

The Portrayal of Women as a Social Construction of Reality in the Press of Mediterranean Countries

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Based on two pieces of research carried out at the Autonomous University of Barcelona's Prospective and Research Laboratory in Communication, Culture and Cooperation (LAPREC), this article analyses how the press in the Mediterranean region, based on the social construction of the reality presented in its reporting, helps establish favourable states of opinion about issues related to women. Both research projects focus on the press in Algeria, Egypt, France, Italy, Morocco, Spain, Syria, Tunisia and the United Kingdom. The analysis of the contents shows the transformations and variations in the sample selected in 2009 and 2013 in relation to the treatment of the subject of women. According to what has been observed, women as actors in public life have little presence in the thematic agendas of the press in the Mediterranean region, so the media should address and highlight the gender objectives and recommendations proposed by international organisations.

Introduction

It is interesting to consider how, based on the social construction of the reality presented in its reporting, the press in the Mediterranean region helps to establish favourable states of opinion on issues related to women.

We will consider the results of two pieces of research carried out at the Autonomous University of Barcelona's Prospective and Research Laboratory in Communication, Culture and Cooperation (LAPREC), entitled "La construcción social del espacio euromediterráneo en los medios de comunicación. La

información en prensa y televisión" [The social construction of the Euro-Mediterranean space in the media. The information in press and television] (Ref: SGR2017-0005), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, and "La construcción social del espacio intermediterráneo y sus correlaciones en la agenda temática de los medios de comunicación. La información en prensa y televisión" [The social construction of the inter-Mediterranean space and its correlations in the thematic agenda of the media. The information in press and television] (Ref: CSO2008-01579/SOCI), funded by the

Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. The sample was selected over two weeks from 9 to 22 March 2009 and from 13 to 26 May 2013.

Both research projects focus on the press in Algeria, Egypt, France, Italy, Morocco, Spain, Syria, Tunisia and the United Kingdom. Based on analysis of the contents, we can examine whether in the sample selected during the periods studied there have been any transformations and variations in how the topic of women is approached. Thus, we will be able to identify possible correlations and changes in the thematic agendas of the media studied in relation to this issue.

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For the list of topics that should be applied to the sample selected, we have followed the objectives and recommendations of the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean, the European Union Neighbourhood Policy and the proposals of the Report of the High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations. Thus, the topics examined were: policy and legislation; peace and security; Euro-Mediterranean integration (first multilateral and then bilateral relations); economy and finance; human rights; migration; and culture, gender, education, religion, and youth, the latter added in 2013. In 2009, we also considered human and social development issues and, in 2013, the Millennium Development Goals. Similarly, we have verified the coherence of this social construction of reality with the objectives and recommendations of these agencies.

We will focus on setting out the research process followed to determine if the media

studied contributes to these objectives from a gender perspective. We know that the media reports events linked to the public agenda because “if the mass media contributes to the construction of reality and presents it in the public communication space, the recipients of that discourse also perceive and construct a reality, either the one presented by the media or the individual according to their knowledge of the world, values, beliefs, opinions...” (Velázquez, 1992: 22). Therefore, the media’s selection and treatment of the topics are fundamental in creating the imaginaries constructed in the receivers of these messages.

Taking this approach, the presence of women in the thematic agendas of the press in the Mediterranean region is mainly linked to aspects such as their integration in economic and political life, followed by those related to violence, abuse, oppression or submission. Other references associated with gender are discrimination and exclusion, and policies of equality and promotion of equality. We will return to this later.

The Newspapers under Study

The newspapers selected, two per country, fall into the categories of conservative or liberal. These newspapers were: *El Watan* and *El Khabar* (Algeria); *Al-Ahram* and *Al Dostur* (Egypt); *El País* and *ABC* (Spain); *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* (France); *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera* (Italy); *Al Massae* and *As Sabah* (Morocco); *Akhbar* and *Al-Chourouk* (Tunisia); *Al-Thawra* and *Al-Watan* (Syria), and *The Times* and *The Guardian* (United Kingdom).

It is important to note two issues. The first concerns the newspapers of Syria and Tunisia. The sample selected in 2009 featured the newspapers *Al-Thawra* and *Al-Watan* from

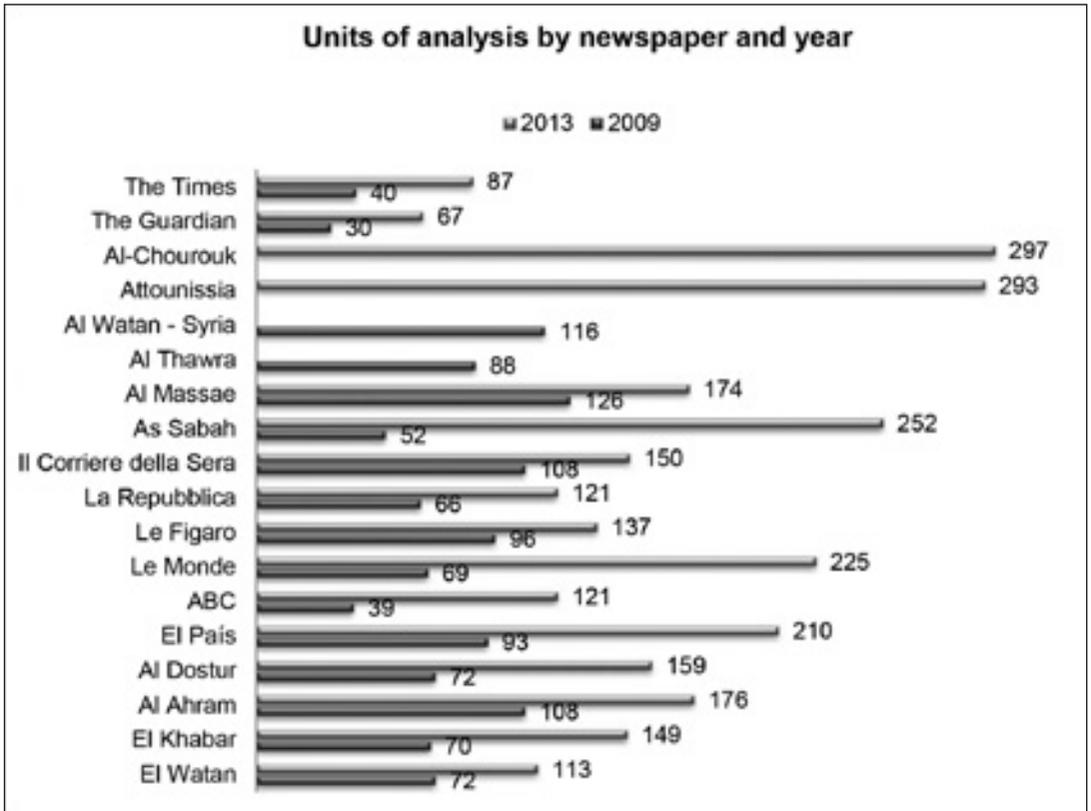
Syria, which we could not include in the 2013 sample. The research team then decided to select the newspapers *Akhbar* and *Al-Chourouk* from Tunisia.

The second issue concerns the inclusion of *The Times* and *The Guardian* in a research on the media of the Mediterranean region and the reason for that decision. In previous research we had detected that, for the British

media, the presence of the Maghreb countries was not significant in general or in terms of its thematic agenda, whereas the Mashreq countries were. This led us to decide to include them and to check if there was any change in these agendas.

The next graph illustrates the presence of reports by newspaper and year during the period analysed.

Graph 1



It is important now to describe the presence of the main topics in the media under study during the period selected, as we mentioned in the introduction to this article. Thus:

Table 1

Topic by year		
Topic	2009	2013
Inter-Mediterranean integration. Multilateral relations	420	651
Inter-Mediterranean integration. Bilateral relations	432	776
Policy and legislation	600	1176
Peace and security	492	970
Migration	124	187
Economy and finance	318	616
Human rights	332	865
Human and social development	355	
Millennium Development Goals		57
Education	91	57
Gender	61	122
Culture	266	382
Religion	138	235
Youth		159

These results very visibly illustrate the significance of the “gender” variable for the press of Mediterranean countries when they select their topics. In the 2009 sample it occupies last place and, in 2013, penultimate place, after “education”. The “youth” variable was only included as a specific value in the 2013 analysis.

Thematic Agenda, Women and Press in Mediterranean Countries

Decision-making by the media to establish the thematic agenda is related to the presence or absence of certain topics rather than others and, consequently, their relevance. If we focus on the aim of this article, in relation to the

topics mentioned above, in 2009, the presence and percentage of the “gender” variable was 61 cases, that is, 4.9% compared to the 1,254 records of the total sample. In 2013, of the 2,751 records of the total sample, it appeared in 122 cases, representing 4.46%. The presence of “gender” by newspaper and year is shown in the following table, and reflects the number of news items selected in the period analysed:

Table 2

Presence of gender by newspaper and year		
Newspaper	2009	2013
El Watan	8	1
El Khabar	2	5
Al Ahram	6	5
Al Dostur	4	13
El País	5	21
ABC	0	7
Le Monde	5	1
Le Figaro	4	1
La Repubblica	3	9
Il Corriere della Sera	10	6
As Sabah	4	8
Al Massae	8	12
Al Thawra	1	
Al Watan - Syria	1	
Attounissia	0	24
Al-Chourouk	0	2
The Guardian	0	4
The Times	0	3
Total records	61	122

We believe that the case figures given in this table do not require further explanation as results speak for themselves. The records of topics of the general sample presented in Table 1 can be compared with the results that appear in Table 3 and that correspond to the topics in

which the “gender” variable has been included in the media studied.

Table 3

Topics and gender		
Topics	2009	2013
Inter-Mediterranean integration. Multilateral relations	21	30
Inter-Mediterranean integration. Bilateral relations	19	29
Policy and legislation	21	38
Peace and security	16	19
Human rights	33	47
Migration	8	15
Economy and finance	10	9
Education	9	1
Culture	17	33
Youth		17
Religion	4	9

Another important element will be the hierarchy followed by the media analysed during this period, and which affects the importance given to the topic that concerns us. We refer to those values related to the location of the unit of analysis in the newspaper, whether on the front cover, back cover, as a front cover story or, simply, not prominent. In 2009, the number of prominent stories on the cover was 6; on the back cover, 2; not prominent, 53. In 2013 we found 7 on the front cover; 3 on the back cover; 108 not prominent. To this we must add the value “cover story”, which responds to the news on the front page, and for which 4 cases were recorded.

Another key element related to hierarchy is associated with the section in which the media includes news in general, so it is interesting to observe in which section “gender” appears in the newspapers studied during this period.

In the 2009 sample, the Society section has the highest number of records, a total of 26, followed at some distance by the International section, with 13 records. In the 2013 sample, the sections International, with 40 records, Society, with 20, and Culture, with 19, have the highest number of cases. The absence of Education in 2009 and a single record in 2013 is noticeable, as is the Economy section, with 0 records in 2009 and 2 in 2013. The same happens with the Science and Technology section, which, in the two time periods analysed, presents 0 cases. In our opinion, these structural and formal aspects of the media, related with decision-making on the selection and hierarchy of the news stories we have referred to, indicate that “gender”, linked to professional activity, is irrelevant if we also take into account that in the four years between each observation it is almost unchanged.

Another key element related to hierarchy is associated with the section in which the media includes news in general, so it is interesting to observe in which section “gender” appears in the newspapers studied during this period

We have noticed that in the Economy section there are very few records for the “gender” variable. This led us to cross-check it with Economy and Finance, and we found that there are 8 records for 2009, of which 4 are related to “poverty and/or economic inequalities”, 1 to “discrimination”, 1 to “oppression/submission/violence and abuse” and 1 to “integration in socioeconomic life”. For “economic crisis” we find 1 record related to “integration in socioeconomic life”; and 3 in “others”: 1 for “integration in socioeconomic life” and 2 in “others”.

With respect to 2013, of the 9 records detected, 4 are related to “oppression/submission/violence and abuse”, of which 1 is linked to “sustainable development”, 1 to “foreign investments/investment promotion” and 2

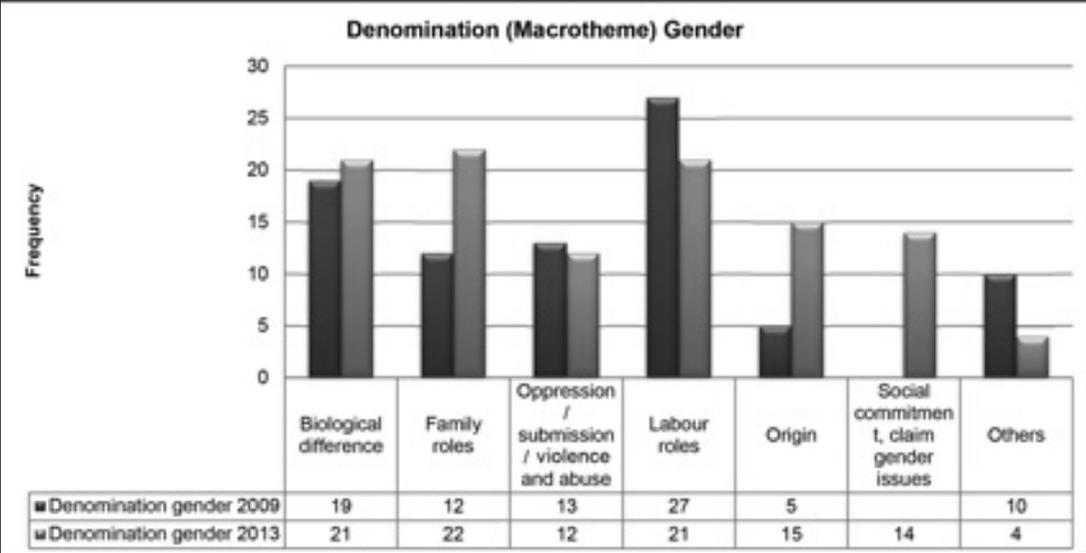
to “business/industrial/commercial cooperation”. Finally, with the value “women’s rights”, 1 record is associated with “business/industrial/commercial cooperation”. For the value “other” we find 2 records, one related to “integration in socioeconomic life” and another with “women’s rights”.

We conclude that, for the media analysed, the 8 records of 2009 and the 9 of 2013, the Economy section was not the most appropriate location for these stories and their contextualisation.

And When the Topic of Women Is Selected, How Is It Portrayed?

The question now arises as to the denomination or macrotheme with which “gender” is associated. We found that this portrayal is linked to “labour roles”, in 48 cases; “biological difference”, in 40 cases; “family roles”, in 34 cases; “oppression/submission/violence and abuse”, in 25 cases; “origin”, in 20 cases; “others”, in 14 cases; and “social commitment, claim gender issues”, in 14 cases only in the 2013 records. The following graph illustrates this.

Graph 2



There is a curious detail in these results: the 48 records that correspond to the value “labour roles”, which, as we have already indicated, are not linked to the Economy section but are found in the Society, International, National, Culture or Entertainment sections.¹

If the media reports what happened in a given society and highlights in its thematic agenda what it considers most relevant, the results presented indicate that in our societies there is still much to be done, despite the objectives and recommendations of the supranational agencies

1. An interesting work on this topic in our opinion was carried out by Rovetto and Simelio (2012), which, although focused on the Spanish press, provides data that complements our arguments.



Anonymous Women (Nassima Baziz).

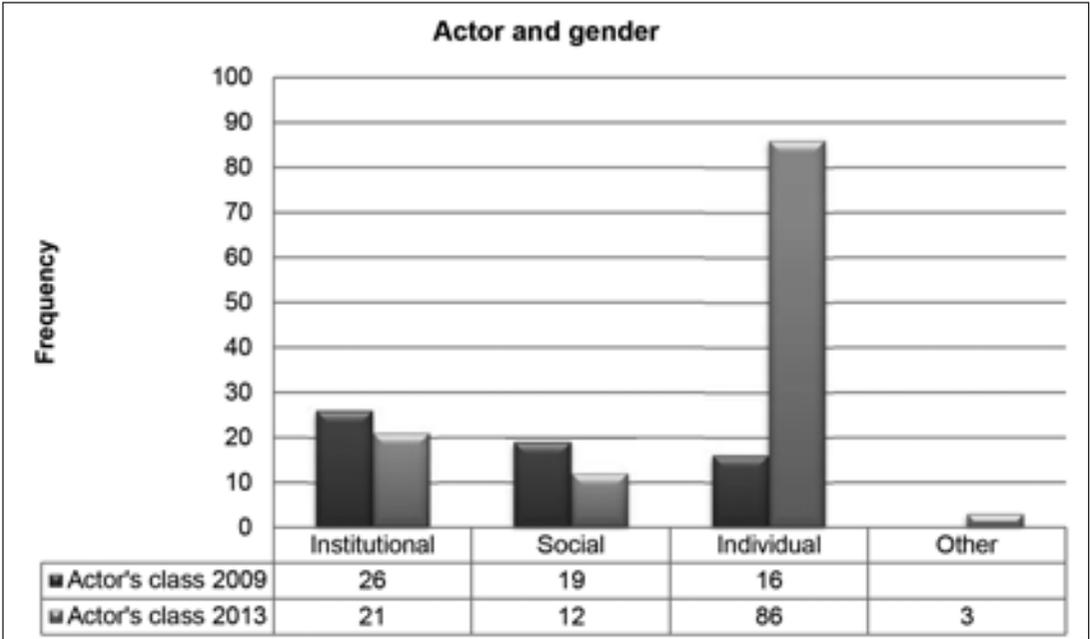
mentioned above, focused both on promoting the active participation of women in economic life and on strengthening the role of women in society, and on the development of mechanisms for monitoring equality in order to analyse situations of inequality and support associations or networks for the promotion of girl's education and projects to improve the general situation of women. These portrayals by the media analysed reflect women's situation in society. We agree with Rovetto and Simelio (2012) that different studies carried out on women and media "have shown that the portrayal of women in news, and even more through advertising, remains anchored in traditional roles, without reflecting the current reality of women who actively contribute to the process of society's development" (Rovetto and Simelio, 2012: 31). In our opinion,

this issue does not depend only on the media but involves the whole of society.

Who Are the Protagonists of the News?

When we talk about gender, the actor highlighted by the media outlet as the protagonist of the news story is another category. Normally, in the topics related to the Politics, Economy and Finance or Education sections, the most important actors in the unit of analysis are mainly the institutional ones. Here we see that the frequency with which institutional and social actors appear is very similar in the years examined. However, and this is a very odd fact, in 2013, the individual very surprisingly stands out in comparison to other classes of actor. There is a considerable change from one sample to another.

Graph 3



We think it interesting to note the relations with which the value “individual” is associated in the case of “gender”. Table 4 reflects this.

Table 4

Actor individual and gender		
Topic	2009	2013
Discrimination and/or exclusion	1	11
Oppression/submission/violence and abuse	10	22
Integration in political life	1	7
Integration in socioeconomic life	2	26
Policies for equality/Promotion of equality		5
Activism		1
Recognition female figure (personal, professional, artistic...)		3
Women's rights		5
Prostitution		3
Others	2	1

In both time periods, the association “oppression/submission/violence and abuse” stands out, with a frequency of 32 cases, and 12 for “discrimination and/or exclusion”. In any case, we see a change in the 2013 sample, in which “integration in socioeconomic life” has a frequency of 26 cases, to which must be added the values of “activism”, “women’s rights” and “recognition female figure (personal, professional, artistic...)”, which we believe indicates that the media is starting to become aware of these aspects and highlights the role of women in the news.

Gender, Migration and Human Rights

Gender and Migration

We feel it appropriate to select some relations between gender and other topics such as migration or human rights. The study published

by Carniel, Ortega and Velázquez (2018) on migration in the Mediterranean media reaches the conclusion that professionals in this media, rather than favouring the processes of dialogue, cooperation and regional integration in the Mediterranean, make them more difficult, as normally the most frequent associations with migration are crime, security and legislation. Moreover, references to migration are identified as a source of problems and conflicts or linked with criminal acts.

In the 2009 sample, the total number of records for “migration” was 124, of which 8 were associated with “gender”. For the 2013 sample, the total number of cases for “migration” was 187, of which 15 corresponded to “gender”.

The values with which “gender” and “migration” are associated in the 2009 sample are “oppression/submission/violence and abuse” and, in the case of the 15 records of 2013, the values are associated with “crime”, “oppression/submission/violence and abuse” and “discrimination and/or exclusion”.

If the media portrayals are linked to how the media, through its activity, helped to present current events, the actors involved and the topics addressed and their transformation into news, and if this allows us to identify the level of classification/stereotypes, then, in this case, the symbolic construction created leads to a negative interpretation of the relationship between gender and migration.

Gender and Human Rights

When we cross reference “gender” and “human rights”, we find 332 cases of the latter in the 2009 sample, of which 33 records correspond to “gender”. In the 2013 sample, of the 865 cases for the variable “human rights”, the frequency of “gender” is 47 records. Once again, this reveals the lack of a relationship between these two topics, which is another example of the media’s low interest in gender issues.

In the newspapers studied as a whole, and within the category of “human rights”, from the values associated with “gender” we draw attention to those related to “infringement/violation”. Of these, 35 cases correspond to the value “oppression/submission/violence and abuse” and 8 to “discrimination and/or exclusion”. Similarly, with 4 cases each, the value “promotion and protection” appears.

These results suggest that in the media there is a preoccupation with news items linked to “infringement/violation” of human rights in relation to the “oppression/submission/violence and abuse” exercised over “gender”

It is important to note that in the value of “integration in socioeconomic life” of women there are 10 records associated with “promotion and protection”, like the 4 cases recorded in the values “women’s rights” and “policies for equality/promotion of equality”.

These results suggest that in the media there is a preoccupation with news items linked to “infringement/violation” of human rights in relation to the “oppression/submission/violence and abuse” exercised over “gender”, given that most records are associated with these values, so it could be concluded that these news stories seek to denounce this situation. We also consider it interesting that there are cases in which there is a “promotion and protection” in terms of women’s “integration in socioeconomic life”, which makes us hopeful about these aspects related with “gender”.

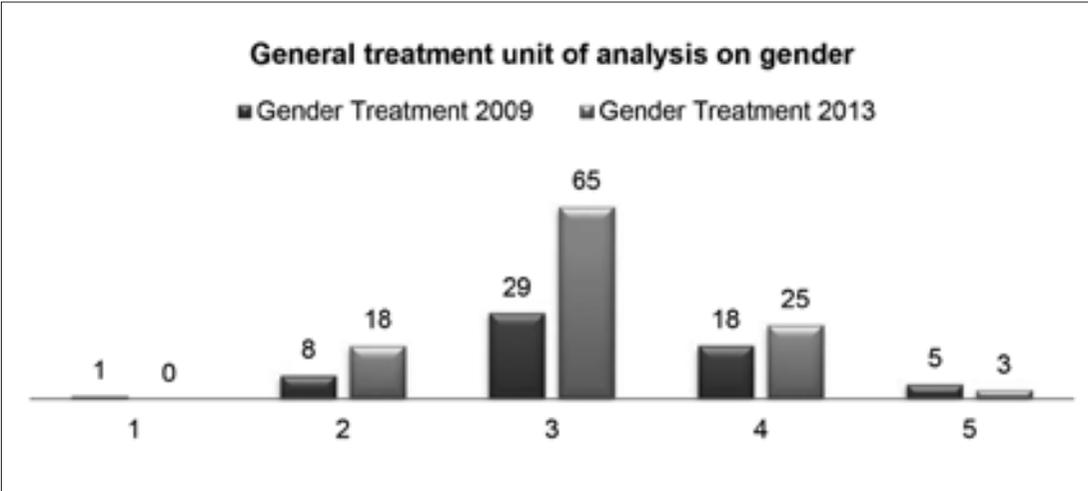
The General Treatment of the Unit of Analysis on Gender

In this section we describe, by way of conclusion, the general treatment by the media of

the topic of gender. For this, we refer to the standards of journalism; in other words, the rules of journalism. We have applied a scale

with values ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 is very poor treatment and 5 excellent. Let's look at the results:

Graph 4



We end with these results that, in one way or another, suggest that, when responding to the formal structure of journalism, the media is very careful about how it covers this news.

In Conclusion

In view of the foregoing, women as actors in public life have very little presence in the thematic agendas of the press in the Mediterranean region. When selecting the topics to report on and the hierarchy established, the media should pay more attention to the objectives and recommendations proposed by the supranational agencies we have mentioned and promote them.

It would be interesting to continue to examine the same newspapers and check for possible

changes that may have occurred in terms of the topics addressed in this research and, in particular, the topic of gender.

In view of the foregoing, women as actors in public life have very little presence in the thematic agendas of the press in the Mediterranean region

We believe that since 2017, and since the mobilisations of 8 March in different parts of the world and the feminist strike that accompanied them, the media has been updating its production routines and incorporating greater visibility of the topics related to women in its thematic agendas, especially as actors in the public space, in order to commit to a professional and journalistic culture suited to the 21st century.

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