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Media Representations of the Woman Criminal: A Theoretical-Analytical Perspective

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Abstract:

This study explores social representations in the media as symbolic mechanisms that construct meaning and shape collective awareness. It examines how woman criminality is portrayed across media platforms, revealing how crime and offenders are framed through cultural and moral lenses.

Grounded in Moscovici's theory of social representations, the research adopts a socio-media analytical approach that combines insights from sociology, media studies, and gender theory to trace how criminal acts are transformed into symbolic images influencing public opinion.

The study is structured around three main axes: (1) the media production of representations; (2) the portrayal of women offenders through familial, moral, and social roles; and (3) the implications of these portrayals on public perception, legislation, and women's social and cultural status. It also considers the impact of digital media, highlighting how online platforms reshape symbolic meanings and public perceptions of woman criminality.

Findings reveal that media coverage often reinforces stereotypical images that subject women to intensified moral judgment and social exclusion. The study calls for a critical re-examination of how crime and womanhood are represented in media in order to foster equality and social justice.

Keywords:

Social Representations - woman Criminal - Media Representation - Public Awareness - Stereotypes - Moral Panic - Interdisciplinarity.

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Introduction:

It is not easy for human societies, in general, to accept the sight of a woman behind bars for committing a crime—just like a man. Symbolically and culturally, women are expected to remain distant from the realm of violence and criminality throughout history. Yet the truth is that a woman is neither an angel nor a demon, as some ancient cultures once portrayed her—representations that continue, in one form or another, to shape the modern collective imaginary.

Crime is a complex social phenomenon that transcends legal definitions, revealing an intricate network of cultural, economic, and psychological factors. While male criminality has long been a focus of criminological and media research, woman criminality remains underexplored, often shrouded in stereotypes. The woman offender is not only viewed as a lawbreaker but also as a violator of femininity and moral expectations, making her image symbolically heavier than her act itself.

Within this framework, the media plays a crucial role in shaping meaning and public opinion. Coverage of woman crimes rarely stops at objective description; it creates mediated images that reproduce collective cultural representations of women. Between sensationalism and moral panic, such coverage established cultural norms regarding women's behavior. With the rise of digital media, these portrayals have gained new dimensions—where audience interaction, comments, and online sharing become part of the representational process itself.

In light of the profound transformations in the media landscape over the past two decades, social representations are no longer confined to traditional journalism but have expanded into digital platforms that allow direct public participation in meaning-making. Thus, understanding the image of the woman criminal today requires a broader, interdisciplinary perspective that bridges criminology, gender studies, and media research, and recognizes the digital sphere as a key site of cultural negotiation.

Research Problem:

The core problem addressed in this paper lies in understanding the mechanisms through which the image of the woman criminal is constructed in the media. The central research question may be formulated as follows:

How does the media reconstruct the image of the woman criminal, and how is this image related to prevailing social perceptions of women?

From this main question arise several sub-questions:

- What is the relationship between media representations and social consciousness?
- How do gender roles contribute to the shaping of this mediated image?
- To what extent do these representations reproduce—or challenge—stereotypical views of women?

To address these questions, the paper is structured around three main axes:

1. Media representations of crime within social consciousness.
2. Social roles and the mediated image of the woman criminal.
3. The reflections of these media representations on the perception of women in society.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To analyze how the image of the woman criminal is constructed in the media through a theoretical and analytical approach.
2. To highlight the role of cultural perceptions and social roles in shaping this mediated image.
3. To identify the mechanisms through which media discourse reproduces—or resists—stereotypical portrayals of women.
4. To discuss the impact of these media representations on social awareness and on the public image of women.

Preliminary Hypotheses:

Building upon the research problem, this study assumes the following:

The media does more than merely describe crimes committed by women; it reconstructs and disseminates social and cultural representations of womanhood.

The woman criminal is often portrayed as an exceptional case that violates collective expectations associated with femininity and social propriety.

Methodological Approach:

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical approach grounded in the sociology of media and communication. It relies on a theoretical reading of selected media texts and empirical examples that illustrate how woman criminality is represented in media contents. The analysis draws on the conceptual tools of social representation theory and interpretive content analysis to identify recurring symbolic patterns and value systems embedded in media coverage.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework:

Before addressing the analytical dimensions of the study, it is essential to define the key concepts that frame the discussion. This section introduces the main theoretical notions related to media and representation, the construction of social roles and images, and the sociological understanding of crime—all of which contribute to interpreting how the woman offender is portrayed in the media.

1. Media and the Representation of Crime

The media plays a central role in shaping the image of crime within the social imaginary. Its activity goes beyond the mere transmission of events; it actively contributes to the construction of this image by reframing it within narratives influenced by editorial orientations and political agendas. In doing so, the media decides what to highlight and what to omit.

Robert Reiner (1997, p.189) argues that the media plays an active role in constructing the discourse of crime—not only through coverage but also by amplifying certain types of crime—thus making it a key instrument for producing social and political meanings related to criminality.

Some researchers have pointed out that journalism, as one of the main branches of the media, does not simply report crime news but reformulates it within pre-established frameworks that emphasize dramatic and sensational aspects. This process contributes to the formation of stereotypical images of crime and criminals among audiences. For example, certain newspapers specializing in crime reporting tend to present criminal cases as thrilling events, to the extent that the image of the offender becomes intertwined with that of an adventurer or even a hero (Saleh, 2005, p.453).

In fact, the relationship between the media and crime falls under a broader intellectual debate that opposes two perspectives: those who argue that the media, including the press, helps prevent and uncover crimes, and those who believe that constant exposure to crime news and the detailed description of criminal methods may actually encourage such acts by providing offenders with broader criminal experience (Baqdouri, 2021, pp.319–320).

2. Social Roles and the Media Image of Women:

Research literature on social issues shows that women have long lived within restrictive social frameworks that confined their roles to the family and the private sphere. However, contemporary economic and political transformations have pushed women toward participation in the public sphere as full social actors. In this context, Fatima Mernissi (1991, p.47) discusses how women's traditional roles were limited to the domestic sphere before economic and political changes led to their emergence as active participants in public life.

Sylvia Walby (1990, p.20) similarly argues that patriarchal structures historically defined women's roles within the private domain, whereas socioeconomic and political developments have expanded their opportunities to engage in public life.

In media discourse, however, the representation of women remains largely tied to the body and to roles such as the victim, the culprit, or the witness. This dynamic contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes—or, in some cases, their contestation. Feminist scholars have noted that women's portrayals in media often fall into stereotypical patterns emphasizing traditional roles such as the mother, the wife, or the embodiment of beauty. Such portrayals reflect the persistence of patriarchal structures in shaping media discourse, despite certain attempts to deconstruct these representations. Nawal El Saadawi (1987, p.33) highlights that Arab media continues to reproduce these stereotypes, associating women primarily with domestic and emotional roles rather than presenting them as independent social agents.

Liesbet van Zoonen (1994, p.35) further demonstrates that Western media also reinforces the portrayal of women as bodies or emotional/familial figures. She adds that media discourse constitutes a field of struggle between the reproduction of such images and the critical efforts to challenge and transcend them.

3. The Concept of Crime in Sociological Thought:

From a legal perspective, crime is defined as “an act committed or omitted in violation of a public law commanding or forbidding it”—that is, any action or omission that the law criminalizes and assigns a penalty for (Blackstone, 1979, p.4).

However, sociologists have introduced a broader social dimension to the concept of crime. Some have defined it as a reaction that violates the collective conscience of society, representing a breach of social control norms established by the community—namely, its prevailing values, customs, and traditions—whether the transgression is individual or collective (Obeid, 1993, p.97).

Émile Durkheim (1988, trans. Qassem & Badawi, p.90) offered an institutional definition of crime, viewing it as a behavior subject to sanction because it constitutes a violation of the moral and emotional sentiments shared by society. For Durkheim, crime is not merely an individual deviation but a social phenomenon inherent to collective life. It serves a functional role in maintaining social cohesion by delineating the boundaries between what is permitted and what is prohibited. A given act becomes criminal, according to Durkheim, when it offends strong and well-defined collective feelings of conscience, thus calling for punishment because it disrupts the shared moral order of society.

Distinguishing Between Representation and Re-presentation:

It is essential to distinguish between the concepts of representation (*tamthīl*) and re-presentation or internalization (*tamatthul*). Representation refers to how the media presents and frames criminal events—constructing them through specific linguistic and visual codes—whereas *tamatthul* (re-presentation or appropriation) expresses how individuals and groups perceive, interpret, and internalize these mediated images within their social consciousness. Accordingly, the media engages in representation through processes such as selection, framing, and narrative construction, while re-presentation manifests in how audiences receive, decode, and reinterpret these mediated images in light of their cultural norms and moral frameworks.

This conceptual distinction enables the transition from abstract theoretical definitions to the analytical study of media representations of crime within social consciousness—a shift essential for understanding how mediated discourse shapes collective perceptions of deviance and morality.

Axis 1: Media Representations of Crime in Social Consciousness:

After distinguishing between the concepts of representation and social representation of crime, it becomes evident that the media's role goes far beyond presenting criminal acts as objective facts. It actively constructs symbolic images that shape social awareness of crime. Through specific mechanisms, the media produces meanings and mental images that become embedded in public consciousness, transforming into social representations that influence how individuals and groups perceive deviant behavior and its actors. Hence, studying media representations of crime within social consciousness is essential for understanding how the image of the woman criminal is framed in media discourse.

1.1 Social Representations: From Collective Awareness to Media Representation:

The theory of social representations is one of the most influential sociological approaches seeking to explain how collective meanings are formed and circulated within society, serving as a bridge between individual knowledge and shared social experience. As Serge Moscovici explains, representations are not mere reflections of reality but symbolic systems that reconstruct this reality within collective awareness, attributing to it meanings that align with the prevailing cultural and moral order (Moscovici, *Les représentations sociales*, trans. Mustafa Safwan, Dar Al-Hiwar, Lattakia, 2008, p. 39 ff.).

The media constitute one of the key domains in which modern social representations take shape. Knowledge today is no longer acquired through direct experience, but through the flow of mediated images and meanings about phenomena, individuals, and events. Thus, the media function as a cognitive intermediary that shapes collective perceptions and restructures the symbolic repertoire of the community.

Abdel-Majid Al-Najjar emphasizes that media representations do not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they are influenced by systems of values and the political and economic orientations that govern media production. This process generates a network of recurring mental images that are constantly reproduced to justify specific social or moral positions (Al-Najjar, *Social Representations: Concept and Applications*, Journal of Social Sciences, University of Kuwait, No. 2, 2019, pp. 65–84).

Hence, the study of media representations of crime—particularly when women are the actors—cannot be separated from analyzing how social values and moral standards are reproduced through media representation. In this sense, these representations serve as a mirror reflecting the structure of collective consciousness and the dynamics of its influence.

1.2 Media as a Producer of Representations:

The media's role extends beyond being a mere transmitter of events; it reformulates them within symbolic frameworks and mental images that make them more suitable for social circulation. The media creates cognitive patterns and interpretive lenses through which reality is perceived. These lenses are often influenced by the policies of media institutions and their financial backers—whether states or private sponsors—which in turn shape public opinion and attitudes toward specific social issues, both old and new.

As Serge Moscovici (1961) explained in his seminal work *La psychanalyse, son image et son public*, knowledge, once introduced into the public sphere, loses its neutrality and is reconfigured into social representations that render it more accessible to common understanding. In this sense, the media acts as a producer of representations: it does not merely report phenomena objectively but infuses them with meanings and connotations rooted in prevailing cultural and social values. For instance, certain crimes committed by women are covered by the media not simply as violations of law but as threats to “family values” or “moral order,” thereby endowing them with significance that transcends the event itself and reverberates within public consciousness (Moscovici, 1961, p. 39 ff).

Media outlets thus tend to generate stereotypical representations of women who commit crimes such as intimate partner homicide. In many cases, the narrative is reduced to “marital infidelity” or “failed love” as the immediate motive, framing the act as an attack on familial norms rather than as the result of complex social, psychological, or structural pressures. In a recent study, Schnepf (2023, pp. 21–49) analyzed news articles and linguistic excerpts, classifying media framing into categories such as “domestic drama” or “crime of passion.” The study found that media coverage frequently emphasized emotional motives and betrayal in cases of woman-perpetrated homicide.

Such reductionism not only reflects audience biases but also reproduces interpretive frameworks that constrain the understanding of gender and social factors in crime. Women are often portrayed as “evil” figures who deviate from traditional femininity, while structural causes are obscured by reliance on stereotypical narratives. This discourse perpetuates the idea of “family threat” instead of promoting a deeper methodological grasp of the phenomenon.

For example, the news outlet Al Arabiya published a story titled “She poisoned her husband and dismembered his body on their bed... the victim's sister recounts” (Al Arabiya, 2023). The report described the crime through sensational details—poisoning, dismemberment, and the location (the bed)—without offering contextual or analytical depth, except through speculative statements from security authorities or relatives. This framing highlights the media's inclination toward sensationalism, privileging shocking and sensory details to provoke curiosity or emotional reaction rather than rational interpretation.

In the main body of such reports, quotes from family members or police are often presented to suggest hypothetical motives such as “jealousy” or “infidelity,” reinforcing the notion that media coverage tends to impose presumed motives without substantial evidence.

Thus, the media produces social representations that recycle ready-made stereotypes of the woman criminal. Understanding the mechanisms behind this process becomes vital to uncover how isolated incidents are transformed into shared social narratives that shape collective consciousness and public perceptions of crime.

1.3 Mechanisms of Constructing Media Representations of Crime:

The production of media representations of crime operates through a set of mechanisms and discursive practices that reshape events within specific frameworks, lending news its sensational character. These mechanisms transform isolated incidents into perceived “phenomena.” Analytical studies have demonstrated that through such

mechanisms, the media reproduces stereotypical narratives that influence social awareness of crime and those who commit it (Surette, 2015, p. 78; Jewkes, 2015, p. 44).

- These mechanisms can be summarized as follows:

1. The mechanism of linguistic selection:

This involves the deliberate use of emotionally charged or sensational vocabulary such as killed, dismembered, poisoned, or crime of passion. As Jewkes (2015, p. 122) points out in her study on media and crime, journalism tends to use loaded descriptions such as “cold-blooded killer” or “unfaithful mother” when reporting on woman offenders, rather than employing neutral or legal terminology.

2. The mechanism of dramatic narration:

This mechanism frames the event as a dramatic plot, often linking it to infidelity, jealousy, or honor, thereby reproducing dominant social narratives. The criminal act is transformed into a compelling story structured around tension and moral emotion. In covering women’s crimes, journalistic discourse frequently employs story-like expressions such as “night of horror” or “family tragedy.”

A study of Egyptian journalism found that headlines like “heinous crime” and “the tragedy that shook the village” were commonly used in family-related crimes (Flora Ikram Matta Beshai, 2022, pp. 156–206).

3. The mechanism of repetition and amplification:

Media coverage often repeats and exaggerates particular types of crimes, presenting them as social “phenomena.” The repetition of specific images or narratives over time turns them into perceived realities, replacing or distorting the truth. Through repetition and amplification, the media blurs the boundary between reality and dramatization, allowing exaggeration to overshadow objectivity.

4. The mechanism of simplification and reduction:

This involves reducing crimes to a single motive—such as betrayal, anger, or revenge—while overlooking or excluding broader social, psychological, and economic dimensions. Such simplification produces an incomplete and distorted image of reality. In Arab journalism, media outlets are often criticized for limiting coverage to emotional motives without examining underlying structural or contextual factors (Abu Hashem, 2022).

5. The visual mechanism:

This mechanism relies on the use of sensational images, provocative headlines, and theatrical framing—such as crime scene photographs, weapons, or emotional statements by relatives—to visually reinforce social representations and enhance the dramatic appeal of news. Multimodal analysis shows that the selection of camera angles and imagery creates specific meanings and directs audience interpretation toward moral or emotional judgments at the expense of sociological or psychological understanding. For instance, a headline like “Neighborhood massacre – the killer mother,” accompanied by a close-up image of the woman’s face taken out of context, reinforces prejudicial interpretations (Jewkes, 2015, p. 64 ff).

1.4: Media Representations of Crime in Social Consciousness:

Media representations gradually penetrate the cognitive structure of audiences, contributing to the shaping of social awareness regarding the woman criminal. They do not remain confined to journalistic or visual spaces; rather, media discourse—through its recurrent images and narratives—functions as a mechanism for reproducing or reshaping social perceptions (Hall, 1997, p. 15).

The image of the woman offender, as constructed by the media, is not received innocently but is interpreted through the lens of dominant cultural and moral frameworks. Consequently, it becomes a reference point for

interpreting women's actions in real life. A woman portrayed as inherently "sinful" or as a deviation from moral norms reinforces a stereotypical collective image that imposes a double burden of blame upon her compared with male offenders (McQuail, 2010, p. 104).

According to these scholars, such representations reinforce several enduring social patterns:

-Double standards: Men's crimes are often explained as resulting from social or economic conditions, whereas women's crimes are interpreted as deviations from their "feminine nature."

-Reinforcement of patriarchal dominance: The woman is re-inscribed as fragile, emotional, and easily tempted, justifying the continuation of social guardianship and control over her behavior.

Erosion of social trust in women: By associating women's public presence with moral risk or potential misconduct, media narratives diminish confidence in women's participation in public and professional life.

Sociological studies reveal that through these stereotypical portrayals, the media participates in shaping the collective unconscious regarding women. Media representations thus serve both as a mirror reflecting prevailing beliefs and as an instrument guiding future attitudes. Hence, the reflection of media portrayals of the woman criminal generates a form of "unconsciousness within consciousness"—a paradoxical process that illustrates how accumulated imagery contributes to the continual reproduction of social thought patterns and collective behavioral norms toward women.

Transitional Summary of the Axis 1:

From the above, it becomes clear that media representations of crime extend beyond factual reporting or short-term influence; they construct an integrated system of meanings and values that guide collective understanding of crime and offenders—particularly women. This lays the groundwork for the second axis, which explores the image of the woman criminal in media between stereotyping and social stigmatization.

Axis 2: Media Representation of the Woman Criminal Through Her Social Roles:

Women occupy multiple social roles defined by their familial, ethical, and societal functions. The media interacts with these roles—either positively or negatively—depending on its ideological orientation and its approach to reconstructing women's images in relation to crime. Consequently, representations of woman offenders emerge across different levels: the family role, the moral-ethical role, and the broader social role:

2.1 The Family Role and the Image of the Woman Criminal in Media:

The media's portrayal of woman criminals rarely presents them as independent individuals; instead, their familial roles are often invoked to explain their criminal behavior. When a woman commits a crime, she is frequently depicted in media discourse as a "failed mother" who has undermined family cohesion or as a "deviant wife" who has abandoned her natural role of care and obedience. This connection between crime and family makes the woman's transgression appear doubly severe—perceived not only as a violation of the law but also as an assault on the moral foundation of the family (McQuail, 2010, p. 124).

In the Arab context, several studies reveal that journalistic narratives frequently highlight themes such as "family betrayal" or "neglect of children" when discussing woman offenders, as though the seriousness of the crime derives from the woman's failure to fulfill her familial duties. Ahmad Abdel Hamid (2008, p. 82) notes that media discourse often reproduces traditional family templates, judging women by standards of the "good mother" or the "faithful wife," thereby deepening negative representations and moral expectations.

Accordingly, when the media links the image of the woman criminal to her familial role, it reinforces a dangerous binary: the "ideal woman" versus the "deviant woman." This dichotomy perpetuates social prejudices and predisposes collective consciousness to condemn women and question their ability to perform their social roles effectively.

2.2 Media Representation of the Woman Criminal in Arab Press: Analytical Models

Media coverage in the Arab world exhibits notable diversity in representing the image of the woman criminal, depending on each country's sociocultural and political context. However, a common feature across most cases lies in the emotional and sensational tone that characterizes news treatment.

In an analysis of Arab press content, Fawzia Al-Atwi (2021, p. 121) found that the image of the woman criminal is often framed within a conservative moral structure that treats crime as a threat to family and social identity. The language employed in such coverage tends to emphasize moral condemnation rather than sociological explanation, reinforcing stereotypical perceptions of women as “emotional beings” who deviate from their nature when committing crime.

Similarly, in her study on “The Image of Women in Algerian Press,” Salima Boualag (2020, pp. 77–78) observed that several daily newspapers employ dramatic headlines and provocative photographs to intensify the reader’s emotional response, while neglecting the structural factors that may explain criminal behavior—such as poverty, domestic violence, or social vulnerability. This journalistic approach, she argues, reflects an implicit bias toward patriarchal norms, transforming women from active social agents into media objects used to fuel public opinion.

Moreover, Laila Ben Khadda (2019, pp. 101–103), in her study of Media Representations of Women in Arab Television, highlights that news programs and crime reports often rely exclusively on authoritative sources—police, judiciary, or relatives—without giving the woman offender any voice or narrative space. This practice produces a one-dimensional portrayal that erases the woman’s perspective and reproduces traditional stereotypes.

These examples reveal that Arab media, despite the technological and digital advances of the past two decades, remain deeply embedded in a cultural system that portrays women ambivalently—as both symbols of motherhood and sources of moral or social threat. Thus, studying media representations of woman criminality becomes an academic necessity for understanding how Arab media mirror and perpetuate dominant cultural values and gender hierarchies.

2.3 The Moral Role and the Image of the Woman Criminal in Media:

In representing the image of the woman criminal, the media does not merely highlight her transgression of the law but links her wrongdoing directly to a breach of socially assigned moral roles. Unlike men, women are often portrayed as guardians of virtue, chastity, and moral order. Therefore, when a woman commits a crime, it is depicted as a moral fall before being viewed as a criminal act (Hall, 1997, p. 24).

Studies reveal that media outlets employ symbolic and morally charged language when covering woman offenders, using expressions such as “deviant,” “dishonored,” or “morally fallen.” Such terminology is rarely applied with equal intensity to male offenders, reinforcing double standards and subjecting women to heightened moral scrutiny (Gallagher, 2014, p. 37).

In the Arab context, a woman’s crime is often associated with social shame and loss of reputation, transforming the act into a means of stigmatizing both the woman and her family. This reflects the dominance of moral framing in media coverage, where crime is not merely reported but imbued with symbolic meanings that pit the woman against society as a whole (Abdel Hamid, 2008, pp. 91–92).

Hence, the media contributes to the creation of representations that condemn women morally before they are judged legally, rendering their public image harsher than that of male offenders.

2.4 The General Social Role and the Image of the Woman Criminal in Media:

The woman criminal is frequently portrayed in the media as a threat that transcends her individual act, extending its impact to the broader social fabric. Her crime is seldom interpreted as an isolated personal action; rather, it is framed as a violation of the moral and value system underpinning society. Within this broader social role, her act is represented as a disruption of collective cohesion and security, which amplifies the severity of judgment compared with male offenders (Cohen, 2002, p. 45).

Media narratives tend to frame woman criminals as abnormal exceptions that endanger the symbolic order of society. Headlines and reports often highlight the repercussions of their crimes on “the family,” “the

neighborhood,” or “the community,” implying that when a woman errs, she causes a collective shock that destabilizes public morality. This demonstrates that media coverage uses woman criminality as a tool for redrawing the boundaries between what is socially acceptable and what is not (Mc Quail, 2010, p. 128).

In Arab media, crime committed by women is often symbolically represented as an indicator of moral and social collapse, reducing the woman offender to a figure of “collective shame” that extends beyond the individual to her family and social circle. This transformation from criminal reporting to social construction reinforces traditional gender roles and legitimizes strict moral surveillance over women.

Transitional Summary of the Axis 2:

Therefore, the media’s representation of woman criminals within the broader social framework strengthens the image of woman as the “bearer of society’s symbolic order,” where any crime she commits is perceived as a threat to communal identity and collective values.

Axis 3: Implications of Media Representations of the Woman Criminal:

The media generally plays a decisive role in shaping public awareness, opinion, and even behavior by promoting particular images, beliefs, and ideas according to the orientations of media institutions and communicators. This influence operates through specific channels and mechanisms, and its outcomes become evident in the case of woman criminality as reflections of media representations—manifesting at the levels of public opinion and attitude formation, policymaking and legislation, as well as in women’s own social and cultural status:

3.1 The Impact of Media Representations on Public Opinion and Attitude Formation:

Media representations of the woman criminal do not remain confined to journalistic or visual narratives; rather, they extend to influence public consciousness and the shaping of opinion. Through the repetition of stereotypes and the consistent association of crime with deviation from social and moral roles, the media fosters negative attitudes toward woman offenders. Consequently, public opinion becomes increasingly inclined to condemn them—not only for their actions but also for their symbolic violation of social norms (McQuail, 2010, p. 142).

Research indicates that audiences frequently adopt the perspectives reinforced by media coverage of criminal cases, internalizing the image of the woman offender as a threat to moral and social order. This framing process leads to what Cohen (2002, p. 78) terms a moral panic, wherein isolated incidents are magnified and transformed into symbols of broader social decay.

In Arab societies, audiences are often highly receptive to these portrayals, and collective condemnation quickly emerges, turning the woman criminal into a “public issue.” This highlights the media’s role in constructing rigid social attitudes that amplify stigmatization and reinforce prejudices against women who deviate from traditional roles.

Consequently, through its portrayals, the media does more than merely report events—it becomes an active agent in shaping public opinion and influencing social attitudes toward women.

3.2 The Impact of Media Representations on Legislation and Public Policy:

Media representations of the woman criminal also influence how criminal and legislative policies are perceived and shaped. Through the amplification and sensationalization of certain cases, the media generates social pressure that reverberates through policymaking circles. As Cohen (2002, p. 112) notes, moral panic resulting from particular media coverage can lead to harsher punishments or the introduction of stricter laws targeting specific groups.

In the case of women, such representations often prompt legislation to view them not merely as offenders but as violators of social and moral expectations. Consequently, some policies become reflections of the stereotypes reinforced by the media, with harsher penalties imposed on crimes committed by women, as they are portrayed as a dual threat—to law and to societal values (McQuail, 2010, p. 158).

In Arab societies, this phenomenon manifests in public debates surrounding issues like so-called “honor crimes” or “public morality.” The woman criminal is frequently depicted as a danger to the cultural identity of the community. This symbolic framing legitimizes certain legal provisions that impose stricter surveillance and penalties on women, making the media an indirect participant in the formulation of public policy.

As a result, media representations extend beyond shaping public opinion; they leave discernible traces in the legislative and penal framework, complicating efforts to achieve true equality before the law.

3.3 The Impact of Media Representations on Women’s Social and Cultural Status:

The effects of media representations of the woman criminal extend beyond shaping public opinion or influencing criminal policy—they actively contribute to defining women’s social and cultural status. By linking woman criminality to deviations from familial and moral roles, the media reinforces a social stigma that continues to shadow women long after their legal punishment ends. This stigma hinders their reintegration into society and leads to multidimensional marginalization (Goffman, 1963, p. 14).

These representations do not affect the woman offender alone; they also shape societal perceptions of women as a whole. When the woman criminal is depicted as a symbol of failure in fulfilling social roles, a broader cultural narrative is reproduced—one that subjects all women to moral scrutiny and reinforces fears of deviation from traditional values. In this sense, the media becomes an active participant in constructing the social culture that defines women’s status and imposes rigid boundaries on their agency (McQuail, 2010, p. 163).

In Arab contexts, these implications are particularly evident in narratives that associate the image of the woman criminal with “shame” inflicted upon her family and community. Such representations reinforce exclusionary attitudes and maintain women’s precarious position within the social hierarchy. Thus, the media does not merely portray the woman offender—it contributes to a wider cultural system that determines women’s placement within society.

3.4 The Transformation of Representational Space in Digital Media :

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the nature of media representations. The media is no longer the sole source in shaping collective perceptions of crime; rather, the digital sphere has become an open space for multiple voices and conflicting interpretations. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have redefined the relationship between producer and audience, turning the audience itself into an active participant in the production of social representations.

As Manuel Castells argues, the shift from traditional to networked media has altered the symbolic control of meaning. The representation of reality is no longer monopolized by institutions but has become a process of continuous negotiation among individuals and communities within what he calls the “network of meaning”—a key component of communication power (Castells, 2009, pp. 55–56).

In this context, digital representations of woman criminality have become faster to form and more powerful in their influence. Images, clips, and comments interact to produce a collective symbolic discourse that escapes institutional regulation. As Mai Abdel Hamid notes in her study “The Digital Sphere and the Making of Public Opinion” (Journal of Media Research, 2022, p. 93), digital platforms have become spaces that reproduce the same moral codes perpetuated by traditional media—but through more emotional and visually persuasive means.

Recent studies show that digital media intensifies negative representations by re-sharing sensational images or headlines about woman offenders, transforming them into digital public issues in which women are judged through comments and hashtags before any judicial verdict is issued. Sherine Fouad highlights that “digital trials” have emerged as a new form of social surveillance within virtual spaces, extending beyond institutional or legal frameworks into unregulated public scrutiny (Fouad, 2023, p. 112).

In this way, the transformation of representational space toward digital media has not eliminated previous symbolic structures; rather, it has redistributed them within new patterns of circulation and participation. Understanding the image of the woman criminal in the digital age therefore requires an analytical framework that combines traditional content analysis with the study of online interaction dynamics, viewed as the contemporary, networked extension of social representations.

Transitional Summary of the Axis 3:

The preceding sections demonstrate that the media does not merely present woman criminality as an isolated phenomenon; it constructs a comprehensive symbolic system that guides social understanding of the woman offender. It shapes public opinion and social attitudes, influences legislation and policy, and reproduces the cultural framework that defines women's social positioning. Hence, the media emerges as a key agent in the construction of collective perceptions of women—both as social actors and as subjects of symbolic representation.

Conclusion :

The findings of this socio-media analytical study reveal that the image of the woman criminal in the media is constructed within a network of social and cultural representations that reshape public consciousness and influence collective attitudes. It is not presented as an isolated or individual event. The first axis demonstrated how the media functions as a producer of representations, reconstructing a stereotypical image of the woman offender that places upon her a double burden compared to men. The second axis showed that this image is rooted in the social roles assigned to women, where their offenses are framed as failures in fulfilling familial, moral, and social duties—thus deepening moral judgment against them. The third axis highlighted the broader repercussions of these representations: shaping public opinion, influencing policy and legislation, and reproducing women's social and cultural positions.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that the media actively participates in producing a symbolic framework that reproduces existing social hierarchies and sustains culturally biased structures. It does not merely depict the woman criminal but fuels recurring forms of moral panic that place women under intensified moral surveillance, whether through traditional media channels or within the new digital sphere that has introduced multiple forms of interaction and symbolic reproduction. Consequently, studying the image of the woman criminal today has become more complex and multifaceted due to the technological presence and networked circulation of meaning.

These findings call upon scholars in media and communication studies to critically re-examine how issues of crime and womanhood are addressed, and to work toward deconstructing the stereotypes that hinder women's reintegration into society and obstruct the advancement of equality and justice.

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