

CHALLENGES IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S WORLD OF COMMUNICATION.

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TODAY'S CHILD; TOMORROW'S WORLD: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN ASIA-PACIFIC IN PROTECTING THE DIGNITY OF THE CHILD.

ABSTRACT

How can the media help to protect the dignity of the child in the Asia-Pacific region? There are perhaps three roles that the media, both mainstream and alternative, can play in ensuring that the self-worth and self-respect, the honour and integrity, of any person below the age of eighteen is safeguarded to the utmost in the most extensive region of the world, stretching from Syria and Iraq, at one end, to New Zealand and the Fijis, at the other end of the geographical spectrum. One, the media should be unrelenting in its mission to expose those circumstances and situations that undermine the dignity of the child in the Asia-Pacific region. Two, the media should never cease to remind policy-makers, other influential elements in society, and society as a whole, of the essential prerequisites of an environment that is conducive for the dignity of the child. Three, the media should convince today's child that if he is to live with dignity in tomorrow's world he will have to be imbued with values and principles that are different from some of the dominant motives and attitudes that have driven economic growth and development in various countries in Asia-Pacific in the last few decades.

Undermining Dignity.

Poverty is one of the greatest threats to human dignity. Though millions of people in the region no longer live in abject poverty, there are still huge numbers trapped in destitution in various parts of Asia-Pacific. There is no need to emphasise that this impacts adversely upon children --- their health, their education, their life opportunities.

It is mainly because of poverty that child labour is still prevalent, especially in South Asia. A big portion of child labourers are actually bonded labourers, forced to work, often in slave-like conditions, because of a family or personal debt. There are millions of them in India, Pakistan and Nepal just as there are street children, as young as five years, in these and other countries such as the Philippines and Thailand. In Cambodia, one-third of the roughly 80,000 to 100,000 prostitutes are children. Child trafficking is also a lucrative trade in some countries in the region.

The media within and without Asia-Pacific has given some attention to the indignity of bonded labour, of street children, of child prostitution. Though this has embarrassed some governments, it has also resulted in legislation aimed at curbing some of the more inhuman and degrading aspects of these practices. Legislation that offers some protection to the dignity of the child is, however, often compromised by weak implementation.

A Conducive Environment.

Effective implementation of laws aside, how can one create an environment that is conducive for the dignity of the child? There must be a sincere, concerted effort to eradicate absolute poverty. At the same time, primary health care facilities and educational opportunities should be made available to every child. Other essential amenities such as piped water and electricity should also be accessible to everyone. An efficient public delivery system should be established to ensure that goods and services reach the people.

These are some of the attributes of societies that have looked after their young in the Asia-Pacific region. Countries like Japan and South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand, have also created well-managed economies with growth and equity. There is political stability and social order.

What this means is that good governance is a vital condition for protecting the dignity of the child. Abuse of power and corruption should be eliminated. Public accountability should be enhanced. And the rule of law should reign supreme.

In those countries in the region where mass poverty is ubiquitous, primary health-care facilities are woefully inadequate and educational opportunities are deplorably truncated, the media should coax the ruling elite to address these challenges. In this regard, it is a pity that only 49 percent of children were in secondary school in South Asia between 2003 and 2008. The media should examine critically the priorities of the elite. Does the state spend much more on the military than on schools and hospitals? Can the media in Asia-Pacific do a budgetary analysis of how much each government in the region spends on protecting the dignity of the child, by looking at allocations for education from pre-school to tertiary levels, and for primary health-care?

There are of course countries in the region that cannot do much for their children because of internal upheaval and political instability. In fact, whenever there is chaos and anarchy, children who are among the most vulnerable suffer much more than other groups in society. As a case in point, children in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan--- societies under occupation and in turmoil ---- are not only deprived of the essentials of life but are also often victims of deep psychological trauma and emotional anguish. Journalists should highlight this in their reports. They should point out that foreign occupation and war have a devastating impact upon the child.

Media analysts should show how other forms of global injustice also impact adversely upon the child. Crippling external debts increase further the burden of poor states that are unable to look after their child population, as proven by the Filipino experience. When a massive financial crisis generated in part by global casino capitalism --- as in the case of Indonesia in 1998--- reduces a nation to penury, the government would be forced to cut back upon public expenditure including food aid to schoolchildren from disadvantaged families.

From what has been discussed, the media should know that it is not only good governance within the domestic sphere but also justice in the global arena that ensures and enhances the dignity of the child.

Today; Tomorrow.

However conducive the domestic and global environment maybe for the dignity of the child, the media should also be aware that there are other forces at work in the contemporary world that are inimical to the spiritual and moral well-being of the child. Today's child is growing up in a family that is in the midst of a profound crisis. The family institution in many parts of Asia-Pacific as in the West, is no longer the strong, stable and secure institution it was six or seven decades ago. Pressures emanating from work, urban living, and an exaggerated notion of individualism, have resulted in the weakening of the institution. Because love, warmth and cohesiveness have ceased to be synonymous with the family, today's child is deprived of a fundamental source of spiritual and emotional succour. The media has an obligation to focus upon this grave challenge to an institution which has been the foundation of human civilisation.

It follows from this that the media should also warn the present generation about the danger of inducting the next generation into an individualistic lifestyle and culture that eschews values such as sharing, giving and caring. It would be disastrous if this happens because the various crises that confront humankind today --- the 'peak-oil' crisis; the water crisis; the food crisis; the environmental crisis--- demand that we move away from an individualistic, self-centred lifestyle towards a culture that is more inter-connected and communitarian. That is the only assurance of our survival as a species. The media should not continue promoting directly and obliquely the vice of self-centredness and egoism, and should instead encourage our children to be more 'other-oriented' through cartoons, comics and films.

To inculcate attitudes orientated towards the other in our children --- attitudes of sharing, giving and caring--- the media, together with other institutions such as the family and the school, should instill in them a sincere appreciation of two supreme moral values embodied in all religions, restraint and moderation. Our children should learn the importance of restraining their own wants and desires, with the interests of the other, especially the weaker other, in mind. They should understand that moderation is an ethic of balance, of balancing one's legitimate interests with the interests of others, of avoiding extremes, of walking the middle path. Restraint and moderation as living values would

dissuade us from becoming overly materialistic and consumerist. They are the antidote to the greed that is the bane of this materialistic, consumerist culture. It is undeniably true that the media, especially the commercially inclined media, has played a big role in reinforcing and perpetuating this culture within the middle and upper classes in Asia-Pacific. Given the perilous state of the world, it would be suicidal if our children, with the help of the media, emulate us.

This is why if our present generation, if the media, really cares for the future, for tomorrow's world, it will help strengthen the spiritual-moral core in today's child. If that core is strong in our children, their dignity would be enhanced, especially in an endangered planet. It would be the media's most precious gift to the children of Asia-Pacific and the world!
