

Women and Media: Libyan Female Journalists from Gaddafi Media to Post- revolution: Case Study

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Abstract

his article examines the representation of women in Libyan national traditional media before, during and after the February 2011 revolution that led to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. What roles did female journalists assume within national traditional newsrooms and how did these roles evolve from activism in the defense of women's causes and the official revolutionary ideals of the former regime to spreading the message of the revolutionaries during the uprising? This article further reflects on changes in the nature of female journalists' roles in the new post-revolution media landscape. The opening of the media market to private ownership for the first time in Libya's history is accompanied by an expansion of women's presence in Libyan newsrooms, where this increased visibility is to be viewed primarily as a mean of attracting audiences. In the shaky media landscape that characterizes the post-revolutionary period, this expansion reflects the clash between the conservative values of Libyan society and the liberal values of the open market. I argue that the growing number of women in national Libyan media post-revolution is not reflective of a general trend towards women's empowerment in a country struggling with the spread of violence and the legacy of the past. Rather, the thorny process of restructuring national media post-revolution and the need for new media outlets capable of catering for large audiences are empowering the presence of women in newsrooms as a strong marketing asset.

Keywords

Arab Spring, Libya, gender, democracy, journalism

Introduction

It is not possible to examine the role played by women in Libyan national traditional media independently from the history of this media sector and its chaotic developments after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. The nature of

the Libyan national media, conceived and developed as a political tool for the propagation of the regime's message, rendered the distinction between male and female journalists inside newsrooms in certain respects irrelevant. Journalists, acting as mere publishers of the regime's message had little say in editorial policies or the content that was their product. The commercialization of this sector after the revolution in conjunction with fierce competition among the new private media outlets that are its driving force have opened new doors for women in Libyan newsrooms; their presence is used as a means both of attracting audiences and as a symbol of modernization in post-Gaddafi Libya.

This article closely examines the status of women journalists in Libyan traditional media and how this status transformed from before to after the revolution of February 2011. This analysis argues that women's role in Libyan media changed from one of engagement in defending women's causes to a feature of commercial marketing strategies. Despite the abundant opportunities for female journalists in new media outlets, especially TV stations, their active role is not a reflection of a general change in the status of women in what is in some respects an increasingly conservative society. Rather it is an expression of the need for these new and inexperienced media outlets to attract audiences by embracing the model of the powerful pan-Arab satellite media. The regression of women's conditions in the aftermath of the revolution confirms the thesis that the expansion of the presence of women in newsrooms does not reflect a general trend towards the empowerment of women in the new Libya.

Women's low representation in the male-dominated newsroom: An international problem

Recent years witnessed a substantial increase in the number of female journalists working in mass media newsrooms at the international level in addition to a steady advancement in women's seniority within these newsrooms. This coincides with an increasing treatment of women's topics in media productions, such as violence against women and gender discrimination.

However, female journalists are still unable to access executive positions in numbers sufficient to allow them to influence the definition of news values and media practices (Zilliagus-Tikkanen 1997; Melin-Higgins 2004; The Annenberg Public Policy Center 2003). For instance, women in the creative sector in the US are only responsible for a humble 20 percent of content (Byerly and Ross 2006:78). In her survey of women in journalism for the International Federation of Journalists, Bettina Peters (2001) finds that although in some media industries women represent around 40 percent of working journalists, they only make up 3-5 percent of leading editorial teams. The main obstacles faced by women journalists in their quest for job advancement are “stereotypes, cultural attitudes expecting women to be sub-ordinate and subservient...; employment conditions, lack of equal pay, lack of access to further training, lack of fair promotion procedures, lack of access to decision-making positions (glass ceiling), sexual harassment, age limits, job segregation; social and personal obstacles, conflicting family and career demands, lack of support facilities (day care centers), lack of self-esteem” (Peters 2001:17). Much feminist criticism of news has focused on three main arguments: the lack of visibility of women in important news content, the distorted representation of women by focusing on their sexual attributes instead of their ideas, and finally the difficulties women face in accessing the news making apparatus as well as promotion to leadership positions within it (Byerly 2004).

The limited access of female journalists to spheres of decision making within mainstream newsrooms is thought to be strongly linked to their inability to influence the definition of news values and the setting of news agendas. Margaret Gallagher, an expert on gender patterns in media, finds that the growing number of female journalists in mainstream newsrooms in various roles did not lead to their empowerment, as their share of decision making is still very limited - as if “one woman at the top is as much as the system can absorb” (2001). According to the statistics of UNESCO, out of more than 200 media organizations in 30 countries across four regions, women head only 7. A further 7 have female deputy directors, although most of these are small radio companies or news magazines (Gallagher 1995).

The ability of women to adapt to the male-dominated newsroom's dynamics remains a major challenge for their career advancement. The seniority of some female journalists did not contribute to influencing a "male-identified" and "male-directed agenda" (Byerly and Ross 2006) inside these newsrooms. While the representation of women within mass media newsrooms is centered on soft topics and field reporting, the number of women considered a reliable voice to write opinion pieces and to report on politics is extremely narrow in a field traditionally considered to be a male domain. The gender distribution of labor inside newsrooms considers women to be less able to be coherent, analytical and affirmative of strong views, which explains the fact that female journalists have little weight in hard politics (Christmas 1997). Women's survival strategy in male-dominated newsrooms thus involves "either beating the boys at their own game or else developing alternative ways of practicing journalism" (Byerly and Ross 2006:79) by resorting to adopting masculine values and behavior in journalistic practice or escaping from mainstream to alternative media. The masculinity of the newsrooms is not linked to the production process itself but to the definition of newsworthiness, angles, and styles (Van Zoonen 1998:35).

However, scholars and practitioners argue that a rise in the number of women in mass media newsrooms will not necessarily lead to the empowerment of women in the media workforce or the granting of due representation for women's topics in news coverage. However, a critical mass of female journalists could have a positive effect in raising editorial sensitivity towards women's issues, thereby improving the coverage of these topics and their place in the news agenda. Without a doubt, the limited numbers of women in the industry reinforces gender inequalities. However, several arguments challenge the perceived positive outcome of a critical mass effect. First, the presence of weak networks of solidarity among female journalists inside newsrooms, caused by a culture of "complicity in patriarchy" with male colleagues, leads to the perpetuation of women's secondary status in newsrooms (Byerly and Ross 2006:166). This complicity is imperative for ambitious women who would hardly make it to top-ranking positions without the support of senior male colleagues. Moreover, having a dual identity of woman

and media practitioner does not lead necessarily to a media production sensitive to women's struggles against discrimination or domestic violence or indeed to increasing coverage of any topics linked to women's rights (Sakr 2004). The newsrooms' traditions of professional promotion consider the expertise in the field of politics imperative to seniority. In that sense, being engaged in defending women's issues would not help in boosting a female journalist's chances of achieving seniority.

The seniority of few women in newsrooms did not lead to major changes in newsrooms in terms of relations' dynamics and media content. Most female media executives have had to adopt "masculine management" behavior in order to earn respect and succeed in high-end jobs. In effect, they have to adopt the news values of their male colleagues. Furthermore, women's promotion to leading positions inside mainstream newsrooms could be linked to their personal profile and not necessarily their professional career, such as being linked to the ownership of the media outlet or the political agenda it supports. In these cases, the promotion of these journalists is not linked to their gender or performance but to their personal conditions. In her analysis of Saudi women in Arab media, Mellor points that those who managed to have a successful journalistic career outside the kingdom belong to a cohort of privileged women from the upper middle classes who already enjoyed socio-economic privileges such as studying in western universities (2010b:219).

The recruitment of women could also be linked to business interests, such as the favoritism for young and beautiful female presenters in Lebanese TV (Al-Qadry and Harb 2000) or the expansion of TV slots dealing with human interest stories considered fit for female presenters as opposed to their male colleagues (Van Zoonen 1998).

The Arab context: Arab women in media

The publication of women's magazines is an old practice in the Arab press; the first such publication is *"Al-Fatat"* [The Girl] magazine, published in Cairo in 1892. The change in Arab media landscapes in the 1990s incre-

ased the representation of women within newsrooms and in media content, especially with the proliferation of regional pan-Arab media. This was accompanied by a newfound courage in tackling topics that used to be socially considered taboos, such as domestic violence, Islamic law, and so-called honor killing (Matar 2007). Special publications or programs dedicated to women's topics increased in recent years, especially with the launch of TV channels targeting an audience of women, such as the Lebanese satellite broadcaster *Heya* [She]. Important slots were dedicated to women's issues in influential pan-Arab satellite TV stations, such as "*Lil Nisaa Faqat*" [For Women Only] on al-Jazeera channel and "*Kalam Nawaem*" [Soft Talk] on MBC TV channel, enabling "subordinate groups to express themselves on their own terms" (Sakr 2004:12). Despite the link between these satellite pan-Arab media and the ruling elites, these programs managed to break the wall of silence on polemic topics both in politics and in women's rights, although these slots were not necessarily used as a means of empowering women. For instance, these liberal trends in tackling women's rights in Saudi-funded media outlets were mainly linked to the need for Saudi women to contribute to family wealth (Sakr 2004). The representation of women in media was equally important for Arab regimes willing to improve their international image by granting some visibility for women and women's topics in their media platforms.

While the literature on women and media demonstrates common difficulties shared by Arab female journalists and their colleagues in the West, there are particularities associated with the nature of political and socio-economic systems in specifically Arab countries. In her analysis of Lebanese female journalists, Yasmine Dabbous (forthcoming) lists the main obstacles encountered by nine senior journalists she interviewed as the following: the difficulties of striking a balance between family and work; the emphasis (in the case of television especially) on the physical appearance of journalists; female colleagues' enviousness; and the reluctance of junior male colleagues to accept the authority of female managers. This difficulty in asserting their authority on junior male colleagues is also expressed by Saudi journalists in leading positions having to deal with junior colleagues from their countries

(Butters 2009). Lebanese media, especially TV stations, tend to favor young and beautiful female journalists who perceive their role as mainly in the field of entertainment and not in politics, unlike their male colleagues (Al-Qadry and Harb 2002).

The particularities of political regimes and media industries in the Arab world make gender irrelevant in impacting certain media practices inside newsrooms. In a context where self-censorship restrictions are the norm, that is, the content is dictated by the official discourse, with clear “red lines” that are not to be breached by either male or female media practitioners. In the Egyptian State TV and Radio Union, programs on women’s rights had to avoid tackling topics considered as a breach of traditional or religious taboos (Sakr2004:9). Similarly, Dabbous (forthcoming) finds that, in the context of recruitment, the political alignment of mainstream Lebanese newsrooms does not distinguish between male and female journalists. Several journalists interviewed said that hiring policies are not based on considerations of gender. Rather, men and women either supported by a given political party or complying with the outlet’s political stance tend to be favored for hire. The nature of the Lebanese media as mostly owned by families linked to politics or politicians makes political connections and not the gender of the applicant the primary factor in recruitment policies.

However, the business interests of pan-Arab newsrooms transformed female journalists into a major “selling point,” thus contributing to raising the profile of female journalists. In her research on women in transnational Arab media outlets, Mellor argues that stereotypical sexist attitudes resulted in privileged access to sources for female journalists, beating their male colleagues in one of their main fields: political reporting. The primacy of conflict reporting from Arab war zones provided female journalists with the opportunity to engage in conflict reporting, a journalistic genre equal in importance to political reporting (Mellor 2010a).

The growing popularity and influence of talk show slots in Egyptian media does not exclude female journalists; some of them are moderating widely viewed prime-time talk shows. The diversification of roles played by Arab

women in Arab media renders it impossible to confine women's roles to narrow definitions (Mellor 2010b).

Moreover, the cultural shape of gender relations inside newsrooms questions the ability to examine the development of women's roles inside newsrooms without linking it to the overall empowerment of women in the workforce of the Arab world. This empowerment is a "multi-faceted, multi-dimensional process of power redistribution in society," the realization of which is conceived of as "a function of the interplay of progressive gender-based societal and legal advocacy actions, on the one hand, and institutional reforms, on the other hand" (Ayish 2010:193). In this perspective, the empowerment of Arab women in media is one facet of a wider dilemma, that of inequality in the distribution of wealth between females and males in various sectors of production as well as women's advancement in economic, political and educational spheres. Arab female journalists face not only barriers based on gender but also the wider limitations on rights and freedoms imposed by autocratic regimes. Their battle to assert their presence in media cannot therefore be dissociated from the political struggle for rights and freedoms in the Arab world (Sakr 2001). Post revolution, female journalists as well as their male colleagues have to face additional restrictions, mainly the spread of violence, growing extremist trends and the attempts of new regimes to muzzle media using the old restrictive regulatory framework.

Libyan media: from Gaddafi propaganda machine to transitional media landscape

Media reform in Libya opted for a complete rupture with the past. In Gaddafi's Libya, the media was seen as the voice of the regime and the vehicle for its propaganda and could thus only be state owned (Richter 2012). The state media were controlled by an extremely centralized governmental apparatus of organizations that were continuously rebranded depending upon the regime's mood. The "al-Ghad" project, launched by Gaddafi's son Saif el Islam in late 2000, could be seen as a limited liberalization aiming to rebrand the image of the regime. The project did not succeed in overcoming

internal pressures, and eventually this experiment ended up reproducing the various mechanisms of control prevalent in the state owned media.

After the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, the Committee for Supporting and Encouraging the Press (CESP) established to oversee the print media sector took a radical approach. It dismantled the state's main newspapers, publishing new ones with the main aim of providing new structures for the regime's media staff. However, these new press publications were understaffed and suffered from both lack of vision and limited resources. For the first time in the history of the country, private media outlets were launched in the absence of any regulatory framework (el Issawi 2013).

Ambitious plans to transform the state media into providers of quality news proved unrealistic given the poor professional skills of journalists and lack of managerial leadership. Furthermore, the struggle between different factions and armed militias over control of the assets of former television and radio stations hampered the rebirth of the old state TV and radio apparatus. Plans to abolish the powerful Ministry of Information and to establish an independent media council that would be responsible for overseeing the media sector did not materialize. In fact, battles over the formation and structure of this body led the government to freeze this project and to reinstate the Ministry of Information.

Most of the new media projects are thought to be linked to specific political agendas and interests. The majority of these projects, which still operate with limited staff and resources, were born outside the country, mainly in Tunisia and Egypt, with the aim of countering the regime's state media propaganda. However, in the post-Qaddafi period they have to redefine their identity while suffering from a lack of vision as much as from the absence of sophisticated organizational capacities. Most of these initiatives are being bought up by powerful business interests eager to invest in the media sector in order to buy influence in the political arena (el Issawi 2013).

Libyan women in media: new/old roles

Methodology

This analysis is based on qualitative interviews conducted with nine Libyan female journalists in various positions in traditional media outlets and forms part of wider research mapping changes in values and practices in transitional Libyan media.¹ It aims to examine the development of their roles from before to after the regime change in light of the radical transformations in the structure and functions of national Libyan media that this regime change entailed.

The methodology applied in this article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted during one to one meetings in Tripoli (Libya) in October 2013. These interviews focused on the personal history of these female journalists, their relations with their working environment and the political regimes. These nine women were chosen from diverse backgrounds using several methods mainly personal connections and media monitoring before and after the revolution as well as reports published by media development agencies operating in Libya. The limited information published on Libyan women in media and on Libyan media in general made the personal connections the most efficient tool to select these women who are part of the larger sample of the study on transitional Libyan media. The most important criteria in choosing them is the diversity of experiences and profiles; some of these journalists had lengthy experience in the former state media with an engagement in defending women's rights while others, younger, have a professional focus on personal advancement. Some of them had assumed high positions in the former state media apparatus while others were engaged in supporting the rebels and conveying their message during the revolution. These female journalists are:

- (1) Inas Hmaida: she was known for being part of the inner circle of Gaddafi loyalists. She had assumed senior editorial positions in different state media, lately in the flagship "Sabah Oya" newspaper that was used as a propaganda platform for the regime before the eruption

of the revolution. She is not working in media currently, being excluded from senior positions in the new regime due to her former senior role in the Gaddafi regime.

(2) Asma Bin Saeed: From the younger generation, she is struggling to integrate herself into the new media environment. She used to work in the old state media and was nominated to a senior position in a newspaper launched post revolution but did not manage to keep her position because of her stated competition with senior male colleagues.

(3) Soad Salem: A well-known journalist in Tripoli, she had occupied a senior position in the former state media but without being involved in politics or being close to the regime's circles. She was engaged in defending women's rights in her work as a journalist and was active in voicing the message of the rebellion by providing news to regional Arab media.

(4) Razan al Moghrabi: She used to assume editorial positions in cultural magazines in the former state media. She is also a writer. She is not working currently as a journalist in the new media environment.

(5) Zaineb Zaidi: She used to work as a TV presenter for family programs in the former state media. She played a prominent role in calling for supporting the rebellion during the revolution from the platform of opposition TV stations. She is currently a talk show host in one of the new private TV channels in Tripoli.

(6) Rana Akabani: From the younger generation. She was active in providing clandestine news reports to foreign media during the revolution. She was arrested and had faced the death penalty. She was liberated with the fall of Tripoli in the hands of rebels. She works currently for an investigative news website in Tripoli.

(7) Mariyam Hajjaji: She used to work in one of the former state TV channels. She was nominated for a senior position in the state

TV post revolution but was unable to fulfill her role because of competition with male colleagues as she states. She is currently head of programming in a private TV channel in Tripoli.

(8) Nahla Hadi: From the younger generation. She was a reporter for a state newspaper. She is reluctant to join the new media environment.

(9) Warda Mohamed: From the younger generation. She used to work as a reporter for a state newspaper under the former regime. She joined a new state newspaper launched after the revolution as a reporter.

All these female journalists were interviewed by the author during the field investigation in Tripoli. They all spoke on the record without requiring their responses to be kept confidential.

Libyan women in a new political and media environment

The Libyan media landscape has changed dramatically since the fall of the Gaddafi regime. A young generation of male and female journalists is now taking the lead in new media outlets that mushroomed in the aftermath of Gaddafi's demise. The change in the nature of this media community is explained by the informal exclusion of the old media staff accused of complicity with the former regime. They are replaced by newcomers who have no previous experience in journalism, coming instead from different professions. Some of them are former rebels while others were active as citizen journalists capturing key moments of the revolution (el Issawi 2013; Wollenberg and Pack 2013). Although there are no accurate figures on the number of these journalists or their respective genders, it is not difficult to observe a prominent number of women in these burgeoning media platforms.

This expansion is, however, accompanied by a regression in women's conditions, with calls for the adoption of ultra conservative gender policies, such as the separation of men and women in all workplaces, classrooms, and gover-

nment offices as well as imposing a ban on women marrying foreigners. One of the serious expressions of this regression is the ruling by the Supreme Court lifting restrictions on polygamy (Human Rights Watch 2013). The growing hegemony of extremist militias is furthermore exacerbating abuses against women in a conservative and male-dominated society.

Under Gaddafi, women enjoyed a reasonably high status. They were granted the right to vote since 1964 and that of passing their nationality on to their children in 2010. Libya has also signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Birke 2011). The widespread sexual violence and rapes witnessed during the uprising remain one of the darkest facets yet to be resolved of this period's legacy (Dettmer 2012). Nevertheless, while their conditions are deteriorating, women are gathering in new structures of solidarity and activism, pushing for instance for a 40 percent quota for women in the parliamentary committee that will write Libya's new constitution (Hawley 2011). The debates about women's rights especially their political representation, are largely reflected in national media. In the meantime, women are paying a heavy price for the spread of insecurity and the growing dominance of militias, being frequently subject to kidnapping and sexual assaults. The controversial political isolation bill that forbid all holders of senior positions in various industries under Gaddafi's regime to assume high responsibilities in the new state is also impacting the process of women's reintegration in the new Libyan media environment. Given the limited number of women who used to assume high positions under the former regime, the law's impact on women's jobs in the new Libya is less prominent than on men of the former regime.

In Gaddafi's media regime, women were present in various media outlets including in limited numbers in senior governmental positions. The best example is Fawzia Shalabi, the prominent Minister of Information under Gaddafi, who was also an active element in the "revolutionary" structure set by the "Leader" and was arrested after the fall of the regime. For these senior women, their passion in embracing the revolutionary ideology of the "leader" was instrumental in their promotion. These women, popularly

called “the revolutionary nuns,”² seriously competed with men for senior positions. The loyalty to the person of the “leader” and an active engagement in defending and spreading the revolutionary ideology were the main requirements to access power, and this equally for women and men.

Women’s publications were well known in Libyan media, providing a platform to discuss diverse topics from family issues to women’s rights in a conservative society. These publications were led by prominent female journalists who managed to impose their editorial style as well as pushing the boundaries of what is tolerated to be discussed in women’s rights. The link between these senior women and the regime did not stop them from expressing dissenting opinions when it comes to governmental decisions that restrict their rights as women. A well-known example is Khadija al Jahmi (popularly called mother Khadija) who founded *al-Maraa* [The Woman] magazine in 1965 in addition to her work as radio presenter of educational programs on women’s rights (Halim 2013). The magazine’s identity was later transformed to become *Al Beit* [The Home], tackling different topics related to the family in general. Other specialized publications were *Al-Amal* [The Hope] transformed later into a magazine for children (1975) and Shehrazad magazine, published from Cyprus and led by Fatima Mohmoud. The main state publication dedicated to women’s issues published post-revolution is *al-Maraa* (based in Benghazi, formerly *al-Beit*). There are various private publications dedicated to women’s issues as well.

The example of Fatima Mahmoud is important as she managed to challenge social and religious taboos by tackling topics such as domestic violence, rape in marriage, and female genital mutilation, among others.

Generations and role models

It is important to note that these writers and journalists were leading figures in a feminist movement and their journalistic contribution was only one facet of their professional and social profile. Known for being “trouble makers” in daring to advocate for the emancipation of women, they became role models for female journalists of the next generation. Unlike their older

colleagues, the young journalists made their way to seniority by being integrated into newsrooms without necessarily belonging to the women's elite. For Soad Salem, a journalist from the former media regime, the example of Fatima Mahmoud was a school in itself in teaching journalism: "When I was appointed managing director for al Beit magazine, I wanted to follow the steps of Fatima. That was impossible, the resources were very limited" (Personal interview, Tripoli, June 2012).

The prominence of these role models for female journalists does not mean that all of these female media figures were pushing for a feminist editorial agenda in newsrooms. The leading female journalists in state media and governmental positions were concerned mainly with serving the regime's policies rather than defending women's rights. However, their activism for women's causes was linked to their perception of their identity as embracing the "revolutionary" vision of the regime. The limited number of women in Libyan media in general was explained by the conservative nature of Libyan society, considering women's presence in media an emancipated behavior. The experience of Inas Hamida, who used to be a senior journalist in the Gaddafi media, is instructive. She had to leave her work in the state TV and move to the print sector, which was considered to be more socially acceptable for women. Working as a TV presenter was an expression of emancipation not tolerated in the conservative Libyan society (Personal interview, Tripoli, October 2012).

However, the prominence of the model of the female journalist/activist permitted the regime's policies to be challenged when these policies were against women's rights. A prominent example is the governmental decision to ban Libyan women's travel without a male chaperone when they are less than forty years old, a decision considered to be highly undermining and humiliating for Libyan women. The decision was leaked to the press before being issued officially and sparked a wave of rebellion among local women's rights organizations supported by female journalists. The response was such that the regime was forced to backtrack on the decision. Soad Salem,

who formerly occupied a leading position within the state newspaper *al-Jamabiriyya*, played a prominent role in this battle and paid the price for her rebellion. She recounts:

I wrote an article criticizing toughly the decision. The article was quoted in a news story published by *Agence France Presse* and *al-Jazeera* channel. This was hugely embarrassing for my editor in chief. I knew that the punishment will come. The government reacted by publishing a statement accusing Libyan women of misbehaving. I wrote an article slamming this statement but the editor in chief refused to publish it. I read the article in the presence of international TV channels cameras. (Personal interview, Tripoli, October 2012)

Soad Salem was removed from her position after this episode and was given a low profile job in a news website. She remained in this position until the revolution.

The “avant gardists” male managers and professional development

As all Libyan institutions, media outlets were governed in an extremely centralized manner. The personality of the editor-in-chief was pivotal in defining not only the editorial line of the media outlet (under the defined regime’s policies) but also its internal dynamics and its ability to challenge the official media discourse in matters which are not of crucial significance for the regime. Under these conditions, the professional advancement of female journalists was a result of the encouragement they earned from editors-in-chief quite often described by interviewed journalists as “adventurers” and “avant-gardists.” Take the example of Asmaa Bin Saeed, who assumed a managerial position in a sports magazine despite the fact that the staff consisted entirely of old male journalists and the field itself was extremely male dominated. She recounts:

The editor-in-chief who nominated me was extremely adventurous. This nomination was a huge challenge for him as I was very young. This put huge pressure on me. I had to continue covering events while

assuming managerial responsibilities. I was also facing a hostile campaign from colleagues; some of them pretended that the editor-in-chief was close to my family. (Personal interview, October 2012)

Although it was unusual for female journalists to cover sports competitions, this was tolerated for Asmaa, who could perform equally to her male colleagues. The situation was totally different when she moved to a weekly cultural magazine with a pronounced ideological tone:

Female journalists were allowed to go out to cover events only till early afternoon and with the company of the company's taxi driver. I told the editor-in-chief that, being a journalist, I have to go out. He responded that I have to prove I am able to do so. I covered an artistic festival where events ended at midnight. I was supported by my father. (Personal interview, October 2010)

The support of male editors has limits - that of personal competition as well as challenging the core regime's policies. Take the example of Soad Salem's evolving relationship with the editor-in-chief of al-Jamahiriyya, the state newspaper that was her former employer. She describes the crucial support of the editor-in-chief in promoting her career:

The editor-in-chief valued my work. He trusted me. This was hugely important in a country like Libya. I was also hard working. I was impressed by his modern ideas... he likes rebellious female journalists and he encouraged me and fellow journalists to challenge the authority of the security apparatus in many situations. (Personal interview, October 2012).

However, the editor-in-chief's support turned to an open war when Soad breached a "red line" by slamming the governmental decision to ban women's travel without a male chaperone and voicing her opposition in international media.

Editorial support for female journalists under the former regime did not extend so far as to grant them top managerial responsibilities. The promotion of

these women was not permitted go beyond the ceiling of a managing director. Take the experience of Razan al-Moghrabi, who used to be a managing director of a cultural magazine under the former regime. She says:

I was granted managerial responsibilities but never financial ones. I was told that the reason is my situation of woman. I was not granted any of the financial prerogatives enjoyed by men in senior positions. The position of executive director or editor in chief was given usually to a man even if this was only a formality on paper. (Personal interview, October 2012)

Journalism vs activism

With political journalism being a monopoly for the national news agency under the former regime (all media outlets had to publish the agency's reports without any change), female journalists found in women's topics a major field for expressing their activism as well as profiling themselves. These topics were rewarding for female journalists, and this activism continued after the revolution. Subjects such as divorce, domestic violence, women's rights and the threat of radical extremist Islam are attractive topics for these female journalists. Among them is Zeinab Zaidi, who used to be a presenter of family programs in the former regime media. She is one of few journalists from the old media regime who managed to survive the change and found her place in the new media environment. Her passion for street reporting took her inside Libyan houses during the revolution where she interviewed women, inciting them to rebel against the regime. "Living in a very conservative society, women refuse to talk to male journalists," she explains (Personal interview, October 2012). After the revolution, Zeinab could experiment with political journalism, interviewing, for example, the head of an extremist Islamic militia and challenging him. This is one among many other polemic topics dealt with on her talk show. She continues to tackle women's topics, especially the post-revolution deterioration of women's conditions. "I don't have the look of a female star. People prefer now the physical look to the content but they still like my program because I am the voice of simple people, the tired people, those whose voice is not

heard,” Zeinab comments (Personal interview, October 2012). In the post-revolution environment, ripe with the spread of violence and extremism, the tyranny of the State is replaced by the threat of violence at the hands of armed militias with extremist backgrounds. Under these conditions, raising the question of women’s conditions can be framed as a significant political stance in its own right.

The involvement of Libyan women in supporting the revolution was strong. Cyber activism allowed women to support the revolution without having to take to the streets and take up arms (Radsch 2012). Female journalists in traditional media were also engaged in supporting the revolutionaries’ camp without taking up arms, although their involvement was not largely known. According to the testimonies of the journalists interviewed, many of these female journalists acted as informants for international and regional media, an initiative that led to the arrest of some. For instance, journalist Rana Akabani was arrested after being accused of spying for foreign governments by filing media reports (Free Rana & Hani Alakbani 2011). Most journalists interviewed were frequently in contact with regional media, especially al-Jazeera, offering updated reports on revolutionary battles while state media conducted misinformation campaigns (Black 2011).

The media battle was not less crucial than the field battle for the former regime. Zeinab Zaidi, for instance, produced TV programs from rural Libyan areas, inciting people to rebel. These programs were aired on an opposition TV station broadcasting from Cairo. She recounts: “I was surprised by my bravery. I come from a very conservative family. They threatened my family, they arrested my sister... I did not imagine I can do what I did, but I believe in God, Libya is more important than my family” (Personal interview, Tripoli, June 2012).

Toward the pan-Arab media model

After the fall of the regime, the plans for re-structuring media were hampered by the growing power of armed groups, who managed to control the state media assets to the extent of interfering in the content of the media

production. Private media, a new feature on the media scene, now flourishes in a chaotic fashion, given the lack of regulatory frameworks. The interim authorities demonstrated a trend towards granting senior positions to experienced female journalists in both state funded and private media outlets. The difficulties these women encountered in practicing their senior posts is linked to different factors: the chaotic media environment after the revolution, the growing power of militias, the battle between the old media staff and the newcomers, and finally the reluctance of this male dominated sector to accept the authority of senior female journalists. The first two sets of problems are faced by all journalists struggling to work in an insecure and unprofessional media environment (Brenzel 2013).

Take the example of the experience of Mariyam Hajjaji, who was appointed head of the TV station *al-Libiyya*, a remnant of the old media apparatus. According to her statements, she could not assume her functions, given the reluctance of male colleagues to accept her authority. She recounts:

They accepted me as the director of programs but not the head of the TV channel, although I was appointed by the Ministry of Culture [overseeing the media sector]. They could not accept that a female colleague who used to work with them before is now their boss. (Personal interview, October 2012)

The new media environment is witnessing a growing number of female journalists in newsrooms as a result of the expansion of the media landscape, and the burgeoning of private media, especially radio and TV stations, has contributed to the normalization of the presence of women within media staff.

Yet the lack of a clear definition of journalists' roles has led to a situation where anyone can work as a journalist. This "invasion" of the media sector from "those who have no link to journalism," as described by Mariyam Hajjaji, is exacerbated by the exclusion of old media staff, who are labelled as "algae" (*Tabaleb*) by newcomers and considered as the voice of the Gaddafi regime. The lack of previous experience in journalism is common for

both male and female journalists, who are reduced to learning by doing in newsrooms. The lack of skilled staff and media outlets' need for journalists are together making the presence of female journalists in newsrooms a crucial requirement, regardless of their experiences or qualifications. Mariyam Hajjaji explains: "I had a problem with a presenter who could not deliver. The management refused to stop her as they need women on screen. This is the new trend now in Libyan media" (Personal interview, September 2013).

The business needs of new media projects are empowering women's roles in newsrooms. However, the growing hegemony of radical extremist Islamic militias in some regions is hampering the ability of female journalists to work alongside their male colleagues. In the eastern Libyan city of Darna, for example, jihadist groups inspired by al-Qaeda are imposing strict social mores that interfere extensively with media operations, such as banning music and songs and preventing male and female journalists working together in newsrooms (el-Issawi 2013). Although restricted to certain regions, these growing ultra conservative trends represent a new obstacle hampering women's integration in the new media landscape at odds with the interest of media management to attract female journalists.

Analysis

The professional experiences of these women demonstrate common challenges faced by female journalists in the media sector both internationally and in the Arab region. Problems such as the reluctance of male junior colleagues to accept their authority and the need for the support of senior male colleagues for professional advancement in newsrooms are common challenges facing female journalists' career progression. However, the struggle of Libyan female journalists to assert their positions in the media field reflects the particularities of the Libyan context under the Gaddafi regime and after its fall. It reflects the transition of Libyan society from a position of isolation to one of integration into the Arab world as well as the struggle between liberal and conservative forces in the new Libya, a struggle in which conservative forces have the upper hand.

Under the Gaddafi regime, the model of the powerful female journalist – dedicated to supporting the regime’s cause – was a replication of the role played by senior female leaders empowered by the regime in order to serve its sought-after progressivist image. The solid loyalty shown by these leading female figures in media and other industries to the regime’s doctrine and leader did not limit their activist role against decisions taken by the regime that were deemed to be in opposition to women’s rights. The development of this activist role was beneficial for the regime and for female journalists in different ranks in the newsrooms’ hierarchy. For the most part excluded from decision-making spheres, the activist role in support of women’s causes empowered a definition of their identity as agents of change in their society.

This model of activism is now considered old-fashioned by younger generations of female journalists, especially with the liberalization of a private media sector that is eager to attract good-looking, “feminine” female presenters/reporters whose role extends from exercising their journalistic duties to providing the image of a liberal, women-friendly media outlet. The trend of using these female journalists as marketing assets to attract large audiences, favoring young and good-looking female journalists following the model of pan Arab satellite media channels, is facing two main obstacles: the shaky conditions of a media sector transitioning from a closed regime to an open and chaotic one and the conservative nature of Libyan society, which does not look positively on the development of this “marketing asset” role for female journalists. The expansion of this model is at odds with the traditions of Libyan society and reflects the difficult battle for liberal voices over ultra conservative ones in the political and civil spheres in the new Libya.

Although patently regressing, the activist role played by female journalists has not completely disappeared despite the deterioration of women’s conditions and the expansion of extremist trends in the post-Gaddafi era. However, it is no longer a model for younger female journalists, who instead focus on their professional advancement by embracing the model of their colleagues in pan-Arab media, all the while struggling to adapt to the new media environment.

Most of the female journalists interviewed in this paper who used to work in the former state media expressed their preference for the previous media environment, where stability was high and roles were clearly defined. While the turbulent media environment – marked by the spread of violence and frequent attacks against media practitioners – impacts female and male journalists alike, it is perceived by these female journalists as an important obstacle hindering their integration into a new and hostile environment. To the old internal obstacles of competitive male colleagues and institutional red lines, these new working conditions add novel ones, mainly the unpredictability of frequent attacks against media staff and the lack of a clear vision and professional structure that would shape this transitional media sector.

Conclusion

The new Libyan media landscape is suffering from a set of complex problems; one of the major obstacles to its rebirth is the lack of skilled media producers (CIMA 2011). The exclusion of media executives who were part of the Gaddafi media apparatus is exacerbating this problem. The adoption of a political isolation law by the Libyan parliament under pressure from armed groups led to the exclusion of experienced journalists at a time when the media industry is in crucial need of skilled workers and leadership. The growing attacks against media outlets and staff by militia groups are forcing Libyan media to self-censor their productions, avoiding tackling polemic topics for fear of retaliation (Amnesty International 2013). Under these conditions, working as a journalist could amount to a misadventure, for male and females alike. Most journalists interviewed for the purposes of this research said they are reluctant to integrate into the new media scene as they consider it to be unsafe and lacking the disciplined structure that used to prevail under the old regime.

In this chaotic media landscape, the ability of male and female journalists to influence the news agenda is limited by the nature of a political transition that is dominated by the growing hegemony of armed groups. Yet the features

of the new Libyan media landscape are still a work in progress, and the real reform of this media industry is still to fully begin. In these conditions, it is premature to define the role of female journalists in newsrooms beyond that of satisfying the business needs of media owners. The empowerment of women in media is linked to the overall battle of Libyan women to protect their rights in the face of alarming ultra conservative trends. For female Libyan journalists, the challenge is double: to integrate themselves into the shaky new media scene and fight for their rights and security in a post-Gaddafi Libya where they are one of the major targets of widespread violence and radical extremist trends.

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Notes

¹ The study “Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions” aims to investigate the change in practices and values of national traditional media under political transitions. It covers Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. It is hosted by the Media and Communications department of the London School of Economics (LSE).

² These women were devoted to the revolution and would do anything for the service of its ideals.