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Business Line

Rami, a very special correspondent

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Rami Chhabra , journalist, feminist and development consultant. (Picture courtesy: Rami Chhabra)

A pioneering Indian journalist regarded equally for breaking stories and barriers.

How does one define a woman like [Rami Chhabra](#)? A glamorous TV anchor or a serious newspaper columnist? A public health professional or a determined feminist? An international development consultant or dedicated social activist? She has played all these roles in a star-studded career spanning decades.

Now in her seventies, she embarked on her professional life in the 1950s. At 18, she broke into the media with an interview of a famous BBC anchor. Growing up in the first flush of the country's Independence, Rami was — much like the country itself — young, idealistic and full of promise. Out of college, she headed straight for a career in journalism, at a time when the number of women in the profession could be counted on one's fingertips.

An early marriage and children made her opt for a freelance career. She took on all sorts of assignments, serious and frivolous (fashion/ ikebana) for the precious 'bylines' she got. When All India Radio began its first daily TV transmission in 1965, Rami began anchoring a weekly magazine show and introduced a quiz programme. In 1967, she was asked to cover Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's press conferences.

In March 1969, she started a fortnightly column called 'Woman About Town' for The Statesman, documenting the excitement of the first decade of the Indian women's movement. It also tracked the women who were trying to make a difference, such as Meera Mahadevan, who began mobile crèches, Tara Ali Baig, the moving spirit behind the SOS Children's Village for orphans, and Ela Bhatt, who was setting up SEWA in Gujarat.

In 1975, she repeatedly questioned in The Statesman and the Indian Express the suppression of the 1,000-page 'Towards Equality' report on the status of women that the government had itself commissioned. The report was published and proved to be a major influence on Indian women. The findings showed they were falling back in many areas, with a decline in the sex ratio, poor work participation and gender gaps in vital areas like education and literacy.

Rami argued for the passage of the controversial Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act in 1972, which legalised abortion in India. The Act saved millions of women's lives, rescuing them from the dangers of backstreet abortion clinics. Recognising her work, the then health minister actually invited her to witness the debate in Parliament!

In 1975, she was invited to the UN Women's Conference in Mexico. She used the ticket to stop over in newly independent Vietnam. In a major scoop, she was one of the first journalists allowed to travel the length of war-ravaged Vietnam and document the brave attempts of its people to rebuild the country. The rights to this international scoop were bought by The New York Times, The Guardian, Dagens Nyheter and other publications, besides the Indian press. The earnings from her travel enabled her to buy a car — a second-hand Fiat.

In March 1977, she began writing the weekly column 'A Feminist Viewpoint' for the Indian Express. For over three years it focused on issues such as the Mathura rape case, dowry deaths, trafficking and other violence against women, the need to raise the marriage age, legislate matrimonial property rights, and address the poor representation of women in Parliament and the legislatures. Samples of these writings and others from her later

career form the bedrock of her recent book, *Breaking Ground – Journey into the Media and out...* (National Book Trust).

When she accepted a communications job with the Family Planning Foundation in 1978, her career took a different turn. She brought a feminist perspective to the spectrum of public health issues. Travel to remote areas exposed her to the plight of the average woman worn out by premature marriage and motherhood, repeated childbirths, poor delivery and healthcare. She firmly believes that family planning should be delivered through a Safe Motherhood and Child Survival movement, not a dry demographic approach. In 1986, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi handpicked her as Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

She inspired Films Division to create films on family planning, persuaded UNICEF for TV spots on childhood illnesses and immunisation, and roped in other agencies to create social communication messages. Doordarshan was persuaded to telecast one-minute spots for free on prime time. The work was rewarding, but after a three-year stint battling bureaucratic resentment of an outsider, she decided to resign and work independently.

She was invited to do a series of consultancies for the World Bank in Africa and World Health Organisation in Asia. She had her first exposure to the HIV/AIDS issue and its handling by international agencies. Although the work was highly paid and the travel opportunities fascinating, her public health background and feminist perspective made her see the fault lines early on. When the World Bank dangled before a bankrupt Indian government in the early 1990s nearly \$84 million to set up a National Aids Control Programme, she was wary. She warned women's groups and public health professionals against the donor creation of a vertical 'silo' for treating this new epidemic when money was needed for the entire public health programme. She found a few allies, but too many others were co-opted by the new money and new rhetoric.

Over the next two decades, Rami battled bravely against the dollar-might of the NACP, severely critiquing it on several counts including corruption, falsification of figures of the afflicted and a strategy of legitimising 'high risk' groups such as prostitutes and drug addicts. As a social communication expert, she condemns the morality and intent of messages such as the hoardings for the Commonwealth Games that said, "Dilli chalo, condom ke saath chalo!" Rami also regrets that her spirited struggle against the powerful HIV lobby has marginalised her even within the world of media, with little space for her forthright views. Yet, this gutsy woman still finds for herself niches and cracks in the monolithic media bastion of today. The battle goes on.

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Keywords: [Rami Chhabra](#), [TV anchor](#), [newspaper columnist](#), [public health professional](#), [feminist](#), [international development consultant](#), [social activist](#)