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“Family, Body, Sexuality and Health”

By Magda Abu-Fadil

A discussion of women's access to the media requires an understanding of the environment in which journalists are forced to work. Given that many developing countries, including those in the Arab world, face strife and economic upheaval, women's media presence often takes a back seat to men's priorities. According to Crosette (2002), “the result is often a surfeit of male-dominated, straightforward event-driven news or superficial political reporting that avoids or brushes aside social and economic issues important to women and their families.” Arab women in the media face a number of additional common obstacles: the proverbial glass ceiling; economic hardships; a lack of positive role models and mentors; censorship in various forms; and a lack of access to accurate information.

The proverbial glass ceiling continues to permeate the media landscape, with obstacles ranging from patronizing employers and colleagues to limited opportunities for upgrading Arab women's skills. Women in the Arab media either work hard to earn their stripes and make a name for themselves, while not quite reaching the top of the corporate ladder, or they claw their way to the top and wrench a piece of the action, but at a very high price. Newspapers and magazines are full of names of women reporters and correspondents or editors, but few are editors-in-chief or publishers. One exception, however, is Egypt, where women occupy countless key positions in the mostly state-run broadcast and print media as well as in the ministry of information (Abou Zeid 2005).

Accurate statistics regarding women's participation in the media are unfortunately hard to obtain. Finding large numbers of women covering “serious” topics such as politics, business, and sports is more the exception than the rule. Risking life and limb in war coverage is acceptable, but women pursuing careers as foreign correspondents do not always receive the accolades of male counterparts. Although women journalists may get stories and report them with more insight in instances where men have been barred by tradition or local restrictions (for example Tania Mehanna), being a female Arab journalist operating in a traditional society has drawbacks. She is treated as a *hurma*, a derogatory Arabic term for a woman, and can be marginalized, ignored, and asked why she is unaccompanied by a *muharram* (male chaperone) (Moukalled 2005).

Additionally, women “experts” are not interviewed on television talk shows or in print media as frequently as men. Women's stories receive scant attention compared to men's successes in the corporate world – a reflection of their relatively small number. One is more likely to come across women journalists' contributions in women's segments in newspapers and magazines and in broadcast media.

Economic obstacles add to the difficulties Arab women face when trying to succeed in the media environment. Fierce market competition means women in the media often juggle several jobs to make ends meet. In a region where conflict of interest is a non-issue, it is not unusual to find a woman journalist working in a government job and freelancing for private media that cover that same government. At the same time, it is not uncommon for female journalists to get paid for stories by the people they cover in the form of cash, gifts, and benefits.

Professional training beyond university studies also falls victim to tight budgets and employers' whims. Unless news organizations have training centers, women journalists often pay for courses themselves or rely on workshop sponsors to up-grade their skills.

Slashed budgets and lower circulation figures for newspapers have also hampered investigative reporting that requires extended research, and the situation is even worse for more costly broadcast media. Female reporters may have to cover several beats, and economic realities often mean news organizations operate with skeletal staffs and journalists go without salary raises for years. Employers are more concerned with survival than improvement of quality. Since mostly

state-controlled media are not market oriented, vast amounts are spent, or misappropriated, on facilities, personnel, and projects, thus yielding poor results. Moreover, there is usually a disconnect between the needs of women journalists and the caprices of top officials.

Positive role models and mentors are in short supply because women, already threatened by male counterparts, do not always feel compelled to reach out and help up-and-coming journalists of their gender. This leads to power-illiterate women who fear being shut out of the loop (Dabbous-Sensenig 2005). "In the era of masses, women are caught between two extremities, capitalist patriarchy and patriarchal fundamentalism," with both ideologies making a cult of the female body (Abou El Naga 2004).

Few veiled women, for example, appear in Arab broadcast media. Women on channels like Lebanon's Hizballah-run al-Manar and the occasional presenters or news anchors such as Khadija bin Qinna of al-Jazeera TV, appear on air with a head cover. Bin Qinna was for years "uncovered." When asked whether the veiled presenter's appearance was a hindrance, al-Jazeera's editor-in-chief, Ahmad el-Sheikh, responded, "We opted to let her wear the veil on air rather than lose a good journalist" (el-Sheikh 2004).

The flip side is the challenge faced by veiled Egyptian television broadcasters barred from appearing covered on air. They have sued the country's television authorities over the ban. Egyptian officials faced jail and fines because of it. Some conceded to letting anchors/presenters appear for no more than ten minutes in non-news shows. Most of the women were given the choice of accepting the ban or seeking jobs elsewhere. The case was to have been decided on 28 December 2005 (al-Sharqawi 2005).

Such matters have political implications, given Egypt's struggle between Islamist forces and the government, as well as mushrooming "religious" outlets calling for freedom of expression (Khairy 2005). "Freedom is at the core of the profession of journalism," says Mahasen al-Emam, director of Jordan's Arab Women Media Center. "When we speak of press freedom, we're not just talking of a professional issue or a privilege. What counts is citizens' right to obtain true, objective and impartial media service" (Abu-Fadil 2002).

Arab women face a number of additional obstacles relating to censorship: stifling media laws that often bar the publishing (print and online) or the broadcasting of content not in compliance with set government rules; unclear guidelines regarding the publishing or broadcasting of unsavory content; uneven implementation of laws that are on the books; penalties ranging from fines to harsh physical punishment for perceived wrongdoing; the blocking of websites with perceived harmful content; and censorship of, delay in distribution, or blacking out of foreign publications with perceived "harmful" content. Self-censorship in the Arab world is also a common practice, and the 24-hour news cycle and competition from countless satellite channels offering all kinds of programming have also cramped women journalists' style.

Lack of accuracy, balance, and fairness still plague Arab media. Functionally illiterate journalists who lack the computer skills needed to write, edit, or use the Internet and databases for research are plentiful. But positive elements exist. The web is an invaluable resource, medium, and tool for research and communication in an increasingly globalized world. For example, blogs have come of age as a source of news.

The information technology revolution is also producing cataclysmic psychological changes in Arab self-perception, with the web serving women as a powerful complement to traditional media (Mernissi 2004). Despite censorship or site bans in some countries, there are ways of circumventing them through mirror sites, short message services, text messages, and so on. Dr. Sonia Dabbous, assistant editor of Egypt's Akhbar El Yom newspaper, believes technology and globalization offer women special opportunities: "There is power where women, news and the Internet come together." (Dabbous 2002)

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