Freedom of Expression and Gender

Review and evaluation from a gender perspective of communications materials generated by the Southeast Asian Press Alliance in the course of its work to promote freedom of expression and media freedom in the region

INTRODUCTION

The mandate of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) is “to promote and expand press freedom and access to information in Southeast Asia.” The organisation aims “to provide a forum for the defence of press freedom, giving protection to journalists and nurturing an environment where free expression, transparency, pluralism and a responsible media culture can flourish.”

It is widely accepted that press freedom is an integral part of freedom of expression. The fact that press freedom is underpinned by a free, independent and pluralistic media system was affirmed as far back as in 1991 by the Windhoek Declaration endorsed by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Freedom of expression, which includes freedom of information and freedom of the media, is both a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for democracy. The concept of freedom of expression was traditionally based on the notion that state control is the primary, if not only, threat to free expression. However, it is now recognised that it includes several other dimensions, including the role played by gender in determining access to these freedoms.

For example, the 2010 Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights to Freedom of Opinion and Expression reiterated “the undeniable link between freedom of expression and women’s human rights, which include the right to express their opinions, to have access to their own means of communication and to work in the existing mass media.”

The tenth anniversary joint declaration, “Ten key challenges to freedom of expression in the next decade,” issued by the UN Special Rapporteur together with colleagues from other parts of the world in February 2010, noted that “Equal enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression remains elusive and historically disadvantaged groups – including women, minorities, refugees, indigenous peoples and sexual minorities – continue to struggle to have their voices heard and to access information of relevance to them.”
Among the areas of special concern listed in the declaration were the lack of adequate self-regulatory measures to address the under-representation of historically disadvantaged groups among mainstream media workers, including in the public media; the inadequate coverage by the media and others of issues of relevance to such groups; and the prevalence of stereotypical or derogatory information about these groups in the media.

In addition, UNESCO’s 2014 report on “World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development” recognised the gender dimensions of media freedom, pluralism and independence. The report incorporated information and insights relating to the gender dynamics of press freedom, including the safety of media workers, underlining the fact that gender equality in media and communications is an essential element of freedom of expression.iii

This, briefly, is the context within which the current review and evaluation of SEAPA’s work, in general, and the different categories of content produced in the process, in particular, is situated.

BACKGROUND

An independent gender assessment of SEAPA’s work was conducted in January 2014, as part of an ongoing attempt by the Swedish Embassy in Bangkok to encourage and enable its partners in the Southeast Asian region to mainstream gender in their programmes so as to ensure that the goal of gender equality is central to their activities.iv

The assessment revealed that SEAPA has the background, knowledge, commitment and leadership at the management level to promote women’s rights and gender equality through its work. A positive development in this direction was the organisation’s adoption in 2012 of a gender policy, which underlines the importance of gender-sensitive communication and the meaningful participation of women in its programmes, and can potentially guide decisions and actions leading to the integration of gender awareness in its programmes and products.1 SEAPA’s commitment to promoting the interests of disadvantaged groups and its recognition of the value of intersectionality were viewed as a key strength since gender intersects with other forms of inequality and discrimination. However, according to the assessment report, despite these advantages, gender has yet to be properly assimilated into SEAPA’s work.

Among the several recommendations that emerged from that exercise was an independent assessment of SEAPA’s communications materials. Accordingly, SEAPA commissioned the present review and evaluation of a selected cross-section of the various types of content (offline and online) generated in the course of its work, in an effort to gauge the extent to which gender has been mainstreamed into its communications materials and to figure out what more needs to be done to integrate gender into its communications strategies. Since communications strategies and materials are based on the organisation’s work and create its public profile, this would in effect mean integrating gender into all aspects of its work.

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1 See Annexure B
SCOPE

The present review covers materials produced over five years – 2010 to 2014 – which includes the periods before and after the adoption of SEAPA’s gender policy. The following categories of materials emerging from various activities undertaken by SEAPA were identified for review and a representative sample of each category was included in the survey:2

- Statements and Alerts (issued by the SEAPA Secretariat3)
- Joint statements (initiated by SEAPA or by partner organisations and endorsed by SEAPA)
- Activity reports (prepared by the SEAPA Secretariat)
- Annual reports on media freedom (prepared by the SEAPA Secretariat with country reports by contributors4)
- Impunity reports (prepared by the SEAPA secretariat, with country reports by contributors)
- Feature articles (by journalists supported by SEAPA to cover specific events/issues)
- Fellowship articles (by journalists selected for SEAPA’s Journalism Fellowship Program5)
- SEAPA’s Facebook page/posts

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The independent assessment of SEAPA and other organisations in Southeast Asia (mentioned above) found that “by and large, the selected organisations enjoy a gender-friendly organizational culture, with gender sensitive procedures, gender equitable participation of men and women and several women in managerial positions.”

SEAPA’s gender policy, adopted in 2012, aims to “integrate gender equality and gender sensitive considerations in the participation of women in the organisation’s programmes, in its internal policy for the Secretariat as well as the network, and through its communications to internal and external stakeholders.”

The first two of the three areas outlined in the policy – participation and internal policy – are not included in the mandate of the present review. However, it is noteworthy that the organisation

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2 See Annexure A for the complete list of documents included in the assessment
3 The Campaigns Manager and/or the Alerts and Communications Officer
4 Staff of SEAPA’s member or partner organisations or other individuals: bloggers, journalists, media lawyers
5 Journalists from the region selected for SEAPA’s fellowship programme typically spend 2-6 weeks in a country in Southeast Asia that is not their own to work on stories related to the programme’s theme of the year
appears to be well-placed in terms of ensuring “adequate and meaningful opportunities for women journalists, netizens and advocates in SEAPA programmes” and creating “an environment within the secretariat, the board and among partners, where gender equality is respected and appreciated.”

According to information available on the SEAPA website, the Bangkok-based, eight-member regional secretariat is staffed by an equal number of women and men, including the female Executive Director. Till recently, the seven-member Board of Trustees included three women. However, the new five-member Board appointed in December 2014 appears less balanced, boasting only one woman.6

The composition of the journalism fellows appears to have fluctuated over the years, with more men selected at certain times (e.g., 2007, 2010, 2011), more women at other times (2008, 2012, 2013) and equal numbers in 2009 and 2014. According to information provided by SEAPA, between 2007 and 2014 there were marginally more female than male fellows: 37 women and 35 men. The overall balance in the numbers suggests that gender was not a critical factor in determining the selection of candidates for the fellowship and that women and men enjoy more or less equal opportunity to become fellows.

It is in the third area flagged in the gender policy – communication strategy – that SEAPA appears to be lagging behind, especially in terms of ensuring that “the voices of men and women are adequately represented in all communication” and encouraging the inclusion of “women as experts and resources where possible.” The present review suggests that there is considerable room for improvement with regard to the indicators mentioned in the gender policy, which are meant to assess the extent to which gender sensitivity and balance are reflected in the communication strategy. While the use of gender-sensitive language is generally practiced, sources of quotes and information/authority are far from diverse and gender perspectives are largely missing from much of the content.

**POINTERS FROM REVIEW OF COMMUNICATIONS MATERIALS**

I. Statements and alerts

Of the 75 statements and alerts scanned in the process of selecting 15 for review, only two included any reference to women: “Vietnam - Imprisoned blogger’s mother dies after self-immolation” and “Burma - Volunteer jailed for ten years for quoting critic, Aung San Suu Kyi’s article.”

The gender neutrality observed in this substantial section of SEAPA’s content is understandable in view of the fact that most of the statements and alerts concern threats to freedom of expression from the state in various countries of the region. This is only to be expected in view of the grim situation with regard to freedom of expression in general and press freedom in particular in several Southeast Asian nations, as described in the documents under review, and SEAPA’s obligation to promote and expand press freedom and access to information in the region.

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6 Names and group photograph shared on SEAPA’s Facebook page on 12 December 2014.
However, a closer reading of the selected documents reveals that gender awareness could, in fact, strengthen the organisation’s efforts to defend press freedom, provide protection to journalists and nurture an environment where free expression, transparency, pluralism and a responsible media culture can flourish.

For example, among the targets of threats flagged by some of the statements/alerts were several women – in Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. It is quite possible that the sex of the journalists or bloggers at the receiving end of such acts of repression was not germane to these particular cases. It is also possible that gender did play some role in one or more of the incidents. The only way to determine whether or not gender was a relevant factor would be to acknowledge the possibility and ask the right questions.

Only one female source was mentioned in just one of the 15 alerts under review, relating to Vietnam, and that was evidently because a French news agency had quoted her.

Furthermore, SEAPA’s critique of the 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD) did not include a gender perspective: it is not clear whether the “other human rights organisations” whose criticism of the AHRD was endorsed in the alert included women’s rights organisations and whether women’s rights – including the right to freedom of expression and the right to information – which have been officially, internationally recognised as full, universal human rights since 1993, were adequately protected in the Declaration.

II. Joint alerts/statements

Of the two (of seven) documents in this category that were reviewed, only one referred to a woman: the statement on the detention of Al-Jazeera journalists in Malaysia. Although it mentioned that the woman among the three detained journalists was questioned for the longest period, it was not clear from the write-up whether that had to do with her sex, her nationality, both, neither or some other factor. From a gender point of view, it may have been worth probing the reason for and circumstances of her prolonged interrogation.

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7 “Imprisonment of journalists may spell doom for online news site,” “Journalists intimidated over PM interview, Redshirts coverage”

8 “Bloggers attacked by suspected state agents”

9 “Media rights groups slam detention of Al-Jazeera journalists, call for greater transparency”

10 “Government orders Internet café owners to install applications to block certain websites, track online users’ activities”

11 “ASEAN limits free speech scope in rights declaration, says regional media group”

III. Activity reports

Both documents included in the review related to activities in 2014, as suggested by SEAPA.

One was the concept note for a regional conference on media and internet freedom. The write-up mentioned that the conference would focus on Asia and “discuss these issues through a number of lenses – human rights and ethics among the main ones.” There was no mention of a gender lens. Hate speech was flagged as one of the four conference themes but the gendered nature of a substantial section of online hate speech was not acknowledged.13

The second document concerned a national workshop on human rights and elections. It contained no reference to women or women’s rights in the context of human rights in general and freedom of expression and access to information in particular. Nor did it appear to recognise the need to focus attention on women’s concerns and rights vis a vis elections.

IV. Annual reports on media freedom

All five annual reports on Southeast Asia’s Press Freedom Challenges between 2010 and 2014 were included in the review. As suggested by SEAPA, one country profile was examined in each of these reports, along with the overviews in two of them (2011 and 2014).

There was very little reference to women or gender in any of the documents. An exception was the country profile of Burma in the 2011 report, titled “Restraint and punishment during election year,” which included two allusions to women: the detention of two Burmese women reporters for a few hours by election authorities near Rangoon and a Burmese court’s confirmation of the 2009 conviction of female reporter Hla Hla Win to 20 years of imprisonment. No further details were provided.

The overview in the 2014 report included an indirect reference to women in the context of bloggers in Vietnam getting organised and attempting to “convert international concern to concrete forms of support to help expand the space for self-expression.”14 According to the piece, a “notable example to emerge in 2013 are the Vietnamese Women for Human Rights (a network of bloggers who were victims of state suppression) and Statement 258 (to call attention to the penal code provision most-used to arrest bloggers).” Unfortunately it was not possible to check for more details in the Vietnam

13 See, for example, the 2014 report on Online Harassment by the Pew Research Centre, USA (http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2014/10/PI_OnlineHarassment_102214_pdf1.pdf), “Keeping women safe? Gender, online harassment and Indian law,” Richa Kaul Padte, Internet Democracy Project, India (http://internetdemocracy.in/reports/keeping-women-safe-gender-online-harassment-and-indian-law/), among other resources on the subject.

14 “Media at Political Crossroads” [Southeast Asia Regional Press Freedom Overview in 2014]
country profile because the document was not accessible on the SEAPA website. But, clearly, the Vietnamese Women for Human Rights network could be a valuable asset in the process of developing a gender perspective on the struggle for freedom of expression in Southeast Asia.

What is perhaps more significant than the presence of these fleeting references to women journalists and bloggers in the press freedom reports was the absence of any acknowledgement that gender may play a role in determining access to freedom of expression, right to information and other human and democratic rights.

For example, the 2014 report examined the issue of media freedom within the context of national elections scheduled in six countries in the region. Similarly, the Malaysia country report in the 2013 report also focused on elections due to take place in that country. However, neither appeared to recognise the gender dimensions of politics and elections, and the gender differences in access to various rights – including the right to relevant information – during elections, as well as at other times. References in the reports to the public, citizens, voters, and so on, did not seem to take into account possible gender gaps in access to these rights, and the need for the media to ensure that election coverage respects and upholds the democratic rights of different sections of the population, including women.

The Cambodia country profile in the 2014 report suffered from similar gender-blindness. For example, it reflected no awareness of the fact that women in most parts of the world typically have less access than men to information and communications technologies, including the Internet and mobile telephones. So the reported increase of over 42 per cent in the number of Internet users in the country within two years does not necessarily mean that a significantly larger number of Cambodian women now have access to the Net. Gender disaggregated figures would provide a more realistic and meaningful picture.

Similarly, the statement that “the rise of social media has allowed many Cambodians to publicly express themselves” begs the question of whether the country’s female population has been able to take advantage of social media to express themselves, publicly or otherwise. The age range of the estimated one million Facebook users in Cambodia was mentioned in the report, but not the proportion of men and women among them. It is difficult to gauge the accuracy of the description of “the unrestricted nature of Cambodian internet access” as “digital democracy” in the absence of gender disaggregated data.

V. Impunity reports

The overview as well as all country profiles of the International Day to End Impunity 2013 Report, titled “States: A problem and a solution to impunity,” were included in the review. The report showcased state violence and violations of freedom of expression which remained unaccountable or unpunished.

A few women did make an appearance in some of the country profiles. In Cambodia, for example, two female journalists, detained after an altercation between an environmental activist and a military policeman which resulted in the deaths of both, reportedly overheard military police discussing the need to kill them in order to prevent the incident becoming public. They were freed
without much delay, but the absence of serious investigation into the activist’s death and the harassment and threats to which the journalists were subjected was worrying.

Also in Cambodia, a woman land rights activist, who had been at the forefront of her community’s struggle for their right to land and had been warned by police on several occasions of that she was on a black list, was found guilty on bogus charges of assault. She was arbitrarily imprisoned despite the fact that it was she who had been beaten by police several times during protests.

In Thailand, the May 2012 criminal conviction of the female manager of an online political news site under Article 15 of the Computer Crime Act had a chilling effect on free expression. She was sentenced to an eight-month suspended jail term for failing to delete, quickly enough, comments by users that were deemed insulting to the monarchy. The verdict was subsequently upheld.

However, the descriptions of the cases did not reflect any inquiry into whether or not there was any gender-specific angle to the experiences, whether the fact that the affected persons were women was just happenstance.

VI. Feature articles

Four feature articles were included in the review – two written in 2013 and two in 2014 (it was a coincidence that the former were by female journalists and the latter by male journalists: the other available features were written in languages other than English).

A 2013 piece reporting on a survey relating to online privacy and anonymity and the protection of online data was virtually gender-blind, possibly because the survey data was presented in a gender-neutral manner. Despite the fact that two-thirds of the respondents was female (it may have been interesting to probe the reasons why so many women participated in the survey), no attempt seems to have been made to find out if women and men have similar or different attitudes to and experiences of online anonymity. For example, what proportion of the 70 per cent who felt that anonymity was used for negative reasons, such as bullying, hate speech, sexual harassment, identity theft or spreading rumours or false information, was female? Considering the growing evidence of online abuse of women across the world, it is surprising that neither the survey nor the article on it made any reference to this emerging form of violence against women. On a positive note, though, this was probably the only content included in the review that mentioned sexual minorities, at least in passing.

The other 2013 article, which focussed on women and the Internet, was essentially a report on a roundtable discussion on gender and the Internet during the 8th Internet Governance Forum (IGF) that year. With several women’s rights advocates participating in the discussion it is not surprising that a range of issues was discussed, including the fact that, while the Internet can be used to educate and empower women, it is often also a space where offline harassment morphs into online harassment. Interestingly, speakers and participants evidently agreed that discussions on Internet governance have yet to fully incorporate a gender perspective. Predictably, judging by the names as well as the photographs used with the piece, all the speakers were women and the audience also seemed to be entirely female. The writer obviously did not think this was a point worth making in the piece.

One of the 2014 features highlighted the fact that among the topics discussed during the 9th Internet Governance Forum was the “digital divide” and the need to connect people across the world who remain unconnected to the Internet. It could be that the Forum did not take the gender divide within the digital divide into account, but the article also made no mention of the fact that
women constitute a large proportion of the world’s citizens who remain unconnected to the Net or have limited access to it.

The other 2014 piece focused on children as the new targets of cybercriminal activities, but made no mention of the sex of the children and/or criminals involved. Neither did it reveal the extent to which crimes against women and girls offline were mirrored online (or not). Of the two interviewees, at least one appeared to be female, judging by the name and photograph.

VII. Fellowship articles

All articles emerging from the SEAPA Journalism Fellowship programme in 2009, 15 2010 and 2013 were included in the review – a total of 26 articles and six sidebars. The set of 20 articles from the 2009-10 period explored different aspects of the quest for an ASEAN community, while the six stories (and six sidebars) from 2013 focused on Internet governance in Burma and Singapore.

The nine articles written by fellows in 2009 included 58 sources of information and/or opinion. Twenty-six (nearly 45 per cent) were identifiably female. 16 The apparent gender parity among sources was certainly encouraging, but it is perhaps worth noting that nearly all (22) of the female sources were concentrated in five articles that can be broadly categorised as human interest stories, relating to human rights: on trafficking, children of illegal migrants, “the new boat people” (the Rohingya minority community), migrant workers and home-based workers.

The 11 articles written by fellows in 2010 included 61 sources, of whom only 16 were identifiably women. 17 Eight of the 16 female sources (i.e., half) appeared in two articles relating primarily to women: one on domestic workers and the other on women in politics. In contrast, somewhat expectedly, an article on countering terrorism relied solely on male sources.

Female sources were more or less missing in action in the six articles written by fellows in 2013. One, headlined “Internet: A new tool to change Burma’s old laws,” included only male sources. The ratio (female:total) in the other stories from Burma were 2:8, 2:9, 1:16 and 2:11. 18 The sole article in the collection on the situation in Singapore had one female source out of a total of eight.

The piece with the worst ratio of quoted sources (1:16), which focused on Burma’s youth power, did include more women in the sidebar. In the last Burma-based article, focusing on efforts to shake off the fear of state censorship, only one of the two women featured was actually interviewed and she was a hospitality intern, whereas the male sources included a couple of journalists, a couple of lawyers, an academic, a human rights activist, a columnist, a cartoonist and a blogger.

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15 This year falls outside the period selected for the review (2010-14) but was included because the reviewer had already gone through the entire publication, which included articles from 2009 as well as 2010, before the review period was finalised.

16 This is the minimum number of female sources – the sex of nine sources could not be identified from their names; it is possible that there were some women among them.

17 This is the minimum number of female sources – the sex of 13 sources could not be identified from their names. It is possible that there were some women among them, but even if half the unidentified sources were women, only around one third of the total would be female.

18 In the latter two articles, these were the number of sources identifiable as female.
Clearly, many of the journalism fellows could have benefited from familiarisation with SEAPA’s gender policy,19 which calls for diversity among sources of information and opinion so that “the voices of men and women are adequately represented in all communication.”

Beyond the numbers, several fellowship articles lacked a gender perspective. Few included gender-disaggregated data. It is possible that no such data was available, although some of the statistics cited did take into account age and country. But sometimes all it takes is an inquisitive, gender-aware and persistent journalist to coax data disaggregated by gender out of researchers and number crunchers.

Gender blindness was most evident in the 2013 pieces. For example, in the one mentioned above quoting male sources only, references to mobile or Internet penetration rates in Burma seemed oblivious to well-established facts about gender differentials in access to communications technology in most parts of the world.

Similarly, references to a campaign for legislative changes launched by a Burmese journalists’ network did not take gender into account: how many of the 10,000 people who signed the campaign petition were women, how many women were part of of the closed Facebook group and the public Facebook fan page created to generate online discussions on the printing and media bills, did the latter (drafted by the Interim Myanmar Press Council and meant to serve as a code of conduct) include gender concerns related to media ethics and standards? Indeed, were women adequately represented in the journalists’ network and/or the press council? Was the promoter of a cybercrime law “to address hacking, phishing and online theft” asked whether the law would also help tackle online abuse and threats, including virtual violence against women? Likewise, a piece on “disconnectivity” in Burma failed to address the likely gender gap in connectivity, referring to “citizens” as if there were no differences among them in terms of access to the Internet.

It must be said that several of the fellowship articles included in the review were otherwise well-researched and engagingly written. The restricted purpose of this review was to assess SEAPA’s content in terms of gender sensitivity and balance. From that point of view, one fellowship article from 2010 stood out as really exceptional: a piece on women and politics, headlined “What women want.” It certainly deserves to be on the reading list for any gender sensitisation workshop for journalists in the region (and even beyond).

Given the generally good quality of most of the fellowship and feature articles, it would seem that efforts to help journalism fellows (past, present and future) become more aware of the significance of gender, especially in the context of human rights in general and freedom of expression in particular, would yield rich dividends in terms of more gender sensitive fellowship articles, as well as more gender aware media coverage in the region.

VII. Social media

Much of the material posted and shared on SEAPA’s Facebook page appeared to be sourced from the region’s press. Only a few – such as the announcement of new members of the Alliance, photographs taken during the recent General Assembly and Annual Meeting of the Alliance, and the statement issued at the conclusion of the General Assembly – were clearly generated by SEAPA. Under the circumstances, the Facebook page does not necessarily reflect or represent SEAPA’s own policies and practices. Nevertheless, to the extent that an organisation’s social media presence is

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19 Adopted after the 2009 and 2010 fellowship programme, but before the 2013 fellowship programme.
part of its public profile, what appears on its Facebook page is likely to create an impression about the organisation among the public.

Another characteristic of social media is its fluid state. What appears on a Facebook page today is not necessarily there tomorrow. A visit to the page one week left the impression that it was over-run with images of men, but that had changed by the next week, when the new cover photograph included eight women in an 18-member group (evidently taken at a recent meeting) and other photographs from the General Assembly and Annual Meeting, as well as other events, showed a fairly balanced mix of men and women.

An article by a 2014 SEAPA journalism fellow also increased the gender quotient of the FB page in mid-December ‘14. The story, Headlined “Journalist killings heighten security awareness,” led with the experience of a female broadcast journalist in the Philippines who received death threats and was stalked by armed men because some of her reports had angered a politician. When attempts at disguise did not work she had to relocate to another place to escape being killed. Her photograph at the top of the page also helped give visibility to the reality that women media professionals are at risk in such situations, too.

Another 2014 fellowship article, Headlined “In gun we trust,” about the controversial trend among some journalists in the Philippines to carry guns in order to protect themselves, included only male interviewees. The trend is probably (though not necessarily) restricted to men, but it may have been interesting to get views on the issue from female journalists, too.

At a different level, the statement emerging from the SEAPA General Assembly 2014, which referred to the International Anti-Corruption Day (9 December) and the Human Rights Day (10 December), omitted mention of the fact that 10 December also marks the end of the annual, global 16 Days Campaign against Gender Violence, which begins every year on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Neither is irrelevant in the context of freedom of expression and media freedom, especially considering that violence, including sexual violence, against female journalists in the course of their work (online and offline) has emerged as a major concern internationally over the past few years.

In any case, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993 made it abundantly clear that “the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights” and that “gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation, including those resulting from cultural prejudice and international trafficking, are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, and must be eliminated.” The Declaration also stressed that “the full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community.” These are important insights for the media, as well as media advocacy organisations with a special interest in human rights in general and rights related to freedom of expression in particular.

**FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND GENDER**

As gender/media researcher and consultant Margaret Gallagher has pointed out, “The pursuit of equality in the media – as in all other spheres – is not a radical feminist issue. It is a matter of human rights, a part of the struggle for genuine democracy in society at large and in media institutions in particular.”
The Platform for Action emerging from the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (BPfA) in 1995 was the first official, international document to highlight the critical importance of media in the attainment of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Section J of the BPfA focused attention on Women and Media as one of the 12 critical areas of concern for the advancement and empowerment of women. It stressed the need to “increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media as well as new technologies of communication,” and “promote balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.”

A number of subsequent, internationally endorsed documents have affirmed the right of both women and men to be informed and to have their voices heard.

A UN Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on women’s participation in and access to the media in 2002 highlighted the fact that the status of women and the status of the media are both key indices of the development and democratisation of a society. Media, in all their forms, are central to women’s advancement and empowerment. Women’s right to freedom of expression and to information, which includes their right to speak and be heard, as well as their right to enter and participate in media professions, are fundamental to the realisation of all their rights and freedoms. Participants in the EGM called for the convergence of debates about women’s rights and about communication systems so that women’s concerns about their access to media and their right to freedom of expression and communication are taken into account in discussions on matters relating to the freedom, ownership and control, and structures of the media.

A background paper prepared for UNESCO’s 2014 report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development pointed out that if media pluralism is understood to be “the scope for a wide range of social, political and cultural values, opinions, information and interests to find expression through the media,” efforts to monitor and evaluate the state of media pluralism must clearly factor gender – along with other socio-economic and cultural factors – into the equation.

There are several facets to the issue of gender and the news media:

- The first and most commonly discussed aspect concerns content: the representation of women and men, and coverage of events/issues of particular concern and relevance to both, in media content.

- The second relates to women’s ownership of media and their access to the media as media professionals, including and especially, in the current context, their access to decision-making within media organisations.

- Then there is the issue of women’s access to and relationship with the media as citizens and audiences – which includes their right to information and communication (i.e., their right to get appropriate/relevant information and analyses, as well as entertainment, from the media, and to be able to communicate their knowledge, experiences, concerns, opinions and perspectives through the media)

- And, finally, possibly the most neglected aspect of the subject is the impact on women of laws and policies relating to the media and communication, including new information and

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20 A working definition proposed by the Council of Europe over the years – see, for example, Council of Europe, Recommendation Rec (2007)2 on media pluralism and diversity of media content, 31 January 2007; Council of Europe, Recommendation No. R (99) on measures to promote media Pluralism, 19 January 1999
communications technologies, as well as other media-related trends and developments at the macro level.

Each of these is equally important and, of course, they are inter-related. As the 2010 joint declaration issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights to Freedom of Opinion and Expression and others pointed out, the lack of adequate self-regulatory measures to address the under-representation of historically disadvantaged groups (including women) among mainstream media workers, the inadequate coverage by the media and others of issues of relevance to such groups and their under-representation in media content, as well as the prevalence of stereotypical or derogatory information about these groups in the media are all matters of special concern vis a vis challenges to freedom of expression.

Of course, it is important to note that gender, whether in the media or otherwise, is not exclusively a women’s issue, particularly since the construction of femininity and masculinity are closely linked. Some ways in which men are portrayed in the media place expectations and limitations on them that adversely affect their lives and those of the women and children in their lives, as well as other people and society in general. Such portrayals are also not compatible with gender equality.

It is also necessary to acknowledge a fact that is all too often forgotten or ignored: that gender concerns sexual minorities – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer (LGBTIQ) – too and that their right to freedom of expression is equally important.

Another point worth recalling is that “women” do not constitute a homogenous group. The experiences and perspectives of women belonging to a variety of social, cultural and economic backgrounds (e.g., class, race/castes/ethnicity, religions, age groups, location, educational levels, health status, etc.), reflecting the complex composition of most human societies, are likely to be different and this reality needs to be taken on board in many instances.

There is substantial, substantive evidence today that gender equality in the media is still a distant goal in most parts of the world, especially with regard to women (there is little information even globally about the situation vis a vis sexual minorities in this context).

For example, notwithstanding the growing and visible presence of many successful, high profile and highly regarded media women across the world, the 2011 Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media, covering over 500 media companies in nearly 60 nations, revealed that in most countries women continue to be under-represented as professionals working in both print and broadcast media, especially at decision-making levels. The report revealed that women make up just over a third (35.1%) of the total media workforce across the world and just over a quarter (27%) and governance (26%). In the Asia & Oceana region women comprise only about a fifth of those in governance positions and hold less than 10% of top management jobs in news organisations.

Similarly, available global data on women’s representation in media content as sources of news, information and opinion is discouraging. The 2010 edition of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), which covered 108 countries, recorded that women constitute less than a quarter (24%) of the people heard or read about in print, radio and television news across the world. The corresponding figure for Asia was 20% (one-fifth of the total). Only a fifth of the authoritative news sources quoted in the news around the world were women (19% of spokespersons and 20% of experts).

A pilot study on Internet news, introduced for the first time in the 2010 edition of the GMMP, which covered 76 national news websites in 16 countries, besides eight international news websites, found
that women comprised only 23% of online news subjects. This suggests that the under-representation of women in traditional news media has been carried over into the virtual news world.

With regard to safety, it took the sexual assault of CBS correspondent Lara Logan in Cairo in February 2011 to bring the issue of sexual violence against female journalists in the course of their work into sharp focus internationally. Logan’s decision to go public with her experience prompted journalists worldwide to begin speaking out for the first time about similar experiences. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), which had been criticised in the past for not compiling enough data about journalists subjected to sexual violence, brought out a special report on the subject in June 2011, based on interviews with more than 50 female journalists across the world.\textsuperscript{viii}

More recently, a joint report of the International News Safety Institute (INSI) and the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF), titled “Violence and Harassment against Women in the News Media: A Global Picture,” released in March 2014 and based on the findings of a global survey conducted among nearly 1000 female journalists, provided a comprehensive picture of the dangers faced by many women working in news media around the world.\textsuperscript{ix} Significantly, nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents said they had experienced some form of intimidation, threat, or abuse in relation to their work, ranging in severity from name-calling to death threats.

Over the past decade several resources have been created at the global, regional and national levels to improve gender balance and sensitivity in the media in terms of both personnel and content. Among these are the Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM), a non-prescriptive global framework initiated by UNESCO, together with the International Federation of Journalists, to gauge gender sensitivity and promote greater diversity in the media.\textsuperscript{x} The two sets of indicators are meant to encourage and help media houses to analyse their own policies and practices and take necessary action towards better gender balance in their workforce and content.

While the GSIM are fairly comprehensive, they are not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. The indicators can be modified, if necessary, to suit specific contexts. They are meant to be used by media organisations, media workers’ unions, professional associations and self-regulatory bodies to internally assess their own operations and practices, set goals, monitor progress and conduct training in order to achieve the professionally sound goals of social inclusivity and diversity among media personnel, as well as in media content. SEAPA could consider making use of the GSIM to monitor and promote inclusivity and diversity in the organisation and its output.

**MOVING FORWARD**

This review and evaluation of SEAPA’s communications materials examined the content produced by and in association with SEAPA in the light of current perceptions about the close links between gender and freedom of expression, including press freedom and the right to information. The assessment report includes as much detail as possible – within the limits of such an exercise – to establish that gender is a critical aspect of freedom of expression and media freedom, and not a mere niche issue that can be viewed and treated as a nonessential appendage.

As mentioned in the General Observations section (above), and detailed in the following section, the review indicates that there is considerable room for improvement with regard to gender sensitivity and balance in SEAPA’s communication strategies and materials. While the use of gender-sensitive language does not appear to be a major problem, it is a matter of concern that the sources of
information and opinion included in the content are far from diverse. So is the absence of a gender perspective across different categories of content.

One relatively simple step towards improving the situation vis a vis content is the conceptualisation and organisation of a series of workshops:

- The first would necessarily be for SEAPA’s own personnel and key members of Alliance partners, designed to explore (and hopefully establish) the relevance of gender to what has hitherto been the core of their work: promoting and expanding press freedom and access to information in Southeast Asia by providing a forum for the defence of media freedom, including the protection of journalists and the nurturing of an environment where free expression, transparency, pluralism and a responsible media culture can flourish.

- Next would come more practice-oriented workshops for journalism fellows (past, present and future, if possible), aiming to progressively create a cadre of journalists in the region – men, women and members of sexual minorities – who understand the value of examining events and issues through a gender lens and practice journalism as if gender matters.

- The workshops could conceivably lead to codes, guidelines, checklists, toolkits and/or other such resources, created by and for journalists and other media professionals from the region, which could also be used in institutions of media education and training in order to reach new generations of media workers.\(^\text{21}\)

- The workshops could even result in gender and media training modules that could be made available to other organisations, including media training institutes.

While such workshops are clearly necessary in order to improve gender balance and sensitivity in the content produced in the course of SEAPA’s work and, by extension, in media coverage in the region, they may not be sufficient for the larger purpose of mainstreaming gender in the organisation in terms of both outlook and output.

For a more comprehensive and effective integration of gender into SEAPA’s DNA and, thereby, into all the different aspects of its work in the area of freedom of expression, including its communications strategies and materials – it may be worth considering the following measures:

- Review and possible revision of the existing gender policy to incorporate both a broader understanding of the centrality of gender to SEAPA’s work in the area of freedom of expression and press freedom, and more specific processes that can help assimilate gender into all aspects of its work.\(^\text{22}\)

- Development of gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that can enable SEAPA to periodically analyse its own policies and practices and take timely action to ensure gender balance in both the organisation’s workforce and its content.

- Appointment of a gender focal point – as proposed in the January 2014 assessment report – to promote and keep tabs on the integration of gender into both programming and

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\(^{21}\) Existing resources from around the world can obviously feed into the creation of region-specific materials.

\(^{22}\) Existing resources from around the world can be drawn upon for the proposed initiatives in redrafting policy and developing appropriate monitoring and evaluation tools.
organisational development. If necessary, the mandate of the focal point could be broadened to include both gender and other social justice concerns.

- Partnership with organisations with a gender/media/ICTs focus – including networks, associations, unions of women journalists, bloggers and media professionals in the region – for mutual exchanges of views and experiences that can strengthen efforts to promote and expand freedom of expression, press freedom and access to information for all in Southeast Asia.

- Periodic events to explore the gender dimensions of freedom of expression, access to information and media freedom in the region.

- Inclusion of sessions focusing on gender in all events planned and organised by SEAPA and its Alliance partners.

- Research to identify and/or generate gender-disaggregated data relating to the media, freedom of expression/press freedom and access to information, which can not only inform SEAPA’s own content and activities (and those of its Alliance partners), but also contribute to improved understanding, as well as better media coverage, of the situation regarding women’s rights to freedom of expression and access to information in the region.²⁴

As the January 2014 assessment pointed out, translating gender awareness and commitment into gender-responsive programming can be a major challenge. The process of meeting the challenge may be daunting and demanding, but it is also likely to be exciting and rewarding – yielding benefits not only for SEAPA and its Alliance partners, but for the media and, thereby, society as a whole, in the region.

After all, as two prominent African women with a special interest in gender and media issues observed not long ago:

““What, in the end, could be more central to free speech than that every segment of society should have a voice?”” (Justice Athalia Molokomme, Attorney General, Botswana)

“When every voice counts we can stop counting the voices.” (Colleen Lowe Morna, CEO, Gender Links, South Africa)

Ammu Joseph
Independent journalist and author
Bangalore, India
December 2014

²³ Information and communications technologies

²⁴ Research projects can, of course, be undertaken along with suitable partners with the requisite skills and experience.


iv “Assisting with Gender Assessment in the contribution support to Regional Development Cooperation in Asia focusing on Southeast Asia,” Maria Reglero (Indevelop), Embassy of Sweden in Bangkok, January 2014

v UN Expert Group Meeting on the “Participation and access of women to the media, and the impact of media on and its use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women,” Beirut, November 2002 (http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/media2002/)


