

Beyond the Glass Ceiling: Women in Journalism



Lauren Maffeo, an MSc student in Gender, Media, and Culture at the LSE Gender Institute recounts a lecture delivered Zeina Awad on women in the newsworld, particularly as reporters. Maffeo endorses Awad's view that women are still heavily discriminated against in the news industry though steps towards equality are being taken.

It has been said that the two aspects of life most often lied about are sex and money—a stereotype that **Zeina Awad**, co-host of Al Jazeera English's flagship American current affairs programme, *Fault Lines*, knows all too well. Speaking at the LSE March 8 to coincide with the London launch of "*No Woman's Land – On the Frontlines with Female Reporters*," a collection of articles written by 40 female media members to which Awad has contributed, she offered her take on covering the United States for a global news outlet—one that included reflection on the elite's resistance to speaking about money, an acknowledgement that the United States is more than the bright lights of New York City, and the evolving role of women in media.

With an emphasis on global news that follows a more public service model, Awad's work with *Fault Lines* has garnered mixed reactions from the public that she covers. She still hears producers on the phone occasionally saying, "No, it's...Al...Jazeera...not Al Qaeda." Her work on a forthcoming documentary about the now infamous 1 percent—and the unwillingness of America's elite to discuss their incomes—prompted her to ask the question of why the connection between wealth and power is often eschewed, noting that "yet it is a society where people so easily talk about emotional things." Awad's work on another forthcoming project focuses on potential civil rights infringements resulting from changes in voting processes in some states that discriminate against African-Americans that now require voters to show a state-issued picture ID. (Awad mentioned that 22% of African-Americans in Tennessee don't have photo IDs, preventing them from exercising their right to vote).

Awad connected this story to what she believes is America's reaction to the election of the nation's first African-American president. She looks forward to covering the U.S. election this year and hopes that Al Jazeera will be a news source to which Americans will turn for unbiased information. "I think it's going to be a race between Romney and Obama, and that is going to be the real meat of the Republican party," Awad explained. "I think there's been an awareness in the U.S. that we're just journalists trying to cover stories...In general, it is the *de facto* station that people in power turn to."

"A lot of times, people are surprised that their story matters enough to be covered by an international news outlet," she added. "It creates an interesting dynamic."

Having honed her skills at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and as a producer at the BBC before joining Al Jazeera, Awad—who received her Master's in Comparative Politics from the LSE—concluded on an optimistic note regarding the current role of women in news. Her work in "*No Woman's Land*" examines the correlation between societal sexualisation of women and how it applies to journalism. While acknowledging women's objectification as an ongoing problem, specifically citing worries that come with aging as a woman onscreen, she also argued that as someone who is accustomed to seeing women in positions of power within news, the profession "has been feminised" in a way previously thought impossible. "Human beings are complicated, and [discrimination] is part of that," she said. "But I think any changes in the [news] industry positively impacts men and women alike, and we have made much progress."



As someone who aims to follow in Awad's professional footsteps following the completion of my MSc in Gender, Media and Culture, the various arguments of academic work discussing the negative discourse surrounding women as the subjects and auditors of news played in my head throughout her talk. Statistics on the role of women in news reveal a trying path for aspiring anchors. According to Jennifer Siebel Newsom's documentary *Miss Representation*, **women and girls are the subject of less than 20 percent of all news stories**, and as of 2003, **women comprised 15 percent of top executives in the United States and 12 percent of board members amongst Fortune 500 communications companies**. There is, across the board, a lack of women in positions of executive authority—a fact that extends to the absence of women not only in front of the camera, but behind the scenes as well.

But Awad's optimism is important to consider alongside these statistics. The 2009 White House Project Report: Benchmarking Women's Leadership found that despite these low numbers, public comfort with female leaders has reached a fortunate high. 96% of those surveyed are comfortable with a woman as the head of a newspaper, and 95% as the head of a major film/entertainment studio. Similarly, a 2008 Pew Research Center study found that the public rated **women above men in five of the right character traits they value in leaders (honesty, intelligence, creativity, outgoingness, and compassion)**. These figures reveal a vast discrepancy between public support of women in positions of power and the numbers of women who occupy these positions, suggesting not an absence of female ability or public support, but rather a lack of widespread knowledge regarding these unequal numbers. If the public is unaware of the progress that must be made, no further action can be taken.

In the era of Oprah and the number of prominent female faces in news ranging from Diane Sawyer to Lara Logan, it is easy to forget the progress that still needs to be made, and encouraging women to occupy a higher number of executive positions involves work beyond the scope of this post. It begins with women like Awad sharing their professional experiences and allowing those who wish to follow in her footsteps to visualise themselves in her position. If women cannot be what they cannot see, then the first step is to pull back the curtain and encourage women in positions of power to share their experiences, as well as media outlets to highlight their accomplishments. If the public support for female leaders exists, the time to make good on it is long overdue.

Lauren Maffeo is a postgraduate student on the Gender, Media and Culture course at LSE and an intern for LSE's Media Policy Project. This blog post was initially published on LSE's POLIS Director's Blog, and her photograph, "The Dreaming Tree," is currently on display in the Atrium Gallery as part of LSE's Photo Prize Exhibition through 13 April.

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