

# Arab Women and the Media

By Samira Aghacy

Society does everything it can to drum into her head the fact that she is only a body, and that special care must be taken of everything that concerns this purely physical shell. Newspapers, magazines and advertisements, when addressing themselves to woman, speak to her as flesh covered by a layer of skin that requires constant massaging with different kinds of creams, and as lips that have to be painted an appropriate hue. (Nawal El-Saadawi, p. 75)

Despite changes emerging in contemporary society regarding women's role and contributions, the images of women represented in the media have not reflected these changes sufficiently enough. Women have generally been presented within the restrictive mold of domesticity and subservience reinforcing traditional roles and behaviors where a woman is defined in relation to men who see her within the framework of marital, maternal and sexual roles.

In varying degrees, the media present a highly stereotypical image of women and fail to give priority to women's issues. Television programs, for instance, emphasize the rigid image of woman as decorative object and as a domesticated and passive being dependent on man for financial and emotional support. It reiterates and sustains the prevailing sex-role division as both fitting and logical.

In newspapers and magazines, the items commanding the woman's pages are food, society news, entertainment, parties and fashion which are perceived as women's chief and principal interests. The traditional concepts of news do not include women as active participants and effective forces in society. In the media, particularly in television news, only female public figures and victims are portrayed.

Nevertheless, being female has recently become an asset in the hiring though not in the promotion of women since higher positions remain an exclusively male domain. If the feminization of various sectors of the media have not ensured non-stereotyped treatment of women, the increasing number of females in the media will, at least, provide a better chance for the eventual emergence of new images of women.

Because of the alignment of authority with masculinity, women's access to the top functions in the media is hampered, causing them to remain mere subordinates with very little power. This why the need arises for making those in control of the media aware of the need for a balanced work force that includes both sexes.

The time has come for the media to adopt a more active role of creator rather than reflector of culture by challenging and interrogating traditional sex roles and portraying women in a wide variety of roles rather than within the constraints of limited male-imposed roles.

The file in this issue includes the proceedings of the regional conference on "Gender and Communication Policy" in the Middle East and North Africa which was jointly organized in Beirut by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World and which took place at the Lebanese American University (November 9 - November 12, 1999). Owing to space restrictions, we have selected only a limited number of papers. The remaining papers, however, are published in summary. Among the papers included are: Teresita Hermano's presentation on the formulation of gender-sensitive communication policy; Mariz Tadros' paper on the reporting of rape in the Egyptian press; Dima Dabbous-Sensenig's work on Lebanese viewers and repercussions of their exposure to dual messages, Lebanese and Western; Magda Abu Fadil's paper on the globalization of the media; May Elian's paper which provides statistics on the hiring of males and females in the Lebanese media; Maria del Nevo's report on the international day of monitoring the representation of women on TV, radio and in newspapers which took place on February 1, 2000; and stereotypical representations of women in United Arab Emirates Mass Media by Amina Khamiz Al-Dhaheri. The file also includes an unpublished thesis "Family Relations and Physical Encounters in Arab Soap Operas" by Dina Toufic Hakim. This issue of *Al-Raida* also includes a special feature "Asmahan's Secrets: Art, Gender and Cultural Diputations" by Sherifa Zuhur on the life and achievements of Asmahan, the Syrian/Egyptian actress and singer, and two book reviews by Lynn Maalouf.