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**Participation and access of women to the media,
and information and communication technologies
and their impact on and use as an instrument
for the advancement and empowerment of women**

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[English only]

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Introduction

The Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 identified women and the media as one of 12 critical areas of concern. Two strategic objectives highlighted the actions to be taken to increase women's participation in, and access to, media and new communication technologies, and to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. These formed the basis for further work in this area.

Eight years on these objectives seem more urgent than ever. The extraordinarily rapid growth of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), the convergence of media through digital technologies and telecommunications, and the increasingly globalised nature of media/technological systems through cable and satellite technologies have produced claims that we are becoming a global information society or that we have entered a 'new information age'. Compared with even a few years ago the world seems ever more saturated with media. If we look at internet connections alone, these have doubled every year since 1996. We are living in an increasingly mediated world.

Observing these trends I am struck by two apparently contradictory things. On the one hand is the sense of a world speeded up, changing, transforming and in flux -- with the emphasis on speed, miniaturisation of technologies and the promise of the new: 3G, picture messaging, digital cinema, P2P, mobile faxes, voice controlled computers, wireless networks, ambient technologies -- these are just some of the new developments promised in the last few months to affluent consumers in the North/West. But on the other hand, against this image of rapid change, one observes the stubborn persistence of old patterns and inequalities, especially in relation to gender: stereotypical portrayals of women, familiar from the 'old' media become a feature of new media; existing patterns of poverty and exclusion are not challenged but reinforced by new digital divisions that leave the world's poor, elderly, disabled and rural-based women worse off; while employment in the industries created by information and communication technologies throws into sharp relief the new international division of labour in which men from the developed world own, control and manage the vast majority of ICT enterprises, and women are concentrated in the lowest paid jobs - whether they are data entry personnel in India, assembling microprocessors in China, or staffing call centres in the UK.

This new information and media saturated world, then, offers opportunities, but also poses dangers. There is a huge potential to use the media and ICTs for the empowerment of women -- for knowledge sharing, lifelong learning, advocacy, community building, support and solidarity, political participation, entertainment and pleasure, as well as economic activities. But the danger is that without urgent and radical intervention the new media age or information society will simply exacerbate existing inequalities, produce new divisions and exclusions relating to access to new technologies, concentrate power in the hands of ever smaller group of commercial organisations, and produce 'market-led' content that is at best stereotypical and at worst highly sexualised and/or culturally insensitive.

In what follows I am going to focus on examining three key areas -- the portrayal of women in the media; ownership, control and employment in media and information industries; and questions of access to information and communication technologies. In each, I'll summarise key findings and raise issues for research and policy.

The portrayal of women in the media

Despite four decades of activism, research and policy initiatives in this area, the portrayal of women in the media remains a cause for concern. The Global Media Monitoring Project (the first truly international analysis of media representations of women) found that an average of only 17 percent of news actors were women. Five years later in 2000 this figure had only increased to 18 percent.ⁱ Even in those countries where women's portrayal is highest fewer than one-third of news actors is female. Many women are quite literally invisible in media representations -- poor women, older women, disabled women, women who do not identify as heterosexual and women in rural areas of the developing world. Entrenched patterns of bias and distortion exist for the representation of minority ethnic women in most countries, and the negative portrayal of female refugees and asylum seekers in Western Europe, the US and Australia and constitutes a grave cause for concern.

The small numbers of women represented in news media is a target for action, but so too is the way in which women are presented. Women in news appear in a narrow range of roles -- often as victims or to provide expression of emotion. Women are frequently presented in ways that trivialize their concerns and focus disproportionately on their appearance. The tyranny of 'beauty' or 'attractiveness' has become worse not better in the last decade, and women's appearance is repeatedly commented upon and evaluated in the press, radio, television and the world-wide web in ways which have no parallel for men (despite the increasingly eroticised representations of men's bodies in some media in some parts of the world). Women's images are consistently more likely to appear than their arguments or opinions. The flip side of this is that women who do not conform to the media's requirement that they be 'eye candy' are subject to vilification. The viciousness with which women are attacked for 'failing' to meet normative modes of attractiveness is increasing -- anecdotal evidence for this is abundant but systematic analysis to document this and other backlash patterns would be very useful.

Women in positions of power and responsibility do not escape from the negative patterns of representation that affect other women. For example, women in Parliaments and National Assemblies receive significantly less media coverage than their male colleagues, even when their relatively small numbers are controlled for. Women's age and marital status are routinely commented upon in news reports, they are frequently referred to only by their first name, photographed in domestic rather than parliamentary settings and have their physical appearance excessively picked apart by journalists. In a comparative study of female parliamentarians in Britain, South Africa and Australia last year, Karen Ross offered many examples of the media's obsession with what women look like, and many angry reflections on it by female politicians: 'Women are never right age. We are too young, we are too old. We are too thin, we're too fat. We wear too much make up, we don't wear enough. We are too flashy in our dress, we don't take enough care. There isn't a thing we can do that is right'ⁱⁱ

Another key theme of the reporting of powerful women is the focus upon their childcare responsibilities, which women in power are asked about repeatedly, whether they are the first female mayor of Mumbai or 'Blair's babes' in the UK.ⁱⁱⁱ Men in similar positions are never asked who is looking after their children. The net effect of the reporting of female parliamentarians constitutes an attack on women's rights to occupy positions of power, and frequent and consistent undermining of their credibility. This focus on how powerful women are represented shows that media representations of the world are consistently more sexist and male dominated than actuality.

Reporting of violence against women remains a key area for policy and action. Research on news has identified a number of very worrying features of the ways in which sexual attacks against women are dealt with.^{iv}

*The media present a distorted picture of rape and sexual violence, disproportionately reporting extremely violent attacks by strangers in public places and ignoring the far more common experience that women are attacked by men they know in private spaces.^v

*There has been a dramatic increase in news reporting of sexual attacks in recent years, but also a parallel narrowing of the focus so that 'ordinary' rapes are no longer judged newsworthy and only the most extreme and bizarre attacks get reported.^{vi}

*There are systematic patterns of reporting of sexual violence, following lines of class, race, age and ethnic bias in particular countries. In the UK, for example, rapes of white and middle-class women are more likely to be reported, rapes of older women rarely make the news, and photographs of convicted rapists are much more likely to be shown if the defendant is black.^{vii}

*Rape reporting is refracted through a series of myths which work to systematically mis-understand its nature and causes. Common myths drawn upon by the media include the idea that women ask for or deserve rape; the notion that rape is 'just' sex; myths about the class, ethnic and racial background of the rapist; the idea that rape is a crime motivated by lust (rather than by power); and the idea that women 'cry rape' for revenge. Also, two common views of rape and masculinity find expression in the media -- first the notion that the rapist is a deranged stranger or monster, different from all other men, and secondly (and contradictorily) the notion that all men are 'testosterone timebombs')^{viii}

*Accounts of rape are often reported only from the attacker's point of view^{ix}

*Reports of rape are very often designed to be titillating with highly sexualised descriptions of victims and of the attack, plus selective use of photographs. In the UK more than half the reports of rape in the tabloid press appear in the pages on either side of Page 3 which features a topless model.^x Similarly, reports of sexual attacks are often juxtaposed with other 'news' stories that feature photographs of semi-naked or scantily clad women^{xi}.

*There is growing evidence that rape stories are being used as part of a package of soft porn by media conglomerates. One study found that in the newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch there was no duplication of news stories about rape -- thus undermining the claim to be reporting matters of public interest, and suggesting that the Murdoch press was creating a situation where men could buy one newspaper and read about one set of rapes and then buy another of the papers from the Murdoch's stable and read about an entirely different set of rapes^{xii}.

Lisa Cuklanz has compared factual (news and current affairs) representations of sexual violence with fictional ones on US television, and has concluded that news reporting of rape is consistently worse than fictional depictions^{xiii}, although all media and genres contribute to a climate in which violence against women is routine^{xiv}.

This leads to another area of urgent concern: namely the increasing sexualization of media content across all forms of media. Like the video recorder before it, the growth of the internet has been driven by pornography, and -- although estimates vary -- it is clear that a very significant amount of Internet use/traffic is related to the consumption of pornography. However, the increasing sexualisation is not limited to the internet, and what we are seeing across media, I would argue, is the normalization of pornography -- 'porno chic' is already a 'respected' category in fashion and across women's magazines, and is clearly present in advertising as well. This type of representation is fuelled by the massive expansion of cable and satellite networks, combined with ongoing deregulation by national governments. In the context of globalization, increasing sexualisation represents a particular concern as highly sexualized representations of women are beamed into households across the globe. Studies from Singapore and India point to the impact of new commercial cable and satellite channels and the privatization of state run media, highlighting the contradictory ways in which such markets led networks are addressing women as independent consumers and highly sexualized subjects^{xv}. In South Korea, the advent of American media products in the mainstream produced a new commodified representation of female sexuality. One outcome of this is that the demand for cosmetic surgery has increased exponentially -- with eye-reshaping interventions the most requested surgical procedure, as young South Korean women seek to emulate the 'wide eyed' look of American movie stars. In Fiji, ten years ago, there was no recorded incidence of eating disorders. Since the arrival of television anorexia has reached epidemic proportions in a matter of only a few years^{xvi}. Clearly, I would not want to suggest any simple causal relationship here -- these are complex matters -- nor

to imply that the women affected were simply passive dupes, however, the findings point to worrying issues, and the need for urgent research on our globalized/localized media environments.

One of the major problems with dealing with these issues is the absence of policies or regulatory mechanisms at national levels that deal with gender and, specifically, with sexism as the problem. WomenAction 2000 concluded that this was a major common obstacle affecting women in all regions. Activists come up against this difficulty repeatedly in trying to challenge particular portrayals, and often some find themselves forced to rely on legislation concerned with the depiction of explicit sex -- aligning them with conservative groups with aims diametrically opposed to their own. The Beijing Platform for Action stated in paragraph 243 that governments and international organizations should 'promote the concept that the sexist stereotypes displayed in the media are gender discriminatory, degrading in nature and offensive;' and 'take effective measures or institute such measures, including appropriate legislation against pornography and projection of violence against women and children in the media'. These actions are urgently needed. Some groups have attempted to rework legislation concerning racism, and have also attempted to think about some aspects of the portrayal of women in terms of hate speech, but a major task at national and international level is to create regulatory authorities that take gender discrimination seriously. Too often media representations are seen as 'just talk or just a picture' and their impact as discriminatory practices with material consequences for women is dismissed.

Ownership, control and employment

In some affluent developed countries an increasing number of women have entered the media industries in the last few years. In the US, for nearly two decades, women have constituted more than half of the students on journalism and media training courses, and some people have argued that sections of media employment are becoming 'pink collar ghettos'.^{xvii} However, claims about feminisation -- even in developed economies -- are an exaggeration. There is persistent evidence of both vertical and horizontal segregation, with women concentrated in the lower status parts of the industry, and at lower levels in the hierarchy. Moreover, the large-scale entry of women into these jobs has pushed the status and pay of media professionals down -- in a manner well-documented from other industries (e.g. teaching).^{xviii} We are also seeing the emergence of new, more complex forms of discrimination -- one example being the difficulties facing women with children. The research on this topic indicates that women still have to make a choice between employment in demanding media jobs and having children -- a choice which men simply do not have to face.^{xix}

Equally importantly, the large-scale entry of women into media work has not translated into better, fairer, or more progressive representations of women in the media in the manner often expected (or at least hoped-for). Early research on this did not adequately take into account the powerful institutional and structural constraints in operation or the significance of professional ideologies or commercial imperatives in producing content.^{xx} Clearly, something more significant than simply more women is needed and policies will have to address not simply access to such employment, but also powerful existing structures. It should also be noted that most of the expansion of women's presence in media occupations has been dominated by white middle-class women in northern developed economies, and there is little sense that this has had any impact on other women within the same countries, let alone elsewhere in the world.

The concentration of ownership and control of a small number of giant global media corporations with interests in film, television, radio, newspaper and magazine publishing as well as Internet and telecommunications is having a negative effect on diversity and leading to increasingly homogenous media content/product. Feminist work to date has not adequately engaged with the macro political economy of media enterprises, preferring instead to focus on the output or representations produced in the media. However as a small number of giant enterprises increasingly dominate the media this will represent an urgent area for attention, and we cannot afford to ignore it. The growing dominance of AOL/Time Warner, Sony, Viacom, Bertelsmann

and Disney accounts for an increasing proportion of media content globally. These giant corporations operate outside the control of any national regulatory system, and are prime candidates for intervention at the international level. Significant trends at the national level include the deregulation of media, the shedding of public service commitments, increasing commercialism and reliance upon standardized formats that can be easily adapted and sold. The growth of the 'pornographization' of the media is one outcome of the demand for cheap content that can be easily packaged and sold to different global audiences. Studies from India and Jamaica have also highlighted the similar role played by easily packagable and globally translatable violence^{xxi}.

The rapid expansion of information and communication technologies has offered lots of new jobs for women, but these are often low paid and place women at the bottom of employment hierarchies. Jobs in hardware and software design are dominated by men, while those involving repetitive and menial tasks are predominantly regarded as women's jobs. An interesting development in Western Europe and the US is for a new generation of creative workers in IT to have come from art and design backgrounds, rather than backgrounds in computing -- which potentially offers an easier entry for women into fields like Web design, animation, Internet broadcasting and computer games design^{xxii}. However, a dramatic feature of work in these fields is its increasingly casualized nature, with most people working as freelancers, with no job security, no benefits in the form of health or maternity cover, and patterns of stop-go working that have been characterised as 'bulimic'.^{xxiii} Entry to such jobs is on the basis of personal networks, and requires huge investments of time outside normal working hours. The research on these workers shows that women are systematically disadvantaged, gaining fewer contracts and earning less money, despite equal or better qualifications than their male counterparts. The evidence shows that this work is frequently performed outside traditional employment structures, which means that gender equality legislation is frequently ignored, protection for workers is non-existent and there is little unionisation.^{xxiv}

Access to ICTs

The development of internet based technologies has huge potential for the empowerment of women, and e-mail, faxes and the World Wide Web have already been used extensively by NGOs and women's activist groups in the run-up and follow-ups to the Beijing conference and Beijing plus 5, often supported by the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Programme^{xxv}. The opportunities for networking and sharing information, for lobbying and getting women's voices heard in the seats of power are immense, and many, many existing projects are using and developing this potential everyday, often with great creativity and inspiration. Given the huge energy and creativity that is evident in the use of new information and communication technologies, it may be easy to forget that only a tiny minority of the world's population have access to them. The entire population of Africa represents only 1% of the world's users of the internet, and indeed in South Asia and sub Sahara Africa only 1.5 percent of the population has access to a telephone line. This figure for telephone-access is 17.3 percent in Latin America, compared with well over 95% in Western Europe. But definitions of access are problematic, and may even overestimate the degree to which women have the potential to use these technologies -- since they are usually based on information about proximity to a particular technology, without questions about knowledge, training, time availability, or cultural practices that might impact on potential use. Figures can also be misleading: for example, the statement that women constitute 51 percent of Internet users in The Philippines may present a rosy picture of female participation in the Internet revolution, until one is made aware of the fact that only 1% of the entire population of The Philippines has access to the Internet -- thus we are talking about half of 1%!^{xxvi} Overall, access to information and communication technologies is characterized by multiple divisions -- divisions between rich and poor nations are most stark, but there are also many other digital divides between men and women, urban and rural populations, old and young, and different class, caste and ethnic groups within countries.

The barriers to access to information and communication technologies for women are well-known and have been extensively discussed in many different forums.^{xvii} They include lack of infrastructure (including stable electricity supply and telephone lines), costs of use, unavailability of training, poor access to technical support, illiteracy, the dominance of English, cultural inhibitions, and lack of time. All these issues need to be addressed if we are to seriously promote greater access to ICTs for women globally.

But as well as promoting access, it is also important, I would argue, to ask some critical questions about what we are promoting access to. Why is it important and for whom?

Beyond connection

I have observed a tendency in recent years to 'fetishize' connection to the internet -- perhaps because it can be measured, and thus policies to promote it can be effectively evaluated (although measurement is problematic, as we have seen). But it is also important to think about what we are advocating connection to. Just how interesting is the English based, US dominated World Wide Web content to most of the world's women? Not very, I would suggest. We need to look beyond access to think about the production of new content, and to support organizations that are producing local, relevant content for women. If you are only just surviving and having to walk many miles a day just for access to clean water, access to an internet connection may not be a priority. But it could be -- if the content were different and if it offered you something of interest and relevance to you or your neighbours -- maybe local weather forecasting which would help with crop planting and harvesting, or health information.

The best ICT projects are those that are not introduced as ICT projects to give women access or get them connected, but are integrated seamlessly into those women's lives and concerns. All the evidence from those countries where women represent a significant proportion of internet users shows us that women use ICT is as a tool or a means of doing something else. That is, rather than thinking 'I must get IT literate' women begin to learn (if they can get over the barriers to entry and access) when they want to (for example) get more information about breast cancer or HIV treatments having just been diagnosed, or they want to research their family tree and know that government demographic information is online, or they want to mobilise around a particular identity (for example a minority sexual identity or ethnic identity). This should not be ignored, but understood and the lessons from it applied more generally.

This implies two things -- first that there needs to be much more support for locally produced content, produced by women and for women, in local languages and organized around specific sets of women's concerns. Secondly, it implies that ICT policy not only needs to be rethought in terms of gender, but it also needs to be considered in an integrated fashion. I would suggest that as well as specific policies and projects on gender and ICT what is needed is a mainstreaming of gender/ICT concerns so that they inform every other area of policy and practice. A project on domestic violence prevention -- how could ICT be used effectively here? A project to increase the uptake of immunizations -- how could ICTs contribute to this? In this way, gender and ICT policy could be integrated into all new and ongoing initiatives, rather than being treated as an add-on, another target that women must achieve. What is missing, however, is research on women's information needs and desires -- very little exists -- and we need to start from this place -- from the bottom up -- and integrate technology organically into women's lives by addressing their immediate and pressing concerns.

Finally, I would argue that governments and non-governmental organisations at national and international levels need to beware of becoming fixated upon internet based technologies at the expense of ignoring older existing forms of information and communication technologies. Older information and communication technologies can have a positive and empowering impact on women's lives-- whether we are talking about using video diaries in women's youth projects, creating leaflets, magazines or local papers on particular issues, or the wonderful potential of radio which, in my view, can be the most empowering communication technology, particularly in

contexts where the majority of women are illiterate^{xxviii} Radio is already playing a huge role in empowering women through sharing information and addressing concerns of interest to them-- in the recording of village meetings in Zimbabwe, through participatory women's programmes in Ghana, Sri Lanka, India and Costa Rica. Economical, easy to produce and -- through solar technologies and windup radios -- cheap and easy to access, radio has a big future in projects to empower women.

Key points for policy and research: summary

*Research is urgently needed to examine the increasingly narrow range of representations of acceptable body size, shape and appearance across the world.

*The growing sexualization of media output needs to be systematically analysed
-- in terms of globalisation
-- in terms of the impact of cable, satellite and internet technologies and the increasing privatization and deregulation of media systems

*The impact of sexualization/pornographization is not well understood. We need research in different countries to examine its effects on women's well-being, self-esteem, body image, health and experience of violence.

*The lack of regulatory frameworks or mechanisms dealing with gender and sexism constitutes a major obstacle to women seeking to challenge existing media representations in all regions. Pressure should be put on national governments to take seriously the effects of media representations as discriminatory practices (and also we need to pool information on the best practice and use of existing regulatory mechanisms)

*Research and action are needed to explore and challenge the barriers to women 'making a difference' in media organizations. Analysis and policy must move on from assuming that more women will mean better representations of women and must interrogate the structures, ideologies and commercial imperatives that prevent this.

*Research and policy on gender at national and international levels needs to engage with the political economy of media/ICT enterprises -- particularly in the context of the increasing concentration of ownership, and the domination of media/ICTs by less than ten global conglomerates which are increasingly operating outside national controls.

*Patterns of employment in new media are in danger of reproducing existing patterns of exclusion, hierarchy, pay and so on. A particular concern in developed countries is the increasing casualization of such work and its operation outside traditional employment structures and social security protections. Research is needed to analyse this further in specific contexts, and to generate policy proposals to challenge the new and flexible forms of discrimination that are emerging

*New and existing measures to promote women's access to and use of information and communication technologies should be stepped up and encouraged, building on the good practice established to date. However, we need to look beyond access and connection to support the production of new, locally relevant content for women, in local languages and specific areas, starting from women own needs. There is currently little research on women's information needs -- this needs to be urgently addressed across a variety of regional and local settings.

*ICTs need to be mainstreamed into all policy areas and programmes, rather than treated as an add-on.

*We need to beware of fetishizing the newest of the ICT's, and remember the enormous value of older, existing technologies for the empowerment of women -- radio being an excellent example of a cheap, accessible, portable technology that is well-suited to contexts in which a majority of women are illiterate.

ⁱ Participation in an access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women. United Nation's Economic and Social Council: Report of the Secretary-General, 30 December 2002

ⁱⁱ Dawn Primarolo MP, quoted in Ross, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Gallagher, 2001; Ross, 2002

^{iv} e.g. Carter, 1998; Soothill & Walby, 1991; Benedict, 1992; Cuklanz, 1996 & 2000; Caputi; Ussher; Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting; Women's Media Watch (South Africa)

^v Carter, 1998

^{vi} Meyers, 1997

^{vii} Soothill & Walby, 1991

^{viii} Benedict, 1992

^{ix} e.g. Women's Media Watch, South Africa

^x Carter, 1998

^{xi} Gill, in press

^{xii} Soothill & Walby, 1991

^{xiii} Cuklanz, 1996 & 2000

^{xiv} for example the normalisation of violence against women in advertising

^{xv} Reported in Gallagher, 2001

^{xvi} Orbach, 2001

^{xvii} Creedon; Lafky

^{xviii} Creedon; Lafky

^{xix} Sieghart & Henry

^{xx} Van Zoonen, 1998

^{xxi} Reported in Gallagher, 2001

^{xxii} Gill & Dodd, 2001

^{xxiii} Pratt, 2000

^{xxiv} Gill, 2002; Christopherson et al, 2001

^{xxv} The APC women's programme is a global initiative aimed at facilitating access to and use of computer communications by women in order to redress gender inequities in the design, implementation and use of ICT's, as well as the policy decisions and frameworks that regulate them -- see Farewell et al, 1999

^{xxvi} Quoted in Huyer, 2002

^{xxvii} WomenConnect; Huyer, 2002; Harcourt, 1999; UN Secretary General's Reprt (op cit- note 1)

^{xxviii} current estimates suggest that one in two women in developing countries cannot read or write.

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