

Women Journalists and Communicators on the Two Shores of the Mediterranean: Mutual Perceptions through the Media

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Acknowledgements to Patricia Estévez, Jeannette Mauricio, Sonia Ruiz and CIMAC of the International Network, to the photographer Muhammad Jaridi and to FCDP.

One of the advantages of the professional networks of women is to be able to carry out analyses, by women themselves, in which different cultural perspectives and political realities converge, based on sharing the different professional experiences, in this case as journalists. These meetings highlight that, for the time being, women's visibility in the Mediterranean media is still poor and highly stereotyped and their treatment is always linked to the most problematic aspects of integration deriving from immigration.

Arab and/or Muslim Migrant Women: The “Other” within Fortress Europe

Throughout modern and contemporary history, women have always come to embody the projection of the desired, imaged, re-invented, re-founded nation or community: from the French and Russian Revolutions to the colonial projects and anti-colonial nationalist movements, religious fundamentalisms and the conflict in Afghanistan, launched in 2001 by the United States and not yet ended.

Up to the present, Western colonial and neo-colonial powers have been using the status

of women in the “other's countries” to justify the white man's burden in the pursuance of his “civilising mission” in the world's peripheries. The essentialist construction of the average veiled Arab and/or Muslim woman as a homogeneously subservient, passive and oppressed category of beings well typifies the wandering of the Western orientalist eye. Nonetheless, these very same othering processes antithetically produced counter-reactions among “native” people, whereby women – and the control of their bodies – became similarly central in the political project of the re-construction of the re-generated nation or community away from foreign interference.

Together with the transport and communications revolutions of the last quarter of the 20th century, processes of economic, cultural and social globalisation accelerated migratory flows towards Western countries, in which women now represent an important share – whether in the context of family reunification or as workers on their own often sending remittances back to their home country.

The ideology of the clash of civilisations has cast an Islamophobic shadow on male and female migrants, who now represent the “fifth column”: the enemy within Fortress Europe

Thus, debates on the domestic governance of migratory processes, between assimilationist and integrationist policies, are not new – as attested not least by the resurgence of far right-wing, chauvinist and racist parties and movements throughout Europe. However, with 9/11 something has seemingly irreversibly changed, as the ideology of the clash of civilisations has cast an Islamophobic shadow on male and female (whether 1st, 2nd or 3rd generation) migrants, who now represent the “fifth column”: the enemy within Fortress Europe.

The image of the veiled, subjugated and oppressed Arab and/or Muslim woman is now seemingly back to haunt the Western eye from within its metropolis, signifying with her (more or less hidden) body the ever blurring borders of cultures which are nonetheless historically constructed as reciprocally sealed-off by the powerful rhetoric of the clash of civilisations. The veiled Arab and/or Muslim woman living in the West is still constructed as oppressed and subjugated by the men of her family, but the veil has now come to represent an obstinate refusal to be “integrated” in the culture(s) of the hosts and, as such, is portrayed and conveyed as a threat. Doubtlessly, women’s bodies have come again to embody rival identity-based projects

in the construction of re-imagined communities stemming from the juxtaposition between “natives” (white Western men and women) and threatening, “invading” others (men and women migrants).

Media Responsibility: Building Bridges or Barriers?

In all the meetings that we journalists from the Mediterranean countries have held since 1990, the issue of the distinct perceptions that we obtain through the news and the images transmitted by the Arab and Western media of women on both shores occupies a central place in the debates.

It is not surprising, given that these transmitted images, although we all consider them very far from the reality and do not believe that they reflect women, their reality or their struggles, gradually create opinion and contribute to solidifying stereotypes. The reflections that we bring together in these meetings and in those we have with women’s associations and NGOs which include the gender perspective in their actions remind us how this influence affects the women journalists themselves, how these stereotypes are revealed through our questions and betray us with our amazement at answers far from those expected.

Half of the women in the world do not see themselves represented in popular culture and most of them do not believe they are represented in the media (71% in Spain) according to data from a sociological survey by the company Dove. While this perception is widely accepted with respect to their own territorial and cultural field, the idea persists that the “other”, that of “other culture”, is very well represented. This leads to a feedback of stereotypes that distances us from each other or at least obliges us to make a great effort in order to relate to each other without prejudices and



Palestinian woman kneading bread (Muhammad Jaridi).

overcome the mutual mistrust that has arisen following these respective perceptions which do not fit reality.

The Migration Issue. Data on the News Treatment of Southern Mediterranean Women in Spain

The migration issue is growing. Migrants have an ever greater presence in European countries. This fact, however, is not reflected on the local, regional or national television channels.

The Observatory of Diversity (coordinated by Mugak and XenoMedia in Spain) in the 2007 European Week of Media and Diversity, presented under the slogan “Equal Opportunities for All!”, notes the following:

- the time devoted to immigration and minorities on the local channels oscillates between 0.78% and 2.86% of the whole of the programming. Within this tiny space, among the issues covered those related to violence and social conflict overwhelmingly stand out, with integration and living conditions in third place;
- on the autonomous channels their presence oscillates between 3.17 and 6.72% while crime, control of migration and social conflict occupy three quarters of the issues covered;
- on the national channels, the three aforementioned issues continue to receive most coverage. Crime and social conflict receive more attention from the most sensationalist channels, while control and migration policies are priority issues for the public

channels or those ideologically close to the current government.

Apart from this poor representation of the migratory phenomenon in the media, generally the image of the migrant group is constructed stereotypically. As Mary Nash says in her book *Inmigrantes en nuestro espejo*:¹ “Fabricating a group identity of the other from discursive strategies of simplification and homogenisation facilitates the establishing of stereotypes and a symbolic construction of cultural and social hierarchical structuring.” We will not see migrants as equals, but as subordinates.

Women migrants as a source, protagonists or subject of the news in these media do not exist. When they are not made directly invisible, the women belonging to other cultures usually appear as victims, as mothers, submissive wives or prostitutes

In the case of migrant women a dual stereotyping takes place: on the one hand, for the fact of being migrants and, on the other, for the fact of being women. Despite the increase in women in this group in the last twenty years, this feminisation of migrations has not been reflected in the media, which continue to present a completely masculinised image of groups of other cultures. Women migrants as a source, protagonists or subject of the news in these media do not exist. When they are not made directly invisible, the women belonging to other cultures usually appear as victims, as mothers, submissive wives or prostitutes. They are presented as agents of action or as autonomous people with the ability to make decisions on very few occasions.

According to Mary Nash, in the aforementioned book, the assertion of feminine invis-

ibility strengthens the negation of women migrants as agents in the construction of identities and values of intercultural dialogue. As well as presenting a biased vision that denies gender diversity, the treatment by the media of migrations denies a central role to women migrant groups and their status as citizens.

Moreover, advertising, which has created discourses for other minorities, does not recognise the existence of the Maghrebian group. In the treatment of the different minorities, advertisers fall into new stereotypes because of their desire to integrate immigration into their condition of male and female consumers, transforming them into smiling people on all their advertising posters. Moreover, they base cultural differences and diversity on overused and exotic ethnic stereotypes.

However, the group of the Maghrebian people never appears. Its absence is total for advertising, which removes them – men and women – even more, if it were possible, from everyday reality and from the possibility of another perspective.

Importance of News Sources

The process of preparing news material is, in essence, a process of reconstruction of reality, insofar as it implies a task of cutting, selecting, excluding and summarising it. From the very moment that the editorial team decides on what is news, what can and must be published, current events are being formed in a determined way. This process is conditioned by many factors, from the editorial policy of the newspaper to the personal style of the journalist writing the news. The style of the journalist influences factors ranging from the form of organisation of the journalistic work to the process of train-

1. Barcelona, Icaria editorial, 2005.

ing the journalists themselves: professional knowledge, working routines, field of relations, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices and visions of the world.

The main sources used to report in the case of immigration are the public institutions and the police. The information they give has a unilateral view, always reporting the nationality of the migrants related to criminal events

A key figure in the representation of images of the “others”, in the case of the news that arrives from other areas, such as the Maghreb, is the figure of the correspondent, who closely experiences the evolution of the country and is involved in the host society. However, this figure has practically disappeared on television, is rare on radio, and has been seriously reduced in the press. Through special envoys or experts in the issue or country where the news is happening, the international media settle for the information that they can extract in a very short period of time, which somehow conditions the quality of the information being provided.

The main sources used to report in the case of immigration are the public institutions and the police. The information they give has a unilateral view, always reporting the nationality of the migrants related to criminal events. This encourages prejudices and stereotypes in society making integration difficult. Journalists do not routinely consider the migrant source, owing to a great extent to the lack of time and the precariousness of their work and it is essential to find a normalised image far from the stereotype and racism. Therefore, the media companies have a serious responsibility. Another factor is the low contracting of journalists from these minorities who could provide a more sensitising and normalising perspective. And, of course, eradicate the inappropriate use of language with so many discriminatory terms.

Moreover, on some occasions, and with issues such as the one put forward in this article, the media go adrift and lack a clear strategy. The fact that the news is covered in a determined way is not so much related with the editorial policy of the media on specific issues but rather with the interest and understanding that exist among the editorial staff. If we add to this the lack of training of many journalists, both female and male, on issues related to Islam, the Arab world and so on, the lack of sensibility or gender perspective and the absence of sources of information alternative to the official on their agendas, we find ourselves with a stereotyped and decontextualised image of women migrants.

A Concrete Experience of the Media and the Public Participation of Women. Conclusion of the Seminar “Towards a Fair Participation of Women in Public Life”

In March 2007 in Ouarzazate (Morocco), the seminar “Towards a Fair Participation of Women in Public Life”, organised by the Association Ennakil pour la Femme et l’Enfant (widespread in Morocco and which works with the international aid of Inter-món Oxfam and the Diputació de Barcelona), included a presentation on women and the media in each of the three roundtables: “Situation of Women in Public Life in Morocco”; “The Actors and the Will to Establish a Fair Participation of Women in Public Life”; and “Possible Opportunities and Instruments to Guarantee a Fair Participation of Women in Public Life”.

In several references devoted to the media, it could be seen that, although women with public responsibilities in these countries have the advice and support of diverse professional groups, they cannot in fact count on the com-



In a Protest (Muhammad Jaridi).

plicity of the journalists. To the great difficulty of the deficit of freedom of expression we must add the almost inexistent visibility of women in the media in all fields of life and the advertising stereotype of the Western superwoman. Moreover, women journalists or communicators themselves, whether for labour reasons or news biases, make no effort to incorporate a gender perspective into the news.

In short, a brief analysis of the five most important newspapers in Morocco during the days when the seminar was held showed that only the activities of the women of the royal house were covered, that the advertising incorporated advertisements for the consumption of pregnant women following the purest style of the perfect and unreal Western woman and there was only brief news on some unfortunate incidents.

As a positive aspect, a newspaper publicised a survey on the new values of Moroccan citizens where, although the information was not provided with gender indicators, it did feature the social transformation towards a greater recognition of the value and position of women in the family, professional life and social life. Finally, another newspaper published an interview with a famous presenter from Moroccan television during the reign of the previous monarch, in a very respectful style.

This low influence in the media, the fact of not having their own communication media and the perception of the impenetrability of the journalistic and communication world are a constant in all the meetings, seminars and forums, as was also reflected in the communication and women sections of the World Social Forum held in Nairobi, Kenya, in January 2007.

Voices of Women Dismantling Stereotypes, Clichés and Confusions

There are increasingly more voices of women struggling against the erroneous perceptions of the North about the South: women seeing themselves as victims, submission, cultural (even pre-Islamic) backwardness, clothing, relegated family and social relations, pride, etc.; and of the South about the North: being seen as sexual objects, frivolity, forgotten values, egoism, superiority, etc. Next, we feature the opinions of some of the women from the two shores of the Mediterranean, or about them, which appeared recently in the press.

On the Veil

“Muslim women have other more important problems, and perhaps more in common with other women. The problem has been created here (in the West). [...] Without denying that in this (Muslim) community, as in any, there are gender inequalities and that it is true that there are women who are obliged to wear the veil (and suffer so many other impositions), we see that there are many who wear it as a personal option. [...] The problem is not the veil but what lies behind.”² Lena de Botton, researcher on public presence of Muslim women.

On Education and Social and Labour Integration

“The Koran makes the man responsible for family maintenance, and this makes feminine advancement difficult. [...] The participation of women in economic activities is lower than in other places, although the report (by the UN)

recognises that girls learn more quickly and are more responsible and work harder than boys.”³ Dolors Bramon, Professor of Islamic Studies.

“Although in the mid-1960s many Arab women had access to school prohibited, statistics now show that 90% of girls go to school. [...] There are still serious imbalances. Half of Arab women are illiterate [...] Their participation in the global economy is still the lowest in the world. Only 33% has an active role in this field in comparison to 55.6% of the global average.”⁴ Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, Yemeni Minister of Human Rights and UN Assistant-Secretary General.

“We are advancing slowly. Female employment in the public sector is exploited and we have broken the taboo of daring to criticise our situation in public. [...] At work men respect us; only traditional people do not receive us well when they know that you are not a housewife or that you do not wear the veil.”⁵ Nadia Alaza, Systems Engineer in the Aramco Oil company.

“At present, in science, women are especially working in branches considered as ‘feminine’, such as biology and food. But from a certain hierarchical level, they are invisible. The whole family burden falls on them [...] I myself have had to fight five times more than any man to now be the only female professor. [...] Women have a very important quality for science. They are less aggressive in their decisions.”⁶ Amena Gurib-Fakim, Professor of Chemistry, L’Oréal-Unesco “Women in Science” Award.

“I have never accepted being treated differently from my brothers [...] I have never accepted the subaltern role to which some male companions wanted to confine us. [...] I

2. Cristina Mas, *Diari de Terrassa*, 17th April 2007.

3. *El Periòdic de Catalunya*, 5th April 2007.

4. *El Mundo*, 8th March 2007.

5. Ricardo Mir, *El Periòdic de Catalunya*, 1st April 2007.

6. Elise Colette, *Jeune Afrique*, 4th March 2007.

try to make young women, the future doctors, understand that they must pass the baton for the rights of women and fight to be the best. Mediocrity is accepted in a man, but not in a woman.”⁷ Hakima Himmich, Head of the Infectious Illnesses Service, CHU Ibn Rochd in Casablanca, Morocco.

On Political Participation

“I have participated in the Moroccan women’s movement since its birth in the early 1980s. Our bone of contention was the reform of the archaic women’s code, the *mudawana*. The feminine question was then a minor issue. [...] the women’s march on Rabat in 2000 was a milestone [...] the dynamic we had created led to the reform of the *mudawana* in 2003 [...] Currently it is necessary to emphasise female political representation and the fight for quotas in elections.”⁸ Latifa Jbabdi, of the Instance Équité et Réconciliation, Morocco.

“There is a tendency to believe that a woman who goes into politics must be like men. I do not agree. Women must preserve their femininity and the qualities typical of women, the sense of reality, intuition, pragmatism. [...] I am the only woman leading a party in Mauritania. Traditionally, women did not work in politics [...] Later, the country became more open, [...] but they (the women) have aimed above all at the economic sphere and I believe they are right. It is necessary to be economically independent to reaffirm oneself and be free.”⁹ Naha Mint Moknass, President of the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès, Mauritania.

“Feminism is educating the population of my country in equal treatment. In my organi-

sation we carry out projects aimed at boys and girls, beginning with the nursery. We want our young population to understand that human rights involve both men and women. [...] In Bosnia we have a law of quotas of 30% of political representation of women. But most of the female politicians still act and think like men. For this reason, one of our fundamental projects is the promotion of the local political participation of women.”¹⁰ Aylin Bajramovic, of Medica Zenica, a help centre for women affected by war and for the promotion of political changes, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

On Personal Freedom

“The greatest problem we have is the total dependence on men. Without your father’s or husband’s permission you can do almost nothing.”¹¹ Rania Karui, journalist, Arab economic press.

“Those North Africa go to the gynaecological appointment accompanied by the husband, who tries to enter the examination room or operation theatre and refuse a male doctor. [...] In my country it is free, here the pill is very expensive, it cannot be found for under 12 euros.”¹² A Moroccan woman without children.

On Multiculturalism and Integration

“In Europe, for years sociological and political currents have advocated multiculturalism as a panacea to solve the coexistence of distinct cultures. From the feminist perspective, their approaches and the resulting regulations, show us that many people end up losing, given that religious customs and impositions prevail, which, in general, clash with many human

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. On *Voces de Mujeres*, Les Pénélopes. Can be heard at www.penelopes.org/Espagnol.

11. *El Periódico de Catalunya*, 1st March 2007.

12. Concina de Gregorio, “L’aborto e l’immigrata. Vergogna e solitudine, Italia falso paradiso”, *La Repubblica*, 30th March 2007.

rights that concern women.”¹³ Carme Freixa, journalist and sexologist.

On Peace and Justice

“These women (the Palestinians), as Israel has intensified the conflict so much, are victims of multiple violations and attacks on their rights. Moreover, tradition and laws treat them as unequal members of society. [...] A growing number of people are increasingly concentrated (owing to the pressure of Israel) in a more reduced territory. This is why the fact of having children, for a Palestinian woman, is a constant fight against the State of Israel.”¹⁴ Ana Suárez, Coletivu Milenta Muyeres y Moces, and Lidón Soriano, Basque Country.

On the Media

“We try to reflect the conflict with the Palestinians providing the Palestinian vision of things. Language is a problem because only Palestinians who speak Hebrew can participate. Neither do the major media outlets give a voice to Palestinians, except Mahmud Abbas. Israelis do not know anything about the real situation. It is amazing how much ignorance there is.”¹⁵ Karen Tamir, Hebrew presenter of the radio station All for Peace funded by the EU and co-directed by an Israeli, Shimon Malka, and a Palestinian woman, Maysa Baransi-Siniora.

“I always dreamt of being a journalist. [...] My audaciousness has several times taken me to jail. Looked down on by the public press, I founded the newspaper *El-Fadjr* (‘The Dawn’) [...] which symbolises the youth revolt of 2002, the arrival of democracy and pluralism in Algeria. Being the only woman editor of a news-

paper is a motive for pride.”¹⁶ Hadda Hazzman, Editor of the newspaper *El-Fadjr*.

To end with this section of voices of women from or in the Mediterranean, in an article aptly entitled “Mediterranean Women”,¹⁷ by Rosa Pereda, journalist and writer, the author states that: “[...] the meeting of Mediterranean women, held at the Instituto Cervantes in Rome, which brought together around thirty female intellectuals and writers from Croatia, Turkey, France, Israel, Italy and Spain [...] put forward a plural reflection, expressed from different feminist trends and from the three Mediterranean cultures of religious origin, which asked about the role of women in the construction of a peaceful, prosperous and egalitarian Mediterranean [...] there was only a shadow of discomfort, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the feminine issue in Islam.” The journalist adds: “It seems that the symbolic dimension of women overwhelms us [...] In these stereotypes, what is lacking is women: Muslims, concealed beneath the chador, and Christians and Jews who have become whores or males. [...] And more. The Jews into aggressors and enemies because of the Palestinian-Jewish conflict.”

Objectives Shared by Women Journalists and Communicators on the Two Shores of the Mediterranean

What can we do to provide more truthful news, news with a gender perspective which brings us closer to the everyday reality of women in neighbouring countries?

13. *20 minutos*, 28th March 2007.

14. Antoni Mateu, *Diario de Baleares*, 8th March 2007.

15. Félix Flores, *La Vanguardia*, 25th February 2007.

16. *Jeune Afrique*, 4th March 2007.

17. *El País*, 19th March 2007.

- Use the instruments already created and issued by the different boards of the journalistic profession and especially the groups of women journalists with a gender perspective as recommendations and style guides on immigration, gender perspective in the media, the treatment of domestic violence, etc.
- Heed the opinions of women's groups, associations and NGOs which deal with their issues (education, health, economy...) by including the gender perspective in all their actions.
- Have an Agenda of Diversity which provides more credibility to the source (a directory to contact women who can speak of their status and their countries as well as those experts who can address the different issues that the media generate).
- Strengthening networking and sharing diverse experiences and realities is what has taken women throughout the world (especially from Latin America and Spain, but also from other European countries such as Italy) to create the International Network of Women Journalists with a Gender Perspective. In Spain it is known as the International Network of Women Journalists and Communicators – International Network of Journalists with a Gender Perspective.

During the 2nd National Meeting of the network, held in Barcelona in November

2006, a group of women journalists worked on the issue of women from other cultures in the media. Among their proposals are the following:

- allow women migrants to speak in the first person. Consider women migrants as authoritative people (in terms of capacities, skills, training) to narrate their realities/situations;
- avoid women migrants seeing themselves as victims in the press releases. Narrate their diverse realities (both negative and positive, including social and economic contributions);
- on-line training for women journalists. Share studies and/or pieces of research on women migrants to better understand their realities and how this affects the relations of the women from the host country;
- use the term migrant or citizen instead of immigrant.

The holding of a Conference of Mediterranean Women Journalists and Communicators is planned for October 2007, organised by the International Network of Women Journalists and Communicators. It aims to strengthen this bridge of communication between women, contribute to dismantle stereotypes and clichés, and achieve a better perception of the different realities of women and their struggles for their rights on both sides of the Mediterranean.