

The Evolving Societal Role and Media Image of Arab Women

Mahasen AL EMAM

Humanity has developed significantly in the sphere of rights, justice and freedom, yet the issue of gender equality remains out of focus in the process of social modernisation. Mahasen Al Eman suggests that part of the problem is the type of image that women, and in particular Arab women, receive in the media. While the latest Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll results signify a positive trend in the perception of women's current and future roles in Mediterranean society, the author argues that there is still much to be done.

The gender issue is central in the process of social renaissance and modernisation as it touches upon various aspects of civic life from the sphere of freedom, to development and participation in decision-making processes. In a context of scientific and technological progress characterised by a revolution in the field of media and information and by a climate dominated by the rise of human rights issues and concepts of justice, equality and freedom, we reflect: Have women benefited from this progress in terms of improving their status in the professional and social field? Or do societal conditions still cause qualitative inequalities between men and women?

Despite the recognition and protection of women's rights and their equality with men by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the inclusion of Arab women's development issues in the context of bilateral and international assistance agreements, such legislative covenants could remain a dead letter without a change in the current social and economic conditions which see practices of power and rigid traditions leading to discrimination. Perhaps the clearest example showing the extent of disparity between both sexes can be found in the media and media institutions.

The image of women in the media

Women's image in the media does not reflect the progress they have reached at the Arab level and it does not reflect the cultural and social diversity experienced by women today. That image in some media – readable, audible or visible – is often distorted and in some cases completely erroneous, tending to focus excessively on negative stories. At the same time, there is potential: media could contribute to the achievement of comprehensive social development policies and address the change of prevailing concepts, traditional legacies and misconceptions about women and their role by working in collaboration with academics to raise society's awareness of the role that women play for its progress, monitor the changes that have affected women recently

and present relevant role models.

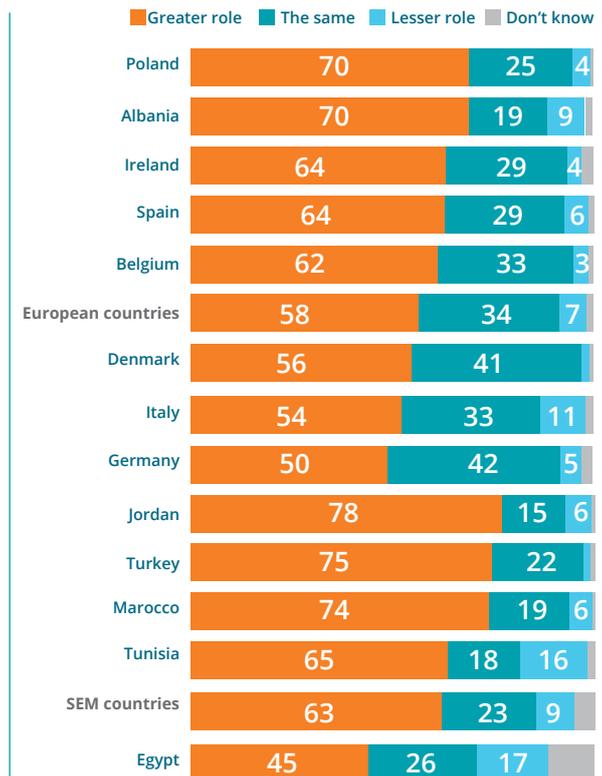
Statistical studies show that the percentage of business women is increasing in the Arab society, yet it is still small if compared to business men and producers. The media production field was for many years among the areas attracting the least interest of women until they acquired the literary and financial ability to carry out production, projects and movie financing, publishing house management and press on their own account. Despite the success of several production experiments in the visual, audible and readable media recently, these were only individual and distinctive experiments of women who were either famous or extremely wealthy or absolutely daring and willing to present a new, surprising and distinct intellectual and artistic work. Sometimes, female authors of TV series scripts do not get the direct credit on the final production and the failure or success is attributed to the whole production team. Having said that, we cannot deny the change of women's image in the media and the increased awareness of the cause of women, not only at the official level but at the grass-roots level supported also by the work of non-governmental organisations.

Chart 8.1
Women's role in society



Survey Question: Do you think that women in your society today play a greater role, the same, or lesser role than they did 5 years ago? And in **Base:** % of all respondents by regions (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

Chart 8.2
Women's current role by country



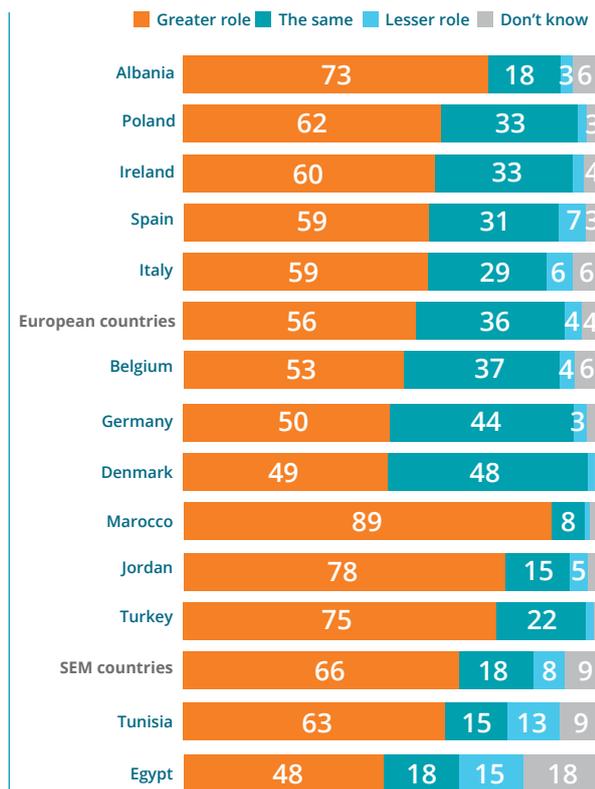
Survey Question: Do you think that women in your society today play a greater role, the same, or lesser role than they did 5 years ago? **Base:** % of all respondents by country (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

Perspectives on women's role in society

Women are one of the underlying sources of change and energy in the Arab countries and in the current geopolitical context. The results of the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll mark a positive trend among population of the North and South Mediterranean shores in the perception of women's current and future role in society over a five-year period (Charts 8.2, 8.3).

Results are here examined according to the gender and age distribution of respondents (people between 15 to 29 years old and people over 30 years of age). In answering the question whether people believe that the role of women in society today is the same, larger or smaller than five years ago, 59% of the European men said that women play a larger role, while 57% of the European women said the same. This was the opinion of 60% of the respondents aged 15 to 29 years old; while this was mentioned by 57% of the respondents aged 30 years old or older in Europe. 65% of men in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) region also said so, versus 61% of women; while this point of view was often mentioned by 63% of the respondents aged 15 to 29 years old versus 64% of the respondents

Chart 8.3
Women's future role by country



Survey Question: Compared to their present role in your society, in 5 years from now, do you think that women in your society will play a greater role, the same, or lesser role? **Base:** % of all respondents by country (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

aged 30 years old or older. It is noted that there are close percentages between population of the Northern and Southern Mediterranean; however, percentages are higher in the population of the SEM countries, regardless of their gender and age. This can be explained in light of the large progress achieved by women in SEM countries due to the rise of university education ratio among women and the rise of their political participation in parliament, parties and higher governmental positions, in addition to their increased contribution to economic development.

Looking at the responses of those who believe women's role is the same as five years ago, we find that this is the opinion of 33% of European men and 35% of European women, of 60% of young Europeans and 34% of people over 30 years of age. In SEM countries, 22% of men said that women have still the same role versus 24% among women, and 25% of respondents aged 15 to 29 years old and 20% of older respondents. In answering the question whether women's role today is lesser than five years ago, the percentage is lower among Northern Mediterranean population, as 6% of men mentioned so versus 7% of European women, 4% of respondents aged 15 to 29 years old and 7% of older respondents. However, 10% of men of the Southern Mediterranean population

believed that the role of woman in their societies declined vs. 9% of women who said so and 9% of youth vs. 10% of over 30 years of age.

Looking to the future, nearly 58% of European men said that women will have a bigger role during the coming five years versus 54% of European women, while 34% of European men believed that the role of woman will not change during the coming five years versus 37% of women and 4% of men considered it will decline versus 5% of women. By age, 57% of Europeans from respondents aged 15 to 29 thought that women's role will grow; in line with the view of Europeans aged 30 years or older, 37% of respondents aged 15 to 29 and 35% of older respondents consider it will stay the same, 3% of respondents aged 15 to 29 and 5% of respondents aged thirty years or older consider it will deteriorate. Of the same view 4% of European men versus 5% of women.

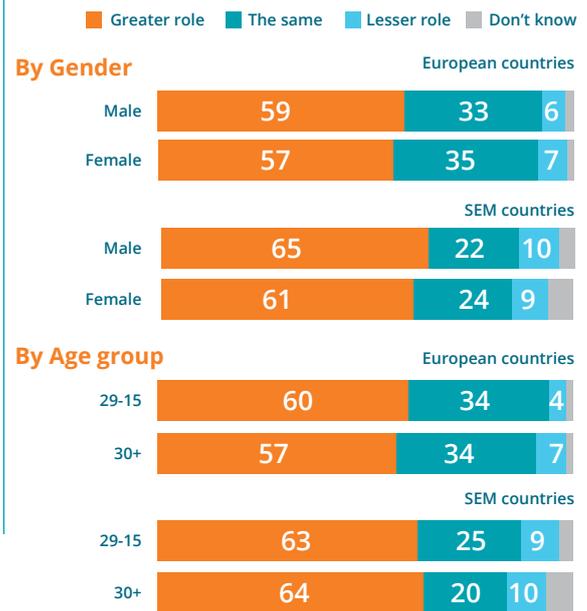
As for population of SEM countries, 67% of men thought women will have a bigger role in the society during the coming five years versus 66% of women who said so. By age, 66% of respondents aged 15 to 29 and 67% of respondents aged 30 or older believed so, while 17% of men thought that woman role will not change versus 19% of women. 10% of men believed that woman role will decline versus 6% of women. By age, 66% of respondents aged 15-29 thought that woman role in the society will grow during the coming five years, vs. 67% of respondents aged thirty years or older. However, 20% of respondents aged 15-29 thought that woman role will not change versus 16% of respondents aged thirty years or older, and 9% of respondents aged 15-29 believed it will decline vs. 7% of respondents aged thirty years or older. Overall, the future expectations concerning women's role in the Euro-Mediterranean region during the coming five years are positive, particularly among SEM countries (Charts 8.4 , 8.5).

Hinders to Arab women march

The obstacles in front of true equality do not only stem from the official ratification of international covenants, but from our own societies as well as deep historical, psychological and social leavings which still control our reality either consciously or unconsciously. Legislations governing the movement of our societies still stem from old frameworks and do not completely recognise women as a separate unit in many Arab countries, thus leading to gender gaps in the personal status, labor, retirement and social security laws as well as other laws. Besides, there is an invisible ceiling for the access of women to decision-making positions.

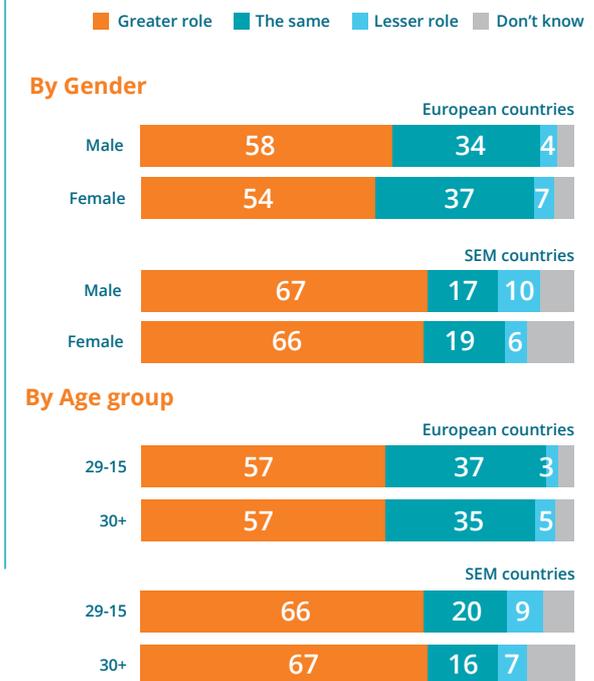
The limited number of effective and influential civil society organisations has had a negative impact on the woman emancipation movement. In an active civil society, women can find contexts framing their work and

Chart 8.4
The perspective of youth and women on the current role of women in society by gender and age group



Survey Question: Do you think that women in your society today play a greater role, the same, or lesser role than they did 5 years ago **Base:** % of all respondents by socio-demographics (©Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

Chart 8.5
The perspective of youth and women on the future role of women in society by gender and age group



Survey Question: Do you think that women in your society today play a greater role, the same, or lesser role than they did 5 years ago **Base:** % of all respondents by socio-demographics (©Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

structures in which they can play their role first through training, then through the practice and then in leadership positions.

Furthermore, the traditional distribution of roles confines women to the house and men to public life and attitudes have not been modified in most Arab societies even if the economic life requirements, the family well-being, women's education and awareness of their new roles call for a change. Arab women themselves have not identified yet a balance among their several roles since they consider that the family occupies the first place in the social structure and women are its mainstay and protector and in this way the guarantor of social stability while on the other hand they are haunted by the negative consequences on the family caused by women labour outside the house in previous years without the necessary legislative and support measures. Many educated women work while considering it as a temporary stage between study and marriage. This drives them away from true professionalism, seriousness, continuity and commitment. Besides, this impacts on their image as influential active partners who are equal to men in rights and duties, and thus casts a dark shadow on their acting as leaders in the decision-making positions and their existence as independent persons having rights, hopes and will.

Jordanian women in focus

The number of female lawyers registered in the syndicate increases significantly every year, and in 2002 it reached 886 members. In 1974, Jordanian women obtained the electoral and running rights for parliaments and, in 2003, for the first time in the history of the Jordanian parliamentary elections, six women were elected and were able to enact laws that would strengthen women current status. In 1983, they were granted to participate in municipal councils. As for the treatment of gender issues within political party programmes, despite the presence of spaces for women, these programmes reflect a conventional understanding of the women's roles and most of them do not propose effective mechanisms to overcome the obstacles. Moreover, most of the parties do not focus in their political and media discourses on attracting and inviting women to join them with the same attention offered to men and they grant women marginal membership roles, linked to secondary affairs such as distributing leaflets, organising training courses and participating in sit-ins and marches.

Female illiteracy has decreased from 48.2% in 1979 to 20.7% in 1994 but the rate is still much higher compared to males whose illiteracy rate in 1994 was only 7.5%. With the increase of female primary and higher education, a higher presence of women teaching university staff was registered. In terms of the concentration of female workers

according to economic activities, the female workforce centers in the public administration and defense sectors followed by the industrial sector. Despite the rise in their overall contribution to economic activities this represents only around 7%.

Addressing gender issues in the Arab countries means paying full attention to women's fundamental rights, reviewing school curricula in relation to the values they present, raising social awareness of men and women alike, and re-considering the administrative practices and traditional templates of work. This will enable women to carry out their multiple roles and achieve the balance required among them, to reform legislations that hinder the recognition of women as separate beings and their multi-faceted role, and to take advantage of the general international climate and its resulting studies and recommendations pushing forward gender issues.

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