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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Majid, Anne.</td>
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Women In Newspaper Management (Panel Discussion)

By

Anne Majid
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege for me to talk to you and a pleasure indeed to meet people in the print media from the Asian region. I must say that I am in a very fortunate and enviable position this morning for at least three reasons:

a) Not being in the newspaper business I can take the liberty of making assumptions and presumptions of the roles and activities of the print media.

b) Blessed with an invitation to address this Seminar I am in a happy position of being able to speak without being interrupted, and with the added bonus of not having to answer technical questions relating to the print media for I know not how.

c) I am also blessed with the opportunity to speak to a group of people whose pens are mightier than the swords, and therefore can be influential in disseminating the philosophy of women in development in this region.

For affording me this wonderful opportunity I wish to thank the organisers of this Seminar.
Since 1975, which was declared by the United Nations as the International Year for Women, countries throughout the world, particularly United Nations member countries through their governments as well as non-governmental organisations have been promoting the integration of women in development. Why women in particular, you may ask. Let's look at some of the United Nations statistics we have here on women.

- Women represent half of the world's adult population.
- Of the 800 million eliminates 500 million are women.
- Women represent one-third of the formal work force and an overwhelming majority are concentrated in low-paid jobs.
- ½ of women are in non-formal work.
- They perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours.
- Yet they receive only one-tenth of the world's income and own only 1% of the world's property.

How do we figure in the Asia and the Pacific region?

- In 1980 there were 1.274 billion (approximately 1.3) of us.
- In the year 2,000, 13 years hence, the number of women is expected to increase to 1.756 billion.
- 310 million are estimated to be in the 15 - 24 years group. They are young women in the reproductive age group, at one end, and 58 million ageing women at the other end.
- Women's life-expectancy is said to be 5 years larger than men.
By the year 2025, the number of females in the Asia & Pacific region is expected to increase to 2.2 billion; subsequently the number of women in the reproductive age group will be substantially increased.

Yet let's look at our status in society and here I quote the introduction to a UNESCO publication "Half of the World".

* In your hospitals, all the nurses are men and all the doctors are women.

* In most families you know, working fathers earn less than working mothers and do the housework as well as their outside jobs.

* The first girl to be born in a family always inherits the estate even if she has older brothers.

* Big firms generally employ men secretaries but very few are executives.

* Your national airline usually takes women as pilots and men as cabin crew staff.

* Parents often encourage their sons to train for subordinate posts in view of their later marriage but make sacrifices for their daughter's higher education.

* Your Parliament has more female members than men. I feel tempted to add one more but this will be purely a presumption. Can you guess.

* Your newspapers employ more women as managers than men.

Of course none of these statements is true, although they could be accurate to a great extent if the sexes were reversed. For inspite of legislation, in spite of goodwill, equality between men and women remains an ideal rather than a reality. Discrimination is a worldwide phenomena depending upon a complex of factors.
We must bear in mind that women form half the world's population; yet in many Third World countries due to their low level of literacy, they are ill-equipped to play their important role in the family. Due to their lack of training they are unable to find their rightful place in society. They became constraints to development thereby stretching the resources of both government and the community.

Besides, there exists a large number of female-headed households which are disproportionately represented among the rural poor. In addition, they are put into a vulnerable situation in the event of political struggles which affect women at all stages of their lives, as daughters, wives, grandmother as well as single individuals. They have to undertake the responsibilities of looking after their families and relatives, fight for survivals, and are always under the threat of loss and deprivation. These and the violation of their basic rights to equal opportunities in development efforts both as recipients as well as contributors, are important reasons for efforts of "Women in Development".

The term "Women in Development" refers to the efforts of ensuring the equal participation of women with men as agents and beneficiaries of development, which embraces the economic, social, cultural, political and other dimensions of human endeavour. It means that women's needs for greater access to nutrition and health services, education, training, employment, financial resources and greater participation in policy-planning and decision making have to be met. In short, appropriate measures arrived at socio-economic changes should be affected and the structural imbalances which compound and perpetuate women's disadvantages should be totally eliminated. This requires the concentrated action of the public and private sectors, non-governmental organisations, the community and the family.

In addition, the priority concern for the next 13 years should be concentrated on the efforts to meet the needs of young women. The increasing number of young people throughout the world is also stretching government and community resources in many countries. Particularly in
Third World countries many young women are reactiving adulthood without the education and training needed to take advantage of employment opportunities and to cope with a rapidly changing world. The continued need of young women for the support and guidance of their families must also be recognised. Hence the vital need for family life education to equip and prepare young women for adulthood and parenthood.

The Nairobi Conference held in 1985 noted that during the UN Decade, a relatively small number of countries achieved some measure of success. There still exist customs and traditions, prejudices conditioned by long-held beliefs, misleading portrayal of women and illiteracy which have resulted in the loss status of women. These are some of the issues which require attitudinal change by the public sector, and the community - both men as well as women.

The Conference also resolved that no stone should be left unturned in our endeavours to promote women's interest because they are so closely linked with the well-being of the family and society. Every individual has a vital role to play in the development of the other half of the population. One of the ways of effecting changes is through a systematic dissemination of well structured and well-presented information. Who could do this well enough but those in the media.

Every women's conference held in various parts of the world during the UN Decade for Women inadvocately stressed the role of the media as an important tool in influencing the policy planners and decision-makers in promoting attitudinal change in society, with respect to the changing roles of women, in raising public awareness of the serious concerns that both men and women have about important issues which affect their families communities and society at large. In addition they can project a more dynamic image of women and men taking into account the diversity of women's roles and their actual potential contribution to society. They can depict the roles and achievements of both urban and rural women from all walks of life throughout history and help women to develop confidence in themselves.
I am sure that you argue that to play their role effectively people in the media must have a full understanding of women's issues as an integrated part of the overall development process. They should then create an awareness of these issues and popularise the cause of women. In the course of their efforts, I feel that they should, however, be cautious and not perpetuate the unfortunate stereotyping suffered by women at present. It is a problem which has been made worse by the mass media which rarely reflects the reality of women's lives and concerns and more often present a negative image. They should instead project such overlooked situations as the problems faced by young migrant women in cities who are contributing considerably to the economy: women with heavy work burdens and working longer hours than men; mothers in single parent families who are crucial to the survival of their families: sexual harassment and other unfortunate situations.

At the same time, the media should not overlook positive situations where women have made and are making outstanding contributions to the political, economic, cultural and social sections of the community.

If we agree that women can play and should play an important role in the development of the country and that they should be the primary force behind their advancement in society, then they should be made aware of their role and be informed of the various facilities available to enable them to perform their role. They must be informed about issues and projects; about expectations; activities and needs of other women.

The media can also play an active role by making women's lives more visible to other women and society as a whole. It could act as a catalyst by generating discussion of problems and possible causes for action; they can provide women access to various channels of communication where they can be heard and which they can adapt to their needs and provide a supportive environment in which women feel free to speak.
If it is true that the established media can and does have a positive part to play in development efforts, the questions that must be answered are very important to women? Is this potential fully utilised by the media? How often does the media personnel draw their thoughts to the specific needs and concerns of women? Do women themselves have a say in what is projected by the media? Do they have any control over the way in advertisement which the media channels are utilised.

The answer lies on who lays down the policy and makes the decision. Inevitably, it should be those who understand the need to promote efforts of women in development. Past experiences have shown that economic, social and cultural activities have been given purity over the promotion of efforts of women in development by newspaper management. Sometimes I myself notice that the economic consideration weighs high about our social conscience. Having experienced this time I again, I sincerely feel that one of the solutions to ensure that there are more women in the policy making and decision making level. They should be women with a social conscience who appreciate the need to promote the activities of women in development.