

Is the Medium Still the Message? Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Lebanon

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As the saying goes, 'the medium is the message' and media platforms around the world are in a state of constant transformation. Is the message being reshaped as well; and if so for the better?

Over half a century ago gender equality activists began challenging discrimination and stereotyping of women on several fronts. They pointed to the glaring absence of female voices, and faces, globally. The few women who were mentioned were usually shown in traditional, inferior and submissive roles. Finally, portrayals of women were accused of condoning or encouraging gender based violence (GBV), sometimes subtly, but often openly. The struggle for gender equality in the media was a long uphill battle, both in the Global North and the Global South.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), great progress has been made. However, as victories were celebrated in one area, new forms of stereotyping were opening up elsewhere. It seems that neither the medium nor news, entertainment, and cultural content are the 'real message'. The core issue is power, control over resources, decision making and communication channels, and this has changed little in 50 years. Much has improved on the surface and this is not insignificant. Today, more women are producing media content and involved in presenting it, both in front of and behind the camera. A wide variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) have taken up the gender equality cause and are becoming increasingly media-savvy. Individual activists and grassroots movements now realize that the media frontier is a primary battleground when fighting GBV and promoting a world in which women and men are judged based on their merit. Today, most political parties in Lebanon have a gender-equality plank in their partisan platforms or media messages.

So why is the mainstream media playing field still tilted so unfairly? Why do women have to work twice as hard to advance in their careers, get their message out in the schools and universities, and break the glass ceiling in cinema, the music industry, theater, art and



design? One of the reasons is that patriarchal power remains invested in social injustice in the workplace, with respect to the family rights legislation, or full citizenship rights for Lebanese women. Equality in the media sector is seen as a threat to patriarchy. Another key problem is nepotism and 'cherry picking', where women are hired based on the proverbial 'wasta' (influence peddling) system or are promoted by men without the support of female networks and movements, which can 'cover their back' once they move up the career ladder in a man's world. Finally, the medium still is the message and sexism, and even GBV, in the digital media sector is as bad as it was in the old days of newspapers, magazines and radio broadcasting.

Today women are increasingly taking up leadership positions in the ICT sector, and many men have joined the struggle against stereotyping and GBV. Together they are focusing their efforts strategically at eradicating the root source of inequality in the media, the pervasive lack of meritocracy within Lebanese society. This struggle requires the combined voices of all genders, confessions and social classes, if we are going to collectively make a difference in the coming 50 years.

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