

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

The Influence of Afghan Media on the Lives of Afghan Women

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When I returned to Afghanistan nine years ago, I rarely heard terms such as violence against women, women's rights, family violence, forced marriages, underage marriages, family law and so on. But now, nine years later, as the young media grow in Afghanistan, such terms are being discussed broadly and regularly. There is no doubt that the media are important creators of such terms. However, the question often raised is: What difference can such discussions bring to the lives and situations of Afghan women?

Problems like inequalities, limitations and violence against women are the issues the media and press have focused on and tried to draw the attention of the people to in recent years. Everyone has witnessed the hundreds of investigative stories, films, articles and reports that the radio, TV and press have broadcast or published on such issues. There are many discussions about family violence, for example, which is widespread in the families of Afghanistan. To name one well-known example, Aisha, an 18-year-old woman in a rural area of Afghanistan, ran away from her husband's house because of family violence. People all around the world are aware of how she was punished, how her in-laws sliced off her nose and ears. When her story was told by the media, people all around the world wanted to help.

Forced marriage is common in Afghanistan, where even women themselves think this is the rule of their lives and quietly submit to marriage with a man they don't want to marry. Underage marriage is another common occurrence in the lives of Afghan women. In most of these cases, the girl does not even truly understand the meaning of marriage. It is common that 12- to 14-year-old girls, mostly in rural areas, are married off, becoming mothers by the age of 15. Exchange marriage is another occurrence. Today there are lots of reports by the media that highlight such cases as an unpleasant custom.

Media reports raise awareness and hope

Media in Afghanistan and in particular those committed to democracy and professional journalism are working to highlight and recognize the inequalities and limitations that exist in the lives of women in the country. To take one example: Mask (Niqab- in dari), a one-hour programme on TV channel 1, continually discusses domestic family violence and the crimes committed against women in Afghanistan. It also covers the situation that women in the security shelters are experiencing (most of the time women who run away from home because of family violence go and stay in security shelters if they don't have anywhere else to go). Like TV channel 1, almost every radio and TV station in Afghanistan follows such cases either regularly or sporadically and airs different programs that discuss these same challenges in the lives of women.

For segments of Afghan women, self-immolation is one of the easiest methods of suicide to escape from violence. Just six or seven years ago, far fewer people were aware of this fact, but today reporters visit survivors in hospitals and tell their stories.

Today reporters go into every prison and tell people about the situation of women who are in jail because of having committed crimes. Many people all over the world are aware that when an Afghan woman goes to prison and finishes her sentence, neither her family nor the community welcomes her back, so often she may prefer to remain in prison even after completing her sentence.

One could say that today for women, the media work like a window through which one can see at least part of the challenges and inequalities facing Afghan women today.

In all likelihood, the problems that exist and are under discussion will not be solved any time soon, but at a time when most women in Afghanistan are covered head to toe with a borqa (a long blue veil), the debates highlighting existing problems can raise hope. It can now be counted as great work.

For example, in Afghanistan when an elder of an ethnic group could solve a dispute by trading a girl into marriage, he was proud to be able to do so. But today the debates in the media mean people hear it is counted as something bad and an inhumane custom.

Supporting the fight for women's rights

The media in Afghanistan focus on and eagerly follow the claims and demands that active Afghan women raise and discuss. These demands generally include participation in decision making in leadership, partaking in higher education and a presence in the justice system of Afghanistan. There are currently three women in the Afghan cabinet, for example. Everyone remembers when President Hamid Karzai was trying to appoint members to the new cabinet. Groups of women active in different areas struggled to convince him to choose a number of women for the posts. He bowed to their pressure. Media served as an important tool here, helping women raise their voices.

Discrimination against women is another common issue that has been around for centuries. Today a number of lawmakers in parliament are even trying to pass laws to further limit the rights of women. Shia Family Law is one such example. It would create additional limitations for women from certain groups throughout the country. When this law was passed, women's rights associations and civil society groups raised countless voices in opposition, which received broad coverage in the media. The law was readjusted as a result. Countless critiques, debates, articles, reports and stories were broadcast or published on this issue.

In recent years, a few educated women in the country have been lobbying to give women the right to dissolve a disagreeable marriage or have the right to access divorce.

Today even an illiterate man or woman has heard much about March 8, Mother's Day, women's rights, inequality etc. through TV or radio. These media have passed on a great deal of information, which is a positive step towards reducing violence.

Even the Afghan women who have founded their own businesses are currently trying to profit from media coverage. They show their wares in exhibitions, where they try to catch the eyes of reporters, drawing their attention to their products, generally handicrafts. They know that reporters are interested in stories about such products.

Different educational and health care organizations and institutes that implement development programmes and projects for women in Afghanistan spread word of their activities in part through media. Many families in Afghanistan who have access to the media (TV or radio) eagerly follow the health programmes most TV channels and radio stations broadcast.

A small candle in the dark

If we take a brief look at the influence of media on women's lives, we see that, on the whole, media are more than a source of entertainment for illiterate women. For those who are involved in politics or similar affairs, they are one of the most important tools teaching them how to reach their goals and higher positions. At the same time, the young Afghanistan media are also producing programmes that encourage women to take part in social, cultural and political affairs. A number of national and international organizations support some of these programmes that tackle women's affairs. Some media do it because they feel it is right, some of the radio and TV channels focus on women's issues because they believe this will draw people's attention to their media.

However in many cases, because they are privately owned, media do not feel it is their responsibility to do so and they do not broadcast on such issues and big projects regularly.

All the aforementioned points lead up to one important question: Will this be enough to reduce discrimination, inequalities, violence and barriers that are still widespread and block the progress of women in Afghanistan? Is this enough to bring change into the lives of women throughout the country? Surely the answer is no.

All the problems and challenges that stand in the way of women in Afghanistan are much greater and run deeper than the work of the media. However, we can say that the work of the media for women in Afghanistan today is like a small candle in a circle of darkness.