SPEAK UP, DON'T BE SHY: REFLECTIONS FROM COMMUNITY RADIO'S WORK ON GENDER ISSUES

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Abstract

Adolescence is a period of emotional storm, moodiness and stress. Life seems to be a secret vessel for an adolescent, with many unanswered questions, thoughts about sexuality and gender, as conversations around these topics are only incident-based. The stream of thoughts, questions and confusion that remain unanswered can start to have a detrimental effect on emotional and psychological health, and sometimes even on physical health.

The UN defines youth as an age group between 15 to 24 years. This population includes 1.8 billion of the 7.3 billion world population. Eighty-seven percent of youth live in developing countries, with 67 percent living in Asia. Half of the youth population are female. The case study intends to share reflections from community radio *Alfaz-e-Mewat* to explore conversations around gender, and gender roles that are imbibed through various means, starting in early childhood, and how they become even stronger in adolescence. The case study tries to analyse the scope of such conversations in the highly conservative region of district Nuh in Haryana state, the inherent challenges and the way forward. It highlights some critical learning from participatory development communications, the power of using narratives and storytelling, and integration with the positive deviance approach, which involves identifying individuals, groups, and communities, who have succeeded in overcoming social challenges against all odds to bring about social change.

Keywords: Development communications, community radio, gender, positive deviance, social change, adolescents

Adolescence and Gender

This paper is research related to a radio broadcast series in India that addresses gender issues that face young people in their personal relations. The series '*Kuch Tum Kaho*, *Kuch Hum Kahen*', translated as "Speak Up" gave some young people a chance to speak up.

Adolescents face a number of unique developmental challenges, including coping with abrupt changes in their bodies, managing their sexual interests,

forming new kinds of relationships, and planning their academic and occupational futures. Gender affects how the youth manage all of these challenges (Perry and Pauletti, 2011). The UN defines youth as an age group between 15 to 24 years. This population includes 1.8 billion of the 7.3 billion world population. Eighty-seven percent of youth live in developing countries, with 67 percent living in Asia. Half of the youth population are female. According to social role theory[1], historical and cultural expectations influence behaviours, gender roles, and characteristics of men and women (Massachusetts Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, n.d.).

The early gender bias experiences that children encounter can shape their:
- Attitudes and beliefs related to their development of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships,
- Access to education equality, as well as
- Stifling their physical and psychological wellbeing (Hendrix & Wei, 2009). Developmental psychology[2] and life span development[3] based on the principles of multidimensionality and multi directionality[4] hold much greater relevance in adolescence where one undergoes a transition from childhood to adulthood.

Influence of Media on Adolescence

Newspapers, magazines, television, radio and computers are some commonly found media tools available worldwide. According to the World Bank Report (2003), 22 percent, 28 percent, 23 percent and 21 percent of the global population have access to radio, television sets, telephones and internet, respectively. The deficit of information is greater in rural regions of India. Accessibility and availability of media options vary substantially between states, districts, tehsils, and by gender.

The influence of the media on the psychosocial development of children is profound. For instance, television has the potential to generate both positive and negative effects. A child's individual developmental level is a critical factor in determining whether the medium has positive or negative effects. Not all television programmes are bad, but negative effects of exposure to violence, inappropriate sexuality and offensive language are often seen (Paediatr Child Health. 2003).

Similar effects of other media, including advertising, radio, videos, can also be seen across varied contexts.

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[1] Role theory is a perspective in sociology and in social psychology that considers most of everyday activity to be the acting out of socially defined categories.

[2] Development psychology shows how people grow and change. These changes include physical, feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.

[3] Life span development is the study of how humans grow and change throughout their entire life.

[4] Multidimensional changes happen across many different aspects of a human life at the same time, biological (or physical), cognitive (or mental) and socioemotional changes. Multidimensionality relates to dimensions and specific components of those dimensions which grow and shrink during different points in a person's development.

Study Objective

This case study talks about how a community radio programme series[5] on Alfaz-e-Mewat (Wikipedia, n.d.) focused on the emotional health of adolescents, and played an effective role in giving them a platform to share their views, concerns, and aspirations. The series also helped youth find solutions amongst themselves and initiate a dialogue amongst various stakeholders, viz families, teachers and peer groups. The study also shares how youth in a closed conservative community opened up to speak about their problems and were comfortable sharing their personal stories of joy, hatred, love, attraction and violence.

Study Method

The study used a mixed method research design, including qualitative aspects to show how community radio is playing an instrumental role in giving a voice to adolescents. It highlights the programming parameter of community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat for the broadcast series focusing on the emotional health of adolescents, as a result of which adolescent girls and boys came forward to speak up and overcame their shyness to talk about their issues. Discussions and case studies were done by the radio team members trained on community learning programme[6] by Maraa[7] pertaining to gender issues to analyse the social and behaviour changes in adolescents after getting the platform of community radio to share and speak up. The series was financially supported by Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA)[8].

Theoretical Perspective

The study was based on action research that included participatory production of radio programmes. Largely experiential in nature, its foundation was in these areas: behaviour change communication[9],social and behaviour change communication[10]. These models mark a critical shift in the understanding of communication

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[5] Community radio is radio broadcasting with the objective of serving the cause of the community, in the service area, by involving community members in the broadcast of their programmes. It affords a unique advantage of receiving transmission through low-cost and battery-operated portable receiving sets (Community Radio India website).

[6] The Community Learning Programme approach focuses on issues related to the health of individuals and their communities. It addresses local needs with clear learning objectives, promotes collaboration between media, development groups and education agents, with interactive and participatory formats, face-to-face learner support, and is driven by local resources.

[7] Maraa is a media and arts collective based in Bangalore, India that works with community radio stations capacity building besides their work on democratising public spaces and politicising artistic practice.

[8] CREA is a feminist human rights organisation based in New Delhi, India. CREA works on a diverse range of human rights movements and networks, to advance the rights of women and girls, and the sexual and reproductive freedoms of all people.

[9] Behaviour change communication (BCC) is an interactive process of any intervention with individuals, communities, and/or societies (as integrated with an overall programme) to develop communication strategies to promote positive behaviours appropriate to their settings.

[10] Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) is guided by a comprehensive ecological theory that incorporates individual level change and change at broader environmental and structural levels. Thus, it works at one or more levels: the behaviour or action of an individual, collective action taken by groups, social and cultural structures, and the enabling environment.

for development. Communication for social change has moved further from "behaviour change communication" (BCC) toward "social and behaviour change communication" (SBCC), which emphasises improved individual and group behaviours as well as strengthening the social context, systems, and processes that underpin emotional health. The study also reveals the positive deviance approach[11] at work using community radio as a tool to promote social and behaviour change because of its local and participatory nature.

Community Radio: A Platform to Connect Rural Communities

Community radio is a powerful tool for the poor and for non-profit organisations serving society. Its enormous benefits as an information and communication tool are widely used all over India. UNESCO's Community Radio Handbook (Fraser and Estrada, 2001) quotes the following declaration of principle by the World Association of Community Broadcasters:

Community radio responds to the needs of the community; it serves and contributes to its development within progressive perspectives in favour of social change. Community radio strives to democratise communication through community participation, in different forms, in accordance with each specific social context.

The essence of community radio is community participation in content planning, management, and day-to-day operations of the station. Non-commercial in nature, community radio serves the communities it caters to with technology that works well in the cultural context of the community it serves. Though its reach is focused by law on a small geography, a community radio station plays a pivotal role in dealing with social problems in addition to providing entertainment. Community radio acts as an intermediary between government and locals, making the voices of the community heard. It has, indeed, proved to be a viable medium of communication at the grassroots level because of its low-cost and availability, even in the case of erratic electricity supply (Murada & Grover, 2014).

UNESCO recognises community radio as a medium that gives voice to the voiceless, serves as a mouthpiece of the marginalised, and is at the heart of communication and democratic processes within societies Fraser and Estrada (2001) suggest that community radio plays a vital role in making people aware about their basic rights, entitlements and duties, while providing a strong platform

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[11] Positive deviance approach involves identifying individuals, groups, and communities that have succeeded in overcoming social challenges against all odds to bring about social change.

to the community to express. Community radio provides a comprehensive mode to disseminate messages on a wider scale and be a source of entertainment. It provides a platform for the promotion of women role models who can inspire others and help educate and sensitise men on gender equality, as men's access and use of the media is more than women's in the villages. They also note that community radio is characterised by the active participation of the community in the process of creating information and entertainment, as well as culturally relevant material and placing an emphasis on local issues and concerns. Trained local producers create programmes using local voices. The community actively takes part in the content creation and station management. Unlike commercial broadcasting, community radio is a unique entity with an ethos of independence and responsibility to serve the community. Given the participatory nature of community radio, the community itself decides its priorities and needs in terms of information provision.

Community Radio Viewed with a Gender Lens

Gender inequalities in participation and access to media limit their potential to become inclusive, democratic spaces. Biases, stereotyping and unbalanced reporting from a gender perspective normalise and further entrench unequal gender power relations at the root of discriminatory attitudes and practices.

Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in 1995 underscores the importance of media to the advancement of women. Shared interests, social behaviour, and communication are attributes that pull women, men and youth into clusters and sub clusters of society that are visible to community radio through a lens that is unmatched by mainstream media. This has been evidenced by many community radio stations that have introduced socially acceptable virtual platforms, allowing women to publicly discuss and debate issues that are related to their unique experiences and needs. This specific opportunity, matched with a response to international standards, lends credibility to community radio, as documented in numerous cases of good practice. It also leads to ethical practices and facilitates support from legislators for enabling policies (Ghoorah, 2014).

By reaching out to the unreachable, community radio is able to foster social inclusion, inspire creative cultural expression, disseminate information and knowledge, and enforce democratic values that invite equal participation in shaping public opinion.

Intervention Area

Community radio *Alfaz-e-Mewat* FM 107.8 operates in a district called Nuh (formerly Mewat), in the state of Haryana, India. Nuh is one of most "backward"

districts, even though it is in such close proximity with the national capital and millennium city, Gurugram (formerly Gurgaon). The area is largely inhabited by Meo Muslims[12] and characterised by some of the lowest socioeconomic development indices.

The maternal mortality rate in the district is 275 as compared to 212 in India. As per the Census of 2011, the region had about 42 percent literacy, of which female literacy stands as low as 28 percent. The average household size is seven. Aggressive and deep-rooted patriarchy at home and in society, as well as violence from male partners, has kept women silent. Gender inequality can be seen right from childhood. The low literacy rate amongst girls makes it evident. Girls often drop out of school to help their mother in the household chores, fetch water from miles away, or take care of the younger siblings. These work divisions based on gender roles and the prevalent gender biases affect development and opportunities as children, adolescents and even further as adults (Godyal & Makhija, 2014).

Alfaz-e-Mewat and Gender Programmes

Sex and gender are often used as synonyms and when one talk about radio and gender, we often think that programmes meant to cover both women and men is gender-based. Alfaz-e-Mewat explored working on gender under a community learning programme series. In order to do gender programmes, it was important that our own understanding on gender gets built and how to engage with youth on such issues.

The term "gender" is a sociological concept. It does not mean "women" and it does not exclude men. The issue of gender is explored by FAO (2011) in the Dimitra Project[13]. Gender expresses the social relations between men and women, which are based on culturally-acquired values and norms associated with femininity and masculinity. These relations vary constantly from one time and place to another. Principles, values, beliefs and behaviours evolve and are rooted in specific contexts[14].

• Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Gender does not pose a problem by itself but by how these gender differences get translated as gender stereotypes[15] and biases.

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[12] Meos comprises the majority of inhabitants of Mewat, a region in northwest India situated between the cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. Most belong to Raj put families and embraced Islam four centuries ago (Shams, 1983: 17), though a lot of Hindu customs were practiced as late as the mid-twentieth century. Moe society is still divided into pals and gotras, as in Hindus, with clear exogamous rules. The religious orientation of the Meo identity is thus deeply contested (Mayaram 2004).

[13] Dimitra Project is a participatory information and communication project that contributes to improving the visibility of rural populations, women in particular. The goal of the project is to highlight the role of women and men as producers, so that their respective interests are better taken into consideration and they can fully participate in the rural development of their communities and countries.

[14] Definition of gender: communicating gender for rural development, integrating gender in communication for development, Dimitra Project, Rome.

[15] Stereotypes are a generalisation, an image applied in a rigid manner to describe all members of a social group.

- Gender equality, which is related to law, means that all human beings are free to develop their skills and make choices without the limitations of stereotypes, prejudices and rigid gender roles. The rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men cannot depend on whether they were born male or female. FAO has defined some of these terms as follows: Gender equality means that women and men have equal rights and that their aspirations and needs are considered equally[16].
- Equity, which is more related to justice, means fair treatment for women and men, according to their specificity. This treatment may be identical or different, but should be equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities. Equity requires specific measures to compensate for the existing imbalances that put women or men at a disadvantage; the ultimate goal is equality (FAO, 2011, p. 16-18).

However, being equal does not mean being the same, nor similar, nor identical. In a population made up of many different individuals, homogeneity is not possible: heterogeneity (multiplicity and diversity) wins out. Identities are shaped by social and economic factors such as sex, age, peer group, social and geographic background, religion, social, marital and family status, health, education and professional position. Our identities create different needs and expectations, specific hopes and aspirations, and particular constraints and strengths[17].

That is why communication initiatives must never be aimed at all and sundry, or at overly broad categories, such as women or young people. Rather, they should be targeted at more specific groups[18]. Formative research, the foundational work in a community learning programme, including focused group discussions, in-depth interviews with stakeholders revealed how gender, sociocultural and economic factors influenced choices and experiences. Focused group discussions with girls and boys on topics of gender came across as a surprise for them, as these topics had never been raised and talked about before. It was more a peer culture.

Alfaz-e-Mewat and Gender Programmes

Community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat (rural voices of Mewat) FM 107.8, is an initiative of the Sehgal Foundation (a public charitable trust registered in India since 1999), that was launched in 2012 and has since then been creating an ever-widening and community-driven platform to give voice to communities and

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[16] Definition of equality: communicating gender for rural development, integrating gender in communication for development, Dimitra.
[17] Communicating gender for rural development, integrating gender in communication for development.
[18] FAO definition of equality: communicating gender for rural development, integrating gender in communication for development.

connect individuals and communities to new knowledge, essential government services and local cultural traditions. With a vision to see 'every person across rural India empowered to lead a more secure and prosperous life', Sehgal Foundation was reaching out to rural villagers through face to face meetings, awareness drives and community based events. The need for having a community media tool such as community radio arose in order to reach a critical mass of people and at the same time give them a platform to voice their concerns. Alfaz-e-Mewat broadcasts thirteen hours a day, seven days a week, and brings important messages in the local language on agricultural techniques, nutrition, women and child health, as well as other social and cultural issues, reaching out to 224 villages.

At Alfaz-e-Mewat, the experience of working on gender themes raised many eyebrows, especially when the word 'gender' was uttered, and when dialogues around gender based issues were initiated (within the target group). The subject led to a lot of curiosity and excitement; the conversations between groups of girls and boys. The Alfaz-e-Mewat team encountered initial resistance, coupled with a willingness to continue with such platforms so that issues important to the target groups could be discussed easily and openly. Initially, the groups were hesitant and shy but their comfort level grew with every meeting we had with them. Simultaneously, we also approached the girls group. Their inhibitions were stronger, logically so, but they also seemed interested. The women reporters spent few hours daily to build a rapport with them and share their own experiences. Slowly the girls started to share and talk about issues like: What is puberty? How do adolescents feel when physical changes come knocking? What is menstruation? When does it start or stop?

Four months of enriching talks with these groups laid the basis for the series being produced on adolescents. The series placed emphasis on participatory content production that is hitherto the best form of production any station can aspire for; however, tight frameworks, lack of resources and timelines sometimes diverted us from this unique concept, only to come back closer to the groups, who now wanted to share more and more. One of radio team members recalls when the groups would request participants to stay over for a longer time and listen to their stories and experiences and how they felt in that situation. The series titled *Kuch Tum Kaho Kuch Hum Kahen*, literally translated as 'You say something, I say something or Speak Up' got its name from the many conversations we had with the groups aimed at encouraging conversations around these topics, which could be the only way to find solutions to challenges faced in these domains.

Similar Problems but Differing Perspectives

As gender equality happens to be a standalone goal in the international community's Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5), the series was a good

opportunity to talk about gender-based stereotypes and how they affect adolescents. Some of our conversations were designed to bring out opinions regarding this such as doing anonymous exercises where the group put out their gender related experiences across different phases in their lives. When this exercise was done with girls, we found the gender-based stereotypes becoming stronger as they grew. One of the girls from the group shared that her brother, though younger, can go out until late but that she was not allowed to do so. She added that although the family did not discriminate between the siblings, girls have to take on certain responsibilities such as helping the mother in the kitchen, taking care of younger siblings, learning how to manage household chores and others as girls are expected to take care of the new family she goes into after marriage.

Gender inequity is widespread in Indian society; this is recognised as an important determinant of sexual and reproductive health problems. Most adolescents are at a threshold where there is a big gap between what they want and what they get. Adolescents narrated several personal experiences related to early marriages of elder brothers, which put an end to the latter's career, bringing in a lot of additional responsibility. As per our research, boys, for instance, opened up quicker and easier than girls, as far as talking about sex, relationships, love, attraction, and pressure of marriage was concerned; girls, on the other hand, were reluctant to even talk about such topics, though they found these subjects to be pertinent, but eventually with increased rapport building this started to change.

The programme was aired every week and an adolescent health counsellor joined in live, at the studio, just after the programme went on air. Students called into share their experiences and pose queries and also visited the general hospital with their concerns around gender and sexuality. All this was done in an anonymous manner such that the identity of the caller is not revealed.

The 10-episode series covered topics such as dreams and aspirations of adolescents, hurdles faced while realising goals, views on early marriage, fashion, and perceptions around both genders, some which are even discriminatory at times. Aijaz (name changed) talked about his first experience of shaving, the kind of scolding that followed from his father, and the taunts of an impending marriage. Suman (name changed) shared the level of confusion, she experienced, when she had her first periods, as no one had told her about this natural biological process. Later, however, she was relieved and happy, as she felt complete as a girl. Looking at things through the gender lens can add value to the content, and see the impact of the influence that stakeholder groups viz peer, family, relatives etc. have on youth.

Way Forward

The gender programming at Alfaz-e-Mewat has been an educative experience, not limited to just broadcasting information, but also serving as a platform for

expression, debate and dialogue. It also helped us evaluate gender sensitivity within the organisation, including efforts made to address gender inequality; increased involvement of women at all levels - from programming to internal decision-making at the radio station; ensure that everyone working at the radio is aware of gender issues and contributes to a culture of equity in the running of the radio station and in programme production; promote voices and concerns of marginalised groups in the community including women and youth; portray women in a positive light as active members of the society; avoid the use of stereotypes, encourage a gender neutral language; and encourage debate and exchanges between different groups in the community (Farm Radio International, 2012).

The radio series gave a platform to adolescents to speak up and share their personal experiences and concerns and at the same time find solutions, all of this aiming at creating a space for these conversations to happen. They are many such stories of embarrassment, frustration, hope, ambition, and failure that are waiting to be heard - this is just the beginning.

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