

Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression, edited by Naomi Sakr. I.B. Tauris, London. 248 pages. \$32.

REVIEWED BY KAELEN WILSON-GOLDIE

Four public service announcements promoting literacy in the rural Egyptian village of Kafr Masoud; eight women's magazines published between the Constitutional Revolution and the Pahlavi era in Iran; ten Egyptian melodramas constructing the woman-as-nation metaphor between the Arab-Israeli conflict and the politics of Islamic fundamentalism; the struggle for women's right to vote in Kuwait between liberal and religious newspapers; seven Lebanese journalists in conversation about their craft. In eleven chapters, *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression* spans a region stretching from Morocco to Iran and material including feature films, government-sponsored television spots, newspapers, internet penetration, non-governmental organizations, documentaries produced by media institutes and the television industry. The diversity of Sakr's book is impressive, but the depth less so. If this had been a collection of compelling journalistic accounts by one writer – snapshots of women working around the region, for example – it might have been insightful as a series of stories linked by a common voice and tone. But as an academic study, it lacks focus. There is neither the critical framework nor the comparative analysis to hold so many subjects and so many countries together. Had media been defined only as newspapers or television or film, to cite just three possible examples, the book might have been able to express the complexities of its subject more fully and in historical perspective. As it is, there is too little connecting the chapters to each other.

The question motivating *Women and Media in the Middle East* is whether or not women are benefiting from rapid changes to the media landscape, which is not quite the same as asking whether or not they are gaining power through self-expression. The answer to either question, on the evidence of the essays assembled here, would have to be yes and no. But Sakr's book is too broad to make firm conclusions. Her introduction considers various approaches to "women-media interaction", but it does so through a litany of statistics that are often more random than illuminating (citing research on women in the workplace in Flanders, for example). Published in 2004, *Women and the Media in the Middle East* is also, at this point and in certain instances, out of date, particularly Deborah L. Wheeler's chapter "Blessings and Curses: Women and the Internet Revolution in the Arab World", which relies on statistics from 2002 to assess the rate of internet penetration among women in the Arab states compared to the rest of the world. There is no mention of Egyptian or Iraqi or Moroccan bloggers, no reference to the phenomenon of Facebook or Twitter or other social networking tools. Rather than grappling with Web 2.0, Wheeler's chapter remains in the first generation of internet usage.

The best chapters are those that sharpen their focus to case studies or clearly delineated themes. Sahar Khamis's contribution, "Multiple Literacies, Multiple Identities: Egyptian Rural Women's Readings of Televised Literacy Campaigns" considers the different reactions among 30 village wives and mothers to four "public awareness messages" created by the Egyptian government to promote literacy. The first message, "a literate mother is a better mother", shows a mother giving her sick child the wrong medicine because she cannot read the label on the bottle. The second message, "literacy helps people live better lives", shows a woman who takes her letters to her neighbors to read being exploited and blackmailed by them. The third message, "educated children should help in educating their illiterate parents", shows children helping their father learn how to read and write.

The fourth message, titled “it is possible for illiterate married women and mothers to overcome illiteracy if they have strong will and determination”, shows a woman juggling her responsibilities to attend classes. Khamis carefully analyzes how the women she met in Kafr Masoud responded to the literacy campaign, and how their reactions tied in with the history of the village. It is a fascinating and unusual account, marred only by the fact that the author never indicates when her study was conducted, or when the government-sponsored television spots were produced.

Benaz Somiry-Batrawi’s “Echoes: Gender and Media Challenges in Palestine” offers an account of the Institute of Modern Media, which was formed at Al-Quds University by Daoub Kuttub in 1996. A groundbreaking initiative, the Institute created a Gender and Media Department and launched its own television station, in addition to producing, among other programs and series, a collection of six 12- to 17-minute documentaries on the everyday lives of different role models, women and men, well known or not well known. The documentaries delved into education, equal rights, financing small businesses through micro-credit, oral heritage, the role of women in Palestinian history, and the achievements of Palestinian women as political activists. According to Somiry-Batrawi, the series is still being used by women’s organizations “to promote women’s participation in social and political life and to gain recognition for their contribution to the life of their country”. But during the incursion in the spring of 2002, the Institute for Modern Media was ransacked by Israeli soldiers, using sledgehammers to smash \$200,000 worth of archives and equipment.

Haya al-Mughni and Mary Ann Tétreault’s chapter, “Engagement in the Public Sphere: Women and the Press in Kuwait”, offers an eye-opening account of how the merchant class in Kuwait created a liberal newspaper culture but then colluded with conservatives to put down a movement for women’s suffrage in the 1990s. In “Power, NGOs and Lebanese Television: A Case Study of Al-Manar TV and the Hezbollah Women’s Association”, Victoria Firmo-Fontan narrates a sharp, incisive history of the Lebanese television industry, and critiques the manner in which it serves to reassert rather than question the sectarian political system and the status quo. Lina Khatib’s analysis of women as national emblems in Egyptian cinema, “The Orient and its Others”, is excellent, but it belongs in a book about the aesthetics and politics of film. The final chapter, “Straddling Cultures: Arab Women Journalists at Home and Abroad”, by Magda Abu-Fadil, profiles seven Lebanese female reporters. It is insightful, but as the endpoint of a book that begins with Sakr’s onslaught of statistics, it is somewhat disheartening to read observations such as generic and vague as “women have to fight ten times harder than men”.

The overall weakness of Sakr’s book is that media is defined too broadly and stretched too thin. Had the book been more tightly focused on the news media, for example, it might have tackled important questions about the roles, rights and responsibilities of the press, newspapers and journalists in society. For example, is the press meant to be a necessary check on political power? Are newspapers a public trust? Is journalism the fourth estate? These questions are never adequately raised in *Women and the Media in the Middle East*.

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