

Middle Eastern Women's 'Glocal': Journeying between the Online and Public Spheres

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Abstract:

Despite the fact that the Arab Spring did not necessarily materialize with the political effects anticipated by some of its activists, it has brought into the spotlight the significance of the role of women in direct connection to the online space. In this respect, the article addresses the online world as Middle Eastern women subcultural capital in their traversal to the public sphere, which is otherwise rigorously enforced particularly on women. The hybridity of the private and the public exemplified in the online world in effect plays a pivotal role in rendering the visibility of Middle Eastern women in the political public sphere possible, where new media provides an effective vehicle for those women to establish social and political networks and organizations. Though the goals for those women activists might vary based on the nature of their countries, they have shown to have aptly journeyed between the online and public spheres in order to voice their glocal experiences.

Keywords:

Muslim women, gender, public sphere, Arab Spring

Introduction

Six years have passed since the occurrence of the Arab Spring. Perhaps the Arab Spring did not materialize with political effects anticipated by some of its activists, but it has brought into the global attention the local activism of Middle Eastern women who have utilized the online world as their subcultural capital in their traversal to the public sphere which is otherwise rigorously enforced particularly on women. The proposed article has thus adopted Wellman and Hampton's deployment of the term 'glocalization' which refers to the combination of global and local connectivity aided by new media technology (Hampton 2001:32).¹ In his dissertation, Hampton has posited

that new media technology could act as a facilitator of connecting individuals who are at a distance with those who are local (Hampton 2001:174). Within the proposed study, the term 'glocal' will be operationally used to refer to the way the local activism and experiences of Middle Eastern women have become globally acknowledged facilitated by new media technology. The online sphere has acted in this sense as a gateway through which Middle Eastern women could voice their rights as 'citizens' in the public sphere unhampered by the constraints of norms and traditions of the Arabo-Islamic region where they belong.

The study thus contributes to the literature examining the connectivity between everyday life and social structure, focusing on social spaces and knowledge production with the aim of challenging the dichotomized approaches to the private/public particularly in Middle Eastern societies. The article posits that the visibility of such cohort has been significantly influenced by the access of this generation of women to novel sources of knowledge including their engagement with new media technologies and communicative practices which have increased the prospects of women's visibility in the political public sphere. The public surfacing of Middle Eastern women in an increasingly complex society enfolds a certain accumulative effect (Raudvere 2002:83-85). Gradually, groups that were not long ago marginalized are now integrated in the mainstream aided by new media technology which they can access without much control from state authorities or from male family members. Such new visibility counters the classical dichotomy of public-private and man-woman established in many secularization-modernization theories.

Within the study, the Arab Spring functions as the temporal experience contextualizing the claiming of public space by Middle Eastern women aided by new media technology. To this end, the study will delineate the development of online activism of the women under study as it goes through the three stages of *mobilization*, *documentation* and *sharing* and *cultural dissemination* as concurrent with the development of the Arab Spring itself. Mobilization in this sense refers to the initial stages of the Arab uprisings where these Middle Eastern women call on other people to join in the protests, to be followed by the process of documentation of events, experiences and stances to be shared

by others. Finally comes the stage of cultural dissemination which is operationally defined as the spreading of culture of active citizenry whether on local or global levels in which citizens move from criticizing to helping. While the structure of the article primarily follows the three afore-mentioned stages of development of online activism, it has taken into account the differences that might exist among Middle Eastern societies as regards to women's access to the public space. The article has thus opted for the cases of Tunisia, both Yemen and Egypt, and Saudi Arabia as exhibiting three levels of access ranging from relatively more open, open, to closed societies, respectively.

As the article draws on a critical analysis of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, the first part of the article will be devoted to a brief introduction of the theory and its critique and the way it is applied in Arabo-Islamic contexts, followed by a delineation of the online activism of Middle Eastern women across the stages of mobilization, documentation and sharing, and cultural dissemination. The article is based on content analysis and discourse analysis of the views, experiences and challenges encountered by the women under study as demonstrated in new media utilities including Facebook, Twitter, weblogs, and Youtube, in order to attain an in-depth understanding of the visibility of Middle Eastern women under study within a dynamic political situation.

The public sphere

The notion of public sphere has been launched by Jürgen Habermas to describe the space intersecting between the political and social life positioned outside the state apparatus without being identical to civil society, where private citizens get engaged in critical public debates which are conducive to forming public opinion and thus impact the formal state apparatus (Postone 1992:164). The public sphere constitutes the domain upon which the pivotal questions of democracy are based on both the conceptual and institutional levels (Gole 2003:27). In this context, the public sphere denotes the domain of social life where issues of common concern could be both unrestrainedly and overtly addressed by citizens, molding and affecting public opinion (Thomas 2004:230). The notion of the public has developed

dialectically with that of the private sphere (Mitchell 2003:132) where the lines defining the public space of the city could be the lines between public and private properties (Madanipour 2003:217). In his seminal work *Keywords*, Raymond Williams has delineated the notion of the public in Anglo-American ideas and practices (Williams 1983). He has stated that between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, the private surfaced as a domain of generalized privilege, seclusion, and shelter from others, liberated from public inspection.

The Habermasian public sphere should not be deemed however as a universally accessible public space (Eley 1992:36). The traversal of boundaries between the private and public spheres has been a controversial topic particularly within women's movement and feminist studies, where debates have been carried out about depicting the private as the political and generating alternative counter public spheres, or the possible disintegration of the private sphere under the impact of mass media and the ensuing need to safeguard the private sphere (Wischermann 2004:184-185).

Though such public-private dichotomy was applied universally, it lay a great focus on Arabo-Islamic cultures (al-Guindy 2007:172). The Arabo-Islamic region is generally characterized by a space-based patriarchy where men are depicted as located in the public space, and women in the private space (Sadiqi 2011:3). In spite of the varying levels of gender differentiation and segregation from one society to another within the Arabo-Islamic region, its public generally emblemizes less an arena of deliberation than submission to authority, as part of a project geared toward fostering and securing a uniform model of moral behavior (Hirschkind 2006:105).

Women's negotiation of boundaries in Middle Eastern societies

Along time, privacy and publicity have become however negotiated within the changing political, economic and cultural relations between state and society in such regions (Shami 2009:19). That particularly applies to women where the first half of the twentieth century witnessed new forms of women's participation in the public life by means of unveiling, education,

employment and political participation (Lapidus 2011:861-862). State formation, economic development and urbanization have been conducive to incorporating women into the workforce. As a result of educational reforms during the nineteenth century, women started to speak for themselves and to communicate platforms that would voice their needs and desires.

Conspicuously, media has played a substantial role in providing a gateway to women's entry to the public sphere. The mass media also disseminated new values and tastes and more importantly the cognizance of Western lifestyles (Lapidus 2011:861). As early as 1891, Fatma Aliye Hanem made use of the press in the Ottoman Empire by publishing a book on women to promote her ideas on women as wives, mothers, and Muslims (Lapidus 2011:857). Women's newspapers increasingly emerged in Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and women's educational and charitable organizations were set in association with publications.

While some women were satisfied with the idealized roles as wives and mothers, others wanted to participate in the politics of independent nations. Women's social activism in the Middle East region was thus ensued by political involvement (Lapidus 2011:858-860). Women have played important roles in politics as in the revolutionary struggles of the Palestinian movement, Iran and Algeria. Those movements have mobilized women to organize, demonstrate, make speeches, and in some cases to fight.

Though the modern national state endeavored to re-demarcate family structure and women's roles, the traditional position of women stood as an impediment to further change (Lapidus 2011:860-862). Among the post profound impediments to change were the deeply entrenched cultural beliefs of both men and women. Low educational attainment combined with family and social beliefs lowered the integration of women into the workforce as well as their political participation. The post-revolutionary period in a number of Islamic countries thus demonstrated a reaction and a withdrawal of women from active political participation.

The massive efforts to curb the activities of women have in fact promoted the most vibrant women's reaction in Middle Eastern societies (Lapidus 2011:866). In Iran, for instance, Educated Iranian women who were driven back in the Khomeni program have established *Zanan*, a monthly women's magazine. They have called for the reinterpretation of the Qur'an and questioned male critical interpretations.

With the advent of new media technology, the online space has helped women activists propose redefinitions of political identities, actions, and locales, which could open another sphere to the plurality of public spheres that feminists have advocated for (Kenway and Nixon 1999:465). New media has then been deemed as a vehicle toward exploring concepts of freedom, empowerment and the transcendence of physical suppression (Haraway 1985). Feminists such as Haraway have further entertained the idea of how hyperreality could allow imagining 'a post-gender world' (Haraway 1985:66). By the turn of the millennium, the idealistic views of the first generation of digital democracy were replaced by a more precise picture of the online space as *not* THE solution to the political crisis but a tool which if properly utilized by social movements and associated by public policies could eventually greatly impact the functioning of political systems (Vedel 2003:213-214).

Middle Eastern women's online activism within the Arab Spring

Recently, the Arab Spring has remarkably witnessed the leadership and activism of Middle Eastern women who have played pivotal inspirational roles and initiated forms of online activism owing to their passion for change and their good command of new communication tools (Radsch 2013:881). The Arab Spring itself was hailed as a 'Facebook revolution' where social media has played a pivotal role in establishing communication networks during the different phases of the uprisings. New forms of media, notably online space, has become pivotal in imparting new spaces for varied and significant views of contemporary life in the region and proposing various role models from across the gamut of political, social, economic and religious experiences. As Bayat has rightly posited, the idea of 'change'

in Middle Eastern societies used to be examined with a largely Western Orientalist outlook that could date back to the eighteenth century, if not before (Bayat 2013:10-11). In this sense, Middle Eastern societies which are essentially equated with the religion of Islam were depicted as locales of historical continuity rather than historical change, where if change were to happen, though uncommonly, it would take place via military, elites, external forces, but not through the people. The Arab Spring has obviously quivered the underpinnings of such perspectives, where distinct and novel forms of agency and activism have surfaced in the Middle East that do not receive sufficient attention since they do not fit into the dominant categories and prevailing imaginations.

Middle Eastern women who have emblemized an integral part of such outlook have benefited from that political momentum to call for their rights as citizens. As delineated in the case studies presented in this article, Middle-Eastern women's online activism has acted as a subcultural milieu facilitating their journeying between the private and the public, the social and the political, the local and the global. Those women's sense of citizenship has constituted the primary principle of their identity, thereby transcending the different identities premised on gender, religion and class as superseded by the unifying experience of the Arab Spring (see Asad 2003). Women of different ideologies hand in hand with men have thus organized demonstrations, mobilized like-minded individuals or disseminated updates via social media (Gray 2015:182). Those women have played a substantial role in laying the foundation for political change and social reform (Khamis 2010). The synergy between the social and the political could be evidenced from the discourse of Middle Eastern women who seem to link between calling for action against despotic regimes and urging their struggling Arab sisters to attain their rights in a male-domineered society.

The cohort investigated in the present study is made up of Middle Eastern women who seem to have experienced some form of transformation of boundaries between the private and public spheres facilitated by new media (Roberts 2014:94). The novel forms of online communication in this sense do not solely work on opening the 'oligarchic' public sphere to

a periphery of novel actors, but more importantly pluralize and distribute, in various ways, forms of public speech by using languages and occupying spaces which traditional politics may quite often not take notice of (Cardon 2012:70). The transformation voiced via online space has gone through the three stages of ‘mobilization’, ‘documentation and sharing’ and finally ‘cultural dissemination’ as concurrent with the development of the Arab Spring itself.

Online space as a mobilizing tool

Some years before the Arab Spring, Arab women have deployed the online space as a vehicle to call for action against some despotic Arab regimes. As early as 2007, the Yemeni Tawakol Karman, acclaimed as the Mother of the Arab Spring has published a valiant article in the *al-Thawri* newspaper and the *Mareb* Press website raising the alarm against the danger facing the state of Yemen and outlining the choice between (deposed) President Ali Abdallah Saleh and his regime on one side, and opposition parties and trends on the other.² Karman has further called for a ‘complete peaceful uprising’ (*intifāda silmiyya kāmila*) with the objective of ‘overthrowing the corrupt regime’ ‘*isqāt al-nizām al-fāsid*’ The numerous comments made in response to this article could illustrate the powerful impact of Karman’s words on its readers; supportive reactions such as ‘a woman worth thousand moustaches (i.e. men)’ (*imra’a bi-’alf shanab*), ‘should be done’ (*al-mathlub-fi’lahu*) or ‘with you till the end’ (*ma’ik hatta al-nihāya*), to mention but a few.

At the outset of the Arab Spring, Middle Eastern women have utilized the online space to participate in the protests as was the case with the viral vlog posted by the young Egyptian Asmaa Mahfouz before 25 January in which she posted that, ‘I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square and will stand by myself and hold up a banner so that people may have some honor.’³ As mentioned elsewhere, being a woman did not seem to act as an obstacle for Mahfouz to participate in the protests.⁴ On the contrary, her womanhood was aptly used as a tool to push men into participating in 25 January protests, relying on the quality of *nakhwa* (manliness towards women)

as a commended quality among Arab and Muslim men. She said, 'Any man who considers himself as such should join me in Tahrir protests. Any man who says women should not go to the protests because they usually get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th.' Moreover, Mahfouz has urged people to deploy new media tools as mobile phone short messages and other Internet communication facilities to make others aware of the protests. Her viral video has not been only popularly credited to have helped inspire thousands of Egyptians to participate in the 25 January protests, but has been further acclaimed as to trigger the Egyptian government's decision to block Internet facilities (Hosni 2016). An exaggeration as it might be, it could demonstrate the strong impact of cyberspace as a powerful tool for social movements toward democratic governance (Wellman 2002).

Online space as a tool for documentation and sharing

In addition to 'mobilization', Middle Eastern women have used the on-line space as a vehicle for documenting ongoing events and disseminating information about the uprisings at its outset. In Tunisia, street demonstrations were uploaded to well-known opposition sites and blogs thanks to the likes of the online activist Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni via her ATunisianGirl.blogspot.com. Ben Mhenni is believed to be the only blogger available in Regueb and Kasserine when security forces massacred people there at the outset of the Arab Spring. In this respect, the cherished pictures and accounts of deaths and injuries from Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine posted by Ben Mhenni acted as the catalysts that have galvanized more Tunisians out onto the streets in protest and have supplied satellite networks with news feeds.⁵ Ben Mhenni is also known to be one of the few Tunisian online activists who courageously blogged and tweeted using their real names under deposed President Ben Ali's rule.

Ben Mhenni's online activism has further emphasized the role of the on-line space as a domain for sharing among activist youth notably the female. Her trilingual blog, conveying an element of glocalization, emphasizes the idea of sharing experiences and stances among women rendering courage

contagious. In response to an article written by Mhenni entitled: 'Tunisia: The short dresses disturb the police' (*Tunisie: Les robes courtées dérangent la police*) where she attacked the attitudes of some policemen toward her female friend who was abused for wearing a short dress, a Facebook friend has narrated a similar experience with the police and how she has shown them that she was not afraid: (they knew I was not afraid of them) (*..ils ont suque je n'avais pas peur d'eux*).⁶ The reciprocity of such element of sharing among Middle Eastern women could also be detected from Mhenni's reflection on the Egyptian blogger Shahinaz Abdel Salam's book (*Egypt: The Beginnings of Freedom*) (*Egypte, Les débuts de la Liberté*), which the former describes as 'a book which relates the life experience, the experience of a whole generation of bloggers and online activists who have dreamt, still dream and will keep on dreaming of changing the world in spite of all obstacles they may encounter on a path paved with thorns.'⁷

Online space as a tool for disseminating a culture of active citizenry

Six years later, the activism of Ben Mhenni and other young Middle Eastern women during the Arab uprisings is still ongoing but perhaps as developing with the development of the path of the Arab Spring. Lina Ben Mhenni, for example, who had reported human rights violations when security forces massacred people at the outset of the Arab Spring has transformed her activity within a democratically transforming Tunisia to disseminating a culture of human rights in Tunisian prisons. In her 'A Tunisian Girl' blogspot, she narrated how she has launched her 'Books to Prisons' initiative when she has learned how prisoners, particularly political prisoners, would go on hunger strikes to claim for their rights to read in prisons.⁸ She has also expressed her worry about how some of the books she has seen on the shelves of the prison library, which are Islamic fundamentalist in nature could be a fertile ground for fundamentalism and recruitment of Tunisians by extremist groups. When she learnt that offering books to prisons was possible after the submission of a request to the General Directorate of Prisons and rehabilitation centers, she and her father first decided to send some of their personal books to one or two prisons. Within her deployment of cyberspace as a domain for 'sharing',

Ben Mhenni has announced the beginning of the initiative on her personal book profile. To make her initiative larger, she decided to launch a special page for the initiative to receive more than 2,500 responses and to get more than 10 thousand books. In cognizance of the impact of the different tools of the online sphere as a powerful vehicle for communication, the information posted on Ben Mhenni's blog has been collected to be published on Youtube,⁹ and she has also alerted viewers on Twitter to her project¹⁰ in order to expand her public as arising in relation to the circulation of texts (Warner 2002:49-50). Ben Mhenni is still pursuing her project, quoting her, as her small contribution in the dissemination of a culture of human rights.¹¹

Conspicuously, these women online activists have reached some level of what I may call 'active citizenry maturity' with the budding democratic transformation materializing in the Middle East. The young Tunisian blogger Amira Yahyaoui could provide a tangible example of how her role as an activist could be transformed with the ongoing democratic transformation in Tunisia. 'Before, I was an activist against,' she says. 'How can I now build? We have to engage ourselves as youth, and then engage the work.'¹² During Ben Ali's regime, Yahyaoui was a member of the Tunisian anti-censorship and freedom of speech movement. Following the Tunisian revolution in early 2011, Yahyaoui was able to demonstrate how the role of civil society could transform from one that criticizes to one that helps. She is the founder and head of an NGO, *Al-Bawsala*, which monitors the Tunisian Parliament, Constitutional Assembly, and city halls and makes its data available to the Tunisian public to foster openness between the new government and its people.¹³ Through *al-Bawsala* and using new technologies, Tunisian citizens have become able to post questions for their parliamentarians and to receive their responses. The responses are further announced online for all readers to access.¹⁴ The goal as pointed by Yahyaoui is to educate Tunisian citizens who have previously lived under a corrupt dictatorship as to why their new government is significant in their day-to-day lives. She believes that while some reform has taken place among representatives, the public has not and this is what her NGO is working on changing.

In addition, Yahyaoui is a staunch believer of the role of women in the Tunisian revolution and thus works on advancing Tunisian women's fundamental rights. She posts, *I try to understand why someone can be against something as beautiful as freedom of expression or gender equality.*¹⁵ She envisages women's rights as the respect of women and their access to the public sphere just like men. For her, this does not solely mean the existence of an article in the constitution that would guarantee gender equality, but the translation of that equality in terms of allotting 50 percent of the ballot of any party to women. That, according to Yahyaoui, would not only ascertain that women will always be represented in the government, but that they will be actively recruited and educated by all parties. She works out of her conviction that they should chart their own approach to democracy in Tunisia believing that they *'have this huge responsibility to show to the world, and to the Arab world, that we can succeed. Even if we are focusing in Tunisia, we are doing it for the entire region.'*¹⁶

Online women activism in more conservative societies

Perhaps such form of active citizenry and inclusion of women could be expected in cases such as Ben Mhennior Yahyaoui who live in an open climate for women as Tunisia, but how could it materialize within closed and segregated societies like Saudi Arabia? With the momentum of the Arab Spring, Saudi women were seeking their right to vote in municipal elections like men as a form of inclusion (Young 2000). Still, Saudi women were not allowed to participate in 2011 elections because of the kingdom's social customs, as announced by King al-Saud. Following the examples of women's early endeavors to access the public sphere in women-confined contexts (Badran 2009), Saudi women managed to reach a middle ground by means of creating their own municipal elections in parallel to men's as a means toward their inclusion in a semi-public sphere. Through 'Baladi' (My Country), a woman national initiative campaigned online, Saudi women were called on to join on Facebook toward attaining the full participation of Saudi women in municipal elections as voters and candidates amid debates over the conflict between law and tradition. In spite of the efforts made, the turn-out was low for Saudi women since many did not

have personal ID cards, a requirement for voting. Though Saudi women could obtain ID cards without obtaining any one's permission, their lack of freedom of mobility in order to access the public space has made it difficult for some women to have ID cards. In addition, some women were not able to make it to the voting points due to their lack of mobility. Though there is no law that bans women from driving in Saudi Arabia, there is an unwritten rule supported by conservative Saudi Muslim clerics that has been enforced since 1957.

The online activism calling for women's participation in municipal elections has thus temporarily shifted to a campaign demanding that Saudi women should have the right to drive. Interestingly, the online campaign included a picture of a face-veiled woman driving while raising her two fingers as a token of success,¹⁷ which could exhibit that women could access the public space unrestrained by the distancing imposed by the face veil (Badran 2009). As stated on the *Women2Drive* website, the campaign aims to revive up a national campaign and to encourage women to post pictures of themselves while driving on social media.¹⁸ The first witnessed campaign took place in 1991, but apparently might not have garnered the same publicity or at least its publicity might not have had the chance to be quantified unlike the latter ones via social media tools such as number of viewers, followers or likes.

Though the tools used in the 2011 and 2013 campaigns were largely similar including Youtube, Facebook or Twitter, the discourse involved did not seem to be quite the same. In 2011, the rationale provided by Manal al-Sharif, a Saudi woman who posted online an 8-minute video of herself driving while explaining why Saudi women should drive, was necessity in cases of emergency, or when the husband or the man expected to take care of the woman was not around.¹⁹ The video was viewed more than 7 thousand times before it was taken down four days later,²⁰ which does not only unveil the state's harshness against women who are not expected to voice their rights, but also the state's awareness of the impact of social media in disseminating ideas among other women. By 2013, the cause of driving has become a matter of a citizen's right particularly as it was associated

with the right to vote or nominate oneself in elections demonstrating the maturation of women's online experience as dovetailed with the new democratic encounter materializing in the Middle East. Al-Sharif's words when invited by TEDGlobal in June 2013 could emblemize such maturity when she started her speech by asserting that people all over the world fight for freedom and rights whether against oppressive governments or oppressive societies, and by referring to herself as 'a woman (who was) always proud of (herself).'²¹ As part of her speech, she narrated how a Saudi woman named Najla al-Hariri drove before her, but though the latter had driven non-stop for four days in the streets of Jeddah and though she announced it, al-Hariri was not arrested since she did not video her driving act online - emphasizing the pivotal role of the online sphere as regards to publicity. Al-Sharif pinpointed that they 'needed proof'; namely, documentation via the online sphere and she played that role by filming herself while driving. She narrated that she got arrested for nine days for such act, but that by setting an example, some one hundred brave Saudi women later were driving but none were arrested this time, proudly announcing that 'we broke the taboo.' Through voicing her dilemma between the two totally different perceptions of her personality as a 'proud' Saudi woman who loves her country but who wants to change her society, al-Sherif has touched on the dynamism between the subject's inner space of consciousness and the external space of the world as reflecting the dynamism between the private and the public (Madanipour 2003). In this sense, al-Sharif and her likes have reconciled between their individuality as women and the society they live in where both realms are interdependent.

Looking for a celebrity to announce the 2013 campaign, many people contacted refused for fear of losing their followers. But when the 24 years old then French literature undergraduate studying in Canada, Lujain al-Hathloul, was contacted she immediately supported the campaign and the next day she posted a Keek Video, which was viewed by over 5 thousand people which in a way could announce that the 26th campaign for women driving has started. In her video as residing in Canada, she has appeared without covering her face which in itself is a form of claiming the public space, and has urged on women who did not have the chance to join the Drive

campaign in 1993 or in 2011 to join the 26 August 2013 Drive campaign.²² Her feminist stance could be evidenced from the way she has described men who would inhibit them from such practice as ‘oppressive’ stating that no religious legislation (*shari’*) or law prevents them from driving. Upon this understanding, al-Hathloul has emerged as a form of a counter-public - both a *product* and a *prerequisite* of new forms of discursive interaction (Negt and Kluge 1993:94). In this sense, she as one of those subordinated social groups could invent and circulate via online sphere counter-discourses with the aim of formulating oppositional interpretations of their identities and needs (Fraser 1992:123).

In spite of the fierce attacks al-Hathloul has received for posting her video, ranging from death threats and insults to false rumors, she did not back down in her stay in Canada. Rather, she booked a flight to Saudi Arabia and then drove herself from the airport while her father filmed her and posted the video online. The video was voiced by her father who described Hathloul as ‘driving happily’ to her home. Again, we could witness the complementarity between the online and public spheres where she has translated her initiative act via the online sphere into a tangible move claiming the public space, and then she has documented such move online for publicity. As a result of her act, al-Hathloul has been detained by Saudi authorities for more than a month not for defying the ban on women driving, according to some activists, but for her online advocacy for female driving in Saudi Arabia.²³ As al-Hathloul wanted to assume full responsibility and to avert her father’s punishment being responsible for her, she moved to the United Arab Emirates and married a Social Media activist who joined efforts with her to reignite the campaign for women to drive. Combining art and activism via the online sphere, her husband was one of the singers behind a hit Saudi Youtube video *No Woman, No Drive* which satirically calls on Saudi women not to drive since ‘queens don’t drive,’²⁴ thus making fun of the Saudi social belief which many Saudi women activists criticize as ‘a big lie.’²⁵

Thanks to the efforts of the likes of al-Sharif and al-Hathloul, the issue of driving, one of the socially constructed and religiously associated practices,

has become considered by religious authority as ‘not recommended’ rather than *harām* (religiously forbidden).²⁶ The progress as regards to the issue of driving has positively impacted other practices as related to the public sphere such that women have become allowed for the first time to vote and to be candidates in 2015. This does not mean that their path to democracy is no longer fraught with obstacles as they would still have to operate in gender-segregated campaign sites. Women candidates are not allowed to display their personal pictures, and they would need to assign men as representatives during their campaigns in case of having women voters. Yet with all these restrictions, many female candidates have posted their electoral platforms online accompanied with personal photos, and finally around 20 women have won seats in the December 2015 municipal elections.

Concluding remarks

Ever since Habermas theorized about the pivotal significance of the public sphere for modern liberal society, his theory has been widely criticized for its systemic exclusions of various types of people, notably women (Asad 2003:183-184). The public arena according to those critics does not simply constitute a forum for rational debate but rather an exclusionary space. The real challenge here is ‘to be heard’, that is, quoting Asad, ‘to make others listen even if they would not prefer to hear’ (Asad 2003:184). In practice, free public debate is not open equally to everyone since it is always bound by pre-established limits. That particularly applies to Middle Eastern women in Arabo-Islamic cultures. Attempts to study the intricate connectivity between gender, politics and the public sphere have gained momentum in these regions (Wang 2010:17), where ‘women’s visibility, women’s mobility, and women’s voices’ have become instrumental in shaping the frontiers of the public sphere (Gole 1997:61).

The hybridity of the private and the public exemplified in the online world has in effect played a pivotal role in rendering the visibility of Middle Eastern women in the political public sphere possible, where new media provides an effective vehicle for these women to establish social and political networks and organizations (Stephan 2007:62) as conducive to their em-

powerment. Free public debate in this sense does not simply materialize in a matter of abstract, timeless logic, but is ingrained by the time and space taken to build and express a particular argument (Asad 2003:184). The article posits that if the online space has provided the spatial locale for the inclusion of women under study in the public sphere, the developments within the Arab Spring have furnished the temporal locale pertaining to, citing Asad, the kind of person these women have become and want to continue to be. The interplay between the spatial and the temporal is what gives value to the activism of Middle Eastern women under study.

The term 'glocalization' has been borrowed from Hampton to refer to the role played by online media in linking the local with the global and in establishing communities regardless of distance. The women under study have not merely deployed online media to have access to the public sphere, but to foster new communities of potentially 'active' women who could identify with one another and who could learn from each other's experiences. The online shared experiences of the likes of Ben Mhenni could demonstrate how these women's courageous utilization of the online sphere has rendered courage contagious.

It is worthy to note that the activism of Middle Eastern women should not be presented as one category but is conditioned by the historical and cultural variations among them. The article has tried to demonstrate how these women activists have tried in different ways to utilize the online sphere as an alternative online-public - as a tool to reach people and to organize their collaborative activism on the ground in accordance with the specific cultural values of their countries. Following Hampton's theorization, the online media allows people to 'think globally and act locally' (Hampton 2001:174). In this sense, the Middle Eastern women under study who have been aspiring for having more freedom and rights as citizens (just like their Western counterparts) have not violated the norms and traditions of Arabo-Islamic societies where they belong. So an activist like the Saudi Hathloul was filmed as wearing the headscarf while driving to the Saudi borders in respect of the cultural and religious values of the country.

Though the goals for those women activists might differ based on the nature of their countries and though they might stand on different positions within the level of their access to the public sphere and within the democracy continuum, they have shown to have aptly traversed between the online and public spheres in order to enunciate their glocal experiences. Throughout their traversal between the online and the public, different levels of journeying have been crisscrossed - the private and the public, the social and the political, the local and the global. More importantly, different levels of transformations are materializing, whether as regards to the nature of their roles as activists or pertaining to the role of civil society at large.

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Notes

¹ The term *glocal* is believed to have its origins from the Japanese word *dochakuka* which means global localization. Originally, referring to a way of adapting farming techniques to local conditions, *dochakuka* developed into a market strategy when adopted by Japanese businessmen in the 1980s. It is believed that the coining of the English word *glocal* was made by Akio Morito, founder of Sony Corporation. In the 1990s, the term was introduced and popularized in the West by a number of sociologists including Keith Hampton, Manfred Lange, Barry Wellman and Zygmunt Bauman. For further information see Wayne Visser's blog briefing series, "Glocality: Thinking Global and Acting Local in CSR," http://www.waynevisser.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/blog_glocality_wvisser.pdf (July 11, 2011, accessed February 25, 2017).

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¹¹ Lina Ben Mhenni, April 30, 2016, The Initiative “Books to Prisons”: The Idea and the Developments, A Tunisian Girl Blog, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/eg/> (accessed August 11, 2016).

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