

A Survey of Media Professionals' Views on Women, the Media and Sustainable Human Development in Lebanon

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Over the years, the focus of development has gradually changed from a purely economic emphasis to a multi-dimensional one. Development today is about the enhancement of economic, human and social resources; the overall aim of the new development approach is to ensure sustainable growth and to encourage human potential. This human-centered, integrative vision is known as sustainable human development (SHD), an approach to development which strives to promote economic growth such that benefits are equitably distributed and the environment is preserved. SHD also takes into consideration the needs and aspirations of men, women and children; empowers individuals by widening their choices and opportunities; and stresses their right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Sustainable human development encourages and fosters self-reliance.

During and after the 16-year Lebanese war, considerable efforts and resources were invested in the "reconstruction" of Lebanon, the development of the economy and rehabilitation of various social institutions. So far, however, we have not seen results from these efforts in terms of improved quality of life, increased employment, equal opportunities, empowerment or the participation of large segments of the Lebanese public in the development process.

The noticeable lack of sustainable human development in post-war Lebanon leads us to ask the following questions: How can we achieve sustainable human development within the new international context of economic and media globalization? How can we develop democratic strategies to reduce poverty, avert ecological disasters, promote quality of life, strengthen human rights, and preserve our cultural identity as well as the social and economic specificities of Lebanon's different regions? The development of macro-strategies will not help us in finding answers to these questions. Rather, we must set specific tactics, for example, empowering people through education and information in order to enable them to express freely their needs and aspirations and to participate rationally in the political, social and economic decision-making process.

Since gaining its independence in 1943, Lebanon has been known as one of the most liberal and democratic states in the region. Thanks to its free press, its numerous publishing houses and the diversity of audio-visual media, Lebanon is unique in the Arab world. Indeed, Lebanon has been called a "media state".

It is now an accepted fact among sociological researchers that media can influence behavior and that television in particular can be considered as a key agent of socialization. Televised images and messages can affect behavior either positively or negatively. Images also present models of behavior and interaction which may be good or bad, foreign or local. These models can encourage stereotypes of women, workers, minority groups, the poor, *etc.*

The importance of audio-visual media as a means of creating awareness and enabling people to act can be understood in the context of A. Bandura's social learning theory. In general, viewers are attentive to new behavior modeled by another person. If they believe that this new behavior is effective in reaching a set of desired goals, and if, furthermore, they feel they can easily model this new behavior, then that behavior has a great likelihood of being adopted, especially if the model performing the successful action is similar to the viewer, or if imitating the model enhances the viewer's self-esteem.

In view of the media's important role in creating awareness among Lebanese men and women, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World hosted two round table-discussion sessions to address the capability of Lebanon's print and electronic media to promote sustainable human development in the country.

These two round-tables represent the initial stage of a larger research project which aims at assessing:

- the role of the Lebanese media in sustainable human development in the context of the communications revolution and the possibility of a regional political settlement.
 - the factors affecting decision-making processes within Lebanese media institutions.
 - the role and status of Lebanese women media professionals and their future opportunities for participation in decision-making concerning format and content of local productions.
 - media education, in view of the fact that 80 percent of all Lebanese students of journalism and media communication are women. What are their motivations for choosing this career? Does their training enable them to understand the aims and concepts of sustainable human development? What are their chances of finding a job and eventually making a successful career in the media?
- The two round-tables attracted large audiences of academics,

journalists, students, media professionals, representatives of development agencies and others.

The first debate grouped prominent Lebanese journalists, both men and women, to evaluate the role of the written press in promoting sustainable human development. The participants were Mrs. May Kahhalé, Press Coordinator for the Office of the President of the Republic of Lebanon (moderator); Ms. Maha Samara (free-lance journalist), Mrs. Laure Ghorayyeb (*An-Nahar*), Mr. Jihad El-Zein (*As-Safeer*), and Mr. Jubran Tuani (*An-Nahar* and *Nahar ash-Shabab*).

The moderator opened the discussion by distinguishing between two types of press: that which expresses the views of the government as well as the opposition, and the totalitarian press. The ensuing debate revealed a consensus among the participants and audience concerning the following issues:

- New technological advances, such as the World Wide Web (Internet), will revolutionize the Lebanese press and shift its focus primarily to national news and events.

- The rapidity with which news reports are dispatched and the absence of communication barriers will ultimately render censorship difficult, if not obsolete, in the region.

- A new political culture is emerging among the younger generation of Lebanese. Youth are no longer interested in abstract and ideologized political news, but rather, in matters which directly influence their lives.

- Given the above-mentioned trends, the press should place greater focus on local news and immediate social and economic issues and become more specialized. The mission of the press is to give objective information to the public in order to enable people to think critically, form opinions, and make rational choices. This new view of the press clearly reflects the philosophy of sustainable human development.

- A new role for the press implies a need for enhanced and specialized training of journalists, as well as increased democratization of decision-making processes within the press.

- Although the number of women journalists in Lebanon has been increasing, women continue to be absent from the decision-making process.

The second round-table grouped television directors and program producers. The participants were Dr. Anissa Al-Amin (Moderator), Professor of Social Psychology at the Lebanese University; Miss Janane Mallat (Producer, C33); Miss Maguy Farah (Talk-Show Hostess, MTV); Mr. Fouad Naim (Director, Tele-Liban); Mr. Pierre Daher (Director, LBC); and Mr. Ali Jaber (Director, Future Television).

Dr. Anissa Al-Amin opened the debate with a brief presentation of the results of her study on the social and psychological profile of the “addicted” television viewer in Lebanon. She stated that “the rationale for today’s debate is to re-examine the relationship between the people of a country and their image of themselves (conveyed primarily through the medium of television), and to assess the influence of the televised image in our world today.”

Discussing the results of a research project she recently undertook (1995) with some colleagues at the Lebanese University on the relationship between people’s attitudes and self-images and their viewing of television, Dr. Al-Amin asked “Who is the addicted television viewer? Addicted viewers, who form the vast majority of the television public, and by means of whom television thrives and survives in Lebanon through employing its considerable capital in advertising, belong to a social category which exists in a narrow space of freedom. By a narrow space of freedom, I mean that the addicted viewers’ perceptions and sense of personal capabilities are profoundly limited. For such people, who are usually poor, money equals freedom. Similarly, for the uneducated, the knowledge imparted by television programs, however partial and inadequate, equals freedom. The narrow space of freedom to which addicted viewers are confined is also limited by conservative behavioral models portrayed on television; the possibilities presented for relationships between classes and genders are few. Also, the addicted viewers’ sense of geographical space has shrunk due to confessional and regional fragmentation within Lebanon during the war years. As a result of this narrowing of freedom and possibilities, the average television viewer has withdrawn narcissistically into himself or herself. A focus on personal matters and concerns is the eventual result of the ineffectiveness of laws meant to guard and guarantee human rights.

“Television benefits from this historical moment. As a profit-motivated industry, it has taken advantage of the fact that so many viewers feel a deep sense of frustration and powerlessness and a corresponding desire for escapist entertainment. Financed by an immense capital, television is able to interrupt the most important news with a trivial advertisement for a sanitary product or a brand of chewing gum. Through its financial and social power, television can unleash a compelling flood of attractive images which arouse the suppressed imagination while repressing critical thought. These alluring images consume the addicted viewer’s time, as well as his or her frustrated self. The televised image is ephemeral, immediate, easy and dazzling. Due to its evanescence, it requires the viewer’s participation on the level of the imagination.

“This study has concluded that living in the imagination, as is the case with Lebanon’s vast television public, leads to a psycho-sociological reality expressed by the following comments

given by individuals interviewed during the research process: 'television is a replacement for my husband', 'I expect [television] to teach me the English language', and 'I search in it for everything sexy'. These and similar comments reveal a passive, reactive and dependent attitude best described as 'consumerism'.

"The solutions presented to viewers' problems by television programs are either mythological-fantastic (e.g., Mexican soap operas such as *Estrellita*), or regressive, as seen in the presentation of behavioral models such as Adel Imam, the wayward Egyptian hero who survives by his luck, wits and charm; or Nadia Jundi, who represents the scheming and vengeful *femme fatale*. Do these images correspond to and facilitate the overall human development of our society? Do they present constructive and realistic gender role models?

"According to one scholar, Schramm, the goals of media in developing countries should be the following:

1. To strengthen feelings of national belonging.
2. To be the voice of developmental programming and planning on the national level.
3. To participate in relevant and necessary vocational training leading to growth and development.
4. Expansion of markets.
5. Helping people to contemplate their future realistically and constructively.
6. Enabling a country to play its role as a nation among other nations.

"The participants with us today, who will discuss and evaluate the policies of audio-visual broadcasting upon which the "freedom of the image" depends, are tasked with a great responsibility. Each one of them has a rich experience, as well as extensive financial and technical resources and considerable human capabilities representing both genders. We hope that the participants of this panel discussion, individually and collectively, will give their suggestions for enhancing the role of the media in sustainable human development in Lebanon. The key question to be answered is: How can the audio-visual media assist the Lebanese television viewer, and hence, the Arab audience, to become more aware of his or her dignity, potential and capabilities so that he or she will be empowered to participate actively and effectively in social processes?"

The participants discussed the role of television in sustainable human development with bold frankness. They pointed out some irrevocable realities of their industry and commented on some of their experiences in broadcasting programs related to development issues. The audience interacted enthusiastically and gave its recommendations. The debate illuminated the following facts :

- The audio-visual industry in Lebanon operates within a democratic polity and a liberal economy.
- All stations are commercial in nature, including the national station, which must attain its own self-sufficiency through advertising.
- Being independent and commercial, television stations must rely exclusively on advertising in order to survive and make a profit.
- Broadcasting *via* satellite is a phenomenon which cannot be controlled. Non-Lebanese television programming will eventually invade every home.
- Given the above parameters, decisions concerning the choice of programs are based on market research indicating public preferences. The discussants indicated that, were they to follow exactly the expressed preferences of the majority of people, the level and quality of programs would definitely decline. In the absence of a higher independent media committee to provide directives for programming, the staff of each station seeks an equilibrium between extreme public preferences and responsible programming.
- However, discussants also demonstrated sensitivity to the issue of enhancing public awareness about problems and events concerning viewers' own lives. In fact, most television stations devote a certain amount of time to public service programming, such as talk shows and coverage of special events.

There is little pressure emanating from public opinion for increased programming on issues related to sustainable human development. The discussants noted that, although talk-shows on human rights issues such as personal status laws, women's rights, divorce, cross-cultural marriages, abortion, *etc.*, attracted acceptable numbers of viewers, topics related to the environment did not. Given the inconsistency of public interest, the discussants stressed that the promotion of sustainable human development should result from a combined effort undertaken by the government, the family, the schools and the media. Through the expression of viewers' needs, television can amplify the public's voice and send strong messages to centers of political power. However, the media cannot, in and of itself, solve complex social and political problems.

The reactions of the audience were varied, but centered on the following :

- The public should not be exploited by advertising. Advertising should serve the needs of the people, rather than people serving the needs of advertisers.
- Television viewing is very important in our society; thus, it

should have a greater role in public affairs and give more attention to public opinion.

- Television can be a mirror of socio-economic realities in Lebanon; it can help people understand the actual contexts of their lives, empower them and enhance their self-respect.
- Television can be used to educate and refine the public's taste.
- Encourage the production of local educational and entertainment programs emphasizing constructive social messages.
- There is a need for more creativity and imagination in local productions.

The two round-table debates revealed three important issues for further reflection:

1. The issue of access to information and its relevance to people's lives

In the absence of clearly delineated and powerful political ideologies, the world has become a single global market. Thus, there is no doubt that the existing link between the globalization of the media and that of the economy will be self-perpetuating and mutually reinforcing. In view of this reality, it is imperative to find effective means to combat foreign control over knowledge and information and to promote our own image and cultural specificity. Concerning this issue, participants of both media panels expressed awareness and concern. However, they differed in their perception of their role in addressing this problem. The print media professionals stated that they have a clear mission, *i.e.*, informing the public, while the audio-visual representatives reported that their main role is to entertain the public. Regarding this divergence in the perception of their roles, the question of media out-reach is key to understanding (and therefore shaping) the relationship between the media and sustainable human development.

2. The issue of public opinion and its relation to the media

The concept of public opinion is closely related to the concept of democracy; hence, the role of the media cannot be understood or evaluated without taking into consideration the political and economic systems in which they operate. Public opinion can have an impact on the media only if citizens are empowered and free to express themselves.

Several questions immediately arise: How do we reinforce people's participation in the public decision-making process?

How do we strengthen the power of civil society? How can we change passive consumers of news and images into pro-active citizens? What is the role of the political authority, of the schools and of the family in shaping a democratic citizen? How do we empower the citizen to express his or her choices and at the same time encourage him or her to respect the choices of others?

3. The issue of women's role and status in the media

Despite the ever-increasing number of women professionals currently working in the media, women's role in the decision-making process is very limited. This situation is counterproductive to the media's role in development. If media are to be partners in the promotion of sustainable human development, it is necessary that women contribute their own perspectives to the definition and analysis of all issues in the communication field.

Women in Lebanon comprise more than half the population and represent at least half of the audiences for all media programming. They shoulder tremendous responsibilities for the well-being of their societies through their contribution to the formal and informal sectors of the economy and through their daily care of the family and the home. Women are at the core of all meaningful human interactions that constitute the social capital of any nation. Consequently, women in the media should be given greater opportunities for reflecting the reality of their societies. The media industry is developing at a rapid pace, and as documented by research and by the *Platform for Action* issued at the conclusion of the recent International Women's Conference in Beijing, women are often the losers in the overall development process.

The questions that arise here concern whether or not, in this era of market and media globalization, there will be room for more "down-to-earth" programs that explain and analyze issues related to human rights, the environment, and realistic situations of women and their families. Also, will women media professionals be given enough power to challenge policies concerning career opportunities and promotion criteria? Will they be able to participate more fully in decision-making concerning the diffusion of violence, negative stereotypes and degrading images of women? Will Lebanese women currently employed in the media, or enrolled in faculties of media, communication and journalism, become more aware of inter-related social, economic and political issues, and, more importantly, will they possess the knowledge and capabilities to act on this knowledge?

The next stage of this research project will provide answers to these and other questions.