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# The Mainstream Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in the Media

Megan A. Mastro  
Gettysburg College

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# The Mainstream Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in the Media

## **Abstract**

I discuss the widespread misrepresentation of Islamic women in multiple sources of media and its subsequent effects on the general population's perception of this demographic as a whole.

## **Keywords**

Woman, Islam, Anthropology, Media

## **Disciplines**

International and Intercultural Communication | Islamic Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Social Influence and Political Communication | Women's Studies

## **Comments**

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## “The Mainstream Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in the Media”

by Megan Mastro

When you hear the word ‘terrorist’, what is the first image that comes to mind? The image of a Muslim man, or perhaps an Arab Muslim man? The term ‘terrorist’ is defined by Cambridge Dictionaries as “someone who uses violent actions, or threatens violent actions, for a political purpose”; some synonyms include ‘extremist’ and ‘fanatic’ (Cambridge Dictionary). Within that definition there is no mention of religious affiliation or cultural identity; ‘terrorist’ is not meant to define a cultural group. Rather, it is a term for a person who commits certain harmful acts. Somehow, a link has been created to connect the term ‘terrorist’ to the Islamic faith as a whole, yet the FBI finds that only 6% of all terrorist acts are committed by religious Muslims (FBI 2006). With 1.6 billion followers (23% of the world's population), Islam is the world’s second largest religion. A group that makes up almost one quarter of the world's population commits less than 1/16th of all global acts of terror, yet is the group most frequently connected back to the term (Pew Research Center 2015). Where have these stereotypes arisen from? If not based on factual evidence, what causes the gap between perception and reality in the eyes of many Americans?

The American perception of Muslims in many circumstances is less than positive. One subgroup that is often a topic of debate and scrutiny is Muslim women. When you see a veiled woman, do the words ‘oppressed’ or ‘helpless’ come to mind? If they do, you are not alone. In fact, less than a year ago I would have agreed with this thinking. Many people - including myself before 2015 - see veiled women as the perpetuation of their own mistreatment, and assume that Muslim women lack access to a context in which they can see their oppression and maltreatment.

The mere sight of a woman with a scarf draped over her hair allowed me, and allows much of America, to assume a great deal about the woman behind the veil. Once again, where do these assumptions come from? What is feeding these notions to the masses?

### **A Unilateral Western View of Muslim Women**

In American society, Muslim women are portrayed and viewed with a relatively singular set of heuristics. In reality, most westerners know very little about Islamic women, and often lack direct interactions or relationships with women who practice Islam. Few if any possess knowledge of Islamic texts or traditions (Green 2015: 233). Mainstream western media creates an image of perpetually distressed and suffering women, leaving behind a discouraging narrative regarding the agency of women who practice this religion (Kasana 2014: 238).

Even in situations in which Muslim women find a voice and a platform through which to share this voice, the audience of said platform often views it with an 'Orientalist fascination'. Mehreen Kasana, a Muslim blogger who utilizes this platform to share her thoughts, states that it became uncomfortably obvious when she began blogging as a Muslim woman that nonwhite voices, particularly these Muslim women but not exclusively, were treated and received as anthropological projects but rarely as personal musings, in comparison to the kind of treatment white bloggers received (Kasana 2014: 237). These Muslim women were keenly aware of this double standard, as young women blogging their day to day lives, their aim was not to serve as a looking glass through which one can see life in the perspective of a Muslim female, but to simply discuss their daily lives. Unfortunately, this goal was widely misinterpreted throughout Europe and the United States. In the face of this miscomprehension, Kasana and various other bloggers from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan created a satirical blog called *Oppressed Brown*

*Girls Doing Things* (239), brilliantly using humor in an attempt to better enable people to understand how and why the popular thinking that attempts to analyze their culture is unacceptable. Kasana and similar bloggers face a unique problem today: the popular western discourse claims that Muslim women are in need of correction or saving, in strong conformity with traditional western liberalism (238). Ultimately, this severely narrows a Muslim woman's ability to express herself, for if she denounces western liberalism while at the same time decrying male sexism, she is caught between her identity as a feminist women and a Muslim woman. In order to be taken seriously in either sphere (as a feminist or as a Muslim), many in western audiences require that she reject one of the two as unjust.

The almost demeaning stance that some westerners take when viewing Muslim women seems unalterable. A traditional Muslim woman is perceived as oppressed, likely uneducated, and helpless. Because of these stereotypes, many westerners approach a woman of an unfamiliar culture as a project, as someone who is incapable of understanding how poorly she is being treated and whose only savior is the West - which can help her see the 'truth'. But when these women attempt to share their personal stories, to provide some context and insight into their genuine situations, they frustratingly gain little to no respect from western liberals. These women, as opposed to being helpless, are now little more than a research opportunity for well meaning westerners. The paradoxical box that Muslim women are placed in is making it increasingly difficult for them to express themselves and their true views.

### **Media Coverage and the Instillation of Certain Stereotypes Pertaining to Muslim Women**

In America there is one clear time in which 'Islamophobia', the fear of all practicing Muslims owing to the violence of an extremely small minority, is visible in the media. This is,

predictably, in the wake of 9-11. When viewing news stories published by major publications and networks such as Time, Newsweek, CNN, ABC, Fox and CBS, relating to the September 11 attacks within a year of the attacks, one can see that a majority related to some degree to the unfair oppression of women in the Middle East (Alsutany 2016: 75). Some headlines included “Free to Choose”, “Unveiling Freedom”, and “Unveiled Threat”, and the general theme of these articles was the exposure of the long “veiled” horrors facing Muslim women (75). These articles had an air of authenticity and credibility due to their being produced in the form of exposés, claiming to uncover secrets long hidden and to be a source of truth for American citizens looking for answers in a tragic time. People will always appreciate being reassured of their impressions and beliefs, and these articles played with incredible ease into the confirmation of biases held by many in the American public. The United States is not the sole guilty party, however. In an article on media manipulation of the truth on terrorism, Daya Thussu places due blame upon all of the western world, stating, “The main stream western media projects Islam as inimical to civilized values. The demonizing of Islam fits in well with western geo-political interest in arms and oil” (1997: 264). Throughout the western world it seems that the portrayal of Muslim women is universally negative; they are certainly victims of the very same terrorist group that is bent on destroying things dear to the ‘liberal west’ (268).

Western media has an agenda, and that agenda is to accumulate views, money, and good ratings by any means necessary. That often entails the adoption of a certain angle, framing (highlighting and shaping) a story related to Muslims and Islam in such a way as to attract consumers and keep themselves in business (Green 2015: 235). When applied to Muslim women, this framing often portrays them as victims of violence or sexism, and at the hands of their culture’s angry and misogynist men (240).

The media obsession with portraying Muslim women as an oppressed group can be best seen via their influx of stories covering honor killings and honor violence in recent years. One example of this is was in the Netherlands, where two honor killings in 2002 and 2003 generated massive amounts of press coverage, and voices like that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali provided lots of coverage (Green 2015: 241). Hirsi Ali, an outspoken activist on topics pertaining to women's rights and the reformation of Islam, was quoted in an interview: "You know how it goes. Honor killing is a component of something bigger. It has to do with sexual morality within Islam, the desire to control women's sexuality. A cult of virginity reigns. A woman who doesn't keep to the rules, can be expelled, hit, murdered." (242) This is a prime example of the concept of framing. For the sake of comparison, in European countries one in three women suffer from sexual assault, and in the United States one in five women have been sexually assaulted (Green 2015: 242). Interestingly enough the media makes little to no attempt to justify or explain these atrocities using religion as a source of blame or explanation.

Women are an easy target for the western media to exploit, and, in utilizing the sympathetic reaction it generates, they draw in more consumers. By shaping the stories and situations of very particular Muslim women, the media are able to paint a picture that is far bleaker than reality.

### **Media as a Positive Feedback System**

Media is not the only factor in the American community at fault for these unjust headlines; on the contrary, the media would not continue to use them if they were not so highly effective. The only reason this system continues to persist is that it works. Americans seem to feed off of sensationalized topics that are bred from a small amount of truth, twisted just enough

to give the most emotion-inciting renditions of a story. Inarguably, the stories that sell are the stories that generate some sort of strong emotion, whether that be fear, outrage, anger, or any emotion that drives someone to continue to click, read, and buy. Today's media exploits the curious and trusting nature of humans to further their own products. Meanwhile, the masses consume information which portrays just pieces of a much bigger, more complex picture.

One driving force behind this system is politics - most influentially, presidential elections. During the years in which presidential candidates are fighting for the presidency, there is a statistically significant upswing in the rate of blatant Islamophobia in the United States (Bridge Initiative Team, 2015). Notable in the 2016 presidential campaign is a tactic that many conservative candidates have used in identifying Muslims as dangerous, essentially implementing fear as a catalyst for more votes. In a recent interview, Donald Trump was questioned on what action he would take to prevent ISIS attacks. His response was ultimately unsurprising: "You're going to have to watch and study the mosques. Because a lot of talk is going on at the mosques, and from what I've heard in the old days, meaning a while ago, we had great surveillance going on in and around mosques in New York City. . . . I'm not sure it's a fact but I heard that under the old regime we had tremendous surveillance going on in and around the mosques of New York City" (CBS News). In other words, he was praising a program of the NYPD called 'Muslim Mapping' - a ten-year program that targeted Muslims in their place of worship and resulted in not one fruitful lead or terrorism case. Trump is not alone in this practice, however, and the use of this rhetoric has been highly calculated and counted upon in recent political elections.

By instilling fear into the public and offering supposed 'solutions', presidential candidates admittedly appear more capable on an exterior level. Their rhetoric brings in an



increased number of voters, and while it remains effective candidates will certainly continue to employ the strategy. Islamophobia, greatly enhanced thanks to western politics and media coverage, is a self-perpetuating ideology that can only be discouraged through an abrupt change in political pandering or in public response. Indeed, without a complete remodeling of the ways westerners receive information about the Islamic community, there can be little change in the perception of Muslims as a group and of Muslim women in particular.

### **Precursors to the Exploitation of Women - Historical Context**

This misuse of sympathy for women is not a new trend. Historically, this has been a tactic implemented since before the early 1960s. During a talk given by Nimat Hafez Barazangi, the speaker noted that, although the stereotypes may shift from decade to decade, there has always been a negative shroud around Muslim woman who were always ostracized to be “the other” (Haddad 2007: 259). A typical audience member of Barazangi’s could be heard saying, ““Oh, yes, isn't it sad that those women are suffering under illiteracy (1960s), that they are subject to polygamy and divorce (1970s), that they are forced into seclusion (1980s), that they cannot drive (1990s), that they are stoned and beaten in the streets (2000)?”” (259) It seems that, even through the passage of time, Muslim women face the same struggle. It may be a different time, and it may be a newly propagated issue, but the outcome is the same: a singular image in mainstream media of the oppression of Muslim women. Looking back to colonial ages, scholars believe that the colonial rulers focused on the veil of Muslim women - but not out of concern for gender equality or the liberation of women (257). Instead, this was an opportunity to provide justification for occupying their lands and obtaining their resources, while simultaneously demeaning them (257).

Upon understanding the longevity of these media (mal)practices, it is beginning to become apparent that they are likely in place because they are consistently effective, even though the information currently being spoon-fed to Americans via mass media is not factually or statistically accurate. What about Muslim women is so appealing to news sources that it would entice them to ignore the fact that the stories they share do not represent a complete picture of the real world?

### **Building a Multilateral View of Muslim Women**

Media bias is an epidemic that sweeps across not only the United States but through the European continent as well. But where and how do we initiate attempts to reform such an environment that systematically stereotypes an entire population as radicals? This task is not an easy one to undertake, and there is not one singular way to begin to break down these notions, but there are a few areas in which change can best commence. First and very importantly, there must be an acknowledgement of its existence and the effect it has on opinions in the public sphere. By recognizing media bias, a personal change may occur (albeit beginning at a slow pace) that eventually allows societal change to follow. This is a change that will have to start within the media, as it is both the source and propagation of the issue.

For example, I previously mentioned the media's sensationalism of honor killings, and of the highly biased and misrepresentative nature of its documentation. Media sources must be held responsible for the ways in which they present their content, because a lie of omission is still, of course, a lie. In this case it is clear the media felt that documenting the whole truth would be less interesting, but it is imperative that they do so as the public expects and deserves just that: the truth. In order to cover this information in a multilateral fashion, it would be necessary to provide viewers with the whole, contextually accurate situation. These honor killings do not happen to

'most' Muslim women; in fact they are inflicted upon very few individuals and are relatively rare. When they are some of the only practices widely cited, they can seem much more common in nature and therefore more available to the minds of newsreaders.

At this point the media holds too much power over the information that is fed to the public, and its ability to frame the information it releases allows it to determine how this information is perceived. The only people who can take this power away are the audience members themselves; the more individuals that begin to hold these networks accountable, the less they will realistically get away with. Freedom of speech is a constitutionally granted right, and in the same way the public should be granted at the very least truthful information from sources who claim to be spreading accurate and responsibly sourced information across the globe.

There is great value in the ever-increasing globalization of modern times. There now exist forums in which individuals feel connected to one another, even though they are usually across the globe from one another. This interconnectedness allows for a more cohesive and interconnected global society, but naturally issues begin to arise when one group is marginalized by the rest and the opinion regarding a whole group becomes one of distrust and distaste. This marginalization stems from the failure of many media powerhouses, which now provide far more than just the evening news; they provide a basis upon which many people build their perceptions of the rest of the globe, sometimes through inaccurate reporting. While an increase in coverage allows a person to become more globally aware in the comfort of their kitchen, it can also negatively affect their views on unfamiliar and non-localized groups.

## **The Imperative Nature of Awareness and Looking to Next Generations**

Why is it so imperative to be aware of media bias regarding Muslim women? It all comes back to being informed and, through becoming informed, changing the dialogue. However, a change in dialogue will not occur spontaneously. In viewing any historical movement, it may be predicted that an alteration in popular western culture could easily take generations. Due to the long-term nature of this project, it is imperative that it start immediately. In order for this to be possible, the root of the issue must be accurately determined. The root of this issue is clearly a strong media bias that feeds off of the fear that has been instilled within the American and European people, and the sensationalism that inevitably ensues. The lack of initiative taken by the consumers of this mass media in the analysis of the information they are given only serves to perpetuate the system further. Until American and European societies begin to analyze and question what they are presented with, this system will continue to overrun the media.

Ultimately, Americans and Europeans need to begin to practice the things they so often preach. The United States prides itself on being a nation of equality, and yet systematically portrays one specific group as less than or 'other' to the rest of society. Europe, a continent of over fifty countries, prides itself in its diversity in other situations - why should the issue of Muslim women be different? In educating ourselves, we become more able to distinguish between truth and sensationalism. By gaining this ability we have an opportunity to share our knowledge with the next generation. This opportunity is incredibly valuable as it is what will begin to create true societal change. With this change will come a greater understanding of the diversity the beautiful planet contains, and the children of the future will have the chance to grow up in an open-minded and accepting environment.

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