

## Introduction

### Women, the Media and Sustainable Human Development

Whenever one looks, whatever one reads, and whomever one talks to nowadays, it is impossible not to notice that the entire world is in the midst of a profound revolution: the global communications revolution. The world-wide phenomena of cable television, satellite communications, the Internet, fax machines, E-Mail and personal computers means that more people in more places can access more information than at any time before in human history. Clearly, this development heralds the emergence of new and powerful political, cultural and economic forces. Will they reinforce or revoke established global relations of dominance and dependency? Will they insure the hegemony of Western economic models, cultural values and political agenda? Or will they instead enable the vast, silent majority of the world's population — those living in the countries of the developing world — to participate effectively in the processes of dialogue, debate and decision-making which will shape the contours and set the priorities of the approaching millennium? Furthermore, how will the global communications revolution affect traditional relations between nations and civilizations? Between social classes? Between genders? Will the increasing powers of the media be employed to facilitate or to obstruct the achievement of social and economic justice and the attainment of human rights in countries in the Arab world?

The contemplation of these and related questions, and the observation that more than 80 percent of all Lebanese college students majoring in media and communications are women (1), inspired the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World to design a comprehensive, multi-stage research project on women, the media and sustainable human development.

The first stage of the project was a qualitative survey, conducted in the form of two public panel discussions, of the views of key professionals in Lebanon's print and electronic media concerning the media's role in sustainable development projects and the role of women in decision-making process in Lebanon's media institutions. Based upon the information collected through these two discussion sessions, we will design and administer a quantitative survey questionnaire for graduating senior students majoring in media and communications at the Lebanese American University and the Lebanese University. The resulting survey data should reveal students' motivations and career goals, their awareness of the meaning and aims of sustainable human development, their attitudes towards their chosen profession, their expectations concerning decision-making and power-sharing in media institutions, and their evaluations of their own preparedness for the demands of the media job market.

Results of the various stages of this research project will appear in *Al-Raida*, beginning with the File section of this issue, which summarizes and interprets the results of the two panel discussions, provides a working definition of sustainable human development, assesses an interesting media experiment which presented the viewpoints and voices of actual Lebanese women ("*Lubnaniyyaat*"); taps the experience of women educators and journalists, and investigates the ways media and advertising in Lebanon reinforce irrelevant and unrealistic expectations about gender roles and relationships. Finally, the File includes a new occasional feature, "Tool-Kit", which provides our readers with an important instrument for realizing sustainable development projects; guidelines for successful grant-writing.

Although there are many possible angles from which to view the role of women in the media (e.g., the portrayal of women by the media, women's alternative media, the media's impact on gender socialization, etc.), our introduction to this File section will focus upon the impact of the rapidly globalizing media on women - and men - in the developing, non-Western world. The *Platform for Action* issued following the 1995 International Women's Conference in Beijing stressed the need for women of all nations to press for greater participation in media decision-making, adding ominously that "most women in developing countries are not able to access effectively the expanding electronic information highways, and therefore cannot establish networks that will provide them with alternative sources of crucial information." Clearly, the economic, educational, personal and political enhancement of women's lives in the developing world depends greatly upon the quality of print and electronic media available to them. Given that many women in the developing world are illiterate, newspapers and magazines are of little use; considering that dependable electrical service is still a rarity in much of Africa and Asia, informative television programming is usually irrelevant. This leaves battery-operated radio, theatrical performances and face-to-face communication as the primary media for the dissemination

of crucial information about health, empowerment, legal rights, child-care, income generation, education, and environmental issues.(2)

Although Lebanon is considered a part of the developing world, the media resources available to the Lebanese public are, fortunately, much richer and more varied than those available throughout most of Africa and Southeast Asia. At present, the *quantity* of media resources is not the main problem confronting the Lebanese public. Rather, it is the *quality* of media that gives cause for concern. Very few public education programs are produced and broadcast in Lebanon. With the exception of some valuable and interesting locally-produced public affairs programming, the prime-time hours of most Lebanese television stations are dominated by imported adventure and romance movies from the United States and Egypt, or, more commonly, by popular soap operas from Mexico which are dubbed in formal Arabic.

Naturally, the scenarios, gender roles and relations, attitudes, values and ideologies communicated by these imported programs are not particularly relevant to the circumstances confronting most Lebanese women and men. Nor are these programs educational, inspiring, or reflective of Lebanese national goals or values. The scarcity of creative, relevant and informative local productions and the resulting dependence on imported Western programming is not conducive to sustainable human development in Lebanon. Young media professionals, an increasing number of whom are women, should focus on creating local educational and entertainment programs which are tailored to the needs of Lebanese women and men.

According to the Bangkok Declaration of 1994:

Globalization of economies and the media...is leading to centralization of control over both resources and decision-making, with the result that one culture dominates and marginalizes women, nature, minorities, and indigenous and Third World peoples....

The so-called mainstream media are a male-dominated tool used by those in power. At the global level, they are controlled by the North (i.e., by the US and Western Europe); nationally, they are in the hands of the local elite. As they are now structured, the media propagate unsustainable life-styles, growing pauperization and consumption patterns which turn people into consumers not only of goods, but of ideas and ideologies; women, children and the majority of men are invisible and their voices are unheard. There is a particular lack of respect for the integrity and dignity of women: stereotyped and dehumanized, we have been turned into commodities. The excessive use of violence in the media is destroying the sensibilities of all of humanity. It is thus essential to promote forms of communication that not only challenge the patriarchal nature of media, but strive to decentralize and democratize them; to create media that encourage dialogue and debate; media that advance women and peoples' creativity; media that reaffirm women's wisdom and knowledge; and media that make people into subjects rather than objects or targets of consumerism. Media [should be] responsive to people's needs.(3)

This statement, which succinctly defines women's ideal participation in the shaping of media programming conducive to sustainable human development, is one that Lebanese media professionals need to consider. After sixteen years of devastating and wasteful warfare, Lebanon is in great need of renovation and reconstruction, and not just at the level of physical infrastructure and public services. Lebanon's greatest resource is its people, their skills, knowledge and experiences. It is the human, intellectual, social and moral capital of Lebanon which is the most valuable, and hence, the most in need of renovation, enhancement and conservation. The media, as well as the family and the schools, bear a great responsibility for the human reconstruction of Lebanon.

Are the print and electronic media in post-war Lebanon fulfilling these responsibilities? The answer is mixed. Although one can easily find educational and edifying media productions, such as the youth and the human rights supplements of *An-Nahar* newspaper and the weekly supplement edited by Claire Gebeyli in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, as well as stimulating talk shows on television and radio, the most prevalent (and apparently the most popular) programming on Lebanese prime-time television consists of imported American movies and Mexican soap

operas. What messages do these programs impart? Blatant materialism and greed, first and foremost. The American movies and the Mexican soap operas do not just narrate stories, they also subtly communicate to the Lebanese viewer the following insidious messages: *this* is how you should look; *this* is what you should be wearing; *this* is the type of house and car you should have; these are the activities in which you should be engaging. If not, then you are a loser and a failure. But, if you buy the products, assume the manners and buy into the values presented on this program and in the accompanying advertising, you might just have a chance at glamour, prestige and sex appeal yet!". This message undermines individual and collective self-esteem; creates feelings of relative deprivation and jealousy (which may have detrimental effects on interpersonal relations); instills false expectations of self and others; communicates distorted and stereotyped gender roles; promises immediate salvation and fulfillment through consumerism; and can lead to excessive spending and debt among those who are easily convinced that they can buy a better lifestyle and purchase an improved self. No message could be more destructive of traditional values, cultural identity or rational economic planning. No message could be more detrimental to social and political reconciliation in post-war Lebanon. No message could be more threatening to the Lebanese environment, since materialism and greed often lead people to sell their lands to ecologically insensitive construction firms in order to turn a fast profit.

It is interesting and instructive to contrast the women and lifestyles presented on the Mexican soap operas with the moving and compelling portrayals of actual Lebanese women presented in "Lubnaaniyyaat", a documentary commissioned for Lebanese television by the Lebanese National Committee in preparation for the International Women's Conference in Beijing last year. In the documentary series, beauty was visible not only in the women's physical appearance, but even more so in their character, courage and convictions. Wealth was found in their experience, skills and knowledge. Their successes were not necessarily material, but spiritual and moral. After viewing this documentary series, most Lebanese viewers were probably much more inclined toward critical thought, moral reflection, intelligent discussion and the undertaking of constructive action than they are after viewing the intrigue, betrayal and lust presented by the typical Mexican soap opera or American movie. Programs such as "Lubnaaniyyaat" should be a regular, weekly feature of Lebanese television programming, not just a once-in-a-decade experiment.

In response to the media's usual claims that such realistic, educational and inspiring programming will not find an adequate audience or enough commercial sponsors in contemporary Lebanon, we beg to differ. The clear popularity and success of such participatory televised talk shows as *Ash-Shater Yehki*, ("The Smart One Talks"), *Al-Haki Baynatna*, ("Talking between Us"), *Bi-Sawt 'Aale* ("In a Loud Voice") and *Kalaam An-Naas* ("People's Opinions") all attest to the intellectual curiosity, public concern and social awareness of the Lebanese viewing public. The fact that many people faithfully view and discuss these programs every week proves that the Lebanese public has a hunger for frank, realistic and informative discussion of pressing social problems and issues, such as human rights, domestic violence, civil marriage, abortion, medical services and educational reforms. The extent and diversity of the audience of one of these programs, *Ash-Shater Yehki* (which is produced by a talented and dynamic young Lebanese woman, Janane Mallat), became clear to some *Al-Raida* staff members last month after they appeared as participants on a segment of the program dealing with inter-faith and inter-cultural marriages. For days after the broadcast, our staff members were continually approached by a wide variety of people from all regions of Lebanon who had seen the discussion on television and who wanted to continue it on the street, in a book-store, in a restaurant, sitting in traffic, and even between floors on an elevator. The Lebanese public is not stupid, narrow-minded or apathetic; there is a vast audience eager for informative and stimulating programs. If the audience exists, which it clearly does, commercial sponsors should not be difficult to find.

Theoretically, the more media outlets available to the public, the more opportunities there will be for quality programs which foster attitudes, values and behaviors consistent with the aims of sustainable human development. Ten television stations broadcasting stimulating and enlightening programs is infinitely preferable to 50 stations spewing out violent, insipid and semi-pornographic movies which deaden sensibilities, discourage thought, and degrade women. The crucial issue is not the number of available media outlets, but rather, the extent to which Lebanese media professionals, citizens, and citizen associations can apply pressures on private and public television stations for the presentation of responsible and constructive programming which serves the various needs of Lebanese society.

During the aforementioned roundtable discussions held at L.A.U., media professionals com-

mented that graduating students of media and communications now entering the work-force often lack the technical skills and intellectual breadth needed for a successful career in journalism. This indicates a clear need for a more diverse and well-rounded curriculum stressing history, sociology, civics, political science and environmental issues. Young journalists often lack an awareness of the wider social, historical and political contexts of the stories they investigate and write. Being able to comprehend and effectively communicate this wider and more complex reality is crucial not only for their future career success, but also for adequately informing the public about the true nature and extent of the social, economic and environmental challenges confronting Lebanon. How can citizens think critically, decide wisely and act effectively if they do not know the facts, and more importantly, the relationships between the facts? It is the responsibility of the journalist to reveal these relationships; thus, it is the responsibility of the universities to teach good writing, critical thinking and strong analytical skills.

Another important topic raised by the panelists concerned the interrelated technological and political challenges facing Lebanon's print and electronic media in the near future. Both the introduction of the Internet and the possibility of a regional political settlement in the Middle East will result in governments' decreased abilities to control and censor media productions, just as it will increase the permeability of the political and cultural borders separating the states of the region. These developments will inevitably lead to heightened regional competition for media products, services and audiences. Hence, the managers, directors and decision-makers at all levels of the print and electronic media in Lebanon, no less than the growing ranks of young media professionals, should be prepared for this sharpening of media competitiveness. The Lebanese media should waste no time in formulating creative, stimulating and inspiring public programming to compete successfully with its neighbors' programming. If Lebanon wants to retain its media audience, consolidate its cultural identity, affirm its national agenda and foster the public's collective self-esteem and sense of empowerment, it would be wise to nurture and encourage the rising generation of young Lebanese journalists, the great majority of whom are women.

In its modest way, the publication you are now holding in your hands represents an attempt to empower and inform Arab women through the medium of the written word. *Al-Raida's* purpose is to widen awareness, encourage debate and critical thought, and to offer suggestions for effective action and cooperation to improve the status of Arab women and children. In the brief twenty years since its founding, *Al-Raida* has made an impact on attitudes, opinions and discourse concerning the role and potentialities of Arab women in the contemporary world. Writers such as Rose Ghurayyib, Emily Nasrallah, Evelyn Accad, Suad Joseph and Laure Moghaizel have asked critical questions, raised sensitive issues and made intelligent suggestions in these pages over the last two decades. As a result, networking among Arab women, as well as communication between Arab and Western women, have been enhanced and the challenges confronting Arab women and children during a violent and tumultuous period of the region's history have been better understood by scholars, activists and policy-makers.

*Al-Raida's* impact, however, is only as powerful as its readership is wide. We encourage you to share this pioneering publication with others; to send us articles, essays and art-work expressing your ideas, hopes and opinions; and we urge you to encourage subscriptions among your friends and colleagues throughout the world. Help us increase our ability to encourage women's rights, gender equality, and sustainable human development in the Arab world.

Laurie King-Irani  
Editor-in-Chief

#### Footnotes:

- (1) *National Report on the Status of Women Prepared for the Beijing International Women's Conference*, 1995.
- (2) Malee Pruekpongawalee, "Women, Communication and Development." Unpublished paper presented at the Bangkok Conference on "Women Empowering Communications", February 1994.
- (3) Final Statement of the Bangkok Conference on "Women Empowering Communications", February, 1994. The conference was organized by the World Association for Christian Communication, London; Isis International, Manila; and the International Women's Tribune Center, New York.