



# Power, empowerment and community radio: Media by and for women in Nepal

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## SYNOPSIS

Agenda for the community media starts from the point of view of liberation from dominant power structures. Production and interpretation skills attained through the participation in community media would allow persons to become more discriminating in their views. It gives them a voice to speak out actively on the matters affecting their lives. In this sense, community media will be subversive to any group, bureaucracy, or individual, who feels threatened by a coalescing of grassroots consciousness. Through reporting on the issues affecting women and advocating their rights, an all-women community radio in Nepal is working towards their empowerment. Based on the theoretical perspectives of power and media, this article through a case study, highlights how bringing Violence Against Women (VAW) into the alternative public sphere contributes towards women empowerment.

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## Introduction

Radio is one of the powerful community media that gives life to the knowledge, wisdom and skills to be transferred from one generation to another (see for example [Brecht, 1979](#); [Girard, 2001](#); [Howley, 2005](#)). Hence, community radio as media by and for the communities is a pro-people media. It has an important role in different stages of social change and development. In this sense, community radio agenda starts from the point of view of liberation from dominant power structures, where communication is a tool for social praxis.

Nepal is the first country in South Asia to begin experimenting with community owned independent radio from 1997. It has more than a decade long history of community radio with a significant number of community radio stations covering all of its 75 districts. Advent of the *Loktantra* (People's Democracy) after the April 2006 popular uprising has significantly contributed in the steep rise of community radio licencing in Nepal ([Dahal & Aram, 2011](#)).

Interestingly, Nepal occupies mere 3% of South Asian landscape and 2% of total population, but it has huge number of private radio stations serving variety of communities, cultures, and geography within the small area of operation. The total number of private community and commercial

radio stations stands at 405.<sup>1</sup> The recent statistics shows that the number of licenced community radio stations in Nepal has crossed 250. Out of those granted licences, more than 80% are operational. If all of the licensees (including the prospective applicants) operate, then Nepal would probably be highest in at least South Asia in terms of independent radio station per capita. The state of community radio in Nepal and its role in community communication is discussed in the later section.

It was the availability of alternative voices through community radios, which has significantly contributed in the emergence of specialist community radio stations in recent times. For example, women specific, Dalit specific, indigenous community specific and faith-based radio stations are recent addition to the long list of community radio stations in the country.

This article discusses women specific community radio station and its contribution towards women empowerment by bringing discussions on Violence Against Women (VAW) into an alternative public sphere. In this context, this study not only mandates the need to ascertain the agenda of women empowerment in the new nation building in Nepal but it would also be a lesson learning opportunity for others, at least in South Asia. The article explores potentiality of

using community radio as a tool for establishing women's voices for inclusive democratic exercise.

*Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2011* reports that one in five women aged 15 to 49 years has faced physical violence in the country (Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP), 2011). United Nations Nepal (UN Nepal) (2011a) points out the root causes of vulnerability of women lying on the patriarchal nature of Nepali society. Women in Nepal are further disadvantaged depending on their caste, ethnicity and geographic location and the gender relations is continued to be defined by a patriarchal value system, which perpetuates women's subordination (Women's Rehabilitation Centre Nepal (WOREC Nepal), 2010). Also, many women do not question the status quo and to a certain degree believe that men have the right to control their lives and bodies; they are discriminated several times over (NWC, 2011).

Patriarchal social values and norms are reflected in many cultural and religious, economic, legal and political practices in Nepali society. In terms of governance, the overall environment and regulatory framework for the promotion of human rights and particularly of women's human rights remains weak. We would see this in the section dealing with 'vulnerability and challenges' of women empowerment through media.

"Domestic violence against women, including beatings by husbands, dowry-related murders, and physical and psychological harassment by families is rampant in Nepal" (Dhakal, 2008, p.547). Women's gender inequality in Nepal stems from a traditional socio-cultural practices that defines the formal and informal rules for women's participation in relation to opportunity, decision-making, access to resources and women's control over them (UNDP, 2009a), including in the media and communication.

Nepal has enacted many new legislations and amended the old ones to improve the status of women that includes Gender Equality Act, 2006; Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act, 2007; 12th amendment to the Country Code that criminalises witchcraft and recognises it as a crime against state; and Domestic Violence Control Act, 2008. To replace the Country Code of 1963, the Criminal Code and Civil Code bills have been registered by the government, which are sensitive to gender issues. For the first time in 2006, Nepali parliament passed a special resolution to ensure proportional electoral system along with extant first-past-the-post system. It directly benefited women (among others) in securing at least 33% of the seats including different castes, ethnicities, geographies and religions in Nepal's first Constituent Assembly (CA), which also acted as the parliament for 2008–2012. As a result, 197 women entered the assembly as member representatives among a total of 601, for the very first time in Nepal's political history.

It was "a remarkable achievement and turnaround from previous elections, and a huge leap forward on the world stage, where women still account for only 19.2% of parliamentarians" (National Democratic Institute Nepal (NDI-Nepal), 2010). Nepal's women did have a voice in politics but was anyone listening? As recently as in May 2011, a women politician and a minister designated refused to take oath of office and kept a promise to take oath only if at least 33% women (as mandated by the law) are included in the cabinet. She continued to lobby for the implementation of the resolution until the untimely demise of the government after little more than a year in the office.

Government of Nepal has already implemented some reservation policies in administrative and security sectors and as a result, participation of women in security sector has reached to 3% in national army and 7% in the police force (NWC, 2011). However, the security and justice sector including police, public prosecutors, lawyers and the judiciary is dominated by men – many of whom are perceived not to be sufficiently gender-sensitive (United Nations Nepal (UN Nepal), 2011b). Even if the cases on Violence Against Women (VAW) make it to the formal justice system, they typically receive low priority. We should see how the formal justice system typically give low priority to the cases related to domestic violence against women as reported by the media.

"Many have sought to disseminate alternative, non-scientific, local knowledge as one form of exercising power" (Foucault, 1980, p.34). The term empowerment means being vocal and having a right to 'voice'. 'Voice' is defined as representation in both formal and informal institutions to enhance participation. In the context of communication for empowerment, within the context of development communication, voice means access and representation in the media (UNDP, 2009b). Lack in voice is termed as voice poverty; also understood as the inability of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making (Salazar, 2009).

A real empowerment should lie on the active participation of subordinated people in the project of governance to make it more equitable, just, participatory, and efficient. Thus, counter-hegemonic projects seek to create political agents of just, equitable, and moral change, who are trained in the arts of resistance, mobilisation, and self-governance (Sharma, 2008). In the conditions of unequal power arrangements along with a situation of lack in good faith, an invitation to give voice to collectively legitimised knowledge of a community may not be in their interest (Arnold & Stillman, 2009). For example, the superstitions and taboos in societies are collectively legitimised knowledge but they are disempowering. Legitimacy, resources and agency would therefore appear to be the key theoretical concepts relevant to the empowerment of communities (Kabeer, 1999).

The aspect of power relations, which could contribute to disempowerment, is an important point of concern for any project aimed at giving voice to the community. In the use of media for development, emphasis has been on telling and teaching, rather than an exchange of requests and ideas between the centre and outlying areas. There are such communications media which not only enable two-way communication, dialogue, from periphery to centre and vice versa, and between groups, but which are based upon this dialogue. Uses of communications media which include two-way communication have been called community communications or community media (Berrigan, 1979).

Within the purview of development communication, community communications have to address the problem of creating self-awareness, of boosting morale, of 'conscientisation' (Freire, 2005 [1970]), and to the problem of giving access to information to those who need it.

Empowerment of women in the context of knowledge societies is understood as building the ability and skills of women to gain insight of actions and issues in the external

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