Missing Half the story: Journalism as if Gender Matters
By Ammu Joseph

Abstract
The book, Missing Half the Story: Journalism as if Gender Matters, was put together by professional journalists sharing their insight and belief that there is a missing angle to much of the reporting in the media. The book suggests that a gendered lens allows journalists to gain deeper insights into the various events and issues that they regularly cover. Events, policies, politics, business and almost everything else often impact women and men differently and recognising these differences and understanding what determines such differences can help us see dimensions of a story that may otherwise be overlooked.

Key words
Gender equality, journalism, Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP)

Introduction
At a press conference to mark the launch of the global and national reports of the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 in Bangalore, a senior (woman) journalist who heads the Bangalore edition of a major national daily conceded that the GMMP findings provide food for thought and pointers for action. She then asked: What happens in the case of a gender-neutral subject like, say, the Nuclear Liability Bill?’

Can legislation relating to nuclear accidents be seen as gender-neutral when it is widely acknowledged that nuclear radiation can have detrimental effects on reproductive health and cause genetic defects in children? As the May 2010 edition of Nuclear-News, which focuses on nuclear power and women, points out, “Decisions on nuclear power, nuclear weapons, nuclear wastes are almost exclusively made by men. Yet the brunt of nuclear-caused cancer is suffered by women and children, as is the brunt of nuclear war, and of depleted uranium spread.”

The journal also highlights the fact that “Opinion
polls over many years, and in many countries, consistently show that women are opposed to nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Also, more women than men are concerned about the health and environmental effects of the nuclear industry.” Under the circumstances, it seems to me that the Nuclear Liability Bill or, indeed, anything else related to nuclear tests, power and/or warfare cannot be viewed as gender-neutral. Not only are there gender-specific ways in which they can impact women’s health and lives (and those of their children), but many women have opinions about them – both as individuals and as a collective – that seem to be different from those of many men.

I do not have the expertise to elaborate on the gender aspects of the multi-faceted and complex nuclear issue. In any case, that is not the point of this particular anecdote, which is instead to underline two issues that are of concern to us at this Summit:

1. It is highly unlikely that any subject covered by the media is “gender-neutral.” Most events and issues in the news are likely to affect different sections of society – including different categories of women – differently because of gender and several other factors that influence people’s lives in particular ways.

2. Yet many journalists continue to assume that certain events and issues – including many the media consider important and/or that fall into the privileged category of “hard news” – have nothing to do with gender, and persist in perceiving “gender issues” as, at best, niche subjects that have nothing to do with the rest of journalism.
It is to address both these issues that a group of us in India collaborated on the recently published book, Missing Half the Story: Journalism as if Gender Matters, edited by Kalpana Sharma (Zubaan Books 2010)\(^2\). As Kalpana explains in the Introduction, the book was “put together by professionals, journalists who have been in the rough and tumble of the trade, who have reported and commented on a vast range of subjects for several decades, managed and edited independent publications and sections in mainstream media, headed news bureaus, taught in journalism schools, and who have emerged from this experience with the belief that there is a missing angle to much of the reporting in the media.

“This angle is that of gender, of understanding that because society mediates so much of what happens on the basis of gendered hierarchies, the media too need to understand these when reporting. That if the media fails to understand this aspect of all our societies, and not just Indian society, then it misses out on at least one half of the story.”

In the book we suggest that a gendered lens allows journalists to gain deeper insights into the various events and issues that we regularly cover. Events, policies, politics, business and almost everything else often impact women and men differently – just as they impact the poor and the rich, the urban and the rural, the privileged castes, races, ethnic and religious communities and the underprivileged ones, the abled and the differently abled, differently. We propose that recognising these differences and understanding what determines such differences can help us see dimensions of a story that may otherwise be overlooked.

I am sure most of you are familiar with these arguments since so much work has been done in this country, and in this region, to highlight precisely such ideas. I am well aware that many of you have applied a gender lens to elections and governance, the economy and business, health and HIV/AIDS, and even – recently – sports in general and soccer in particular!

The book - Missing Half the Story

Missing Half the Story, is divided into three sections.

Section 1 - Understanding Gender

I. The first section, titled Understanding Gender, provides what we think is important background information that can help journalists come to grips with terms like gender and patriarchy, understand what feminism is all about (and disabuse themselves of popular myths about “rabid feminists,” “the battle of the sexes,” etc.), get a sense of the history of women’s subordination, and familiarise themselves with the history of contemporary women’s emancipatory movements.

This section also unravels the many new terms that are increasingly appearing in the media but often do not seem to be fully understood by journalists, such as transgender, transsexual, intersex, etc. Today, with the “emerging other” gender becoming more vocal, visible and organised, journalists need to know exactly what these and a number of related terms mean and how to write about transgender and sexual minorities with accuracy and sensitivity. The section includes a glossary as well as a chapter titled Gender Sensitivity on the Run, which includes practical tips on how to identify gender insensitivity and how to strive to be gender sensitive as a matter of course. The second chapter in this section begins with the difficult and distressing experience Caster Semenya went through last year.

Section 2 - A Gender Lens

II. The second section, titled A Gender Lens, includes a number of chapters that examine how a gender perspective can be applied to a wide range of topics covered by the media – from sexual assault to disasters and conflict, from the environment to health, from politics to economics.

The idea was to highlight the fact that gender-sensitivity must not be left only to the features and
opinion sections of the media and that it needs to become an integral part of news coverage. As Kalpana Sharma points out in the introduction, “We believe that such a perspective is not a stressful, artificial add-on, something that you do only if you have a boss who insists, or if as a media student you are asked to do an exercise that incorporates gender-sensitivity. Our own experience over several decades as journalists has taught us that this is how you can be a more effective, credible and serious journalist.”

To illustrate this point chapters in this section focus on a number of areas that journalists have to cover as a matter of routine, such as sexual assault (including cases of rape and molestation), and environmental issues such as the impact of deforestation or climate change.

- Using examples from the Indian media to flag problems with the way the media tend to cover violent crime, especially sexual crimes against women, the chapter titled, When Survivors Become Victims, includes suggestions on how to better report sexual assault. Incidentally, you may be interested to know that an IPS-Africa publication, “Reporting Gender Based Violence: A Handbook for Journalists,” which many of you are probably familiar with, is quoted in the chapter.

- The next chapter, titled Why Toilets and Forests Matter to Women, starts with the assertion that “There are few subjects that illustrate better the saying that as journalists we are only telling half the story if we miss the gender dimension while reporting on environmental and developmental issues.” Again, using examples that highlight the importance of covering hot-button environmental issues, this chapter drives home the fact that many complex topics of current interest, such as climate change, can be made more down-to-earth and thereby comprehensible to readers and viewers by presenting them in terms of how they affect women. After all, what does climate change mean for ordinary human beings, particularly the poor and the vulnerable? Is it all about the Kyoto Protocol, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change and official negotiations at Nusa Dua, Copenhagen, Cancun? Wouldn’t it all make much more sense to the average citizen if it is connected to the impact of changing weather patterns and sea levels on real people’s lives? Since women, particularly poor women, around the world depend on the earth’s natural resource base far more than others, a useful and meaningful way to explain the significance of climate change is to highlight the issue through the experiences of women.
lives you can imagine the likely effects of nuclear radiation. But, at the same time, it is important to note (about Bhopal) that many women – most of them with little formal education and no prior experience in public life – emerged as leaders in the campaign for justice and remain integral to the 26-year-old struggle. It is important to report on the positives, too, and not to portray women caught up in disasters and conflicts only as victims.

With reference to the discussion on conflict in this chapter, I would like to flag a recent example. You may be aware that the conflict in Kashmir has been back in the news, at least in South Asia, for several months now. Despite the reams of media copy devoted to the Kashmir issue over the past couple of decades of on-again off-again conflict, there has so far been little focus on the impact of the continuous, ongoing tension and violence on women (barring a few notable examples). However, the recent agitation, which has been marked by the active participation of ordinary Kashmiri women, has generated at least a couple of articles that focus on them. I will quote from one of the pieces to give you an idea of how the media may be forced to recognise women’s role in the struggle for self-determination:

“It should not have been necessary for Kashmiri women to actually take to violence (albeit armed only with stones) for the media to take notice of them. But I guess that’s the way the media cookie crumbles – unless we journalists are willing to change the way we do things.

Based on our own individual observations as well as the relatively scanty data yielded by a few relevant studies of media content (scanty in South Asia at least), I think we can safely assert that women in politics are not very well served by the media in most of our countries – although consistent work by many of you to improve the situation seems to have brought about some positive change at least in some places within the region.

As the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 revealed, globally females now constitute 19%
(less than a fifth) of persons in stories on politics and government, compared to 7% fifteen years ago. In India, too, men dominate as news subjects in stories relating to politics/government. Women account for only 18% of the subjects in political stories. Across Asia, women constitute only 16% of the subjects in political stories. Interestingly, men seem to dominate even in stories where women are supposed to be the focus; we found that in India 60% of the news subjects in stories on women in political power and women electoral candidates (local, regional and national) are men! I look forward to finding out whether the sustained gender and media activism in southern Africa symbolised by this Summit has resulted in a substantially improved situation here.

In South Asia, for example, the norm continues to be that while a few prominent, highly-placed, high-profile and/or controversial women receive quite a lot of coverage, that coverage often reveals a certain amount of bias, some of it based on gender (often in combination with other factors such as caste, class and community). In India female politicians like Sonia Gandhi, Pratibha Patil (now that she’s the President of the country) and a few others are often in the news at the national level these days, partly because they occupy important positions (the Speaker of the Lok Sabha or Lower House of Parliament, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, ministers holding important portfolios at the national level, chief ministers of states, heads of political parties, etc.). I am sure such high-flying women in politics can be identified in all our countries.

At the same time hundreds of other women in national, state and city level politics receive hardly any attention, including many who have been re-elected several times on the strength of their work rather than their pedigree and/or contacts. A few of the over one million women in grassroots politics at the panchayat level in rural India receive some coverage, partly because of special efforts on the part of certain organisations to promote such coverage (e.g., in India there are a couple of awards for coverage of women in institutions of decentralised governance in rural areas, which have encouraged a number of journalists to pursue such stories).

It is clear that many aspects of news coverage –
including coverage of politics in general and women in politics in particular – need to change if society is to be realistically and accurately portrayed, and if women – in politics and otherwise – are to be proportionately and fairly represented in the media.

The last chapter of the second section of Missing Half the Story, titled Women are not a Disease, highlights the fact that, in view of the large amount of healthcare-related information in the media these days, reporters covering health issues related to women have to be like detectives in order to unearth the real story. It proceeds to provide a guide to journalist-detectives on how to avoid common pitfalls in reporting on health, including the tendency to ignore the socio-economic and cultural factors that affect women’s health status and access to healthcare, as well as to downplay issues relating to public health (e.g., common communicable and non-communicable diseases).

It deals with the myths about population that have an adverse impact women’s reproductive health, the role of the pharmaceutical industry in distorting health and healthcare priorities and the growing influence of the beauty/cosmetics/diet industries on women’s health. It also focuses attention on women’s health issues related to ageing. The chapter ends with a checklist for reporters covering women’s health.

Section 3 - Gender-Sensitive Writing

III. The third section of the book, titled Gender-Sensitive Writing, presents nearly a dozen examples of illustrative (previously published) articles from the Indian print and online media on issues ranging from water and sanitation through floods and land conflicts, politics and economics, to human trafficking and HIV/AIDS.

The Annexures include a checklist for reporting on survivors of trafficking and a brief synopsis of evolving feminist perspectives.

Before I end let me tell you one of my favourite stories in this context. Some years ago, when I was teaching an elective course on “Covering Gender” at a journalism school in south India, I had assigned a student to interview a senior editor specialising in economic affairs about the gender implications of the annual national budget, which had at that time just been presented in Parliament. She returned dejected, having been sent away with the dismissive question: “What does the budget have to do with gender?”

A few years later, when the then Finance Minister of India, P. Chidambaram, introduced the concept of “gender-budgeting” in Parliament during his presentation of the Union Budget 2005-06, I was sorely tempted to call that editor and remind him of his ill-informed snub. But, of course, he was – and is – not alone in his ignorance. Reporting on Chidambaram’s apparent innovation, a journalist writing in a financial daily admitted that the proposal was “something quite a few of us in India would have heard (of) for the first time.” Yet gender budgets – earlier sometimes known as women’s budgets – had been around in different parts of the world at least since the mid-1980s.

According to advocates of gender-responsive budgets (GRB), although national budgets may appear to be gender-neutral policy instruments, they are not: government expenditures and revenue collection often do impact women and men (and girls and boys) differently. Gender-responsive budget analyses link publicly stated official commitments to gender equality and women’s human rights to the distribution, use and generation of public resources. The most effective way to pressure governments to do more than pay lip service to gender equality, women’s empowerment, and other such popular, politically correct buzz words, is to figure out whether or not they are actually putting money where their mouths are. Yet it is evident, even now, that many of those who cover and analyse the budget in the media, including senior editors, have not bothered to inform themselves about GRB and have a limited understanding of what it is all about, at best.
Conclusion

To conclude, covering gender has nothing to do with being overly gender sensitive or being burdened with what some people choose to see as a “women’s ghetto mentality.” The budget has everything to do with gender, as do other aspects of economics, as well as various other high profile areas of media coverage such as politics, war, social conflict and disasters. The stories are out there. If few of them make it to the mainstream media it is because gender awareness is still missing in most newsrooms.

There is, today, no dearth of sources and resources that can be tapped to figure out whether or not an event or process has any special implications for women, including different categories of women, as well as other vulnerable sections of society whose voices are not commonly heard in the media. We hope that our book, Missing Half the Story: Journalism as if Gender Matters, will serve as an accessible resource for journalists – of both sexes – who are keen to tell the whole story.

In the final analysis, unless gender is acknowledged as one of several factors that affect people’s experience of almost everything, and accepted as one of the “angles” to be explored while covering anything, the media will continue to tell only part of the story – whatever that story may be.