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An Investigation of Saudi Women's Experiences in the Media and their Opinions about  
their Status in it, the Barriers they Face and the Issues they Address

by

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## ABSTRACT

‘An investigation of Saudi women’s experiences in the media and their opinions about their status in it, the barriers they face and the issues they address’ is a research study of the cultural circumstances under which Saudi women work in the media including religion, traditions and social considerations. The research is based on the feminist theory and methodology, which aims at uncovering the various ways of oppressing women. In the research, six Saudi women with work experience ranging from 4 to 24 years in print, radio and television are interviewed. Also, a survey of the number of Saudi female employees in various media institutions was conducted to arrive at an approximate representation of women’s presence in the Saudi media. Analysis of the interviews reveal a rejection by the Saudi women of some of Western feminists’ objectives and methods although they do seek the same basic goals of feminism for equal opportunity and representation.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my late father, Mostafa Akeel, who passed away earlier this year. He always believed in me and encouraged me to reach far in my aspirations. May he rest in peace and God bless his soul.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction:**

Despite the large presence of working women in the media, research shows that they continue to have little influence on media content and a minor role in decision-making. In today's information age, the media play a significant role in our social life, and for women to be so lacking in influence and authority undermines their efforts for equal opportunity and fair representation. This is a major issue for women everywhere who are seeking to eliminate barriers and stereotypes that hinder the advancement of women not only in the media but also in all workplaces. And in a country such as Saudi Arabia, where women face other restrictions, their status in the media takes on an added importance. Saudi women are veiled and segregated from men in almost all public interactions. The media, particularly print media, are perhaps the only and most direct venue for women to express their views and discuss their issues. When barriers and career limitations are put on that venue, that hinders women's ability to contribute to the media's development and society's public forum.

The purpose of this study is to examine Saudi women's status in the national media, the barriers they face and the issues they address concerning their work and the Saudi media. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television are relatively new media in Saudi Arabia, and women have been involved from the beginning as writers and editors in the print media and as program presenters in broadcast media. This thesis will look at their status today in these media; how many Saudi women are working in them and in what capacity? Mostly, I am interested in knowing about their experiences in the media,



how they perceive their role, the difficulties they face, and how the media are helping them or preventing them from bringing women's issues to the forefront. In order to answer these questions I will rely on a quantitative method (survey) to gather statistical data, on a qualitative method (interviews) for an in-depth analysis and on personal observations and experiences as a Saudi female journalist. I will only be looking at information media and not at popular culture or entertainment media except for a few references to them for comparison.

From a feminist perspective, the objective of this study is to understand the lack of equal opportunity and representation of Saudi women in the media, and to give these women a voice to express their views on the matter. However, feminism is understood and approached differently in Saudi Arabia, therefore it will be applied according to the cultural background of a Muslim society where the western definitions of feminism might not be completely suitable. Although feminist theory is the basis of this thesis, it was apparent from the beginning that a difference in perspective and interpretation of what feminism is between Western society and Middle Eastern, would result in a new definition that is more encompassing of the different cultures and yet specific to a particularly Islamic view.

Saudi society, especially for women, is very private and guarded from the rest of the world. Islamic principles and Saudi traditions have a great impact on the relationship between men and women and on every aspect of public and private life. There are also other factors that influence Saudi society, including education, politics and the economy. In order to understand Saudi women's role in the media, the issue has to be presented within the context of Saudi society. While there have been many discussions and studies

about the unequal representation, the image and the status of women in the media in the West and a few studies in other Arab and Islamic countries, there has not been any on Saudi women and their role, status and image in Saudi media. There are many restrictions and limitations on where women can work and what positions they can hold that are unique to Saudi policies. There are also some social limitations and perceptions that hinder their advancement. The media provides a public outlet for women to discuss these barriers and address their issues from their point of view, but if they are facing barriers and limitations in the media, in terms of adequate representation and power, then they will not have the chance to use the media as a platform for their cases. This is the problem that Saudi women have and this thesis is for them to express their concerns about their status in the media and how they are using the media to influence discussions on women's place in the media and in society as a whole.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“Feminism” and Media, with Particular Reference to the Arab World:**

#### Feminist Theory and Third World Feminism:

Feminism has been defined as "the theoretical study of women's oppression and the strategical and political ways that all of us, building on that theoretical and historical knowledge, can work to end that oppression" (Valdivia, 1995, p.8). Women's oppression can take different forms depending on the women's class, race, ethnicity, country, religion etc. In their research on the causes of women's oppression, feminists have focused on the social environment in which women live, whether it is capitalism, patriarchy or sexist society. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of feminist theory is acknowledging that reality is socially constructed. Feminists believe that "people cannot be understood separately from their environments - the social and historical context" (Cirksena, 1989, p.51). This has led them to reject and criticize traditional standards of objectivity and universality, the basic principles of the scientific method designed by men. From a feminist perspective, it is vital to reevaluate assumptions about impartiality and detachment upon which the standard scientific method is based because whatever knowledge the researcher arrives at is unavoidably contextualized within his or her own experiences. It is argued that traditional science, with its "objective" and "detached" approach to the women being researched, "not only ignores women's themes and experiences, it also denies the validity of women's ways of knowing" (van Zoonen, 1994, p.14). According to Liesbet van Zoonen, the feminist challenge to traditional science has produced a postmodernist understanding of science as

socially constructed, as situated knowledge, grounded in the social experiences of its practitioners (p.15).

Another important aspect of feminist theory derived from situating knowledge within its social environment is the undermining of the binary opposition of public and private spheres. "Feminist media scholars have rejected the division between personal and political issues, suggesting that we need to study both individual and institutional forms of oppression as well as public and private issues" (Valdivia, 1995, p.13). The dominant sphere for the majority of women in the world is the private sphere and their interactions and issues revolve around or are affected by personal life whether they are employed or not, live in the West or East and married or single. Therefore, it is logical and necessary for feminists to focus on the private and personal aspects of women's lives and give those issues prominence in the political arena. Rather than looking at issues in the private sphere as separate from the public and therefore less significant, feminists politicized private issues and made them public, open for analysis and discussion.

Inherent in the issue of oppression is the question of power. However, the question for feminism is not who is in power, a man or a woman, but rather what are the power relations and structure between them. According to van Zoonen "gender and power form the constituents of feminist theory" (p.4), gender as a component of culture, and power as a form of structure within society. Understanding the culture in which women live is important for feminist studies because culture is where the social meanings and values among people are formed and articulated in their daily interactions. It is where the processes of symbolization and representation are formed. These processes, according to van Zoonen, "take place in institutionalized forms where the production and

reception of mass mediated meanings are concerned" (p.6) and in people's everyday life through symbolic interactions. The whole process is part of culture. Therefore, in order to understand the struggles of women in a certain culture and the issues that concern them most, it is important for the researcher to understand the culture and circumstances in which she lives before making general statements or comparisons between one society and another as if all women are the same just because they are women.

This brings us to the issue of representation, which is an important point of contention for contemporary feminism and particularly in feminist media studies and the continuous tug for power. Feminists claim, "we need to question representation both as a political and as an epistemological problem" (Ganguly, 1992, p.61). Whether it is the representation of women in politics, society or the media, feminists ask the key questions of who is representing women, how and to what effect? For Keya Ganguly, these questions apply even when women are studying other women of a different race, social class or culture. She argues that feminists should not depend on relative comparisons between one culture and another as a basis for intelligently conducted research and analysis and urges them to examine the assumptions, categories, and effects of their conclusions (p.65). According to her, feminists have tried to revise some of their narrow interpretations of cultural practices and to recognize how sometimes mainstream, Western feminism can become part of the oppressive structure of Western masculinism and imperialism (p.70).

Despite these idealistic goals and frameworks of research, Western feminists are criticized by feminists from other cultures, particularly those from what are referred to as underdeveloped or third world countries, as being insensitive to and judgmental of their

way of knowing. Western feminists are asked to respect the different cultures and allow the women of those cultures to speak for themselves and about what they consider is important to them. "While it is clear that sexual egalitarianism is a major goal on which all feminists can agree, gender discrimination is neither the sole nor perhaps the primary locus of the oppression of Third World women" (Odim, 1991, p.315). For most non-western women, struggles against racism, economic exploitation, and dictatorship are a priority and part of their struggle as feminists. However, because these women lack the power to participate in defining feminism and setting its agenda on the international stage, their concerns are not adequately portrayed and they themselves are not well represented. This is because, in many cases, perhaps unintentionally, Western feminists assume they are speaking for all women. While women in developed countries, generally speaking, might have achieved their economic and political goals and moved on to gender and sexual identity as their major focus, women in developing and underdeveloped countries are still struggling to gain basic economic and political power. From a Third World feminist perspective, "the liberation of women, and therefore the process of equality, is fundamentally tied to socioeconomic change" (Gilliam, 1991, p.229).

In her introduction to the book *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes that scholars often locate Third World women in terms of the general category they are allocated to – underdeveloped country, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, and overpopulation – categories that apply to Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries (p.6). These analyses, according to her, "freeze Third World women

in time, space and history” (p.6) because they represent them as a unitary group without any social, economic or ideological differences. Women living in Third World countries are very different from one another in fundamental ways; there are differences even among women living in the same Third World country. What they do have in common, Mohanty points out, is their struggle against sexist, racist, and imperialist structures including feminism (p.7). The term feminism is itself questioned by many Third World women. "Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia" (Mohanty, p.7).

Mohanty criticizes most Western feminists of implicitly assuming that all women agree on the priority of their common issues. "This process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World" (p.54) is where Western feminist discourse exercises its power over Third World women. Mohanty defines three basic analytic principles or presuppositions that are present in Western feminist discourse on women in the Third World:

1. The strategic location of the category "women" vis-à-vis the context of analysis: the assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group.
2. On the methodological level: the uncritical way "proof" of universality and cross-cultural validity are provided.
3. A political presupposition: a homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of

Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.

These presumptions privilege a particular group as the norm or referent (Mohanty, p.55-56). Mohanty also defines six ways in which "women as a category of analysis is used in Western feminist discourse on women in the Third World" (p.57): women as victims of male violence, women as universal dependents, married women as victims of the colonial process, women and oppressive familial systems, women and religious ideologies, and women and the development process.

Western feminists, sometimes ignoring the plurality and multi-dimensionality of feminism, address issues such as reproduction, the sexual division of labor, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy, etc., without reference to the local cultural and historical contexts. According to Mohanty, "the mere existence of a sexual division of labor is taken to be proof of the oppression of women in various societies" (p.68). In addition to being categorized as an "oppressed woman" simply because she is a woman, she is also attributed other characteristics because she is a "Third World" woman. Third World women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as religious, meaning "not progressive"; family-oriented, i.e. "traditional"; legal minors, that is "they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights"; illiterate, or "ignorant"; domestic, as in "backward"; and sometimes revolutionary, "their-country-in-a-state-of-war; they-must-fight" (Mohanty, p.72). This kind of categorization and narrow perceptions of third world women offend and detach many of them and their leaders from the Western feminist movement. However, for the purpose of this thesis and in the interest of simplicity, I will be using the term "feminist" for all these individuals sharing a desire in



the equality of women, no matter what designation they may or may not be and without implying that they all share the same opinions or indeed even agree on what equality for women means.

### Islamic feminism and Arab women:

“The image that most Westerners have of Arab women is a stereotypical image that has little to do with the lives of real Arab women” (Sabbagh, 1996, p.xi). As with other Third World women, Arab women find the analysis of Orientalists and other researchers of the East as being naïve, prejudiced, biased and distorted, to say the least. “That women in different cultures might have a somewhat different agenda or methods of achieving their objectives is rarely considered” (Sabbagh, p.xiii). It is widely believed by many in the Middle East that the conclusions arrived at by these researchers mostly serve “to establish the positional superiority of the writers and, through them by proxy, Western women.” It is about “establishing Western domination and not about liberating Muslim women” (Sabbagh, p.xiii). Therefore, a theory like feminism is viewed with suspicion. While it was acceptable for Arab men to adopt modern/Western ways, “women's attempts to gender the discourse of modernity are commonly viewed as subversively linked to an imperialist West that sought to undermine essential Islamic values, especially concerning the family and the private sphere” (Afsaruddin, 1999, p.22). So, the pressure is on the woman to uphold traditions and Islamic values because she is the center of the family, but it is the man’s duty to make sure she complies and is not swayed by outside influences, which means that a Muslim woman’s objective is to prove that she can take care of herself with the support of the man but not as his dependent.

Suha Sabbagh argues that even though “all cultures are sensitized to internal forms of oppression, it is essential not to judge other cultures through the norms of the culture that we live in” (p.xvi). This is a point made by several Western feminists, as indicated earlier, however, for Arab and particularly Muslim women it is not just about recognizing cultural differences but also recognizing a difference in perception and interpretation of the history and environment. While the West focuses on the cause of discrimination against women as being the result of a culture of male domination, Sabbagh writes “in the Third World, women say their struggle cannot be considered outside the regional political and developmental issues” (p.xxiv). She declares that just as “Western feminism is grounded in Western thought, ideology, and values, Arab women's struggle is equally grounded in the religious, cultural, and political norms of the Arab world” (p.xxiv). This struggle cannot be based on Western concepts and it cannot imitate the Western approach. Therese Saliba explains that Arab women's struggles for their rights has to be conducted within the framework of their own society in order to maintain an indigenous identity that is part of the overall culture, and not to be seen as influenced by foreign ideologies (2000, p.2).

In her article “The Challenges for Middle Eastern Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (2000), Elizabeth Fernea takes a look at the present situation facing women in the Arab world. “Women constitute at least half of the population in the Middle East today,” and despite the negative image Westerners have of the status of women in the Middle East, Fernea asserts, “they are no longer passive acceptors of the status quo, of the ideology that men are in charge of women” (p.186). She speaks of their participation and struggle to improve their standard of living and opportunities at every level for jobs, promotions,

and political clout. Of course their achievements differ from one country to another, but nevertheless, in each Arab country the women there continue to gain more. Generally speaking, in "traditional" occupations such as teaching and social work, women are in the majority. In addition, Fernea points out that women are also entering and succeeding in occupations that were previously closed to them, such as medicine, law, engineering, journalism, TV and advertising. "Education has been, and continues to be, the spur to women's activism and participation in the public sphere, combined with the economic need for new kinds of skilled labor" (Fernea, p.189). The second great change in Middle East society, according to Fernea, has been the shift from country to city, from agriculture to industrial production (p.189). However, and contrary to popular perception in the West, "it is in the area of religious revival that one sees for the first time a women's movement that, from its outset, has cut across class lines and been concerned with wider political and social issues" (p.190). Although religious women do not hold leadership positions in this Islamic movement yet, their intellectual discussions and knowledgeable understanding about a woman's place today as articulated in the Qur'an gives them credibility and influence. Except for some clear and definite verses in the Qur'an, women's place in Islamic society as dictated in Islamic scriptures is open to interpretation and can respond to changes and circumstances in each society. However, in a country like Saudi Arabia, "where great wealth allows the state to continue to impose ideology on all of its citizens, particularly women, and to rigidly regulate practice" (Fernea, p.190), women still find it difficult to express their views and challenge the status quo. So, although "this new women's participation is important in education, the labor force and religion, it is still not affecting political life" (Fernea, p.190). However, Fernea does not

consider the election of women to public office as necessary, but rather "the shifting and changing of a whole universe of long-honored assumptions about the male and his power that is important" and she claims that this is already beginning to take place in the Middle East (p.192).

On the other hand, according to Sabbagh, Arab women who seek greater rights and bigger roles are incorrectly perceived as having adopted and accepted Western perceptions of the Arab world, when in fact gender and women's roles are issues that have occupied Arab writers in every country for centuries (1996, p.xxii). With the process of modernization that occurred in the Middle East, involving urbanization, industrialization, socio-cultural changes, literacy, and communication, a change in women's roles and status also occurred. The issue for women in the Arab world, as far as Arab men and women are concerned, is whether or not they are able to strike a balance between preserving certain valued traditions of the Arab/Muslim culture and participating in the national progress of modernization (Allaghi & Almana, 1984, p.15). However, this binary opposition of separating the world into traditional and modern spheres, where "Third World embodies tradition and the Western industrialized nations embody modernity" (Valdivia, 1995, p.15), works against understanding Arab women's struggle. For example, in many cases, particularly in the past two decades, Arab women are wearing the hijab (veil) not just because it is a religious and traditional norm, but also as "a symbol of defiance against Western policies in the region" (Sabbagh, 1996, xxiv). This makes hijab a political choice and not a form of oppression. Furthermore, "modernization and development may further lower the status of women, especially those

in rural areas and in poor urban slums” (Allaghi & Almana, p.17) because they marginalize these women’s lifestyle and their handcrafted products.

Another binary opposition challenged by Arab/Muslim feminists is that of private (feminine realm) and public sphere (masculine realm) but for a different reason than that of Western feminists. According to Asma Afsaruddin, Islamic feminists “challenge the notion of a completely separate and impenetrable territory of male versus female inhabitancy” (1999, p.3). She argues that the traditional Islamic milieu of confining women to the private/domestic sphere and segregating them from men has not prevented them from participating in public venues and acquiring what is due to them from public institutions. Rather, “lack of knowledge of the avenues that exist for exacting social redress and an inability to exploit these avenues on the part of women have often led to their disenfranchisement” (Afsaruddin, p.6). This makes such variables as social class, economic status and education, important means by which women can improve their status while still perceived as functioning within the private sphere. Amal Rassam continues on the same line of argument by stating that "implicit in the dichotomy of public/male, and private/female is the assumption that power, viewed as belonging in the public-political domain, is a monopoly of the men and that women, being confined to the domestic sphere, are therefore powerless" (1984, p.124). She rejects the notion that women are without any kind of power or influence in society just because they lack official authority and visibility. In her view, "men's power" and "women's power" should not be seen as one having influence over the other but rather that they both share a “reciprocity of influence” (p.124), which means they are operating “within different, but complementary spheres, which are equally important” (p.125). It is a relationship

structure that acknowledges the importance and influence of informal and behind-the-scenes power. This view of power “shifts the emphasis of research from social structure to social process” (Rassam, p.125), thus, it reevaluates and questions the perception of segregation as a form of women's oppression and subordination. In the Arab world, women's place in the home is highly valued and respected, and Islamic law gives women their full rights and considerable power in the home and outside it. The problem for Muslim women is lack of education and knowing their rights and the extent of their power.

Part of the discourse on the public-private issue within the Islamic setting is the veiling of women. A judgmental and narrow interpretation of veiling by the West considers it an indication of powerlessness and dependency while unveiling to the extent of wearing minimum clothes and even nudity is associated with feminine independence and freedom. However, in the Islamic world, even in modernist Islamic circles, the veil is associated with “moral, cultural and political authenticity and superiority for both the woman and her family... in the face of Western encroachment” (Afsaruddin, 1999, p.8): This exemplifies how the difference in perception and approach towards a cultural issue can affect the interpretations and conclusions reached. This makes it necessary when studying Arab women not to adopt Western feminist concepts but rather the local feminist theories.

During the time of nationalist aspirations and struggles for independence from Western colonialism in the Arab world, “feminism, especially in stages of open activism, constituted uncomfortable challenges to masculinist scrambles to control the construction of modernity” (Badran, 1999, p.159). During the colonial era, Arab women were not

only oppressed by some aspects of their local traditions but also by the foreign occupying powers. After independence, most- if not all- of the political systems that came to power in the Arab world restricted feminists' goals or postponed addressing them because they were not considered as essential as national development of political, economic or military structures. Feminist movements of that period failed to advance and grow because they were perceived to be too liberal and too westernized. In its place, and during a general uprising of an Islamic movement, "the rise of Islamic women's movement throughout the Arab world challenged the secular, liberalizing assumptions of feminism by focusing primarily on progressive readings of Islamic texts to argue for a more egalitarian Islamic tradition that enhances women's rights" (Saliba, 2000, p.3). Therefore, rather than putting Islam in conflict with modernity and human rights for women as some try to do, Muslim feminists have used and continue to use Islamic scriptures and principles to support their goals and appeal to the modern Arab woman in a meaningful way. "In the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, highly educated Muslim women... are applying a combination of historical, linguistic, hermeneutic, literary critical, deconstructive, semiotic, historicist, and feminist methodologies in their rereading of sacred texts pushing ijihad (interpretative reading of Islamic sacred texts) to new limits" (Badran, p.180). By expanding the boundaries of these methodologies and redefining such categories as Orientalist, Islamist and even feminist, Muslim women have made them more inclusive and less of a threat to the indigenous cultures.

#### Feminism and the Media:

The feminist theoretical perspective on social research is based on understanding the influence of gender divisions and relations on social life. Therefore, research on

women in the media will look at how power relations and the division of labor between men and women in the media affect women's status, image and representation in the media. Based on the assumption that mass media contribute to systems of representation that shape and influence the ideological processes in a society, feminist studies from the beginning focused on the media's biased or inadequate representation of women as a means of defining and controlling gender relations. The argument was that by neglecting to show women or by depicting them in a stereotypical way, the media reinforce the society's dominant male values and symbolically denigrate women; this prevents girls and women from having positive role models to emulate and consequently restricts their development. However, in this theory, "the audience is implicitly conceptualized as a rather passive mass, merely consuming media messages" (van Zoonen, 1994, p.18) and accepting them, when in fact these images might have the opposite effect and push women to change or influence social values.

Van Zoonen identifies another key issue in feminist media studies and that is "the relation between male dominance among media professionals and masculine discourse in media texts" (p.7). It is argued that the dominance of male broadcasters and journalists in the industry gives them the power to define and interpret society's values according to their standards as if they are the norm. She refers to Gramsci's use of the term 'hegemony' in speaking of "the process by which general consent is actively sought for the interpretations of the ruling class" (p.24). The ruling class in the media is the men. These interpretations then become the dominant ideology, unchallenged as "the way things ought to be" and accepted as "common sense," seemingly by everyone. Feminists and many other theorists believe that "the media are the contemporary mediators of



hegemony, the question being how, and to whose avail” (van Zoonen, p.24). According to van Zoonen, the media are conceptualized as agents of social control by feminists in their research on stereotypes, anti-pornography campaigns, and theories of ideology (p.27). In all three areas a structural functionalist media theory is employed: who says what, to whom, and with what effect? In feminist terminology, “media are thought to transmit sexist, patriarchal or capitalist values to contribute to the maintenance of social order” (p.27) generally serving male interests and perceptions. Again, feminists assume that meaning in media texts is “relatively consistent and uncontradictory” (van Zoonen, p.27), but van Zoonen points out that this concept is generally disputed and research has failed to show a clear causal relation between media exposure and sexist attitudes; instead, research found that media effects are mediated by other variables such as age, class, gender and education (p.34). She concludes that the relation between gender and communication is therefore primarily a cultural one; the way media texts are received and interpreted depends on many individual and environmental variables. On the other hand, she finds that the role the media play in the ongoing construction of gender discourse depends on their economic structures (commercial vs. public media), on their specific characteristics (print vs. broadcast), on the particular genres (news vs. soap opera), on the audiences they appeal to, etc. (p.41). Nevertheless, she still acknowledges that “most texts do offer a 'preferred reading or meaning' which, given the economic and ideological location of most media, will tend to reconstruct dominant values” (p.42).

While it is reasonable to say that there are many factors that affect how the audience interprets and processes meaning in media texts, this does not cancel the view that how the message is contextualized, formatted and presented does send a certain

image or meaning, whether obvious or subliminal. Analyzing the content of US media, Kathryn Cirkseña finds that it is “highly gendered in offensive ways” (1989, p.48) for women. Most “general consumption” TV programming reinforces images of male dominance and female invisibility. Content targeted towards women is presented, scheduled and regarded in a way indicating that it is less significant than specifically male oriented programming (Cirkseña, p.49).

The underlying assumption of these arguments is that if more women were employed in the media, particularly in decision-making positions, there would be better presentation of women and discussion of their issues in the media and consequently in society. Therefore, the main concern over women's employment in mass media is removing obstacles to their equal participation and allowing them to express their own values and interpretations. “The challenge is not merely to ensure that the overall media workforce reflects an equitable balance of female and male employees,” according to Margaret Gallagher, “the ultimate goal should be equal representation of women and men within each occupational category, including policy and decision-making posts” (1987, p.12). In her book *Unequal Opportunities: The Case of Women in the Media* (1981) Gallagher examines the different patterns of distribution and access to the media between men and women in several countries around the world. She found that “aspects of the mass media's relationship to women in terms of portrayal and employment transcend cultural and class boundaries” (p.28). Women are almost completely absent in technical jobs and in senior media management, but there is a huge presence of women in presentation and announcing. This is referred to as vertical discrimination. There is also horizontal discrimination in the segregation of program making where more women are

given responsibility for educational and children's programs than for news and current affairs (Gallagher, 1987, p.13). Even "the legislative requirements of the various countries in relation to equal pay and equal treatment of women and men... hides a whole range of attitudes, beliefs and organizational procedures, which amount to indirect discrimination against women" (Gallagher, 1987, p.14). She concludes that discrimination begins in men's minds, "invisible barriers – the attitudes, biases and presumptions, which even women themselves often do not recognize as discrimination," (1987, p.15) is what stands in women's way. Therefore, it is not enough to just open the doors of media employment to women and expect the problem to be resolved, but also to change men's attitude and to change women's own self-perception. On the other hand, Gallagher finds that even though misconceived "professional" beliefs formulated by men may undervalue women and women's interests, professionally ambitious women seeking top positions are unlikely to risk their image and career by associating themselves with women's issues regarded by the dominant male professionals as marginal or minor interests. "As long as they work within structures where final editorial decisions are made by men, their interests are likely to be judged as secondary or peripheral" (Gallagher, 1981, p.112).

Changing the dominant social and media structures is not a simple matter. Assuming that women are by themselves capable of transforming media output even if there were more of them in the field, completely "ignores the organizational context in which the media production process takes place" (van Zoonen, 1994, p.64). Gender is not the only relevant variable to consider in changing the media's output, according to van Zoonen. "General political economic analyses of the media show that their profit

making, commercial interests and their transnational power tend to support consensual and conservative values with regard to gender and many other issues” (p.60). There are also social and cultural expectations of women working in the media. They are constrained by certain images of femininity while asked to meet criteria of professionalism, criteria that men have set up but which do not necessarily conflict with women’s feminine nature. Women are expected to and assigned to work in areas of communication that can be considered an extension of their presumed social role of care, nurturance and humanitarian work. These unspoken rules and expectations start at the level of education where “the process of adjusting the professional norms tends to reaffirm a conservative status quo,” (van Zoonen, p.57) not through obvious instructions but by more subtle messages about “professional journalism” which result in self-censorship among journalists. Gradually, “these obstacles (attitudes of colleagues, audience conceptions, social-political contexts) take on objective status and become a self-evident part of ‘normal’ and desirable routines” (van Zoonen, p.58).

While the media industry is generally dominated by men, there are some areas of media production that seem to have become a women’s field, such as magazine publishing in industrialized countries. An explanation for this might be in the status of the medium itself, which differs from one country to another. According to van Zoonen, in many Western countries national radio has lost its audience to television resulting in the loss of its prestige, thus driving men towards television and leaving radio for women where they are now in the majority (p.50). In many developing countries, on the other hand, radio is still a vital mass medium and therefore it is still dominated by men. “Another indication of the importance of the medium’s status for the employment of

women is the fact that local (low prestige) media almost invariably employ more women than national (high prestige) media” (van Zoonen, p.50).

Mass media systems reflect the distributions of power and control as they are defined by the society's political, economic and cultural parameters which tend to exclude or diminish women's status and role. Gallagher identifies two approaches to handling women's employment in the media, depending on the social structures and media systems in a country. “In those countries or regions where media systems developed and established structures at a time when women's specific needs had not yet been articulated, the fundamental problem is structural reform to reflect changes in women's role and status” (Gallagher, 1981, p.29). Therefore, women should change the political and economic structure and identify the mechanisms, attitudes and values that need to be developed or changed in the media in order to reflect the changes in the broader social system. The second approach, according to Gallagher, stresses the need to research ways in which the media can be used to improve the status of women. It emphasizes development and opportunities in countries where the media systems haven't evolved yet or where the government has strict control over them (1981, p.22). This second approach can be the one used in Saudi Arabia.

In 1995 Gallagher did a study through the UN on women's employment in the media in different countries of the world. Her overall findings include:

1. Perceptions of the representation of women in senior posts do not necessarily correspond with statistical facts.

2. Women are a significant on-screen and on-air presence in the broadcast media.
3. The range of media jobs occupied by women is still extremely limited.
4. The alternative to 'relegation to the women's page' has been to become 'one of the boys' - accepting a particular set of priorities about who and what is important, priorities traditionally determined by men.
5. Percentage of women in journalism and mass communication schools is on the rise.
6. The proportion of women finding employment in mass media is not equal to their share of training.
7. Men are more likely than women to enter the media through other doors than those opened by education or training.
8. Male media professionals tend to be less well qualified in educational terms than their female counterparts.
9. Among equally qualified graduates, women are less likely than men to find employment in the media.
10. Women are discriminated against at the stage of recruitment.
11. Women will tend to be channeled into certain kinds of work.

12. Attitudes and beliefs about women's "natural" inclinations and aptitudes play a role in what issues or areas they are made to work in.
13. Although journalism and communication training institutions have a high enrolment of female students, women play a relatively minor role in defining the curriculum of these courses.
14. Cultural barriers and traditional beliefs play a role in women's media careers.
15. Women are more likely to be found in part-time and temporary work than in full-time employment.
16. Employment in the temporary, part-time media workforce very rarely provides access to promotion paths or decision-making posts.
17. Women tend to be concentrated in certain kinds of occupations (administrative but not production/editorial), at certain levels of the hierarchy (low-level secretarial and junior management posts), and to be employed in certain media more than others (a higher proportion in broadcasting than in the press). Technical work is almost exclusively a male preserve.
18. Lack of appropriate training is a severe handicap for women.
19. Few top media managers are women.
20. There is no outright discrimination but "invisible barriers": stereotyped attitudes, salary differences, values and priorities, and working conditions.

An obvious example of how women's issues and interests are either ignored or presented as less important is that of the news. According to Carolyn M. Byerly, "news, in all of its various forms, has historically underrepresented and misrepresented women" (1995, P.108). Not being the ones setting the standards of news items, women and their problems and stories continue to be defined as un-newsworthy and, when they are included, their portrayals are limited to sexual issues or related to the private sphere of home. Byerly suggests that female journalists can "contribute to gender advancements by including women's perspectives and achievements in news stories" (p.110). However, recent research on news from and about developing countries shows that, on the whole, women remain insignificant in terms of their number as writers and subjects of news stories. As for the developed countries, we can "see" more women as news deliverers and makers, but "the processes of gathering and defining the news has not changed fundamentally" (Creedon, 1993, p.13). Pamela J. Creedon cites three possible explanations: 1) mass communication is a profit-driven, advertising supported business, and women in the field have not gained enough power to influence news content. 2) Females entering the news industry find that the news definers remain predominantly white males, and they as editors and owners control the hiring and firing decisions. 3) Pre-established workplace standards and values force reporters to conform rather than attempt any changes (p.13). According to H. Leslie Steeves, no country with available data reported that more than 20% of the media news was about women, and most current news about women is trivial- related to family status and appearance- and when important women's activities are reported, they are often undermined or demeaned (1993, p.41). In order to change this and improve media content on women, Steeves suggests



using the media for development issues concerning women. Another suggestion is, rather than keeping media outlets centralized in the cities, to have more of them in the local communities where women are more likely to participate in decision-making (p.42). And the third suggestion is for women to have economic power by becoming politically organized and using the new information technology (p.52).

Deborah Rhode's article "Media Images, Feminist Issues" (1995) talks about the relationship between the gaps in women's representation and the coverage of women's issues in US media. She makes the connection between the inadequate representation of women in media decision-making and the media's inadequate representation of women's issues and concerns. Even when the media address women's issues they don't involve women in the discussion. She continues her analysis of the media and how they influence the role and perception of women in society by their emphasis on biased and stereotyped images of them. The same point is made by Muhammad I. Ayish citing a study by Awatif Abd al-Rahman in 1994 titled, "The Image of Arab women in Mass Media and Arts of Expression," where the researcher found that Arab media devote little attention to women despite all their achievements, and instead focus on and reinforce traditional stereotypes (Ayish, 2001, p.127). By focusing on a limited aspect of a woman's life in the home, a certain segment of women in society and typical women jobs, the Arab media consistently ignore Arab women's role, achievement and struggle in various fields and thus present an unbalanced and distorted image of the Arab woman.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Women's Place in Arab Media, with Particular Reference to Saudi Arabia**

#### The mass media in the Arab world:

In his analysis of the mass media in the Arab world and the Middle East, Kai Hafez states that starting from the early 1990s they have undergone profound changes (Hafez, 2001, p.1). "The introduction and spread of new technologies such as satellite television and the Internet have extended media space beyond the local, national, and regional realm," (Hafez, p.1). However, technical, financial, cultural and language barriers prevent the majority of Arab TV audiences from exposure to foreign programs. Nevertheless, commercialization, competition and the increase in the number of media companies have changed the media content in the Middle East considerably. In 1979 William Rugh (as cited in Hafez, 2001) distinguished between three types of Arab press: mobilized (government owned and controlled), loyalist (private but directed by the government), and diverse press (independent and free). These three types of media systems could be considered as general descriptions because in each Arab country the media content and structure continues to change, adopting a combination of aspects from each type (Hafez, p.5). Privatization, alternative-independent media, liberalization and alterations in the structures of media ownership are other factors that have contributed to the changes in the content and form of Middle East media. On the other hand, Hafez noticed that despite their different approaches, "many governments, communication theorists and Islamist groups agree in their critique of the West's 'cultural invasion' via mass media and media imperialism, either through direct broadcasting or by means of

Western texts and programs in the indigenous media” (p.12). So, collaboratively or independently, Arab governments and Islamic groups established their own media empires to counteract and defend themselves, their religion, their culture, etc. against the supposedly negative influence of foreign media. “They aim at cultural separation and pushing back the effects of media globalization, particularly the opening up of censored spaces” (Hafez, p.12).

With the technological developments in mass media and new opportunities for the private sector in the Arab broadcast industry, more commercial interests are taking over control of content and attracting audiences. In addition, the growing readership caused by a rising rate of literacy is demanding more and better publications, which is also being met by the private sector. “By the early 1990s, the Arab governments' tight hold on media operations began to loosen, primarily in response to economic and political globalization trends” (Ayish, p.122). However, because Arab media continues to operate within the context of vague and mostly unwritten laws and regulations, it is often vulnerable to government interpretations of communicator's rights and duties (Ayish, 2001, p.115).

Very few studies have been done on Arab women in the media. One of them was by Fawzia Fahim in 1981 in Egypt, the center of the Arab media industry due to its large production capacity compared to other Arab countries. According to this research study by Fahim, there was no outright discrimination against women; it was all in the attitude of men towards women. For example, the President of the Engineering Sector in Egyptian television said that the reason there was a small number of women in Engineering was because it is a difficult job for women, even though women have proved

very efficient in studio work (p.85). Another example is in work value. Men's performance is rated higher by male senior managers (p.91). Fahim found that “the number of women announcers and program presenters exceeded the number of men, especially in TV” and “the dominance of men in scriptwriting and production in both radio and TV meant that women were inadequately portrayed in radio and TV drama and advertising” (p.88). A major obstacle to women's career development according to both men and women in senior management who were interviewed by Fahim is “the propensity of young women to be absent from work on maternity leave or for family reasons” (p.89). Family commitments and bringing up children are the major obstacles for women because the men don't share in domestic work.

In Saudi Arabia, most of the research done on the media was about the effects of the media on society, the behavioral patterns of people towards the media and how the media are used in social development. The only study done on Saudi women in the media was by Abdullah Al-Jahlan and Mohammed Al-Rubaian in 1984, a master's degree comparison study of Saudi female journalists' career in two newspapers. The thesis chronicled their activities and achievements against the social, economic and political background of that time and found that they were progressing slowly in their career but were held back by family and social issues (Al-Shebili, 2000, p.41). In recent years, Saudi women working in the media have participated in international conferences and seminars, speaking about the barriers they face (Ahmed, 2002, p.50). They emphasized the need to change society's attitude towards women by changing the government's perception of women's role, increasing women's participation and progress in the various administrations and following a policy of inclusion rather than separation.

Background on Saudi Arabia and its media:

As I have indicated, approaching women's studies in Saudi Arabia from a feminist perspective requires consideration of certain factors, most important of which are Islam and the local culture and traditions. It would not be reasonable or practical to apply the same feminist concepts and standards of the West to the Middle East and especially Saudi Arabia. Therefore, a paradigm shift in feminist theory and approach has to be implemented in order to accommodate and incorporate the local culture; this shift is called Islamic feminism by some Muslim scholars and activists. Although there has been no real feminist movement in Saudi Arabia as in other Arab countries, the general concepts of feminism - equality, representation, oppression - have all been discussed and debated by women and men in Saudi Arabia throughout the years. Unlike most of the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia has never come under Western colonialism. Therefore, it has never come into direct contact with or influence of Western lifestyle, ideology, or political and social interference in its history and development. Added to that is its special place in the Islamic world due to the presence of the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the birthplace of Islam, in its territory. As the center of Islam and one of the most conservative Islamic countries in the region, Saudi Arabia and the women there face the greatest challenge in juxtaposing Islam with modernity. Even after becoming a modern country due to the wealth generated from oil production, Saudi society remains conservative and religious.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in 1932 (Rampal, 1994, p.245). It is an absolute family monarchy with no constitution or elected assembly. All power is ultimately vested in the king, who is also the country's religious leader. There are no political parties, and legislation is by royal decree. The king rules in accordance with the Sharia (Islamic law scripted in the holy book the Qur'an). In making decisions he consults with senior members of the royal family and the Council of Ulama, consisting of the country's senior Islamic scholars. He appoints and leads a Council of Ministers, which serves as the instrument of royal authority in both legislative and executive matters. Decisions of the council are reached by a majority vote but require royal sanction. King Fahd – the current king - issued a decree on March 1, 1992 that provided for the formation of a 60-member Consultative (Shoura) Council by the end of September 1992. Its 60 members would be appointed every four years and would be "chosen by the King from amongst scholars and men of knowledge and expertise" (Rampal, p.245). The decree defined the areas on which the council would "express opinions" as including the general plan of economic and social development, annual reports submitted by ministries, international laws and treaties, and the interpretation of laws. The number of members have increased to 120 men and in recent years a few women have been selected to advise on women's matters but not participate in the meetings. Another decree on March 1, 1992, provided for a written constitution, although it also noted that "citizens are to pay allegiance to the King in accordance with the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition" (Rampal, p.245). "In spite of these moves toward political reform Saudi Arabia remains an absolute monarchy. The authoritarian political system has therefore resulted in a controlled press, especially since 1958 when

the government's Publication Department was given the power to censor publications” (Rampal, p.245).

Although private ownership of the press is allowed in Saudi Arabia, such publications must be published by press organizations (Rampal, p.246). These organizations, which took over from small private firms under a royal decree in 1964, are privately owned by groups of companies chosen by the government to act as the board of directors. They, in turn, appoint individuals experienced in newspaper publishing and administration who are approved by the Ministry of Information (Al-Shebili, 2000, p.129). This change in ownership and structure of the press was designed to improve the licensing and establishment process of a publication as well as regulate management and editorial content (Al-Shebili, p.130). In 1993, there were ten press organizations in the country publishing a variety of newspapers and periodicals (Rampal, p.246). The government also publishes several periodicals. Under the 1964 Press and Publication Law, all newspapers must be licensed, and a censorship committee reviews and censors all national and foreign publications according to the policies of the state (this committee was eliminated a few years ago and instead editors are instructed to apply self-censorship or face the consequences). The government may revoke a license or stop a newspaper from publishing (Rampal, p.255). In addition, a Saudi government policy statement of 1982 requires that all newspapers refrain from criticizing the government, the royal family, or the clergy (in recent years, more freedom has been allowed the press in terms of criticizing the government and the clergy but not the royal family). Editors-in-chief (appointed by the government through the Ministry of Information) are held responsible for the publication of everything in their newspapers, and journalists accused of breach of

the regulations are tried by emergency courts Rampal, p.255). Rarely do journalists and editors-in-chief get imprisoned for their writings or newspaper content. Rather, they are usually suspended from work for a period of time or fired without being tried at court. Most of the press is financed by members of the royalty because even though the press establishments are privately owned, most are closely associated with or partially owned by the royal family. The state also provides newsprint at subsidized rates. Advertising and circulation sales are other sources of revenue (Rampal, p.254).

Of the ten daily newspapers in Saudi Arabia, seven are in Arabic and three in English (Rampal, p.246). One of these three English newspapers- Riyadh Daily- announced in May 2003 that it will close due to financial difficulties and two of the Arabic newspapers are bankrupt and their future is uncertain. Five of the Arabic dailies are based in Jeddah, the administrative capital and commercial center; two in Riyadh, the royal capital; and one each in Mecca, Dammam (Eastern region) and Abha (North-Western region). An important Arabic-language newspaper is Asharq al-Awsat (Rampal, p.246). Based in London, the newspaper is also published from New York, Paris, Marseilles, Cairo, Casablanca, Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dhahran. It is published by Saudi Research and Publishing Company, a press organization owned by members of the Saudi royal family. It is read throughout the Arab world. Saudi Research and Publishing also publishes the country's leading English-language daily, Arab News. The other two English-language dailies are Saudi Gazette and Riyadh Daily. As with newspapers, most periodicals are published by press organizations (Rampal, p.247). Twenty-five magazines and periodicals catering to various reading tastes are produced by such organizations, plus a number of periodicals published by the government and ARAMCO



(Arab American Oil Company- it's the main oil company in Saudi Arabia and it's based in the Eastern province) and distributed free of charge. This puts the total number of periodicals at 58. The number of magazines has increased considerably since 1994 and the exact number is not easily determined.

Most of the news in Saudi Arabia is gathered and distributed by the government-controlled Saudi Press Agency (SPA) established in 1970 (Rampal, p.257). Operating under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Information, its primary function is to centralize and distribute regional and national news to the different channels of information inside and outside the country. The SPA supplies news and features in Arabic and English to both print and broadcast organizations in the country. For international news, the media also rely on other Arab and international agencies, although their copy is subject to censorship to comply with Saudi publication laws. The Islamic Press Agency is the second of the two news agencies in Saudi Arabia, with its focus on Islamic events and issues. Complying with the wishes of the royal family and the demands of religious leaders are the main considerations of a newspaper. In addition, newspapers regularly receive guidelines from the Ministries of Information and Interior on government positions on controversial issues. For reasons such as these, William Rugh (1979) classified the Saudi press as "loyalist" (Rampal, p.258).

Radio services were introduced in the 1930s, but the first indigenous program did not begin until 1949 (Rampal, p.248). The ultraconservative Muslim religious leaders had strongly opposed the introduction of radio in the kingdom, but Ibn Saud, the kingdom's founder, convinced them of its benefits in the 1920s with a two-way demonstration of transmission of readings from the Qur'an between Mecca and Riyadh.

Today's Saudi broadcasting is equipped with first-class facilities. The state-owned Broadcasting Service of Saudi Arabia (BSSA), a department within the Ministry of Information, holds a monopoly over public broadcasting. BSSA operates five radio networks, providing two general Arabic-language services (originating from Riyadh and Jeddah), two religious services (from Mecca and Jeddah), and a foreign-language service in English and French (broadcast from Dammam and Jeddah). All of these services are relayed throughout the kingdom.

As with radio, there was resistance by the Muslim religious leaders to the introduction of television in the kingdom (Rampal, p.249). However, King Faisal considered television an essential tool to help combat propaganda from neighboring countries and to assist in national development. Saudi Arabian television went on air on July 17, 1965. ARAMCO had earlier initiated a television service for its employees in Dhahran in 1957. The government-controlled Saudi Arabia television (SATV) operates on a network of 140 stations, including 6 main stations in Riyadh, Jeddah, Medina, Dammam, Qassim (in Central region), and Abha. The SATV operates a second television channel in English and French, which began in 1983 (Rampal, p.250). A third was launched in 2002 as a youth channel in Arabic and a fourth all-news channel was launched in early 2003. Saudi Arabia imports a substantial amount of programming from other Arabic-speaking countries, especially Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, and Western programming from the US, Britain and France (Rampal, p.250). Many of the imported programs, even those from Arab countries, challenge traditional values and draw strong objections and criticism from religious leaders. There has been a continued effort to engage local and regional talent, including women, in the development of

indigenous production, with noticeable improvement and success in recent years. Other than the ARAMCO radio and television stations in the Dhahran area, the government holds a monopoly in broadcasting. All operating costs of the state-owned broadcasting stations, therefore, come from the government, although the situation has changed somewhat for television. In 1986 the Saudi government allowed advertising on the TV channels. However, commercial income provides a very small portion of the system's operating costs. The government continues to provide most of the financing. There is no advertising on radio, and it is financed entirely by the government (Rampal, p.254).

The current Saudi government policy does not allow cable television in the country, and the private reception of television programming via satellite dish is also illegal (Rampal, p.251). Satellite dishes, however, have spread like wildfire on the rooftops of most of the homes, even though the importation and sale of such equipment for private use is supposed to be illegal. There are no commercial film production companies in Saudi Arabia and there are no cinemas in Saudi Arabia because the government prohibits public exhibition of films. However, movies are allowed to be shown, after being censored, in the large expatriate compounds, such as ARAMCO (Rampal, 253).

In the area of telecommunication, oil-rich Saudi Arabia has invested in the most modern technology available and taken the lead in pushing links among Arab states via communication satellite (Rampal, p.252). It contributed the largest share, (25%) of the \$100 million cost of ARABSAT, a regional satellite system launched in 1985 to serve the 21-member Arab league. The satellite is operated by ARABSAT, a multinational organization based in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia is also the ninth largest investment

shareholder of the International Telecommunications Satellite Organizations (INTELSAT), which provides a choice of satellite telecommunications services to users around the world.

#### Saudi women and the media:

Studies in the Arab world show an “explicit or implicit recognition that women in Arab society occupy a secondary and inferior position to that of men” (Rassam, 1984, p.2). Arguments based on perceived innate differences between men and women, and on the presumed role of women in ensuring the cohesion and survival of the male kin groups are at the center of the confinement of women to the private/domestic sphere. Research on women in the Arab Gulf region, where Saudi Arabia is, shows that “customs, values and male attitudes, which are important variables in explaining women's inequality, tend to be religiously legitimized,” (Rassam, p.5) even though there might not be actual support for them in Islamic text. For example, the hijab (veil) is believed by many to be a product of social life rather than of Islamic dictums (Allaghi & Almana, p.29).

In the Gulf region, modernization has improved the lives of many women, especially in terms of providing accessibility to education and employment. Public education for women in Saudi Arabia officially began in 1960, but illiteracy rates remain high, particularly among women and more so in the rural and isolated communities. Literacy rates in Saudi Arabia were 73% for men and 48% for women in 1990 compared to 15% for men and 2% for women in 1970 (Fernea, 2000, p.189). According to the research done by Farida Allaghi and Aisha Almana (1984), the difficulties facing working women in Saudi Arabia include: family restrictions, lack of transportation

(women are not allowed to drive), fear of rumors (if the woman has to work with men), limited opportunities, lack of child-care facilities, lack of economic incentives (because Islam requires the men in the family to take care of the women financially and some families don't need the extra income), and cultural heritage that insists on division of labor between the sexes (p.25-26). In general, women exercise informal power in Arab society, particularly within elite families, although badu (nomad) women are more mobile and aggressive than their urban counterparts. Still, "Gulf women do not feel that they are given opportunities to contribute equally to their countries' development," (Allaghi & Almana p.31).

Nesta Ramazani states that "nowhere in the Muslim world is the clash between ancient traditions and modern values more graphically demonstrated than in the life of the educated, professional women of Saudi Arabia" (1985, p.267). These Saudi women live two separate worlds, according to her. They are professional, active, contributing members of society, but they are also protected females, bound by tradition, veiled in public and forbidden to drive a car or travel unless accompanied by a man. Many of these same women, however, vigorously defend the restrictions imposed on them in the name of Islam and reject the kind of freedom enjoyed by Western women, which they consider to be exploitive and demeaning. The educational opportunities provided to Saudi women have opened up and continue to open many professional occupations for them. "The very segregation of the sexes in the workplace gives the women a professional advantage because they do not compete with men for their jobs," according to Ramazani, "many of the women who work do so out of a sense of commitment to the progress of the nation, and to achieve a sense of fulfillment and self-worth, rather than

out of economic necessity” (p.268). She found that many women work as journalists, and the issue of women’s place and role in Saudi society is hotly debated in the press, leading her to conclude that there is “much confusion of values within Saudi society” (p.270). The main point of contention is the possible consequences of allowing women the freedom to work outside the home and the possible threat to the stability of the family, which could undermine traditional male dominance. Many of those who oppose women’s employment cite studies that correlate women's education and participation in the workforce with the increasing rate of divorce, although most studies point to other factors such as violence and financial problems. Even those conservatives who agree on the need to educate women and allow them to work differ with the liberals over the extent and range of professions and responsibilities women can be permitted to have. For example, conservatives insist on limiting them to 'women's jobs' such as teaching and health care, and on not bringing women into any contact with men or bringing them into the public eye. “Although traditional attitudes about women's place being in the home persist, one sees more and more young Saudi males accepting and even promoting the professionalism of their wives” (Ramazani, 1985, p.272).

Each of the three main regions of Saudi Arabia (Western, Central and Eastern) is different in its history, culture and traditions and in its political, economic and social aspects. The Western region is generally considered more liberal than the Eastern region and the ultraconservative Central region where the government is. Therefore, any changes or new developments, such as opening schools for girls or media facilities or means of transportation, had to be introduced gradually to the country, taking into consideration all the different religious and cultural backgrounds in each region.

Employing women in the media was and still is a controversial matter. However, it is believed by many Saudi intellectuals that “Saudi media could not fulfill their role and function without the participation of women, as long as that participation does not conflict with Islamic values,” (Al-Shebili, 2000, p.40). In the 1950s, women began writing in newspapers, sometimes under pseudonyms. Gradually they had their regular columns and pages, but they did not reach the level of a specialized press or having their pictures published in the newspapers and magazines until recently. “Saudi press, despite its technical advancements and various publications in literature, science, finance and management, is still lagging in providing excellent press for women, family and children” (Al-Shebili, p.145). Saudi presses for women have flourished abroad, but they do not address specific social Saudi issues and instead try to appeal to all Arab women. In the early 1960s, Saudi women were able to reach the high-level positions of supervisor to the women's page and managing editor in a newspaper. There was also the pioneering experience of a Saudi woman establishing her own magazine in the 1970s, but it is based outside Saudi Arabia (Al-Shebili, p.41). However, the 1980s saw a pullback in women's advancement in the press due to conservative pressures.

The same thing happened in television. At first women's image was not allowed, then non-Saudi women were allowed to present in a limited manner, and then only the Saudi women's voice was heard. It was not until the 1970s that Saudi women were allowed to present programs and read the news (Al-Shebili, p.41-42). This slow advancement was also cut short in the 1980s, but since the mid-1990s Saudi TV has seen a comeback of Saudi women as presenters, editors, and directors. Saudi women did better in radio. They began working in radio as coordinators and presenters of programs

for women and children after the establishment of the Ministry of Information in 1963. With the support of the society and the Ministry of Information they became involved in other programs as well. Until 1975 women worked in radio part-time and not as official staff employees. Things, however, improved fairly quickly for them after that. In 1981, a woman's programs department was established in radio and a woman was appointed director of that department, while another woman was put in charge of the children's programs. In mid-1980s women were employed as technicians and the first Saudi female director was also hired. With the increasing number of Saudi women working in radio, a complete female administrative department was established in 1996 to handle all aspects of women and children's programs. A woman was also made head of the English programs department.

There are no media and communication or journalism departments in any of the women's universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia. Those who studied communication or journalism did so abroad. There are few women working in the Saudi Press Agency and mostly part-time.

This general review of Saudi media and women's role in them within the cultural boundaries of Saudi society, lays the foundation for my thesis which focuses on the women's perspective and interpretation of their present status and future potential in the media. Since I am basing my research on feminist theory and methodology, it was necessary to review some of the main points of feminism and set the parameters upon which I will be approaching my analysis.



## CHAPTER 4

### **The Research: Questions and Subjects**

According to van Zoonen, feminist research adds to interpretive research strategies the dimension of power, “the acknowledgement of the structural inequalities involved in and coming out of the process of making meaning” (1994, p.134). She defines interpretive research as “an inductive procedure to arrive at empirically grounded understandings and explanations of social phenomena” (p.135) and notes that there are “three criteria to assess the quality of interpretive inquiries: theoretical compatibility and comprehension (do the results match the orientations of the participants), analytical relevance, and functionality” (p.145). In this thesis on Saudi women working in the media, I relied on feminist theory and research methods because I considered it the most suitable for my objective of discussing these women’s role and status in the media from their perspective, as opposed to conducting a questionnaire where I would be limited in scope and ability to interact with the participants. My thesis shows how feminist theory is compatible with the participant’s mindset and comprehensive in its view of their perspective, that it is relevant to my analysis of their concerns and that it is applicable to the conclusion regarding their struggles in the media.

According to Shulamit Reinharz, feminist methodology is the sum of feminist research methods, with the understanding that feminism itself is a perspective, not a method (1992, p.240). In other words, “it is based on cognitive and emotional frameworks or attitudes rather than a set of guidelines for conducting research” (Reinharz, p.242). Feminist methodology allows the researcher to use multiple research

methods for the same study in order to explain the data gathered, to generate a new theory or perspective from the results and to test a current theory or modify it. There are various characteristics of feminist research. It is open to being trans-disciplinary, it aims to create social change and it strives to recognize diversity. What differentiates feminist research from other methods is that it builds a relationship between the researcher and the people studied by involving the researcher as a person in the study and describing the people studied as participants. The way the study is written will also tend to create a bond with the readers by addressing their concerns in direct and practical ways rather than in abstract and academic jargons. These are the main themes of feminist methodology, according to Reinharz (p. 240).

Feminist methodology is quite flexible and accommodating to a certain extent, which makes it appealing when studying the women of another culture, i.e. a non-western culture. The fact that it allows for the use of multiple methods means that it allows for multiple points of view to emerge, adding breadth and depth to the analysis. One of the main methods used by feminist researchers that allows such in-depth understanding and communication is the interview, particularly the unstructured or open-ended interview. Semistructured or unstructured interviewing is a qualitative data gathering technique; it is not intended to arrive at numbers and percentages but rather at identifying common themes and detecting points of view and opinions. Using an inductive approach, “interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words” (Reinharz, p.19).

### The interviews:

Due to time constraints, my goal was to interview only six Saudi women working full-time at media establishments in the city of Jeddah where I resided. Two of them work in the newspaper field, two in television and two in radio. I had no problems contacting and speaking with the women in radio and newspapers. In fact, they were very interested in the research and very cooperative. I had easy access to them because I knew most of them personally through my work as a journalist or through my colleagues, which made them comfortable talking with me. I chose women who had at least three years of experience and represented a range of career stages in the media. The result was six women who had work experience ranging from 4 to 24 years and who occupy different positions in the career ladder available to women. There were difficulties in contacting the women working in the Jeddah television channels because they work part-time, so they didn't have office phone numbers. I did not know any of them personally, although I did speak to one of them and she showed interest. However, she was not able to participate for personal reasons, so I had to arrange for interviews over the phone with two women working in the women's department in Riyadh. Although they were happy to participate and provide me with statistical data, they were not thorough or forthcoming with their personal views, information and experiences, perhaps because the interview was over the phone.

Each of the interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two hours and the interviews with the women in Jeddah were conducted either at their place of work or at a public place. Except for the interviews over the phone, they were all taped with the consent of

the participants. I had a set of basic questions to ask them but we often went into other issues related to the topic that required further explanation:

1. How did you begin your career and how long have you been working here?
2. What has changed for you and in the field since you began working here?
3. How would you describe your experience in this field?
4. What opportunities and barriers have you encountered?
5. How is your relationship with your male colleagues and boss? What is their perception of you?
6. What are the main issues you report or write on? Is that by choice?
7. Do you think there are adequate discussions of women's issues in the media?  
Why?
8. Do you think there is a need for more women in the media? Why?
9. Do you see a difference in the way men and women discuss women's issues in the media? How?
10. What changes would you like to see in women's status in the media and in the Saudi media overall?

I was interested to know as much as possible about their own personal perspective on what they thought their role in the media was, what are the barriers to their advancement and what is their future potential or, at least, what do they hope to achieve and how. These questions led to inquiring about some fundamental issues concerning

women working in the media, such as salary, training, education, family life, social concerns, religious issues, political issues and economic issues. I also asked about the work environment in terms of physical and emotional comfort, the interpersonal and professional relationships among the staff and the level of control and influence over media content, management and strategy. Two of the interviews were in English because the participants were fluent in it and felt confident and comfortable speaking in English, the rest were in Arabic. I took a few notes during the interviews (but thorough notes with the phone interviews) because I wanted to keep eye contact and an informal atmosphere, and later I went over the tapes several times and registered further details for analysis such as tone of voice, hesitations and repeated points in their replies. In analyzing the interviews, I used an approach that emphasized subjectivity and difference to allow each participant's voice to stand out while also bringing my own experiences to bear on the analysis and the experiences of other Saudi women working in the media with whom I have spoken. I tried to identify the main themes expressed by the participants and common concerns while also registering variations in views, subtle or indirect references and direct insights, complaints and suggestions.

#### Background on the participants:

The six women I interviewed may be considered privileged in the sense that they are from middle to upper class society and they are well educated; some of them even studied abroad. They are generally considered liberal or semi-liberal by society simply because they work in the media regardless of how conservative or religious they might otherwise be. They all have their family's full support and encouragement for their career in the media, which is very important in Saudi society. I tried to interview women

from different social backgrounds, different age groups and different experiences in the media. My choices were limited to women I knew personally or through colleagues, women I could interview as soon as was possible and to women willing to be interviewed. These are not their real names:

Sandra studied radio and television abroad despite initial objections from her father, and went on to complete a master's degree in communications. Upon returning to Saudi Arabia, she accepted a job in radio at a lower position and salary because they didn't have an opening for someone with her high qualifications. She has been working in radio for almost twenty years, achieving a respectable professional reputation in presenting a variety of successful programs.

Julia began her career in radio over twenty years ago and succeeded in reaching a high administrative position. She comes from a family that worked in the media. She began working in radio as a child and continued while in college and then went abroad for a master's degree in radio and television. When she was hired in radio, there were a total of three Saudi women working there and they were only hired part-time.

Jane was looking for a job after completing her BA abroad and a master's degree and she thought working in a newspaper would be interesting. When she began more than eleven years ago as an editor, there were only two women in the department. She said that her male colleagues were nice to her because they weren't used to working with a Saudi woman but she made it clear that she wanted to work like everyone else. They tried new and different assignments for her but only recently was she given bigger responsibilities and roles to play in the newspaper.

Barbara wanted to work as a journalist and began immediately after graduating from a local college. She began as a trainee in a newspaper, then freelance or part-time, and later became editor and senior editor in a magazine. Now she is a reporter in a newspaper as a full-time staff. She tries to go for news stories that are not expected of a woman to cover. Her different experiences as part-time and full-time and working in a magazine as well as newspapers are insightful.

Emily works in television and achieved a high administrative position after years of training and experience. Choosing to work in television at the time she began her career was not an easy decision. She has witnessed the slow progress, retreat and now revived progress of women in Saudi television.

Jennifer presents programs in television. As a relatively new face in television, she has hopes for more involvement of women in different programs. She believes in her work despite what she considers a disapproving opinion of her job by society.

#### The survey:

Another method I used in my research is a survey to gather basic statistical data. I wanted to know how many women worked in each of the media institutions in Saudi Arabia, mainly newspapers, radio and television and their positions in them. I eliminated magazines from the inquiry because there are more than 50 magazines. Most of these magazines are issued by large publishing companies that have several publications, and the same female journalists working at a publishing company writes for a number of its publications. The other magazines are issued by government establishments and the writers are from among their staff. However, I was able to talk to some of the women working in a select few of these magazines as a sample and they provided me with the

number of female employees in their magazines. The survey had three questions and the goal was to figure out the approximate percentage of women working in the media and in what positions:

1. What is the total number of employees working in this institution?
2. What is the number of Saudi women working in this institution?
3. What are their positions?

I spoke to the Human Resources department and the women's department in these institutions and they were cooperative. Most of them agreed to provide me with the information over the phone after I explained my research to them. Two publications and the radio and television administrations asked for a faxed request and they replied by fax. After several failed attempts at first to ask for a signed consent for the survey, I realized that it would be better to have only a verbal consent. Only two newspaper publications I contacted refused to provide me with complete information. Although sometimes I was able to get the information I wanted from one of the newspapers' offices but not from the head office. I contacted eight publishing companies that publish ten daily Arabic newspapers and two English newspapers plus two publishing companies that publish two local women magazines, and I contacted the women's department at the radio stations in Jeddah and Riyadh and the women's department at the television station in Riyadh.

It was not easy determining the exact number of Saudi women working in these media institutions because some of them did not have a women's department and many of the women working in the media work part-time. I was able to talk with four women



who worked full-time and two who worked part-time at Al-Madinah, Okaz, Al-Watan and Al-Yum newspapers as well as two women who worked part-time at Al-Ataa and Hayat magazines. Even though they were not part of the participants in the interviews, they were very eager to provide me with information about their workplace and speak about their issues. The answers to the survey shed further light on the presence, or lack, of women in the media and how that is affecting their contributions to the field and influence on society. This research does not include a content analysis, so even though there are references to types of programs or articles by Saudi women working in the media or on Saudi women and their issues, there is no detailed study or analysis of these programs and articles in this research because that is beyond its scope.

#### Personal observations:

Besides the survey and the interviews, I followed the discussions in the local newspapers, magazines and television about the current situation of the Saudi media including women's role in them. As a journalist myself at Arab News newspaper with four years of experience as a part-time and full-time employee as well as two previous years of experience working in television while studying communications in the United States, I have vested interest in following up on the changes in Saudi media and I have developed many relationships at all levels in the local industry. This allows me considerable access and insider knowledge to issues and information on the Saudi media. There has been an increase lately of open criticisms and request for reforms in the media, and along with these discussions there have been some changes in the format and content of the media that I have taken note of. Within the year 2003 alone, the Saudi Journalists Association was established and as part of an overall restructuring of the government in

May 1st, the Saudi Press Agency and Saudi Radio and Television were made into independent administrations with the Minister of Information and Culture as chairman of the board, and the Higher Council for Information- formed in 1981 to set the overall policy and strategy of the media in Saudi Arabia and supervise its activity, and chaired by the Minister of the Interior- was eliminated. These kinds of changes took place gradually after a few years of tense dialogue and debate. Most of the suggestions concerning women in the media focused on the need for communication schools, better training and the improvement of their role and status (Amoudi, 2003, p.24). I also had the opportunity to attend a seminar on 'Saudi women in the media: Their problems and expectations', organized by Al-Jazirah Corp. for press, printing and publishing on March 1, 2003 in Jeddah, where several of them spoke about their problems and the barriers they face. All these venues gave me further insight into women's issues in the media, which confirmed the general experiences and comments of the women I interviewed. I have developed good relationships with the participants and most of the other women working in the media with whom I have spoken. This encouraged them to update me on anything new in their workplace.

A final point about difficulties I had doing this research regards the lack of adequate and efficient libraries and resources. I had completed almost all of the literature review for this research in Calgary because I knew I wouldn't find most of it in Saudi Arabia or at least it would be difficult to find or difficult to receive in time if I had to order any of it. Although I found some books and journal articles about the media in Saudi Arabia, there were very few that discussed specifically women in the Saudi media; most of them had only some reference to their role and achievements. There were more

resources on the media in other Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Lebanon, but again only a few of them addressed women's issues. However, some of these Arab countries had a feminist movement, which means there are chronological and documented general changes in policies and roles of women in various sectors of the society that was reflected in their status in the media. The same is not true in Saudi Arabia, which can explain the lack of research and focus on women and their issues including their status in the media, a point elaborated on in the findings and analysis chapters.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Findings:**

There are three main themes that stand out in the interviews. These themes can be seen as the overarching issues that concern the participants and under which there are several related issues, barriers and problems they encounter in their media career. In order not to over-categorize and simplify the participants' views, I will let them speak for themselves- according to the principles of feminist research methodology- and then analyze and try to interpret the meanings and implications of their words as I understood them.

### Cultural and circumstantial factors:

#### *Social constraints:*

According to Julia, Saudi society now is a little more open and accepting of women working in the media and participating in their coverage of events or issues. This has reached the extent that women from the public actually seek the media out for publicity or to expose a problem. Nonetheless, women working in the media continue to face social barriers and restrictions. Julia said that "work in the media is demanding, but if a woman loves her job, she can balance that with her duties as wife and mother, and that's an issue for women all around the world; if it wasn't for my mother helping me with the children, I wouldn't have managed to continue without interruptions." The family plays a big role in a Saudi woman's life and career. If it weren't acceptable for the family that their daughter or wife works in the media, or any field for that matter, she

wouldn't have a career in it. "Working in the media requires flexibility in time and going beyond regular hours. It also requires mobility because most of it can be field work and meeting different people including men. Without the family's support and understanding, a Saudi woman would not be able to meet the demands of her job," said Julia. Another family issue that has direct influence on a Saudi woman's career is the children. None of the media institutions has a child day-care center, and if there is no adult family member or baby-sitter with the children at home, especially during the infancy years, then the mother would have to quit or cut down on her working hours. Sandra pointed out that some women quit their job in the media or limit their involvement after getting married, perhaps because of pressure from their husbands who might not consider a Saudi Muslim woman's career in the media as appropriate. Having a career in any field for some Saudi women sometimes means choosing between it and having a married life, and this was true for some of the women I interviewed. Sandra admitted that she sacrificed having a family for the sake of her career in the media.

Women in television are the most affected by this negative perception. "There are some reservations regarding women in television because their faces are revealed," said Julia. Most of the conservative sectors of the society do not look favorably upon them because of that, even though the women cover their hair and dress modestly. "The only barrier to my work in television is men's perception because it's a mixed work environment," said Emily. This perception limits their participation and role in television because the top managers do not wish to antagonize the public further by giving these women more power, more air time or more options. "Society's perception of our job is a problem, many of them don't consider what we do as important. This affects us

psychologically and limits our role,” said Jennifer. It is a barrier to their motivation and level of productivity.

Most of the media institutions try to segregate men and women, according to regulations in all the workplaces where it is possible. For example, segregation is impossible in hospitals. However, clearly it is not possible to segregate men and women in television and radio, and this is a problem for the women who work there or want to work there because some of the more conservative sectors in the society are against mixed work places. “The main problem for women in television remains society’s regard to the job and workplace,” said Emily. In radio, “there aren’t a lot of female applicants because it’s a mixed workplace and there is no way to separate the men from the women,” said Sandra. “The field was open for us. I wasn’t restricted as a woman, but then we went through a period when they prevented us from interviewing men and limited us in other ways. Now they have allowed us again,” she said. In publishing companies, the degree of segregation is different from one company to another. In one of them the women are in a separate room but there is regular interaction with their male colleagues and access to their boss. In most of the other companies, however, women are in a separate floor or a separate building and their only contact with their male colleagues and boss is through telephone, fax and email. “My family is supportive of me in my work, but some members don’t like the idea of a mixed working place,” said Jane. “We are different here [where she works], but in other local newspapers, they are segregated and women are not given responsibility,” she said. Salwa Khamees, a journalist at Okaz newspaper, said in an article I wrote on women's issues in the media, "because our department is separate from the men’s, we have problems in addition to the problems we

share with the men. This is because being in a separate department makes us distant from the decision-making headquarters, distant from the editors, and distant from the daily meetings for journalists which add to the difficulties and barriers we encounter" (Akeel, 2003, p.2).

Another social restriction "is if the woman needs to travel for her work and most families would object to her traveling by herself," said Barbara. In fact, women need the permission of male guardian (father, husband, brother or uncle) to travel outside Saudi Arabia. "Even traveling within Saudi Arabia I had some problems, not from my family but getting permission from my work and coverage for travel expenses," said Sandra. Not being allowed to drive is also a major obstacle for women. "Driving is a problem. I'm dependent on the driver," said Jane, frustrated. This restricts their mobility, and working in the media requires unhindered movement. Also, "there is a problem in access- government functions, state functions- maybe it's changing a little because there are more women journalists and they should be taken seriously," said Jane. "I contact people by phone and many are understanding, but it's a problem contacting high officials, going to press conferences, doing interviews. It is very hard for me to go to public administrations and meet ministers," said Barbara. Saudi women are denied entrance to some government buildings. Barbara puts it this way: "I would do a story much faster if I was a man."

#### *Invisible barriers:*

"A big problem we have is that even the women working in the media don't feel or realize the problem of how they are being treated or depicted because it's a social

taboo,” said Barbara, meaning that it is not wise to discuss these matters in public. For example in caricatures, she feels that women are usually portrayed in a demeaning, humiliating and accusatory way. She urged women and everyone working in the media to stop the self-censorship and be more courageous in expressing their views.

Surprisingly, though, all the participants said they do not feel mistreated by their boss or male colleagues, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t feel discriminated against. “All the bosses I had, especially Saudis, were supportive of me,” said Barbara. “The Saudi market needed female reporters and there are a lot of non-Saudi female reporters.” She is speaking of her boss’s support for her as a Saudi female reporter replacing expatriate female reporters but not replacing a Saudi or expatriate male reporter. The participants feel that they are treated with respect by their male colleagues and have good working relationships with them. “The male supervisors and directors we have are open-minded and believe in women’s work,” said Sandra. They blame the general society’s attitude towards women and some top management officials’ lack of interest or desire to improve women’s role in the media. “There were problems in the beginning from the general society but not at work from our male colleagues. They encouraged us and there was no sense of me being a woman but a colleague,” commented Julia. Some of them, however, as indicated earlier, expressed a sense of lack of appreciation by the male managers and lack of respect by some members of society towards women in the media. “I wish there is more appreciation of women’s work in general and particularly in the media,” said Sandra. “Change doesn’t come from having more women working in the media, it comes from top management, and we have proven that we are just as capable as men in doing the same job. We should be trusted more, given more responsibilities, bigger jobs and



tasks, and more exposure,” said Jane. “Men are territorial, they have to come first and women second. They’re not interested in women’s issues. They are the ones who set the criteria of what is important,” she added.

*Education and training:*

There is no communications department or journalism school in any of the girls’ colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia yet, only a mandatory media and communication subject taught to all freshmen students in the humanities colleges. Those who majored in radio, television or journalism did so abroad. Therefore, most women who apply for a job are considered unqualified until they get the proper training. “I don’t think education [she is referring to a college education in communications] is a problem. I think it [being able to work in the media] is a talent,” said Barbara. “It is important to have a degree, that you are a well-informed person. It’s important to have training before or at the beginning of joining,” she said. Sandra thinks differently, “I think not having a college for communications and media for women is a problem because many of the women working in the media now have a middle or high school degree and even those with a college degree are far from the media field. The media is not about a pretty face or a good voice, but about ideas, intelligence, personality. As an audience member, I don’t want to waste my time on nonsense dialogue. We have to respect the audiences’ mentality,” said Sandra. Julia and Sandra thought that a degree in communications helped them refine their talent and gave them the knowledge and experience required. “There is an acceptable number of women working in the media, but they lack experience and enough education in communications and we don’t provide them with that in our

colleges,” said Emily. Jennifer feels that the lack of communication schools or training programs is a problem for Saudi women, “we need specialized training in directing, writing, presenting and other areas.” On the other hand, “I don’t think it’s necessary to have media schools,” said Jane, “but we do need more practical training on the job, learning new things and going to other countries for training. I only got basic training and learned by trial and error.”

Those who do not have a communications degree or some sort of training are hired as trainees for an unspecified time period that lasts from a few months to over a year. There are no standard training programs for them in any of the media institutions except in radio which provides three to six months of training. While the participants differed in their opinion for a need to have a degree in communications, they were all of the opinion that women working in the media should have some sort of college degree because, while it was acceptable twenty years ago to hire women with a high-school degree, this should not be the case now. The general opinion of the participants and the women who spoke at the media seminar I attended is that there are more qualified women now than before. The fact that some women do not have a communications degree is used to describe them as unprofessional and therefore of a lesser level than the men, and therefore my interviewees believe that there should be some standard or criteria for hiring women in the media. Sandra felt strongly about women in the media who are unqualified and truly unprofessional, “we should raise the level of standard for accepting applicants. Besides education, I think one of the main requirements for hiring a woman should be her work ethics and personality. Many of the young women don’t take their job in the media seriously and leave it after getting married, which decreases the motivation to train

women. There has to be commitment, interest, a desire to continue and a sense of responsibility and this is something they lack.” She felt that the low standard of some of the women working in the media and their attitude towards the job is hurting the image of the other women in the media and their potential to advance. It is particularly important for her that women in the media are committed to their job and serious about it and not to regard it as a temporary gig or a way to become famous or catch a husband. She is clearly placing some of the responsibility on the women’s shoulders for their low status and restricted advancement in the media. To compensate for the lack of a college degree in communications, Barbara and Jane think that there should be a better training system on the job for the women and more workshops and seminars offered to them by the institutions. Barbara and Sandra also think that the women journalists and presenters should try to become specialized in a certain field such as economy or health and so on instead of covering everything without gaining expertise in anything.

#### Organizational structure:

##### *Career limitations:*

According to my survey, none of the newspapers employed women in any of their administration or technical and production departments; all the female employees were either reporters or editors, except for the women’s department’s secretary and photographer. The highest position a woman can hope to achieve is the head administrator or managing editor of the women’s department in addition to her work as a reporter; this extra responsibility doesn’t necessarily translate into a significant increase or any kind of increase in salary. According to my statistical data, female employees in

any newspaper in Saudi Arabia are less than 10% of the total number of employees (see Table 1), the reason, according to a female journalist I spoke to, “is because my newspaper cannot accommodate more women,” but even this small percentage does not give the full picture. Some newspapers don’t have a women’s department and all their female employees are collaborators who work from home (see Table 2). The same journalist said that every newspaper’s policies are in accordance with the country’s overall media policy. “Whatever changes that happen in the media are part of the general policy and strategy of the government,” said Julia. Jane agrees, “I think it’s the government’s policy that all the bosses should be men.” All these factors and others contribute to the loss of female talent who give up on journalism out of frustration and disappointment, said many of the female journalists. Some have opted for a new way to get their word out and that is the Internet, where they create their own websites or simply post their articles in available sites, which allows them fewer restrictions on their opinions and investigative reporting (Baswaid, 2002, p.52). “It’s not just the working environment or institution, sometimes it’s the family because of the mixed workplace and the traveling, and there isn’t much glitter or reward in the job. No woman has reached the top, they don’t advance,” said Barbara. “Unless you work at a woman’s magazine there is no chance of advancing except to be recognized as a reporter,” she added. Why? “It’s a male-dominated job,” she explained.

In magazines, the situation is actually not much better. All of the large circulation Saudi women’s magazines are published and headquartered outside Saudi Arabia. These magazines are distributed in all Arab countries and internationally, so their focus is not local. They have a large female staff at all levels including editor-in-chief but they are all

non-Saudi. There were two exceptions to this. One in the early eighties when a Saudi woman became the first editor-in-chief of Sayidaty magazine (a publication of Saudi Research and Publishing Company), but since then, non-Saudi women and Saudi men have followed as editors-in-chief of the magazine. The other exception is the Al-Sharqiyah magazine which was founded by a Saudi woman in the late seventies. After she died her daughter took over as editor-in-chief and continues publishing it to this day. Significantly, Al-Sharqiyah publishing company recently began publishing a new all-women newspaper Donya, which boasts of being the first Saudi newspaper for women and by women. There are also several internationally oriented magazines on general interest topics which are owned by Saudi publishing companies also based outside Saudi Arabia and employ women as reporters and editors. Most of these Saudi magazines based outside Saudi Arabia have offices in Saudi Arabia where female local reporters work for them. Few of the Saudi women working in these offices are staff. Usually, they are collaborators (see Table 3). Unless these women are able to work at the main office abroad, they can work for years without improvement in their salary or status and the highest position they can achieve is the head administrator of the women's office,

It is in local magazines published in Saudi Arabia that Saudi women have a better chance of becoming a managing editor or editor-in-chief. However, they work mainly for magazines for women, family and children and, still, most of them are under the supervision and general administration of men (see Table 3). Saudi women are employed as reporters and editors in specialized magazines for business and economy, health, education, religion, politics, sports, computers and many other topics. Publishing companies, various governmental ministries such as the Ministry of Health or the

Ministry of Education, chambers of commerce, charity organizations and private institutions publish these magazines. According to the women I spoke to, publishing companies that have several publications will sometimes employ the same female journalists and writers to write for more than one of their publications without extra pay. With magazines published by a government institution or charity organization, sometimes the regular staff of these institutions or organizations volunteer to write for the magazines and edit them and manage them. The total number of magazines in the market continues to change every year as new ones are introduced and established ones cease to be published for various reasons, mainly financial. As the number of magazines continues to increase, including newsletters and internal publications, the need for female writers and journalists will increase. However, if they are only allowed a limited role and no monetary benefits, then their status will not improve much.

The participants agree that more women are needed in the media but they have to be qualified. "It is better to have more women in the media, to bring in new blood with new energy and new ideas, but they must have the right qualifications and ability to work with men," said Sandra. Julia said that there are more female applicants now than in past years for jobs in radio but unfortunately there are not many job openings. "There is no discrimination against hiring women, all applicants, males and females, are hired based on their qualifications and oral exam," she said. However, since there is no professional degree and training in college for women, they are already at a disadvantage. On the other hand, it seems that in Saudi Arabia, as in other countries, women working in radio have a good opportunity to advance in their career once they get their foot in the door; some have even managed to move on to international Arabic radio stations. "I don't

think there are real barriers to a woman reaching top managerial and leadership positions as long as she has the ability and knowledge,” said Sandra, as if to imply that what is preventing women from advancing is an invisible wall which they are unable to surpass or overcome. Saudi women have had a long and productive role in radio and have been able to reach high administrative levels in the local centers but not in the top national executive levels. Currently in Jeddah, for example, the head of the women and family programs is a woman and the head of the English programs is a woman. Previously, the head of the French programs was a woman. Julia said that they are involved in all management and strategy decisions as well as being on the committee for training and hiring new employees.

In the women’s department of the Riyadh television station, there is one female director and one assistant director, several program producers and supervisors, along with the presenters. There are also a few women working in setting up the studio and décor. According to Jennifer, although they have their own department and budget, they still lack some equipment and well-trained and specialized employees. But, despite all the limitations and barriers, they feel that they have proven themselves and want the opportunity to do more.

Radio and television is administered by the Ministry of Culture and Information, and by looking at the number of Saudi women working in them we find that they represent around 5% of the total number of employees in the Ministry (see Table 4). Despite the good career opportunities available for women in radio, they are still a very small minority because they are mostly involved as presenters and in programming but not in the administrative and managerial departments of the Ministry. The situation is

even worse for women in television. “Not many changes happened in my workplace or for me personally since I began working in television a few years ago,” said Jennifer. In contrast, Emily considers it an achievement for them to have their own administration where they are responsible for all the women’s and children’s programs and participate in other programs.

Because there are not enough job opportunities for women in the media and because they have little chance of being promoted, not many Saudi women consider it a good career option. Most of the women I interviewed, as indicated in their background information, chose the field because they love it. Others entered it by accident or because there was no other job opening available to them but, once hired, they enjoyed it. After over ten years as an editor, Jane sums her feelings this way, “one annoying thing about my job is that I’m still doing the same thing. They might try new things with me and I’m learning a lot, but I’m not going anywhere with my career and I don’t expect that to change.”

*Lack of representation:*

Currently there is no women’s organization in Saudi Arabia that represents them during talks at the government level or in society and the workplace. “There is no organization or women’s movement that asks for the improvement of women’s status, but we try to talk about women’s issues and problems in the media as much as possible, and present awareness programs in health, education, social problems and organize seminars on the air for advice and discussions in a way that helps us as a developing nation,” said Julia. “There is no women’s organization or union but that doesn’t mean we can’t move



forward and advance by personal efforts,” said Sandra. There are many individual voices of men and women asking for reforms, but changes are slow to happen in Saudi Arabia. The Minister of Information announced in February 2003 that a Saudi Journalists’ Association will be established soon, and in March all the editors-in-chief of the newspapers and some magazines (all of them men) held the first meeting to establish this association. At that meeting, they assigned a committee to overlook the process and design the by-laws and regulations in coordination with the Ministry of Information (Okaz, 2003, p.7). Women are allowed membership in the association and have been promised equal treatment.

The role of the association will be that of facilitator and mediator between the journalists and the media institutions they work for in matters concerning their rights, duties and obligations. It will also work to improve the standard of journalism in Saudi Arabia and set the rules and regulations for employment and training. Some female journalists expressed concern over not being involved in the establishment process of the association, fearing that whatever role or rights they may be given will be an imposition rather than a conviction (Akeel, 2003, p.2). They see the need to have female representatives speaking on their behalf during all the founding discussions and throughout the existence of the association, as well as having their own committee or club where they can meet regularly. They also see the need to have a legal consultant who can represent them in a lawsuit by or against them. Another concern is whether the association will have any real authority or influence over the media institutions in changing their policies.

### Gender patterns:

#### *Media content:*

Most of the participants agree that there is not enough discussion of women's issues in the media but they are trying to change this in their own capacity. "There isn't enough discussion of women's issues, and even though many articles are being written about women's jobs, education and social issues, none of them are addressing women as part of society and should be involved in the whole development process," said Jane.

"We need to be talked to as people, with intellectual minds and activities and culture and not just housewives." Barbara also criticized the way women's issues are written about. "There is a lot of discussion of women's issues now, but I don't like that most of it is so preachy and typical. The only big women's issue in the media is policy changes for female teacher's salary, benefits and retirement because it is the male relatives who are also affected by any change in the household income. They are not really concerned about women's problems... The social pages talk negatively about women as if they are the only problem," she added, referring to the zeroing in on women and the failure to see the bigger picture. However, there is hope for change. "Before, women were assigned only women's stories and to do office work, but now I have the opportunity to work outside the office," said Barbara. "Women used to only present programs for women and children when they first began working in radio. Part of society was apprehensive about her work and the other was enthusiastic. With time, women began participating in drama and almost all the other programs," said Julia.

Most female reporters are restricted to the women's page or pages which is, as Barbara said, about 2% of the newspaper's material and therefore not vital. Granted, these pages cover health issues, economic issues and international issues related to women besides the usual beauty and fashion material, but the length is subject to shrinkage depending on the amount of "more important" topics being printed that day. Several female journalists I spoke to felt that the women's departments in the newspapers are a nice façade to prove management's allegations of supporting women's employment and role in society, that they are created as window dressing because other newspapers have a women's department, and that they are used as a source for "soft" stories to fill the pages. "Although some newspapers trusted their female reporters to cover elections and international stories abroad, they still prefer relying on male reporters for the 'serious' and important stories, especially local ones," said Jane. Perhaps Saudi society itself has something to do with this discrimination in that it does not favor a woman covering a serious story or that it does not take a story seriously if it has a woman reporting it.

Most of the newspapers don't have pages designated as women's pages anymore (9 out of the 12 Arabic and English dailies) and they allow their female reporters and collaborators to write about any topic or issue they want. Still, rarely do women cover sports or politics and they tend to be assigned women-related stories. One female journalist from Al-Watan newspaper (Manal Al-Shareef) whom I spoke to pointed out that, because of the segregation in society and some women's objection or discomfort at being approached by male reporters, newspapers need the female journalists to cover women's events, investigate women's issues and go to women-only administrations and institutions. There are efforts by some newspapers to expand the role of women by

involving them in regular meetings and discussions. An example of this is Arab News newspaper, which is the only one that has hired a woman as its on-line editor. Others are opening new sections for women, as in Okaz newspaper, which opened a marketing and advertising department for women, hired a female cartoonist and was one of the pioneer newspapers to promote a woman as managing editor in the 60s. Although all the female journalists I spoke to expressed annoyance with their work, the level of annoyance differed from one publication to another according to how much freedom, rights and participation in decision-making the women perceived themselves to have in their workplace compared to others.

Barbara wants more educated and open-minded people- men and women- to be in control of the newspapers and the way newspapers are run to be changed from the old centralized management. "I think we need more smart women joining the media, more opportunities given to them and more people paying attention to them," she said. With the increasing number of female journalists, whether staff or collaborators, there is hope that they might have a better status and bigger role to play in the future if they are given the proper training, and the invisible barriers- low salary, demeaning attitude, social and religious pressure- are removed.

Both Barbara and Jane, the two participants representing women in newspapers, had several other complaints about Saudi newspapers in general and women's place and issues in them. They would like them to be more serious and less sensational. "Even major newspapers are somewhat sensational," said Jane. "We don't write about big stories. We cover small silly activities and conferences," said Barbara. "Topics should be approached in a more realistic way, writers should stop preaching to people on how they

should behave and reporters should not mix personal opinions with news stories,” were other points Barbara raised, as well as the self-imposed barriers and censorship on issues. Other women working in newspapers had other complaints also indicative of the gender patterns present in their workplace (Sheikh, 2002, p.46). For example, whenever there is a need to downsize, it is the women who are usually let go first. Indeed, in some institutions the women’s contracts are not always clear about their rights or obligations. Sometimes a woman is hired without being given a specific job title or description. This means she is given added responsibilities as the need arises for her to do so – reporter, editor, page editor, photographer, administrator, trainer of new recruits- without a salary increase. At the same time, the interviewees were not unaware of problems within the female department among the women themselves. There can be underhanded competition, badmouthing, relying on family connections and unacceptable behavior with the male supervisors in order to advance. All of these add to the low morale and frustration at work. This unhealthy working atmosphere in the women’s department is not surprising when there are limited job opportunities and career potential for women and little power over management.

In June 2003, Saudi newspapers announced that the first issue of a Saudi newspaper with an all-Saudi-female reporters and editors staff has been published, based in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia and with offices in all the other cities (Al-Harbi & Abuljadayel, 2003, p.2). This newspaper, Donya, is the first Saudi women’s newspaper directed towards Arab women and completely edited by women, according to the news items. Donya is now weekly but will become daily in a few months once all preparations are established, and “will focus on women’s issues in all their forms except

international and local politics unless they are related to women” (Al-Nowaiser, 2003, p.35). I think the prevailing perception continues to be that women’s issues are separate and different from the rest of the local community and world society because women are confined to the private sphere of the home even if they are educated and employed. There is also the perception that women are not interested in politics, assumed by nature, or maybe they don’t understand politics and therefore should not be involved in it. The news items went on to say that supervising the editing process is a team of Saudi women and that the role of men is “limited to that of editor in chief, general director, managing editor, production, technical operation and execution” (Al-Nowaiser, p.35). Women, however, will be trained to take over these positions eventually so that the whole team consists of women. If that is true, women will be allowed some space to be in control without competing with men. Otherwise, nothing is achieved here. On the other hand, I do not think women will learn and advance in the society as women if they cannot interact and exchange experiences and views with men. One achievement by Donya is that it employs 50 Saudi female journalists and editors, the largest number of female employees in any Saudi publication.

Compared to newspapers, women working in radio are a little more involved in policy and decision-making. “The women working in radio have a lot of control over their programs,” said Sandra. They can create their own programs, produce them, edit them, write the script, and decide on the issues and style of presentation. They present a variety of programs covering a wide range of topics- particularly issues related to women, social development, health care awareness and education- at all hours of the day including peak hours. However, they do not present sports programs, although Sandra

said that women are capable of doing such programs and the audience will accept them if they had the proper background information on sports and the qualifications and training to handle these programs. Women also do not present the news in Arabic, even though they used to in the seventies and eighties. “We used to read the news and present political programs, but policies changed in the mid eighties,” said Julia. Women continue to read the news in English and French. An explanation to this is that there is some conception by the top decision-makers that the average Saudi male listener will not appreciate a female sports or news presenter, but since the listeners of the English and French programs are either expatriates or Saudis who have lived abroad, they might be more open-minded. Julia pointed out that women might have better career opportunities and programming options if there were privately owned radio stations and more local stations in all the cities. “After working hard and proving themselves, women have established themselves and society accepts working women; but we are still not allowed to read the news because we are told that the evening newscast is too late in the day for women, as if there are no other times for the newscast,” commented Sandra. She is referring to the criticism women and management might receive from society if the women were given the night shift, which is not considered appropriate for women.

There was almost a consensus among the participants that there is no professional difference between men and women in their approach to covering or presenting news or a topic and that personal differences depend on the individual’s background, education and personality. Julia, however, said that there might be more emphasis on the human side or emotional aspects of a story when approached by a woman, which is not a negative thing. For example, after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack in the US there was a radio program

by a woman on how families can detect a change in their sons' behavior and how through dialogue and flexibility in upbringing they can make them capable of making the right decisions and not be influenced by someone.

While women working in newspapers and radio seem to have some power and control over their work, women working in television, on the other hand, remain limited. There is a women's department in Riyadh television station but not in Jeddah even though there are women working in the Jeddah television station. However, they are all collaborators. This women's department in Riyadh has its own female administrator and a few employees. They are in charge of the women and children's programs but they are not confined to these programs. "There is adequate presentation of women's programs but we need to have a bigger role," said Emily. However, Sandra believes that television programs for women lack seriousness and intellectual diversity, unlike radio programs. I think Emily and Sandra are saying the same thing but each focusing on a different part of the issue and that is that women in television do not have enough input and control on the types of programs they present because they do not have enough power. According to Jennifer, they have some control over their programs but men do the editing. In other words, the women are not in charge at the top decision-making level of programming and neither are they in charge of the final program output; they can create a program, present it, direct it but they do not decide on how it will come out even though they may express their opinion on it. As for news, again, women used to present the news in Arabic in the seventies and early eighties and then were stopped after the attack in 1979 on the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamic fundamentalists causing a change in media policy, but women continued to present the news in English and French on the second channel.



News of Saudi women – their achievements, problems, opinions, activities, etc. - are rarely mentioned, and even then, without pictures. When there is an opening of a new women's facility or the graduation of school and college students, there might be coverage. Rarely is there an official news item on Saudi women by name or even the appearance of a Saudi woman in the news footage. Clearly, and unlike the situation in other countries, Saudi women are inadequately represented either in front of the camera or behind it in television. This is because of the unique culture and tradition in Saudi Arabia that places great emphasis on not exposing women despite all efforts by the women working in television to comply with the conservative codes of dress and conduct. This, however, is not the case with the Arabic satellite channels, which do show many women in front of the camera but do not necessarily have as many behind it. Although most of the programs presented by women in the Arabic satellite channels focus more on beauty, fashion and entertainment, there are several of them that are intelligent and sophisticated, addressing social, cultural, scientific, economic and political issues.

### *Salary:*

All radio and television stations are government administrations and men and women employees are paid equally based on a standard salary scale. They are also promoted with salary increases according to set regulations. "I compete with the men for promotions and the salaries are equal. Women also get two months maternity leave," said Julia. As for the print industry, it is a private sector and therefore it has a different employment and salary system than does broadcast. Promotions and salary increases are up to management; regulations on when an employee can expect a change in his or her

status are not always implemented. This is particularly disadvantageous to women because some managers view the women's job, their contributions and their whole department as unessential. "Women are not paid the same as men for doing the same job as men," said Jane bluntly. "Men always get more at every level, but this is something even in the States," commented Barbara.

Salaries vary from one institution to another depending on policies towards women. According to my sources in the various publications, salaries could range from SR3000 to SR10000 (approximately US\$800 to US\$2666) a month based on the women's skill, experience and standing as an employee. This is less than what a man gets for doing the same job. As for benefits, in most companies the women's contracts do not include housing allowance; women get medical and dental insurance coverage but not their dependents even if they are the sole bread winner; and they get the same allowance as men for transportation, even though women have more transportation expenses than men given that they cannot drive and must arrange for transportation themselves. Another back draw is that there are no regular salary increases and when there is it is very small. "Compared to other jobs and places, I'm paid a good salary but we need increases. Years go by before there is an increase which is very small. In government jobs there is a yearly increase," said Jane. Yet Sandra thinks that salaries in the government are low and promotions are slow, which is why many work part-time and earn double salaries. "I think I'm being paid fairly but it's so static, there are no bonuses or increases every year. Most female journalists are paid poorly," said Barbara. "I think a person should be paid according to how much work they do and their experience, and not

based on gender. It should also be about the quality of the work and not just the quantity,” she added.

*Part-time employees:*

Women working part-time - referred to as collaborators by the employment system— are at more of a disadvantage in the print industry because in most cases they are not given a contract at all. They are paid according to what their published work is considered to be worth, either by piece as a freelancer or as a monthly bonus if she is a regular collaborator (between SR1000 to SR2000 a month, approximately US266 to US355). The fact that they are called collaborators instead of part-time employees indicates that they are not considered employees who have some benefits and rights and should be paid for their time, which might be the same number of hours that a regular staff works. Instead, they are paid for the number of articles they submit and get published, something that does not encourage them to try and improve the quality of their work. Most of the women working in newspapers and magazines are collaborators (see Table 2), and they usually write for several newspapers and magazines. Furthermore, most of them work from home because they do not really have an office. Some of these collaborators are not journalists or writers but professional working women (doctors, university professors, businesswomen) who have a regular newspaper or magazine column and are paid well for it. They are respected by the society and have quite an influence on public opinion. Their writings range from literary works to opinion articles that are quite conservative or critical and progressive in nature.

There are many female collaborators working in radio but most of them choose to be collaborators rather than staff, as Sandra pointed out, because they usually have another full-time or part-time job. If they are full-time government employees, according to regulations, they are not allowed to hold another full-time job either in the public or private sector but they can work as collaborators in the media. They are paid well for their working hours in radio, especially those who have a regular program and have been working there for years. "Another bonus for working as a collaborator is that she is only obligated to do her program and not concern herself with office hours. She can negotiate and terminate her contract at any time," explained Sandra. Of course that also works the other way, and neither can she hold any managerial positions, be promoted or receive regular salary increases. The advantages of working as a collaborator in radio might also be considered another invisible barrier because these women are encouraged to be collaborators rather than staff. This leaves them at the mercy of the administration and prevents them from fully participating in the management and development of the radio programs and receiving their full rights as employees.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Analysis:**

To analyze my findings and put them in context, I first need to address the issue of feminism in Saudi Arabia. This thesis is based on feminist theory and methodology, which is in itself problematic because feminism, particularly the western definition of feminism, is rejected by Saudi society. However, in my research, I found a different type of “feminism” that is not recognized as such by Saudi women. There is no single and all-encompassing definition of feminism even in western societies, so rather than trying to categorize and label Saudi feminists as liberal or radical or post-modernist, etc., I will consider their opinions from a broad feminist view of identifying oppressive measures and lack of equal career opportunity and representation. As a feminist researcher, I will also need to look at the local environment and cultural aspects of Saudi society and history.

### **Feminism in Saudi Arabia:**

Saudi Arabia did not have a feminist movement similar to other Islamic countries where women demonstrated in public, spoke up about their rights given to them by Islamic laws and demanded political and economic participation in their country's development. Neither the social and cultural environment nor the political system in Saudi Arabia allows women to even consider such an option to this day. I think that is the reason why Saudi women are still politically immature in terms of organizing themselves, setting an agenda and a strategy for achieving their goals. However, with the

increasing number of educated and employed Saudi women, they have become, at least, more aware of their rights according to Islamic law and are becoming more vocal in expressing their opinions. Although most Saudi women would not describe themselves as feminists, their ideologies and opinions are certainly congruent with basic tenets of feminist theory. Feminism and the feminist movement in the West have a negative image in Saudi society. They are associated with lesbianism, prostitution, pornography, illegitimate children, abortion- all considered immoral traits of Western society which Saudis do not want spread in their society.

The Saudi women I spoke to said they do not consider themselves feminists for several reasons. Barbara explains that she does not like feminists' "aggressive behavior", "anti-male attitude" and the "victimizing of women". She thinks that feminists are always in a combative stand against men and seem to be constantly placing women in the victim category, imagining every little word or gesture as somehow demeaning to women in a paranoid sort of way. On the other hand, some of the participants felt that feminists urge women to become more like men in looks, lifestyle and work, thus losing their femininity and uniqueness. "In wanting to be equal to men they are becoming like men," said Sandra. However, they do consider themselves somewhat as feminists in terms of demanding equality in salary and opportunities at the same workplace, in standing up for their rights as Muslim women and in rejecting discrimination, according to Jane. "I don't like extreme feminists, they are wasting our time and take away attention from important issues," said Barbara. She refers to the feminists who focus on sexual identity and demand equal employment opportunity in every job category, rather than focusing on unfair representation and economic exploitation and ghettoization of women in the

industries where they already work. According to Odum and Gilliam, as I pointed out in the literature review, the issue for women in developing countries is gaining basic economic and political power, which is tied to socioeconomic change.

The point for these Saudi women is not to align themselves with Western ideologies too much because the general society, men and women, will immediately castigate them. Margot Badran writes, “the feminisms that evolved later in Muslim societies in postcolonial contexts were discredited in the patriarchal mainstream as Western and a project of cultural colonialism and therefore were stigmatized as antithetical to Islam” (1999, p.166). The majority of Saudi society is very conservative, and even those who are considered liberal or semi-liberal remain, when it comes to certain issues, adamantly traditionalist. The problem is that most confuse the term “women’s liberation” with “sexual liberation,” as in having sex with whomever, whenever and wherever, with complete disregard to religious or moral values. Clearly, this is a total misunderstanding of both terms. “A lack of critical deconstruction of concepts, especially gendered deconstructions, and sufficient historicization have hampered understanding of Muslim women’s feminisms” (Badran, 1999, 163). Unfortunately, to most Saudi women’s minds, feminists have contributed to this confusion by their emphasis on sexuality issues. For Saudis, sex is a private matter and should not be discussed or displayed in public, and this is in accordance with Islamic principles. In addition, Badran explains that “persistent circulation of disparaging and degrading stereotypes of feminism” have prevented public debates on the subject (p.163).

Although Saudi women did not go through any stages of a women’s movement as in other Islamic countries such as Egypt or Iran or Kuwait, they have been influenced by

the fundamentalist Islamic movement in Saudi Arabia and by the economic and social changes in the society. The Islamic movement has gone through periods of advancement and retreat and with it women's role has either improved or diminished. This is true in most Islamic countries including Saudi Arabia. Islam gave women, 1400 years ago, rights that Western women have only acquired 100 years ago or less. These rights include a woman's right to inherit, to divorce her husband, to own property, to run her own business, to hold official authority and many other rights. Despite all this, Islam has been accused of subjugating women and oppressing them. From a Muslim perspective, this was mostly done by Western intellectuals who misunderstood or misrepresented the culture and by feminists who had just gone through the suffrage movement and thought all women should experience it as well. However, for most Middle Eastern countries, these intellectuals and feminists were part of the colonialist powers who denied them their independence for centuries, therefore, they had no credibility and no right to tell them how they should live their life. On the other hand, Badran writes that a dichotomy was set up early between Islam and modernity not only by Westerners hostile toward or ignorant of Islam but also by certain segments within Muslim societies (p.161). The aim, according to Badran, was to prevent Muslim women from participating in the construction of modernity in postcolonial Muslim society because women were supposed to preserve the traditions and not compete for the benefits of modernity and define it in egalitarian terms (p.160).

While all Islamic countries integrated many aspects of Western modernity and culture, they continued to resist other aspects and concepts, particularly those concerning women. The dichotomy between "Islamic society" and "Western modernity" deepened.



Those who adopted Western ideologies such as “equality” and “democracy” were considered westernized and liberal, and those who followed Islamic interpretations were called fundamentalists and conservative. Their goals might not have been very different from each other, as many Muslim intellectuals would point out that Islam advocates democracy, equality and freedom. However, because of the conservatives’ biased understanding of Western laws and the liberals’ misunderstanding of Islamic principles, each of them approached those goals differently, mainly by attacking each other. Where women’s rights, status and role in society are concerned, the conservative and liberal factions took opposite stands from each other without careful consideration of their common grounds. As the division between the two continued and as their struggles for power and control escalated, their attitude towards women became more extreme. In both cases, women lost the right to choose and determine their own destiny because they were denied any real power and involvement in the decision-making process. Most of the time it was men, whether conservative or liberal, who spoke on their behalf.

“Historically, women have been both seduced by men’s liberal discourses and co-opted by men’s conservative discourses. Women have at different times and places through their gender activisms tried to take charge of their own destinies. Both nationalist and Islamist mainstream discourses have delegitimized feminism and especially independent, organized feminist activisms” (Badran, p.179). Throughout those periods and to this day, Muslim women active in women’s issues and women’s movements are trying to balance the two sides without losing their identity. This is true in Saudi Arabia as well, even though the women’s efforts do not take the shape of any formal organization or movement. Badran refers to this as Islamic feminism, a term used in some Muslim

countries but not yet clearly defined (p.166). Badran believes that this new Islamic feminism will play a role in the revisioning of Islam, the constitution of a new modernity and the transformation of feminism itself (p.165)

Besides Islamic movement, another factor that contributed tremendously to the feminist discourse in Saudi society and the change in Saudi women's status is the great wealth generated from oil, which changed the whole of Saudi society in its economic and social environment. It became more urban, modern and international. This made it more open to outside influences and brought it in contact with other cultures. With the changes in the basic structure of Saudi society, changes were also made in women's status and role. Introducing women to formal education all the way to graduate degree level at universities and opening the doors for their employment had an impact on their intellectual confidence, social awareness and economic power. Saudi women do not use the term Islamic feminism, but with their newly acquired education and economic independence, they have been able to argue for the rights due to them by Islam. Saudi anthropologist Mai Yamani writes that social circumstances in Saudi Arabia have caused "an identifiable strand of Saudi women to make of Islam the vehicle for the expression of feminist tendencies," (1996, 263). This strand of Saudi women is usually middle-class, highly educated, employed and liberal in social and political views, particularly regarding women, which can be described as feminist tendencies. To these women's mind, there is no contradiction of terms when describing themselves as conservative and modern because by "conservative" they are referring to their Islamic roots and traditions which they are proud of and by "modern" they are referring to their thinking and lifestyle which is not in conflict with Islamic principles. Talking about a progressive Islamic society is

not an oxymoron because, as much as the West tries to categorize Islamic societies as backward and “traditional”, most Muslims would reject that kind of polarization and can prove that Islam is not a gatekeeper to progressive thinking and modern lifestyle.

According to Badran, highly educated Muslim women have begun gender-progressive readings of Islamic scriptures that have achieved significant feminist breakthroughs, and this feminism has to be Islamic in order to reach women of all classes and across urban-rural divides (p.164).

#### Education and employment:

There is no doubt that education is the factor that has the greatest influence on the changes in Saudi women’s status and role in society. Women’s illiteracy rate has dropped considerably in the past few decades (31% in 2002 according to UNFPA), and more girls are completing their high school and college degrees. They are also entering the workforce at greater numbers than before even though there are not enough employment opportunities available to them. Women represent 14% of government jobs, mostly in education and health, and 0.5% of the private sector, fifty percent of that 0.5%, work in medical and social jobs and 20% in banking industry. They represent 4% of the total workforce (Taher, 2003, p.11). At the time of the economic boom during the seventies, not a lot of Saudi women had the desire or the required education to work and those who chose to work did so for self-fulfillment and personal ambition. Now, as Julia said, women work because they need to and want to for a variety of reasons including financial independence, maintaining a certain lifestyle, and social prestige. This is a major shift in attitude by the society towards working Saudi women. It is now expected of a girl to complete her education and to work even if she does not need to, but this is

mainly in urban centers. Rural areas still suffer from high illiteracy and unemployment rates, especially among women. Julia also pointed out that the role of the extended family, particularly grandparents, in helping raise the children, and the ability of some households to hire maids, makes it easier for the women to work outside the house. This indicates the importance of family and society as a whole in shaping Saudi women's life, sometimes too much. Barbara complained at one point that there are restrictions and interferences in a woman's life not only by the family and society but also by the system in general.

The women I interviewed were all well educated and qualified for their jobs. This was not intentional, as I tried to interview women of a variety of backgrounds and some of the women I spoke to for the survey were not as highly educated or qualified. But, it reflects the general standard of the women working in the media. In fact, some of these women were better qualified and had a higher education than their male counterparts, and yet were not given the same salary or opportunity to advance. Also, as women working in the media, they can all be considered semi-liberal or semi-conservative, meaning that they do not consider themselves real liberals for fear of backlash, and the society does not consider them real conservatives regardless of how religious they might be. This is the balance they have to present as Muslim women with feminist tendencies. As Muslim women they did not consider the veil a problem or a barrier. It was not an issue they raised, but, as educated Muslim women, they did raise the issue of male-imposed restrictions on their mobility without legitimate Islamic support. And, without realizing that they were speaking in feminist terms, they raised the issue of equal pay for equal work and equal opportunity to advance in their career.

As indicates earlier in the quote from Fernea, education is the spur to women's activism and participation in the public sphere in the Middle East, and, with their knowledge on women's place in Islam, they are challenging the status quo. The participants asked for a bigger role in the decision-making process of the media institutions and rejected the limitations on their choice of topics they should be concerned with. They questioned the men's attitude of superiority and discrimination towards their contributions and status even if it was in an indirect way such as a recruitment process based on an education they are not provided with, being pushed to accept part-time positions indefinitely and the lack of child-care facilities which, if available, could ease the burden of family responsibilities and expenses. While completely understanding the cultural environment in which they live, the participants criticized such socially imposed circumstances as segregation and their inability to access some government officials for interviews. They also wondered at the media institutions managers' decision not to provide proper training programs for their employees and particularly women in order to improve the quality of their work. The conclusion I drew is that the goal is not to give them the chance to improve because that might encourage the women to ask for a raise in salary and maybe even a promotion. I think, in general, women working in the Saudi media are economically exploited and under appreciated, as some of the participants mentioned.

Throughout the interviews, I got the impression that the women are frustrated with their work because it is stagnant and unrewarding, either financially or socially. They are not given enough incentives to work in terms of career advancement and psychological motivation, although they are satisfied with the level of their productivity

and contributions. In her research on women in the media in several countries, Gallagher (1987) found that women's portrayal and employment transcend cultural and class boundaries, and that women encounter vertical and horizontal discrimination in addition to indirect discrimination in the form of invisible barriers such as attitudes, biases and assumptions. From my research, Saudi women in the media clearly encounter the same things. They are not allowed promotion to any top managerial and decision-making posts and they are generally confined to certain types of jobs, namely as journalists and presenters, and they are treated as subordinates who are unprofessional, incapable of doing the same job as men and unreliable.

As Gallagher (1981) observed, as long as women work within media structures where men make final editorial decisions, their interests and contributions will continue to be marginalized and ambitious women trying to break away will not associate themselves with women's issues. I noticed something similar in Sandra who I think was trying to put herself on a different scale compared to other women in the media and present herself not as a woman working in the media but as a professional media personnel. As much as she acknowledged a bias in the system, she emphasized that it is up to the woman to distinguish herself and prove that she is as capable as a man in addressing any issue and not just women's issues, which is a valid point. I think both Sandra and Julia, being among the few women pioneers in radio, feel the need to de-emphasize their gender and focus more on their productivity and qualifications as variables for their success. After their long years in proving themselves they believe that they have achieved much and are optimistic about women's future potential in the media. Others, like Jane and Barbara, who also believe that there is no difference between

women's and men's ability to do the same job and that they should be treated equally, are disenchanted with the prospect of improving their status and feel that the odds are stacked against them from the beginning, no matter what they do it is not going to make a difference in their career; change will have to come from those in charge. So, as Gallagher found in her research, the main concern over women's employment in the media is not only the hiring of more women but also the removal of obstacles to their equal participation. They must be allowed equal representation within each occupational category, including policy and decision-making posts. The participants agreed that more women should be allowed to work in the media and that more women's issues should be addressed, but the women have to have a bigger role and more power to make a difference. Having said that, they recognize that it is not a simple matter of hiring more women or even promoting them into managerial positions. As van Zoonen pointed out, this perception ignores the organizational structure and the social and cultural environment in which the media production process takes place. The participants recognize that the current system and social barriers will continue to prevent them from achieving any real changes or improvements. To break through these barriers and limitations, there has to be a change in the employment policy towards women so that they are given an equal opportunity to be hired, trained and promoted. In order to position themselves on an equal footing with men as employees, women also have to have the power to make change by gaining representation rights in the industry's associations, general meetings and boards of directors.

### Power and representation:

Feminism is defined as the theoretical study of women's oppression and how we can end that oppression by implementing a policy and a strategy that is based on historical and cultural knowledge. Oppression is a result of lack of power, power not in the sense of political authority necessarily, but in the power relations and structure between genders. We cannot speak about the forms of oppression of Saudi women in the media and their lack of power and representation without looking at their status in Saudi society in general. In Saudi Arabia, women lack political representation, economic freedom and independence as individuals. To illustrate this contention and the misapplication of Islamic principles by the society to justify the situation, Saudi women - only two years ago - were issued an optional national photo-ID card (with the permission of their male guardians to apply for it). After years of debating the card's necessity to protect women from fraud and all the hazards that result from that, yet many men and women refuse these cards because of the photo and consider it a trespass over their privacy and in opposition to their Islamic beliefs. As explained earlier, Islam does not oppress women or subjugate them, it is the system, traditions and lack of knowledge that prevents Saudi women from representing themselves and practicing their power according to Islamic laws and principles. Afsaruddin has argued that the Islamic tradition of separating men and women does not prevent women from participating in public venues and acquiring what is due to them from public institutions, it is the lack of knowledge and venues available to them and an inability to exploit these venues on the part of the women that led to their disenfranchisement. Rassam added to that the notion that just because women are confined to the domestic sphere and lack official authority



and visibility does not mean they lack power and influence, but it is mostly informal and indirect power. Some Saudi women are reluctant and perhaps fearful of stepping onto the public stage and thus losing some of their already limited protection under the current system and are satisfied with women not representing themselves. Still, they want men to consult them and recognize their issues. For others, perhaps, they want at least the door opened for them and slowly let society cope with the gradual changes in their status; it is not about a power struggle between men and women but about power-sharing within the acceptable boundaries of religion and culture.

Saudi women have some power and influence in society, but it is not defined or public. They rely on indirect ways, such as the media, to express their concerns and suggest changes in policies, but the media is not totally free or independent to allow them even that space for public participation. Still, they continue to speak out and point to their achievements and the significant influence they have, whether inside the home or outside and of how being marginalized is affecting the development of the whole society. Saudi women play an important role in the development of all aspects of the society - education, health, social work, economy, etc. - but that role is not taken seriously by the men in power who set the strategy and policy and are reluctant to integrate women in that circle of power. In all public administrations, men represent women and speak on their behalf even on issues that affect only women. Some of these men are great supporters of Muslim women's rights and stand by their progress and believe in the need for them to be involved in government administrations. Currently, there are debates in the media and in government administrations about including women in official positions and involving them in all stages of decision-making processes, which will bring women's role and

participation in society out in the public. Of course, these kinds of discussions are causing a major stir at all levels and sectors of the society, and the expectations are of impending changes that will take the country in more of the same conservative direction or in a new middle road depending on who has the most influence and power.

Saudi women do not have political power but they do have economic and social power. A recent study found that 22,000 commercial licenses have been issued to women, nearly 20% of mutual funds are owned by women and that around 70% of total bank deposits belong to women (Al-Shammari, 2003, p.13). If they become more organized and more vocal about their issues, they can develop political power and their indirect and informal influence can become more focused. There are some steps being taken in that direction. For example, Saudi businesswomen have become members in all the big chambers of commerce in Saudi Arabia and have established their own committees in each of these chambers where they can meet, talk about their issues, make proposals to the general assembly, make decisions affecting them and organize their own activities. The new Saudi Journalists Association being established, if given enough authority to make and implement changes and if women are given equal rights as men, can become the means by which women can move forward and gain power. The participants and many of the female journalists I spoke to indicated that without having a channel to voice their concerns, an access to media executives and the ability to participate in decision-making they will continue to be exploited and deprived of their rights and opportunities. Two issues in particular need to be addressed and resolved in an equitable manner, women's contracts and their part-time status. According to my findings, women working in the media are given a bad deal.

According to Gallagher (1981), the mass media systems reflect the distributions of power and control as they are defined by the society's political, economic and cultural parameters, which tend to exclude or diminish women's status and role. Saudi women's lack of power and representation in the media can be seen as a reflection of their status in Saudi society in general. To approach women's employment in a country like Saudi Arabia where the media systems are not highly evolved and are controlled or directed by the government, Gallagher stresses "the need to search out positive ways in which the media can be used to advance egalitarianism and to improve the status of women" (1981, p.22) by emphasizing development issues and opportunities for women in the media. She recognizes the access of various sectors of a population to the media that exists as an important factor in women's role in the media. In many developing countries, for example, television is mostly accessed by the urban elite, and research found that in some countries, men tend to watch television more than women, while almost as many women listened to the radio as men (Gallagher, 1981, p.23). Differences in literacy rates between men and women also affect the access ratio to the various media. It is argued that these differences might explain why there are more women employed and able to reach higher positions in radio than in television and newspapers, and I think that this argument can be applied in Saudi Arabia and needs to be investigated. Perhaps if television was made more accessible to the rural areas and literacy among women increased, women's opportunities in television and newspapers might increase, something we can already see in terms of the growing number of female reporters in newspapers.

Van Zoonen had another explanation as to why some areas of media production such as magazines and radio have more women employed in them and that is because of

the status of the medium itself (1994, p.50). Much depends on whether it is prestigious or not, meaning that radio has lost its prestige and role in society as a vital medium to television and thus lost its attraction for men. This argument can also be applied in Saudi Arabia because when television was first introduced many of the male presenters who were in radio moved to television, leaving space for women to occupy. I will add to both these arguments the fact that Saudi society is very conservative and the audience accepts hearing a woman's voice for radio programs more than seeing her on television, and this is something Julia and Emily pointed to. Research also found that in many developing countries, the lack of resources to produce local material, particularly for television, makes it more economical for these countries to import programs rather than produce them, which affects the employment of women (Gallagher, 1981, p.25). While Saudi Arabia might not lack financial resources, the social and cultural barriers certainly pose a problem for more women being employed in television and being promoted. On the other hand, other opportunities for Saudi women can be found in alternative women's press which can fill a need to address local issues not being met by traditional women's magazines, according to Gallagher (1981, p.27). There are many examples in Saudi Arabia of small circulation local women magazines and the new all-women newspaper, but their success still needs to be evaluated and researched.

Van Zoonen gave another indication of the importance of the medium's status for the employment of women and that is the fact that local (low prestige) media usually employs more women than national (high prestige) media (1994, p.50). Julia had suggested that maybe if more local and private radio and television stations were permitted, this might provide more job opportunities for women and better programs

because of competition. I think the more local a station is, the more people will have access to it and feel more related to its programs and by using the media for development issues concerning women, the female media employees can build an audience base that can boost their standing and contributions. To implement all these changes to the media structure and power relations in Saudi Arabia, many other factors have to be considered and changed as well.

#### Social changes:

Social changes in Saudi Arabia are affected not only by the national political, economic and religious climate but also by the regional and international circumstances. In 1979 a group of Islamic Saudi fundamentalists attacked and occupied the Grand Mosque of Mecca for a few days before they were forced out by the army. They were protesting the progressive changes in the society towards a modern lifestyle including more rights and freedoms for women, which they perceived as abandonment of true Islamic traditions and values. To appease this growing segment of the society and contain them, the government began taking steps curbing these progressive changes and thus redirected its policies towards women. Many of the women I spoke to including the participants have hinted at changes in media policies towards women at a certain point in the early 80s because of internal and international (the Iranian Revolution) circumstances which hindered their progress and limited their opportunities. This same kind of reevaluation and reassessment of Saudi internal policies is taking place now after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington, the war on Iraq in March-April 2003 and the terrorist attack in Riyadh on May 12, 2003, but this time in an effort to control and limit the influence and power of this fundamentalist segment.

Another factor affecting the changes in Saudi society is the slowing economy resulting in high unemployment, 8.34%, according to the latest statistics (Al-Fahiqi, 2003, p.1), and an increase in poverty accompanied by inadequate infrastructure and civil services such as health, social security and public safety. According to statistics, the Saudi population is growing at the high rate of 3.1% a year, women represent slightly more than 50% of the population, over 70% of the population are under the age of 30 and expatriate workers represent 25% of the population which was figured at 21.7 million in 2002 (UNFPA, 2002). These are added pressures on the government to make radical changes in its policies, some of which, such as a move towards privatization, reducing bureaucratic government procedures and administrations and opening up to international investment, are already under way. It is hoped that such reform will provide more job opportunities for both men and women. There are also steps towards studying and reevaluating the education system and the religious undercurrents affecting the society. Therefore, when researching the status of Saudi women, it is important to take all these factors and the history of the country, which is only 70 years old from a mostly bedouin tribal society to a modern one, into consideration.

The changing political and economic circumstances in Saudi society might be moving towards opening more career opportunities and better representation of women, but without social and cultural acceptance and support to these changes, women will continue to be marginalized and discriminated against. Convincing an entire population of different backgrounds to change their views and attitudes towards women's role starting in the home is not easy, and our history taught us that it has to be gradual. In the early decades of Saudi Arabia's history when each region was almost separate from the

other, before the advancement of communication technology and transportation and before the migration of bedouin tribes and villagers to the cities, it was possible to introduce changes and modern developments to the exclusivity of certain regions or communities before others and slowly allow them to spread. Now, with the country more unified and the population more mingled, it is a challenge for the government and the society to follow a single strategy at a common pace suitable for all.

The education and employment of women in Saudi Arabia was introduced gradually and more fields and opportunities continue to open for women as the need for them arise and the reception of the idea by society is welcoming. However, the same obstacles that faced Saudi women in 1984 when Allaghi and Almana did their research are still found today. According to Allaghi and Almana, the difficulties facing working women in Saudi Arabia include: family restrictions, inability to drive, fear of rumours if women are working with men, limited career opportunities, lack of child-care facilities, lack of economic incentives because of men's obligation to provide for women financially according to Islamic law, and cultural traditions insisting on the segregation of the sexes (p.25-26). Some of these obstacles - such as the lack of child-care facilities, the inability to drive and the limited career opportunities - need to be removed in order to allow women to work to their utmost potential; removing them also makes economic sense for the family and the nation. The other obstacles can only be coped with or adjusted slightly with time, although the issue of driving and career options depends on these other social obstacles. The participants in this thesis have all pointed to these same obstacles to their career advancement, except perhaps the lack of economic incentives. The changing economic conditions in the country is forcing many people to face up to the

need for a dual income household. Even the women in families that do not need the extra income find that work provides them with financial independence, personal satisfaction and self-fulfilment. The problem, however, continues to be lack of career options and advancement.

Other major obstacles, as Fawzia Fahim found in her research on women working in Egyptian media in 1981, are family commitments and bringing up children because most men do not share in domestic work (p.89). This continues to be true in Saudi Arabia because the home and children are considered to be the women's domain. Great emphasis is made of the important role women have in being at home even if they work outside it. Women's priority lies in taking care of their home, husband and children. This concept is prevalent in all segments and mentalities of Saudi society, and it is something both men and women believe in because Islam places dutiful wives and good mothers on a high pedestal. However, Islam also encourages both men and women to seek knowledge and participate in public forums, a point mostly ignored. Unfortunately, this great principle of putting the family's interests ahead of herself has made it seem that everything else a woman does - getting an education, working, volunteering, etc. - is secondary and therefore can be ignored, underdeveloped and disenfranchised, which again limits the woman's ability to develop as an individual and limits her contribution to society. More and more women enter the workforce, whether for personal or economic reasons, and the question is whether Saudi workingwomen can balance their private life and career based on this priority while also confining themselves to the limited public role they are allowed to have by the system. It is inevitable that as women continue to gain economic power, they will eventually seek political representation to protect their



interests. Based on the feminist concept of bringing the private and public spheres together in order to better serve women's interests, it is essential in Saudi society to demonstrate that a woman's ability to be a good wife and mother is affected by her public status in the system, which will protect her rights and improve her life standard by providing her with a better education, work opportunities, health care and legal rights, all in accordance with Islamic principles.

#### Changes in the media:

In addition to all these political, economic and social factors, there is a new media venue opening up for Saudi women and that is the satellite channels- television and radio. Although Saudi businessmen or members of the royal family own many of these satellite channels, all are based outside Saudi Arabia, either in neighboring Arab countries or in Europe (Boyd, 2001, p.49). These channels tend to be more liberal and courageous in approaching diverse, sensitive and controversial topics. Several Saudi male and female media professionals have opted to work in these channels and some professional Saudis in various fields participate as guests in talk shows discussing the problems and issues in Saudi society. This includes women's status and the barriers to their progress in different fields. Despite these satellite channels' liberal and independent approach to topics and seemingly gender-neutral approach towards hiring people to present different programs and occupy various jobs, they remain constrained by political considerations, inadequate media laws and regulations, and commercial interests (Ayish, 2001, p112).

These satellite channels pose a direct competition to the local Saudi television and radio stations, which has prompted some changes in the style of presentation and the

range of issues being presented in the Saudi channels. Still, because the local Saudi stations are owned and subsidized by the government (except for a small portion of television revenue from advertisement) they remain limited and restrained and unable to compete. This has been made very obvious by a considerable reduction in viewers and listeners since the advent of the satellite channels. However, the continued pressure and criticisms being expressed on the satellite channels by Saudis and non-Saudis of the social, economic and political problems affecting the society are forcing some changes or at least in open discussions. As for women working in the local Saudi radio and television stations, they have not been included yet in the recent slow changes in content and style brought about in response to the competition. Women, particularly in television, are yet to increase in number, get promoted to higher managerial positions, occupy various jobs besides presenters, and present programs other than family and children programs and at different hours of the day.

Feminist studies look at how power relations and division of labor between men and women in the media affects women's status, image and representation in the media. They argue that media's biased or inadequate representation of women reinforces society's dominant male values and hinders women's development, but van Zoonen rejected this concept because it assumes that the audience is a passive receptor. In Saudi Arabia, I think that further research needs to be done on what the audience thinks of Saudi media, particularly television's portrayal of women and if it actually represents their role in society. Emily and Sandra have indicated that women's lack of power prevents them from playing a bigger role in the types of programs they want to present; they are restricted in scope and content. My impression is that most people - liberal and

conservative – do not approve of the Saudi media's, and especially television's, representation of what they consider is the appropriate image of Saudi women, whether they want it to be more liberal or more conservative. This could be one reason they have switched to the competition, not because Saudi women's image there is better but because at least their status in society is discussed openly and they are allowed to express their opinion whether for or against more women involvement in the media. I would agree with van Zoonen on how the media's stereotypical portrayal of women might actually have the opposite effect and motivate women to change social values and improve their status. I sensed this from my research and in talking to many Saudi women.

Van Zoonen identified another key issue in feminist studies and that is "the relation between male dominance among media professionals and masculine discourse in media texts" (1994, p.7). The argument here is that the dominance of male broadcasters and journalists in the industry give them the power to define and interpret society's values according to their standards, unchallenged. Van Zoonen pointed out that this concept is disputed because research failed to show a clear causal relation between media exposure and sexist attitudes. Instead, there are other variables such as age, class and education that affect media's influence on social values (p.34). She found that the relation between gender and communication is primarily a cultural one, the way media texts are received and interpreted depends on many individual and environmental variables. Nonetheless, she still acknowledges that most media texts do offer a "preferred reading or meaning" which tends to reaffirm the dominant values. These are for the most part defined by men because they have the economic and ideological power

to do so (p.42). Again, we are talking about women's lack of power and representation in defining society's values as equal members of that society.

In Saudi media, the criteria, the tone, the structure and everything is undeniably male oriented. All the participants in this thesis have indicated one way or another that they are powerless, underappreciated and unfairly represented. However, I cannot say that this situation is unique to the Saudi media, but rather it is a general observation in other sectors as well. Still, changes in attitude and improvements in women's status continue to develop and be implemented, including in the media. Jane stated clearly that the problem is with men- whether it is because of their position of power or because of their larger number- being domineering and selfish in setting the media agenda and deciding on who, what and how to present issues in the media. However, this situation does not exist in a vacuum. Looking at the cultural environment and recent examples from history, one cannot put the whole blame on male-biased management or a "male club". Even when the government policy allowed women to advance in their media career and become more involved in different types of television and radio programs, religious fundamentalist groups pressured the government to change its policy. I think to create a better media working environment for women and the Saudi society as a whole, it would be wise to introduce changes gradually and to make changes optional for each region according to what the locals consider is appropriate to them. This means a decentralized management approach of the national media, where there is more local control over content and employment policies, but within national set boundaries and strategy and based on Islamic principles. Saudi Arabia is a large country geographically and has a diverse population. The government can implement a plan of having one or

two national television and radio channels and several local channels that can be more in tune with the local population. This will provide more job opportunities to men and women, more career options and it will provide more diversity in programs.

## CHAPTER 7

### Conclusion:

Saudi women's status in the Saudi media seems to resemble other women's status around the world in their local media. They are not well represented in the media workforce nor in the media content, they do not have opportunity equal to men to advance and they are not appreciated as a valuable asset to the industry. There are also similarities in the type of media jobs and positions they tend to be concentrated in, the type of programs they present and the type of social problems they face. However, when we compare the circumstances Saudi women in the media work under, the details of their occupations and the specific cultural considerations affecting their career, we can see the many differences and exceptional situations. This thesis sought to understand what Saudi women working in the media thought of their role in it, the barriers they face and what they are doing to improve their opportunities and status. In a society deeply influenced by tradition and inherited concepts, more so than Islamic laws and principles sometimes, suggesting changes and actually implementing them is a difficult task. And when these changes involve women, the difficulty is double. Having said that, despite all these difficulties, Saudi women have achieved and continue to achieve many things in their career.

I decided that the best approach to researching this topic was to adopt the feminist theory and methodology because it allows the participants to speak about their issues in their own words and allows me multiple methods for gathering the data. However, I found that although Saudi women's self perceptions and aspirations for their career and

social status generally agree with the basic demands of western women, using the word feminist, even Islamic feminist, is inappropriate in describing them because of the negative connotations associated with feminism in the Muslim society. I suggest using the phrase Saudi women's Islamic progressive movement because it connects Islam with progression and women's rights, which is the way it should be. This does not imply that feminist theory and methodology were ineffective in approaching my research. On the contrary, it was an apt tool for providing the framework and background for the research. However, I refrain from describing the participants as feminists because they had certain reservations about the meanings associated with it. If anything, this proves the validity of the theory, which rejects imposing culturally circumscribed meanings and values on another culture, and instead emphasizes the need to understand and accept the local meanings and values of the culture being studied. Therefore, the basic concepts of feminist theory are still suitable for my study of Saudi women working in the media.

The study of women's oppression and the work to end that oppression based on the specific social structure and environment in which women live is the goal of feminist theory. Women in Saudi Arabia would tell you that Islam liberated women, gave her all her rights and treated her with respect but it is the system and tradition that limits them and oppresses them. Therefore, when studying the oppression of Saudi women, it is necessary to distinguish between Islamic laws and the Saudi traditions that interpret these laws and execute them, a point generally ignored by Western feminists and scholars, thus contributing to the overall distrust by Muslims of any western theories and concepts.

Separation of the public and private spheres, power and representation are three key areas of importance in feminist theory and they are three areas that shape Saudi

women's place in society. Feminists reject the binary opposition of the public and private spheres, claiming that in order to understand the forms of oppression that women endure in any society, we have to analyze both spheres because they are interrelated. This cannot be more true than in Saudi society where the line separating the private from the public is meant to be clear - the high concrete walls around homes and buildings, the veil, the segregation between men and women in almost all public and social life- and the attempts by the conservative sectors of society and influential groups to keep that line where it is and as clear as possible. Therefore, any argument calling for the bringing out of private issues into the public is scorned and vehemently attacked. This makes it all the more obvious that women's public status is a reflection of her private status- silent, invisible and powerless- all in the name of protecting women's virtue and upholding Islamic, or rather traditional, values and principles. The issue for Saudi women is in being recognized as individuals with political rights, economic power and social standing that is independent but not separate from the family unit. Segregation, the veil and driving are all governed by culture and tradition more so than religion, and they are enforced not necessarily to oppress women as much as to separate the public and private domains of men. For women to succeed in stepping out of the men's private domain and into their own private and public domain while maintaining the cohesion of a family upholding Islamic principles, they must assure the men and themselves of the priority of the family over the career, not because the career is not important but because it is not as important.

The oppression of Saudi women in the media takes different forms. It starts with the segregated workplace, which prevents them from active participation in the decision-



making process and involvement in managerial and editorial strategy. Then there is the limited type of programs or topics they are encouraged, but not necessarily forced, to focus on- family, society, health, home and fashion- and the limited opportunity to advance in their career. There are also many forms of indirect discrimination or invisible barriers such as inadequate training, low salaries, negative social attitudes towards women working in the media and inequitable contracts, especially for the part-time employees (collaborators). In addition, the system puts restrictions on their mobility by not allowing women to drive or travel unaccompanied by or without the permission of their male guardian, and it limits their access to government officials; all factors that act as barriers to their career.

Some of the factors contributing to the oppression of Saudi women might actually work to their advantage in improving their status in the media. There is talk that a women's department will open soon in one or several of the girl's universities, which means a majority female college staff (male professors can teach through closed-circuit television) will instruct a new generation of women according to the standards of true professionalism and equality, although there will still be the issue of a curriculum defined mainly by men. The fact that many Saudi women received their media and communication degree from abroad (Egypt, Lebanon, Europe, USA, Canada) adds diversity to the knowledge and experience pool available for those seeking education and training in the media. The segregated workplace can also be an advantage to women because they do not have to compete with men for the same job. There are several successful examples of a majority female staff running a magazine- and now a newspaper- but the issue remains of who is actually in charge and who is making the final

decisions. Until men trust and believe that women can do as good a job as men and can work with them on a professional level and not in a sexist or discriminatory way, there cannot be much improvement in women's status in the media. A good example of such a workplace in Saudi Arabia is hospitals where male and female medical staff work together very professionally and respectfully of each other and the women can achieve an almost equal career opportunity. The new journalists association, if given enough power and authority and women are allowed representation and equal rights, can become a very strong resource for women. One of the key issues that should be addressed by the association is the contracts and the status of part-time employees.

In terms of each media type, radio so far has provided the best career opportunities for Saudi women compared to print and television. However, radio is a shrinking medium in our daily life, except in the rural areas, and the Saudi radio stations are challenged by the international Arabic and foreign radio stations. Quite simply, they are more entertaining and their news is immediate, up-to-date and accurate. Saudi women's status in radio can improve if more local stations are established in every city and they are given a bigger role to play in management. Also, if private radio stations or specialized stations such as musical or politics and economy were permitted, this would provide more job opportunities for both men and women.

Print, whether newspapers or magazines, can become the most rewarding and respectful media workplace for Saudi women because it poses the least challenge to the society's conservative viewpoint, as long as the Islamic and cultural traditions are observed. With print's wide variety of output and categories, women can find a career in any area that suits them. The issue in the publishing business in Saudi Arabia is

management. Do the managers and boards of directors in the publishing companies believe in giving women the opportunity to prove themselves? So far there are some companies that have done better than others in terms of women's role and career in them. However, they all lack a true vision, strategy and plan for women even though the women themselves have expressed their view on the matter. Alternative women's media inside Saudi Arabia have not been feasible or successful, although there are a few attempts, including Saudi women's magazines, Saudi women's newspaper and some websites. However, they either faced problems in the establishing stage or had financial difficulties or were run and managed by men.

Television remains the most challenging field for Saudi women only because of the cultural restraints. The best perceivable solution to that is a government policy that ensures women's appropriate participation and status at all levels, and perhaps implements a decentralized management approach in which local stations are established with more control over content and employment strategy that is appropriate to the local culture but based on a national criteria and within Islamic boundaries. Overall, I think the government needs to have a long-term strategy and plan of incorporating women in all media institutions and at all levels with the proper education and training made available to them equally as men. Based on the opinions expressed by the interviewees in this thesis, I think they would agree with me on the need for women to have a bigger role at all levels of decision-making and management, as well as more media diversity in programs, outlets and ownership structure in order to develop the Saudi media and raise production level.

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**Table 1:** Percentage of Saudi Female Employees in Saudi Newspapers\*

Publication Co.	# of Employees	# of female employees	Percentage
Saudi Research & Publishing Co. (Jeddah office)**	185	13	7.03
Okaz & Saudi Gazette	500	30	6
Al-Madinah	520	13	2.5
Al-Nadwah		3	
Al-Riyadh		38	
Al-Jazirah	580	25	4.31
Al-Watan (Jeddah office)	22	4	18.18
Al-Yaum	520	17	3.27

\* The number of employees and female employees in each of these institutions are according to the human resources department in each of them.

\*\* SRPC has 13 publications with offices in London, Riyadh and Jeddah.

**Table 2: Number of Saudi Female Staff and Collaborators in Saudi Newspapers\***

Newspaper	Female staff	Female collaborators	Comments
Arab News	6	4	In all the offices in Saudi Arabia. Head office in Jeddah
Asharq Al-Awsat	2	2	In Jeddah & Riyadh offices. Head office in London
Okaz	13	14	In all the offices in Saudi Arabia. Head office in Jeddah
Al-Madinah	5	9	In all the offices in Saudi Arabia. Head office in Jeddah
Al-Watan	1	3	In Jeddah office. No women's dept. at head office in Abha
Al-Nadwah		3	No women's dept. at head office in Mecca
Al-Riyadh	8	30	In all the offices in Saudi Arabia. Head office in Riyadh
Al-Jazirah		25	No women's dept. at head office in Riyadh
Saudi Gazette	3	1	In Jeddah office. Head office in Jeddah
Al-Yaum		17	Head office in Dammam

\* The numbers are according to the women's department in each of these institutions or the human resources department if there is no women's department.

**Table 3:** Number of Saudi Female Staff and Collaborators in a sample of Saudi Magazines\*

Women's magazines	Female Staff	Female collaborators	Comments
Sayidaty (Jeddah office)	2	2	Head office in London, UK (published by SRPC)
Al-Jadida (Jeddah office)	1	1	Head office in London, UK (published by SRPC)
Laha (Jeddah office)	1		Head office in London, UK (published by Al-Hayat)
Al-Ataa	12	Open	Head office in Jeddah (published by Ministry of Education)
Hayat	7	10	Head office in Riyadh (published by Wahj Al Hayat Communication)
Osratana	7	7	Head office in Riyadh (published by Islamic Daawa Organization for Publishing)

\* The numbers are according to the women's department in each of these institutions.

**Table 4:** Number and Percentage of Saudi Female Employees in Saudi Radio and Television\*

Jeddah Radio & TV- Total # of employees	Female Radio staff	Female Radio collaborators	Female TV staff	Female TV collaborators	Total female employees	Percentage
1500	11	12	0	7	30	2
Riyadh Radio & TV- Total # of employees						
1600	4	30	11	9	54	3.37

\* The numbers are according to the human resources department and the women's department in each of these institutions.