ARAB WOMEN AND NEW SOCIAL MEDIA.
PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLES AND IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT DURING THE ARAB SPRING EVENTS AND AFTER

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Abstract: From a historical perspective and varying on different intensity levels, one may say that in the long years of resistance to dictatorships women have always played a crucial role. A perfect example to illustrate this fact is the women's involvement in the movements of the Arab Spring, be they riots or peaceful demonstrations, events that have given women unprecedented visibility. However, even after the years of the Arab Spring turmoiled events, women are still confronting attempts to exclude them from decision-making processes and the public sphere through discrimination and violence. As a reaction to this situation, the last years have revealed an increasing tendency of the engagement of Arab feminist activisms online, most notably during the citizen revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and, specifically, women's use of online social networking to aid social change. Therefore the specific Arab organizations – either feminist or just expressing the demands of women - mobilize, produce knowledge, and develop and share resources online, the new social media becoming in the traditional Arab context precisely the key-element of communication, able to turn the local knowledge into global knowledge. By looking at the opinions and perceptions of Arab women, with particular reference to Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, this paper aims at giving key insights on the Arab Spring and its impact on women's rights, and on new social media as the most effective means of communication. It also addresses the different views and approaches of the post-authoritarian regimes by both religious and secular Arab women.

Keywords: Arab women, Arab Spring, new social media, communication, activism

Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, followed by the 2002 assassination of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, the 2004 murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, the Madrid train bombing in that same year, and the 2005 London bombings, the Western relations with the Middle East have become rather problematic. The European public discourse on the Middle East particularly started to increasingly revolve around the presumed incompatibility of Western values and those of Islam, the latter reinforcing the cultural barriers, not only at a state level, but also among civil society. Before 9/11, the average non-Islamic European knew little about the Middle East and Islam in particular. However, since the terrorist attacks and their explanation within an Islamic framework, often public opinion associated Islam with terrorism so far. As a result, "terrorists" and "Muslim fundamentalists" quickly became unfortunately synonyms for the Middle East, generating erroneous interpretations, with undeserved stigmata and dramatic consequences for the innocent people. Additionally, "in public debates, Islam and Muslims are currently and typically presented and perceived as threatening national identity, culture, and security."[1] In other words, stereotypes and prejudices have begun to dominate European public opinion about the Middle East.[2]

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[1] Velasco et al. 2008, 668.
[2] Simonetti 2011.

Parallel to this turmoiled international framework, at the social level in the Middle East, the situation is convulsive also in terms of gender segregation, lack of democratic rights and/or their unclear and uncertain situation for women and any kind of minorities. With respect to the women condition, it is important to point out that they played a crucial role in the long years of resistance to dictatorships. In the last decade, due to the new social media, they have played an essential role in the calls for political change that have swept the Arab region, too. However, to completely understand them as catalysts for political change and mobilizers for political action one must contextualized their important role within the broader political and social structure in each country, with all their respective complexities and unique qualities. Therefore, in comparing and contrasting the role of cyberactivism in, for instance, the Egyptian revolution, or the Syrian uprising, from the very beginning of an analysis of this kind it is important to compare and contrast the underlying nuanced social, political and communication structures unique to each country, as well as the different roles of not only the women have played, but also the other political actors and the types of online and offline communication strategies they deployed.[3]

The role of women in the Arab Spring new media

The movements which formed the so-called Arab Spring phenomenon have given women unprecedented visibility.[4] Young women have been at the forefront of the revolutionary uprisings that have toppled regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, along with the more protracted struggles in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. They were among the Twitterati, Facebookers, and citizen journalists who became leading news sources—the protesters who took to the streets and the cybersphere to demand that their entrenched leaders step down, and the citizens who paid the ultimate price, being beaten to death and murdered in those regimes' desperate attempts to cling to power.

In our view, it is important to highlight in the present paper at least one case of this type of revolutionary women related to the online activism which initially impacted as a spearhead the civil consciousness of the outraged people. We choose an Egyptian instance from January 18, 2011: in a video posted to YouTube a 26-year-old woman Asmaa Mahfouz has called to action. Almost instantly the video went viral and turned her into a symbol of the Egyptian revolution.

> "*I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone. And I'll hold up a banner. Perhaps people will show some honor. I even wrote my number so maybe people will come down with me. No one came except … three guys and three armored cars of riot police … I'm making this video to give you one simply message: We want to go down to Tahrir Square on January 25. If we still have honor and want to live with dignity on this land, we have to go down on January 25. We'll go down and demand our rights, our fundamental human rights… If you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25th. Whoever says a women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th*

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[3] Khamis et al. 2012, 1.
[4] Maraqa and Oehring 2013, 1.

... Sitting at home and just following us on news or Facebook leads to our humiliation, leads to my own humiliation. If you have honor and dignity as a man, come ... If you stay home, you deserve what will happen to you ... and you'll be guilty, before your nation and your people ... Go down to the street, send SMSs, post it post it on the 'net. Make people aware ... It will make a difference, a big difference ...
never say there's no hope ... so long you come down with us, there will be hope ... don't think you can
be safe any more! None of us are! Come down with us and demand your rights my rights, your family's
rights."[5]

This dramatic statement might shed new light on the engagement of women with social media, action which has coincided with a shift in the political landscape of the Middle East - and it is unlikely that they will ever retreat from the new arenas they have carved out for themselves. Throughout the region, women have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers, translating digital advocacy and organization into physical mobilization and occupation of public spaces in a dialectic of online and offline activism that is particular to this era. They have used citizen journalism and social networking to counter the state-dominated media in their countries and influence mainstream media around the world. In the process, they are still reconfiguring the public sphere in their countries, as well as the expectations of the public about the role women can and should play in the political lives of their countries.

The bridging role of the young women in the Arab uprisings
Several of the women who participated in and led the Arab uprisings were cyberactivists prior to the convulsions of 2011, but many more were inspired to become activists by the events happening around them. Although women young and old alike took part, it was the younger generation that led the way online. They helped organize virtual protests as well as street demonstrations and played bridging roles with the mainstream media, helping to ensure that the 24-hour news cycle always had a source at the ready. Twitter became a real-time newsfeed, connecting journalists directly with activists and becoming a key tool in the battle to frame the protests and set the news agenda, particularly in the international media like *Al Jazeera* and elite Western outlets. Media outlets repurposed citizen-generated videos on YouTube and photos on Flikr, while Facebook provided a platform for aggregating, organizing, disseminating, and building solidarity.[6]

Not only that women have played a central role in the creation of a virtual public sphere online via social media and blogs, but they have also demanded greater access, representation, and participation in the physical public sphere, epitomized by the physical squares that represent the imaginary center of political life in their countries: Tahrir Square in Egypt and Benghazi, Libya; Taghir Square in Yemen; and the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain. They tore down physical and social barriers between men and women, challenging cultural and religious

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[5] Radsch 2012, 3.
[6] Ibidem.

norms and taboos and putting women's empowerment at the center of the struggle for political change. As one blogger put it,

"The most encouraging feature of the current upheaval is the massive participation of women; not only the

young educated women who uses (sic) the Internet but also the grassroots uneducated older women from rural cities."[7]

Arab women as catalysts to overthrow dictatorship and rebuild democratic societies

The Arab uprisings have occurred spontaneously and simultaneously in several Arab countries, with the aim of overthrowing dictatorships and rebuilding Arab societies based on the principles of democracy, equality, freedom and social justice. Within this collective mass movement for democracy, Arab women fought together with men, struggling for a better future for themselves, for their husbands and fathers, and particularly for their children. Gender issues were not explicitly part of the demands of the protesters, but the equal participation of women in the events has contributed to gender-equalising the protesters' demands. However, female participation in the uprisings does not necessarily reflect a single ideological, political and feminist framework. It is rather a reflection of their political, social and cultural background throughout their whole life and across the generations, influenced by mainly traditionalist, modernist/liberal and Islamist discourses. That is why it is essential to take into account this context when analysing the important role of women in the Arab uprisings. The post-uprising de facto political map has not yet been finally articulated. Secular liberal women and women's organisations in the region have largely feared to lose what they have achieved in terms of their individual liberty and human rights under the previous secular regimes. Thus their main discourse included aspects of gender policies, democratic liberties and social, cultural and educational changes. Therefore the primary task of both Islamist and secular women's, and of course of the human rights organisations is to co-operate, monitor, negotiate and strategise to ensure that gender issues are integrated into political discussions and formulations as a substantial issue and as part of real democratisation.[8]

Another threat that the Arab women have to be aware of is that entering the Post-Arab Spring Era women are now confronting attempts to exclude them from decision-making processes and the public sphere through discrimination and violence. Although the situation of women varies across the region, threats to their human rights converge.[9] In this case women's activism is revealed once again to and within online mobilization of cohesive democratic groups.

International focus on the Arab world has increased during and post- "Arab Spring", while recognition of individual women's involvement in the conflicts and demonstrations has risen.[10] Yet, simultaneously, both traditional and social media cite a contrasting reality, i.e., the absence of gendered revolution or factual gender-based social change.[11]

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[7] Ziada 2011.
[8] European Parliamentary Research Service 2012.
[9] Maraqa and Oehring, ibidem.
[10] Khamis 2011.
[11] Universal Peace Federation, Office of Peace and Security Affairs 2012, 31-32.

Online activism and women's goals during and post Arab Spring

Online activism, while often tied to offline activist organizations and efforts, differs from conventional activism in several key ways. Online activism affords opportunities for issue-focused efforts that allow activists to identify with and support specific efforts, for promotion of goals and activities that can reach further and more quickly than is the case with traditional activism, potentially reaching beyond its contained status. In addition, online activism occurs in a liminal "third space", a place where traditional rules governing society can be set aside.[12] Rooted in theories of space as constructed by the material needs of its inhabitants, the concept of the third space assumes that space is not empty, socially defined by the contrast between what is experienced in them and what can be imagined for them.[13] The online activist third space is thus located between the concepts and experiences of power, revealing a space of contained empowerment, specifically in the context of women's role and agency in the revolutions in Tunisia, December, 2010 – January, 2011 and Egypt, January – February, 2011.[14] Moreover, online activism provides the potential for empowerment to marginalized voices, provides the opportunity for cross-boundary dialogue, and provides an impetus for social change. Online feminist activist spaces attempt to provide the possibility for enacting the ideas of gendered dialogue. Therefore, online feminist activist spaces are an excellent starting point to build a discussion of gendered identity and dialogue online. However, with the relatively low internet penetration in the Middle East and North Africa, online populations consist mostly of women academics and other privileged women. In addition, up until the demise of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes citizens self-censored and silenced public political discourse. Such self-silencing occurred more intensively in Tunisia under Ben Ali's rule[15] and its "harsh offline oppression."[16]

During the last decade Egypt's online activism case revealed the mechanisms by which virtual media power has been and is still transformed into moments of political struggle through activism, newsmaking, and online interaction.[17] Hence, Radsch identified at least three stages in the development of the Egyptian blogosphere, each shaped by key episodes of contention which pitted political movements against the state.[18] Thus, while she called the first and earliest phase as the Experimentation Phase when an Egyptian blogger "elite" has influenced the mainstream media and fellow bloggers, the following stage, the Activist Phase, was marked by the activist-blogger relationship and by the fact that blogs gained exposure because of their role in political movements. Finally, the third phase was that of the Diversification and Fragmentation, characterized by virtual enclaves or communities of bloggers that tend to engage primarily with each other and covering the entire social, cultural and political spectrum, i.e., activists, Leftists, Muslim Brotherhood, cultural entities, Copts,

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[12] New Media Consortium 2003.
[13] Bhabha 2002; Newsom and Lengel 2012, 32.
[14] Ibidem.
[15] Lengel and Martin 2010, 334-347.
[16] Jansen 2010, 37, apud Newsom and Lengel 2012, 33.
[17] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.
[18] Radsch 2008, 1.

Baha'i, gay minority, Salafis, human rights organizations, feminists movement, women rights organizations, etc.[19] In the author's viewpoint, the most critical stage in the development of Egyptian blogging was the activist stage because it helped empower bloggers by granting them access to the resources of international media and human rights organizations and transnational activist networks on a level incomparable to any other blogosphere except perhaps China's. The Egyptian case has at times become a blueprint for other online activists in the Arab world, from the freedom campaigns in Saudi Arabia and Morocco to the media savvy of the Lebanese blogosphere.[20]

However, blogging was just one among several distinct online manifestations of the Arab and Muslim activists during the last years. This is due to the fact that for many repressed and isolated voices, new social media – such as Twitter and Facebook - are a primary way that needs and goals can be recognized to gain support from global institutions.

Conclusion

The impact of the Arab Spring new/social media revolutions on enhancing gender equality in the Middle East and North Africa has been challenged by multiple feminist scholars and activists, including Arab feminists[21]. To have a more nuanced understanding of the impact of the Arab Spring on Arab women, transnational and western feminist scholars must interrogate their role in contributing to essentialism and must enhance their awareness of the authenticity of local knowledge[22]. Newsom[23] points out that broad attempts to "empower" women as a monolithic category both essentializes and contains women, and fails to recognize social, cultural, and intellectual traditions and experiences of women outside of the dominant position. Failure to reach a global audience means failure to secure the aid of systemic power. In historically patriarchal regions, values often do not match the values of global feminism, therefore the need for recognition of local values is particularly strong[24], tending to minimize up to dissolution both women's other roles in society other than those as wife and mother and feminine values. Western assumptions of Arab women's complicity have been critiqued by Arab feminist scholars for decades[25], and re-interpreted from local and post-colonial perspectives as using Western standards to interpret something that has to be understood from the *Othered* point of view[26]. However Khamis and Vaughn argue that in this context "social media's horizontal and non-hierarchical structure was empowering for women, who not only engaged in online activism and citizen journalism through social media, but also effectively and courageously participated in demonstrations and protests" [27] trying to impose their will and viewpoint and thus to establish a new paradigm on women's goals in a

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[19] Ibidem.
[20] Ibidem, 11.
[21] See for instance the opinion of Iman Bibars, in Bohn and Lynch 2011; Brown 2011; Fathi, 2011, Fathi 2011; Younis
   2011.
[22] Newsom, Cassara, and Lengel 2011, 74-89.
[23] Newsom and Langel 2012.
[24] Lengel 1997; Newsom and Lengel 2003, 360-363.
[25] Kandiyoti 1988, 274–290; Lengel 1997; *Muslim Media Watch* 2010.
[26] Abouzeid 2008; Abu Lughod 2001.
[27] 2011, 12.

new Middle East in continuous transformation. Thus, these women of the Arab Spring revolutions were made visible on the larger global stage due primarily to their use of social media, reflecting again the idea espoused by the BBC that social media changed the world.

The actions of several women (such as the April 6 Youth Movement activist Asmaa Mahfouz[28] or Mannoubia and Samia Bouazizi, the mother and sister, respectively, of Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid triggered the protests throughout the nation[29]) utilizing tools and space generally reserved for masculine norms brought them into global recognition, and in many ways equated them to Western feminist heroines and placed them in globally understood narratives.[30]

Some clarifications are required with respect to the nature of Arab women's voices. First, it is important to point out that Arab women seek spaces where they can be heard separately not only from the more mainstream understanding of feminism, but also outside of patriarchal structures. Online, raised as calls for actions, Arab women's voices resonate as powerful. However, this type of power is restricted to the gendered space created specifically for that type of power to operate. The agency inherent in social media may not always translate offline. Therefore, these gendered online spaces are examples of contained empowerment: liminal sites where normative rules are suspended in favor of generating alternative norms. The internet's key resource is information. The technology of the world wide web is an information-based technology. Cyberspace is built from information, and operates as a mechanism for transmitting information. Information means accessing knowledge, that is why the value of information is often mediated by historically powerful entities, although social media can sometimes change that hierarchy. Although historically women have not been active as in the construction of the web as men, they – and particularly the Arab women - have subsequently proved both as an online voice and force, and as the producers of meaning in web-spaces[31]. As a result, the last years have revealed an increasing tendency of the engagement of Arab women activisms online, and, specifically, women's use of online social networking to aid social change. Therefore, in the Post-Arab spring era, the specific Arab organizations – either feminist or just expressing the demands of women - mobilize, produce knowledge, develop and share resources online, the new social media becoming in the traditional Arab context precisely the key-element of communication, able to turn the local knowledge into global knowledge, and the values of Arab women into universal feminine values.

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  her Facebook wall that she was headed to Tahrir Square and urged others to join her there to save Egypt. See Tasnim,
  2011.
[29] Labidi 2011.
[30] Newsom and Langel 2012, 35-36.
[31] Ibidem, 37-38

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