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PANEL I

**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**

Written statement submitted by

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Paper for panel on “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,” during the 47th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, United Nations, New York, 3 March 2003.

Special focus:

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING, BEIRUT, NOVEMBER 2002:
OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Ammu Joseph

- ❖ The status of women and the status of the media are both key indices of the development and democratization of a society.
- ❖ Media, in all their forms, are central to women’s advancement and empowerment.
- ❖ Women's rights are human rights. Women’s right to freedom of expression and to information, which includes their right to speak and be heard, as well as their right to enter and participate in media professions, are fundamental to the realization of all their rights and freedoms.
- ❖ The dramatic changes in the global media and communications systems over the past couple of decades have major implications for women's access to the media, communication and information as both users and professionals, for the representation of women and their experiences and perspectives in the media, and for policies relating to women's access to and participation in the media as well as their advancement and empowerment in society.
- ❖ The hitherto parallel debates about women's rights and about communication systems must converge so that women’s concerns about their access to media and their right to freedom of expression and communication are acknowledged and taken into account in all discussions on matters relating to the freedom, ownership and control, and structures of the media.

The deliberations of the Expert Group Meeting on the “Participation and access of women to the media, and the impact of media on and its use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women,” held in Beirut in November 2002, rested on the firm foundation provided by these fundamental principles.

The ten experts, two consultants and six observers from different corners of the world who took part in the meeting were united in their understanding that concerns about gender vis a vis the media can no longer be compartmentalized as a special interest side-show with little relevance to or impact on supposedly larger issues regarding media and communication. Nor, we agreed, could they any longer be confined to questions of women's representation in media content and professions. We were and are convinced that they have to be viewed and discussed in the context of recent developments in the field of media and communication, which have rendered the situation more complex than ever and present new challenges as well as opportunities.

Our discussions focused on four aspects of the subject:

- ~ Policies as enabling frameworks
- ~ Access to employment and decision-making
- ~ Representation, portrayal and other issues of content

~ Impact of new media technologies, professions and content

This paper represents an attempt to summarize the debate on the many issues involved in each of these areas, highlighting the key insights and recommendations that emerged from the meeting.

I. POLICIES

A. Imperatives

Policy must be understood not as an abstract concept but as a practical tool which, when effectively used by groups both inside and outside the media, can improve and transform an existing situation.

In view of the critical role of media, communication and information in promoting democracy and development, nation states must reassert their ability to formulate and pursue progressive communication policies, which has of late been compromised by the process of globalization, including the spread of transnational media, as well as by trends towards concentration of media ownership, under-funding of public service broadcasting, commodification of news and information, and commercialization of the new ICTs. The accountability of national media systems and their vital role in facilitating public expression and promoting diversity in information and opinion must be reaffirmed and safeguarded. Women's right to access and participate in media and communication, and their right to information, must be understood and secured in this context.

At present few communication policies or laws take gender into consideration and few among those who frame them even notice this fact. Generating awareness among official decision-makers about the importance and impact of gender is a necessary first step towards ensuring that the gender dimension is built into all legal and policy frameworks relating to the media, communication and information. In addition, more women with the requisite knowledge, experience and perspective must be inducted into decision-making positions in this field.

Among the different categories of policy and legislation referred to here are those that support freedom of expression and information, deal with standard-setting and accreditation, concern broadcast licensing and frequency distribution, and/or relate to telecommunications and matters of universal access. A gender-sensitive approach can help make all of them more comprehensive, inclusive and equitable.

Policy frameworks and systems of regulation can both be strengthened by the inclusion of a range of perspectives, including the interests and opinions and of women in general and women from disadvantaged communities in particular. They can also benefit from an equitable sharing of responsibilities between independent regulatory bodies, media organizations and civil society, including women.

Regulatory or standard-setting bodies and media organizations must not only introduce gender-sensitive codes of conduct and ethical guidelines but also ensure that they are implemented. Codes and guidelines based solely on narrow concepts of gender portrayal must be expanded to incorporate the broader framework of human rights and equality rights. Such an approach would help create awareness about women's rights in relation to the media, communication and information, expose violations of these rights, and enable action for change in consonance with international human rights law.

Research is required to generate information on the gender aspects and implications of media content and performance, in the context of existing laws, policies, codes and guidelines, for use in

dialogue, advocacy and lobbying efforts to help implement, change or develop appropriate, gender-sensitive legislation and policies.

The distinction between state-controlled and public service media must be clarified, understood and accepted. Public broadcasters must be de-linked from government and placed under autonomous, accountable, publicly appointed bodies constituted with due attention to transparency and gender parity. Public and community media organizations must promote the public interest and reflect the experiences, concerns and perspectives of diverse publics, including heterogeneous groups of women. Public service mandates, developed through public debate and agreement, must reflect concerns about gender equality in content, production, management and ownership structures.

Where public and/or community media systems do not exist or are under pressure or threat from the intensification of market-oriented media, official policies and financial measures must be introduced to support and strengthen or create such media in the public interest. Independent regulatory bodies, media organizations and civil society must also strive to convince private, commercial media organizations that diversity is good for business. In addition, both public and private media organizations must recognize that the privileges and protections they enjoy in democratic societies are due to their special status as repositories of the public trust. They must also be conscious that women constitute at least half of the public they are meant to serve in that capacity.

The public must be educated about media systems and content, and about regulatory standards and instruments, so that citizens, including women, become aware that substantive, well-formulated and properly targeted complaints can yield results. Simple, accessible templates and checklists for media monitoring, along with information on effective means of communication with the relevant bodies and organizations, can encourage women to overcome their sense of powerlessness and the resulting “culture of silence” in order to take constructive action for positive change.

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women’s groups, do and must continue to play an important role in lobbying for the development and implementation of policy in the field of media, communication and information. At the same time, if their efforts and initiatives are to be effective and replicable, they must be recognized and supported through both policy and resources, including funds.

B. Recommendations

The Expert Group Meeting generated a number of recommendations relating to policy frameworks, which were addressed to different sets of actors – ranging from the UN and inter-governmental bodies through governments, regulatory bodies in the field of media and communication and national mechanisms for the advancement of women, to media organizations, professional associations, institutions of media education, and CSOs. The detailed recommendations are available in the full text of the report, which is in the public domain (and has been since December 2002). In the interest of brevity, only a few priority areas for action are highlighted here.

- (i) There is clearly an urgent need to incorporate a gender perspective into the analysis and development of policy and legislation, and into efforts to monitor their implementation. Policies meant to protect and promote freedom of expression, as well as the right to communication and information, must not only recognize and affirm women’s right to these, but also aim to create an enabling environment for women to access their rights. This principle applies equally to the various agencies involved in formulating policy at the national and international levels, in the public sphere as well as within organizations, both public and private.

- (ii) Incentives are practical means to achieve desirable ends – in this case, to encourage media organizations to institute and implement gender-sensitive policies linked to measurable targets. Linking the grant or renewal of broadcast licenses to the institution and implementation of such policies could be one such incentive. Establishing the potential commercial benefits of gender-awareness and sensitivity through research could yield more indirect but persuasive incentives.
- (iii) The importance of regulation as well as financial support for public service and community media is more evident than ever in the present, increasingly market-driven media environment. Media that address the interests, needs and concerns of diverse publics, including women, need to be preserved and protected through policy and regulation. In this context a critical recommendation of the EGM calls for the protection of cultural products in free trade agreements in order to ensure the survival and independence of public service broadcasters and their continued adherence to local content requirements, which generally allow women's voices to be heard.

II. EMPLOYMENT AND DECISION-MAKING

A. Imperatives

Access to employment and decision-making in media and communication is central to women's human rights. Although more women are entering and using the media, concerns about their access to employment and decision-making remain. Concerted efforts are still required to counter persistent trends that limit women's access to and participation in the media.

Women's representation in senior, decision-making levels must be consciously boosted in media and communication organizations worldwide, including in the new information and communication technology industry. Their increased access to male-dominated sections of the news media, such as political, business and sports journalism, and male-dominated functions within the media, such as technical jobs, must also be actively encouraged.

Access and participation must be promoted among women of color and those who belong to religious or ethnic minorities or other socially excluded groups, who are currently under-represented in the media.

Persistent obstacles to women's advancement in media occupations, including social roles and attitudes, lack or paucity of institutional support and training, exclusion from influential networks, and sexual harassment, must be acknowledged, understood and removed.

The high attrition rate of women from the media industry, even among those who have achieved some measure of success, must be recognized as a serious problem which impacts not only individual women but their organizations and the industry as a whole. The reasons for this worldwide trend must be studied, analyzed and addressed through a variety of measures, including gender sensitization of media managers, modifications in organizational systems and structures, training, professional networking and mentoring.

The factors that continue to limit women's capacity to influence media content must be addressed. Documentation, analysis and action are required to improve not only gender portrayal in the media as a whole but also the representation of women's experiences and views in news, including coverage of situations of conflict.

Efforts must be made to ensure that the intensified competition in and accentuated commercialization of the media in recent times, and the consequent shifts in media priorities and preoccupations, do not detract from the primary purpose of the news media in particular, which is to serve the public trust. Dominant, traditional news values and hierarchies that came into being in a male-dominated media environment must be reviewed and modified to ensure that the media serve the varied needs and reflect the varying concerns of the public in all its diversity, including different categories of women.

Women in the media must be empowered to assert their opinions regarding content instead of passively adapting to prevailing norms that do not serve the public interest, including the interests and concerns of women. Those who face criticism, censure or discredit for bringing sensitive political and social issues into the public arena must be supported, especially when the legitimate issues they raise are conveniently projected as attacks on or betrayal of religious or cultural identities and values.

Technology-enabled efforts to generate and highlight news and information that addresses a wide range of issues, including those of special interest and concern to women, must be supported, strengthened and made more widely known, especially to media professionals, in order to promote the integration of gender dimensions in all types of media output.

B. Recommendations

The Expert Group Meeting generated a number of recommendations relating to access to employment and decision-making. It was agreed that media enterprises and organizations, professional associations, educational institutions and other social actors, including governments, the UN and inter-governmental organizations should share responsibility for increasing women's access and participation. The detailed recommendations are available in the full text of the report, which is in the public arena. The majority, predictably, relate to action by media organizations and professional associations. For the sake of brevity, only some priority areas for action are highlighted here.

- (i) There is clearly an urgent need for the institution of practical and practicable measures within media organizations to progressively eliminate the remaining obstacles to women's access to and advancement in media professions. Among these are the establishment of goals and targets for the achievement of gender balance among media personnel in different categories and levels of work, gender-sensitive policies and transparent procedures in various aspects of human resource management, and specialized training designed to deal with gender-based tensions and hurdles within organizations. To be truly effective in promoting diversity among media professionals, these measures must also address the specific needs of women who are additionally disadvantaged on account of class, caste, creed, race, ethnicity, age, health, sexual orientation and other social categories that can lead to exclusion.
- (ii) There is also need for research to generate reliable and comparative gender-based data on employment patterns in different categories of media professions at the national, regional and international levels, and to identify the stumbling blocks that continue to hamper women's advancement in the media. In addition, efforts are required to develop checklists and indicators for use in monitoring the access and participation of women in media organizations. Such research, documentation and monitoring must be supported by governments, the UN, other intergovernmental organizations and donor agencies.

- (iii) The contribution of women's initiatives in the area of community and alternative media in increasing women's access to and participation in the media must be recognized as a vital aspect of the democratization of communication systems and structures. Groups engaged in such work must be supported and strengthened through facilitative policies and procedures as well as financial and other resources.

III. CONTENT, REPRESENTATION AND PORTRAYAL

A. Imperatives

The right to communicate is increasingly recognized as central to democracy, citizenship and good governance. The problem of women's portrayal and representation in media content must be recognized as deeply rooted in power imbalances both within media institutions and in the wider society. Content is influenced by the institutional policies, professional values and commercial interests of the media, as well as by the social, cultural, political and economic environment in which the media operate. Real, sustainable, positive change demands a social and political transformation through which women's rights are truly understood, respected and implemented by the media and in society. These rights include their right to information and communication, as well as their right to be and be seen as complete human beings and equal citizens.

It is in this context that the editing, if not censoring, of women's experiences and views, and the stereotyping of male and female roles in the media must be seen. These are critical issues that affect not only women but also society as a whole.

Concern about the continuing under-representation and misrepresentation of women in media content has stimulated fresh thinking about effective strategies for intervention. Activities based on these relatively new approaches and strategies must be supported and strengthened.

One approach situates the promotion of gender equality and gender consciousness in the media within the broader framework of human rights and democratic values, on the one hand, and quality and professionalism, on the other. Three premises underlie this approach: a) gender equality is intrinsic to the freedom of expression and the right to information; b) rights come with responsibilities and the media, therefore, have an obligation to ensure equal voice to women and men, and to serve the information needs of both; and c) gender awareness results in better media practice.

The strategy evolved from this approach envisages the introduction of a gender perspective in media values and practice, either through collaboration between media organizations and external agencies or through internal mechanisms instituted by media organizations. It involves direct engagement with key actors in the mainstream media that is designed to stimulate them to think about gender as a factor in the professional choices they make and the representations they produce. Media professionals of both sexes are then encouraged to improve content through greater diversity of images, voices and perspectives.

A second approach, also based on concepts of human rights, democracy and citizenship, employs a different strategy of direct engagement by interacting with media users or consumers rather than practitioners. Innovative media literacy programs with a special focus on gender are used to engage the general public in various types of critique and debate around media practices that help develop critical media skills among audiences. The resulting public opinion and pressure can lead to improvements in media content.

A third, emerging approach views the right to communicate as an essential element in the consolidation of democracy and an indispensable aspect of citizen participation in public life. It perceives information as a public good to which all citizens are entitled. This approach involves moving from a media-centric focus on production and content to one that acknowledges the centrality of citizenship in matters relating to media and communication, and takes into account the different ways in which citizens, including women, receive and make meaning from media messages. The strategy here combines elements of the first two. It envisages women's groups and CSOs working together to promote gender-sensitivity in both media practice and communications studies, as well as to foster among citizens more awareness of the media, their own right to information and their increasingly recognized right to communicate.

Apart from introducing a wider perspective on the question of representation or portrayal in media content and locating the issue within the framework of democratization, human rights and equality rights, these relatively new approaches seek to establish that gender is not exclusively a women's issue, that the construction of femininity and masculinity are closely linked, and that the ways in which men are portrayed also place expectations and limitations on them that are not compatible with gender equality. In addition, they attempt to promote change through a range of actors, both male and female, from within and outside the media.

B. Recommendations

The Expert Group Meeting generated a number of recommendations relating to representation, portrayal and other issues of content. The new thinking on these issues clearly calls for more strategic and targeted approaches that engage those who own the media and create its content in finding solutions that enhance the professionalism of the media and simultaneously open the door to more diverse and gender-balanced content. The detailed recommendations are available in the full text of the report, which is in the public domain. Most naturally relate to action by media organizations and professionals, including training institutes, professional associations, media monitors and researchers. In the interest of brevity, only some priority areas for action are highlighted here.

- (i) Gender-sensitive policies, codes and guidelines are clearly required to tackle the continuing problem of gender biases in media content, including gender-based stereotyping and inadequate attention to women's experiences, concerns and views. Such instruments must take into account problems of content in different genres of information-based and entertainment-oriented programming, as well as in advertising. Independent regulatory bodies, media organizations and professional associations must act to integrate a gender perspective into professional and ethical codes and guidelines that set standards for balance, fairness and sensitivity. They must also monitor compliance with such directives.
- (ii) Training is obviously key to promoting greater gender sensitivity in the media. Both institutes for media education and training, and organizations promoting media literacy and advocacy, must ensure that gender awareness is integrated into their training activities. In-service orientation and training to promote gender consciousness among women and men in the media, as well as internal mechanisms to encourage media practitioners to critique their work from a gender perspective, could also be critical to the improvement and diversification of media content.
- (iii) Financial and technical resources must be provided for the generation of practical tools for policy development, monitoring, training and consumer awareness in the area of gender and media, as well as to document and disseminate examples of best and worst practices in this area.

IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES ON MEDIA PROFESSIONS AND CONTENT

A. Imperatives

With control of mass media networks increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few mighty media conglomerates, many of them transnational entities with apparently infinite resources, women must be empowered to negotiate the new, complex maze of technology and power in order to participate at every level of social, economic and political life in their countries, regions and the world as a whole.

The advent of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the growing convergence of the various media made possible by them have had a major impact on the media as well as on the information and communications work done by women's groups and movements.

For those women who can access and use them, ICTs offer many benefits. However, accessibility remains a critical issue and must be addressed urgently and holistically. Attention must be paid to factors such as literacy and education, poverty, language, technical infrastructure, computer literacy and connection costs, which currently limit the access of large sections of the population in many countries across the world. The additional disadvantages that women face on account of the impact of gender roles and relationships on their education, mobility, time, skills and resources must also be recognized and dealt with. The needs and preferences of users, the design of hardware and software, and the location and staffing of tele-centers and other community access points must be determined taking the gender dimension into account.

The economic benefits of the so-called Information Society derive not only from the consumption of ICTs but also from their production. Advocacy efforts, so far focused on ensuring access to ICTs, must be expanded to include issues of control. Women must be prepared for active use and creation of ICTs through adequate investment in education, research and training, especially in mathematics, science and technology. Educational programs in these fields must be designed with due attention to gender differences in learning patterns and processes. In addition, the gaps in training and knowledge that currently make the World Wide Web frustrating and inaccessible to many people, and certainly most women, must be addressed through a combination of requisite financial investment and policy goals that are gender-sensitive.

The patterns of gender segregation that are being replicated in the new media must be noted and discouraged. Women must be encouraged to get involved in the high-paying, creative work of software development and Internet-based start-ups and empowered to reach decision-making and politically influential positions in the ICT sector. They must also be supported to enter the field of software and hardware production so that their viewpoints, knowledge and interests are adequately represented in the new media.

With news priorities and sources in Web-based media largely determined by language, access to connectivity and other factors, news and views from wired and connected parts of the world and powerful, resource-rich media outlets dominate the so-called information super-highway; such imbalances are, in fact, often exacerbated by ICTs. If the voices of women, especially those who are already marginalized, are to be heard in the new media, concerted efforts must be made to ensure that they are adequately and accurately represented in cyberspace.

Much of the content currently available on the Web is of little direct relevance or use to most women in many parts of the world. Content that is appropriate in terms of both substance and language is urgently required. Technology must be used to address the interests, concerns and

aspirations of women and girls, especially those from disadvantaged and marginalized groups. In using ICTs for development, the prevalent top-down approach must give way to a more bottom-up one, which incorporates information and insights from the grassroots into all levels and stages of policy-making as well as program planning and implementation.

The persistent problem of masculinist rhetoric and sexualized, often sexist, representations must be addressed. These old problems have resurfaced in the content of the new media, especially that put out by the burgeoning pornographic industry whose reach and riches have been boosted by the World Wide Web. The aggressive manner in which such content is propagated and promoted, especially on the Internet, constitutes a major, hostile backlash against women and children that must be recognized and effectively countered.

While ICTs are assumed to enhance the work of professionals employed in “traditional” media, even here the notorious digital divide is often compounded by a gender divide. Special efforts are required to equip women in the media to take advantage of the opportunities made available by technology. Similarly, concerted efforts must be made to enable and encourage media professionals of both sexes to use ICTs to access the women-related data, news and views that are available on the Internet. Simultaneous attempts are needed to help women and women’s groups to learn how to use ICTs to get their messages across to the mainstream media.

Alternative media organizations and NGOs that are using ICTs to do legitimate media work must be recognized and supported, if only because cover issues that receive inadequate attention from the mainstream media and reach large sections of the population that are poorly served by the commercial media,. The fact that many of them typically use multiple forms of media and communication to serve the needs and interests of their constituents must be noted and care taken to ensure that new technologies, such as computers and the Internet, do not deflect attention from older but equally relevant and useful ones, such as radio, video and print. The practice of repackaging content from “traditional” to new technology media, and vice versa, must be accepted and valued as an effective and efficient means of creating information and communication links between “connected” and “unconnected” women.

Access to information and communication is a human right that must be ensured at all times, and especially during periods of crisis and conflict. Media and communication, including those made widely available through ICTs, are important tools to be used in the promotion of long-term peace. They also have a role to play in addressing and combating racism and other forms of discrimination and exclusion.

B. Recommendations

The Expert Group Meeting generated a number of recommendations relating to the impact of new ICTs on media professions and content. The detailed recommendations are available in the full text of the report, which is in the public arena. For the sake of brevity, only some priority areas for action are highlighted here.

- (i) One set of recommendations relates to the need to bridge the digital divide that exists across the world irrespective of gender. For instance, infrastructure concerns, such as poor public utility and telecommunications services and cost of hardware and software, need to be confronted and tackled if universal access is to be achieved.
- (ii) Another set of recommendations addresses the gender dimensions of the digital divide. Among these, some highlight the specific ways in which gender exacerbates infrastructural deficiencies to make ICTs even more inaccessible to women than to men and suggest ways

to overcome this problem. Others stress the need to encourage girls and women to use and develop ICTs through education and training that takes into account gender differences in learning patterns and gender stereotyping in educational and professional options. Yet others focus on the need to help women overcome special difficulties with access to ICTs on account of the combination of gender and other factors such as poverty, language barriers, health and/or disability.

- (iii) Another set of recommendations makes a case for gender to be taken into account in both policy frameworks and funding mechanisms, and calls for the involvement of women in the formulation and implementation of policy as well as their representation in regulatory bodies.
- (iv) The importance of ensuring a development-centered approach in the formulation of ICT policies and a bottom-up process for incorporating women's ideas and needs into policies and programs is the focus of another set of recommendations in this field.

The EGM also took note of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and drafted the following recommendations to be taken into consideration during the lead-up to the global event, at the Summit itself, and in the final outcomes document emerging from the Summit:

Action by governments, regional and international organizations, the United Nations system, civil society organizations and other relevant stake-holders:

1. Ensure equal opportunities for women as participants and decision-makers in all aspects of the process of shaping and implementing legal and policy frameworks related to ICTs.
2. Ensure the education and training of women and girls in the full range of possibilities for employment in and use of ICTs.
3. Ensure the involvement of women in all decision-making bodies relating to ICTs, including the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Council for the Assignment of Names and Numbers (ICANN), and the Internet Society (ISOC).
4. Ensure at least 30 % participation of women in government delegations to the planning and preparatory sessions of the WSIS and at the World Summit itself.

The insights and proposals arrived at in the course of the discussions at the EGM were based on the experiences, observations and work in the field of participants from different parts of the world. If future policies and actions in the area of media, communication, information and gender are based on the holistic approach and practical strategies outlined here, perhaps there will be reason to hope that the concerns expressed in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action and subsequent documents and meetings will soon be part of history, while new concerns are effectively tackled as they emerge.

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