In Search of Gender and Communication Policy

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In Thailand, children learned recently from a popular TV soap opera that in order to get their estranged parents back together again, it is perfectly all right for the estranged father to drug the mother and rape her. In Malaysia, a sports car ad entices male buyers by featuring a woman purring, "I'm all yours." In Chile, newspaper reports of crimes against women trivialize the violence through the use of humorous language and jokes. In Uganda, unmarried women running for political office are hounded by journalists to produce boyfriends or fiancés for media coverage. In Zambia, female newsreaders are expected to model clothes from sponsors and are generally treated as mere ornamental accessories to serious news programs. And in most countries in the South, the majority of rural women, who are invariably poor, have neither access to the media nor see themselves in it.

These are among the many concerns voiced by media practitioners, women activists and policy specialists from the academe and government in the first three regional conferences on Gender and Communication Policy held in Anglophone Africa, Asia and Latin America. Organized by the World Association for Christian Communication, the conferences have highlighted the problems of sexism, inequity in media employment and training, women's lack of access to the media, and commodification and stereotyping of women's images in the media. They are part of a special three-year Women and Media Program undertaken by WACC with the support of Evangelisches Missionswerk in Hamburg and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and will involve conferences in six regions and some related publications on media and gender. The program is a follow-up to the global conference on "Women Empowering Communication" organized by WACC together with two international women's groups in Bangkok in 1994.

WACC's Women and Media Program is also a response to the recommendations made both by the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and the Mexico Declaration approved at WACC's second World Congress, also in 1995. The Beijing Platform urged mass media and advertising organizations "to develop, consistent with freedom of expression, professional guidelines and codes of conduct and other forms of self-regulation, to promote the presentation of non-stereotyped images of women". Taking this a step further, the Mexico Congress recommended that WACC launch a series of regional workshops on media policy to cover not only gender portrayal but also media control and employment patterns. WACC, a London-based international network of over 800 member organizations and individuals, has had an active Women's Program of workshops and projects since 1987.

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Preparing for the conferences turned out to be a monumental task. Most of the countries did not have any existing self-regulatory guidelines, much less any national policies, on gender issues in communication. But participants at the conferences were unanimous in their belief that media policy needed to be developed in their countries.

In Asia, the first regional conference on Gender and Communication Policy was launched in the Philippines in July 1997, with Isis, a locally-based women's network, as co-organizer. The conference brought together 26 participants from eleven Asian countries: Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In most of these countries, media have been seen to have a "developmental" role, which in the face of increasing globalization and economic

pressures, have shifted their concern and responsibilities away from the rights of individuals to the support of national and regional economies. Newly emerging political systems such as in Mongolia, have not made provisions for gender issues in their constitution or media practice. Tumursukh Undarya of Women for Social Progress recalled that when Mongolia opened its doors to the global market economy in 1990, Western media and commercial systems flooded in, giving rise to concerns about the increase in pornography and media violence. Nevertheless, if older, more stable legal systems such as Japan's have better developed provisions and guidelines on media and gender, they are disregarded in practice. Toshiko Miyasaki of the Forum for Citizens' Television noted that there is a proliferation of pornographic and violent material in Japanese programs and cartoons, yet rape is a crime hardly reported in the media because it is not considered serious enough to warrant attention. Even the word "rape" is not used in the Japanese language; the media use is "itazurasuru" meaning "doing mischief", as if referring to children who do something naughty but relatively harmless.

It would seem natural to expect a greater diversity of voices with the advent of globalization, but Asian participants claimed that the blurring of national boundaries has only led to a diminishing national accountability for sexism in the media. Mega-mergers in recent years have concentrated power in a few media conglomerates that are able to present their world view, reinforcing the same news values, marginalizing further the already marginalized.

In Latin America, the regional conference was organized by WACC, WACC-Latin American Region and the communication research group La Calandria in Lima, Peru in late January 1998. A total of 36 women participated from 11 Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. With their focus still on policy, the Latin Americans chose the theme "Gender, Communication and Citizenship" in order to emphasize their rights as citizens - since their right to communicate, their right to information, to participate with true equality, all hinged on their right as citizens. After the UN World Conferences on Women in the recent decades, most governments in Latin America created "women's ministries" or "women's departments". WACC -Latin American regional secretary Maria Elena Hermosilla, who is also a member of the National Television Council of Chile, pointed out that this has created "new spaces for women's initiatives", so women must take advantage of these opportunities and offer new strategies and policy ideas for the advancement of their communication rights. Videazimuth President Regina Festa from

Brazil reported that women's NGOs in the region have clearly stepped up their lobbying of media and government. The Lima Declaration, which participants endorsed and agreed to submit to their respective governments after the conference, fully asserts these rights: "We claim our right, and that of all citizens, to participate in drawing up the regulations in different countries to tackle the quality of communication and its realization so that the dignity of women and all human beings is respected and recognized."

The Anglophone Africa conference was held in Cape Town, South Africa in June 1998 and was co-organized by Mediaworks, a media monitoring and training group. It was attended by 29 participants from 10 African countries: Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Their reports and discussions showed that their biggest struggle is to gain more access for women in the media. While conceding that the most serious barriers to access are illiteracy and poverty, they also claim that access is denied in other ways: there is very little coverage of women in the media and there are very few women employed in African mass media, and almost none in management positions. WACC - Africa Regional Secretary Dorothy Munyakho, who is also executive director of the Kenyan rural news service Iris, cited African studies as showing that in the Kenyan daily press, only 10% of journalists are women (1992, 1993), and in Senegal, the figure is also 10% (1989). The statistics for African broadcasting are hardly better: in Togo 12% of TV personnel in programming, production and engineering are women (1992); and in Zambia, women constitute 22% of the entire staff of the national broadcasting corporation (1993). More than any other region, Africa has seen the successful formation of national and sub-regional media women's associations and many of them were represented at our conference. But despite the valuable support that such organizations provide, participants acknowledged that they are no match for the sheer pervasiveness of Africa's media sexism. Inequities in reporting assignments, job promotions, wage levels and training opportunities are compounded by the high incidence of sexual harassment. In Uganda, for example, female journalists who stay in hotels in the line of work are reportedly regarded with as much suspicion as women who sell sexual services.

Why do Women and Media Issues Matter?

All of the conferences so far have ended with strong declarations and plans of action. Most of them call for the formulation of gender-sensitive communication policies that will address many of the issues raised in the regions. But will new policies solve these problems? It is possible that media and governments can turn a blind eye even to existing policies. However, if governments are committed to

these policies, then they should have some effect. Even media self-regulation works better when encouraged by government. NGOs and mass movements have also found that they must hold their governments to their promises by monitoring implementation of international agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Follow-up is part of the plan of action in all of these conferences. In Asia, Latin America and Africa, the participants agreed to disseminate widely the Declarations they produced. Participants were also encouraged to pursue policy ideas in their own countries. WACC would facilitate networking by sharing information by e-mail or through publications such as the Media and Gender Monitor which report on the progress of the regional conferences and other activities under the Women and Media Program.

There have been two more conferences since then: in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Each new regional conference brings more insights and issues into the huge body of knowledge and experiences already gathered from other regions.

Although the Program has already shown some tangible results, WACC is aware that policy development is a long process and this is only an initial step in that direction. There will certainly be an assessment of the effectivity of the conferences at the end of the Program. It may be that more follow-up is needed to bring the issues to a higher level of mass media owners and governments.

Why do women and media issues matter? Because media - both local and global - have for years influenced our opin-ions and attitudes about ourselves and the world around us. Media choose what they consider important enough to be news - and most of the time, women are absent from them. Media promote and propagate ideals of beauty and thinness which many people try desperately to achieve. Media and advertising can objectify and commodify women. Media contribute to a culture of violence which affects many people's lives. Yet women are avid users of media, and they need the media for their own entertainment and information, as well as for their campaigns and causes. On the other hand, we must not forget that there are millions of women who, because of poverty, illiteracy or oppressive structures, have no access to mass media at all. Perhaps they are the women most affected - as they lack access to information that can help them in their daily lives and needs.

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