

**GAMMA, Ecuador**

## **Campaigns Highlight Stereotypes in the Media**

**By Redemtor Atieno**

“Women and the media” was identified as one of 12 critical areas in the Platform for Action adopted at the United Nation’s Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing. Fourteen years later, media and gender justice is increasingly being recognized as one of the most serious and urgent challenges impeding the empowerment of women and gender equality.

The results of WACC’s 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) mapped the representation of women and men in the news media in 76 countries and showed that women are dramatically under-represented and marginalized in the news.

For the past five years, one organization in Ecuador has been bringing exhibits on sexism in television, radio, and print to the public in a bid to end the negative portrayal of women in the media. Grupo de Apoyo al Movimiento de Mujeres del Azuay (its Spanish acronym is GAMMA) is a non-governmental organization based in Cuenca that works with community organizations to further people’s understanding of gender discrimination in communication.

WACC is supporting three of GAMMA’s programs in communication. In one of these—its Observatory of Communications program—GAMMA is bringing together 11 civil society organizations, local governments and media to discuss strategies to improve media productions and media monitoring of entertainment, advertisement and news in TV, radio and newspapers.

Nidya Pesantez, GAMMA’s Coordinator, says the Observatory project enables people to understand and criticize media messages that reinforce discrimination against women or undermine human rights. They show people different kinds of advertisements and locally produced entertainment programs on TV, radio, newspapers and banners and participants vote for the best and worst productions in terms of sexism. The best production gets a first prize from the local government and a second prize from the Observatory while the worst gets three kinds of moral punishments.

“The prizes motivate people to vote and say their views about media production,” Pesantez explains. She adds that after the results are announced GAMMA writes a press release to the media to show the public what people in Cuenca have said about media production in their city.

“Because of these expositions advertisement agencies now engage with us to better their production because if people don’t like them it is not good for the agencies’ advertisements,” she explains.

Pesantez says media practitioners are also interested in the voice of the people and ask how people have voted. She notes with interest that while the media and those in production agencies have claimed that audiences like productions with naked women and entertainment programs

with skimpily dressed women while men are well dressed, when GAMMA asks the audience, they refute those claims.

GAMMA's media campaign has been working slowly and systematically to try and sensitize the media on issues of gender justice. "We are patient with them and we know in the long run we will manage to convince them to change the way they portray women. We don't fight with the media but we talk to the media because we know that together we can build a new kind of media," she states.

GAMMA organizes media training events for journalists and editors each year. It has also taken the exhibits on sexism in the media to universities and colleges in Cuenca and is urging one university to include a course in gender and media in its curriculum.

Pesantez is optimistic that the project is right on course. "What is important is that people are now talking about the situation like never before. People are now telling us that since they got involved in the project they analyze all programs and advertisements in the media," she observes. She adds that another achievement has been the increase in the number of people who vote in the expositions each year. More and more people in the city are now eager to participate in the votes of the best and worst advertisements and programs.

GAMMA has also been involved in monitoring other kinds of advertisements and the coordinator says they have become better every year. "Advertisements in Cuenca that break stereotypes are now 10 percent [of the total], up from 1 percent in the previous years. Fifty percent of advertisements have reduced sexism and gender stereotypes," she says. GAMMA monitors advertisements twice a year and entertainment programs once a year in the five national TV channels and local radio stations and newspapers.

Cuenca municipality, which has a department for Gender and Social Equality, is also part of the Observatory project. GAMMA and the municipality are working together to create a bylaw that states that Cuenca is a city with freedom for sexist communication. She says this goal will soon be achievable, as more and more people are questioning the relevance of sexist programming and advertisements.

"People are happy with the project and each year we have more people voting and expressing their opinion about media programs. Journalists are also interested in the proposals because of the results."

However she still sees the need to publicize the project in Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador with about 400,000 inhabitants. "We want to reach a moment where people refuse to buy products because the adverts are sexist or marginalize women. We need more force to push forth this agenda. The next step is social and visible action," she observes.

The project also helped GAMMA build alliances with 20 other non-governmental organizations that participated in the media training. She says networking with other organization is important to reach a critical mass and bring social change in society.

GAMMA borrowed a lot from tools for monitoring used in WACC's Global Media Monitoring Program to develop its own monitoring tools specific to its context.