Abstract

This study aims to examine how the Israeli media conveys the phenomenon of prostitution to the public. Prostitution, a social phenomenon with a distinct gender aspect, takes place throughout the world and constitutes a burning issue across various discourses and diverse cultures. This study aspires to uncover the dominant narratives in the Israeli media discourse as they manifested in the eleven years (2008-2018) preceding passage of the Law for the Prohibition of the Consumption of Prostitution Services. In addition, the study will address the interrelationship among the media discourse, the promotion of legislation, and the public mindset, with reference to developments and changes in policy and public discourse surrounding prostitution as mirrored in the Israeli media.

In the framework of research on the media from a critical perspective, the study builds on the hypothesis that the manner in which the media conveys information to the public has tremendous inherent power in terms of promoting issues and groups within society to the top of the public and political agenda, to the extent of instigating institutional change. Language, which is at the basis of the media, shapes and influences reality, thereby creating public awareness and moral norms. Through its modes of framing, representation, and use of images and stereotypes, language as employed by the media not only describes reality but also shapes it. This is of paramount importance in discussing the phenomenon of prostitution, for two reasons. First, prostitution cannot be separated from the language chosen to describe it, from the stigma associated with it and with the women themselves, or from the negativity of the words used. Second, the manner in which the media elects to tell the story of prostitution influences the public’s and the decision-makers’ perception of the phenomenon and of women generally, independently of whether or not they are part of the world of prostitution.

The present study has two main objectives. The first is to present an in-depth and critical look at the Israeli media discourse on prostitution over the course of eleven years, thus making it possible to closely trace the historical course of the Law for the Prohibition of the Consumption of Prostitution Services against the panorama of Israeli society. The second objective is to closely examine the dynamics between change in policy and change in media coverage, by seeking to identify the reciprocal effects of these changes and the moral perceptions and norms of society as these relate to the phenomenon of prostitution and gender equality. In pursuit of these objectives, the study examines various narratives as articulated by journalistic texts drawn from two different spheres of online media: traditional online media (the websites of *Haaretz*, *ynet*, and *Walla*) and critical online media (the websites of *Ha’oketz*, *Hamakom Hachi Ham Bagehenom*, *Siha Mekomit*, and *Davar Rishon*). The corpus of the study comprises 1,471 articles that appeared on these websites between the years 2008 and 2019, and through the narratives presented in these texts the study examines how the Israeli media constructs, shapes, and reflects the phenomenon of prostitution. The core questions guiding the study are:

* What are the main narratives proposed by Israeli media regarding the phenomenon of prostitution, and what ideologies are inherent to these narratives? In addressing this question attention is also paid to the interrelationship among legislation, media, and society.
* Does the discourse that emerges from these three spheres seek to challenge or to preserve the stereotypical perceptions and myths that exist in Israeli society regarding the phenomenon of prostitution? Assuming that such a stereotypical perception and myths do exist, how do they manifest in the various texts produced in each sphere? What changes have taken place over the years in the media discourse?
* What is the interrelationship between government policy on prostitution in Israel and media coverage of the issue? How has it manifested over the years?

To address these research questions, the study adopts a methodology that combines grounded theory, narrative research, and critical discourse analysis. The reason for combining these methods stems both from an interest in developing the ability to conduct an in-depth, critical analysis of the media texts, and from the nature of the research field and the phenomenon studied, which make this the most appropriate methodology. Because it is not possible to foresee what will emerge from the encounter with the various texts, the starting point is grounded theory. The decision to use critical discourse analysis as well is based on the attention this approach devotes to the role of power as expressed in language, which is relevant to the power structure underlying the phenomenon of prostitution. In addition, a narrative analysis of the texts is employed in light of the understanding that journalists create a story, not in the classical sense, but in the sense that there is significance to the point of view from which a story is told, the background assumptions on which it rests, and the particular emphasis on words, phrases, sequence, characterization of figures, language, and style that were chosen to tell the journalistic story.

The study identified four salient narratives in the media discourse over the years: The narrative of “Prostitution – a Shocking Case” is prone towards sensationalism, detailed descriptions of cases involving severe violence, and in particular, association of the phenomenon with forced prostitution, child prostitution, and prostitution the very consumption of which is perceived as a breach of moral and social contracts (a mother who prostitutes her own daughter, a policeman who consumes prostitution services, a priest who consumes prostitution services, and the like). The narrative of “Public Relations and Myth Shattering” is a softened version of the “Prostitution – a Shocking Case” narrative because although it affirms the truth of the harm caused by prostitution, it does so while shattering salient myths and adopting rhetorical tools that may be ascribed to the world of education and public relations. The narrative of “Prostitution – Business and Independence” tells the story of prostitution through an economic prism, emphasizing concepts that are familiar from the labor market and marketing. This narrative frames prostitution as an occupation or business, while also exalting the themes of independence and free choice. The “Law and Order” narrative addresses the activities of various institutions in relation to prostitution: for example, its treatment by the Ministry of Welfare and aid organizations, its treatment by the police, and its treatment by the judiciary and by the legislature.

The research findings reveal the distribution of media coverage over the years. The data indicate a clear and significant upward trend in the volume of media coverage throughout this period, for all the sites examined. The increase amounted to 240% (the average coverage for 2008 and 2009 compared with the average coverage for 2017 and 2018), with a discernible significant increase beginning in 2015. In addition, the research findings point to the critical media’s contribution to the overall media map, with the website *Davar Rishon* accounting for a significant portion of the total volume of coverage for 2018. Indeed, it was the second-largest contributor in terms of volume of coverage contributed by all the media sources examined for 2018, after *Haaretz*, which had the most coverage that year. It is also evident that the scope of media coverage is in line with legislative developments, and it appears that legislative developments fuel the media discourse and vice versa, although it is not possible to say with certainty which one preceded the other. Aside from changes in the scope of coverage over the years, particularly in the years leading up to adoption of the Law or the Prohibition of the Consumption of Prostitution Services, one can point to shifting trends in the narratives that characterized the media discourse on prostitution over the years prior to adoption of this law (31 December 2018). As noted, the study identified four dominant narratives in the media discourse over the years: “Law and Order”; “Public Relations and Myth Shattering”; “Prostitution – a Shocking Case”; and “Prostitution – Business and Independence.” The study found that from 2008 to 2015 there were no unusual fluctuations in the four dominant narratives, and that the differences in their relative volume remained steady, with the exception of occasional isolated fluctuations. Beginning in 2015, however, there was an evident increase in three of the four narratives – “Law and Order”; “Public Relations and Myth Shattering”; and “Prostitution – a Shocking Case”– whereas the fourth narrative – “Prostitution – Business and Independence” – evinced a downward trend. This pattern plays an important role in shaping the public narrative. The shifting trends point to a change in the public mindset regarding prostitution, to the extent that legislation was adopted in practice. Because media coverage is not only a textual element but also a source of data from which we can derive conclusions about public discourse, we can use the changing media narrative to draw conclusions about changes in the public mindset. Thus, as the media discourse increasingly framed prostitution as a manifestation of violence, the exploitation of female sexuality, and the preservation of existing power structures, so too the public mindset became willing to accept legislation in which prostitution is regarded as a violent, exploitative phenomenon that civilized society must eradicate. As of the end of 2018 – when the Law for the Prohibition of the Consumption of Prostitution Services passed second and third readings in the Knesset – the dominant narrative in the debate was “Prostitution – a Shocking Case,” the coverage of which exceeded that of “Prostitution – Business and Independence” by several hundred percentage points. Thus the findings illustrate how the vast discrepancy between the narratives of “Prostitution – a Shocking Case” and “Prostitution – Business and Independence” shaped the public debate.

The study proceeds from a critical feminist starting point, and from the hypothesis that the media is a critical space with the power to preserve or to challenge a social reality of gender inequality. This research is important in bringing to the fore a phenomenon with a gender dimension that is situated on the margins of public discourse, on the margins of morality, and in fact regarded as taboo. Women constitute the vast majority in the world of prostitution. While there are also male minors and adult men in the world of prostitution, the very fact that they are the exception relative to women only underscores the distinct gender aspect of this phenomenon, of who is the buyer and who is bought. The twofold obliteration of these women – both quantitatively and symbolically – because they are women and because they engage in prostitution reduces their chances of enjoying fair resource allocation and basic human rights. This study therefore also proceeds from a sense of female solidarity and an aspiration to expose the naked truth about the media discourse so as to transform it.

No study to date has extensively surveyed the manner in which the Israeli media approaches the phenomenon of prostitution in Israel over the course of eleven years and in conjunction with the evolution of historical legislation on the issue. This study therefore seeks to make an academic contribution that will expand the knowledge and insights surrounding the media’s approach to prostitution in Israel. In addition, it seeks to posit initial answers regarding the dynamics between different spheres of media, and changes in social and legislative processes, in conjunction with media coverage of the same issue. This research aims to be the first in its field and to foster additional in-depth academic studies addressing media coverage of gender-based and marginalized social groups. The present study is intended as a means of serving the social struggle to improve the status of women everywhere and eradicate the phenomenon of prostitution by making the modes of journalistic coverage transparent to both the public and the journalists themselves, so that these modes can serve them as a compass when covering a similar event, or as an aid for the public in forming an opinion about similar phenomena.