

## How Can Media Better Serve the Cause of Women and Development?

New communication technologies are increasing the quantity of information that is available. Nevertheless, the information on women that is diffused by the media is often sporadic, its content is fragmentary and the message, which is poorly targeted in terms of its audience, is rather superficial. Although specific information about rural women has increased in recent years, it is poorly disseminated and little of it has trickled through to the general public. The media do not give sufficient prominence to the true contribution made by women to economic, social and political life.

Rural women's issues often have "low media appeal" because they are seen as being too humdrum, and development issues no longer attract public attention.

This lack of attention to women is partly the result of the information glut, which forces the media to be selective about the subjects they choose to report on. Only information that can be exploited and can attract attention of the "customer," while sending out a clear rousing message, passes through such screening. Rural women's issues often have "low media appeal" because they are seen as being too humdrum, and development issues no longer attract public attention. In order to shake people's convictions and lead them to ask the right questions, the media should be supplied with information that is packaged in an original and attractive manner without losing its integrity.

However, when major occasions, particular anniversaries or outstanding events occur, the media have shown an interest in the societal issues raised by the status of women. Thus, they have helped to alert pub-

lic opinion and sensitise the authorities to the urgent need to recognise women as full-fledged economic, social and political actors.

The media can affect policy-making by influencing public opinion and creating social pressure. Decision-makers are well aware of the power of the media. The media can be a powerful vehicle for publicising contributions made by rural women to food security and the economy, emphasising the constraints placed on them and directing the orientation of social and economic measures.

Yet, as in other areas of society, there is still a long way to go before equality is achieved in the media. Not only do the media speak about a world in which women are often invisible, but few women hold key positions in the media themselves. The consequences are considerable, both in terms of information content and with

regard to the public. Until gender equality is established in the media, women's ideas will have few possibilities of being put into words and even less chance of being taken into consideration. In addition to redirecting the content of the information, one of the ways of remedying the existing imbalance in the media is to implement affirmative action policies.

With regard to communication for development, in order for the media to contribute to the recognition of the contribution to food security of the rural population, especially the women, the following measures should be adopted.

#### Immediate Measures

- ▶ Encouraging information campaigns that convey a positive and true image of rural women's roles, responsibilities and capacity to innovate.
- ▶ Identifying the media—in the broad sense of the term—that disseminate information about rural women (or that are willing to do so), and giving them opportunities to develop programmes that acknowledge women farmers' contribution to food security and rural development.
- ▶ Collaborating with the media to analyse the content and presentation of information about which dissemination methods are most effective in mobilising public opinion on issues such as women's rights.
- ▶ Making greater use of the traditional and modern communications media that are used in the rural environment, particularly radio, to broadcast programmes serving the in-

terests of women.

- ▶ Encouraging the organisation of national debate among media specialists, rural women and agriculture and equal-opportunities bodies in order to modify attitudes and mentalities and influence the contents of information.
- ▶ Organising special events and celebrating days devoted to rural women which highlight their skills, capacities and potential.

#### Longer-term Measures

- ▶ Encouraging the recruitment of women in the media and in high-level information and communication training institutions in countries where there is an imbalance.
- ▶ Organising joint workshops with information and communications institutions on issues related to the contribution made by women farmers to the national economy and food security.
- ▶ Evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the media by a comparative cost-benefit analysis in order to improve media coverage and the capacity for interaction between decision-makers and the rural population.
- ▶ Reaching agreements with the media to convey a steady flow of information on the many, differentiated and complementary roles and responsibilities of men and women farmers.

Source: "Information as a tool in negotiation" (original title) in *Strategy for Action*, published by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Rome, 2000.

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