Five Questions About Arab Women's Activism Five Years After the 'Arab Spring'

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Abstract:

The Arab world witnessed unprecedented waves of revolt in 2011, which have taken the whole world by surprise, and led to many unexpected outcomes and varying results. Five years after this wave of revolt, it becomes necessary to examine its wide array of effects, especially on certain groups who played a significant role in the midst of these uprisings, such as youth and women. This article addresses a number of important points pertaining to Arab women and their future, such as the effect of the turbulent political environment in the Arab region on Arab women's movements and their ability to organize; the impact of violations of human rights and the curbing of media freedom on Arab women's online and offline activism; the implications of the prevailing environment of fragmentation and polarization in many parts of the Arab world on Arab women's activism, both offline and online; rethinking the potentials and limitations of "cyberactivism" and "cyberfeminism" in terms of enhancing Arab women's empowerment, activism, and inclusion; as well as coming up with a more inclusive and comprehensive approach, which accounts for different categories of Arab women, when rethinking the notion of "cyberfeminism."

Five years ago in 2011, the whole world's attention turned to the Arab region, where massive waves of citizen revolt swept across several Arab countries, starting in Tunisia and spreading to Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, shaking the thrones of long-time dictators, while shocking the world with a multitude of varying outcomes and unexpected results. Five years later, it became obvious that the path to de-

mocratization in many of the so-called 'post-Arab Spring countries' is far from smooth or straightforward. Syria is suffering from a brutal, ongoing civil war and an enormous, unprecedented humanitarian crisis.Egypt relapsed back to military rule, after overthrowing President Morsi in 2013, in what has been described by some as a military coup and by others as a popular uprising. Libya is in a state of total chaos and anarchy to the extent of becoming a stateless state. Yemen has internal rifts and tensions, which violently escalated due to military intervention from other countries, especially its powerful neighbor Saudi Arabia. Bahrain became the forgotten revolution or the invisible revolution, which no one talks about or pays enough attention to, primarily due to safeguarding the strategic interests of predominantly Sunni neighboring Gulf countries, as well as the strategic interests of Western superpowers, especially the United States. The only exception to this twisted and bumpy road to democracy and reform is Tunisia, which was recognized internationally by awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to some of its parties, hailing their peaceful and bloodless rotation of power, through effective coalition building.

Taking into account this complicated new picture in the Arab region and the fact that many activists who instigated and coordinated these massive protests relied on social media and new media to enact socio-political transformation, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "cyberactivism," which is the use of new media to advance a cause which is difficult to advance offline (Howard 2011), it becomes essential to revisit this process and its potentials and limitations in the context of current developments and transformations in this rapidly changing region. This is especially important in light of the initial moment of social media euphoria at the inception of these new waves of sweeping revolt in the Arab world, which was reflected in the widespread description of these movements as "Egypt's Facebook Revolution," "Tunisia's Twitter Uprising," and "Syria's YouTube Uprising" (Khamis and Vaughn 2011a, 2011b).

It is also especially important in the case of Arab women, in particular, who played an important, central, and visible role in the instigation, continuation, and amplification of these 'Arab Spring' movements. Hundreds of thousands of Arab women throughout the region, in-

cluding in some of the most traditional, conservative countries, like Yemen and Bahrain, took to the streets, alongside men, calling for an end to dictatorship and repression and demanding dignity and freedom (Radsch 2012, 2011a, 2011b; Khamis 2013, 2011; Krajeski 2011). In doing so, they were not confining themselves to stereotypical gender roles, such as nurturing or supporting men in their struggle for freedom. Rather, they assumed non-stereotypical gender roles by being in the front lines of resistance, risking their own lives, and exposing themselves to the dangers of arrest or assault (Al-Malki et al. 2012; Khamis 2013). Here it is worth mentioning that even though many women have historically assumed such front line roles in the midst of many conflicts, such stories of women's bravery and heroism have not necessarily made it to mainstream historical (mis)representations, in both the literature and the media, which predominately and consistently stereotyped men as active and bold in facing danger, and stereotyped women as passive.

Many of these women became iconic figures and role models, not just for other women, but for fellow men citizens as well. For example, Tawwakul Karman, the Yemeni activist and journalist, who was the first Arab woman to win the Nobel prize, Asma Mahfouz, who was called "the most brave girl in Egypt," due to her very bold vlog on YouTube calling people to go out and revolt on January 25th, 2011, and Ayat El Gomizi, the 20 year old Bahraini young woman, who was arrested due to publically reciting a poem against the king and the ruling family of Bahrain (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013).

Many of these women engaged in a dual socio-political struggle to launch parallel social and political revolutions in their respective countries (Al-Malki et al. 2012; Khamis 2011; Radsch 2012; and Radsch and Khamis 2013), through raising awareness about gender-specific issues, such as sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, and women's underrepresentation in politics and their exclusion from the public sphere.

In doing so, many of these Arab women, who became iconic figures of resistance, activism, and protest, relied on social media to enact

their activism and to get their messages across, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "cyberfeminism," which could be defined as "the innovative ways women are using digital technologies to re-engineer their lives" (Daniels 2009, 103), to raise awareness about women's issues, and to overcome the challenges confronting them. The innovativeness here could be said to stem from both the medium and the message simultaneously, in other words from the new vehicle of transmission in cyberspace, as well as from new forms of expression and new mediated messages and representations.

This was especially evident in the case of some of the women bloggers, such as Tunisian citizen journalist and blogger, Lina Ben Mehni, for example, who reported on the uprisings taking place throughout her country via social media, since her country had few international correspondents and domestic media were tightly controlled, but who additionally addressed women's issues, demands, and concerns through her blog as well, in an attempt to increase awareness about them and to rally public support (Radsch and Khamis 2013). Another example is Egyptian blogger, Nawara Negm, who in addition to tackling important political issues, such as exposing governmental corruption and violations of human rights, through her popular and bitterly sarcastic blog, was also able to address some of the most sensitive, taboo social issues, such as sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo. By doing that, she was able, alongside a number of other activists and bloggers who championed the cause of fighting sexual harassment through launching a number of anti-harassment campaigns, to successfully influence the agenda of mainstream Egyptian media, who felt obligated to tackle this thorny issue in an unprecedented fashion (El Nawawy and Khamis 2013). Therefore, we can simply say that these women bloggers, and many others, were able to break the taboos in both the political and social domains and to create a spillover into the mainstream media domain.

The roles of these Arab women activists five years later, and beyond, have to be closely reinvestigated and reassessed to better understand the political, social, cultural, and communication factors which may be aiding, or hindering, their activism, both online and offline. In this

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context, it would be wise to ask five important questions pertaining to Arab women's online and offline activism, in the context of ongoing changes and developments in the Arab region.

The first question is how does the overall turbulent environment in the Arab world impact women's movements and their ability to organize with some degree of effectiveness? We can argue in answering this question that while political turbulence and upheaval can negatively impact any movement, in general, this becomes particularly more true and more pressing in the case of minorities and marginalized groups, such as women, who are fighting parallel struggles simultaneously. In other words, beside engaging in the political struggle for freedom and democracy that has been, and still is, taking place in many parts of the Arab world, alongside their fellow men citizens, women are also engaging in an equally pressing, ongoing, gender-specific struggle, namely the struggle to secure legal and social gains for themselves, despite many challenges, such as reactionary social forces, the rise of political Islam, the imposition of a top-down, cosmetic feminism, which only serves those in power, and an unsafe public space, which poses the risks of rape, humiliation, and sexual harassment, as tools to curb women's activism and their visibility and participation in the public sphere (Khamis 2013). Five years after the eruption of the 'Arab Spring' movements, the gains which Arab women were able to achieve in the political, social, and legal domains remain very limited, with the exception of Tunisia, the only Arab country which had a relatively smooth transition to democratization, and which was able to secure some reasonable gains for women, such as a specific quota of representation in the parliament. This means that Arab women's political, social, and legal revolutions are still very much a work in progress.

The second related question is how does the increasing violations of human rights and the curbing of media freedom impact Arab women's activism, both online and offline? Here again, while, undoubtedly, such an atmosphere of intimidation, lack of freedom, and restrictions does have negative implications on all citizens, both men and women alike, and on any political or social movement or group, in general, it does have more negative impacts on traditionally marginalized groups,

such as women, in particular. This is especially true since women historically suffered from multiple layers of invisibility and oppression, and their bodies could very well be targeted as sites for struggle and as venues for exercising repression and domination, through physical violations, such as harassment, rape, or virginity testing.

One good example to illustrate the impact of these increasing violations of human rights on Arab women's activism is the fact that many Arab women activists either curbed their offline and/or online activism for fear of arrest and other forms of governmental crackdown and intimidation, or they increased their reliance on pseudonyms and anonymous posts for this same reason. This anonymity, however, could be said to be a double-edged sword for Arab women activists, many of whom found social media to be an excellent window to see the rest of the world, while being seen by the rest of the world simultaneously (Khamis 2013). That's mainly because, on one hand, the factor of anonymity could provide them with the needed protection, not only from political arrests and intimidation, but also from social stigmatization, especially in the most conservative, traditional societies, such as Yemen and Libya, for example. Yet, on the other hand, this anonymity could decrease their visibility, recognition, and credibility, by not allowing them to take credit for their activism or to be associated with it (Radsch and Khamis 2013).

Here it is worth mentioning that although social media are ideally best suited for these women's activism, due to their grassroots, bottom-up nature, anonymity, accessibility, interactivity, and broad international reach, the tightening atmosphere of media surveillance, which now extended to cyberspace, with many Arab governments monitoring social media activism and engaging in advanced "cyberwars" against dissidents and opponents, including activities such as tracing, hacking, and sabotaging activists' accounts and websites, made many forms of "cyberactivism" and "cyberfeminism" highly risky. This resulted in either halting or toning down online activism; resorting to anonymity; or increasing activism from the diaspora, as in the case of many Arab women activists who are carrying out their grassroots activism, both online and offline, while being in exile, such

as members of the Syrian and Bahraini opposition movements, for example (Khamis 2013).

The third question is how does the prevailing environment of fragmentation and polarization, which is characterizing the political scene in many parts of the Arab world today, impact women's activism, both offline and online? For the offline part, we can certainly argue that it can add to the lack of solidarity and the absence of umbrella feminist movements in the Arab world, which has been a sad reality for many years. For the online part, it is important to bear in mind the differing role of social media, depending on the surrounding political environment and the degree of unity and solidarity, or division and fragmentation, which is demonstrated in it. If there is a moment of unity and uniformity motivated by common goals, for example, during the Egyptian revolution of 2011 when all Egyptians across the board chanted the same slogans: "The people want to overthrow the regime" and "Mubarak must go," social media can be very successful in increasing this unity and amplifying the voices of protest, and they can help by acting as catalysts, mobilizers, and networking tools, which can aid the process of transformation and pave the way for change. However, once this moment of solidarity is gone, and is replaced, instead, by deep divisions, severe polarization, and dangerous fragmentation, as witnessed in many 'Arab Spring' countries today, including Egypt after June 2013, then social media can widen the gap between the different groups and increase the tensions and the divisions among them even more, since every group will use its social media venues as effective weapons to attack their opponents and defend themselves, while refusing to listen to their opponents' views.

This could certainly be said to be true in the realm of Arab women's online activism and "cyberfeminism," where the prevailing political divisions and fragmentations resulted in increasingly more fragmented and diametrically opposed movements and groups locally, regionally, and internationally. Many of these groups have their own agendas and their own mediated platforms which are used to propagate them. This makes it harder to solidify women's efforts in any coordinated manner for the purpose of achieving significant political, social, economic, and legal gains. One good example is the deep divisions in the

Egyptian political scene after 2013, which hampered the efforts of women's groups, many of which reflected this highly polarized scene, to join forces together to advance women's issues or to put forward a unified agenda representing Egyptian women across the board under any form of umbrella organization. The only exception again is Tunisia, where women's movements were able to come up with some form of effective, collective coalition building, coordination, and rotation to advance women's issues and to represent their interests, which paid off through securing concrete gains for Tunisian women, legally, socially, and politically.

The fourth question is how can we rethink about the potentials and limitations of "cyberactivism," in general, and "cyberfeminism," in particular, in the realm of enhancing Arab women's empowerment, activism, and inclusion, in light of the developments which have been unfolding in the region recently? In terms of potentials, it is evident that many Arab women activists relied on social media venues, such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter to achieve three main functions, namely: mobilization, education, and documentation. The mobilization function refers to the use of social media to increase the coordination of efforts and to expand networking and outreach, as in the case of rallying international help and support for Syrian women who were rape victims and/or refugees, through increasing the visibility of these disadvantaged groups, both nationally and internationally, in the hope of securing the needed medical, economic, and social support for them. The education function refers to increasing societal awareness about issues of particular salience and significance to women, such as rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and political underrepresentation. This could take place on two levels, namely: educating women themselves about these issues and about their own rights, as well as educating society at large about such issues and what could be done about them. Finally, the documentation function was largely carried out through women's role as citizen journalists, who were able to act as eyewitnesses, in their various capacities as journalists, activists, and average citizens, taking advantage of the immediacy of social media tools and their wide outreach, which ensures that important events will get instant coverage and attention, both at home and abroad (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013).

Despite these important potentials of social media, however, it is worth investigating some of their limitations as well, five years down the road. Some of these limitations include the digital divide between the technological haves and have nots, due to a variety of reasons, such as technical and technological barriers, economic, and infrastructural constraints, as well as educational and digital illiteracy barriers, all of which are prevalent and widespread in many parts of the Arab world, but become more visible and pressing in the case of some segments, such as women and rural populations, for example. There is also the danger of "slacktivism" and "clicktivism," which refers to substituting words for actions, or substituting posting, texting, and tweeting for doing, as well as the fact that social media, no matter how effective they may be, cannot substitute for the absence of organized leadership on the ground and cannot fill the power vacuum resulting from the lack of active and organized civic engagement movements and institutions (El Nawawy and Khamis 2013).It could be said that these social media limitations need to be revisited and reassessed in each of the so-called 'post-Arab Spring countries,' especially in terms of their potential impact on Arab women's online and offline activism.

The fifth, and last, question is how can we come up with a more inclusive and comprehensive approach, which accounts for different categories of Arab women, when rethinking the notion of "cyberfeminism?"This is particularly important since most previous research on this topic focused on certain categories of women, mostly elite, upper middle class, urban women, while excluding women who represent other socio-economic and geographic segments and other demographic profiles. This "urban-centric" and "elite-centric" approach was prevalent and evident in both previous media coverage, as well as previous academic research. Today, it needs to be revisited and reassessed to account for a much broader and more representative umbrella of Arab women activists, especially with the rising tide of activism among women in the diaspora and in exile, as well as the proliferation of new means of communication in rural areas and in less advantaged urban neighborhoods, due to their increasing affordability and accessibility, as well as the growing phenomenon of "secondary Internet users," whereby those who are less digitally literate can depend on others

to help them navigate the realm of online communication (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013). This expansion and extension of the process of "cyberfeminism" to make it more inclusive of a wider array of Arab women can help in overcoming the undesirable phenomenon of "tokenism," whereby certain limited categories of elitist women are constantly overrepresented, whether in mainstream media coverage, in academic research, or in political representation, at the expense of much broader segments of women, who are more representative of their respective societies, but who constantly receive less media coverage, less academic attention, and less political representation, thus projecting largely flawed, skewed, or inaccurate depictions of women's true realities and real needs and demands in this part of the world (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013).

In conclusion, in attempting to find answers to these pressing questions moving forward, it is wise and realistic to bear in mind that the perceived opportunities and threats related to the future of Arab women's activism are directly tied to the uncertainties and the haziness of the political future of their respective countries and the directions they will take in the future. The uncertainty, volatility, and instability which characterize this region during these tumultuous times, make it extremely difficult to chart the political and social road ahead, with all the challenges posed by transitioning to new orders and shaking old ones. This similarly casts doubt on the status of Arab women, the salience of their issues, the future of their struggles, as well as the multiple forms and varying outcomes of their activism, both online and offline.

One thing remains certain, however. Just like there is no turning back on Arab citizen's calls for change, reform, and transformation, despite all the pumps and detours on the road to democracy and freedom right now, there will be, undoubtedly, no turning back on Arab women's strive for justice, equity, representation, and inclusion, despite all the challenges confronting them in both the political and social domains at present. The exact forms, shapes, outcomes, and impacts of Arab women's ongoing socio-political struggles, through both online and offline activism, however, remains to be largely seen, and will be

dictated by both the will of the Arab women themselves, as well as myriad political, social and economic factors which will dictate the future of their own countries simultaneously.

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