"Participation and access of women to the media, and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women"

Aide Mémoire

I.   Introduction

At its forty-fifth session in March 2001, the Commission on the Status of Women adopted a new multi-year programme of work identifying the priority themes for the period 2002-2006. Accordingly, in 2003, the Commission, at its forty-seventh session, will consider the theme "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". In order to assist the Commission in its work, the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) will convene an expert group meeting on the theme of "participation and access of women to the media and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women", in cooperation with the United Nations Department of Public Information, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)." The expert group meeting will take place at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in Beirut, Lebanon from 12 to 15 November 2002. (The theme "information and communication technologies" will be the subject of a separate expert group meeting).

The Platform for Action (PfA) adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 included women and media among its 12 critical areas of concern, and notes that "everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women" (PfA, para.234). The PfA recognizes the technological advances which have helped to create a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour.   It notes the continuing under-representation of women in decision-making positions in the media, and the lack of gender sensitivity within media organizations (PfA, para.235), and it calls for the elimination of negative and degrading images of women in media communications in order to provide "a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world" (PfA, para.236).

Among the achievements noted in the Secretary-General's report, "Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action" (E/CN.6/2000/PC/2) is an increase in the number of women's media organizations and programmes, a development that contributed to the aims of promoting increased participation and diverse portrayals of women in the media. Progress has also been made by establishing professional guidelines and voluntary codes of conduct that encourage fair gender portrayal and the use of non-sexist language. Nevertheless, bias against women remains in the media. The document

draws special attention to the negative, violent or degrading images of women, including pornography, which have increased in different forms, in some instances using new communication technologies.

Questions concerning how increasing women's participation in communications and media, and achieving a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women have been considered in the context of several meetings hosted by entities of the United Nations system, for example, the International Symposium on Women and the Media, sponsored by UNESCO and held in Toronto, 28 February to 3 March 1995.

The Commission on the Status of Women, at its fortieth session, in 1996, considered the critical area of concern women and the media within the context of a review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. To support the Commission in its work the Division for the Advancement of Women prepared background papers on women and media. The deliberations of the Commission resulted in the adoption of agreed conclusions 1996/2.

II.   Background

The issue of women and the media has been on the international agenda for more than two decades. Countless studies have drawn attention to the serious under-representation of women as protagonists and participants in media structures around the world. While there is no necessary or simple relationship between the numbers of women working in media institutions and the type of content that is produced, the fact that women continue to be marginalized in media output raises questions about the values, norms and priorities of those who direct and control media output in what is becoming an increasingly globalized communication system. In 2000 a study covering 70 countries round the world showed that women accounted for just 18 per cent of people in the news. Women were the central focus of only 10 per cent of stories, and even these were rarely concerned with women's role in or views about social, economic or political matters. Many portrayed women in limited, stereotyped ways and most failed to present women's perspectives or points of view on subjects that affect women directly. The invisibility of women in media content raises fundamental questions about freedom of expression and the right to communicate.

Other research has shown that, although in many countries women's share of junior and middle-level positions within media organizations continues to rise, everywhere the number of women in senior decision-making and policy-making positions remains extremely small. Whether one looks at the traditional media institutions of press, radio and television, or the newly emerging sectors of telecommunications, multi-media and e-media, the picture is similar. A study published in 2001 by the International Federation of Journalists found that even though more than a third of today's journalists are women, less than 3 per cent of senior media executives and decision-makers are women. The European Union's database on women in decision-making shows that in 2001 women held only 9per cent of senior management jobs in the telecommunications industry in Europe. A recent study in the USA finds that only 13 per cent of top executives in the major telecommunications and e-companies are female. Although policy frameworks and strategic targets for the enhancement of women's careers in media have been shown to produce positive results in a number of settings, the increasingly global and commercial

structures of media institutions do not sit easily with the adoption of gender sensitive measures.

Yet there been some encouraging developments, which can be attributed in part to the growing maturity of the women's movement and its access to an increasing body of facts and figures that document women's exclusion in terms that resonate with media producers and policy makers. Women's media associations and organizations have historically played a crucial role in supporting women media professionals, in creating alternative media spaces for the expression of women's perspectives on the world, and in critiquing offensive or stereotypical media content. In recent years, many of these groups have become pivotal in the development of media education initiatives and in the launch of critical debate with media practitioners. Interaction and dialogue between gender specialists and media professionals has proven an innovative and often successful strategic approach in the struggle to change and diversify media content. Often referred to as media monitoring and advocacy, the approach rests on the belief that a combination of hard data and professionally-based arguments will be more persuasive than generalized criticisms. By drawing attention to the taken-for-granted routines and practices that result in gendered patterns of portrayal, gender advocates attempt to reach media with an immediacy that appeals to and connects with professional identities and values. Examples of successful monitoring and advocacy approaches can now be found in all world regions.

A further development is the growth of new information and communication technologies, and their impact on the mass media. This has many, sometimes conflicting, facets. The electronic highway systems created by satellite, cable and the Internet provide existing media giants with vast global markets for their information and entertainment products and create a new communication and cultural environment. Traditional boundaries between media are blurred, as are the dividing lines between leisure activities, information and culture. This development introduces many new concerns – for example, in relation to media freedom, intellectual property rights and cyber-crime, to name just a few – each of which has a gender dimension. On the other hand, the arrival of digital media technologies provides the means for individuals, small groups and previously marginalized communities to express their views. For instance, there are increased opportunities for national, regional and global distribution of women-generated news much of which, in the past, was limited in outreach through low-cost newsletters or – in some cases – short-wave radio. In that sense the new technologies offer potentially important new audiences, access to a wider range of sources of material, and rapid means of information exchange on issues of professional or political concern. However, women are not the only constituency whose messages can be easily and widely distributed via these new channels of communication. The proliferation of pornographic, violent and other sexist material is a cause of great concern and provokes considerable debate in terms of defining appropriate responses and approaches to regulation.

III.   Objectives

The nature and scale of women's continued marginalization in the media, allied with the difficulty of establishing effective systems of accountability in an increasingly commercial, globalising media marketplace, mean that no single strategy can accomplish a great deal on

its own. Ideally, a variety of approaches is needed which support and sustain each other. The expert group will consider experiences and approaches that have proven successful in specific contexts, and will draw out generalized lessons and recommendations for policies and actions directed at various levels – national, regional and international. Taking account of the rapid pace of technological change in the area of media and communications, the group will try to look to the future in an attempt to anticipate new challenges and emerging trends.

In particular the expert group meeting will consider the following issues:

a)   **Policy approaches as enabling frameworks**: Within the field of media and communication there is a considerable policy vacuum in the area of gender and media. In some cases codes of ethics for media professionals and advertisers ignore the issue of gender entirely; in others media codes and guidelines are too general to allow concrete interpretations. While respecting the principle of freedom of expression, the expert group meeting will examine cases of good practice – at the national, regional and international levels as well as within organizations levels – with a view to proposing approaches that are enabling rather than delimiting. It will make recommendations to encourage policies and self-regulatory systems that allow a diversity of voices and perspectives to flourish in the media.

b)   **Access, employment, decision-making**. Equal gender access to the media, whether as citizens or as professionals, is fundamental to human rights and to empowerment. Many obstacles stand in the way of equality in this sphere, and most of these have been well documented. Equally, many types of action have been adopted in attempts to redress the gender imbalance. These include data collection and monitoring, target setting, the provision of women-friendly working conditions, fair and transparent recruitment and promotion procedures, training opportunities, confidence building and awareness-raising. But while in most countries more women are entering the media professions, few are breaking through "the glass ceiling" into senior creative and decision-making positions. The meeting will analyze ways to enable women's advancement within the media, and strategies to increase women's input into decision-making and policy-making bodies in the media field. Recommendations will link the issues that are specifically media-related with issues that pertain to gender relations in the wider society.

c)   **Content issues**. An abiding and crucial element in all debates about women and the media is the issue of limited and one-dimensional gender portrayal. The Expert group meeting will therefore examine a range of approaches aimed at developing a balanced, diversified and non stereotypical portrayal of women and women's perspectives. Questions to be considered by the meeting include: What can be done at the organizational level (e.g. in terms of policy guidelines, sensitization etc)? What scope does the individual media practitioner have to make change? What can be done in terms of developing awareness within the media organizations about the impact of programming and production decisions on patterns of gender content? How do government policies, such as granting of media

franchises and licenses impact on women's access and use of media? What monitoring, advocacy and media education strategies can be put in place?

d)	**Impact of the new technologies on media professions and media content.** Analysis of contemporary media developments must be set within the context of the technological advances that are changing established media distribution channels and contents. For instance, the issue of media access needs to be reconsidered in the light of the development of online media (both print and audiovisual). In additional there are implications for the profession itself – for example, the expansion of journalistic sources, the extent to which professional networking is enhanced, access to online training etc. Also to be considered is the potential of online communication to extend the outreach of women's alternative media, as well as the possibilities for international networking, information exchange and media education among women's media associations and media advocacy groups. Finally, are-examination of content issues (for example, pornography and violent imagery) in the light of Internet use is essential.
The experts, in the light of their deliberations, will formulate recommendations directed toward governments, the United Nations system, intergovernmental and regional bodies and civil society. They will aim to propose recommendations that address issues of women and the media at both the international and national levels based on an approach that builds on the Beijing Platform for Action and takes account of the rapidly changing media, information and communication context of the 21st century.

## IV.	Expected Outcome

The outcome the expert group meeting will be a report containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations addressed to different actors at different levels on the impact, and use of media as a tool for the advancement and empowerment of women. The report will be widely distributed, including through the Division for the Advancement of Women website. The findings and conclusions of the expert group meeting will also provide the basis for a report of the Secretary-General on this theme to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2003.

## V.	Organization of work

The meeting will be organized by Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and in collaboration with United Nations Department of Public Information, the United Nations Economic and Social Council for Western Asia (ESCWA), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The expert group meeting will work in plenary session and in working groups, It will discuss the suggested topics based on background papers prepared by the experts, and commissioned by the Organizers.

VI.   Profile of Participants

The expert group meeting will be attended by eight to twelve experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, as well as observers from Governments, entities of the United Nations system, intergovernmental organizations academia, private sector and non-governmental organizations. In selecting the experts, criteria of geographical and gender-balance will be respected. The participants will be drawn from a variety of fields and expertise, in accordance with the objectives identified above.

VII.   Background documentation

The documentation for the meeting will consist of:
- a background paper prepared by a consultant outlining the issues to be discussed;
- short papers prepared by experts on specific topics related to their expertise;
- papers prepared by observers on their perspectives

VIII.   Administrative arrangements

The meeting will be conducted in English and the documentation will be in English. The United Nations will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance for experts and a consultant (travel cost in economy class and daily subsistence allowance). United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia will provide logistical support. Observers are responsible for their own travel arrangements and expenses.

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