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REACHING THE DISADVANTAGED

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Mr. Chairman, fellow speakers' ladies and gentlemen.

Music, humor and drama I was told make a listenable presentation.

Drama there is and plenty of when we study and dig deeper into the plight of the disadvantaged. Music and humor I doubt. However let's see how all of this progresses.

I have divided my paper into two sections taking my cue from the topic itself.

REACHING THE DISADVANTAGED

I have taken the liberty of turning this around.

I will first discuss the **DISADVANTAGED**.

And then I will attempt to talk about **REACHING** them.

Being more familiar with the Pakistani scenario where I live and work whatever thoughts I share with you today will reflect largely that perspective. However one can find not only a broader spectrum of Asia in the images I will be projecting but perhaps also from all the countries represented at this conference.

The Oxford dictionary describes "*disadvantaged*" as "*placed in unfavorable conditions*". It further goes on to elaborate disadvantaged as "*i.e. especially those persons who are lacking normal, social conditions*". The key words here being "*lacking*" and "*normal social conditions*".

Very broadly speaking in Pakistan one would define the disadvantaged as;

1. All those persons living below the poverty line.
2. All those persons with special needs be they physical or psychological. And after the October 8th earthquake these numbers have risen phenomenally.
3. The minorities in Pakistan also fall into this category.

4. The women of Pakistan also qualify as “*lacking normal social conditions*”.

So what do I mean by “lacking normal conditions” would be my next point of discussion.

Access to food, clean water and shelter I would say in a nut shell.

Carrying on from there I would move to add access to education, basic health and sanitation facilities. Moving still further I would add better and equal opportunities to employment, political, legal and economic empowerment and finally equality of all human rights as citizens in a free and democratic society.

As a media professional who professes to know and propagate with much gusto and zeal the cause of women on and from the electronic media I tried to understand what or who was responsible for placing the women in Pakistan and indeed the world over in “*unfavorable*” conditions and thus bracketing them as “*disadvantaged*”.

Primarily I came up with the following 3 “forces” that restrict us all in any given society to enjoy or not to enjoy as the case may be “social normal opportunities”.

1. **Religion**. As would be the case certainly in Muslim societies and countries.
2. **Political** structures or systems of any given country.
3. And thirdly the **social structures** prevalent in those countries. The communities, the cultural and family set ups.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan under religion which is **Islam** women are allowed all equal rights at par with their male counter parts.

There are numerous verses in the **Quran** that not only specify this fact but also repeat it time and time again.

There are many **hadiths** which are related to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that reflect not only how the Prophet (PBUH) himself was a prime example of ensuring complete equality of both sexes in his own family but also how he publicly admonished the persons

who thought otherwise.

In the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan it is stated in article 25 of chapter 1 titled FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

1. All citizens are equal before law and are also entitled to equal protection of law.
2. There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex alone.

So then who is the “villain” this whole scenario?

I would identify the third factor which is the social set up, the community, the tribal or feudal systems, the cultural taboos, and the family.

Women in Pakistan are not “allowed” to vote or choose a life partner or seek further education or be gainfully employed or decide the number of children they want to have. The list is endless. After the earthquake in October one of the major concerns of the national and international agencies trying to help out is the fact that women are stranded up in the mountains are dying because the village or family elders will not allow a male doctor to treat them and there are not enough female doctors to go around. Pakistan already has a high maternal mortality rate of ranging between 300 to 700 for every 100,000 live births according to a UNFPA report published in 2004. The latest figures are still being accurately updated but there is no doubt that they will rise not decrease as population experts told me before I came here.

And now I come to the second part of my presentation.

The **REACHING** part.

So we have identified the disadvantaged and we have identified the “culprit” which is responsible for their plight. So who is going to change this?

Beyond any doubt it should be and must be the media who has to pick up this challenge.

Be it radio or TV or print it can only be the media that has to break cultural taboos, challenge feudal traditions, awaken the consciences of communities and help in creating an awareness in each and every member of that society that he or she enjoys equal rights in the eyes of God, law and country and should have access to “normal social opportunities”.

In Pakistan and indeed in many countries of the world there is both public and private broadcasting. We have government owned TV and radio channels.

Broadly speaking the heavy onus of responsibility of reaching out to the disadvantaged does lie with the public sector. However when any government has its own agenda to push it will do so with great determination and effort regardless of the realities on ground. When it's election time suddenly all eyes are on how to “better” the “opportunities” for the “disadvantaged”. The public broadcaster will also present a “rosy” picture of the realities on ground when the actual reality is in direct reverse.

We now turn to the private broadcaster.

What do we find here?

In the present highly competitive media global scene the case of the disadvantaged has to be “commercially” viable for any private enterprise. And why not? It is all about balance sheets and profits. Every one follows the money line they say.

So then who or where do the disadvantaged look for help to “champion” their cause and plead their case? And where indeed lies the answer?

I will conclude here by focusing on the following:

1. Firstly the “disadvantaged” must be made aware of “how” to have access to “normal social opportunities”.

Here we look to both the private and public broadcasters. It must be their prime responsibility to create awareness and to promote an awakening amongst the disadvantaged about how to cross that line and walk into the “advantaged” zone.

2. Secondly once the “disadvantaged” have gained that awareness that enlightenment, that information then that is where their battle begins in earnest. And that is to keep the media focused on their fight and with them as partners to pursue the issues that need to be readdressed.

The people, all the people of all the countries are the stake holder’s here. They must voice their concerns. They must ensure that their voices are heard on and from the media.

In any democratic set up it is the people who govern and, it is the people who elect the people who govern.

Therefore it is the people themselves who must ensure that the people they elect to govern safeguard and protect their rights in a free and democratic society where each and every individual must have the right to “normal social opportunities”. They must all have shelters over their heads, food and clean water in their bellies, health facilities, education and the right to employment. They must be empowered economically, legally and politically but most importantly of all they must know how to use this empowerment for a better life for themselves and their future generations. And their partner in this journey must be the media.

Reaching the disadvantaged is a two way relationship.

The media and the stakeholders themselves have both to be active and vigilant in ensuring that this objective is achieved.

I thank you for listening and I thank the CBA for inviting me to speak today.

But before I finally wrap up I do think a bit of music would help. And here it is.