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GENDER REPRESENTATION IN INTERNATIONAL MEDIA DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN COVERAGE OF THE PALESTINE–ISRAEL CONFLICT

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Abstract This article examines gender representation in international media discourse through a comparative analysis of CNN and Al Jazeera English coverage of the Israel–Palestine war after 7 October 2023. It asks how women and children are discursively constructed in wartime journalism and what ideological work these representations perform. The article combines framing theory with feminist gender theory and applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to a purposive sample of victim-centred reports, explainers and humanitarian stories. The study argues that both outlets foreground women and children as morally charged figures of civilian suffering, yet they do so through different discursive logics. Al Jazeera more consistently embeds women and children within the structural vocabulary of siege, occupation, deprivation and collective punishment, while CNN tends more often to position Palestinian women and children within cautious, aggregated, and institutionally mediated accounts, alongside a stronger individualisation of Israeli victims. Across both outlets, women are frequently rendered as mothers, mourners or pregnant bodies, and children as emblems of innocence, grief and futurity. Such framing intensifies empathy, but it also risks depoliticising women and children by reducing them to passive symbols rather than social and political actors. The article concludes that gendered conflict reporting is not merely descriptive; it orders whose suffering becomes legible, credible and grievable in global public discourse.

Keywords: gender representation, framing, critical discourse analysis, war journalism, CNN, Al Jazeera, Israel–Palestine, women, children.

Annotatsiya Ushbu maqola xalqaro OAV diskursida gender reprezentatsiyasini CNN va Al Jazeera English tomonidan 2023-yil 7-oktabrdan keyingi Falastin–Isroil urushi yoritilishini qiyosiy tahlil orqali o‘rganadi. Unda ayollar va bolalar urush jurnalistikasida diskursiv jihatdan

qanday konstruksiya qilinishi va bu tasvirlar qanday mafkuraviy vazifalarni bajarishi masalasi ko‘rib chiqiladi. Maqola framing nazariyasi bilan genderga oid feminist nazariyani birlashtiradi hamda qurbonlarga yo‘naltirilgan reportajlar, sharhlovchi materiallar va gumanitar mazmundagi hikoyalar tanlanmasiga nisbatan tanqidiy diskurs tahlili (CDA)ni qo‘llaydi. Tadqiqot shuni ta’kidlaydiki, har ikki media tarmog‘i ayollar va bolalarni fuqaroviy azob-uqubatning kuchli axloqiy timsollari sifatida oldinga chiqaradi, biroq buni turli diskursiv mantiqlar asosida amalga oshiradi. Al Jazeera ayollar va bolalarni qamal, okkupatsiya, mahrumlik va jamoaviy jazolash kabi strukturaviy lug‘at doirasida izchilroq tasvirlasa, CNN Falastinlik ayollar va bolalarni ko‘proq ehtiyotkor, umumlashtirilgan va institutsional vositalar orqali yoritilgan kontekstda joylashtirishga moyil bo‘ladi, shu bilan birga Isroillik qurbonlarni individuallashtirish kuchliroq namoyon bo‘ladi. Har ikki OAVda ham ayollar ko‘pincha ona, motam tutuvchi yoki homilador sifatida, bolalar esa begunohlik, qayg‘u va kelajak timsoli sifatida ifodalanadi. Bunday framing empatiyani kuchaytiradi, biroq u ayollar va bolalarni ijtimoiy hamda siyosiy aktorlardan ko‘ra passiv ramzlarga aylantirib, ularni depolitizatsiya qilish xavfini ham tug‘diradi. Maqola genderga oid mojaroli yoritish shunchaki tasvirlovchi emas, balki global ommaviy diskursda kimning azobi ko‘rinadigan, ishonchli va aza tutishga loyiq deb qabul qilinishini ham belgilaydi.

Kalit so‘zlar: gender representatsiyasi, freyming, tanqidiy diskurs tahlili, urush jurnalistikasi, CNN, Al Jazeera, Falastin–Isroil, ayollar, bolalar.

The war in Gaza following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 generated a vast transnational media archive in which women and children became central figures of humanitarian narration. This was not simply a matter of demography, although official and intergovernmental reporting repeatedly showed that women and children constituted a very large share of those killed, injured and displaced. It was also a matter of discourse: war journalism made women and children the privileged signs through which innocence, loss, urgency and moral shock were communicated to global audiences. UN Women reported in early 2024 that roughly 70 percent of those killed in Gaza were women or children, while the UN human rights office later stated that nearly 70 per cent of verified fatalities were women and children, confirming the symbolic and political centrality of these categories in public discussion of the war.²⁴⁵

Yet women and children are never transparent categories in war reporting. Feminist scholarship has long criticised the routine conflation of “women and children” as a single humanitarian bloc, because this formula obscures women’s agency, homogenises civilian

245 UN Women (2024) Gender Alert: The Gendered Impact of the Crisis in Gaza. New York: UN Women

suffering, and reproduces a masculinist definition of war as something done by men to others. As Megan MacKenzie notes, feminist conflict theory challenges precisely this move: the tendency to equate gender with women alone, to conflate women and children as victims, and to define war as a masculine and public activity. Michelle Lazar’s feminist CDA similarly insists that discourse does not merely reflect gendered power; it helps naturalise it by turning historically contingent hierarchies into common sense (Dijk 1993).

Against that backdrop, this article investigates how CNN and Al Jazeera English represent women and children in their coverage of the Israel–Palestine war. The comparison is analytically productive because the two outlets occupy different geopolitical and journalistic locations. Recent comparative studies of the Gaza war show that CNN and Al Jazeera diverged in rhetoric, source selection and framing, while broader large-scale analysis suggests that Western outlets including CNN were more likely to individualise Israeli victims, equalise asymmetrical suffering, and cast selective doubt on Palestinian casualty reporting, patterns that were absent or significantly weaker in Al Jazeera English.²⁴⁶

The central argument advanced here is that both networks rely on gendered humanitarian framing, but they do so differently. Al Jazeera generally humanises Palestinian women and children through testimonial voice and structural context, whereas CNN more often mediates Palestinian suffering through institutional caution, aggregate statistics and professional detachment, while more readily individualising Israeli women and children. In both cases, however, women and children frequently function as symbolic bearers of innocence rather than full social actors.²⁴⁷

Literature review

Framing theory provides the first conceptual anchor of this analysis. Entman’s classic formulation defines framing as the selection and salience of certain aspects of perceived reality in ways that define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies. Crucially, framing operates through inclusion and exclusion; what is omitted is often as consequential as what is highlighted. Entman also warns that “objective” journalism can still reproduce dominant frames by making some interpretations more accessible than others. This insight is especially important in conflict reporting, where balance rituals may conceal asymmetries of power and suffering. A second body of literature comes from feminist theories

246 Al-Muhtaseb, D.W., Qnaiby, R.B.M., Rije, D.N. and Alhanini, B.R. (2025) ‘A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis of Language Use in CNN and Al Jazeera English Media Coverage of Gaza War’, *Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences*

247 Al-Muhtaseb, D.W., Qnaiby, R.B.M., Rije, D.N. and Alhanini, B.R. (2025) ‘A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis of Language Use in CNN and Al Jazeera English Media Coverage of Gaza War’, *Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences*

of war and media. MacKenzie’s overview in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* synthesises a major line of feminist critique: mainstream conflict analysis often erases women’s multiple roles and treats them primarily as passive victims.²⁴⁸ Feminist research, by contrast, asks where women are located in war, how gender intersects with class, nationality and age, and how media discourse reproduces the boundaries of who counts as a political subject. Lazar extends this insight at the discursive level by showing that feminist CDA must analyse the subtle and not-so-subtle ways gender ideology is produced, sustained and normalised through language.

CDA adds a methodological and political dimension to framing analysis. Van Dijk argues that discourse is inseparable from power because institutions control not only topics but also lexical choice, narrative structure, voice and access to speaking positions. In news discourse, this means that who gets quoted, whose numbers are doubted, and whether violence is described actively or passively are all ideologically significant. CDA is therefore particularly useful for examining victim hierarchies, epistemic authority and agency assignment in wartime journalism.

Recent scholarship on Gaza coverage reinforces the relevance of this approach. A 2025 qualitative study of CNN and Al Jazeera English found systematic differences in rhetorical style, source attribution and framing strategies in their coverage of the war. A 2026 content analysis of victim coverage in CNN, Al Jazeera and CGTN reported that CNN tended to favour an Israeli perspective, while Al Jazeera showed greater sympathy toward Palestinian victims; even when CNN covered Palestinian suffering empathetically, it often retained editorial caution and professional detachment. A large-scale 2025–2026 study of more than 14,000 articles likewise found that Western outlets including CNN were more likely to depict Israeli victims as identifiable individuals and Palestinians as undifferentiated collectives, while also invoking October 7 to equalise suffering and selectively casting doubt on Palestinian casualty figures.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative comparative design. It analyses a purposive sample of English-language news texts from CNN and Al Jazeera English published during the early and high-intensity phases of the post-7 October 2023 war, with particular attention to stories centred on women, children, family loss, pregnancy, displacement, hostages and humanitarian breakdown. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical. It reads headlines, leads, sourcing

248 MacKenzie, M. (2017) ‘Women, Gender, and Contemporary Armed Conflict’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

patterns and lexical choices through the combined lenses of framing theory, feminist theory and CDA.²⁴⁹

The CDA component focuses on five discursive features. First, **nomination and categorisation**: how women and children are named, whether as mothers, girls, hostages, families, victims or civilians. Second, **transitivity and agency**: whether violence is attributed clearly to actors or rendered through passives and nominalisations. Third, **aggregation versus individualisation**: whether subjects appear as named persons with biographies or as anonymous masses and casualty counts. Fourth, **evidentiality and source attribution**: whether claims are presented directly, attributed neutrally, or surrounded by markers of doubt. Fifth, **moral framing**: whether women and children function as witnesses, symbols of innocence, depoliticised sufferers or agents with voice and social role. Because a full article-archive corpus is beyond the scope of a single interpretive essay, the analysis also triangulates its close reading with recent peer-reviewed and preprint studies comparing CNN and Al Jazeera. This allows the article to remain analytically grounded while advancing a theoretically informed argument about gender representation in wartime media discourse.

Analysis

Women as mothers, mourners and vulnerable bodies

In Al Jazeera, Palestinian women are frequently represented through embodied precarity, but also through first-person testimony. The headline “‘How will I give birth?’: Dangers of a Gaza pregnancy amid Israeli bombing” foregrounds pregnancy as a specifically gendered site of war, immediately centring reproductive vulnerability. The lead notes that “50,000 pregnant women” lack treatment and access to health care, while the body of the report explains how destroyed roads and collapsing medical infrastructure turn childbirth into a life-threatening ordeal. Here, the female body is not only a symbol of suffering; it is a way of narrating the destruction of civilian life-sustaining systems. Al Jazeera’s discourse thus links women’s suffering to infrastructure, siege and state violence rather than presenting it as abstract tragedy.²⁵⁰

At the same time, even Al Jazeera often codes women primarily through maternal and familial roles. Women appear as pregnant women, mothers carrying wounded children, wives waiting, or mourners. This framing activates empathy, but it also narrows femininity to care, reproduction and grief. Feminist theory would read this as a classic gendered reduction: women become visible when they embody vulnerability or kinship, less so when they act as political

249 Entman, R.M. (1993) ‘Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’, *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), pp. 51–58

250 Al Jazeera (2023) “‘How will I give birth?’: Dangers of a Gaza pregnancy amid Israeli bombing”, 25 October 2023

interpreters, organisers, medics, journalists or strategic actors. The problem is not visibility itself, but the restricted grammar of visibility.

CNN’s broader pattern, as reported by comparative studies, is different in register rather than in kind. CNN tends to frame Palestinian women within institutionally mediated humanitarian language and to maintain greater editorial caution around attribution and casualty reporting. By contrast, Israeli women more often appear as named and individualised subjects within hostage, bereavement or family-survival narratives. The asymmetry lies in narrative texture: some women are introduced as singular persons with biographies and emotional continuity; others appear as humanitarian categories. Such differences shape not only empathy but recognisability. A named mother is grieved differently from “women and children” as a statistical class.²⁵¹

Children as innocence, futurity and moral witness

Children occupy an even more charged symbolic position. In Al Jazeera’s explainer “Israel’s ‘war against Gaza’s children’ explained,” the headline itself compresses the conflict into an accusation framed through the child as the paradigmatic innocent. The lead stresses that more than 100 children were being killed each day, and the story moves quickly from the statistic to legal protection, thereby constructing children as both humanitarian victims and juridical subjects under international law. Another Al Jazeera article described Gaza as a “graveyard” for children, intensifying the moral register through stark metaphor and humanitarian authority. The child in this discourse is not only a victim; it is the measure of civilisational failure.

This mode of representation has clear rhetorical power. Yet it also risks transforming Palestinian children into affective symbols whose political existence is exhausted by suffering. The figure of the child condenses innocence, futurity and non-combatancy, but repeated use of children primarily as evidence of atrocity can flatten them into emblems rather than persons embedded in family, school, neighbourhood, labour and social history. Feminist and critical scholarship warns against precisely this move: humanitarian discourse often elevates women and children morally while depriving them of political subjectivity. Comparative studies suggest that CNN handles children through a more uneven representational logic. Israeli children are more likely to be individualised in hostage-centred narratives and family stories, whereas Palestinian children appear more often as casualty counts, humanitarian aggregates or institutionally reported figures. The large-scale arxiv study is especially useful here: it finds that Western outlets including CNN were substantially more likely to portray Israeli victims as

251 AlShebli, B., Casara, B.G.S. and Maass, A. (2025) Media Coverage of War Victims: Journalistic Biases in Reporting on Israel and Gaza. arXiv:2510.06453

identifiable individuals and Palestinians as undifferentiated collectives. Applied to children, this means that one child may become a story, while thousands of others become a number. That is not a minor stylistic difference; it is a hierarchy of narrative humanity.

Agency, voice and the politics of attribution

CDA also draws attention to agency assignment. In Al Jazeera’s coverage, agency is comparatively explicit. Headlines and leads more often identify Israeli bombing, siege or attacks as the cause of women’s and children’s suffering. This is visible in lexical choices such as “Israeli bombing”, “war against Gaza’s children”, and “relentless bombing”, which preserve a strong causal chain between military action and humanitarian outcome. The result is a structurally intelligible narrative in which women and children suffer not from generic war but from specific political and military acts.

CNN, according to comparative scholarship, more frequently relies on attributed claims, cautious hedging and source-labelling conventions that can create epistemic distance from Palestinian suffering. The issue is not that verification is wrong; verification is a journalistic obligation. The issue is asymmetry. When Palestinian casualty figures are routinely qualified through phrases that foreground source suspicion, while Israeli victim stories are narrated more directly and individually, a differential regime of credibility emerges. AlShebli, Casara and Maass call this “one-sided doubt casting,” and they treat it as one of the most systematic patterns in Western coverage.

Victimhood, symbolism and depoliticisation

The deeper similarity between the two outlets is that both rely on what may be called symbolic humanitarianism. Women and children are mobilised as the most legible embodiments of civilian pain. In media terms, they condense the conflict into emotionally intelligible forms: the pregnant woman, the grieving mother, the wounded child, the orphan, the hostage daughter, the bereaved family. These images are powerful because they universalise vulnerability. But they also perform ideological work by shrinking the representational field. Women and children appear most often as those to whom violence happens, not as those who interpret, organise, resist, document or negotiate it. This matters because gendered passivisation does not merely exclude certain identities; it organises public morality. If Palestinian women and children are seen primarily as faceless masses, their suffering becomes humanitarian but not fully political. If Israeli women and children are more often individualised, their suffering becomes both humanitarian and narratively intimate. The distinction shapes grievability, credibility and urgency. In that sense, gender representation in war journalism is inseparable from geopolitical media power.

Discussion

The comparative evidence suggests that CNN and Al Jazeera are not simply offering two versions of the same reality; they are constructing different moral cartographies. Al Jazeera’s discourse tends to situate women and children within a broader account of blockade, bombardment, health-system collapse and collective punishment. This produces a more structural and accusatory frame. CNN, by contrast, more often reflects the conventions of Anglo-American “objective” journalism: greater reliance on official sourcing, more hedged attribution, and a more cautious vocabulary around Palestinian casualty claims. Entman’s insight is especially relevant here: formal objectivity does not neutralise framing; it may reproduce dominant geopolitical assumptions precisely by appearing professionally neutral.

At the same time, a purely celebratory reading of Al Jazeera would be inadequate. Although it gives more narrative space to Palestinian women and children and more clearly names structures of violence, it still frequently draws on maternalist and child-centred iconography. Women become visible as mothers and pregnant bodies; children become visible as innocents and martyrs of the future. This framing is ethically forceful, yet analytically incomplete. A fuller gender-sensitive journalism would also represent women as political thinkers, workers, medics, journalists, community organisers and survivors with strategic agency, and would treat children not only as symbols of innocence but as subjects located in concrete social worlds.²⁵²

Conclusion

This article has argued that gender representation is central to the international media narration of the Israel–Palestine war. Through framing theory, feminist theory and CDA, it has shown that women and children are not merely reported; they are discursively produced as particular kinds of subjects. In both CNN and Al Jazeera, they function as privileged signs of civilian suffering. Yet the two outlets diverge in how that suffering is made visible. Al Jazeera more often embeds women and children within explicit structures of violence and deprivation and grants greater space to testimonial humanisation. CNN more often filters Palestinian suffering through aggregated, cautiously attributed and institutionally mediated discourse, while individualising Israeli victims more readily.

The broader implication is that war journalism does not simply mirror casualties; it distributes recognisability. It decides whose pain appears as biography, whose pain appears as statistic, whose suffering is narrated as immediate fact, and whose suffering is mediated through suspicion, balance or abstraction. For that reason, gender-sensitive conflict reporting must move

252 van Dijk, T.A. (1993) ‘Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis’, *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), pp. 249–283.

van Dijk, T.A. (2015) ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’, in Tannen, D., Hamilton, H.E. and Schiffrin, D. (eds.) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. 2nd edn. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

beyond the routine formula of “women and children” and ask more difficult questions about agency, voice, credibility and political visibility. Only then can international media discourse begin to represent war’s gendered realities without reducing them to sentimental symbols.

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