

# WOMEN EMPOWERING COMMUNICATION

## DROWNED WOMEN'S VOICES TO BE BROUGHT BACK INTO THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

by Karen Waterman

*«The woman has the right  
to climb the scafott.  
Similiarly she must have the right  
to climb the rostrum.»*

What Olympe de Gouges demanded for women during the French Revolution - namely their unlimited share in human rights - more than 200 years later has still not been realized. Not only is her declaration of rights for women still up to date, but also the fate of this courageous woman is still a reality: Olympe de Gouges, who was an embarrassment to certain circles in society and politics due to her fight for women's rights, her consequent struggle against the death penalty and her involvement in political processes during the French revolution, she was sentenced to death on the scaffold on the 3rd November 1791.

Women who query the status quo, criticise their government, or insist on their rights, even nowadays not too rarely have to reckon with brutal attacks. Women often end up on the political and social scrap-heap due to their job engagements: courageous lawyers, nurses, Church collaborators and not to forget the journalists, who are literally climbing the rostrum, due to their daily work.

Recently 428 women communicators from 80 countries attended the «Women Empowering Communication Meeting» held in Bangkok. This conference was organized by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) along with Isis International from Manila, Philippines, and the International Women's Tribune Center, New York City, USA.

During several statements of the conference keynote speakers it was observed that the negative trends regarding the conditions of women in today's world remain dominantly powerful. In spite of some achievements made by the United Nations Decade for Woman, that e.g. some governments and non-governmental organizations take some action or initiate programmes to benefit women, still no significant change for the better can be concluded.

In this respect, Brigalia Bam, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, addressed the gathering: «It is my contention that very little progress has been made. The rise of religious and ethnic fundamentalism has reinforced oppression of women in many countries. Even in Europe and the United States of America women's movement is on the retreat as conservatism of all guises rises... The media exposed customs that violate women's rights, for example, exploitation of unskilled female labourers in export processing zones, destructive forces devastating the lives of women and their families in countries of political tension and military conflicts. The condition of women in today's world is that of greater and more subtle subjugation of women. The media plays a very important role in this subjugation.»

The Conference had a wide ranging agenda touching on topics such as coping with violence against women in the media; women, ecology and media; changing the treatment of women in advertising; obstacles and prospects for women working in media; alternative media strategies; and the media and the sex industries. The gathering agreed that large media organizations are patriarchal in nature, which promotes stereotyped gender-roles, treats women like commodities, highlights violence against women and veils women's contribution to society. Mainstream media have been considered to be «Man-stream» media which are tools of countries and people who want to maximize the economic and political power they already have by perpetuating a status quo in which women form the majority among oppressed groups.



A wide ranging agenda

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«As things stand, the communication of the ruling classes drowns out the voices of the dominated, particularly the voice of women. A natural reaction is to try to become the voice of those we believe to be voiceless. The fact of the matter is that they are not voiceless, their voices have been drowned. What we are in fact called upon to do is to provide a clearing in the communication environment in which those voices can be heard. For most women the provision of such a clearing implies the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy. In other words, they need to be brought into the global village... One of the most ridiculous signs of the oppression of women is the preventing of women from getting knowledge and then accusing them of being ignorant. Societies have always been able to create disabilities and then ask to be praised for attempting to cure such disabilities. This ridiculous situation must be exposed and fought if there is to be any possibility of creating a communication environment which empowers women.» (Brigalia Bam)

The Bangkok meeting was devoted to the search for and sharing of practical alternatives to the current media approach and the development of strategies aimed at strengthening and empowering women's communication. Especially education, networking and consciousness-raising for gender issues have been regarded as effective tools in order to restore justice and integrity to the communication environment. The following strategies were approved by the participants in the final «Bangkok Declaration»:

- \* Strengthening peoples' and more specifically women's media, including storytelling, visual and performance arts, to build on their knowledge, wisdom and creativity
- \* The integration of human values into our media creations such as harmony with nature, cooperation, nurturing, caring, love and compassion, and our struggles for freedom, to ensure that our alternatives do not become hierarchical, undemocratic and elitist
- \* Increasing opportunities for education and technical training methodologies for women in the area of communications and incorporating gender sensitivity, local



history and cultural diversity in the training of professionals in the field of communications

\* Networking and building up linkages with potential allies from government, non-government, corporations, commercial institutions and community people

\* Consciousness-raising through information campaigns and political lobbying on development issues affecting women.

The Declaration especially addressed the funding organizations to re-examine their funding policies giving priorities to strengthening women's media and communications networks through support which is relevant, practical and substantial.

Unfortunately the topic of communication among women themselves received only little attention during the meeting, whereby there seems to be sufficient reason for implementing such kind of supervision. In women's projects and initiatives there appears to be increased tension caused through a lack of mutual acknowledgement, power struggles and undercover hierarchies, the inability of delimitation and constructive criticism, of merciless quarrels and too little praise and passion. Since women's projects along the years have been - and still are - suffering from lack of finances as well as social securities for their collaborators and labours, this is regarded as one major cause, beside class, race and caste discrimination - for the disturbed communication structure among interpersonal contacts and women's projects. For many it is no longer a secret that e.g. the traditional struggle of the women's movement for better working conditions for women has resulted - in many cases - in creating in the movement itself, less protected working conditions for women.

In a recently published survey on communication among women engaged in women's initiatives\* it was concluded that the playing-informal element, which was characteristic of women's initiatives from the starting point of the movement, has vanished during all the internal fights and external struggles for subsidies. In order to reach a change for the better, the author opted to utilize more strongly the communication method of «debate» among women. This would allow every thought and its verbalization. To implement such a kind of debate she advised the women to establish a so-called «advocata diaboli», a woman who has the task of consciously provoking during the debate, by giving her voice and vote to all kinds of motives which are considered to be patriarchal and socio-politically incorrect. It was expected that such kind of uncensored communication could introduce processes of clarification and could cancel manners of communication among women which have already in several cases paralyzed the collaboration of women and consequently made their work ineffective. It will allow discussion in order to face and counter the reality that communication among women does not take place in a vacuum freed of discriminating attitudes concerning class, race or caste.

As mentioned before, this aspect didn't receive much attention on the conference agenda, but then one woman took the initiative, Kamla Bhasin, for 20 years the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) officer for India and Bhutan. She challenged the members of the Global Bangkok meeting with her thoughtful statement: «Global Sisterhood also has its dangers because it is only the literate, the well connected and endowed who can make it to events like this. People like me become self-appointed spokespersons for others... We middle-class, literate feminists need to be constantly vigilant to ensure that we do not impose our communication on other women.» ■

The communication among women  
themselves

\* *Fortune, Every day life and Disaster. About the Collaboration of Women.*  
Orlanda Women Publishing, Berlin  
1993

