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Women, Development and Al Jazeera: A Balance Sheet

Naomi Sakr

Development across the Arab world is being hindered by gender inequality. Such was the conclusion reached by the team of Arab thinkers who compiled the first Arab Human Development Report, published in 2002 under the joint auspices of the UN and the Arab League. Women's participation in the workforce and in political decision-making in Arab countries is lower in quantitative terms than anywhere else in the world, the report declared. It went on to warn: "Society as a whole suffers when a huge proportion of its productive potential is stifled, resulting in lower family incomes and standards of living."¹ Based on this assessment, it may reasonably be argued that marginalization and disempowerment on grounds of sex are issues of concern not only to Arab women but to the whole of Arab society. The report itself concluded that progress towards broader political and economic participation will depend on changing attitudes at all levels of society, "from top levels of government to local communities and individual households."²

How beneficial is it therefore for television stations serving Arab countries to address the specifics of women's inequality in programs that appear to be targeted exclusively at women? Television is a mass medium; its audiences include millions of people who may not have access to the printed press for reasons of illiteracy, limited distribution and high cost. The number of television programs of interest and relevance to ordinary people in Arab countries increased dramatically during the late 1990s, as competition for viewers and advertising revenue intensified among a proliferation of Arab satellite channels.³ Growth in viewership and in the number of talk shows focusing on socio-political issues created an unprecedented opportunity for televised debates on women's status in the region. In some cases these debates took place in shows defined primarily by their format (face-to-face interview, two guests or panel of guests) or

by their subject matter (religion, politics, law, current affairs, recent history, and so on). More often, they took place in shows clearly demarcated as intended for female audiences through titles like *Laki* (the feminine form of "for you"), *Kalam Nowaim* (*Talk of the Fair Sex*), and *Lil Nissa Faqat* (*For Women Only*).⁴

The exclusivity implied by titles like these proved contentious.⁵ If women talk among themselves, asked Fairouz Nasr, Director of Development Programs for Syrian Television, "who will dialogue with men?"⁶ It appeared to critics as though women were being homogenized and added into the schedules as an afterthought or sideshow. Such a trend seemed reminiscent of the Women in Development (WID) approach that international agencies had adopted in the 1970s out of concern that women were being excluded from development. The WID remedy was to treat women as a single category and help them out of their putative "private" spheres into the productive sectors of the existing economic system. In contrast, the later Gender and Development (GAD) approach took a holistic view of development that called for change in households and society at large. Questioning how and why particular gender roles and attributes are defined and assigned, GAD rejected the public-private dichotomy and examined women's situation inside the so-called private sphere as well as outside it.⁷ Arguably, television programs that treat male-female power relations in the "private" realm as a matter for public dialogue among men and women could be considered compatible with a GAD approach.

Al Jazeera's programming includes the series *Lil Nissa Faqat*, in addition to periodic discussion of women's rights and responsibilities included in its other popular talk shows. This chapter draws on examples of both kinds of programming—those with single-sex and those with mixed-sex panels—to assess Al Jazeera's contribution, if any, towards rectifying women's empowerment deficit in the Arab world. The study starts by reviewing arguments for and against special women's programs. It then deploys the concept of the "counterpublic" (developed by scholars of the public sphere) as a tool with which to probe aspects of television debates about gender inequalities.

TELEVISION DEBATES AND COUNTERPUBLICS

In embarking on a discussion of television's capacity to empower women, it is useful to ask from the outset whether the medium is

naturally equipped to redress women's lack of power in society or whether it is more likely to reflect it. As Gaye Tuchman said of American television in the 1970s, stereotyping and underrepresentation of women are often regarded as "distortion." Yet, she argued, these negative aspects may actually have "symbolically capture[d]" women's real lack of power in American society.⁸ In other words, the blame for unsatisfactory media treatment of women cannot be laid solely at the door of media institutions, since these are simply part of the wider fabric of power relations. Nevertheless, if the media form part of the apparatus through which gender roles are assigned, they can equally be deployed to renegotiate those assignments.

Women's employment in media institutions and media portrayal of women were identified as key global concerns in the Beijing Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in China in 1995. Since then, efforts to end negative stereotyping and recruit more women to higher editorial ranks have had different degrees of success with different television stations, depending on the way those stations are financed and controlled. Public service broadcasters are susceptible to target-setting because of their public ownership and funding. In Germany, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands, for example, they are explicitly required to provide programming that contributes to gender equality.⁹ Female senior executives at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) increased from 3.6 per cent in 1985 to 30.8 per cent in 1999, after the BBC took deliberate steps to achieve a more equitable workforce balance of gender and ethnicity.¹⁰ But such policies are not universal. Not only is independently regulated public service broadcasting absent in the Arab world, but pressure groups in the region remain unaware of its potential for giving a voice to all segments of the population.¹¹ Indeed, where regulations governing Arab broadcasting specifically prohibit material that criticizes religion and traditions or questions family ties and family values, the possibilities for even debating factors contributing to women's disempowerment—let alone discussing how to overcome it—would seem to be severely limited.¹²

The challenge of framing gender-sensitive policies has thus been left to those Arab satellite broadcasters willing and able to avoid such stifling regulatory constraints. These have had to decide for themselves on the benefits and pitfalls of setting aside designated program slots for women. Ghettoization, as the latter practice is sometimes pejoratively described, brings with it the "burden of

representation," whereby "very few people with opportunities to make very few programs have to bear the responsibility for representing a diverse and complex social group."¹³ Ghettoization is seen as creating more problems than it solves because it ignores the likelihood that members of an identified target group will in fact be irreconcilably split by basic political, economic and cultural differences.¹⁴ Yet, there may also be occasions when ghettoization is a misleading term. Indeed, it is possible to regard television programs reserved for female guests and ostensibly aimed at a female audience as providing a much-needed space in which women may put their points across uninterrupted, on their own behalf. It could be said that television should provide such spaces, or else risk being accused of masking the fact that women often do have different priorities from men and different perspectives on issues of shared concern.¹⁵

Nancy Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics can help in assessing the pros and cons of discussing gender inequalities in women-only as opposed to mixed-sex forums. Fraser developed the concept in response to Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere. Habermas applied the term "public sphere" to the "arena for discursive interaction"¹⁶ that arose out of changing relations between capitalism and the state in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Habermas's original account, of an egalitarian community of citizens openly, rationally and critically debating matters of public interest, has since been exposed as idealized, given the reality of exclusions based on gender and class. Yet the concept of a public sphere, where access is guaranteed to all citizens, retains normative value, since it can guide criticism of existing conditions and practices and provide a "social imaginary" to aspire to.¹⁷ The concept becomes even richer as a theoretical tool if the discursive space to which it refers is envisaged not as an all-encompassing single sphere but a "multiplicity of dialectically related public spheres."¹⁸ This is where the notion of the counterpublic comes in. Fraser points out that informal pressures may marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups, even when they are formally free to participate equally in a public sphere. Thus hierarchies may continue to function despite a pretence of participatory parity; indeed the very pretence of parity "works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates," because it leads to the strong claiming to speak in the name of the weak.¹⁹ It is, as Fraser argues, the task of critical theory to "render visible the ways in which societal inequality infects formally

inclusive existing public spheres and taints discursive interaction within them."²⁰ For subordinated groups, meanwhile, the task is to form subaltern counterpublics, or "parallel discursive arenas," where specific needs, objectives and strategies can be hammered out.

These insights suggest certain ways of examining whether or not programs on Al Jazeera are conducive to women's empowerment. Al Jazeera's wide geographical reach, large audience and active promotion of generally uncensored and critical discourse about subjects of general public interest make it eligible to be treated as contributing to the realization of a pan-Arab public sphere. The question for this chapter is whether *Lil Nissa Faqat*, by reserving a separate program space for women speakers, constitutes a form of ghettoization or whether it supports subaltern counterpublicity. For Fraser, the emancipatory potential of the counterpublic lies in the dialectic between its dual functions as a space both for withdrawal and regroupment of the subaltern group and also for agitational activities on behalf of that group, directed at wider publics.²¹ That is to say, subaltern counterpublics are seen as having both an internal and an external orientation. They operate as a space in which participants can seek to argue out among themselves what counts as a matter of common concern to a wider public. Where such matters have hitherto been ruled off limits, the counterpublic then looks outward to contest that perception and "convince others that what in the past was not public in the sense of being a matter of common concern should now become so."²² Fraser herself cites the issue of domestic violence, which was forced onto a public agenda through contestation in and by a feminist counterpublic.

Notions of "arguing out," "regroupment" and "contestation" help formulate questions about relevant Al Jazeera programs. It is indeed a hallmark of Al Jazeera programs that they favor contestation over consensus, because such contests are still relatively novel on Arab television and the station's management sees them as making for "interesting television."²³ Yet, there is a difference between arguing and "arguing out." Whether programs on Al Jazeera create a sense of direction or a sense of confusion regarding gender inequalities can only be answered through analysis of specific examples. Similarly, in light of the concept of "regroupment," it is worth reflecting on how these programs portray groups. Groups do not usually appear as such on television.²⁴ Where they are represented at all, it is generally by a single individual who will be pitted against another individual representing a different persuasion. Finally, there is the question of

whether the issues identified for discussion are already widely accepted as matters of common concern to the general public or have previously remained beyond the bounds of public debate.

DISCUSSION OF WOMEN'S STATUS ON AL JAZEERA'S TOP TALK SHOWS²⁵

Al Jazeera is the nearest approximation in Arab television to a public service broadcaster. Unlike the public sector monopoly broadcasters operating in most other Arab states, which are directly accountable to governments because they are supervised by ministers of information, Al Jazeera is organized in such a way as to serve and be accountable to a pan-Arab public. Its relationship with the government of Qatar, where it is based, has been likened to the relationship between the BBC and the British government,²⁶ in that the government has limited institutional means of day-to-day control over the station's editorial content. In addition, Al Jazeera's initial nucleus of staff was drawn from a BBC television news service in Arabic that had been closed down. These people, including the station's first two editors in chief, continued to make editorial judgments based on their understanding of BBC criteria several years after leaving the BBC.²⁷ Whereas Arab governments continue to fund monopoly broadcasters regardless of their profitability, Al Jazeera was established on the basis of a loan from the ruler of Qatar, with the aim of becoming self-financing through revenue from advertising, leasing of facilities and sales of exclusive film footage. This aim dictated an editorial policy geared to maximizing audiences. A Gallup poll in 2002 indicated success on this front, finding that viewers in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco were turning to Al Jazeera before other channels in order to catch up with the news.²⁸ On being set up in 1996, the station was initially given until the end of 2001 to become self-financing. In 2002, however, this deadline was extended, with the Qatari ruler also agreeing to inject more of his own money on an annual basis to keep the channel going.²⁹ On the one hand, politically motivated advertising boycotts had kept Al Jazeera's revenues artificially low.³⁰ On the other hand, the station had already expanded its output through development of a website and was planning further investment in a documentary channel and an English-language news channel.³¹ These ventures could be seen as making a wider range of critical discourse on public affairs accessible to a wider public.

Although there is evidence to support Al Jazeera claims of editorial independence,³² there are also noteworthy parallels between its allocation of editorial time to issues of women's empowerment and the efforts of Qatar's Emir to empower Qatari women. Qatar was the first Arab Gulf country in which women stood as candidates and voted in municipal polls, in 1999.³³ In municipal elections in 2003, the sole woman candidate won her seat after rivals stood aside.³⁴ The country's first female cabinet minister was appointed in May 2003, after voters had overwhelmingly approved a written constitution which guaranteed, among other things, women's right to vote and run for political office.³⁵ Irrespective of such developments, however, Al Jazeera had its own internal rationale during the period 1999–2003 to run items about women's status in the region and beyond, simply because these were sufficiently newsworthy and contentious to suit the station's characteristic *Crossfire* style. Controversy over women's involvement in elections in neighboring Gulf states, employment issues raised by reform programs and globalization, changes in legislation affecting women in various Arab countries, the spread of AIDS, the growth of women's organizations, the impact of conflict on Palestinian and Iraqi women—these and many other events and trends merited general coverage on the strength of their topicality alone. Al Jazeera consequently carried such coverage before *Lil Nissa Faqat* got under way at the start of 2002. After the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, it explored the prospects for Afghan women in a program called *Oula Houroub Al Karn (First Wars of the Century)*.³⁶ In the same period the regular series *Al Sharia wal Hayat (Islamic Law and Life)* devoted an episode to polygamy, under the title "Polygamy: solution or problem?"³⁷ Earlier in 2001 the series *Bila Hudud (Without Borders)* had dealt with "The role of the Palestinian woman in the intifada."³⁸

Al Sharia wal Hayat, a format copied by other Arab satellite channels, is a 90-minute program in which a prominent religious scholar, Youssef Al Qaradawi, advises on codes of conduct in Islam. His rulings have sometimes been at odds with those of Muslim scholars elsewhere. During elections in Bahrain in 2002, he formally approved women's participation as candidates, especially those past their child-bearing years. In this he was contradicted by a Saudi cleric.³⁹ During controversy over the appointment of Egypt's first female judge in 2003, Qaradawi approved the appointment of female judges, whereas Egypt's own most senior religious authority

indicated that a female judge might be permitted to write opinions on the outcome of court cases, but not to judge the cases themselves. An episode of Qaradawi's series in February 2003 was entitled "The Islamic view of women participating in public life."⁴⁰ Since the early days of Al Jazeera, *Al Sharia wal Hayat* has been tackling questions about women's status in Islam. In 1997, an episode looked at "The Muslim woman in the West."⁴¹ This was followed in 1998 by "The position of women in Islam," "Misyar marriage (a temporary marriage contract)," and "Why Islam organizes and regulates marriage."⁴² Other related episodes included "Women's issues" in 1999 and "Women's liberation in the Arab world" in 2000.⁴³ This sample of programs does not list all relevant topics covered in the series, such as health, or all episodes during which women's status was mentioned. Even so, it gives a sense that *Al Sharia wal Hayat*, by discussing intimate personal matters like marriage and family life on television, accustomed viewers of Al Jazeera to public discussion of what goes on in the privacy of homes. A program in 2002, for example, covered "The family relationship and its effect on society," while another in 2003 tackled what it described as "Absent happiness in the life of Muslims."⁴⁴

Al Sharia wal Hayat is interesting to the present study for three reasons. First, by providing a forum for religious opinions to be pronounced, it would appear to be designed to overcome confusion rather than create it. Second, by inspiring other Arab satellite channels to launch similar programs, it could be said to have played a part in expanding the public space available for rational discourse on matters that include gender roles and women's status. By adopting comparable formats, ART's religious affairs channel, Iqra, Abu Dhabi TV and the Egyptian Space Channel created unprecedented opportunities for women callers to discuss treatment they had received in matters of marriage and divorce. Third, through the phenomenon of intertextuality (whereby audiences inevitably and sometimes unconsciously "read" texts in relation to each other⁴⁵), the content and tone of *Al Sharia wal Hayat* can certainly be assumed to have had repercussions in terms of audience expectations of other Al Jazeera talk shows, and vice versa. However, instead of examining specific episodes of *Al Sharia wal Hayat*, I propose now to turn the spotlight onto two talk shows in other series, in which women took part—one dealing with women's right to vote and stand for political office, the other with divorce. Aspects of these examples will be noted to allow comparison with the women-only talk show, *Lil Nissa Faqat*.

Akthar min Rai (More Than One Opinion), one of Al Jazeera's flagship discussion programs, is presented by Sami Haddad, a veteran of the BBC Arabic television service, who became one of the founding screen personalities of Al Jazeera. As its title implies, the point of Haddad's talk show is to highlight currents and counter-currents. An episode of the program, aired on May 28, 1999 and devoted to the political freedom of Gulf women, featured one woman and two men. The topical peg for this choice of subject was a decree by the Emir of Kuwait allowing Kuwaiti women to vote and stand as candidates in national legislative elections. The decree—being consistent with the Kuwaiti constitution, which guarantees equality between men and women—amended the country's electoral law which, by allowing male suffrage only, conflicted with the constitution. Later in 1999 (that is, after this particular episode of *Akthar min Rai* went on air), Kuwait's National Assembly overturned the emiri decree.

The guests on the show included Nouriya Sadani, long-standing campaigner for women's political rights in Kuwait and leader of two groups, the Arab Women's Development Society and Kuwaiti Women of the Twenty-First Century.⁴⁶ As a newspaper columnist and historian, Sadani has also written extensively on the subject. With her were Dr Abdel Razzaq Al Shayji, Assistant Dean of the Sharia College in Kuwait University, and Dr Abdel Hamid Al Ansari, former dean of the Sharia College at Qatar University. Sami Haddad introduced the episode by pointing out that both supporters and opponents of votes for women in Kuwait had quoted religious texts to support their arguments. He then launched the debate by asking Shayji whether men alone were responsible for public life in Kuwait, given the absence of the "other half" of society. Shayji, replying that democracy in the Gulf was still "immature," suggested that women did not regard elections as a "priority." Asked immediately by Haddad to explain, Shayji cited tradition and religion and disparaged what he called women's "little" groups in Kuwait, the purpose of which, he said, was "probably to strip women of their religion." Pressed by Haddad to cite a religious text forbidding women from choosing someone to represent them in public affairs, Shayji clarified his view to the effect that Islam allows women to vote but not to be parliamentary candidates. He indicated that it would be hard under current Kuwaiti law to allow women to vote but bar them from standing as candidates. To support his points Shayji quoted Quranic verses calling on women to "keep to their houses" and stating that men have the responsibility of providing for women.

At this, Haddad turned to Ansari for his interpretation of the first of these verses. With Ansari's reply, the "other opinion" alluded to in the series title (and in Al Jazeera's mission statement) became apparent, as he opened by disagreeing with Shayji on tradition. Restrained however by Haddad, who was still seeking a response to the point about women and their houses, Ansari declared that the consensus view of Muslim scholars was that the verse in question, being explicitly addressed to women in the family of the Prophet Mohammed, applied only to them. And yet, Ansari continued, they also left their houses when necessary. In response to questioning from Haddad, he insisted that women in the Prophet's family had been told in the Quran "You are not like other women," and that the instruction addressed to them did not apply to contemporary Muslim women.

Having established the opposing viewpoints of his two male guests, Haddad then briefly mentioned Sadani's background and asked her to comment on Shayji's opinion. Sadani's response was to point out that Shayji seemed to have no problem accepting orders from the female president of Kuwait University. Following on swiftly and addressing herself to Haddad, Sadani proceeded to dispute Haddad's introductory remarks about Kuwaiti Islamists objecting to women exercising political rights. Repeatedly blocking Haddad's attempts to interrupt, she noted that Islamist women in Kuwait were also campaigning for political rights. She applauded the head of state who, she indicated, was putting the interests of his society and country ahead of those of a few people resisting progress. Those opposing the decree, she said, should be thankful they lived in a democracy, protected by a constitution, and not in a police state. And yet, Sadani continued, despite more efforts by Haddad to cut her off, Shayji was effectively arguing against the equality enshrined in the very constitution that was protecting him.

It becomes apparent from these opening snatches that, although Sadani was in a minority of one female to three males, the more obvious outsider in this gathering was Shayji, as the sole self-professed opponent of women's political rights. The lone female guest started, as she meant to go on, by overriding interruptions for long enough to make her chosen points. The long program ended with Sadani and Shayji disagreeing over the contribution of women's organizations in Kuwait, thereby implicitly highlighting Sadani's position as spokesperson for active groups. Of the three guests, it was Sadani who literally had the last word, before Haddad turned to address his viewers and sign off.

Similarly hard-hitting debates take place on other Al Jazeera talk shows. In the series *Al Ittijah Al Muaakis (The Opposite Direction)*, presented by Faisal Al Kasim, the format involves two guests confronting each other head to head. Al Kassim is proud that his program provides an arena for such exchanges. Off-screen, he has argued that live debates on Arab television help to liberalize attitudes to debate generally in Arab society, thereby changing a situation in which there is "no dialogue in families, no dialogue in schools" and where fathers, teachers and preachers are allowed to behave like dictators.⁴⁷ Al Kassim clearly appreciates participants who are practiced in defending their views. Referring to an episode of *Al Ittijah Al Muaakis* in which the outspoken Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi took part, he once described her as having "made mincemeat" of an opponent. On another memorable occasion in 1999, his show hosted two female guests to debate the practice of polygamy. One, the Egyptian writer Safinaz Kazem, stormed out of the studio in mid-debate rather than be perceived to contradict the Quran.⁴⁸ Her sparring partner was Toujan Faisal, one of only two women ever to have been a member of the Jordanian parliament before it introduced a six-seat quota for women in 2003.⁴⁹

On February 22, 2000, an edition of *Al Ittijah Al Muaakis* tackled the practice of *khula*, which had just been introduced in Egypt as an alternative to protracted litigation for women seeking divorce. Under *khula*, a woman is permitted to divorce her husband unilaterally and without delay on condition she returns her dowry and surrenders all financial rights, regardless of the length of her marriage and the reasons for her decision to end it. Although the Egyptian parliament approved the introduction of *khula*, it did not do so without a fight. Intense controversy, combined with wide public interest inside and outside Egypt, made the topic highly suitable for *Al Ittijah Al Muaakis*. The episode devoted to *khula* brought together two Egyptians: Farida Al Naqqash, female head of the Progressive Women's Union, and Ibrahim Al Kholi, a male professor from the University of Al Azhar in Cairo.

After a lengthy preamble setting out the issues, Al Kasim kicked off the debate by challenging Kholi to justify the "revolution" going on among men of religion just because women were "taking a few of their usurped rights." Rejecting the term "revolution," Kholi began with a defense of the system of religious scholars and a defense of women's rights in Islam, challenging "anyone" to name a religion that "gave" women more than Islam had given them. His

opposition to *khula*, he said, was based on corruption in the judicial system, where lawyers were "messing around" and taking advantage of other people's problems. Kholy said changes in the courts would be preferable to *khula* as a means of ending the backlog of protracted divorce cases raised by women. He saw *khula* as opening the way to blackmail between couples. Naqqash, having briefly interrupted Kholy to correct the title of an official he had referred to, then proceeded (with encouragement from Al Kasim) to set out her opinion. She cited specific cases in which women had been denied the right to divorce. Apparently aware of viewers' concern that change was being imposed from abroad, Naqqash moved to pre-empt such a notion. She gave statistics for women's contribution to the economy, saying that these signaled a "new reality" and a need for "radical change" in the family. The "old relationship," according to Naqqash, was based "not on equality or justice but on oppression."

When male callers to the program suggested that Muslim women were better off than women in the West, Naqqash insisted that women wanted only justice and equality in accordance with models that existed in the region in an earlier era. "Arab houses are closed," she said, and "behind closed doors" there is suffering, isolation and enslavement. When Kholy argued that injured women already had the right to seek divorce, Naqqash pointed out that a woman suing for divorce through the courts could wait ten years for a settlement. In heated exchanges, the two guests stood their ground, battling to make themselves heard. Kholy maintained that men and women were suffering because secular laws were being used instead of Islamic law. Naqqash, goaded at one point by Al Kasim's interjection that women and the family were seen by some as the last bastion of Arab culture, responded that the last bastion would be formidable if built on love and compassion, not oppression and humiliation. Quoting the view expressed by some sheikhs that unveiled women bring dishonor and defeat on the whole nation, she seized the opportunity to stress that "secular" did not mean "atheist" or "against religion." The program ended with Kholy insisting that the point of reference should be the "Holy Book" and the traditions of the Prophet, and Al Kasim announcing "our time is up."

Here, as in the earlier example from *Akthar min Rai*, the female guest chosen to debate a controversial topic had long experience in parrying hostility and speaking plainly about actual examples of injustice visited upon a large group of people. Seizing on Kholy's statistic that corruption had caused a backlog of 1.5 million divorce

cases, Naqqash said that nearly half of these cases had been raised by women whose husbands had injured them physically. For a woman to prove injury, Naqqash explained graphically, she had to display a blinded eye, broken leg or cut hand that a judge could see for himself. Invisible injuries were much harder to prove. With Al Kasim having suggested in his first question to Kholy that women's rights had been "usurped," the latter—being opposed to speedier divorce for women—was put on the defensive. In these episodes of *Akthar min Rai* and *Al Ittijah Al Muaakis*, women were numerically in a minority. Formally, this might be perceived as a lack of parity in participation. Informally, however, this disadvantage was mitigated by the factors outlined above. The programs demonstrated strong feelings and differing views with no attempt at resolution or summing up.

AL JAZEERA'S LIL NISSA FAQAT

Like Al Jazeera's other talk shows, the weekly *Lil Nissa Faqat* is a regular fixture in the station's schedules. How much of a fixture was demonstrated when it remained on air during the Israeli siege of Palestinian towns that started in March 2002 while some other programs were temporarily shelved at this time to make way for extended daily reports of the siege. In 2003, however, *Lil Nissa Faqat* lost its place for a few weeks to coverage of the invasion of Iraq, as Al Jazeera and other Arab satellite channels competed to be first with breaking news. As this scheduling policy confirms, timeliness is not a priority element of *Lil Nissa Faqat*. Since it started in 2002, its discussion topics have sometimes been prompted by events, as in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq, the elections in Yemen or the Earth Summit.⁵⁰ At other times, however, the program makers have chosen subjects of perennial interest to do with marriage and family relationships. On still other occasions, they have stepped back to take a fresh look at everyday phenomena such as popular sayings, social customs and women's magazines. Topics chosen for the series are equally likely to relate to what have traditionally been perceived as the public or private spheres, either separately or within the same program.

Topics debated on *Lil Nissa Faqat* have included: exchange of roles between men and women, violence against women, women's writing, businesswomen and Arab women's role in building the economy, women in the spotlight, the effect of September 11 on

Arab and Muslim women, women and fulfillment, women in popular sayings, the image of Arab women in video clips, the position of women in war, the position of Arab women in professional unions, the future of Arab women's movements, the understanding of gender, women and religious rulings, women and political change in Iraq, the mother and her teenage daughter, women and diplomatic work, and a husband's use of his wife's money.

Lil Nissa Faqat differs from either *Akthar min Rai* or *Al Ittijah Al Muaakis* in having had a much shorter history, as well as a succession of four different presenters during its first two years. The first of these, Khadija bin Ganna, who reportedly pushed for the program's creation, was one of the original Al Jazeera team drawn from the BBC Arabic Television Service. Muntaha Al Romhi, who succeeded bin Ganna before leaving Al Jazeera in early 2003 for Al Arabiya, shared a similar background. Al Romhi was followed by Laila Chaieb, who in turn was followed by Lona Al Shebel. As prominent women on Al Jazeera, they were clearly in a numerical minority, along with the station's few female news reporters, including its Ramallah correspondent Shereen Abu Aqla. The two episodes of *Lil Nissa Faqat* described below were both screened in October 2002 while the program was being presented by Muntaha Al Romhi. Although selected almost at random, as two episodes aired in quick succession, it so happens that the ones chosen lend themselves to comparison in terms of subject matter with the two shows (on Gulf women's political participation and divorce law) discussed in the previous section. One, broadcast on October 14, 2002, dealt with the position of Gulf women in relation to leadership and management roles. The other, aired on October 28, 2002, was entitled "Women's attitude to polygamy."

The *Lil Nissa Faqat* focus on Gulf women and leadership was timed to coincide with a symposium taking place under the patronage of Qatar's first lady, Sheikha Moza, on women's advancement in the six Gulf Co-operation Council countries. It featured three panelists from Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. Dr Wajihah Sadiq Al Baharna was introduced as head of the Bahrain Women's Society and deputy head of the Society for Cultural and Social Innovation. Dr Zakiya Ali Mallallah Abdel Aziz was described as head of the Research Unit and Information Centre in the Qatari Public Health Ministry's Pharmaceutical Administration. The third guest was Mrs Aida Bint Salim Al Hajri, Director of Studies and Research in Oman's Ministry of Social Development. Before presenting her

guests, however, Muntaha Al Romhi launched the program by explaining the issue to be discussed. The question, she said, was one of priorities. Should proficient and able women, faced with an enduring multitude of obstacles to entering jobs with executive authority, take a gradualist approach to reaching their strategic objectives, given the deeply-rooted social norms that currently bar them from such jobs? Or should deliberate steps be taken to enable them to break into such fields? How much distance separates qualified women from decision-making circles, asked Al Romhi, and what are the strategic landmarks on the way?

Having thus narrowed the debate to one around optimum methods of achieving a mutually agreed end, Al Romhi brought her guests into the discussion by appealing to Mallallah for information. Why, she wondered, was there such a big discrepancy between the number of Gulf women with higher degrees and the number occupying leadership positions in either the public or private sector? Mallallah replied by confirming that there was indeed a serious gap. She then proceeded directly to identify obstacles placed in front of women from their earliest upbringing as young girls. Arguing that traditions and customs put men in authority over women throughout their lives, she noted that, as girls grow up, they are subject to interference in what they wear, where they go, where they work and whether they can travel to gain experience and education. "These," she said, "are things we have all lived through, suffered from and still suffer from." Baharna, the next guest to speak, took Dr Zakiya's points further by noting that doubts expressed about women's leadership ability instilled doubts in women themselves and undermined their confidence. When Bint Salim's turn came to contribute, she began by highlighting rapid changes in women's circumstances in the Gulf during the second half of the twentieth century, including the rise of businesswomen. Soon, however, she was endorsing the previous speakers' arguments about upbringing, adding that female voters are more inclined to vote for male rather than female candidates. Girls, she said, are brought up to see their brothers and fathers as the ones who take decisions. On marriage, the decision-making role falls to the husband. The expectation that men will take decisions is consequently transferred to the workplace, Bint Salim said.

Other voices on the topic were introduced by means of a short report. Here women attending the Doha symposium were interviewed to say whether women should wait for gradual social change

to elevate them to directorships or whether they should be calling for political intervention to accelerate that change. The report concluded that it was now up to women to push for equal opportunities while also boosting their skills and experience. It was followed by calls from viewers who, as often in *Lil Nissa Faqat* phone-ins, were predominantly men. The first proved to be out of step with the assumptions underlying the program, as he was strongly opposed to women becoming rulers, ministers or judges. He cited religious texts to argue that women should stay at home, not occupy positions of authority and not reveal any part of their anatomy. At this Baharna insisted, despite Al Romhi's cautioning against discussion of religious rulings, on stating that God had created men and women equally and given them equal responsibility for stewardship of the earth. When Al Romhi observed that Balkis was mentioned in the Quran as a wise female leader, Baharna concurred. The second caller declared that women had been claiming for the past 50 years that they were oppressed. When repeatedly urged by Al Romhi to be clear about whether or not he thought they were oppressed, he threatened to end the call. The program finally ended as an academic conference panel might, with a round-up of one-liners from each guest.

Several observations can be made about this episode of *Lil Nissa Faqat*. The first has to do with the way its assumptions and approach differed from those of the mixed-sex debates previously discussed. Instead of starting, as one of those debates did, by inviting a guest to argue against women's political participation, this program took as its starting point the view that qualified women should be aiming for decision-making jobs and that the subject of debate was not whether to aim for them but how. Second, an obvious and explicit level of agreement among all participants and the presenter allowed them to build on each other's contributions. In observing at one point that "these are things we have all lived through," Mallallah even took the initiative of speaking on the others' behalf and was not contradicted. Whereas Sami Haddad in his program on female suffrage blocked early attempts to discuss tradition, the guests in this show were quickly able to articulate their own shared experiences of traditions prevalent in the raising of girl children in the Gulf. In this way, a debate that was apparently focused on public affairs soon drew in evidence and explanations from the supposedly private territory of families and homes. Third, the program did not end with a slanging match in full swing. Instead it was rounded off

with the producer establishing a sense of direction through final proposals for action from her panelists. As will be seen, these conventions were not so much in evidence in the program two weeks later on women's attitudes to polygamy, which featured guests with opposing views on a contentious subject.

Muntaha Al Romhi introduced the debate on polygamy by noting that an old topic had been given a new twist by the emergence of female voices calling for men to be allowed to take more than one wife. Some women, she explained, had come to see the abolition of polygyny as protecting men and hurting women, because it sanctioned men abandoning their first wives. By conveying the view that polygyny could "guarantee women the achievement of motherhood," Al Romhi seemed to allude implicitly to existing rules giving divorced men custody over their children above a certain age. Having briefly introduced the "new thinking" in this manner, Al Romhi pointed out that the program was to discover the reasons for it. She then presented her three guests: Hiyam Darbak, Egyptian media writer and head of the Society Calling for Polygamy; Afaf Al Sayyid, "active" writer from Egypt; and, via satellite from Rabat, the writer and thinker Khadija Moufied, head of the Society for Women's Custody (of children). Addressing both guests and viewers, Al Romhi stressed that the aim of the program was not to deal with the Islamic law (Sharia) aspects of the issue but to "open the door wide to discuss the logic of women's voices calling for or against polygyny."

Turning first to Darbak, Al Romhi reiterated that there was nothing new in women rejecting polygyny; what's new, she said, was women's tendency to support it. Mentioning again that Darbak headed a society calling for polygamy, she asked for her interpretation of this "radical change" in women's attitudes. Darbak started off with an anecdote, recounting how a close friend of hers had discovered that her husband had married a second wife three years earlier. Her friend's husband had treated her nicely during that time, but as soon as she discovered the second marriage she felt she had to divorce him. Darbak told viewers the advice she had given her friend. This was to remember that the husband had not committed adultery or gone against his religion and that divorce would complicate the problem. In fact, divorce would hurt the three children of the first marriage, persecute the second wife and destroy the first household. Concluding her narrative, Darbak said her friend had taken the advice and found that her husband felt indebted to her for not destroying the first marriage or depriving him of the children.

Sayyid had a different interpretation from Darbak's. Arguing that promoting polygyny would discourage men from seeking fulfilment from their first marriage, Sayyid said it would lead men to keep searching for satisfaction through a second, third, or fourth wife. Darbak's society was only a number of individuals, she noted, not a significant phenomenon in relation to the population as a whole. The third guest, Moufied, offered yet another view in defining polygyny as a right for women as well as men. Asked what she meant by that, Moufied gave her view that Islam allowed men to have more than one wife in order to solve problems. It had not legislated for polygyny, she said, but had regulated it and put it in a legal framework. Yet men had monopolized the interpretation of Islamic law and turned it to their own benefit. Women's voices on the subject had been absent, she continued. Women needed to know about Islamic law and had to avoid regarding certain matters as taboo. Since wives could not restrain their husbands, Moufied argued, they should, if necessary, uphold their right to remain as the first wife. This was a right, not a deprivation, she explained.

The outside report compiled for this program consisted mainly of vox pops—soundbites from individuals intercepted on the street in Arab countries and asked for their views on the principle of polygyny. This straw poll brought in the opinions of eight men and two women in the United Arab Emirates, six women and two girls in Lebanon and three men and three women in Egypt. None of the female interviewees corroborated the stance taken by Darbak or Moufied. Instead they expressed either flat rejection or grudging and conditional acceptance based on the need to observe Islam. A female caller to the program, who described herself as young, religious and a defender of Islamic law, voiced concern that Darbak's approach risked weakening a wife's position vis-à-vis her husband, as he could use an additional marriage to "defeat her because she has a strong personality." The program ended with Sayyid putting Darbak on the spot. Asked by Al Romhi to state whether she would accept that her husband marries another wife, Darbak said that, if he was ready to follow his desires come what may, it was up to her to ensure he took the route permitted under Islamic law. With Sayyid pressing Darbak to be clearer about her own motivation, Al Romhi intervened to apologize that time was up and remark that the dialogue would have to continue off the air.

It is hard to imagine the range of views expressed in this program having had an equal chance of being aired in a talk show involving

both women and men. Discussions of polygyny in a mixed-sex panel risk being perceived as a dichotomous contest of male versus female. The two women speaking up for polygyny in the Al Jazeera debate were doing so in what they claimed to be the interests of women. By providing space for them to speak their minds, the program demonstrated that the two did not share the same rationale and that there could be nuances of interpretation. This was also possible because the debate was not conceived as a clash of opposing viewpoints but as an attempt to examine the thinking of those female defenders of polygyny who claim to be pro-women. The program differed in format and tone from the earlier one on Gulf women and leadership jobs. Yet, in the same way that the previous episode highlighted inequalities in child-rearing, this one enabled public discussion of inequalities in marital commitment.

CONCLUSION

Based on a brief assessment of the way gender inequalities are confronted in Al Jazeera's programs and a more detailed assessment of four specific programs, it can be argued that Al Jazeera has expanded the space for critical and contestatory discursive interaction over issues related to women's empowerment. This assessment is based on qualitative, not quantitative criteria. The conclusion is not that *Lil Nissa Faqat* contributed to a net expansion of discursive space through the mere insertion of a weekly slot for all-women debates. Instead, it made this contribution through the nature and management of those debates. For one thing, they complemented discussions already taking place among all-male or mixed-sex panels on Al Jazeera's other talk shows. For another, they allowed female representatives of groups and opinions in wider society to handle gender issues holistically, switching freely back and forth between the so-called public and private spheres, without their contributions being subject to reinterpretation, misrepresentation or even validation by male speakers or presenters.

Far from ghettoizing discussion of gender inequality, *Lil Nissa Faqat* added an extra dimension for discussion. In this additional space, women gained the opportunity to adopt debating styles that differed from the head-to-head clashes of other Al Jazeera talk shows. The format of the two programs discussed here, consisting of a three-woman panel, a female presenter and short documentary clips containing interviews and vox pops, not only increased the number of

voices and opinions represented but created new opportunities for participants to gain media exposure and experience. Moreover, it was clear that, although supposedly a "women's program," *Lil Nissa Faqat* had no brief to homogenize women. Quite the contrary, the debating agendas set out at the start of both episodes highlighted the aim of representing a plurality of women's views about priorities and objectives in pursuit of their own interests and those of society at large. By taking calls from male viewers, the series demonstrated how a space that has been reserved for agendas decided and pursued by women can also be outward looking. In these circumstances, callers who opposed gender equality found themselves momentarily alone as they sought to defend their views on air.

The concept of the counterpublic proved highly revealing in assessing Al Jazeera's contribution to development. When gender inequality impedes development, one way to confront it is through public discourse. But, no matter how well intentioned, public debates about inequality will remain lopsided if groups on the receiving end of unequal treatment can only ever discuss their treatment with those who are complicit in handing it out. The group seeking redress needs its own separate spaces in which to articulate shared concerns, free from manipulation or domination. In *Lil Nissa Faqat*, Al Jazeera provided something approximating to such a space.

NOTES

- 1 UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2002 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 3.
- 2 Ibid., p. 11.
- 3 Naomi Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001); Naomi Sakr "Maverick or model?: Al Jazeera's impact on Arab satellite television," in Jean Chalaby (ed.), *Transnational Television Worldwide* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 66–95.
- 4 These titles were adopted by Abu Dhabi TV, Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) and Al Jazeera Satellite Channel, respectively.
- 5 Objections were voiced to this author by a number of female media professionals working in the Arab media.
- 6 Quoted in Nouredin Aathar, "Women's screens: return to the pre-Islamic age," *Al Hayat*, September 6, 2003.
- 7 Nalini Visvanathan, "Introduction to Part 1," in Nalini Visvanathan, Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff and Nan Wieggersma (eds), *The Women, Gender and Development Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 18–19.
- 8 Gaye Tuchman, "Women's depiction by the mass media," *Signs*, Vol. 3 (1979), condensed and republished in Helen Baehr and Ann Gray (eds), *Turning It On: A Reader in Women and Media* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 12.

- 9 Tomas Coppens, "The goal of public broadcasting: a comparative study of the missions, tasks and roles of public broadcasters in 13 European countries." Paper presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Media Communication and Cultural Studies Association, London, January 2002.
- 10 Caroline Millington, "Getting in and getting on: women and radio management at the BBC," in Caroline Mitchell (ed.), *Women and Radio: Airing Differences* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 211–12.
- 11 Dima Dabbous-Senseng, "The Arab world and the challenge of introducing gender-sensitive communication policies." Paper presented to the Expert Group Meeting of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women on Participation and Access of Women to the Media, Beirut, November 12–15, 2002.
- 12 Naomi Sakr, "Seen and starting to be heard: women and the Arab media in a decade of change," *Social Research*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (Fall 2002), p. 841.
- 13 Jane Arthurs, "Women and television," in Stuart Hood (ed.), *Behind the Screens: The Structure of British Television* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), pp. 83–4.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ros Coward, "Women's programs: why not?," in Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (eds), *Boxed In: Women and Television* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), p. 105.
- 16 This terminology relating to the public sphere is drawn from Nancy Fraser's formulation in her "Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy," in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 110–11.
- 17 Lisa McGlaughlin, "From excess to access: feminist political agency in the public sphere," *Javnost/The Public*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1995), p. 37.
- 18 Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, "Introduction: reconfigurations of the public sphere," in Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer (eds), *Counterpublics and the State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 6.
- 19 Fraser, "Rethinking the public sphere," pp. 120, 123.
- 20 Ibid., p. 121.
- 21 Ibid., p. 124.
- 22 Ibid., p. 129.
- 23 According to Mohammed Jassim Al Ali, speaking as Al Jazeera's General Manager. See Chris Forrester, "Broadcast censorship: it's a question of culture," *Middle East Broadcast & Satellite*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (October 1999), p. 15.
- 24 Leonor Camauër, "Women's movements, public spheres and the media: a research strategy for studying women's movements' publicist practices," in Annabelle Sreberny and Liesbet van Zoonen (eds), *Gender, Politics and Communication* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2000), p. 175.
- 25 Discussion of specific programs in this and the following section is based on verbatim transcripts posted on Al Jazeera's website. The author thanks her husband, Ahmad Sakr, for help with Arabic-English translation.
- 26 Brian Whitaker, "Battle station," *Guardian*, February 7, 2003.

- 27 "From day one most of our editorial staff were from this BBC environment," Ibrahim Helal told an interviewer in 2001. "Even after five years if we're in doubt in a certain situation, we convene and ask ourselves, if we were in London now what would we do." See Sarah Sullivan, "The courting of Al Jazeera," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, No. 7 (Fall/Winter 2001), <http://tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall01/Jazeera_sjs.html>.
- 28 "Viewers say Al Jazeera objective and daring." *Gulf News*, November 21, 2002.
- 29 Albawaba.com, "Al Jazeera struggles from beneath financial pressures," *Global Vision News Network* (gvnews.net), November 1, 2002.
- 30 According to internal estimates compiled by the Pan-Arab Research Centre (PARC), Al Jazeera achieved advertising income of very roughly US\$48 million in the first nine months of 2002, compared with levels of US\$174 million for MBC, US\$133 million for LBC-Sat, US\$115 million for Future International and US\$ 74 million for Abu Dhabi TV.
- 31 Abdullah Schleifer, "Interview with Mohammed Jasim Al Ali, Managing Director, Al Jazeera," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, No. 10 (Spring/Summer 2003), <<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring03/jasim.html>>.
- 32 Sakr, "Maverick or model?"
- 33 Universal adult suffrage came later to Oman and Bahrain. National Assembly elections in Kuwait in 2003, as previously, were by male suffrage only. By late 2003, legislative elections had yet to be introduced in the UAE. October 2003 saw the Saudi government promising elections but without stating that women would have the vote.
- 34 "Qatar appoints first woman cabinet minister," *Middle East Times*, May 9, 2003.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 First screened on November 24, 2001.
- 37 First screened on December 30, 2001.
- 38 First screened on May 30, 2001.
- 39 Anthony Shadid, "Maverick cleric is a hit on Arab TV," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2003.
- 40 First screened on February 9, 2003.
- 41 First screened on October 5, 1997.
- 42 First screened on March 15, May 3, and October 4, 1998.
- 43 First screened on September 5, 1999 and March 5, 2000.
- 44 First screened on August 11, 2002 and August 17, 2003.
- 45 John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 108.
- 46 See Haya Al Mughni and Mary Ann Tétreault, "Engagement in the public sphere: women and the press in Kuwait," in Naomi Sakr (ed.), *Women and Media in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 132 and 134.
- 47 Comments on "The centrality of live talks in Arab satellite broadcasting," made at the conference on Arab Satellite Broadcasting in the Age of Globalization. University of Cambridge, November 2002.
- 48 Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar Farag, *Al Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), p. 98.

- 49 Rana Husseini, "53 women express interest in running for Lower House," *Jordan Times*, March 4, 2003.
- 50 "Women and political change in Iraq" was first screened on May 12, 2003. "Women's defeat in the Yemeni elections" was first screened on May 26, 2003. "Arab women and the Earth Summit in Johannesburg" was first screened on September 2, 2002.