

LOOKING BACK, STEPPING FORWARD, STRIDING AHEAD

Opportunities and Challenges for Women in Pakistani Media

Karachi Press Club

August 11, 2008

Panos Pakistan, in association with the Pakistan Women's Media Network (PWMN) and the Saneeya Hussain Trust, paid tribute to women in Pakistani media at the Karachi Press Club on August 11, 2008. The seminar "Opportunities and Challenges for Women in Pakistani Media – Looking Back, Stepping Forward, Striding Ahead" was part of Saneeya Hussain Week celebrations, a befitting occasion to pay tribute to some of Pakistani journalism's most courageous and dynamic women. The seminar was attended by about 60 women from Pakistani media, and a few brave men.

A number of distinguished and accomplished media women spoke on the occasion. Zohra Yusuf (veteran journalist, media analyst and Human Rights activist), Sahira Kazmi (TV producer/director), Zubieda Mustafa (Senior editorial writer) and Mehtab Akbar Rashdi (TV anchor) shared their thoughts and experiences with the largely-female audience.

Apart from paying tribute to Saneeya Hussain for her remarkable work as a journalist, women's activist, and development communicator, they reflected on memories and achievements of other Pakistani mediawomen like Razia Bhatti, Ameneh Azam Ali and Najma Babar, who are not among us.

Introduction:

Panos Pakistan's Country Representative, Sahar Ali, welcomed speakers and participants to the seminar. While briefly introducing Panos, she said that today's event was not about organizations and representations. We are all gathered here as women in Pakistani media and not as representatives of media organizations. Hence there were no references to organizations in the agenda.

Sahar spoke about the gender imbalance in Pakistan, one of the few countries in the world where men outnumbered women. She said this anomaly was also reflected in the media, and there were not just fewer women in media but only a handful in positions of decision-making in media. Perhaps that was why the numbers of women in media were dismally low, Sahar said. The Women in Media seminar was an attempt to narrow the gap – by providing a platform for women in media to unite and gather their

collective strength behind the objective of increasing women's visibility and participation in and on media.

Speaker: Ms. Zohra Yusuf

Topic: Women in Media – The Way We Were

The first to speak, Zohra shared her memories of working with Razia Bhatti, Ameneh Azam Ali and Najma Babar.

Speaking about Razia, she narrated how Razia became an icon for young journalists in Pakistan during her lifetime. She inspired them with her professionalism, her thoroughness in editing – and, above all, her courage. Threatened by bullies ranging from the MQM to a PPP governor – and the Bugtis – Razia did not flinch!

Razia received the HRCP Nisar Osmani Award for courage and journalism and Washington-based International Women Media Foundation award also for courage in journalism.

She recalled how Razia used to encourage others to write. She rarely wrote herself and only for *Herald* and later for *Newsline* (which she founded) in their annual issues. But her written pieces were precise with clear analysis and not a single extra word. Razia was a nurturing journalist, Zohra said.

Razia's qualities as a journalist and an editor inspired any woman entering the profession in the troubled days for journalism in Pakistan, especially for women journalists. Her most difficult moment probably came when she chose to leave the *Herald* and launch *Newsline*. It's a tribute to her memory that *Newsline* continues with her bold tradition of journalism and continues to have an almost exclusively female staff.

Zohra reminisced about Saneeya Hussain's days with her at *The Star*. It was she who persuaded Saneeya, her very dear friend, to join *The Star* after she had despaired over the quality of editing at the newspaper. She was a pillar of support in the days when the cadre of impartial journalist were battling for survival under General Zia's strangling censorship. Saneeya shared Zohra's deep respect for their contributors and their opinions – often expressed in a style guaranteed to get *The Star's* editorial team into trouble with the regime!

Zohra said nurturing was a trait that Saneeya and Razia shared. Saneeya rarely wrote but when she did it was with ease and fluency. She particularly recalled her piece on Bhitshah after they traveled there together, riding with Kaleem Omar playing the harmonica and S. M. Shahid humming old Indian film tunes.

Saneeya inspired many writers. Salman Rashid (travel writer) acknowledges his debt to Saneeya and often recalls how she launched his writing career.

Tired of internal and external pressure, Saneeya Hussain left *The Star* to do more pioneering work in the field of environmental journalism and, above all, training journalists in environmental reporting for all media. Saneeya was also among the first to recognize the importance of radio journalism.

Talking about Ameneh Azam Ali, Zohra pointed out that she shared a love of Bhitshah and music with her. Ameneh's contributions were later published in a book called "Rhythms of the Lower Indus". Ameneh was probably the first to do environmental reporting in Pakistan when she joined the *Herald* after returning from England. She also wrote on urban issues often in collaboration with famous architect and urban planner, Arif Hasan. Ameneh was rarely judgmental and wrote with clarity, building her case with well-researched and documented facts.

Najma Babar believed in journalism "for a cause", said Zohra. She was among the few women journalists who felt strongly about issues of injustice and discrimination. Most of the journalist during her time were writing on beauty tips and cooking recipes. She did feminist reporting. Zohra and Najma went together to attend the meeting where the Women Action Forum (WAF) was born. With Najma, Zohra shared a love of Indian art and feminist films.

Zohra briefly also mentioned the efforts of Maisoon Hussain as a HRCP activist who was always ready to do fact-finding and investigative stories on human right abuses and issues of children. Her work focused on children in prison and in the carpet manufacturing industry.

In conclusion, Zohra said that women journalists are luckier today since they are working in a much freer media environment; however, they need to be more passionate about issues of injustice and the underprivileged.

Speaker: Ms. Zubeida Mustafa

Topic: Women's Writes - Walking the Corridors of Editorial Power

She started her speech with a note of thanks to the organizers for inviting her to speak in the seminar. She endorsed the tributes paid by Zohra Yusuf to Razia Bhatti, Saneeya Hussain, Ameneh Azam Ali and Najma Babar and stated that all of these women were great journalist not because they wrote well but because they had a passion and commitment for journalism, and had some of the qualities which make a person a great communicator. She mentioned how their writings were of great human interest and they had empathy for the people they wrote about.

Reflecting on the achievements and challenges she faced as a woman working in the leading English language newspaper in the country, Ms Mustafa said that on occasion her gender led to discrimination which she and other female colleagues learnt to counter.

But rather than speaking about her own experience, she spoke in general about the challenges women face in the media today and placed these in a socio-historical perspective.

She said it was a cause for celebration that a growing number of women were entering the profession. When she joined *Dawn* in 1975, she was the only full-time female journalist around. Today, there are more than 20 women at the newspaper, and they are holding important positions. There are four leader writers. The head of the business section is a woman. The library is headed by a woman. Four of the magazines are edited by women. And this isn't just the case at her newspaper. The fact is, the number of women in most other papers has also grown phenomenally. In some, women have been editors of national dailies. And of course the main influx of women has been in the electronic media where the explosion of TV channels has created new openings for women. They have certainly made their mark.

This is a sign of the empowerment of women generally in our society, Ms. Mustafa observed. Previously women were barred from many professions and it was an uphill task for them to first make public space for themselves and then hold on to it against heavy odds. But the task was made easier in some ways with the women's movement in the early eighties and with the creation of Women's Action Forum. The growth in the number of women in media came quite naturally as women gained empowerment generally in Pakistan.

She conceded, however, that the ratio of women to men in the media was still very, very low. Another matter that needed attention was to discourage the compartmentalization of women in specific slots. "Why should women be asked to write only about women's issues?" questioned Ms. Mustafa. The need is to integrate women and men in all fields and allow gender equality in positions of decision-making, she said.

Women have managed to overcome to a great extent the challenges posed by male chauvinism by enlisting the support of the liberal minded among men and reassuring the insecure ones. But they now face a new challenge: the polarization that has beset society. Personal beliefs and ideologies have become so overbearing and control many people's public and private lives that tolerance has become the first casualty. Unfortunately this phenomenon knows no gender barriers. For women journalists this is a new challenge.

Speaker: Ms. Sahira Kazmi

Topic: Before the Camera, Behind the Lens – Life and Times in Television

Speaking about her experiences on terrestrial TV in Pakistan, Sahira Kazmi said that it was an honour for her to portray women in a positive light – to project them as they really are. She admitted that it was extremely difficult

at times, given the cultural sensitivities compounded by the era of Islamization, “but that was the challenge.” Her serials *Hawwa ke Naam* and *Hawwa ki Beti* boldly portrayed the dark side of women’s status in Pakistani society. Another play, *Zaibunissa*, highlighted domestic violence.

Ms. Kazmi said thought times had changed, in many ways for the better, she was disappointed by the lack of interest in social issues. “There is so much (media) freedom but I don’t see social issues anywhere,” she pointed out. Reminding the audience that we are a Third World developing nation, she said the glossy Indian soaps we are copying – where one doesn’t see anyone poor on screen – do not reflect Pakistan’s reality.

She also lamented the deterioration in the language used on TV. She talked about the phenomenon of ‘minglish’ and pointed out that people spoke neither Urdu nor English correctly, but a corrupted hybrid of the two languages.

She noted with appreciation the efforts of the Saneeya Hussain Trust, terming it a movement of women doing things that matter. “I’m proud to be part of this group,” she said.

Speaker: Mahtab Akbar Rashdy

Topic: Chadar, Chardiwari aur TV Channel – Women on Mass Media from Islamisation to Enlightened Moderation

The much-loved Mahtab Rashdi, a renowned TV anchor of the time when there was just one TV channel in Pakistan, spoke next. Continuing in the vein of Ms Kazmi’s views, Ms Rashdi recounted how she challenged General Zia’s policy of requiring women to cover their heads on TV. “I could not digest it (the dupatta policy),” said Ms Rashdi, “because I was born Pakistani and Muslim.” She said people wanted to hear her voice and didn’t care if there was a dupatta covering her head or not. “I got respect without the dupatta on my head,” she said. For a while, she defied the directive and bypassed the dupatta policy by wearing a sari. “No one should dictate to me how to appear on TV. I’m glad that what I took a stand on was reversed later. Anything imposed will not survive.”

When her defiance was ‘uncovered’, she withdrew from the media and used her celebrity to support the cause of the environment at Sindh Environment Protection Agency. It was here that she met and interacted with Saneeya.

In flawless Urdu, Ms. Rashdi said how encouraging it was to see more and more women joining media in Pakistan, particularly television. But she believed that the media was passing through a challenging phase. “We (women) have come a long way from beauty tips and recipes. Women have given this profession a dignity and gender holds no meaning.”

Speaker: Nosheen Razzaq

Topic: Bol ke Lab Azaad Hain Tere

Representing women on radio, the young and dynamic Nosheen Razzaq the medium of radio enabled women to make a name for themselves on media before entering into the more high profile media e.g. TV and newspapers. As an example, she referred to Rukhsana Naz Baloch who listened to radio in secret and when one day listeners were invited to write in, she did and was asked to start writing regularly for radio.

Ms Razzaq said that radio in Pakistan had provided women with that stepping stone, encouraging them to step forward through radio, to have their voices heard, to develop confidence in themselves and their views. All this helped them to 'step forward' and eventually 'stride ahead'.

She also pointed out that radio was an extremely effective medium especially for women, because it enabled women's voices to be heard with focus and concentration, and without any visual distractions.

Speaker: Tasneem Ahmar

Topic: The Way Forward – Pausing to Celebrate and Support

Tasneem Ahmar introduced the Pakistan Women Media Network (PWMN) to the participants. The PWMN was launched in Islamabad on May 16, 2008 and is an outcome of Uks' decade long struggle, since its inception in 1997, for fair and sensitive reporting on women's issues.

The idea of forming PWMN was crystallized in 2003, during the conceptualization of *A Gender Sensitive Code of Ethics for Print Media in Pakistan*, that addresses journalistic codes and ethics for gender-just reporting for the media.

With Islamabad as its base, the PWMN will be initiated and followed in Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur, Quetta, Sibbi, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, Mardan and other locations. A focal person will be identified from each location to carry out the required activities.

She explained that the PWMN is an informal, non-hierarchical group, comprising women media persons and others working in or on the media. It is an autonomous body, committed to raising voices and concerns against gender-based violence, injustice and biases in the media and society.

The PWMN aims to address a number of issues

- Bring to forefront factors behind the under-representation of women in the media
- Absence of women at the decision-making tiers
- Ensuring fair and equal representation of women working in the media.

She handed out membership forms to the participants and requested them to become members of the PWMN.

In conclusion, PWMN paid tribute to the career achievements of Zuhra Karim, the long-serving publisher and editor of Pakistan's first and foremost women's magazine, *She*. Panos Pakistan's Sahar Ali accepted the plaque on behalf of Ms. Karim, who was not in Pakistan at the time and could not be present on the occasion.

SUMMARY REPORT EVENT MEDIA WORKSHOP - August 11, 2008

This was the opening event among others organized to celebrate Saneeya Hussain week August 11-17, 2008

More than 60 women, and a few brave men, gathered at the Karachi Press Club on August 11, 2008 to celebrate women's achievements in media, and embrace the challenges they face in realizing their rights and their potential, at a seminar on Opportunities and Challenges for Women in Pakistani Media titled "Looking Back, Stepping Forward, Striding Ahead".

The event was organised by Panos Pakistan and the Pakistan Women's Media Network with support from the Saneeya Hussain Trust.

The event attracted some leading names from the world of media. Celebrities from TV, print and radio were among the speakers and the audience. Zohra Yusuf, a former journalist who began her career at *The Star* and is now an advertising executive as well as a media analyst, took charge of "looking back" by profiling the achievements of women like development writer Ameneh Azam Ali, pioneering magazine editor Razia Bhatti, feminist writer Najma Babar and environmental journalist Saneeya Hussain.

Zubeida Mustafa recounted the challenges and achievements of women in the print media, pointing out that the success of the women's movement had paved the way for women's empowerment and advancement in many professions, among them media. When she began her career at an English daily, she was the only full-time woman journalist at the paper. Times had changed, and now there were 320 women at the same newspaper, many of them in positions of authority. Women had even held positions of editors of leading national dailies.

Sahira Kazmi, renowned TV producer, reminisced about the times when TV boldly went where no man had gone before by highlighting the status of women in society and exposing ills such as domestic violence.

Pakistan's favorite TV presenter, Mahtab Rashdi, recalled the days of Islamization when women on TV were required to cover their heads. She bypassed the ban by wearing saris, and when her defiance was 'uncovered' she took a stand and sat out the policy by quitting media and using her celebrity to support the cause of environment protection.

The dynamic radio presenter Nosheen Razzaq said radio was a way for women to gain confidence and to project their voices. It was a stepping stone that empowered women to achieve greater heights in media - on TV and in the print media. In itself, radio allowed women's voices to be heard with focus and concentration, and without any distractions.

The need for providing a platform for women to step forward, and to stride ahead having closed ranks, was fulfilled by the establishment of the Pakistan Women's Media Network. This was the message delivered by Tasneem Ahmer, the force behind the PWMN. She introduced the network and invited women in media to become members in order to tackle the under-representation of women in media, to present positive images of women on media, and to raise their voices against gender-based violence, injustice and biases in the media and in society.

At the end, PWMN paid tribute to the career achievements of Zuhra Karim, the long-serving publisher and editor of Pakistan's first and foremost women's magazine, *She*. Panos Pakistan's Sahar Ali accepted the plaque on behalf of Ms. Karim, who was not in Pakistan at the time and could not be present on the occasion.

Partners Profiles

Pakistan Women Media Network

PWMN is a representative organization of women in Pakistani media. It aims to bring together women working in different fields of the print and electronic media in Pakistan on one platform, for a more positive portrayal and increased representation at all levels, as well as for improved conditions for women working in the media. The PWMN is expected to take shape as a nationwide network.

Saneeya Hussain Trust

In honour of the memory of Saneeya Hussain (1954 - 2005) – copywriter, journalist, development activist and women’s rights campaigner – and to carry on her legacy, her family and friends have set up The Saneeya Hussain Trust. The Trust seeks to support some of the causes Saneeya was deeply committed to – primarily the empowerment of women through imparting knowledge and skills. Saneeya’s last assignment was as Executive Director of Panos South Asia (PSA) in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Panos Pakistan

Panos Pakistan is a country office of Panos South Asia in Pakistan. Panos South Asia is part of a family of Panos institutes worldwide that work towards improving the quality of journalism on critical development issues such as environment, public health, conflict and globalization. Gender remains a cross-cutting theme in Panos’s work, through its commitment to media pluralism, which in effect involves ensuring better gender representation in media and a gender balance in all Panos activities.