

CONTENT DISCONTENT: TOWARDS A FAIR PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

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Contents

Acknowledgments

Preface

Introduction

1. The Power of the Media - The Media's Role - Some Common Views
2. Women - Misrepresented or missing
3. Portraying Women and Men in the Media
4. Who Pulls the Strings?
5. Money Talks - The Bottom Line
6. Women as Experts and Commentators
7. Women Working in the Media
8. Sticks and Stones - The Importance of a Fair Language
9. A Checklist for a Fairer Portrayal
 - News and Current Affairs
 - Sports
 - Entertainment
 - Sales and Promotions/Audience Research
 - Programming and Decision-Making
 - Policy Making
10. Action
 - Portrayal of Women
 - Women Working in the Media
 - Power and Policies
 - Networking
 - Bibliography

Preface

It has often been said that information is power. If that is true, it is equally true to say that the mass media have an even wider power, since as well as providing us with information, they also entertain us. Modern media are the gatekeepers of messages of all kinds. They are able to reach our minds, hearts and senses -an awesome power. But with that power should come responsibility.

INSTRAW is the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women. In the course of our work, it has become increasingly obvious that there is concern among people worldwide over the way women and men are portrayed in the media. During the past decade, those taking part in international meetings concerned with increasing women's participation in society have pointed to the discrepancy between the media treatment of women and men and the reality.

No matter where in the world they come from, people have reported the same problem -that men and women are not only covered differently by the media, but that coverage is frequently both unrealistic and unfair. That is why we have called this handbook "Content Discontent". Many people are not content with much of the contents of the mass media.

We believe improvements can be made. We are not trying to push a "woman-first" agenda. Nor will we try to thrust any dogma down unwilling throats. Instead, in this handbook we will present the arguments and the issues, and offer some practical suggestions on how fairer portrayal of both sexes might be achieved.

Who is this handbook for? For people working in the media who have some say over what is printed or broadcast. That includes journalists working in news, current affairs, sport, documentaries and features, regardless of the medium.

In radio and television, it includes the producers, directors, editors, scriptwriters and story-liners who create the programmes. In newspapers and magazines, we are aiming to reach the chief reporters, sub-editors, photo editors and designers who decide not only what is to be printed, but also how it will look, and what headlines or illustrations will accompany it. Editors, programmers and managers from all media must also be included, since they have the power to decide what the public will finally see or hear.

Finally, we want to talk to the Boards of Directors, the policy makers and the Heads of the media organizations. In some cases these will be Government Ministers and Departments, in others private companies. Even if they have no direct involvement in the day-to-day running of the media, their general directives and policies can ensure fairer portrayal and treatment of both sexes in the media -or not.

Our aim is not to limit or censor the mass media in any way. This handbook is about proving that there is currently an imbalance in the way women are covered by the media, and trying to improve both the quality and quantity of coverage. This does not mean that all stories, articles and programmes about women must be favourable and glowing, nor that women should be portrayed in ways that do not reflect reality. That would be patently absurd.

It does mean reflecting the full scope of women's and men's lives -something almost all media aim to do-and getting some positive changes so that more of the world's readers, viewers and listeners will be more content with media content.

The preparation of this handbook was initiated in 1993 by the then Director of INSTRAW, Margaret Shields, and the Chief of Research and Training, Pari Soltan Mohammadi. The handbook is an output of the project "Development of Communication Materials on Women and Development" funded by the Government of Italy. It is a pleasure for me to see their efforts materialized in this edition prepared for the Fourth World Conference on Women: Equality, Development and Peace.

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