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Scheherezades: a thousand and one stories of women in community radio

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Community radios are rich with stories of women. All of these tales could fill hours and hours of broadcasts and women's voices would be the conduit for bringing these talking stories to life. Thus, it would be a radio broadcast story about women and radio. Just imagine. I am imagining it as I write this. I can hear the strong, precise words of Doreen in Nairobi, her steady voice telling us about the work of Pamoja FM with youth in the settlements of Kibera, one of the poorest places lacking services in a site considered to be Africa's New York. On the other hand, from Fiji comes Sharon's soft voice telling stories of young women who travel from one island to the next with a suitcase containing a small radio transmitter and who help island women launch their voices over the radio to share how they are participating in democratising their communities or how they address water issues.

Listening to and reading about the role that women play with radio stations would lead us to publish book after book, all of which would captivate us with the richness of their stories, the diversity of voices, the creation of spoken landscapes that would help us leap from Africa to the Fiji Islands, to Kathmandu in Nepal or Matagalpa in Nicaragua, or even to the Alps in Europe. Collecting stories about community radio broadcasting in which women are the protagonists is a pending task that those of us working in this field should no longer dodge or delay further. I am absolutely sure that this will be an interesting, enjoyable way to learn about the influence women play in community-based media, 'to get to the meat of things', as we say in my country. Better yet, we could gather this information through the voices of the protagonists themselves and the sounds in their local contexts. We need to tell these stories in the way that radio broadcasters do: with the mike out and ready to produce radio. Although it may seem like a titanic task, this process will help us to take one another into account as female community radio broadcasters, to get to know one another, to identify who we are and where we are coming from and to learn about the situations and problems we face as we exercise our freedom of expression. It will also help us to take account of and have evidence of how much we help other women to have access to information.

If we start by recognising that community radios exist in 120 countries around the world and that women participate in every one of them, situating the gender and development social agenda in their programming, then we can begin to grasp the dimension of the efforts needed to systematise information that will help us build a stage for enacting the topic of 'women & gender in community radio'. Addressing this topic appears to be an immeasurable task but not an impossible one. Progress will depend upon the attention that governments, non-governmental organisations, researchers and international organisations decide to and are capable of dedicating to these issues. Seeking to sound out this issue and most definitely running the risk of putting many governments on the spot, international bodies like UNESCO, through the International Programme for the Development of Communication, could request available information from many different governments about the participation of women in community radio.

Some information about women's participation is very likely to be available in states in which legislation recognises a citizen's right to operate his or her own communication media, in countries where community radios exist grounded in a community's rights to exercise freedom of expression.

The information that the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) has concerning its members is not conclusive and has not been verified or updated. However, we can use the lists of voting members by continent, which include the names of the people who run each radio station or production group. We share some figures here seeking to establish a single indicator from the many that community radios should set in order to monitor gender mainstreaming. This indicator is numerical and only shows how many community broadcasting entities are run by women, according to this international network's membership roll.

AMARC states that it brings together a network of more than 4,000 community radio stations, federations and allies of community radio in over 130 countries. The following data only considers voting members. We have counted a total of 1,780, 397 of which are run by women; this means that approximately one in five radios is run by a woman.

In Africa, 117 of 511 members are represented by women (W), corresponding to the overall correlation of 1 woman for every 5 men running a community radio station. In general, female to male representation varies from country to country, however, proportional representation is noted in the Ivory Coast with 20 women (W) from a total of 75 members, Ghana has 8 (W) of 19 members; Kenya 4 (W) of 8; and Mali has 10 (W) of 39. In Mali, two of the radio stations are collectives composed entirely of women; these entities belong to a network entitled La Voix de la Femme, which is also present in Burundi.

In Latin America, this gender correlation declines to 1 (W) in every 4, meaning that there are more women running radios in Africa. The figures indicate that Nicaragua is the country with the greatest parity in the relation of men and women running community radio stations with 10 (W) out of 17. Argentina is next with 12 (W) of its 26 members, followed by Peru with 10 (W) of 33. With 114 members, Bolivia is the country with the greatest overall number of AMARC members in the region, however, only 16 are run by women. In Chile, we have Radio Tierra, the historical broadcasting entity of feminist organisation La Morada; La Radioneta, which is run by a feminist woman, broadcasts from Valparaiso in Chile as well. In Nicaragua, Radio Vos belongs to the Matagalpa Women's Collective, a group of women that have been working on women's rights issues since 1986, promoting sexual and reproductive health and counselling on human rights issues. Radio Vos is clearly the voice of this women's collective – it is a feminist, political communications project.

In North America, there is one woman for every man running a community radio in the United States and Canada. AMARC has 201 member radio stations in these two countries, 55 of which are run by women. WINGS (the Women's International News Gathering Service), with its weekly news service that feeds many other broadcasting entities, has played an important role in Canada.

In Asia, AMARC has 207 member community radio stations but only 24 are run by women, that is to say, approximately 1 (W) out of every 9 stations. However, this is the region that demonstrates the greatest amount of activity with respect to women's capacity building and this was the first region to discuss, develop and write up gender policies for the broadcasting entities; these policies, with their contextual differences, have been adopted in other regions or countries, such as Mexico, a country that has greatly furthered the adoption of gender policies in the network's internal regulations.

In Europe, the relation returns to 1 (W) for every 4 members. The United Kingdom demonstrates the greatest parity with 9 (W) of 16 members, followed by Switzerland with 2 (W) of 4 and Spain with 5 (W) out of 16. Although France has 114 members overall, only 18 are run by women. Radio Lora in Switzerland is one of the most consolidated feminist projects in the region.

The North Africa-Middle East region registers 2 (W) of 14 members, for a 1 (W) to 7 relation. This is a new region and the community radio stations are very recent, however, there are very interesting experiences in this region, such as Ammanet, an internet radio station that has worked especially with rural women in Jordan.

In Oceania, there are 38 (W) of a total of 85 members and the 4 existing radio stations in Fiji are women's projects that are well-positioned not only on the islands but also throughout the region.

These numbers do not say much about the daily reality of women in these community radios. I began by saying that we should tell their stories, gather their voices, recreate their resoundingly colourful contexts and describe the concrete actions that they are carrying out to improve women's lives.

To this end, we need to systematise the experiences that the women of AMARC have accumulated over the past two decades. Each woman holds a part of the story, each one has made a contribution from the place where she participates, each one adds her experience and work to enrich a global network that seeks to influence public policy on our right to exercise freedom of expression.

Gender and feminist mainstreaming in AMARC's actions is a necessity and a strategy that will surely contribute to greater empowerment of women and other sexual identities at community radios and across the network.

We also need to be involved and take ownership in actions regarding the defence of the right to communication, the demand for the radio spectrum, our call to modify national laws that establish or strengthen legal frameworks that protect plurality and diversity in communication, the need to exercise solidarity when women and men community communicators face emergencies, in addition to networking and cooperation with other social movements.

New information and communication technologies present a new challenge with regard to achieving their use by women. In this sense, they represent a huge need for training and development but they also open up possibilities for communication that did not exist before. By promoting their use – and by training

women – we can strengthen women's capacities and promote processes for interactive communication in which women from community radios become part of a whole and can contribute to the work of their female colleagues in other countries and regions of the world.

One path for making progress towards greater women's leadership is the creation of strategies that include affirmative action. This strategy, debated in many different arenas, becomes necessary in spaces in which women are at a disadvantage and do not have the necessary tools to position themselves to participate in decision-making. I am referring to the need to carry out actions so that women community radio broadcasters can become active decision-makers at their radio stations, in their communities, within the national and regional networks and in the international arena.

Economic issues are a breaking point for women's participation in communities where community radios exist. Although it depends upon the regulatory framework in each country, in most cases community radios are sustained through the voluntary efforts of their members and collaborators. This means that women once again deposit their labour power for free in a labour space, leading them to have an additional burden. Hence, in addition to the need to change laws so that community radios can survive with different sources of financing, we also need to garner greater economic support through national and international organisations that support and foster community radio. While the lack of money does not have to be an obstacle to building a movement in which the sum of political will, active membership and commitment to the struggle for the rights of those who have the least is critical, financial resources are the fuel to keep the motor of our actions running strong.