The Beirut Declaration

A regional conference on "Gender and Communication Policy" in the Middle East and North Africa was jointly organized in Beirut, Lebanon, by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), at the Lebanese American University, from November 9 to November 12, 1999. Thirty participants from eight countries attended the Conference.

On the basis of the country reports presented, participants voiced their concern over:

• the stereotyped and traditional image of women and their sexual objectification as reflected in mass media;
• restrictions on press freedom and the invisibility of women in the media in some countries;
• the role played by the media in creating and perpetuating a culture of violence;
• gender disparities in the communication industry, be they at the level of employment practices, training, opportunities or access to decision-making;
• the high rate of illiteracy among women in some countries of the region which limits their access to the media;
• the globalization of media and its impact on gender issues;
• the lack of gender-sensitive communication policies.

Participants agreed that, despite the different socio-economic and political contexts, there is an urgent need to formulate a common set of recommendations aimed at stimulating the formulation of communication strategies using a gender approach.

There was a strong consensus on the necessity of implementing the following recommendations in order to achieve gender equity in human rights, freedom of choice, greater access to mass media and full participation in the process of decision-making.

Training

• Provide NGOs with adequate training to enable them to interact and build linkages with the media;
• offer gender sensitivity training, to communication personnel at all levels;
• urge schools, communities and NGOs to initiate media literacy training in order to help civil society become a more critical user of the media;
• facilitate capacity building of women in the media through specialized training for strengthening gender equity and promoting full participation in decision-making.

Advocacy

• Establish media watch groups to monitor women's representation in the media;
• encourage the formation of media women's associations or unions in various countries in the region to promote women's rights;
• request the media to produce programs that would highlight the multifaceted role of women;
• raise awareness about the impact of media globalization on women and use the opportunities it offers for greater access;
• call upon media organizations to develop codes of ethics that would include gender portrayal;
• demand that media institutions introduce equal opportunity policies that aim for gender parity in recruitment and specifically prohibit unfair discrimination based on gender or marital and parental status;
• promote greater media debate and coverage of the issue of violence against women in society;
• urge media groups to establish guidelines on the reporting of violence against women.

Networking

• Encourage the creation of networks at both the national and regional level to exchange information and share experiences on women and the media;
• create a regional committee to monitor and follow up on the recommendations of the Beirut Declaration;
• prepare a directory of women's communication groups and organizations interested in women and media issues to facilitate interaction with the media;
• establish alliances between women's groups and key media personnel who are supportive of women's issues.