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# **Middle Eastern Women in the Media: A Battle Against Stereotypes**

Al Jazeera: A Case Study

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction to the Invisible World**

Ideological, political, and even social battles are often waged using women's images as their emblems, and stereotypes of women in the media are no exception. When the American public was being prepared for the invasion of Afghanistan, images of veiled, depressed Afghani women under Taliban control were widely circulated in the mass media. When Muslims contest Western democracy and values, they also condemn some 'Western' governments, which have banned headscarves in schools.

Several questions arise such as: do the media reflect the diversity of the world's women, including more progressive models, or do they concentrate on a traditional image? How can the media do justice to the modern reality of women in a particular area? Are their perceptions based on stereotypes and clichés, or do they represent a pluralist view of women? All these questions and others reveal that the media can play a pivotal role in transforming stereotypical representations of women.

Such inquiries are raised insistently and with good reason, as negative stereotypes of women reflect and reinforce wider gender inequalities in any society. In addition, studies of the representation of women's issues can be used as a tool to evaluate media bias not just with regards to gender issues, but with regard to the media's political and ideological attitudes.

### **Middle Eastern women under focus**

The Middle Eastern region<sup>1</sup> is a particular area of media focus, especially after the attack of September 11th 2001 which opened eyes around the globe to the fact that people can no longer ignore that political, economic, social and religious affairs and action in any particular area can have an impact on the whole world. Many columnists and experts consider that date not just to be one which changed the world's political agenda, but also one that directly affected the media landscape and coverage, and subsequently the perceptions of audiences towards the issues of

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<sup>1</sup> As the 'Middle East region' has no clear boundaries, and many authors have classified this region in different ways, this study will adhere to the most commonly used definition and classification of this region by the majority of media news agencies. This defines the Middle East as spanning South Western Asia and North Eastern Africa, and including the Arab countries of Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Emirate, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and non Arab countries including Iran and Israel.

groups such as Middle Eastern women. This was simply because Middle Eastern women's issues were not main topics or priorities of media agenda for a long time previous to this date. This was due to the low appreciation of these women's role in society which translated itself into the high percentage of illiteracy and lower socioeconomic standing, and through the tenacity of customs and traditions such as early marriage arrangements.

In contrast, author Naomi Sakr noted in her book, 'Women and media in the Middle East: power through self expression' that media interest in women's issues actually began prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. This was due to a dramatic change in the Middle Eastern media occurring since the early 1990s, when the voice of women's rights organisations also began to become more audible.

In fact, in the period from 1991 until 2003 the Middle East underwent many political and economic changes and conflicts, including the first and second Gulf wars, which rocked the socio-economic atmosphere in the whole area. This period also witnessed the remarkable launching of many satellite channels and media agencies, with agendas varying from news to entertainment. The most eye-catching channels were those with outlets in the West which chose to address Middle Eastern issues, such as France 24, BBC Arabic, Alhura, and those channels which have been described as anti-American such as Al-Jazeera Arabic.

Women's rights organisations and human rights activists have increasingly used such mass media as a tool to communicate their messages about Middle Eastern women's issues, especially addressing those topics held as taboo in the Middle East. However, many researchers have indicated that the mass media neglects a real representation of Middle Eastern women, by giving the stage only to intellectual, educated women who do not reflect the wider community of women, who are characterized by a high rate of illiteracy.

Nevertheless, media agencies, especially those focused on a news agenda, could no longer ignore the stories of Middle Eastern women who have become part of the news they are broadcasting. Women are no longer just the mothers, the sisters, or the daughters who embody a society's norms, but are increasingly featured in breaking news as they become more directly involved with events, for example as female suicide bombers or as rape victims in armed conflicts.

Again however, a woman's place in the headlines did not mean that media were able to convincingly explain the background of such involvement. On the contrary, the decision to

publish such sensational stories often had the result of damaging the reputation of the media and its neutrality. For example when both Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al-Jazeera English aired an 'exclusive interview' with an Iraqi woman who said that she was a victim of rape by Iraqi police officials, the story was published with many notable contradictions in terms.<sup>2</sup>

### **Women are either invisible, or negatively portrayed**

It is perhaps too soon to evaluate or analyse to what extent the altered media landscape has managed to create a climate able to empower women. Many studies have revealed that the media do not give enough attention to women's issues in general, and those of women in the Middle East in particular. The same situation is found in the international media whose sources and interests are mostly the result of stories published or aired in the local media.

According to a report conducted in 2005 by the Global Media Monitoring Project<sup>3</sup>, covering 78 countries including the Middle East, only 21% of news subjects - the people who are interviewed or whom the news is about - are female. Though there has been an increase since 1995, when 17% of those heard and seen in the news were women, the situation in 2005 remains abysmal. For every woman who appears in the news, there are five men "The world we see in the news is a world in which women are virtually invisible", concluded the report.

In addition, the 2002-2005 Arab Human Development Report, released under UN sponsorship, identified key 'deficits' harming the Arab region, including 'freedom deficits' and the 'women empowerment deficit'. It also used a set of indicators such as 'voice and accountability' and 'media independence' to reveal that most voices are stifled and that women's voices are stifled worst of all.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at just one of these indicators as an example, the rate of female labour force participation in the Middle East is estimated as 29.5%. The data also shows that these women are more likely to work in low productivity jobs in agriculture and services. Women's share in

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<sup>2</sup> see chapter 3

<sup>3</sup> The GMMP systematically monitors the representation of women and men in news content in radio, TV and newspapers.

<sup>4</sup> 2002 Arab Human Development report

industrial employment is also much smaller than men's.<sup>5</sup> However even this group can barely be heard through the mass media. Instead, the media tend to reinforce stereotypes of Middle Eastern women according to the GMMP report.

Rash Allam has argued that Middle Eastern media have tended to portray women in a manner that has arguably done more to aggravate than to alleviate these problems. "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 as 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", says Allam.<sup>6</sup>

The Western media haven't been better at handling Middle Eastern women's issues, according to many international reports and experts who argue that the Western popular imagination, nurtured by a media which commonly lacks sensitivity to complex realities, is quick to associate Arab women with oppression and subordination.<sup>7</sup>

"A woman wearing a veil has now become the symbol of women in the Arab world; what an insult!" Ibrahim Nawar, the Chief Executive of Arab Press Freedom Watch<sup>8</sup> has commented. He continued: "yes, it is true that an increasing number of Muslim women now wear a hijab (veil), but it is wrong to generalize and stereotype," warning that stereotyping can be physical as well as mental. As Arab women are seen generally in the West as veiled, some believe there is a general perception that they are extremist and anti-West. "Mental stereotyping is very dangerous, especially when it is based on narrow-minded ideas and false data. Mental stereotyping of Arabs in the Western media includes features of anti-Western attitudes, extremism and terrorism. Such

<sup>5</sup> Global Employment Trends for women 2007 – International Labor Office

<sup>6</sup> *Countering the Negative Image of Arab Women in the Arab Media: Towards a "Pan Arab Eye" Media Watch Project* by Rasha Allam- The Middle East Institute *Policy Brief- page 3*

<sup>7</sup> In a symposium "Arab Woman between East and West" , organized in the framework of UNESCO's Arabia Plan in 2004 – Paris  
<sup>8</sup> Portraying Women in the Western and Arab media- general remarks by Ibrahim Nawar, page 96

stereotyping can only promote hate talk and conflict rather than tolerance and respect for others within the societies of Europe and may poison the relations across the Mediterranean,” he added.

What Nawar said can be spotted in the pictures that are used intentionally or unintentionally on many news websites. For example, the BBC Arabic website displayed a photo of a veiled woman wearing the green logo of Hamas, when the topic was a translation of an article written by Jeremy Bowen, BBC Middle East editor, about Hamas’ plots to win an “unbalanced war”. His article had nothing to do with women, as he was discussing the political condition of the Islamic movement (Hamas) and its conflict with Israel.

The need to simplify or to present an easy picture of what is going on in other areas of the world to an audience can cause the creation of stereotypes, which in many cases do not merely distort the truth and manipulate the minds of ordinary people, but also call into question the principles of censorship, objectivity, and diversity of the media.

It is worth mentioning that studies analysing the portrayal of Middle Eastern women in the media are quite limited, although several studies conducted to assess the image of women portrayed in the Arab media have yielded startling results.<sup>9</sup> These studies were, however, subject to many limitations. Most of these studies, especially those conducted on the broadcast sector in Arab countries, focused only on analysing the content of drama programmes, such as movies and TV series, or the image of women in advertisements and video clips, and neglected other important programs, such as newscasts, political talk shows, social programs, and documentaries. Despite being incomplete, these studies found that 78.68% of the images of women were negative.

These studies were also directed by Arab women living in Arab countries. Women from Israel were not taken into consideration even by those researchers belonging to countries which officially recognise Israel. Moreover, women in Iran attract special attention from the Western media, perhaps due to the political position that Iran occupies currently as an anti-Western country seeking nuclear power. (Another reason could be the ability of some Iranian activists to highlight women’s lives and gain access to a closed society by using means of communication

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<sup>9</sup> 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).

like the cinema). Yet, few studies have been carried out to exclusively evaluate the representation of Iranian women in the media.

Naomi Sakr also offers the insight that the low representation of women actually working within the media mass itself must also play a large part in the low coverage of women's issues in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

### **Al-Jazeera, and the challenging mission**

Within the previous overview of the way in which local and Western media are currently portraying Middle Eastern women, a question arises as to whether today's changing media landscape<sup>11</sup> is able to empower women in the Middle East. Will they be able to break the stereotypes of women and deliver more relevant coverage that is able to communicate the real situation of women in the Middle East? And furthermore, do the media in fact need to play such role?

“In the age of satellite and internet technology, the media have taken on a global rather than a national role. Censorship is more difficult in the global age and freedom of expression means more responsibility than ever. But although the global media can bring people together, they can also separate them if they use the wrong discourse,” argues Ibrahim Nawar.<sup>12</sup>

Reem Obeidat agrees. She said “The media are 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.”<sup>13</sup>

So the media are an important factor in the empowerment of women, as most researchers have concurred. And since the Middle East region was and still is a hot spot for news agencies, Middle Eastern women's issues have become an often contentious part of the media agenda.

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10 “Women and media in the Middle East: Power through self expression” by Naomi Sakr

11 James Painter mentioned in his study “Counter-Hegemonic News” that the main remarkable change appears with the “boom” of the state-funded channels, such as Aljazeera, based in Qatar, as well as the new tendency of agencies in Western countries such as CNN and the BBC to expand their international broadcasting operations in the Middle East.

12 ‘Portraying Women in the Western and Arab media’- general remarks by Ibrahim Nawar, page 95

13 ‘Content And Representation Of Women In The Arab Media’, a paper conducted by Reem Obeidat in the Expert Group Meeting on ‘Participation and access of women to the media, and the impact of media on, and its use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women’, Beirut, Lebanon, 12-15 November 2002

For example, most news agencies highlighted as a news item the U.N. session headed by the ex-U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in June 2008, when she addressed the sexual violence against women in conflict areas.<sup>14</sup> Al-Jazeera Arabic used this as a platform to begin discussion as to whether the U.S. will follow U.N. resolutions and prosecuted Americans who have committed war crimes and violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. This debate took place not just within the news content but also in talk show programmes.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, this example raises the question of whether the media play a role solely as a source of information, or whether they should go beyond that to campaign:<sup>16</sup> how women's issues can be tackled in different media agendas, and how such agendas can harm or benefit women's issues.

This study is going to focus on Al Jazeera in its English and Arabic versions.

The Al Jazeera network provokes constant discussion through its ability to provide coverage of Middle Eastern issues, gaining notably large audiences through its specific editorial style. Al Jazeera hasn't just claimed independent, impartial and honest coverage of world events and news stories; it goes beyond that to say that it is able to tell the stories that other networks do not. "It aims to give voice to the voiceless in under-reported regions with journalism that is honest, courageous and distinctive," says its website.

Middle Eastern women's issues can be a challenge for this type of media, so this study aims to identify their bias or the lack of it in their products - especially within feature programmes handling women's issues.

And as both Al Jazeera English and Al Jazeera Arabic are predominantly news-based, the study will try to track the quantity of their inputs regarding women's issues in the Middle East during a certain period; then to examine particular cases to analyse the style, images, terms, interests, and presentation style of their coverage of this topic.

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14 In 2000, the UN chamber passed a resolution condemning the rape of women and girls in war zones but a number of Security Council members, including China and Russia, prevented the resolution being re-adopted last year. The dissenting countries stressed that they do not approve of rape and violence but that the Security Council had no right to pass resolutions on such matters because they do not regard rape as a threat to international peace and security.

15 See chapter 3

16 James Painter classified the new channels as those who follow a 'Western', model of impartiality, including the BBC, and those which follow the 'counter-hegemonic' style, or Southern' perspective on news; see Counter-Hegemonic 24/7: A case study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur.

Content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) methods will be used to analyse two feature programmes, 'Everywoman' in Al Jazeera English, and 'For women only' in Al Jazeera Arabic, as well as the output of Aljazeera.net. The research will try to answer such questions as: is there a lack of coverage of women's issues? What exactly attracts the Al Jazeera network's attention? Do they have proper access to information about women and their issues? Are there examples of stereotyping?

## **Chapter 2 Breaking the mould**

Al Jazeera has been described on many occasions as ‘controversial’. This tag is still being given to the Arabic origin media outlet which, with the addition of Al Jazeera English, now has a worldwide reach, broadcasting from centres in Doha, Kuala Lumpur, Washington DC, and London. After studying the editorial content, programmes and even Al Jazeera’s special features and footage, many columnists and researchers have also described the satellite channel as ‘radical’, ‘alternative’, and even ‘sensationalist’.

Since its launch in April 1996, Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) has had a huge influence on the Middle Eastern media landscape. This impact has been attributed to many factors, but the way AJA broke the mould is often seen as the most critical. Until the 1990s many Middle Eastern citizens in countries like Iraq and Syria were unable to watch satellite TV channels, and had access only to state-censored national TV. When Al Jazeera obtained permission to broadcast, audiences began to experience different, eye-catching programmes that they were previously unable to watch on their state TV, where entertainment, commercial programmes, and government-biased news dominated the agenda.

From the start, Al Jazeera’s distinctive style sought to offer something different to domestic television broadcasting. By allowing audiences from across the Middle East to engage in its call-in programmes, it allowed these audiences to air their anger towards the region’s governments in a way they had not been able to do before. As James Painter, author of *Counter-Hegemonic News* has argued: “the overriding factor behind Al Jazeera’s success was the state of the Arab media market before it arrived. With some minor exceptions, there was little space for criticism of governments or public debate. Much of Al Jazeera’s popularity stems from its talk shows where ‘opinion and counter-opinions’ are freely debated in a loud, plebiscitary manner. It broke the mould and offered a voice to a large sector of the population that did not have one. In many ways it plugged into, but did not create, the anger many viewers felt at the political situation they found in the region.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Counter-Hegemonic News*, James Painter

Throughout its history Al Jazeera has also dared to air controversial views attacking both Arab and non Arab regimes including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, the U.S and Pakistan. It has also presented controversial opinions on the relationships between states, for example Syria's relationships with Lebanon, Yemen and the Gulf.

Al Jazeera has not only provided a stage for an indignant popular audience, but also for those who have been labeled as terrorists, notably Al Qaeda's leaders, and the Palestinian Islamic movement, Hamas. Ironically, due to this new commitment to give the stage to both 'opinion and counter-opinion', Al Jazeera was subject to criticism by both parties.

Some authors argue that Al Jazeera goes further: "By providing unprecedented coverage of the turmoil and its causes, Al Jazeera opened a window onto conflicts not previously exposed to an international gaze. In doing so it provoked charges that it was not just reporting on conflict but stirring it up."<sup>18</sup>

There is no doubt its well-presented coverage of the Lebanese Civil War in 2000-2001, the war in Iraq in 2003, and the recent coverage of the Israeli attack in Gaza increased its viewer ratings.<sup>19</sup> Frequently, Al Jazeera describes itself on air as 'the only international broadcaster with a presence in these regions'. Indeed media analysts and commentators observed that many people see Al Jazeera as a more trustworthy source of information than government.<sup>20</sup>

The achievements and influence of Al Jazeera Arabic in the Middle East since 1996 created anticipation in the western media at the launch of its English language counterpart, Al Jazeera English, in November 2006 which covers not only the Middle East but the entire world.<sup>21</sup> Al Jazeera English aimed to provide new competition for the western media, not only as an additional presence in the market, but also due to its unique ability to present a non-western or 'southern' perspective on news. This perspective would hope to rival the dominantly negative

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<sup>18</sup> Essay: 'Network That's Changing the Arab World', Naomi Sakr

<sup>19</sup> The Western news media was largely prevented from reporting from Gaza because of restrictions imposed by the Israeli military. Al Jazeera had a distinct advantage with an existing base there.

<sup>20</sup> The network is largely unavailable in the United States, carried only by cable providers in certain areas like Burlington, Vt.; Toledo, Ohio; and Washington, D.C. (Few in U.S. See Jazeera's Coverage of Gaza War BY Noam Coham- the New York Times- Jan.11 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Al Jazeera English touts itself as the first Middle East-based English-language channel

coverage in the western media of people in developing countries, arguably seen most often as passive recipients of natural disasters. Al Jazeera English wanted to compete by giving a voice to those who were hitherto voiceless.

Al Jazeera now claims at least 40 million viewers in the Arab world and an estimated reach of around 300 million households worldwide.<sup>22</sup> A research study conducted by Allied Media Corp<sup>23</sup> has estimated that the majority of Al Jazeera's viewers are aged between 15 to around 40 years old. While most viewers report watching an average of 3 - 4 hours a day, viewers in the 15 - 29 year old range on average an extra hour every day. Furthermore, the statistics clearly show that male viewers outnumber female viewers in every age group.

### **Where are the women?**

Unfortunately, despite the goal of giving a voice to the voiceless, Middle Eastern women's voices remained often unheard, and women's issues neglected. Al Jazeera's leading figures say there is space for women's issues to get an airing. For example, Khadija bent Qana, one of Al Jazeera Arabic's famous news readers, recently said that "There is a space regarding social programmes, youth and women's issues".<sup>24</sup> She added that Al Jazeera has reflected political issues to "the maximum extent possible, and also in an unprecedented way to other satellite channels", explaining that Al Jazeera now needs to develop provision of real cultural programmes.

Al Jazeera Arabic made a modest start to rectify this gap in provision by addressing women's issues in its feature programmes. However, the majority of these continued to be based on a man's perspective, as the presenter was a man, the guests were men, and the audience calling to participate and share their views was also men. The main programme addressing women's issues at that time was 'Shria and Life', a weekly interview with Sheikh Yussef Al Qaradawi, a renowned Muslim scholar. 'Shria and Life' tackled subjects of public concern in the Arab world,

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<sup>22</sup> Rajah Omaar, Al Jazeera's English correspondent revealed this information in a seminar in Oxford, February 2009

<sup>23</sup> An Alexandria marketing firm that works with ethnic media outlets placing advertisements.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Khalij Magazine, May 2008.

analyzing and filtering them through an Islamic point of view and ensuring a wide representation of differing Muslim ideologies.

In time, female intellectuals and activists managed to get a presence on Al Jazeera's programmes. The network's commitment to their motto 'the view and the counter view' opened the door for their often controversial views to be aired. The slogan led to a style where the presenter adopts a counter-argument role while the guest seeks to defend his views. The Egyptian presenter Ahmed Monsour became a famous proponent of this style in his programme 'No Boundaries'. Other programmes like 'More than One Opinion' also tried to put all the views on the table.

However, women's issues were handled in very general themes. Titles like 'The Role of Women in Life', 'Women's Issues in the Next Century' and 'Women and Development of Society' illustrate the level of generalization of women's issues at this time. This was perhaps due to fear on the part of Al Jazeera's broadcasters about the possible furious reaction of the prospective audience.

Handling women's issues was like walking in a mine field for AJA as it strove to respect the conservative culture of the audience whilst seeking to deliver freedom of speech. This dynamic between conservative representation and free debate which has characterized AJA's style and attracted its large audiences was dramatically illustrated in a now famous episode of an encounter between two women representing different approaches: the first liberalism, the second Islamism. The audience watched on air as one of the women (representing the Islamic ideology) walked out of the studio in the middle of the episode, calling the other lady 'a woman with bad manners'. Such a method of creating drama has proved popular however and was also adopted by a later programme which is now one of the most famous shows called 'The Opposite Direction'.<sup>25</sup>

### **For Women Only**

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<sup>25</sup> The Opposite Direction has been described as one of the most popular interactive programmes amongst the Arabic-language Satellite Channels. It continues to air daring, controversial topics. Every week, Dr. Faisal Al Qassem moderates a debate between two personalities with opposing views on a certain topic.

In 2002 a new programme was launched, geared specifically towards women. It was called 'For Women Only' and was aired once a week. It hosted educated women from across the Arab world, who expressed their points of view regarding critical social, political, scientific and environmental issues. As with the majority of Al Jazeera's cultural programmes, audience input was vital to the show. The audience - regardless of their gender - was asked to participate via calls.

The show went out on a Monday and the episode was recorded to be re-shown twice a week on a Tuesday and Wednesday. It was aired at 21:30 pm GMT, placing the programme in the grouping of main shows timetabled to be broadcast after the main news.

The show has been classified as one of the most popular programmes on Al Jazeera<sup>26</sup>. The presenter was always female, as were the guests. In a five minute introduction, the female presenter raised questions about a particular issue to be discussed in the one hour edition. Many times the approach was decided in the introduction. For instance in an edition titled 'The image of Arabic women in Arabic media', the hostess gave an introduction in which she criticized the Arabic Channels which seemingly used women's bodies to sell their products and programmes whilst ignoring 'women's real issues'.

An example was when the presenter Khadiga bent Qana was visibly pained as she talked about the poor media coverage of the suffering of Palestinian women:

"At the time when the eighteen year old heroine Eyat blew her body up into small stumps for the sake of her nation's cause, some satellite channels were airing images of wiggling bellies and waists, reflecting a soul-emptied body that has lost the spirit of the nation. Bodies haven't found a role outside the physical limits. Such a situation raises a series of questions about this contradiction between image and reality,"

In many cases, 'For Women Only' also made use of a five-minute reportage, conducted by an Al Jazeera correspondent. Most of these reportages were interviews with women who gave their views and answered questions relevant to the programme's topic. The programme was

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.allied-media.com/Al Jazeera/JAZprogrammes.html](http://www.allied-media.com/Al%20Jazeera/JAZprogrammes.html)

occasionally also able to show footage of women sharing their stories, for example the mother of a child exposed to sexual abuse, or Palestinian women who have lost their relatives during the continual war in their region. Not all the editions made use of reportages however.

'For Women Only' was able many times to cross new frontiers to discuss very sensitive issues such as sexual harassment against women, sexual abuse of children, infidelity, white slavery, use of women in the entertainment of tourists, frigidity, and sexual and emotional coldness among men. Through its sensitive handling of these topics, the show successfully addressed these issues without outraging traditional Arabic family modesty.

By hosting women from different areas of academia and experience such as female lawyers, women working in the media, female psychologists, social affairs experts, businesswomen, singers, models, female physicians and political activists, the programme conveyed different perspectives on issues previously debated only by men or not discussed at all.

While women were mostly portrayed within a family context as wife, mother, sister or daughter, the show also portrayed women outside of this context such as the political activist, candidate or worker, and the victims of society norms, difficult economic conditions, and cultural and religious misconceptions.

In many episodes a warning against 'western impact' was heard very explicitly. Globalization and 'Americanisation' were seen as forms of such an 'impact'. The content of this warning was almost the same across several editions<sup>27</sup>: Arab women have been negatively affected by globalization<sup>28</sup> due to the approach of woman being used physically as objects to market international products. The pressure of conforming to stereotypical images of beauty has led Arabic women to underestimate themselves by becoming consumers of cosmetics and seeking plastic surgery. Thus with the added contribution of the Arab media, an Arab woman becomes either a product's frontage or its consumer. The concept of globalization and its effect on economic, political and cultural life was discussed extensively in the programme during its four year history: the emphasis remained firmly focused on its negative potential impacts.

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<sup>27</sup> 'women and economic globalization' 'women in Arabic entertainment satellite channels' 'women images in video clips' and other editions all address the issue of globalization

<sup>28</sup> 'Globalization' used contextually to refer to a tool used by the West to impose its political, cultural, and ideological rules and values.

At the same time the show unearthed, via its guests and sometimes its hosts, the social norms which discourage women to play a powerful role to change their reality. Editions which illustrated this included those focusing on women's participation in elections in the Gulf countries. The common attitude in many editions was that the misinterpretation of Islamic law, the main factor shaping traditional social norms, was associated with the degradation of women. Of course the female guests<sup>29</sup> replied and refuted these misconceptions.

A very interesting link between the role of women in 'resistance' and the Islamic parties was also reported. In an episode named 'the Palestinian woman' aired in 2002, the show hosted a woman introduced as an activist in the Islamic Palestinian party Hamas<sup>30</sup> asking her "to what extent do Islamic parties in Palestine limit women's role in the resistance?". The activist said that women are not encouraged to carry out the 'martyr process' unless they found themselves in situations where they must fight to defend their land, family or honour against the 'occupier'. 'For Women Only' used the terms 'female martyr' and 'women sacrificing their lives for their lands' to describe these women who were killed either during an armed resistance, or as victims of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine.

It is worth noting that the majority of the coverage of women's issues in the programme was geographically focused on Palestine and Iraq. In contrast to Palestine, in Iraq women were represented as paralyzed beings having no choice but to surrender to their fate under the American invasion, where they have been subjected to killing and kidnap by the tribes and some Islamic parties.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the Palestinian women, Iraqi women were never described as martyrs.

Often general titles were used to focus discussion on particular regions in the Middle East. For example in an edition on the 'political participation of women', the talk was about women in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, where women are fighting for their rights to run the election both as voter and candidate. In 'women and military activities in Arab world' the discussion tended to focus on women in Libya and Tunis where women can join the navy.<sup>32</sup> Some episodes were directly addressed to women in certain regions, as in 'Iraqi women waiting for War' 'the rights

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<sup>29</sup> A female studying Islamic law was often hosted to rebut the Islamic parties' claims

<sup>30</sup> An Islamic Palestinian socio-political organisation which includes a paramilitary force.

<sup>31</sup> There was slight reference to the Shiite Islamic party that aims to depress the status of women in Iraq.

<sup>32</sup> There are also women in military forces in Iraq and Yemen, but this edition did not refer to them

of women and children in Palestine’ ‘woman and political changes in Iraq’, ‘the Palestinian woman’, ‘the impact of oil revenue on Gulf women’, ‘Gulf women and leadership’ and ‘Yemeni women and chewing Qat’.

The programme also tried to move beyond the political image that Al Jazeera’s programmes are often branded with. It tackled a variety of light features such as ‘women and shopping’, ‘the Valentine’, ‘families and summer vacations’, ‘marriage customs in Arab world’ and ‘the portrayal of women in Arab poetry’.

However, the show did not manage to avoid slipping into the ‘repeat’ net. It tackled the same topics more than once, sometimes even with the same headlines and themes. This was an indication that the show was perhaps running out of creativity and original thought, even though it hadn’t covered many Middle Eastern countries, and many women’s issues.

This study examined 95 episodes of the programme, aired in 2002, 2003 and 2004, and found that the most common messages that the programme seemed to want to convey were:

- Arab women who emigrate (especially to the west) are subject to discrimination and suffer in their homes from social, cultural, and sometimes religious pressure.
- Mass media in the Arab region does not reflect current women’s issues, with some media responsible for portraying Arab women as objects used for entertainment.
- Arab women are very vulnerable to international economic changes as they are always subject to the consequences of these changes but are not able to be decision makers.
- Many taboos prevail in Arab society, such as talking about sex inside or outside of marriage, and because of society norms women can be misled, and denied right access to information, causing them to forgo their rights to be positive actors in family or community.
- The Arab world has been absorbing so-called ‘western values’ with negative impact according to the show on the social and economic links within the Arabic family and community. The values and concepts that are a result of globalization contribute to the isolation of women as intellectual and connected human beings.
- Although women have made progress in the political sphere, women in the Arab world still face daily violence, exploitation and domestic slavery and are the group most

affected by disease, hunger and marginalization, a situation that denies women the chance to participate actively in the processes of development and decision-making.

- Women in conflict areas are playing critical roles as resisters. They can also reflect the break down of society.

The programme stopped broadcasting in 2005. No clear reason was given, though it was clearly daring to discuss taboos and provocative topics. Perhaps the lack of thrilling element that most of the Al Jazeera's Arabic programs characterized by (which are based on raising clashes between guests with different perspectives, or challenging their guests to entice the audience to sympathy or disagreement) may have contributed to its failure to keep its audience for a longer time<sup>33</sup>.

The main aim of the programme seemed to have been to empower women in Arab countries, so the guests were pre-selected to come up with ideas and thoughts that were mostly already acceptable as theories. In addition, the method of presenting of these issues using a studio discussion for almost an hour, and receiving calls from abroad, became too traditional and easily imitated by other satellite channels like "Soft (women) Talks" . Moreover, the lack of more filmed reports weakened the programme, and prevented it from reaching the common ordinary women by giving the stage only to intellectuals to discuss their issues.

However, in many cases the programme was able to raise a debate not about the issues but about the way these issues were presented. It was criticized by some Islamic groups who said that the programme called for imperialism and was disrespectful of Islamic fatwa. Episodes which were talking about women's rights in leadership or hijab "woman headscarf" received most criticism from the Islamic groups.

Other critics noted that Al Jazeera has a double standard in dealing with women's issues, saying that "Al Jazeera applauds female Islamist activities and the significance of their movements when they are targeting western governments, while, at the same time, it portrays Arab female activists calling for human rights or criticizing Arab societies as western agents and uses this

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<sup>33</sup> There are other programmes which are older than this one and continue.

alleged accusation as a pretext to oppress any traditions or modes of behavior foreign to the Arab region.”<sup>34</sup>

However, the question of why the programme was suspended is still open. Why did Al Jazeera management not think of improving it instead of relegating women’s issues to mainstream programming, leading to less coverage and attention?

### **Everywoman**

The Al Jazeera Network was proud to announce at the launch of Al Jazeera English (AJE) that it would be the first media outlet in the Middle East to produce a show with women's issues at its core. The show, titled ‘Everywoman’, was conceived by an ex-BBC producer Marie Devine, who came to AJE with the idea of making a current affairs programme about gender issues. As AJE addresses not just the Middle East but the world, ‘Everywoman’ was intended to be a mix of hard news and softer features - stories that have universal appeal.

The magazine format and global agenda, which stopped broadcasting in June 2008, included an exciting mix of challenging and incisive journalism with stories coming from AJE’s broadcast centres around the world. Stories came from countries including Japan, China, Kenya, Nepal, and India. The show, which tackles various subjects like religion, society, sex, education and arts, all from women’s perspectives, was granted a prestigious prize from the Association of International Broadcasting.

Unlike For Women Only, Everywoman employs a documentary style, using interviews with women telling their stories, arguing their rights, or revealing their suffering. The programme is thus able to show these women’s views and experiences as they move spontaneously in front of the camera, filming them in their house, at work, with their families or alone. A photo montage of ten minutes combined with very skillful audio effects (particularly the local music of the region that the woman comes from)<sup>35</sup>, helps the audience to engage with the story, and provides a taste of these women’s cultural and social background and environment.

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Electronic Media and Human Rights’ by Mohamed Hakem.

<sup>35</sup> In a story revealing the struggle of deaf people in Gaza, the mute-audio effects help the audience to experience the silent world of these people.

Middle Eastern women have a remarkable share of the programme output. During the last 100 episodes there were approximately 45 stories about women residing in different countries in the Middle East<sup>36</sup>. Trying not to portray women as victims, the show aired stories of women who push society boundaries, and pass political, social, economic, cultural, and even religious restrictions to become positive examples of how far women can reach if they overcome such boundaries.

Sport and women on the frontline:

For example, the show met women in the field of sport such as Nada, the first female rally driver from the Gulf, who switched to archery and went on to represent Qatar twice at the Asian Games. Despite the traditional social frameworks of women in the Gulf, Nada found support from her father to persevere. She said she wanted to inspire sportswomen throughout the Arab world.

The show also met Siham, from Morocco. She is a middle-distance runner who has competed in championships across the world. Siham said that besides addressing the tough training schedule, she was also challenging people's perception of a woman's place in Muslim society. She criticized countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, who prevent women participating in sport due to the concern over women's athletic clothing which contravenes the Islamic restrictions.

Women who play football in Iran and Egypt were also interviewed, telling their stories of the challenge and fun they found in a game that has been long dominated by men. These women continue to enjoy playing the game, wearing the veil (head scarf), despite facing criticisms from conservative quarters who do not like the idea.

But the show revealed that even conservative women can enjoy sport. Two Israeli Arab women Riham and Fatma, both described in the show as conservative Muslims, are practicing boxing even though one religious leader has decreed that women should not be allowed to fight. With the encouragement of their family and community, they both wish to reach international standards in this sport.

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<sup>36</sup> <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmemes/everywoman/2007/07/2008525184431352134.html>

Besides the field of sport, which is considered an unusual choice for Middle Eastern women, the show highlighted women who choose to be in the frontlines in other ways, like the first female fire fighters in Iran, the female miner in Lebanon, and female paramedics in Qatar. These occupations are all still monopolized by men in much of the Middle East.

### **Conflict areas**

The show paid huge attention to women in conflict areas like Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq. Trying to avoid repetition of the same sad, shocking images of women losing their relatives in conflicts, or women as victims of the conflicts, which are the common images in news items, the show emphasized the stories of women who try to survive and help others to get through times of war. The show in its last episode chose to air the story of two Israeli and Palestinian families who lost their young children during the conflict. Instead of revenge, the two families unite to establish an organisation to call for greater dialogue between Palestinian and Israelis families.

The show also told the story of the woman who witnessed the death of a child who was shot as he played in one of the neighborhoods of Gaza. She decides to build a playground for Gaza children to be a safe place for them.

But the gloomiest edition came from Iraq. In a special edition about Iraqi women airing Saturday 3rd March 2007, *Everywoman* was hosted by guest presenter Laila Al Shaikhli<sup>37</sup>, herself an Iraqi. Instead of interviewing women who had overcome the circumstances of conflict as the previous editions in Palestine and Lebanon had done, *Everywoman* chose to highlight the changes that have taken place in Iraq since the U.S invasion in 2003, by meeting four women – a journalist, a mother, a widow and an activist.

Through glimpsing into these four lives we were able to see that sectarian strife, rising violence and a climate of constant fear is a reality for these women of Baghdad.

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<sup>37</sup> Shiulie Ghosh is the known presenter of *Everywoman*, but some “especial editions” aired from Doha or Lebanon, Al Jazeera chose Arabic female presenters.

Throughout 15 minutes of documentary and 23 shots the absence of security and the collapse of the country's infrastructure were revealed. The shots included car bombings, funerals, army fighting in the streets, looting of houses and offices, masked foreign military carrying guns, and women wearing black cloths, crying and weeping. This quantity of shots of the conflicts was not found in former films of women in other conflict areas such as Palestine or Lebanon.

There was also a comparison between the situation of women during the regime of Saddam Hussein, when women formed 40% of work force and education was obligatory; and during the current occupation where women are subjected to abduction, rape, and killing by the 'conservative Islamic groups', who emerge during such occupations. Even Christian women were forced to wear the veil to avoid being targeting by these 'Islamic groups'.

Images of women, including young girls, wearing the black robe and covering their heads and part of their faces, dominated the film, and transmitted the high feelings of depression, and the repression that women have undergo.

The testimonies of the four women revealed that women not only suffer what everyone in Iraqi society suffers through the daily bloody conflicts, but that they also become easy targets of constant violence—looting, assault, kidnapping, rape or death at the hands of suicide bombers, militias, foreign troops, Iraqi police, and local thugs. Such circumstances trap women and children in their homes. Women who had formerly worked outside the home or attended school were now walking with a sense of fear and carrying weapons for protection; such as the case of the female journalist who was subjected to shooting many times during her work.

#### Wearing the veil

Most of the episodes tried to shed light on the cultural, social, and religious misconceptions that lead many women in many countries to struggle for their rights. A story of a single mother in Morocco, who was rejected by her family, revealed the weakness of the application of family law in Morocco. Another story of two female writers in Iran and their attempt to deal with the striking censorship that the Iranian government uses in publication, illustrated the limits to freedom of speech in the country since the revolution in 1970s

However, one of the most interesting episodes was about the wearing of the veil (the head scarf and also the niqab which covers the face). Devoting a special 30 minute edition to talk about the veil, revealed how the use of the veil represented the changes in the Egyptian society.

“In Egypt now, the majority of girls cover their hair, either with a hijab - a headscarf, or with a niqab - which veils the entire face, including the eyes. But this hasn't always been the case: in the 1970s only a minority of Egyptian women covered themselves,” said the presenter, adding that some say the changes reflect a growing conservatism in Egyptian society. Others argue the hijab is more of a fashion statement than a symbol of religious purity.

Everywoman met three Egyptian women, and their families, and asked them about their decision to cover themselves - or not.

The show met a female journalist who decided to wear headscarf who explained that she was exposed to society pressure: “everywhere I went I met women wearing the headscarf, who kept telling me if you wear the scarf you will be more pretty”. But later she said that she felt that she was missing the more important reasons for wearing the hijab and began to think more of hell and heaven and how she could work to being granted a place in heaven. That was the point at which she decided to wear the head scarf. The female journalist told Everywoman that her decision was welcomed by her friends and family and she felt that the headscarf protected her from harassment by men. But on the other hand, she was rejected from working with an NGO because of wearing the headscarf.

The second woman was a mother and teacher who decided to wear niqab. It was her own decision to wear it, since she was working a Catholic school and was not feeling pressure from society. She said that wearing the niqab was a result of her belief that it was part of God’s orders to protect women from harassment. She went on to say that she loved the Saudi system which separated women from men in public places.

She confirmed that wearing niqab doesn’t prevent her from achieving her duties as a wife, mother, or a teacher. Her husband who was with her during shooting the episode was supporting her, carrying their baby.

The third lady was a Muslim woman who chose not to wear the veil, even though her sisters were wearing it. The young lady said that she had worn the headscarf for three years, after she attended religious classes. She was convinced that she had to cover her body, as she didn't want to be perceived as a sexy woman. But she decided to remove the scarf when she realized that she was spending time in front of the mirror to fix her new-look with the headscarf, just in order to prove that veiled woman could be fashionable. At that point she decided to take off the scarf saying that against its purpose.

This special edition was interesting not just because of the topic of wearing the veil which is still a confused and much debated symbol of Muslim women in the Middle East, but also because of the way the programme tackled the topic.

These women were carefully selected to examine the different reasons for women choosing to wear the veil: how much the veil is about vanity, how much about perceived modesty, and also the religious concepts of the veil. Choosing such women to talk seemed a very clever idea, because it directed the audience to understand that wearing the veil is no longer simply a symptom of the repression of women – at least in Egypt- where wearing the veil is a woman's choice whatever their reason for doing so. The last shot of this edition stressed this point, as the director chose to end the documentary with a smile or a laugh from all the characters to illustrate their confidence in their choice to wear the veil or not.

The director also led the audience to reach their conclusions by the selection of location in which the episode's characters were interviewed. For example, the director chose to film the female journalist in a hair dresser's salon where the hair dresser wrapped the veil for her and other women. Though the female journalist never talked explicitly about the veil as a fashion, the way she was portrayed gave the impression that she was following the fashion and wanted to be received decently by the people around her.

The teacher who wears the niqab and her face covered was filmed with her husband and her child in a park. Some of the feedback from the audience expressed their shock at these images<sup>38</sup>,

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<sup>38</sup> Many websites took advantage of allowing this programme in You tube, thus they download certain editions where the internet users can watch and comment directly.

saying that they felt sorry for the child who they felt could not connect with his totally covered mum. But most of them expressed a belief that this woman was more confident talking about her motivation to wear the veil: that she was obeying God's order.

Of course the show filmed the three women in other locations such as at work or in ordinary life, together with other shots of Egyptian women in the street walking, chatting or sitting freely with men. All these shots gave one impression: that regardless of the motivation, wearing a veil is a woman's decision in Egypt.<sup>39</sup>

### **Women's rights**

The programme did not concentrate its efforts on explaining the complexity of political conflicts in the Middle East, but instead aimed to highlight the human side of any story. However that didn't prevent the programme from condemning the governments of certain countries regarding the implementation of women's rights. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Morocco attracted the greatest criticism in the show.

As Al Jazeera has been banned in Saudi Arabia, the show was not able to produce any documentaries handling the situation of women there. The programme mostly focused on human rights reports and hosting a human rights activist to review or comment on such reports<sup>40</sup>.

Saudi Arabia was reported as a country where every woman has to have a male guardian, usually a husband or father, who makes critical decisions on her behalf. She cannot get married, divorced, travel, get a job or an education without a man's permission. In many cases she cannot even get routine medical procedures without express consent from her guardian. The show said in two of its episodes, aired on 1 February 2008 and 9 May 2008, that although Saudi Arabia ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women eight years ago, and although the Saudi king had promised reforms, women still suffer a high rate of gender discrimination.

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<sup>39</sup> In Saudi Arabia and Iran wearing Hijab is obligatory by the law

<sup>40</sup> This edition spotlighted the report of Human Rights Watch which said women in Saudi Arabia are treated like "a child",

The programme covered the case of a 19-year-old woman gang-raped by seven men<sup>41</sup>. She went to court, and the rapists were jailed. However the young woman was sentenced to 90 lashes for admitting to being in the company of an unrelated male shortly before the incident - the man she was with was also gang-raped. When she appealed, her sentence was more than doubled to 200 lashes and six months in jail. In its introduction to the story, the show acknowledged the woman's behavior of going to the court, but at the same time described it as "a shocking story".<sup>42</sup>

During the three episodes that handled the rights of Saudi women, there was obvious criticism of the 'religious institutes' and 'the Wahabia sect', directed by non-Saudi human right activists, hosted the show.

Using positive stories from Iran, Everywoman portrayed Iranian women as highly educated women who are nevertheless still treated badly by the law of this Islamic republic. Everywoman said that Iranian law treats women as second class citizens, where women are legally considered to have half the rights of men. According to the programme, women in Iran cannot become judges or run for president, and many jobs that are traditionally male are closed to them. However, women there refuse to be intimidated, and continue to struggle to gain equality in law and to be recognized as full citizens. The programme stressed their perseverance and determination as a positive angle to the story.

## **Suicide Bombers**

Everywoman obtained a scoop for a show aired on April 11, 2008; to address women following or adopting particular ideologies, such as those women who choose to 'to give up their lives as suicide bombers'. The programme began with an eleven minute film presented by the hostess in which she reviewed the historical events in which women were recruited as the tool of military-resistance struggles, whether as resistance fighters or plane hijackers. The reportage was insistent in conveying the message that this phenomenon of recruiting women in military struggles is a global one throughout Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

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<sup>41</sup> The story which didn't run in the Arabic website, while covered in the English.

<sup>42</sup> The Saudi king later issued a pardon after high international pressure.

The episode also presented a Palestinian woman, described as an activist, who claimed that becoming a suicide bomber was her only choice. The masked woman was filmed during her military training with several other masked people. The ten minute documentary also interviewed the family of a 60 year old female suicide bomber who was killed by Israeli soldiers just before blowing herself up in an Israeli military spot.

The film maker paid special attention to certain symbols such as the gun that women carried during training, a wall painting of previous suicide bombers including female suicide bombers, a woman walking in front of the Israeli wall in the west bank, the tents of Palestinian refugees and women carrying photos of their male relatives imprisoned by the Israelis. The episode demonstrated that Palestinian suicide bombers are considered as heroes and martyrs in Palestine. But neither the presenter nor the female reporter described these women as martyrs.

Though the episode did not show any footage of Iraqi suicide bombers, it did discuss the increasing phenomenon of female Iraqis being recruiting in this field, with the counter-terrorism expert Farhana Ali from the Rand Corporation. She said that women use violence as a mean of protest. They are protesting against the loss of family and relatives, or against the loss of their fundamental rights. This was especially true of Iraq, where women occupied high positions and jobs before the U.S invasion, but then became subject to killing, kidnapping, and rape.

It was interesting to distinguish between Palestine women who volunteered to give up their lives up as a sign of their depression and protest at losing land or male relatives, and Iraqi women whose recruitment as suicide bombers is seen as a sign of the breakdown in Iraqi society following U.S occupation.

## **Hezbollah**

'Hezbollah women' was the title of another special edition of Everywoman. This episode which was aired on August 28th 2007 interviewed women who strongly believe in Hezbollah<sup>43</sup> as a means to resist the Israeli military.

Everywoman traveled to Southern Lebanon, to the scene of some of the fiercest fighting during the Israeli Lebanese war. The programme which was recorded in Lebanon and presented by the Lebanese Al Jazeera correspondent, talked to an ordinary woman who had chosen to stay in her town despite the fighting and had risked her life sheltering Hezbollah fighters.

In this special edition on the women of Hezbollah, the show met Al Manar's<sup>44</sup> English speaking presenter Zeinab Al-Saffar, who gave an insider look into the controversial channel that has been called 'terror television' by some, and banned in various countries around the world.

Back in Beirut, the programme visited the women's Islamic Resistance Support Association, where volunteer members contribute to the cause by making handicrafts that are sold at trade shows and fairs to fund the resistance. They also run sponsorship programmes whereby women can pay to outfit a fighter from his helmet to his boots and even provide him with bullets. Whilst there the Everywoman team was invited to the annual Hezbollah's Iftar – an affair attended by close to seven thousand women.

The show also interviewed a widow who lost her husband in the Hezbollah Israeli conflict in Southern Lebanon in 1996. Despite her loss, she chose a member of Hezbollah to be her daughter's husband, knowing that her daughter might face her destiny of being a widow. That what in fact what happened. Ten years later in August 2006 history repeated itself when the daughter lost her husband of two years. Now he is celebrated by Hezbollah as a "martyr".

In this episode, Everywoman could give a different perspective of women in areas of conflict. They are not just victims, and not just fighters, but are playing a critical role as embracers of a

<sup>43</sup> Hezbollah is a Shia Islamic political and military organisation based in Lebanon. It is regarded as a legitimate resistance movement throughout much of the Muslim world, while it is considered a terrorist organisation by the United States, Israel, Canada, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Australia

<sup>44</sup> Al Manar is the official satellite channel of Hezbollah

male dominated party movement which hasn't yet recruited women as fighters in the battle. According to Amal Saad, the writer of 'Hezbollah: the politics and the religion', interviewed in the same special edition, women of Hezbollah are playing a social role at a grassroots level rather than a political level, and because of that they are not reported politically. So these women can be seen as mothers, daughters and wives of the fighters. But this role has powerful impact in feeding the resistance movement, because these women are encouraging their male relatives to be 'martyrs'.

### **The strong points of Everywoman:**

- Everywoman was able to be more specific in addressing Middle Eastern women's issues. By choosing particular topics, areas and countries, and through including individuals' views and eyewitness accounts, the programme better reflected the diversity of the Middle Eastern region.
- Avoiding generalization helped to break down stereotypes and convey messages representing Middle Eastern complexity and diversity. For example the veil was discussed as a symbol of repression of Iraqi and Iranian women who are forced to wear it, but presented as a symbol of the freedom of choice Egyptian women.
- By using films and short documentaries, Everywoman attracted greater attention from the audience who were better able to interact with the issues.
- The film maker does not depend only on a narrative style, using only the voice of the presenter or the correspondent, but also gives the main characters, who are women, the opportunity to talk and give their views.
- Men's voices were also heard, through interviews with male relatives of the main female characters. This indicates that the show is not only for women, but that also men can enjoy it.
- Shooting the characters in different locations; at work, at home, among family, in the streets or undergoing training, highlighted the cultural, social and economic diversity of each character's background.
- Giving attention to certain details during filming the characters such as focusing on their hand movements, eyes, symbols and particular locations, may help the

audiences' brains to process a lot of information quickly about the life style, the character's emotions, and attitudes of the community.

- Sound effects, particularly music, used in many of the documentaries, gave special flavour. The director chose traditional classic music, allowing the audience to taste the cultural diversity. Sometimes the sound effects were chosen to create more emotional involvement: for example using sad, slow music, or the sound of gun machines, used in the special edition on Iraqi women. The sound effects also play a role in creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm, such as in the special edition about Hezbollah.
- The show's main theme was to show positive models of women overcoming the challenges and the difficulties which are the outcome of their societies' misconceptions. This was demonstrated in episodes talking about women and sport, women's rights in Saudi Arabia, and the secret marriages.

#### **Weaknesses:**

- The show's predominant concern was to argue from a woman's view and perspective, and to largely ignore the counter opinion. For example the show never hosted a representative from the Saudi government to reply to international reports regarding the breaching of women's rights.
- The show referred to social and traditional obstacles which prevent women from practicing sport in the gulf, but did not make clear what these obstacles were.
- It was also ambiguous in its approach to the role of the rule of Islamic religion in establishing or fighting such misconceptions. For example in the episode talking about Saudi women, there was a reference to 'Islamic institutes'. Sometimes the show's guests named these institutes as the 'Wahabi cult', and there was a clear accusation that this Islamic sect is behind women's rights breaches.
- The same perspective was offered concerning Iran, which was always introduced as an Islamic country where women suffer a lot of repression. There was also reference to Islamic cults in Iraq which force women to wear veils, but the show then avoided naming

these groups. On the other hand, there was an appreciation of the Islamic teaching which had removed sexual misconceptions within marriages in Egypt.

- The show's attitude to an Islamic concept of fighting or involvement in resistance was also ambiguous and unexplained. For example there was an attitude of appreciation towards Hezbollah women, and of sympathy towards Palestinian suicide bombers, while at the same time a warning about certain Islamic groups that take advantage of society breakdown to recruit more women.

### Chapter 3: Images and words

Video images and still photographs can provide much information and shed light on significant issues and grievances. They can also promote greater understanding and cooperation between peoples and societies. Images can also play a major role in galvanizing public opinion.

Furthermore, the mass media realise that using images of a woman or child to portray suffering in a certain area will guarantee more sympathy and involvement from the audience. Many media tend to publish pictures of depressed starving women, for example, in order to talk about poverty. Ironically, a woman's appearance in such reports and news items may just be photographic, and have nothing to do with the context, her words remaining unquoted.

The reason for this use of images of women is perhaps also an attempt by the media to show that women are more vulnerable to crises in the third world, and this is what most international aid agencies and organisations report on.

In addition to the power of images is the power of words, which play an important role in defining messages and shaping perspectives. Almost always, the words journalists select reflect a certain judgment, particularly when these words are 'loaded'.<sup>45</sup>

Realising the power of images and words, news websites are growing in number, especially those linked to satellite television networks. They now compete to attract news followers and people concerned about particular issues who will spend hours digging around for certain information. To cater for this audience, these websites selectively pick eye-catching photos and try to improve their 'objectivity and credibility' by offering links to original documents, and to special features with additional material that goes into greater depth.

The Al Jazeera bilingual web site<sup>46</sup> has been ranked top of 50,000 news websites<sup>47</sup>. It has also in the last few years emerged as one of the main sources of global news.

Since its launch, it has seen an increase in the numbers of visitors and observers. Many observers have noted that these visitor numbers peak during the wars and political crises that affect third world countries.

There have been only a few studies conducted to analyse the websites of Al Jazeera; however, such studies have unearthed significant points, such as that Al Jazeera.net Arabic is characterised by a chiefly political focus as compared to one on human rights, education and advocacy.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> According to Wikipedia 'loaded language' is verbiage that attempts to influence the listener or reader by appealing to emotion. Loaded words are those which have strong emotional overtones or connotations, and which evoke strongly positive or negative reactions beyond their literal meaning.

<sup>46</sup> The Arabic version of the website was launched in 2001, the English language version in March 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Arabic and English Coverage on Aljazeera.net, Muhammed M. Abdul-Mageed, Susan C. Herring

Another very interesting study using content and critical discourse analysis revealed differences between the two language versions in all aspects, indicating systematic bias in coverage.<sup>49</sup> The researcher of this study concluded that different language versions of the same news site may construct different social realities, and that this has implications for cross-cultural understanding, diplomacy, and foreign policy.

Another study noted that the website of Al Jazeera shows greater interest in and respect for the religion, culture, traditions, and the aspirations of its audience, whereas Al Jazeera's competitors, CNN and the BBC, do not show similar respect.<sup>50</sup>

The main inquiries of this study are these: have the distinct editorial differences of the two news websites in different language versions helped to reflect the diversity of Middle Eastern women, including more progressive models? Do they concentrate on a traditional image? How can the media do justice to the modern reality of women in a particular area? Is this perception based on stereotypes and clichés or does it represent a pluralist view of women?

### **Newsworthiness and women's issues**

The constant process of adding more links and web pages to the Arabic version, which has been recurrently redesigned, and the different editorial interests of both sites, complicate the ability to analyse the different treatment by each site of a particular story related to Middle Eastern women's issues.

Currently, the main page of Aljazeera.net Arabic contains links to eight sections news, satellite channels, knowledge<sup>51</sup>, economy and business, freedom and rights<sup>52</sup>, other studies, Aljazeera.net English, and live broadcasting. The stories on the site cover the Arab world and to a lesser extent the third world, while stories on the English-only site attempt to cover the whole world (Africa, America, Asia-specific, Central Asia, Europe and Middle East). The main sections of the English site are: In Focus, Business, Sport, Programmes, Weather, and Your Views.

The main page of each site cannot show the text of each section. The priority of Al Jazeera.net Arabic is always the analysis of recent events, together with breaking news and main news. The main page of Al Jazeera.net English pays greater attention to news. However, many researchers have noted that both versions prioritise coverage of military activity and violence rather than other stories.

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<sup>48</sup> Electronic Media and Human Rights, Mohamed Hakem

<sup>49</sup> Arabic and English news coverage on Aljazeera.net, Muhammed M. Abdul-Mageed, Susan C. Herring

<sup>50</sup> Micro-longitudinal analysis of web news updates by Kutz, D., & Herring, S. C. (2005)

<sup>51</sup> This contains political analysis and views written by well known Arab intellectuals, and exclusive coverage and files conducted by Al Jazeera.

<sup>52</sup> This webpage has been added recently, to tackle human rights issues. This webpage is edited by ex-Guantanamo detainee Sami Al-Haj, who was Al Jazeera's camera man in Afghanistan before his arrest by the U.S. in 2001. He was released in May 2008.

It is rare to find a news story related to women's issues on the main page of either version, indicating that not all women's stories are ranked as news worthy, unless this news is taking place in a hot spot region where conflicts are taking place.<sup>53</sup> Palestinian women's stories have many times occupied a remarkable amount of coverage on Aljazeera.net, especially on the Arabic site.<sup>54</sup> For example, on 8th March 2009 as part of celebrating International Women's Day, Aljazeera.net English focused on the UN theme given to this day which was violence against women, while Aljazeera.net Arabic chose to talk about women's suffering in Palestine. It also chose to talk about a mother who lost her five children during the Israeli attack on Gaza on Mother's Day.

### **Loaded words**

Although Aljazeera.net gives plenty of attention to Palestinian women, both sites pay uneven and unequal treatment to women who are involved in the armed conflict there. Palestinian women who blow themselves up among Israeli citizens or soldiers are always described by loaded words such as 'martyr', or are described as 'someone who has sacrificed herself'. 'Martyr' is a word also used to describe women killed by Israeli troops. Aljazeera.net Arabic hasn't paid any attention to Israeli women's issues, and has never described them as victims of any Palestinian or other Arab attacks. For example, the story of the Israeli girls who were shot by a Jordanian border guard in 1997 was covered solely from one perspective; that of sympathy and support for the Jordanian soldier who was given a life sentence - the story of the girls who were killed and their families was totally ignored.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, Aljazeera.net English uses words like 'human bomber', 'attacker' and 'a woman who has blown herself up' to describe the Palestinians who blew themselves up. Just recently they described women and children killed during the Gaza war as 'victims', but before this Aljazeera.net English has also simply described them as 'Palestinian women who were killed or shot' - the same treatment as for the Israeli women who were killed during a Palestinian attack. This choice of words reflects the differing political alignments of the two sites regarding the handling of the ongoing Palestine- Israel conflict.<sup>56</sup>

The two sites however displayed no differences in depicting Iraqi women, who were reported as living in very wretched conditions since the U.S. invasions. Footage was showed for example, women held in Iraqi prisons without charge, women who become prostitutes in order to feed

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<sup>53</sup> The source was not specified as a particular news agency, but only the label 'agencies' was given as the source. In other cases, the source was given as 'Al Jazeera and agencies'.

The Arabic site derived stories from more diverse sources, with some stories derived exclusively for Al Jazeera.

<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that many of Al Jazeera's correspondents in Palestine are female.

<sup>55</sup> This story may have had no coverage on the English site.

<sup>56</sup> A notable number of Al Jazeera's Arabic staff are Palestinians, and the influence of their cultural background and identities may impact on their way of editing the news.

their children<sup>57</sup>, and the exclusive interview with an Iraqi woman who was raped by Iraqi police officials. This shows Aljazeera's ability to have access despite a ban on its broadcasting in Iraq.

Aljazeera.net, (both English and Arabic) use the word 'victim' to describe those killed during violent action in Iraq. They have never chosen to describe Iraqi women as 'martyrs'. Those women who carried out, or were involved in explosions were described as 'suicide bombers' on both Arabic and English sites. It is worth noting that, unlike the term 'martyr', the word 'suicide' has helped to create a negative impression of Arabic culture.

### **Different treatments, different interests**

The Al Jazeera network is proud of giving different and deeper perspectives of the nature of conflict in the Middle East, by referring to the sectarian tensions among the Sunni and Shiite for example, which many news agencies avoid due to the sensitivity and complexity of such news. However in an attempt to give a deeper analysis, the Al Jazeera websites commit intentional or unintentional critical errors which may threaten its credibility for its audience.

In footage interviewing the Iraqi Sunni woman Sabrine al-Janabi, who claimed she was raped by three Iraqi policemen, Al-Jazeera.net Arabic avoided referring to the Shia-Sunni tensions, saying the woman was raped by three soldiers belonging to Iraqi forces. The Arabic site referred to the case of the American soldiers who raped another Iraqi teenager as a background to the story. The English site was however surprisingly insistent in giving the impression that the 'raping of women' was a result of Islamic sectarian conflicts. There was no reference to the case of the U.S. soldiers.

"Al Jazeera has reported statements by a Sunni woman that she was raped by three Shia-led police force members after she was detained over the weekend" was the headline of the news item entitled "Woman accuses Iraqi police of rape". But following this setting of context, there were shocking contradictions as in a later paragraph which said: "The victim did not specify that her attackers were Shias, although they form the majority within the ranks of Baghdad police, especially within elite commando units."<sup>58</sup>

Aljazeera.net English has showed more coverage of sectarian issues by criticizing the Saudi police as well as the legal system, which is based on the Islamic Sharia law. This was the case in the treatment of the story of a teenage gang-rape victim in Saudi Arabia in 2007, who was sentenced to 200 lashes and a jail term for being alone with a man unrelated to her. This case had triggered international outrage, and was ignored totally by Al Jazeera.net Arabic. In contrast Aljazeera.net English did not simply report the story as a news item, but also tried to highlight

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<sup>57</sup> This story was on the English site, not the Arabic under the title 'Sex for survival'.

<sup>58</sup> Later Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister stated that this case was fabricated by Sunni politicians to discredit the police and the ongoing security crackdown in Baghdad.

the Saudi's strict interpretation of Sharia or Islamic law, which prohibits women from being seen publicly in the company of men other than close male relatives.

However, and for unclear reasons, both Aljazeera.net English and Arabic did not choose to broadcast particular stories coming from Saudi Arabia, such as 'Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti okays marriage for girls starting at age 10', or the sentence to lash a fifty year old woman. These stories were widely covered in other international media outlets<sup>59</sup>.

Having no correspondents or offices in Saudi Arabia can be seen as the excuse to have less coverage, especially of stories tackling women's issues. But this justification cannot be used to explain the rare and sometimes complete absence of coverage of women in other Middle Eastern countries like Oman, Bahrain, Syria, United Emirates, and Libya.

Even Qatar, where Al Jazeera is based, has a low coverage of women on Aljazeera.net. The news of the launch of a campaign by Qatar's First Lady and the wife of Qatar's sheikh, Sheikha Moza, to raise money for schools in Gaza had good coverage on the Arabic website, but was totally ignored on the English site, despite the fact that the participation and public appearance by a First Lady in a conservative oil-rich country is considered an extraordinary step which generally attracts poor media coverage.

"The image of Arab women in the West is that we are just princesses in a golden cage, with no rights, no choice, no brains and no education..." said Sheikha Sabeeka, the wife of the King of Bahrain, at a trail-blazing international conference in Bahrain. She and the First Lady of Egypt were warning of the blight of 'sexual slavery', 'trafficking', 'child exploitation', 'prostitution' and 'rape' in the Middle East<sup>60</sup>. Again Aljazeera.net did not cover the event.

The editorial selection of the news, and especially news covering women's issues, raises questions of what publishing criteria Al Jazeera follows. Does the cultural-religious sensitivity which makes Aljazeera.net distinctive lead them to tiptoe around certain issues to avoid being criticized and thus become painfully superficial, timid and state-sanctioned; or on the other hand, does this sensitivity lead them to be at worst sensational, incendiary and to border on the use of hate speech?

### **Sensationalism or reality?**

Photos have played critical roles in creating certain impressions when combined with stories published on the websites. Though the 'relevance' is an important element to link the picture with the topic, such links can be tenuous.

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<sup>59</sup> These stories were published in many international media outlets in the beginning of 2009.

<sup>60</sup> "The First Ladies of the Arab world blaze a trail for women's rights" - [The Observer](#), Sunday 8 March 2009

For example in the story, published on the Arabic site, in 25 January 2009, entitled “The female Iraqi minister reveals the plight of Iraqi female detainees”, there was no picture of any Iraqi detainee. Instead there was a picture of American soldiers, with a subtitle saying ‘Some of the attacks against the American troops were a plot as revenge for the exposure of Iraqis women to assault’. The source of the photo was a French news agency.

Al Jazeera.net Arabic employs more images per report, as it already has a large archive, especially of the Arab world. Al Jazeera.net English however, employs images from a wider variety of sources<sup>61</sup>. But on many occasions Aljazeera.net seems to show caution in the selection of pictures of women. Aljazeera.net Arabic, for example, tends not to use photos of Saudi women in news stories (despite the fact that these women may actually feature in this news<sup>62</sup>). Rather, photos of the Saudi king, the Interior minister, or a picture of a site in a Saudi city are mostly used. The English site on the other hand is more likely to use images of veiled Saudi women, with very critical subtitles such as “a Saudi woman can only have a husband or a male relative as an escort in public”, “Saudi Arabia is one of the world's most conservative societies” and “Women in Saudi Arabia must be covered from head to toe when they go out in public.” Such stories, subtitles and photos can give a strong impression that all Saudi women are unhappy and wronged.

Ironically however, one contrary story came to be published on Al Jazeera.net English, entitled “Saudi women resent media distortion”, in which Saudi women were quoted as being tired of their portrayal as deprived in the Western media. This story was published on the website in 2005, while the other stories discussed above were published in the period 2006-2007. This indicates that although there have been calls to correct the image of the Saudi women in the media, Aljazeera.net English continues to follow the Western media in emphasising negative stereotypes of Saudi woman, perhaps because Aljazeera.net English still depends mainly on Western news agencies as sources of news and photos.<sup>63</sup>

However, the situation is different with regards to the use of images of Palestinian women, who were portrayed on many occasions as brave women who can withstand the hard circumstances imposed by the Israeli siege. In addition, most photos taken by Al Jazeera reporters during and after the attack on Gaza, showed clearly the effects of the aggressive and massive Israeli military attack on Palestinian citizens, as seen in the pictures of the buried bodies of children and men under the damaged buildings, injured women, and the tired and exhausted faces of women with

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<sup>61</sup> Arabic and English news coverage on Aljazeera.net, Muhammed M. Abdul-Mageed, Susan C. Herring

<sup>62</sup> A search on the Aljazeera.net website in both Arabic and English versions revealed only 15 news items in English and 17 in Arabic published from 2003 to 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Most of the images that accompanied the stories were from Agency France-Press (AFP), Reuters, The Associated Press (AP) and the European Press photo Agency (EPA) and Al Jazeera on both the Arabic and the English sites.

tearful eyes looking at the heap of stones where their house used to be. Obviously Aljazeera.net was not afraid of being accused of sensationalism by publishing such pictures. It aimed to record what it considered a 'war crime' committed by Israel against Palestinians.

Most of the pictures coming from Iraq published on the Al Jazeera website show women wearing black dress covering their head and sometimes face, walking in streets with visibly high numbers of police or U.S. forces. Both sites may show bodies of men or children killed due to the violence taking place in Iraq or Palestine, but they rarely<sup>64</sup> use photos of the bodies of dead women.

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<sup>64</sup> On 5th April 2009 Aljazeera.net English published a photo of a Palestinian girl who was shot by Israeli police before her attempt to open fire. The photo didn't show the details of the body, but it aimed to show the machine used by the Israeli side to search for bombs on her body.

## **Conclusion**

The Al Jazeera network has paid special attention to Middle Eastern women's issues. It has had the potential to come up with stories and news tackling their rights, beliefs, states of life, struggling and sufferings, by considering women as an important element in their programme agendas and news items. However, its mission to break down the stereotypes of these women still needs more effort and focus to fairly reflect women's issues.

An assessment of the two language versions of the Al Jazeera programmes and news which deal with women's issues in the Middle East discloses a surprising number of differences, considering that both are part of the same network. These differences are not restricted to the way these topics are presented, but also expand to the way these topics are treated. This different treatment has encoded itself in the different editorial selection of news, photos, and ideological associations.

It is very important to consider that such different treatment of women's issues may lead not just to the construction of different social realities of these women for the Al Jazeera audience, but may also confuse bilingual viewers who may be led to question the objectivity and the credibility of the media network.

This different treatment is not the only obstacle that prevents Al Jazeera from providing a fair and balanced reflection of Middle Eastern women's issues. The suspension of certain women's programmes on these channels decreased the possibility of getting more exposure for the diversity of the world's women, including more progressive models.

There is no doubt that Al Jazeera has captured many stories and exposed many abuses committed against women in the Middle East. But Al Jazeera's agenda and decision to tackle a particular topic or ignore it limits its ability to give a just reflection of the state of women. For example, Al Jazeera rarely approaches controversial issues involving the Arab Gulf region, including women's issues.

Moreover, the regional nature of the coverage and its focus on hot spots and conflict areas also limits the opportunity to give more attention to voiceless women who live under the heavy burden of cultural and social misconceptions of their roles.

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