The Rise of Fourth-Wave Feminism in the Arab region?
Cyberfeminism and Women's Activism at the Crossroads of the Arab Spring

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Abstract:

This article explores the emergence of fourth-wave feminism in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region in the context of the Arab Spring, which was a series of uprisings that followed the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 and spread through several countries in the MENA region. The uprisings protested authoritarian regimes and called for democracy, freedom, and social justice. Fourth-wave feminism finds its origins in the new Web 2.0 technologies which give users the power to shape their own content, and is characterized by a mass of tech-savvy and young feminists who harness the power of the Internet and the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to advocate for social justice and gender equality (Baumgardner 2011; Licudine 2015; Martin and Valentin 2013). Despite the enduring digital gap in the MENA region, feminists contributed significantly in the context of the Arab Spring to the public debates and discussions online to call for mass mobilization as well as raise awareness about gender issues and discrimination.

Taking as objects of analysis three case studies of feminist interventions from Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon, the article examines the ways in which the selected activists in the region respond to their contemporary context by advocating for gender equality at the same time that they seek to promote a wider social justice agenda for their respective countries. The case studies were selected on the basis of the artists self-identifying as feminists who attempt to harness the power of ICTs to end authoritarian rule and promote human rights, with specific attention to achieving societal gender equality. In addition, the selected case studies are particularly relevant because their online platforms received significant media coverage and also benefit from a significant online following and fan-base (ranging from 2,400 fans to 12,660 followers for the Facebook pages). The analysis is based on conducted structured

interviews with the three feminist activists, and is complemented with a textual analysis of their own online platforms, which include a feminist blog and Facebook pages, as well as relevant contextual information found in the public domain.

Keywords:

Arab Spring; Authoritarianism; Cyberfeminism; Fourth-Wave Feminism; Gender Equality; Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); Middle East and North Africa; Social Justice.

Introduction

Both before and during the Arab Spring uprisings, women in the Arab region expressed their agency through several online activist initiatives such as the *#women2drive* campaign in Saudi Arabia, and the more recent hashtag and petition *#RIPAmina* in Morocco following the suicide of a young teenager who was forced to marry her rapist, leading to the abolition of the repressive law in the country. Hashtags have indeed played a predominant role in giving women's movements a new impetus, allowing feminist activists to acquire more visibility and draw greater support to their cause. More recently, a series of uprisings which aimed to overthrow despotic regimes across the Arab region and lead to the rise of a transnational activist movement, marked a historical turn and the start of a new chapter for Arab women's activism. In December 2010, the self-burning of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid officially marked the start of the Tunisian revolution and the beginning of the Arab Spring, which was marked by a series of uprisings that sparked across the Middle East and North Africa. Arab Spring social movements contested several autocratic regimes through both violent and non-violent protests, coups, and demonstrations. It is impossible to understand the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region without paying close attention, first, to the favorable conditions that were permeated by the unique technological and geopolitical context that constituted the Arab Spring. A more inclusive and humanist version of feminism that draws on third-wave (i.e. intersectional) feminist concerns, fourth-wave feminism has spread rapidly with the advent of the Internet and the ICTs that give

women users the power to shape their own content by posting it online in order to advocate gender equality and social justice (Licudine 2015; Martin and Valentin 2013; Munro 2013).

Therefore, in this article, we examine how the Arab Spring provided the quintessential technopolitical conditions for the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the MENA region. Given that the literature on the different waves of the feminist movement tends to base its assumptions on a European and North American context, we provide in this article a more "inclusive" overview of the literature on the different waves of the feminist movement, and trace the genealogy of feminist activism in both Western and Arab contexts. In the following section, we situate Arab women's agency in relation to the role of new media technologies. Subsequently, we analyze the role that the Internet plays in the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the region, and the important characteristic of transnationalism. We then identify some regional specificities and examine the women activists' integration of human rights and social justice concerns. Finally, we identify the humanist stance of this new wave and discuss obstacles facing cyberfeminists today in the region. This article suggests that online activism was effective as it resulted in greater empowerment of women across the region to claim equal access to the public sphere, where online activism was efficiently translated into offline political and social engagement.

Genealogy of Feminist Movements

The typical genealogy locates the historical birth of the feminist movement in the West, and particularly in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, in the late 1880s as a movement to establish equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women (Hawkesworth 2006). Feminism subsequently evolved through several phases. First-wave feminism, also known as the "suffragettes' movement," lasted throughout the first half of the 20th century and aimed to achieve voting and political representation rights for women (Baumgardner 2011; Munro 2013).

During this period, Arab and Muslim women played an active role in their countries' accession to independence during the long years of resistance against colonial rule in the late 19th century. They were actively involved in their countries nationalist struggles against imperialism and colonialism in the region through such prominent figures as Huda Sha'rawi, the then President of the *Egyptian Feminist Union*, and Malika El-Fassi in Morocco, who advocated both for women's educational rights and national independence (cooke 2016; Ennaji 2016).

Second-wave feminism was born in the 1960s out of a growing sense of social injustice in the context of the U.S. anti-Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement to tackle all aspects of discrimination against women, including socio–economic concerns, in order to achieve equal access to the public sphere (Baumgardner 2011; Rampton 2015). At the same time, during this second-wave, Arab and Muslim women were actively involved as members of various feminist associations and organizations to denounce their unfair social and political exclusion from the public sphere in recently independent Arab states. In the post-independence era, despite their active contributions to nationalist struggles throughout the region, women were denied political participation and representation rights, and were (re) ostracized in the private–domestic sphere to fulfill their "God-given" family and reproductive roles (Sadiqi 2016). Since then, feminists in the region have struggled to improve their legal rights and to raise cultural awareness about gender discrimination through several feminist organizations, and to advocate gender sensitive reforms of highly conservative Family Codes such as the Moroccan Personal Status Code (Hamza 2016; Sadiqi 2016).

A third-wave, beginning in the 1990s, criticized earlier movements for treating all women as a homogenous group, introducing notions of privilege checking, intersectionality (Mohanty 1991)[1], post-colonialism and critical race theory (Crenshaw 1991; Walker 1995), sex-positive feminism (Snyder 2008)[2], and queer theory (Mann and Huffman 2005)[3]. During this period, Arabo–Muslim postcolonial feminist have actively drawn from theories of intersectionality to denounce the narrative of powerlessness and submissiveness that is usually ascribed to Arab and Muslim women

because of their double-minority status: as members of the racialized Arab minority vis-à-vis the white dominant majority and as the female minority of a male-dominated (Arab) community (Abu Lughod 2002). Against this dominant and demeaning narrative, Arab and Muslim third-wave feminists have underscored not only their indisputable agency but also their context-sensitive and cultural specific project of emancipation through effective tactics of negotiation with various regimes of power, from international organizations to state institutions and local NGOs (Moghadam 2010; Mookherjee 2005).

Cyberfeminism has emerged as one of the largest innovations in feminism in the last 50 years that harnesses the power of online media platforms to discuss, uplift, and activate gender equality and social justice (Martin and Valentin 2013). In fact, the genealogy typically traces the emergence of fourth-wave feminism to 2008 (Munro 2013). Several authors argue that we are witnessing the rise of a new (fourth) wave of the feminist movement with the advent of cyberfeminism, the Internet and the ICTs, which are becoming increasingly effective tools to denounce misogyny and social injustices against women (Baumgardner 2011; Carrier 2015; Munro 2013). Fourth-wave feminism finds its origins in the technology brought about by Web 2.0 which gives users the power to shape their own content (Licudine 2015). A new generation of "tech savvy", "gender-sophisticated" women, and "a mass of younger feminists" are harnessing the power of the Internet and social media to challenge gender inequity and advocate socio–economic and political concerns concomitantly (Baumgardner 2011; Cochrane 2013; Maclaran 2015; Schuster 2013). Cyberfeminism has given feminist activism a new momentum by instigating a mass movement where social media and the Internet act as equalizers between people of various ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds (Carrier 2015; Licudine 2015). It has, therefore, led to the development of transnational solidarities between feminists worldwide, and allowed women's rights activists to fight on several fronts today, by incorporating aspects of human rights, the feminization of poverty, good governance, and social justice to their initial struggle for gender equality (Cochrane 2013; Martin and Valentin 2013; Maclaran 2015).

In light of the recent Arab uprisings and the series of devastating events which have been shaking the region for the past decade, Arab women activists are also increasingly mobilizing around new technologies, more specifically the Internet and social media, as crucial tools to press for peace and conflict resolution in the region and to advocate for women's rights (Al Rawi 2014; Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014; Hosni 2017). However, it is clear from the genealogy discussed above that Arab women's activism did not start with the digital revolution.

Role of New Media Technologies

Two conflicting and opposing views on the role of new media technologies are prevalent in contemporary societies. On the one hand, techno-utopian authors argue that access to ICTs contributes to enhanced civil society and deliberative democracy (Hague and Loader 1999). In The Rise of the Network Society, Manuel Castells (2010) posits that the decentralized structures and decision-making patterns that characterize "the network society" have an overall empowering effect because of the increase in social exchange and interactivity (2010, 385). In a similar vein, Larry Diamond (2010) coined the term liberation technology to underscore the power of the ICTs for social activists living under authoritarian regimes.

On the other hand, a more pessimistic view calls attention to the reality that the same *liberation technology* can also be used by authoritarian states to exert pressures on social activists, through either censorship or repression (Barber 1996; Fox 1994), as well as to collect private information on individuals to be manufactured by governments and multinational corporations (Schneier 2000). For instance, Rebecca McKinnon advances the term *networked authoritarianism* to denounce the Chinese government's effective use of ICTs to censor and suppress dissent (2010, 2). As a consequence, a more moderate view advanced by Deibert and Rohozinski in "Liberation vs. Control: The Future of Cyberspace," criticizes the classical dichotomy and reductionist polarization between the either liberating or repressing role of the ICTs in today's societies, and instead, they argue that: "cyberspace is

a domain of intense competition, one that creates an ever-changing matrix of opportunities and constraints for social forces and ideas" (2010, 45). This "ever-changing matrix of opportunities" is not dissimilar from the Arab region[4] where activists used new media technologies for emancipatory purposes during the Arab Spring. However, authoritarian Arab regimes instrumentalized them to exert censorship on activists' platforms (Morozov 2011; Tucker 2012).

Rather than viewing cyberspace as a unidirectional environment, we locate it as a complex and dynamic domain which affords ordinary users opportunities to generate content but also limits their potential due to the surveillance and loss of privacy inflicted on them by government and large corporations.

New Media Technologies and Arab Women's Agency

For Arab women, the dominant narrative of their powerlessness has been challenged by their active presence online, but also before that by other women on the ground who sought to improve their conditions through activist engagement. Scholars have denounced the narrative of powerlessness and victimization that is usually ascribed to Middle Eastern women (Moghadam 2010), perpetuating the stereotypes of Muslim women as helpless victims in need of Western liberation (Abu-Lughod 2002). Feminist analyses which challenge the dominant narrative of the victimhood, submissiveness, and powerlessness of Arab and Muslim women serve, therefore, as crucial points of reference for this research (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ayotte and Husain 2005; Butler 2004; Jiwani 2006; Khan 1998; Macdonald 2006; Nayak 2006; Oumlil 2010; Parameswaran 2006; Razack 2008; Vivian 1999; Todd 1998; Yeğenoğlu 1998). In this sense, we argue that agency is distributive and contingent on social location and contextual factors (Pienaar and Dilkes-Frane 2017).

In more recent events, women have actively contributed to challenging to authoritarian regimes throughout the region in the context

of the *Arab Spring*. As Moghadam (2010) and Khamis (2011) suggest, the advent of the Internet has significantly impacted the feminist movement in the Arab region in recent years, where "Arab women's prolific online activities have contributed a new chapter to the history of both Arab feminism and the region" (2011, 748). These two studies therefore mention the potential of using digital technologies as cyberfeminism in the region.

In fact, in the context of the Arab Spring, digital media provided the necessary tools for social movements to fulfill political goals that were unachievable before (Howard and Hussain 2013, 18), and have granted women "unprecedented visibility" (Bernard, Bessis and Cherif 2012, 3). Digital technologies played a significant role in the context of the Arab Spring in enabling ordinary people and social activists to establish communication networks and overturn authoritarian regimes (Hosni 2017). In societies where states closely control and monitor the mass media, ICTs play a critical role to circumvent state censorship and repression. Across the region, activist groups have been using new technologies to create "pressure from below" to destabilize the traditional hierarchies of power (Al Rawi 2014, 1149). Digital technologies have also created alternative platforms for dissenting and opposing voices, where the free flow of information becomes a source of power that enables "political contests to take place over the aspirations, values, and imaginations of people" (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014, 4), in spite of the persistent digital gap throughout the region.

In fact, the plague of the digital divide in the Arab region continues to undermine equal access (and, therefore, empowering potential) of the Internet for all. In communication studies, the digital divide refers to the gap between those who have access to computers and digital technologies, and those who do not. And here, access does not only include the ability to have a computer, digital technology, and Internet connection, but also to possess the digital skills and know-how to operate these technologies (van Dijk and Hacker 2003). Benni et al. (2016) examined the degree of digitization across nine Arab

countries (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) and found that only 50 percent of households have access to the Internet, and only 61 percent of individuals are regular Internet users.

Methodology

To explore the development of cyberfeminism, the authors relied on a series of structured interviews conducted from 2015–17 with three feminist activists, who fall into the age range of 21 to 34 years old, and who have created their own online platforms. The selected three female activists are Tunisian, Egyptian, and Lebanese and self-identify as *feminists*. These case studies were selected because they were feminist interventions involved in the Arab Spring democratization project. In addition, they received significant media coverage and attention (e.g.: Errazouki 2012; "*Farah, The Egyptian Feminist*" 2013; JC 2015), and have benefited from a significant online following and fan-base (ranging from 2,400 fans to 12,660 followers for the Facebook pages).

The interview questions were administered by email in the form of a questionnaire including open-ended questions to gain further understanding about the selected feminist activists' motivations for creating and maintaining their blogs and Facebook pages. The interviewees were also asked about their overall objectives, targeted audiences, levels of interactivity with their audiences, and topics of interest.

The interviews were supplemented with rigorous textual analysis of the activists' online posts, including the descriptive (or "About") sections of each platform, articles posted, and other audiovisual materials in order to identify the activists' topics of interests, ideological motivations, and objectives for their platform.

The first case study is *A Tunisian Girl*, a trilingual blog (French, Arabic, and English) by Tunisian activist Lina Ben Mhenni's that went viral and served as a major informational source during the 2011 Tunisian

demonstrations. Protests were recorded live on cell phone cameras and uploaded onto the blog. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, the young Tunisian activist launched her "Books to Prisons" campaign for political prisoners who would go on hunger strikes to claim their right to read in Tunisian prisons. Ben Mhenni unexpectedly died of Lupus recently (January 2020) at the young age of 36. Images of women carrying her coffin broke with cultural norms as women typically stay at home and do not attend funeral processions, thereby mirroring the spirit of Ben Mhenni's activism and her commitment to freedom and women's right to access the public sphere.

The second case study is *Egyptian Feminist*, a Facebook page created in 2013 by twenty-one-year-old Egyptian activist. This interviewee requested that her identity would be kept confidential and to be referred to anonymously in this article as *Egyptian Feminist* – the name of her Facebook page. In the "About" section of the page, *Egyptian Feminist* clearly identifies herself as a feminist: "I am a feminist – someone who believes in social, political, and economic equality between women and men. This page is dedicated to fighting misogyny and sexual discrimination." The page currently has 2,416 fans. In an interview published on the *Sweden and the Middle East Views* website, *Egyptian Feminist* speaks about the role models who have inspired her project; she mentions Xena Amro, founder of *True Lebanese Feminist*.

The third case study is *True Lebanese Feminist*, a Facebook page started in 2012 by twenty-two-year-old Lebanese college student Xena Amro. In an interview published on the *Sweden and the Middle East Views* website Xena (JC 2013) said: "The purpose of the page is to raise awareness about women's issues not just in Lebanon, but also globally. There are too many stereotypes placed on women that I want to fight against." Despite the harassments in school and on the Facebook page, which was reported and blocked several times, Xena says she was determined to keep her page and to further expand it. *True Lebanese Feminist* has nearly 12,684 followers today. Xena can be considered a pioneer of fourth-wave feminism in the region because her page served as an inspiration for other young feminists in the region who created their

own platforms or engaged more purposefully in debates about women's rights (Amro 2015).

Analysis

The Internet as a Tool to Raise Feminist Awareness

The analysis revealed that the increasing Internet penetration and digital presence in the Arab region has led to a shift in feminist organizing. Mobilizing online platforms, fourth-wave feminists express their views and push for change in new mediated forms. In fact, the selected feminist activists have used the Internet as a tool to raise awareness about social injustices that affect women in their daily lives and to mobilize other women to join the struggle. These concerns and means of activism represent essential characteristics of fourth-wave feminism (Baumgardner 2011; Martin and Valentin 2013; Munro 2013).

As a tool, the Internet presents several advantages: first, effective online activism is only possible because the Internet offers anonymity, accessibility, low-cost, and flexibility. In her interview, the founder of the *Egyptian Feminist* Facebook page stressed the advantages of accessibility and anonymity associated with the use of the Internet: "First of all, on the internet, it is so easy to reach a lot of people. Second of all and most importantly, you can be anonymous, choose a pseudonym if you're not feeling safe, and you're good" (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015). Capitalizing on these multiple affordances, fourth-wave feminists in the West have used the Internet to create a "call-out" culture which challenges sexism (Munro 2013, 1). In a similar vein, when interviewed, *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) also commented that: "The Internet, in my opinion, is a great tool for women who feel oppressed and want to express their opinions and fight for their rights."

Baumgardener (2011) and Schuster (2013) highlight that, in the context of the rise of fourth-wave feminism in Europe and North America, feminist blogs and Facebook pages have, in fact, become increasingly popular ways to raise awareness and share information, and have also provided

unprecedented platforms for interaction and discussion. Similarly, the Internet is also increasingly used by Arab cyberfeminists to raise awareness about social injustices which affect women either directly or indirectly in their everyday lives. *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) pointed out in her interview: "*Egyptian Feminist's* message is to empower women and spread awareness about the discrimination women face on a daily basis in Egypt particularly. The Internet gave me the support I needed." Hence, cyberfeminism has played a key role in developing our selected interviewees' awareness about feminist issues and helping them educate other women.

Therefore, our analysis has revealed similar patterns of interaction and topics of interest between fourth-wave feminists in the West and Arab cyberfeminists today. Several articles on *Egyptian Feminist's* page, such as the "Inside Egypt's Sexual Harassment Crisis," aim to denounce the extent of sexual harassment in Egypt, which can be likened to "The Everyday Sexism Project" led by fourth-wave feminists in the UK and their anti-harassment campaigns (Cochrane 2013). In addition, many articles on the *True Lebanese Feminist* page focus on the beauty industry and its disastrous effects on the lives of women; one photo post reads: "the beauty industry relies on us feeling unhappy with and ashamed of our bodies" (Amro 2015). The effects of the beauty industry standards and ideals on women has also been a core concern of fourth-wave feminism in the West (Cochrane 2013).

On Transnationalism

Another aspect of fourth-wave feminism is the development of a transnational mass movement connecting women activists. Fourth-wave feminists in the West are currently developing a network of solidarity to effectively denounce social injustices and misogyny across national borders, as social media tools enhance women's ability to network at regional, national, and international levels (Carrier 2015; Licudine 2015). Likewise, cooke (2016, 31) characterizes current Middle Eastern women's activism as "a transnational feminist revolution." For Arab

women activists, the "collective identity and character" that is forged through Arab women's online movements appears in the ways in which they challenge gender inequality and unite women and men activists across Arab states (Al Rawi 2014, 1147).

Increasingly growing as an effective tool to educate, raise awareness, and promote women's empowerment, the Internet has facilitated the breaching of physical and geopolitical boundaries in the Arab region. It has enabled activists to reach out to a wider feminist audience across the region and beyond, as well as to attract support from a broad range of activists, as Xena Amro of *True Lebanese Feminist* explains: "through social media, I was able to reach more people, from different countries, and I was able to be highly aware of the impact the posts were making on young girls specifically, for they realized they are not alone in this patriarchal society" (Amro 2015). In fact, new media technologies contribute to giving voice to women in the region and facilitate their practice of citizen journalism, allowing them to communicate with the outside world in a transnational way (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014). This finding coincides with Munro's (2013, 23) study of fourth-wave feminism which shows how the Internet is creating a global community of feminists who use the Internet to educate themselves on topics they lack knowledge about and spread feminist awareness and activist ideals. In our interview with *Egyptian Feminist*, the young woman activist also told us that she is primarily interested in issues affecting women in the region:

> I wrote about feminist issues I could relate to like: Why is it okay for a man to have premarital affairs and not okay for a woman? Why should women inherit half as much as a man according to Islam? Why are women supposed to stay at home and aspire to marriage? Why do women stay in abusive relationships? (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015).

She added that the instrumentalization of religion is at the origin of many of those issues: "I focus especially on female genital mutilation, rape (and marital rape), using religion to give women an inferior status

in society, domestic violence and virginity testing" (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015).

The feminist movement in the Arab region has also shown a growing concern with women's rights not only in the Middle East and North Africa but also across the globe. The "About" section of the *Egyptian Feminist* page reads: "Feminism is Global – We're not free unless our sisters are free." Another example includes a recent post on the *Egyptian Feminist* Facebook page which commends a village in India where inhabitants plant a tree to celebrate the birth of a girl, highlighting the existence of transnational solidarities between today's feminists globally as the blog entry recognized a feminist initiative taking place at the other side of the world. *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) also said that the majority of her fans are from Egypt and the USA. As a consequence of the efficacy of women's transnational activism, one of the achievements of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region appears in the ways in which it facilitates Arab women's access to the public sphere and empowers them to strive for reaching a status of equal citizenship.

The Internet as a Tool to improve Women's Access to the Public Sphere

In addition to advocating human rights and a sense of social justice for all (Carrier 2015; Cochrane 2013), fourth-wave feminists continue to highlight women's need to access fully and safely the public sphere. Current fourth-wave feminist activists in the Arab region also use the Internet to promote, at a transnational level, women's access to the public sphere and denounce the prevalence of the traditional gender roles and the ongoing discrimination against women in the region. An article on the *True Lebanese Feminist* page discusses a social issue that is of growing concern in the region: men's dominance in the public sphere and the stigmatization of women in the private sphere. The article honors an Egyptian mother who dressed as a man for 43 years to provide for her family. As revealed in an Alarabiya article, "her situation was complicated by a local culture opposed to women in the workplace, which forced her to dress as a man and work

outside the home to support her baby daughter Houda" (Abdelmajeed 2015). In fact, the role of the local culture which imposes strict codes of modesty for Arab women is significant. As a result, women develop bargaining and survival techniques in the face of challenging cultural and societal norms (Kandiyoti 1988). Equal access to the public sphere, which is considered to be an exclusive male domain, and increased mobility for women are core concerns for fourth-wave feminist activists in the region today.

Therefore, online women activists' newly gained visibility in the region defies the classical dichotomy of public–private and man–woman that was used to characterize Arab women's lives in many secularization–modernization theories and promote their image as powerless, helpless and submissive (Hosni 2017). In this sense, the online sphere becomes a gateway through which Middle Eastern women can voice their concerns and advocate their right to access the public sphere as it constitutes an essential step toward their full empowerment.

Third Wave Feminism and Intersectionality

One of the main tenets of fourth-wave feminists in the West is their foregrounding of third-wave feminism beliefs, including the concept of intersectionality (Carrier 2015; Cochrane 2013; Munro 2013). In fact, other third-wave concerns also include the fight against racism and anti-imperialism; in her interview, *Egyptian Feminist* stated: "I personally believe that feminism is intersectional and fights for the equality of everyone" (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015). Arab cyberfeminists' emphasis on the question of intersectionality is similar to women of color's emphasis on this point in the West – the ways in which different axes of identity including gender and race come together to create a sense of self, and how identity cannot be reduced to a unique characteristic such as gender. By putting the emphasis on the notion of intersectionality, women of color in the West sought to demark themselves from White feminists who viewed womanhood as an all-encompassing category and neglected to take into consideration differences between women and the ways in which positions

of privilege impact their unifying potential. In such an attempt to demarcate themselves from mainstream white feminism, our selected interviewees have underscored their lack of identification with fourth-wave feminism as it emerged and has been theorized in the West. *Egyptian Feminist* (2015) distinguished Arab feminism from Western feminism in her interview: "we still have a long way to go in women's rights issues in comparison to the West." Likewise, Xena Amro also stated that: "there are wider debates [about feminism] today but they all stem from unjust attitudes towards women. Wider debates reach religion and political issues which indirectly affect women" (Amro 2015).

In addition, third-wave feminism is also concerned with the integration of male activists' perspectives. In her interview, Xena Amro said that: "My page is also targeting men to become more supportive towards the feminist movement" (Amro 2015). To support her point, an article on her page celebrates 100 Lebanese men who walked in heels in Beirut to denounce violence against women and support women who are fighting against abusive partners (Najib 2015).

Human Rights and Social Justice

In Europe and North America, fourth-wave feminist activists not only challenge or "call out" sexism, but also other social injustices online (Carrier 2015; Munro 2013). Women in the Arab region have also used the Internet and ICTs' momentum to continue to incorporate the framework of human rights and social justice to their struggle for gender equality. As relevant literature on the subject demonstrates, MENA women activists integrate issues of women's rights into their blogs to demand that women be granted equal rights in social movements and contentious politics. (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014, 19).

Through a strategic use of new media technologies, the selected women activists were able to integrate aspects of regime change, conflict resolution, democracy building, human rights, and social justice into their initial struggle for gender equality. In her interview, *Egyptian Feminist*,

argues that: "feminists should not disregard issues such as Syrian crisis, immigration, war, racism, climate change, poverty which affect women both directly and indirectly. In some of these situations, more women are affected than men" (*Egyptian Feminist* 2015). In addition, a picture post on the Egyptian Feminist shows Pakistani women marching in the streets to demonstrate against the Talibans' regime and the atrocities committed against women and all citizens alike because of religious fundamentalism. In fact, a core objective of fourth-wave feminism has been to incorporate wider social and human rights concerns which affect women in order to achieve gender equality (Carrier 2015; Cochrane 2013). Women activists in the region therefore seem to take interest in pressing human rights issues, which affect women and their social status.

Arab Spring Specificity

In the context of the Arab uprisings, women around the region have played a significant role in their countries' democratic transitions – women's movements and broader social movements became "intertwined social phenomenon" (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014, 2). Women activists played a leading role in the Arab uprisings through their strategic use of digital technologies, at three important stages: first, during the mobilization phase, when women called on other people to join the protests; second, in the documentation of events and experiences of the revolutions; and finally in the cultural dissemination phase, where women activists have been able to move from critiquing to contributing to social justice and the development of their societies (Hosni 2017).

First, as part of the mobilization phase, Egyptian women online activists and bloggers played a leading role in mobilizing mass demonstrations of women and girls during the uprisings (Naber 2011). Asmaa Mahfouz, a young twenty-five-year-old woman played an important role at the start of the Egyptian revolution through her viral YouTube video that called for massive participation in the January 25 demonstrations and the abandonment of chauvinist and misogynist attitudes. Similarly, famous hashtags such as *#SidiBouzid* and *#Jan25* also played a key role in fueling

the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and were posted across many platforms run by women.

In addition, the selected women activists rose to stardom as citizen journalist figures thanks to their role in cyberfeminism and in documenting the uprisings. In Egypt, women activists' increased familiarity with social media tools was a push factor for them to go out to the streets and film the protests, posting the content live on various blogs in order to rally national, regional, and international support. In Tunisia, activist Lina Ben Mhenni's blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, served as a major informational source to document the Jasmin revolution and call for international support by using pictures and videos recorded live during the uprisings and uploaded onto the blog. Content from *nawaat.org*, an independent collective blog featuring leading Tunisian (women and men) dissident voices, and from les *Révolutionaires de la Dignité* platform, which also included several women among their activists, served as important news feeds to keep the international community informed about the progress of the revolution as well as call for international support. As indeed revealed by the literature, two key features of the mass social protests that characterized the Arab Spring are the significant reliance on ICTs for the purposes of mobilization and documentation, including mobile phone technologies and satellite TV, and the large presence of women in the protests (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014, 2). However, the conjuncture of the Arab Spring also meant for women an unsafe Tahrir Square in Cairo, gang rapes in the street during protests in Egypt, and a police officer dragging a topless woman with what will become an iconic blue bra in Egypt[5]. Despite the unsafety of the streets, women continued their involvement in democracy building and reconciliation processes, as part of the cultural dissemination phase. One enlightening example is Lina Ben Mhenni's initiative to promote a culture of human rights in Tunisian prisons through her blog *A Tunisian Girl*, through which she denounced several human rights violations committed against non-violent protesters by official authorities during the uprisings. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, Lina Ben Mhenni, together with her father Sadok, a former political prisoner under Ben Ali's regime, launched the "Books to Prisons" campaign for political prisoners who went on hunger strikes to

claim their right to read in Tunisian prisons. Inspired by her father's seven-year-long imprisonment experience, their initiative aimed to both counter the radicalization of inmates and provide them with some productive enjoyment.

Therefore, women's increasing use of blogs during the Arab Spring uprisings had two significant implications in terms of social movement theorizing. First, women bloggers tended to adopt a non-violent stance, and therefore to promote values such as democracy, peace, and inclusion in their societies (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014). Such characteristics, we argue, also reflect the humanist stance of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region. As defined by Lamont (1997), humanism emphasizes the "interconnectedness of humankind and peace on earth" and the "establishment throughout the world of democracy, peace, and a high standard of living" (1997, 56). In this sense, women's online forms of activism during the Arab Spring could suggest the start of a new chapter for women's activism in the region (Khamis 2011). Furthermore, this analysis showed that they coincide with current understandings of fourth-wave feminism as theorized in the West.

Concluding Remarks

Whereas existing literature focuses on the rise of fourth-wave feminism in Europe and North America, this study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region, in order to assess its main characteristics and social implications. This research examines a unique historical development: the rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region in the geopolitical context of the Arab Spring uprisings. Previous research has revealed that young Arab women activists have actively mobilized new media technologies, more specifically the Internet and social media, as crucial tools to press for regime change, democracy, and social justice in the context of the Arab Spring (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014; Khamis 2011). Both previous research (e.g., Hosni 2017) as well as our own findings in this study demonstrate that women activists in the region have "extended" their early online activism to offline activism. During the early stages, they called for mobilization in the protests

of the Arab Spring. The subsequent phase consisted of the recording–documentation of the protests. Finally, during the cultural dissemination phase, women online activists from the Arab states have been claiming their rights. Despite the enduring problem of the digital divide in the region, the analysis revealed that recent developments in Arab women's activism in the context of the Arab Spring exemplify core characteristics of fourth-wave feminism. Such features include primarily the mobilization of ICTs to put an end to authoritarian rule and advance the gender equality cause in the region. Although the selected activists did not clearly identify with fourth-wave feminism when interviewed, their initiatives displayed such characteristics. In addition, recent geopolitical and technological developments have facilitated the development of transnational solidarities between feminist activists in the Arab region, where access to the online sphere has paved the way for greater access and mobility within the public sphere, therefore resulting in women's empowerment and their ability to incorporate wider social issues of peacebuilding, human rights, and social justice to their feminist agendas. These recent developments reflect the growing humanist stance of fourth-wave feminism: a key tenet in Humanist philosophy is the equal entitlement to dignity and respect of all human beings and their interconnectedness (Lamont 1997, 56).

However, fourth-wave women activists in the Arab region have also faced online harassment and "doxing" – a phenomenon that typically refers to the publication of private information on a specific individual on the Internet with a malicious intent. Xena Amro's Facebook page, *True Lebanese Feminist*, was blocked and reported on several occasions. Amro was harassed and threatened, but she insisted on keeping her page online and further expanding it. For several years, *Egyptian Feminist* relied on anonymity to conduct her activism: even her friends, relatives, and father did not know that she was the administrator of *The Egyptian Feminist* Facebook page as she feared that feminism is still widely considered a taboo topic in Egypt. She has also been concerned about the ways in which feminist activism can lead to significant personal and social costs in the country. Ultimately, cyberactivist Lina Ben Mhenni was also assaulted and tortured by the Tunisian police in 2012 for protesting article 28 of

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the new constitution which emphasized complementary roles for men and women within the society (interview with Errazzouki 2012). However, starting in 2013, Lina lived under close protection of the police because of increased terrorist threats directed at her. These attacks against feminists in the region exemplify the backlash against feminism and the associated personal and social costs of cyberactivism.

The findings of this study are thus significant because they point to the possibilities and obstacles facing cyberfeminists and fourth-wave feminism in the region. A limitation of this study is the limited number of case studies, as the analysis was based on the online interventions of three feminist activists (Tunisian, Egyptian, Lebanese). However, the focus of this qualitative analysis was on providing an in-depth exploration of the potential and limits of such interventions, in the pursuit of gender justice. Future research could expand on the similarities and differences between the emergence of fourth-wave feminism characteristics in the Arab region in comparison to elsewhere, as well as the transnational characteristics which blur some lines between the "here" and "there." It could also explore the online expressions and articulations of women's rights in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the extent to which their active contributions to the struggle against authoritarian regimes were translated (or not) into more egalitarian legislation and material change enhancing their equal participation in their societies' political, economic, and cultural life.

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Notes

[1] In feminist studies, the concept of intersectionality refers to the ways in which different axes of identity such as race, social class, and sexuality, come together to create a sense of self (Mohanty 1991). The concept emerged out of a concern of a previous (and White) homogenization of the "woman" category which unrecognized differences between women and the hierarchies of power that separate them.

[2] According to Snyder (2008), sex-positive feminism refers to a prosex attitude of third-wave feminists, born out of the sex wars and split within second-wave feminists. Third-wave feminists claimed to adopt a less judgmental stance on sexuality, pleasure, and symbols of femininity than their predecessors.

[3] In regards to the link between queer theory and third-wave feminism, Mann and Huffman (2005) state that: "Young feminists also are more likely to embrace the postmodern politics of queer theory, especially on issues related to sexuality. As a consequence, they promote a feminism that is more inclusive of a profusion of gendered subjects, like butch, femme, transsexuals, and transgendered people. They also tend to view the second wave as a prudish feminism that 'has put up more restrictions than green lights when it comes to sexuality' (Alfonso and Trigilio 1997, 12)" (2005, 72).

[4] In this article, we are using the terms "Arab region" and "Arab women" to refer to the 22 Arab-speaking countries which are part of the Arab league. It is important to recognize however the many other non-Arab ethnic groups left out of the designation "Arab," which is often mistakenly conflated with the label "Muslim." When quoting the relevant literature, we use the terminology of the scholarly work ("Muslim," "Middle Eastern," "MENA…").

[5] The victim of police brutality was shown in a photograph as topless and wearing a blue bra, which later became a symbol of dissent in Facebook and other online platforms. Many shared the photograph on Facebook with the message "down with military rule [in Egypt]." The woman was participating in a protest at the occasion of the Women's International day in 2011 in Cairo (Gheytanchi and Moghadam 2014).