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## Gender and the Media

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**The Media Market**

During the past two decades there has been an explosion in the field of information technology which has in turn spawned a global communication network that transcends national boundaries and impacts on public policy. “With advances in computer technology and satellite and cable TV, global access to information – although this is not always used democratically – continues to increase and expand, creating new opportunities for the participation of women in communications and media and for dissemination of information about women ...” (Toronto Platform for Action, UNESCO, 1995).

Today’s media can deliver messages and symbols – imported or domestic – directly into almost every home. Unfortunately, however, they continue to perpetuate and reinforce negative, stereotypical images of both women and men, according to which the resort to violence on the part of some males is presented as a ‘natural’ and acceptable way of resolving conflicts, and which do not provide an accurate or realistic picture of women’s multiple roles and contributions to an ever-changing world.

Additionally, it is an increasingly centralised industry, as the resources in this profit-driven global media market have become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. In 1993, for instance, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation acquired a majority interest in Star Television, based in Hong Kong, thereby making it the largest satellite broadcasting empire in the world.<sup>1</sup>

“Western wire services dominate news coverage” (Steeves, 1990) and at both global and regional levels, “the shift to high technology ... has widened differences in technical resources, skills and capabilities among countries” (Adagala and Kiai, 1994). Gallagher (1994) speaks of “the transnationalisation of the women’s magazine industry in Europe.”

But while these developments give the impression of a world swamped by information and communications technologies emanating from a few Western sources, the fact is that millions of women across the globe remain untouched by the mass media: they do not have the time, access or literacy skills to pursue information and/or news (Gallagher, 1995).

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**Audience**

The mass media are major socialising agents in modern society. Where media systems are highly developed, people spend at least four hours a day watching television, listening to radio and reading magazines and newspapers. Although in domestic

viewing and listening situations, the decisions of the adult male in the household tend to prevail (Mytton, 1993; Lull, 1988), women are enthusiastic media users.

The pattern of preferences is similar worldwide: men prefer sports, action-oriented programmes and information (especially news); women prefer popular drama, music, dance and other entertainment programmes (Sepstrup and Goonasekara, 1994; Bonder and Zurutuza, 1993). Numerous studies worldwide have established that by far the favourite television genre among women is serialised drama, soap opera and telenovelas because of the exceptionally high proportion of female characters in such programmes (Brown, 1990; Seiter et al, 1989; Lull, 1988). Media content which features powerful, dynamic male characters and in which women play decorative, supportive roles (as in action drama), or which revolve almost exclusively around male figures (as in most sports and news programming), appeals primarily to men. This is not to suggest that all men or women prefer these categories of programmes, simply that this is the dominant trend observed by the researchers.

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## Access

Gender differences are linked to power and influence in the mainstream media. Over 400 women communicators from 80 countries called the media “a male-dominated tool used by those in power” (Bangkok Declaration, 1994). Hosken (1996) asks the question, “Who is sending messages to whom and therefore making decisions for all involved?” and makes it clear in her answer that “international communication and the tools used are almost exclusively male prerogatives.” According to a 1995 global survey (Global Media Monitoring Project), “It is evident that gender differences are linked to power and influence,” and “news gathering and news reporting are rooted in a value system which accords higher status to men and ‘the masculine’.” The way the world is portrayed on television “serves to maintain entrenched power imbalances,” and “this fits into a long history of the use of public displays of violence to maintain rankings of domination ...” (Eisler, 1996).

Overall, news, for example, is increasingly being presented by women but it is still very rarely *about* women. According to the 1995 Global Media Monitoring Project,<sup>2</sup> women comprised 43 percent of journalists but only 17 per cent of those interviewed as experts or opinion makers (see Tables 1 and 2). The largest number of males interviewed (29 per cent) appeared in stories on politics and government, while the largest proportion of female interviewees appeared in stories on disasters/accidents (20 per cent) and on crime (17 per cent). On a global level female reporters cover stories categorised as ‘other’ stories (arts, entertainment, environment, pollution, health, housing, human rights, science and social issues) while men covered ‘core’ stories (crime, disasters, economy, international crises, labour, national defence, politics and government).

Studies in Germany and the United Kingdom suggest that the presence of more women journalists and female experts voicing opinions in the media would create “significant role models for other women, stimulate female interest in public issues, and – perhaps – sometimes speak in the interests of and for women” (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1994).

Another solution is for the media to shift attention away from the traditional ‘power’ perspectives with respect to the top echelons of politics, government and business, and focus more on aspects that are more inclusive of women. This is not to suggest an abandonment of power and influence, but rather that the media broaden their horizons and seek greater inclusiveness and diversity in their reporting. A feature on, say, a general election can speak to the (mainly male) candidates but it can also

examine women's involvement as candidates, polling clerks, scrutineers and in other positions that actually make the event happen. It can also ask pertinent questions: what are the barriers to women running for office? What do women get out of all this when their party comes to power? In the case of business, stories can seek to make visible women's contributions to the GNP of a country – as small farmers, entrepreneurs, and through their (often unpaid) domestic work.

## **Employment Patterns**

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During International Women's Year (1995), when world attention was focused on the systematic nature of discrimination against women, "things seemed deceptively simple: if more women worked in the media, it was said, the media would change for the better" (Gallagher, 1994).

Since then, most regions have seen a steady growth in the numbers, range and scope of women working in mainstream media, but women are much more likely to be concentrated in administrative than in the other occupational categories (i.e., production/editorial, design, and technical). Of all the women working in media, some 50 per cent are located in administration in contrast to five per cent on average in the technical field (see Table 2) (Gallagher and von Euler, 1995).

Women still lack the power to develop media policy, or to determine the nature and shape of media content. This is so even in North America, where a dramatic increase has been noted in women-owned media and in women's organisations working on media representation issues. According to National Federation of Press Women (USA) figures, women increased their share of management posts by only one per cent per year between 1977 and 1993 and if that trend were to continue it would be another 30 years before gender balance is attained in newspaper jobs in the US (NFPW, 1993). A 1995 survey by the US-based International Women's Media Foundation states: "the news media remains an industry dominated and directed by men." In Europe, "in every professional category women are disproportionately situated in the lower salary bands and the less authoritative jobs" (Gallagher, 1994). In Africa, "on the average, women represent less than 20 per cent of workers in media organisations (and) lack influence where it really matters" (Adagala and Kiai, 1994).

"The very top jobs in media – director general, chief executive, president – are almost exclusively occupied by men," according to a 1995 UNESCO study of gender patterns in media employment spanning 43 countries (Gallagher and von Euler, 1995). Of 239 media organisations studied, only eight (3 per cent) were headed by women. Another eight, mostly small radio companies or news magazines, had female deputy directors.

Women's average share of posts at the top three levels of management is below 20 per cent in all media and all regions except for broadcasting in Latin America. "While it is heartening to see that some women can and do succeed in reaching the summit of media management ... these women represent a tiny proportion of all women working in the media. Analysis of European broadcasting data shows that, at the top level of the management hierarchy can be found one in every 1,000 female employees and one in every 140 male employees. On average, men are seven times more likely than women to reach the top" (Gallagher and von Euler, 1995).

Women are a minority in the committees and boards that define and shape policy, holding just 12 per cent of these positions in broadcasting, and nine per cent in the press. Of the 120 top management committees in radio and television worldwide, more than half (67) include no women at all. In the press just under half (21) of the 45 equivalent committees have no women. Women do slightly better in terms of seats

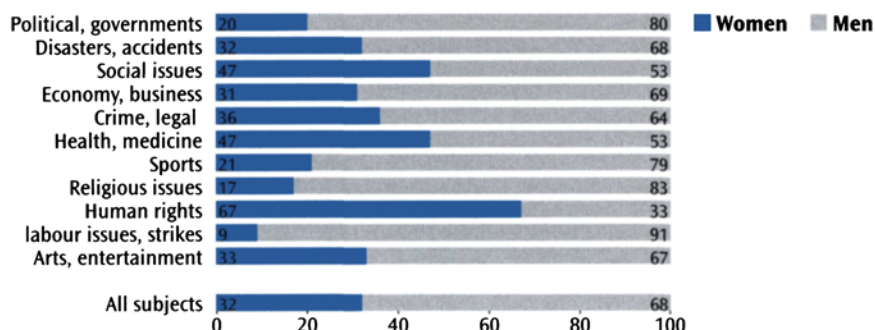


Table 1

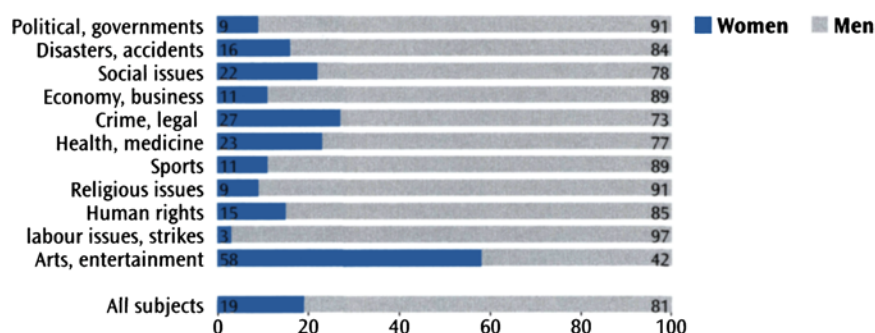
### Proportion of Female/Male Journalists Against Female/Male Actors in Main Subject Areas by Region

#### Africa

Proportion of female and male journalists in main subject areas

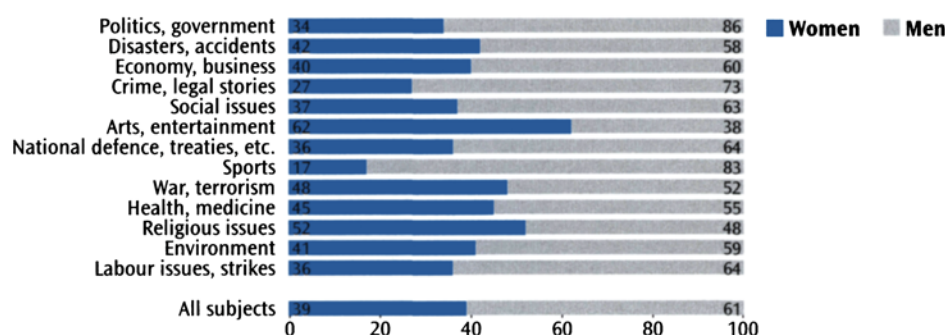


Proportion of female and male news actors in main subject areas

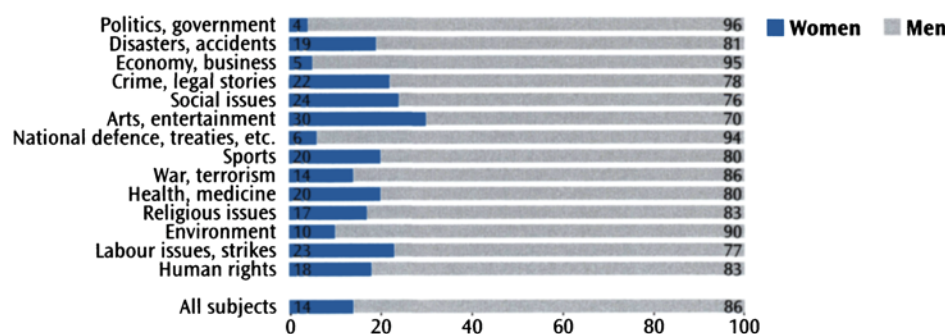


#### Asia

Proportion of female and male journalists in main subject areas

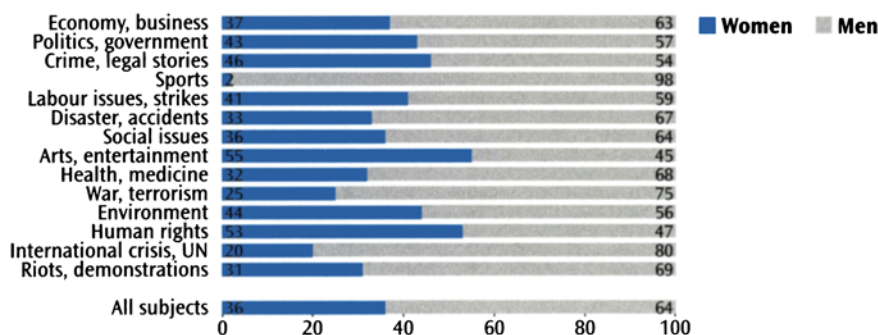


Proportion of female and male news actors in main subject areas

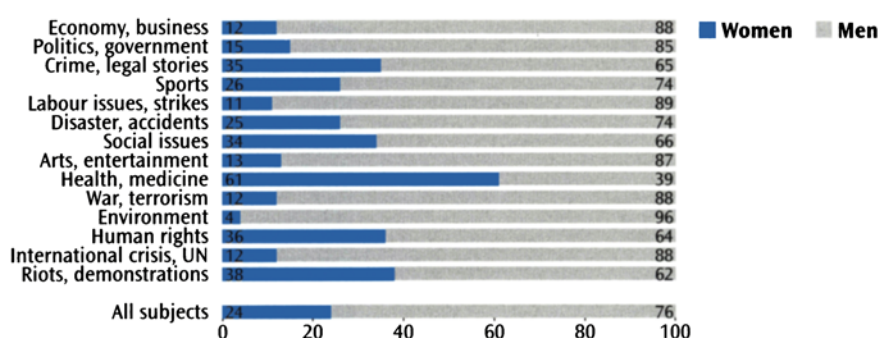


### The Caribbean and Central America

Proportion of female and male journalists in main subject areas

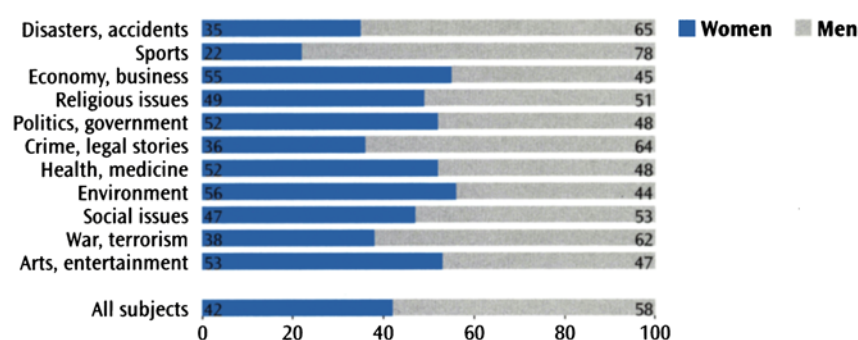


Proportion of female and male news actors in main subject areas

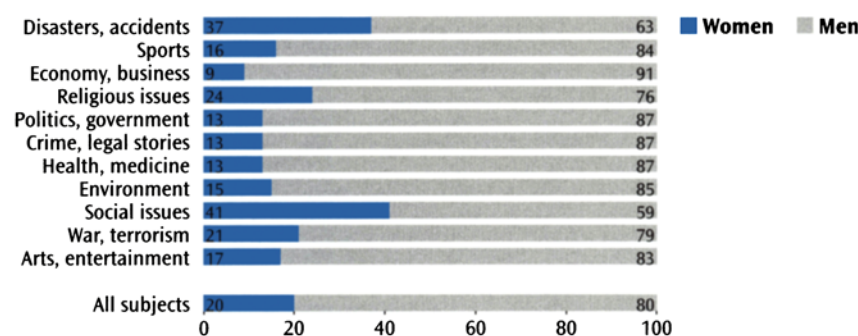


### The Pacific

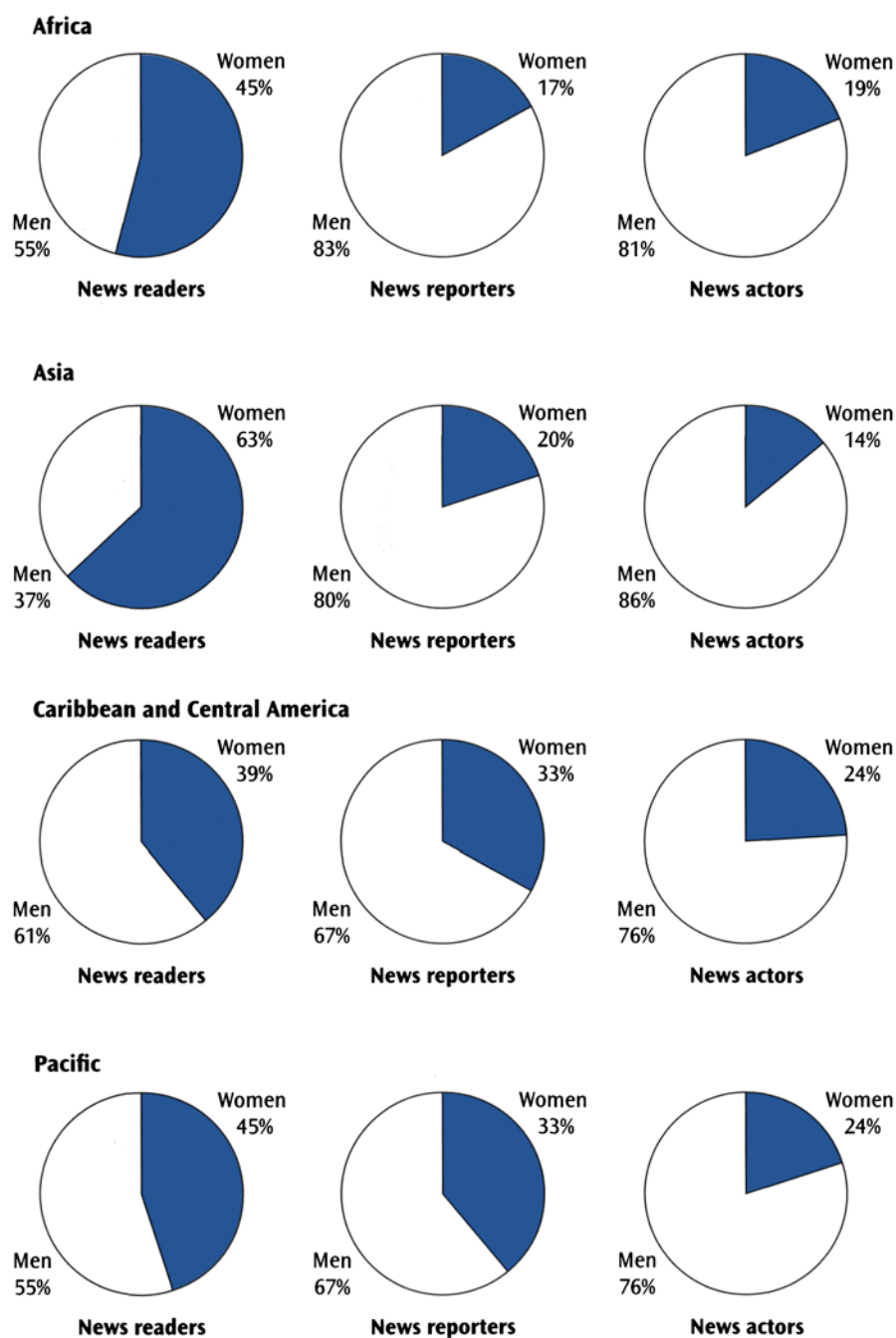
Proportion of female and male journalists in main subject areas



Proportion of female and male news actors in main subject areas

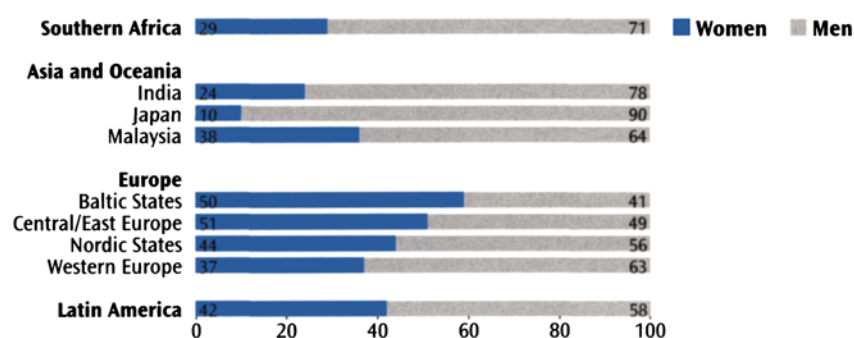
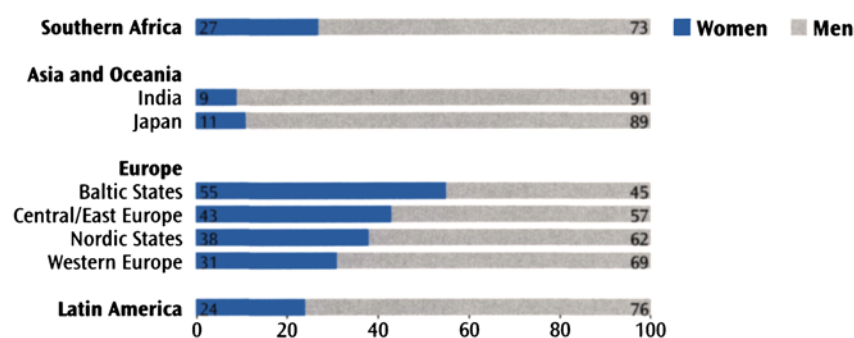
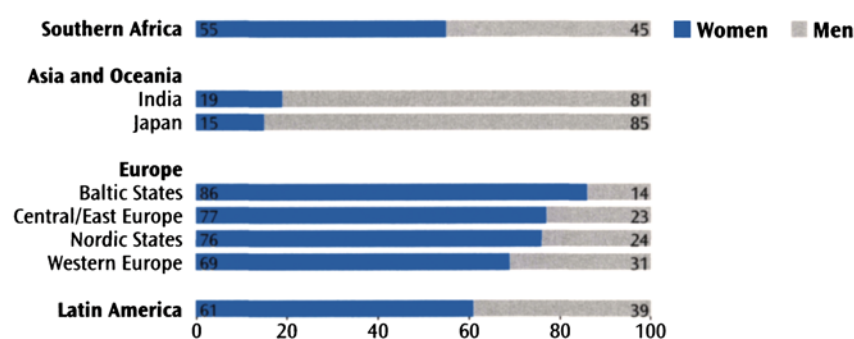
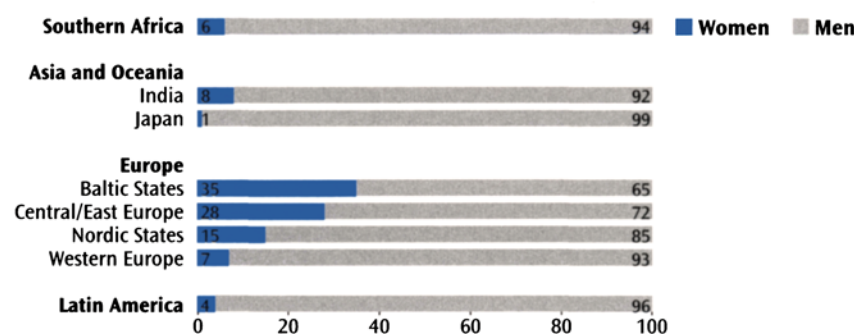


Source: Women's Participation in the News, WACC 1996

**Table 2** Presence of Women and Men in Newspapers, Radio & Television by Region

Source: Women's Participation in the News, WACC 1996

Table 3

**Women's and men's overall share of jobs in main occupational categories, broadcasting****Production****Crafts****Administration****Technical**

Source: An unfinished story: Gender patterns in media employment, UNESCO, 1995



on governing boards, the external bodies which advise broadcasting organisations on policy and, in some cases, on financial matters – although these vary considerably in influence from one organisation to another. In broadcasting, 16 per cent of board members are women; and in the press, 21 per cent. However, about 30 per cent of these governing bodies have no female members: 32 of the 105 boards in broadcasting, and nine of the 31 boards in the press include no women at all.

Despite the general upward trend in their numbers and visibility women also drop out at a greater rate than men. The most commonly reported obstacle to career development reported by women is that of male attitudes. Women are constantly judged by male standards and performance criteria of what constitutes news and who constitutes a newsmaker, a gender bias which leads to discrimination in the awarding of assignments: many women journalists report being denied approval to cover beats such as science and technology, politics and economics.

Women are also confronted by social disapproval since the critical, independent, assertive and self-assured approach required of journalists often runs counter to cultural norms for women. Many sources expect journalists to be male, which when coupled with sexist language on assignments (e.g., “Gentlemen of the press ...”), often leaves women feeling like intruders in a man’s world. Sexual harassment by both colleagues and information sources, along with salary discrimination, lack of opportunities for training, and lack of role models contribute to the erosion of women’s self-esteem and determination to excel. Moreover, the conflict between taxing working conditions and domestic responsibilities often force women to pass up career-boosting essential extras – working long hours, networking with colleagues, strengthening and seeking out new sources, making oneself available to cover breaking news or to travel or for training opportunities that take place outside of the standard nine-to-five working day – which puts them at a disadvantage in competing for the best jobs and assignments (Adagala and Kiai, 1994; Gallagher and von Euler, 1995; Houenassou-Houangbe, 1992; Kamotho, 1990; International Women’s Media Foundation Survey, 1995).

It is widely accepted that greater involvement by women in both the technical and decision-making areas of communication and media would improve both the content of media coverage as well as the context in which women journalists work.

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## Images and Portrayals

Gender-based stereotyping can be found in public and private, local, national and international media organisations – electronic, print, visual and audio. The media is often criticised for perpetuating images that reduce women to sex objects, and for promoting violence against women as ‘entertainment’. Degrading images negatively affect women and distort men’s attitudes towards women and children by fixing them to their physical attributes and making no recognition of the complex realities of their lives. Programming that reinforces women’s traditional roles, particularly in the family, can be equally limiting (Nicholson, 1995; Toronto Declaration, 1995; Global Media Monitoring Project, 1995).

Advertising, in particular, often offers lurid sexual innuendoes aimed at men and which demean women as appendages or reinforce the notion of women as mere objects. All too often these include ads by public sector entities seeking international investments in tourism and manufacturing. In a two-month study of the Asian edition of Newsweek, Ling found the most stereotypical images to be tourist ads that showed smiling Asian women in traditional dress beckoning the foreign traveller to come and enjoy their “service”. One resort tantalises potential male customers with



the slogan, "Come to the Banyan Tree with your wife and leave with another woman." But Ling notes that even ads that appear less sensationalist, "are infused with a masculinised, westernised authority," citing as an example an ad for a Hong Kong bank in which three men and a woman are gathered around a table. All are Asian but the men wear crisp Western business suits and are clearly engaged in some sort of business transaction, while the woman – dressed as a worker – is holding a vacuum cleaner and peering over one man's shoulder. "The implicit message: she may be just a cleaning-woman but even her interest is piqued by their stimulating business" (Ling, 1996).

Nicholson (1995) notes a 1987 ad luring investors to Jamaica's Free-Trade Zone where the labour force is largely female, which featured the silhouette of a woman's bottom and legs clad in a mini-skirt under the caption, "Your bottom-line is beautiful when you make it in Jamaica," and another some years later focusing again on a female bottom – this time in brief panties and without the legs – with the words, "a brief example of our work." In this latter case, one notes that the negative images were promoted by a government entity – Jamaica National Investment Promotion (JNIP). It is also useful to note that women did something about it. A public protest led by Sistren Theatre Collective, a grassroots popular theatre NGO, led to the withdrawal of the ad, which was widely criticised for selling the image of young working-class women as sex objects.

In the developing countries particularly, there are additional concerns about the overload of foreign programming in which "the ideal woman presented is usually white, leading an American upper class lifestyle, with alien values and appearance" (de Bruin, 1994), and there is on the one hand a "heavy dosage of ... women of foreign origin" and on the other "a total lack of coverage of Kenyan rural women", on Kenya Television Network (Adagali and Kiai, 1994).

In many developing countries, television fare is restricted by budget constraints. Programming imported from the US, often old series in which the way women are portrayed may be outdated even in the country of origin, may dominate peak viewing times. While it is true that local programming is often expensive to produce and may even lack sophistication, joint productions with local private companies, sensitive pre-screening of programmes from developed countries and exchanges with other developing countries, are some ways to improve this situation. National broadcasting entities can also foster partnerships with community groups using video for community development.

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## Media and Violence in Society

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Gender stereotyping by the media leads women, men and children to develop false and stultifying views and expectations of themselves and others, and masks reality. When women and men fail to match up to the fantasy ideal created by the media, serious problems may arise. Both women and men may develop low self-esteem. Women are more likely to become depressed and accepting of abuse, while men are more likely to become frustrated and angry, leading to violent and abusive behaviour.

The high incidence of media violence worldwide – whether verbal, physical, psychological and/or sexual – is of great concern and has generated debate and research into just how media violence affects viewers, in particular children. Media violence is insidious since the viewer may perceive no visible long-term effects. It is appealing since it is so often linked with power, and it is shown as a quick way of resolving conflicts.

How much violence is there on television (for many the most hypnotic of all media)? The US company TV Guide, in a 1995 study based on 18 hours of viewing (6:00 a.m.-12:00 midnight) on 10 channels (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, PBS affiliates; plus the cable channels: WTBS, USA Network, MTV, HBO) in Washington DC, concluded that “violence remains a pervasive, major feature of contemporary television programming, and it is coming from more sources and in greater volume than ever before.”

The study cited 1,846 individual acts of violence – ranging from violence that resulted in one or more fatalities, to threatening behaviour with a weapon. Cartoons had the most violent scenes (471), followed by promos for TV shows (265), movies (221), toy commercials (188), music videos (123), and commercials for movies (121). Numerous other North American research projects had already ascertained the link between media violence and violence in the society<sup>3</sup> (Nicholson *et al*, 1997). Media watchdog groups in all continents have proved most effective in raising public awareness of these issues.<sup>4</sup>

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## Women's Alternative Media Networks

Riano's *Typology of Women's Participation in Communication* (1994) identifies the discourse and practices of four major frameworks: development communication (women as subjects of information); participatory communication (women as participants); alternative communication (women as subjects of change); and feminist communication (women as producers of meaning). Within their organisations and more broadly within civil society, women have used all these types of communication to achieve their development goals.

During the 1960s and 1970s, women's groups in developing countries responded to their negative portrayal in the mainstream media by establishing media monitoring and social action groups. The literature recognises “a growing number of women's information networks, linking researchers, journalists, and activists across countries and regions” (Riano, 1994). Concerned as they are with “the basic needs of their societies ... the creation of life and the preservation of the environment,” and recognising that they are “at the bottom of all hierarchies,” there are many women communicators, in all continents, who see their role “as one of ensuring that women's interests, aspirations and visions are centrally located and disseminated” (Bangkok Declaration, 1994).

The creation of alternative presses has opened new publishing opportunities for women. Worldwide networks of independent video makers and filmmakers are developing a variety of visual alternatives and narratives (Riano, 1994). In Asia, despite constraints of scale and heterogeneity “several serious attempts have been made” to establish solid women's media networks at both regional and national levels (Balakrishnan, 1994). In the Caribbean, “each country has its own set of women's organisations producing and using alternative media as fora for women's issues” (Francis-Brown *et al*, 1995). In Africa, women using folk media (oral history, traditional performing arts, etc.) “fulfil a variety of functions from transmitting information to improving thinking ability, to instilling values and shaping a world view, lobbying for social causes and a variety of other educational causes” (Adagala *et al*, 1994).

Women are now able to move information around the globe even faster than some governments through watchdog networks that combine fax-trees, e-mail, postal services and word of mouth. One such example is that of the global fax and electronic networks-Women's Global Faxnet and Women's GlobalNet, which developed from a fax network, WomeNet, started by 14 women communicators from 10 women's media

networks in nine countries at a workshop in Barbados in 1992. A support and solidarity mechanism aimed at exchanging information and alerting each other to national and regional developments affecting women, WomeNet (by then 28 organisations strong) came into its own when women bound for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing protested efforts to marginalise them from the proceedings. Once the first fax alert went out from International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) in New York, it took just four days for 111 organisations in 40 countries of eight world regions to fax protest letters to the UN Secretary-General. "Within six weeks, the WomeNet had evolved into a Global Faxnet servicing over 500 organisations, groups and individuals, and it had generated an estimated 3,000 signed petitions and protest letters from women's organisations, global networks, NGOs and even governmental bodies, in over 100 countries in every region" (Ross Frankson, 1996).

The Beijing Platform for Action, in recognition of the important role of women's alternative media networks, calls for governments "to support the development of and finance, as appropriate, alternative media and the use of all means of communication to disseminate information to and about women and their concerns" (Paragraph 245e).

Ministries of Information and Communication can link up, support, and benefit from women's alternative media organisations in respect of their outreach, innovative uses of local culture, and their perspectives. A first step is to recognise their work, contribution and expertise by including their representatives in policy-making – on advisory boards, and editorial groups – and as experts in programming. Ministries may also seek to partner with women's alternative media networks for education purposes: in awareness-building workshops for ministry and public service broadcasting personnel, for public sensitisation campaigns, and for media awareness training in schools.

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## Electronic Communications

The general findings of an Associated Progressive Communications (APC) survey (*Networking for Change*, May 1997)<sup>5</sup> reveal that women are making great strides in adopting electronic communications, and have benefited from the support and facilitation provided by proactive initiatives. Increased communication and sharing of knowledge among women, particularly in the developing South but also in Eastern Europe and remote communities in the North, has broadened the scope of on-line participation creating a more equitable global women's forum on-line. For many women who knew very little about computer communications just a few years ago, using e-mail has become a routine part of their day-to-day lives.

Women in the South – particularly Africa and Asia – and in Eastern Europe, primarily use e-mail, conferencing and listservs, while women in the North show greater use of Internet tools, such as search engines and the World Wide Web. These regional differences are due to access issues, such as infrastructure limitations or costs to connect, rather than lack of interest or motivation on the part of women to adopt the newer technologies.

Of particular note for ministries of information and communications as they seek to raise public awareness about gender issues is the fact that many connected women, particularly in the developing South, act as bridges to unconnected groups in their communities by repackaging information they find on-line and sharing it through other communication channels such as print, fax, telephone, radio, theatre, etc.

The challenges and pitfalls of electronic communications include limited accessibility, information overload, language constraints, skill deficiencies, and lack



of gender-sensitive training. Women in the developing South face particular challenges: limitations of e-mail only accounts (not having access to remote databases or Internet tools); limited infrastructure (difficulty in getting a phone line); and the high costs of data transmission (networks in the South often charge their users for all messages, both sent and received).

The APC survey identified lack of training, the high cost of equipment and lack of time and human resources as common barriers and concluded that it was necessary to encourage local expertise in efficient and cost-effective computer networking technologies.

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## Research

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Existing literature on women's portrayal by, access to, and employment in the media is still heavily dominated by research from North America and Western Europe. Studies from other parts of the world, where they do exist, are often limited in their scope. "Very few studies have been done regarding gender and media audiences in Africa" (Adagala and Kiai, 1994). "There is no systematic documentation on the position of women in Caribbean media, their influence or lack of influence, their power or lack of power" (de Bruin, 1995). In Asia "there are very scant studies on media's position vis-à-vis socio-political and economic structures and the concomitant effects on women" (Balakrishnan, 1994).

Apart from the need to develop and strengthen data bases about women and media, research should be used as the basis for action that productively enhances women's relationship to the media. The research should also be used to develop appropriate support materials. With regard to electronic communications, for instance, computer manuals, 'how-to' books, instructional guides and access resources tend to be written for North American and other Western audiences: they are expensive, full of technical jargon and assume an infrastructure and knowledge base that may not exist in less-developed contexts. Moreover, they rarely contain either gender- or culturally-sensitive wording or examples. Materials written in local languages that simplify the technical jargon, contain recognisable images, and are geared towards community realities would be a welcome first step for increasing women's interest in electronic communications.

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## Training

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In all regions the number of women in higher education journalism courses has been increasing. White (1992) found that at the University of Nairobi School of Journalism, "the number and proportion of women students (had) steadily increased until 1991 when there were actually more women than men in the ... postgraduate training programmes." Balakrishnan (1994) says that "in all parts of Asia, women outnumber men in at least some of the programmes," and in Southeast Asia and Australia "women outnumber men in all communications programmes." UNESCO figures show that women now account for 52 per cent of all students in journalism and mass communication schools in Europe, but women who enter journalism education are "more likely than men to quit the profession through frustration or disillusionment" (van Zoonan, 1989). At the same time, few courses are tailored specifically for gender concerns even where courses in development communications exist. In Kenya, despite a strong presence of women in formal training programmes, Kibutiri (1990) found that 56 per cent of media women "did not feel adequately trained to tackle gender issues."

Women-specific training that is free is recommended particularly in the area of electronic communications. Studies have recorded different tendencies between women and men in their ease and use of electronic communications; for example, men tend to start with hands-on exploration, while women first want to know how it all works. Women have less access to electronic communications and less ownership of equipment. They therefore tend to be less proactive in learning the new technologies and need more initial encouragement and training. The main difference is not related to capacity to learn or even eagerness, but in approach: many women are more comfortable learning in women-only or women-centred environments (APC Survey, 1997).

### Notes

- 1 As noted by Gallagher (1994), the Australian born Murdoch also controls – *inter alia* – 60% of the Australian press, 40% of the UK press, the entire press of Fiji, a US TV network, a Hollywood studio, the largest circulation magazine in the US and a major international book publisher (TV World Guide to Asia, October 1993).
- 2 Co-ordinated and facilitated by Women's MediaWatch, Canada, this study is based on 49,000 data records collected by groups and individuals in 71 countries on the same day, January 18, 1995. The monitoring project gave women a tool with which to scrutinise media output and document the gender bias that exists in news content worldwide. Taking part were teachers and academics, activists and lobbyists, journalists and other media professionals, some with research experience, others with none. In some countries, disparate groups co-operated for the first time, united by their concern about the portrayal of women by their national media.
- 3 Among them: the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1968); the Surgeon General's Report (1972); the National Institute for Mental Health's study on Media Images and Violence (1982); and the US Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence (1984).
- 4 Ten years ago when Women's Media Watch Jamaica (WMWJ) was formed to "clean up the negative images of women in the Jamaican media, and raise public awareness around the issues," it was seen as "too feminist, too middle-class and totally impractical," but nowadays "the radio talk shows seem full of women and men complaining about an ad or programme they find offensive." In the period WMWJ has conducted hundreds of workshops in Jamaica and overseas, designed and conducted scores of public campaigns, lobbied the media and government bodies, helped establish similar groups in Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados, and works closely with the Jamaica Broadcasting Commission and is represented on Inter-Press Service's editorial committee and the National Cinematographic Authority, according to Melody Walker in Ms magazine (Jan/Feb 1998).
- 5 Aimed at identifying women's electronic networking needs and opportunities around the world, the survey findings are based on 147 responses from a diversity of groups and individuals in 36 countries. The survey was e-mailed to over 700 women's groups and individuals working on issues of concern to women in both the public and the private sectors.