

"Mujeres que desvían" en los medios de comunicación árabes de lengua inglesa: una comparación de las representaciones en Iraq, Arabia Saudita y Catar

Summary:

Introduction. Methodology. Online Newspapers: A Context. "Deviant" Women in Arab News, Iraqi News and Al-Jazeera. Depiction of Women Involved in Violence. Socially-involved Women: A Mitigated Coverage. Spaces of Feminist Confrontations. Concluding Thoughts

Resumen:

Los relatos más comunes sobre las mujeres en el mundo árabe son de sumisión y victimización, especialmente en los medios de comunicación occidentales. Esto lleva a interrogarnos a saber si los medios de comunicación árabes están dando una visión más representativa de las mujeres consideradas "desviadas" de sus roles de género. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar, desde una perspectiva de género, las representaciones de las mujeres "desviadas", después del 9/11, en tres periódicos árabes en línea: Al-Jazeera, Arab News e Iraqi News. Se trata de fomentar un debate con relación a la agencia de las mujeres y sus diversas formas de activismo político en los Estudios Árabes Feministas de los Medios de Comunicación.

Abstract:

The most common narratives regarding women in the Arab world is one of submission and victimisation, especially in the Western media. This raises the question of whether or not the Arab media are giving a more representative account of women considered to be "deviant" from their expected social gender roles. The objective of this article is to analyse, from a gender perspective, the representations of "deviant" women after the events of 9/11 in three online Arab English newspapers: Al-Jazeera English, Arab News and Iraqi News. The ultimate goal is to foment a debate regarding women agency and political activism for Feminist Arab Media Studies.

Palabras claves: mujeres "desviadas", representaciones de género, Al-Jazeera, Arab News, Iraqi News

Key words: "deviant" women, gender representations, Al-Jazeera, Arab News, Iraqi News

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“Deviant” women in English Arab Media: comparing representation in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Qatar¹

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Introduction

When Al-Jazeera English² (AJE) chooses “Shifting gear: Saudi women defy driving ban” as the title of an article regarding the prohibition of women driving in Saudi Arabia, it positions itself in favour of the struggle of Saudi women but also reveals a certain “masculinisation” of their struggle by using terms like “shifting gear” as if the women were “defying” something apparently unfeminine for the Saudi society. The question of Muslim/Arab women agency has been at the centre stage of international attention since the events of 9/11, especially with regards to women. Although these are debatable categories, it is difficult to deny the virulent discussions, both in the media and academia that began after 9/11 and with the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. These events strongly shaped the idea of Arab/Muslim women under narratives of submission and victimisation, particularly in Western³ media, but also in large fringes of the academia (Brunner, Sjobergy Gentry, 2007).

Misconceptions about Arab women are coupled with an almost incapacity to give an account of politically active women or even women implicated in violence both in the Arab and Western media. The information we receive daily concerns direct and symbolic violence against women, positioning them in a constant status of victimisation. Obviously, there is still an indispensable need to denounce these different forms of violence and address the problems of inequality among genders. However, the path to gender equality also requires the deconstruction of gender stereotypes that confines women to passive roles of victims. In this regard, authors like Brunner (2007) have made some relevant critiques concerning the portrayal of Muslim/Arab women in the Western media and academia, but few studies have focused on the depiction of these women in Arab media.

Apart from the book of Al-Malki and Kaufer, *Arab Women in Arab News: Old Stereotypes and New Media* (2012), there have been too few attempts of understanding women's depiction in the Arab media. Articles on the topic are

¹ Artículo de reflexión: perspectiva crítica sobre una investigación.

² We consider AJE as an Arab-English newspaper because of its provenance, Qatar, and its high impact in the Middle East and in promoting Arab culture and point of view. As well, we considered it under this label as it clearly shows a strong ability to cover news from the Arab world. We do not analyse the coverage of Al-Jazeera America in this article.

³ We use the term “Western” to qualify the hegemonic thinking and literature produced mainly in North America and Western Europe to distinguish it from the one produced in the Muslim/Arab world. It is by no means an attempt of dividing the academia world along the lines of a “clash of civilization” as referred to by Huntington (1993).

concentrated on mass media like AJE or Al-Arabiya, lacking comparative analyses with local media channels. There has been an explosion of the literature on the topic following the Arab Revolts, where women used social media to protest against Arab regimes. A more comprehensive approach to femininity was not permitted; therefore, there is a need to investigate the portrayal of Arab women (and women in general) by Arab media as these media still spread "[s]tereotypical images of women as weak, docile and subservient" (Allam, 2008: 1) and consequently, contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality. Additionally, the depiction of women that are acting "outside" from what Arab societies are expecting from femininity has almost never been addressed. It has been recognised that Western media failed in offering a balanced portrayal of Arab women, but it is very difficult to measure the capacity of Arab media to break these stereotypes (Al-Ariqi, 2009: 8) above all, regarding "deviant" women.

Thus, the objective of this article is to analyse and problematize, from a gender perspective, the representations of "deviant" women in three online Arab English newspapers after the events of 9/11. As Terry and Urla (1995) argue, the notion of "deviance" is largely Western as it systematically suggests a dichotomy with the notion of "normalcy". However, it should be considered that it takes "many forms in relation to particular historical and political contexts". Further, based on a study of the 19th century, the authors are also proposing that the "female bodies are perceived to be inherently deviant in relation to a male norm of the human body" (1995, pp. 1 y 13). Consequently, in this article we understand "deviant" women as the ones who are not following the acquired gender stereotypes, or normative femininity, in their societies. The focus is on women's depiction, who are either extensively socially involved (like politicians and activists), who have entered a sphere "normally" perceived as masculine (soldiers, female suicide bombers, specific jobs) or who are classified as being outside the sexual norms (lesbians and transgenders).

This research questions women representations in the Arab world, presenting a possibility to explore how media are particularly shaping gender roles in society, but also how media can "be a site for negotiating changes" (Sakr, 2004, p. 4). Thus, the article's ultimate goal is to raise questions on women's portrayal within their societies and foment a debate on their agency. In order to do so, we first present

our methodology; secondly, we address the theoretical background; thirdly, we present the results of our investigation on the three English Arab media we previously selected; and finally, we conclude with the recommendations concerning future research on the topic.

1. Methodology

In this article we analyse three English Arab online newspapers that are reaching a wide audience in various countries: Arab News (based in Saudi Arabia), AJE (based in Qatar) and Iraqi News (based in Bahrain but covering Iraqi territory). These newspapers have been chosen because (1) they target an international audience, being the voice of the Arab world for English speakers; (2) they permit us to approach the phenomenon in three different regions and pursue a comparative analysis and; (3) they all represent regions with different relationships towards gender roles, contributing to the study of women's place in the Arab media and societies.

Our methodology consists of a qualitative analysis of discourses regarding online articles as we consider that discourses and texts in global media are having an active influence on social practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008) and gender constructions. We compared these analyses with the literature on "deviant" women, trying to depict the intertwinement between media and political situations. We chose our sample on the basis of selected keywords accordingly to our definition of "deviant" women (ex.: "female suicide bombers", "lesbians", "women politicians", etc). In total, we analysed 235 online articles in the three online media sources published between 9/11 events to 2014: 60 articles for both Arab News and AJE and 115 for Iraqi News. The reason why we scrutinised more articles in Iraqi News is related to the difference on the news coverage of this website in comparison to the other ones. Iraqi News does not engage in deep analysis and concentrates in communicating facts: we needed to examine almost double the amount of articles in order to portray the "deviant" women representations. In contrast, AJE and Arab News were offering more debates on women issues and the articles were considerably longer.

Since our methodology was based on a keywords search, and because of space/time limitations, we could not analyse the totality of articles engaging on women topics: we chose to concentrate on the analytical categories we



previously selected to conduct our investigation and we systematised the information in an Excel table where we could carry out a cross-reading analysis of the discourses found. We are aware of our language limitation: we could not compare our results with Arabic newspapers and underscore the difference in information processing. However, we tried to counter-balance this by adopting a comparative analysis both between the online newspapers and within the investigation we carried out on the literature.

2. Online Newspapers: A Context

This section aims at briefly presenting the historical context of the emergence of the different online Arab-English newspapers analysed: (1) Iraqi News, (2) Arab News and (3) AJE. According to its web page, Iraqi News “is a private English-language online newspaper that covers a range of Iraqi issues, including business, politics, security, social issues, culture, entertainment and sport” (IN, 2014). Iraqi News claims transparency and refuses any link with political groups, prioritising “neutral reporting” (IN, 2014). However, the news coverage regarding women in Iraq is still presenting difficulties, largely due to the newspaper's context of emergence and recognising the coverage difficulties in post-war Iraq (IN, 2014).

In fact, the whole media apparatus in Iraq has been largely influenced by the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and the recent war. With NATO's occupation since 2003, “the country's political, social and media systems changed dramatically” (Al-Rawi & Gunter, 2013, p. 43). Media has been polarised based on sectarian interests even if censorship has been removed with the fall of the regime (Al-Rawi, 2010, p. 225). Iraqi News benefited from the growing presence of online media, even if still confronted with political issues that considerably affect the coverage of women issues.

Iraqi News presents inconsistencies referring to English language editing and the redaction of opinion columns in comparison to AJE and Arab News. The capacity of the newspaper to criticise hegemonic views on women is limited, largely due to the media situation in Iraq. While it clearly states its intentions of objectivity in the coverage of the Middle East issues, it mostly concentrates on Iraq, especially regarding women's issues. Although Iraqi News is less interested in

addressing comparative analyses with international news (as is the case with AJE and Arab News and their alliances with news agencies), it is a good point of departure to understand the underlying dynamics of the women considered “socially deviant” from the norms in the Iraqi society.

The website home page is mainly dominated by topics associated with men and politics: women are rarely making the headlines and when they are, it is mostly as victims of violence or because they occupy certain political positions in the government. The website in itself is less developed than the two other online media: English mistakes are common and the articles are less refined and mostly descriptive, impacting on the considerations we could make on “deviant” women coverage. While “gender” is an accepted and widely used concept in Arab News and AJE, Iraqi News still conceptualises gender under the term “sex”. Finally, there are only five journalists that are actively reporting on women's issues: among them, the only woman is Layla Mohammed and she is the one that usually deepens the analysis and furnishes more critical articles.

For what concerns Arab News, “Saudi Arabia's first English-language newspaper”, its printed version was “founded in 1975 by Hisham and Mohammed Ali Hafiz” in Jeddah (AN, 2014) and, nowadays, its website covers a wide range of issues and is enjoying a “growing popularity”, presenting a Saudi Arabian perspective to English readers as a part of an editorial politics drawing upon various columnists. It also has a wider regional impact than Iraqi News as it “can be found on newsstands throughout the Middle East” (AN, 2014). The idea of establishing Arab News came after the brief Arab-Israeli war of 1973. Officially, Arab News is not under the control of the government; it is a “professional and independent” (Al-Faisal, 2010) newspaper; however, it has always been under the domination of the Saudi royal family. Currently, the newspaper's owner is Turki bin Salman, nephew of Nayef bin Abdulaziz the ex-deputy minister who passed away in 2012 (Mouline, 2010).

Arab News reflects the policy of the Kingdom's administration in every arena, including conservative views on women's issues. Sharia law has a strong and direct influence on Saudis' lives; however Islamic regulations are more focused on women's dress, jobs, education and seclusion from men. Femininity and masculinity are strictly associated with citizens'

identity and two separate societies exist in Saudi Arabia: a male and female one. Saudi men are responsible for their families' livelihood, are the heads of their families, and are guardians, drivers and take up the vast majority of senior positions in the public and private sectors. Women's responsibilities are still limited to social, religious and cultural spheres.

Finally, Al-Jazeera Arabic (AJA) was founded in 1996, and in 2006, the platform of AJE was established to counterbalance the hegemony of western satellite media (Al-Ariqi, 2009, p. 12; Figenschou, 2011, p. 238). AJE claims its international orientation, "especially from underreported regions", counting more than 60 bureaus worldwide and broadcasting across 130 countries (2012), reaching "around 300 million households worldwide" (Al-Ariqi, 2009, p. 13). For this same reason, AJE publishes international agencies articles that generally present more stereotypes regarding women while AJE columnists' work is well-developed and critical, fomenting deeper debates on different matters.

AJE is a more powerful media network than Iraqi News or Arab News: it emerged with the satellite media arrival in the Arab world and it "marked a change in the flow of information" (Mellor, 2005, p. 1) in this region. The overall strength of AJE resides in its promotion of debates and controversies in countries where conservative forces are still tackling civil society empowerment. We included AJE in our analysis for this reason: the channel can be of a strong influence regarding issues of gender, especially concerning women "deviating" from the gendered norms of their society.

The objective of Al-Jazeera is to give voice to the marginalised, and above all, to the "global South" as it tries to counterweight the flow of information from the North (Figenschou, 2011, pp. 249-50). This is precisely interesting in our investigation since we aim to portray these women that are falling outside the "acceptability" of their gender in their society: AJE was expected to answer these necessities as the network's "motto 'the view and the counter view' opened the door for their often controversial views to be aired" (Al-Ariqi, 2009, p. 14) and therefore, to have an *existence* within Arabic societies.

3. "Deviant" Women in Arab News, Iraqi News and Al-Jazeera

The media are a reflection of social and historical conditions that shape political contexts and,

since 9/11, the high level of "orientalisation" of the Muslim/Arab female body in the West has been largely criticised, as they are represented as weak and victims of patriarchy (Al-Malki & Kaufer, 2009, p. 113-14). It seems that these misperceptions on women are also prominent in the Arab world as the focus is also on their bodies instead of emphasizing "stories about their professional abilities or expertise" (Rahbani, 2010, p. 9). Contrarily, some stipulate that media like AJE are challenging these misrepresentations by favouring a growing number of women with access to Internet and online debates regarding gender issues by confronting the usual emphasis on women's bodies (Warf y Vincent, 2009, p. 89; Obeidat, 2002, p. 1).

Generally, in opposition to their male counterparts, women are still portrayed as victims; the stories of violence prevail over the stories of women empowerment, professional successes (Rahbani, 2010, p. 12) or even, of women's implication in scenarios of violence. Globally, media tend to perpetuate these stereotyped views on women, preventing us from a deeper examination of women's social engagement, mostly portraying them as "deviant" from their assigned gender roles or completely making them invisible.

There is an intrinsic problem when addressing "deviant" women: it is a slippery field as we risk legitimising uncommon practices for women and being accused of supporting their violence, for example in the case of women engaged in terrorism or armed forces. Even Feminist Theory has had difficulties in integrating controversial experiences of women "deviating" from the gender norms (West, 2005, p. 2).

In this article, we adopted a gender perspective: we consider it is a necessary tool to overcome the daily gender dichotomies that inhabit us as human beings and researchers in the social science field (Forastelli, 2007, p. 52). From a theoretical perspective, we align with Butler as we consider that gender is performative: it is therefore not bounded by a stable identity, "rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). It allows us to go deeper in the contemplation of Arab media representations of "deviant" women: they are not intrinsically "deviant", but society has come to attribute them a "deviant" function as through iteration, we learn what it is to be a normal woman. Each



society establishes, through repetition of acts, what the acceptable gender categories are and what falls outside the norms. It reflects the complexity of analysing “deviant” women but also of considering the power of the frames and the importance of the language as a builder of meaning (Ahall, 2011, pp. 15-16). Truly, both in the West and in the Arab world, media are powerful entities that frame what we understand as “normal” or “deviant”: the different means of getting information shape our vision of gender subordination but also of contemporary violence as society, which has definitely failed in explaining women's engagement in violence (Sjoberg y Gentry, 2007). The following section aims at analysing the depiction made by the selected Arab media with regards to “deviant” women in their societies and in global politics. What are the “acceptable” gender behaviours in the Arab world for women and what is the emerging role of Arab online media on the matter?

More than giving answers, our research wishes to interrogate the representations of “deviant” women as to open different venues of discussion on the topic in the Arab world, offering us insight on how the Internet is changing our societies as the “newer technology is beginning to affect social and gender relations” (Loubna, 2006: 51), but also the different geographies and socio-political landscapes of the Arab world. The regions concerned by the media selected surely vary widely for the situation of human rights, especially on women's issues: while Iraq has been marked by a recent war, Saudi Arabia still faces conservatism regarding the development of civil society, while Qatar affronts similar challenges but definitely tries to give it a progressive turn. Though women coverage is neither static nor uniform, we propose a comparative analysis of the image projected by the three media on “deviant” and socially engaged women. During our analysis, we could trace three different trends which are exposed in the three next part of this section: (1) the important place allocated to women involved in violence; (2) the depiction of socially-involved women and (3) some spaces of feminist confrontations with regards to heteronormativity.

4.1 Depiction of Women Involved in Violence

Iraqi News coverage on women involved in violence is marked by two tendencies. First, there is an explicit portrayal of women as victims

of violence: with the keywords “violent women”, all the results were related to violence against women, enhancing the victim narrative. This is not a trend particular to this newspaper; as Gámez Fuentes and Núñez Puente express, the victim of gender violence appears as an image of consumerism in most media nowadays (2013, 148). Second, and representative of the armed conflict context, Iraqi News focuses largely on female suicide bombers (FSB): there was only one descriptive article related to a woman teacher that caused the death of a student (Amin, 2010).

The keyword search of FSB gave us six pages of results, which means much more than usual for this website while with “male suicide bombers” we obtained merely one page of results. This might signify, on the one hand, that there is a need to “name” women's violence and deviance or, on the other hand that men's violence has been normalized through long-term socially internalized patterns while women's violence is seen as an aberration, as a sign that war has come to its paroxysm.

Even though Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) are mostly focusing on the representation of “deviant” women in Western media, their analyses are substantial for the depiction of FSB in Iraqi News. These two authors expose how women's violence attracts more attention than men's violence and how we usually resort to all sorts of narratives in order to explain women's violence as it does not fit into any of our gender conceptions of what a woman should and should not do (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007, pp. 2-5). In an attempt to explain female terrorism, Iraqi News also reproduces these gender stereotypes and, does not investigate the root causes of women's violence, merely repeating the information provided by generals or officials, generally over quoting them.

While not limited to Iraqi News, we found a tendency of reifying Iraqi women under the banner of victims. As Gentry maintains, the common perception of Iraqi women is one of “apolitical victims of exploitation and manipulation” (2011, p. 187) and Iraqi News presents some examples of these misconceptions on women agency. The article by Layla Mohammed is an example: she interviewed a FSB called Rania, presenting one of the most complete texts on the topic. She portrays Rania as a victim of patriarchy, and more specifically a victim of her 10-year senior husband. While Mohammed is the only author trying to portray women's violence, she does it in a way the reader can only deduce

that Rania is a mere victim of a society that produces violent and controlling men: "a 20-year-old dark-skinned woman, has always dreamed of becoming a physician, but instead she ended up as the first female suicide bomber in Diala [...]" (2008). Another article follows the widow narrative elaborated by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) and victimises women as it assumes that there is an eminent danger for widows to become terrorists or prostitutes, once more reiterating victimhood and gender stereotypes.

We also found the motherhood narrative identified by Ahall (2011, p. 42): as motherhood is "something we do not question" as we conceive the female body as the bearer of life, it is difficult to conceive it as a life taker as is the case with FSB. Iraqi News makes no exception within the global media and frequently associated the horror of suicide attacks with the incoherence of a mother committing the deed. In one particular article, the reference to motherhood is connected to what is socially accepted for a woman in Iraq (and globally): "She wore a black abaya and, like many of the other women, was walking with a child, in her case a young girl [...]" (Hussein, 2009). In this quote, the normalcy for women is to bear children, which is incompatible with the perpetration of violent action. However, there is no explanation of the deed and no contextualization, which results in misperception with regards to political agency while not analysing correctly the conditions under which a woman may take or be forced to take the decision to commit suicide bombing.

The easiest way to explain women's violence is also to categorise them as absolutely "deviant" from the norm, as psychologically inapt and therefore, easy to manipulate. This has been used a lot by the Western media, and later disclaimed, as was the case in 2008 when a woman who blew herself up was considered to have Down syndrome (Howard, 2008; Bloom, 2011, p. 219). Iraqi News reporters cover FSB events with the same kind of affirmations: "A mentally-retarded female suicide bomber" (Berwani, 2008) or "[m]ost of these female suicide bombers are either mentally-disabled or bereaved women who have lost their loved ones" (Mohammed, 2008). The problem of female terrorism is associated to emotions and irrationality as it is easier to assume that the woman is "deviant" from her gender than to suppose any agency or resilience in political actions. While emotions are important factors in the war context, it is dangerous to reduce FSB acts to irrationality without taking the whole socio-political context into account.

Arab News does not address the problematic of women involved in violence as Iraqi News: there was only one short report about a female bomber in Pakistan, and a few other articles depicting the phenomenon in Afghanistan and Iraq. Only two articles in the entire online version of Arab News focus on women's participation in the Al-Qaeda organization. The first article published in 2003 is based on an email interview with Um Osama, the leader of the women Mujahedeen of Al-Qaeda. In this article, Um Osama indicates the role of women in Al-Qaeda as bombers and fighters. She mentions: "Besides martyr operations, our mission is to provide logistical support to the Mujahedeen and intelligence on the hypocrites wanted by the Mujahedeen" (AN, 2003). The second article, titled "Saudi women played a marginal role in deviant group's activities" (Al-Sulami, 2010), and highlights the women doing marginal tasks, such as logistical matters, helping wanted militants, travelling with militants, fundraising for Al-Qaeda's widows and media relations officers.

Even in AJE, the keywords "violent women" did not explicitly give us many results: the problem of domestic violence and above all rape in India was monopolising the media attention on this topic. This confirms that there is a saturation of news portraying women as victims of gender violence (Gámez Fuentes & Núñez Puente, 2013, p. 148), while less is done to comprehend their active role in society. However, it is worth mentioning that AJE, compared to the two other media outlets, is publicly taking part in promoting the campaigns against gender-based violence, as was the case for India and Saudi Arabia.

With that being said, since the events of 9/11, AJE has been creating more and more assertive views on women's political actions in armed resistance. Contrary to what was expected, we got only 4 pages of results on the topic of FSB, which is low for AJE. When we searched for "women terrorists" and "women in terrorism" we both obtained 25 pages of results but very few were really depicting women's political violence. Since most of the articles on FSB come from international news agencies, the narratives that were identified by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) as well as Brunner (2007) in Western Media are repeated in AJE. It was the case on the coverage of Chechen and Dagestani FSB with the recurrent use of the expression "Black Widow" to categorise them (AJE, 2010). Such labelling only portrays these women as



monstrous and abject, “othering” North Caucasus women, demonising and dehumanising Muslim women (Sjoberg y Gentry, 2007, p. 103). However, AJE has sought to give another portrayal of FSB, especially Palestinian ones, by promoting programmes like “Everywoman” or “Riz Khan” where the analysis goes in depth, and experts are invited in order to understand the political reasons behind women's actuation, while deconstructing the myths behind their violence (AJE, 2008). “Everywoman”⁴ offered a more comprehensive approach to women's suicidal violence by insisting on the necessity of involving them in peace processes and by interviewing directly some of the women willing to commit the deed and: “[...] there is something special about sacrificing yourself [...] by blowing yourself up you become one with the land [...] building a bridge with the future generation which will liberate Jerusalem” (AJE, 2008).

AJE also addresses controversial themes on female combatants, as is the case with American women who got their right to fight in ground combat or with the reclamation of self-defence combat for women. On the topic, AJE shows high abilities in describing women political/military agency while also representing the victims by demonstrating women's resilience in conflicts times. Nevertheless, most of the time, women are portrayed as masculinised because they are deviating from the gender norms (Sjoberg y Gentry, 2008, p. 14), and AJE even proves that women are characterising themselves as such quoting a Syrian female combatant: “I do not feel like a woman whatsoever when I am here” (Atassi, 2013). AJE also makes a relevant portrayal of political engagement of female fighters in Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger (Grey, 2007), even if the aberration of the journalist covering the topic evidenced the general difficulty of understanding why a woman would decide to sacrifice herself, largely due to our understanding of women as intrinsically peaceful.

The approach of AJE with relation to combat and fighting is comprehensive, mostly portraying women as political agents and resilient in the face of violence. However, the question of female combatants in the Arab world is not clearly addressed, apart from some articles on Syria where the violence of women is presented as a civil war effect: “mothers, wives and daughters are increasingly becoming weapons of war on the frontline of the battle

between government forces and the opposition” (AJE, 2013). The strength of this article, and the video related, is that it makes one of the rare portrayals within the mainstream media of women implicated in the Syrian conflict and the battle engaged on their bodies. The video is quite polarised on the topic of women engagement, offering a fervent debate between three women experts and activists of the Syrian conflicts, showing the intention of AJE to expose marginalised points of view.

Generally, the language of AJE is appropriate regarding the coverage of politically and military engaged women, even if sometimes the newspaper employs terminology as “mother of revolution” or “peace mom” to explain women's political engagement, which tends to reduce women agency to their role as mothers. Fortunately, these discourses are balanced with many reports on the implication of women in Arab Revolts, including interviews with women on the street to see how they struggle for their rights.

4.2 Socially-involved Women: A Mitigated Coverage

Iraqi News gives a voice to women that are actively defending a non-conventional position in society, above all, to human rights activists. There is a firm difference between the articles redacted by Mohammed as she tries to give voice to feminist activists and female politicians. In general, the articles are mostly quoting women activists, not really deeply analysing their political acts *per se*. Most of the articles seem to argue that we should “not limit the image of women in typical roles” (Mohammed, 2012) and that the role of women in politics should be promoted. However, lots of articles are using the expression “female elements” (Mohammed, 2012a) to portray women in some of the roles considered “deviant”, suggesting a certain objectification of women. It confirms the complexity of perceptions on women's insertion in “men's business” showing that the women entering politics or armed forces are still considered to be the “other”, the “strange elements” within a dominated masculine world.

One recurrent element in various articles was that women that “deviate” from their gender roles in Iraqi society are associated with land and national pride. As we argued regarding FSB, motherhood functions as a “symbol of

⁴ The programme was stopped without any clear reason.

heteronormativity", and therefore, represents the "natural femininity" (Ahall, 2011, p. 29), most of the narratives on women are based on a direct association between women, politics and the land. The feminine body is directly associated to the nation and nationalism because the mother's body is connected to the perpetuation of the nation (Qazi, 2011, p. 32; Agra Romero, 2012, p. 66). The woman is therefore not fully recognised for her achievements, but for what she can provide for the nation: quoting the Women Committee supervisor, one article stresses the necessity of supporting women to "highlight the Iraqi artistic, cultural heritage and civilization" (Mohammed, 2012b).

Equally, articles assume that women should be given a space in politics because of their "sacrifices for Iraq" (Hussein, 2013) or because "women's honor is the honor of all Iraqis" (Hussein, 2012). As Banner argues, women's bodies are often territories of battle during war and this leads to national efforts in promoting women's emancipation in post-war society as proof of a nation's progress (2009). Consequently, women are accepted in certain jobs as "Iraqi women proved to be trustworthy" (Amin, 2009): their femininity is an obstacle to their role in society, but since they have "proved" themselves in a male world, they have been accorded some public space.

Iraqi News raises a number of alarming issues such as honour killings (Amin, 2010a) which seems to be a preoccupying question for the newspaper, the dilemma of polygamy (Hussein, 2012a) and the compelling problem of women prisoner abuses (Hussein, 2012). However, these topics are superficially addressed while it would have been interesting to investigate Iraqi women's resilience and agency on the matter.

Iraqi News tries to give voice to women in Iraq, although in a very embryonic manner to perceive it as a changing force, especially considering that the general public might not read in English and does not necessarily have Internet access on a regular basis. It surely confronts at some point the notion of women normalcy for Iraqi society, denouncing the inaction of the government on topics like women prisoners abuses. However, Iraqi News does not present itself as an emerging force for Iraqi women: the online newspaper largely sticks to the facts and does not provide a space for women and men to discuss gender issues. The portrayal of "deviant" women would be more accurate if the

newspaper would hire more female journalists: although it is still difficult in post-war Iraq for them, "they have managed to get new opportunities and enjoy new freedoms of speech" (Al-Rawi, 2010, p. 223).

The conceptualisation of "socially-involved" women is relative following the country and the normativity with regards to femininity. Arab News shows that politics, driving cars and working in the media are "deviant" work for Saudi women because, despite their activism, they are still denied a social space. Several articles have been published in Arab News on the topic of driving women in Saudi Arabia. The newspaper tries to give voice to both sides: the ones who support lifting the ban on women driving, and the "activists" who are "opposed to women getting behind the wheel" (Khan, 2013). Arab News is not officially against women's driving, however in the reports they published, the Saudi women's efforts to lift the ban on driving are portrayed as very pale. These three articles' titles express this trend: "Driving alone can't define Saudi women's progress" (Al-Mulhim, 2013), "Activists oppose women's getting behind the wheel" (Khan, 2013), "Women driving campaign fizzles out" (Al-Bargi y Ali, 2013). In the first article, Al-Mulhim (2013) indicates many women's achievements in the Kingdom and adds that: "Yes, women in the Kingdom are not allowed to drive. I have a gut feeling that it is just a matter of time when the world will witness women drivers wading through traffic jams in the Kingdom".

In the second article, Arab News reported on several "activists" going against the recommendation of three women members of the Shoura Council over the lifting of the ban on driving for women. Furthermore, one day after the campaign launched by Saudi women that drove on the streets near their houses on October 26, 2013, Arab News used the expression "fizzles out" and reported on only a few women's initiatives.

It seems that Arab News is a liberal newspaper in Saudi Arabia playing a positive role in women's participation in the media; some of the articles we analysed in our investigation had been written by women and some women also commented on the articles even though it is reserved to English speakers. Women's rights are discussed even by male journalists, as is the case with Ghafour when addressing the use of social media, particularly Twitter. He notes that thousands of Saudi women use social media and fight for their rights. He gives an example of the



part-time female teachers' campaign to get full-time jobs, resulting in the government giving permanent jobs to 10,000 teachers (2013).

After 9/11, there was strong criticism toward the Saudi Arabian government, one of the USA's closest allies in the Middle East, because fifteen of nineteen hijackers had Saudi nationality. Thus, the improvement of women's status and creating democratic societies in the Middle East and Islamic countries was put on the agenda of their governments. The Saudi government is also working on reforms, including women's issues. Arab News is a voice of the Saudi government, especially when it publishes in English and targets foreign readers, highlighting the government's reformation proposals and achievements: it warily talks about women's issues and still has a conservative and prudent approach toward "deviant" women.

AJE is definitely transcending the typical "victimisation" of women: compared to Arab News and Iraqi News, it presents women as much more resilient and proactive in social change, giving voice to women that are breaking the typical role associated with their gender. AJE offers multiple and diverse critiques, and censorship is not really felt, mostly due to its international reach, allowing a certain "defiance" on women's issues.

As women activists are affected by different constraints concerning their gender roles following their cultures, it must be recognised that AJE tries to portray their diverse points of view, but above all, the context of emergence of such activism. For instance, "Witness Al-Jazeera" published a video reporting on Maryam Bibi, a Pakistani woman engaged in girls' right to education in Tribal areas, depicting her as a strong communitarian leader daring social norms. AJE also discusses women occupying uncommon jobs and defying traditional views on women's social participation. As a matter of example, we can quote the reporting of a woman wedding videographer in Morocco who is fighting against her conservative family that prohibits her from working (AJE, 2013a). This article challenges the gender dynamics in Morocco, showing the social barriers to her career development while affirming her struggles in the midst of conservatism.

Equally, AJE does not fear addressing uncommon roles for women, even if considered "deviant". It goes as far as criticising some Arab regimes, taking a strong position against their legislation, as is the case of the ban on driving in

Saudi Arabia. It explicitly appeals to other governments to stop supporting the Saudi regime as a means of pressure (Naar, 2013). These tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia are currently deteriorating which is partially due to the polemical coverage of AJE (Gresh, 2014).

Interestingly, there were not many results with regards to Qatari women except from some news on the insertion of Qatari women in sports. The only divergent voice of Qatari women is a video on the Qatari author Al-Malki where she is interviewed in April 2012 regarding women's place in the public arena and the necessity to institutionalise women's rights. The almost absence of Qatari women in the newspaper is revealing as it seems that the debates on "deviant" women are only concerning other countries and not the host country of AJE, which can signify that it does not want to risk entering the slippery field of criticising the country's policies.

In sum, various articles are presenting women in different social roles, more often than not prohibited or frowned upon by their societies, as is the case with the testimony attacking the common understanding of Yemeni women as victims of child marriage and in "necessity to be saved". This depiction victimises Yemeni women and limits the possibility to have any form of agency and control over their life. AJE breaks down these stereotypes, affirming a more complex portrayal of Muslim women and feminism: "Instead, we hold tight to an orientalist vision of the Middle East that makes women into oversexed and illiterate haram maidens" (Fawcett, 2013).

4.3 Spaces of Feminist Confrontations

Arab News was the first liberal initiative of the Saudi government "because it was issued by a company with limited liability outside the framework of the Publications Regulations which governed all local newspapers at the time" (Al-Faisal, 2010); however, we found double standards regarding "deviant" women. For example, it is rare to find any article about Saudi or Arab lesbian women in Arab News: only one article was identified on April 2011, titled "Student appeals expulsion over deviant relationship". It is the story of a sexual relationship between a female student, Sarah, at the King Abdulaziz University, and a supervisor. Arab News identified a lesbian relationship as a "sexual identity crisis" (Humaidan, 2011) and, in all online issues brings up this one case

repeatedly, while university administrations and psychologists say they have observed many cases in universities and schools in Saudi Arabia. It is interesting to note that Abdul Qader Tankal, the supervisor of safety and security of Abdulaziz University contends that: "Lesbian relationships are quite common among girls in recent years because of satellite channels and the internet" (Humaidan, 2011). The newspaper promulgates numbers of reports about homosexual rights movements in other countries such as India, UK, USA and some other European and African countries. It shows the double standards of the paper regarding the issue of considered sexually "deviant" women; the approach of Arab News regarding lesbianism is generally a reflection of Saudi Arabia's Islamic attitudes about this issue.

The status of women in Saudi Arabia always has been a controversial issue between the Saudi government and the international community. A Human Rights Watch report (2008) discusses male guardianship and sex segregation in Saudi Arabia. This report highlighted that every Saudi woman, regardless of their economic and social status, must obtain permission from their guardian (a male relative) to work, study or marry. Sex segregation puts Saudi women in a category in which they are treated differently to their male counterparts. General Presidency of Girls Education (GPGE) has a specific curriculum for girls that teach them housewife skills and motherhood practices. Even though the Kingdom created some reforms in women's education, invested millions of dollars in universities and King Abduallah has encouraged girls to continue their education at higher levels, culture and tradition still create barriers that confine women's study within the county.

Meanwhile, Arab News rarely ever mentions these discriminatory situations for Saudi women and their political resistance. It is true that it often presents achievements of a certain fringe of Saudi women as, for instance, was the case with the two Saudi women who were selected to be among 20 top Muslim scientists by Muslim Science, a UK-based online magazine. However, in some articles Arab News "slams" the international approach towards the "oppression" status of Saudi women, thus exposing Saudi government policy towards women's rights. One article published in September 2013 strongly disclaims the World Bank report "[...] saying that Saudi Arabia tops the list of countries for laws that limit women's economic potential" (Jiffry, 2013). Another

article, "Activists slam UN rights report" was posted in October 2013, quoted the argument of Suhaila Zain Al-Ardeeen, a women's rights activist, wherein she argues that Saudi women are allowed to participate in municipal elections and that are acting as senior officials and others that manage their own businesses (Jiffry, 2013).

While Iraqi News did not present any concrete analysis of the heteronormative society or question sites of contestation with regards to feminism, AJE is clearly positioning itself on the matter. When we searched for lesbian representations in AJE, most of the results were in relation with Sochi Olympic Games of 2014, as the debate was virulent on the topic. Nevertheless, the coverage of lesbians' rights in the Arab world was low: instead, the focus is on other countries mostly in Asia, Russia and the USA, suggesting that the problem is addressed from an international perspective while almost nothing is said on Arab lesbians. The keywords "Arab lesbians" presented only 2 results and the most relevant reportage on the subject was an article of photojournalism on the Mumbai gay pride parade, which included lesbian women in the pictures and their social demands.

Considering our topic, AJE's strength resides in its power to discuss gender and feminism, mostly because of the technology and budget it relies on: the coverage of what are considered "hot" topics in the Arab world is thus facilitated by the dynamism of its platform and its worldwide access.

In the post-9/11 political landscape, feminist ideals have been used to justify foreign intervention to "save" Muslim women behind rhetoric of a civilising mission presenting Islam as abject (Butler, 2009, pp. 129-30). AJE advocates for a revision of this perception with a critical confrontation between Western feminism and the representatives of a feminism that better encompasses the Muslim precepts and social realities of Arab countries. For instance, articles are focused on criticising the justification of war relying on women's rights in Afghanistan trying to portray women's participation in combating gender inequalities in their country: "[...] Afghan women also have been activists on their own behalf long before the US invaded [...] determined to fight for their rights [...]" (Eisenshtein, 2013).

Within this scenario, Al-Jazeera also challenges typical views on women liberation as is the case of one article questioning why "women are 'free' to undress, but not to dress up" (Petkova, 2013), calling for a more comprehensive



approach to Muslim women's fight for their rights. Criticising FEMEN activists, this article refuses the idea of social confinement of Muslim women and affirms that they are socially engaged, having a long history of activism. These positions are "deviant" compared to Arab News for example, however, there is currently no investigation reporting the real access of Arab women to these challenging debates.

In the end, "it is hard to say that Al-Jazeera has a policy on representing women" as it definitely provokes massive debates but still "like many other broadcasters worldwide, is said to select female presenters on visual rather than intellectual criteria" (Sakr, 2002, p. 836). AJE is promoting a space for feminists confrontation contrarily to the other newspapers analysed where the debates on the topic are still embryonic. There are various articles in AJE discussing Arab women and Islamic Feminisms, mostly developed by the numerous newspaper columnists with the intention of restoring Muslim women's image and their longstanding social involvement, despite the overall submissive image in the media.

4. Concluding Thoughts

This investigation is only a first step towards broadening the academic knowledge on Arab media coverage of "deviant" women. Our extensive analysis of the three online media demonstrated that reification is impossible. In general, we conclude that the three online media are enthusiastic while reporting on "deviant" women of other countries, while more reserved in depicting them in their own country, as we confirmed with lesbianism. AJE definitely proved to be the most progressive website of our investigation, confronting feminist issues and portraying "deviant" women more exhaustively. Arab News, because of the social control on women in the kingdom, tends to cover "external" women's issues fairly, but the debate on women driving is much more polarized and aligned to Saudi Arabia's policies. Finally, Iraqi News presents a quite embryonic vision on "deviant" women (and women in general) because of its underdeveloped opinion columns and low presence of female journalists.

As our topic has been understudied, this article is evidently a call to deepen the analysis of "deviant" women, but also of women in general. Thus, there are plenty of new venues for future investigation on the topic. It would be of great interest to investigate this topic in

Arabic newspapers, especially AJA, to compare with the coverage in English, as the language might provoke some change in news coverage related to women as English is used to promote an innovative image of Arab countries to the world.

There is a need to "assess the impact and reach of these online publications" (Loubna, 2006, p. 53) and the whole technology complex that is behind as proved in the aftermaths of the Arab Revolts where women's participation in protests did not favour their rights. We are conscious that the media we analysed "consist mostly of women academics and other privileged women" who have English notions, as is the case in the Arab world concerning Internet access, reducing the target population. Future research should also be oriented towards the conceptualization of how a woman is portrayed as a victim, both when she is actually a victim of gender violence and when she is perpetrating, as she is often portrayed as left unprotected because the depiction made by the media has direct consequences on women's status in society (Sakr, 2002, p. 834).

The challenge for Arab media is fomenting an alternative discourse on gender violence (Gámez Fuentes y Núñez Puente, 2013, p. 152) and assessing the reality of Arab women as strong social agents in their society. This includes going out of the traditional vision of submission, but also considers that women are capable of violence: we should consciously address our responses to contemporary violence and the media are one of the first concerned on the matter as their coverage can contribute to the perpetuation of violence. In this huge task, Arab media cannot stay neutral and need to engage in democratic and ethical journalism that permit women's voices to be heard, but further, to be translated in real socio-political emancipation for them.

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