

# Being Selective

## Media Images of Palestinian Women



By Wafa' Abdel Rahman



Although we want international media to think beyond stereotypical images of Palestinian women, even at home in Palestine, we must come to terms with contradictory images: Traditional Palestinian women, on the one hand, and the contrasting images of professional women, on the other, who must decide how much "Western appearance" to adopt.

Western media are dominated by images of women wearing *hijabs*, chanting for revenge, carrying rifles. These women stand behind suicidal sons and weep over martyred sons, husbands, and brothers. Theirs are the images that sell and thus are promoted both at home and abroad.

But the actual reality of life for Palestinian women is far more complex. In truth and like everywhere, there are all sorts of women in my country whose lives are diverse. Many Palestinian women lead lives in ways that are unknown to most people outside the country: Professional women, some wearing suits, working from behind desks, venturing into the field as journalists and photographers, treating children in hospitals, or developing high-tech projects. They may or may not cover their heads, but they are well groomed; they take care of themselves and are proud to contribute to their society.

Consider another image of Palestinian women that is emerging despite the burden of the Israeli occupation and within a patriarchal society whose political system excludes women – while bragging about its three female cabinet ministers. Recently, there has been a shift from one stereotype to a new, more progressive one, and local media have begun to celebrate these new images of professional Palestinian

Due to gender discrimination and the lack of women in media management and the newsroom, pluralism is absent both in the workplace and in media content. The following figures serve to illustrate this reality.

Palestinian women in public life: In 2012, 21 percent of members of the local councils were females in the West Bank; in 2013, 15.6 percent of judges were females; in 2015, 20 percent of journalists were females. Women accounted for only 5.1 percent of ambassadors; and 41.2 percent of employees in the public sector (civil servants) were females.

**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015.





women even though the contradiction remains: Women are by and large excluded from the decision-making processes in Palestine. For example, only 10 percent of newspaper editors in chief are female.

Who has been pushing for this new representation in local media? In fact, it is the outcome of many years of lobbying by local female activists and has been shored up by financial and moral support from foreign donors who expect the depiction of Palestinian women to be more representative of the new reality of day-to-day life that is valid for many women in Palestine.

But while the image of Palestinian women has changed in our local media, it has failed to cut through in the West, where we are all still presented as weeping, suppressed people, forced to wear the *hijab*. Are they depicting the truth? The truth is, we do not want to be the victims that these images may suggest.

As a female Palestinian activist I admit that we are challenged on two fronts – both locally and internationally – and we have a long way to go in order to break stereotypes. At home, professional women are still not the norm, and they face difficult decisions: Do we want to be Westernized, forgo the *hijab*, wear suits, and be tough superwomen? Or are we more comfortable as subordinate mothers, daughters, and sisters?

Not all Palestinian women are happy with the new representation in local media. Take

my mother, a housewife who raised twelve children and looks after her grandchildren. Or my neighbor, a single mother of five, who has little education and relies on intermittent cleaning jobs to support her family. Neither of these women can identify with the new image of a more modern Palestinian woman. They feel that this image does not represent their hopes, challenges, or aspirations for the future.

So which image accurately represents Palestinian women? The fact is we are both these women: The subordinate and the superwoman. We are a reflection of our society and of our ongoing struggle to end the occupation, to end the Palestinian political divide, and to end the violence and discrimination against women that still prevails in many segments of our society. We are a reflection of our society, and we are shaping it.

Whether we are wearing a suit, or a *hijab*, or dressed in a traditional dress but with our head uncovered; whether we are working in a private enterprise, in the field, or in public service; whether we are protesting in demonstrations, weeping over lost loved ones, or singing and dancing, all this is who we are – we all are Palestinian women.

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*Article photos courtesy of Filastiniyat.*