

## **WOMEN, DEVELOPMENT AND THE MASS MEDIA**

*by Faridah Ibrahim*

### **Introduction**

Women, as people in their own rights, have perspectives about major issues affecting human life. These perspectives can be usefully mobilized through development and changes in cultural perceptions, political and social structures to ensure the participation of women as resourceful and effective partners at the community, national, regional and international level (Heyzer, 1985). Women hold at least one half of a nation's resources in their hands. Together they represent a major portion of the work force. Non utilization of this force, is a waste no country can afford. These statements rendered some truth especially in the current economic turmoil caused by the world economic depression.

To ensure that the resources a nation is spending to achieve the objectives in national development and nation building, be translated into concrete objectives, the participation of women in these processes is of great importance and should not be considered superficially. And one of the important factor as to speed up women's participation in national development is via the mass media. The mass media are important to developing societies because they are being used as an effective vehicle for social change. Today, men and women use media as aids for coping with an increasingly complicated environment.

### **Women as resourceful human factor**

Although considered important to their societies, women have not been given equal opportunities and share of resources in development (Sundram and Tan, 1985:52) According to a Singaporean sociologist, Noleen Heyzer (1985) development strategies pursued in many countries of the world especially the Third World are affecting women's position. Women forces in many countries complained of being denied equal access to education, technology, training, meaningful employment and decision-making. She further stressed that women's interests are assumed to be included in the strategic planning of many nations development programmes, yet on closer observation, the women work force are located in the lower ranks of the programmes. The lack of concern on women during the initial planning stage has created new problems such as greater burden, decrease in job opportunities, less participation of women at the decision-making level, changes of social and economic rewards where feminine task is concerned.

The serious considerations that must be given in development planning is dependent on the political will of the government as much as on the work of women's groups and specific bodies. As it is today, women constitute a strong, and most likely the strongest, potential force for change. This is because not only are they holding one-half of a nation's resources in their hands, the handling of the massive younger generation also remains in their domain. Thus it should be realised that the centrality of women in the development process is already a necessity, rather than a luxury.

In many developing nations, the priority need is to make women conscious of their on-going and potential participation in the development processes, along with certain basic changes in attitude of the whole country. This is typically so in developing societies such as Malaysia. Women remain entangled within the webs of traditional values, sex-roles and sex-discrimination which are then reinforced in the workplace. Often such discrimination resulted in women filling the lower ranks of the job hierarchy whilst only a few landed in the decision-making positions. In terms of job promotions, working women

for instance in the media organisation, experience horizontal job movement rather than vertical movement (Faridah, 1988). Even when they have jobs, women are expected by society to be primarily responsible for the reproduction and care of the next generation. Such situations place women in dilemmas and at tensions. They do not have much choices. They either have to stay at home and remain productive at household level or they can go out to work and help in increasing their family income and at the same time have to shoulder the burden of household chores, child rearing and work pressure.

In many developing societies, the discrimination against women was the direct result of colonial intervention when a Western model of the different roles and responsibilities of men and women was superimposed on traditional societies. At the initial stage, cash crop cultivation was directed to the men even though the wife and the family worked on it together. In the fields of education, colonial policies further reinforced local gender segregation. It is also true in the division of economic resources and job opportunities (Sundram & Tan, 1985; Rogers, 1980). A Developmentalist, Barbara Rogers stated that as long as men become the prime factor in Western writing, the women will remain excluded from these writings. This poses as one of the critical elements in the process of discrimination in the Third World development planning, since it enables planners to see problems from the males whilst, statistical data on the females remain incomplete. With less attention given to the women and women's issues, the overall effect is to exclude a large portion of female population in the development planning (Rogers, 1980:36-39).

Given the situation, it is therefore important for nations to reevaluate their development programmes. This is to ensure that development planning process responds to the inadequacies faced by the women and also to find ways so as to increase women's contribution in the planned development.

Recognition for the importance of women to be involved in national and economic development programmes only came on the international scene in 1974 when UNESCO put forward a resolution that stressed the need to intergrate women in all development programmes in order to achieve successful development planning.

UNESCO also at that time appealed to donor countries to review all foreign aid programmes to ensure that women were included in the programmes and getting benefits from them.

Development for women is not just a matter of increasing production or transfer of technology. Development planning is now taken to mean achieving a better life for all groups of the population. The intergration of women in development planning is only one aspect of the development objectives. A thorough study in this matter needs immediate attention to ensure further integration of women in the development process. As it is, research on this subject which deserves high priority, is still dominated by women researchers (Rushidan Islam, 1985:299).

Present development objectives that require human participation are in education and manpower planning. The ultimate aim of raising the participation of women in education is because they represent the higher efficiency group in child raising as well as the greater scope to participate in productive activities.

According to Sundram and Tan (1985:52) most development plans in many nations give priority to education and the eradication of poverty and illiteracy as one of their targets. However, in many parts of the developing nations, the exposure to education is minimized because of poverty or unemployment. In Malaysia, it has been found that rural girls cannot go to school because of household responsibilities and economic factors. In many rural households, girls have to opt for domestic chores or work as babysitters or helpers at an early age of 15 and above. Often, they cannot even reach lower secondary level because their contributions are much needed by their families. This trend will continue unless employment ensures at least a survival income to the adults.

Noeleen Heyzer (1985:xxviii) quoting Virginia Miralao listed three steps that can be taken by planners to close the educational and training gaps between male and female:

1. the promotion of women's entry to higher educational and technical fields through financial

- assistance, scholarship or other incentives;
2. the review of textbooks, curricula and educational material and to eliminate gender biases in educational material and to consciously promote more egalitarian values and perceptions of sex-roles; and
  3. the establishment of a planning strategy to direct women's education and skills to employable areas or anticipated areas of economic expansion.

In general, women are at a disadvantage, no doubt, but this is not due to their inherent inabilities and weaknesses. Facilities to develop their potentials are lacking. If attempts are not made to meet their needs they will always lag behind (Rahman, 1985:303). Although there are women who have made achievements and are successful in their professions, it is still the men who hold the rein; men who wield and bestow power. The women still have far to go when it comes to decision making (Graham, 1982: 262).

Sundram and Tan (1985:71) proposed a range of social policies to enable women to accommodate work, child care and household duties. Such policies should include expanded possibilities for flexible working hours, good child care facilities at low cost, special child care centre near the workplace, maternity and paternity leave options; in employment both sexes should be treated equally in contracts and fringe benefits, further training and promotions, and equal access to training to upgrade the knowledge and skills of women in various sectors.

However, all these proposals would remain isolated if improper channels are used to disseminate information. The key point that need to be considered here is the role of the mass media as an important conduit. While the mass media are responsible to help society informed of any matter of interest, they are also equally responsible to provide information on the social progress that is being achieved as well as future planning and alternatives that need women's attentions.

#### **Women and mass media**

Development plans in many countries especially in the developing nations have often been equated with mass media. The fact that the governments of these nations are using the mass media to help in promoting national development objectives and efforts, clearly demonstrate the potential of the mass media in facilitating development.

However, the role of the mass media in facilitating development was often indirect and only contributory rather than direct and powerly (Rogers, 1976: 49-50). Some may even argue that other functions and external factors are more important. But even so, intellectual critiques agree that no change can occur without the flow of information by the mass media. From this point of view, it is not difficult to understand why mass media have been given considerable attention in nations where socio-economic improvements are urgently required.

With the increasing consciousness of national development, the role of mass media in development has been considered an important factor because of their educational, informational and persuasive roles. Wilbur Schramm points out the task of mass media in national development. According to Schramm (1963: 125) the communication task behind the social change of national development are three kinds. First, the populace must have information about national development. Second, there must be an opportunity to participate intelligently in the decision process. And third, the needed skills must be taught.

Women journalists especially in the developing nations such as Malaysia and its ASEAN neighbours, have come to realise that they need to participate as equal partners with the government in developing the country, the same way their male colleagues are doing. And through active involvement in development, not only will they be able to make their presence felt but also be given the opportunity to establish equal rights in all fields of life. Women in the mass media have the power

and potentials to focus attention on events, ideas as well as interpret events. These are great powers and should therefore be utilized with great care and responsibility in favour of development.

In recent times, seminars on mass media whether at national, regional or international level seemed to place high emphasis on training of manpower, employment and training for women in the media, access by women to new media technology, cultural influences of media, effects of media on women, marginalization of women's news by the media and the like.

But inspite of these orientations and exposures, the women have not been treated fairly by the media. Today the exploitation of women have gone beyond the traditional setting, into the more sophisticated modern world where their feminine attractions are being exploited for profit. Women as consumers are the targets of the business world. Product promotions in commercials and advertisements use women as symbols of attractions (Unesco, 1980:54). Saunas, massage parlors and other tourist lures utilize female services for the material gain of the operators. Women have become victims of circumstances.

In terms of role playing in the mass media, women are, for too much of the time, portrayed as superficial and mindless especially in advertisements and their brains, strengths and talents are played down (Ariffin, 1979; Rahmah, 1976). These observations demonstrate that the mass media not only help to carry the image of women across to the masses but also reinforce the stereotypes already formed in the mind of the masses - that women are basically the inferior ones of the sexes. With constant reminder, inferiority becomes habitual and familiar and even desirable.

Thus, it can be seen that the media are not doing too well in propagating positive image of women as a whole.

However, this does not mean that nothing is being done to remedy the situation. Efforts have been stepped up and the sensitivities of women writers are increasing. Women journalists in Malaysia are now on the move. They are active in every field of journalism. The women journalists today work for daily newspapers, magazines, radio and television news rooms covering news on politics, crimes, education, social and women activities, entertainment and business news.

Recent studies also showed that many women journalists are well trained and educated. Previously, women journalists had no experience because there were no institutions teaching journalism. At present, five universities in Malaysia are involved in producing women graduates in this field each year. A study on women journalists in Malaysia, showed that 27.4 percent of women journalists have Form Six, 25.8 percent with Diplomas, 16.1 percent with Bachelors' Degrees, 11.3 percent with Masters and 1.6 percent with Doctorate. From the samples of respondents, it is found that 62.9 percent have undergone formal training in journalism before joining the profession, while 37.1 percent have no experience or formal training in journalism prior to entry (Faridah, 1988).

These figures are very encouraging. Yet, inspite of these realities, news coverage is always concentrated on economic and political problems. Only a small percentage of the content is intended to help women in shouldering their multiple tasks in development. If women are expected to play a positive role in development, then special attention and coverage should be given to their needs to gain a better understanding of the fast changing environment, the modern technology that is being introduced, and also its ensuing consequences. To do this, women journalists should devote more of their coverage on social problems so that the women will have a better understanding of such problems. Serious attention on the political, social, and economic aspects of development planning and implementation will also enable women to view the processes and problems faced in a clearer perspective. A deeper understanding of these common problems will be of benefit to the women in carrying out their role in societies.

Women journalists need to accept the fact that they have the duty to contribute to the development of the nation. In this respect both the male and female journalists bear the same responsibilities. But as women journalists, they have additional task to see that the potentials of their sisters are not being ignored. The task needs special breed of women journalists with a high degree of professionalism, great

responsibilities and sensitivities.

Thus, if attitudinal problems about women and their concerns are to be changed and improved, training in basic sociology, psychology and human rights, and the like, is necessary along with better editorial policies. The appointment of women to more responsible positions will promote the abolition of sexism, elitism, racism and the neglect of the disadvantaged generally (Siwatibau et. al., 1985: 279).

Several suggestions are put forward here for us to ponder and digest:

- 1) a fair representation of women is needed at the decision making level in order to ensure women's representation in development planning and policies formulation;
- 2) women should be given access to education in order to prepare them for their role in socio-economic and political development;
- 3) equal access to training to upgrade knowledge, skills and productivity of women in employment - at the industrial, agricultural and professional level; and
- 4) facilities that match her three important roles reproduction, production and household maintenance should be provided.

### Conclusion

The key issues in the advancement of women's position are their awareness and participation. Only when women participate in the whole process of planning, decision making and resources allocation, can they develop the capacity to determine their social environment and own destinies. In general, women can make progress base on two critical areas. First, women have to develop strong values, improve their self-image and know what they want in life. Second, the recognition that women are equal partners in development. By increasing women's participation in the development process not only will upgrade women's well being but also the total human resources of the nation.

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