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The Arab World And The Challenge Of Introducing Gender-Sensitive Communication Policies

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In the present paper, I will start by identifying some of the major problems and issues that account for the lack of gender sensitive media policies and representations in the Arab world. The introductory section will be followed by a set of recommendations that can help develop gender sensitive communication policies that are suited to the cultural, religious, political, and economic specificities of this part of the developing world.

Current situation/problems

To start with, gender sensitive policies per se (in the media or elsewhere) are basically non-existent in the Arab world. In Lebanon – the most Westernized of all Arab countries and the one (theoretically) best placed to reflect some gender sensitivity - the union of journalists' code of ethics, dating from the pre- Civil War period, remains unrevised at the time of writing. Like any other piece of legislation, it does not include gender provisions concerning the fair portrayal of women. The lack of gender awareness, moreover, is reflected in the belief, prominent among journalists and media practitioners, that general provisions against libel and defamation are sufficient to protect men *and* women. The situation is similar as far as the text of the first law on private broadcasting introduced in the Arab world in 1994 is concerned. The 1994 Lebanese Broadcasting Act recognizes the importance of the respect of human dignity, freedom of expression, and pluralism of opinion. In avoiding dealing specifically with gender in media policies, one might argue that women's rights are human rights, which they certainly are. The problem, however, lies elsewhere within an Arab context. To a large extent, both in theory and in practice, human rights are not the same for men and women in the Arab world. This has already been widely denounced and documented with respect to labor laws (non-existence of laws on sexual harassment in the workplace, unequal health insurance and retirement plans, etc.), personal status laws (inheritance, divorce, custody of children), and civil laws (an example would be the different penalties received by men and woman for the same state punishable "crime of adultery", with women receiving the harsher penalties of the two).

This lack of gender awareness is also strongly reflected in other areas, especially in educational institutions that could be best used to promote gender awareness. Not only are gender issues and gender studies absent from university curricula in general, and from journalism programs in particular, school textbooks (excluding those used in a very few expensive, private Western schools) continue to perpetuate old gender stereotypes.

The above mentioned problems, which can be largely attributed to government decisions, traditional values, and dominant patriarchal interpretations of Islam, continue to exist at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is so despite a growing awareness, especially *within* Arab countries, of the unjust treatment of Arab women. One major reason to account for the slow, often imperceptible change concerning the status of women in the Arab world is the weakness, if not absence in some situations, of civil society in Arab countries. This weakness is mostly due to the predominantly authoritarian political systems, inexperience, and underdevelopment. In such an environment, local NGOs are left with little room for manoeuvring, and indeed may face physical or legal persecution both from authorities and disgruntled, radical religious groups protecting the status quo. Fatima Mernissi, one of the most outspoken Arab feminists, has repeatedly decried the acts of vandalism perpetuated against small

publishing houses and offices run by Arab feminists in Northern Africa. A few years ago, a respected Turkish Muslim feminist and scholar, Konca Kuris, who among other things, argued from a Muslim religious perspective against the segregation of the sexes in Muslim societies, was kidnapped, tortured and killed by a Muslim fundamentalist group.

Finally, since the role of the media is crucial in promoting awareness and change in the area of gender awareness, it is worth expanding on the type and state of the media in the Arab world. Understanding media systems in Arab countries can help CSOs adopt those strategies for action best suited to introduce change. To start with, public service broadcasting (or PSB), whether in Europe or North America (especially in Canada), has been traditionally relied upon to include and give a voice to all segments of the population, regardless of differences in ethnicity, sex, religion, and so on. Moreover, independent bodies and councils were set up (with varying degrees of success) to keep these public media institutions at arms length from the government. It was believed that PSB was crucial to create a sense of common national identity and inclusion among all citizens of a democratic country, and to provide them with a common forum for debate. It was also believed that this inclusion could only be provided by media institutions that could act independently of market pressures and could therefore address those (usually non-affluent) segments of the audience that are usually neglected by private commercial media. In the Arab world, lobbying the public broadcaster and related (and basically non-independent) regulatory authorities to implement gender equality regarding access to employment, fair representation, and so on can be a quite futile experience and largely a waste of resources. There is no tradition of public service broadcasting in the Arab world. Only government-controlled media exist, the majority of which are mainly concerned with political propaganda and social control. Even if one can find provisions against racial segregation in the text of some broadcast laws (e.g. the Lebanese Broadcasting Act of 1994), these remain ink on paper. Indeed, blatantly racist portrayals of Blacks in general and of Sri Lankan female guest workers in particular exist in the Lebanese media, and do not seem to be problematic for the authorities or the existing regulatory body (the National Audio-visual Council). By contrast, political or religious taboos such as criticizing Islam or any Arab head of state or country can cost dearly.

Even when a landmark law regulating broadcasting (Arab broadcast media are still generally regulated by press laws) was introduced for the first time in the Arab world (i.e., the Lebanese Broadcasting Act of 1994), the law totally neglected the role that can be played by the state controlled broadcaster (i.e., Tele Liban). Instead, the 1994 Act deferred the discussion of the role, mandate, and status of that state-owned broadcaster to “later on”, totally overlooking the important function that could be played by a revamped Tele Liban in creating a sense of cohesion in a (still) highly fragmented society. This is a far cry from the South African experience (with all its shortcomings), where the media were seen as instrumental in turning a society founded on racial segregation into a more democratic, integrated one.

Concurrent with the absence of PSB in the Arab world, is the absence of independent regulatory bodies for the media. Unlike the case in Western countries where (relatively) independent bodies can be resorted to check abuses and unfair representations in the media, most media issues or “infringements” in the Arab media are processed by the state. Even when regulatory bodies exist (Lebanon again is a case in point), they are given very limited powers and act more like lapdogs of the government. Worse yet, through their “rulings”, they, more often

than not, provide a convenient cover up for what is essentially a politically-based decision. For example, the Lebanese National Audio-visual Council, set up in 1996 to license and monitor the private broadcast media in Lebanon, still does not have the budget, facilities, location, permanent staff and equipment to carry out its “monitoring” activities. Even if it did, its powers are minimal, while most of the decision-making regarding regulation of media content is retained by the Minister of Information and/or the Council of Ministers.

The inability to include public service broadcasting as part of a comprehensive plan of action in order to introduce gender equality in the media is compounded by the absence of a civil awareness (on the part of regional NGOs and society in general) of the important role that can be played by PSB. This lack of awareness is especially alarming in an age of rapid privatization of the broadcast media. With the wave of deregulation and satellite proliferation reaching and overwhelming the Arab world, we are witnessing a direct and sudden transition from government-controlled media to private-owned media. As a result, and unlike the case in the Western world where civil society is up in arms in defense of a dying breed (i.e., PSB) believed to be crucial for the exercise of citizenship in a pluralistic democracy, no similar defense has been undertaken in the Arab world. This is not to say, of course, that there is not a general dismay among the Arab populations about the predominance of tasteless, strictly commercial, and blatantly sexist programming on the mushrooming Arab satellite television industry.

Finally, as a result of the above-identified problems (the list is not exhaustive), one can speak of a *schizophrenic* situation in the Arab world. Whereas global images of women who are “liberated” (sexually or otherwise), and are economically and socially independent of their male counterparts, are globally consonant with Western cultures and lifestyle, these images strongly clash with the conservative and patriarchal reality and legal systems of the Arab societies that receive those images. For example, in Arab countries female promiscuity, in the form of pre-marital or extra-marital sex, is a crime and is severely punished. Males, for the same “crime”, usually are let off the hook. A case in point are the infamous honour killings where any male member of a woman’s family has a *legal* right to kill her if he merely suspects her of having lost her virginity.

This schizophrenic situation, I would argue, is very problematic when considering an entire generation of young Arab viewers exposed to widely conflicting global media messages concerning female identity (the submissive, chaste Arab woman vs. the heavily objectified, but also often independent, liberated and quite appealing image of Western women). Meanwhile, both Arab cultures and their legal systems are set up in a way to prevent Arab women from having equal rights with men or from being independent of them (in many Arab countries, a woman cannot perform economic transactions or make travel arrangements without the approval of her husband, brother, or father).

Therefore, not only is there a pressing need to come up with and implement gender sensitive communication policies in order to present a fair and more diversified portrayal of women in the media. Serious action has to be taken concurrently to address and to stop the blatant sexism in the myriad social policies and laws that discriminate against women in the Arab world.

Towards a solution

When working on policy recommendations to affect change in areas as sensitive as those of gender on the one hand, and media on the other, we need to address the cultural, political, and economic specificities of the Arab countries in question. These countries, though sharing a common language and some cultural characteristics and problems, are far from being a homogeneous entity and are actually quite diverse (e.g. Lebanon and Saudi Arabia being at both ends of the democratic and political spectrum).

Moreover, it would be more effective, knowing that civil society is weak in the Arab world, to consider a two-pronged approach when pressing for change: first pressure should be exerted from *within* by local CSOs (including NGOs), with the support of their international counterparts. Simultaneously, pressure should be exerted from *without*, coming from international organizations and bodies with enough leverage to initiate change, especially in the area of human rights, environmental protection, and so on.

Pressure from within

The Arab Middle East is still mired in a predominant culture of religious patriarchy and conservatism. Failure to address the role, power and impact of the Islamic religion (or, to be precise, of a specific/dominant interpretation of Islam) in redefining gender roles and policies will make it very difficult to affect change in that area. Here, alliances and networking between Western organizations and local/Arab/Muslim ones is crucial, for the following reasons:

1. When it comes to combating the sexual objectification of women in the media, local NGOs can benefit greatly from the experience of Western feminists. Although both come from different cultural and political contexts, both have the same goal in that respect, and can pool resources and expertise to conduct a common battle on this front. Not only that, but this specific feminist agenda (i.e., to fight the objectification of women in the media) dovetails with the Islamic ideal which seeks to protect women and to prevent their objectification in society at large. However, combating the sexual objectification of women in the media, high on the agenda of traditional or conservative Muslim feminists and Muslim societies in general, is not sufficient in the struggle to achieve gender equality in the media. Liberal Muslim feminists, for instance, also try to change prevalent gender stereotypes that see women exclusively as wives and mothers, and prevent them from being socially, economically, and politically active.
2. In areas other than the objectification of women in the media, Western organisations and their human rights ideals, even when dealing with flagrant abuses in the Arab/Muslim world (e.g., female genital mutilation or FGM), can be easily dismissed by the conservative and religious establishment as being foreign implants, imperialistic, etc. This, however, should not discourage Western activists from continuing to work and support local Arab organisations. Western NGOs can still provide the much needed funding, training and expertise, while the local organizations can more effectively counter the (mostly) religious/cultural arguments that have been used to justify abuses against women. The reason

for the inefficacy of Western feminist organisations in dealing alone with indigenous Arab resistance, in order to empower women, is twofold: on the one hand, without the help of local CSOs, it is difficult for Western organisations, as part of their human rights activism, to combat starkly inhumane practices such as FGM. This is especially so when such a practice is defended by its (patriarchal, conservative) practitioners who invoke their right to exercise their freedom, religious or other. In the specific case of FGM, insider's knowledge (through local CSOs) was instrumental in preventing defenders of FGM from framing the debate as one around competing rights (i.e., human rights vs. freedom of expression or freedom of religion). Indeed, local or regional CSOs were better placed than Western NGOs in exposing FGM as a purely traditional practice that is not rooted in religion (Islam in this case) and therefore is not entitled to any sort of protection under general human rights laws.

On the other hand, it is equally, if not more difficult, for Western NGOs to try to eliminate certain forms of discrimination or violence against Arab women when these practices are actually based on the predominant and patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Here too, the role played by local NGOs and liberal feminist activists is invaluable. They can indeed challenge the hegemonic politico-religious patriarchal elite if their challenge capitalizes and incorporates religion in the feminist struggle, and if it searches for a combination of indigenous, Muslim and internationally-based concepts of human rights. This approach would have two benefits: on the one hand it would not alienate the Arab women themselves who are (unknowingly) victims of patriarchal practices, and who do not want to think of themselves as defying the word of God. Second, an Islamic-based challenge to the patriarchal religious establishment would make it very hard for the latter to dismiss the challenge out of hand (except by physical persecution or elimination, which has often been the case indeed). To give one example, in order to establish the guilt of an adulterous woman in Islam, four witnesses of the "act" are needed according to the Islamic sacred text (the Kur'an). In practice, however, *suspicion* by a (male) family member is sufficient to establish guilt and sentence the woman to death (i.e., honour killing). Only liberal and feminist activists and NGOs, armed with the knowledge of the Islamic Scriptures, can challenge the status quo from within.

In sum, failure to know the difference between what is traditional and what is religious or sacred, and failure to know that there are actually different interpretations of Islam (polygamy can be both justified or refuted according to the Ku'ran), can doom any human rights effort seeking to change the status of Arab women. This is especially so in the face of rising religious fundamentalism in the region. However, a homegrown approach to gender equality, coupled with Western expertise, can undermine the (often flawed) arguments used by the threatened patriarchal establishment and culture and can more effectively introduce change.

Pressure from without

The success of NGOs in Europe, North America, and elsewhere is largely due to the existence of a vibrant civil society and democratic values in those countries. CSOs (including NGOs) in the Arab world, work in a much more restrictive socio-political environment. Their lobbying of and pressure on Arab governments, despite the difficulties and sometimes the risks entailed, should be pursued, even when change is very slow to come. However, the effectiveness of their work in the area of gender equality may be significantly increased when pressure is

simultaneously exerted from without. This link between domestic and international gender equality strategies would seem to be especially promising in fields related to universally recognised human rights and values, championed by the countries of Western Europe and, to an extent, North America. A recent example of this policy "spill over" can be found in the wave of landmark domestic reforms in Turkey, where this country's ambitions to join the EU have forced it to abolish most forms of capital punishment and to recognise the rights of its Kurdish minority.

Finally, two notes of caution should be made when discussing the introduction of change (especially in sensitive areas such as women's rights in patriarchal societies) in developing countries:

1. Signing legal documents to introduce change is only a first step in the legislative process and does not in any way guarantee the actual application of newly introduced measures. Indeed, the monitoring of the implementation process in developing countries is key, because more often than not progressive laws are introduced with no intention of having them implemented. These laws may be signed either because of external international pressure (the case of Turkey) or because of internal ones. In Lebanon, for instance, the introduction of legislation for private media in 1994 was mostly due to the de facto existence of dozens of unlicensed television and radio stations during the Civil War. The government-controlled broadcast media, which up until the Civil War, enjoyed a monopoly status, were increasingly being challenged from within. Eventually, the Lebanese government had to legalize privatization of the broadcast media, especially if all parties to the Civil War were to be reconciled by being given a share of the media pie. When it came to implementing the 1994 Broadcasting Act, however, it turned out that the Act and the regulatory authorities it introduced were largely a smoke screen for undemocratic political decisions by one of the post-war governments in charge of introducing and implementing the law.
2. Secondly, the legitimacy of exerting external pressure on governments reluctant to introduce change is a key issue in the ongoing discussion on social clauses and the tying of preferential trade agreements and/or development aid to minimum standards in such areas as human rights, environmental protection, or gender equality. This very old debate assumes that First World countries and international and regional organisations (IMF, WTO, EuroMed, etc) should encourage or force beneficiary developing countries to live up to international (basically Western) concepts of good practice. The policy of social clauses, so often championed by Western social partners (trade unions, and industry), has often been justifiably criticised for being a disguised form of protectionism, if not a new form of economic and cultural imperialism. Such policy, moreover, assumes a certain universalism of Western values, according to which those values are presumed to be applicable to all situations at all times. In a post-modernist world, it should be noted, such universalism is being increasingly challenged, both within and outside of the Western World. It is now often being replaced with a more relativist approach to culture which recognises the need and right of historically muted voices and values (usually from the ex-colonies) to be heard and legitimised

Another hurdle preventing developed countries from effectively resorting to social clauses in order to introduce/consolidate human rights in developing countries is the perceived

selectivity in the imposition of such clauses. Western governments have often overlooked human rights abuses in many parts of the world, and only paid attention to those abuses when Western interests were being served by applying sanctions or imposing social clauses. Such selectivity is counterproductive and gives oppressive regimes and cultures a convenient excuse to brush aside any external criticism of their human rights record. The opening speech of the Lebanese Minister of Information, given during the UN organised Expert Group Meeting on women and the media that took place in Beirut between 12 and 15 November 2002, is a good case in point. The Minister's speech centred on Western governments' hypocritical concern for the plight of Muslim women. He questioned their sudden, recent concern for the oppression of Afghani women under the Taliban regime. He also reminded the audience that this oppression has been ongoing for almost 20 years now. The point made by the Minister struck a chord with his Arab audience, by now familiar with the Western governments' inconsistency in dealing with human rights abuses around the world. Unfortunately, this inconsistency gave him an excuse not to address, much less recognise, the fact that women in most Arab and Muslim countries continue to be oppressed, treated as second class citizens, and often denied their basic human rights.

To prevent oppressive cultures and regimes from having an easy way out, Western CSOs, concerned with the advancement of women's rights in developing countries, should have an agenda clearly independent of their own governments'. Most of all, they should demonstrate continuity and consistency when dealing with international human rights abuses, and simultaneously make good use of the media to reflect their ongoing concern.

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