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Bernama Feature (First of Two-Part Series)
STALE MENU FOR WOMEN IN THE MASS MEDIA

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KUALA LUMPUR: When Bufori, Malaysia's first sportscar was introduced in early 1995, a TV commercial showed three women walking into a matchmaking agency, each declaring what she wants in a man.

The last woman, the prettiest, said: "I don't care what he is or how he looks like, as long as he drives a Bufori, I'm all his."

The ad got many viewers riled up. Three English dailies and one Malay daily played up their complaints and wrote editorials that forced the ad to be withdrawn.

But these stereo-type images seem to be a prevalent menu, no matter how stale, serve up by the mass media for women.

An international seminar on women in the media in Bangi recently noted that sexist advertising which "discriminates, degrades and humiliates women" has not stopped. It invites short spurts of publicity in the media, but when the dust settles, it is back to business as usual.

Even worse is the cumulative findings of many studies on the portrayal of sex roles in the media that confirm that the depiction of sex roles in the media corresponds to the pattern set by traditional sex-role stereotypes in societies.

Recent literature also provides evidence of the media's role in shaping women's view of herself and in controlling female behaviour by setting agendas for the female world.

Columnist Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir made an interesting observation at the seminar on how women themselves have stereo-typed mindset about other women.

Marina, who is chairman of the Malaysian AIDS Foundation and president of the Malaysian AIDS Council, said that she had frequently been asked stereo-typed gender questions by female reporters on her personal life, her likes and dislikes and other "female-stuff" on her hair style, etcetra, etcetra.

"Would they ask similar questions to a man if he is in her position? Are the female reporters being told to ask such questions by their news editors or the reporters themselves, being women, thought those were the relevant questions that should be directed at her and women in general?", asked Marina who is also the project coordinator for the 15-volume Encyclopedia of Malaysia, to be published late this year.

Malaysia's popular women's magazines can fairly indicate where the direction of women's concerns and interests are headed. According to Mary Assunta Kolandai, a media officer of the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), an average of about 40 percent of the pages of three popular women's magazines in Malaysia are devoted to advertisements and another 20 percent to various types of promotions.

In other words, about 67 percent of the space in the two English magazines and about 50 percent in the two Malay magazines are devoted to advertising and promotions of goods and services.

Of these, the bulk of the advertisements and promotions are for cosmetics (32 to 52 percent), fashion (19 to 66 percent) and other beauty related products and services.

The main themes emerging from these advertisements are looks, youth and slimness. Based on the kind of advertisements appearing in these magazines, one is led to believe that there is a deep concern among women for whiter skin - to make paler, bleach, blanch or discolour -- and defy aging.

When The New Straits Times Features Editor, Aishah Ali, was given the task to head the women's desk ten years ago, the women's pages consisted of the typical menu of fashion, beauty and cookery. There were little, if ever, discussions relating to equality or legal rights.

But things changed after she was invited to a gender-sensitising workshop organised by the Asia Pacific Development Centre (APDC) in 1987. Since then, she had made it her mission to make a change by focusing on issues of crucial importance to women and she has never looked back.

"The feedback was instantaneous. Readers hungered for stories on strong women, careers, childcare, self-esteem, polygamy and the glass ceiling. They wanted to know how to cope with rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence. They needed to be informed about women's reproductive health and HIV/AIDS," she said.

These stories became the main agenda in the NST's women's pages and even fashion and beauty stories focused on teaching women the finer points of grooming instead of simply decorating the pages with pictures of beautiful models, said Aishah.

Dr Wang Lay Kim, a lecturer of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), said that the myth that nature determined women's destiny through beauty, charm and sweetness, still persist in many media images, be they print or broadcast media.

For instance, advertisements for personal care invariably use models who are always Barbie doll thin, always tall and young, always possessing perfect features.

Another myth that is often used in the media is that of woman's main role of mother and wife, limiting her area of expertise to the kitchen, or home. Many women's programmes on television deal mainly with how to cook and take care of the house and children, and fashion.

At the same time, drama serials produced locally also tend to portray women as wives and mothers, and women who fall outside these roles are invariably portrayed as bad mothers who are incapable of blending career and family, she said.

"There is nothing wrong with being a mother and wife. They are good roles for women. What is unacceptable is that the media constantly push women into the role as caregiver and housekeeper, as if it is natural. Although what we see may be based on real-life situations, such portrayals institutionalise unfair and unequal household relationships in the home."

Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Haji Mohd Ali in her keynote address at the seminar said those who control the media can control the mind of the audience. "Studies have shown that those who control the media do not necessarily have enlightened views or attitudes with regards to women, having been brought up to believe in the traditional sex-stereotypes in society."

In the midst of all these grievances, RTM's TV2 controller, Zohara Gany Mohd Bathusha, urged women leaders and non-governmental organisations to support the inclusion of a provision in the proposed amendments to the Film Censorship, 1952 to curb negative images of women in films. She said she would pursue this matter with other members of the Film Censorship Board.

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