

Arab Women Journalists Slam Palestine/Iraq Sieges, Urge Skills Upgrade

Magda Abu-Fadil*

Beirut, November 2002 — Arab women journalists meeting in Jordan this fall slammed the siege laid on Arab reporters in Palestine and Iraq and called for training programs to upgrade practitioners' technical skills and optimization of the Arab Women Media Center's (AWMC) website, notably through an online newsletter in Arabic and English.

"Participants hailed the struggle, courage and steadfastness of Palestinian women and journalists against Israeli aggression and denounced continued American aggression against the Iraqi people," read the Petra Declaration at the end of the conference.

It also praised Syrian women's struggle in the occupied Golan Heights and Lebanese women's resistance in the Sheba'a Farms area.

The four-day conference organized by the Amman-based AWMC, under the patronage of Princess Basma bint Talal, drew 35 participants from various countries, except the occupied Palestinian territories, where Israeli forces had barred journalists from attending.

Another 55 Jordanian women journalists took part in the event October 24-27, 2002 that included sessions held in the historic city of Petra and a visit to the Red Sea port of Aqaba.

"We're proud of what Arab women journalists have accomplished to date but the road ahead is still long as there are many challenges and pressing issues to be tackled," said Princess Basma, the AWMC's honorary chairwoman, at the opening ceremony. "They include a clear media vision to deal with women's issues far from seasonal upheavals and hesitance."

She also praised Arab women journalists' efforts to advance the cause by denouncing stereotyping and by focusing on issues such as politics, economics, culture, and the featuring of women excelling in these domains.

Princess Basma noted that the greatest challenge was overcoming the distorted portrayal of Arab and Muslim women in Western media, which she said required organized and sustained efforts.

"You, my sisters, are best qualified to convey the true image of self-confident Arab women and to take part in correcting this distorted picture of our Arab and Islamic society," she said.

In her own welcoming address, AWMC director Mahasen Al Emam said democracy and respect for basic human rights, as well as guarantees for human beings to exercise freedom of expression, were no longer a choice, if Arabs sought the recognition they deserved among the world's nations.

"Freedom is at the core of the profession of journalism," she added. "When we speak of press freedom, we're not just talking of a professional issue or a privilege. What counts is citizens' right to obtain true, objective and impartial media service."

Al Emam should know. She was the recipient of the 2002 Knight International Press Fellowship Award, to honor her outstanding work under difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances.

Al Emam was the first female editor-in-chief of a Jordanian newspaper in 1994, two decades after breaking into the male-dominated field, and has stood out for her defiance of government restrictions and for covering the Iran-Iraq war on her own when her newspaper's management refused to send her.

She established the AWMC, a non-governmental organization, in 1999 to help train women journalists, provide networking opportunities and organize gatherings geared towards empowering these media professionals.

Al Emam's efforts have resulted in two conferences for Arab women journalists and a series of training

Conference Report

workshops all aimed at improving the lot of those in print, broadcast and online media.

Papers and presentations during the second conference in October 2002 dealt with press laws in the Arab world and their impact on women, various obstacles faced by the media, the role of women journalists in advocating human rights, war reporting, online journalism and the media's role under occupation.

The first paper from Lebanon, presented by this writer, underlined the importance of online journalism and development of the Arab media.

"We cannot treat journalism and professionalism in the 21st Century the same way we did media in the 20th. Technologies have changed and we're overwhelmed with volume, so our strategies must be modified as well to manage the flood," wrote the author.

She urged publishers to use the online versions of their papers and magazines as supplements to their print editions, not just copies of them, and to be more attractive to younger consumers.

The author discussed Google's new news service and the Columbia Newsblaster prototype, which let computers select from top stories and provide links to content – bypassing human editors – or the use of artificial intelligence to actually write the news.

Other options in online journalism include web logs (or blogs) – sites allowing journalists to publish their stories when constrained by their own media. Last, but not least, is research and reporting with the Internet and the design of websites. Full text of the paper is available on <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/200210/jordan1.html>.

Another speaker from Lebanon, LBCI TV reporter and correspondent Tania Mehanna, moved the audience with her graphic presentation and videotape of her coverage of demining in south Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal from the region in 2000 and the disastrous effects of mines on the lives of villagers there.

"Man's suffering from wars isn't limited to one country and perhaps the area that has affected me the most in the past two years was covering the war in Pakistan and Afghanistan for about three months," she said as the tape showing thousands of refugees escaping the ravages of the conflict rolled behind her.

Her live broadcasts, risking limb and life, showed the human tragedy that perhaps only a woman could portray so poignantly. She also ventured into Taliban-held territory, risked being a target of unexploded shells,

risked the theft of her crew's equipment and perhaps assault by Al-Qaida sympathizers.

Turning to history, Hanan Ballah Hassan, the secretary general of the Sudanese Women Journalists' Society (SWJS), briefed participants on the evolution of print and broadcast media in her country.

"A key element of women's presence in the press was the creation of the first SWJS in 2001 aimed at upgrading members' skills and providing them with training opportunities, as well as a forum for networking with other local and Arab organizations," she said.

Egypt's Sonia Dabbous, who is assistant editor of Akhbar Al Yom newspaper and teaches journalism at the American University in Cairo, presented a case study of women in the media in her country, past, present and future.

Looking to the future, Dabbous said that technology and globalization offered special opportunities for women. "There is power where women, news and the Internet come together."

She also said that women in the media viewed the Internet as a new professional outlet to establish their professional credibility.

Three participants from Syria discussed women's presence in the mostly official media, with speaker Hanan Al Fil describing her experience and struggles as director of Radio Aleppo, which offers programs for residents of that key city.

Raghda Al Ahmad, another Syrian delegate, discussed coverage of honor crimes and how women like her had fought to eradicate them by presenting rational arguments and establishing lines of communication with religious leaders who may condone such crimes.

Iraq's Majd Al Hashemi's paper was a tirade against what she called the US media war on her country.

"No country in peace or war, except Iraq, has been exposed to such an ongoing media assault since the Gulf War and in the run-up to another military strike," she said.

Other speakers at the conference came from Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United States of America.

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