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News As A Service To Society.
The Example of the Women's Feature Service

By

Anita Anand
The Women’s Feature Service (WFS) is a news-feature service of views and analyses of women in their societies and their perception of local, national and international development. The WFS produces, and sends over a teleprinter wire, almost 600 features a year from 60 countries, in English and Spanish. The service is selectively available in Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hindi, Nepali, Norwegian, Portuguese and Swahili. The features are written from a progressive perspective by over 120 Third World women journalists.

The only wire service of its kind, the WFS seeks to ensure a realistic portrayal of women in mainstream media by actively recruiting and training women journalists.

The WFS emerged as a project of three major events in the seventies. The New International Information and Communication Order (NIICO), an initiative of UNESCO, in calling for better news and communication flows between North-South and South-South, also stressed the lack of women’s writing in mainstream media. The United Nations Decade for Women (1975-85) culminated in a conference in Nairobi in 1985. A plan of action ‘The Forward Looking Strategies’ was adopted and the role of media in realistically portraying women was highlighted.

As early as 1975, the first UN Decade conference on Women in Mexico City, delegates of the member nations as well as NGOs pointed to the negative role of media in portraying distorted and unrealistic images of women. To rectify this UNESCO and other UN agencies began several pilot projects in the field of print, radio and television.

At the same time there was a resurgence of women’s movements in many parts of the North and South. Along with the independent status of many nations of the South, and the student and civil rights movements in the North, and the aftermath of the Vietnam War, a new consciousness was emerging. Women were demanding a more active role in shaping their societies.

Additionally, in the development dialogue women also raised the issue of their marginalisation: in policy making, as beneficiaries of development aid, and the importance of being recognised as a group whose needs, aspirations and experiences had to be taken into consideration for real development to take place.

In all the dialogues and debate one thing came across strongly: the missing voices of women at all levels. It was to rectify this situation that the women’s feature services were created. It was hoped that information and analyses produced by women and distributed through mainstream media would be available to men.
and women that were in or could influence policy makers.

In 1978 UNESCO approached several news agencies with the idea of starting a feature service written by women on issues they considered important to them, and wanted to see in print. All the major news agencies refused, with the exception of Inter Press Service (IPS) Third World news agency, headquartered in Italy with regional offices in Latin America and Africa and stringers and correspondents in almost 80 countries. IPS agreed to take on the Latin American region and UNESCO took the other initiatives to regional news agencies and organisations. By 1979 initiatives had been set-up in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

In 1980 IPS took on the African women’s feature service, and by this time the Middle East and Caribbean initiatives had proven unsuccessful. In the Middle East there was no organisation willing to seriously take on the challenge UNESCO has posed them. In the Caribbean, while initial efforts were successful in locating a cadre of writers, over a period of time this came to a halt, and the regional organisers blame the lack of timely funding and the lack of interest in the local market for the demise of this experiment.

In 1985 IPSs central management decided to give its WFS a boost by hiring staff and making a hard sell to donors and funding raising for the project. This paid off and by the end of 1986 regional offices in Latin America and Africa were consolidated and an Asia service started. The aims and objectives of the project were shaped and stated clearly and guidelines for writing were established. Production doubled, and by the end of 1990 quadrupled.

The WFSs had always been envisaged as projects of news agencies that would eventually become independent and be managed and staffed by women. By mid-1990, the WFS was registered as a Society in New Delhi. At the end of 1990 it officially separated from IPS and is in the process of registering itself as a legal entity in the USA, Costa Rica (regional office). It is already registered in France and the Netherlands as a foundation.

How does the WFS come into the picture of news as service to society? The WFS aims, through its products, to provide a mirror to society, in which society’s challenges, neuroses, successes and failures are kept up front. It provides a forum in which the poor, the powerless and the disenfranchised can have a say. Most of all the WFS is about change and the processes of change. It views development as a social, political and economic process of change, which to be just and sustainable, must ensure the participation of all class, race and gender groups.

Using this working definition of development the WFS covers a range of topics that may or may not have been covered by mainstream media, and is distinctive by its approach of the topic -progressive, eclectic, connecting the micro to the macro; avoiding stereotypes, highlighting the people who are being effected by the situation. It acts as an interpreter of the people who are being written about, to the readers. It attempts
to report and interpret responsibly, by maintaining the integrity of those writing (while editing), those being interviewed and the treatment of the issue or situation.

The WFS has at present a 70 percent pick up rate in mainstream media. It is most widely used in Latin America (with the exception of Brazil, due to translation limitations), India, Europe, the Caribbean, in that order. A market survey of 11 Asian countries has just been completed and follow-up work is underway. The WFS has observed, over the years, that in many cases, in different countries, mainstream media is open to the WFS product, provided it is within the parameters of the media. Sometimes, editors has gone around these parameters to use the material, with a little help from the WFS. This improvement has come about as the WFS has been sensitive to what the media has been saying about the service and the WFS becoming more conscious about meeting the needs of media, within limits.

Comments from media clients in the North (Western Europe) regarding quality-details, background, statistics-have been taken seriously, and this has paid off. As time has passed, the WFS has got more deliberate about the material in terms of where in mainstream media it should be placed. From the early 1980s when the WFS products appeared in the women’s and lifestyle sections, they often appear in the editorial pages today. And the media cooperate. One example of this is when the decision of using a WFS feature was made by a leading daily in India recently, the editorial staff got around their norm of not using syndicated pieces on the editorial page, by saying that the author worked with the WFS, as our norm required that both the author and the WFS be given credit!

The WFS has always trained journalists, on the job. No journalist has come to us, ready and tailor made. Our policy is to edit a feature and send both versions back to the contributor, along with any clippings of the pickup. The major advantage the WFS has in this training is that the material, if accepted, is sent over the wire service. Thus the journalists have a readymade market for their efforts. In this process some expertise on the subject of development journalism has been collected among the staff and the organisation. We are in the process of packaging these experiences, and at the same time, continuing the training.

The WFS has been operating on an annual budget under half a million dollars. An international network to be efficient and effective needs much more. While the WFS has a policy of not giving its service free, it will be a long time before an level of self-sufficiency is possible. The donor community, in spite of its theoretical and verbal commitment to the issues of women, development and communication have not come through with the level of funding it takes to make a genuine effort to change the image of women in media. The WFS feels it needs to turn its attention to more profit oriented enterprises to "make a living".

Many experiments both in alternative and mainstream media have been initiated over the last decade and half. These efforts need to be evaluated for the purpose of working together and to avoid
overlapping. Donors are often caught in the bind of funding projects which they see as competing and often diffuse their funding in dealing with the problem. This, while being appropriately democratic, makes the pie smaller and less can be done by each group by smaller amounts of funds. Many projects could gain if certain levels of cooperation and coordination were to be devised.

The WFS is in the phase of its work in which it is looking for such collaboration. It is seeking training institutions that can use its experience in development journalism, radio and television networks that can use the WFS material as background for programmes, and individual journalists as well as organisations of journalists both in the North and South to work with.

In retrospect, the WFS has achieved the aims and objectives it was created for. While a lot more has to be done in terms of expanding into regions it does not fully cover (Africa, the Arab world and Southeast Asia), and those it is not yet present in (Pacific), a beginning has been made. The lack of a WFS presence in the above mentioned regions in not due to lack of trying, but due to the enormous obstacles we have faced and we continue to try and overcome them, in the most creative ways possible.

September 1991