Women's Voices: Engaging the Excluded

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Abstract

Media plays an important role in defining gender roles within the society. From traditional media forms to new communication technologies, media has been exercising its influence in creating societal expectations of gender.

Radio is one of the oldest and affordable information and communications technology (ICT) tools. It holds potential to bring positive change for women. The importance of radio, or community radio (CR) to be more specific, enhances in the regions marked by restricted mobility, less access to resources, education and low decision-making ability. This article focuses on how CR is facilitating women's voices in such areas. The role of CR will be illustrated with the example of Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8, a CR station at work in the district of Mewat, Haryana. The case study looks at the role of CR as a communication medium in bringing social change by creating spaces for women to express themselves.

Keywords

Women's empowerment, community radio, information and communication technology, rural development

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Introduction

Community radio (CR) is one of the participatory information and communication technology (ICT) tools. CR is a low-cost medium that aims to bridge the information gap existing in rural areas. The essence of CR is participation of the community in content planning, management and day-to-day operations of the station. Being non-commercial in nature, it serves the communities it caters to. The technology seems to work very well in the cultural context of the community it serves. It has great potential for countries like India. Although the reach is small as compared to the size of the Indian territory, but it plays a pivotal role in dealing with social problems, besides providing entertainment. CR also acts as an intermediary between government and local masses, making the voices of the community reach resonance at places. It has, indeed, proved to be one of the viable media of communication at grass-roots level because of its low-cost and availability, even in the case of erratic electricity supply.

CR can play a vital role in making people aware about their basic rights, entitlements and duties, while providing a strong platform to the community to express. There are times when community biases hinder broad-based participation from all sections of the community, especially women. But once the trust is created with time through community mobilisation, the community buy in comes through.

Literature Review

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

It is a powerful tool for the poor, not-for-profit companies meant to serve society. CR has enormous benefits as an information and communication tool and is being used to a great effect all over the country. UNESCO's CR Handbook (Fraser and Estrada, 2001) quotes the following 'declaration of principle' by the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC, 1988: 4, as cited in Fraser and Estrada, 2001):

> Community radio responds to the needs of the community it serves, contributing to its development within progressive perspectives in favour of social

change. Community radio strives to democratize communication through community participation in different forms in accordance with each specific social context.

Some of the benefits of CR are:

- It is a democratising tool, encouraging participation and involvement in local affairs, political and social.
- It provides access to the media to communities and groups that have previously not had such access.
- It increases the political and social power, knowledge and experience of those who participate in it.
- It offers communities opportunity for self-expression.
- It creates and sustains political community through its role as participatory public forum. CR stations are a forum for discussion of community problems, and thus are spaces where community problems can be described, interpreted, analysed, mobilised around and solved.
- It creates a public, and a public sphere, where one had either withered or had never existed before (Calhoun, 1991; Kumar, 1994; Lang, 2002; Maiava, 2002; Myers, 1995; Prometheus, 2013; Ross and Rolt, 2005, as cited in Tucker, E., 2013).

UNESCO sees CR as a medium that gives voice to the voiceless that serves as the mouthpiece of the marginalised, and is at the heart of communication and democratic processes within societies. With CR, citizens express their views on decisions that concern them. The notions of transparency and good governance take on new dimensions, and democracy is reinforced (Community Radio Handbook, Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo Estrada, UNESCO, 2001).

CR is characterised by the active participation of the community in the process of creating news, information, entertainment and culturally relevant material, with an emphasis on local issues and concerns. With training, local producers can create programmes using local voices. The community can also actively participate in the management of the station and have a say in the scheduling and content of the programmes. Second, it is essentially a non-profit enterprise. In these days of highly commercialised broadcasting, the ethos of CR remain independence and responsibility to serve the community, not the advertiser. As the station is owned by the community, it also maintains some responsibility in the running of the station. Third, CR programming is designed by

the community, to improve social conditions and the quality of its cultural life. The community itself decides what its priorities and needs are in terms of information provision (VOICES, India: a non-profit development communication group).

CR provides another way to understand women's political participation (AMARC-WIN, 2013). Increasing women's political participation is one of the Millennium Development Goals and has been interpreted as increasing women's representation in governing bodies, although this has been criticised as tokenism, and it has been challenged that the women in these governing bodies are not consulted or equal members (Parpart, 2002; UN, 2005; Wood Wetzel, 2004). CR stations started by women or women's groups within CR stations can increase women's political participation in some of the following ways: increases participation in public debate, to set the terms in local/community media, creates opportunities for leadership and decision making, creates forums for discussions of women's political issues and for women's response to political decisions. Women can also learn a variety of skills including, technical skills/radio engineering, reading/writing/news editing and reading skills, radio show production techniques, and collective decision making strategies (Jallow, 1996). Through distance education and other educational programmes, which can reach women in their homes, CR can aid in the promotion of women's education. According to the World Bank,

> Another cost-effective means of reducing schedule conflicts for women is distance education, which generally revolves a combination of radio and correspondence techniques. Radio (or sometimes television) is used for transmitting classroom instruction in all subjects, and students supplement this with the use of textbooks and self-paced workbooks. Evidence suggests that self-study schools can reduce costs by atleast 20 to 30 per cent while opening access to girls. (World Bank, 1994: 44)

In 'Women on the Air: CR as a tool for feminist messages' Birgitte Jallow writes about the use of CR by feminist groups in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. She identifies the following as key reasons that CR was a tool for feminists, how it worked to empower women.

1. CR increased the visibility of women and women's experiences on the airwaves, countering stereotypes of women in the media (Jallow, 1996: 203).
2. It gave women place on 'public stage' and an 'avenue for involvement in public sphere' (Jallow, 1996: 203). Jallow writes,

'Community radio has provided an ideal opportunity for women to get on the air and contribute women's voices and perspectives to public debate' (Jallow, 1996: 205).

3. Participation in CR allowed women to express themselves, empowering them to make changes in their lives.

   Realizing women generally are not free to make crucial decisions in their lives; the women working in the stations attempt to organize the experiences of individual women into a collective unit of experience. By letting women speak for themselves, the individual experiences are transformed into a collective understanding of their life situation. Such understanding can contribute to further choice and action. (Jallow, 1996: 203)

4. The training they received allowed them access to better opportunities.

Moutse CR in Moutse Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, was started in 1997 by a group of rural women who had been mobilising around issues of water shortages and other community needs (Jallow, 1996: 205). Lahliwe Nkoana, one of the founders of the station, reports, 'Moutse Community Radio Station (MCRS) was born of many years of our community struggle. During those years, the rural, mostly female community campaigned for rights to water, education, health care, electricity, democracy and an end to polygamy which discriminated against rural wives' (Dagron, 2001: 172). Moutse focuses on women's empowerment and community development, and although women initially ran the station, they have opened up training, management and production positions to men in the community. KBOO CR in Portland Oregon has a women's caucus and two women's collectively run public affairs groups which produce 5 hours of programming on local, national and international women's issues. Each collective is made up of different women from different ethnic, political, social and geographic backgrounds. Each collective produces programmes of interest to different communities of women. The women's collectives also train their own members, engage in outreach to include young women and women from immigrant and minority groups, homeless women and women on public assistance to participate in the creation of programmes. KPFK CR in Los Angeles has two women's collectives, which produce two programmes: Feminist Magazine and the Radio Insurgencia Femenina (CR in Political Theory and Development Practice, by Ericka Tucker).

Alfaz-e-Mewat (AEM) Community Radio: Serving Marginalised Muslim Minorities

Introduction

The S M Sehgal Foundation (a public charitable trust established in 1999) has been working with the rural communities of Mewat for the past 15 years with a mission to strengthen community-led development initiatives to achieve positive social, economic and environmental change across rural India.

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 CR arose in order to reach out to a critical mass of people and at the same time give them a platform to voice their concerns.

Mewat is one of most backward districts even though it is in such close proximity with the national capital and millennium city of Gurgaon. The area is largely inhabited by an ethnic tribe, Meo Muslims, which is characterised by some of the lowest socioeconomic development indices.[1] As of Census 2011, Mewat had about 42 per cent of literacy, of which female literacy stands as low as 28 per cent. Even in the twenty-first century, child marriage is a norm here and only 15 per cent of child births take place in hospitals. The average household size is 7.[2] As per Agriculture Census of 2005–06, about 70 per cent of the farmers are small and marginal[3] in terms of their landholdings. Government programmes and schemes to uplift the communities function in plenty but there is no information about them to the people to access their entitlements. Based on our experience of working in the area and an assessment of local knowledge, capabilities and interests, Sehgal Foundation initiated a community media programme to empower individuals and communities through information-based communications. This includes CR and mobile technologies that help champion the voices of the most isolated and vulnerable populations by raising citizen awareness and providing a platform for expression.

The community media initiative is creating an ever-widening and community-driven network to connect individuals and communities to new knowledge, essential government services and local cultural traditions. CR station, Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8, operating in Ghaghas, a remote village at the foothills of Aravallis in Mewat, district, Haryana was launched in 2012. AEM broadcasts 12 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 to 183 villages in Mewat, including some on the Rajasthan border.

Since its programmes hit the airwaves in 2012, the station has received over 14,000 calls from its listeners, including nearly 20 per cent women. These women most often call to give feedback on programmes broadcasted and request for songs. The feedback that the station gets in the form of recorded calls is sorted and included in the programme '*Mann Ki Baat*' (Straight from the heart). The idea is to give a sense of belongingness to our listeners. Many listeners call up the station in order to hear their voices back on air. In our over two years of broadcasting experience, we have observed that women of Mewat are not yet comfortable to talk about women-centric issues. The key reasons for this are the closed and conservative society and the fear to get exposed on radio. To engage women, the station is focusing on programming that is based on women using a collaborative approach of learning from the community where women are involved right from the research phase of the programme in all stages of production and post-production.

It is imperative to also see the media accessibility by people in Mewat, which will enable the success or failure of our programmes.

Media Accessibility in Mewat

AEM is an easily accessible and effective platform to voice the views and concerns that are central to this marginalised Mewati community with low-literacy rates.

A mid-term monitoring study of Alfaz-e-Mewat (December 2013) by Sehgal Foundation's Rural Research Center was carried out after one year of AEM operations to explore five major domains, namely, listenership, mode of listening radio, information channels, usage and benefits of information received via radio and relative importance of radio. The research used both quantitative and qualitative aspects. For quantitative method, the statistical facts have been obtained via detailed structured questionnaire from those 51 villages that were enlisted in the baseline survey carried out in November, 2011–January, 2012. The interim data collection was done from December, 2012–February, 2013. The pre and post-analysis approach was employed throughout the study to explore the scenario existing before and after the launch of

Table 1. Village-wise Sample

Blocks	Number of Villages	Number of Matched Households
Nagina	25	1235
Nuh	03	271
Punhana	17	265
Ferozpur Jhirka	06	107
Total	51	1878

Source: Mid-term monitoring study of Alfaz-e-Mewat (December 2013), Rural Research center, Sehgal Foundation.

AEM. The villages in the baseline survey were those who would be receiving radio signals within the radius of 20 kilometres after the launch of AEM. The village selection under each block was done using stratified random sampling approach (Table 1).

Initially, the sample consisted of 2,427 households in the baseline survey. In the interim assessment, the attrition rate was 23 per cent and thus responses from 1,878 households were compared. Keeping same respondent and same sample size maintains the research rigour, ensures data compliance and the consistency of the respondents to measure the progress of AEM.

The study found out that mobile phones, television and radio sets are three vital media options locally available with the listeners of AEM. Amongst all, mobile phones outnumber all other media options with almost 90 per cent respondents having access, followed by television. Over the period of one year, there is a further addition of households by 4 per cent who now own mobile phones. Also, there is an increase (2.8 per cent) in the percentage of households having mobile phone with radio facility. This clearly indicates that the percentage of households who bought mobile phones, half of them bought phones with radio facility.

The gaining popularity of radio sets is apparent from Table 2, wherein there is an increase in the number of households by almost 4 per cent who now own a radio set. The qualitative discussions in the villages reveal that AEM is one of the factors behind increase in the purchase of radio sets. Although these figures are minuscule but they hint towards the scenario where inhabitants have started giving importance to radio, either by purchasing radio sets or mobile phones with radio facility.

Other media options include newspapers, magazines, landline phones and computers (Table 3). Newspaper covers almost 8 per cent

Table 2. Accessibility—Vital Media Options

Source	Before AEM	After AEM
Mobile Phone	90.2	94.3
Radio in mobiles	47.9	50.7
Television	17.3	18.7
Radio Sets	13.1	17.0

Source: Mid-term monitoring study of Alfaz-e-Mewat (December 2013), Rural Research center, Sehgal Foundation.
Note: N = 1,878; figures are in percentage.

Table 3. Other Media Options

Media Options	Before AEM	After AEM
Newspaper	7.6	7.5
Magazine	1.0	2.3
Landline Phone	2.8	1.2
Computer	3.9	2.0

Source: Mid-term monitoring study of Alfaz-e-Mewat (December 2013), Rural Research center, Sehgal Foundation.
Note: N = 1,878; figures are in percentage.

of households, whereas other remaining three media options cover a small proportion of respondents ranging from 1 to 4 per cent. However, over the period of one year not much difference is noticed in the trend of accessibility to other media options by the sampled households.

AEM Accessibility

The report further points out that radio sets and mobile phones are two sources available in the rural setting for listening to AEM. Radio listeners have increased from 265 respondents in baseline study to 395 in the interim study after the introduction of AEM. However, it is important to note that this increase in the number of respondents cannot be attributed only to the introduction of AEM. It is plausible that the new respondents might be listening to other radio stations along with AEM (Figure 1).

The qualitative analysis with women listeners of AEM revealed that women take equal interest in listening to AEM, however, they are not as vocal as men, when it comes to voicing opinions. Another survey with women listeners of AEM from six villages makes us understand the patterns of radio usage by women (Kotian, 2013) (Figure 2).
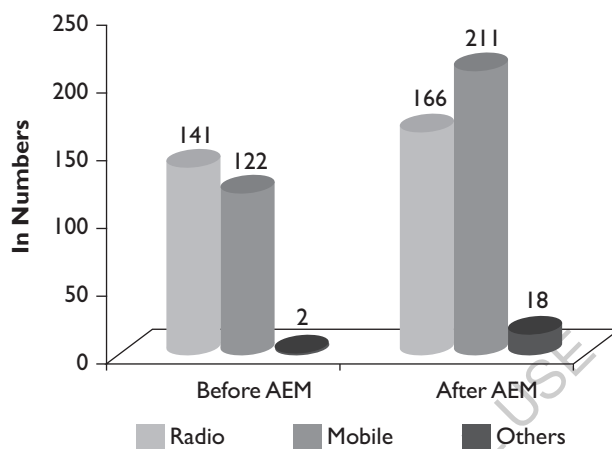
Figure 1. Sources of Listening Radio

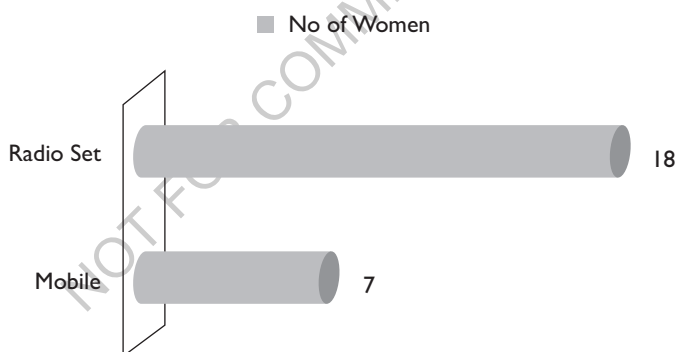**Note:** N = 265 (before AEM) and N = 395 (after AEM).

Figure 2. Means of Listening to Radio

Most of the interviewees listened to radio on the radio set available at home, while the rest listen to AEM through mobile phone, which most of the times belongs to a male member of the family (Figure 3).

Most of the women interviewed, started listening to AEM right from its inception. Few of them had already been introduced to other radio stations.

For most of the women, AEM was introduced to them through a male member of the family. Some women got to know about AEM through the training programme conducted by the radio team or either
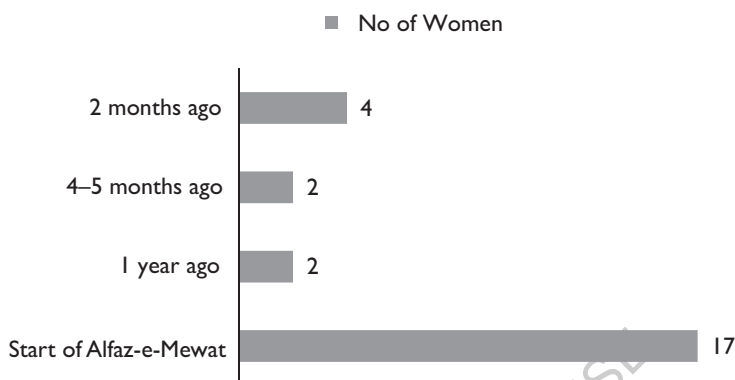
Figure 3. Listening to AEM

Figure 4. Introduction to AEM

they themselves were felicitated on Women's day by the radio team (Figure 4).

In Mewat, the most popular form of nazm is 'naat' that specifically praises the Islamic Prophet Muhammad) is a favourite among Muslim women (nazm is a major part of the Urdu poetry, that is normally written in rhymed verse and also in modern prose style poems). The other most favourite programmes heard by women are Galli Galli Sim Sim (the Hindi language adaptation of the American children's television series *Sesame Street* for India that brings innovative engaging content maximising the educational power of media to help children reach their highest potential.) and Kisse Kahani (local folklore on stories from Mewat and
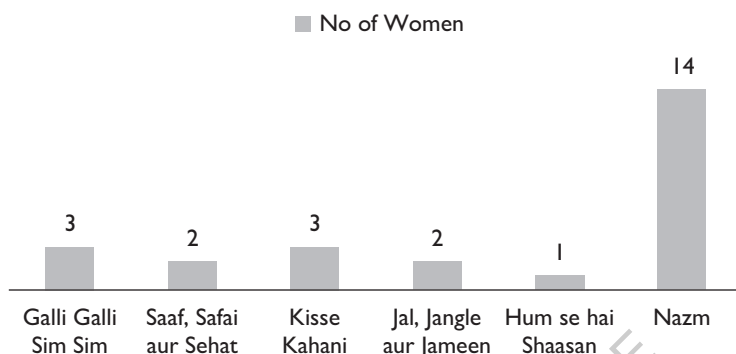
■ No of Women

Figure 5. Favourite Programme on Radio

its people) (Figure 5). The reason for liking nazm was it provided good entertainment, talks in their language and is acceptable by the male members of the family. On the other hand, women who like listening to other programmes confessed that they liked it because they are informative and make them aware. For these women, radio is, therefore, not just a source of entertainment. It is an interesting blend of education, information as well as entertainment.

The most popular time of listening is evening when they are done with most of the household chores. Most of the women listen to radio through the radio set.

Role of AEM and Challenges Faced

Since AEM began to work, it was not easy to make CR familiar among people. The initiative seeks to mainstream women but faces a lot of challenges in women participation. In the testing days and even after six-months of broadcast, the station did not have any women caller. This made us rethink the programming strategy. It was decided that we needed to reflect on the needs of women in the region and come up with a relevant programme design. It included special interest programmes on health and hygiene and holding discussions on topics that affect women. Focused programming on women was the first step in bringing women participation. The station broadcasts give special emphasis to women through programmes, such as, 'Saaf Safai aur Sehat' (Cleanliness and Health) and Galli Galli Sim Sim, which has helped to engage children, especially girls.

Today, AEM is providing opportunities to the rural poor to learn new skills, and bring a positive change at individual level. Sehgal Foundation initially trained 19 community members in this project through a six-month training, of which there was only one woman. It taught them how to operate equipment, produce programmes and manage the station as technicians, producers and facilitators. Later, three more community women have joined as reporters in the team. Bhagwan Devi said:

> I don't know how to express what I feel. Like men, I also have opinions but they hardly took the shape of words. Earlier, I was feeling sceptical about the community women broadcaster's training, started by Sehgal Foundation. But after attending the training, I feel that I can talk about issues that matter to me.

She belongs to Bhadas village in Mewat district of Haryana. She is now a regular visitor and contributor to CR.

The CR hosts special programmes/campaigns marking International Women's Day. It profiles women achievers' and recognises the unsung grass-roots women heroes from the community.

At the heart of CR is the team work of community members, who are responsible for creating content, in accordance with their own knowledge, capabilities and interests. In this spirit, AEM is led by a team of six radio journalists, three men and three women, who were recruited from the local community and trained by the staff of Sehgal Foundation. The station believes in the power of programming that is determined by its listeners. The foundation is also working closely with a women group on health-related series of programmes using Community Learning Programmes (CLP) technique, which is unique, local, collaborative and based on storytelling.

Community Radio Giving Voice to Women

AEM's radio jockey Saroj, who hails from a family with meagre resources, has risen above all odds to become the voice of Mewat. She came to the station as a volunteer, got trained in radio broadcasting and pursued her interest in radio programming. She vividly expresses her empowerment journey,

> *We made a series of radio programmes on tuberculosis as Mewat has large number of TB cases. We produced short radio dramas to drive home the message and address social taboos associated with the disease. I played*

the TB patient, who was shown recovering while administering the right doses of medicine and treatment. Once, the series was broadcasted, people called me by the character's name that I played. It was so pleasing to hear the appreciation and recall. I felt so empowered and was elated to have contributed in my little way.

Two other female radio jockeys at the station share equally inspiring stories of change. They have built good rapport with the Mewati women, who have started sharing their problems freely.

Its various programmes are working for in the direction of empowering women of the Mewat community. Its major roles in the community can be listed under following points:

Spreading awareness on women's rights and entitlements: Radio campaign 'Asha ki Kiran' on International Women's Day featured 65 unsung women heroes at the grass-roots.

Breaking stereotypes: Through our programmes, we reflect on empowered images and women role models breaking gender stereotypes prevailing in the area.

Celebrating womanhood: AEM has been celebrating women since its inception as acknowledging women heroes at the grassroots would certainly motivate other women to come forward.

SWOT Analysis

In order to strengthen what exists, grow further and explore newer avenues, it is important to undertake a SWOT.

Strengths The CR has successfully been able to create a stronghold within the community. It has further accelerated the process of creating a positive image for Sehgal Foundation, making its work in the community easily acceptable. AEM broadcasts for 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

Weaknesses Human resources and finances for sustainability pose to be the greatest weaknesses along with new and engaging content for the listeners. Religious leaders sometimes have a negative image of the medium and discourage people to listen.

Opportunities The integration of mobile technology and other media helps in increasing the radio reach. AEM has used Integrated Voice Response System (IVRS) to send voice calls to its listeners on governance and agriculture messages. Narrowcasting enables the reporters to physically reach out to areas outside the coverage area and facilitate discussion. Other opportunities that exist are running thematic radio

campaigns that bring in increased listenership and experimenting with new radio formats, such as, drama, magazine and others.

Threats Retention of skilled staff is the biggest threat because the medium as such is so empowering and provides exposure to a varies themes and information at the same time. Engaging volunteers at the station is very challenging as livelihood options are limited. In addition, technical breakdown of the transmission also poses as a great threat. There have been times when listeners call up the station and complain that the signal is dipping and they can't hear the station properly.

Way Forward

AEM continues to strengthen and grow the existing women participation in CR. We plan to engage school pass outs, especially girls in volunteer programmes at radio, teaching them the basics of radio broadcasting.

Other ways of engaging with women are through **Community Learning Programmes.** Here the station is working on a series of programmes on health and sanitation engaging them in all stages of programming. Also c**onvergence with existing women platforms** such as women self help groups and collectives in Mewat can get women to share their voices and also garner support for participation in radio. We plan to have at least 50 per cent women in its community advisory group that meets every quarter and guides us on programming from time to time.

Having understood the dynamics of Mewat and identified potential areas of improvement, the work at hand is to further come up with inclusive strategies to achieve the objective of engaging more women and increase listenership among women. The task at hand is to analyse our current programming catering to women and its usefulness.

With experience, Sehgal Foundation has realised that to empower women, there is a need to take a holistic look on the phases of women empowerment, namely:

Access

It is important that women have access to media, so that they are aware of the political, social, economic, cultural happenings around them and make their own opinions. Radio programmes on women-related issues

with women participation can motivate other silent women in the communities to come forward and share their opinions.

Portrayal

We often see that gender stereotypes prevail in media.[4] Women's opinions in expert evaluations are most often neglected. To break this, women representation in media is necessary. It is important that their role and equal space in society is acknowledged as experts, programme producers and presenters as well as decision makers.

The first logical step in the journey of women empowerment is the formulation of policies supporting women as per the need identified in the region. Here, it is important to understand the need of access, portrayal and inclusion in media. This can be done by sensitising the staff and community towards women participation.

Focused group discussions with women enable to initiate the process of changing community mindset, supportive policies for women staff, and their capacity building can go a long way in getting women to participate in CR.

To conclude, we can say that this is just the beginning of the journey towards women empowerment. It requires sustainable efforts of all stakeholders involved to realise this dream. Together we engage the excluded.

Notes

1. http://mda.nic.in/Mewat-Profile.htm
2. Census 2011 (http://censusindia.gov.in/); District Level Household and Facility Survey-III, 2010; Sample Registration Survey 2011 (http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/Sample_Registration_System.html).
3. http://agcensus.dacnet.nic.in
4. Gender stereotypes prevail in ICT: A research review (http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1542160).

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