

# Media Contributions to Arab Women's Rights

Written by Maurice Odine

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MAURICE ODINE, JUL 5 2013

We are all humans. But we have crafted societies in which humans are not equal. This has come to characterize societies where males rule and women are ruled, thus fomenting a gender inequality. Hrichak (2010) admits that inequality is prevalent in the Arab world and is delighted that the demand for women's rights is taking hold in the Middle East. Hrichak refers to Isobel Coleman, senior fellow for United States (US) foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Speaking to promote the book, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East*, in San Francisco (California), Coleman said that '[t]he women are inspired by their own dreams, visions, and beliefs in what they can do for themselves' and highlighted 'an explosion of new media in the Middle East that is reaching diverse audiences' (Hrichak 2010).

It is also clear that living in perpetual inequality is not a welcome phenomenon for women. Murphy (2009) is a foreign correspondent for Agence-France Presse (AFP). Murphy reports on Wejeha Al-Huwaider who is respected outside Saudi Arabia, but scorned in her own country because of her involvement in women's rights. For years Wejeha has championed the campaign against the kingdom's 'guardianship' system, which gives men virtually total control over women's lives. 'If Saudi Arabia wants to be a part of this world they . . . cannot be paralyzing half of society and discriminating against them [women] and treating them like third class citizens,' Wejeha told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Wejeha cannot believe that, for 30 years, women are still asking for their right to drive a car. In the meantime, Mahdi (2009) points out that violence against women was perpetrated mainly by their husbands (89.9 percent); by their brothers (18.4 percent); by their fathers (16.2 percent); and by strangers (6.8 percent).

For progressive Arab women, acquiescing to traditional second-class citizenship is no longer a life option. These women want their fair share of opportunities that have, until now, been reserved for men. The women understand the power of media and social technologies. Arab women want to develop and nurture a long-term partnership with media in the fight for their rights. Really, they want responsibility.

### Journalistic Responsibility in Reporting Women's Rights

Nafissa Lahrech is from Algeria and writes a blog (undated, copy with author) for the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). She believes women media practitioners should assume the responsibility that comes with the practice of journalism. She argues that any semblance of imbalance in upholding freedom on the one hand, and exercising responsibility on the other, would jeopardize the media's role as an agent of change. Naffisa is certain that 'press freedom implies distancing from governments and never giving in to threat, blackmail, or pressure from any party.' She also recognizes the importance of journalistic responsibility in a bid to advance Arab women's rights, and is mindful of the contribution of mass media, notably the internet, chat rooms, radio and television debates (some of which are streamed on social media), without which women's rights would be at a dead end. 'Responsible journalism, and reporting on women's rights, have further heightened awareness of gender issues, such as equality and ideal alternative to discrimination,' Naffisa concludes.

It also behooves journalistic responsibility that women assume positions of authority within mass media organizations. This is consistent with the saying that, 'You can't lead from behind.' Shira Tarrant (2009) posted a blog opinion, in which she lauded women journalists, describing them as 'fierce young women working from within media structures in countries not especially known for their equal rights.' She refers to bloggers as 'profiles-in-

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courage.' Shawna Kenney is a freelance journalist with a special interest in Arab women's rights. She writes about 22 year-old Hana Al-Khamri, a Yemeni woman from Saudi Arabia currently studying journalism in Denmark. Hana's goal to become a responsible journalist so as to use her acquired skills to address women's issues has landed her in another country. And what is the reason? 'It's illegal for women to study journalism in Saudi Arabia,' she confesses. Moreover, Hana faced ridicule and hostility when she wrote for the women's section in the local newspapers. An acquired degree and training will permit Hana to join others before her to harness media to promote Arab women's rights.

### **Weighing Media Coverage of Arab Women's Rights**

A feminist could not have put it better: Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1990) said, '[t]he 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' (1994, p. 171). Meanwhile, Mahmoud Kamel (1996) remarks that women are considered to be second-class citizens in society. This untenable condition, the author stresses, is inimical to the overall development of society.

Rasha Allam, professor of journalism at the American University in Cairo, takes issue with stereotypical images of Arab women as weak, docile, and subservient. She reports that, while women perform two-thirds of the total working hours of a given Arab nation, they earn just ten percent of the income. Rasha's view is that, 'Arab media have tended to portray women in a manner that has, arguably, done more to compound than alleviate these problems' (2008, p. 1). The woman's distorted image, Rasha (2008) notes, is contrary to the teaching of Islam, which is also a cornerstone of women's implicit subjugation. The life of Aisha, the Prophet's wife, is proof that women can have more knowledge than men, and that a woman can be a teacher of scholars. Furthermore, Aisha's life is proof that a woman can be both a source of knowledge and pleasure, joy, and comfort to her husband. Yet the media fail to project these virtues of a woman.

Other women's advances do not make it to the media either. The Bahraini Women's Organizations have shepherded the Bahraini Women's Union (BWU) to mobilize women's participation in socio-economic and political decision-making in Bahrain. Associated Press journalist, Jim Krane, (2006) in an article entitled, 'Islamists Dominate Bahrain Elections,' writes that 18 women ran for parliamentary positions in that country. During the election, only one woman, Lateefa Al-Gaoud, won outright; she was unopposed in her district. In Iraq, the US state department (US Department of State 2013), has thus far awarded \$10 million in grants that have covered issues to build the capacity of Iraqi widows, improve non-governmental organization (NGO) services to widows and their children, and connect widows to the government of Iraq's widow stipend program. In Jordan, Princess Basma Bint Talal initiated the formation of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) in 1992. These are all worthy achievements by women: however, the media do not provide adequate coverage and sometimes consider women's issues insignificant or not newsworthy.

Thus, the way forward is to confront the dominant negative image of women. These include enhancing women's image in the mass media by monitoring types of discrimination meted out to women; increasing awareness about the media and their reportage of women's issues; and monitoring media content with women as a target audience.

### **Advocating Women's Rights Through Media Involvement**

To be disadvantaged can require standing up and doing something to ameliorate the predicament. For Arab women, it behooves them to seek positions in the media where they can have a direct impact by virtue of their involvement in decision-making and content development for dissemination. Eposito and Haddad (1997), in the book *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, have collated imperatives designed to challenge the representation of the traditional role of women in the Middle East as oppressed and entirely 'condemned' to a secondary role in society. In an attempt to reverse the status quo, women have discovered a voice in the global transformation of virtual communications and new information technologies. To this end, the authors present a positive milestone in the representation of women in Arab media. One perspective is that the positive portrayal of women in society as a result of media content will change stereotypes and encourage more objective reporting on women and women's issues.

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'Arab women can use the media not only as their workplace or a basis for professional development, but also as a tool to convey their position to the mass audience,' state Eposito and Haddad (1997). It is one thing for women to become bona fide media practitioners, and quite another to carry on in a male-dominated communications industry.

## Women's Challenges to Reportage

While women may be newcomers to media careers, they could not have come aboard at a more critical and opportune time in history. The proliferation of new media technologies has come with innovation and 'virtuality' that even circumvents control by Arab nations. The real challenge is protecting the reportage of women journalists in the midst of male counterparts who are used to protecting male turf. One example will suffice. In Egypt, four areas hinder the work of women journalists. First, the women's section in the daily newspapers is not often included in the elaborate weekly editions, in, say, *Al Ahrām* (Friday edition), *Akhar Al Youm* (Saturday), or *El Goumhurya* (Thursday). As for independent party newspapers, they do not publish women's sections in their dailies or weeklies. Second, media content is targeted toward the more sophisticated city dwelling women (urbanites), at the expense of lower-class rural women. Third, media messages tend to focus on the traditional role of women, including being housewives. And fourth, many newspapers are focusing on women's increased participation in national development, while other concerns of women's rights are being overlooked or neglected.

Tamimi (2010) makes reference to a report by the International Federation of Journalists that says women journalists in Egypt continue to suffer from discrimination regarding access to positions of leadership. It is therefore no wonder women account for only 34 percent of the general assembly of the Egyptian press syndicate. In the meantime, a meager seven percent of women are represented on the syndicate's council. Tamimi adds that in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen, women journalists occupy just ten percent of managerial positions. The current state of affairs is unacceptable. One way forward is to provide training for women in the area of media and new technologies.

## Training Arab Women Media Practitioners

The Arab Women Media Center coordinates training for women journalists. All Arab nations participate in the center's programs, which are meant to instill in women intrinsic media skills to serve their causes. Magda Abu-Fadil (2002) recalls that participants receive insight and training in the following areas: print and electronic media; online journalism; social media; full Internet exploitation; media awareness; reportage; youth online activism; documentary film production; coverage of violence on women; and women's rights in the media.

A key component of AWMC is its annual conference, which brings together women journalists from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The conference venue in 2002 was Amman (Jordan), attracting 35 women journalists from October 24-27. Magda Abu-Fadil (2002), reporting on the conference, quotes Jordanian Princess Basma as saying, 'We're proud what Arab journalists have accomplished to date, but the road ahead is still long as there are many challenges and pressing issues to be tackled.' Abu-Fadil writes on Princess Basma: 'They include a clear media vision to deal with women's issues far from the seasonal upheavals and hesitance' (2008). Conference participants deliberated, and agreed, that the confluence between freedom and professional journalism is paramount when women's rights are concerned. The participants called on journalists to aim for vigilance and diligence, emphasizing that it is a matter of professional conduct and privilege. Magda references Princess Basma, who said '[w]hat counts is citizens' rights.'

Randa Abou Azm is thankful to her parents for their support in enabling her to obtain a journalism education. Egyptian by birth, she gained employment at Al Arabia Cairo bureau of the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation, known as MBC. Quickly putting her training into practice, she was ready to answer the question (as a female journalist): 'Are you afraid of the rising popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood?' Having calculated a journalistic response, Randa said, "[y]ou can always make a mistake in your choice, but as long as there is democracy, the mistake can be put into perspective, and added, "Egypt is strong enough to handle an extremist movement as long as democracy is the practice of the day." What is of the essence is that Arab women journalists avail themselves of available new media technologies.

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## Arab Women Bloggers for Arab Women's Rights

The Center for Liberty in the Middle East brought forth a noble initiative in 2009, namely, the Online Activism Institute. It is closely associated with the World e-Democracy Forum in Issy-les-Moulineaux (Paris). The Institute, with operational centers in Cairo (Egypt), Amman (Jordan) and Washington, DC (USA), affirms that 30 percent of bloggers in the Middle East are women. Bloggers have access to necessary tools that will "turn their dreams into action for change." In addition, the Institute provides e-learning training and a social online course, "Create Your Activism Plan."

Indeed, the challenge for women journalists is not that of acquiring training; rather, it is to anticipate ongoing challenges in a territory where power has eluded them for decades. It is like venturing into the 'unknown.' The future, therefore, holds the key to the effective use of media and information technologies to cover and report on women's rights, by women, and for women. As a matter of fact, the ideal invocation is women's media democracy.

## Conclusion

It defies reason to argue that there are no negative effects emanating from the representation of women in Arab media. To be blunt, the presence of Arab women in the media is sometimes frowned upon by the audience, causing stereotypes about and biases against women to proliferate. In Kuwait, it is not uncommon for a journalist to obtain a signed consent in order to take and/or publish a woman's photograph. Thus, it is not just men, but women, too, who do not look kindly at women's involvement in media operations.

Zuhur (2003) suggests it may even be dangerous for Arab women to work in the media. In Lebanon, May Chidiac is the host of the television program 'With Audacity,' which deals with issues that contravene cultural and local tradition. She survived a 2005 car bombing assassination attempt, but lost a hand and leg. Although May successfully underwent surgery and returned to the television program, the attempt on her life has given future women journalists a reason to reconsider a career in the media. In Palestine, Mai Yacoub Kaloti is a 25-year reporter at *Al Quds* newspaper. 'I chose the field because it opens up minds and reveals the truth about what's happening in this part of the world,' she explains (Tarrant 2009). Initially, Mai's father did not approve of her desire to become a journalist. Today, however, the father is proud each time he reads a story with Mai's byline: 'Women in the Middle East are just like all women on earth. They deserve respect,' Mai affirms.

The role of Arab women journalists as agents of change is long overdue and desperately needed in the future. Rubin (2007) discusses a 2004 Zogby International poll that asked men and women in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and UAE to rank, in order of importance, ten reform issues. Disappointingly, an overwhelming number of respondents put women's rights second to last! Surely, this is the century for women's rights. And fortunately, along with globalization, media and technologies are evolving.

It is anticipated that media content generated by women, and for women, will pave the way for positive results. Reporter Shalbany (2009) recounts that in Bahla (Oman), Salwa Al-Habsi (a young woman) owns and runs a grocery store in a rural conservative region of the country. Suburbia is no longer attractive to growing numbers of men, leaving the likes of Salwa to assume entrepreneurship roles. Salwa's three brothers had refused to allow their sister run the store. However, her mother stood firm in support of her daughter. She gave Salma her treasured gold. Salwa sold the gold and used the money to buy out the brothers' shares of the business. Reflecting on her achievement, Salwa hints, "If it is all right for women to run a business in Muscat (capital), why are men raising their eyebrows in the regions?" She continued, "It is certainly not against Islam and I have . . . a business license required to buy my father's shop." This author surmises that there are many stories like it, beckoning on female journalists to report on women's rights from the perspective of women.

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