



The Middle East Institute

Policy Brief

No. 15

June 2008

Countering the Negative Image of Arab Women in the Arab Media: Toward a “Pan Arab Eye” Media Watch Project

By Rasha Allam

Executive Summary

Through different types of media, people adopt behaviors, assume attitudes, and build stereotypical images that affect their actions in real life. The issue of the portrayal of women in the Arab media has been under examination for many years due to its negativity and its ability to adversely affect the image of Arab women in society at large. Although some positive models are beginning to appear, the movement in this direction is quite slow. This Policy Brief discusses the image of women in the Arab media in general, and in Egypt in particular, and proposes a media initiative that involves the establishment of a Pan Arab media-monitoring unit to ameliorate the portrayal of women in the Arab world.

Media has a powerful effect on people, who subconsciously adopt and internalize attitudes, beliefs, and values presented graphically or textually. People are unaware of how much they are manipulated by the glamorous or subtle messages conveyed through a variety of media. Television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and radio advertisements are trying to sell people various products, and people also buy into — perhaps without fully realizing it — beliefs and attitudes that govern their lives, as well as their way of thinking. Newspapers, television, and radio carry a variety of messages and views on issues that affect women and their portrayal. According to the Nigerian feminist Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, “The power of the media to make and unmake the image of women, to hasten or retard the progress of women in society, cannot be denied or underestimated.”¹

In his article, “The Reality of the Arab Woman in the Mass Media,” Mahmoud Kamel draws attention to two important facts. First, women symbolize a number of roles to men: mother, wife, daughter, aunt, and colleague. Women are considered to be half of society, making it quite difficult for all of society to develop should females be left behind. Second, women are considered to be an integral part of the development of the Arab world politically, economically, socially, and culturally. The position of women in the region is influenced by any change in these aspects, whether positively or negatively.²

There are many obstacles that affect Arab women’s status in society, such as the high percentage of illiteracy, lower socioeconomic standing, and the grip of customs and traditions which cause financial strain, such as high dowries and costly weddings. Regrettably, however, Arab media have tended to portray women in a manner that arguably has done more to compound than to alleviate these problems.

This *Policy Brief* examines the prevalence of negative images in the Arab media’s depictions of women. The first section establishes that positive examples of Arab women do exist and that activities to empower women are underway throughout the Arab world. The second section reveals that these positive aspects are grossly underrepresented in the Arab media, as are the multitude of economic and other problems faced by women in Arab societies. This section is followed by an in-depth treatment of the Egyptian media. Recommendations are then offered for a Pan Arab media watch project in order to counter the negative stereotypes of women in the Arab media.

POSITIVE MODELS AND MOVEMENTS

Stereotypical images of women as weak, docile, and subservient persist throughout the Arab world. The Arab media have tended to validate these misrepresentations in various ways, and therefore have helped to perpetuate them. These false images are all the more disturbing given the statistical evidence about the roles and status of women in the region today. The data show that women comprise one-third of the world’s labor force and perform two-thirds of the total working hours. The data also show that women earn just 10% of the income and own just 1% of the world’s possessions.³

1. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, “The Image of Women and the Role of Media in a New Political Culture in Nigeria,” *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1990), pp. 52-59.

2. Mahmoud Kamel, “The Reality of the Arab Woman in Mass Media,” Cairo University, 1996.

3. Mahmoud Kamel, “The Reality of the Arab Woman in Mass Media.”



Rasha Allam is a Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Cairo and a specialist in media management. She works as an international media consultant and serves on the editorial advisory boards of the *Journal of Social Studies* and the *Journal of Telecommunication and Information Technology*.

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Women's work and participation in production and development is not adequately recognized; moreover, it is not sufficiently compensated to enable their economic independence. The persistent gender gap stems from a variety of historical and other factors including, if not because of, the misunderstanding and misapplication of Islam. Many women nowadays play a role in assuring this negative image by passively following customs and traditions that devalue females relative to their male counterparts.

The life of Aisha, the Prophet's wife, is proof that a woman can have more knowledge than men and that she can be the teacher of scholars and experts. Aisha also proved that a woman can exert influence over both men and women, thereby providing inspiration and leadership. Her life is also proof that a woman can be both a source of knowledge and of pleasure, joy, and comfort to her husband. Aisha's utterances are studied in faculties of literature, her legal pronouncements are analyzed in colleges of law, and her life and works are studied and researched by students and teachers of Muslim history.⁴

But one need not turn all the way back to the Islamic period and the case of Aisha for evidence of what women are capable of achieving. The Arab world today is replete with examples of the awakening and the mobilization of women. Clear evidence of this can be seen in the proliferation of organizations that encourage women's participation and promote their social, economic, and political roles.

Bahraini women's organizations, for example, have established the Bahrain Women's Union (BWU), which was a crucial and influential step to set up a strategy for women's participation in the social, political, and economic decision-making process in the country. Indeed, in 2006, 18 women ran for seats in Parliament, and Lateefa al-Gaoud was elected to the Council of Representatives.

In Iraq, the US State Department has begun implementing a \$10 million grant program in which several nonprofit organizations are assisting thousands Iraqi women in performing various functions in democratic life by training them in political leadership, advocacy, entrepreneurship, and organization.

In Jordan, Princess Basma Bint Talal initiated the establishment of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) in 1992. The following year the Commission, which is the highest policy-making forum in Jordan for women's issues and rights, formulated the National Strategy for Women, which covers the political, legislative, economic, social, educational, and health sectors.

Kuwait participated in a US-sponsored regional program to train women activists working to develop an efficient plan for obtaining women's political rights. Women's rights activists hope to draw attention to the ways in which women are economically and legally disadvantaged in order to gain more support for political reform.

In Lebanon, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), is striving to eliminate laws, traditions, and customs that are intended to or otherwise result in gender-based discrimination.

In Morocco, there are ongoing efforts to improve the status of women through wide-reaching legislative reforms. The Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) proposed a national plan to integrate women into the country's economic development — the *Plan d'action National pour l'integration de la Femme au Development* (PANDIF). (Unfortunately, PANDIF faces opposition because of specific reforms dealing with the Moudawwana, Morocco's civil status code that encompasses the family code governing women's status in society.)

For a final example, we can turn to Saudi Arabia, where the Nahda Charitable Society for Women seeks the em-

4. Jamal A. Badawi, "The status of woman in Islam," *Al-Ittihad Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Sept 1971).

The Arab world today is replete with examples of the awakening and the mobilization of women.

powerment of women within the framework of Islamic law.

THE PREVALENCE OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING

According to the Arab Women Development Report, the literature on the portrayal of women in the Arab media is quite limited.⁵ Yet, the 23 studies conducted to measure the image of women portrayed in the Arab media have yielded startling results. Most of the studies, especially those conducted on the broadcast sector, focused only on analyzing the content of the drama, such as movies and TV series, or focused on the image of women in advertisements and video clips, neglecting other important programs, such as newscasts, political talk shows, social programs, and documentaries.⁶ The studies found that 78.68% of the images of women were negative. Research on the Arab media's depiction of women has focused mainly on the mental and psychological aspects of their portrayal. The usage of women's bodies as sexual commodities or a vehicle of sexual arousal was found to be the main negative image used in the Arab media, followed by an image of women who are in some way immoral. Other negative images included the portrayal of women as being illiterate, of limited intellectual capability, inexperienced, materialistic, opportunistic, weak, or dependent.

According to Naomi Sakr, women have helped foster social and political change — and not just with respect to issues exclusively related to females. For example, women historically have had a lot of success in fighting imperialism through the media, especially in Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria. The media also have been a powerful tool, if wielded properly, for women to increase awareness of their political rights and improve their status in the region.

This *Policy Brief* now turns to a case study of Egyptian print and broadcast media, as well as the country's well-known movie industry.

THE EGYPTIAN PRINT MEDIA

Although Egyptian print media outlets vary between national, oppositional, and other political parties, most portray women in a traditional, cultivated role. Several studies⁷ were conducted on Egyptian women's magazines to assess their approaches to covering women's issues. The studies showed that the magazines have generally focused on the traditional preoccupations of women, such as fashion, cooking, cosmetics, and home affairs. Although one of the magazines, *Nesf El Donia* [*Half of the World*] has political sections and *Hawaa* or [*Eve*] magazine focused more on the social development of Egyptian women, the others focus on fashion, decoration, and cosmetics.

The issues of family bonds and problems, such as parents' relationships and methods of child-rearing, were given more space than issues related to women's social development. No closer look is given to the social reality of women and the expression of her duties and responsibilities in a more authentic form.⁸ These studies showed that little attention is given to rural women,⁹ and that women's social development is regarded as important for the family and not for the woman's attainment of independence.

The usage of women's bodies as sexual commodities or a vehicle of sexual arousal was found to be the main negative image used in the Arab media, followed by an image of women who are in some way immoral.

5. *Arab Women Development Report: Arab Women and the Media*, Analytical Survey for Women Research Studies from 1995-2005, Kawthar Organization and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

6. *Arab Women Development Report*.

7. Awatef Abdel Rahman, "The female media between job responsibility and a social role" (Mass Communication Department, Cairo University (April-June 1994); Amira El Abassy, "The tackling of the specialized women's magazines of women's issues and the development in the Egyptian country side: Analytical study from Hawaa and Nesf El Donia Magazine," Mass Communication Department, Cairo University (September 1992).

8. A'liaa El Sissy, "Content Analysis of Hawaa Magazine from 1957-1970," Mass Communication Department, Cairo University, 1985.

9. Nahed Ramzy, "The image of women as portrayed in the Mass Media: Analysis and study of the women's press," *The Social national magazine*, The Central Institute for Social and Criminal Research (1977).

However, two recently launched independent newspapers — *Al-Masry al-Youm* [*The Egyptian Today*] and *Nahdat-Misr* [*The Egyptian Renaissance*] — are considered an exception; both publications have consistently depicted women outside of their conventional societal roles. These new newspapers reflect a different kind of reporting, one that goes hand in hand with the transitional Egyptian media system, which is moving in a libertarian direction. Refreshingly, these two newspapers tend to convey a positive image of women and give quite a bit of attention to social, legislative, economic, cultural, and political discrimination against women. *Nahdat Misr* and *Al-Masry Al-Youm* pioneered what might be called the “intervention text,” that is, coverage of discrimination against women, sexual abuse in the work place, and the harm caused by stereotypical perceptions of gender roles.¹⁰

Both papers have given attention to laws and practices related to discrimination against women by tackling issues of gender equality such as sexual harassment and abuse, as well as criminal and other legal provisions that confer more power on men than on women.

These newspapers also discussed the discrimination of women in the field of journalism, stating that women should have a larger presence in the Press Syndicate. The coverage explored the obstacles to establishing new newspapers that give female reporters job opportunities and the need to eliminate these impediments. Discrimination against women in courts was discussed as well.

Both newspapers have given ample attention to women’s political rights, highlighting the efforts undertaken by women’s organizations, whether governmental or non-governmental, to ensure that women are aware of their political rights. Both newspapers criticized the Saudi government’s policy of prohibiting women from participating in the parliamentary election. The newspapers discussed political issues, such as fixing a “quota” for women in the Parliament. To their credit, they portray educated women significantly more often than illiterate women.

Although the two newspapers reflect a positive image of women, they lack coverage of women’s participation in the economic field, neglecting issues such as women’s low wages, economic rights, poor working conditions, and exclusion from the economic decision-making process. Other weak points still exist, such as the rare portrayal of lower class women. Yet, it is noteworthy that these newspapers have portrayed upper class women in progressive roles. Examples include Morocco’s Queen Salma opening a social organization to help widows; the choice of a woman as Oman’s Minister for National Development; and Safaa Al Baz, head of the health and housing committee of the National Council for Women, delivering lectures on increasing women’s roles and political, economical, and social participation.¹¹

The over-reporting of women in criminal news is another dimension of the negative portrayal of women in the Egyptian media. They are typically characterized as passive and treated as sexual objects instead of autonomous, thinking individuals. In addition, most of the women in criminal news are from the lower class, which is considered a bias in news reporting, and which in turn perpetuates a negative stereotype about the lower class. There are other important issues that the media still marginalize, such as women’s sports and health issues as well as the emotional, educational, and developmental issues of female teenagers.

Still, it is important to mention that both newspapers adequately represent mature adult women, the stage at which women are likely at the pinnacle of their professional achievement.¹²

10. Rasha Allam, “Image of Women as Portrayed in the Egyptian Independent Newspaper” *Global Media Journal*, Vol. 1 (Spring, 2005), Arabic Edition.

11. Rasha Allam, “Image of Women as Portrayed in the Egyptian Independent Newspaper.”

12. Rasha Allam, “Image of Women as Portrayed in the Egyptian Independent Newspaper.”

Two recently launched independent newspapers — *Al-Masry al-Youm* [*The Egyptian Today*] and *Nahdat-Misr* [*The Egyptian Renaissance*] — are considered an exception; both publications have consistently depicted women outside of their conventional societal roles.

THE EGYPTIAN BROADCAST MEDIA

According to George Gerbner, father of Cultivation Theory, the mass media propagates attitudes and values in a given culture through the repetition of the same messages. The repetition of the traditional and negative representations of women cultivates these stereotypes and acts as a main obstacle to their achievement.

In the studies¹³ conducted on the image of women in the Egyptian radio, results showed that positive images of women were displayed 22 times, whereas the negative images were displayed 41 times. The positive points were discussed in five main themes, represented as follows: the ability of women to overcome difficulties; to be independent and make decisions; to offer help to friends and relatives; and to control and counteract their husband's greed. Yet, the negative points were discussed in 12 main themes, all of which reflect the passivity of a woman who is unable to feel secure, think independently, and cope without a man by her side.

It is noteworthy that a high percentage of the population depends on radio due to the high rate of illiteracy and the greater affordability of radios compared to television sets. The high rate of listenership makes changing the negative portrayal of women on radio all the more urgent.

Research has found that almost all Egyptian television soap operas depict the family as the smallest social unit in society. One would naturally expect that the roles and relationships depicted in these programs would correspond roughly to the changes taking place in the broader economic, political, and educational landscape. And clearly, profound changes have taken place in society at large, including with respect to the status of women. For example, women have gained greater access to education, have entered the work force, occupy higher posts, and have started to become economically independent. These changes, instituting greater parity between men and women in the public sphere, have in turn altered the relationships between male and female family members. However, the programs still exhibit men struggling with the developing status of women from her traditional role; between serving him rather than sharing life with him.¹⁴

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THE EGYPTIAN MOVIE INDUSTRY

Other studies¹⁵ monitored the main characteristics of women in Egyptian movies. It was shown that 50% of movies focused on people living in cities while the other half gave attention to other sectors of Egyptian society. Other studies in the 1990s indicated that rural women were represented in no more than 5.4% of movies. Also, 57.4% of the characters represented in the movies were males while 42.6% were females. Indeed, although the percentage of females is lower than that of males, this percentage is considered a development in representing women characters in the 1990s.

In addition, Egyptian movies have tended to place women in an uncompetitive level educationally and have denigrated the divorced woman. Most of the Egyptian movies studied showed women enjoying a comfortable economic

13. Samia Rizk, "The Image of Women as Portrayed in the Women's Programs in the Radio," Egyptian-Anglo Library, Cairo, 1988; Zeinab Khadeer, *Kassem Amin: The New Woman* (Cairo: Sinaa Publications, 1987).

14. The results of research on the content of advertisements broadcast on Egyptian television from 1974-1977 showed that 90% of the ads focused on the beauty of the women in order to attract attention only. Yet, the other 10% of the ads, women were shown as housewives who are concerned about detergents or nurturing babies. None of the ads had represented an image of the working woman. Sawsan Abdel Malik, "Analyzing the Message Content of the TV Advertisements: Analytical Study of the Egyptian Television Advertisements" (Dissertation, Mass Communication Department, Cairo University, 1980).

15. Aly Agwa, "The image of women portrayed in the Egyptian movies broadcast on Channel one on the Egyptian TV," Mass Communication Department, Cairo University, 2000; Mona El-Hadidy, "An Analytical Research on the Image of Women in the Egyptian Movies," Mass Communication Department, Cairo University, 1977.

situation, a situation which does not reflect reality for most Egyptian women. These results confirm the findings of another study, where it was found that television dramas are directed towards the middle-upper and the upper classes alone. This skewed image is distorted even more by the fact that Egyptian movies mainly portray these relatively well-off women as housewives or university students, and only a small fraction of them as professionals.

In a recent study on the impact of media in the formation of cultures, Lina Khatib noted that Egyptian movies portray women as sexual objects. In addition, the movies tend to reinforce the idea that although women bear many social difficulties, they cannot take leading positions.¹⁶ The results showed that a lack of concern for women's level of education appeared in 72% of the characters. All of the movies tended to place women in an uncompetitive level educationally; such representations surely discourage women's advancement in higher education and participation in political life.

The positive images portrayed kind and affectionate images of a mother, a religious woman, and a woman punctual in her work. Yet, the negative images emphasized her body and a preference for money over morals. In 9.7% of the representations, women used sexual acts and behavior to curry favor from men. The movies also showed that women used illegal methods to gain money and suggested that women are indifferent towards their marital lives.

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CONFRONTING THE DOMINANT NEGATIVE IMAGE

Ensuring that the portrayal of women by Egyptian media specifically and by Arab media more generally is realistic, balanced, and nuanced is a formidable challenge. Some efforts have been taken to address this need. For example, the Women Renaissance and Development Organization together with the British Cultural Center decided to undertake a project to monitor the media coverage of women's issues in Egypt. The stated aims of the project are as follows:

- Enhancing women's image in mass media by monitoring the kinds of discrimination against them.
- Increasing the awareness of the media about women's issues.
- Monitoring the content of the media messages directed to women.

The first scientific research trial was conducted by an Egyptian women's organization to monitor the way the media was tackling women's image in the media. The method used was the composite week methodology, in order to get reliable and valid results, and the duration of the sample was about four weeks.

The Egyptian Council for Women has held many conferences to discuss the portrayal of women in women's magazines. One such conference was held on May 28, 2002. According to Tahani El Sawaby, managing editor of *Hawaa* magazine, women's aspirations for liberty and self-expression were first aired in Arab newspapers by female journalists such as Aish Taimor in 1840, and later by Zeinab Fawaz in 1914. The first women's magazine, *Al Fatah* [*The Girl*], which was established by Hend Nofal in 1902, played a crucial role in defending women's liberty from Ottoman imperialism and in calling for women's suffrage as well as for women's rights in the workplace.

In contemporary Egyptian society, many problems continue to hinder the objective and empowering portrayal of women. First, the women's section in the daily newspapers are not mentioned in the weekly annex supplement, such as in the *Al Ahram* weekly supplement on Friday, *Akhbar Al Youm* on Saturday, or *El Goumhurya* on Thursday. Indeed,

16. Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

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the independent party newspapers lack a daily section for women or weekly supplement. It seems that there is a fear of bringing women's issues to the forefront, and of allowing intelligent women journalists to have a strong impact on women in society.

The second obstacle is that media messages are directed towards sophisticated modernized women living in cities, ignoring lower-class, rural women.

The third obstacle comes in the form of media messages that focus on the traditional role of women, such as that of housewife, which implicitly encourages women to consume rather than to produce.

Fourth, many newspapers are not focusing on women's increasing participation in economic, social, and political fields. While participation in elections is encouraged, women's other rights receive little attention in the media.

It is unknown whether these omissions stem from the laziness of journalists working in the women's section or an overall policy of the newspapers. Moreover, favoritism in hiring journalists in the women's sections leads to unprofessional journalists who do not adequately educate and direct women. These sections have failed in helping to shape a supportive public opinion of women. Furthermore, due to the focus of these newspapers on women as sexual beings, journalists have failed to tackle women's real issues and problems.

PAN ARAB EYE MEDIA WATCH PROJECT

Effectively monitoring women's media coverage is a potentially valuable tool, though not yet fully developed or widely utilized. Due to the introduction of new technological innovations (e.g., digitization) that bring change in the media sphere, it is urgently necessary to establish a "media watch" mechanism to monitor how women are portrayed in the Arab media. The growth in the number of the satellite channels in the Arab countries — now over 400 — makes it necessary to have a Pan Arab media watch to serve the Arab world.

It is crucial to create an entity to monitor the dissemination of images of Arab women and to set measurements to enable a scientific approach to the problem. The media watch project should work on increasing the awareness of the media about the social, legislative, economical, cultural and political discrimination against women in the media.

The media watch should include departments concerned with local media in every Arab country — from daily and weekly print media, national and local radio networks, to national and local terrestrial channels — in order to monitor each country. The watch should create comparative studies and implement similar approaches and strategies in countries facing common problems.

The project should include a quarterly report, which records and evaluates all of the women's issues mentioned in the media and is sent to special mass media organizations. This report should be sent to many related institutions, such as the Ministries of Information, Mass Communication departments in different Arab universities, the higher council of the press, and the press syndicate in all Arab countries.

The Pan Arab eye media watch will be responsible for:

- Forming a plan which deals objectively with women's issues.
- Representing successful models of women in all fields.

The media watch project should work on increasing the awareness of the media about the social, legislative, economical, cultural and political discrimination against women in the media.

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- Changing the inherited stereotypes about women.
- Calling for women's achievement in leading positions in all fields.
- Shedding light on women's important roles in society and increasing awareness of their rights at work and at home.

CONCLUSION

In general, Arab media have cast women in a negative light. By focusing on the traditional role of women as being concerned with cooking, cosmetics, and gossip, the Arab media have, presumably inadvertently, portrayed them as (excessively) emotional and thus unable to think rationally and make decisions. The time is long overdue for the media to consider how to become part of the solution rather than remaining part of the problem of misrepresenting women and perpetuating their ill-deserved second-class status.

The Arab media can be a vehicle for the dissemination of credible information as well as a force for positive change in society simply by devoting more attention to the social, economic, cultural, and religious sources and manifestations of women's problems. Special attention should be given to rural women, the poor, the young, the aged, the disabled, and the unmarried — though without distorting their images. In addition, the Arab media should balance its coverage of women by portraying them as productive members of the work force and not just as consumers. Finally, the Arab media should avoid depicting girls and women merely as followers, lest this further entrench gender discrimination.

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