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## **Content And Representation Of Women In The Arab Media**

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## CONTENT ISSUES

### I - Introduction

This paper endeavours to answer two important questions related to the role of the media in the advancement of women in the Arab World: How can the media in the Arab World promote more positive, realistic portrayal of women? How can the role of Arab media women be strengthened as a means of changing the portrayal of women in the media?

It is a cliché to state that women are shown as sex objects by the media. Advertisements use the images of women to sell products. Pornographic and violent depiction of women sell films. Media enterprises, rather than promoting social welfare, often are catering to popular tastes in order to make money. In response, critics in some Arab countries are confronting the focus on women's bodies prevalent in the media and are calling for new images of women as mothers, wives, and active participants in society. Changing economic and social conditions have led to increased cultural sensitivity toward women as members of society. Thus, the media has responded by developing more positive images of women that reflect daily life. Advertisements featuring women in the Arab world nowadays are often showing women as submissive wives happily using the products being sold. So the camera focus has turned toward a different, but still stereotypical direction. As noted by media specialist researchers, there is too much focus on housewives and too little attention given to working women. They urge redressing the misrepresentations, inaccuracies and demeaning portrayal of women in the media, and push for bringing to the forefront the women who are at the grassroots level of society who are invisible and marginalized in the media.

The media is in a primary role to change the portrayal of women. No longer is the media just considered a mirror of the society and its events. Its effect has expanded and is influencing the way people are arranging their priorities and interests. In fact, it is influencing how people formulate their knowledge, attitudes, stands and practices. Shifting the portrayal of women in a more positive and realistic manner could be accomplished by the influence and efforts of women working within the media. Governments reports on job trends submitted to the UN indicate an increase of women graduating from journalism and mass communication programmes and entering media organizations at the professional level. This greater presence of women in the media is noted internationally and in the Arab world. Although some women have attained key decision making positions in media organizations, they have yet to play an active role in changing media portrayal of women. This could be accounted for by their numbers not yet reaching a "critical mass" to overcome the gender-based discrimination in the workplace and more importantly by the incentive of media enterprises to make a profit.

Governments are the key players in directing social changes within their countries. Some have restructured their national programmes to advance women, but without integrating measures to monitor the treatment of women by the media. National media codes could be a means of upgrading the image of women, but if in place they are often not implemented or may even not exist. Furthermore, women are generally not participants in governing authorities that oversee formulation and implementation of media policies. Therefore, as media workers or policy makers, the power to shape and influence the media eludes women.

Satellite channels functioning above governmental controls and local cultural sensitivities have a role to play in a negative or positive sense toward the advancement of women. The next section will examine their impact.

## **II - Satellites impact**

Satellite television programming reflects a trend of globalization that is paving the way for increased transborder communication and commercialization and homogenization of cultures. Its effects upon the Arab world have been studied by numerous scholars. Entertainment programmes are most popular with Arab women, and many studies have indicated that movies and soap operas are usually ranked first in terms of satellite viewing. Many Media Researchers asserted that the observation of Arab society reveals obvious Western influence on women and girls with regard to fashion, clothing and fast food consumption. Another writer indicates that satellite television has reduced reading habits and radio listening. They found that high school girls in the Arab world who are exposed to satellite channels, especially American, look forward to travel in the Western world. And concluded that satellite exposure is positively correlated with adoption of Western values and that satellite viewing causes superficiality, distortion and ambiguity. In contrast Some scholars found that American soap operas had no effect on teenagers' perceptions and retention. Therefore, consideration of measures to advance and empower women must include the aspect of transnational communication technologies, such as satellite television or Internet.

## **III - Major content and representation themes**

*What can be done at the organizational level (e.g. in terms of policy guidelines, sensitization, etc.)?*

First of all, would Arab society support organizational efforts to change media representation of women? Despite the apparent integration of Western attitudes and behaviours in Arab society due to influences such as satellite television, there are negative reactions to the phenomenon. Inherently, the Arab-Islamic society is defensive of its traditions and cultural values, such that it is broadly perceived that satellite broadcasting is cultural imperialism corrupting the society. Some even equate satellite channels with pornography, which has lead some families in the UAE to prohibit women in general and young girls in particular to view satellite television programmes, to the extent that promises are taken that even newly wedded daughters will not be allowed to view them in their new homes. The foundation of this reaction is the concern that satellite programming will threaten family ties and values. For example, programmes featuring divorce as a means to solve family problems or sexually related material, such as obscenity, nudity, and premarital sexual relations, are forbidden in most Arab homes. Therefore, it can be assumed that Arab-Islamic society would welcome governmental and nongovernmental organization efforts to "clean up" media representations of women.

On the other hand, the popularity of Arabic movies and films with portrayal of women in scenes of sex and violence often verges on the misogynous. Cases in point: one must only list the titles of some contemporary Egyptian films, such as A Dangerous Woman; The Devil is a

Woman; A Woman of Ill Repute: The Curse of a Woman; Torture is a Woman. Thus, there is definitely an audience in Arab society for entertainment not accordant with Islamic values.

Secondly, what organizational means could be undertaken to change the image of women in the media? Many media specialists in the Arab world, including conference participants, have expressed the need for a media-watch organization. A network of concerned individuals who could closely monitor the representation and treatment of women's issues in the local media and then protest when representation is demeaning or unfair. Such an organization could also lobby for change. Many media specialists agreed that NGOs should play a role in monitoring activities, as well as seek to establish stronger links with the media. A certain naivete, however, may have characterized the discussions of the role of NGOs and the extent to which they can bring about change in the media. One participant, for instance, suggested that a law could be passed prohibiting the representation of women as sex objects. Many wondered whether legal recourse would be effective, however. Again, would such a law mean that films featuring women's bodies would be censored?

Print media can also be seen as a means to achieve empowerment of women. A major suggestion was to focus upon the specialized women's publications, which provide alternative, and far more empowering coverage of women's issues. As a women's only forum, they provide women with the necessary space to tackle their problems and call for emancipation. Such specialized women's publications tend to be void of "how-to-have-lustrous-hair-while-losing-a-few-pounds" stories, as well as have feature writers that have extensive experience in addressing women's issues. On the other hand, others called for greater gender equality in mainstream newspapers and journals, which permits and supports women holding posts traditionally held by males, plus promotes change in content that would be empowering to women.

Some complained that increased sensitization to women's issues within media organizations cannot take place until adequate numbers are able to reach the "top". For example, one participant complained that as an editor she was sneered at by male colleagues when she decided to relax on censorship related to articles on the president because she was thought to be incapable to enforce the necessary control over the journalists under her charge. Thus, being a woman media specialist is a variety of mental handicap that requires one to overcome and to work harder than male counterparts. Some Arab female journalists have been able to move beyond the victim mentality and have succeeded to master male-only fields, such as defense and security issues. Advice given from one was: "Kill them with your brilliance and charm. You'd be surprised how far you can go without doing something illegal, immoral or fattening."

Some questions were raised by participants that could result in other measures to improve the image of women. What are the links between women's rights activism and the media in terms of the frameworks in place and the actual situation on the ground? What are the available international or regional machinery that can provide As NGOs, journalists and others with legal bases and internationally-agreed upon strategic objectives, as well as funding, know-how and general back-up for initiatives aimed at redressing the imbalance in women's representation in and through the Arab media? Should women be presented as positive agents of social, political and economic change? Or is the problem that all marginalized groups, including women, need to be better represented in efforts to improve social welfare?

***What scope does the individual media practitioner have to make change?***

Arab media women are the ones most capable of reflecting the true image of Arab women and the Arab-Islamic community to the West. Their role should not be limited to women's issues, but should be expanded to encompass social, economic and political issues. Women journalists must work hard to gain credibility through improving their language skills and gaining expertise in coverage in these areas.

***What can be done in terms of developing awareness within the media organizations about the impact of programming and production decisions on patterns of gender content?***

In spite of fears, satellite broadcasting has provided an excellent opportunity to access information and knowledge for Arab women through the different satellite services. As women access international channels for news and information, women are ever more able to discuss topics that were previously considered taboo. Greater freedom of expression is affecting all walks of public life in the Middle East. Women are turning to satellite broadcasting as a forum for the exchange of thoughts and ideas, as a means to gain a public forum for development and empowerment, as a medium for education that overcomes barriers of distance and time, and as a tool to advance progress and development of communities.

***How can women use the media to claim their rights?******What are the causes and symptoms of complacency about women's advancement in sections of the media and the public at large?******How should women be represented in the Arab media?***

New images of women as mothers, wives and agents of change in society should be promoted. Images of women who choose to be housewives and mothers should not be replaced across the board with images of independent working single women. Women should be presented as positive agents of social, political, and economic change, and at the same time they should have proportionate representation within these fields.

***How far has the campaign for women's rights and the development of media practices converged or diverged?***

The Arab media have a vital role to play in promoting women's rights, but it is a role that has yet to be fulfilled on a whole range of issues--violence against women, equality before law, women's right to education, and much else. Part of the problem is that the public is suspicious of women's rights advocacy and complacent about negative stereotyping of women in the media. When a campaign for women's rights does take place, winning over the media will be crucial for orienting the public debate to the message that women's rights are integral to national development. As for women's rights as an international issue, the Arab media can bring to popular attention the plight of Palestinian women through interviews and illustration of the inhuman conditions that Palestinian women endure under Israeli occupation.

### ***How do government policies impact on women's access and use of media?***

Actually, the issue is not government policies that impact on women's access and use of media, it is rather the role of the family in the Middle East that restricts the media viewing of ordinary women. Satellite broadcasting in the Arab world is providing Arab women with educational, entertainment, and cultural and artistic services that are generally considered "safe" by their families. Women in Egypt have had access to satellite television longer than women in other Arab countries, which Fahmy (1997) gives credit for the active role many have started to play some role in modernizing Arab society. Through satellite programming, Egyptian women have been able to receive education and obtain knowledge about each other as well as education. Satellite programmes facilitate the transfer of information throughout the country through a good part of the region and does away with the isolation of desert and rural areas. Arab women of the Middle East can likewise benefit. Because of the multi-channel environment it creates, it invites to take the opportunity for fair and equitable access to local and global resources and facilities for conventional and advanced channels of communication; to receive opinions, information and ideas; to receive a range of cultural products designed for a wide variety of tastes and interests; and to have easy access to information.

### ***What monitoring, advocacy and media education strategies can be put in place?***

A clear media vision tackling women's issues that works to rectify the distorted images of Arab Muslim women in the West are the main challenges facing Arab media women today. Arab media women should work to remove obstacles and inconsistent policies in the tackling of women's issues. There are several questions that should be asked in this regard:

- What are the available leadership training programmes for women that address the challenges involved in lobbying via the media?
- What are the steps taken to ensure that these issues and campaigns are covered in the media, and are they reported fairly and accurately?
- Do we want more positive and more realistic representations -- and what happens when the two do not always mean the same thing?

### ***What structures should be recommended?***

Do we need a media-watch organization? Or should we call upon NGOs to play a role in such monitoring activities, and seek to establish stronger links with the media? If we choose the first option – namely a media-watch organization – then we should recommend the emergence of a special network of concerned individuals who could closely monitor the representation and treatment of women's issues in the local media and protest when representation is demeaning or unfair. Such an organization could also lobby for change.

Moreover women must work harder to reach the same position as men; women also need to work on improving their skills by being experts in areas not considered "women's issues". In other words, "Women should move beyond the victim mentality." Women in the media should shoulder the responsibility of serious programmes. They should regularly discuss, debate, and

confront the state of politics in their countries. They should have a role to play and a message to convey, which is far more important than a better paycheck.

It is disappointing that there is still almost non-existent representation of women in public office. Although the status of women is improving, men still believe that women have a limited role to play in the process of change. Lack of confidence in women's leadership ability is the reason we see few, if any, women in government. The state of gender relations is frustrating and disappointing. Women are still being doubted and belittled by their male co-workers. Let us hope that a day in our lifetime will come when we see women play an equal role in the development of society.

#### **IV. Key issues on women and the media**

The advances made in information technology have benefits as well as disadvantages for women. Increasing numbers of women work in the communications sector. However, this has not translated into increased access to power and decision-making in media organizations; women have not been able to influence media policies. There is lack of gender sensitivity in media policies and programmes; instead there is increased promotion of consumerism. The media needs to create self-regulatory mechanisms to manage both trends.

Women continue to be portrayed in a stereotyped manner by the media; and worse yet there is an increase in violent and pornographic images of women. Many women face obstacles to access of the electronic information highways. Women should be involved in the development and dissemination of new information technologies.

#### **V Impact of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) on women advancement**

The new information technologies (ICTs) have allowed women to link and network with each other more effectively and share information and resources faster. The women's movement in the region is increasingly using the electronic medium to put forward their advocacy and build solidarity.

#### **VI- Strategies and Recommendations**

Women in media organizations should work to change the media environment through engaging in the following activities. They need to:

- Discuss research-based media issues, particularly on strategies to raise public awareness of women's issues.
- Publish a newsletter to promote networking for career promotion and cooperation toward advancing and empowerment of women through the media.
- Conduct nationwide television monitoring to raise awareness of the media and bring to public attention misrepresentations, inaccuracies, and demeaning portrayal of women by the media.

- Organize regional and international conferences, workshops, fora and other events to discuss issues pertaining to women and media.
- Provide training for women on radio production, electronic networking, database and resource centre management.
- Disseminate information to women across the world through a monthly newsletter, a magazine, website, and electronic mailing lists.
- Launch a women's resource exchange facility as an Internet-based women's information service and network made up of women's information, media and communication organizations in the region.
- Develop cooperative approaches and partnerships in exploring applications of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) for social and economic empowerment of women. This network aims to facilitate regional and national network-building in the women's movement through the promotion of electronic resource sharing and building a regional information service that will support various advocacy programmes.