

IN FOCUS

Funding Local Media, Strengthening Human Rights

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Last summer, I was invited to participate in a roundtable with leaders from North Waziristan – the war-torn tribal belt along Pakistan's mountainous border with Afghanistan. I represented Internews, an international organization that supports the development of local language media and provides small grants for local media development. Both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, Internews trains journalists, supports local and independent radio, and helps get lifesaving information to people in humanitarian crisis and in conflict zones.



The seven Waziri leaders who sat across the table from us wanted Internews to help their communities. "Our women need to learn about health and hygiene issues in the language they understand," a Waziri religious leader offered. "They cannot travel to health centers to learn about this. They cannot leave the house. Can you teach them through radio?"

The dialogue that followed allowed me a rare glimpse into a society where tradition restricts women's movement and tribal codes enforce women's silence and invisibility. Is it a wonder then that in war-torn communities and in conflict zones, civil society organizations find it a challenging task to get even the most basic services to those who need them most: women and children.

The photo above depicts a reporter from Awaz FM, Punjab, getting lifesaving information out to people displaced by the 2010 Pakistan floods.

Media promotes access to information. Article 19 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers." The right to access information is not only a right in itself, but is essential for exercising other rights. Local media, in the language the community understands, is an essential tool for pursuing a human rights agenda.

Media shapes perceptions, creates space for dialogue

Media, by itself, may not be able to change deeply entrenched community norms. However, print features, radio programs, television documentaries, mobile media products and online media outputs (i.e. blogs, wikis, podcasts, etc.) can provoke and sustain dialogues that lead to positive change. Media can influence and challenge what people consider normal and acceptable. Accurate, well-informed and insightful stories can inspire community members to make changes in their lives, and motivate policy makers to consider public reaction while forming public policy and laws. Media also gives audiences the facts and an understanding of context to help them make informed decisions, understand policies and initiatives and interact effectively with the institutions and systems that shape their realities, their lives and their times.

Local media has the potential to empower women. Media has the power to determine how society views women and the multiple roles they play in their communities. Local radio, in particular, can be used to engage, convince and inspire communities to seek justice, respect and equality. Combining radio with mobile phones, for example, creates the ability to engage in two-way communication, allowing radio to “be/carry/give voice”. From including women journalists in training, to developing more stories about women and girls, expanding the media landscape for women helps build and mainstream a human rights framework for women.

Local media is a trusted and valuable lifeline of information, and can be used as a tool or a weapon. In 2008 and 2009 in Pakistan, *FM Fazlullah* (named after a militant leader allied to the Pakistani Taliban) broadcast radio programs from the Swat Valley. Fazlullah’s transmitter reached listeners spread over many mountainous miles. His broadcasts blamed music and dance as major sources of sin, disallowed television viewing and supported *Sharia* courts to dispense justice. He opposed polio vaccination as a conspiracy by the West to wipe out Muslims, declared elections as un-Islamic, opposed education for girls and forced nearly 500 schools to close, blowing up many that attempted to stay open. Fazlullah, and others like him, prey on rumors, feed misinformation and thrive in information “black holes.” While *FM Fazlullah* is no longer on the air, radio in Pakistan continues to be the dominant medium to reach women, many of whom are illiterate. Indeed, in border regions and in rural Pakistan - like many areas struck by political and natural disasters - local radio is still the only source of reliable information for internally displaced people.

Local radio can contextualize “human rights.” During our discussion with the Waziri leaders, no one used words typically associated with “human rights, women’s empowerment, gender equality, social justice” etc. – to describe our mutual agenda. Yet for the 90 minutes that we sat around the table sipping *Kawah* (green tea) and listening to each other, we found common priorities, and agreement that radio can get information and news about health, sanitation, and education to their women – meeting critical information needs of their community members, but also starting to address two of the important challenges listed in the Millennium Development Goal.

Through funding local media, human rights grantmakers can provide – as well as ask - the most vulnerable populations about the critical information they need to access the most basic services like: food, clean water, sanitation, how to report abuses, etc.

One Internews trainee, a tenacious reporter from Northwest Pakistan, did a story about accessing wheelchairs. As a result, half a dozen people called back the station to report back that the story had helped them obtain wheelchairs, dramatically changing their quality of life. The relevance of the story to the local people, covered by a reporter who understood the people’s needs, and ability to report in a language they understood, illustrates the power of local radio to bring about significant change.

For more information or to learn more:

- 1) Review the publications and articles on human rights and gender issues the website of *Internews*: <http://www.internews.org/global/gender/default.shtm>;
- 2) Contact Manisha Aryal, Director, Internews, Global Human Rights Program, at manisha@internews.org
- 3) Visit the IHRFG Funder Directory to search for and connect with funders in the area of media, access to information, freedom of press, information, and expression: <http://www.ihrfg.org/funder-directory-search>
- 4) Connect with grantees on using local media as a resource to facilitate their programs and priorities.