

The Image of Arab/Amazigh and Moroccan Women in the Media

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Abstract

This article aims at reviewing the relevant literature on the image of Moroccan women in the media. We show that Arab women in general and Moroccan women specifically are underrepresented in media outlets. Afterwards, we focus on the category of Moroccan women subjected to violence and the way media deals with them as they constitute a fragile social category that should be studied. In this respect, we attempt to understand the root of the phenomenon of gender violence in Morocco since research in this field is rare and incomplete as the majority of the findings are to be found in general reports and human rights accounts. Among the reasons behind the vulnerability of Moroccan women subject to violence, we enumerate many including poverty and illiteracy where language is a crucial component.

Keywords: Gender violence, Women rights, Media, Morocco, Laws against violence, Literacy

1. Introduction

“Over the course of their lifetimes, one in three women in Morocco are victims of physical violence, one in four of sexual violence, and one in two of psychological violence. The majority of violence against women occurs in the context of marital, family or other intimate relationships” (Bordat & Kouzzi, 2017, para. 5). This alarming finding posted in *Morocco World News* clearly shows the necessity to understand the roots that underlie violence against women in Morocco; hence, this constitutes a rationale for carrying research in this under-documented area of social science in Morocco.

The aim of this article is to review anterior research done on Moroccan women representation

in the media with a special focus on women subjected to violence, and to attempt to understand the reasons behind this extreme violence. First, We will clarify the fact that research carried on women and their image in the media in Morocco and in the Arab world is not substantial as apart from governmental and human rights organizations reports, it is very rare to find well-articulated pieces of research like articles in scholarly journals or books dedicated to the topic. Second, we will zoom on the image of women subjected to violence in Morocco to foreground the under-representation of this category in the Moroccan media. Third, we will highlight the limitations of research on the topic. Finally, we will try to contextualize the phenomenon of gender violence in Morocco by referring to a set of factors, among which literacy and the linguistic variable are pivotal.

2. The Image of Arab Women in the Media

For Al-Ariqi (2009), women are either invisible or negatively portrayed and she is even skeptical about whether media has been able to empower women as many studies have demonstrated that media do not give enough attention to women's issues in general and those of women in the Middle East (countries similar to Morocco) in particular. She supports her argument by referring to a report conducted in 2005 by the Global Media monitoring countries including the Middle East, which found that only 21% of news subjects are female. She also mentions the 2002-2005 Arab Human Development Report, released under UN sponsorship, which identified key 'deficits' harming the Arab region, including 'freedom deficits' and the 'women empowerment deficit'. This report adopted a set of indicators such as 'voice and accountability' and 'media independence' to reveal that most voices are stifled and that women's voices are stifled more.

Allam (2008, p. 3) has argued that "research on the Arab media's depiction of women has focused mainly on the mental and psychological aspects of their portrayal. The usage of women's bodies as sexual commodities or as a vehicle of sexual arousal was found to be the main negative image used in the Arab media, followed by an image of women who are in some way immoral. Other negative images included the portrayal of women as being illiterate, of limited intellectual capability, inexperienced, materialistic, opportunistic, weak, or dependent".

Al-Ariqi agrees with all scholars on the point that studies treating the portrayal of Middle Eastern women in the media are scarce and that the ones conducted on the broadcast sector in Arab countries are mainly geared toward the content of drama programs such as movies and TV series, or the image of women in advertisements and video clips and "neglected other important programs, such as newscasts, political talk shows, social programs, and documentaries. Despite being incomplete, these studies found that 78.68% of the images of women were negative" (2009, p. 7).

Naomi Sakr (2000) backs up the idea and adds that the relatively low number of women who practice in the media is also a factor to be taken into account behind the low coverage of women's issues in the media. Rahbani (2010) adds that Arab media have shifted from representing women as sex objects to new images of women as mothers, wives, and active participants in society. The problem with this shift lies in the fact that there was too much

focus on housewives while women as workers or political leaders have been underrepresented, which means that “Arab media focus has turned towards a different, but still stereotyped direction” (2010, p. 10). She confirms previous findings that highlighted the fact that in talk shows and news, Arab women are more likely to be featured as victims in stories about accidents, natural disasters, or domestic violence than in stories about their professional abilities or expertise. She based her analysis on an international report containing information collected from monitoring news in 70 countries in different regions of the world and posits that, among other findings, “even in stories that affect women profoundly, such as gender-based violence, it is the male voice (64% of news subjects) that prevails, while women are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims”. ((GMMP, 2005, pp. 30-32, qtd. in Rahbani, 2010, pp. 12-13). The same report postulates that “Women make the news not as figures of authority, but as celebrities (42%), royalty (33%) or as 'ordinary people' ((GMMP, 2005, pp. 30-32, qtd. in Rahbani, 2010, pp. 12-13).

According to the same report, in talk shows and professional reports, “Expert opinion in the news is overwhelmingly male. Men are 83% of experts, and 86% of spokespersons. By contrast, women appear in a personal capacity - as eye witnesses (30%), giving personal views (31 %) or as representatives of popular opinion (34%)” (Rahbani, 2010, p. 12). The conclusion of the report is the following: “The world we see in the news is a world in which women are virtually invisible” (GMMP, 2005, p. 16, qtd. in Rahbani, 2010, p. 12)). The absence of women in news and talk shows in powerful positions seems to be an international feature.

3. The Portrayal of Women in the Moroccan Media

Abdul-Latif and Serpe (2010, p. 3) started their report entitled “The Status of women in the Middle East and North Africa: A Grassroots Research and Advocacy Approach: Preliminary findings from surveys in Lebanon and Morocco” by the revealing fact that like women in the Middle East and North Africa, women in Morocco suffer at all levels ranging from a lack of social and economic autonomy to a lack of political and media representation, a thing that makes them rated negatively in comparison with women from other countries, and even with men in their region. The authors of the report add that the scarcity of comprehensive data on these areas renders research even thornier and thus the evaluation of the status of women becomes difficult.

Oubou (2013, p. 1) holds that the economic, social, and political situation of women which has tremendously changed over the past two decades is not reflected in the Moroccan media, which keeps producing the same outdated, stereotypical images of women broadcasted on television programming, especially in sitcoms, without taking into account the new roles women play in modern Morocco. She cites two popular TV shows, *Moudawala* (Jury Deliberation) and *L'khit L'byed* (The White Thread), which represent women negatively, mainly from low classes, as being unskilled and submissive. These generalizations, according to the author, overlook the complexities surrounding the status of Moroccan women and convey a false image about them. Another argument advanced by Oubou is her finding that Moroccan media “perpetuates a false image of dichotomy and extremes. Women are

presented either as well educated and chic, or docile and “traditional.” However, reality is much more nuanced and complicated. Unfortunately, though media outlets could be so helpful to the advancement of the Moroccan feminist movement by broadcasting the ongoing process, they choose to perpetuate false and often detrimental images of Moroccan women” (p. 2).

Media, from an economic perspective, is a business owned by the elite for whom gender equality is not a priority. Accordingly, the lack of civic responsibility does not help in enabling the Moroccan change makers to exploit the power of the media to trigger meaningful social, political, and economic improvement. The case of women portrayal is revealing in this regard as “the media’s insistence on portraying women as victims, uneducated, or as a source of scandal, may even exacerbate women’s social troubles and violence against women.” (Oubou, 2013, p. 2).

Ennaji (2012, p. 156) posits that “ICTs can improve women’s lives and gender relations, promote social change at the individual, institutional, country, and broader social levels”. He further argues that digital technologies influence the portrayal of gender roles and relations, and they paradoxically make both the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the positive transformation of gender roles an easy endeavor. He concludes his article by saying that ICTs make it possible for each case of abuse to be made into an individual case that attracts attention.

Beyond the cube (2011, cited in Odine, 2013) qualifies Morocco as a country that relies extensively on social media to communicate and interact with the female population with women making up 33.5 percent of all users. In this respect, Euler (2013, p. 2) raised the question of self-representation inherent to social networking as these sites by nature allow their users to construct their own identities. Social networks challenge notions of privacy and publicity and modern technologies such as mobile phones and Internet access have resulted in new forms of socializing. Women gain a new agency through these new spaces. The freedom of interaction accorded to women within these public spaces makes them gain even more within the realm of social networking sites. The Internet has led to new definitions of social interaction that have formed a new socialization, mediating the concepts of domestic and public expectations (Euler, 2013, p. 22).

Skalli (2006), in her important study on gender communication in the public sphere in MENA countries, states that women have become more creative and more strategic in their actions despite the pockets of resistance they face. Women’s efforts have found new places for expression like newspapers, magazines, and periodicals, television programs (including satellite television), radio programs, documentaries, feature films and the Internet. Women use different mediums to maximize their chances of inventing alternative discourses on womanhood and citizenship.

Skalli (2006, p. 39) agrees with Abdul-Latif and Serpe (2010) about the observation that research on women and the media in the MENA region is recent and scarce, including the issue of the negative stereotyping of women in print and broadcast media. She further states that some women journalists in the MENA have gained confidence, competence, and

aggressivity, a thing that allowed them to tackle subjects that used to be considered taboo.

4. Violence against Women in Morocco

Concerning violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa, the survey published in “The Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa: A Grassroots Research and Advocacy Approach Preliminary findings from surveys in Lebanon and Morocco” by Abdul-Latif and Serpe (2010) has scrutinized the general perceptions and attitudes towards violence against women and whether domestic violence, in particular, is tolerated or rejected by society at large. Among the findings related to the Moroccan context, a comparison between Morocco and Lebanon in the report under review shows that 93% of Lebanese women and 91% of men think that domestic violence is totally condemned in their communities. Likewise, whereas 91% of Moroccan women believe that domestic violence is completely rejected in their communities, 5% believe that it is somewhat rejected. The striking finding in this report is related to Moroccan men’s opinion about domestic violence and which notes that Moroccans differ from both Moroccan women and Lebanese men and women as only 42% of Moroccan men feel domestic violence is completely rejected and 45% believe it is only somewhat rejected (p. 11).

Even more striking is the finding that Lebanese women (4%) and men (10%) say they personally find it acceptable that a man beats his wife. It should be noted here that this acceptance of domestic violence by women declines with educational accomplishment and stays the same with educated and uneducated Lebanese men. Contrarily, nearly 9% of Moroccan women state that they personally find it acceptable for women to be beaten by their husbands in certain situations, and a striking one-third of Moroccan men agree (30%); additionally, the survey elicited information from respondents about whether they find beating a justified behavior “when framed in terms of six specific situations: if she neglected household responsibilities; if she was disobedient or did not follow his orders; if she neglected the children; if she tried to impose her views; if she went out without telling her husband; and if she refused sex” (p. 12). 83% of Lebanese women and 79% of Lebanese men rejected domestic violence under all possible situations whereas men and women’s responses showed that 53 % of Moroccan women and 48% of Moroccan men say domestic violence against women is never justified in all five of these situations, which means that for them domestic violence may be tolerated in certain situations (Abdul-Latif & Serpe, 2010, p. 12).

Sadiqi (2010-2011, p. 17), on another level, points to the fact that questions related to domestic violence have been marginalized theoretically although activism and legal reform work remain strong in North Africa, and although gender-based violence is considered a major issue in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). For the author, this lack of theoretical work on domestic violence in the region has led to an absence in terms of decisions and action on the part of policy-makers. For her, academic theory on the topic cannot develop without stressing the “private with the aim of rendering it public” (p. 17). In her article, Sadiqi (2010-2011) links domestic violence with the nature and structure of the family in North African societies which are patriarchal and where “economic crises, unemployment, and a superficial form of

religiosity led to a crisis of masculinity in the Maghreb, a fact which resulted in more domestic violence” (pp. 20-21). Domestic violence is not only a family effect as we find that the state also plays a role as studies have shown that state-building in the Maghreb has been based on family regulation (Charrad, 2007). For Sadiqi (2010-2011, p. 23), the media fulfill their function of sensitizing the population about violence directed toward women and showcasing the activities of civil society groups on the issue. As a matter of fact, investigative reports, advertisements dealing with violence against women, and talk shows are abundant on television. It remains, however, that for the author, the mainstream media do not project the different advances made by women, and despite the fact that they have addressed issues like sexual harassment, domestic violence, and gender roles, these attempts remain scarce.

For Ennaji (2012, p. 155), mass media, especially television, perform an influential job in raising awareness about women’s right, mobilizing women to fight for their rights, breaking the silence about violence, and sensitizing the public to the dangers of violence against women. He exemplified with a recent national campaign against gender-based violence, an extensively mediatized event, in addition to programs like *Moukhtafoun* and *lkhitlebyad*, two famous 2M television talk shows in Morocco that tackle the issue of violence against women. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), according to the author, constitute an ideal means to catalyze change in social relations as they are heavily adopted by NGOs to support women subject to violence and the people and organizations working to combat it.

In the article entitled “Media and the law: Potential friends or enduring foes of the women’s rights movement in Morocco?” , Oubou (2013) argues that the UN Women-sponsored study on Moroccan women in 2011, which stated that about 60 percent of Moroccan women have experienced some form of violence recently, is revealing in the sense that although it would be unfair to assert that violence against women in Morocco is caused by their misrepresentations in media, the big question about the extent to which “banal” portrayals of women in the media unconsciously reinforce the perception of women as less powerful than men in society remains crucial.

Skalli (2006, p. 40) says: “Whether we talk about domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation, or sexual harassment, individual journalists are contributing to breaking the culture of silence surrounding women’s reality”. The author exemplifies the situation by referring to countries in the MENA region and mentions Morocco where “investigations of sexual exploitation, domestic violence and harassment at school and work have been published since the 1980’s by commercial and feminist magazines. In the mid-1990s, journalists from *Femmes du Maroc* and *Citadine* extended a practice initiated in the mid-1980s by *Thamania Mars* (March 8), an early feminist periodical published by the Union of Feminist Action. Despite the multiple episodes of censorship and threats from conservative groups, professional women remain determined to give a voice to the marginalized by articulating in public what society seeks to overlook, silence, or forget” (p. 40).

In a Gender Studies Report that dates back to March the 13th, 2017, Hayat Naciri has attempted to enumerate factors behind gender-based violence in Morocco. She has

taxonomized these factors into societal and socio-economic ones. For her, at the social level, women are mistreated because violent husbands take drugs and drink alcohol. At the socioeconomic level, the dependence of women on their husbands financially leads also to violence, but she did not explain why. For the author, the direct outcome of this domestic violence is physical as it may lead to injuries ranging like fractures, bruises, disabilities, and burns. The statistics she advanced are revealing as she found that “62.8% of women in Morocco of ages 18-64 had been victims of some form of violence during the year preceding the study and 48% have been subjected to psychological abuse”, and that “this same study found that 55% of these acts of violence were committed by the victim’s husband, and the violence was reported by the wife in only 3% of such cases”(p. 14). As far as the psychological effect of violence is concerned, Naciri (2017) observes that it definitely contributes to the dehumanization and loss of the sense of worth of women, which in turn leads to fear and insecurity. It also takes from women their right of being effective members in their family and their community. The effect is even greater on children who undoubtedly suffer from behavioral problems.

Naciri (2017) has suggested few solutions to solve this problem. The first solution is legislative and it consists of narrowing the judicial gap and devise a redressive law that is able to incriminate the wrong doers. Second, religiously, she suggests that social and cultural modes that do not respect women under the label ‘Islam’ should be changed. Third, raising awareness is of paramount importance as this measure will use information, sensitization, and education to fight back, in addition to providing better job chances and structure nonviolent culture together with boosting women social networking and media.

What is more alarming in the review of literature about WSV is the painful fact that not only women who live in Morocco are concerned, but also Moroccan women who live abroad. In their study about domestic violence during pregnancy in Turkish and Moroccan communities, Korfker, van der Pal-de Bruin, and Rijnders (2005) have found that among the largest minority groups who live in the Netherlands, namely the Surinamese, Antillean/Aruban, Turkish and Moroccan communities, there is a low level of domestic violence among these groups compared to the native Dutch population: 24% versus 45% due to underreporting because of cultural reasons. This does not mean that it is inexistent.

5. Contextual Clues about Gender Violence in Morocco

The fact that the WSV we have studied speak only Moroccan Arabic points to the potential correlation between the linguistic repertoire of our subjects, illiteracy and poverty. Ennaji (2005) spots three major social classes: the upper class which dominates the scene economically and politically and consists of “the urban bourgeoisie, and the rich peasantry and landowners”; the middle class, “which comprises doctors, industrialists, administrators, university teachers, lawyers, etc”; and finally the lower class, “which includes workers, miners, small merchants and peasants” (p. 15).

While we think that monolingualism is strongly associated with illiteracy, there is a strong tie between social class, language and literacy as it is noticed that “while illiteracy is very high among the lower class, the majority of middle and upper class people are literate, bilingual or

multilingual”(Ennaji, 2005, p. 15).

For Agnaou (2004, p. 21), Moroccan women are subject to intra and inter-discrimination. The first one concerns injustice as far as “sexist” legislative texts, specifically *Al-mudawwana*, the Personal Code, are concerned. The second one concerns discrimination “by class, language, area and level of education”. She links this discrimination with women’s illiteracy and affirms the fact that this latter is part and parcel of patriarchal societies where women’s roles are confined to children upbringing in a typical domestic sphere totally detrimental to education and communication.

The private/domestic sphere mentioned above is seen by Sadiqi (2003) as a system that excludes women and sanctions them physically and morally as any emancipation is considered as a threat to the prevalent masculine order. This is done through the pivotal notion of the family where a system of “kinship relations, a battery of traditions and rituals, and taboo” reinforce women gender roles as “guardians of social organization” (p. 54).

The access of women to the public sphere is incomplete and contested according to Skalli (2006), an observation she ascribes to the fact that “the public sphere has remained as the self-acclaimed space of male absolute power and dominance until recently. Women’s access to this sphere is contested because the male-dominated politico-religious centers of power in Muslim societies remain ambivalent in their positions toward the scope of women’s mobility as well as their visibility” (p. 38).

Skalli (2006, p. 38) relies on a survey on Arab attitudes which confirms the above mentioned ambivalence projected in the opinions gathered from the Muslim populations. This survey has come to the conclusion that while Arab respondents to the survey unequivocally praised the pursuit of knowledge and condemned authoritarian rule, they expressed the limits of their democratic aspirations with regard to gender equality and empowerment. In other words, “Arabs stood for gender equality in education but not in employment....Arabs expressed support for building the human capabilities of women but not for their utilization” (UNDP, 2003, p. 2, qtd. in Skalli, 2006, p. 38).

Agnaou (2004) ascribes women’s low self-image to the culture that they largely participate in its transmission and which leads to the eradication of any motivation in them and in their daughters to learn (p. 21). While the Moroccan state has become aware of the devastating effect of female illiteracy on socio-economic development, which is engendered in setting up corrective literacy programs “to compensate for their illiteracy, which is nowadays considered as an obstacle to socio-economic development, literacy programs have been developed to improve literacy rates, child care and immunization, and to decrease fertility rates. The question would be: what is the place of women’s empowerment among such target national goals?” (Agnaou, 2004, p. 21).

The connection between women’s grim situation and social organization is confirmed by Sadiqi (2003), who states that this organization has a huge effect on gender perception and gender construction. She states that:

Men and women in Morocco evolve within the same social and cultural context and

cultural discourses are constantly circulating and affect their speech and behavior. These discourses are not internalized and reproduced mechanically; they filter through an 'active' reproduction mechanism where social organization plays a key role. Moroccan society is built on clear role assignments for men and women. These roles are meant to guarantee the structure and functioning of society. Control over men's and women's behavior is ensured through a set of three substantive designata: (i) rituals, (ii) the codes of honor and morality, and (iii) the concept of 'collective self'. These three designate are 'created', 'fostered' and 'perpetuated' in the unit of the Moroccan social organization: family. (pp. 53-54)

In an important article that dates back to 2001, Skalli has stressed the fact that over the last decades Morocco has abandoned investment in the social domains like health and education, a thing that has increased women's vulnerability. Specifically, it has become hard to assure a job to cater for family needs, which in turn has compelled them to search for informal jobs with longer hours and lower wages (p. 83). Economic recession and restructuring has also affected the supporting network engendered in the family unit which has collapsed due to socio-economic, demographic, and cultural changes in the Moroccan family. Another impact is related to the reproduction of illiteracy as daughters are denied any access to education and they are sent to work in households at an early age in total violation of the law (p. 84).

The feminization of poverty is also clear in the cities where poor girls and women and with the lack of education and skills find themselves practicing risky activities like working in bars and nightclubs, jobs that lead directly to prostitution. To conclude this section, Skalli shows the intimate bind "between the feminization of rural poverty and the increasing feminization of migration in Morocco" as rural exodus has shifted from being a male activity to a decision made by rural women to survive" (Skalli, 2001, p. 84).

In an article entitled "Violence against women: 16 reasons to amend Morocco's 103-13 bill" and published in *Morocco World News* by Stephanie Willman Bordat and Saida Kouzzi in December 19, 2017, the journalists have summarized the legal situation of WSV in Morocco by first stating that thanks to the pressure imposed by NGOs, 28 amendments by the House of Representatives were advanced before the vote in July 2016 on the draft law 103-13 on Violence Against Women, of which the Moroccan Government approved an initial version in March 2016.

According to the journalists, these amendments have widened the scope of the meaning of violence to embrace "all forms of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, as well as coercive control, deprivation and intimidation. Reforms also integrated acts intended to, are likely to, or may cause harm or suffering, including threats, and not just those that actually do result in harm or suffering. Other significant changes made by the House enable victims to file a request for a non-contact order, as well as integrate NGOs into local violence against women Committees" (para. 2).

For the authors, the amendments mentioned above are not enough. To explain, they advanced 16 reasons why the Draft Law 103-13 has to be amended. These reasons are the following:

1. Violence against women is invasive in Morocco.
2. To be able to better fathom and fight violence against women.
3. Violence against women is costly for both the victims and the country.
4. To respect Article 22 of the 2011 constitution that defends women's rights.
5. To abide by international commitments and laws.
6. To be part of the international community in as far as violence against women is concerned.
7. To guarantee immunity against violence for women.
8. To respect human rights.
9. To participate in decreasing corruption in public services.
10. To adopt a global and integrated treatment of violence against women.
11. To help and encourage women to report violence.
12. To eradicate tolerance for violence against women (1): An explicit law in favor of more civic responsibility.
13. To eradicate tolerance for violence against women (2): reinforce laws to have an educational role to sensitize the population about what is appropriate and what is not.
14. To grant a clear framework for public actors.
15. To synchronize services in the public sector nationwide.
16. "Finally, just because enough is enough."

6. Limitations of Anterior Research

It is clear from the survey that both research on women and their image in the media in Morocco and in the Arab world is scarce. It is true that many reports from both governmental and human rights organizations have dealt with issues related to women rights and violence against them, but articles in scholarly journals or books dedicated to the issue are rare. Additionally, we have not found any piece of research that studies the image of women subject to violence in the Moroccan media, a thing that has encouraged us more to take this challenge and attempt to deal with the issue in the future, which we consider a crucial one in the Moroccan context due to the big dimension of the phenomenon and its impact on the Moroccan society.

7. Conclusion

This review of literature on the image of women in the Middle East and North Africa in the media, and the issue of violence against women in the Arab world and Morocco and its different manifestations have clearly shown the degree of the scarcity of documentation on a serious issue, which constitutes a rationale for future research on the thorny issue. We would

strongly recommend that the government devises more inhibiting laws against husbands who commit violence in the domestic sphere and make the laws, which are abundant, easier to implement. Besides, more efforts should be done to reduce poverty and illiteracy by innovating new programs and calque others from countries which have been able to reduce these two diseases. Economic empowerment and total equity with men is also a key issue that has to be addressed if any progress is to be made in Morocco. Finally, at the academic level, it would be a good idea if future research tackles forms of violence as narratives in the media from a critical discourse analysis perspective by keeping with the plea made by other researchers that action research may be a source of solutions at different levels.

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