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Make the media work for us!

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THERE used to be a picture of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad with a small boy looking ahead towards the future. Both were smiling.

Though it was a simple picture, the message I saw was that there is a bright future ahead.

It was a beautiful image because it was positive. It spoke volumes about the ideals of a nation.

Last week, when I was giving a paper on Media, Myths and Realities at the Asian Institute of Broadcasting Development, I remembered that picture and illustrated it amidst so many negative pictures on the abuse by the media.

Although my audience were women from various countries like India, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Singapore, there was this common annoyance about Vogue, Cosmopolitan and other women magazines that advertise jeans with women wearing nothing else but jeans, or models in chains, straitjackets or yanked by dog collars. Or, even the model in a coffin advertising some product which was definitely not the coffin.

Although, I cannot figure out the message in some of these products, I must admit that the media's power is phenomenal in changing the mindset of people.

For instance, the fashion merchants have almost defined the status of women simply by altering women's wardrobes. It is the fashion merchants who decide whether women should have the feminine look, the domineering look or whether we should dress like men.

It is the fashion industry that introduced the "dress for success" ideology. The fashion industry has been women's biggest enemy by determining as well as narrowing women's choices in life and taking women on a roller coaster ride.

The myth it perpetuates is that women can realise themselves with a certain brand of clothing, cosmetic or plastic surgery.

Women do not change. It is fashion that attempts to change women!

Advertisements have also determined the status of woman, whether she be liberated, a mother, single, independent, happy or successful women up and down the career ladder.

One of my all-time favourites is a 1970 glossy picture of a smiling woman who has a career, feels liberated and is happy with her life. However, in 1980 the same woman in the same glossy picture has a frown with a message - "Is this the Price to Pay for liberation?"

I can go on and on.

But I am tired of jumping on soap boxes and shouting about the demerits of any system. That was what we did for an entire millennium and though we did get somewhere with that mode of persuasion, we still have a long way to go.

Frankly, I do not want to criticise anymore because we end up losing only energy. The same energy can be used to make the media work for us instead of against us.

Somehow, when I started on the positive elements of the media, the atmosphere in my audience changed.

All of us started talking about some good advertisements we had seen, we offered suggestions about changing the image and suddenly we seemed to be getting somewhere.

At that point, Trish Williams a broadcasting and media consultant from Britain said, "Why don't all of us go and write about the media legislature in our countries which protects women. Perhaps we can share the suggestions."

Precisely! We should communicate with each other to come up with the best methods that will allow us to use the media. We should suggest ideas that have worked in our countries – ideas that can sell a product with a positive image.

The media decides who we are, what we should stand for and women's organisations have been up against this for decades. The media is the most persuasive and influential means of presenting an idea or to create an impression.

The lightning speed in which a message is passed and the impact that it has on the sub-conscious mind is amazing. Said enough times, anything can become true, even a lie.

People go to the movies and tend to believe what they see. The movie industry is in a position to drive any image. Movies can get audience participation in such a way that we can express sympathy or deep resentment for a certain typecast character.

The classic example is the audience's hatred for the role played by Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction. I still remember a guy in the audience shouting in the most abusive language, followed by "Kill her, Michael Douglas!" I admit at that young vulnerable age, I too wanted to kill Glenn Close.

We should persuade the movie industry to portray real women. There is an absence of real women – women who are intelligent, who have careers, women who have children, women who have successful marriages and women who do not have to reach the top by being manipulative.

It is up to us as consumers to dictate the terms of the media.

For instance, although many of us keep complaining about its portrayals of women, we are the same people who buy these magazines and thus support these images.

If we are really outraged about the way we are devalued, perhaps we shouldn't buy the magazines.

In that way, we will be sending the right signals that we want a change in the way we are being perceived.