

Presentation at IPRA conference on July 18, 2008

For the past few years I have been involved in a media activist project conducted by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, a Swedish organisation that supports women and women's organisations in conflict-ridden regions.

I would like to talk about the background and results of a recent study by the Woman to Woman Foundation's media group, and also about how peace journalism and feminist theory might enrich each other and in ultimately join forces.

"In order to deliver up-to-the-minute news coverage, we have to speak to the people who make the decisions, and they are usually men. It is not the journalists' job to change society, and the fact the inequality of our world is reflected in our reporting doesn't bother me."

This comment was made by Karl Viktor Olsson, foreign affairs editor at the Swedish central news agency Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå (TT), at a seminar in May at which the Woman to Woman Foundation presented its study of reporting on war and armed conflicts in Swedish newspapers. He was part of a panel of five representatives of management staff at major Swedish media outlets.

It was obvious that the media representatives did not appreciate the results of our study, which included embarrassing figures on gender balance in their conflict reporting. News subjects were found to be 85% male and 15% female. (news subject = person whom the story concerns).

The study involved monitoring the media for 14 days from January 21 to February 3 this year. We counted the number of women and men appearing as news subjects. We looked at the various roles given to men and women. Were they representatives of the parties in conflict, or of civil society, or were they independent experts?

Did they themselves speak, or were they presented through voice-over? Were they named or were they anonymous? We also monitored the extent to which peaceful conflict resolution was taken up and if the underlying cause of a conflict was included in the reporting.

Here are some of our findings:

Gender distribution of news subjects

Despite the fact that both men and women participate in conflicts and are affected by them, women get only 15% of media conflict coverage. Correspondingly, 85% of the news subjects were men. Of the total news subjects, a large majority were official sources and only a few were representatives of civil society.

Swedish Radio/Ekot	21%	79% (public service radio)
Svenska Dagbladet	20%	80% (daily newspaper)
Dagens Nyheter	18%	82% (daily newspaper)
TV4		14% 86%
Swedish Television	9%	91%(public s television)

Non-governmental organisations

Civil society actors appear rarely as news subjects. Representatives of peace groups, human rights groups and humanitarian groups appeared in as few as 4 of the total news items. The parties featured in the reports were chiefly officials and adversarial factions. When NGO representatives were in the picture it was generally for news items by reporters who were in the vicinity.

Non-governmental organisations	4%
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Gender distribution of experts

Experts were mainly men. The particular media players monitored in the study used experts in one third of their news items. Most experts were official sources. Of the experts used in the coverage, 11% were women and 89% men.

Experts, women/men	11%	89%
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Underlying causes

The underlying cause of the conflict is focused on in about 46 of the news items. On closer inspection, it is clear that the background information consists mainly of event and incident reports rather than explanations of the underlying causes of conflicts that are still taking place.

Underlying causes	46%
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Swedish Radio/Ekot	77%
Dagens Nyheter	77%
TV4	73%
Swedish Television	54%
Svenska Dagbladet	33%
TT (News agency)	28%

Gender distribution in images

In the image material illustrating conflict coverage, men appear in 75 of the images and women in 25. In most cases the people shown are officials and their names are supplied.

Women/men in images	25%	75%
TV4	33%	67%
Swedish Television	29%	71%
Dagens Nyheter	27%	73%
Svenska Dagbladet	24%	76%
TT	–	–
Swedish Radio/Eko	–	–

A few words about the monitoring methodology

A check was performed to ensure that there were no major events during the period that could impact foreign news reporting. The selection of media players represented an equal distribution between radio, TV and print media. The emphasis was on daily reporting, and no local media were included. Two evening papers, and a weekly news magazine, were also monitored – but their coverage of conflicts was too fragmented and sparse to analyse. There were a total of 262 texts – that is, news items – about conflicts during the analysis period.

The observations were analysed using a matrix consisting of seventy quantitative questions. Eight people were engaged to conduct the analysis, all of them with extensive media backgrounds.

A pilot survey was conducted, to test the questions on a small selection of the media to check validity and reliability. Over the course of the monitoring, the group constantly discussed cases in which uncertainty arose as to the categories.

A certain bias in the reporting is impossible to avoid completely. The findings of the monitoring, however, are clear enough to provide plenty of room for a margin of error.

The results of the monitoring all point in the same direction. Women and civil society are not regarded as newsworthy, and journalists' interest in reporting news about peaceful conflict resolution is limited.

Again, the media we studied were not overjoyed – however, as it turned out, our study made the headlines of the primary newscast of Swedish public service radio.

The story was also picked up by other media players and became the subject of several editorials in major Swedish newspapers. The results of the monitoring also led to lively discussion in the blogosphere.

To continue the story we need to shift our focus (for a while) to the Woman to Woman Foundation, and explain why we conducted our media-monitoring survey.

8. The Kvinna till Kvinna logo

Ever since the start in 1993, Woman to Woman has been involved with issues relating to women's vulnerability in armed conflicts. Right from the start, it was clear to us that media tend to focus on women's vulnerability in wars and conflicts, but rarely report on strong women working to promote peace and human rights.

We found that women in particular and civil society as a whole are clearly marginalised in conflict reporting. This is the case in local media in conflict areas, as well as in the international media, that is, the coverage found in the rest of the world.

During the wars in the former Yugoslavia (and in Rwanda) in the 1990s, the media drew attention to women's vulnerability. It was thanks to the media that the fact that rapes were used as a war method became generally known.

It was right, and important, for these war crimes to be brought to light. Media coverage was part of the reason why the international community, in the foundation statute of the permanent criminal

court in the Hague, included the use of rape as a war method as a crime subject to sanction by the court.

However, the attention surrounding these war crimes had several negative aspects. The greatest problem was that descriptions of the women's vulnerability often caused further exploitation of women who had had traumatic experiences. The media hounded rape victims for interviews. Another problem was the fact that the image of women as victims became dominant.

When women in active roles as breadwinners, activists – and soldiers – are relegated to the background, the picture becomes distorted. When women are presented almost exclusively as victims, we can lose sight of the fact that women are also agents who are influenced by and who influence conflict outcomes.

The ability of women to make themselves heard in society on the same terms as men is in itself a critical factor in societal development. A society in which women's voices (or women as a group) are marginalised is not a democracy in the fullest sense of the word. If (we believe that) the connection between democracy and sustainable peace is valid, we cannot ignore the fact that gender equality is a key precondition of sustainable peace.

Woman to Woman's partners in conflict-ridden countries in the Balkan Region, the Middle East and the South Caucasus tell the same story. It is extremely difficult for them to make themselves heard in the media, and to get the media interested in what they say and do, and especially how they influence the society in which they live.

Because what women do is not valued as news. Women's rights activists are subjected to "master suppression techniques" – such as marginalisation, ignoring and ridiculing – by the media. Some are also attacked for their political work in support of women's rights, peace and reconciliation.

Unlike male activists, female activists find that whatever they are accused of is presented as being linked to their gender. They are hung out to dry by the media, accused of being immoral, promiscuous, prostituted and homosexual.

In Serbia, for example, the organisation Women in Black, which promotes peace and Kosovo's independence, have been accused in the media of conducting prostitution and of being lesbian.

The ultimate case of misogyny propagated by the media occurred prior to the Rwandan genocide, when hate campaigns carried on in the media against a particular ethnic group often focused on women.

One of the first victims of the genocide was the prime minister, Agathe Uwiringiyimana, the first woman to hold the position. In the year before the genocide, she was often portrayed in propaganda and politically extremist literature as promiscuous and a threat to the nation.

It was against this background that Woman to Woman launched the project "The image of women in the media" and started monitoring the media more systematically. The purpose of the project was to influence the media to become more gender- and conflict-sensitive in their coverage of conflicts. To do that, we realised we needed to formalise our analysis and expand our argumentation.

We were already aware of peace journalism, and saw similarities between its analysis and conclusions and our own work. However, on closer study, we discovered a critical difference: there was no gender perspective in the model. Despite an obvious overlap between PJ and feminist perspectives on news media there were no references to any common analysis of power structures or society as a whole.

Feminists and the women's movement have been talking for a long time about the media's gender imbalance and how it connects with peace and sustainable development.

Thanks to the Global Media Monitoring Project, which was most recently carried out in 2005, we now have the numbers to describe the imbalance in a global perspective. In the global news flow, 20% of the news subjects are female, whereas the remaining 80% are men.

The conflict analyses offered by peace journalism and the women's movement share the same fundamental principles – that all of the parties in a conflict must be heard, and that members of civil society should be given greater opportunities for input in conflict reporting.

That all parties must be given a chance to be heard is a basic rule of journalism. However what or who the parties are is a matter of interpretation. Even if women, the elderly and children are not

considered permanent active combatants, they are clearly participants in the conflict, as are their interests and needs. Allowing these parties to be heard creates a broader perspective on the conflict.

During wars and conflicts, it is the women who are largely responsible for day-to-day survival and are engaged in the civic society. It is also common for women to instigate peace initiatives that transcend borders such as in the Israel–Palestine conflict. This is greatly due to the fact that women see possibilities due to their experiences in conflicts, which may differ from men’s experiences. However, these initiatives seldom receive attention in the media.

Another aspect of peace journalism that harmonises with feminist theory is its emphasis on structural problems. This becomes clear when it comes to violence. Where conventional conflict reporting automatically addresses only the apex of the “violence triangle” – so called “direct violence” – peace journalism emphasises the base, that is, the context and underlying arguments of the conflict. In terms of this focus, factors such as poverty, the distribution of natural resources and gender inequality become vital explanations of violence, more than reprisals or hate between ethnic or religious groups.

Moreover, analysing power structures and suppression techniques comes naturally to peace journalists and feminists. The five “master suppression techniques” identified by Norwegian professor Berit Ås can easily be adapted to the reproduction of the general male-dominated news agenda. Women are made invisible in the media in that they are rarely portrayed as agents. They are ridiculed; in the sense of being portrayed with irrelevant comments on their clothing and appearance.

Another way to exert power is to withhold information. When the media fail to provide information on women’s situations or even include information from women to the same extent as information from men, it affects our image of our society and of political decision-making.

It is also important to acknowledge that women are not always “good agents.” In terms of conflict reporting we need to recognise that women participate in battles and are also decision-makers during wars and conflicts. In order to ensure a just and comprehensive representation of conflicts it is also important to show women that deviate from the norm of the “good woman.” Women are not good by nature.

Johan Galtung has suggested that women would make better peace journalists. The question is what we would gain from applying a gender aspect to the practice of PJ? Would it attract more

practitioners? Would it ultimately help to bring about a better gender balance in conflict reporting? I do not think so. It seems more likely that such thinking will steer us into biologism and squeeze peace journalism into the rut of “soft issues” – that is, earmarked for women – possibly scaring off male journalists in the process.

The question itself incorporates the key feminist question of when and to what extent is it relevant to distinguish between men and women. How can we describe women as victims, and refer to their vulnerability, without further establishing or strengthening patriarchal thinking and norms?

It might be that in many cultures, women typically have to become competent in a broader range of different discourses than men and this could possibly make them more likely to take up peace journalism.

However, the Kvinna till Kvinna survey gives no clear evidence that gender affects reporting. Such thoughts are articulated, however, by a few of the media managers we interviewed. This focuses particularly on the fact that women choose less conventional subjects when they get the chance to do jobs of substantial length. It is also clear that women are involved in different types of projects involving communication for development (community radio stations, etc.) projects to a greater extent than men.

The question is whether we should focus on gender differences we can see – is there any benefit to peace journalism in marketing a gender comparison charting professional roles? A better starting point for peace journalism would be to assume that both genders are capable of seeing beyond journalistic conventions.

A productive approach for gender PJ would be to focus on and analyse the media logic that results in men and women being reflected so differently in conflict coverage (as well as in news reporting generally). Swedish researcher Ylva Brune has studied the coverage of human rights (including women’s rights) in Swedish media. Not surprisingly, she found that the media reflect the de facto discrimination of groups in society generally.

“There seems to be a mechanism of media logic at work here: the media reflect society’s power structure, not its composition.”

Government study by Ylva Brune: SOU 2007:102: “Human rights reporting by Swedish news media.”

When Kvinna till Kvinna presented the results of its study, the media bosses' reaction was that the imbalance was justifiable with reference to the actual distribution of power in society. Several of them maintained that the primary task of the media is to shine a critical light on power.

None of them seemed to want to acknowledge the professional code whereby the task of the journalist is to report on society's many aspects and give the weak a voice. The realisation that the organisations of civil society are a key source in the business of shining a critical light on power (and that they are watchdogs in themselves) was also notable in its absence.

One of our international guests at the seminar, Inna Michaeli of the Israeli organisation Women's Coalition for Peace, articulated succinctly how the media's Catch 22 as regards gender could be resolved.

I will let her conclude my presentation:

"You choose sides – you choose the side of power, which marginalises us. You say there are no women in key positions – but if you talk to us we will become important."

Agneta Söderberg Jacobson

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