

Women and the Media in the Arab World

The term, "media", plural of "medium", is used to indicate publications or broadcasts used for communication, information and publicity. They may include a large number of literary forms such as poetry, drama, fiction, essays, research and the like, but, strictly speaking, when we discuss the media nowadays we particularly mean three powerful, modern, representative arts: journalism, radio, cinema of television.

To what extent have women in the Arab countries and elsewhere utilized these powerful tools as a means of self-expression and of publicity for their cause?

Journalism, the oldest of the three, was practiced by Western women in the 19th century. The first women's magazine, "Women's Voice" was founded in France in 1849. Since that time, women's journalistic activity has progressed in Europe and America. It produced, during the thirties and forties, outstanding figures like Genevieve Tabouis, who was distinguished as foreign correspondent and political journalist.

In the Arab countries, women journalists appeared in the Period of Awakening, in the late 19th and the early twentieth century. The earliest pioneer was Zainab Fawwaz (born 1845), a Lebanese from South Lebanon, who emigrated to Egypt where she acquired a self-taught culture, was able to correspond with papers and magazines and published poems, stories, articles and an anthology containing biographies of famous women from East and West. Marianna Marrash from Aleppo, Syria, was another pioneer who created a literary salon for intellectuals: men and women, corresponded with papers and published a collection of poems. In the early 19th century, the first well-known Arabic magazine for women was founded in 1903. It was called "Majallat-us-Sayyidat Wal-Banat" (The Magazine for Ladies and Young Girls). The founder was a Lebanese, Rose Antoun, but the magazine was published in Alexandria, Egypt, where it was supported by the emigrant Lebanese intellectuals and their Egyptian, friends and colleagues. Other women's magazines which obtained recognition were: "Fatat-e-sh-Sharq" (The Oriental Girl), founded by Labeebah Hashem, 1906, in Lebanon; "Al-Aroos" (The Bride), in Damascus by Marie Ajami; "Al-Khidr" (The Purdah), by Afeefa Saab, in Lebanon, 1919, "Al-Mara'atu-l-Jadeedah" (The New Woman), by Julia Tomeh Dimashquyyeh, in Beirut, 1921; "Minerva", by Marie Yanni, Beirut 1923.

Between 1892 and 1955, there appeared in the Arab World about 40 women's magazines, scattered in Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and other cities. Most of them were suspended during the first or the second World War, probably for financial reasons.

Now their number is highly limited, but they have expanded into new areas in the Gulf countries and Al-Maghreb (North Africa). Some of these magazines are published in Western cities containing a large number of Arab emigrants, such as London, where one can read the Arabic magazine "Sayyidati" (My Lady). Another magazine published abroad for women, by an Arab woman, is "Ash-Sharqiyyah-Elle" (The Oriental Woman-twinning Elle).

Compared to radio and television as a means of communication, journalism seems to be the most accessible art to women, probably because it is the oldest of the three and the one in which they have had more experience. This profession has produced women veterans like Aminah Es-Said, who has practiced it for 43 years. She was the first woman to be elected member of the Egyptian Press Syndicate's Executive Board. In the early stage of her career, she was member of the staff of Dar-el-Hilal, a publishing house created by the Lebanese scholar Jirji Zaidan; now she is president of its executive board and editor-in-chief of "Hawwa" (Eve), the most widely read women's magazine in Egypt and though she has reached the age of retirement, she has not given up her work but keeps writing and publishing at the same time. Women journalists in Egypt form 25 % of the members of the Press Syndicate in which they dominate the elections every year.

We have sporadic information about women journalists in other Arab countries. At the seminar of Arab women journalists held in Beirut, February 1981, it was possible to meet Rashida Nifer, the Tunisian delegate who, in view of her seven years of successful journalism, had been elected president of the Journalists' Syndicate in her country. In that seminar, the UNESCO delegate, Margaret Cababan, declared that "Women's concerns were poorly covered in all information media. In Lebanon for example, information on women during the last 40 years did not exceed 4% of the total".

Another seminar organized in Tunis, November 1983, by the Union of Tunisian Women, in conjunction with the UNESCO, and attended by delegates from various Arab countries, Ms. Dardana Masmoudi, an executive committee member of the Union of Tunisian Women gave the following information about Arab women's participation in the media: "They participate as journalists, producers in radio and television, authors of children's books and school books. In Lebanon and Egypt, they form 20% of media workers; in Tunis, 10%. As to women's image in the media, it is still traditional." The same idea is presented by Dr. Ilham Kallab Bsar in her book about the image of the Lebanese women in school books, published by IWSAW, Monograph 3, 1983.

In Lebanon, women represent 25% of the whole body of journalists, according to a 1980 census. They generally belong to the highly educated class, participate in the production of French, Arabic and English papers and magazines, but they rarely occupy leading positions in the field. Occasionally their mastery of foreign languages allows them to correspond with foreign papers as, for example, Nora Boustany, correspondent of the Washington Post and of the Financial Times. Another distinguished journalist is Sorayya Antonius, daughter of the author of "The Arab Awakening". She is a Palestinian of Lebanese origin, who took charge of the American University of Beirut magazine, "The Middle East Forum" in the sixties, and now occupies a leading position in the field of European journalism. The reasons that prevent women's promotion may be their small number in the profession, their lack of persistence and the traditionalism of employers; yet the improved status of working women seems to evolve in their favor. Denise Ammoun, executive secretary at l'Orient-le-Jour daily paper, declares that: "Women who have taken journalism as a career include the married and the unmarried. All of them have proved to be so competent that we may assert it won't be long before they reach the upper echelons in the profession." Then she adds: "Our demands are the same as those stated by the journalists' syndicate: first, requiring every candidate to have the necessary qualifications; second, giving employees the right to social security which would encourage their persistence in, and adherence to their work."

In radio and television, a large number of women are employed as broadcasters and interviewers. The news broadcasts are usually prepared by men while women are usually in charge of the regular "Women's Program" which has given three outstanding figures: Edvick Shayboub who carried out her work for 30 years, Raymonde Angelopoulo who for several years has presented interesting weekly programs about women, social problems, etc. and Charlotte Wazen el-Khoury who has worked as broadcaster for the last 15 years. By a consensus organized at Télé-Liban, she was proclaimed the best broadcaster. Charlotte is distinguished by her reserve, her natural gracefulness, her microphonic voice and her tasteful attire.

In the cinematographic field, women have produced a number of star actors like Faten Hamama of Egypt, Nidal Ashkar, Hind Abillama and Elsie Fernaineh of Lebanon and other successful actors from other Arab countries, but in screen play writing, film direction and production, there are only a few women pioneers like Jacelyne Saad of Lebanon, Laila Abu Saif, Egyptian

writer and film producer (Al-Raida 12, 1980 and 38, 1986); Nadia Hamza, first film director in Egypt (Al-Raida, 29, 1986). In Kuwait, we may mention Fatima Hussein, an active feminist, pioneer writer and prominent figure in the media, a member of the Consultative Council for the media since 1977. In 1985, she published a book called "Nuqta" (a point), which presents her ideas regarding the liberation of women, the roles played by the media, by education, legislation, traditions and norms, in guiding and in effecting or preventing change in women's status (Al-Raida 36, 1986).

In Saudi Arabia, a country where women are not allowed to appear in public without the veil, Salwa Shaker breaks with tradition to become the first female public figure on Saudi television. A multi-talented woman who sings, writes for children, acts in radio and television serials, she also presents a family program on TV with special emphasis on health question. Together with her husband, a radio announcer himself, she presents a popular, varied radio program. (Al-Raida 27-28, 1984).

Finally, the meager information we have been able to have about this wide topic requires us to give it more concern in our future issues. An important medium which should attract our attention is that of women's studies or research activities regarding women in the Arab World. We know of the existence of centers or institutes for these studies in Beirut, Lebanon (IWSAW), in Al-Azhar University, Egypt; in the Arab League, "Arab Women's Committee, Department of Social Development, for the Eradication of Illiteracy". We also know of the existence of women's unions in all Arab countries and that many of these unions give a share of their efforts to publication. The numerous Arab or local universities in the Arab World have lately been encouraging research on women's status and problems as a requirement for the preparation of university degrees. To the already mentioned media, we may add Arab women's international conferences and their recently created associations for the promotion of the social sciences in the Middle East. But the treatment of all these topics would lead us to deviate from the main one which requires us to concentrate on the three important media: journalism, radio and television.

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