

Portrayal of Women

Dima Dabbous-Sensenig



By Dima Dabbous-Sensenig
Lecturer, Media Studies, Arts and Communication
Lebanese American University

Women are either represented as loving mothers, obedient daughters, or as belly-dancers and prostitutes.

Generally, women are portrayed in the media as being submissive, passive, dependent, inferior, and subservient to men. Cross-cultural research, moreover, has found great similarities in these portrayals between western industrialized countries, eastern communist (or ex-communist) countries, and southern developing countries: women are overall underrepresented in the media, in production as well as in content.

However, such generalizations, though justified, can gloss over important differences in representation, especially when a country like Lebanon is concerned. Reliant on Western (mostly American) imported programming and enjoying a wide range of communication technologies, including satellite television, to receive predominantly American and Egyptian programming, Lebanese viewers are exposed to dual messages as far as women portrayed in the media are concerned:

1. Whether on commercial national television or on American satellite television, Lebanese viewers are exposed to a 'Western' representation of women where women are beautiful ornaments (à la James Bond Girls), threatening femmes fatales, but also and increasingly modern, assertive, liberated, and especially in control of their bodies and sexuality.
2. Women in Arab (mostly) Egyptian fiction are, by contrast, more submissive, passive, and dependent. Most importantly, their portrayal is restricted in range: women are either represented as loving mothers, obedient daughters, or as belly-dancers and prostitutes. Even when an Arab woman is portrayed as emancipated and assertive, with a career of her own, she is never so without staying virtuous and keeping her hymen intact.

This difference in representation can be related to the difference in the socio-cultural contexts of the film or program production. While Western societies have been sexually revolutionized since the 1960's, with, as Helen Brown wrote, 'sex [being] a powerful weapon for a single woman in getting what she wants in life', and where sexual knowledge and practice has replaced virginity or sexual innocence, the same cannot be said about Arab societies. These societies still retain a strongly conservative character, where sex, especially female pre-marital sex, is still unacceptable, a sin still punishable by law or by society itself in several Arab countries, including Lebanon, where religious values and laws are still dominant.

Ideally, the varied, often contradictory media portrayal of women in Lebanon should be seen as reflecting a variety of



in the Media

social attitudes and behaviors and of providing viewers with a more complex, differential representation of women. The media is considered to reflect reality not when it singles out one reality and neglects another, but when it provides us with images of men, women, and various groups in all their complexities and differences. Any one-sided representation, whether entirely positive or entirely negative, can only mean that the media are mis-representing reality and are engaged in stereotyping humanity.

However, the 'mixed', if not contradictory representation of women in Lebanese media can be quite alarming for viewers in a Lebanese context. Lebanon is, on the one hand, the most open of all Arab countries to Western cultural products, and on the other hand, its criminal and civil laws are just as restricting to women (here I am referring specifically to the crimes of honor and adultery which punish women, often by death, and largely exonerate men). Thus, while Western films that represent a sexually liberated womanhood are banned altogether in other Arab countries, Lebanon is relatively permissive with such portrayals, with censorship only cutting out scenes of complete nudity or non-heterosexual love. As a result, we are in a society whose media products, mostly imported or modeled after Western products (Lebanese soaps literally copying the plot, mood, and values of the Mexican tele-novelas are a case in point), are entirely out of sync with the society we live in and the laws that govern that society. Our media cannot promote sexual promiscuity and liberation for women as long as we have laws to punish such behavior for women. There is an alarming gap in the case of Lebanon between the messages that our youths, especially female youths, are exposed to and encouraged to adopt in films and advertising alike, and the society and laws that condemn sexual liberation. What is to be done in this case?

Since the beginning of the conference, there has been much discussion of the role that media workers can play in order to change the stereotypical and generally negative representation of women in the media: most solutions were seen to lie in the hands of responsible journalists and media workers. If more women participated in cultural production, it is said, and if female and male media workers alike were trained to become aware of women's issues and improve the representation of women in the media, then the problem of under-representation of women can be solved, at least to some considerable extent. However, these solutions are oblivious to the following points:

1. First, equal opportunity for women in the media, at least on its own, has proved incapable of improving the way women

were represented in the media. In Lebanon, 80% of journalism students are female and 25.5% of major employees in Lebanese television stations are women (of whom 17.9 are in a decision-making position). Despite this considerable female presence in the field, research in Lebanon and elsewhere has shown that female media workers continue to work in a male environment, are subjected to male power, and often perpetuate male values. In short, as one media critic put it, 'when one stresses the role of individuals manning the system, one is tempted to await a Messiah who will come over and help transform the system'.

2. This emphasis on individuals (broadcasters in this case) and their integrity, as opposed to structures, in fact ignores the various pressures affecting broadcasting choices and outputs, and consequently prevents them from seeking the appropriate solutions to the problem of women in the media. Two such pressures are ownership and advertising. I will start with the ownership factor, especially that the comparatively 'free' character of media in Lebanon has been emphasized repeatedly. One is naturally tempted, when looking at the media landscape in Lebanon, to equate the significant number of different media outlets with pluralism and freedom of expression. But a closer examination of the patterns of ownership and control in Lebanon reveals a different picture: while it is true that we have a relatively high number of broadcast media, these are exclusively owned by politicians, their relatives, and business partners in other ventures (bankers, contractors, industrialists, lawyers, etc.). Moreover, the dividing of the 'media cake' in Lebanon reflects the power division along confessional lines in the country. Each of the licensed broadcast media is associated with one of the major confessional groups or political leaders in the country.

As a result, these media, though they apparently differ in their output and thus convey a climate of freedom and plurality unique among other Arab countries, are deceptively free and democratic. It has been said that 'freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one'. In Lebanon freedom of the broadcast media belongs to the politico-economic elite associated with one major religious community or another. Each medium has become a mouthpiece for one of the powerful factions and is free to disseminate views particular to that faction without believing in freedom of speech (other than for themselves). Therefore, thinking that we are dealing with free media in a free country is a misconception: we have different media with each championing on its own its own freedom of speech. These media exist not because freedom of expression is consecrated in the Lebanese Constitution but

because the multi-confessional government of the day was able to distribute as many broadcast licenses as there were powerful or significant confessional groups (non-powerful political, economic, or confessional groups were naturally denied license and excluded from public debate).

While patterns of ownership account for the existence of different political orientations in broadcast media and a pseudo-mood of political freedom, advertising is probably the major influence on non-political programming. Lebanese broadcast media abound with programming and advertising that heavily promote a certain image of womanhood at the expense of others. The emphasis on the female body, beauty, and sexuality, even though it exists in contradiction to the country's laws and social norms, is a direct influence of advertising which offers consumer happiness and satisfaction with a beauty product or a fashionable item that can be bought in the market. This interconnectedness between the media image of an essentially sexual/physical womanhood and the advertising world is crucial to understanding why women are represented mostly as sexual objects in our media. Expecting that commercial broadcasters can be properly trained and counted on to change that image is asking them simply to bite the hand that feeds them.

Having explained some of the major constraints that affect our media output, I suggest the following multi-faceted approach to redress the imbalance in the representation of women:

1. There should be an increased awareness among broadcasters, male and female, through workshops and training sessions, of the existing imbalance in the representation of women in the media and the need and ways to improve it. Efforts should not concentrate on broadcasters alone, though, for the reasons mentioned above.
2. Spreading awareness on women's issues should extend to the society at large, starting with children at school. Pressure groups should work towards eradicating (the still existing) sexist education at the school level by changing the textbooks that stereotype women, and working towards the implementation of feminist studies curricula or at least

the introduction of feminist studies courses in journalism programs. Needless to say, these courses remain non-existent in a country boasting not less than six different universities offering journalism and communication degrees (the Lebanese American University is the exception here).

3. Pressure from outside the broadcast media can be more effective and free of the internal organizational and financial pressures that affect media output. Media watch



groups and other lobbying groups should be set up to monitor media output and organize efforts with women and other human rights organizations to enforce anti-discriminatory media policies and the implementation of any similar existing laws.

4. Finally, though not directly related to the media, but equally pressing is the issue of the existing sexist laws. Lebanese law, like similar - Arab laws, strongly discriminates against women and denies them equal rights with men, especially where their sexuality or body is concerned (abortion law, crimes of adultery, crimes of honor, etc.). If we are asking our media to reflect reality truthfully, we cannot blame them when they send us back a picture as conflictual as our own reality.