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Introduction

Scope and Objectives of this Reference Manual

This reference manual provides guidelines for mainstreaming gender into the functions of Ministries of Information and Communication. Its main objective is to assist governments in advancing gender equality in their countries, especially through the establishment and operation of a Gender Management System as a means of mainstreaming gender throughout all government policies, plans, programmes and projects.

The manual examines the major gender issues in the media, communications and development, showing the impetus behind this critical area of concern, its international context, its emancipatory potential and the need for decentralisation. It also provides an overview of existing media policy in Commonwealth regions. While most Commonwealth countries have in place regulatory legislation and/or self-regulatory guidelines and ethical codes governing the media, very few of these instruments mention or deal adequately with gender or address the matter of equal employment opportunities within the sector.

The reference manual describes the current global 'mediascape': who creates, controls and consumes the information presented by the media; what the gender imbalances are in access to and employment in the media; how the marginalisation of women as newsmakers and as subjects of news perpetuates gender inequalities; and how, despite the odds, women have sought to correct these imbalances through alternative media networks.

This manual presents some processes and strategies for mainstreaming gender, and provides an extensive list of recommendations for action, grouped under a series of strategic objectives. It includes a questionnaire for conducting a gender impact analysis as well as tools designed to assist government personnel in putting gender on the agenda of their activities: conducting gender impact analysis, collecting specific data on problems faced by women and men in the sector, using gender-sensitive language, and creating linkages with women's media networks at regional and global levels.

Governments are of course only one of the stakeholders in the information and communications sector. The private sector and civil society organisations play a major role in all aspects of the media, mass communications and information dissemination. To a greater or lesser extent, the activities of these other stakeholders may be beyond the direct control of the government. This manual is aimed at governments, and private-sector and civil society organisations that wish to advance gender equality and equity in the sector. It is designed to present a menu of options and action points that users may adapt to specific circumstances in the national context.

Appendix 1 contains a questionnaire to assist in carrying out a gender impact assessment, and Appendix 2 presents an international and regional listing of women's media associations and networks. Appendix 3 provides a glossary of terms used.

A Gender Framework for the Information Sector

What is gender?

Gender is a concept that refers to a system of roles and relationships between women and men that are determined by the political, economic, social and cultural context rather than by biology. One's biological sex is a natural given; gender, on the other hand, is socially constructed, a "process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male or female become the social categories of women and men through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity" (Kabeer, 1990). In other words, "people are *born* female or male but *learn* to be girls and boys who grow into women and men" (Williams, 1994). We are taught 'appropriate' behaviour and attitudes, roles and activities, expectations and desires. It is this learned behaviour that makes up gender identity and determines gender roles.

The distinction between gender and sex is made to emphasise that everything women and men do, and everything that is expected of them – with the exception of their sexually distinct functions (impregnation; childbearing, breast feeding) varies from one society to another and may change over time according to ideology, culture, religion and economic development (Williams, 1994).

These deeply entrenched attitudes are reflected by the media in their portrayal of women and men as homogenised beings: denying differences, and tending to make invisible or make less of women's contributions in all areas of life at local, national, regional and international levels. Barriteau-Foster (1995) calls for a deconstruction of these received knowledges and frameworks. In order to escape the oppressive relations of gender she suggests a three-step programme of pro-activity to begin reframing perspectives:

- 1 Acknowledge differences.
- 2 Recognise the gendered nature of all social relations.
- 3 Work on the immediate environment to achieve political action.

In some countries and regions, recent gender analysis reveals that in certain areas of life men are disadvantaged, especially young men (for example in educational attainment and access to health care). Where this occurs, a gendered approach can ensure that interventions address these inequalities appropriately. In most parts of the world, however, it is women who are disadvantaged. Therefore, since this manual is intended to advance gender equality and equity, much of its analysis focuses specifically on ways to improve women's standing in the information sector.

Gender roles

Gender is only one of the ways in which society categorises people. Different roles and characteristics are assigned to people not only on the basis of their gender, but also their race/ethnicity, class/caste, age, religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

How are differentiated gender roles manifested in the social construct and what are the implications for women and men? Four areas are addressed by the *Oxfam Gender Training Manual* (Williams, 1994): work, global resources and benefits, human rights and religion.

In the workplace, women are most often assigned to housekeeping or 'wifely' duties (secretarial work, public relations, cleaning, making coffee), while positions related to finance and management are most often assigned to men. Women tend to have less access to training and other career enhancing opportunities and few provisions are in place that take into account women's triple workload, e.g., flexible working hours, child day-care facilities. Few women are in decision-making positions at all levels.

Resources and benefits are often allocated according to gender, sometimes in an obvious way and at other times, more subtly. In some societies, for example, women are not allowed to own land, so their ability to cultivate (and as a consequence be self-sufficient) depends on a male relative or husband. In others, there may not be any obvious reason why women aren't getting the benefit of, say, literacy classes, but when the issue is examined, one finds women's access is actually limited by their workload and other daily factors impinging on their lives – no time, no energy, no money, no baby-sitter.

Despite the guarantees of equal rights to all people enshrined in the International Declaration on Human Rights, women are routinely denied equal rights to land, property, mobility, education, employment, shelter, food, worship, their children, and the right to manage and care for their own bodies.

While many religions teach equality between people, interpretations of religious texts and traditions can result in women's subordination, and in practice women often play a subordinate role or are excluded altogether from the religious decision-making hierarchy. Nonetheless, for many women, religion continues to be a great source of hope and support. Likewise, while many culturally sanctioned practices – such as genital mutilation and preferential feeding of male children – damage women and make their lives difficult and painful, culture can be a source of cohesion and solidarity among women and between women and men. The challenge lies in changing discriminatory practices for both women and men, while retaining the positive attributes of particular cultures.

Journalists and media managers are just as subject to these influences as other members of society. These influences are all-pervasive and include "the individual journalist's skills and values, the written and unwritten rules of the profession, the dynamics of the particular newsroom, the organisational culture and structure of the media organisation – its aims and objectives, competition in the media market, the negotiating of interest groups – each with their own intentions, legal constraints, audience expectations ..." (de Bruin, 1995).

Content is determined on subjective factors that often skew the information broadcast or printed. The fact is that journalists and journalism not only "reflect society but also affect the society of which they are a part ... overtly, through editorials and commentaries and, less obviously, in terms of story choices, angles and so on ..." (Francis-Brown, 1995).

Communicating gender

Objectivity is often held up as the main principle of journalism. Traditionally, objectivity has been defined by the mainstream media as truth in its purest sense: truth uncoloured by feelings and opinions. But how does the assumption of objectivity find expression by individual communicators socialised into accepting unequal relationships between men and women as the norm? Once this reality is clear, the importance of raising gender awareness among writers, reporters, editors and all those involved in the creative process, becomes self-evident.

The critical areas to target are:

Language: The UNESCO guidelines on non-sexist language are aimed at giving fair treatment to individuals and groups by assisting authors and editors to “avoid writing in a manner that reinforces questionable attitudes and assumptions about people and sex roles.” There is little extra work or difficulty involved in being language conscious, merely a requirement that editors examine current conventions and substitute more precise meanings that respect the way people wish to be viewed. For example: former ‘blacks’ in the US are now ‘African-Americans’; the ‘handicapped’ are now the ‘disabled’; ‘Ms’ has become the female equivalent of ‘Mr’ since neither indicates marital status.

Stereotyping: Women are too often tagged with stereotypical labels, e.g., ‘mother of three’, ‘the wife of so and so’ (as though these were the only relevant facts about the person); or labelled as ‘feminist’ in a code that suggests the subject is not acting according to traditional gender roles, and that this is in some way a ‘bad’ thing; a woman Member of Parliament or in some other position of influence will have her clothes and hair described in minute detail, while her male colleagues are distinguished by achievements unrelated to their physical appearance. Defining women in terms of their appearance, or offering excuses for their political opinions, delegitimises their achievements, and renders them less threatening and more palatable to the status quo.

Men too can be portrayed by the media in stereotypically negative ways, “... as rarely to be trusted ... as completely evil ... [or] as stupid buffoons. Even male heroes are often given one-sided and simplified characterisations” (Jackins et al, 1999).

Story selection: Many good stories about women are never told because they are not given any importance, or because there is no conscious effort to find out what women are doing or what their views are on, say, financing or engineering or football.

Communicating gender requires journalists and other media practitioners to observe the ways that people may be marginalised because of their gender as well as race/ethnicity, class/caste, age and other such factors. Who gets coverage? From what perspective? Through which lens? Reflecting which stereotypes about people from different gender, race/ethnic, class/caste, and other groups? Are stories helping to advance gender equality and equity in society or are they angled in a way that upholds traditional attitudes and values? Are women’s or men’s concerns being separated from the concerns of society in general?

Gender and development

The belief in the possibility of change for the better is the essence of development work, yet development planners and policy-makers are often unwilling, or unable, to recognise the role that gender plays in the outcome of initiatives and interventions. One difficulty in introducing gender concerns into development planning has been the perception that gender is a subject for scholars, specialists or, simply, women. “Many attitudes expressed by development workers at the community, national and international level demonstrate a gap between gender concepts as discussed by experts and application of these concerns in policies, programmes and day-to-day work” (Shallat and Paredes, 1995). Perceptions about appropriate behaviours for women and men are deeply embedded and false assumptions and stereotypes taken as axiomatic – thus ‘hard’ news (politics, war, economics, etc.) becomes the domain of male journalists, and ‘soft’ news (social issues, environment, etc.) becomes that of female journalists.

Another element that often escapes development workers is the essential role of the media in advancing development, not merely for their publicity value but as meaningful

components of projects (Shallat and Paredes, 1995). Media and communications have been important components in community development, playing an essential part in helping to change the deeply entrenched values that place women in a subordinate position to men. Community media and people-to-people communication (as opposed to the top-down packages offered by the mainstream media) inform, educate, and empower using local languages and cultural norms and practices.

Gender on the Global Agenda

“Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women”

Beijing Platform for Action

Women and the media is a Critical Area of Concern (Section J, paragraphs 234-245) in the Platform for Action, the final document signed by 187 governments – including all Commonwealth governments – at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. Section J outlines actions to be taken by governments, national and international media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media professionals around two strategic objectives:

- 1 Increasing women’s participation and access to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication. Here the actions relate to women’s education, training and employment; women’s participation in drawing up policy, developing non-stereotypical programming, and in the new information technologies, and strengthening women’s media networks.
- 2 Promoting a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women and girls in the media; encouraging gender-sensitive training for media professionals; and taking effective measures against pornography.

It could be said that Section J has been in the making for the past 20 years. The current development discourse on gender and media began in the decade of the seventies within the framework of three international events and processes: the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), the New International Information and Communication Order (NIICO) spearheaded by UNESCO, and the networking activities of women’s movements worldwide.

The aim of the UN Decade for Women, which followed the 1975 International Women’s Year Conference (Mexico City),¹ was to focus attention on the “systematic nature of discrimination against women ...” (Gallagher, 1994). The main goal of the NIICO was “to correct the imbalance of information and communication between the North and South and the lack of it South to South ...” (Anand, 1994). The NIICO recommendations were mainly addressed to the larger international news agencies and only a small part of the initiative addressed the absence of women’s voices in mainstream media.

At the same time, women’s movements, particularly in the South but also in the North, were gaining momentum; networking regionally and internationally and exchanging information through newsletters, bulletins and by word of mouth: “small, lightweight media, folk media and interpersonal communications (which) were most appropriate for reaching the masses of women in developing countries” (Adagala and Kiai, 1994). Women’s media networks and women’s studies programmes took the lead in gender research, analysis and action with regard to media content and employment patterns.

Further activity by women’s media networks, UNESCO and concerned media activists prior to the Fourth World Conference on Women was instrumental in ensuring the inclusion of women’s media concerns in the Platform for Action. Issues

raised in a number of documents produced in international meetings of women working at all levels of the information and communication sector are reflected in the Beijing Platform. These documents speak of the essential need “to promote forms of communication that not only challenge the patriarchal nature of media but strive to decentralise and democratise them; to create media that encourage dialogue and debate, media that advance women’s and peoples’ creativity, media that reaffirm women’s wisdom and knowledge, and that make people into subjects rather than objects or targets of communication, media which are responsive to peoples needs” (Bangkok Declaration, 1994).

While it is acknowledged that information technologies create new opportunities for women to participate in communications and media, and for the dissemination of information that can advance gender equality and equity, the documents recognise the imbalance of information flows from North to South that can have a negative impact on existing cultures and values in the receiver countries.

These documents also recognise that a greater involvement by women in both the technical and decision-making areas of communication and media would increase awareness of women’s lives from their own perspectives. Since women are concerned with the basic needs of their communities and the environment, these documents argue, promoting women’s interests in particular, in fact serves the interests of all humanity. They each call for significant support to enable women to create progressive change.

In its forward-looking strategies, the Platform for Action suggests that “women should be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology. This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals of women internationally and to challenge instances of abuse of the power of an increasingly important industry” (paragraph 237).

The 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development includes 15 action points that are recommended for governments to take in order to advance gender equality and equity. These action points include the following:

- ◆ **undertake an advocacy role in partnership with the media:** support gender training for journalists in order to ensure broad and non-discriminatory representation of women in the media and advertising, and encourage reporting on women’s achievements, difficulties and multiple roles; and
- ◆ **use gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive language:** use gender-inclusive language in legislation, government documents and all educational materials, and promote its use in the mass media.

A consultative approach is required in mapping out actions to be taken by all the actors – governments, regulators, broadcasters, and civil society, particularly women engaged in creating and fostering alternative media that seek to make information available to all, and who promote communication as a participatory exercise. Such an approach, particularly with respect to the sensitive area of media content, fosters the development of democratic practices and offers broader possibilities for freedom of expression in civil society.

Regional Policy Perspectives

Freedom of expression is a concept deeply embedded in most media organisations and is accompanied by a tradition of resistance to anything perceived as an attempt to influence output – however well-intentioned that effort may be. Nonetheless, many countries have in place some form of legislation or guidelines which seek to direct or encourage ethical behaviour on the part of the media, although these typically cover

broadcasting services rather than the print media. Specific language in respect to gender – either stereotyping or employment practices – is less apparent. The effectiveness of such regulation and/or legislation, by themselves, is a matter of some debate. It is often argued that both the content and the effectiveness of legislation and/or guidelines is enhanced where watchdog groups are at their most active in lobbying the media and raising public awareness.

Africa

In Africa, the most significant change in the past two decades has been a trend towards allowing private broadcasting stations to come into co-existence with state-controlled networks which previously held a monopoly. In most countries censorship boards exist within broadcasting organisations and national film distribution organisations. In general these boards attempt to minimise the screening of excessive violence, explicit sexual scenes, politically undesirable material and anything else deemed as culturally offensive. But these boards tend to be male-dominated and gender-related issues are not explicitly addressed. National communication policies, where they exist, do not appear to address gender (Adagala and Kiai, 1994).

Asia/Pacific

In Asia/Pacific during the same period, the trend has been towards establishing self-regulatory mechanisms and providing guidelines rather than enacting laws. One such example is *Australia's Fair Exposure Guidelines*; first developed in 1993 by the Government's Office of Multicultural Affairs, it has since been updated by the Status of Women Office. However, few other Asian or Pacific countries have guidelines, regulatory mechanisms or affirmative action policies aimed specifically at advancing gender equality.

India has in place an Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, passed by the Indian parliament in 1986 which, "prohibits indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner." The punishment imposed for violation is a fine and up to five years' imprisonment. The Act was based on the recommendations of a 60-member committee on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, constituted in 1983. After passage of the Bill, a smaller advisory committee was constituted to oversee its implementation in October 1987. But in Asia, citizen initiatives are generally the most effective. These include the Tokyo-based Forum for Citizen's Television, which developed a list of Television Viewers' Rights that has helped raise awareness and indirectly influenced programming and advertising norms (Balakrishnan, 1994).

Canada and the Caribbean

In Canada, women have done much to improve the portrayal of women, increase women's presence in broadcasting and facilitate the communication of women's perspectives. Over several years, the Toronto-based NGO National Watch on Images of Women in the Media (MediaWatch) Inc. and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, comprising hundreds of women's organisations, helped bring about the final passage of provision 3.(1) (c) of the Broadcasting Act, which states:

"the Canadian broadcasting system should through its programming and the employment opportunities arising out of its operations, serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural nature of Canadian society and the special place of aboriginal peoples within the society."

and:

“the programming provided by the Canadian broadcasting system should be varied and comprehensive, providing balance of information, enlightenment and entertainment for men and women of all ages, interests and tastes.”

Observation of the fair portrayal and employment requirements of the Broadcasting Act is a “condition of license” for the publicly owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the privately owned broadcast stations of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. CBC also has its own Employment Equity Office and an Equitable Portrayal Office and it reports to the Canadian Radio and Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) periodically on the progress of women and minorities in various categories. Its guidelines seek to avoid sex role stereotyping and sexist language, reflect women and their interests in news reporting and public affairs, recognise the full participation of women in Canadian life and seek out women’s opinions. But, according to the literature, in practice the CRTC does little reinforcement and has never denied a broadcast license or renewal on the grounds of violations of the Broadcasting Act or any of its guidelines.

In the Caribbean, it is only recently that women’s employment in the media and the media’s portrayal of women have emerged as subject areas for specialised enquiry. Legislation governing the operations of the mass media exists only in the larger countries – Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago – and then only in respect of broadcasting services. The print media are subject to the laws of libel which apply to all areas of social activity. Even where legislation exists, it is silent on gender. Caribbean Community (CARICOM) information ministers adopted a policy on communication and culture in the region, but this too makes no mention of gender issues and concerns. National and regional bodies concerned with content (professional associations, advertising standards councils, etc.) tend to emphasise self-regulation, enjoining members to refrain from making offensive references on the basis of race, sex, nationality, religion or ideology. Media houses have rarely written editorial policies that are gender specific (Wallace, 1994).

Western Europe

In Western Europe, media institutions have traditionally followed a system of self-regulation with relatively few formal directives or legislative constraints apart from basic and fairly general requirements to respect standards of decency and good taste, the latter usually within the context of the protection of minors. The 1989 European Directive on Television Broadcasting only includes one reference relevant to the portrayal of women which concerns television advertising which, it states, must not “include any discrimination on grounds of race, sex or nationality” (Article 2b). Legislation at the national level is extremely general in nature and few media organisations have any additional guidelines or policies (Gallagher, 1994). The situation is more clearly defined in respect of employment practices. In the UK, for example, the Independent Television Commission is empowered (by the 1990 Broadcasting Act) to grant and renew licenses on condition of “equality of opportunity between men and women” (Article 108). Nevertheless, largely as a result of activism by women’s organisations, the media have opened up significantly to the articulation of women’s voices, perspectives and concerns.

Notes

- 1 Follow-up conferences were held in 1980 (Copenhagen, Denmark), 1985 (Nairobi, Kenya), and 1995 (Beijing, China).
- 2 These include The Bangkok Declaration from the Women Empowering Media Conference held in Bangkok, Thailand in February, 1994 (World Association for Christian Communications, Isis Manila and the International Women's Tribune Centre); the Toronto Platform for Action from the UNESCO International Symposium on "Women and the Media: Access to Expression and Decision-Making" held in Toronto, Canada in March 1995; and reports from the Regional NGO Meetings in the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and the Middle East, and Europe and North America in the process leading up to the Beijing conference; the Dublin Meeting of Women Broadcasters for Beijing held in June 1995; and the International Women and Media Seminar convened in Kalmar, Sweden, in June 1995.