

Questionnaire for Women

Film and Video Makers

1. Does the fact that you are a woman affect your perceptions of issues you are dealing with in film or video?
2. Is your work in film or video committed to women's issues?
3. Do you believe in the existence of a women's cinema that has distinguished characteristics?

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May Masri

1. Being a woman has certainly affected my choice and understanding of issues. The characters in my films are mostly women who are in a personal state of rebellion and are actively striving to fulfill their aims. Issues include women who have struggled to educate themselves, to raise their children on their own and to succeed in their careers as women in a traditional society. Other films focus on women's initiative to organize themselves in the absence of their men (imprisoned, kidnapped) and to play a crucial role in civil resistance (*intifada*, South Lebanon, Palestine). Other issues include sex education for school girls and gender inequality.

2. I don't consider my work to be exclusively committed to women's issues in a conscious or militant way. Out of a total of nine films I directed or produced, three deal exclusively with women, five have a strong female presence, and only one focuses mostly on male characters. I am instinctively drawn to the experiences of women. I believe that women are more open about their feelings, emotions and weaknesses which gives them credibility and emphasizes their humanity. This allows an audience to believe and identify with these women.

3. I don't believe in the existence of a Women's cinema. However, I think that there are similarities of patterns which can be found in the films made by women: a predominance of women main characters, focus on intimacy, details, auto-biographical touches. Women's films rarely focus on violence, crime or spectacular special effects. They are usually human stories which strive to be sensitive and thought-provoking - and of course, are usually made on much smaller budgets because of the historical bias of Hollywood and mainstream movie industry towards male directors and producers.

Azza El-Hassan

1. I find it very odd that I should be asked this question. From the day I was born I was a female, and I have never, not even for one day, experienced being a male. Thus my daily experiences of growing up and interacting with the society around me were based on the fact that I was first a girl and now a woman. So of course it is natural that this should affect my perception of life and my perception of issues which I deal with in my work. I would say that if it doesn't then I am not honest with myself or with my work. I would simply be lying or at least pretending to be not who I am if I did not look at matters from a woman's perspective.

2. No, my work is committed to myself and I am a woman who wishes to talk about her life and her surroundings. Many people who see my work would say that it is committed to women and I would say of course it is since it is committed to myself in the first place. For example, in my short documentary "Title Deed from Moses" which dealt with Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, most of the characters in the film are women. The grand issue in the film is the settlements, but as a woman it is easier for me to interact and enter the space of *Bedouin* women, for example, rather than the space of *Bedouin* men. I identify with women better than I identify with men and as a woman I am much more accepted by *Bedouin* women. In the film this meant that women took the platform and spoke about the effect of settlements on their lives. This is unusual in films which deal with politics since it is usually considered to be a world of men.

In "Sinbad is She," I look at how a story created by a woman was appropriated by men; and how women today are unable to identify themselves with their own story. So in this documentary women's issues

are taken to the front. In the film we are told a story about a young girl who had acid thrown at her face because she wore trousers. I think this could be the nightmare of any woman who lives in inhuman surroundings. This is my fear and theirs; I am committed to expressing my fears.

3. There is a saying that says "A big house teaches you how to walk." Now do not tell me that this saying was first uttered by a man. Women are the ones who stay at home and they are talking about their own surroundings. This is not to say that a woman's world is more exciting than a man's (although in a man made cinema we are put under the impression that a woman's space like *Al-Hamam* is exotic and exciting). Probably not, since men are the ones who are supposed to experience the external world which has more variety. I am just saying that since it is a different world, a different being, it must tell a different story. This is only natural.

Even if a woman works and experiences the external world this does not make her genderless; she still interacts with what's around her as a woman. I think if a woman film director is conscious of her being, her camera movement would defiantly express that. Do you think a heterosexual woman would film a man or a woman in the same way a man does?

I think sometimes one sees women film directors treating their subjects as if they themselves are men, but I think this is because they have been trained to see the world from the man's perspective. I think that they are not yet conscious of their own gaze.

In response to the first and second questions I spoke about the storyteller who should be telling the story from his/her own perspective. As a result the kind of story that is told depends on who is telling it. Why is it that we accept that there is an urban and a rural story and that each has its own special characteristic and cannot acknowledge that there are stories, "films" told by women and others told by men and hence, with different characteristics and traits?

Nesrine Khodr

1. Recently I had an experience that made me realize that there was no clear cut boundary between what I consider a woman's perceptions and a man's. I co-directed a 30mm documentary/fiction entitled "Ghiwaya" with Ghassan Salhab, that attempted to show how some women live their power to seduce, and whether their awareness of possessing a power that they can use (or abuse) for any reason affects their perception of themselves and of their lives. It

was an interesting experience for first, theoretically, there was a woman's and a man's perspective behind the camera and second, the film dealt with women only. However, there was never an issue-from the conception to the final cut of the film-of a woman/man perception, and the end result was very much a blending of two peoples' efforts to make one coherent end-product. The fact of my being a woman did not affect my perceptions of issues when making a film, but I would like to add in this context that this is not done consciously since the issue of gender is a very multi-layered one - but this is a subject that needs further discussion perhaps some other time.

2. No, not really.

3. I have seldom seen films directed by women. I know there exist many videos in Lebanon made by women but I haven't seen enough to judge whether there is such a current, though I doubt its existence, and I do not think there should be a conscious effort to create a woman's cinema.

Nadine El-Khoury

1. Of course it does. I believe that the personality of each director/writer affects the perception of issues he or she is dealing with. Being a woman is part of me, and it affects my sensitivity, my personality and my perception of the issues I'm dealing with.

2. My work is not committed to women's issues though they are part of my work. As a woman, and as a writer/director, and being aware of the influence film or video has on people, I certainly do not allow myself to create characters or situations that may reinforce some ideologies women are fighting against.

3. No I don't. Some women may create a certain cinema with distinguished characteristics, but it won't be a "women's cinema." Men and women have many things in common and I believe that if someone were to define what "women's cinema" is, we will find that many men directors or writers would perfectly fit into this category.

Rindala Kodaih

1. I think that being a woman helps me dive into the depths of my inner personality in order to discover and express sensitive points nonexistent or unconsciously hidden in a man's psyche. It has nothing to do with POSITIVE or NEGATIVE points of view. When a woman deals with an issue, instinctively, she chooses the "heart's" way to pass over her message. Unlike the man, who would approach the same prob-

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lem or theme in quite a different way : the “mind’s” way.

2. Not really. I always try to talk about human problems, about social problems as well as political and national problems. For example, in my short-movie video (diploma) titled *Al Aaricha*, that won the second student prize in the Beirut Film Festival in 1997, I evoked a social problem and dealt with it in a very human and rather feminine way. The subject matter is the refugees from South Lebanon in Beirut and their devastating efforts to reconstruct their lives. But I chose to talk about two old people and their relation to each other (especially the woman: her caring attitude and strong devotion to her husband). On the other hand, in my 16mm short film, titled “The music box”, I dealt with one day in the life of a lonely taxi driver from the South who drives along Hamra street in Beirut. The problems that faced him during that day were just a simple push for his hidden feelings and emotions to come to the surface and reveal to us the sensitivity of this man’s nature.

3. Surely, as I have said before, women have their own way of expression. As we can see all around the world, the women’s filmmaking industry is getting bigger and bigger. It has distinguished characteristics that make it special, powerful and praiseworthy. The examples are numerous: from the USA, Jane Campion with “The Piano”; “The Portrait of a Lady”; Nora Ephron with “Sleepless in Seattle”; Jodie Foster with “Little Men”; in Lebanon, Jocelyne Saab with *Kan yama kan Beirut*; Randa Chahal with *Shashat Al-Raml, Moutahadirat* and many others. There are also many male directors whose main subjects are women (for example: Ingmar Bergman or Pedro Almodovar), but they deal with psychological deviations in women as a result of their inability to understand women’s mysterious nature.

Joana Hadjithomas

1. Being a woman is an individual characteristic, and as such intimately inherent to any woman individual, no matter what her professional field is. As a woman, my perceptions of issues have undoubtedly been affected, whether in the professional field or more generally in my personal or relational exchanges. It is clear that my approach to life as a woman is certainly different from that of a man, particularly that female sensitivity, intuition and understanding of situations differs from men and is reflected in their works. Having said that, I have had to fight hard as a woman in all aspects of life, both in the Arab world and in other countries I have been to. As such, I do

not consider this issue particular to the Arab world. The problem is the same everywhere in my opinion. Simply, the way it appears differs from place to place, according to culture and habits. It is not so much the woman’s approach to the world that is at stake, but rather the way they are perceived worldwide.

2. I do not only make it a point to fight for women’s issues in my work, but also in everyday aspects of my life. I personally believe there exists a constant and latent racism directed against women, and this is the very issue I try to address on a daily basis. I am presently working on a scenario which figures a central female character dealing with all the contradictions and battles inherent and pertinent to the shared female condition.

3. I do not like to consider women’s cinema to be parallel or intrinsically different from men’s cinema. As such, I do not even approve a cinema that can only exist as woman’s cinema. It’s another kind of ghetto I refuse to belong to. I believe in authors’ cinema, masculine or feminine, composed of individuals with something to express. In order to be, I do not feel I should belong to any group that justifies my work or my existence. My definition of myself lies elsewhere.

Mona Hatoum

1. The fact that I am a woman affects my perception of the whole world. One can only speak from one’s own experience which shapes one’s perception of the world.

2. My work in film and video touches on women’s issues as well as issues of war, exile, and displacement.

3. I believe that there is a women’s cinema that articulates women’s issues and has distinguished characteristics from mainstream Hollywood cinema. But this doesn’t mean that every film made by a woman belongs to this category.


Najwa Najjar

1. There are many issues which affect my perceptions in film and video, one of which is my being a woman. But I am also a Palestinian and living under occupation in a region which is still underdeveloped and undemocratic. These are issues I cannot overlook.

2. Again, I cannot but include women’s issues in my work, but it is not the only issue I am committed to. To me it is equally important as a woman filmmaker to deal with other issues. That by itself is a statement

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on women and the problems she must contend with being female and a filmmaker in the Arab World in particular.

3. Yes. In general I tend to find that cinema by women filmmakers has a particular sensitivity to which I can relate, generally of course. There seems to be certain characteristics in women's cinema which I find distinctive:

a. The woman character is usually in the foreground, not reduced to a secondary role (to the male character), and her role is an active role.

b. The primary characters and secondary characters seem to be many-sided and more rounded.

c. The story in general tends to be more cohesive in terms of structure and storyline. There are enough emotional qualities that give a deeper dimension to the story.

Nabeeha Lotfi

1. If it has an effect, I am not aware of it. I look at things from a human perception with a very wide outlook. I love life, and I am willing to fight against any conception that tries to limit the chances of living for human beings. In that light women are still in the phase of fighting for these chances, so I fight for that.

2. In the last ten years nearly all the films I made were devoted to women's issues both in the sense of demanding a fair deal for women and revealing the importance of her role in development once given the chance.

3. How do these distinguished characteristics show on the screen? and what are they? sensitivity? emotions? sweetness? appeal to women's rights and status? All these traits could apply to men. The thing is not who makes the film (man or woman), it is how? It is the re-establishment of roles in society to make it more balanced.

Viola Shafik

1. Yes, because I tend to tell my stories or to report from a female perspective and stress on female characters and female life-conditions.

2. Yes, absolutely. Most of my films deal either directly with female issues such as social roles or reproductive health, or touch on women at least indirectly. I am interested in what women have to say; therefore, I center my documentaries on women.

3. Not formally, but on the thematic level. I do not

develop a so called female film language, but I choose topics related to women.

Raghida Skaff

1. In my opinion being a woman does not affect my job in the audio-visual domain (films, videos). Today, we are aware that women have their own ideas, their own mind, as well as their own independent thinking which is distinct from men. Women have proved to be rational, conscious, and responsible like men, even better. Probably, the fact that I am a woman makes me perceive things with more sensitivity.

2. In my profession, I work on denouncing social and human injustices, as well as on accentuating certain humanitarian problems. Therefore, women are evidently present in my work since they are often the victims of these injustices.

3. No, I do not like the label "feminist" (feminist literature, feminist cinema). On the contrary, I think that such a label widens the male/female division. One thing is for sure, when a woman works in an artistic domain (be it cinema or any other form), she has a different sensitivity, which gives character to her work.

Zeina Osman

1. I find it very difficult to separate my being female from anything else about me. Class, nationality, etc., influence our perceptions. I am familiar with issues that bother or affect women in my environment, class and denomination, and of course that would tint my interests and perceptions. That said, I do often find it difficult to deal with male characters or male viewpoints in my films. They always come out as purposefully one dimensional or very mysterious.

2. I don't believe it is a cause that I must address particularly in my films because I cannot separate women's issues from any other worthy issue. But I am drawn to topics that depict women, and their lives and emotions. I am not sure that could be called a commitment.

3. My short answer to the question would be no. It presumes a type of segregation that I find very difficult to understand. However, I believe that there is a certain genre that speaks to women - or is understood by women - more than it is by men. Women and their issues have become very central these days, causing directors of both sexes to delve into and explore these issues.

*I am
interested
in what
women
have to
say*

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