



MEDIA PROPAGANDA TO PORTRAY MISOGYNY AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN GULF

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Abstract

Media across the globe has been portraying women in the Gulf as oppressed by the male counterparts and guided by the strict rule of *Sharia* (Islamic Law). The women are judged as open-minded or conservative depending upon how western their dress code, outside appearance are, and on how western their thoughts are, which isn't exceptionally sensible since numerous liberal Muslims hold their religious beliefs that fit their way of life and culture. The present study is based on the practice widely used by journalists to superimpose western ideology as an overlay. If a Muslim woman holds certain opinions that are not at par with the Western culture, she is portrayed as backward, regardless of how profoundly emphatic, educated or independent she is; at the end of the day, women are not judged on how they fit inside their own cultures as they would fit in Western culture. Moreover, as much as most of the reports attempt to accomplish balance in the story to consent to editorial conventions of news creation, some journalists still end up focusing on one side; for the most part, it is the negative, stereotypical viewpoint that is accentuated. But generally, most of the coverage outlines the Muslim women as a victim, a sexual object, and furthermore as voiceless. This paper explores the portrayal of misogyny and gender inequality in the Gulf region by Western media. Through a critical analysis of key news articles, documentaries, and media narratives, it examines how the media in the West has framed the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait, as centers of gender discrimination. The research considers the role of cultural biases, geopolitical interests, and sensationalism in shaping these narratives, as well as the impact they have on global perceptions of the region. Additionally, it highlights the complexities and nuances within Gulf societies that are often overlooked by Western media outlets, offering a more balanced perspective of gender dynamics in the region.

Keywords: Propaganda, Media, Women, Gender inequality, Misogyny, Gulf.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman—have become focal points in Western media, often portrayed as oppressive and patriarchal societies where gender inequality and misogyny are rampant (Taylor, 1992). This depiction is particularly evident in the coverage of women's rights, with Western outlets frequently highlighting issues such as the ban on women driving (in Saudi Arabia until 2018), restrictions on women's mobility, and societal pressures placed on women in these countries. While these issues undoubtedly exist, it is crucial to examine how Western media narratives frame the region, and how these portrayals serve broader political and economic agendas (Williamson, 2019). The depiction of the Gulf region in Western media has been largely influenced by Orientalist discourses, which characterize the East as exotic, backward, and oppressive in contrast to the "enlightened" West. This binary often includes the portrayal of women in the Gulf as subjugated victims of patriarchal systems, further reinforcing stereotypes about the region's supposed "primitive" social structures. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1978) provides a critical framework for understanding how Western media constructs the Gulf as a site of both cultural fascination and moral superiority. In the 21st century, this framing is often coupled with sensationalist reporting that focuses on human rights violations, such as the imprisonment of women's rights activists or the restrictions placed on female mobility. These issues, while significant, are often depicted in isolation from broader social, cultural, and economic contexts, leading to a skewed understanding of gender dynamics in the region (Tadmouri, 2020).

Historical Context and Media Framing-The Western Gaze on the Gulf

The portrayal of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in Western media has been highly influential in shaping global perceptions of the region, particularly concerning gender issues. While many of the criticisms of these countries—such as restrictions on women's mobility, patriarchal norms, and gender inequality—are based on real practices, the media's representation is often more complex and sometimes distorted (Zakarriya, 2024). Reinforcing stereotypes and misunderstandings of high-profile issues have been focal points in Western media's coverage of gender inequality in the Gulf:

1. Saudi Arabia's Ban on Women Driving

Saudi Arabia's decision to lift the ban on women driving in 2018 was widely covered by Western media. However, the extensive media attention often disregarded the gradual progress made by women in other areas of life, such as in education, employment, and politics (Sirsat, 2014). The lifting of the ban was portrayed as a monumental step, but media narratives failed to acknowledge the political and social complexity surrounding the issue, including the diverse opinions within Saudi society.

2. Women's Participation in the Workforce and Politics

The portrayal of women as passive victims in the Gulf often overshadow the significant strides women have made in politics, business, and other sectors (Shaheen, 2003). For instance, in the UAE, women make up over 66% of university graduates, and women hold significant positions in

government, including ministerial roles. However, these advancements are often downplayed or ignored in favor of focusing on issues like dress codes or the ban on women driving.

3. Reproductive Rights and Legal Restrictions

Western media frequently highlights the legal restrictions placed on women, especially in relation to issues such as guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia. These laws have garnered significant attention in the West, especially when high-profile activists like Loujain al-Hathloul have been detained for advocating for women's rights (Sandikcioglu, 2000). While these restrictions are important, the broader efforts by Gulf governments to reform such laws, including granting women more rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance, are often overlooked.

Research Questions

This paper investigates the ways in which Western media constructs and propagates an image of misogyny and gender inequality in the Gulf. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Western media portray the Gulf region in terms of gender equality and women's rights?
2. What are the cultural, political, and economic motivations behind these portrayals?
3. What are the consequences of these portrayals on global perceptions of the Gulf region?
4. What is the reality of gender dynamics in the Gulf, and how do these portrayals diverge from reality?

Research Methodology

To explore the portrayal of gender inequality and women's rights in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries within Western media and the broader political and cultural contexts that shape these portrayals, a mixed-methods research approach has been used. This approach combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how media narratives are constructed, how they reflect broader geopolitical concerns, and how they impact perceptions of gender in the Gulf.

1. Research Design:

This study has adapted an **analytical research design** to examine the representation of women rights and gender issues in Western media coverage of the GCC countries.

2. Data Collection Methods:

- **Content Analysis:** The core of this research involves **content analysis** of Western media outlets. This includes both **qualitative** and **quantitative** approaches:

Quantitative analysis: Systematic coding of articles, news reports, and opinion pieces from major Western news outlets (e.g., The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC, CNN, etc.) to identify the frequency of specific topics (e.g., women's driving rights, legal restrictions, women in politics, etc.) and the tone of coverage (positive, negative, neutral).

Qualitative analysis: In-depth examination of the themes, language, and imagery used in media portrayals of gender roles in GCC countries. This analysis would identify patterns in how women's rights are framed, focusing on key narratives such as oppression, resistance, and change.

- **Case Studies**

The **2018 lifting of the women's driving ban in Saudi Arabia** or the **political empowerment of women in the UAE**. This case study will provide insight into how media narratives shift in response to significant policy changes or public events. Another case study is the legal status of women in leadership positions across the region.

- **Interviews with Experts**

Interviews with journalists, scholars, and experts on Middle Eastern gender studies, international relations, and media studies. This provided insights into the motivations behind media portrayals, political influences, and the role of media in shaping perceptions of the GCC.

- **Social Media Analysis**

Analyze discussions on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit regarding women's rights in the GCC. This further helped to gauge public sentiment and understand the relationship between mainstream media narratives and grassroots or alternative media representations.

3. Sampling

- Media coverage sampled from major international news organizations (e.g., The Guardian, BBC, Al Jazeera English, The New York Times, etc.), spanning the last two decades (2004-2024) to capture changes in the portrayal of gender issues in the GCC.
- A selection of case studies involving key reforms (e.g., women's right to drive, the legal status of women in leadership, etc.) will be drawn from news coverage over the past 5-10 years.
- Interviews conducted with 15 experts in the field, selected based on their expertise in gender studies, Middle Eastern politics, and media studies.

4. Data Analysis:

- **Quantitative Data Analysis:** Using software like **NVivo** or **Atlas.ti**, coded data from content analysis has been analyzed to identify patterns in coverage, tone, and focus of articles related to gender inequality in the GCC.
- **Qualitative Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis has been used to identify recurring themes, keywords, and frames in the media coverage. Key themes include **patriarchy, women's empowerment, human rights, economic modernization, and cultural values**.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory and **Feminist media theory** has been applied. Integrating them to critically analyze how Western media representations of gender issues in the GCC countries are influenced by political, economic, and cultural power dynamics. The combination of postcolonial theory, feminist media theory, provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding how Western media construct narratives about gender inequality in the GCC.

1. Postcolonial Theory:

Postcolonial theory, particularly as articulated by scholars like **Edward Said** (Orientalism) and **Gayatri Spivak** (Can the Subaltern Speak?), offers a useful framework for examining the Western portrayal of non-Western societies, especially in relation to gender. The theory suggests that Western representations of the East (including the Middle East and GCC countries) are often filtered through colonial and imperialist lenses that depict the region as backward, oppressive, and in need of Western intervention.

- **Orientalism:** This concept suggests that Western media frequently represents the Arab world and Gulf countries as monolithic, eroticized, and in need of "saving" from their patriarchal structures. Gender inequality is often portrayed as a symptom of an uncivilized society, reinforcing Western superiority.
- **Subaltern Studies:** Applying Spivak's notion of the "subaltern," the study explores how women in the GCC are often silenced or portrayed as passive victims, and how this representation is used to serve Western political agendas.

2. Feminist Media Theory:

Feminist media theory has been applied to critique how gender inequality is framed and how media representations of women reflect broader patriarchal structures. Key ideas from scholars like **Laura Mulvey** (the male gaze) and **Bell Hooks** (intersectionality and representation) will help examine how women are portrayed in Western media about the Gulf.

- **The Male Gaze:** Western media may depict women in the GCC through the "male gaze," emphasizing their roles as objects of male control and desire. This theory will be used to analyze how the media constructs these women as either oppressed or needing to be liberated.
- **Intersectionality:** The research will apply an intersectional lens, considering not just gender but also race, class, and nationality, which influence how women from the GCC are portrayed. This framework highlights that Western narratives often ignore the complexities and diversity of women's experiences in the region.
- **Media Representation:** Feminist scholars argue that media plays a crucial role in shaping societal norms and gender roles. By examining how Western media portray women's rights in the GCC, this study assesses whether these portrayals reinforce or challenge existing gender stereotypes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This study aims to analyze the evolution of media coverage of gender issues in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, focusing on how such issues have been portrayed over time. The methodology for the analysis is outlined in three key components: media sampling, case study selection, and expert interviews. Each of these aspects contributes to a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics within the region, particularly as they have been shaped by social, political, and legal reforms. Through a combination of quantitative analysis (media coverage) and qualitative insights (case studies and interviews), this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the portrayal of gender issues in the GCC and how this portrayal

has changed over the last two decades. Through content analysis, expert interviews, and case studies, the research will examine the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape these portrayals, offering a nuanced understanding of the representation of women's rights in the Gulf and the broader geopolitical implications.

1. Media Coverage Sampling (2004-2024)

Sampling media coverage from major international news organizations such as *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *Al Jazeera English*, and *The New York Times* from 2004 to 2024 allows the study to trace changes in the portrayal of gender issues in the GCC countries over two decades. This timeframe is significant as it covers several pivotal moments for gender reforms in the region, including the lifting of the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia (2018), increased female participation in the workforce, and evolving legal and social frameworks. The rationale behind choosing international media outlets is to gauge how these reforms are viewed and reported by the outside world, often through lenses shaped by Western values. This external perspective may contrast with or reinforce local narratives about gender roles and rights in the GCC. For example, these outlets may focus on issues such as women's legal rights, economic participation, and political representation, which could be framed as either progress or as partial reforms from a Western standpoint. By analyzing how such issues have been covered, the study identifies shifts in tone, framing, and the broader global narrative around gender in the GCC. It explores whether media coverage has moved from a more critical stance to a more celebratory one, especially as reforms have gained momentum in recent years. Key changes in the portrayal of gender equality could be linked to broader political and social trends in the GCC, including the influence of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, which emphasizes modernization and diversification, alongside societal and cultural changes.

2. Case Study Selection (2014-2024)

The selection of case studies focuses on critical reforms that have had a direct impact on the status of women in the GCC, particularly in the last 5-10 years. Two notable cases include the women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia (2018) and changes in the legal status of women in leadership positions across the region. These cases are pivotal as they represent landmark shifts in gender policy, often framed as symbols of the changing attitudes toward women's rights in the region.

Women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia (2018): This reform was widely publicized and discussed globally, making it an important case study for examining how gender roles and social norms have evolved in one of the most conservative countries in the GCC. Media coverage before and after the reform offers insights into how such a significant change is interpreted and framed in the international press.

Women in leadership positions: In many GCC countries, there has been a push toward increasing women's representation in leadership roles, such as in government, business, and other sectors. These developments examined through media portrayals of specific leaders, such as the appointment of women to high-ranking positions in government or corporate sectors. This is

particularly relevant as countries like the UAE and Qatar have seen high-profile women in positions of power. The study analyses how these changes are portrayed by international media, comparing coverage of female leaders to their male counterparts, and identifying any potential biases in the reporting.

These case studies, drawn from the last 5-10 years, highlight the complexities of reform and the tensions between progressive moves and conservative societal structures. They also offer an opportunity to explore how media coverage fluctuates during periods of significant social change, possibly reflecting public attitudes or governmental narratives.

3. Expert Interviews

Interviews with 15 experts in the fields of gender studies, Middle Eastern politics, and media studies provide an in-depth perspective on the implications of the reforms and the role media plays in shaping or reflecting these changes. These experts were selected based on their specialized knowledge of gender in the GCC, either through academic work, policy experience, or journalistic expertise. The experts were asked to comment on:

- How they perceive the evolution of gender issues in the GCC over the past two decades, especially in terms of social, legal, and political reforms.
- The role of media in framing these changes, including whether the international coverage tends to reinforce or challenge local norms and policies.
- The impact of reforms, such as the right to drive, on the everyday lives of women and how these changes are reflected in or shaped by public discourse.
- The influence of political narratives or governmental policies (such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030) on media coverage of gender reforms.

These interviews provided a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing gender reforms in the GCC, including the interplay between media, public opinion, and government actions. They also helped to contextualize the findings from the media coverage analysis and the case studies, offering expert insights on how reforms are perceived both locally and globally. The overall analysis of these three components (media coverage, case studies, and expert interviews) allows the study to draw connections between media representations of gender reforms and the actual impacts of those reforms in society. The key themes are:

1. Shifting narratives: The evolution of how gender reforms are discussed in international media over time—moving from skepticism or criticism to more positive depictions as reforms gain momentum. Early international portrayals often focused on the limitations and contradictions within the reforms, highlighting the gap between official statements and the lived experiences of women in these societies. Over the years, however, as reforms have gained momentum, the narrative has shifted.

2. The framing of women's rights: How international media balance celebrating reforms while also highlighting the ongoing challenges that women face in the GCC, such as legal restrictions, societal expectations, and cultural barriers. International media often face the difficult task of celebrating

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women's rights reforms in the GCC while also acknowledging the significant challenges women still face in these societies. The framing of women's rights is a balancing act.

3. Intersectionality in media: Intersectionality plays a key role in shaping how gender reforms are portrayed in the international media, particularly in the context of the GCC. Media often explore how gender is not just an isolated issue, but is also shaped by class, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. This perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of gender reforms.

4. Impact of media coverage on local policies: The relationship between international media coverage and local policy in the GCC is complex and often indirect, but media attention can certainly influence the trajectory of gender reforms in these countries. While the impact of media coverage can sometimes be overstated, international scrutiny and the desire to align with global norms often serve as catalysts for further reforms. The media, therefore, plays a significant role in influencing the pace and direction of change in these countries.

Conclusion

Western media's portrayal of the Gulf as a bastion of misogyny and gender inequality is often oversimplified and sensationalized. While gender inequality and misogyny are real issues that require attention, the media's focus on these problems can obscure the complexity of gender dynamics in the region. Additionally, the geopolitical and economic motivations behind such portrayals can distort the true picture of women's rights in the Gulf. A more nuanced approach to reporting on the Gulf region would recognize the progress that has been made in terms of women's rights and highlight the ongoing efforts within Gulf societies to create more inclusive and equitable societies. By moving beyond reductive narratives of oppression, Western media can contribute to a more balanced and informed understanding of gender in the Gulf. The portrayal of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in Western media has been highly influential in shaping global perceptions of the region, particularly concerning gender issues. While many of the criticisms of these countries—such as restrictions on women's mobility, patriarchal norms, and gender inequality—are based on real practices, the media's representation is often more complex and sometimes distorted. Understanding the framing of these issues requires an exploration of both the realities on the ground and the broader geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors that influence these portrayals. The consistent portrayal of the Gulf as a region of gender inequality and misogyny has significant consequences for global perceptions of the area. It reinforces stereotypes of the Middle East as a place where women are universally oppressed and denied rights. This simplification often prevents a nuanced understanding of the diversity of women's experiences across the Gulf, as well as the agency that many women exercise in their lives. Moreover, these portrayals contribute to the broader "clash of civilizations" narrative that contrasts the supposedly progressive West with the regressive East. Such binary thinking often disregards the complexities of gender dynamics within the Gulf, where women's rights movements are gaining momentum despite the challenges they face.

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The portrayal of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in Western media as oppressive and patriarchal societies is shaped by a combination of real gender inequalities and broader political, economic, and cultural agendas. While it is important to acknowledge the challenges women face in the region, it is equally important to recognize the agency of women and the significant progress that has been made in certain areas. Western media's framing of gender issues in the GCC often oversimplifies complex social dynamics and overlooks the evolving nature of women's rights in the region. By adopting a more nuanced and context-aware approach, both the media and the global audience can better understand the challenges and opportunities women face in the Gulf countries.

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