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MENA
PEACE
&
SECURITY
PROJECT

GUIDEBOOK

MAINSTREAMING THE WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY (WPS) AGENDA IN THE MENA REGION THROUGH MEDIA

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1 CENTERING GENDER IN PEACE AND SECURITY NEWS

Over two decades ago, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolved to prioritize women's full participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding as members of society equally impacted by war and other threats to security. The UNSC resolution 1325 [1], unanimously passed in 2000, calls for greater participation for women in decision-making concerning conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and advocates for their rights to live without fear of violence and to have access to accountability. It is important to note that 9 subsequent resolutions were passed by the UNSC on Women, Peace and Security after UNSCR 1325.

For journalists and media practitioners, UNSC resolution 1325 serves as a strong reference of the importance of including women's voices in news reporting and news production and offering gendered perspective when reporting about conflict and peacebuilding news.

A number of resources have been developed to improve the representation of women in conflict news, including a chapter [2] published jointly by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 2012. Motivated by the need to update existing resources, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), with support from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung developed these guidelines with journalists as well as media educators and researchers during the summer of 2022 through a series of workshops held at the Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut at the Lebanese American University. IFI also developed a full-fledged training program for media practitioners on how to mainstream the Women Peace and Security Agenda into their workplace, whether in terms of news team structures, news reporting or production. This document provides a brief overview of the workshop outcomes and compiles the content guidelines for achieving gender equity in peace and security news.

[1] https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/
[2] WACC & IFJ (2012). "Guidelines: Reporting on peace and security." From Book 2 of The Learning Resource Kit for Gender-Ethical Journalism and Media House Policy (p. 48). Who Makes the News? Retrieved from https://whomakesthenews.org/3655-2/ and Arabic: https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/who-makes-the-news/Imported/learning_resource_kit/resourcekit-book2.ar.pdf

2 GENDERED PROBLEMS IN NEWSROOM CONTENT AND PRODUCTION PRACTICES

Peace and security news underrepresent women. News coverage of conflict and peacebuilding rarely includes a gendered perspective. Media plays an important role in molding, shaping, mirroring, and reflecting gender norms in society. This is because gender is a social construction (like race); gender is sociological and not biological (unlike sex, which is biological).

When considering women's portrayal in news content, it is important to remember women are not a homogenous group. This means women have different experiences in society and diverse views on conflict and peacebuilding because of their socioeconomic background, ethnicity, class, age, etc. We can also think about it as how a woman from a social majority group has a different experience with conflict and peacebuilding than a woman from a social minority group.

Thinking about gendered problems in news means considering women's representation and the portrayal of socially marginalized groups in the news.

Also recognizing that one woman cannot represent all women helps think about gender stereotypes that should be avoided in news coverage. These can include trait descriptors (e.g. emotional, motherly concern, cannot drive), physical characteristics (e.g. height, weight, or hair length), role behaviors (e.g. childcare or household duties), and domestic or occupational statuses (e.g. wife, mother, or homemaker).

Stereotypical portrayals can be rooted in patriarchal discourses that position women as inferior or subordinate to men or Orientalist [3] discourses that position women of different races and non-Western cultures as needing protection. Such portrayals are harmful, especially when used to justify military interventions that typically bring more violence to women and do not improve the lives of vulnerable populations.

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[3] Edward Said coined the term Orientalism to describe how the West has the power to (mis)represent non-Western cultures. Here is a short video in English that introduces Orientalist discourse in Western news content: Al Jazeera English (2017). Framed: The Politics of Stereotypes in News (Edward Said). Al-Jazeera English (Media theorized series). Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqbyp3EbqMg

A glaring example of this coverage was found in Western and Arab media coverage of the 2001 US war in Afghanistan (and the US "withdrawal" in 2021), which Barbara Bush justified as "a fight for the rights and dignity of women." [4] This is an example of imperialist feminism or purple washing [5] where women's liberation is used to deflect from the oppression caused by military intervention, foreign occupation, and other state policies.

In addition to avoiding patriarchal and Orientalist discourses, journalists should consider who is the source of the stories they cover as well as who is quoted in the story.

Research from Palestine shows that where women make up more than half of the population, in the media they barely make the news with around 10% of news stories quoting women or girls. [6] This study shows that although women are directly affected by the occupation, media in Palestine does not afford them equal representation as spokespersons, experts, or commentators because Palestinian women are more often quoted as eyewitnesses or about their personal experiences.

Harmful portrayals of women and their underrepresentation in media is also related to media ownership and employment practices within newsrooms. Few women own media or have decision-making roles as most news media are owned and run by men as well as operated as private companies with the goal of making a profit.

[4] https://theconversation.com/afghanistan-the-west-needs-to-stop-seeing-women-as-in-need-of-saving-170731
[5] https://decolonizepalestine.com/rainbow-washing/purplewashing/
[6] Women Media and Development - TAM (2017). Media Monitoring of Palestinian women's image and representation in news related to peace and security. Bethlehem, West Bank — Palestine. English: https://tam.ps/newsite/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/media-monitoring-report-english-FINAL.pdf and Arabic: https://tam.ps/newsite/ar/reports-studies/

There are some exceptions in the region, like Nisaa FM [7] a social enterprise founded by a woman and largely run by women with the goal of facilitating moment engagement in the mostly male-dominated media industry. [8] Women may be increasingly present on camera as journalists and reporters, but many are restricted to "women's topics" and are typically not reporting on conflict or peacebuilding. Further, few women are allowed to age on camera because "a pretty face sells" and even fewer women are employed in newsroom management or work as a news producer or camera director.

In media, women should have a share of the coverage whether they are victims or political analysts, whether they are peacebuidlers or combatants. Coverage must be inclusive.

[7] https://www.radionisaa.ps/english.php and https://www.radionisaa.ps/
[8] https://www.tuniscope.com/ar/article/30692/culture/tv/rfm-415509

3 GUIDELINES FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUITY IN PEACE AND SECURITY NEWS

The following content guidelines make recommendations to improve the portrayal of women and girls in peace and security news as well as to center a gendered perspective when producing and reporting on conflict and peacebuilding.

Values

Newsrooms should have clear editorial policies that determine the values that shape news coverage. For example, news reporting on Yemen should include Yemeni women, or news about gender equality should interview diverse genders working on this issue. News content should strive to not represent women and girls as victims, but as agents of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. All news programs should present a gendered perspective and ask: "What does this news mean for women and girls or other social minorities?"

Sources

Interviews should include women and provide a gendered or feminist perspective from women's or feminist organizations, especially in reporting on conflict and peacebuilding news. Women from diverse backgrounds (ethnicity, religion, class, age, etc.) should be interviewed. Women should be quoted as spokespersons, experts, commentators, or eyewitnesses. Panels should be reflective of a society's composition and therefore respect gender, social and more generally, diverse representations.

Beat/Priority Bureau:

Newsrooms should follow stories related to conflict and peacebuilding. This should include a focus on women in politics and provided a gendered perspective when reporting on conflict and peacebuilding news.

Minority Groups:

Different minority groups (such as women, refugees, migrant workers, etc.) should be invited to narrate their own stories or produce citizen journalism. For example, women's organizations should be involved in news program planning and implementation.

Prohibitions

It is recommended that news content should not allow the representation of women as inferior or subordinate to men as well as news reporting that objectifies women or glorifies the perpetrators and acts of gender-based violence.

Training and Evaluation:

Newsrooms should conduct annual trainings on how to implement the above content guidelines and workshops on broader topics like gender rights or local histories of women in conflict resolution or peacebuilding. The application of the guidelines should be regularly assessed by evaluating the representation of women and gendered perspectives in conflict and peacebuilding news coverage. For example, "Who appears or is quoted in news stories?" and "What is the news role for women and men quoted in the news? Are they spokespersons, experts, commentators, or eyewitnesses?"

The curriculum developed by IFI that informed this guidebook can be presented as training modules or a full-fledged training program for media practitioners on how to mainstream the WPS agenda into their workplace. The IFI curriculum introduces the WPS agenda, covers gendered analysis in media, and provides localized case studies to understand newsroom practices, the representation of WPS in the news, and the impact on audiences. IFI is ready to offer media outlets and media practitioners such training to provide an in depth understanding of mainstreaming WPS in the MENA through media practices and policies.