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**Democratisation in the Arab World
Media and Women**

Abstract:

This paper explores some recent changes in women's involvement with the Arab media, taking account of developments in different media sectors and media-related fields. In doing so it attempts to track whether the media act as a catalyst or amplifier for social and political change affecting women in Arab countries, or whether the same social forces that structure audiences, values and predispositions also shape the character of media content. That is to say, the paper considers ways in which struggles about women's status may be played out in the media, just as they are in the fields of politics and law.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

1. Women's Increased Visibility

- 1.1 Weapons in a ratings war
- 1.2 Recognition for female presenters
- 1.3 Women war reporters
- 1.4 TV as a forum for dialogue
- 1.5 Controversy over female singers
- 1.6 Managerial appointments
- 1.7 Radio and the printed press

2. Organisational Developments

- 2.1 Uses of the Internet
- 2.2 Limited benefits of union representation
- 2.3 AWMC's pan-Arab network
- 2.4 Media exposure of violence against women
- 2.5 Domestic abuse and media monitoring

3. Media-Politics Dynamics

- 3.1 Campaigning and the media
- 3.2 Approaches to division and cohesion
- 3.3 Women, media and democratic practices
- 3.4 Reform: process or breakthrough?
- 3.5 Climates conducive to change

Conclusion

Bibliography

Introduction

Dramatic changes in the Arab media landscape over the past ten years have been dominated by media producers' and consumers' ready adoption of satellite broadcasting technology. Transnational media are by no means new to the region: its shared language, Arabic, has long encouraged a dynamic whereby centres of newspaper publishing and radio transmission move around the region in accordance with political shifts. However, perhaps because the spread of satellite television coincided with major global events involving Middle Eastern countries, a great deal of attention has centred on the television phenomenon in its own right. Media-centric observations have blamed television stations for inflaming anger among Arab populations, prompting certain styles of cultural consumption and so on. In debates about women's advancement in the region, television is cast in the role of both enemy and friend. This paper explores some recent changes in women's involvement with the Arab media, taking account of developments in different media sectors and media-related fields. In doing so it attempts to track whether the media act as a catalyst or amplifier for social and political change affecting women in Arab countries, or whether the same social forces that structure audiences' 'values and predispositions' (Curran et al 1987: 2) also shape the character of media content. That is to say, the paper considers ways in which struggles about women's status may be played out in the media, just as they are in the fields of politics and law.

1) Women's increased visibility

1.1 Weapons in a ratings war

When considering women's visibility in Arab media, it is useful to start with the simple economics of supply and demand in the job market. Rapid expansion in the number of Arab satellite channels occurred in two phases, the first in 1996-98 (marked particularly by the arrival of new output from Qatar, Lebanon and Egypt) and the second in 2002-04 (stimulated in part by changes that allowed new privately-owned channels in countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Kuwait). Arab Advisors Group, a consultancy based in Amman, counted 55 new free-to-air channels entering the market in the 18 months to July 2005. In a separate study it listed 13 television news channels in Arabic, including the privately-owned Al-Arabiya (launched in 2003) and state-owned Al-Ikhbariya (2004) that were both created with Saudi finance to provide alternatives to Al-Jazeera. That women were among those recruited to high profile positions in

the major satellite TV stations was to be expected. Lebanese channels made no secret of their assessment that female presenters would attract audiences, especially in countries where women are rarely seen in public, and thus give them an advantage over the competition. Female presenters say they were explicitly reminded that viewers were interested in seeing them, not listening to them. This recruitment policy had repercussions for other channels. For example, Al-Ikhbariya chose a female presenter to deliver its opening bulletin as a signal that the channel would portray Saudi Arabia in a new light. Al-Arabiya poached a number of female staff from Al-Jazeera.

1.2 Recognition for female presenters

Whatever the motives for appointing women as TV anchors and presenters, several soon made their mark as personalities on transnational channels. TV personalities are to media audiences as brands are to consumers; similar loyalties take effect in the sense that audiences favour media faces or voices they know and trust. In August 2004 a US-based research company, InterMedia, surveyed viewers in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and found that two of the top five anchors named as favourites by respondents of both sexes were women, while women respondents overwhelmingly identified women anchors as their favourites (Talgar 2005: 28). A list of ten female anchors, ranked according to how many men and women named them as favourites, put Khadija bin Qenna, an Algerian journalist working on Al-Jazeera, firmly in first place. The survey was conducted several months after bin Qenna started wearing a headscarf on screen, in November 2003. A rather different indication of the credibility earned by successful female presenters came in September 2005 when May Shidiyac, a news anchor and presenter for LBC, was almost killed by a car bomb, hours after hosting a show in which she discussed aspects of the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, including allegations of Syrian involvement.

1.3 Women war reporters

War reporting also played its part in boosting the visibility of women doing the same jobs as men on television. The drama of war is said to be intensified by the sight of women reporters, while its horrors are simultaneously mitigated by women's presence (Sebba 1994: 277). Future TV sent three women to cover the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. According to one of them, Najat Sharafeddine (2005), this was a deliberate decision by Future to promote its coverage in the face of stiff competition from better-resourced channels with more up-to-date technology. Diana Moukalled, another of the three, was already known on Future for her documentary series *Bi'l Ain al-Mujarrada* (With the Naked Eye), which had taken her to many conflict zones.

Moukalled says she was motivated to do such work after witnessing the Qana massacre in 1996, when Israeli forces bombed civilians sheltering at a UN post in South Lebanon (Abu-Fadil 2004: 193). Her documentary-making increased her knowledge about the effects of war, including on women (Moukalled 2003). The third, Najwa al-Qassim, was later hired by Al-Arabiya. She was at Al-Arabiya's bureau in Baghdad when it was attacked by a car bomb that killed seven people and wounded more than a dozen others in late 2004. Cut by broken glass, Qassim reported live on air shortly afterwards and later received death threats for spreading 'lies' about the Iraqi 'resistance' (Shapiro 2005).

1.4 TV as a forum for dialogue

Documentaries like Moukalled's are just one example of new types of programming on Arab television that involve and represent women in diverse ways. Innovations have prompted much debate inside and outside the media about the contribution television could make in airing women's grievances and explaining them to men. Across the Arab countries, few other public forums exist for dialogue on these lines, while private *salon*-style meetings tend to be all-male or all-female. In these circumstances, the Alliance of Arab Women, a Cairo-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), achieved something of a breakthrough in 1993 when it held a series of meetings in which women lawyers were able to speak directly to Egyptian judges (then exclusively male) about their rulings on matters such as divorce (Ammar and Lababidy 1999: 162). Arab customs dictate that fruitful dialogue between the sexes is more likely to take place through quiet persistence behind closed doors than via stormy talk shows of the kind for which Al-Jazeera became famous. Al-Jazeera's managers are not in the business of advocacy: they conceived these shows as compelling viewing for audiences unused to such exchanges, not as vehicles for making people change their minds. Yet the very series with formats more conducive to dialogue about women's status were given titles denoting exclusivity, such as *Lil Nissa Faqat* (For Women Only), *Kalam Nowa'im* (Talk of the Fair Sex), or *Laki* (For You - in the feminine). While Al-Jazeera's weekly *Lil Nissa Faqat* had much to recommend it as a place where female panellists from across the region could probe contentious issues together (Sakr 2005), and while most live phone-calls to the programme were from men, many Arab women activists expressed exasperation with its title and aspects of its content. After running for three years, the show was suspended in mid-2005.

1.5 Controversy over female singers

At the same time, controversy has been sparked by the breaking of social taboos on reality TV shows and music video. Leading Lebanese and Saudi-owned satellite channels have acquired highly successful programme formats (*Pop Idol*, *Fame Academy* etc¹) from European companies, as a means to hook viewers to their schedules week after week. With Arab contestants, music and presenters, and 24-hour spin-offs on digital channels, these formats have proved hugely popular with younger viewers, as demonstrated by the millions of votes cast for shortlisted singers, both male and female, since 2003. But social conservatives, especially in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain, have objected to reality TV programmes in which unmarried contestants live together under one roof. They have also denounced provocative singing and dancing by female Lebanese and Egyptian stars on Arab music TV. The music channels, owned by Saudi and Egyptian entrepreneurs, are apparently lucrative for local cellphone companies because of text messages shown on screen. Some commentators say the videos have obliterated awareness of women's agency by turning the female body and its exposure into a battleground (Abou El Naga 2004). Others, noting the existence of alternative Arabic music videos that celebrate religion and family values, see the video controversy as 'part of longstanding tensions over the status of youth in a patriarchal culture' (Armbrust 2005: 28).

1.6 Managerial appointments

In parallel with the increasing visibility of women on Arab television there has also been a growing female presence behind the screens. To date, however, the significance of this development has been limited by lines of accountability that tend to lead directly or indirectly to an information minister, in a government that may be unelected and unpopular. Women managers in this case are not only constrained in terms of challenging the status quo — they may actually be seen as propping it up. Conflicts of loyalty are further complicated when Arab governments are perceived as relying for survival on foreign sources, including Western military support. In such situations, overt Western pressure aimed at women's empowerment combines with a government's lack of legitimacy to discredit women-friendly policies as 'Westernisation'. Sometimes resentment against such policies already exists. For example, parliamentary quotas for women introduced by presidential decree in Egypt under Sadat had the effect of casting a 'shadow of authoritarianism' over women's rights (Hatem 1992: 234). This background, combined with heavy government censorship of media content, minimises the

¹ The Arabic versions of *Pop Idol* and *Fame Academy* are called *SuperStar* and *Star Academy* respectively.

impact of an extensive presence of female managers throughout the labyrinth of Egypt's state-run media. The availability of experienced female department heads in state-run broadcasting created a pool of talent which new privately-owned Egyptian satellite channels like Dream and Al-Mehwar drew on. Yet personal experience and connections could not overcome censorship-induced obstacles to these channels' success. In Jordan, where women occupy posts in media management, the government co-opted a women's rights activist as a minister, in a role that appeared to make her complicit in policing the media.

1.7 Radio and the printed press

Nevertheless, the Arab media explosion has massively increased opportunities for female media professionals to gain experience on the job, while also increasing the availability of relevant information. Independent FM radio in the region, which previously consisted mainly of Lebanese and Palestinian stations, increased sharply in 2003 after regulatory changes in Egypt, Jordan, the UAE and elsewhere. By end-2005 there were more than 60 independent FM radio stations, with radio debates echoing those on TV and forcing state broadcasters to try to compete. Newspapers and magazines have increased in number over a longer period, again partly in response to changes in media legislation, for instance in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen. New market entrants, such as papers like *Al-Masri al-Youm* or *Nahdet Misr* in Egypt, or Moroccan glossies such as *Femmes du Maroc* or *Citadine*, are more likely than older publications to reflect social changes affecting women. In Saudi Arabia, the publisher of the Dammam-based weekly *Al-Sharq* launched a women's weekly newspaper called *Donya* in 2003 and arranged distribution in other Arab countries in 2004. *Donya* has a male editor-in-chief but a team of women staff writers, who report about such issues as health and education and the people working in these sectors. Three stories on the front page of a December issue (selected at random for the present research) dealt with the treatment of women teachers, Saudi girls wanting to be pilots, and the percentage of women in Saudi Arabia affected by AIDS.

2) Organisational developments

2.1 Uses of the Internet

By the nature of the medium, television bestows visibility on prominent women. But visibility alone is not a reliable marker of women's activism and big changes have taken place away from the media spotlight, at the interface between media organisations and women's activism. It has

been suggested that we should think of newspapers and broadcasting as 'enablers of a range of functionings rather than a stream of content to be consumed' (Garnham 2000: 33). Where the Internet is concerned, the enabling possibilities are very clear. Raw data indicating low levels of Internet penetration in some of the more populous Arab countries do not tell the whole story, because reliance on cybercafés is exceptionally high. Jordan apparently earned a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records* because the concentration of 200 Internet cafés on a single street in Irbid is among the highest in the world (Wheeler 2005). Girls and women frequent cybercafés as well as men. One of the multitude of Arabic language sites¹ they may visit is Islamonline. Launched in Cairo in 1999, this site's input from women journalists and advisors (Kristianasen 2005) reflects the upsurge of women's independent activity — from charitable work to Quranic reading circles — centred on mosques. A more recent initiative, with an outright political objective, was the creation by a female teacher, Ghada Shahbandar, along with other professionals, of an Internet-based group called *Shayfeen.com* (meaning 'we see you') to receive complaints about voting irregularities in Egypt's September 2005 presidential election. Leading news channels Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya both maintain websites, which they use to gauge public opinion or, in the case of Al-Arabiya, to challenge social taboos. Al-Arabiya's Saudi owner, a relative by marriage of Saudi Arabia's ruling family, has told western reporters of his desire to rid the region of what he calls the 'Taliban mentality' (*Washington Times* 2003).

2.2 Limited benefits of union representation

Areas of the media industry where women have yet to make inroads include senior newspaper management and the boards of journalists' unions. In Egypt, the presence of female managers in state-run broadcasting is not matched by similar appointments in the semi-official press. It had been expected that a reshuffle of senior editors in leading Egyptian dailies in 2005 would place a woman in a top job at *Al-Akhbar*. This did not happen. Moreover, the board of Egypt's Journalists' Syndicate has been without a woman for two terms, since Amina Shafiq, a veteran journalist with *Al-Ahram*, was voted off. This is despite the fact that one-third of the syndicate's members are women and despite the call on unions to meet challenges facing female journalists in an era when long shifts and casualisation of labour have become global norms. Most Arab governments allow only one union to represent journalists and restrict union membership to those with written employment contracts. Where other controls deny independent media the financial security that would come from sufficient distribution outlets or advertising revenue,

¹ An article by Layal Daou in *Al-Hayat* on January 16, 2006, estimated that 800 sites carried material relating to Arab women.

and that would enable them to give contracts, journalists' unions end up being dominated by employees of outlets that stay within prescribed margins of free speech. Thus the formation of a Saudi Journalists Association (SJA) in 2003, and the election of two women to its board in June 2004¹, although remarkable in the Saudi context, was not a major departure, given ministry vetting of candidates. Reformist elements in the Saudi leadership are battling with religious conservatives to open professional avenues to women. The SJA's female board members described their priorities as getting contracts and job security for the kingdom's large contingent of freelance female journalists.

2.3 AWMC's pan-Arab network

Had Jordan's union, the Jordanian Press Association (JPA), represented its women members adequately, there would have been less need for a new NGO to do the job instead. Mahasen al-Emam, the first woman to be elected to the JPA's governing council and first editor-in-chief of the weekly *Al-Bilad*, gave up on the JPA when she formed the Arab Women Media Centre (AWMC) in late 1999. Aware of efforts to attract pan-Arab media organisations to establish bases in Jordan, Emam conceived the AWMC as a body that would equip new women journalism graduates for the workplace through training and advice, including advice on work-related legal issues. AWMC members have since produced training videos and organised an annual conference attended by women journalists from almost all Arab countries. By the time of the fourth conference, in September 2005, articulation of concerns at the intersection of media, gender and democratisation was highly developed. Under the overall theme of 'Arab Women Facing Political Change', participants discussed women's citizenship and legal rights, the impact of political and economic changes on media institutions, corruption in the Arab media industry and challenges posed by new technology. At one point, Farida Naqqash, an Egyptian activist in the leftist Tagammu party and the Progressive Federation of Women, who was known to her audience through her newspaper articles and television appearances, drew attention to the treatment of women at a demonstration in Egypt a few months earlier. On May 25, security forces had looked on while thugs ripped at the clothing of female demonstrators and journalists, dragged them by the hair or punched them (Eltahawy 2005). According to Naqqash, the opening of up new media spaces had not so much increased freedom of expression as freedom from fear.

¹ Nahed Bashatah and Nawal al-Rashed, both linked to the daily newspaper *Al-Riyadh*.

2.4 Media exposure of violence against women

It is a fact that women in many different contexts have learned how to use the media to raise awareness of authoritarianism, violence and gender inequality. Photographs of the scenes referred to by Naqqash were carried in the Egyptian opposition newspaper *Al-Ghad*. Rania al-Baz, a Saudi television presenter, put media influence to good effect in April 2004, after her husband beat her nearly to death. She invited journalists around her hospital bed to take pictures of her disfigured face, thereby triggering unprecedented Saudi media coverage of domestic abuse. Rana Husseini, a crime correspondent for the English-language *Jordan Times*, started writing about so-called 'honour crimes' back in 1994. These are crimes in which women are killed or injured by relatives for allegedly besmirching their family's honour; under vestiges of European law in the penal codes of many Arab states¹, male perpetrators can count on leniency for such crimes. Husseini's exposure of this issue during the rest of the 1990s had almost too much impact. It led western media to identify honour crimes with Jordan alone, thereby antagonising Jordan's king and public. The country's conservative, tribal parliament, constituted under a new electoral law, resisted any change in the penal code made under foreign pressure. Yet Western condemnation of honour crimes and sex discrimination in Jordan's justice system did not extend to criticism of the king or the electoral law (Clark 2003: 41). Nor did media publicity at home and abroad safeguard Saudi Arabia's Rania al-Baz. Prohibited from leaving the kingdom without the written permission of a male guardian, she escaped to France in October 2005 with no legal way to return home. As for the abuse mentioned by Naqqash, the outrage it sparked had such limited repercussions that Egypt's attorney-general decided some months later not to pursue an investigation into the events. Viewers of Saudi-owned Orbit TV, which has personal links to Egypt's president, were encouraged to think that the victims had made their stories up.

2.5 Domestic abuse and media monitoring

Studies by Arab women have shown that violence against women is a commonplace feature of television dramas and films. Monitoring of media output to grasp the extent and nature of the phenomenon remains an activity on the margins and one that has only just begun. Egypt's government-sponsored National Commission for Women and the Tunis-based Centre for Arab Women Training and Research (CAWTAR - created by the Tunisian government, UNDP, and

¹ E.g. An article in the French penal code of 1810, which commuted the sentence on any man who killed his wife after finding her in the act of committing adultery, remained in force long enough to enter the laws of Arab countries that came under French rule.

Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organisations) say individually that they intend to undertake media monitoring. To date they have not published results. Instead, MediaHouse, a private production company, and the New Woman Research Centre (NWRC), a Cairo-based NGO, have monitored Arab film and drama seen across the region in 2002 and 2003 and have publicised their findings in the press and on television itself¹. They analysed material shown during the fasting month of Ramadan, when families gather to watch television in the evening after breaking their fast. In the 12 serials and six films monitored in 2002, 559 cases of violence against women were recorded, 13 per cent of which involved killing and 42 per cent beating (MediaHouse 2003: 13). The monitoring exercise in 2003 focused on stereotypes. Far from welcoming this research, the Egyptian government sought to prevent the NWRC from registering under the new NGO law of 2002. The NWRC only managed to register after it appealed against the government's decision in court. Since foreign funding is problematic for Egyptian NGOs, funding for the media watch project came through MediaHouse.

3) Media-politics dynamics

3.1 Campaigning and the media

So far the evidence in this paper has demonstrated that media visibility does not of itself empower women, because empowerment requires change in legal and political systems. Conversely, women's invisibility in the media does not signify an absence of autonomous action. Ethnographic studies of Arab women's groups, including women's movements centred on mosques, reveal forms of agency that defy classification in binary terms as either reproducing or subverting patriarchy (e.g. Mahmood 2005; Barazangi 1999). Studies like these show that women do achieve self-realisation under restricted conditions, where the restrictions they face relate not only to gender but to other axes of power relations as well. The studies also provide cautionary evidence that concepts of consultation and consensus-building captured in the Arabic term *shura*¹ mean far more to most men and women in the region than simplistic versions of 'democracy' that reduce it to majority rule and the casting of votes. Consensus-building has implications for modes of political action. Where the media are mostly linked to entrenched power structures in society, subaltern groups may not regard the media as the primary or most effective channel for their efforts to overcome inequality. A survey of Jordanian women's perceptions about improving their status in public and political life ranked

¹ E.g. The Saudi-owned daily *Al-Hayat* and Al-Jazeera's *Lil Nissa Faqat*.

the media rather low as potential agents of change (Salem-Pickartz et al 2002: 116-117). This situation works both ways: the Saudi daily *Al-Watan* kept one recent story about women's advancement off the front page for fear of negative publicity (Fattah 2005).

3.2 Approaches to division and cohesion

Among the factors that prevent Arab media from making a major contribution to consultation and consensus-building are laws designed to suppress coverage of dissent. In some societies, open disagreement through the media is seen as promoting knowledge and understanding, leading in turn to social cohesion and establishing a middle ground. Many Arab journalists press for greater media freedom precisely because they share this approach. In contrast, their national legal systems are frequently used to prop up what is effectively one-party rule by outlawing material that tackles social divisions, on the grounds that it will exacerbate sectarianism, undermine family values, destroy tradition and so on. Thus Saudi Arabia's celebrated 'National Dialogue', launched in 2003, initially brought male and female representatives of different communities together only in private. Live TV coverage of its sessions did not begin until December 2005. Elsewhere, scriptwriters face censorship if they address issues like Christian-Muslim or Sunni-Shia relations, or women's status. To some extent this accords with public sensibilities. For example, the film-maker Hala Galal² believes that Egyptians have an 'oppressive' way of viewing themselves and their society, wanting things to be portrayed how they would like them to be, and not how they really are (Morgan 2005). That is why Al-Jazeera, which follows internationally accepted norms of newsworthiness and interviews different parties to conflict, has so often been accused in Arab countries of being divisive.

3.3 Women, media and democratic practices

Greater margins of freedom associated with transnational media have increased awareness in Arab countries of how national media could progress. But persistent impediments to such progress at the national level are one reason why campaigns for gender equality in the region are often linked, directly or indirectly, to initiatives for media diversity and free speech. For example, the very active Palestinian women's movement, which is widely credited with helping to 'create a democratic political subculture that values tolerance for political differences' (Barron 2002: 90) has worked with non-governmental Palestinian media outlets, including Al-Quds Educational TV and the Ma'an network of local broadcasters, which also aspire to promote

¹ The Quranic injunction '*wa'l-amr shura bainakum*' means 'the matter is to be decided among yourselves'.

² Including *Dardasha Nissa'iyya* (Women's Chitchat)

participatory politics by representing diverse political views. The Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), a coalition of political parties and NGOs, was formed after women were marginalised in committees set up under the framework of multilateral peace talks in 1991 (Kuttab 1998: 121). WATC campaigned for women to have a quota of 30 per cent of seats on the Palestinian Legislative Council when it was first elected in 1996, and finally succeeded in getting a 20 per cent quota system adopted in 2004. It helped women elect nominees for appointment to municipal councils in the late 1990s when official municipal elections were called off, and organised sessions of a Model Parliament for women and men. Throughout this period, WATC and other women's NGOs worked with publishers and broadcasters, producing newspaper supplements and radio and television programmes, including documentaries and talk shows about women's education and rights (Somiry-Batrawi 2004: 115). A WATC-Ma'an documentary, about a woman elected to head a West Bank municipality, is worth mentioning in light of the December 2005 vote by councillors representing Hamas and other parties to elect a Christian woman as mayor of Ramallah.

3.4 Reform: process or breakthrough?

Similarly, the sequence of events in Moroccan women's struggle for political participation indicates that the process of opening up space for democratic practices also entails development of more pluralistic media. The Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), formed in 1985, created its Committee for Women's Participation in Political Life in 1992; in the 1993 legislative elections (the first for nine years) two women were elected to parliament for the first time. When the 1997 elections brought no further breakthrough, the ADFM concentrated on training women in advocacy and communication skills. In doing so it had to combat media content (especially drama and advertisements) that directly contradicted not only the ADFM's efforts but the government's own declared intention of boosting women's health, education and financial resources and reforming the discriminatory *moudawana* (family code). The *moudawana* was eventually revised in 2004 after Morocco's popular Islamist movement, Al-Adl wa'l Ihsan, pronounced itself in favour on religious grounds, and after suicide attacks in Casablanca discredited extremist opposition to reform. The independent press played a part in the discussions, as when *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* published a 'civilised debate' (Jamaï 2004) between Nadia Yassine of Al-Adl wa'l Ihsan and a minister behind the reforms. But Moroccan's independent press has been harassed by the government and starved of advertising revenues. Women activists meanwhile fear that judges will be slow to implement the revised *moudawana*,

meaning that media scrutiny needs to be kept up. In the Moroccan case, therefore, the continuing struggle for gender equality and survival of the independent media go hand in hand.

3.5 Climates conducive to change

It can be argued that, while media openness and revitalisation of politics combined with women's activism to prepare the ground for revision of Morocco's family law, other factors triggered the revision when it finally occurred. A similar point can be made about the May 2005 change in Kuwait's electoral law, which, after decades of campaigning for Kuwaiti women's political rights, finally granted them the right to vote and stand in elections for public office. Women have long held prominent positions in the Kuwait media, liberal sections of which have also long supported votes for women. Yet these factors, albeit helpful, were not the ones that eventually triggered the breakthrough in the face of opposition from tribal and Sunni Islamist MPs in the National Assembly. Instead it was the prime minister's anxiety not to be embarrassed by the issue on an imminent visit to the US. With quick thinking and deft footwork, the government suddenly pushed the measure through by resorting to a special rule of parliamentary procedure, while also offering MPs a sweetener in the form of a bill proposing pay rises for public and private sector employees. Nevertheless, taken together, the role of the media and the availability of space for debate are instructive in understanding how women's groups worked for change in Kuwait, as they did in Palestine and Morocco. They may also help to explain why, in Egypt, where the ruling party dominates both parliament and the media and obstructs NGOs, the climate has been much less conducive to transforming women's status in politics. In Egypt's 2005 legislative elections the number of women elected to the People's Assembly decreased from seven to four, while the 73 new prosecutors appointed that year included no women at all.

Conclusion

A large and rapid increase in the number of Arab media outlets, especially television channels, has opened up space for women journalists, presenters, producers, film-makers, scriptwriters and managers. At the same time, women in Arab countries have been prominent among those taking advantage of new openings for communication over the Internet. Despite the greater visibility of women in these new media, however, it would be wrong to try to generalise about changing portrayals of women or the impact these may have on public opinion. The same process that opened space for broadcast debates about gender inequality or printed articles about women in the workforce also opened space for contentious music videos, extremist websites opposed to women's presence in public life, and drama serials in which domestic violence

against women appeared to be regarded as a norm. Reductions in the gender imbalance on the boards of journalists' unions have been patchy; NGOs advocating fairer representation of women in the media often remain subject to harsh controls; and independent media outlets struggle to survive. All of which indicates that women's presence in the media, including their presence as journalists, has to be viewed in the context of wider social and political change, since the media are subject to the same divided and competing forces that are at work in the wider society. These forces in turn are variously weakened or strengthened by differing configurations of authoritarian rule, Western intervention, and public weariness of both. In those countries where women have had breakthroughs in winning parliamentary quotas, equality before the law, or even just the vote, these advances remain to be safeguarded and nurtured through the media as in other forums.

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