it, in public or in private. The societal requirements, which make her real self as a stereotyped form, with her haste to conform to its demands, makes her the 'other' the binary of 'self'. She becomes as passive as her model on the television, and just as ineffectual and helpless.

Kerala has the highest percentage of newspaper readers and television watchers in India. From this it is evident that the media enjoy high status in Kerala, and so the media professionals too. But the situation of women journalist is quite different. Most of the students who are coming to join the Mass Communication Institutes are girls but the number of those who reach the media field is very small (Nazir 2010). After the emergence of visual media in Malayalam, more women are being recruited as reporters/anchors. But that most of them are leaving the scene is a recent phenomenon as just like the flow to the visual media (Rasheed 2008; Raghavayya 2009; Seema 2009). This phenomenon raises some serious questions: Are the women media persons not comply to the market demand product? Or the stories they produced are not popular or lead the channel at risk? Is the work environment, neck to neck competition among channels, long working hours, etc compelling them to quit. What is the pattern of gender division of labour in a media house? Hence the study contains the following objectives: 1) find out the magnitude of outward flow of women media professionals from television industry. 2) whether the entry of women has increased in this field, 3) assess how many have remained continuously for a period of 10 years. 4) find out the Reasons behind taking up the decision to leave media by the women journalists.

Methodology

In a way, the study makes an ethnography of women media workers who resigned from the media within the last 5 years. In terms of the tools, the study employs semistructured interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FDs). Priority is given to qualitative information gleaned through interviews, combined with a tint of reflexivity, by undertaking a reading of the personal experience of the author. In this sense, auto ethnography is used here as a method because the author herself had associated with a reputed Malayalam news channel as a news anchor cum news reporter for five year period, from 2002 to 2007 and resigned from there five years back. Including the author, mainly five cases are illustrated and analysed. Ethnography of lives of women journalists in the visual media are analysed here. Subjective experiences are used here for objective analysis. The writer has conducted extensive interviews and interactions with women journalists who are working at present and resigned from the field too. Women journalists' individual experiences are narrated here. This study is done after discussions, interviews either directly or telephonic, with the media professionals and were associated with TV channels based at Trivandrum, Kochi and Kozhikode. Samples are selected randomly among the resigned women professionals from visual media throughout the state. Secondary data and reports from Public Administrative Section and different TV channels are also used.

Women Journalists and Visual Media

Telecasting began in Kerala in 1985 when the *Doordarshan Kendra*, Trivandrum was commissioned. But it was only in 1994 that the regional language Satellite Channel was introduced and Malayalam programmes came to be produced. *Asianet* the first private channel began transmission in the 1990s. Following, *SuryaTV* channel launched in 1998 by the Sun TV Network and *Kairali Channel* began in August, 2000. Leela Menon was the first woman in the state to join the profession in Kerala. She began her career late in life and kept her stories focused on women's issues. She started at the Indian Express in Hyderabad as a headline writer and later moved to the bureaus in Kerala. When she joined here there were no women in the field but today the situation has changed a lot. Today media boom and IT revolution opened up new vistas of quick development throughout the global village. It also increased the empowerment and recognition of women's contri-

bution in the task of information gathering and dissemination across the globe. On the other hand, they are performing multiple roles as readers, reporters, viewers, and audience for media. As compared to print media a bulk of women entered the profession of visual media. In visual media the screen shows almost equal number of males and females. Still the upper seats are controlled by the male majority. Whenever women want to come forward they have to cope with gender discrimination.

Female presence in Journalism is not just like the presence of females in other professions. A journalist should be much more socially committed as she/he can make his/her voice heard throughout the world. So a woman journalist can represent the whole women society. The voice for females, who are considered as a second class in the society, is a necessity especially in a democratic country. And it is now clear that participation of women in mass media at present is higher than before. In the last 20 years there has been a marked progress in the mass media.

In 2001, the International Federation of Journalists reported that around the world, 38 percent of all working journalists are women. But yet they are behind men in total representation. Women in visual media are increasing at a faster pace. A number of young women journalists are in the field. The glamour of visual media attracts both female and male journalists to the field. But a noticeable thing is that the female journalists do not stay back for a long time in the visual media. What could be the reasons for the disappearing of this talented pool of women from the field of journalism? According to the handbook released by Public Relations Department there are only 21 women reporters out of the total 498 in the Kerala state.

Visual media is featured by deadline pressure. Journalists have to play as reporters at the same time as the editors, news presenters, news producers, translators and so on. They are living with news at each second. Very little time allocated them for reporting news. This makes professional life for both male and female journalists in visual media more stressful. Twelve years back, the famous freelance journalist of Bangalore Mrs. Ammu Joseph who is a Malayali, has done a study on the situation of female journalists working in Indian media of the country (Joseph 2000). She met 20 women journalists personally in three, and she has revealed the bitter conditions and sufferings by the women in media. She opined that there existed a situation in Media which makes women mentally and emotionally alienated.

The study of the participation of males and females in media of America shows that 60 percentage of copy editors, 60 percentage of reporter's and 72

percentage of photographers are males (Chakravarthy 2000). Among the existing 70 more television stations of America, only 4 are owned by women. This profession always demanding high commitment, interest, talent and competence no doubt, but the point is that how much women are getting such a chance to prove their ability as a potential journalist. Still the media owners are hesitating to give the production freedom and responsibility of programmes to women journalists. So there are only a few women who are enjoying the higher status like Editor, Bureau Chief Etc. In print media of Kerala only one woman is working as the Bureau chief throughout this period. In Kerala society, yet people accepted that journalism is suitable for women as a profession. Still Keralites believe in women centred family so they are demanding women's service in homes more than at working place. In reality, women journalists also suffer a lot to make adjustments with their family because of the special features of such a job like journalism. But to avoid such conditions women are always compelled to resign their jobs.

Actually the responsibilities related to family and the safety problems in working place and outside are not the private issues of women only; in contrast by considering these as the social problems media should have to provide a space to women to overcome such issues. But most of the media are led by the notion that the women are a liability to their institutions. According to the study conducted by Press Institute of India for National women's Commission pointed out that, as compared to 90's there is an increase in the number of women journalists but still ignorance towards their problems remain. Most of the women journalists had opined that so many situations were there to prove their capacity to their chiefs by working very hard than their male counters. And most of the women who participated in this study revealed that they were afraid of the rumours and sexual scandals associated with their chief officers, if they were getting promotion or any type of encouragements from the higher authority.

Primary statistics reveal that there is a substantial trend in increasing the number of women who enrol as journalists as well as an equally important trend of draining of women journalists in Malayalam television industry. *Indiavision*, the first news channel in Malayalam, witnessed the highest number of female journalists' drain in Kerala. In nine years of its operation, 148 women enrolled *Indiavision* as journalists, but as many as 120 of them resigned their job. *Manorama News*, started in 2006, employed 37 women journalists over the years, 16 of them resigned. In *Asianet news*, 48 women enrolled as journalists, 24 of them quit the channel eventually.

Amrita TV had 28 women on their pay roll over the years, but 14 of them left the channel (Data collected from the news desk of above mentioned T.V. channels by the author herself).

The above statistics may not reflect the real picture of female journalists drain, because many resignations are followed by their relocation of the media job to another channel or media house. Nevertheless, 120 women who quit *Indiavision* over nine years, 20 women never returned to journalism; 11 of them sought job in other fields and nine women gave up their quest for a salaried job. In *Manorama News*, out of 16 journalists who relinquished their job, 8 persons opted other professions than journalism, and an equal number permanently discarded the job and became housewives. In *Asianet News*, of 24 women who quit the channel, 15 women opted other fields and nine persons discarded the job. In *Amrita*, 5 women permanently gave up the profession and became housewives (data collected from the news desk of related TV Channels).

Shades and colours

Maliha Raghavayya

Maliha Raghavayya (57), a former Principal Correspondent who retired from *The Hindu*, two years back, holds the view that sex disparity and male domination are the main factors for this transition. It is the male domination which plays an important role, even when man claims to protect the woman. It is quite evident in the media field in Kerala. The female staff are denied of their space in the Newsroom. There is generally an impression that women are not that clever and that they will not be able to deal with tough news especially when it comes to political news. The female journalists are often given soft stories on art, culture and social welfare and only very few of them have been able to prove themselves as political viewers in the print Media. The main reason for this is that the regional media is still very traditional in its outlook. Women are underestimated and rarely given the opportunity to express their view points. The partiality and mental tension borne by female journalists at work place is too high when compared to other professionals. When asked the reason behind her quitting job, she would say that in spite of having opportunities she was deprived of it. Those who have been able to withstand this partiality and create own niche, also disappear in a short span of time. Maliha had worked in different parts of the country for

more than a decade.

Shahina K. K.

Shahina K. K. (39), who was News Editor in Charge with *Asianet*, has left the field and turned to research. Later on she came back to media but preferred print media as a magazine journalist. During her tenure, she realised the power of a journalist and learned how one should carry it. It was a general impression that a news presenter needed to be well dressed. She had to change her beliefs for this. In her tenure, from 1997-2007 with *Asianet*, she realised that a News turns out to be just a show and the reporter has no other option than being an anchor.

It is seen that female journalists in visual media take up the attitude of a male, in their body language, thoughts, ideas etc. The work atmosphere for the journalists in Kerala is not favourable in the case of maternity leave, duty schedule etc. Male domination is glaringly prevalent in this field.

V.M. Deepa

V.M. Deepa (38), was a Senior Correspondent in *Asianet Channel* and she tendered her resignation in 2007. According to Deepa, the main limitation of the television is that, 'the news is forgotten the moment the telecasting ends'. The news on gender issue is often followed by anti-women stories. How victims were treated and what protection was given to them was one major issue that kept haunting me throughout the career.

The occupational hazards of women journalists in visual media are immense. Maternity leave is never an accepted term in many of the organizations. There are enough numbers of cases where women journalist had to resign when pregnant. Some of them had to resign for marrying journalist of a different channel. It is generally believed that, women leak the exclusive news items to their husband and men abstain from doing that.

Labour law are commonly violated by news channels in large scale and employee benefits are never talked about. In many companies conveniently neglect the need to providing conveyance facilities to women working late nights. Most women find it extremely difficult to handle the responsibilities of a journalist and wife together, and eventually they cease working. It is widespread feeling that women are only fit to handle women issues and related news items. It is a fact that women keep on following the issues of the

marginalized and socially weaker sections and bring them to lime light with apt intensity. With all this, it goes without saying that women have to put in double the effort when compared to men working as reporters, says Deepa.

Vidhu Vincent

Vidhu Vincent (37), joined in *Asianet* in 2000 as a reporter and finally resigned from *Manorama Channel* in 2007. Vidhu says that there prevails an unwritten rule that women journalists are not supposed to behave like their male counterparts while working. During press briefings women are not supposed to raise questions as done by male journalists. Those in power have real interest in silencing the voice of women. All these rules have something that pose a threat of impediment to women journalists.

The glamour and power of visual media is momentary and that is never understood while in being part of the news industry. One major concern of women journalists is that they find no way to justify their stand. The dissatisfaction and discontentment of the job is more a problem to women than men. Men find outlet to stress in cocktail parties. Once a women television presenter who wanted to keep her identity undisclosed said that she faced the discrimination in work place along with the non-cooperation of relatives for being a working journalist. She was criticized for not following the religious dress code and using make-up while making television presentations. Finally she had to forsake her job in one year. She was even divorced for these reasons. It was real pity that she had to leave journalism and opted for another industry to make a living.

A Muslim women television journalist was of the opinion that her professional growth was something displeasing for her community and society. "Our professional efficiency and merit are never taken into account, but our dress code stands to be a matter of discussion and attracts criticism" she said. Profession demands women journalists to move late nights, something that the conventional society wouldn't want them to do. Our society is of the strong belief that women are just meant for nursing men and nurturing children and if they object to do so, they lose the support of the family in total.

The Journalist in Me*

When *Indiavision* has started as the first news channel of Malayalam in 2003, I was also there with the news team. I started my job as a journalist by

presenting the first news bulletin of *Indiavision* News channel. That moment was my achievement and to be a journalist was my dream also. To reach that position as a news presenter I suffered a lot as a member of an orthodox under educated Muslim family of north Malabar. I worked as the news presenter for two years at Kochi and as a news reporter for two years at Kozhikode for the same channel. I experienced a kind of loneliness and isolation throughout these two phases as a journalist. My family members and community members were reluctant to see my news presentation in mini screen without any head covering and with a heavy make-up too. When I was presenting a life related reality show "*Ente kadha*" 2001 at *Asianet channel*, which was one of the popular programmes at that time, were not noticed by my parents only because I didn't wear head scarf with saree. My growth and progress as a journalist, even from a less educated and traditional orthodox family, no one was ready to encourage or recognise my achievements. No one remarked about my news presentation style and knowledge on that, instead they blamed me by pointing out my dressing style and pattern of dress and heavy lipstick on my lip. Such bitter experience was there when I was working as a reporter too. Even after travelling for days without considering day or night, still I didn't get any appreciation, even I was accused of loafing around with other men for doing these things. The pressure can be from two angles one from the community and from the other sources like work place and kith and kin. I had to leave the profession which I loved very much and derived much satisfaction being a journalist, on the pretext that a woman has to look after the children and run the family affairs in 2007, and joined teaching profession ever since.

Discussion and Conclusion

The presence of women as media workers is gradually increasing in the last ten years globally. Though, in the areas of crucial decision making and holding high official ranks related newspaper and TV, they are still in a poor position. From the above mentioned life experiences itself it is very clear that interest was the main factor which made them to choose journalism profession. Further, the sense of social commitment, better possibilities to serve society and enough confidence to do something daring also made them to choose the same. But during the course of their work, most of them have felt disgusted towards their profession because of the stereotypical gender construction that prevailed in society and media. There is double burden on

women in any profession as they want to look after their children, husband and family. If there is a supportive system in the family, they can go forward easily. Society is expecting certain things from her and thus she is compelled to do that along with her profession. Society has assigned many roles and responsibilities on women. Thus it is not the lack of talent that pulls back the women journalists, but the burden of responsibilities which society has put on them. Such pressures will lead to her resignation from the journalism field.

The conversations by the respondents also reveal the fact that women journalists have to put up more efforts than men while entering this field. Women journalists have to prove their capacity as there exists a prejudice that they cannot cover deep political stories, sports news etc. but all agree that they would get appreciation for what they have accomplished. All of them seem to have believed that gender discrimination towards women journalists exist mainly among the family and society rather than media institution and work place. So each of them demand a supportive family system to go forward successfully in the media field.

The study as a whole dealt with women and visual media in which it focused on women as a media person. The study delves on aspects of women on visual media. The objectives were analysed from the angle of female journalists. It was observed that some hopeful changes are there in the position and status of women related to media just like other fields of development. But then some uncertainties also exist while the increasing number of women appear to be fading out from the screen.

Note

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* The author had been working with *Indiavision* Malayalam News Channel as News Anchor cum News Reporter for five years from 2002 to 2007.

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