

**"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH
PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"**

Panel 4: Media Changing Identities: Focus on Gender and Generation

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"Women as Representations of Class and Modernity:

Gendered Public Visibility on National TV in the United Arab Emirates"

Abstract

This paper explores the framing of Emirati women in the public domain by analysing the role models circulated via state television in the United Arab Emirates. The analysis of gendered public visibility will show how class-distinctions within Emirati society are reinforced by the media.

Since its beginning in the 1970s, the government controlled media have strongly relied on a constructed image of an ideal Emirati citizen to promote the country's identity through visual media. The rulers in particular are represented as role models for the citizens. Accordingly, news presenters on national television are encouraged to follow the Sheikhs in mannerisms and attire whenever they appear on screen. Thus, their media appearances become part of the public image of the country's values and traditions. Unlike their male colleagues, however, female reporters are not provided with a female equivalent to the Sheikhs. Unlike the male rulers, female members of the ruling families remain shielded from the public eye. This selected display of gendered public visibility leads to disputes about the appropriateness of Emirati women appearing on screen.

Using an anthropological approach, this paper draws from interviews conducted with female Emirati TV presenters between 2010 and 2012. Their narratives illustrate how the government encourages women to partake in the public domain as symbols of the nation's modernity. Yet the absence of "first ladies" from the public simultaneously contradicts the supposed support of women in all spaces of public life. My paper uses the experiences of the news presenters to unravel the unspoken rules of gendered public appearance in the media. I will argue that the selected public visibility ultimately enforces existing class-distinctions in Emirati society, making the women symbolic embodiments of the hierarchical society. Whilst the TV presenters feel supported and liberated by their appearances in the national media, the absence of women from the public sphere is simultaneously enforced. By taking on the created role of TV personality, the female presenters become part of a constructed 'mass' carefully set apart from the ruling elite who draws its legitimacy from a purity of ethnic lineage. The voices of TV presenters illustrate that their compliance with the established structure enforces a national discourse which links between purity as a value and an ethnic Bedouin heritage.