

**United Nations  
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)  
Expert Group Meeting on  
“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”  
Beirut, Lebanon  
12 to 15 November 2002**

## **Roundtable and Recommendations on Women in Media**

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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*

***A report from the Roundtable held October 17, 2002 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in preparation for the Expert Group Meeting on Women in Media, to be conducted by the UN Division for the Advancement of Women 12-15 November 2002***

## **Introduction**

Nairobi, Beijing, New York – all three of these global women’s conferences<sup>1</sup> addressed issues related to women in media. With new media and other forms of communication technologies coming to the fore, the UN General Assembly has called for a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to meet in Geneva December 2003, giving the United Nations system, NGOs and women the opportunity to develop additional strategies to address the issues of women in media.

Because of the need to position women in media as a distinct area for discussion during the WSIS, NGOs have taken great interest in the CSW’s deliberations on this topic for the upcoming forty-seventh session (March 2003). For that reason, the NGO Committee on the Status of Women decided to hold its first Roundtable discussion earlier than usual, and for Women in Media to be its first topic of discussion in order to coordinate with the DAW Expert Group Meeting and the various Preparatory Committee meetings for the WSIS. Regional preparatory sessions for the WSIS are already underway, and the next preparatory session for the WSIS will be held the last two weeks of February 2003 in Geneva.

The NGO Committee on the Status of Women, an association of more than 100 international NGOs in consultative relationship with the UN and more than 250 individual members, follows the work of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the UN in New York and brings experts and NGOs together to address, in roundtable format, the issues coming before each CSW Session. On Thursday October 17, 2002 in Conference Room 1 at UN headquarters the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, in collaboration with the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, held a roundtable discussion “Women and Media.” More than 100 persons attended, including representatives from eight of the Permanent Missions to the United Nations – Denmark, Eritrea, the Netherlands, Malawi, South Africa, Norway, Germany and Greece.

## **Speakers at the Roundtable**

Leslie Wright, chair of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, chaired the roundtable meeting. Dr. Carolyn Hannan, Director, UN Division for the Advancement of Women, provided the wrap-up. Speakers included Florence Avakian, UN Correspondent; Terese Gastaut, Director, Public Affairs Division, UN Department of Public Information; Erin Martin, Senior Consultant, Strategy XXI and strategist for the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund; Vicki Semler, representing Anne Walker, director of the International Women's Tribune Center; Rita Jensen, Editor-in-Chief, Women’s E-News. Most of the presenters at the meeting, along with some of the guests in the audience, will be either experts or observers attending the Expert Group Meeting in Beirut 12-15 November 2002.

## **Presentations**

The presentations dealt with women's employment in the media, the images of women portrayed by the media, policy issues to be addressed by decision-makers, and women as media decision-makers. Two key issues were the invisibility of older women in the media and the seeming lack of concern by younger women regarding sex discrimination in employment and advancement in the workplace.

*Florence Avakian, UN correspondent*

The first speaker, Florence Avakian, discussed the lack of women in decision-making positions. She noted that according to industry statistics, women represent fewer than 20% of Board members in the largest communications companies. Of the ten major conglomerates, women comprise only 13% of directors and 14% of executives. Of the 23 largest telecommunications and cable companies, only 12% of directors and 16% of executives are women, and among the most successful e-mail companies, women are only 8% of directors and 18% of executives. In publishing women have fared better – they comprise 17% of the directors and 22% of the executives among the eleven largest firms. But the most alarming statistic is that the largest communication and entertainment media in the US are controlled by only a handful of corporations (6) – and men control all of these.

Avakian noted that today, in situations of war, about 90% of those affected are women and children but fewer than a third of war correspondents covering stories from those areas are women. Even so, it is an improvement from the 1970s, where only 6% were women. She noted that the information and reporting remains controlled by the military, which continues to place the spin on these stories because they hold the source of information, allowing them to control reporting and public opinion.

Avakian described her own career path, beginning as a speechwriter for a US Congressman. Her speeches on Cyprus netted her an invitation to Cyprus, where her plane was hijacked. She went on to report the story to WPIX. When she asked for reimbursement for an expensive international telephone call, they agreed to reimburse her – but only at 50%. And that became her first payment as a journalist. She noted some of the many opportunities and frustrations of reporting the news as a woman journalist.

*Terese Gastaut, Director, Public Affairs Division, UN Department of Public Information*

Ms. Terese Gastaut presented another point of view. She discussed the UN as a source of information, elaborating on the flow of information between the media and the UN. The Department of Public Information (DPI) has the same number of male and female professionals, though she is the only woman at the director level at this time. Gastaut noted that the 1995 Beijing Conference could be identified as the turning point for women and the media. For governments, media is seen as the 4<sup>th</sup> power, and at the UN, CNN is seen as very influential. MediaWatch and others monitoring media are seen as influential in creating change through the monitoring and reporting they produce.

She noted that media's primary role is to inform rather than to advocate. To accomplish this, there are two guiding principles: the media must be free and it must report responsibly. There are two strategic objectives for women: increased participation and access to the media, and balanced and non-stereotyped presentation of women in mainstream media. Key to this is creating an environment where the media is more responsive to women.

She noted that the UN has dealt with many women's issues, and that the coverage of these issues has resulted in attitudinal change. The role of the UN in communicating these issues is a source of pride. One example is that rape, once considered the "spoils of war" is now considered a war crime and something the world no longer tolerates. Another issue, HIV/AIDS, which now affects more women than men, is no longer seen as an issue of vulnerable groups, but is an issue for us all. The media has been responsible in dispelling many myths associated with the disease and has played an important role in disseminating accurate information about how it is spread. As Kofi Annan stated the week before at a meeting in Beijing – "Confronting AIDS is a point of pride, and not a source of shame."

*Erin Martin, Senior Consultant, Strategy XXI and strategist for the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund*

When it comes to public policy, do women "spin"? According to Erin Martin, of course. As a reporter, consultant and political press secretary, Martin expressed her respect for women editors/managers, who had guided her career, and she supported a role for women as mentors for younger women. Martin told the audience that the word "spin" is not necessarily a negative term. She defined it as telling your story guided by facts and underpinned by values that take a long-term view of a situation or problem and shares an altruistic common vision. It is a story or opinion told in your own terms. The bad part of "spin" is when selected facts cause an intentional misrepresentation or short-term gain.

The September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund is an example of positive "spin" – guided by values, telling the public about what is being done for the victims and families of victims. They decided early on that they would not use/exploit family members to tell the story. Values, confidence, and belief in their actions guided the media stories.

She concluded her remarks with comments about building support through greater inclusion to sell a story. From her perspective as press secretary for US Senator Dodd during the early days of discussion of the Family Leave Act, it became important to build the story to show that it was more than pregnancy leave – not just a women's issue. As the story grew, it received broader coverage and a broader audience, which was key to the success of the legislation.

*Vicki Semler, International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC)*

Vicki Semler discussed the importance of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the lives of women throughout the world. She noted that storytelling is a traditional form of women's media, and used her talk as an example of this media.

Semler spoke of the vision of an information highway for rural women, a community hub for women to be able to share their stories. She told the story of a telecenter in Uganda, Africa

and how this center eventually became the medium for many women to tell their stories despite the fact that they could not read.

The International Development Resource Center in Canada created many of these centers, but from research they found that women were not using the technology. IWTC began to work with a rural community outside Kampala to begin to identify and meet their needs. They worked with the women to create a CD-ROM to assist them in reaching a goal that the women themselves identified – earning more money. They created a story where women were talking to each other about their strengths and assets, which was used to communicate more about their successes. The first user, a 71-year-old woman, became the project's spokesperson. IWTC is now involved in using these lessons to create materials for HIV/AIDS education, working with the YWCA.

*Rita Jensen, Editor-in-Chief, Women's E-News*

Rita Jensen, Editor-in-Chief of Women's E-News brought out the lack of presence of women in the media. Women's E-News is a non-profit response to this lack of women's presence. According to the Annenberg study, the role of women has been shrinking in the United States. Women's news is not being covered as such, and is losing its impact among women readers. For example, when women's stories about welfare are not covered as such, but are covered more generally, the disproportionate impact that policy changes have on women are not reported and go unnoticed.

What does it matter that women are not in the newsroom? Jensen noted that a study of 100 daily newspapers undertaken by the Readership Institute of the Media Management Institute of Northwestern University showed that in the 3500 front page stories it analyzed, male sources outnumbered female sources 3 to 1. Moreover, men were more likely to be quoted about politics, business, parenting, religion and science. Women, on the other hand, were quoted about health, home, food, travel and fashion. Women, she said, are lacking in US talk shows and as key discussants and it is worse since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

Women's E-News hires reporters all over the world to cover women's issues and stories. It also covers local women's issues, including, for example, the lack of emergency contraceptives in New York City. In the near future, they expect to create an Arabic language site to increase access to women's voices in that area of the world.

### **Discussion – the audience responds**

After the presentations attendees were invited to participate in the Roundtable.

Audience comments related to a variety of issues. Comments began with **Marlene Sanders**, who started in television in the 1950s and was one of the few women in the newsroom at that time. She told of her collaboration with other women in the media, who worked together to improve the opportunities for women in the news. She shared her concern that there is no longer a women's movement in the media. She said that women need to be in charge – they need to be in charge and they need to care enough to work to effect change. She shared strategies

that could be used to have more women represented, such as providing letters to the producers with women's names and contact information so women can become spokespersons when these issues are discussed in the news. She expressed concern that having women spokespersons is an unseen problem – that is, that men don't see a problem and do not see that there is an issue in the under representation of women.

Sanders noted that older women are discriminated against in that they are not covered adversely – they are simply invisible and not covered at all. She spoke about the use of demographics in decision-making at corporate level.

Two respondents from the NGO Committee on UNICEF's Working Group on Girls expressed concern about the lack of coverage of girls and HIV/AIDS. Specifically, they noted that girls should be a primary target group for education related to the spread of HIV/AIDS. They asked how to get the media to focus on this issue. The South African delegate attending noted that in her country there is more attention paid to this issue, and that there is a UN resolution being offered as well.

**Fannie Munlin**, International Council of Women, asked, "How can we get media to be more representative of the population it serves?" Another respondent noted that the Knight Foundation is very concerned and is taking steps to develop internships in media to bring more diverse peoples into the education sector. More training, outreach and mentoring is necessary – to all people and from all people – to bring about more diversity in reporters and reporting.

**Dr. Joyce Braak**, who represents several medical women's NGOs, noted that children aspire to be what they see and can believe, so with shrinking numbers of visible women in the electronic media, there needs to be more awareness built into the possibilities of the "dangers" for future generations. She also noted that women need to understand what they can do when there is discrimination, so that they do not question and doubt themselves and their competencies. She noted that this is especially important for younger women.

**Marlene Sanders** noted that 70% of students in media are white women. There is great disparity in the field, given that so many women are graduating with these degrees and yet the workforce has not reflected this change. Of the men and minorities entering the workforce in media positions, many find that the jobs are not paying well and transfer to related areas. Some do not want assignments that are in areas where they do not fit in, for example relocation from (US) urban areas to the Midwest. In response to the comment about finding more appropriate reporters who better represent the demographic of the audience, she noted that coverage was changing, but not fast enough.

Young women responded to point out that teaching staff makes a difference to their entry into a university major – mentoring is important. Young women do not feel that there is a feminist movement now. Those who do declare themselves as feminist feel they are marginalized. There is perhaps a niche for women who take risks, but most women prefer not to stand out. They responded that they do not want to be singled out for being women, but believe that they will succeed on their own merits as reporters, spokespersons and in other competencies.

The delegate from Eritrea spoke about the need to consider individual merits, but recognized the need for niche marketing of skills. She noted that categories are still used in the selection process of hiring, but wanted to express the need to recognize merit more than labels.

Another young woman noted that young girls are susceptible to moving back to more traditional roles, and noted that it is important to express what is happening with respect to girls and women worldwide. It is also important to have forums where girls and boys, women and men, can begin to discuss issues to reach mutual conclusions.

A delegate from Norway shared the fact that politics tends to take all the space for the news. She was concerned about the US dominance of the media, and the way that politics affects the view of women in the media because of the US spin and dominance. She is concerned about the positioning of coverage, and that more stories need to cover the woman's point of view as well.

### **Wrap-up**

Ms. **Carolyn Hannan**, director, UN Division for the Advancement of Women, wrapped up the roundtable discussion. She noted that presenters and discussants looked at policy issues, participation, decision-making, and the link with ICTs.

There was concern about monopoly of the news and entertainment media. "Spin" and how it could be used effectively to promote women's issues and concerns was identified as being potentially helpful, as was the strategy of broadening the audience to include men and others who might extend the appeal of an issue.

She noted that there is a low priority for covering issues that concern women. It is problematic that there is so little access to what women think and feel. It is also alarming to note that women are in so few decision-making positions – that women appear to be clustered at lower levels. She observed that there was a need to have women in decision-making in order to effect change, which is why more women are needed in these positions.

More women are reporting from conflict areas. There is a meeting next week at the UN to recognize women's role in peace – what level of attention will be given by the media to women and this meeting?

Hannan noted that there is a sense among younger women that the older women have solved the problems associated with discrimination, but we note from the studies reported here that there are not enough women present, and that there is a need to mainstream a gender perspective among both women and men so that the issues of concern to women are covered in the news.

Visible role models are clearly needed. We also need to look at issues of class and race, and strategies to have more involvement from all peoples in what is covered and who covers them. Hannan noted that the link between media and politics needs more examination at the expert group meeting.

## **Documentary: Women in News**

Following the Roundtable participants were invited to a viewing of “She Says: Women in News,” winner of the 2002 National Emmy Award for documentary, long form. Barbara Rick, director/producer of the film, noted that it could be purchased at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org). The film presented ten women who hold influential positions in the US news media whose influence and presence has brought a new focus to the news.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendation and areas for further dialogue are drawn from the above discussion.

### ***Access, Employment and Decision-making***

1. Regulators need to concern themselves with the fact that too few women are in decision-making areas, and that gender-sensitive strategies are not obvious in mainstream media. Regulators could encourage better representation of spokespersons and others in presenting news.
2. More men than women control the decisions about what is covered and who speaks to the issues. There needs to be a more balanced, gender-sensitive approach to decision-making.
3. Women in media need to be used well as mentors for younger women and men.
4. There needs to be a better gender balance in employment of men and women in media-related careers. Educational opportunity and recruitment policies should be examined.
5. Young women in media fields view their success as tied to merit rather than fitting into certain criteria of employers to have representation of various groups. Hiring practices should be balanced to meet the needs of various competing interests, and young women seeking employment need to become aware of the criteria used to assist them in seeking employment or promotion.
6. Women’s issues appear have little coverage in mainstream media. More needs to be done to bring gender sensitivity to news coverage.
7. The distinction of the role of media as information rather than advocacy needs to be clearer in many countries. State-ownership of the media needs to be examined in relation to assuring a free press. Use of the press to “spin” national positions, or of governments to shape public opinion through the press should also be examined.
8. Public goods are being sold by governments to bring in resources. The sale of airwaves needs to be examined to give women ownership/access.



9. There needs to be a clear international policy about access to communication and freedom of speech.

### ***Content and Portrayal***

1. Women's role in society is not clear in the news coverage. Most women's issues are covered in traditional or alternative press. More needs to be done to mainstream women's interests into the media.
2. Media appear to be ignoring certain groups of women, and they are invisible. This is particularly true of older women. Stereotypes and lack of coverage of older women need to be addressed.
3. Organizations such as MediaWatch need to be expanded to examine the content and portrayal of women by media. Information from these sources needs to be used by regulating bodies to influence change.
4. The DAW and other areas of the UN system that work on women's concerns need to work more closely with the DPI to develop a strategy for providing information about women's issues on a strategic basis.
5. Producers need to develop contacts in subject areas that can offer balanced coverage to news stories.

### ***Information Communication Technologies***

1. Internet regulation needs to be developed to control unwanted messages and to control pornography and other illegal matters.
2. Freedom of speech and expression need to be balanced against degrading or demeaning images.
3. Girls need to be encouraged to use information communication technologies, and educational approaches need to adjust to encourage girls' participation in such courses.
4. Women will require additional training or retraining to remain competitive in this new field, and to use these technologies for development.
5. Women need to encourage other women to enter technological fields. More support should be given to employment practices that will encourage women in these areas.

### ***Policy as an enabling environment***

1. Community access to television and radio should be guaranteed.

2. Freedom of speech and a free press need to be assessed and discussed internationally to assure that women's voices are heard.
3. Regulatory practices should assure that there is a gender perspective in all aspects of the media.

#### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> The First United Nations World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City in 1975 and the Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen in 1980. Both of these meetings adopted strategies for implementation for the *UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace*. The Third Conference, hosted by Kenya in Nairobi in 1985, adopted the *Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, took into consideration the work of Nairobi and produced the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (PfA). Section J of the PfA provided the basis for review of Women in Media during the deliberations and follow-up of the UN Special Session "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the peace for the twenty-first century. Held in New York in June 2000, discussions produced an intense interest in the impact of new technologies on women's access and participation in the media, leading to its being adopted for discussion by the Commission on the Status of Women for March in 2003.