

Arab media: To lead or to follow?

Nadia Al-Sakkaf, editor in chief of the Yemen Times, wonders why her newspaper was the only one in Yemen to take up the case of Nujood Ali, the 10-year-old girl who fought her way out of a marriage to a man more than three times her age, until it became a huge story in the Western media.

By NADIA AL-SAKKAF, Special to MENASSAT

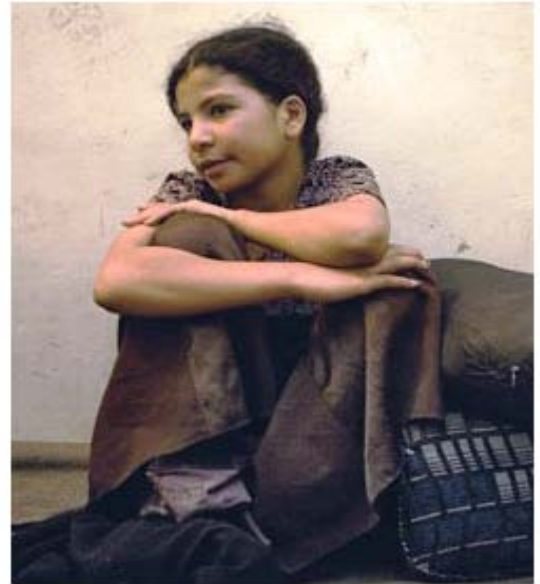
A full-page report in Al-Thawra, the leading official newspaper in Yemen, was dedicated to the story of Nujood Ali, the ten-year-old girl who fought her way to freedom from an early marriage. The report talked about her receiving the Women Of The Year 2008 Award from Glamour Magazine in the USA together with her lawyer Shatha Naser, who helped her with the divorce.

However, the story was not about how delightful it is to be recognized by international media, or how the girl and her lawyer are Yemeni heroes fighting injustice. The article was direct slandering of the lawyer, accusing her of taking advantage of Nujood's story and "showing our dirty laundry to the world."

Al Thawra and many other Yemeni newspapers had not paid attention to the issue of early marriage before, and Nujood was not on their editorial agenda until she became an international figure. Only then did this case catch their attention, and then mostly in a negative way. The first and only media that raised Nujood's plight, and the other two girls who shared her fate, were the child rights website Seyaj, and the English-language newspaper Yemen Times, of which I am the editor in chief. The rest of the local media either turned a deaf ear or took interest only when they read about it on the BBC website.

The point is not about what the international media is doing with our local stories. It is what we are doing with them. To what extent are Yemeni journalists and Arab journalists in general aware of their communities and sensitive to their local issues in a constructive way? And should we devote our attention to what interests the international media and simply work as a copycat? Or should we be the ones to create the news agenda and highlight what we think is important for us as Arabs and lead the world in the coverage of our region?

Another example of how international media is indirectly manipulating the headlines of local media is the story of a Yemeni businessman's son who was accused of killing a Norwegian girl before fleeing London. The story made international headlines and newspapers sent their reporters all the way to Yemen to investigate the story of the fleeing suspect. Local media chewed on the story for several days just because it came up on Google News.



In fact, many Arab journalists are complaining that our countries only make headlines in western media when it is about negative publicity. However, they forget that we all do the same with our local media when we say: "It is only news if it is bad news."

Nujood was not the first girl who got married at such a young age, but she was the first to take her case to court and demand to be divorced. Perhaps her action was an indirect threat to the Yemeni traditions, where early marriage is not seen as anything outrageous (although nine- and ten-year-old spouses do trigger a lot of popular dismay.) Nujood encouraged two other girls whom she never met to do the same, and with the help of the same lawyer. Now there is heated debate in Yemen about specifying a minimum age for marriage and whether it would be Islamic or not to do so.

Our little hero has been interviewed by many international media to the extent that it has become embarrassing for our local media not to deal with her issue. It has also become clear for women's rights movements that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to demand amendments to the civil status law in order to guarantee that similar stories do not happen again.

For some, especially for the conservative religious people, the international attention for Nujood's case has had the opposite effect. They now consider the demand for a minimum marriage age as yet another attempt by the West to uproot our society and install "wicked blasphemous practices."

Our friend at the Thawra newspaper, for example, did not find it amusing when a female lawyer took the ten-year-old girl to New York to be awarded and meet with Hilary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice. Although he is entitled to his point of view, he could have claimed the issue with more authority if he had taken some time to research and understand the problem, and then perhaps adopted it as a journalistic mission for his newspaper.

The problem is that Arab media have a very short memory. We become hyper in a second, scribble a few heated words and the next minute forget about the issue completely. The concepts of campaign journalism or citizen journalism do not exist. We are moved by politics and events, and we are bought and sold easily, except for a few real journalists who believe in their profession.

Perhaps this is a good time to reflect on what we are doing as Arab journalists and realize to what extent we are being faithful to our readers. Just because it makes international headlines, it does not mean that it should be our first concern. Let us be true to ourselves and think, for example, to what extent did the international financial crisis affect our local economies? In countries with no stock exchange or credit cards, to what extent did we really suffer? Why are we making the crisis seem like the end of our world and conveying to our readers that there is an economic disaster heading our way? If we didn't know it yet, we are already living in one for totally different reasons. Why not write about those different reasons for a change, and set the news agenda for the rest of the world instead of merely following?

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