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CONFERENCE BACKGROUND PAPER*

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The World Conference of the International Women's Year held at Mexico City in 1975, in its resolution 19, requested, inter alia, that international organizations should organize seminars in order to propagate the revalued image of women in the mass communication media.

This report with recommendations is the product of one such four-day seminar, on the subject of Women and the Media, co-sponsored by UNESCO/UNFPA and the WCUNDW, and held in New York from 20 to 23 May 1980. It will serve as a background document for the Copenhagen World Conference. Twenty-three persons (practitioners from the print and audio-visual media and some researchers) participated in the seminar, which was also attended by invited resource persons and was open to observers.

Appended to this report are:

- (a) Annotated agenda (annex I);
- (b) List of seminar documents (annex II);
- (c) Participation (annex III).

SUMMARY

Participants agreed and noted that in spite of the many recommendations and proposals concerning the image, access to and participation of women in the media made since the International Women's Year in 1975, fundamental problems in this area persisted.

It was concluded that the relationship between women and the media must be set in the over-all context of the existing communication structures at the national and international level. Prevailing media values and objectives are largely determined by the transnational structure of communication and its commercial outlook. The near monopoly on news distribution by five large news agencies and the importation by developing countries' media of programmes produced in industrialized countries is one major factor. But a more basic fact is that media are treated as merchandise and not as a social need; moreover, advertising, upon which media sectors in many countries are heavily dependent, is consciously oriented towards promoting Western lifestyles and consumer behaviour.

Fundamental values of human rights are denied genuine expression under this system. These values undermine vested interests, do not generate "news" in the commercial sense, and threaten the established order.

The specific problems of women have to be set within this context and related to discussion of global issues such as the new international economic and information orders. It was noted that, in particular, large groups of women had

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been excluded from the communication process. Not only has access to communication channels been denied these groups, but the realities of their participation in social, economic, political and cultural life have been largely ignored by the media.

Women are particularly important in the dominant social and productive system due to their multiple roles. As consumers, women make 75-85 per cent of private consumer decisions. Women are the centres and sustainers of the family circle where consumption takes place. Women are particularly vulnerable recipients of the ideology transmitted through the media, and at the same time they act as transmitting agents of this ideology through the education of children.

The oppression and manipulation of women is fundamental to the continuation of the structure of society as it exists today, and the media are major instruments in reinforcing this exploitation. For example, in general, media portrayals of women are conveniently limited to their domestic and sexual roles. But when economic or political conditions require, women are portrayed by the media according to the requirements of the hour. At the same time, it was noted that the differences as well as the similarities in the social and cultural contexts of women the world over needed to be reflected in the structure of communication.

An all-important need is, then, that of generating a response that would counteract the negative effects of the dominant communications system and create an alternative one - one which would be an educating and liberating tool. No society can even pose the possibility of "another development" if it is unable to identify and focus upon the specific problems of its women with realism, objectivity and a will to overcome them. No New World Information and Communications Order can really exist unless it can responsibly take on this task.

In so far as developing countries are concerned, there should be encouragement and promotion of the efforts made by some of these countries to reduce the monopoly over their mass media and communications systems. However, it is regrettable that in some of these very countries, women are not visible in the media, or are presented in an abstract or negative way, thereby ignoring women's concrete lives and their daily problems.

These problems and the struggle to overcome them do not concern women alone. They concern the society as a whole. It is therefore imperative for women and men to engage in common endeavour leading to a genuine democratization of the media and of the society of which they are part.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Developing grass roots media

Given the dangers inherent in the dependence on foreign programming, which is seen as impeding national efforts to create programming and disseminate information appropriate to the need of the majority of the population, it is recommended that every effort be made to encourage local production of programmes which are relevant to the national effort, including the passage of enabling legislation where appropriate. Where programmes are imported, community-based organizations should develop an analytical and critical attitude toward such materials in terms of their relevance to national goals and values.

Given that large groups in developing countries who are most in need of information are often denied it for reasons of illiteracy or unfamiliarity with the dominant and/or official national language; and also given that no genuine development can take place without the education and participation of these groups who may even be majorities, national media resources should be redirected with the aim of investing in and enhancing: (a) materials and programmes in the national and local languages that best promote the role and help raise the status of women; (b) traditional media such as theatre, folk art, song and story telling; and (c) organization and education for communication, by making available to social groups at the grass roots level, knowledge and technology to reflect their needs and concerns.

In this connexion, workshops need to be organized for local level media personnel in order to create an awareness of equality and other social issues and further to link these media personnel with sources that can continue to inform and sustain these interests.

UNESCO should lead the initiative to collect and disseminate information about materials made by independent producers which are not given wide distribution through commercial channels.

Advertising

National legislation and administrative regulations should be established to evaluate the relation between prevailing advertising values and the real needs of the majority of the population. Action in this field should take particular account of women, adolescents and children.

Research should be undertaken to consider alternative ways to finance media in order to reduce present excessive dependence on advertising. Among others, the following should be considered:

(1) Non-governmental independent public funding; financing by organized social groups such as trade unions, political parties, social movements, universities and others; special taxes on advertising, international pressure and lobbying groups.

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(2) To request UNESCO, in collaboration with the United Nations, to convene a seminar on the role and impact of advertising on society in order to address the financial, cultural, political and social problems posed by contemporary advertising and to suggest an international year for the study of advertising.

Legislation

It is recommended that national Governments examine all existing constitutional and legal instruments that have a bearing on women's status in the media, both as workers and consumers. Such provisions and laws as relate to equal pay, sex discrimination in employment and promotion, maternity and paternity leave, child care arrangements, safe and hygienic working conditions, sexual harassment, and anti-pornography regulations must be critically reviewed by an expert committee and legislation or administrative orders introduced where any lacunae are found. Pressure should be brought on employers to implement these laws.

Where protective legislation such as that which relates to night work operates to the detriment of women employees, such laws should be re-examined and reformulated so as not to discriminate against women.

Training courses

Training courses for professional media women should be organized by UNESCO at regional and national levels to promote programmes focusing on the problems and participation of women in development.

UNESCO should, at the earliest possible point in the second part of the Decade, convene a series of regional seminars with high-level media managers to bring to their attention the considerable body of research carried out in recent years which highlights the extent and nature of women's disadvantaged condition in every sphere of life, and to focus particularly on the neglect by the media of these issues.

The fundamental aim of the seminars would be to sensitize media leaders to the implications for society of this neglect of women, both as audience members and media personnel. The regional seminars which would seek the commitment of decision-makers to more sensitive media policies should be followed up by national seminars which would attempt to lay down action guidelines.

Important discussion points would be:

(a) Re-evaluation of current media portrayal of both men and women with a view to breaking down stereotypes which fail to reflect the actual conditions of both sexes.

(b) Re-examination of prevailing news values in the media which accord women low priority and marginalize them and their concerns.

(c) Review of recruitment, training and promotion policies with a view to correcting existing discrimination, with particular reference to in-service skills

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training to open up job opportunities for women at higher levels and in non-traditional sectors.

(d) Commitment to minimum quotas for women's employment within the media, such quotas to be reviewed and raised from time to time till parity in employment is reached.

(e) Provision of parental leave, on-site child care facilities, and transportation (where this is a problem) so as to ensure equal opportunities for work.

(f) Initiation of studies on the situation in certain regions where sexual discrimination is maintained and reinforced in spite of over-all socio-economic development, resulting in millions of women being by-passed in national and international communications systems. Such studies should be undertaken primarily by groups of women living in these regions.

In view of the very large audiences for entertainment programmes, special attention should be paid to this aspect of media output in international seminars and in research.

In order to increase a cadre of committed and aware communicators with expertise on women and social issues, it is necessary to institute a range of fellowships for media personnel at all levels, but particularly at the junior and middle levels. These fellowships should offer opportunities to media workers to work on special projects with - or observe - investigators in research institutions dealing with women's issues. Additionally, they could enable people to undertake in-country travel (and also in certain cases promote exchange of experience between countries of a region and among regions) with the aim of providing exposure to prevailing social conditions in rural areas and to study organizational and individual efforts to effect social change.

Awards

Action should be taken to incorporate values concerning the equality of men and women among the criteria for international awards.

Action should also be taken to establish special awards for outstanding contributions by media personnel which serve the advancement of women in society.

Satellites

Relevant women's organizations, professional bodies and unions should be represented at the decision-making level when discussions are held with reference to utilization of satellites and allocation of frequencies, eg., the 1983 ITU Conference on short-range frequency allotment.

Research

Since the messages of the media are among the most influential normative models in society and function as forces that shape patterns of cultural behaviour, it is of vital importance to investigate and document this process.

Even though some aspects of women and media have been well documented, the very undertaking of research sharpens awareness of issues in this field, and media organizations should be encouraged to participate in and use research on a continuing basis.

Continuing research should be carried out on women's functions and role in the media both as creators and consumers. It is also important to study the content of media output in terms of norms and values relating to the image of woman and man, and to place emphasis on action-oriented research.

Special support should be given to studies in under-researched geographical regions.

An International Women's Informational and Communication Network: a contribution to the debate on women and the New International Information Order

The Seminar felt that, considering the limited progress made since the Mexico Conference of 1975, the programme of action from the Mid-Decade World Conference in Copenhagen should receive real and concrete support from the United Nations system, for the remaining five years of the Decade for women.

The Seminar equally felt that the participation of women in the system should be increased. Wider responsibility, proportional to that of men, should be given to the women working in the United Nations.

New communication and news media networks should be established nationally, regionally and world-wide (1) to create additional sources of information, analysis and perspectives that seek to transform the media and contribute to the transformation of society in general; (2) to monitor the information and presentations about women in the existing media; (3) to train and develop women's media skills as part of democratizing the existing media by giving women more access to communication with other women through these media; and (4) to give a political voice to the powerless in the effort to bring structural change.

The Seminar also recommended* the initiation of a study on the feasibility of an International Specialized Women's Multi-Media Centre, together with regional and national media centres for media training, providing technical training in all aspects of design and production, and in all media including electronic media. These centres would also serve liaison and clearinghouse purposes, including the

* The results of a vote taken on this recommendation: 14 for, 2 against, 2 abstentions, with 5 absent.

task of disseminating studies and information material on women. They should moreover be extended to women's non-governmental organizations to enable them to set up new media networks such as newspapers, magazines, films, tapes, cassettes. The more extensive use of folk media (for example, songs, dances and dramas) should also be encouraged. Training courses in all aspects of the media should be extended to women media professionals of the third world in order to reduce their dependency and to allow these media personnel to assist in more effective communication with the majority of women, so as to ensure their full involvement and participation in national development.

The Seminar stressed the importance of alternative media as a means of drawing attention to the problems and roles of women. It deplored, however, the insensitivity of the present information systems to women's participation and responsibility, and to their values, perception and realities, and considered that existing alternative networks for the circulation of news and views on issues of concern to women, men and society, such as the UNESCO/UNFPA-supported Features Services on Women and Population should be strengthened. To this end, new sources of funding should be sought, in particular from WHO, FAO, ILO, UNICEF, UNIDO and all other United Nations agencies involved in women's development. Such alternative networks should encourage the participation of women, and be primarily controlled by women.

Recommendations concerning problems of the United Nations family

The United Nations and its specialized agencies should, in substantive activities to support the development of communication systems and in their public information activities, give greater coverage to women's issues, and in particular those of the most disadvantaged groups among them.

In order to ensure greater access to and understanding of development opportunities for women, a special communication component should be written into all projects for women's development. Further, every development project should be utilized to further information/education/communication (IEC) efforts to reach disadvantaged women with information on their basic rights, such as education, maternal and child care, employment, and particularly information on all alternatives and research on family planning and its economic and social implications.

The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women should be asked (a) to formulate guidelines for, and to assist in, undertaking research studies on women and media to ensure comparability of data at the international level, and (b) to set up a system for a regular exchange of reports among research institutions, and for distribution of research findings to media policy makers, managers and practitioners.

Minimum quotas for women on internationally assisted training courses should be introduced.

Information on the kinds of technical and financial assistance that the United Nations and specialized agencies can provide for activities in the field of women and the media should be given wider publicity.

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The United Nations existing programmes on women, e.g., DPI's weekly radio programmes, should be continued and more material on women's issues should be included in their regular publications, films, tapes, etc.

UNESCO, in its substantive activities to support the development of communication systems should pay greater attention to the need to promote the participation of women in the communication process.

In addition, endorsement was given to the proposals made in relation to dissemination of information and experience at the international and regional levels in the draft Programme of Action for the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women (A/CONF.94/22).

ANNEX I

Agenda*

1. Status of women in the media
2. Media images and social change
3. Challenging the established media structure
4. Alternative media and networks to portray and communicate with women
5. Promotion of the female population's access to and participation in the communication process
6. Recommendations for a new international information order that would include women

* Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations used in the annotations to this agenda are taken from the paper "Women in the media: some aspects of their portrayal and participation" (WCUNDW/SEM.1/2), prepared by a UNESCO consultant.

ANNOTATIONS

1. Status of women in the media

Overview of the subject:

(a) The image of women portrayed by the media:

Media for information - reportage (news)

Media for education - analysis (commentary and in-depth reporting)

Media for entertainment - the artistic vision

Media for commerce - advertising

(b) Employment of women within the media:

"In those countries or regions where media systems developed and established structures at a time when women's specific problems and needs had not yet been articulated, the fundamental problem is structural reform, to reflect changes in women's roles and status.

"But following upon our knowledge of the essentially conservative or even discriminatory tendencies of the developed media in both the portrayal and the employment of women, and their potential influence on the formation of attitudes, self-concepts, and social perceptions, the debate in countries with newly-emerging media systems is more concerned with how to make these media work in women's best interests.

"... the crucial issues concern the early development of appropriate structures and mechanisms to ensure a fair representation of women, as employees and as audience members. Additionally ... the media are seen as having a positive role to play in improving women's status.

"Quite apart from the fact that very few women get to the top in any category, there is a noticeable concentration of women in certain areas - usually the less prestigious, less well-paid ones, from which promotion or career development is a near impossibility."

2. Media images and social change

Examine differences among media systems, also identifying cross-cultural influences.

Examine the presence of conflicting media images in some societies.

Does any media image reflect reality?

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Can social change affect established media images? Can portrayal of women by the media affect social change?

What influence do women have on media portrayal: as practitioners? As audience?

"A view of the media as potentially powerful agents of socialization and of social change lies at the heart of discussions of the relationship of media to the women's issue.

"(This) interrelationship between the mass media and politico-economic systems highlights the very limited sense in which the media can be described, much less used, as independent change agents.

"An overriding concern for women, therefore, should be with changes in the political and economic structure. At the same time, a fundamental question is whether, and which, mechanisms can be developed to minimize ways in which the media have been observed to lag behind change in the broader social system. For even if the media cannot always be expected to initiate change, they can certainly be expected to reflect it."

3. Challenging the established media structure

(a) Democratization of power in the mass media:

"Any serious programmes for liberating women must start from the premise that liberation is not just about equality. It is about power ... Their liberation not only means changing consciousness and social structures in ways that will transfer to women much of the power monopolized by men. The nature of power itself will thereby change, since throughout history power has itself been identified in sexist terms - being identified with normative supposedly innate masculine taste for aggressiveness and physical coercion and with the ceremonies and prerogatives of all-male groupings in war, government, religion, sport and commerce." 1/

(b) "Until women constitute a 'critical mass' within the media, their ability to work against accepted cultural and professional values will be negligible":

Equal opportunity and training for media employment

Access to decision-making positions

Self-censorship as practised by women

Towards achievement of a "critical mass"

1/ Susan Sontag, "The third world of women", Partisan Review, 1973.

4. Alternative media and networks to portray and communicate with women

(a) Roles and functions of the feminine media: women's magazines, women's columns, and specially designed women's programmes

(b) Roles and functions of the feminist media: magazines, journals, networks

(c) Other alternative media channels, for example, inter-press services, feature services, development alternatives

(d) The organization of women in the media and women in the audience

"Although overall change may seem relatively slight, some positive developments have occurred. The growth in women-oriented programmes, pages and journals has been substantial in many countries ... Although often criticised for merely underlining women's marginality, these ventures have certainly highlighted some of the specific problems which exist and which need to be solved. ... Current concentration on women's needs in this way may be an inevitable, though necessarily temporary, stage in the search for a new balance."

5. Promotion of the female population's access to and participation in the communication process

(a) How the media have failed communication, particularly in respect of women:

"Although the notion of 'the free flow of information' goes back some 50 years, it has been invoked as a concept ... only since the end of the Second World War. ... Although the word 'communication' was already current at that time in English-language texts, what was meant, in fact, was a rather one-sided dissemination of information. It was only much later that there emerged the concept of communication in its true sense ... no longer implying merely an active transmitter and a passive receiver, but allowing for feedback from the latter of a kind to modify the behaviour of the former or, better still, requiring the active participation of all concerned in the communication process, which thus becomes a pluri-dimensional flow of information with multiple feedback." ^{2/}

(b) The media as a development resource

(c) The impact of technology and development:

(i) women in the media;

(ii) women through the media.

^{2/} United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Medium-Term Plan for 1977-1982 (Paris, 1977).

(d) Innovative programming and training for heightened media "literacy" of audience and producers

(e) Using radio as a case study:

(i) Has radio proved optimally effective in the past?

(ii) Does the present training and programming encourage maximum effectiveness of radio as a medium?

(iii) Is radio equal to the challenge of communication? Can it live up to the promise?

"(Radio) must be transformed from an instrument of distribution into an instrument of communication. Radio could be the most remarkable instrument of communication imaginable in public life, a vast network of communication channels. Or rather, it could be such an instrument if it were capable not only of sending out but also of receiving; not only of getting its audience to listen but also of getting them to speak; not of isolating them but of bringing them into contact with their fellows." 3/

"Radio represents the most promising mass communication medium for improving women's status as an integral part of development." 4/

6. Recommendations for a new international information order that would include women

(a) Points for discussion would include:

(i) Action by individuals

(ii) Action by organizations;

(iii) Action by Governments.

(b) The formulation of general guidelines to propagate the revalued image of women in the mass communication media.

3/ Bertolt Brecht, Theory of Radio, 1927-1932.

4/ Mieke Ceulemans and Guido Fauconnier, Mass Media, the Image, Role and Social Conditions of Women, University of Leuven Study (Paris, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1979).

ANNEX II

List of documents

WCUNDW/SEM.1/1	Agenda
WCUNDW/SEM.1/2	Women in the communications media: some aspects of their portrayal and participation (Margaret Gallagher)
WCUNDW/SEM.1/3	An international women's information system: an inter-press service contribution to the debate on women and the new international information order
E/CN.6/627/Rev.1	Influence of the mass communication media on attitudes towards the roles of women and men in present day society (Esmeralda Arboleda Cuevas)
WCUNDW/SEM.1/5	Women, communication and development: UNESCO/UNFPA features services on women and population
WCUNDW/SEM.1/CRP.1	Women in the communications media: some aspects of their portrayal and participation, conclusions and recommendations

ANNEX III

Participants

Eugenie R. Aw (Senegal)
Salim Lone (Kenya)
Miriam Habib (Pakistan)
Ann Legare (Canada)
Liz Fell (Australia)
Rami Chhabra (India)
A. Djebar (Algeria)
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Yoko Nuita (Japan)
Maria Andrassy (Hungary)
Donna Allen (United States of America)
Yolanda Ferrer (Cuba)
Sandra Brown (United Kingdom)
Ulla Abrahamsson (Sweden)
Adrianna Santa Cruz (Chile)
Josiane Savigneau (France)
Eno Irokwu (Nigeria)
Beatrice Schiller (Brazil)
Ingy Rushdi (Egypt)
Sara Maldoror (Guadaloupe)
Roberto Savio (Inter-Press Service)
Doris Hess (Methodist Church)
Eunice Njambi Mathu (African Feature Services)

Opening session

Doudu Diene, Director, UNESCO Liaison Office, New York
Leila Doss, Deputy Director, Division for Economic and Social Information

Session facilitators

Margaret Gallagher (UNESCO Consultant)

Esmeralda Arboleda Cuevas (Special Rapporteur on Mass Communication Media)

Elizabeth Reid (WCUNDW)

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Marcella Martinez (WCUNDW)

Sonia Mills (WCUNDW)

Closure

Lucille M. Mair, Secretary-General (WCUNDW)
