

A Sara Mills Analysis of Middle Eastern Migrant Women's Representation in BBC Arabic

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Abstract

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Gender-based violence against migrant women remains a critical issue during migration, while media play an important role in shaping public understanding of these experiences. This study examines the representation of Middle Eastern migrant women in BBC Arabic news using Sara Mills' Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. The study aims to identify the subject-object and author-reader positioning constructed in news discourse. The research focuses on one BBC Arabic news article entitled *كل المهاجرين يدفعون مالا للمهرب، لكن يطلب من النساء دفع الثمن بالجنس*. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed using documentation and close reading techniques. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that migrant women are predominantly positioned as objects of sexual exploitation, human trafficking, forced prostitution, and asylum-related bureaucratic barriers also show that migrant women are portrayed as individuals who strive to survive, seek protection, and share their own experiences. The news also prompts readers to understand their experiences and draws attention to the unequal power relations and gender-based violence that shape the migration process.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing flow of international migration reflects growing population mobility and raises concerns regarding the protection of vulnerable groups. According to the UN Population Division, the global migrant population reached approximately 304 million in mid-2024, with women and girls accounting for nearly 48% of all migrants (Deggeler, 2025). Existing research indicates that migrant women are more vulnerable to gender-based violence across different stages of migration. Gillespie argues that the intersection of multiple social identities and broader structural inequalities shapes violence against migrant and refugee women (Gillespie et al., 2022). Tan and Kuschminder contend that gender-based violence is rooted in gender inequality, unequal power

relations, and harmful social norms (Tan & Kuschminder, 2022). Phillimore describes this vulnerability as a continuum of violence occurring before, during, and after migration (Phillimore et al., 2023). Reports from Human Rights Watch and Doctors Without Borders likewise document widespread sexual violence experienced by migrant women along migration routes. In addition to serving as a conduit for information, the media also acts as an agent that shapes public perception through the construction of specific discourses. Beyond functioning as an information provider, the media shapes public perception through discourse construction. Byerly and Ross argue that media representations often appear objective while privileging male perspectives, resulting in unequal portrayals of women (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Similarly, Kania emphasizes that

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media discourse can marginalize women by presenting unbalanced viewpoints (Kania & Hamdani, 2023).

The BBC, a British public service broadcaster, is recognized as one of the world's most influential international news organizations, delivering multilingual news through television, radio, websites, and digital platforms, including BBC Arabic. Its multilingual reporting enables global issues to be presented to different linguistic audiences while maintaining a consistent editorial focus. The BBC has consistently reported on sensitive issues such as armed conflicts, migration, and gender inequality through testimonial-based narratives that provide space for marginalized voices. In particular, BBC Arabic has published several reports highlighting migrant women's experiences of gender-based violence and forced displacement.

One example is *A Living Hell: Sudanese Women Face Rape and Abuse in Libya* (2025), which documents the experiences of Sudanese women facing rape, sexual abuse, and social pressure during displacement while seeking protection in Libya (Mhadhbi, 2025). Following a similar reporting pattern, BBC Arabic published an article entitled *كل المهاجرين يدفعون مالا للمهرب، لكن يطلب* *من النساء دفع الثمن بالجنس* on 11 December 2025. The report presents firsthand testimonies from migrant women who experienced sexual exploitation during migration and prolonged uncertainty throughout the asylum process. Among the women featured in the article are Esther, a Nigerian asylum seeker who survived repeated sexual exploitation in Europe, and Nia, a woman from Kosovo who escaped sexual violence only to experience further abuse during her migration journey (Petitsa, 2025). The article highlights the interconnected forms of gender-based violence experienced by migrant women and offers rich textual material for examining how the media represents and positions them.

Sara Mills' feminist discourse perspective offers an effective approach to understanding how migrant women are represented in media texts. Mills (1995) explains that feminist analysis seeks to uncover how textual representations of women and men reproduce particular ideologies instead of presenting neutral accounts (Mills, 1995). Mills

(1997) further highlights that discourse reflects underlying power relations by defining who has the authority to speak, whose perspectives are foregrounded, and how readers are encouraged to interpret social realities (Mills, 1997). The relevance of this framework is reinforced by studies showing that Arabic-language media construct migration through specific discursive and framing strategies that shape public understandings of migrants (Ammar & Murgia, 2022). Hourani et al. argue that migrant women's lives continue to be shaped by structural and symbolic violence even after escaping direct abuse (Hourani et al., 2022). This broader context makes Sara Mills' feminist discourse perspective useful for examining how BBC Arabic represents these experiences.

Sara Mills' Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis has been widely applied to examine representations of women in media and literary discourse, including studies on rape victims in online news (Putri et al., 2022), child sexual violence (Azzahra et al., 2024), and sexual harassment in online news (Fatmawati et al., 2025), gender injustice in the Israel–Palestine conflict (Sirait & Zawawi, 2025), and literary texts (Andriana & Manaf, 2022). These studies demonstrate the usefulness of Sara Mills' framework in revealing gendered power relations. Most studies focus on Indonesian media and literary texts, while only a few have examined Arabic-language news related to the representation of migrant women.

This study examines the representation of migrant women in BBC Arabic news using Sara Mills' Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. It focuses on how subject and object positions are constructed and how writer and reader positions shape the discourse. The study also contributes to the existing literature by examining Arabic-language news, which has received limited attention in prior research.

METHODS

The study uses a qualitative approach and applies Sara Mills' Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to examine the representation of migrant women in media discourse. The study focused on identifying subject–object positioning and writer–reader positioning in a BBC Arabic

news article entitled *كل المهاجرين يدفعون مالا للمهرب، لكن* *كل المهاجرين يدفعون مالا للمهرب، لكن*, published on December 11, 2025.

Data were collected using the documentation method. The researcher selected the news article as the primary data source, read the text repeatedly, and recorded sentences, paragraphs, and quotations relevant to the representation of migrant women. The collected data were then classified according to Sara Mills' analytical categories, namely subject-object positioning and writer-reader positioning.

The data were analyzed through qualitative textual analysis. First, relevant textual units were identified and categorized. Next, each category was interpreted using Sara Mills' Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to reveal how migrant women are positioned in the discourse and how the text constructs the relationship between the writer and the readers. The findings were interpreted to reveal the ideological meanings embedded in the news discourse.

The results are organized around selected textual excerpts and supported by critical analysis grounded in Sara Mills' analytical framework. This approach facilitates an examination of how linguistic choices and narrative structures shape the representation of migrant women in the selected BBC Arabic news article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The representation of migrant women in the selected bbc arabic news article was analyzed using sara mills' feminist critical discourse analysis, with a focus on the concepts of subject-object positioning and writer-reader positioning. The analysis reveals that migrant women are predominantly represented as objects of sexual exploitation and violence, while at the same time being given space to become subjects through their personal testimonies and survival strategies. These representations also influence how readers are directed to understand migrant women's experiences throughout the migration process.

Subject-Object Position

Migrant Women as Objects of Sexual Exploitation and Violence

BBC Arabic predominantly represents migrant women as objects of exploitation and violence. This representation is introduced from the beginning of the article through the headline:

كل المهاجرين يدفعون مالا للمهرب، لكن يطلب من النساء

دفع الثمن بالجنس

The headline indicates that migrants are represented differently based on gender. In the sentence "كل المهاجرين يدفعون مالا للمهرب" ("All migrants pay money to smugglers"), migrants are generally portrayed as paying a fee to continue their journey. However, the following phrase, "لكن يطلب من النساء",

"دفع الثمن بالجنس" ("But women are required to pay the price with sex"), shifts the focus specifically to female migrants, whose bodies become the means of payment rather than money.

From Sara Mills' perspective, women occupy the object position because they are represented as the recipients of the smugglers' demands. In contrast, the smugglers implicitly occupy the subject position as the actors who determine the conditions of the exchange. The phrase "يطلب من النساء" ("required from women") positions women as those subjected to the actions of a more powerful actor. Furthermore, the expression "دفع الثمن بالجنس" ("paying the price with sex") objectifies women's bodies by reducing them to a form of currency during irregular migration. The lexical contrast between "مالاً" ("money") and "الجنس" ("sex") further reinforces gender inequality.

Male migrants are represented as paying a financial cost, whereas female migrants are portrayed as paying with their bodies and dignity. This contrast demonstrates that women experience additional forms of vulnerability beyond the general risks of migration, particularly the threat of sexual exploitation.

From the perspective of writer-reader positioning, BBC Arabic directs readers to interpret migrant women as victims who are disproportionately exposed to gender-based violence compared to other migrants. The lexical contrast between financial payment and sexual exploitation encourages readers to perceive women's experiences as a consequence of unequal

gendered power relations rather than individual circumstances. This representation is consistent with UNHCR's classification of gender-based violence, which includes human trafficking for sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, domestic servitude, and slavery-like forms of marriage involving sexual exploitation and abuse (Tardy, 2020).

The representation of migrant women as objects of violence is further reinforced through Esther's testimony, which narrates her experience of sexual violence during the migration process.

كما حدث مع إستير التي خذلتها المرأة التي وعدتها
تقول إستير: "حبستني في غرفة وأدخلت رجلاً اغتصبني بالنجاسة
بالقوة."

Just as happened to Esther, who was betrayed by a woman who had promised her safety. Esther said, "She locked me in a room and brought in a man who raped me."

This excerpt reveals the sexual violence experienced by migrant women during irregular migration. The phrase "اغتصبني بالقوة" ("raped me by force") explicitly describes an act of coercive sexual violence, while the verbs "حبستني" ("locked me up") and "أدخلت" ("brought in") demonstrate the perpetrators' control over Esther's body and freedom. According to Sara Mills' framework, Esther occupies the object position because she is represented as the recipient of actions performed by more powerful actors. In contrast, the woman who betrayed Esther and the man who committed the rape occupy the subject position, as they exercise authority and control over the events. Notably, the phrase "خذلتها المرأة" ("a woman betrayed her") in the incident suggests that women may also have a role in facilitating sexual exploitation when they occupy positions of authority in trafficking networks.

From the perspective of writer-reader positioning, BBC Arabic presents Esther's experience through direct testimony, allowing readers to witness the violence from the victim's perspective. Rather than describing the incident from the journalist's point of view, using Esther's own voice strengthens the narrative's emotional impact and encourages readers to empathize with

her experience. This narrative strategy positions readers to understand sexual violence as a consequence of unequal power relations experienced by migrant women during migration.

This interpretation is supported by Ramage et al. (2023), who argue that asylum-seeking women's testimonies reveal how gender-based violence is embedded within broader structural and legal systems throughout the migration process (Ramage et al., 2023). Evidence from *Journey of Violence* (2024) further shows that refugee women's narratives reflect a continuum of gendered, structural, and symbolic violence experienced across different stages of migration (Borges, 2024). Rather than representing an isolated case, Esther's testimony reflects a broader pattern of gender-based violence experienced by migrant women in irregular migration contexts.

The representation of migrant women as objects of exploitation is further reinforced through BBC Arabic's discussion of human trafficking, which describes the systematic recruitment and sexual exploitation of young women across national borders.

هذا ما يفعلونه، يطوفون القرى في نيجيريا لاصطياد الفتيات
الصغيرات وجلبهن إلى ليبيا لاستعبادهن جنسياً
"What they do is go around villages in Nigeria to 'hunt' young girls and bring them to Libya to be sexually enslaved."

This excerpt illustrates the organized nature of human trafficking targeting migrant women. The third-person pronouns in the verbs "يفعلونه" ("they do it") and "يطوفون" ("they go around") identify traffickers as the active actors responsible for the exploitation. Furthermore, the verbs "يطوفون" ("go around"), "لاصطياد" ("hunt"), and "وجلبهن" ("bring them") depict a systematic process of recruitment, transportation, and exploitation. The metaphorical use of "لاصطياد" ("hunt") dehumanizes young women by portraying them as prey rather than as individuals. At the same time, the phrase "استعبادهن جنسياً" ("to sexually enslave them") explicitly constructs women's bodies as objects of control and exploitation. According to Sara Mills' framework, traffickers occupy the subject position because they initiate and control every stage of the

trafficking process. In contrast, migrant women are positioned as the object because they are represented solely as the recipients of these actions.

From the perspective of writer–reader positioning, BBC Arabic guides readers to perceive human trafficking as a systematic form of gender-based violence rather than an isolated criminal act by describing the trafficking process sequentially from recruitment in Nigerian villages to transportation and sexual enslavement in Libya. The article encourages readers to recognize that the exploitation of migrant women is organized through transnational trafficking networks. The emphasis on the victims' experiences and the mechanisms of exploitation directs readers' attention to the structural nature of violence rather than to individual incidents.

This finding is supported by Kiss et al., who found that many trafficked women and girls are recruited through trusted social networks, including family members and acquaintances, before they experience violence and exploitation during transit and at their destination (Kiss et al., 2022). Esther's experience similarly illustrates how organized trafficking networks exploit migrant women throughout the migration process rather than only after they reach their intended destination. Likewise, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) notes that Libya remains one of the principal transit countries for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and continues to be a region where migrant women are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, smuggling, and various forms of exploitation ("Migran Report Round 52," 2024). BBC Arabic's portrayal of migrant women aligns with broader patterns of transnational trafficking documented by international organizations and highlights the structural vulnerabilities they face during irregular migration.

A similar pattern is found in Nia's experience after arriving in Libya, where the news portrays forced prostitution as a consequence of the violence experienced by migrant women during the migration process.

أجبرت نيا وشقيقتها على العمل في الدعارة بعد تعرضهما للعنف
Nia and her sister were forced into prostitution after experiencing violence.

This excerpt demonstrates how migrant women become victims of sexual and economic exploitation following the violence they experience during migration. The passive verb "أُجبرت" ("were forced") indicates that Nia and her sister had no autonomy in determining their own lives. At the same time, the phrase "بعد تعرضهما للعنف" ("after experiencing violence") establishes a causal relationship between previous violence and subsequent sexual exploitation. The expression "العمل في الدعارة" ("working in prostitution") represents women's bodies as commodities exploited for the economic benefit of others. According to Sara Mills' framework, Nia and her sister occupy the object position because they are subjected to actions imposed by an unnamed perpetrator. The passive construction further emphasizes their lack of agency by foregrounding the victims while backgrounding those responsible for the exploitation.

From the perspective of writer–reader positioning, BBC Arabic directs readers' attention primarily to the victims' experiences and suffering rather than to the perpetrators' identities. By omitting information about those responsible, the article frames forced prostitution as the outcome of a broader cycle of violence and exploitation faced by migrant women. This narrative strategy encourages readers to interpret prostitution not as an individual choice but as a consequence of structural violence and human trafficking.

This finding is consistent with the study by Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al., which argues that the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by migrant women, including unsafe migration conditions, violence, and displacement, are frequently exploited by trafficking networks for sexual exploitation (Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al., 2025). Nia's experience illustrates how prior exposure to violence heightens migrant women's vulnerability to forced prostitution while constructing them as objects of sexual and economic exploitation through transnational trafficking networks.

Migrant Women as Subjects of Survival and Resilience

Despite being frequently represented as objects of violence, BBC Arabic also portrays

migrant women as subjects through their resilience and survival strategies. One example appears when the article describes how many women continue their journey despite being fully aware of the risks they may face.

تعرف كثير من النساء هذه المخاطر، ومع ذلك يواصلن الرحلة.
يحملن الواقيات الذكرية معهن أو يستخدمن وسائل منع الحمل
مسبقاً تحسباً للاغتصاب أثناء الطريق

Many women are aware of these risks, yet they continue their journey. They carry condoms or use contraception beforehand as a precaution against rape during the journey.

This excerpt highlights migrant women's agency in responding to the risks associated with irregular migration. The verbs "يواصلن" ("continue")

and "يحملن" ("carry") position women as subjects

because they actively decide to continue their migration and adopt preventive measures to protect themselves from potential sexual violence. Their awareness of these risks and the strategies they employ demonstrate resilience and the ability to make decisions under extremely difficult circumstances. Rather than being portrayed solely as passive victims, migrant women are represented as individuals who actively negotiate the dangers they encounter throughout their journey.

Although the phrase "تحسباً للاغتصاب" ("as a precaution against rape") acknowledges the persistent threat of sexual violence, it primarily serves to explain the context in which women's survival strategies emerge. Thus, the discourse emphasizes not only their vulnerability but also their determination to continue despite the risks.

From the perspective of writer–reader positioning, BBC Arabic guides readers to understand migration as a survival strategy rather than a voluntary choice. By highlighting women's awareness of the dangers and their efforts to protect themselves, the article encourages readers to recognize the resilience of migrant women while also acknowledging the structural conditions that compel them to make such decisions.

Borges argues that many migrant women continue their journeys because migration is perceived as a strategy for protecting themselves and their families from life-threatening conditions (Borges, 2024). Based on Borges's view, the

decision to migrate is best understood as an act of survival rather than a freely made choice. In this context, the various preventive measures described in the article demonstrate the resilience of migrant women in confronting structural violence while striving for safety and a better life. Another example of migrant women as subjects of survival and resilience is found in Esther's account of seeking asylum after escaping sexual exploitation in Libya. The article portrays her persistence in pursuing international protection despite the numerous challenges she encounters throughout the asylum process.

وبعد ٤ أشهر من التعرض للاستغلال في ليبيا، هربت إستير
وعبرت البحر المتوسط في قارب مطاطي، حيث أنقذها خفر
وقد تقدمت .السواحل الإيطالي وتُقلت إلى جزيرة لامبيدوزا
بطلب اللجوء ٣ مرات قبل أن تمنح صفة اللجوء

After four months of being exploited in Libya, Esther fled and crossed the Mediterranean Sea in a rubber boat, where she was rescued by the Italian Coast Guard and taken to the island of Lampedusa. She applied for asylum three times before finally being granted refugee status.

This excerpt illustrates Esther's resilience in seeking safety after experiencing prolonged exploitation. The verbs "هربت" ("fled"), "عبرت" ("crossed"), and "تقدمت" ("applied") position Esther as the subject by emphasizing her active efforts to escape violence, continue her journey, and pursue international protection. These actions demonstrate her determination to survive despite the severe challenges she faces throughout the migration process.

The discourse also reveals that institutions and authorities constrain Esther's agency. The phrases "أنقذها خفر السواحل" ("the Italian Coast Guard rescued her") and "تُقلت" ("was taken") place Esther in the object position, since her safety depends on others' actions. The statement, "تقدمت بطلب اللجوء ٣ مرات" ("she applied for asylum three times"), highlights the bureaucratic barriers she faces in accessing protection and shows that her efforts to rebuild her life remain subject to institutional procedures beyond her control.

From the perspective of writer–reader positioning, BBC Arabic guides readers to view

Esther not only as a survivor of sexual exploitation but also as a woman who persistently struggles to obtain legal protection. By emphasizing her repeated asylum applications, the article encourages readers to understand that the challenges faced by migrant women continue even after escaping violence. Esther's testimony invites readers to see her experience as reflecting broader structural barriers in the international asylum system rather than an isolated case of individual suffering.

Jansson describes prolonged asylum procedures as a bureaucratically produced condition of stuckness that leaves asylum seekers with limited control over their lives (Jansson, 2024). Isaac extends this argument by showing that migration bureaucracy governs through temporal dispossession, transforming waiting into a mechanism of institutional power (Philipson Isaac, 2022). Esther's experience illustrates that migrant women's resilience is not limited to surviving gender-based violence but also involves negotiating institutional systems that continue to regulate their lives after migration.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of migrant women in a BBC Arabic news article using Sara Mills' Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on subject-object and writer-reader positioning. The findings reveal that migrant women are predominantly represented as objects of sexual exploitation, human trafficking, rape, and forced prostitution under unequal gender and power relations. At the same time, they are positioned as subjects through their personal testimonies, survival strategies, and continued efforts to seek protection, including pursuing asylum despite prolonged uncertainty. This representation acknowledges migrant women's agency without overlooking the structural conditions that constrain their choices. This representation acknowledges migrant women's agency while recognizing the structural violence, trafficking networks, and institutional barriers that continue to shape their lives.

In terms of writer-reader positioning, BBC Arabic constructs a humanitarian discourse by foregrounding migrant women's voices and experiences while encouraging readers to

empathize with their struggles. Through lexical choices, direct quotations, and narrative structure, the news article guides readers to interpret sexual exploitation and gender-based violence as structural issues rather than isolated incidents. This finding confirms Sara Mills' argument that discourse not only determines the positions of subjects.

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