

Depiction of Women in the Media: Examining the Effect of Portrayals on Education

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Abstract: Undoubtedly, women around the world both deserve and need a positive portrayal in the media. This includes television programs, commercials, newspaper articles, other forms of print media and radio. The growing influence of social media provides another critical avenue for women to promote the importance of providing access to all area of society. The economic benefit of including women in traditionally male-dominated careers is another reason to embrace this change. By harnessing media to promote a gender-positive message in which women are capable of anything in society, rates of discrimination will likely decrease. Perhaps most importantly, rates of both physical and sexual violence will also be reduced following attitudinal change.

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Introduction

Throughout history, women living in Saudi Arabia have experienced a considerable degree of change. Transformation can be seen in the domains of education, human rights, employment, access to healthcare and many others. Education in particular has seen perhaps the greatest movement towards equality and acceptance of women, though there is still a great deal of space in which government, media and society can improve. Significant change over the past several decades have afforded women with more rights, more choice and more access to different areas of society. The growing degree of acceptance of women in new societal roles has been of paramount importance and fueled in large part by the media, both domestic and international. In this paper, I will discuss some of these changes, focusing primarily on the shifting perceptions of Saudi media that has given rise to Saudi women's newfound independence.

History and Culture

Traditionally, Saudi women were placed in situations in which they were required to enter marriage and begin raising a family at a very young age. This resulted in very few women entering universities, trade schools and other forms of education, necessarily limiting their prospects for employment. Only recently, women have been allowed to study careers that have normally been dominated by men. These career paths include medicine, law, engineering and numerous other fields that require considerable university education. I have come to realize the view that women are unable to participate in these fields results in large part from how they are portrayed by the media. Television, newspaper and other sources do not depict men and women working under the same roof. Rather, women

are shown to be good wives who take great care in looking after their families.

Fortunately, these views have begun to shift and an increasing number of females are entering the workforce as doctors, judges, lawyers and other trained professionals. Parents are becoming somewhat more open-minded in terms of the positions that they believe their children should hold in society. I was privileged to have parents that saw value in the education of women, allowing me to study both in private schools in Saudi Arabia and university in Canada. My younger sister is pursuing studies in medicine along with several of her female friends. While this experience is slowly gaining ground in my country, it is not one that is shared by any number close to the majority.

Women in the Media

A striking example of how women are often viewed in Saudi Arabia was outlined by the popular online news organization Aljazeera (2011). In article, Aljazeera writers described the commonly held view that women should follow their husbands in all circumstances, disallowing them from taking initiative or making decisions. Essentially, women should not be allowed to make contributions to the community outside of raising her husband's children. Unfortunately, these views are pervasive and little discussed in Saudi Arabia. Further complicating the matter is a general ignorance of women's opinion by the media. Given that women are traditionally not allowed to voice their own thoughts this obliviousness to women's views is not altogether surprising. The article produced by Aljazeera (2011) goes on to discuss that in recent decades women have begun to lift their status in society. This has come at the expense of years of hard work and indeed loss of life

by women who have taken risk to break these long-held societal norms. Women breaking such stereotypes have given hope to the younger generations of mothers, daughters and sisters who, prior to their efforts, would not have thought such achievements possible.

Malnaimi (2012) notes that the popular media has committed a significant disservice to the women of Saudi Arabia. In portraying women as incapable and servile to men, they have misrepresented the role of women in both Saudi Arabia and Islamic culture in general. Malnaimi (2012) argues that the media places too great an emphasis on cultural differences such as the wearing of Abayas, which is a traditional covering that women wear as part of Islamic religion. Abayas are not required to be worn by law in Saudi Arabia, rather they are worn when women go outside of the home and represent an important component of their culture. Malnaimi (2012) contends that media portrayals often miss the mark in the sense that they depict these garments as oppressive. In Saudi Arabia, it is now much more of a choice as to whether one wears an Abaya or not.

In a similar article, Fatany (2007) states that “the image of a faceless woman shrouded in black does not represent the true discipline of a Muslim woman. It is an image that has been distorted by misinterpretations of Islam and has made the world less respectful of our faithful women. It has portrayed Islam as being suppressive and a religion that deprives women of their basic rights to be respected and admired” (p. 14). It is not difficult to see where Saudi and Western media depart in terms of their portrayals of Saudi women. Where domestic media tends to depict Abayas and other traditional covering as a way of expressing one’s culture, international media tends to be highly critical of their use. Understandably, it can be very challenging to examine a culture by looking from the outside. Rather, it is important to begin to understand women’s own views on what wearing these garments means to them. Insights of this nature will help to provide perspective on the meaning behind these cultural practices.

The Saudi Education System and the Media

Fatany (2007) notes that attainment of both basic and higher education acts as an “engine of chance and development.”(p.75) This message has been voiced consistently by other authors and has begun to be heeded by the Saudi government. The government has also started to improve its education programs for women in public schools across the country. Previously, much of the work done in school was targeted towards helping male students develop their critical thinking and reasoning abilities. Lesson plans can be seen as patriarchal and often include numerous gender stereotypes. For example, worksheets and

classroom examples that depict professionals almost exclusively include young adult men. These men are nearly always in a position of authority and only rarely are women shown to be anywhere close to equal.

These outdated teaching approaches are becoming less and less common. Messages in texts and teacher comments now include women-positive dialogue and represent women as participating in careers of genuine importance and ability. Examples are also provided that showcase stories of highly successful women who participate on the economic, scientific and technological world stage. The media has been critical in promoting these changes. Without such support, it is possible that these changes in views may not have been durable. Unquestionably, this movement has taken considerable time to get underway. It is clear now that the education of women has become a priority for the government.

Improvement to education system of Saudi Arabia was driven in part by the development of a major scholarship program instituted by King Abdullah in 2005 (Draper, 2012). This program dedicated funds to support both male and female students to continue their education in different countries around the world. For 2012, 30,000 students were provided financial support, allowing a great number of students to further their education (Draper, 2012). While the program has been successful at helping students as well as promoting Saudi Arabia as a country dedicated to education, only 20% of scholarship receivers are female (Draper, 2012). This number continues to grow, however it is troubling that these numbers are not more balanced.

King Abdullah’s scholarship program has been coupled successfully with a great degree of media coverage. As mentioned, the significantly greater number of males that have been granted scholarships could be rectified using the media. Campaigns could be developed that target young women who may be considering further education. This could include portrayals of independent women succeeding first in the classroom then later in the workforce. Representing the independence and ability of women through the media provides an opportunity for attitudinal shifts in both women and men. By offering more access to this opportunity, women who study abroad could also begin to establish changes in perceptions in other countries. Ideally, these scholarship winners will act as representatives of the change in equality that has occurred over the past several decades in Saudi Arabia.

Media and Women in the Workforce

A critical reason that helps to explain this change in opinion can be seen through the economic value that educated women can provide to society.

Currently, women only make up a small fraction of the workforce in Saudi Arabia. AlMunajjed (2010) notes that only approximately 5-15% of the country's workforce is female. This lack of women in the workforce has even been called sex segregation or gender apartheid by some researchers (e.g. Agarwal, 2012). The media plays a significant role in cultivating the view that women are capable of taking on employment in essentially any role available in society. For example, current television programs have traditionally depicted women in child-rearing or servile roles. However, this is gradually changing with women being shown as taking part in various careers such as medicine or law. From an attitude perspective, women who view these programs are able to relate and identify with the successful women they see on television.

Commercials during programs provide another avenue for furthering the perception of women's abilities. Beyond the material benefit to companies who order or produce these commercials, the depiction of women in these roles also includes important societal benefits. When in Saudi Arabia, I have noticed an increase in commercials that show women taking part in historically male-centric activities including piloting aircraft, performing mechanical work and other positions. It is important that women, especially those who are young and beginning to form perceptions of their place in society, be exposed to a sufficient amount of gender-positive media.

Malynami (2012) summarizes the change to women in the workforce, as driven in part by influence from the media. She notes that women are not limited solely to raising children, though this is a critically important role that deserves a great deal of respect (Malynami, 2012). Women can, and frequently do, work as accountants, lawyers, doctors, designers, teachers and engineers. This "newfound" source of talent has even led to significant economic gains in Saudi Arabia (Yamani, 1996).

The point that such careers were unthinkable for women to take part in as recently as the past few decades is illustrative of the change that has occurred in Saudi Arabia. Malynami (2012) argues that the government has played a large role in supporting this change through media campaigns. These campaigns encourage employers to hire women, even stating that one woman is equivalent to two men (Malynami, 2012). This truly is a seismic shift in how women have been traditionally portrayed.

Using Personal Examples to Promote Change

I was fortunate to be born into a family that included women who were well educated, which is certainly outside the historical norm for Saudi Arabia. My mother is an associate professor in a university in

the country. She earned her PhD in Nuclear Physics. The number of women who pursue education in this or related fields is staggeringly small. Two aunts in my family have also earned PhDs within the sciences. Again, this is quite atypical given that most women in Saudi Arabia never attend school beyond state-mandated grade school. Their educational achievements inspired me and instilled within me a dream to pursue my studies and eventually return to Saudi Arabia to contribute to my country. I believe it is important for young women to be exposed to positive examples such as my mother and my aunts.

My case is one that can be used readily disseminated through newspaper articles or interviews on television. Increasingly, social media has provided a route for individuals to share their stories. Younger generations that make use of social media on an everyday basis could be exposed to many hopeful stories of women rising above the servile roles and allow them to see themselves as equal to men, capable in every way.

Canadian society is far more progressive than Saudi Arabia. Realizing my dream of further education was made possible, in part, by my move to this country. I believe that media can play a powerful role in bringing experiences like mine back to Saudi Arabia. Examples such as mine prove that it is possible for unmarried women to travel to foreign countries to learn and live. This concept is unfortunately still foreign to many individuals in Saudi Arabia. However, it is critical that all women are shown that it is possible to be successful and continue on not just in education but in roles such as artists or musicians, adding great economic strength to every position they occupy.

Bringing Awareness to Issues of Human Rights

The view that media has the power to change both attitudes and policy is held by a number of journalists in Saudi Arabia (Fatany, 2007). The author notes that "media in Saudi Arabia can play a more important role in raising the level of awareness among citizens and educating women about their legal rights" (Fatany, 2007). As well, there is growing influence from human rights groups that have been established to provide a check on the extent to which women are allowed to participate in society. These organizations currently report high rates of violations, including demonstrations where the legal system has consistently let down women who have challenged unjust or discriminatory treatment. Fortunately, Fatany (2007) reports that these rates are on somewhat of a decline. Regardless, the use of media can be a valuable tool for publicizing instances on injustice, thereby raising the public consciousness to these issues.

By coupling increased awareness with respect to human rights as well as education, the media's role in changing public perception is critical. There is a growing voice among women, who rightfully demand greater representation in society. One means through which that can be accomplished in the introduction of greater numbers of female newscasters, columnists and other figures in the media. By acting as positive role models, these women help to "project a progressive international image" that is admired by younger girls (Fatany, 2007, p.7). These women may also use their position to act as ambassadors for Muslim women in other parts of the world. These portrayals can act as a powerful catalyst for changing traditional and necessarily outdated opinions.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Fatany (2007) notes how "confident and capable" Saudi women are beginning to act on the global stage, events that have not gone unnoticed within the country.(p.71)The author goes on to note that portrayals of women in positions of power have provided a much-needed impetus for transforming the view that Saudi women are "uneducated and dull," existing to serve men or raise families (Fatany, 2007).

Undoubtedly, women around the world both deserve and need a positive portrayal in the media. This includes television programs, commercials, newspaper articles, other forms of print media and radio. The growing influence of social media provides another critical avenue for women to promote the importance of providing access to all area of society. The economic benefit of including women in traditionally male-dominated careers is another reason to embrace this change. By harnessing media to promote a gender-positive message in which women are capable of anything in society, rates of discrimination will likely decrease. Perhaps most

importantly, rates of both physical and sexual violence will also be reduced following attitudinal change.

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