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**Women, Media And Democratic Society:  
In Pursuit Of Rights And Freedoms**

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*\* The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.*

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### **Introduction: The Journey So Far**

*When the Taliban successfully captured Kabul in September 1996, they immediately did two things: they barred women from ... any participation in the public sphere, and they banned television. Control over these two elements – women and the media – lay at the heart of the Taliban regime. It is interesting to note that the state of each is increasingly taken as a key index of the democratization and development of a society.*  
Sreberny, 2002, p. 271

Over the past twenty-five years, analytical critique of the interconnections between women, media institutions and media content has come to occupy an ever more central place on the international agenda. This has occurred against a background of dramatic transformations brought about by changes in the global media system. During the early years of the international women's movement, media issues were generally regarded as secondary to cardinal problems such as of poverty, health and education for women. But by the early 1990s in most regions of the world the media could no longer be dismissed as an élite irrelevance. As the spread of satellite communication introduced previously unimaginable numbers of channels into many countries, the enormous power of the media to influence ideas and behaviour at all levels of society became fully apparent. In parts of the world where media systems had been founded with a mission to educate and inform citizens in the context of social development, free trade principles and deregulation – allied with digital technology – produced profound changes in traditional patterns of media financing and control.

The exponential rate of technological change that has transformed media and communication structures globally is reflected in the degree of attention paid to the women-media-communication nexus by the international community. While the media were barely mentioned in the strategy documents of the first three United Nations conferences on women in the period 1975-1985, the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 identified the media as one of twelve Critical Areas of Concern. And while in 1995 there was little recognition of the impending explosion of information and communication technologies and their implications for women, five years later these new media had moved centre stage. The review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+5, June 2000) acknowledged the effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a major challenge to be addressed in promoting women's advancement.

Today the technological, regulatory, economic and political contexts in which we must situate and analyse women's relation to media, communication and information systems are highly complex. Indeed over the past twenty years it has become an increasingly daunting task to map out this terrain in a way that adequately reflects the particularity of positions and problems in immensely different social and cultural environments. For example, in the media-saturated world of multi-channel television and 24-hour Internet access experienced by many of us today it is easy to forget that 'our' experience is a minority experience; that half of the world's population has never made a telephone call and that in the poorest regions media access is minimal. In Africa, for instance, just 25% of people have a radio; 8% have a television; one out of 130 has a personal computer; 1 out of 160 uses the Internet; 1 out of 400 has pay-TV (Jensen,

2002). Media access of women, and of rural women in particular, is even lower. A recent study of female heads of households in rural Zimbabwe (Matewa, 2002) found that only 4% of these women had a television set. Although radio ownership was more common, more than 60% of the radios were not working or were not being used because of lack of power and the high cost of batteries. None of the local shops sold newspapers or magazines, which could only be purchased in the nearest town – over thirty kilometres away. Of course ownership does not necessarily equate with access. The women could listen to radio in the village shops, could sometimes watch television in the homes of neighbours, and could occasionally read a newspaper or magazine brought to them by a visiting family member. But clearly these media experiences are of an utterly different nature from those of urban-based women in high-density media environments.

However, the hazards of presenting an overall review of issues and trends in this now vast field are rooted in even more complex questions than differential levels of access and use. One of the most important lessons from feminist media theory over the past twenty years has been that women's experience of discrimination, and indeed of identity itself, is heavily determined by differences in terms of class, economic status, age, sexuality, religion, race and nation. The inadequacies of 'women and media' studies that conflate the condition of white, heterosexual, middle-class women with the condition of all women are now acknowledged, and contemporary media research has tried to grapple with more complex understandings of gender identity and experience. As one African American media scholar has put it: 'Women of color do not experience sexism *in addition* to racism, but sexism *in the context of* racism; thus they cannot be said to bear an *additional* burden that white women do not bear, but to bear an altogether *different* burden from that borne by white women' (Houston, 1992, p. 49). A great deal of contemporary research – including many studies referred to in this paper – still fails to address these issues of interlocking identities and media experiences. Nevertheless, this theoretical understanding must be a constant backdrop against which to appraise the validity of research findings and the policy-oriented conclusions to be drawn from them.

Yet another change over the past twenty years is that media culture itself has become increasingly complex. We are witnessing a convergence of media technology and services, a gradual merging of television, radio, print, computers and the Internet. This convergence blurs the boundaries between definitions of 'old' and 'new' media, as well as of 'mainstream' and 'alternative' media. Alongside this, we are seeing a globalization of media distribution systems, formats and applications which calls into question what have traditionally been considered national media and local identities.

A good example of these trends is the phenomenally successful television programme *Big Brother*, which originated in the Netherlands (see Drotner, 2002). The format revolves around the selection of a group of 'real' people (i.e. not actors) who are required to live together in a single household over a period of weeks. Their interactions are witnessed by the viewing public, which each week votes to eliminate one member of the group. The *Big Brother* format has been sold to most European countries, as well as to Argentina, Australia, South Africa and the USA. In all of these it has been adapted to local cultural norms and production codes – with varying degrees of success. *Big Brother* is conceived as a composite media text, whose content evolves through the entire range of media and ICTs – television, radio, print, Internet sites, phone-in polls – and whose audience at times becomes transformed into a physical public which gathers

outside the *Big Brother* house to witness dramatic events. *Big Brother* illustrates not only the convergence of media technologies, but also the emergence of new forms of media expression, and new relationships between media content and media audiences.

These convergences and shifting boundaries make it increasingly problematic to maintain the distinctions that have traditionally characterised the study of women and media internationally – women as media producers, women in media content, and women as media users. Having said that, the remainder of this paper will attempt to maintain some of these broad distinctions, which continue to be helpful in shedding light on empirical trends and emerging issues around the world. Nevertheless, these separate concerns should be understood as belonging to a more complex conceptualisation of the structure and process of gender portrayal in the media, the cultural and economic formations that support this structure and process, the social relations that produce gendered subjects, and the nature of gendered identity.

### **Powerful Issues: Media Employment and Decision-Making**

It is salutary to be reminded that – despite today’s theoretical sophistication, and even though the global political and communication environment has changed dramatically over the past twenty or thirty years – the issues that need to be addressed are fundamentally the same as ever. They still revolve around the most basic questions of power, values, access and exclusion. Indeed one of the most important lessons learned through feminist scholarship has been the deeply embedded nature of gender-based judgements and assumptions – assumptions that permeate not just the media but all social, economic and political institutions. Thus although early diagnoses called for a “critical mass” of women in the media as part of the solution to the problem, it is now clear that “the problem” is both more deeply rooted and more over-arching than can be solved by a numerical redistribution.

#### ***Presence, Role and Power***

*The reality shows a presence rather than a role of women in the media*

May Kahhale, media advisor to former President of Lebanon, quoted in Dabbous-Sensenig, 2000, p. 15.

It is undeniable that women are now ‘present’ as an important middle-level cohort of producers, directors, journalists and reporters in the media of many countries round the world. The only available international comparative study (Gallagher, 1995a) found that approximately a third of radio and television producers in Southern Africa and in Latin America were women; in Europe the equivalent figure was 37%. Of particular significance is the increasing presence of women as newscasters and programme presenters in the broadcast media. This phenomenon is extremely widespread. For example, the 2000 Global Media Monitoring Project which monitored the news in 70 countries on 1 February 2000 found that 56% of news items on television, and 41% on radio, were presented by women on the monitoring day. Yet only 36% of television reporters, 28% of radio reporters and 26% of newspaper reporters on that same day were female (Spears et al., 2000).

However, the increased presence of women on the screen and in a few other high-profile positions almost certainly contributes to a gulf between perceptions and reality. In a survey carried out in Lima, Peru in 1997, 51% of people thought there were about equal numbers of women and men working in television and 31% thought there were actually *more* women than men. In fact, this same study showed that women held only about a quarter of jobs in television (Alfaro, 1997). Women's visibility in some media occupations actually hides their absence from others. For although it is true that more women than ever before are entering media industries in almost all world regions, women still have very little real decision-making power.

The 1995 international comparative study found that out of 239 organizations studied, only eight (3%) were headed by women. A further eight had female deputy directors. Most of these were small radio companies or news magazines, and almost all were in Latin America (Gallagher, 1995a). In 2000 the International Federation of Journalists carried out a survey covering 70% of its membership in 39 countries. It found that although more than a third of journalists are women, less than 3% of senior media executives and decision-makers are female (Peters, 2001). In the newly emerging media industries, the picture does not look much better. A study of the major telecommunications and e-companies in the USA established that only 13% of top executives are women (Jamieson, 2001). The European Union's database on women in decision-making shows that in 2001 women held only 9% of senior management jobs in the telecommunications industry in Europe (European Database, 2001)

### ***The Glass Ceiling: Obstacles to Advancement***

Why do so few women break through the glass ceiling? It can be argued that survival and success in the media – particularly in market-driven systems – are dictated by the logic of commerce, to which male journalists are equally subject. Of course there is an element of truth in this. But particularly when it comes to the most senior editorial jobs another – perhaps parallel, perhaps predominant – logic seems to operate. As Canadian journalist Huguette Roberge put it a decade ago: "One woman at a time (...) One at a time. We barely manage to fill the shoes left by one another" (quoted in Pelletier et al. 1989, p. 91). In the years since then, the situation has barely changed. Gail Evans, former executive Vice President of CNN, believes that women themselves bear some responsibility for this. If there are "six seats at the [management] table, and five of them are held by men, and one is held by a woman, every other woman in the organization thinks there is one seat open. There isn't. There are six seats open" (see Evans, 2001). Wherever the responsibility lies, the 'one at a time' mentality vis à vis women in senior editorial management precludes the possibility of women building up the kind of power base necessary for real change – either in terms of media output or in the way that media institutions are organized.

But by far the most common obstacle to advancement that women media professionals report is the problem of male attitudes. One of the most important implications of the male dominance within media organizations is that women are judged by male standards and performance criteria. Often this means a constant effort to be taken seriously, and 'to prove that you are as good as a man'. The hazards of not being taken seriously include the risk of sexual harassment – a problem mentioned by women surveyed in the 2001 IFJ study, and in countries as different as Belgium (De Claque, 2002), Finland (Cassava et al., 1993) Senegal (van den

Wijngaard, 1992) and Tunisia (AJT, 1991). Thus while their male colleagues use time after work to develop the 'old boys' network', some women may limit their after work contacts because they prefer to avoid 'risky' situations.

Perceptions of editorial management as a tough and virile domain, where men in smoke-filled rooms make decisions, are enough to stop some women from trying to become part of a world they regard as alien. Even in Sweden, generally presumed to among the most advanced in terms of gender equity, it seems that women must struggle against male-defined norms to reach a senior media management position (Djerf-Pierre, 2002). In certain sectors of the media, the overwhelmingly male culture appears to make it almost impossible for women to feel comfortable, and thus to thrive professionally. A recent study of employment in British advertising found that the creative branch of the industry – the sector responsible for the creation and design of adverts – is actually losing women. Only 17% of copywriters are women – down from 20% in 1990. Similarly, only 14% of art directors are women – the lowest level ever recorded (Klein, 2000).

The study argues that the stereotypical 'laddish' atmosphere in most creative departments is off-putting to women. "It's a bit like walking into the lion's den," said one female creative. Another said: "Women find the atmosphere childish, petulant and myopic and they don't want to put up with that." The implications of this for advertising output seem obvious. According to research from Japan, where the advertising industry is a 'highly political, middle-aged male-dominated sphere' the creative process is shaped by chauvinistic conventions of 'Japanese' femininity – cute, consumerist, obedient and tradition-oriented (Badurina Haemmerle, 2002).

### ***The Rules of the Game***

*Is her copy so marvellous that she thought it worth making her daughter an orphan?  
...This may be a strange war, but it is a proper war, not a gender war. We want  
information, not pictures of blondes in khaki.*

'A Journalistic Risk that Was Not Worth Taking' *The Scotsman*, October 2, 2001, quoted in Magor, 2002, p. 143.

When British journalist Yvonne Ridley entered Afghanistan illegally (with the consent of her newspaper) in September 2001, and was then arrested and held by the Taliban, the press released a barrage of criticism that revolved around the assumption that women journalists with children are first and foremost mothers. Their careers are of secondary importance. Press reports of the parallel case of French journalist Michel Peyrard, also caught entering Afghanistan illegally, never referred to his actions as irresponsible, although he too was a parent.

In a highly dramatic way, coverage of war exposes the masculine agenda of the news media, and the implicit 'rules of the game' that permeate media organizations. There has been considerable analysis of the absence of women's voices or even images in the reports filed from Afghanistan during and after the war in 2001 (see Curry Jansen, 2002; Dunn, 2002; Friedman, 2002; Joseph, 2001). Others have highlighted the ways in which women reporters themselves were sidelined in the news coverage. For example, one respected British weekly newspaper ran a section dedicated to "women's views of the war – as though these women are not real reporters,

because they're not men". The result is that women's views of the war were "sectioned off from other, mainstream views, and thus trivialised as weak, feminine, motherly and lily-livered rather than as valid, informed opinion" (Roper, 2002). Reflecting on women's role in the reporting of this and other conflicts, one scholar concludes: "If women are at the forefront of an alternative rhetoric and action against war, then there are dozens of powerful men (some who head countries, some who head newsrooms) who'll make sure that these views are berated and second-rated – thus ensuring that the dominant language of war and 'justice' conquers and that the patriarchal order which supports this rhetoric is sustained" (Magor, 2002, p. 143).

The 'rules of the game' also mean that most news organizations demand a willingness to express viewpoints quickly, with bold affirmation and authority. Not all women feel comfortable with this. For instance, one British journalist noted that many of her female colleagues wanted to 'pause' on the unfolding of the complex events of September 11, so as to register the scale of what was happening, before rushing into print as so many men seemed ready to do (see Branston, 2002). These gender-based differences undoubtedly affect women's perceived status within media organizations, and their chances of promotion. In their study of journalists in Finland, Kuusava et al. (1993) concluded that women's skills are undervalued. A journalist writing about 'hard politics' is supported and regarded as good promotion material. Someone writing about 'human' and 'everyday' issues is seen as unambitious (because apparently uninterested in the top priorities of the organization), and tends to remain a rank-and-file reporter. The subtlety and circularity of this process, which both reflects *and* constructs power relations between women and men in the profession, is aptly described by Eric Neveu (1997) with respect to French journalism. The journalists he interviewed referred again and again to the conditions and professional interactions of daily newsgathering and writing, conditions in which women are unlikely to succeed unless they play by the male rules. These include the practice of working late, which is perceived as the price of success – a price which women often regard as taking too high a toll on their family lives; and the male fascination with political power games, which often converts the journalist into an 'insider' with privileged access to sources in the political sphere.

The male-defined rules of the game which determine journalistic culture – the customs and practices which prevail within the profession – must therefore be understood not simply in terms of working conditions, definitions of newsworthiness, values and priorities. In a more fundamental sense these rules permeate the very essence of what journalism 'is', or is believed to be, by the majority of its practitioners.



### ***The Experience of Discrimination***

*I've never noticed that there was any discrimination based on sex.*

William Dean Singleton, vice chairman and CEO of MediaNews Group Inc.

*My sense is that it is not true.*

John G. Craig, Editor and Senior Vice President, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

*It doesn't track with my own experience.*

Heath J. Meriwether, publisher, the *Detroit Free Press*

Comments from male editors in response to results of a 2002 survey detailing perceptions of gender-based discrimination among women in top newsroom jobs in the USA (Strupp, 2002)

The survey carried out in 2000 by the IFJ compared results with those from a similar survey conducted a decade earlier. Ten years after that first study, many issues remain unresolved. Women still lose out in appointments to the top jobs, have less access to training, earn less than their male co-workers, are confronted with job segregation, limited promotion perspectives, sexual harassment, and continue to be forced into impossible choices between career and family life. This last is one of the major reasons given by women who drop out of media jobs in their mid-30s (De Clerq, 2002).

Nevertheless, the belief that the gender balance in the media – particularly in its higher echelons – will shift 'in time', as more women graduates enter the profession, is remarkably persistent. Yet UNESCO data show that the predominance of female students in mass communication stretches back to at least 1980 in most of the so-called developed countries, and to at least 1986 in Chile, Egypt, Jamaica, Lebanon, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay and Tunisia. How can this be reconciled with women's minority presence – especially in senior media jobs?

There seems little doubt that women are discriminated against at the stage of recruitment, simply because they are women. Studies from various countries show that male journalism graduates are more successful than females in finding jobs in the profession (see Gallagher, 1995a). Research released in 2002 by the Minority Media and Telecommunications Council (MMTC) in the United States found that in 1999 15% of broadcasters, 19% of cable companies and 19% of newspapers intentionally discriminated against women. Ethnic minority groups were even more severely disadvantaged: 20% of broadcasters, 36% of cable companies and 37% of newspapers intentionally discriminated against African Americans; 24% of broadcasters, 20% of cable companies and 26% of newspapers intentionally discriminated against Hispanics (Blumrosen & Blumrosen, 2002).

Studies show that after recruitment men advance more quickly than women (Gallagher, 1995a), and women are well aware of this. An extensive 2002 cable industry survey in the USA conducted for the National Association of Minorities in Communications (NAMIC) found that 21% of minorities and 22% of women employed in the cable industry perceived that their race or

gender, respectively, had a negative impact on opportunities at their companies (NAMIC, 2002). A further 2002 US study, for the American Press Institute and the Pew Center for Civic Journalism discovered that 64% of the women in senior newsroom jobs who don't see opportunities to move up say it is because men are preferred for these positions. Only a handful of men (6%) in a similar situation see sexism as a barrier (API/Pew, 2002). The experience of discrimination is not, of course, confined to the USA. Studies in other countries also show that women media professionals are much more likely than their male colleagues to perceive gender-based discrimination as a career problem (De Clerq, 2002).

### *Actions and Policies*

*Even if they frequently disappoint, any equal opportunities policy is better than no policy.*  
Aldridge, 2001, p. 614

There is no easy way of dismantling the obstacles faced by women media professionals. Mentoring systems, networking, improved recruitment procedures, management and skills training, family-friendly working conditions, setting numerical targets to redress gender imbalance in creative and decision-making posts, regular monitoring, performance assessments – all these can help. But the hardest task is to change the attitudes which foster inequalities, and the organizational culture that supports these attitudes.

To pursue those goals, some media companies have adopted policies and action programmes. These are more often found in the broadcast media than in the press, and more often in the publicly funded than in the commercially financed sector. In that sense, market trends do not present a promising scenario for women. The pursuit of equal opportunities does not easily coincide with the pursuit of maximum financial gain. Moreover the overall context of competition in which the public media now operate has had an impact on employment structures and policies – for example, by increasing the use of short-term contract and casual staff, the majority of whom are women (Gallagher, 2000). Major public broadcasters such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and various others which launched optimistic and well-funded equality programmes in the 1970s and early 1980s, have had to struggle to justify such expenditure in the very different economic – and ideological – climate of the past decade.

But do these programmes and policies make any real difference? Indeed are they actually necessary? It goes without saying that policies alone change absolutely nothing if they are not backed up by commitment at the highest level, and by line managers who 'own' policies, and who are themselves given proper advice and support in implementing them. Given those conditions, progress does seem possible. For instance, a European review of equality policies concluded that broadcasting organizations in Denmark, Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom that pursue a vigorous policy of positive action *have* managed to increase the proportion of women in their management and decision-making echelons (Gallagher 2000).

But even when they work, equal opportunities policies seem to drag change along behind them – at what often seems an excruciatingly slow pace – rather than pushing media institutions forcefully towards real transformation. For example, Goga (2001) found that the application of

affirmative action policies in the South African media *had* helped to increase the number of women and people of colour, even in higher grades, in the period 1994-1999. Nevertheless, because white males continued to be concentrated in top and senior management, inequality persisted in the 'power relations' at work within the media organizations. These are rooted in much deeper structures of privilege and are infinitely more difficult to breach.

The overall political and social framework is a further crucial factor in establishing an environment in which goals of equity will or will not be pursued. For instance, a study of women's employment in the Canadian newspaper industry found that in the early 1990s optimism about women's evolutionary movement into positions of real organizational power seemed reasonably well founded. But rapid changes in the commercial ethos of the media, allied with the introduction of an aggressively conservative national daily newspaper in 1998, illustrate how quickly attitudinal and cultural change can be stalled, or even reversed, by changes in management priorities triggered by a threat to profits (Aldridge, 2001). This demonstrates the fragility of 'progress' in women's employment prospects unless anchored in some combination of established policy, statute and changed material reality.

### **Critical Issues: Media Content and Portrayal**

The limitations of media content have often been linked to women's under-representation and lack of power within the media industry. But the link between media content and the individuals who produce it is of course greatly attenuated by countless factors including institutional policies, professional values and advertisers' demands. So although in most countries more women are entering the media professions than ever before, it would be unreasonable to imagine that this will result in a radical transformation of media content. It is certainly possible to see the mark made by individual media women, as women, on certain types of output. But the fundamental patterns of media representation that preoccupied the women's movement of the 1970s remain relatively intact thirty years later.

#### ***Patterns of Portrayal***

It is difficult to assess accurately the extent to which these patterns are universal, and the extent to which they might be changing. Studies spanning more than one country are rare. In 1995 the first extensive international quantitative study of women's portrayal in the media was launched. Known as the Global Media Monitoring Project, the study monitored newspapers, radio and television news in 71 countries around the world for one day in January. It found that only 17% of the world's news subjects (i.e. newsmakers or interviewees in news stories) were women (MediaWatch, 1995). The results of the second Global Media Monitoring Project, carried out in 70 countries on 1 February 2000, suggested that the world of news might have been standing still for five years. On that day women accounted for just 18% of news subjects (Spears et al., 2000). Television had slightly more women than radio or newspapers. Across the regions the percentage of female news subjects ranged from a high of 25 percent in North America and in Oceania, to a low of 11 percent in Africa. Many familiar gender differences were illustrated by the quantitative findings, whose only surprise was perhaps the consistency with which they depicted similar patterns right around the world.

Of course it could be argued that these results simply reflect the way in which news is defined and structured. According to this argument, we *know* that the main focus of news is on politics and economics so it is no surprise that there are so few women in the news, or that women are represented in such stereotypical ways. One response to this can of course be found within the important strand of feminist media scholarship that has called into question the gendered nature of prevailing news values, definitions and priorities (for example Carter, Branston and Allen, 1998). However, an analysis of almost any other media genre – from entertainment, to drama, to talk shows – will show strikingly similar patterns of gender representation (for a European review, see European Commission, 1999).

These patterns are therefore not uniquely a product of news content or of news values, but a reflection of much more fundamental socio-cultural ideas and values. For instance, qualitative analysis of the 2000 global monitoring data revealed a disturbing absence of female voices in news items that concerned women in very specific ways. Stories that covered plans to establish a Family Court in Jamaica, the high abortion rate among teenagers in Scotland, women's rights to seek divorce in Egypt, maternity plans in Northern Ireland, the punishment of women for marital infidelity in Turkey: these were just some of the cases where the exclusion of any women's point of view seemed blatantly negligent. This tendency to ignore women or – at best – to talk *about*, rather than *to* or *through* women is deeply embedded in normative cultural practices, and therefore in newsgathering and in general production routines throughout the media.

Media representations in general, and of women in particular, are deeply embedded in political and economic contexts. For instance, in Asia the media in many countries have recently seen a spectacular transformation with arrival of new commercial cable and satellite channels, and the privatisation of old state-run media has led to new market-oriented content. Current studies from this region highlight the tensions and conflicts that such changes introduce into representations of women. The findings indicate a greater diversity in women's roles and a move away from the subordinate housewife-mother image. However, studies from India and Singapore point to the often contradictory ways in which the media and advertising are accommodating to women's multiple identities in contemporary society. Images of the 'new woman' as an independent consumer whose femininity remains intact, or as a hard-headed individualist, whose feminine side must be sacrificed, illustrate new stereotypes of women – whose 'femaleness' is always the core issue (for example Wildermuth, 2002; Malhotra and Rogers, 2000; Lee, 1998). Others note the emergence of new and highly sexualised images in the commercial media, for example, in Cambodia and Korea – images that are considered shocking and culturally intrusive (Palan, 1995; Park, 1997; see also *Changing Lenses*, 1999: 20-1).

The numbers tell only a tiny part of the story. Behind them lies a power structure – social, political and economic – in which men are considered to be central and predominant. News values intertwine with political priorities to portray a particular view of what is important. For instance, despite China's declaration during the welcoming ceremony of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women that 'gender equality is a basic state policy', analysis of the official party newspapers in the years following the FWCW has shown that this is the least mentioned basic state policy. In 1996 the *People's Daily* (circulation two million) published over 5,000 articles that mentioned education policy, 400 that mentioned environmental protection, and 221 that

mentioned family planning. But only 20 articles mentioned equality between women and men (Yuan, 1999).

Issues that are particularly central in women's lives come low down in the scale of what is regarded newsworthy. At best, they may become 'news' in coverage around a particular event such as Women's Day. For instance, studies by the Media Monitoring Project in South Africa have shown that while coverage of women's issues increases dramatically in the run-up to National Women's Day (9 August), there is an equally drastic decline immediately afterwards. And despite the increase in coverage around Women's Day, most of it fails to represent women as active participants in society. For example, the initiatives of civil society organizations are largely ignored. In fact, the overall conclusion from this study is that the sharp increase and decrease in stories around Women's Day, allied with inadequate reporting, serve only to underline the marginalization of women in society (Media Monitoring Project, 1998).

These kinds of data illustrate just how deeply embedded is the problem of women's portrayal in the media. It is not simply a matter of notching up a few percentage points in the share of women's time on air or in print. What is at stake is not just the number of women who appear in the media, but their ability to influence. Despite the small shifts noted in some contemporary analyses, by and large media content still reflects a masculine vision of the world and of what is important. The very fundamental nature of this vision means that women's portrayal in the media will not be improved by increasing the number of women journalists, or by getting rid of the worst excesses of sexism in advertising. What it actually requires is a social and political transformation, in which women's rights – and women's right to communicate – are truly understood, respected and implemented both in society at large and by the media. In effect, whether or not a 'critical mass' of women working in the media can make an imprint on media content is a secondary question to the need for wider and deeper social change. This can be illustrated by an analysis of how the media reflect the experiences of two specific groups – older women, and women from ethnic minority communities.

### ***The Disappearing Older Woman***

*This is a business. Our bottom line is affected by one thing: our performance among adults 18 to 49. That is all we sell. That is all our competitors sell.*

NBC head of entertainment, Jeff Zucker (quoted in Goodale and Mason, 2002)

If the 18 to 49 age group is regarded as a desirable market in commercial media terms, the 'premium' market is composed of males between 18 and 34. Even though they make up only 12% of the US population, and watch less television than almost any other demographic group, young males are "far more valuable to advertisers than people who watch a lot of television and are regularly available," according to the Chief Executive Officer of Turner Broadcasting System. Television advertising is a \$36 billion industry in the USA (Nielsen Monitor-Plus, quoted in Goodale and Mason, 2002). In such an intensely commercial media environment, people over 49 (known as 'spillovers' in the industry jargon) are not considered worthy of attention. Industry executives believe that older people spend less money than the young and are unwilling to try new products.

One response from associations of older people – for example, in North America and Europe – has been to try to change the perceptions of marketing and advertising agencies about the 50+ group, stressing their buying power (for example Tréguier, 1999). But such a tactic is completely irrelevant to the vast majority of older people in the world – many of whom live in poverty. And in almost every country women are among the poorest of the poor (HelpAge International, 2002). Buying power is not the issue. In fact, the invisibility of older people – and of older women in particular – in the media is rooted in much deeper causes.

In the United Kingdom, the BBC – a public service broadcasting organization, which accepts no advertising – discovered that in 1999 only 7% of characters seen on its channels were aged 60+, although this group accounts for 20% of the British population. Moreover, the male/female ratio was 7 to 3 – although in the 60+ population women outnumber men. This under-representation occurs despite the fact that the BBC has Producers' Guidelines dealing with the portrayal of older people (Tielen and Groombridge, 2000). A national research study in the United Kingdom in 2000 showed that older women are twice as under-represented as older men, and more likely to be represented negatively (Age Concern, 2000). A 1998 study in six northern European countries found a similar pattern – only 4% of those seen in prime time television were aged 65 and women's share of appearances decreased dramatically in the older age groups. Even in the 35-49 age range women were less than a third of those who appeared, while just 20% of those aged 50+ were women (Eie, 1998). This configuration seems universal. The 2000 Global Media Monitoring Project covering 70 countries world-wide found that in the 50-64 age group men were *six times* more likely than women to appear in the news on television, radio and the press. In the 65+ age bracket, there were twice as many men as women (Spears et al. 2000).

Research from the USA shows that not only does women's share of roles in prime-time television decline precipitously after the age of 40, but that as they get older women are more likely to be cast in the role of 'villain'. This increasing 'villainization' of age is, it seems, confined to women. It is actually reversed in the case of men who, as they get older, are *less* likely to be portrayed in the 'villain' role (Gerbner, 1998). The double standard is undoubtedly linked to a gender-based tendency to judge women in terms of youth and sexuality, and to regard ageing in women as synonymous with de-sexuality. Gender-based assumptions and cultural images of this sort help to shape older women's lived experiences in sometimes devastating ways. In 1997 the Tanzanian Media Women's Association (TAMWA) highlighted a practice, based on beliefs about witchcraft, that was leading to the killing of elderly women in one particular region of the country. TAMWA launched a well-publicized media campaign and public debate that resulted in a three-year plan of action to address the problem of the killings (see Gallagher, 2001). The example is an extreme one, but it reminds us that the 'fantasy' images of the media are rooted in particular cultural discourses, which reflect real power relations in society.

That there is so little research into older women and the media is itself a statement about what and who is assumed to deserve attention. Indeed there has been little feminist analysis of the connections between gender and ageing, even at a general level. These interconnections, and the role of media within them, certainly call for more serious study and debate.

### ***Invisible Ethnic Communities***

*There are very few characters and situations with whom women of color can identify, especially women of color who are not African American. Latinas, Asian American women, and Native American women, to name but the major ethnic groups in the United States, seldom see themselves in any shape or form on the big or the little screen.*  
Valdivia, 2000, p. 169

If women are under-represented or misrepresented in media content, this is doubly so for those women who are not members of the dominant national culture. For example, a study of television news, drama and sitcoms in Malaysia – a multi-ethnic society – concluded that while major ethnic groups were represented, minority ethnic groups such as the Orang Asli (aboriginals) were marginalized from the small screen. Not surprisingly, women from these minority communities were almost invisible. But democratising access to the media means ensuring that all ethnic groups must be given equal opportunity to ‘express publicly their ideas, and anxieties and fears even, so as to provide them with a sense of being part of a nation’ (Anuar and Kim, 1996, p. 277).

Several media monitoring groups have taken up these issues. A study of Canadian drama and news by MediaWatch found that, compared with men from ethnic minority backgrounds, women fell well behind – especially in news, where they were almost invisible either as reporters or as news sources. Ethnic minority women were 3% of all news sources (compared with 25% for women in general and 8% for ethnic minority men). In drama ethnic minority women were likely to be cast in minor, traditionally stereotyped roles (poor, lawbreaker, drug addict etc.). In news they usually appeared in the context of a racially or culturally specific story and were likely to be identified as mothers or victims of violence. Yet ethnic minority groups are the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population. Moreover, studies show that Canadians respond positively to seeing the country’s diversity reflected in the media (MediaWatch, 1994b).

This issue takes on quite another dimension in a country like South Africa where, although 77% of the population is black, black women and men are severely under-represented in media content. A monitoring study of television, radio and print media carried out for Women’s Media Watch in 1999 identified 66% of women as white, and only 25% as black. Other racial groups – Asian and coloured – made up the remaining 8% (Media Monitoring Project, 1999). White dominance was somewhat more marked in television – a finding linked to the fact that many programmes are imported. But in the press too, the overall pattern prevailed. Only one newspaper, the *Sowetan*, had a higher percentage of black (65%) than white (28%) women in its coverage. Racial stereotyping in news topics was disturbing. White women dominated in every topic except politics and government, in which there was an equal balance of blacks and whites; and corruption, where black women were mentioned seven times more than whites. The dominance of white women as programme presenters (65%, compared with 25% blacks) was a further indication that the South African media still portray a white face and voice to a nation that is largely populated by blacks.

It is sometimes argued that both global and local developments in media markets, corporations and technologies open up new possibilities for the production of content targeted at

specific ethnic communities (Cottle, 2000). For example, Korean-Americans can watch Korean television programmes in Los Angeles, Asian-British viewers can watch Indian films on cable television in London, and so on. Again, however, the commercial imperative intervenes. Where ethnic populations are small in number, or widely dispersed, they will not be perceived as providing a viable economic base for a medium dedicated to them. Even when they are large – such as the Hispanic population in the USA – they will be considered as a potential ‘market’ rather than an ‘audience’. Although this is still an under-researched topic, the implications for content seem obvious. Some conclusions can be drawn from a recent study of how a group of working-class Latina women (living in Texas), perceive and evaluate Latina portrayals in Univision and Telemundo, the two largest Hispanic television networks in the United States (Rojas, 2002).

Although the women in this study understood that Hispanic television networks have a commercial base that dictates the need for ratings and profits, they believed that the channels could provide entertainment shows that were less ‘audience-seeking’. Above all, they wanted Univision and Telemundo ‘to stop stereotyping and sexualizing women.’ The women were critical of the sexual representation of Latinas in variety shows, talk shows and telenovelas. And they rejected the ‘homogeneous Latina identity’ promoted by the networks, which purport to be their own ethnic media. The US Latinas in the study could not identify with the Latin American women who populate the programmes of Univision and Telemundo any more than they feel at ease with the television portrayals of white American women such as *Ally McBeal*. In fact, although these networks present themselves as a space ‘to empower Latinos’, and to project a pan-ethnic ideal of Latino unity, this study concludes that what they really do is to exacerbate a sense of otherness and difference.

### ***The Contradictions of Commercialization***

Women have always been a big selling point for the commercial media around the world. The rapidity with which commercialism has taken hold in previously strictly controlled media systems has introduced quite new images and aspirations for women in society. There are both positive and negative sides to this. According to one scholar, in the Middle East the arrival of satellite television “suffused with assumptions and values about individual choice, freedom of action, gender equality” may make a “central contribution to gender politics in the region” (Sreberny, 2000, p. 77). Another point of view – from Lebanon, whose media, especially television stations, supply a heavy diet of practically uncensored Western programming – is that “viewers, especially youths, are confronted with a schizophrenic situation where easily available media products – local or imported – are entirely out of sync with the society they live in and the laws that govern that society” (Dabbous-Sensenig, 2000, p. 15).

Contradictions abound. In Tanzania since 1990 there has been a proliferation of newspapers, magazines and periodicals. For the first time Tanzanians are now exposed to views, opinions and commentaries other than those of the dominant ruling class. The down side is that as newspapers vie for readers, sensationalism and unverified news have become commonplace. In this situation women have suffered most, as they are usually the subject of sensational reporting. Because newspaper sales are all-important, ‘gender sensitivity has often been sacrificed’ (Mtambalike, 1996: 135). In China too, the commercial media have helped to de-



politicize the news traditionally presented by the established party organs, offering audiences a different, more entertaining type of information. And indeed from the perspective of gender, analysis shows that the commercial media in China pay more attention to women and women's issues than has been true of the established media channels. But again there is a tendency to sensationalize the portrayal of women as victims and passive objects, and many articles are 'saturated with details of lurid and unnecessary violence and sex' (Yuan, 1999: 4).

So as state-run media cede control to commercial interests, the struggle for change has become more complicated than before. In their study of the coverage of women's issues in the Indian press, Joseph and Sharma (1994) concluded that the presence of women (and of some gender-sensitive men) had made a difference to coverage of these issues in a number of Indian publications. But with more recent trends in the market-driven, consumer-oriented media those contributions are being eroded. While in the 1970s and 1980s many journalists kept in close touch with grassroots movements and organizations, "today journalists who take strong positions on issues of justice risk derision, if not marginalization. They are often referred to as crusading, campaigning or 'committed journalists' or even 'Mother Teresas of the press'" (Joseph, 2000: 285). So the paradox is that, as more women enter the media profession, proprietors and managements with profit-oriented agendas are exercising more control than ever on editorial matters, making it difficult for journalists of either gender to swim against the tide.

### ***Changing Media Content***

*Unless we learn the language of the media, our journey will become even slower than the one we've already been travelling*  
Portugal and Torres, 1996, p. 13

The issue of the lack of change in media content, despite the measurable presence of more women working in media organizations, has increasingly preoccupied feminist activists and researchers over the past decade. In an important 1994 essay the late Donna Allen, founder of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, emphasized the need to bridge the gap between women's groups and associations outside and inside the media, if women's experiences and viewpoints were to get a better hearing (Allen, 1994). At more or less the same time, groups such as Cotidiano Mujer in Uruguay, the Media Advocacy Group in India (now known as the Centre for Advocacy and Research), Women's Media Watch in Jamaica – to mention just a few – were simultaneously thinking along the same lines (see Gallagher, 2001). Their view was that without interaction and dialogue – between researchers, activists, audiences, advertisers, journalists, radio and television producers – there could be no way out of the impasse in which the debate about gender portrayal appeared to be locked. From this position, establishing a dialogue means not simply trying to get certain 'overlooked' issues or events covered in the media – the traditional feminist approach – but working to promote an entire perspective, a gender vision within the media.

Central to this recent work – which has been developing apace since the mid-1990s – is a search for data, concepts, language and examples capable of involving media professionals, and of stimulating them to think about gender as a factor in the choices they make and the representations they produce. In essence this approach is a form of media education. It argues

that the predictable patterns of gender stereotyping also tend to produce predictable, tired media output – and that paying some attention to gender can lead to more creative, higher quality content. In other words it tries to convince media practitioners that gender is a professional issue. Important keywords in this endeavour include ‘diversity’, ‘balance’, ‘pluralism’, ‘creativity’, ‘innovation’ and ‘quality’.

The development of critical media skills, aimed at engaging the general public in various types of critique and debate around media practices, is another strategy that has been vigorously and successfully pursued over the past decade. Groups like MediaWatch (Canada), the Women’s Media Centre (Cambodia), Women’s Media Watch (South Africa), the Forum for Citizens’ Television (Japan), ZORRA (Belgium) are among those who have spearheaded innovative media literacy approaches with a focus on gender. Apart from programmes aimed at the general public, some groups target specific audiences. For instance in addition to its main website, MediaWatch (Canada) has a special website for young people aged under 25 which includes media literacy tools and topics packaged and presented with a youthful audience in mind ([www.mediawatchyouth.ca](http://www.mediawatchyouth.ca)). Women’s MediaWatch (Jamaica) has been working with young men to analyse media images of masculinity, sexuality and violence (Nicholson and Small, 2002).

In many ways, media education is the bedrock on which other approaches can take root. A media literate public can help to ensure that policies and codes of practice are implemented, that monitoring studies are given credence, and that complaints and protests are listened to. Above all, an informed and media literate audience is in a position to evaluate media content, to make its opinion known, and to push for change.

### **Emerging Issues: Impact of New Technologies**

*To be able to post this message, I have spent close to two hours by the computer waiting for the site to open up.*

Nigerian contributor, 27 September 2002. Online discussion on "Participation and access of women to the media and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women"

For those women who can access and use the new information and communication technologies, there are undeniable benefits. Networking, research, training, sharing of ideas and information – all these can be made infinitely easier through computer-mediated communications. Many women’s organizations have gained national and international visibility through web sites, and have obtained vastly increased access to information about international and regional women’s movement activities (AWORC, 2001). Most women agree that ICTs offer immense possibilities for reducing poverty, overcoming women’s isolation, giving women a voice, improving governance and advancing gender equality – but only if they are made more accessible (Morna and Khan, 2000).

### ***Access: Gender and the Digital Divide***

*The digital divide at the global level is seen also within our own NGO (a media education organization). Our professional members with Internet access are becoming much better informed, but our grassroots members without access are left further behind.*

Jamaican contributor, 20 September 2002. Online discussion on "Participation and access of women to the media and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women"

Accessibility is the fundamental issue. It is estimated that the number of Internet users had reached 501 million by the end of 2001, up from 7 million in 1992. But these impressive figures represent only 8.2% of all people in the world. In most regions only a small proportion of the population is connected: 5% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2.7% in Asia (excluding Japan), and just 0.8% of people in Africa were Internet users in 2001 (ITU, 2002). Some factors – such as technical infrastructure, connection costs, computer literacy and language skills – limit the access of both female *and* male populations. But women are often additionally disadvantaged. Gender roles and relationships affect not simply women's technical skills, financial resources, mobility and availability of time. They also help to determine perceptions of users' needs and preferences, the design of hardware and software, the location and staffing of telecentres and other community access points.

In 2000 the USA became the first country with more female than male Internet users. Women do represent a growing proportion of Internet countries in many regions. But truly significant numbers of women are currently online in only a small number of countries outside the OECD group. In most regions, outside the upper income strata, home access to a computer and to the Internet is not a phenomenon. When women do have access, it is generally in their workplace. In countries with low teledensity, umbrella NGOs at national level can communicate with only a fraction of their members, and regional NGOs can often communicate only with members in capital cities. For many the World Wide Web is frustrating and inaccessible – often due to technical problems and costs of access, but also due to lack of training and knowledge (see AWORC, 2001; Morna and Khan, 2000). Without gender-sensitive policy goals, and adequate financial investment, these inequalities are bound to deepen.

### ***Production and Content***

*Traditionally, the tendency has been to view new technologies introduced into the global marketplace as gender neutral, having equal potential to be used by either men or women ...If women seem to be 'fearful' of technology or reluctant to experiment with new technologies, then this is usually interpreted as a 'female problem', rather than as a reflection of the inappropriate design of the technologies or the aura of male dominance surrounding their use, or both.*

Rathgeber, 2000, p. 23

Despite the hyperbole that often surrounds them, the new technologies are inherently no 'better' than the old ones – print, radio, television and so on. Just as we have had to deconstruct traditional media beliefs, such as 'news is news', so we now have to challenge the idea that 'technology is technology' – i.e. that it is gender-neutral. In fact, patterns of gender segregation which are well known in the established media industries are already being reproduced in the

new information and technology sector. Men are more likely to be found in the high-paying, creative work of software development or Internet start-ups, whereas employees in single-tasked ICT work, such as cashiers or data-entry workers are predominantly female and low-paid (ILO, 2001). Women are virtually absent from senior decision-making and politically influential positions in the ICT sector. According to the European Union's database on women in decision-making, in 2001 women held only 9% of senior management jobs and 9% of positions in the supervisory bodies of the telecommunications industry across 18 countries in Europe (European Database, 2001). In the USA, in 2001 women held 13% of top executive positions and were just 9% of board members of major telecommunications and e-companies (Jamieson, 2001).

The almost complete absence of women from the production of ICT software (and hardware) raises the question of how women's viewpoints, knowledge and interests can be adequately represented in the new media. One of reasons given by women to explain their low attendance at telecentres in Africa is language and content that does not 'speak to them' (Morna and Khan, 2000). Language in this sense is meant as 'mode of address' rather than lack of proficiency in a foreign language – although the latter is also cited as a major problem even by educated women in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Francophone Africa (Farwell et al., 1999). Although the relative presence of English on the Web is declining (an estimated decrease from 75 percent of web pages in 1998 to 51 percent in 2001), English is still the dominant language of Internet content (Funredes, 2001).

The picture that emerges from most analyses of new information and communication content is of a masculinist rhetoric and a set of representations which are frequently sexualised and often sexist. Pornography, e-mail harassment, 'flaming' (abusive or obscene language), and cyber-stalking are well documented (van Zoonen, 2002). It is estimated that 10 percent of sales via the Internet are of a sexual nature, whether in the form of books, video-clips, photographs, on-line interviews, or other items (Lafrance, 1999). Revenue from sex sites is said to be between several hundred million dollars and over two billion dollars annually (Hamelink, 2000). It is revealing that an important early women's website named itself 'cybergrrl', because searching the Net for 'girl' produced mainly sex sites (Sherman, 1998). A recent phenomenon has been the illegal appropriation of existing Internet domain names by creators of pornography sites, with the result that users searching for a legitimate site may inadvertently come across pornographic material instead. In the USA 70 percent of adolescents (aged 15-17) who use the Internet have accidentally come across pornography on the Web, and just under half of these say they were upset by the experience (Kaiser, 2001).

### ***The Internet and Journalistic Practice***

*There is no human intervention. We're flying without a parachute.*

Marissa Mayer, Google product manager, on the introduction of Google's robotic news service (quoted in Kurtz, 2002)

In September 2002 the search engine Google introduced a news service. 'Google News' is culled from approximately 4,000 news sources worldwide and is automatically arranged to present the most 'relevant' news first. Topics are updated continuously throughout the day. According to Google, the service enables readers "to see how different news organizations

(around the world) are reporting the same story. You pick the item that interests you, then go directly to the site which published the account you wish to read.” The news service is compiled solely by computer algorithms, without human intervention. Google employs no editors, managing editors, or executive editors (see [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)).

‘A Novel Approach to News’ is how Google describes its service. But although the technical approach may be novel, the results it produces are predictable and in some senses disquieting. On 15 October 2002, the ‘top news’ listed in the early morning was the Iraqi election, taking place on that day. Out of 258 separate stories sourced for that news 174 came from the USA, and 33 from the United Kingdom. Other sources were Canada 14; India 10; Australia 8; South Africa 5; Ireland 3; Taiwan and Singapore 2 each. Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Oman, Pakistan, and New Zealand furnished one story each. What the listing illustrates is not which of the world’s media are giving priority to a particular piece of news, but which countries’ news services are online – and moreover which are online in English, the language in which the robotic search is made. Thus there is nothing at all from Latin America, and only English-language media from the other regions – ruling out most of Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Francophone Africa. Throughout Africa as a whole, the low level of connectivity makes it unlikely that even English-language media will be adequately represented. It is noteworthy that only South Africa featured in this sample. The ‘world-wide sources’ of Google News therefore boil down to a highly select and geographically slanted grouping.

Equally predictable is the traditional gender patterning in the selection of stories. Google News is divided into seven categories – World, US, Business, Science & Technology, Sports, Entertainment and Health – in each of which 20 top stories are listed in order of ‘relevance’. On 15 October 2002 women were to be found almost nowhere, except in the Entertainment category where the top story announced ‘Baby Sequel for Catherine Zeta Jones’ (who is going to have a second child). Story number five in this category announced that super model ‘Kate Moss Calls Daughter Lila Grace’. Another story featured Madonna’s role in a new film. Apart from these three items, women’s only other appearance was in the category ‘US News’ where story number seven ran with the headline ‘Mom Sentenced in Suicide Case’. So women were the subject of four (6%) of the 70 top stories, and were seen almost exclusively in the role of mother.

Critics have argued that, in the context of the Internet, the essence of journalistic practice – research, critical analysis and interpretation – risks annihilation in the cause of speed, which is the selling point of much online news. The cross-checking of facts, verification of statements and sources, and the search for balance, are all likely to be jeopardised in favour of instant reporting (Dimitrakopoulou, 2002). Google News provides a dramatic example of how the practice of journalism is being reconfigured. And its reception has been enthusiastic. As one journalist concludes, ‘Google News or a similar site will soon become your first stop for breaking news. No team of human editors can compete with 24/7 robots’ (quoted in Kurtz, 2002). When the news structures on which these services are based are so monolithic, and so void of gender sensitivity, the struggle to have women’s voices heard in the international news agenda promises to move into even more difficult terrain.

## *Spaces of Difference*

*The main thing behind the e-zine is the act of self-publishing, of using your right to free speech to 'say' something, and that draws you and another author together, that motivation. I really find that comforting, to know that there are so many people with different interests out there, but we're all kind of bound together through our motivation.*  
E-zine author, quoted in Cresser et al., 2001, p. 465.

Counterbalancing the homogenizing trends exemplified by Google News is the fact that the Internet has brought women's news and views into the public domain with countless websites targeted specifically, if not exclusively, at women. Many of the early sites have not survived, and some have reoriented their columns away from 'serious' news to more 'popular' content. Yet, despite the unfulfilled 'revolution' that many commercial sites promised, at least in the USA, it seems clear that the Web has changed things for a lot of women – primarily in terms of creating strong online communities. "Women's sites encourage women of all ages to become their own publishers and then thrust that content ... in front of the eyes of millions. ... Every point of view is being expressed in the public eye, and that's a start" (Brown, 2000).

Despite the vast amount of content available on the World Wide Web, however, little of it can be of relevance or use to most women in most parts of the world. A web search in early 2000 found some 200,000 websites related to women and gender, but only a fraction of these originated in developing countries (Fontaine, 2000). For most women, content – whether in the established media or the new ones – is directly linked to use. If women are to benefit from ICTs, there must be more relevant content. This pertains to both substance and language. Moreover, it is important that the new technologies such as computer and Internet do not deflect attention from technologies that have been around for longer – radio, television and video, print, CD-ROMs. Often a mix of 'traditional' and new technology is the most appropriate choice. In many situations, the combination of radio and Internet is proving especially powerful.

One example is FIRE (Feminist Interactive Radio Endeavour), created in 1991 as a short-wave radio programme in Costa Rica. In 1998 FIRE launched an Internet Radio initiative, to broadcast women's perspectives on issues and events around the world. Its Web page contains text images and embedded sound files for 'on demand' listening (see CDEACF, 2000, for details of this and other innovative uses of media and ICTs). A different example comes from South Africa, where just 7% of the population can access the Internet, but 90% has radio. Here, the Women'sNet community radio project is based on appropriate technology use. It includes a Web-based clearinghouse of radio content on women's issues, whose main features are a database of searchable audio features, clips and news, links to gender resources for 'radio on the Internet', and a help section that includes information about how to get connected and where to get the right software (Boezak, 2000).

The principle of content repackaging that underlies these and many other projects is a key to providing information to 'unconnected' women. Many 'connected' women – particularly in the global South – can and do act as bridges to unconnected groups in their communities by repackaging information they find online and sharing it through other communication channels such as print, fax, telephone, radio or theatre, sometimes also translating it into more accessible

languages (Farwell et al., 1999; Morna and Khan, 2000). These new linkages and new approaches to information provision hold great promise in terms of bringing women to the centre of media and communication developments in the future.

### **Foundational Issues: Policies and Their Implementation**

*The struggle against sexism is a human rights issue. It is not an issue of morality or censorship.*

MediaWatch (Canada) brochure

In the name of freedom of speech, the media claim the right to represent women as they wish. In the name of claiming the right to fair portrayal, women often find themselves denounced as 'feminist police'. Those who are struggling for change are confronted by this double standard on a daily basis.

The situation is complicated by the fact that advocates for media change may indeed find themselves temporarily in the company of some unlikely and unwelcome travellers. Whether it is conservative groups whose aim is to limit sexual expression, or authoritarian regimes that seek to censor media criticism, women striving for genuine diversity in the media must frequently side-step false allies. The shadowy presence of such unwanted company is just one of the things that can make it difficult to explain to media industry bodies, practitioners and policy-makers that the search for a policy framework within which rights and freedoms can be fairly evaluated has nothing to do with censorship, but everything to do with openness and inclusivity.

### ***Gender and Media Policy***

The two central axes of women's critique of media are quite differently situated in relation to available policies and codes of conduct. Generally speaking, when it comes to issues of employment, things are relatively clear. Many countries have policies, and even legislation, to prevent discrimination in the workplace. These apply to the media industry, just as they do to other occupational sectors. Frequently, media organizations have their own in-house policies and guidelines – sometimes quite elaborate – to ensure that women experience neither direct nor indirect discrimination. Although it is not always easy for employees to make effective use of these policy measures and codes, their very existence is a public statement of the rights and treatment to which women are entitled. Even if policies are implemented inadequately, or sometimes not at all, they do introduce an element of accountability against which organizations can be judged.

In the area of media content, however, the situation is utterly different. In their report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action's media recommendations, WomenAction 2000 concluded that one obstacle common to all regions is the lack of adequate media policy on fair gender portrayal. In many countries a strong ethos of freedom of expression means that self-regulatory measures are entrusted to media enterprises or to compliance/complaints authorities, who often lack monitoring capacity and whose policy frameworks rarely include any consideration of gender. Often action is left to private citizens, who must watch, challenge and litigate. However, in a survey of Canadian women and men carried out for MediaWatch in 2000,

only 6% said they had tried to complain when they were offended by something they saw or heard in the media. This suggests that a complaints-based system of regulation will catch only a very small proportion of those who encounter offensive content, and that other channels of public criticism are needed (MediaWatch, 2000).

One of the problems in mounting successful challenges is that media codes tend to be too general to allow unambiguous interpretation. A review by Isis International of existing codes in nine countries in Asia and the Pacific concluded that concepts were not clearly defined and guidelines were vague, with the result that they can be easily side-stepped (*Changing Lenses*, 1999:146-155). In relation to the Arab States, similar issues are touched on in an extensive report covering nine countries by the Centre for Media Freedom – Middle East and North Africa (CMF MENA, 2000) In Europe a survey of 60 broadcasting organizations across twenty countries found that only nine had any written policy on gender portrayal, and most of these were too vague to be made operational. Just four companies had truly specific written policies on gender portrayal (Gallagher, 1995b). All of these were public service broadcasters – in Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

As a general rule public service companies tend to have more specific codes of practice in this area than the commercial media. For example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's clause on portrayal of women and avoidance of stereotypes is precise in relation to the portrayal of women's roles and physical characteristics, demeaning or discriminatory stereotypes, and the need for gender balance in interviewees and experts (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.). The Code used by the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations simply proscribes material that will seriously offend on grounds of gender. And even this is hedged around with so many caveats that it would be practically impossible to invoke the Code in any challenge (Leonard, 1999). It is not surprising that codes and guidelines are more explicit in public than in commercial media organizations. But the growth of the commercial sector and the shrinking of the public service ethic in most parts of the world means that it will be even more difficult to develop effective codes of conduct in the future.

### ***Policy, Dialogue and Gender-Awareness***

Another major problem is that when codes are specific vis à vis the portrayal of women, this tends to be expressed in moralistic terms in relation to the depiction provocative or obscene imagery. Often these exhortations reflect obsolete interpretations of public taste. For example, the Broadcasting Standards code of the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters of Japan includes a section on 'Sex' whose portrayal must not, *inter alia*, "cause feelings of unpleasantness or consternation" and must not "arouse undue passion on the part of the audience" (Code reproduced in Venkateswaran, 1996). In India the only relevant legislation is the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986, which forbids 'indecent representation' of women in print media, including advertisements. The limitation of obscenity laws is not simply that they are incapable of dealing with the many aspects of gender portrayal that concern women today. The more profound problem is that if they are invoked they help to maintain an extremely conservative system of values to which many women do not subscribe.



But even newly developed codes do not necessarily take account of gender. In Thailand, the initial draft of the Press Council's 1998 Code of Ethics tackled standard issues of accuracy, balanced reporting and the right to reply. However, although the portrayal of women as sex objects is prevalent in the Thai press, this was not covered by the Code. Eventually, after intense pressure by the group Media Consumer Power a new clause was added to the original proposal, stating that news reports must not victimise women or violate their dignity (Siriyusavak, 1999).

The example demonstrates the need for gender specialists to be fully involved when policies, codes and guidelines are being discussed and developed. Gender awareness among most policy-makers and media practitioners is usually low or non-existent. Often the debate and discussion that accompanies analysis of policy proposals can move things forward significantly. In Sri Lanka, the Women's Education and Research Centre (WERC) established a Consultative Forum to draft a set of guidelines on gender portrayal. The chairperson of the state television corporation SLRC and the programme director of one of the private television stations MTV were invited – and accepted – to become members of the Consultative Forum. The resulting Code of Ethics for Gender Representation in the Electronic Media (1999) includes policy recommendations for media managers, a set of guidelines for television producers, guidelines for formulating advertising policy, and an action plan for gender equity in the media (WERC, 1999). Instructive approaches to policy development based on broad consultation and dialogue have also been initiated in countries such as Jamaica, Japan and South Korea (see Gallagher 2001, pp. 39-42).

In countries without well-developed structures for policy implementation, however, there is often a legitimate fear that legislation or codes of practice could simply strengthen the power of government to close or gag unfriendly media in an arbitrary way. In newly emerging democracies, the spectre of censorship is very real. For example, the Women's Media Centre in Cambodia believes that the best solution is media education – with programmes aimed at the general public, the media and relevant policy-makers – to build a climate in which the cultural assumptions that lead to stereotyping and women's oppression are fully understood (see Gallagher, 2001).

### ***Reconciling Rights and Freedoms***

Instinctive media reaction to the idea of any kind of regulation, even voluntary, usually tends to be negative. From a position outside the media, it is sometimes difficult to understand vigorous opposition to attempts to introduce codes that reflect taken-for-granted precepts of civil society organizations. While a requirement to ensure "accurate, fair and responsible reporting" may seem self-evident to some, by others it may be perceived as a jeopardising "fundamental guarantees to freedom of expression and editorial independence" (see Index on Censorship, 2002). In this minefield it is, however, important to work towards frameworks that encourage reflection on the potential conflicts between human rights, freedoms and responsibilities, and which acknowledge that 'rights' have a different legal basis from 'freedoms' (see McIver, 2000). Two examples – from Canada and South Africa – will serve to illustrate different approaches within this problematic area.

Canada has long been acknowledged as having the most detailed codes of conduct on gender portrayal and the most effective mechanisms for their implementation. Backed by a strong culture of public participation in policy development of all kinds, Canadian citizens are exceptionally well positioned to advocate for fair and balanced media content. Since its establishment in 1981 the monitoring and activist group MediaWatch has made regular representations to regulatory bodies such as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) when it believed that gender portrayal guidelines were being flouted. For instance, a four-year campaign to remove sensationalist and sexist American 'shock-jock' broadcaster Howard Stern eventually resulted in his removal from the Canadian airwaves in November 2001. But questions have increasingly arisen about the relative strength of broadcasters and private citizens in cases such as Howard Stern. As one of the CRTC commissioners put it: 'Do complainants become worn down while the broadcaster in question has endless resources to keep up the fight? Do complainants give up on ... the CRTC?' (see *MediaWatch Action Bulletin*, August 1998, p.1).

This is one of the central issues taken up in a detailed analysis of Canada's self-regulatory system, commissioned by MediaWatch. The report concludes that self-regulation has moved the onus of monitoring the media from the government and the media to the public, without fully supporting the public in this effort (Coulter and Murray, 2001). Two of its recommendations are worthy of special note. First, that while Canada's traditional focus on 'gender portrayal' is important, a shift is needed to address issues of gender equality in the context of human rights. Second, that the essence of regulation of the media is defining the balance between 'collective human rights' and 'individual freedom of speech' – a balance that could best be achieved in a 'co-regulatory model' that would include tripartite co-ordination of government, industry and civil society.

South Africa provides a quite different, though equally pertinent example. In 2001 the Department of Communications, which is responsible for communications policy and regulation in South Africa, initiated an investigation to evaluate the effectiveness of broadcast legislation and operational policy in advancing women's position within the media sector, and in promoting diverse images of women in media content. The project, coordinated by Women'sNet, analysed the 1999 Broadcasting Act, the 1996 Telecommunications Act, the 1993 IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority) Act, and the 2000 ICASA (Independent Communications Authority of South Africa) Act, various Codes of Conduct, and the Gender Equality Guidelines produced by the Department of Communication itself. This review highlighted the lack a consistent approach to gender within existing legislation, and insufficient depth of understanding of the ways in which broadcasting and telecommunications policies intersect with discriminatory gender practices. As a result, although constitutional requirements and international conventions are adhered to in the Acts, 'the legislation and policy framework will not facilitate any substantive contribution to transforming skewed power relations' between women and men (Department of Communication, 2002, p.37).

An exemplary aspect of the analysis is that its development went hand in hand with public consultation, as well as on-going discussion with the Department of Communication. In the course of the review, the Department revised its own Gender Equality Guidelines (Department of Communication, 2001). This extremely comprehensive document, intended as a

framework within which all stakeholders in the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors should address gender, makes a significant contribution to the development of an understanding of gender issues as well as advancing concrete proposals to meet the challenges.

The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) – the regulator of the telecommunications and broadcasting sectors – also developed a New Code of Conduct for Broadcasters. As well as introducing a clause on the depiction of violence against women in broadcast material, the Code deals explicitly with the tension between freedom of expression and the rights of women. The Broadcasting Amendment Bill currently under discussion in South Africa, which proposes changes to the 1999 Broadcast Act, will allow ICASA to gazette the new Code of Conduct by regulation (see Broadcasting Amendment Bill, B34-2002: [www.gov.za](http://www.gov.za)). The ICASA clause on rights and freedoms is worth reproducing in full:

*The outcome of disputes turning on the guarantee of freedom of expression will depend upon the value the courts are prepared to place on that freedom and the extent to which they will be inclined to subordinate other rights and interests to free expression. Rights of free expression will have to be weighed up against many other rights, including the right to equality, dignity, privacy, political campaigning, fair trial, economic activity, workplace democracy, property and **most significantly the rights of children and women**. (ICASA, *New Code of Conduct for Broadcasters*, para. 7, emphasis added; see [www.icasa.org.za](http://www.icasa.org.za))*

These recent developments from Canada and South Africa – two countries that have evolved innovative, participatory approaches linking media regulation and gender equality policy – offer some new ways of conceptualising the pursuit of rights and freedoms, and perhaps some possible routes towards their reconciliation.

### **Conclusion: The Next Decade**

*The great challenge of the next decade will be to make technical convergence a ground for gender equity and advancing social justice in the media in a world where deregulation and the privatization of consumption allow wide ambit ... To achieve this ... citizens and consumers around the world must find a new rallying cry and new tools to 'watch the media watchers' who have been delegated as our democratic protectors.*

Coulter and Murray, 2001, p. 116

The changes that are reshaping the world's media, information and communication industries around the world affect all women and men. Concentration of media ownership in fewer and fewer hands, under-funding of public service broadcasting, commodification of news and information, commercialisation of new information and communication technologies – all these, allied with trade and investment regimes that undermine the ability of nation states to pursue progressive media and information policies, limit not only the accountability of national media systems but also the diversity of views that find public expression.

At a global level, the same trends are obvious. In January 2001 one of the largest mergers in corporate history made AOL and Time Warner the world's biggest media company –

combining ownership of online communication channels, cinema, cable and digital television, magazines, book brands and theme parks. There is no sign of a change of direction in this process of media concentration and conglomeration. To take just two examples: the US Federal Communications Commission is presently considering a severe relaxation of its remaining media ownership laws, while a draft Communications Bill currently under discussion in the United Kingdom aims to significantly deregulate the British media system. Meanwhile, national and multinational corporations have become key actors in attempting to shape e-Societies. “Their concerted lobbying, extensive public relations activities and the well-oiled doors connecting cabinet rooms to boardrooms have moved them to the centre of policy formation. In many countries, they are knocking on a door already opened wide by government enthusiasm for marketisation” (Murdock, 2002, p. 389).

But the drive to commercialize the new information and communication channels has not gone unopposed. Indeed the struggle of social movements and campaigning groups around the control and future direction of the Internet has, to a large extent, provided a new impetus for civil society organizations to re-open what had become somewhat defunct debates about the ownership and control of media and communication systems in general. Concepts such as the media as ‘public goods’, the right to communicate, the airwaves and cyberspace as part of a ‘global commons’, have re-entered international discussion – particularly in the context of preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society.

Thus in the past few years we have seen the emergence of many new movements and public interest groups who are questioning the trends in communication and information systems, and who are working towards equality of access. Creating alliances with such groups can be an important strategy for women to consider, for at least two reasons. First, alliance building with other public interest groups does not entail the abandonment of principles or objectives related to gender equality in media systems. But it may provide more leverage in achieving these objectives. The second reason is even more pragmatic. Despite the good intentions of civil society organizations whose work is in pursuit of media democracy, many of them operate within a paradigm that ignores gender differences and the specific issues that these differences raise. To the extent that such organizations are successful in making their voices heard, those voices may – yet again – exclude women.

In March 2001 the MediaChannel – a global network of media issues groups – published some twenty media declarations, emanating from different parts of the world, aimed at promoting reflection and mobilising action on citizens’ rights in the field of media, information and communication (see [www.mediachannel.org/issues](http://www.mediachannel.org/issues)). Only four of these statements make any reference to gender. In pursuit of women’s democratic rights and freedoms in the media, there is still a long road to travel.

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