



# CyberOrient

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# Arab Women's Changing Identities, Activisms and Resistances in a Changing Region

Sahar Khamis

## Abstract

*The wave of uprisings which swept the Arab world in 2011 did not just instigate a "political awakening" that has shaken the power structures in a number of Arab countries and resulted in dictators fleeing their countries, resigning from office, or facing brutal death. Rather, it also instigated a "social awakening" that has shaken Arab societies' commonly held assumptions about gender roles and women's ability to challenge them. This was evident in the many heroic examples and iconic images of Arab women's multiple activisms and resistances, in both the political and social spheres, which stunned the world and earned its respect and recognition, as evident in the selection of Tawakul Karman, as the first Arab Nobel Prize winner ever, in what has been seen by many as a node to the "Arab Spring" movements, in general, and to Arab women's roles in them, in particular.*

## Keywords

*Libya, politics, cyberactivism, democracy, public sphere, gender, journalism, Arab Spring, Bahrain, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, activism, Muslim women, Egypt*

The wave of uprisings which swept the Arab world in 2011 did not just instigate a "political awakening" that has shaken the power structures in a number of Arab countries and resulted in dictators fleeing their countries, resigning from office, or facing brutal death. Rather, it also instigated a "social awakening" that has shaken Arab societies' commonly held assumptions about gender roles and women's ability to challenge them. This was evident in the many heroic examples and iconic images of Arab women's multiple activisms and resistances, in both the political and social spheres, which stunned the world and earned its respect and recognition, as evident in the selection of Tawakul Karman, as the first Arab Nobel Prize winner ever, in what has been seen by many as a node to the "Arab Spring" movements, in general, and to Arab women's roles in them, in particular (Khamis 2011; Radsch and Khamis 2013).

Therefore, three years after the eruption of this massive wave of revolt, it is mandatory to revisit Arab women's complex realities and to reexamine their multiple roles, challenges, and opportunities in the realm of socio-political activism, with a special focus on their utilization of various mediated modes of communication and self-expression to affect change in their shifting societies, and to analyze how and why they are using them and with what outcomes. This is what this special issue of *CyberOrient* devoted to "Arab Women" aims to achieve, through capturing the complexity of the shifting political, social and communication landscapes in the Arab world three years after the eruption of the "Arab Awakening" movements, with a special focus on how and why they are affecting, as well as being affected by, Arab women's multiple roles, activisms and resistances, in both the private and public spheres, as well as in the political and social domains.

In doing so, it casts a wide net which stretches geographically across different countries in the region, including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, while stretching temporally to cover different time periods: before, during and after the eruption of the "Arab Spring" revolts in 2011.

It also casts an equally wide net thematically, through covering a wide array of topics, including: Egyptian Islamist women's deployment of multiple forms of online and offline modes of expression to enact socio-political change; Libyan women journalists' changing roles, both during, and after, Gaddafi's rule; Bahraini women's deployment of social media tools to enact political change and social reform in their conservative, Gulf country; Saudi Arabian women bloggers' usage of their blogs as tools to express and negotiate their identities, thus contributing to the creation of a new form of indigenous Islamic feminism; Moroccan women's reliance on mediated representations and artistic forms of expression, such as videos, to redefine socio-political boundaries and enact resistance in the context of the February 20th movement; and Jordanian women's reliance on multiple platforms of offline communication to protest controversial legal codes, such as "Article 308," which came to be infamously known as the "Rape Law."

Most importantly, it tackles all of these complex issues through a number of insightful contributions by a highly qualified and impressively diverse pool of experts, who represent both “indigenous voices” from within the Arab region and the “outsiders’ gaze” from Western contributors, while combining the perspectives of academics, activists and journalists; in addition to both women and men’s outlooks on the issues at hand.

Therefore, this special issue hopes to provide the reader with an equally diverse, deep and thorough analysis of the complex, intertwined and shifting realities of Arab women’s multiple struggles and their deployment of mediated modes of self-expression in their quest for political justice and social equity, whether online or offline; whether individually, as independent actors, or collectively, as members of organized movements; whether they embrace secular or Islamist ideologies; and whether they are mainstream or citizen journalists.

By doing so, it hopes to unpack some of the complexities of these phenomena, while complicating some of the simplistic assumptions about them simultaneously, through painting a rich picture that captures the changing and multi-faceted realities of Arab women’s identities, roles, and struggles in an equally, and rapidly, changing region, and their numerous impacts on redefining not only the notions of feminism(s), socio-political activism(s) and resistance(s), but also civic engagement, citizen journalism and cyberactivism.

We hope that our readers will find this special issue not only intellectually stimulating, thought provoking and eye-opening, but also enjoyable to read!

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# Gendering the February 20th Movement: Moroccan Women Redefining: Boundaries, Identities and Resistances

Houda Abadi

## Abstract

*The Arab Spring opened up social and political spaces for women to make demands for gender quality, political and social reform, human rights, and equality. It has produced, changed and reinvigorated contestations around space, citizenship, femininity, religion, and sense of belonging, as women played an increasingly significant role in the revolutionary processes and developments in the region. This article will analyze the online and offline communication strategies that the February 20th Movement employed to answer the following three questions: a) What is the nature of gendered based demands and how are they articulated in February 20th movement?; b) How did the movement's activists discursively construct the gendered subjects and what are the material effects of the discourse; and lastly, c) What forms of expression, tools, and channels were used by Moroccan women activists to ensure the inclusion of gender-related issues and demands in political movement? To answer these questions, this qualitative study will take into account the prevailing political, social and economic contexts of Morocco, in an attempt to interpret Moroccan women activists' experiences, demands, opportunities and constraints and how they contribute to redefining these women's identities, subjectivities and resistances differently. It uses textual and visual analysis of mediated communication materials obtained from the February 20th movement digital campaign videos and website to document not only women's representation within the February 20th movement but also explores the various ways subjects are materially and discursively constituted and circumscribed.*

## Keywords

activism, Muslim women, gender, public sphere, Morocco, Arab Spring

## Introduction

The "Arab Awakening" or the "Arab Spring," caught many off guard, toppled regimes, mobilized masses, and negated many commonly held stereotypes and misconceptions about the region, in general, and Arab women, in particular.

As vast popular youth demonstrations and protests in Tunisia, one of the smallest countries in the region, in terms of both territory and population, and in Egypt, one of the largest countries in the region, succeeded in toppling autocratic regimes and dictatorial governments, similar mass movements spread throughout the Arab world, in the hopes of breaking the chains of fear and oppression. In this sense, the Arab Spring is a historic moment in MENA's history with a true promise of reform and democracy. The decades-long western policy of containment and backing of Arab autocrats for "stability" proved to be a failure (United Nations Human Rights 2013). The Arab Spring demonstrated the unprecedented show of people power to remove Arab dictators.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of these popular uprisings was the visible and significant role played by Arab women, with hundreds of thousands of women representing different ages, socio-economic profiles, and religious and political orientations. Likewise, young women activists from Arab countries which had a relatively long history of women's involvement in public life and visibility in the public sphere (e.g., Morocco and Tunisia) to more conservative and traditional countries where women have been predominantly confined to the domestic, private sphere (e.g., Libya and Yemen) have also started similar campaigns to call for their rights, demand better positions, and secure more representation in their swiftly changing societies (Radsch 2011; 2012). As Nada Darwazah, from the UN Human Rights Middle East Office said, "The Arab uprising has at long last empowered women to claim a larger presence and role in the public arena, which is something revolutionary, and somehow contrary to decades of gender stereotyping" (United nations Human Rights 2013).

Examining how Arab Spring movements manifest, express, and negotiate gender equality is a necessary step, especially in a post revolutionary context. This is particularly important to examine because beside the political turmoil that is still taking place in many parts of the Arab world, there is an equally pressing, ongoing, *gender-specific* struggle, namely: women's struggle to secure political and social gains. This study contributes to understanding how the Arab Spring revolutionary processes opened up social and political



spaces for women. It will shift the focus to a movement that did not call for a regime change. Through textual and visual analysis of mediated communication materials obtained from the Moroccan February 20th movement official websites, this article will focus exclusively on how Moroccan pro-democracy February 20th activists in the movement mobilized new kinds of 'feminisms.' These new form of feminist activism were artistic, indigenous, authentic and created a space where both female and male activists placed gender equality demands as part of the larger February 20th movement.

## Literature Review

### Gender and the Arab Spring: Redefining Boundaries and Resistance?

The Arab Spring produced, changed and reinvigorated contestations around space, citizenship, femininity, religion, and sense of belonging, as women played an increasingly significant role in the revolutionary processes and developments in the region. Women were not just 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 (Khamis 2011). Even though they risked their lives, these brave women made their presence a defining feature within these protests. These protest movements opened up social and political spaces for women where demands of gender quality were being made in addition to calls for political and social reforms.

Arab women activists used Internet Communication technologies to bring visibility to their participation within the movements and were determined to take control of their own destinies. Throughout the revolution, instances of creative activism took on different gendered forms and an emerging digital and cultural underground movement flourished. Women blogged, tweeted, uploaded photos, and reported the revolutions through various online social platforms. These online images served as a powerful display to challenge orientalist portrayal of the oppressed and passive Arab women victims who are in need of western saving. Echoing the abovementioned views, Ghannouchi (2012) argued that these online images deconstructed

the perception of the Arab women as powerless, invisible, and voiceless. Through their active online and offline participation, they showed that these orientalist representations of the Arab women are only imagined.

While the Arab Spring marked an upsurge of new activism by women and concrete gain in some political transitional processes, in other cases, it has been described as the “Arab Winter” for women’s rights (CARE 2013). Many serious challenges still face women, such as the prevailing patriarchal mindset in many Arab societies, stagnant traditions, economic and infrastructural constraints, institutionalization of protest movements, militarization and the security state, and the rise of political Islamic groups to power, some of whom adopt a restrictive agenda on women’s issues and women’s place in society. Not surprisingly, female activists faced a different set of challenges from their male counterparts. Some of the women activists were harassed, tortured and raped. For example in Egypt, women activists were terrorized in Tahrir Square demonstrations and had to undergo the security state’s virginity testing (Amar 2011:300). A blind eye was turned to the gravity of sexual assaults and terrorization of women activists.

Although Arab women fought alongside men to overcome dictatorship and autocracy, “unlike men, women face two battles: the first for political change and the second to obtain a real change of their societal status to become fully equal to their male counterparts” (Alamm 2012:14). Due to a lack of security, oppressive practices returned and reproduced marginalization of women. At a 2012 OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights) regional meeting, an Egyptian participant reported that the situation of women is worse after the uprising and that harmful practices returned due to lack of security. For example, many families are marrying their young daughters out of concern for their safety (United Nations Human Rights 2013). In Libya, rape is a huge problem and female elected officials face a fierce opposition when they propose laws that address women’s rights (United Nations Human Rights 2013). The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report scored the MENA region more poorly in 2012 than in 2011. MENA ranked lowest on economic participation and political empowerment and second lowest on educational attainment

(World Economic Forum 2012). Viewed historically, such results come as no surprise (Al-Ali 2012). Women during post revolutionary transitions are regularly marginalized and loose many of the gains they might have gained during the height of the revolutionary struggle.

## Methods

This qualitative, feminist study relied on a textual and visual analysis of mediated communication materials obtained from the February 20th Movement digital campaign videos<sup>1</sup> (*I am Moroccan I will Protest and Who We Are*) and two films directed by February 20th activist Nadir Bouhmouch (*My Makhzen and Me and 475 When Marriage Becomes a Punishment*). I also used several Internet sources including the main February 20th movement webpage *Mamfakinch*, activists' blogs and YouTube videos that captured street protests.<sup>2</sup> The time frame was limited to the movement's first year

I used visual and textual analysis to document women's representation within the February 20th movement and gendering processes to explore the various ways subjects are materially and discursively constituted and circumscribed. I analyzed the communication strategies employed by the February 20th Movement from to answer the following three questions: a) What is the nature of gendered based demands and how are they articulated in February 20th movement?; b) How are the gendered subjects discursively constructed and what are the material effects of the discourse?; and lastly c) What forms of expression, tools, and channels were used by Moroccan women activists to ensure the inclusion of gender-related issues and demands in political movement? In answering these questions, this study will take into account the prevailing political, social and economic contexts of Morocco, in an attempt to interpret Moroccan women activists' experiences, demands, opportunities and constraints and how they contribute to redefining these women's identities, subjectivities and resistances differently.

## Morocco: The Rise of the February 20th Movement

Morocco, long considered to be one of the most stable Arab countries, has not been immune to the revolutionary waves of protests shaking the Arab

political regimes. Although the Moroccan monarchy has historically enjoyed legitimacy, the political landscape in Morocco shares much in common with its neighboring countries in terms of sociopolitical and economic problems. Inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, young Moroccan activists, known as the February 20th Movement, stood against the so called “Moroccan exceptionality,” created online digital campaign videos explaining dissatisfaction with the monarchy’s top down approach, and called for a national march in all major cities. Unlike their counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the Moroccan activists did not demand a change of regime but instead called for a genuine constitutional monarchy. The social and political protests the February 20th movement sparked in Morocco are not new but the appeal of the movement within the Moroccan streets signaled a major shift in popular attitudes regarding the monarchy and the current sociopolitical situation (Maghroui 2011). Inside the Moroccan kingdom, the February 20th prodemocracy movement mobilized thousands of protestors to the streets to demand greater political reform and social justice.

The February 20th activists voiced their counter narratives in digitalized formats and complemented them with offline aesthetical forms of resistance due to media censorship and political repression in Morocco. They called for major demonstrations to denounce lack of citizen power in relation to the state and to encourage the reformulation of these power relations. The movement brought to the surface the hidden layers of unreported patterns of subjugation and silencing. To make its messages audible, meaningful, and unifying, the February 20th movement used music, reappropriation of national and state symbols, promo videos, films, protest signs, and different social media platforms. Their videos called for universal values of diversity based on ethnicity, language, gender, and class, while simultaneously making claims to Moroccan identity and ‘Moroccan values,’ such as freedom, education, economic social justice, and gender equality. The February 20th movement’s use of different media platforms enable us to examine how discourses are organized and address the processes that allow or disallow access.

## The February 20th Movement and its Visual Strategies

The visual expression of the February 20th movement within campaign videos and protests played an important role in interpolating their subjects and shaping political identities. The visual functions from a universe of culturally shared meaning and serves as resources for the movement. This visual narrative focused its attention away from the prescribed official narrative and the existing social structures and offered a critical counter narrative. For example, the February 20th movement used heavily Fatma's hand symbol in its campaign videos and during its protest marches. After the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks, a national symbol emerged that united the Moroccan people as one people willing to stand together and fight against any transgression to protect their brothers, sisters and their country. The red and green (colors of the Moroccan flag symbolizing nationalism) Fatma hand included two messages: one written in French *Ne touche pas a mon pote* that translates to "don't touch my buddy" and the other one in Arabic that translates to "Don't touch my Country." During these difficult times, the highly circulated Fatma hand state symbol represented a message of unity and oneness of Morocco. The movement and its supporters re-appropriated this same symbol and inserted a new message: "Don't suffocate our nation's Children" and "Don't steal from my Country." The February 20th movement's re-appropriation of the state symbol was a direct response to the regime's accusation that these young activists were terrorists. At the same time, it also served as an indirect critique to the King Mohammed VI title of 'King of the Poor.' It highlighted the severity of poverty and corruption within the nation. By altering the old message, young February 20th movement activists redefined nationalism and patriotism to dignity, economic social justice and freedom.

### A Gendered Collective Identity as a Communicative Strategy

Because of Morocco's vast class and educational divisions, the public is heavily divided on issues of reform and thus the creation of a collective identity becomes empirically important for mobilization and raising political consciousness. Political identity in social movements has three analytical

levels: identity for empowerment, identity deployment, and identity as a goal (Bernstein 2008:277). A sense of we-ness or connection to the movement is essential in order to achieve social change. As such, collective identity plays an important role in meaning making, shaping movement participants' actions and building cohesions within actors over time (Polletta and Jasper 2001). It can be used as a protest strategy and deployed to transform culture, its categories, values, and practices.

The February 20th movement deployed a gendered collective identity as a communicative strategy to push for change. The activists questioned the top-down state-imposed desired citizen and state co-optation of institutions and equated Moroccan citizenry with values of freedom, economic social justice, and ethnic and gender equality. Gender equality became part of the larger discussion of Moroccan citizenry and constitutional reforms. As such, women's issues were not marginalized to the periphery and instead women and men partnered as a team to fight the battle for social and economic justice.

The February 20th movement grounded its political legitimacy in cultural beliefs, values, and local public cultures. It strategically employed identity as a strategy to influence public discourse and achieve cultural resonance. As such, the February 20th activists embedded themselves in popular culture, social media, adoption of local languages (Amazigh and Darija), and moving images in demonstrations to negotiate and navigate between the different Moroccan public(s). The cultural media practice of the movement fueled a "Moroccan Collective Identity" that deconstructed state myths and challenged nationalist and monolithic narratives. For example, the first campaign video opened with a young woman, Amina Boulghabi, a founding member of the February 20th movement. Speaking in the first person, she states "I am Moroccan; I am going out on February 20th because I want a Morocco that belongs to all of us. No to Hate and Yes to Equality" (I am Moroccan Video Protests 2011). A young man follows Boulghabi and states: "I am Moroccan. I am marching February 20th because I want all Moroccans to be equal" (I am Moroccan Video Protests 2011). The faces of young women and men keep changing, each one speaking in first

person while beginning by claiming their Moroccaness and following by stating their reasons for marching. Gender equality is among their many demands.

The call within these videos reconfigures national identity through a culture of contestations and protests-allowing for the diversification of identifications and gender equality. Identity was redefined through replacing the 'I am,' with its defensive closure and insistence of fixity of position, with a more nuanced collective gendered understanding of Moroccaness. Loyalty to the nation was communicated through cultivating the expression "I am Moroccan" and calling on Moroccans to give up old imaginary, remold national narratives, and build local histories that break away from hegemonic state narratives of nationhood. In their *I am Moroccan and I will Protest* campaign video, activists specifically list their motives behind marching which include: freedom, gender equality, better living standards and education, labor rights, a lift on the restrictions on the media and minority rights. These campaign videos clearly illustrate how the February 20th movement activists strategically articulated women's demands and gender specific needs within their respective wider struggle.

These digitalized narratives enable us to take a discursive approach on how the movement used identity frames to invite *all* people to participate. The first campaign video ends with an older woman who spoke in *Daarija* (Moroccan dialect) and called for the right to protest. Her personal story took the longest in terms to narrate and is most striking. She inhabited the persona of a Moroccan grandmother who is suffering the abuse of the corrupt system. Her narrative was affect-driven as one does not expect an older woman to be beaten and abused by the police for her right to protest. She states:

"I am Moroccan and I am going out on the February 20th. I am going to protest... The high food prices are killing me. Every time I tried to protest against the high prices, the authorities abused me. I don't understand why I am afraid and abused in my country. I was in a peaceful protest, and was beaten and harassed by the police." (I am Moroccan Video Protest 2011)

Unlike others in the video who called for concrete material changes, she called for the right and freedom to peacefully protests and assemble.

The shift to an older woman appeals for support, action, and instills in the audience a sense of confidence to mobilize and engage in political contention. On the one hand, she represents an image of a nurturing mother, and on the other, an image of a militant for freedom. In a way her image is halting, as one does not automatically associate an elderly soft-spoken Moroccan woman with activism and mobilization. Yet, the woman's voice portrays a strong sense of involvement, commitment, and strength. This image confounds existing cultural codes and becomes a powerful mode to challenge the system, solidify commitment, and challenge the cultural state of fear and inaction. She appealed directly to the Moroccan people and calls on them to join the protest. To inspire others to join the protests, identity is invoked to express a new massive adherence of the Moroccan people with a notion of citizenship and collective will to endorse a new more inclusive type of social contract and opposes token nationalism devoid of full citizenship rights. These videos propose a discussion of the evolving sense of citizenship and political subjectivities that is based on extensive forms of inclusion inspired by a sense of *intersectionality* (youth and older generation that cut across class, gender and ideological divides).

### Performing a new form of Gendered Citizenship

The framing of the February 20th movement's goals in terms of equality places women's demands and needs at the forefront. The movement's activists call on the Moroccan public to practice critical citizenship wherein women are equal partners with men in their fight for socioeconomic justice. This type of feminism seems to emerge from outside of the traditional spaces of feminist organizations and is carried out by women and men as partners in the struggle of social and economic justice (Salime, 2012:105).

There is a stark difference between the older Moroccan liberal feminist movements that pushed for Family Law Code changes (Moudawana) and the February Movement feminist understanding. The Moroccan liberal



feminist movement sees change through state institutions and working within the government framework where as the February 20th movement has the desire to overthrow those same institutions (Salime 2012:108). Having no constraints, the February 20th movement is not shy to critique the regime for corruption, poverty and social woes. It holds the government at large accountable for political and social repression and refuses to be coopted by the state. As a consequence, this poses a true challenge for feminist movements in Morocco that work within state frameworks; especially when the King made announcement for a new constitution. They view the Moroccan king as an arbitrator and as such are limited with their critiques and agenda for social change.

Women's activism in the February 20th movement differentiates itself from the older feminist movement not only in its understanding of state power and its conscious effort to not be coopted but also in its generational dynamic and negotiation of identities, ideologies, use of social media, and their artistic expression of protests. In a sense, it can be characterized as a departure from the older Moroccan women movement that focused solely on law changes and institutions. Young men and women within the movement acknowledge the struggles and successes of the liberal women's movement but they also distance themselves (Skalli 2013:7). They question the power structure and position themselves within the broader struggles for democracy. The younger generational activists are particularly sensitive to the issues of exclusion that might be produced on the basis of age, religion, gender, race, language and class. For example, February 20th activists ask men and women why they will be participating in protests. Interviewees in this video (Call to Protest in Sahat Hamam Casablanca 2012) all speak in *Daarija* and are equally divided in number between male and female and their grievances range from corruption, unemployment, human rights, illegal use of antiterrorism laws to police brutality, freedom, and equal representation. One woman states I am participating in the protest so I can fight about my rights because no one will bring my rights to my home.<sup>3</sup>

With this type of feminism, women in the February 20th movement were not isolated in their struggle for gender equality; they carved an impor-

tant space for themselves within the movement where they play an equally important role. They participated within all of the aspects of the movement: representation, decision-making, mobilizations, and debate. In most of the their digital campaigns, there was an equal number of male and female. The images from the protests and videos represented women from a wide spectrum: young, old, unveiled, veiled, poor, rich, Arab, and Amazigh. They deconstructed racial, class, and gender identities that reproduce the same old power structures of historical, social, and cultural hegemonies.

These gendered online performances spilled to offline as well where the art of presence of women in the streets was visible at all levels of mobilization, creativity, organization and decision-making. The February 20th movement's artistic modes of engagement involved high visibility for women that challenged traditional feminist representations. Young female activists channeled their demands and expressed political consciousness through different forms of aesthetic resistance such as street theater, flag embodiment, spoken word, graffiti, and street theater. Through these forms of aesthetic resistance, they questioned the construction of 'truth' and relate it to systems of power that is readily consumed and diffused. For example, as a response to the government's allegations of the movement's creation of disunity and violence, the movement organized a performative act in front of the Rabat parliament entitled: "*Freeze for Democracy*" (Freeze For Freedom 2011). The young female and male activists used their bodies to 'perform' their message with utter silence-something that was never seen before in the Maghreb region. They called it 'freeze for democracy' because their bodies were frozen in time and space. As they occupied public space, pedestrians and bystanders walking by had to interact with the protestors as they walked or crossed the streets; making even the ones that were just curious unknowingly participate in the demonstration. As such, the streets were transformed to a performative stage that invited participation in collectivities and construction of self via the protestors and reality they constructed around them. The self and the public became intertwined and interconnected. These simple, but meaningful acts diminish state's governmentality and become a stepping-stone for a further claim that demands legitimacy, socio-economic justice, and human rights.

Similarly, many of the male activists within the February 20th movement label themselves as feminists too. For example, the young male filmmaker and the February 20th activist, Nadir Bouhmouch, sees himself as an activist, artist, and feminist (McManus 2013). In an interview about his two movies on the February 20th movement and women in Morocco, he states:

“Women are half of society, so the struggle for women is half of the greater struggle for political and socioeconomic equity. As Khadija Riyadi told us in her interview for the film, women’s rights and democracy come hand in hand. Women should not just fight for women’s rights, but they must involve themselves in all aspects of society and especially in the fight for democracy. But we should not fall into the trap of fighting for democracy alone, because we also have to fight for women’s rights...” (McManus 2013).

Interestingly, he concludes by critiquing the February 20th movement lack of emphasis on women and states it might be due to their collaboration with *Adl wal Ihsan* (an Islamist movement demanding change as well and working outside the state framework). According to a female Moroccan February 20th activist confirms that *Adl wal Ihsan* (Justice and Charity) negatively influenced the gender equality agenda and gender rights slogans were no longer raised in the protests (El Idrissi 2012). To her, this was a big transformation for a movement that saw women at its forefront. Interestingly, this is no longer the case as the February 20th movement and *Adl wal Ihsan* parted ways and many say that gender dynamics and understanding of women’s role within the movement caused friction and made them part ways. This withdrawal is bitter sweet because it has brought a dramatic drop of numbers.

Bouhmouch’s acclaimed film 475, *When Marriage Becomes Punishment* (2013) underlines the influence and role of patriarchy and how Moroccan women articulate their subjectivity in face of social exclusions and rural poverty. The video traced the life of Amina Filali, a 15-year-old young woman who swallowed rat poison as a way to escape marriage from her rapist. The film sheds light to how patriarchy becomes a force influencing attitudes and laws. The

February 20th activists linked the case of Amina Filali to the self-immolation of the single mother Fadoua Laroui (February 2011). As a mother of two children, Fadoua Laroui could not bear the injustice of being denied the right to social housing in what was believed to be due to her marital status. Laroui is the first Arab woman known to have set herself on fire in protest against socioeconomic inequality (Skalli 2012). To some, Laroui became the “Moroccan Mohammed Bouazzizi” (Lalami 2011). The case of Amina and Fadoua show us the consequences of a patriarchic defined gendered dignity where honor and shame become the main preoccupation. Women and their bodies become sites of contestation and gatekeepers of human passages and a symbolic-cultural site upon which societies in script their moral order (Benhabib 84). Dignity becomes “inscribed in women’s bodies, sexuality, mobility, and the practices of their everyday lives” (Skalli 2012). The February 20th movement brought national and international visibility to cases such as Amina Filali and Fadoua Larouai by mobilizing online and offline to raise political and social consciousness. Thousands of protestors poured the streets of Morocco and demanded gender equality and challenged the patriarchic understanding of gender dignity.

### Discussion and Conclusion: 3acha al Shab! Long live the People

The February 20th movement tailored its communicative messages with local languages (Daarija and Amazigh) and summoned indigenous symbols and narratives to mobilize the Moroccan public. As previously examined, the movement’s heavy repetition and dependency of “I am Moroccan” in both of its campaigns served to establish a political identity and a claim to ‘real’ citizenship. Their overemphasis of “Moroccanness” is to first and foremost ground their grievances and narratives locally to generate a new understanding of politics and women’s status within the Moroccan public.

The February 20th ushered a wide range of repertoires that included the use of various national languages, appropriation of national symbols, pop culture, and ideology to invoke a politicized meaning of citizenship. Language and social imaginaries are as important as institutional changes since they become constitutive tropes for mobilization. Pluralism expressed within

their communication strategies through its manifestations of cultural diversity is mobilized to rebuild a common cultural identity that is enriched by traditional customs, rituals, and symbols. They situated their actions locally as a frame for collective action and for political consciousness.

Through its aesthetic forms of protests, the February 20th movement brought human rights, politics and social issues back to the field of public discourse. Discussions about women's rights have not wavered and are taking place across various borders, from remote southern villages to the streets of Casablanca. The movement has extended the space for contesting state power within the Moroccan Kingdom; smaller towns such as Seffrou, Guelmim, Safi, Larache, Sidi Ifni and Tetouan experiences protests as well and participated in the national debate about reforms (Al Idrissi 2012).

However, the February 20th movement is able to transform Moroccan women's lives in a meaningful way only if they enable a fundamental epistemic shift in how Moroccans interpret citizenship and its relationship to the state, challenge entrenched patriarchic customs, and pressure for political changes. Even though the February 20th movement used a bottom up approach in changing cultural and social mindsets, it continues to face serious challenges. For furthering women's rights in Morocco, we need to examine the obstacles the February 20th movement faces and think of the present as an outcome of continuous struggles. As such, in-depth interviews with not only the February 20th activists but also members of the Moroccan public is necessary to examine whether there is any real epistemic shift in challenging patriarchic customs.<sup>4</sup> Further work is needed to assess whether the message strategies worked within the Moroccan audiences.

In general, the February 20th movement was successful in breaking the chains of fear within the Moroccan streets and called for a national debate on political and social reform. It highlighted the tragic stories of Amina Filali's suicide and Fadoua Laroui's self-immolation to highlight the misogynist and patriarchic laws. It was the February 20th movement and not the older Moroccan women's movements that rallied and protested against misogynist laws and pressured for political change. These two victims

showcase the intersectionality of gender, poverty and oppression. Women's demands were at the core of the February 20th movement's visions and ideas of a new Morocco. As the February 20th movement demonstrates, women's rights and issues are part of the larger debate on the critical understanding of citizenship and rights.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All of the video campaigns are available online, see Call to Protest in Sahat Hamam Casablanca 2012, Morocco campaign #feb20 #morocco 2011 and Second Moroccan February 20th Campaign Video 2011.

<sup>2</sup> This study is only a small part of the larger dissertation project where in-depth face to face interviews will be conducted with February 20th activists.

<sup>3</sup> See Call to Protest in Sahat Hamam Casablanca 2012.

<sup>4</sup> This article is part of a larger project I am currently working on. I will be conducting dissertation fieldwork in Morocco and will interview February 20th activists, politicians as well as people from the subaltern publics.

# Sowing the Seeds of The Message: Islamist Women Activists Before, During, and After the Egyptian Revolution

Mona Abdel-Fadil

## Abstract

*This article focuses on the activities and experiences of a group of Islamist women activists, socialized within the ranks of Islam Online Arabic (IOL). These activists engaged in a range of significant social, political, and media practices, before, during and after the ousting of Mubarak; as individuals, as journalists, as counsellors, as agenda setters and creators of media campaigns. Drawing on longitudinal and ethnographic research, this article is able to highlight and document the continuities in modes of civic engagement and activism across multiple media platforms, organizations, and time. It demonstrates how these women's activism continues to be framed by the (IOL) trope the message, which entails cultivation of self, social, and political awareness. The Egyptian revolution is theoretically conceptualized as a phase of liminality (Turner 1979). Liminality entails upheaval, fear, and promise. The article draws attention to the gendered experiences of the revolution including circumvention of patriarchal structures and the re-negotiations of gender norms. Upon conclusion, it is argued that the message has proven highly adaptable to shifting political scenarios. Indeed, the betwixt and between stage of liminality that Egypt was thrust into after the ousting of Mubarak, was particularly fertile soil for sowing and reaping the seeds of the message.*

## Keywords

*Egypt, activism, gender, public sphere, media studies, Arab Spring*

## Introduction

In the revolution of January 2011, many young Egyptians turned to participatory and social media in conjunction with real-world organizing and demonstrating. That is, participatory media were used as platforms for political activism, a use that activists had increasingly employed to compliment real-world actions. (...) The revolution did not introduce this phenomenon. (Wall and El Zahed 2011:1341).

Drawing on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork and research, I will shed light on how particular group of Egyptian Islamist women activists, engaged in a range of significant social, political, and media practices, before, during, and after the ousting of Mubarak. These activist women were all socialized within the ranks of Islam Online Arabic (IOL), often characterized as one of the most successful and influential religious websites worldwide, until its demise in 2010 (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009; Gräf 2008; Hofheinz 2007).

IOL employees were bound together by a strong “institutional narrative” (Linde 2003) that highlighted the message, *wasatiyya* and empowering Arab and Muslim populations through: self, social, and political awareness.

*The message* entails cultivation of self and social awareness (...) In essence it is a call for the reform of both society and the self. The vision for society is a society that is comprised of socially aware and responsible individuals, who engage in constructive dialogue about a multiplicity of opinions, accept difference, and are able to make informed choices (Abdel-Fadil 2013, emphasis added).

In the following; I shall demonstrate how *the message* lives on in the activities and perspectives of these particular women activists, and how it develops in tact with shifting political scenarios in Egypt. More specifically, I will demonstrate how these women activists participated in the overthrow of Mubarak and the political processes in its aftermath, as: individuals, journalists, counsellors, agenda setters and creators of media campaigns. My focus is on the *actors*, and on these particular women’s interpretations and experiences of their own modes of activism and socio-political and civic engagement, in addition to their gendered experiences of the Egyptian revolution. In this regard, I am following in the footsteps of Moll (2013), Radsch (2012), Radsch and Khamis (2013), Wall and El Zahed (2011), and Winegar (2012). The empirical data presented in this article draws on ethnographic fieldwork amongst these women activists from the beginning of December 2009 until the end of June 2010, and briefer research visits consisting of interviews and/or observation in the spring of 2009, 2011, 2012

and 2013.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this article is able to highlight and document the continuities in modes of civic engagement and activism across multiple media platforms, organizations, and perhaps most importantly, across *time*. Before delving into the activists' experiences, I will briefly introduce the contextual landscape from which they emerged.

## Spreading the Seeds - The Message Across Platforms

Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina<sup>2</sup> constitute the core group of activists that are the focus of this article. They all hold journalism degrees and are young media professionals in their twenties or thirties. These activist women, used to comprise the backbone of the social team of IOL, a website that once employed roughly 350 employees in Cairo. IOL came in to being in order to provide a platform, which fused secular disciplines with Islamic teachings, and, to offer users a contemporary and life-relevant Islam (Abdel-Fadil 2013; Gräf 2008). While many of the founders and employees self-identified as Islamist, they also strongly identified with their secular training. The Social Team which dealt with societal issues, family matters and online counselling - was no exception. The activist women that are the subject of this article, are dedicated and qualified female media-professionals, with a commitment to IOL's socio-political goals.

Significantly, these activists have all been part of working environment that placed great importance on developing self reflexivity, political, and social awareness, promoting interpretations of Islam that are compatible with every day and modern life, and bettering gender relations. The following explanation by Kawther AlKholy demonstrates how omnipresent the trope the message was in the IOL professional context:

You know the famous quote from McLuhan "the medium is the message?" Well, we at IOL, are our message. It is part of the context. The organization itself is *the message* (Alkholy 2009).

In 2009 the organization could be said to be *the message*. Yet, as IOL disintegrated in March 2010, due to new ownership and the intense disagree-

ment that ensued, the social team members offered one another consolatory utterances on ways to keep the message alive:

I am thinking of a rose, you know. It is beautiful and has a lovely smell, but it has a short life (...) spreads seeds that can be replanted, and can grow new flowers. (...) I am thinking that IOL may be just that, our rose, and now we have seeds that we can spread and develop elsewhere (Abduh 2010).

Here, IOL counsellor Samar Abduh describes how the seeds of *the message* may perhaps spread across more platforms and audiences due to the disintegration of IOL.

In the wake of the collapse of IOL, Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina were among the activists who contributed to setting up and running [www.onislam.net](http://www.onislam.net), which was online by August 2010, and was initially envisioned as the successor to IOL in order to spread *the message*. In many ways, it was set up as a replica of the old website in terms of services, structure and themes, yet the activists strove to renew their approach. These activists contributed their time, effort and dedication to On Islam. Towards the end of 2011 it became evident that On Islam Arabic was not economically viable in the long-term fashion that the activists had anticipated, and the website's activities had to be downscaled. Mada Foundation for Media Development, was initially set up to operate [www.onislam.net](http://www.onislam.net), yet proved to be successful in attracting funds for a number of other projects and initiatives. For Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina, this has gradually resulted in a wider range of their socio-political activities being affiliated to Mada, rather than On Islam. In the years 2009 to 2013, these women have been active in IOL, On Islam and Mada. In practice, these different organizations were run out of the same offices in the 6th of October City, and operated with similar tasks and/or foci. The activist's affiliation has ranged from full time employee to volunteer in various varieties, depending on the funding situation and their schedule. As time progressed, the activists maintained their links to Mada, yet found paid jobs in other media outlets.<sup>3</sup>

During the revolution, my research participants were working for On Islam. It is in this capacity Amal, Abeer, Reem, and Amina witnessed and reported from Tahrir.

### Witnessing and Reporting the Revolution - From Tahrir: Journalistic Participation

We used to go to Tahrir square, to get a few stories, to publish them the next day (...) We were dividing the days amongst us, because we could not all go to Tahrir (...) Two would be in the office, following the news and publish things ASAP because our work here [office] was also part of the revolution. If you were not transferring, transmitting the truth, reporting these things, who would, right? That's it. So, these were beautiful days! (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011)

Amina makes a claim to contributing to reporting the “truth,” alluding to the importance of countering inaccurate state narratives. Nonetheless, one also gets a sense of the excitement of actually *being* in the square and the teamwork involved in splitting tasks and organizing who stays in the office writing up, and who roams the streets, interviewing protestors. Still, Amina describes how working from the office ought to be seen as “part of the revolution.” This points to the importance of widening the vision of what constitutes a *revolutionary act*, beyond iconic squares of political protest. As argued by Winegar (2012) the majority of Egyptians were not in Tahrir square. Yet, many Egyptians supported the revolution from their homes. For Amina and her fellow activists, participation from home or the office easily took the form of *writing the revolution*:

In the beginning, I did not go to Tahrir, but I was participating in the revolution journalistically, I mean, I was trying to write as many articles as I could and publish them on our website (...) but most of all I was trying to participate through stories (...) in order to communicate my point of view. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

This quote is not insignificant as it points to gendered modes of protest and participation. While Egypt is not a conservative as for instance Yemen

or Libya, there appear to be parallels in how women activists experienced the uprisings in their countries, in that *writing the revolution* or virtual participation became a means to circumvent patriarchal restrictions preventing them from participating physically (2013:883). In addition to writing for On Islam, Abeer shared her thoughts about the anti-Mubarak protests that hit the nation, on other online platforms. She illustrates how women's interpreting of events and journalistic writing may be seen as *participation* in the revolution. Indeed, she places emphasis on her contribution being a communication of her "point of view," which can be considered an attempt at counterbalancing state media narratives. Reem relates her experiences of being in the square in the following manner:

We were going to the streets, talking to people, extracting what was going on (...) It was a revolution for the entire people (...) for the entire society, so all the people were going to the demonstrations, women, men, children, the elderly (...) So we [journalists in On Islam] took the stories and tales of people from the heart of the square (...) the people were protesting and sleeping over - so we'd look at how people were acting in the heart of the square. What was *different* at this time? At that time, there were a lot of things that were different, even the international newspapers picked up on this, the people who were cleaning the square, the people who helped (medically) treat people in the square, the families that were living close to the square and were sending food and blankets to those who were sleeping over in the square, so (...) all of this we were publishing. (Interview with Reem, May 3 2011).

Reem here, reveals a bit of the feeling of exhilaration that many Egyptians could not stop talking about - and the feeling that Egyptians of all walks of life, all ages and both genders participated in bringing the president down. Reem's description, thus, perpetuates the common claim about this being a revolution for "all" rather than "the few" and/or "the privileged." Yet, as Winegar (2012) points out, the "family friendly" demonstrations were few and far between, and most Egyptians were not in the iconic squares of protest. Still, this is not how the protests were talked about. Reem reveals another key aspect of the way the revolution was spoken of, namely what some repor-

ters dubbed *the Tahrir Republic*, the near magical level of pulling together, including thousands volunteers who made sure Tahrir and the surrounding areas were clean, and ensuring that the protestors were safe, medically cared for and well-fed. Arguing a similar point, Amar (2011:300) illustrates how for many “Tahrir Square represented a utopian space that forged a new gendered social contract.”

Similar enthusiasm of *Tahrir Utopia* was expressed in Wall and Zahed's (2011:1341) study with commentaries such as: “this is the Egyptian people we always dreamed of. I can now say I am proud to be Egyptian.” This euphoria may in itself be a byproduct of what Turner (1979:466) labels *liminality*, that is “the transition from one sociocultural state and status to another.” The sense of pride and dignity is I believe, key. For my research participants, participating in Tahrir as a citizen and demonstrator and being overwhelmed by sentiment may easily intersect with the journalistic tug to translate this exhilaration into reporting.

We had a particular type of communication and reporting, during this period. There is a great difference (...) It's not just that we write articles about different perspectives, no, we also used to check out what is going on in the society (...) I mean, for example the incidents of the revolution, we were (...) I mean (...) I believe that (...) we had a particular type of reporting on *the social* (aspects) of this period. I mean, it was not only *political reporting* (...) No, but we also had glimpses of the social. (...) We have nothing to do with the governments or the presidents or anything (...) we were in Tahrir square, and we'd come back to our offices and write articles. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

Here, Abeer struggles slightly with the flow of words and the re-articulation of her journalism practices, which are not only being adapted to a new medium, but also to a new reality, namely that she is participating in a revolution. To solve this predicament, Abeer makes claims to reliability, that is not being on the side of the regime, and uniqueness, that On Islam's edge is their reporting on the “social aspects” of the revolution. By eye-witnessing



and reporting events the activists are able to counter fabricated narratives. In the words of Radsch and Khamis (2013:883) women activists are thus able to “do something in the face of a patriarchal hierarchy and an authoritarian state.” Abeer’s claim to “distinctiveness” relates to these activists’ longstanding engagement with the goals of reforming, self, society and politics (part of *the message*). This puts a certain socio-political spin on the way they write about how Egyptians are engaging with and experiencing the revolution. It also makes these particular activists well suited to reflect on gendered experiences of participation in the Egyptian uprising.

### Gendered Experiences of the Revolution

Listen, no one had really imagined that the ousting of Mubarak might happen. (...) Even for those of us who were in the square [Tahrir] (...) During *the day of rage*, we participated because we felt the wrongdoings and hatred and that we wanted him to go. But to tell the president to go, this was (...) something we did not think could be done like this! But, we learnt a lesson; that frustration creates miracles (...) (Interview with Reem May 3 2011).

Reem’s reference to “miracles” both signals the common and perceived collective sentiment of the astounding overthrow of Mubarak, and, the transition from one social order to another. Indeed, liminality may incite sentiments of disorder and fear:

I was trying to write as many articles as I could and publish them on our website, after the Internet came back. But in the beginning, I was in a phase of massive confusion because I was thankfully [ironic laughter] stuck inside our house, I was not allowed to leave [for demonstrations] I mean, from my father especially, he was calling home everyday to make sure that I was at home. (...) So, I respected his wishes. I did not want (...) I was not against it, I felt, I have to respect the family’s fear for me. But, thank God when everything got a bit calmer, I started to come and go, and see for myself. And after there was a bit of security (at the square) I went for a couple of

Fridays (...) And, my father did not have any objections. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

This excerpt points to how participation in the demonstrations had a gendered aspect, namely that a number of women may have been prohibited from going to demonstrations. Much like her sisters in Yemen and Libya (Radsch and Khamis 2013), Abeer resolves her need to participate in the revolution, through her online activism and by reporting for On Islam. Fear for the safety of female demonstrators is experienced as a double bind, simultaneously constraining and an emotion to be respected and cherished as an expression of love and caring. The ambiguity in Abeer's stance, resembles Asmaa Mahfouz's famous call to "honourable men" to rush to the square to protect women, and reflects what Wall and El Zahed (2011:1339) have dubbed a *gender jujitsu*; for as these women conquer new spatial territories, they simultaneously call for patriarchal protection. Abeer reveals that she was eventually able to persuade her father to grant her access to the square, which might have been eased by the collective efforts at making Tahrir a zone free of sexual harassment, during those epic 18 days. Nevertheless, Peterson (2011:2) emphasises how "Revolutions are extraordinary times in any society" - another example of which can be seen here:

I did not go to Tahrir the first days. You know, the family was a bit anxious [for me] - a little too much, and I was stuck in the house, so I did not go. But, as soon as the Internet got cut off, and the phones etc. - that was it! (...) The only place we learnt about anything was from the Internet. And, the [state] television was just telling lies, so there wasn't much info (...) when the Internet was cut off, all of us were emboldened to tell our families that there should be no constraints. (...) Every one of us [in group of female friends] was thinking that we need to lift these constraints and we told our families (...) "We are going to break these constraints and go to the square!" And, we actually did go and join the demonstrations several days! (...) But, of course we were not sleeping over (...) I think that all the boys that I know from our street were part of the neighbourhood watch groups and were protecting us in the evenings (...) They were swapping

shifts. One day in the square, the next day in the neighbourhood watch group and vice versa. So it was a beautiful spirit! (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).<sup>4</sup>

Amina like Abeer experienced the constraints of patriarchal family structures, that prohibited her from being able to experience “the beautiful spirit” in Tahrir square. Yet, when the Internet gets shut off Amina and her friends negotiate new rules of conduct based on the unusual state of affairs - and succeed in altering the rules. Peterson (2011) drawing on the classic work of Turner, writes: “revolutions move a people from one state to another, they usher in a period of liminality in which the world is upside down and old rules do not apply.”

The Egyptian revolution, can be viewed as the overturn of an authoritarian father, by his unruly children, with striking parallels to what went on in the families of Amina and her friends. The patriarchal protectionism while interpreted as love on the one hand, is also perceived by Amina and her friends as exclusion from taking part in one of the most unique moments in Egyptian history, and eventually leads to small revolutions in these families. “transgressions of norms” and inventive ways of “public reflexivity” are according to Turner (1979) signs of liminality, and all appear to be apt descriptions of the re-negotiation of gender norms that Amina and her friends succeeded in. In both Abeer’s and Amina’s case, being professional reporters, might have also eased eventual access to going to Tahrir square. Nonetheless, despite the upheaval of certain social norms, it ought to be noted that the previously mentioned gender jujitsu is not entirely eradicated, since young men act as “protectors” through neighbourhood watch groups and the like and women are still perceived of as in need of male guardians (Ghannam 2013).

The next section, sheds light on how the activists in question counselled fellow Egyptians about their experiences with the revolution, and illustrates the perceived overlap between self and socio-political reform.

## Counselling During the Revolution

In the spring of 2011, On Islam was still offering online counselling to its users. This is how my research participants talk of the counselling service and the focus of counselees during this abnormal time:

I replied to a counselling question from a girl, who did not go to Tahrir at all. She has no brothers who can take her and bring her back, and her family were worried about her. She felt shameful for not going to the demonstrations. So, I answered her saying “no of course not, no, you did something good, you honoured your mother and father who were anxious on your behalf, and they need you, they needed you for instance to go get medicine for them, or to see you in front of them in one piece. So, this is not something bad.” In this phase, we do not have to think: I went or I did not go (...) what we need, is to try and build our country. (...) What we need now, is to think of which ideas we want to use to change our country. Not to go around saying: “I’m no good, I did not participate.” (...) It’s not useful at all. I hope that the message reached her, that she does not beat herself up about something that was not in her hands. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

Abeer tells us of a guilt-ridden girl who was prohibited by her family from physically being at Tahrir, and thus from taking part in the spectacular moment of Egyptian history. While this experience appears to be a common experience amongst many Egyptian women, it is a far cry from the iconic image a revolutionary - namely an angry man protesting in Tahrir square, as argued by Winegar (2012). Abeer’s experiences with her own father are likely to have shaped her attempts to console the girl, by highlighting that the decision to not go was not *hers*, while at the same time reinforcing the importance of abiding by the family’s wishes. In effect, the counselling serves both as a reinforcement of self-autonomy and respect for the constraint of patriarchal family bonds. As previously argued, while a number of young Egyptian women were eventually able to negotiate access to the demonstrations, the company of trusted men (as protectors) was a prerequisite. This

indicates that the state of liminality may lead to the overthrow of certain structures but certainly not all. Abeer's redirecting the focus on to "which ideas we want to use to change our country" is an elegant deflection. It is in this context that *the message* resurfaces:

We were always working with the concept of change and reform, like you mention. But it used to be just talk. No practice. You did tell people: "go out and go change yourself, and go say your honest view," but, this was not there. So it was hypothetical, you know. Now, it has changed, the space has changed, the audience itself, are discussing with you in a different way. I mean you write an article and people share it on their Facebook and then they comment about you, they say for example "Well, you said this and this, but you should have said so and so." (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

In 2009 and 2010 Amina and her fellow activists talked about how self-reform was the first step towards societal and political change. At the time, there was a sense that one could not change the political system but one could change individuals. Similarly, I then often heard praise for users of IOL that engaged with the perspectives of a counsellor (Abdel-Fadil 2013). Yet, after the spectacular ousting of Mubarak, Amina sees these types of discussions as a new trend that characterises changing spaces of dialogue online, which are becoming increasingly an arena for exchanging different views, mirroring Egypt's state of liminality. This may be the case. However, Amina's rendering, may also be considered a narrative twist, which serves to strengthen the sense of transition from one social order to another and reflects the sentiment of endless promise ahead. On a similar note of optimism, Reem speaks of a fascinating recent development amongst their website users, after the ousting of Mubarak. In her own words:

The audience itself is changing, well, even the user comments are changing (...) Now, people are even saying that they want a *revolution of the self*: "We made a national revolution, now we want to change to ourselves." This is something very beautiful. (Interview with Reem, May 3 2011).

Intriguingly, new preachers used similar terminology; a new preacher called Moez Masoud's produced a TV show called "Revolution of the Self" shortly after the Egyptian revolution (Moll 2013). However, Reem and her fellow activists have a deep commitment to counseling psychology and psychological wellbeing, which cannot be said of the new preachers (Abdel-Fadil 2012). Indeed, Reem's statement suggests that the revolution has lead to a certain level of realization, amongst users, of the entwined goals of self, social and political reform embodied by commitment to *the message*:

A lot of people wrote to us saying, now (...) we want to have a revolution in our personal lives. "We made a revolution in the country but we all have negatives we need to break" (...) to start working from scratch. So, this was also a very beautiful theme and space ... that we can help people with: "ok, you want to create a revolution in your life [because] there is something that is bothering you. If you want to change it, how do you change it? So we can help you with that." And actually, we did (...) we worked a lot on this topic, a holistic approach to the revolution. (Interview with Abeer, May 3 2011).

Abeer, much like Reem, describes that people are in a state of upheaval and renewal or liminality. Abeer makes a number of lofty claims about a changing audience who now call for a revolution of the self. Yet, rather than write these off as mere figments of imagination, it may be fruitful to see this optimism as an effect of a transitional period where all seems possible. According to Peterson (2011:2): "during a social and political revolution the contingent nature of the future engenders a sense of creativity, energy and imagination in which transformational possibilities seem endless." Indeed, stimulating personal, social, and political awareness and reform have been the longstanding goals of these particular activists. The uprisings in 2011, simply provided a unique opportunity to apply the ideas. In the next section, I will delve into how these activists were able to seize these particular political moments.

## Working the Nation: Raising Awareness Media Campaigns

Look, we saw that (...) the world has changed, but, we were not qualified as youth. We did not understand politics correctly. (...) All our lives, we were used to not having anything to do with what happens in the country (...) So to be participating in this political sphere is something new for us all. So we had to learn (...) People were criticizing the youth who were in Tahrir, saying that they do not know anything about politics. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

On the one hand, Amina appears to have internalized the paternalistic view of the *inexperienced and naïve youth*, which many of the older generations were perpetuating in the public sphere. On the other hand, she is accentuating a political reality: how she and other youth have no experience in partaking in formal politics. With the new turn of events, Amina deems it essential to contribute to the awareness of others. First, however, she, and her colleagues must educate themselves. Amina elaborates:

It is true that we did not participate in politics before. So, we had to enter onto the path of awareness. We had to explain to people, what is the constitution, and the referendum, which clauses are going to be changed, and why, and if they are not changed, what will happen. And you know there was a campaign saying that people who say “no to the referendum - will go to hell,” and those who say “yes -will go to heaven!” [laughing]. Really! There were people who said this, in the mosques ... and the Salafis, this was really their opinion you know. So, we tried to make it clear to people that “Yes or ‘no’ is *your* [personal] choice, and no-one else’s.” (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

In this excerpt, there is a clear link to the old IOL/On Islam counselling goal of helping others build the capacity to make their own decision. Indeed, increasing awareness and enabling informed choices, is key to the message. Amina’s account demonstrates how she and her colleagues continue to sow the seeds of the message, in shifting political scenarios. Framing the information in conversational Arabic and employing the direct form of “you” as an activator, is increasingly becoming a signifier of younger generations of

activists” modes of communication (Wall and El Zahed 2011).<sup>5</sup> Part and parcel of the democratic schooling in vernacular is the “ABC of Politics” campaign:

We do (...) a group of workshops, “the ABC of politics,” where youth groups come and discuss with expert (...) We start from the very basics, we explain the suppositions which we say that people understand, but they really do not, I mean like, *the government*, like *the head of state*, what is his job? Except for suffocating us, and that’s it, what is his job? [laughingly]. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

Amina’s language is not only colloquial, with talk of “suffocation” it also becomes *slangy*, with clear parallels to Wall and El Zahed’s (2011:1338) analysis of the way Asmaa Mahfouz speaks in her seminal vlog. Moreover, as argued by Wall and El Zahed (2011:1340) by “breaking with traditional modes of political communication as well as gender and age expectations for civic leadership in Egypt,” Amina and her fellow activists can be seen as “suggesting that authentic political action is no longer the realm only of professional politicians.”

Above, the importance of introducing the fundamentals of politics to youth and the audience at large is highlighted. This is done through the series “ABC of politics” which is a series of offline workshops, combined with articles published on the On Islam website. Amina avows that there ought not be any directive advice about which way to vote in a referendum. In other words, the ideal of *not being chosen* for ought to be seen as in line with these activists’ wider goal of empowering people to make their own decisions in their life, including politics. Since the goal is that Egyptians make *informed* decisions in politics, the crash course “the ABC of politics” is provided. The joke about the president’s job description as “suffocating his people” is illustrative of the use of everyday language and even slang is employed in order to reach out to a wider audience. It also offers some comic relief. Amina continues to describe their work with prepping their audiences for the referendum and elections:



And so we started to explain to people, what does a nation mean? How do you create a nation? And what does electing by list vs. by suggestion mean, and what will the election period look like, how do you choose candidates. One of our counsellors had an excellent analysis of all the personalities of the presidential candidates, and as of now includes an analysis of Amr Moussa, al-Baradei, al-Bastawisi (...) all of them (...) an excellent analysis. (...) So, that's beautiful (...) it helps people read the personality of so and so (...) in case he has you fooled with his talk or his looks! I think we will continue with this approach. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

This is an illustration of how the basic education of the masses can feature a specialist's analysis. One of the counsellors provided a psychoanalysis of the personalities of a number of the presidential candidates, prepping the audiences for the upcoming presidential elections. This particular focus is an interesting fusion of the self-social-political reform, integral to the milieu that these activists have been shaped by. The idea of non-directive advice ties into the notion that Egyptians *can* be prepped for democracy:

As for the referendum, here we took the stance, of how to make people aware, how to think, on what grounds, how to think, how to read, how to reach his own decision, this was our thought. We are completely opposed to the idea of someone telling the other what to do and say. You cannot force your opinion on him. You must show how he should form his own opinion (...) There were people directing people to say "no." There were also people urging the nation to say "yes." We reject this idea. We disagree with the concept of someone doing this for you. (...) That was the whole idea behind the revolution, that there was always someone who believed that this nation is not *mature*, that this people is unable to create their own opinion, and therefore we will not give them the chance to form their own opinion. And always (...) the talk about the people not being ready for democracy (...) The revolution rose, took place because of this. So we cannot create a revolution to get rid of something, and then with our own hands reintroduce it, by telling people what to do! (Interview with Reem, May 3 2011).

Reem expresses a clear critique of paternalistic authoritarian concept of “conquer and rule” politics that she and her fellow activists have been attempting to counter in word and deed for over a decade. In many ways, the new political stage in Egypt provided a unique opportunity to take the message to a new level. In Amina’s words:

And to say your true opinion is the first change (...) it is the first exam, so let’s not fail it, the first democratic step. This is our first exam of democratic thinking. So, that’s it if we do not pass, all of this (the revolution) was for nothing. (Interview with Amina, May 3 2011).

Both Reem and Amina can be seen as critiquing the “orientalist stereotype” that “Arabs were culturally unprepared for, or incapable of democracy” (Peterson 2011:9). Rather, this new political scenario and state of liminality, was perceived by the activists, as a chance at translating words into deed; to not just *talk democracy*, but, also *practicing democracy*. “Make up your mind-choose well” was a related campaign that several of my research participants were involved in.<sup>6</sup>



Another avenue of mediation was involvement in the “Freedom bus”<sup>7</sup> project which was interlinked with the previously mentioned “Make up your mind-choose well”:

The “freedom bus” toured the governorates in all of Egypt’s streets. (...) The bus set out to create general [political] awareness, laying out (...) essential principles of politics. What does it all mean? The freedom bus volunteers” chat with people (...) It toured more than ten governorates. The bus met up with locals before reaching the governorate, would announce its arrival at this and this governorate, and people would volunteer to tour with the bus. So the local people who know the place, introduce the place, and make contact and talk with the people in the street. (...) We helped select the topics that they would discuss in the streets. (Interview with Reem, April 15 2012).



Involvement in the “the freedom bus” project demonstrates how Reem and her fellow activists were aware of the importance of reaching out to audiences far beyond what Winegar (2012) considers the privileged iconic revolutionaries of Tahrir square. It also demonstrates how the activists employ “participatory and social media in conjunction with real-world organizing” (Wall and El Zahed 2011:1341). Indeed, a number of different media formats were employed in an attempt to reach larger audiences, and assist in the project of general political awareness of Egyptians. One of the most successful enterprises, is perhaps the following:

Revolution on a bus (...) We made a film (...) The one in the bus (...) The democracy one, in the bus. (...) It originated from our group. The

group included directors, script writers, and one of the script writers (...) Tamer Mohsin (...) made the film, and the film received a very high percentage of viewings. And, many people wrote about it (...) We also created small animation films for awareness together with our partners. (Interview with Reem, April 15 2012).

This excerpt shows how female activists collaborated with script writers, in the creation of animated videos and short films in order to trigger political awareness amongst a larger public.<sup>8</sup> The short film was popular on YouTube. (Thāwrt 25 yanāyir min dākhil al-utūbīs 2011).<sup>9</sup>



The snippet is less than eight minutes long, yet succeeds in mediating a dense message. The story is set in a regular Cairo bus, and features a discussion of the divergent interests of the various passengers – and whether or not they should protest the bus price just having been arbitrarily raised by the young ticket collector. Interestingly, the passengers voice their viewpoints based on their differences in gender, age, political orientation and religiosity. The film has repeatedly struck me as highly professional and impressive. It gets across the parallel between what is going on in the bus and what is going on in Egypt – in a most salient manner despite its brevity.

In addition, a number of these women activists were involved in creating engagement and awareness about the content of the constitution:

We create awareness (...) there is for instance a project called, “Come, let’s write our constitution.” The initial idea is that we create a dialogue in the society so that people understand what is the constitution and what ought to be in it, and what we *want* in it. (Interview with Reem, April 15 2012).

Reem and her partners wished to instigate a dialogue about what Egyptians want their constitution to contain. It was a call to political involvement. This campaign was mediated online with its own Facebook page called: “Come, Let’s Write Our Constitution.”<sup>10</sup>



The title is in the aforementioned conversationalist and personalized Arabic, directed at “you,” for optimal personalized engagement.

In sum, Reem and her fellow activists continue to adapt and spread *the message*, using multiple platforms to mediate their lessons of political awareness. In the next and last section, I demonstrate how these activists also target direct politics through lobbying.

### Lobbying for Gender Equality

In December of 2011, the pamphlet “Manual for Revising the Family Law For More Equality” went into print. It was the result of a collaboration

between my research participants and Coptic gender activists. “We were trying for the success of our work to be in this diversity,” says Amal.



The pamphlet was the first step, in lobbying to both al-Azhar and the constitutional committee for enabling a more just family law. I had the fortune of being able to attend (as an observer) the gender summit where this pamphlet was launched. I shall not here recap the entire summit but instead summarize my first impressions as expressed in my field diary:<sup>11</sup>

The 2012 conference appears to be filled with hope and visions for the “new Egypt.”<sup>12</sup> There is a wish to (...) build awareness on gender issues. “In society, there is focus on democracy in politics. Now it is time for democracy in the family.” (...) This rhetorical question is asked repeatedly: “Can Egyptians only have democracy in terms of electoral rights and leave the social sphere out of it?” The answer: “– Impossible.” “there is a need for real change, changing axioms on gender, changing the on-the-ground perceptions of gender.” (Field notes Gender Summit 2012).

In sum, the great promise of liminality clung to the walls. On a pragmatic level, the conference was an attempt at bringing together gender activists

at different ends of the spectrum, in order to have more powerful leverage in further dialogues with both al-Azhar and the constitutional committee tasked with amending the Egyptian constitution.

We were able to encourage al-Azhar to produce something called the “al-Azhar declaration on women’s rights.” We made it for them, and we said we do not need to be in the picture, you can publish it with your name. And this declaration has been finalized (...) It is the result of one year of discussion.<sup>13</sup> (Interview with Amal, June 12 2013).

All of these activities can be seen as not only as manifestations of *the message*, but also as an expression of what Amal calls “a holistic perspective on the revolution.” Amal explains that their starting point for the “Family Declaration” was that:

People are buried down in all sorts of problems be it economical or political (...) in bad social customs. They’re not able to live a good life (...) not even able to interact with one another in a good manner.

This is an example of how Amal and her fellow activists always have an eye to the micro level, and what they deem the “social side” to the revolution, that is the everyday lives and real life problems people face. This used to be the very trademark of IOL, and continues to shape the activities of the activists. Amal goes on to explain how the political turmoil may add layers of tensions to family life:

The political and economic stress puts things off balance, makes the balance overturn, she comes back from work, maybe her husband beats her, maybe her husband insults her. And therefore you do not solve the problem, if you focus only on the woman (...) You are empowering one individual, and the rest (of the family) you ignore (...) The man - in the end - he is an important individual, I mean, to ignore him is not right, you know. (...) So we made a “Family Declaration” (...) to ensure the inclusion of family matters in the amended constitution.

This is an illustration of the common view amongst these activists: that family problems at the micro level may reflect societal or political problems

at the macro level. The emphasis is on the family as an organic unit with internal dynamics:

We were attacked harshly by the women's association, because in feminist scholarship (...) talking about "the family," is considered a belittling of the woman, as if when you talk about "the family," you are *taking rights away* from the woman, for example, saying "live only for your family," (...) But, we were not talking about that. What we are saying is that women's rights, is something very important. However, seeing the family as whole, seeing the individuals together, and their interaction with one another, is very important and we should talk about that as well. This is not a belittling of women but a security for women. (Interview with Amal, June 12 2013).

Amal and her colleagues, eventually succeed in gaining support from secular activists for their "family perspective." Still, it was a difficult climate for discussing gender politics. Suzan Mubarak was the fore figure of most legal reforms that pushed for improving women's rights, and after the revolution, her name tarnished the work of gender activists (Sholkamy 2012). In reference to the latter, Amal concludes that their credibility is derived from lack of ties to the old regime,<sup>14</sup> and the ability to collaborate with a variety of parties:

So, the secret to our success is that we stayed away from the (political) divides (...) We are trying all the time to bring these people together to discuss topics, about children, about family, how to make the Family Declaration for the constitution, and how to present this to the constitutional committee. (Interview with Amal, June 12 2013).

Here, Amal emphasises the importance of including a wide range of allies in putting forward a gender agenda, and trying to influence the constitutional committee. This last section, demonstrates that these women activists are not only trying to create political awareness amongst the general public but also by approaching bodies of political power. It also serves as a reminder of how far *the message* has spread.



## Conclusion

This article has showcased how a group of Egyptian Islamist women activists engaged in a range of significant social, political, and media practices, before, during and after the ousting of Mubarak; as individuals, as journalists, as counsellors, as agenda setters and creators of media campaigns. By using an array of media and outreach approaches these activists are able to reach disparate audiences, breaching the digital divide. Moreover, their multifaceted approach to encouraging critical thinking and awareness, can be considered what Rose (1999) classifies as “practices of citizen formation.”

During the gender summit of 2012, Sawsan, an activist affiliated to Mada (and previous IOL employee), reformulates Samar Abduh’s metaphor about spreading the seeds of the message from memory:

Samar Abduh used to tell us something very beautiful. She used to say. “We are like the rose that when it dries, God wants us to (...) wants it to dry (...) scatter everywhere” (...) We are no longer united in one rose. No we are now spread out into many different places, so that the message can reach all of the places that we have gone to. (Interview with Sawsan, April 15 2012).

Sawsan’s description aptly describes how *the message* has travelled with each activist across the media platforms, organizations, and collaborative projects they have been a part of. Their modes of civic engagement continue to be shaped by the message, which advocates reform of the self, society, and politics. However, the activists also adapt to shifting political scenarios, by constructing a “new” form of revolutionary reporting, contributing to a wider understanding of what a “revolutionary act” can be considered, and by re-emphasising the relevance of *the message* in a new political landscape.

Indeed, the betwixt and between stage of liminality (Turner 1979) that Egypt was thrust into after the ousting of Mubarak, was particularly fertile soil for sowing and reaping the seeds of *the message*. It provided a unique opportunity for the activists to demonstrate the links between reforming the self, society and politics - and to reach out to a wider public with their

*message*. In such transitions, radical and creative ideas are accepted more readily. The state of liminality and social upheaval laid the groundwork for a renegotiation of gender norms, expanding women's modes of participation in the Egyptian revolution, and generated small family revolutions.

The overthrow of Mubarak was an optimal moment in history to invite audiences to join the activists in living *the message*, through the facilitation of informed and independent political choices. In this sense, the message has proven highly adaptable to shifting political scenarios. *The message* used to be the (IOL) organization. Now, *the message* lives on in each and every individual activist, and continues to spread across a multitude of media platforms, activist practices, and political transitions to come.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I conducted all the interviews in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded. The research participants have all consented to the interviews being cited in my scientific publications.

<sup>2</sup> Two quotes feature with the real identity of the persons interviewed. This is because these particular two quotes have been published elsewhere under the respondents' full names. Otherwise I employ pseudonyms in this text, due to the sensitivity of some of the topics discussed. This is considered a measure to minimise the risk of causing my research participants any harm.

<sup>3</sup> These activists found employment with for instance the Freedom and Justice Newspaper, the Amr Khaled website, Reuters, and Abu Fotouh's presidential campaign.

<sup>4</sup> This excerpt also sheds light on another aspect, namely how the "shutting off" of the Internet was a turning point in terms of mobilizing more demonstrators, of both genders, to pour into the streets of Egypt.

<sup>5</sup> However, in the case of these particular activists, accessible language may also be due to influence from counseling lingo. See Abdel-Fadil (2012) for a discussion of this.

<sup>6</sup> For more information see *Make up your Mind! Choose well!* 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The "freedom bus" was one of a series of collaboration enabled by foreign funding. For more info see *Freedom bus* 2011.

<sup>8</sup> I myself had viewed the "Revolution on a bus" a couple of times, before I was made aware of the involvement of my female research informants in its actual creation.

<sup>9</sup> The film can be viewed on YouTube. See *Thāwrt 25 yanāyir min dākhl al-utūbīs* 2011.

<sup>10</sup> For more information see *Come, Let's Write Our Constitution* 2011, Dostorna 2011.

<sup>11</sup> For more information see *Al-dalil al-irshādiy l-i'dād qanūn al-uthra aktar al-'adāla* 2010.

<sup>12</sup> All words or sentences within quotation marks in the field diary excerpt are direct quotes.

<sup>13</sup> For the al-Azhar declaration for women's rights, see Kubār al-‘ulama’ tuqr wathīqit al-azhar l-ḥuqūq al-mar’a b-ḥudūr al-qardāwī 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Amal says this explicitly in the interview.

# The Saudi Blogosphere: Implications of New Media Technology and the Emergence of Saudi-Islamic Feminism

Philip Tschirhart

## Abstract

*he Kingdom of Saudi Arabia serves as a protector of the social, cultural, and religious epicenters of the Islamic faith; Mecca and Medina. While other Islamic autocracies have fallen in the wake of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and its religious and political elite remain. However, threats to their legitimacy are growing. Especially relevant are increasing calls for women's rights. The Saudi Arabian public sphere of the pre-digital era had effectively banned women's participation in public. More recently, the spread of Internet authored blogs has created a new public sphere for women's deliberation.*

*This study seeks to analyze how the Saudi blogosphere, as a public sphere of deliberation, provides insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminism through a critical discursive analysis. Three discursive themes emerge to identify how Saudi women negotiate identity and manage dialectical tensions stemming from their intersectional positions: displaying and defending iman (faith), repositioning the 'ulamā,' and restoring Saudi history. Taken together these discursive themes detail a Saudi-Islamic Feminist perspective that is emerging in resistance to Western feminist frameworks and in defense of a distinctively Islamic claim to women's rights, education, and equitable treatment within the public sphere.*

## Keywords

*Islam, Saudi Arabia, gender, Muslim women, blogs*

Formed as a nation less than a century ago, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, serves as a protector of the social, cultural, and religious epicenters of the Islamic faith; Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia's role as guardians of Islam's most holy sites is embraced with a national piety and devotion to Islam that is represented in the state's adherence to Wahhabi Islamic doctrine. Wahhabi Islam calls for a return to authentic Islam, purging impurities and rejecting Western innovations. The Wahhabi doctrine permeates the social

sphere of Saudi Arabia and is actively enforced by the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). The CPVPV's main priority is ensuring compliance with the tenants of Islam and Sharia. However, they also concern themselves with public dress codes, dispersing public gatherings of women, and enforcing the prohibition of *Ikhtilat*, or gender mixing. "Saudi social space is compartmentalized in order to prevent *Ikhtilat*" (Kraidy 2009:349). The boundary that exists is described as a deep division between men and women. In Saudi society women cannot enter the Saudi public sphere without the company of a male guardian, are unable to drive motor vehicles, and only recently earned the ability to leave the country without a male relative.

However, new media technologies are subverting Saudi prohibition of *Ikhtilat*, providing Saudi citizens with cyber avenues of community and expression. The Saudi state and CPVPV are finding it increasingly difficult to control public sphere deliberation. Where Saudi Wahhabi Shari law prevented gender mixing, Saudi women are now networked with the rest of the world. New media channels of communication like blogs, social networking, and instant messaging have increased the frequency and ease of communicating across distances and through barriers. In addition to breaking down barriers to communication these new media methods allow for the selective disclosure of personal information including gender and location. This research seeks to explore how Saudi women navigate the intersection of technology, faith, and gender in deliberations on the blog Saudiwoman.me. A discursive analysis of blog posts and their resulting deliberations seeks to identify how the blogosphere, as a public sphere of deliberation, provides insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminist perspectives.

## The Saudi Public Sphere

Despite being formed as a nation within the last century, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is home to the crossroads of the world's oldest monotheistic religions. This rich history extends beyond the scope of this research. Most important in the context of this research is an examination of the way



political, social, and religious factors have affected discourse and deliberation within the public sphere. Increasing dissent within the public sphere has correlated with the rise of Saudi Internet technology. Efforts to discuss religious interpretations and politics have been concealed in the physical public sphere. "A more open and honest debate flourishes in printed books published outside of Saudi Arabia and in Internet discussion boards" (Al-Rasheed 2007:87). Saudi Arabia has experienced a technological growth that far exceeds any that western nations have experienced. From 2000 to 2008 Saudi Arabia experienced an 11,466 percent explosion in registered Internet users (Al Nashmi et al. 2010:724), with well over two and a half million users (Samin 2008:199). Saudi Arabia has become one of the most active producers and consumers of Internet content in the Middle East (Samin 2008:198). Indeed the growth of Saudi blog readership exploded 650 percent from 2000-2009, "with a conservative estimate of [Middle Eastern] feminist blogs being upward of 240,000" (McCauliff 2011:62). It is important to analyze how Saudi women have utilized Internet technology to create a public sphere of deliberation.

The Saudi Arabian government, while maintaining limits and control on Internet use, has in many ways encouraged and facilitated the development of an Internet infrastructure (Samin 2008:199). The Saudi government did not introduce Internet access to citizens until they were able to ensure that they would have effective Internet filtering (Zittrain and Palfrey 2008:40). While some of the strictest regulations and limits may exist on the Saudi Internet, these are typically unable to target user created communication forums, but instead focus on pornographic and anti-government sponsored websites (Al-Shohaib et al. 2009:22). A spokesman for the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information conceded that they do not regulate blogs, "there are just so many we cannot control them. If I shut one [blog] down, it would just pop up the next day under a new name" (Khalil 2011:141). Conservative religious groups are not absent from Internet discourse, conservative religious groups have also developed blogs to express their dissenting opinions. In societies with an absent free press there are few options for seeking news and opinions. For this reason many Saudi Arabians have sought an alterna-

tive in online media such as blogs (Al Nashmi et al. 2010:734). In addition to breaking down barriers to communication these new media methods allow for the selective disclosure of personal information including gender and location.

The women of Saudi Arabia are uniquely positioned to organize a collective call for agency, “Saudi women under the age of 30 grew up with satellite television, the Internet, and mobile phones. Their broadened view of the world far exceeds that of their mothers and older sisters” (Wagner 2011:para. 12). However, it is important to remember the duality of Saudi Arabian Internet communities. While the Internet is capable of providing a venue or medium for the marginalized voice it is just as capable of reinforcing the existing status quo and norms (Samin 2008:198). In order for the marginalized voice to gain collective agency it must be organized and accepted in the Saudi public sphere. For women this means deliberation of a Saudi-Islamic feminism in relation to existing Islamic feminist perspectives. Recent research indicates that some Saudi women are utilizing social media to develop grassroots campaigns for rights.

Revolutions in neighboring Arab countries have raised the consciousness of women who are questioning why Saudi society is marginalizing them. This consciousness has sparked the stirrings of what some women are describing as the potential for a ‘Saudi-Islamic feminist movement’ (Wagner 2011:para. 5).

Indeed “the social dynamics of the kingdom make it fertile ground for a new generation of tech-savvy youths seeking new forms of expression” (Khalil 2011:142). Research is necessary to determine whether the Internet can support an online feminist movement in Saudi society, and also, how Saudi-Islamic feminism may emerge as a new form of expression distinct from other forms of Islamic feminism. Saudi-Arabia and its feminisms are distinct from other Middle Eastern states for political, social, and religious reasons. However, because there is a lack of research related to Saudi female perspectives and because the momentum is only now building for such a

perspective it is important to first analyze the standpoint of Saudi woman before then analyzing the existing literature surrounding the emergence of Islamic feminism elsewhere.

### Saudi Women's Standpoint

Historically, Saudi women have made advances and demanded their voices be heard. Most significantly, Saudi women overturned the 'ulamā,'s rejection of women's education. When the first educational opportunities for women were introduced in 1959 men rioted in protest; today education for women is mandated. Since 1962 Saudi women have been admitted to state universities and now mirror the separate male classroom population with a near 1:1 gender ratio (Mellor 2010:210). A large number of Saudi women have a university education and several have gone on to found women's-only banks, clothing lines, and hospitals. The present study seeks to analyze how Saudi women navigate the blogosphere to organize a collective identity and community with one another.

Previous Saudi women's movements have been fractured and kept beneath the surface. In 1991, 47 Saudi women protested the ban on female drivers by driving through Riyadh. The response from authorities was swift, "religious leaders in Mosques across the Kingdom called them 'prostitutes' and encouraged their harassment" (Grant 1999:1263). Many were fired from their jobs and found their families and themselves harassed in public. Following the drive-in there was little organization or action by women's rights advocates. Until recently, on May 19 2011 Manal al-Sharif decided to resume the protest. She recorded herself driving on several occasions. She was arrested on May 22 on charges of "inciting women to drive" and "rallying public opinion." Her May 30 conditional release was largely a result of pressure from an online petition demanding her release which had organized 4,500 Saudi's signatories. The campaign continued to organize after Manal's release and utilized a Facebook group to call more than 12,000 supporters of the page to drive in protest. Cognizant of the drive in of the early

1990s Saudi women must now overcome what collapsed previous efforts. The networked structure of the Internet is uniquely positioned to facilitate deliberation and collective organization for social change.

Previous efforts to organize Saudi Islamic feminist coalitions have been restricted by Saudi laws prohibiting women's involvement in the physical public sphere (Wagner 2011:para. 2). The blogosphere, as a public sphere of deliberation, facilitates a forum for dialogue and discourse previously denied to women's emerging perspectives. As women converse on the blogosphere they do not share a singular perspective, a multitude of voices may be heard. Saudi women's perspectives vary greatly. Some Saudi women find themselves supporting Western feminism and others have found inspiration in nearby Middle Eastern women's movements. The minority viewpoint is that of the Western feminists, "The face of Saudi feminism, many say, should be more conservative and reflect Islamic values" (Leslie 2011:para. 6). Saudi women resist Western methods that they see contributing to increased divorce, infidelity, addiction, and a weakened family structure. The Western world and its "narrow-minded" ethnocentric feminist frameworks are seen promoting "double standards of American men and women" (Mishra 2007:270). Instead Saudi feminist deliberations are "testing the waters" and utilizing a variety of feminist readings to raise consciousness and spark "the stirrings of what some women are describing as the potential for a 'Saudi-Islamic feminist movement'" (Wagner 2011:para. 4). Rather than seek to articulate a homogenous Saudi feminist perspective this study seeks to analyze responses to confrontations and challenges raised in blog deliberation.

Saudi Arabia's strict adherence to Wahhabi Sharia law and gender segregation has positioned women as the representatives of piety and devotion. "Muslim women are considered to be symbols of Islamic authenticity; they are also made a distinguishing feature between Muslim societies and all that is perceived as Western" (Mishra 2007:263). As Saudi women deliberate online they may embrace or contest representations and discourses of piety. Islamic feminist movements elsewhere have reappropriated representations of piety, organizing the piety movement. While these movements are often

not organized as feminist movements Saba Mahmood argues that, “despite the self-avowedly apolitical stance of the pietists, their practices have a profoundly transformative affect in the social and political fields. They have transformed the very ground on which nationalist, statist, and other kinds of secular-liberal projects can be envisioned and practiced” (Mahmood 2005:xi). In an effort to map the grounds on which Saudi Islamic feminism is emerging it is first necessary to analyze how other movements have articulated Islamic feminism.

### Islamic Feminist Perspectives

There is no one Islam, instead there are many perspectives, so we should talk about the Islams of Islam (Said 2002:70). The differences in the status and treatment of Muslim women vary from country to country and are the result of cultural differences not ubiquitous religious commands (Halim & Meyers, 2010). Women’s conditions are instead, “the result of a gender-biased misreading of the Quran, not the text itself” (Moghissi 1999:130). While both, “Western feminism and Islamic feminism oppose violence against women, Islamic feminism ties that opposition to the Quran and the *ahādīth*, and in doing so can be empowering to Islamic women in ways that Western feminism simply cannot” (Halim and Meyers 2010:87). This contrast between Western feminism and Islamic feminism necessitates a notion of empowerment that is reflective of the Islamic experience. By reconciling issues of feminism and women’s advocacy with the teachings of the Prophet women adopt a framework that allows them to simultaneously affirm their religion and combat oppression.

The three vastly different forms of emerging Islamic feminist scholarship in the Middle East are: secular feminists, Islamic feminists, and Islamist feminists. Secular feminists, located on the left of the political scale, contend that religion has no place in public life; “they refuse any notion of feminism within an Islamic framework” (Morin, 2009, p. 386). Their struggle is mainly defined in political terms. Access to basic freedoms is a must. Secular feminists do not seek to redefine Islam or reinterpret the Quran, instead

they seek to make political gains so that women may have equal access to rights. Similar to Western Liberal feminists they advocate for maternity and marriage rights, equality in employment, and separation between religion and law.

In contrast, the Islamists seek to redefine religious texts and claim that “feminism and Islam are redundant concepts within the ‘true’ Islamic paradigm” (Morin 2009:387). They argue that there is, “a significant gap between what the Quran says and the manner in which its teachings are practiced” (Hashim 1999:9). This gap is due to the fact that “Islamic theology has been adapted and interpreted by male theologians who have claimed exclusive rights to the process” (Shirvani 2006:4). Islamists feminists, rejecting the patriarchy of theology, advocate that women reinterpret the Quran and holy texts from the Islamist perspective, what they claim to be the true perspective. Using Muhammad’s treatment of his wife, daughters, and several female advisers they claim that true Islam is meant to be gender egalitarian. Rather than push for equal rights they push for complimentary rights. They believe that authentic interpretations of the Quran provide a justification for the fair treatment of women in society. Islamist feminists reject honor killings and dowry with *ḥadīths* or reinterpretations of the Quran and proclaim their right to be educated and respected. However, the Islamist discourses fall short of advocating political reform. They do not seek equal pay or access to jobs, the right to vote, or political representation. Instead, their focus is on a respect for their role as mothers and sisters. This demand for complimentary but not equal rights puts them at odds with the Western feminists. The Western feminists see the Islamists’ adherence to their religion as another form of fundamentalism and feel that to be liberated they must give up their religion. However, the Islamists, “argue that they are ‘revivalist’ and are returning to the roots of Islam to regain a purified vision lost in the world. Their intent is to recapture both the purity and the spirit of Islam at its inception” (Shirvani 2006:3).

The third and probably largest group of Muslim feminists, the Islamic feminists, are located between the leftist secular feminists and the conservative

Islamists. Taking the middle ground these scholars claim Islam as a central part of their politics and identity, like the Islamists. Similar to the secular feminists the Islamic feminists oppose the male dominated hierarchy of most Islamic governments and, “advocate for equal rights for women through a reinterpretation or reformation of Islam” (Morin, 2009:387).

The emerging Saudi Arabian feminist perspective is most reflective of the Islamist feminists. A Saudi-Islamic feminist movement, much like the Islamist movement, relies on the rejection of Western feminism. Young Saudi women contend, “that a Saudi-led feminist movement must include the rights accorded women in the Quran and specifically in Sharia” (Wagner 2011:para. 8). The Saudi-Islamic feminist seeks to work within the system and does not seek democratic reforms or even equal rights. Many reject the label ‘feminist’ based on the grounds that they reject gender equality, advocating for gender equity instead (Cooke 2001:ix). While perhaps not explicitly feminist, or even political, analysis of the piety movement suggests that “transgressing gender norms may not be a matter of transforming ‘consciousness’ or effecting change in the signifiatory system of gender, but might well require the retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiments” (Mahmood 2005:118). The Saudi Arabian blogosphere has a unique potential to facilitate online deliberation regarding both the personal and political dimensions of Saudi Islamic feminism. Islamic feminist deliberations reveal “multiple identities oscillating between the poles of collectivism and divergence, accommodation and confrontation, as well as locality and universality” (Khamis 2010:252). I seek to analyze the discursive tensions of collectivism and divergence, accommodation and confrontation, and locality and universality as they emerge in women’s deliberations on the blog Saudiwoman.me in effort to critique how this new public sphere of deliberation, provides insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminism.

## Methodology

Eman Al Nafjan’s blog Saudiwoman.me was chosen for several reasons. First, this blog was chosen for its unabashed Saudi woman’s perspective, the

“straight from the source” authentic voice. Second, the blog has a long history in comparison to others, and consistently registers high comment counts from actively involved users. Third, Eman Al Nafjan was named as one of the top 100 Global Thinkers based on her blog being “one of the most influential English language blogs in Saudi Arabia” (Slattery 2011:10). Nafjan is incredibly well educated and travelled. She received a master’s degree in teaching English from the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom and is currently in Saudi Arabia finishing her PhD in linguistics at the University of Riyadh. While her travels and education are not shared by all Saudi women her blog is written to be widely accessible. The Foreign Policy article, credits her wide readership and following, with amplifying the driving videos and protests of 2011 and concludes with a quote from Eman Al Nafjan proclaiming that, “the country is fertile ground for a revolution” (Slattery 2011:10).

Eight blog posts and the resulting 889 comments were selected for analysis. Six of the eight blog posts included are listed on Eman al-Nafjan’s self-identified “Top Posts” which are hyperlinked on a side column that appears on every page of the website. Eman provides no justification as to why the blog posts merit “Top Post” status, but their high comment counts and relevance to the issues she believes in make them especially relevant to this study. The seventh and eighth posts had originally been designated a “Top Post” but were replaced during the course of this research. As the data was already collected and incorporated there was no reason to reduce the data set. The eight posts selected were titled:

Eman al-Nafjan’s About Page  
What Does Being Wahhabi Mean?  
Misyar Marriages  
Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have  
Prominent Saudis: Rania Al Baz  
Punishment In Saudi Arabia  
Ten Most Beautiful Saudi’s  
Manal Al Sherif



The choice to analyze an English language blog is a choice of necessity and does create limitations. However, there are surprising advantages to analyzing a blog authored in English. The first is increased freedom of expression and a wider readership. Specifically, a report by the Index of Censorship described Middle Eastern bloggers consciously using English to “tackle controversial and unpopular subjects” (Khalil 2011:144). Others suggest that the “spread of English as the language of expression is closely tied to the direction of social development in Saudi Arabia” (Monteiro 2008:47). Finally, Saudi Internet adoption studies suggest that proficiency in English is a “compatibility attribute” that significantly determines Internet adoption. Indeed, a majority of Saudi bloggers are able to communicate in English (Al-Shohaib et al. 2009:24). However, there are users on the blog Saudiwoman.me who choose to post in Arabic. In such cases, I will make note of their frequency but will be unable to dedicate resources necessary to translate them.

A discourse analysis seeks to analyze those posts and comments on the blog that have generated substantial feedback to determine whether this deliberation promotes a uniquely Saudi-Islamic feminist perspective. A focus on blog deliberation allows for an analysis of the protocols of debate and reasoning, including which references are engaged in deliberation, and how they are rhetorically constructed and contested. A critical discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory, implying a rhetorical methodology with a critical relationship between the text and its social conditions, ideologies, and power-relations. This study has identified those categories and varieties of Islamic feminism that have emerged elsewhere, but makes no attempt to place the parameters of these frameworks around its methodological inquiry. The point is not to support or deny the existence of categories but to analyze the way these categories are produced, experienced, and resisted in everyday life. Through an analysis of eight blog posts and the resulting 889 comments I seek to explore how the Saudi blogosphere has facilitated the production of a Saudi Islamic feminist identity by analyzing the way Saudi women’s deliberation is produced, experienced, and resisted.

## Results and Discussion

Khamis (2010:252) identified three discursive tensions that surfaced among female blog users; collectivism and divergence, accommodation and confrontation, and locality and universality. These tensions appeared in the present study and provide insight into how Saudi-Islamic feminism is emerging within the Kingdom. A discourse analysis identifies the source of the tensions as they apply to the Saudi sphere before then identifying three themes that result from their deliberation.

### Collectivism and Divergence

The tension between collectivism and divergence relies on discursive analysis of both individual posts and also their broader deliberative effects. Readers may choose to ostracize themselves or others through their comments or lack thereof. In several cases, flaming tactics were used to ostracize members from the cyber community, most notably in the “Misyar Marriage” post where several men left contact information seeking a Misyar wife. In these cases there were waves of fellow blog reader’s comments to outcast the soliciting men. In less frequent cases comments would support patriarchal or fundamentalist Islamic ideology. These comments, supporting the status quo’s treatment of Saudi women, would not be left unaddressed. Active users took it upon themselves to defend one another’s ideas so much so that Nafjan rarely replied to commenters. Replies from Nafjan were unnecessary; an active and empowered audience took it upon themselves to reply. This active and empowered audience illustrates not only the collective majority, but also the divergence of the minority. Collectivism is marked by shared interpretations and recognition of the group, where divergence is marked by semantic debate and communal shunning. The present study finds no examples of communal shunning; however, the presence of flaming would suggest that some users were more readily accepted to the blogosphere than others. Those welcomed were most often in favor of weakening the power of the ‘ulama,’ strengthening the protections and roles for women, while also speaking praise of Islam. The members whose presence was ignored or ostracized were those who spoke of Islam as perfect and unchangeable or those who spoke of it as if it should be disregarded.

## Accommodation and Confrontation

Saudi Arabia's political elite have long sought to discourage political and religious dissent. The strict presence of the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) ensures that dissent is eliminated and government owned or co-opted media prevents opportunities for dissenters to inspire others. Blogs have emerged as a public sphere capable of escaping the reach of authority and promoting opportunities for dissent. The low frequency of flaming suggests that confrontation is low. Where confrontations do surface, users comment to support one another and identify and enforce blog norms. Community norms ensure that racist and sexist language is explicitly rejected and may even be deleted from comment history. Furthermore users explicitly defend the purpose of the blog to promote the betterment of Saudi women and users attempting to oppose women's empowerment are quickly confronted. Also, users articulate the rules and norms to suggest that users should be willing to defend and explain their positions. Even where there are disagreements, confrontations are often avoided by sticking to facts and debating the issue rather than the person.

The largest source of confrontation is among those attempting to preserve the Saudi's status quo treatment of women. For example, in Nafjan's "Manal Al Sherif" post several users associate driving with being Western and identify women's mobility as the greatest threat to the Saudi social order. Despite being the minority, a large frequency of the comments involve users trying to refute the existing Saudi religious and political infrastructure's legitimacy. These confrontations are litmus tests for Saudi feminisms broader integration into the Kingdom. As Saudi blog users discuss women's status they test the waters of the religious, political, and social climate, becoming more sophisticated in designing persuasive appeals that will position them as opinion leaders for the next generation of Saudi women.

## Locality and Universality

The tension between locality and universality reflects both an internal and exter-

nal dimension. Internally bloggers must navigate protecting their authentic identities while simultaneously entertaining, informing, or persuading readers (Liu and LaRose 2008:8). Externally the blogging community must decide what voices, if any, it wants to incorporate from outside of Saudi Arabia. These deliberations position Saudi Arabian feminist dialogue against several existing feminist theories ranging from secular Islamic feminism, Islamic feminism, Islamist feminism, and Western feminism. Comments advocating for Western feminism quickly promote much deliberation. Resistance to western feminism is apparent in the overwhelming dissent garnered by these comments. Users frequently identify western feminism with adultery, alcoholism, and unwed pregnancy. Those supporting secular feminism are labeled as *kafir*, and treated as atheists. Blog users advocate, not for the removal of the religious ‘ulama,’ but the repositioning of it. Users suggest that individuals should be able to critique and deliberate about the interpretations of Islamic texts free from the interference of the CPVPV.

The social consequences of the tension between locality and universality are exemplified in Nafjan’s “Manal Al Sherif” post. Two distinct elements become apparent through the resulting deliberative comments. First, an audience of Saudi expatriates in support of Nafjan and Manal struggle to understand their role in a Saudi political struggle they recognize is not their own. Second, Saudi women consider whether efforts should prioritize mobility rights in favor of appeals for broader rights to public inclusion. In both cases, as users navigate the tension between locality and universality, Saudi Arabian discourses are positioned as the local discourse and contrasted from the universal discourses.

The 8.4 million Saudi Arabian expatriates represent nearly one third of the country’s total population. These individuals live in separate expatriate communities with different social structures, but are still prohibited from driving. For expatriate users, punishment in shared Saudi public space is often severe, with expatriate individuals at risk of deportation if they are caught with a Saudi of the opposite sex. For expatriate bloggers, the shared exchanges through reciprocated blog comments may be their only opportunity

for interaction with Saudi citizens. In Nafjan's "Manal Al Sherif" post she details five instructions for those wishing to participate in the June 17 drive in. No mention of the expatriate population is included. Expatriate bloggers use the comments to inquire about their role in the movement, asking the "local" Saudi commenters for insight into their participation or lack thereof in Saudi women's movements. A user identified as "expat in saudi" writes:

As an expat living in the Eastern Province I do want to address what some of the other expats have said. I do not believe that this issue of women driving is an issue only for Saudi women. There are many expat women living in Saudi who are affected by this rule. I am struggling with an appropriate response to this myself. I would love nothing more than to show solidarity on June 17th with the Saudi women who want the right to drive and take to the streets ... I would love to hear feedback from Saudi readers of this blog. What do YOU think? What is the place of a Western expat in this debate? How can we best help? (Manal Al Sherif 2011)

Nafjan responds and confirms "expat in saudi's" concern that driving would not be in Saudi women's best interest. Nafjan writes in response:

Thank you so much for your concern and support... Going out now would work against us. However as soon as the ban is lifted officially then the more women driving of every nationality, the sooner Saudis will get used to the sight. What you can do right now however is raise the issue wherever you can, ask your politicians to raise the issue when they meet Saudi delegations. Ask car manufacturers from your country why they sell cars at a place where women are banned from driving them. Talk and write about it as much as you can. (Manal Al Sherif 2011)

Nafjan's response identifies the tension between locality and universality by identifying "Expat in Saudi" as a member of an out-group. However, her

response also suggests that this out-group has a role, and in trying to accommodate expatriates Nafjan provides several options for them to support the movement. “Expat in Saudi” responds incorporating Nafjan’s advice:

Yes, I’m working on getting the word out. It’s the one comfort I have right now when I feel like my hands are tied and I question the morality of being here. The fact is I am here now, and I can help tell the story. (Manal Al Sherif 2011)

She describes the tension she experiences as similar to having bound hands, and expresses relief at her ability to share the story with others. In this way the blog has already served its purpose, informing and reducing the tensions of a supportive expatriate community. In reducing these tensions, expatriates find their role in the movement, and Saudi women protect their authentically Saudi movement from well-intentioned but misguided outside interventions.

### Discursive Themes

A discursive analysis guided by an awareness of the dialectical tensions of Islamic bloggers revealed three themes that provide insight into the emergence of Saudi-Islamic feminism. These themes articulate the boundary lines for Saudi women’s organized efforts. Saudi-Islamic feminism, in its early stages, is probably best described as a women’s rights movement. Many women themselves would be hesitant to describe themselves as feminists. The term feminist carries with it a Western connotation that is likely to draw disdain among the Saudi political elite. Unlike feminist movements elsewhere, their calls are not revolutionary, but are instead rooted in discourses of religious righteousness. Those calling for increased women’s participation in the Saudi blogosphere followed three deliberative themes; displaying and defending iman (faith), repositioning the ‘ulama,’ and restoring Saudi Arabian history.

### Displaying and Defending Iman

Iman is one of three crucial dimensions of a Muslim’s practice. The first, Islam, means to submit. Second, iman, means adherence to religious law

and practice. The final dimension, *ishan* denotes applying iman to obtain excellence in worship. In the Saudi blogosphere observed on Nafjan's Saudiwoman.me, user posts were contested along questions of proper adherence to Islam. To be identified as "western" or "liberal" were second in offense only to charges of "atheism" or "kafir." Saudi women seeking change recognize that their message must first resonate domestically. While blog posts reveal high levels of international support for Saudi women's issues, Saudi voices resist coalitions with international advocates and position religion as central to deliberation. This deliberative tactic has the effect of positioning Islamic theology and interpretation at the center of deliberation. Further, it ensures that Saudi women's voices are not coopted or misrepresented by other feminist discourses.

Comments that ignore challenges of religious legitimacy are ignored or negated and contested. Those that engage religious texts often fill several printed pages of text, with users acting as religious scholars to demonstrate their Islamic knowledge. Posts like Nafjan's "What Does Being Wahhabi Mean?" explicitly recognize and reject the fracturing of Islam through religious interpretation and practice. Instead, Nafjan and several of her supporters suggest that the histories be re-read. By examining Islamic theology and texts from multiple perspectives new readings may impact how old questions are answered. One of the largest debates that played out in Nafjan's "Manal Al Sherif" post, concerned not whether Manal and the June 17th Drive-In were necessary, but whether they were conducted Islamically. User's defensiveness in regard to Islam, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia, signal a movement that seeks approval from these forces.

While many Muslims identify the time of the Prophet's life as the golden age of Islam, bloggers resist canonizing historical texts and instead promote a controlled modernization of the religious texts, guided by the hands of the entire community, rather than just among the religious elite or Saudi 'ulama.' Where Quranic Surahs appear in support of violence against women, Saudi bloggers utilize a wealth of religious knowledge to undermine the user's assertion of its meaning, provide contrasting Surahs and aḥadīth,

in addition to stressing its historical context. This deliberative process introduces historical and religious meanings to critique in the public sphere, and in doing so, may threaten “Muslims’ sense of their past and thus also of themselves” (Barlas 2002:87). In responding to this cognitive dissonance, Saudi bloggers reposition the ‘ulama’ in effort to justify their ‘taking back’ of religious interpretation.

### Repositioning the ‘ulama’

Nafjan’s “get it straight from the source” attitude fosters a community of open deliberation and encourages new contributors to the social, religious, and political deliberations. The posts and their associated comments create a new space for deliberation that is discursive, performative, and participative, and unlike any offered in the tangible Saudi public sphere. Voices previously silenced now have a forum to organize and deliberate and researchers as well as the international public should be listening. While a Saudi women’s movement is early in its formation, Nafjan’s posts concerning women’s mobility rights reveal a movement steadfast in seeking progress. In a June 11, 2012 post Nafjan submits her translation of a petition titled “My Right To Dignity” seeking signatories. The petition discourages protest and pledges to work within the Kingdom’s avenues for political change. However, it very cautiously articulates discontent with ruling religious elite and seeks the king’s support to guide the ‘ulama’:

This campaign does not seek to disrupt the government or to violate any national laws or regulations. Here it is important to point out that there is no explicit law banning women from driving. We are not in cooperation with any foreign organizations or bodies nor do we represent a political party or opposition. We do not intend to start a public protest... Our hope is now hanging on the generosity of your response and support for this campaign. We hope that your majesty will instruct all those who have in their capacity to support us to do so, such as the regional princes, the police and the Commission for Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue. We hope that you will



command them to enable women who have valid licenses to drive their own cars when running their basic daily errands and thus lift the financial and social burden on some families that has lasted far too long. (Translation of My Right to Dignity petition 2012)

By pledging to work within the existing political structure and discouraging protest the movement seeks political influence. The petition details frustration with Saudi 'ulama' while still positioning itself in a politically favorable way by seeking the king's blessing. This appeal effectively seeks to use the double-discourse described by Al-Rasheed (2007:26) to the movement's advantage. Recognizing division between Saudi political and religious elite, and growing tired of contesting the religious factions controlled by the Shura council, activists seek political influence to persuade the 'ulama.' While petitions for political influence may not constitute feminist resistance or political subversion elsewhere, the political efficacy of such movements is not drawn from their political potentials. Instead, the political efficacy of such movements is "a function of the work they perform in the ethical realm" (Mahmood 2005:35). As Saudi women organize online they identify new strategies of persuasion. Exploiting the double-discourse of Wahhabi rhetoric, Saudi women are able to forge ethical claims against the political. As religious debates are moved into the Saudi public sphere, Saudi women are given an opportunity to participate as defacto members of a cyber 'ulama.' In this cyber public sphere women's interpretations and opinions are valued and developed, and through deliberation they are contested and compared. This emerging public sphere promotes new and varied challenges to laws, interpretations, and practice which open the existing public sphere to multiple opportunities for religious and political opposition.

### Restorying Saudi Arabia

First by positing their support of Islam, secondly by shifting the religious debate into territory where it may be more easily contested, and finally by reshaping and restorying Saudi Arabian history and values, Saudi women in the blogosphere are actively 'taking back' discourses previously controlled by ruling elites. Posts similar to Nafjan's "Punishment in Saudi Arabia" and

“Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” seek to describe Saudi Arabian history and values as though they are supportive of women’s efforts for progress. Saudi men and ruling parties are held accountable for their deviations from the original values and scriptures of Islam. In many cases men who are protective of the status quo are described as weak and fearful of women’s power and roles within society.

Saudi women describe the necessity of male participation in the movement and seek to offer them a history whereby they are justified in their supportive efforts. In some cases, faith is positioned in support of the effort and religious texts are quoted to support their movement. In other cases, examples of the Prophet’s fair treatment of women are presented. Often men are reminded of their role as fathers, and of the need to protect and defend their mothers, sisters, and daughters. This recognition of separate roles is paramount to a Saudi women’s rights movement that seeks restoration of the egalitarian modes of Islam rather than following more secular and demanding women’s movements as seen in Egypt or Malaysia. The calls for reform are echoed in posts such as Nafjan’s, “Misyar Marriage,” “Punishment in Saudi Arabia,” “Manal Al Sherif” and “Prominent Saudi’s: Raina Al Baz.” The voices engaging these discussions seek not to replace leadership or oust the ‘ulama,’ but instead to inspire an active public which may guide the political and religious factions.

For those navigating the Saudi Islamic blogosphere, the communication exchanges encountered are significantly more open than those found in communal markets, news outlets, and business or academic conferences. The discursive deliberations on Saudiwoman.me revealed a blog audience that sought to reconcile religious identity, connecting Saudi tradition with desires for reform. Posts like Nafjan’s “Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” and the resulting comments argue for a view of Saudi women that incorporates their autonomy and resists depictions of victimization. One user comments on Nafjan’s critique of veiled Saudi women’s as either “victimized and brainwashed or surprisingly educated and powerful.” The user writes:

I am happy to be a voice for all the women who feel that the burqa is a source of oppression. Just as I am happy to stand by the women for whom it is the biggest sign of their faith, the very backbone of their beliefs. I am happy to do both because my say doesn't count unless I am the one wearing the burqa. The West has a misplaced notion of being the freedom-giver of all the world's oppressed. Just as Islamic nations have a misplaced notion that only tradition without innovation and change will carry them into the future. What we need is the best of both worlds. Nobody is above anyone else, however different the view on the other side may be. (Saudi Girls Just Wanna Have Fun 2008)

This response wonderfully typifies the necessary compromise between accommodation and confrontation and provides each perspective a role in the dialogue. This user confirms Nafjan's restoryed depiction of Saudi women and suggests that victimized portrayals stem from a western superiority complex. It is awareness of this complex that drives Saudi reform to distance itself from western feminism while simultaneously advocating for modernization of the public sphere and women's place within it. Those who restory western visions of Saudi women often detail rampant drug and alcohol abuse or unwed pregnancy. Adherence and submission to Islam are supreme in any vision of Saudi women's reform. Second to Islam is nationalism and pride in being Saudi. Reconciled between the two are women's issues. By restorying Saudi feminist identity women's issues become about nationalism, religion, and society from their standpoint and intersections. By creating Saudi-Islamic feminist discourses they uniquely resist the restraints of victimizing labels and promote empowerment.

## Implications and Conclusion

While revolutions elsewhere have called for the establishment or removal of a secular regime there are no such calls in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia dissent is framed from within a revivalist Wahhabiyyaa framework. In this framework, Islam and interpretations of it, become the center point for

contestation. “What is at issue is challenging the monopoly over the divine held by a government based on religion. Islam in Saudi Arabia is therefore a subject of contention, primarily between the regime and the Islamists, but also among the Islamists themselves because of the multiplicity of visions that motivate them” (Lacroix 2011:2). The women deliberating on Saudiwomen.me open a space for women’s voices within Islamist discourse. As users interact with one another they refine their social, religious, and political worldviews. By collectively defending women’s knowledge of Islam, positioning women’s ethical claim within the ‘ulama,’ and restoring male and female identities a new form of Saudi deliberation is facilitated. The dissenting discourses that emerge from these deliberations challenge the state, not at the political or legislative level, but at the very root of what it means to be an authentically Islamic state. From women’s varied perspectives it is possible to imagine a Saudi Islamic state that encourages women’s active deliberation in the public sphere.

In attempting to address whether the public sphere can be reconstituted to promote increased deliberation, scholars must address socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors that influence the development and maintenance of public and counter public spheres. This multidisciplinary approach contributes to a wide range of disciplines and promotes a flexible and varied approach to identifying the emergence of women’s discourses in publics where they were previously discouraged or prohibited. While this research highlights existing forms of feminism as they have appeared in the Middle East, it makes no attempt to provide a framework for future Middle Eastern feminist study. Instead, political, religious, and cultural knowledge should be combined with a knowledge and respect for previous women’s movements within the region to allow for the recognition of intersectional identities and relevant tensions. Research should be guided by an awareness that Saudi women’s standpoint is unique and largely resists Western frameworks of feminist theory. Continued development and awareness of Islamic feminist theory offers researchers ever increasing opportunities to study the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and faith as they affect public sphere deliberations. As Saudi women continue to organize for social change, scholars

should examine how their messages are constructed and interpreted in the public. As contrasting discourses attempt to position Islam and women's rights in binary opposition, scholars should give considerable attention to those advocates that are able to reconcile the two.

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# Women and Media: Libyan Female Journalists from Gaddafi Media to Post- revolution: Case Study

Fatima El Issawi

## Abstract

*his article examines the representation of women in Libyan national traditional media before, during and after the February 2011 revolution that led to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. What roles did female journalists assume within national traditional newsrooms and how did these roles evolve from activism in the defense of women's causes and the official revolutionary ideals of the former regime to spreading the message of the revolutionaries during the uprising? This article further reflects on changes in the nature of female journalists' roles in the new post-revolution media landscape. The opening of the media market to private ownership for the first time in Libya's history is accompanied by an expansion of women's presence in Libyan newsrooms, where this increased visibility is to be viewed primarily as a mean of attracting audiences. In the shaky media landscape that characterizes the post-revolutionary period, this expansion reflects the clash between the conservative values of Libyan society and the liberal values of the open market. I argue that the growing number of women in national Libyan media post-revolution is not reflective of a general trend towards women's empowerment in a country struggling with the spread of violence and the legacy of the past. Rather, the thorny process of restructuring national media post-revolution and the need for new media outlets capable of catering for large audiences are empowering the presence of women in newsrooms as a strong marketing asset.*

## Keywords

*Arab Spring, Libya, gender, democracy, journalism*

## Introduction

It is not possible to examine the role played by women in Libyan national traditional media independently from the history of this media sector and its chaotic developments after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. The nature of



the Libyan national media, conceived and developed as a political tool for the propagation of the regime's message, rendered the distinction between male and female journalists inside newsrooms in certain respects irrelevant. Journalists, acting as mere publishers of the regime's message had little say in editorial policies or the content that was their product. The commercialization of this sector after the revolution in conjunction with fierce competition among the new private media outlets that are its driving force have opened new doors for women in Libyan newsrooms; their presence is used as a means both of attracting audiences and as a symbol of modernization in post-Gaddafi Libya.

This article closely examines the status of women journalists in Libyan traditional media and how this status transformed from before to after the revolution of February 2011. This analysis argues that women's role in Libyan media changed from one of engagement in defending women's causes to a feature of commercial marketing strategies. Despite the abundant opportunities for female journalists in new media outlets, especially TV stations, their active role is not a reflection of a general change in the status of women in what is in some respects an increasingly conservative society. Rather it is an expression of the need for these new and inexperienced media outlets to attract audiences by embracing the model of the powerful pan-Arab satellite media. The regression of women's conditions in the aftermath of the revolution confirms the thesis that the expansion of the presence of women in newsrooms does not reflect a general trend towards the empowerment of women in the new Libya.

### Women's low representation in the male-dominated newsroom: An international problem

Recent years witnessed a substantial increase in the number of female journalists working in mass media newsrooms at the international level in addition to a steady advancement in women's seniority within these newsrooms. This coincides with an increasing treatment of women's topics in media productions, such as violence against women and gender discrimination.

However, female journalists are still unable to access executive positions in numbers sufficient to allow them to influence the definition of news values and media practices (Zilliacus-Tikkanen 1997; Melin-Higgins 2004; The Annenberg Public Policy Center 2003). For instance, women in the creative sector in the US are only responsible for a humble 20 percent of content (Byerly and Ross 2006:78). In her survey of women in journalism for the International Federation of Journalists, Bettina Peters (2001) finds that although in some media industries women represent around 40 percent of working journalists, they only make up 3-5 percent of leading editorial teams. The main obstacles faced by women journalists in their quest for job advancement are “stereotypes, cultural attitudes expecting women to be sub-ordinate and subservient...; employment conditions, lack of equal pay, lack of access to further training, lack of fair promotion procedures, lack of access to decision-making positions (glass ceiling), sexual harassment, age limits, job segregation; social and personal obstacles, conflicting family and career demands, lack of support facilities (day care centers), lack of self-esteem” (Peters 2001:17). Much feminist criticism of news has focused on three main arguments: the lack of visibility of women in important news content, the distorted representation of women by focusing on their sexual attributes instead of their ideas, and finally the difficulties women face in accessing the news making apparatus as well as promotion to leadership positions within it (Byerly 2004).

The limited access of female journalists to spheres of decision making within mainstream newsrooms is thought to be strongly linked to their inability to influence the definition of news values and the setting of news agendas. Margaret Gallagher, an expert on gender patterns in media, finds that the growing number of female journalists in mainstream newsrooms in various roles did not lead to their empowerment, as their share of decision making is still very limited - as if “one woman at the top is as much as the system can absorb” (2001). According to the statistics of UNESCO, out of more than 200 media organizations in 30 countries across four regions, women head only 7. A further 7 have female deputy directors, although most of these are small radio companies or news magazines (Gallagher 1995).

The ability of women to adapt to the male-dominated newsroom's dynamics remains a major challenge for their career advancement. The seniority of some female journalists did not contribute to influencing a "male-identified" and "male-directed agenda" (Byerly and Ross 2006) inside these newsrooms. While the representation of women within mass media newsrooms is centered on soft topics and field reporting, the number of women considered a reliable voice to write opinion pieces and to report on politics is extremely narrow in a field traditionally considered to be a male domain. The gender distribution of labor inside newsrooms considers women to be less able to be coherent, analytical and affirmative of strong views, which explains the fact that female journalists have little weight in hard politics (Christmas 1997). Women's survival strategy in male-dominated newsrooms thus involves "either beating the boys at their own game or else developing alternative ways of practicing journalism" (Byerly and Ross 2006:79) by resorting to adopting masculine values and behavior in journalistic practice or escaping from mainstream to alternative media. The masculinity of the newsrooms is not linked to the production process itself but to the definition of newsworthiness, angles, and styles (Van Zoonen 1998:35).

However, scholars and practitioners argue that a rise in the number of women in mass media newsrooms will not necessarily lead to the empowerment of women in the media workforce or the granting of due representation for women's topics in news coverage. However, a critical mass of female journalists could have a positive effect in raising editorial sensitivity towards women's issues, thereby improving the coverage of these topics and their place in the news agenda. Without a doubt, the limited numbers of women in the industry reinforces gender inequalities. However, several arguments challenge the perceived positive outcome of a critical mass effect. First, the presence of weak networks of solidarity among female journalists inside newsrooms, caused by a culture of "complicity in patriarchy" with male colleagues, leads to the perpetuation of women's secondary status in newsrooms (Byerly and Ross 2006:166). This complicity is imperative for ambitious women who would hardly make it to top-ranking positions without the support of senior male colleagues. Moreover, having a dual identity of woman

and media practitioner does not lead necessarily to a media production sensitive to women's struggles against discrimination or domestic violence or indeed to increasing coverage of any topics linked to women's rights (Sakr 2004). The newsrooms' traditions of professional promotion consider the expertise in the field of politics imperative to seniority. In that sense, being engaged in defending women's issues would not help in boosting a female journalist's chances of achieving seniority.

The seniority of few women in newsrooms did not lead to major changes in newsrooms in terms of relations' dynamics and media content. Most female media executives have had to adopt "masculine management" behavior in order to earn respect and succeed in high-end jobs. In effect, they have to adopt the news values of their male colleagues. Furthermore, women's promotion to leading positions inside mainstream newsrooms could be linked to their personal profile and not necessarily their professional career, such as being linked to the ownership of the media outlet or the political agenda it supports. In these cases, the promotion of these journalists is not linked to their gender or performance but to their personal conditions. In her analysis of Saudi women in Arab media, Mellor points that those who managed to have a successful journalistic career outside the kingdom belong to a cohort of privileged women from the upper middle classes who already enjoyed socio-economic privileges such as studying in western universities (2010b:219).

The recruitment of women could also be linked to business interests, such as the favoritism for young and beautiful female presenters in Lebanese TV (Al-Qadry and Harb 2000) or the expansion of TV slots dealing with human interest stories considered fit for female presenters as opposed to their male colleagues (Van Zoonen 1998).

### The Arab context: Arab women in media

The publication of women's magazines is an old practice in the Arab press; the first such publication is *"Al-Fatat"* [The Girl] magazine, published in Cairo in 1892. The change in Arab media landscapes in the 1990s incre-

ased the representation of women within newsrooms and in media content, especially with the proliferation of regional pan-Arab media. This was accompanied by a newfound courage in tackling topics that used to be socially considered taboos, such as domestic violence, Islamic law, and so-called honor killing (Matar 2007). Special publications or programs dedicated to women's topics increased in recent years, especially with the launch of TV channels targeting an audience of women, such as the Lebanese satellite broadcaster *Heya* [She]. Important slots were dedicated to women's issues in influential pan-Arab satellite TV stations, such as "*Lil Nisaa Faqat*" [For Women Only] on al-Jazeera channel and "*Kalam Nawaem*" [Soft Talk] on MBC TV channel, enabling "subordinate groups to express themselves on their own terms" (Sakr 2004:12). Despite the link between these satellite pan-Arab media and the ruling elites, these programs managed to break the wall of silence on polemic topics both in politics and in women's rights, although these slots were not necessarily used as a means of empowering women. For instance, these liberal trends in tackling women's rights in Saudi-funded media outlets were mainly linked to the need for Saudi women to contribute to family wealth (Sakr 2004). The representation of women in media was equally important for Arab regimes willing to improve their international image by granting some visibility for women and women's topics in their media platforms.

While the literature on women and media demonstrates common difficulties shared by Arab female journalists and their colleagues in the West, there are particularities associated with the nature of political and socio-economic systems in specifically Arab countries. In her analysis of Lebanese female journalists, Yasmine Dabbous (forthcoming) lists the main obstacles encountered by nine senior journalists she interviewed as the following: the difficulties of striking a balance between family and work; the emphasis (in the case of television especially) on the physical appearance of journalists; female colleagues' enviousness; and the reluctance of junior male colleagues to accept the authority of female managers. This difficulty in asserting their authority on junior male colleagues is also expressed by Saudi journalists in leading positions having to deal with junior colleagues from their countries

(Butters 2009). Lebanese media, especially TV stations, tend to favor young and beautiful female journalists who perceive their role as mainly in the field of entertainment and not in politics, unlike their male colleagues (Al-Qadry and Harb 2002).

The particularities of political regimes and media industries in the Arab world make gender irrelevant in impacting certain media practices inside newsrooms. In a context where self-censorship restrictions are the norm, that is, the content is dictated by the official discourse, with clear “red lines” that are not to be breached by either male or female media practitioners. In the Egyptian State TV and Radio Union, programs on women’s rights had to avoid tackling topics considered as a breach of traditional or religious taboos (Sakr2004:9). Similarly, Dabbous (forthcoming) finds that, in the context of recruitment, the political alignment of mainstream Lebanese newsrooms does not distinguish between male and female journalists. Several journalists interviewed said that hiring policies are not based on considerations of gender. Rather, men and women either supported by a given political party or complying with the outlet’s political stance tend to be favored for hire. The nature of the Lebanese media as mostly owned by families linked to politics or politicians makes political connections and not the gender of the applicant the primary factor in recruitment policies.

However, the business interests of pan-Arab newsrooms transformed female journalists into a major “selling point,” thus contributing to raising the profile of female journalists. In her research on women in transnational Arab media outlets, Mellor argues that stereotypical sexist attitudes resulted in privileged access to sources for female journalists, beating their male colleagues in one of their main fields: political reporting. The primacy of conflict reporting from Arab war zones provided female journalists with the opportunity to engage in conflict reporting, a journalistic genre equal in importance to political reporting (Mellor 2010a).

The growing popularity and influence of talk show slots in Egyptian media does not exclude female journalists; some of them are moderating widely viewed prime-time talk shows. The diversification of roles played by Arab

women in Arab media renders it impossible to confine women's roles to narrow definitions (Mellor 2010b).

Moreover, the cultural shape of gender relations inside newsrooms questions the ability to examine the development of women's roles inside newsrooms without linking it to the overall empowerment of women in the workforce of the Arab world. This empowerment is a "multi-faceted, multi-dimensional process of power redistribution in society," the realization of which is conceived of as "a function of the interplay of progressive gender-based societal and legal advocacy actions, on the one hand, and institutional reforms, on the other hand" (Ayish 2010:193). In this perspective, the empowerment of Arab women in media is one facet of a wider dilemma, that of inequality in the distribution of wealth between females and males in various sectors of production as well as women's advancement in economic, political and educational spheres. Arab female journalists face not only barriers based on gender but also the wider limitations on rights and freedoms imposed by autocratic regimes. Their battle to assert their presence in media cannot therefore be dissociated from the political struggle for rights and freedoms in the Arab world (Sakr 2001). Post revolution, female journalists as well as their male colleagues have to face additional restrictions, mainly the spread of violence, growing extremist trends and the attempts of new regimes to muzzle media using the old restrictive regulatory framework.

### Libyan media: from Gaddafi propaganda machine to transitional media landscape

Media reform in Libya opted for a complete rupture with the past. In Gaddafi's Libya, the media was seen as the voice of the regime and the vehicle for its propaganda and could thus only be state owned (Richter 2012). The state media were controlled by an extremely centralized governmental apparatus of organizations that were continuously rebranded depending upon the regime's mood. The "al-Ghad" project, launched by Gaddafi's son Saif el Islam in late 2000, could be seen as a limited liberalization aiming to rebrand the image of the regime. The project did not succeed in overcoming

internal pressures, and eventually this experiment ended up reproducing the various mechanisms of control prevalent in the state owned media.

After the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, the Committee for Supporting and Encouraging the Press (CESP) established to oversee the print media sector took a radical approach. It dismantled the state's main newspapers, publishing new ones with the main aim of providing new structures for the regime's media staff. However, these new press publications were understaffed and suffered from both lack of vision and limited resources. For the first time in the history of the country, private media outlets were launched in the absence of any regulatory framework (el Issawi 2013).

Ambitious plans to transform the state media into providers of quality news proved unrealistic given the poor professional skills of journalists and lack of managerial leadership. Furthermore, the struggle between different factions and armed militias over control of the assets of former television and radio stations hampered the rebirth of the old state TV and radio apparatus. Plans to abolish the powerful Ministry of Information and to establish an independent media council that would be responsible for overseeing the media sector did not materialize. In fact, battles over the formation and structure of this body led the government to freeze this project and to reinstate the Ministry of Information.

Most of the new media projects are thought to be linked to specific political agendas and interests. The majority of these projects, which still operate with limited staff and resources, were born outside the country, mainly in Tunisia and Egypt, with the aim of countering the regime's state media propaganda. However, in the post-Qaddafi period they have to redefine their identity while suffering from a lack of vision as much as from the absence of sophisticated organizational capacities. Most of these initiatives are being bought up by powerful business interests eager to invest in the media sector in order to buy influence in the political arena (el Issawi 2013).



## Libyan women in media: new/old roles

### Methodology

This analysis is based on qualitative interviews conducted with nine Libyan female journalists in various positions in traditional media outlets and forms part of wider research mapping changes in values and practices in transitional Libyan media.<sup>1</sup> It aims to examine the development of their roles from before to after the regime change in light of the radical transformations in the structure and functions of national Libyan media that this regime change entailed.

The methodology applied in this article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted during one to one meetings in Tripoli (Libya) in October 2013. These interviews focused on the personal history of these female journalists, their relations with their working environment and the political regimes. These nine women were chosen from diverse backgrounds using several methods mainly personal connections and media monitoring before and after the revolution as well as reports published by media development agencies operating in Libya. The limited information published on Libyan women in media and on Libyan media in general made the personal connections the most efficient tool to select these women who are part of the larger sample of the study on transitional Libyan media. The most important criteria in choosing them is the diversity of experiences and profiles; some of these journalists had lengthy experience in the former state media with an engagement in defending women's rights while others, younger, have a professional focus on personal advancement. Some of them had assumed high positions in the former state media apparatus while others were engaged in supporting the rebels and conveying their message during the revolution. These female journalists are:

- (1) Inas Hmaida: she was known for being part of the inner circle of Gaddafi loyalists. She had assumed senior editorial positions in different state media, lately in the flagship "Sabah Oya" newspaper that was used as a propaganda platform for the regime before the eruption

of the revolution. She is not working in media currently, being excluded from senior positions in the new regime due to her former senior role in the Gaddafi regime.

(2) Asma Bin Saeed: From the younger generation, she is struggling to integrate herself into the new media environment. She used to work in the old state media and was nominated to a senior position in a newspaper launched post revolution but did not manage to keep her position because of her stated competition with senior male colleagues.

(3) Soad Salem: A well-known journalist in Tripoli, she had occupied a senior position in the former state media but without being involved in politics or being close to the regime's circles. She was engaged in defending women's rights in her work as a journalist and was active in voicing the message of the rebellion by providing news to regional Arab media.

(4) Razan al Moghrabi: She used to assume editorial positions in cultural magazines in the former state media. She is also a writer. She is not working currently as a journalist in the new media environment.

(5) Zaineb Zaidi: She used to work as a TV presenter for family programs in the former state media. She played a prominent role in calling for supporting the rebellion during the revolution from the platform of opposition TV stations. She is currently a talk show host in one of the new private TV channels in Tripoli.

(6) Rana Akabani: From the younger generation. She was active in providing clandestine news reports to foreign media during the revolution. She was arrested and had faced the death penalty. She was liberated with the fall of Tripoli in the hands of rebels. She works currently for an investigative news website in Tripoli.

(7) Mariyam Hajjaji: She used to work in one of the former state TV channels. She was nominated for a senior position in the state

TV post revolution but was unable to fulfill her role because of competition with male colleagues as she states. She is currently head of programming in a private TV channel in Tripoli.

(8) Nahla Hadi: From the younger generation. She was a reporter for a state newspaper. She is reluctant to join the new media environment.

(9) Warda Mohamed: From the younger generation. She used to work as a reporter for a state newspaper under the former regime. She joined a new state newspaper launched after the revolution as a reporter.

All these female journalists were interviewed by the author during the field investigation in Tripoli. They all spoke on the record without requiring their responses to be kept confidential.

### Libyan women in a new political and media environment

The Libyan media landscape has changed dramatically since the fall of the Gaddafi regime. A young generation of male and female journalists is now taking the lead in new media outlets that mushroomed in the aftermath of Gaddafi's demise. The change in the nature of this media community is explained by the informal exclusion of the old media staff accused of complicity with the former regime. They are replaced by newcomers who have no previous experience in journalism, coming instead from different professions. Some of them are former rebels while others were active as citizen journalists capturing key moments of the revolution (el Issawi 2013; Wollenberg and Pack 2013). Although there are no accurate figures on the number of these journalists or their respective genders, it is not difficult to observe a prominent number of women in these burgeoning media platforms.

This expansion is, however, accompanied by a regression in women's conditions, with calls for the adoption of ultra conservative gender policies, such as the separation of men and women in all workplaces, classrooms, and gover-

nment offices as well as imposing a ban on women marrying foreigners. One of the serious expressions of this regression is the ruling by the Supreme Court lifting restrictions on polygamy (Human Rights Watch 2013). The growing hegemony of extremist militias is furthermore exacerbating abuses against women in a conservative and male-dominated society.

Under Gaddafi, women enjoyed a reasonably high status. They were granted the right to vote since 1964 and that of passing their nationality on to their children in 2010. Libya has also signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Birke 2011). The widespread sexual violence and rapes witnessed during the uprising remain one of the darkest facets yet to be resolved of this period's legacy (Dettmer 2012). Nevertheless, while their conditions are deteriorating, women are gathering in new structures of solidarity and activism, pushing for instance for a 40 percent quota for women in the parliamentary committee that will write Libya's new constitution (Hawley 2011). The debates about women's rights especially their political representation, are largely reflected in national media. In the meantime, women are paying a heavy price for the spread of insecurity and the growing dominance of militias, being frequently subject to kidnapping and sexual assaults. The controversial political isolation bill that forbid all holders of senior positions in various industries under Gaddafi's regime to assume high responsibilities in the new state is also impacting the process of women's reintegration in the new Libyan media environment. Given the limited number of women who used to assume high positions under the former regime, the law's impact on women's jobs in the new Libya is less prominent than on men of the former regime.

In Gaddafi's media regime, women were present in various media outlets including in limited numbers in senior governmental positions. The best example is Fawzia Shalabi, the prominent Minister of Information under Gaddafi, who was also an active element in the "revolutionary" structure set by the "Leader" and was arrested after the fall of the regime. For these senior women, their passion in embracing the revolutionary ideology of the "leader" was instrumental in their promotion. These women, popularly

called “the revolutionary nuns,”<sup>2</sup> seriously competed with men for senior positions. The loyalty to the person of the “leader” and an active engagement in defending and spreading the revolutionary ideology were the main requirements to access power, and this equally for women and men.

Women’s publications were well known in Libyan media, providing a platform to discuss diverse topics from family issues to women’s rights in a conservative society. These publications were led by prominent female journalists who managed to impose their editorial style as well as pushing the boundaries of what is tolerated to be discussed in women’s rights. The link between these senior women and the regime did not stop them from expressing dissenting opinions when it comes to governmental decisions that restrict their rights as women. A well-known example is Khadija al Jahmi (popularly called mother Khadija) who founded *al-Maraa* [The Woman] magazine in 1965 in addition to her work as radio presenter of educational programs on women’s rights (Halim 2013). The magazine’s identity was later transformed to become *Al Beit* [The Home], tackling different topics related to the family in general. Other specialized publications were *Al-Amal* [The Hope] transformed later into a magazine for children (1975) and Shehrazad magazine, published from Cyprus and led by Fatima Mohmoud. The main state publication dedicated to women’s issues published post-revolution is *al-Maraa* (based in Benghazi, formerly *al-Beit*). There are various private publications dedicated to women’s issues as well.

The example of Fatima Mahmoud is important as she managed to challenge social and religious taboos by tackling topics such as domestic violence, rape in marriage, and female genital mutilation, among others.

### Generations and role models

It is important to note that these writers and journalists were leading figures in a feminist movement and their journalistic contribution was only one facet of their professional and social profile. Known for being “trouble makers” in daring to advocate for the emancipation of women, they became role models for female journalists of the next generation. Unlike their older

colleagues, the young journalists made their way to seniority by being integrated into newsrooms without necessarily belonging to the women's elite. For Soad Salem, a journalist from the former media regime, the example of Fatima Mahmoud was a school in itself in teaching journalism: "When I was appointed managing director for al Beit magazine, I wanted to follow the steps of Fatima. That was impossible, the resources were very limited" (Personal interview, Tripoli, June 2012).

The prominence of these role models for female journalists does not mean that all of these female media figures were pushing for a feminist editorial agenda in newsrooms. The leading female journalists in state media and governmental positions were concerned mainly with serving the regime's policies rather than defending women's rights. However, their activism for women's causes was linked to their perception of their identity as embracing the "revolutionary" vision of the regime. The limited number of women in Libyan media in general was explained by the conservative nature of Libyan society, considering women's presence in media an emancipated behavior. The experience of Inas Hamida, who used to be a senior journalist in the Gaddafi media, is instructive. She had to leave her work in the state TV and move to the print sector, which was considered to be more socially acceptable for women. Working as a TV presenter was an expression of emancipation not tolerated in the conservative Libyan society (Personal interview, Tripoli, October 2012).

However, the prominence of the model of the female journalist/activist permitted the regime's policies to be challenged when these policies were against women's rights. A prominent example is the governmental decision to ban Libyan women's travel without a male chaperone when they are less than forty years old, a decision considered to be highly undermining and humiliating for Libyan women. The decision was leaked to the press before being issued officially and sparked a wave of rebellion among local women's rights organizations supported by female journalists. The response was such that the regime was forced to backtrack on the decision. Soad Salem,

who formerly occupied a leading position within the state newspaper *al-Jamahiriyya*, played a prominent role in this battle and paid the price for her rebellion. She recounts:

I wrote an article criticizing toughly the decision. The article was quoted in a news story published by *Agence France Presse* and *al-Jazeera* channel. This was hugely embarrassing for my editor in chief. I knew that the punishment will come. The government reacted by publishing a statement accusing Libyan women of misbehaving. I wrote an article slamming this statement but the editor in chief refused to publish it. I read the article in the presence of international TV channels cameras. (Personal interview, Tripoli, October 2012)

Soad Salem was removed from her position after this episode and was given a low profile job in a news website. She remained in this position until the revolution.

The “avant gardists” male managers and professional development

As all Libyan institutions, media outlets were governed in an extremely centralized manner. The personality of the editor-in-chief was pivotal in defining not only the editorial line of the media outlet (under the defined regime’s policies) but also its internal dynamics and its ability to challenge the official media discourse in matters which are not of crucial significance for the regime. Under these conditions, the professional advancement of female journalists was a result of the encouragement they earned from editors-in-chief quite often described by interviewed journalists as “adventurers” and “avant-gardists.” Take the example of Asmaa Bin Saeed, who assumed a managerial position in a sports magazine despite the fact that the staff consisted entirely of old male journalists and the field itself was extremely male dominated. She recounts:

The editor-in-chief who nominated me was extremely adventurous. This nomination was a huge challenge for him as I was very young. This put huge pressure on me. I had to continue covering events while

assuming managerial responsibilities. I was also facing a hostile campaign from colleagues; some of them pretended that the editor-in-chief was close to my family. (Personal interview, October 2012)

Although it was unusual for female journalists to cover sports competitions, this was tolerated for Asmaa, who could perform equally to her male colleagues. The situation was totally different when she moved to a weekly cultural magazine with a pronounced ideological tone:

Female journalists were allowed to go out to cover events only till early afternoon and with the company of the company's taxi driver. I told the editor-in-chief that, being a journalist, I have to go out. He responded that I have to prove I am able to do so. I covered an artistic festival where events ended at midnight. I was supported by my father. (Personal interview, October 2010)

The support of male editors has limits - that of personal competition as well as challenging the core regime's policies. Take the example of Soad Salem's evolving relationship with the editor-in-chief of al-Jamahiriyya, the state newspaper that was her former employer. She describes the crucial support of the editor-in-chief in promoting her career:

The editor-in-chief valued my work. He trusted me. This was hugely important in a country like Libya. I was also hard working. I was impressed by his modern ideas... he likes rebellious female journalists and he encouraged me and fellow journalists to challenge the authority of the security apparatus in many situations. (Personal interview, October 2012).

However, the editor-in-chief's support turned to an open war when Soad breached a "red line" by slamming the governmental decision to ban women's travel without a male chaperone and voicing her opposition in international media.

Editorial support for female journalists under the former regime did not extend so far as to grant them top managerial responsibilities. The promotion of



these women was not permitted go beyond the ceiling of a managing director. Take the experience of Razan al-Moghrabi, who used to be a managing director of a cultural magazine under the former regime. She says:

I was granted managerial responsibilities but never financial ones. I was told that the reason is my situation of woman. I was not granted any of the financial prerogatives enjoyed by men in senior positions. The position of executive director or editor in chief was given usually to a man even if this was only a formality on paper. (Personal interview, October 2012)

### Journalism vs activism

With political journalism being a monopoly for the national news agency under the former regime (all media outlets had to publish the agency's reports without any change), female journalists found in women's topics a major field for expressing their activism as well as profiling themselves. These topics were rewarding for female journalists, and this activism continued after the revolution. Subjects such as divorce, domestic violence, women's rights and the threat of radical extremist Islam are attractive topics for these female journalists. Among them is Zeinab Zaidi, who used to be a presenter of family programs in the former regime media. She is one of few journalists from the old media regime who managed to survive the change and found her place in the new media environment. Her passion for street reporting took her inside Libyan houses during the revolution where she interviewed women, inciting them to rebel against the regime. "Living in a very conservative society, women refuse to talk to male journalists," she explains (Personal interview, October 2012). After the revolution, Zeinab could experiment with political journalism, interviewing, for example, the head of an extremist Islamic militia and challenging him. This is one among many other polemic topics dealt with on her talk show. She continues to tackle women's topics, especially the post-revolution deterioration of women's conditions. "I don't have the look of a female star. People prefer now the physical look to the content but they still like my program because I am the voice of simple people, the tired people, those whose voice is not

heard,” Zeinab comments (Personal interview, October 2012). In the post-revolution environment, ripe with the spread of violence and extremism, the tyranny of the State is replaced by the threat of violence at the hands of armed militias with extremist backgrounds. Under these conditions, raising the question of women’s conditions can be framed as a significant political stance in its own right.

The involvement of Libyan women in supporting the revolution was strong. Cyber activism allowed women to support the revolution without having to take to the streets and take up arms (Radsch 2012). Female journalists in traditional media were also engaged in supporting the revolutionaries’ camp without taking up arms, although their involvement was not largely known. According to the testimonies of the journalists interviewed, many of these female journalists acted as informants for international and regional media, an initiative that led to the arrest of some. For instance, journalist Rana Akabani was arrested after being accused of spying for foreign governments by filing media reports (Free Rana & Hani Alakbani 2011). Most journalists interviewed were frequently in contact with regional media, especially al-Jazeera, offering updated reports on revolutionary battles while state media conducted misinformation campaigns (Black 2011).

The media battle was not less crucial than the field battle for the former regime. Zeinab Zaidi, for instance, produced TV programs from rural Libyan areas, inciting people to rebel. These programs were aired on an opposition TV station broadcasting from Cairo. She recounts: “I was surprised by my bravery. I come from a very conservative family. They threatened my family, they arrested my sister... I did not imagine I can do what I did, but I believe in God, Libya is more important than my family” (Personal interview, Tripoli, June 2012).

### Toward the pan-Arab media model

After the fall of the regime, the plans for re-structuring media were hampered by the growing power of armed groups, who managed to control the state media assets to the extent of interfering in the content of the media

production. Private media, a new feature on the media scene, now flourishes in a chaotic fashion, given the lack of regulatory frameworks. The interim authorities demonstrated a trend towards granting senior positions to experienced female journalists in both state funded and private media outlets. The difficulties these women encountered in practicing their senior posts is linked to different factors: the chaotic media environment after the revolution, the growing power of militias, the battle between the old media staff and the newcomers, and finally the reluctance of this male dominated sector to accept the authority of senior female journalists. The first two sets of problems are faced by all journalists struggling to work in an insecure and unprofessional media environment (Brenzel 2013).

Take the example of the experience of Mariyam Hajjaji, who was appointed head of the TV station *al-Libiyya*, a remnant of the old media apparatus. According to her statements, she could not assume her functions, given the reluctance of male colleagues to accept her authority. She recounts:

They accepted me as the director of programs but not the head of the TV channel, although I was appointed by the Ministry of Culture [overseeing the media sector]. They could not accept that a female colleague who used to work with them before is now their boss. (Personal interview, October 2012)

The new media environment is witnessing a growing number of female journalists in newsrooms as a result of the expansion of the media landscape, and the burgeoning of private media, especially radio and TV stations, has contributed to the normalization of the presence of women within media staff.

Yet the lack of a clear definition of journalists' roles has led to a situation where anyone can work as a journalist. This "invasion" of the media sector from "those who have no link to journalism," as described by Mariyam Hajjaji, is exacerbated by the exclusion of old media staff, who are labelled as "algae" (*Tahaleb*) by newcomers and considered as the voice of the Gaddafi regime. The lack of previous experience in journalism is common for

both male and female journalists, who are reduced to learning by doing in newsrooms. The lack of skilled staff and media outlets' need for journalists are together making the presence of female journalists in newsrooms a crucial requirement, regardless of their experiences or qualifications. Mariyam Hajjaji explains: "I had a problem with a presenter who could not deliver. The management refused to stop her as they need women on screen. This is the new trend now in Libyan media" (Personal interview, September 2013).

The business needs of new media projects are empowering women's roles in newsrooms. However, the growing hegemony of radical extremist Islamic militias in some regions is hampering the ability of female journalists to work alongside their male colleagues. In the eastern Libyan city of Darna, for example, jihadist groups inspired by al-Qaeda are imposing strict social mores that interfere extensively with media operations, such as banning music and songs and preventing male and female journalists working together in newsrooms (el-Issawi 2013). Although restricted to certain regions, these growing ultra conservative trends represent a new obstacle hampering women's integration in the new media landscape at odds with the interest of media management to attract female journalists.

## Analysis

The professional experiences of these women demonstrate common challenges faced by female journalists in the media sector both internationally and in the Arab region. Problems such as the reluctance of male junior colleagues to accept their authority and the need for the support of senior male colleagues for professional advancement in newsrooms are common challenges facing female journalists' career progression. However, the struggle of Libyan female journalists to assert their positions in the media field reflects the particularities of the Libyan context under the Gaddafi regime and after its fall. It reflects the transition of Libyan society from a position of isolation to one of integration into the Arab world as well as the struggle between liberal and conservative forces in the new Libya, a struggle in which conservative forces have the upper hand.

Under the Gaddafi regime, the model of the powerful female journalist – dedicated to supporting the regime’s cause – was a replication of the role played by senior female leaders empowered by the regime in order to serve its sought-after progressivist image. The solid loyalty shown by these leading female figures in media and other industries to the regime’s doctrine and leader did not limit their activist role against decisions taken by the regime that were deemed to be in opposition to women’s rights. The development of this activist role was beneficial for the regime and for female journalists in different ranks in the newsrooms’ hierarchy. For the most part excluded from decision-making spheres, the activist role in support of women’s causes empowered a definition of their identity as agents of change in their society.

This model of activism is now considered old-fashioned by younger generations of female journalists, especially with the liberalization of a private media sector that is eager to attract good-looking, “feminine” female presenters/reporters whose role extends from exercising their journalistic duties to providing the image of a liberal, women-friendly media outlet. The trend of using these female journalists as marketing assets to attract large audiences, favoring young and good-looking female journalists following the model of pan Arab satellite media channels, is facing two main obstacles: the shaky conditions of a media sector transitioning from a closed regime to an open and chaotic one and the conservative nature of Libyan society, which does not look positively on the development of this “marketing asset” role for female journalists. The expansion of this model is at odds with the traditions of Libyan society and reflects the difficult battle for liberal voices over ultra conservative ones in the political and civil spheres in the new Libya.

Although patently regressing, the activist role played by female journalists has not completely disappeared despite the deterioration of women’s conditions and the expansion of extremist trends in the post-Gaddafi era. However, it is no longer a model for younger female journalists, who instead focus on their professional advancement by embracing the model of their colleagues in pan-Arab media, all the while struggling to adapt to the new media environment.

Most of the female journalists interviewed in this paper who used to work in the former state media expressed their preference for the previous media environment, where stability was high and roles were clearly defined. While the turbulent media environment – marked by the spread of violence and frequent attacks against media practitioners – impacts female and male journalists alike, it is perceived by these female journalists as an important obstacle hindering their integration into a new and hostile environment. To the old internal obstacles of competitive male colleagues and institutional red lines, these new working conditions add novel ones, mainly the unpredictability of frequent attacks against media staff and the lack of a clear vision and professional structure that would shape this transitional media sector.

## Conclusion

The new Libyan media landscape is suffering from a set of complex problems; one of the major obstacles to its rebirth is the lack of skilled media producers (CIMA 2011). The exclusion of media executives who were part of the Gaddafi media apparatus is exacerbating this problem. The adoption of a political isolation law by the Libyan parliament under pressure from armed groups led to the exclusion of experienced journalists at a time when the media industry is in crucial need of skilled workers and leadership. The growing attacks against media outlets and staff by militia groups are forcing Libyan media to self-censor their productions, avoiding tackling polemic topics for fear of retaliation (Amnesty International 2013). Under these conditions, working as a journalist could amount to a misadventure, for male and females alike. Most journalists interviewed for the purposes of this research said they are reluctant to integrate into the new media scene as they consider it to be unsafe and lacking the disciplined structure that used to prevail under the old regime.

In this chaotic media landscape, the ability of male and female journalists to influence the news agenda is limited by the nature of a political transition that is dominated by the growing hegemony of armed groups. Yet the features

of the new Libyan media landscape are still a work in progress, and the real reform of this media industry is still to fully begin. In these conditions, it is premature to define the role of female journalists in newsrooms beyond that of satisfying the business needs of media owners. The empowerment of women in media is linked to the overall battle of Libyan women to protect their rights in the face of alarming ultra conservative trends. For female Libyan journalists, the challenge is double: to integrate themselves into the shaky new media scene and fight for their rights and security in a post-Gaddafi Libya where they are one of the major targets of widespread violence and radical extremist trends.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The study “Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions” aims to investigate the change in practices and values of national traditional media under political transitions. It covers Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. It is hosted by the Media and Communications department of the London School of Economics (LSE).

<sup>2</sup> These women were devoted to the revolution and would do anything for the service of its ideals.

# “My Life is More Important Than Family Honor:” Offline Protests, Counter-Cyberactivism, and Article 308

Sarah A. Tobin

## Abstract

*In summer 2012, protests erupted in Jordan in light of several high-profile enactments of Article 308 of the Penal Code, or “Rape Law,” that allows rape charges to be dropped if the perpetrator agrees to marry the victim, which were organized offline and aimed to create a groundswell of public support for changing gender inequities in society rather than political and legal structures. Users of social media were quick to deride and disparage the protests and protesters in highly visible and aggressive ways. This case demonstrates that the Internet can simultaneously act as a vehicle for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation through cyberactivism, while also serving as a mechanism for reinforcing preexisting cultural norms through, what I call, “counter-cyberactivism.” Such displays amplify the argument that the Internet serves as a space for online cultural performance of offline life, which enables the capacity for both cultural change and durability simultaneously. I conclude with the implications of this case for the online, virtual umma.*

## Keywords

*Jordan, activism, cyberactivism, gender*

## Introduction

One afternoon in late June 2012, I drove from downtown Amman towards the University of Jordan. This is a busy route, and there is typically a predictable degree of traffic and congestion. This particular day the traffic was the worst I had ever seen: where it would normally take 20 or 30 minutes for the entire five mile trip, it took me more than three hours to pass through the 300 feet of the Interior Circle, or *Duwaar Dakhiliya*. As I emerged from the Interior Circle headed towards Sport City, or *Medina Riyadhhiya*, I saw hundreds of women standing alongside the street holding white signs with black Arabic writing that read individualized statements such as “My life is more important than family honor,” and “No to Article 308.” Passersby slowed to a crawl to read the signs that varied with each protester. Some

stopped their cars to get out and join in on the protest. Some honked their horns in support. Some shouted out their windows at the protesters to go home or worse, and still others expressed frustration that this protest was interrupting their daily commute.

The women lining the Interior Circle and its approaches came out to protest a culture and society that supports Article 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code, which stipulates that male perpetrators of rape are exonerated from their punishments – including the death penalty – if they agree to marry the victim. The protesters that June afternoon were not agitating for governmental reform of legal systems in place as they had during the Arab Spring protests, which were typically unsuccessful at mobilizing the masses and at securing political change. Rather these protests were an attempt to build a groundswell of societal support against enactments of the law and in support of victims of rape in Jordan.

The online response to the offline protest was highly notable: it was Internet-based and asserted negative, disparaging, and deprecating comments and character assassinations about the women protesters and the method and topic of protest. In particular, male users of social media, particularly Facebook, were quick to discredit these protests with altered photos and commentary and deride and disparage the protesters in highly visible and aggressive ways. In this article, I argue that Article 308 protests and backlash demonstrate that the Internet can simultaneously act as vehicle for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation, while it also serves as a mechanism for reinforcing preexisting cultural norms through, what I call, “counter-cyberactivism.” Such displays underscore the idea that Internet serves as a space for online cultural performance of corresponding offline life, enabling the capacity for both cultural change of gender norms and durability of patriarchy simultaneously. I conclude by discussing the implications of this case for the online, virtual *umma*.

### Cyberactivism, Counter-cyberactivism, and Performance

The Internet has been promoted by some as a panacea for self-expression in otherwise authoritarian contexts throughout the Middle East (for a varie-

ty of discussions on this point, cf. the following: Anderson 2013; Kalathil and Boas 2010; Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Sreberny 2001; Wheeler 2006a, 2006b; among many others). Some have gone so far as to call such assertions “utopian claims” (Dimaggio, et al. 2001:307). Still, there is some support for a tempered optimism in the Middle Eastern contexts, as has been revealed in the last few years.

Cyberactivism has proven to be one way to largely bypass these authoritarian states to reach an international audience, often with messages underscoring needs for political and social reform. Cyberactivism is defined by its position as “both subversive to the state” and “empowering to the public” in the creation of new forms of public engagement (Radsch 2008:8). It “refers to the use of digital media technologies and social media platforms for sociopolitical contestation” as well as “contentious politics” (Radsch 2012b:5-6). Furthermore, the goal of cyber activism is “often to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes” (Howard 2010:145).

Blogs, for example, are often cyberactivist avenues for information sharing that reside beyond state control in many Middle Eastern countries, and bloggers can experience relatively wide personal freedoms of expression (Radsch 2008:7), discussing otherwise forbidden women’s issues such as sexuality (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008) or politics (Beckerman 2007), and even adopting a purposefully deceitful and false identity to do so (Bennett 2011). As early as 2007, bloggers in Egypt - who were frequently activists using this Internet platform and their politically influential positioning in agitations against the state - were arrested in a larger crackdown in freedom of expression, beginning with Kareem Amer (Radsch 2008:9-10). By virtue of their cyberactivism, activist bloggers were granted “access to the resources of the international media and human rights organizations and transnational activist networks on a level comparable to any other blogosphere except perhaps China’s” (Radsch 2008:11), which many regimes have found threatening and difficult to control. Cyberactivists have also utilized Twitter, and the killing of Moammar Ghaddafi, for example, was among the top ten trending topics on Twitter in 2011 (Radsch 2012b:9).

Women too have utilized such cyberactivism to agitate for often-controversial positions. Depictions of women's cyberactivism often show women as posters, the bloggers, and the activists using the Internet to achieve not only political change but also social and gender-specific cultural change, and often with severe repercussions (Radsch 2008). Radsch (2008:5) describes an incident from 2006 in which dozens of women were sexually assaulted in downtown Cairo while police stood and watched. Bloggers seated in a local coffee shop were compelled to go into the streets and document the sexual assaults by taking pictures and videos. As a result of the cyberactivism of the witnesses, the attacks were covered in the Arab and Egyptian news three days later. "Citizen journalists" also engage in cyberactivism to define resistance "against social justice, harassment, and censorship as part of a broader movement for political reform" by documenting, witnessing, and in making meaning (Radsch 2012b:11). Women citizen journalists were amongst the first to report the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, and some women citizen journalists and cyberactivists have larger Twitter and blog followings than their country's state newspapers, as is the case with Bahraini writer Lamees Dhaif (Radsch 2012b:11). Cyberactivism through citizen journalism is also filling the gap when the state fails to protect both its citizens and enforce the rule of law.

Cyberactivists are not only organizing in opposition to the state and in affiliations with other, internationally allied networks (Severo and Zuolo 2012). They are also projecting and pushing their modes of sociality from their offline lives into an online presence in expanded and oftentimes new forms of interaction with persons and networks, and may create unexpected or unusual alliances (Piela 2009). "Cyberspace presents a kind of social space wherein practices and imaginaries of self and other, resistance and power shape collective bonds of interactivity" (Rahimi 2011). The Internet is "not only instant and trans-spatial but multilateral, including many participants and connecting many different activist groups" (Salter, et al. 2003:4). Through the Internet, cyberactivism and the online presence of offline actors becomes another, expanded social space in "the marketplace of ideas" (Ingber 1984), or more accurately the "online marketplace" of ideas (El-Nawawy

and Khamis 2010:230) in which preexisting cultural norms can be and are projected to a larger community for examination, vetting, and in the cultivation of the self.

As Anderson has discussed, these connections between online and offline social fields and actions are often vexing problems for researchers (Anderson 2013). Internet activism and cyberactivism is reliant frequently on a duality of approach or “an ongoing taking back and forth between cyberpolitics (political activism on the internet) and ... place politics, or political activism in the physical locations at which the networker sits and lives” (Escobar 1999:32). The online-offline relations or “flows” (Castells 1996) between the two realms has also been discussed in terms of a “social thickening” (Sassen 2000) of the global in local sites and an accompanying “hollowing out” of local institutions (Anderson 2013; Dimaggio, et al. 2001). However, as the case of the Article 308 protests demonstrates, there are times in which different strategic approaches to online and offline activism and an assumed coherence between the two prompts a “thickening” of local institutions as part of a perceived local *umma*, while the global in the local is not a primary, or even peripheral, concern.

In fact, construing online-offline activities as primarily moving outwards from actors’ offline lives and into the online modes in ways that reshape socialities “out there” does little to explain the preexisting local forms that are reinforced through the Internet, including the reproduction of gender inequalities (Anderson 2000). Beyond the inequalities reproduced in the “digital divide” (Dimaggio, et al. 2001:310), there are real limitations to the revolutionary power of the Internet, particularly on the issue of gender equity, which can be attributable to offline actors’ preexisting interests in maintaining status quo and patriarchal affluence (Considine 2009). There are, of course, “Internet authoritarians,” just as there are cyberactivists; the Internet is not and does not necessarily make for more democratically oriented actors (Anderson and Hudson 2012). While ultimately the literature confirms strong links of translation and replication between online activism and offline life (Anderson 2013), it is particularly true that, as Considine

indicates, the Internet reflects the society from which it is created, and for women, “the internet reflects this patriarchal society. Language barriers, gender directed lifestyles and traditional domestic role ensure that female online activity is reduced” (2009:141). Frequently when women are online, they - along with their male counterparts - frequently encounter projections and representations of women as repressed and objectified (Considine 2009:135; Rius 1999:23).

Such displays amplify the argument that Internet serves as a space for online cultural performance of offline life (Anderson 2013; Radsch 2008; Rahimi 2011). They are performances in the sense that they build a durable and consistent reputation in their form and content, often with calls for mobilization (Anderson 2013). While Internet activism consists of complex, “meaning-laden performances that carve out spaces of dissent” that link action, affect, and “social affinities” or identities (Rahimi 2011), the same forum and type of Internet activism can be used for the reinforcement and perpetuation of preexisting cultural norms, in this case gender hierarchies. If we understand the Internet as a medium or space for performance of corresponding and preexisting offline perspectives and social relations, which the women protesting Article 308 did, then the web-based responses to Article 308 protests carry a particular sting. Those responses and performances are best understood as, what I am calling, “counter-cyberactivism.” I understand counter-cyberactivism to be defined by online actions conducted in ways that disempower the populace by non-state actors in support of preexisting, offline political and socio-cultural status quos. Counter-cyberactivism is, in many ways, the antithesis of cyberactivism.

While it is true that internet performance is a type of political action (Rahimi 2011), not all Internet performances of political action are necessarily in opposition to the state. They may also be in support of the state. In the case of Article 308 actions, the offline protests were not designed necessarily in opposition to the state, in light of the Arab Spring “failures.” Rather, they represented primarily an offline act to change offline cultural and gender inequities. Meanwhile, the responses to and backlash against Article 308



protests demonstrate that online performances of counter-cyberactivism by non-state actors and counter-cyberactivists can ultimately serve the interests of the state and help maintain legal, social, and cultural status quos.

The case of Article 308 backlash is not the only occurrence of counter-cyberactivism seen in the Middle East in recent years. After the elections in Iran in 2009, for example, the citizens supporters of Iran's regime took to the Internet to demonstrate their positions, mirroring the pro-regime demonstrations on the street (Fowler and Rhoads 2009). The Syrian Free Electronic Army is another example of apparently non-state affiliated individuals engaging in counter-cyberactivism and hacking in order to paralyze and stop the online anti-Assad electronic communications and Internet postings and to reveal the offline locations and identities of the Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime (Perlroth 2013). In the case of university students in the U.A.E., women, in particular, are more likely to hide their gender in their online activities because of the potential for prejudice and differential treatment, (Sokol and Sisler 2010:14), in what I call counter-cyberactivism. There are other examples, however they are often difficult to locate. Stories of counter-cyberactivism are less frequently discussed, likely due to their support of otherwise unpopular regimes and positions. The case of Article 308 demonstrates that despite the fact that the protests were primarily offline, the online backlash of counter-cyberactivism by non-state and pro-regime actors supporting the gender status quo renders the Internet simultaneously holding the capacity for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation while also serving as a mechanism for reinforcing pre-existing cultural norms and gender inequities. Such displays further amplify the idea that the Internet also serves as a performance space for the correspondences between online and offline interests, enabling the capacity for both cultural change and reproduction simultaneously.

### Article 308: The Rape Law

Article 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code is presented in the context of other articles that discuss sexual conduct and misconduct, including Article 292,

which defines the legal terms for rape and stipulates punishments based on the ages of the victims. It reads:

Whoever has sexual intercourse with a woman, other than his wife, without her consent – whether through coercion, threat, deception, or fraud – is punished with hard labor for no less than 15 years. Any person who rapes a girl under 15-years-old is punished by death, and with hard labor for 20 years if the victim is between the ages of 15 and 18 (Selfscholar 2012).

Another translated version of Article 292a reads, “Whoever has sexual intercourse with a female (other than his wife) without her willingness whether through the use of force or threat or deception or trickery, will receive a temporary prison life-sentence period” (Sonbol 2003). As the penal code indicates, rape is legally recognizable only between a man and a woman to whom he is not married. As a result, rape within the context of a marriage is legal in Jordan. When rape occurs, the punishment of hard labor or a prison sentence is based on the age of the victim, and the rape of a child under age 15 is punishable by the death penalty.

The penal code goes on to describe the way by which these punishments can be evaded in Article 308:

If a valid contract of marriage is made between the perpetrator of any of the offenses mentioned in this section, and the victim, the prosecution is suspended. If judgment was already passed, the implementation of the punishment upon the sentenced person is suspended (Selfscholar 2012).

Punishments for committing an act of rape – including the death penalty for the rape of a girl under the age of 15 – can be evaded by marrying the victim. The enactment of this Article is contingent upon the perpetrator of rape not divorcing the victim/wife for at least three years, though the goal of such policy enactments is to evade punishments rather than to build a cohesive family structure.

In 2012 there were several high-profile reports of rape and enactments of Article 308, which is colloquially referred to as “the Rape Law,” that gained national and international news and media attention. In April 2012 a 19-year-old male kidnapped a 14-year-old girl from Zarqa, and, according to one report, the man’s wife was also in on crime, assisting in the kidnapping (Khaberni 2012). He took her to the desert where he proceeded to rape her for three consecutive days (AFP 2012b). The police found them during a routine desert patrol, returned the girl to her family, and arrested the male. The court sentenced the male to death by hanging, but he managed to produce a very recent marriage certificate between himself and his victim signed by a judge (Tarawnah 2012). The court then stayed the execution but added that it will be reinstated should the boy divorce her without a “justifiable cause.” The male avoided his death sentence by agreeing to marry the girl, in accordance with Article 308. In June 2012, a man talked a 15 year-old girl into entering an empty apartment where he proceeded to rape her (AFP 2012b). He sought to marry the girl to avoid prosecution. Cases such as these were brought to light at an alarming rate.

The moral outrage that these enactments sparked is not surprising. This has been a widely debated policy, particularly by women’s rights groups and affiliates including the International Women’s Right’s Action Watch (IWRAP), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and in international forums such as the International Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In 2003, IWRAP observed that, “In the case of rape, cultural and social traditions coupled with inadequate laws inform discriminatory legal practices” (Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada 2003).

Many notable Jordanian leaders spoke out against these legal acts as well. Jordan’s first State Minister for Women’s Affairs, Nadia Hashem Alul said, “This issue must be effectively addressed. I think Article 308 should be amended to ensure justice to rape victims” (Pearlman 2012). Hani Jahshan, a forensic pathologist and physician at the Ministry of Health and the Fami-

ly Protection Directorate agreed, “Society believes that a female’s virginity must be preserved until marriage. This forces girls to marry their rapists in order to protect her reputation and avoid social problems” (AFP 2012a).

Furthermore, Twitter lit up with popular responses to these public enactments of Article 308, including comments expressing incredulity such as “Department of WTF?!” “horrificed,” and “ridiculous” (Pearlman 2012). A Facebook group, “No to Article 308” gained over one thousand members (Al-Urduni 2012). Online petitions to change the law were signed by thousands of people, both inside and outside of Jordan (iPetition 2012). The outrage expressed in social media spanned both official and unofficial reports and were put forth by both women and men.

Despite the public outrage, not everyone found the enactments of Article 308 to be so morally reprehensible. Dr. Hussein Khazai, a sociologist at the University of Jordan, came out in support of Article 308 with “evidence” that women are sociologically different from men. He claimed that women have the ability to overcome the ordeal if they have the desire to do so, which is achievable by fulfilling their social roles as wives and child bearers (AFP 2012b). While Dr. Khazai later retracted his comments (Abu Subh 2012), Jordan’s first female coroner, Israa Tawalbeh, came out vocally in support of Article 308, saying there is

nothing wrong in Article 308 as such. The problem is how some local and international human rights groups interpret the law. Actual rape cases are rare in our society. Sometimes, girls under 18 lose their virginity to force their families to accept marriage to their boyfriends. The law categorizes this as rape. [It] solves problems for some . . . I think the law fits our society and reality. It protects the girls by forcing attackers to marry them (AFP 2012b).

Comments invoking the “protection” of girls are often used as code for the protection of the girls against honor killings. In honor killings, the honor of the family - broken by a female’s sexual misconduct, broadly-defined - once lost, can be restored through the death of the female or the legal binding

of the two persons in marriage. The female's "sexual misconduct" in these cases can also include being a victim of rape. Article 308 provides women a marriage to their rapist when, at least in theory, their only other alternative would be death.

Jordan is considered to have a relatively high-rate of honor killings in the Middle East, including one-third of all murders in 1999 (Cuomo 2013), which constitutes approximately 15-20 women per annum (IRIN 2007). Perpetrators of honor crimes are typically offered lenient sentences, if charged at all. Article 98 of the Penal Code, for example, stipulates shorter sentences of only three months to two years in prison for murders committed in a fit of anger. As Iman Aqrabawi, the Gender-Based Violence-Unit Manager at Queen Rania's Jordan River Foundation, explained it, "the raped woman should be thankful to her abuser for marrying her, and not leaving her alone" (Pearlman 2012). The logic is that it is better to be seen in Jordanian society as a divorced woman than a raped women. In 2010, there were 379 cases of reported rape (AFP 2012b), of which the percentage that resulted in an honor killing, marriage of the victim to the perpetrator, or some other outcome are unknown.

Moral failings of Article 308 aside, there are legal problems with Article 308 as it is currently written. For example, if a woman or a minor girl is raped by more than one male, to whom will she be married? The law does not provide a clear sense of how to resolve a gang rape, for example. Article 308 also does not recognize the concept of consent in marriage, in a turn derived from medieval Islamic jurists (Ali 2008), thereby rendering rape of a wife legal within the confines of a marriage relationship in full accordance with the law. Additionally, acts of sodomy against young females or males – or other acts of rape, such as those committed with foreign objects or non-penile body parts – are neither recognized as rape nor reconcilable through Article 308. In particular, a marriage between an adult male perpetrator and a young boy neither resolves the sexual misconduct of sodomy perpetrated nor is recognized legally or socially in Jordan. Though there is a legal framework in place for *bat'ird*, or sexual offenses of a lesser status, including emotional,

verbal, and physical assault or personal injury in which there is no forced vaginal sex by a male (Sonbol 2003:204-206), these offenses and their legal resolutions do not prompt the same ire as enactments of Article 308.

Furthermore, many human rights activists indicate that there is no political desire or will to alter the laws surrounding gender inequities and sexual crimes (IRIN 2007). In light of the failings of the Arab Spring to facilitate political reform (Sadiki 2012, 2013; Seeley 2012; Tobin 2012), this is an important contextual point. One anonymous blogger captured a commonly-held sentiment about changing Article 308, indicating that

Realistically speaking, changing such a law won't come that easy nor quickly. Our esteemed parliament, who only manage to be productive when it comes to their pensions hearing, still have about 30 temporary laws to vote on, I've been told (Anonymous 2012:2012).

Ahmed Shaath, a Palestinian media analyst, echoed such sentiment by stating that repealing Article 308 “does not stand a chance without interference by royal decree or a high court to reverse it... it seems nothing will change by a popular referendum” (Shaath 2012). Freedom House has been unsuccessfully pushing for the repeal of Article 308, among other forms of legal discrimination against women, since 2005 (Abu Hassan 2005).

As it became clear in Jordan that political protest during the Arab Spring was largely disappointing and ineffective, many activists and protesters turned to offline movements to change their “Islamic cultural milieu” and understandings of cultural and social tradition rather than seeking to alter the law and women’s legal standings. In a shift from the focus of the Arab Spring’s aims of political and legal change, culture and society became the objects of offline protest of Article 308.

### Protesting Article 308

In June, 2012, Jordanian women and men began taking to the streets in protest of Article 308 (Azzeh 2012; Geasey 2012). Through the collective forces of several women’s rights organizations in a performance of solidarity,

rather than each one protesting on their own, women's groups organized a combined series of protests. Toleen Touq led the charge, bringing in the online and offline groups "308 is a Crime," "Mush Shatara," "My Mother is Jordanian and Her Citizenship is My Right," and "No Honor in Crime." For the first time, these four groups, which were united online, came united in an offline protest against Article 308 under the banner of "Like me, like you," or "*Zayyee Zayyak*."

On June 25 – the day I drove through *Dakhiliya* Circle – more than 200 people linked arms in the Circle and along Queen Alia Street, holding white signs with a basic black font and printed slogans in Arabic that read, "You're killing us with your honor;" "I am not your honor;" "Rape has become a national duty;" "My life is more important than family honor;" "I am not obligated;" and "Like me, like you," among others. Largely contested, these protests were highly visible and disruptive to traffic flows, as they lined the busy intersection of *Dakhiliya Circle* near *Medinah Riyadhiya* or Sport City, which was the same location as the most contested Arab Spring protests in March 2011. In addition to the fact that the protests had a special space for the inclusion of passersby and those that wished to join in the protest, with women in particular as welcome additions, there were several unique differences between these protests and Arab Spring protests.

The aims and objectives of the protests were different from Arab Spring protests. "They weren't there, as in the past, to protest one policy or one outrage against the rights of women. This protest covered a broad swath of deeply rooted issues. Simply, it was to stand for their equality" (Geasey 2012:32). In a shift from Arab Spring protests, the protests against Article 308 aimed to create a groundswell of public support for changing the culture of society more than the legal structures in place. These were protests against patriarchy more than against politics, "calling daily practices into question" (Geasey 2012:76). The messages targeted both men and women, even using humorous approaches, as one sign held by a male protester read, "I do the dishes too," as well as a more serious leveling of cultural charges of abuse (Atallah 2012). According to Rozan Khalifeh, one of the organizers,

“If this was a political issue, a revolution would solve it. But you can’t have a revolution to change people’s minds” (Geasey 2012:76).

It is important to note that these protests were conducted without government permits, in a break from Arab Spring protests (Tobin 2012). Previously, the requirement for governmental permits enacted as part of the Consent to Hold Rallies in the Public Assembly Law was a threshold criteria for any and all protests. Quietly suspended in 2011, offline protests of Article 308 were some outcroppings of this legal alteration. Beginning in 2012, small groups of protesters took advantage of this procedural change and gathered in Fourth Circle outside the Office of the Prime Minister, where they held signs and shouted slogans in protest of Article 308, “but no one paid attention” (Geasey 2012:32). They also organized a small flash mob skit against honor killings, and they filmed a short video Rainbow Street, a popular street for socializing at local cafes and shopping for crafts. But the protests on June 25, 2012 in *Dakhiliya* Circle proved the most visible and attention grabbing; they were the culmination of these early offline and online efforts, activism, and protests bringing together otherwise disparate efforts against Article 308 in a moment of solidarity. At the June protest, Khalifah said, “We needed every demonstrator to be able to advocate for our movement if approached by the media, and we knew that we would only be as strong as our weakest link” (Atallah 2012). In a moment of reflection prompted by the Arab Spring, protesters took advantage of newly legal possibilities to gather offline, and by fighting culture and social pressure protesters were depicted by some online as “brave” and “daring” (Atallah 2012).

The June protest was also notable as Facebook and other social media were eschewed for person-to-person offline contact in organization, mobilization, and engagement. Protest organizers utilized their position as a community of online and offline connected political outsiders to mobilize for their demonstrations by way of personal invitations to friends and colleagues of like minds, which allowed their energy to be focused on people who were interested in protesting cultural practices. One of the participants, Dana Suleiman said, “We want a feminist movement formed by interested



people and people who believe in the cause, not just to spend time and meet people and then go home,” (Geasey 2012:33,76). Khalifah added about the protesters that “Quality was more important than quantity” (Atallah 2012). In some ways, these protests harkened back to a pre-Arab Spring preference for tempered Internet usage in protest mobilization, while at the same time demonstrating innovation by using protest to engage in culture change of fellow citizens by fellow citizens. These adaptations of protest as a tool for community mobilization speak to an evolving notion of protest efficacy (Skoric, et al. 2011) and hint at a future of heightened internal divisions and protest for change in Jordan (Tobin N.d.).

### Backlash: Counter-cyberactivism

The protests of Article 308 and their commentary on daily practices associated with rape and honor killings touched deep emotions on the part of the passersby and the Jordanian public. Some of the reactions were supportive. Passersby would cheer and honk their horns in support; some stopped their cars to participate spontaneously (Geasey 2012). Of the demonstration photos posted on Facebook following the event, many received over one hundred likes, and dozens were shared and re-posted (Geasey 2012). Bloggers covered the events in both English and in Arabic (Anonymous 2012; Amman 2012). News of the protests garnered international news attention as well (AFP 2012b).

Many of the reactions to the protesters themselves, however, were negative. In a change from generalized Arab Spring support for women protesters by fellow Jordanians (Adamczyk 2012; Donger 2011; Helfont 2011), these protesters were subject to the insults, harassment, and defamation by fellow citizens both offline and online. Passersby yelled disparaging comments and threats at protesters as they drove by. In particular, protesters’ pictures and the signs they held were altered and slandered on Facebook and other online social media sites. Via social media and in personal accounts, threats of rape to protesters were in abundance. Even death threats were launched against them.

A glance at the Facebook page for “Zayyee Zayyak” (Frekeeh 2012), which became the online presence for this consolidated group of offline protesters, reveals popular discontent for the protests. One comment speaks to a presumption of women’s so-called nature, “Frankly, I do not understand the purpose of this event, and I do not read in the signs anything other than the timeless and universal stubbornness of women.” Another comment speaks to the content of the signs, and reads, “I am against the slogans in these protests that call for women’s rights; there is no actual link between all of them and instead they are mixing fact and fiction.” Some respondents on Facebook invoked the Quran 33:59 in their lambasting of women protesters, which states, “Oh Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful.” One author of a Facebook comment quoted this Quranic verse, and then went on to say:

You women are wrong. God did not say that you should only cover yourselves because that will save you from suspicions and disadvantages; you have exposed yourself during this scandal, which does not reflect your good behaviors and ethics (as you say you’re doing). You say you don’t need the veil, but my sister the Messenger of Allah says: Where is your modesty? (Frekeeh 2012).

As of the time of writing, comments on this Facebook page are still posted and are often unkind and reprimanding of women, highlighting the very attitudes and practices that women were keen to change.

The protesters suffered consequences from their families as well as strangers. Rozan Khalifeh, one of the organizers of the protest, was interviewed on live television during the protest. In the interview, she denounced Article 308, asserting her belief that “it would be better for a raped woman to never marry than wed her rapist” (Geasey 2012:32). When the cameras turned off, Khalifeh’s mother called her cell phone. She was furious with her daughter, convinced that the public and the unretractable statement had committed her daughter to a lifetime without a husband or prospects for marriage.

One of the most prominent images and persons that suffered this backlash from the fellow Jordanian citizenry was the figure below (Figure 1), featuring Dana Suleiman with a poster that reads “My Life is More Important than the Honor of the Family.”



*Figure 1: Dana Suleiman with a protest sign that reads, “My Life is More Important than the Honor of the Family” Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012d)*

This image (Figure 1) was altered in ways that underscored the very cultural practices and outlooks that Suleiman was trying to protest. The text in the picture from Figure 1 was edited in a number of ways that slandered and disparaged by claiming her sexual promiscuity. One altered version proclaimed she was only looking for sex and another indicated her brothers should kill her for her actions, and yet another indicated that she was looking for a new boyfriend everyday (Geasey 2012).

Figure 2 is an example of one of those altered images. In Figure 2, the image of Dana Suleiman on the left is the same as the original image in Figure 1.



Figure 2: Side-by-side comparison of original and altered image of Dana Suleiman's protest sign (Figure 1), which reads "My Life is Important to Me, and I Don't Care About Anyone Except Myself" Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012g)

The image on the right, however, is altered to read "My Life Matters to Me, and I Don't Care About Anyone Except Myself." The captions above the images reveal a self-consciousness about these altered images on the part of the creator: the caption above the original image reads "Photoshop" and the image above the altered image reads "The Real Picture." The creator of these images not only altered the original, but then tried to pass off the altered image as *the original*.

The altered images were also reflective of overt sexual violence. Figure 3 shows a middle-aged Jordanian woman with a sign that reads, "Like Me, Like You." Figure 4 shows the altered picture posted on Facebook. The photo was transformed so that the woman's eyes are blackened out, and a moustache is added. The woman's sign has diacritical marks that were slightly altered in ways that have a tremendous impact on the meaning. The slogan now reads, "My Penis is Like You," demonstrating sexual violence against a woman who is already covered with the *hijab* and, by local standards, dressed modestly and adhering to Islamic commands.



*Figure 3: Original sign of “Like Me, Like You” Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012c)*



*Figure 4: Altered photo of Figure 3 that reads, “My penis is like you” Photo credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012e)*

Beyond sexual violence, the disparaging comments and photo alterations attempted to link female protesters with politically offensive charges of Zionism and a “Zionist Crusader Conspiracy,” as in Figure 5.



*Figure 5: Altered photo with a sign that reads, “Like me, like you I want to marry 4 [men]” Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012f)*

The photo in Figure 5 shows an unveiled woman holding a sign, which has been altered to now read, “Like Me, Like You, I Want to Marry 4 [Men].” Similar to Figure 4, the eyes of the woman have been blackened out. In addition to the altered text, a Star of David has been added. In personal correspondence, Dana Suleiman (the woman in Figures 1 and 2) indicated that the protesters had been accused of “Zionist-Crusader Conspiracy.” The disparagement and denigration of the protesting woman is clear: women protesting their rights and Article 308 are as threatening to perceived gender hierarchies as Zionism is to a population of Muslim Palestinians.

In another photo, Figure 6, one commentator added the red text indicating: “These are the ladies of the feminist demonstrations in Jordan behind the undertakings to revolt against the Islamic religion and the Arab customs, values and ethics. Did you know that these women stand in the role as agents of a Zionist Crusade against us?”





Figure 6: Female protesters accused of launching a Zionist Crusade against Islam. Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012b)

The claims that women – even protesters in full *hijab* – were arbiters of the dismantling of Islam were also found. Figure 7 is one example of this.



Figure 7: Female protesters accused of undermining Islam. Photo Credit: Dana Suleiman, (Suleiman 2012a)

The red text below the picture reads: These are women from the Jordanian feminist demonstrations. And they say ‘Like me like you.’ What does that mean?? Does it mean that men should accept whatever they [the women] refuse to accept from the Quran, such as the male is equal to two females (in inheritance laws)? Or is it the case that women can be married to 4 men (family law)? Who is behind this new undertaking that overruns our prohibitions/tabooes? (Suleiman 2012).

The disparaging of these protests ran on claims from the “natural” self-centeredness of a “typical woman,” to invocations of sexual violence, and from being a part of a Zionist-Crusade, to being a source for the breakdown of the family, legal systems, and Islam itself. Women were publicly smeared, with reputations attacked and personal safety compromised. More than one year later, many of these pictures are still available online. Immediately after the protest, however, these altered pictures found wide circulation on both domestic, Jordanian websites, as well as others in the region.

Ultimately, female protesters suffered harassment for these protests of Article 308 from their friends, family, colleagues, peers and strangers on the street and those on the Internet for opting to adjust their protest in ways that challenged existing structures of gender inequity in popular parlance and socio-cultural practices. In many ways, there is a wider set of socio-economic and cultural vulnerabilities to which the women were exposing themselves by approaching the protest this way, rather than binding themselves with men and wider society in shared political protest against the Jordanian regime.

## Discussion and Conclusion

It is easy to point to the backlash to the protests of Article 308 in Jordan and say that the protest of Article 308 was ineffectual and did nothing to change the culture and social milieu of contemporary Jordan. In fact, cases of alleged “sexual misconduct” by women and their resolution through physical violence, honor killings, and enactments of Article 308 are on the rise. In March 2013, one study found that 70 percent of Jordanian women believe



that it is acceptable for a man to hit his wife for her misconduct (Hadadeen 2013). On April 14, 2013 police found the burned and mutilated body of a woman in a suburb in Amman. It was believed to be an honor killing, as a four-month-old fetus was exposed through cuts to the abdomen (AFP 2013b). Just two weeks later, on April 30, 2013, a brother admitted to killing his sister by stabbing her 20 times in the face before slitting her throat in order to “cleanse the family honor” (AFP 2013a). One report in late 2013 indicated that 99 cases of rape had been reported by the end of June 2013, and 95 percent of them – 94 of the 99 cases – had been resolved through enactments of Article 308 (Azzeh 2013). There is clearly a strong resonance between wider public opinion in Jordan on violence against women and gender inequities and the legal statutes in place that entrench, perpetuate, and legitimate them. As Jordanian women have sought meaningful interactions in offline protest of Article 308, the underlying sources for gender inequities are not solely governmental, legal or procedural. Rather, it can be argued that they have deeply situated cultural and social roots.

As Radsch has discussed, sexual violence is not only an offline occurrence (Radsch 2012a; 2012b). It is a particularly powerful threat and a form of intimidation that was used against women during the Arab Spring (Radsch 2012b:22-28), which resides within an Internet context of wide sexual degradation of women (Considine 2009:135). Offline and online sexual violence is a way to silence women. Although the backlash to protests of Article 308 did not include physical violence or virginity testing, the protests were character assassinations invoking the notion that women have brought the dishonor upon themselves. Such counter-cyberactivism invokes symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1979) to reinforce gender disparities. Furthermore, such counter-cyberactivism invoked the tacit approval of the state, thereby adding additional layers of structural inequities and power disparities. As Spender has indicated,

Men talk more often, they talk for longer periods, they adopt ‘centric’ positions (forcing females to hover around; men define the topic, assume the legitimacy of their own view, and override women who do not see the

world in their terms... The only difference between the real world and the virtual world is that, if anything, male domination in cyberspace is worse! (1996:193).

As a result of the intensity of online violence protesters of Article 308 and others experienced, it is not a surprise that women tend to hide their identity and gender in their online performances and activities more frequently than men (Sokol and Sisler 2010:1). This study further supports the findings of Sokol and Sisler (2010), who demonstrated that “although the Internet can largely act as a vehicle for resisting social exclusion and gender segregation, it can also simultaneously serve as a mechanism for reinforcing pre-existing norms within newly-networked traditional communities” (Sokol and Sisler 2010:2). The male domination in counter-cyberactivism that these women experienced is reinforcing these preexisting gender inequities and hierarchies, and even utilizing religious language and positioning to achieve it.

In fact, as El-Nawawy and Khamis point out (2010:229), online discussions and presence of a distinctly Islamic nature have an impact on mainstream Islamic discourses. Echoing Sokol and Sisler (2010), Piela (2009) found that, “digital media had the potential to facilitate a change in power dynamics between genders and cultures in a religious context” by bringing together unusual alliances at the intersection of gender empowerment, new media, and religion (Piela 2009:3). The case of Article 308 and gender inequities, however, reveals underlying problems with casting Muslims as part of a single and homogenous, “virtual *umma*.”

As (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009) discuss, the “virtual *umma*” is an imagined community in cyberspace that can bring together the diasporic Muslims on the Internet. There are times in Islamic social life when the imagined *umma* is transformed into a real community, including the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009:114). There are also times when the offline community becomes the “virtual *umma*” through online practices (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009). It is a “vibrant cyberworld” enhancing “constructive dialogue that is needed for strengthening the para-

meters of the Muslim *umma*” (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009:16). However, what happens when those parameters are redrawn, confusion sets in, and authority is unseated, if it was even present to begin with?

So-called feminist offline and online actions in the Muslim world can be highly contentious. As El-Nawawy and Khamis point out (2009), many online and offline Islamic feminist movements have taken on strategies of accommodation rather than conflict (155), exercise “rationality, piety, wisdom, and self-discipline” (154), and do “not apologize for being Muslim or for being a woman” (161). The power of these movements is that they have given women a voice, which may be accepted on certain terms and conditions within the parameters of the online *umma*. However, the case of Article 308 demonstrates that there are times when people, despite a feeling or sense of singularity in a Muslim community, are unwilling to participate in online forums as part of civil discourses on topics that are deeply entrenched and difficult to change; cyberspace then becomes a “non-deliberative public sphere” (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009), reinforcing preexisting cultural norms with exclusionary powers granted to counter-cyberactivists, even amongst those that would otherwise place themselves and others in the imagined community of the “virtual *umma*.”

Despite enhanced Internet technologies and the potentialities of a virtual *umma*, there is a durability to the preexisting gender inequities that is not likely to change. As the backlash to the protests of Article 308 demonstrated, the treatment of women and acceptable forms and types of conduct – sexual and non – is not going to change overnight, either by way of the law and women’s legal standing or through socio-cultural changes. Certainly, changing the legal code and policy also requires changing the culture and the social milieu in which the norms and ethics emerged originally. Mothanna Gharaibeh, one of the men who helped organize the protest indicated, “This is how things change. You cannot just press a button and have people become open minded. You have to have discussion” (Geasey 2012:76). These protests of Article 308 succeeded in entrenching women’s relationships with each other, both on and offline, pushing the question of the role and place of

social media to the forefront, and opening up the discussion to the inclusion of women's voices about the socio-cultural inequities that exist between men and women, in hopes of – someday – going back to the Jordanian government with a groundswell of support that the regime cannot ignore. As things stand now, this is the only hope for political and legal change, and it demonstrates that women are willing to risk their relationships with family and friends, as well as their own reputations in social media, in order to affect it. A big price to pay, but the gain seems to be even bigger.

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## Comment:

**Social Media As an Opportunity to Bahraini Women****Nada Alwadi**

## Abstract

*Since the uprising in February 2011 the Bahraini female activists but also ordinary Bahraini women have emerged as new leaders in the society, and this due to the increasing role of social media. Their ideas, voices and activities have been receiving stronger support from within their – often conservative – communities. It is now more accepted by the public that the democratic transition cannot be achieved without the participation of women.*

## Keywords

*cyberactivism, democracy, journalism, activism, Muslim women, Arab Spring, social media, Bahrain, media studies*

There is no doubt that social and new media helped young women to play a central role in the uprising in Bahrain, similar to the rest of the so called “Arab Spring” countries. Cyber activism became the main drive to put many young Arab female activists on the map, providing them with lots of online followers, media exposure and in some cases international fame. I still remember how my Twitter account was tripled with followers in just a few days after the uprising started in Bahrain in February 2011. As a journalist, people from inside as well as outside Bahrain felt the need to follow me and many other journalists in order to get a sense of the news from the ground. That was the beginning of the shift in the way Bahraini journalists, as well as activists were seen and perceived in the eyes of their own community.

Since 2011, the portrayal of women in Bahrain has dramatically shifted; women are now being portrayed as proactive leaders, vocal, and brave. A portrayal which is somehow new to the small island. When Jalila Alsalkan, a Bahraini teacher and mother, was released after spending months in prison

for her activism, people treated her like a hero. Thousands of Bahrainis gathered in front of prison to receive and cheer her and her family. Huge banners showing her picture were hung on the houses of her conservative village for months to resemble the pride of her role in the prodemocracy movement. Many people in those Bahraini villages were hesitant to vote for women in the election, now treating one of their own as a hero and a leader.

In 2007, I completed a comparative study, the first of its kind in Bahrain, researching the portrayal of women politicians in the Bahraini media. This research focused on print media, since it was the most popular media at that time, before the media landscape shifted to give more space to new media. The main finding of this research was: women politicians were covered by print media in Bahrain positively, but they were not given as much space and attention in the coverage as the space given to the men politicians. Women politicians were always treated as “fillers” to the news coverage, they rarely made it to the headlines or front pages, and they were almost never portrayed as political leaders. However, the good news was that the negative content towards women political participation in the Bahraini print media was very small.

Those findings sound very strange today considering the shift not just in the media landscape in Bahrain and the region, but also the shift in the political situation and the rise of new, young and fresh political actors, as a direct result of the Arab Spring. And in order to understand this shift, we need to go back to analyze both the media landscape and the political situation in Bahrain prior to the 2011 popular uprising.

Up until the end of the year 2010, the only TV and radio stations in Bahrain were state owned and controlled, which is why the general public were depending on print media as the main source of news and information. Even though newspapers in Bahrain were privately owned, but the majority of these newspapers were owned or controlled by members in the ruling family, leaving very little space to independent media content. After the Bahraini uprising in February 2011, the government practiced more control

over the media as part of its crackdown on the uprising, which was the main reason for the major shift in the media landscape. Social media has blossomed in Bahrain over the last few years, among a youthful and well educated population, especially women. During the recent uprising, thousands of Bahrainis used Facebook and Twitter to organize protests, share information otherwise hidden by state media, as well as playing the role of the watch dog to human rights violations committed inside a country facing a media blackout.

And it is hard to mention Bahraini online female activists, without mentioning Zainab Alkhawaja, or “Angry Arabiya” as her profile name in Twitter shows. Zainab is a twenty something Bahraini activist who became widely known since early 2011 for her online activism. Zainab has almost 48 thousand followers to her Twitter account, and even though she is in prison now, she was recognized as one of the most influential people in the Arab world online.

Politically, the main idea behind the uprising in Bahrain in 2011 was to put an end to the authoritarian role and force the ruling family to share the power with their people. This was never an easy fight, especially considering the fact that it’s happening in one of the only remaining absolute monarchies in the world. Though this was not the first time for such an uprising to take place in Bahrain, social media and new technologies made it possible for the movement to grow stronger. Many groups managed to play a vital role in this movement, including women who were politically and technologically savvy. It is worth to mention that 42 percent of the population in Bahrain is women, and that the female labor participation rate in Bahrain is 39 percent, which is a relatively large percentage in the Arab world.

The impact of women’s work to feed the uprising in Bahrain was very alarming to the authorities in Bahrain, which is why they were equally punished. Bahrain is still the only country in the Gulf region which has cases of jailing and torturing women for their political engagement, as well as several cases of women killed on the ground by police forces.

The crackdown on women activists in Bahrain created a lot of admiration from the general public, people in very conservative villages started chanting

for those women, they started viewing them differently, following them on Twitter and listening to them speak in the media, or on the stage when they organize for a public protest. Suddenly the image of the Bahraini women as a political leader became so popular and acceptable, as Bahraini women were equally active online and on the ground.

If there was something that the Arab Spring achieved in Bahrain so far, it is giving women a political outlet to prove themselves as real players to the general public to see. This outlet was not available before to normal women and was only available to those who were privileged by the state. However, the uprising witnessed the rise of ordinary Bahraini women, who were given a golden opportunity to emerge to the public. They proved themselves to their community, and still are proving that no transition could be achieved without the participation of women.

### Acknowledgements

Nada Alwadi is a Bahraini journalist, writer and researcher. She has been working in print media since 2003 covering politics and human rights issues in Bahrain and the Middle East. She holds a Master's degree in Mass Communication with an emphasis on women's political empowerment in the media. She was a Humphrey/Fulbright fellow at the school of journalism in the University of Maryland. Alwadi covered the recent crackdown in Bahrain for several international media outlets including USA Today. In 2011, she was one of the recipients for the first James Lawson Award for Nonviolent Achievement by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. Alwadi co-founded the Bahraini Press Association with other prominent Bahraini journalists last year. This association focuses on defending local and international journalists who have been attacked or targeted by the Bahraini authorities.