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What Does a Feminist Look Like? Arab Women's Activism as a Challenge to Authoritarian Politics

Bir Feminist Nasıl Biridir? Otoriter Siyasete Bir Meydan Okuma Olarak Arap Kadınların Aktivizmi

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Abstract

As the so-called "Arab spring" revolutions got underway in various part of the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, some outside observers noted the emergence of a new form of feminism as Arab women took to the streets in large numbers. This article seeks to problematize and contextualize the term "feminism" through women's own voices and argues that, through their activism, it may have been that women had "no choice but to become feminists". However, while they enacted emancipatory roles in the public sphere, the patriarchal establishment and some individual men responded through the tools of depressingly familiar authoritarian politics. It raises the question, which this article seeks to answer, of whether women's actions were able to effectively challenge this form of reactionary politics or were unable to prevail against the rapidly reasserted status quo in the region.

Keywords: "Arab spring", Women, Feminism, Authoritarian politics, Revolution.

Öz

"Arap Baharı" diye adlandırılan devrimler 2011 yılında Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika'nın çeşitli bölgelerinde başladığında, bazı dış gözlemciler Arap kadınlarının kalabalıklar halinde sokağa dökülmesiyle yeni bir feministlik şeklinin ortaya çıktığını belirtti. Bu makale, kadınların kendi sesleri aracılığıyla "feminizm" terimini sorunsallaştırıp kavramsallaştırmayı amaçlamakta ve kadınların bu aktivizmleriyle, "feminist olmaktan başka çareleri kalmadığı" ihtimal ve iddiasını tartışmaktadır. Fakat, kadınlar, kamu alanında özgürleştirici roller üstlenirken, ataerkil yapı ve bireysel olarak bazı erkekler, bunaltıcı derecede tanıdık otoriter siyasetin araçlarıyla karşılık vermişlerdir. Söz konusu durum, bu makalenin de cevap bulmaya çalıştığı soruyu; kadınların eylemlerinin bu tür geri tepen siyasete etkili bir şekilde meydan okuyup okuyamayacağı veya bölgedeki hızla yeniden tesis edilen mevcut duruma karşı galip gelip gelemeyeceği meselesini gündeme getirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: "Arap Baharı", Kadınlar, Feminizm, Otoriter siyaset, Devrim.

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Extended Abstract

This article explores the emergence and transformation of feminist consciousness among Arab women during and after the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings, arguing that their activism constituted both a performance of feminism and a challenge to entrenched authoritarian politics across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Framed by a question posed by Zorica Mrsevic—that women sometimes have "no choice but to become feminists"—the study interrogates how feminist praxis unfolds within specific socio-political and religious contexts.

Combining theoretical analysis with ethnographic insights, the article critiques the applicability of hegemonic, Western-centric feminist paradigms to the lived experiences of Arab women. It situates their activism within broader struggles against patriarchy, colonial legacies, and state violence, emphasizing that many women engaged in revolutionary activities not as self-identified feminists but as citizens demanding justice, dignity, and freedom. Nonetheless, their public visibility and agency often provoked patriarchal backlash, revealing how deeply gender norms remain embedded in political structures and cultural attitudes.

The article dissects various feminist frameworks—Islamic feminism, postcolonial feminism, and vernacular feminist movements—and argues for the necessity of intersectional and context-sensitive approaches. It reveals that while international institutions and discourses tend to universalize gender struggles, Arab women increasingly develop indigenous feminist models that reflect their own values, histories, and goals.

Through detailed examples from Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Yemen, the author demonstrates how women's revolutionary participation simultaneously defied patriarchal norms and exposed the limits of political transformation in authoritarian contexts. Although the post-uprising periods often witnessed the re-entrenchment of male-dominated power and violence against women, they also gave rise to durable forms of resistance—including legal reforms, digital activism, and grassroots mobilization.

The concept of "patriarchy" is critically revisited as a multifaceted system of structural, cultural, and direct violence. Drawing on feminist scholars such as Deniz Kandiyoti and Suad Joseph, the article shows how women navigate "patriarchal bargains" and challenge systemic constraints, even while remaining vulnerable to societal pushback. Importantly, the article concludes that feminism in the Arab world cannot be reduced to a single narrative or form; rather, it manifests through a plurality of performances and practices, shaped by history, identity, faith, and political struggle.

Ultimately, the article calls for a reconceptualization of what a "feminist" looks like in the MENA region. It suggests that Arab women—regardless of whether they adopt the label—enact feminist agency in diverse, contextually grounded ways that deserve scholarly recognition and solidarity. Their continued engagement in public life redefines feminism as a lived and evolving practice, embedded in the region's struggles for social justice and democratic reform.

Keywords: "Arab spring", Women, Feminism, Authoritarian politics, Revolution.

Introduction

> "*There were and are moments when we feel so psychically and physically menaced by the patriarchal society that we simply have no choice but to become feminists.*" (Mrsevic 2001, p. 45)

In the early days of the 2011 "Arab spring" in Egypt, as thousands of women poured into the public space, with men, to protest against the oppressive regime of Hosni Mubarak, Margot Badran (2011) suggested that the revolution was inscribing what she called a "new feminism". It did not go by the name "feminism", she added, but, rather, "freedom, equality and justice for all". What was significant for Badran was that women took part in the uprising as citizens rather than as women, meaning that gender equality was not a stated priority. At the same time, the very act of participation could be interpreted as an expression, or performance, of feminism. Like Zorica Mrsevic (2011), Egyptian women had "no choice but to become feminists" and, while they were calling for "freedom, equality and justice for all", many were also keen to change the terms of the debate on women's rights in a state well known for its rigid patriarchal structures and gender-based violence. It raises the question of how best to understand and categorize Arab women's activism in an age of resurgent authoritarianism.

When women joined the revolutions in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, they were met with multiple forms of violence which had the effect, on the one hand, of inhibiting their ability to play a meaningful role and, on the other, of making them more determined to shift the narrative. Some felt they had "no choice but to become feminists", while others already identified as feminists, and many did not consider feminism at all or rejected the label altogether. But, almost 15 years after the "Arab spring", the opportunity to bring more accountable political actors into power has receded and authoritarian "regimes across the region have reasserted their control" (Al-Muslimi 2023); as Dalia Fahmy (2023) observes, when "authoritarian regimes are confronted with public protest and social unrest, they often respond by violently attacking women".

Research Problem and Methodology

Although women were undeniably front and centre in the "Arab spring'" uprisings in all the affected states, the debate on authoritarian Arab governments and revolution tends largely to exclude the female voice. My article seeks to address this omission and will do so by analysing the theory and practice of feminism and female activism in the MENA region through two knowledge claims. One challenges the assumption that women have a vital part to play in social life, not as citizens and political actors but, rather, "as the upholders of the private foundation of the political world of men" (Pateman & Shanley 1991, p. 3). The other, by focusing on violence against women and the system of norms which enables it to flourish, emphasizes that, while violence is the methodology that sustains patriarchy (Aitkenhead, 2014), feminist activism has been described as "the most consistent and important driver of policy change to combat violence against women" (Weldon & Htun, 2013).

In this article, by reflecting on women's experiences of the "Arab spring" uprisings of 2011 in terms of violence and agency, and also by exploring alternative ways of "doing feminism", I will ask what a feminist looks like in the MENA region. First of all, I will critically assess Badran's interpretation of women's involvement in the "Arab spring" as a "new feminism". Feminism has a chequered history in the Middle East, from the top-down "state feminism"[1] of countries such as Tunisia and Egypt to the grassroots struggles of organizations seeking enhanced rights for women. To understand what Arab women mean by "feminism", I will assess forms of female activism that challenge the "civilizing mission of white, bourgeois feminism" (Verges, 2021, p. 4), such as Islamic feminism and post-colonial feminism. Seeking to move beyond the stereotypes surrounding Arab-Muslim women, I argue that there is a tension between western – mainly white and elite – feminist practices and post-revolutionary Arab feminists who "are raising the ceiling of their demands and are encompassing all social justice causes within their work" (Daibes, 2021).

[1] Arab regimes have implemented gender strategies "through what some have called 'state feminism', which is the top-down use of state power to further a women's rights agenda" (El-Husseini, 2023).

Second, with reference to my own ethnographic research in the region, the link between patriarchy and violence against women will be studied. Such violence is not only physical and sexual;[2] despite their participation in the 2011 uprisings, Arab women continue to suffer the violence of exclusion and traditional practices. Third, while there is some notion of a universal "feminism", as disseminated by organizations such as the United Nations, which holds that all women are entitled to equal rights, Arab women are locating their own, more nuanced and specific feminisms. Indeed, nowadays some Arab feminist groups are "enabling the production of distinctly indigenous articulations of feminism", situated in opposition to what has been called "hegemonic feminism[3] embodied in international and non-governmental women's organizations" (Mahadeen, 2024, p. 374); they are "raising the ceiling of their demands", as Daibes remarks. To meet these challenges, it has been necessary to find ways of "doing feminism differently", by employing intersectionality as a method.[4] This "allows us to contest established barriers between academic knowledge and political engagement and to understand how power operates through the production of classification systems and social divisions that render inequality invisible and normal while making it appear necessary" (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020, p. 184). It is an approach that ensures the diversity of Arab women's lived experiences can be accommodated.

The article builds on research I have conducted with a broad range of women in several Arab countries.[5] Between 2000-2019, I undertook research projects on Palestinian refugee women, violence against women

[2] The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (1993).

[3] "Hegemonic feminism" refers to "an institutionalized understanding of power articulated around a binary perception of gender relations and its implementation in projects, indicators and expert knowledge" (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2020, p. 185).

[4] Intersectionality has been described as "a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and interests" (Kimberle Crenshaw, 2017).

[5] Egypt: 2004; Jordan: 2004, 2019; Lebanon: 2000, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2017, 2019; Palestine: 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2019; Tunisia: 2012, 2019; Yemen: 2003, 2010.

in the MENA region, and women's use of Islam as a tool of resistance.[6] The work acknowledged a responsibility to "promote politically progressive and liberating research methodologies", intended "to empower our research subjects" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009, p. 29). As a western researcher, I acknowledge my own positionality and privilege, and recognize that feminist theory, as a product of western colonial history, often fails to reflect the reality of women's lives in non-western settings. I approached this project in a spirit of humility and solidarity and a determination, as far as possible, to understand women's lived experiences through their own narratives. While remaining vigilant to the danger of perpetuating "deep-rooted assumptions about Arab women and their culture" (Amireh, 2005, p. 232), my article seeks to problematize the applicability of the term "feminist" and to argue that we cannot appreciate Arab women's feminisms without taking into consideration the context and background of their lives and of course the terminology they themselves adopt or reject. Women's lives across the MENA region are highly diverse, reflecting class, economic status, geographical location, age and levels of education and employment. I will further suggest that, while "our" frames of knowledge are limited since we cannot live in "their" bodies, we have a responsibility to reflect as best we can their methods of contesting authoritarian politics.

Feminism and Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa

Although it has a beginning, feminist thought "has no end" and, because it has no end, it "permits each woman to think her own thoughts" (Tong, 1992, p. 238). Whatever the reality of feminist thought or thinking her own thoughts, for several centuries "women of various backgrounds have been associating themselves with feminism" (Kausar, 2007, p. 44). As a

[6] Interviewees were selected through cooperation with local women's organizations. They were usually conducted on an individual basis, in the woman's own language, often in her home or a trusted communal space. Interviews were based on a questionnaire. The purpose of the project was clearly explained to each participant; she was assured of anonymity and it was made clear that she need not answer any question that made her feel uncomfortable. Trust and safety were primary concerns at all times. Over 200 women were interviewed over the course of several research projects and numerous visits to the region.

general theory, specifically in the west, it emphasizes "the attainment by women of the same social, educational, political, economic and other rights as are attained and enjoyed by men" (Kausar, 2007, p. 44), and sees the relationship between the sexes as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations… which has led to domination over and discrimination against women by men" (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993). However, I would argue that western feminism has evolved too narrowly, has become too enmeshed in its own impenetrable language and has been unable to free itself entirely from post-imperialist framings.

It also tends to generalize about non-western women, "assuming a homogeneity amongst very diverse groups of women" (Lewis & Mills, 2003, p. 9). Feminist women of colour in the US, for example, have described "the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women's movements" as a form of colonization (Mohanty, 2003, p. 49). Why call yourself "feminist", as Francoise Verges (2021, p. 5) asks, "why defend feminism, when these terms are so corrupted?". Arab women too are critical of "hegemonic white women's movements" which, on the one hand, fail to adequately reflect their experiences and, on the other, appear too closely aligned to post-9/11 western democracy promotion and what is regarded by many Arabs as a hypocritical and selective regard for human rights.

Orientalists and western feminists alike have used the division of the social sphere into "public" and "private", and a fetishistic concern with female dress, as a way of "understanding" Arab women's lives. However, studies carried out over the past few decades, mainly by Arab women, "show the multiplicity of roles that Arab women actually play in their societies" (Al-Hassan Golley, 2004, p. 526; see also Abu-Lughod 2013; Afsaruddin, 2023; Ahmed 2011; Mir-Hosseini, 2019; Sayigh, 1981). A more productive contemporary approach to understanding Arab women's activism is through the tools of postcolonial feminism, defined as seeking to "undo the legacies of colonialism within feminist activism"; in other words, "to decolonize feminist activism", by "de-centring the white, western, Eurocentric experience" (Lubelska, 2018). For many women in the Global South, "their analyses have emerged from the intersections formed through political engagements with western feminism and their

own Indigenous communities"; this has given them an important space, to talk and write, "one that connects and grounds a wide range of their concerns at local, nation and global levels" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021, p. 148). At the same time, while postcolonialism offers Indigenous feminists "the conceptual toolbox to see multiple sites of oppression and to reject universalisms around gendered experiences" (Parashar, 2016, p. 371), it also exposes the colonial female subject to "double colonization", as she "simultaneously experiences the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy" (Tyagi, 2014, p. 45).

Here we may perceive a tension between a colonial agenda "that instrumentalizes gender issues in Global South societies as a means to intervene and exert control" (Hosny, 2024) and colonial constructions of Arab women that seek to transform them into symbols of modernity. The "gendered nature of colonial space" (Mills, 2003, p. 692) continued long after the European colonizers had departed. Even nowadays, by problematizing women's participation in public national events such as the 2011 revolutions, colonial memory sustains the native man's paradoxical sense of entitlement and inadequacy, as well as encouraging him to assert his manhood by taking ownership of the public sphere of action and politics, thus excluding women, or reducing them to "the upholders of the private foundation of the political world of men". It also contributes to a reassertion of the type of discredited authoritarian politics that incorporate colonial legacies and a knee-jerk patriarchal response to female activism. Taken together, these elements suggest that force and coercion may still be considered by some appropriate tools to control female dissent. However, as stated by Daibes, women have been "raising the ceiling of their demands" since the 2011 revolutions, for example through cyber activism (Mahadeen, 2024) and by insisting that women's liberation cannot occur "without full political liberation" (Khamis & Mills, 2018, p. 20).

A Tradition of Female Activism

I do not wish to give the impression that the debate on Arab women's activism can be reduced to a simple binary between western and Indigenous 'feminisms'. However, while cautioning against generalization, I suggest that, in understanding the development of female activism,

there are two particular forces in Muslim-Arab societies that affect the forms it adopts: first, the norms within particular societies, both formal and informal, that structure women's lives; and second, "the society's attitudes and relationship to feminism's civilization of origin, the Western world" (Ahmed, 1982, p. 153). Rola el-Husseini has identified several trends in the transformation of women's roles in the MENA region: first, male religious leaders are reinterpreting "Islamic scriptures in ways that provide a greater scope for women's political participation"; second, Muslim feminist scholars "are working to integrate their belief in gender equality with their religion"; third, secular feminists are lobbying for changes in personal status laws; and fourth, female Islamist activists are "redefining the role of women in the public sphere" (2016, p. 55).

To elaborate: in the early decades of the 20th century, what Leila Ahmed calls the "founding feminist discourses" emerged in the MENA region. From the start, she argues, there was a tension between the "dominant voice of feminism", which identified with "the westernizing, secularizing tendencies of society" and "promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress" toward western-type societies and democratic development; and an alternative voice which sought a way "to articulate female subjectivity and affirmation within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse" (1992, p. 174). In other words, feminist scholarship in this region "has followed a distinctive trajectory, reflecting both its engagement with local debates and its dialogue with broader currents of thought" (Kandiyoti, 1996, pp. 7-8). It is worth analysing the claim that, from the start, women "grounded their feminism first in Islam and later in nationalism" (Badran & Cooke 1990, p. 27); to better understand this assertion, it is necessary to delve deeper into the development of women's rights in individual MENA states and the interplay between neoliberalism, class and the state, and also to appreciate why some women might feel more comfortable expressing their feminism through the lens of religion.

The complex and nuanced relationship between feminism and Islam takes us back to the foundations of the religion, to 7th century CE Arabia, "when women had their place as unquestioned partners in a revolution that made the mosque an open place and the household a temple of debate" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 11). In the modern era, when women's partnership is being denied and women excluded from the revolution,

some Muslim women are articulating their own feminisms, some of which – as Ahmed suggests – are articulated "within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse". "Islamic feminism" or "feminism in Islam", which "derives its understanding and mandate from the *Quran*, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" (Badran, 2002), has been described as "new critical thinking", seen as paving the way for gender liberation and social change. According to the Arab Human Development Report:

> *"In a context where much of the population is sensitive to or supportive of Islamist-oriented political projects, Islamic feminist movements have emerged. Groups taking this approach concentrate on the radical transformation of Islamic jurisprudence or otherwise use Islamic arguments to challenge gender inequality, including movements that use religious texts to challenge domestic violence."* (2016, p. 99)

But Islamic feminism is also portrayed as "the subject of confusion and contention, and of considerable ignorance" (Badran, 2009, p. 1), a mode of activism that is becoming increasingly contested. Ziba Mir Husseini (2010) argues that the term Islamic feminism "has become so loaded with disputed meanings and implications, so enmeshed in local and global struggles that it is no longer useful in any kind of descriptive or analytical sense". On one side, as I point out, Muslim critics see "feminism" as "another form of Western assault upon their culture", an integral part of the colonial project while, on the other side, westerners "attack Muslims by belittling the very notion that they could generate a feminism of their own, and in so doing denigrate Islam as inherently gender-unjust" (Badran, 2009, p. 1).

Nonetheless, channels of compromise and cooperation exist to accommodate the various opposing perspectives. Claiming that "it is not Islam per se that oppresses women but, rather, the continuity of patriarchal values within nationalist and religious ideologies that limits women's agency" (Saliba, 2002, p. 4), Islamic feminists point out that, in the beginning – as Mernissi highlights – Islam provided enlightened and revolutionary changes in the lives of women, giving them rights and responsibilities which they had not previously enjoyed; and it is this "Islam", rather than the arguably distorted "Islam" of the male

establishment, that Muslim women should seek to reclaim, as elaborated by Zainah Anwar from "Sisters in Islam" who declared that "rejecting religion is not an option. We are believers and, as believers, we want to find liberation, truth and justice from within our faith" (1991).

Fatima Seedat (2013, p. 25), on the other hand, has articulated a persuasive argument "for maintaining a critical space between two intellectual paradigms that inform Muslim women's anti-colonial equality struggles in the neo-colonial present, Islam and feminism". She suggests that Islamic feminism "may appear to be the inevitable result of the convergence of Islam and feminism" however, it is also "inadequate to concerns for sex equality in Islam". She adds that, as an analytic construct, Islamic feminism, "precludes new understandings of sex difference originating in non-Western and anticolonial cultural paradigms" (Seedat, 2013, p. 25). Others differ. Ghaliya Djelloul (2018), for example, notes that, as Islamic feminists are concerned with developing an ethical reading of the foundations of Islam, the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*, "in order to find a form of religious exegesis that will support their feminist viewpoint", it is "legitimate to speak of the production of a new Islamic discourse". Drawing on postcolonial criticism, she argues that "Islamic feminism reveals how the trope of 'saving Muslim women' is produced by the colonial nature of power" . Self-identified Islamic feminists, therefore, face a two-pronged struggle; on the one hand, they seek to untangle centuries of male (mis)interpretation that has persistently privileged men's rights and entitlements over women's; and, on the other hand, they face the rigid and uncomprehending power of western narratives, heavily coloured by Orientalism. I argue that feminism, whether Islamic, western or an authentic voice of the Global South, is an incomplete explanation for Arab women's activism in response to crisis.

In a 2004 study, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (2004, p. 521) explored the question of whether feminism, as it is practiced in the west, is even relevant to Arab women. Since feminist consciousness "developed hand in hand with national consciousness" in the MENA region, she argues, it was, in essence, a reaction to western imperialism and, therefore, "an alien import" and "not relevant to the people and their culture". According to this reasoning, feminism is a product of "decadent" western capitalism, associated with western colonial occupation in the first part of the 20th

century. It either "alienates women from their culture, religion and family responsibilities" or from the "revolutionary struggle for national liberation" (Jayawardena 1982, p. 1). This tension reflects the confusion that "feminism from outside" provoked; while, for some members of society, it was associated with progress and with liberation from European colonial control, for others it represented an alien imposition, or more subtle intervention from the west to subvert Arab societies. Therefore, to assume Arab feminism is a democratic force would be "an exaggeration" (Al Atiyat, 2020).

I think we need to separate the notion of feminist consciousness, as it evolved through its link with anti-colonial, national liberation struggles, from the quest for gender equality that has characterized mainstream western feminism. To do this, we must have a clearer understanding, in the context of the MENA region, of non-western feminist models and the "increasing acknowledgement of Western feminism's cultural specificity… and most recently, the manner in which Western hegemonic agendas appropriate feminist/humanitarian concerns to justify their 'interventions'". Indeed, a range of such factors "has fractured and complicated the debate concerning the relationship between feminism and Islam (Almond 2007, p. 133). This suggests that "Arab feminism" is escaping the shackles of western imperialism by adopting a vernacular Islamic discourse, as Leila Ahmed observes; it may thus be capable of countering Al Atiyat's claim of exaggeration and contributing to democratic development in significant and innovative ways. To test this argument, let us turn to Arab women's participation in the so-called "Arab spring".

An Arab Spring for Women?

> *"It was young Arab women who mainly drove the events that led to the so-called Arab Spring They demanded socioeconomic justice and mobilized protestors. On the frontlines, they paid the highest price for their activism, risking rape, imprisonment and even death – by marching. They built cross-regional solidarities, graffitied, tweeted, blogged, facebooked and instagramed. Most of these women were cyber-activists unaffiliated with any prominent women's organizations. Their participation added an important dimension to demands for dignity, freedom and justice."* (Al Atiyat, 2020)

The momentous events in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, often referred to as an "Arab spring", took much of the world by surprise. What was even more astonishing to many outside observers was the mass participation of Arab women in all the revolutionary sites. Previously, the predominant western image was of "a passive, exotic and veiled victim-woman who reacts to events instead of actively participating in them" (Martin-Munoz, 2012). But, in 2011, women were not only physically present in the public sphere but also worked as mobilizers and organizers. In Libya, for example, "the woman" was described as "the Muslim, the mother, the soldier, the protester, the journalist, the volunteer, the citizen" (Rice et al., 2011). Women's involvement prompted some to wonder whether this might be a significant moment, a new form of feminism, as Badran suggested, or "an Arab spring for women" (Cole & Cole, 2011). It highlights the tension between violence and agency.

The reality, however, was more complicated and less optimistic Worse, the conclusions and outcomes of these events, and of later anti-government protests in other Arab states, indicated the persistence of authoritarian politics in the MENA region. While women appeared to be welcome and equal participants, they also suffered high levels of violence and a subliminal message that their public presence was not altogether welcome. In Yemen, for example, women were beaten in the street by security forces and told to go home (Khalil, 2013). In Egypt, the public sphere has long been an unsafe environment for women as successive political regimes maintained "a spatial culture of humiliation and inferiorization" as a political tool to silence them (Zakarriya, 2019, p. 113), and this became even more evident during the 2011 protests.

Wearing or not wearing a veil seemed to have had little effect on whether a woman was sexually assaulted or taunted for "wanton behaviour"; indeed, sexual violence was used as "a systematic political tool" (Zakarriya, 2019, p. 113) to intimidate and terrify women from publicly voicing their opposition "by targeting their respectability" (Tadros, 2015, p. 1349). For example, following the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, violence against women increased and "women detainees were subjected to 'virginity tests' and sexual humiliation" (Alvi, 2015, p. 295; Hamzeh, 2020) after they gathered to demand improved rights for women; all of which raises the question of "women's acceptable role in the revolution" (Van Den Bogert, 2019, p. 64).

While the public space became, for a while, democratic and inclusive, the response of authorities, and many male protestors, resulted in a mass of contradictions. One of these, stemming from frightening circumstances and perceptions of inappropriate behaviour, as experienced by women in all the protest sites, mythologized the model of the ideal Arab woman. Hanna Papanek (1994, p. 47) argues that "movements promising to 'restore order' to a world perceived as chaotic often restrict themselves to imposing more stringent controls on women, redefining their collective identity, rather than addressing the problems that have led to disorder". Yet, although the supposedly disorderly conduct of rebellious women was experienced by some men as threatening, the relatively permissive environment unleashed by the 2011 protests persuaded many women to believe that the old order was being overturned and, with it, women's restricted designation as "the upholders of the private foundation of the political world of men"; they sensed a genuinely emancipatory moment.

Another paradox is embodied in the behaviour of men themselves who appeared torn between a revolutionary impulse and a lingering compulsion to "restore order", emphasizing the key issue of male control of public space and how even revolutions are unable to disrupt this fundamental dynamic. This pinpoints yet another contradiction, concerning a growing realization that "notions of masculinity undermined by a repressive regime have observably shifted the terms of the patriarchal bargain" (Hafez, 2012, p. 37), the local man's paradoxical sense of entitlement and inadequacy that I discussed earlier. A woman's rights activist in Tunis described this dilemma as an attempt by the existing patriarchal framework of society "to intimidate women from participating in politics"[7]. In response, during the protests, women "re-appropriated gendered and patriarchal ideals as a means of revolution", a process best understood, as "embodied agency" (Van Den Bogert, 2019, p. 65); it is a reference that also hints at conscious feminist actions.

Women's participation in the 2011 revolutions raises pertinent questions within the debate on nation making in the MENA region. Although most of the female revolutionaries did not articulate gender-specific demands, they began to be aware of their own lack of inclusion during transitional

[7] Interview, Tunis, September 2019.

periods (Alwazir, 2012). To support the role of women in the post-revolutionary landscape, as Haddad (2012) argues, "one must not shy away from addressing the wider structures of economic and political oppression". It is clear that, in all the "Arab spring" states, many women were concerned about the future. They were worried, even as reforms were implemented, that their rights would be "discarded in favour of male constituencies, whether patriarchal liberal or Muslim fundamentalists" (Cole & Cole, 2011). In other words, they feared that, while women may have sustained the "Arab spring"[8], "it remains to be seen if the Arab spring will sustain women" (Rice et al., 2011).

During the brief revolutionary period, women used their agency, or sense of entitlement to act, to engage in resistance against the established power structures. Yet "agency", in this context, is a somewhat problematic concept; feminist theories of agency as resistance tend 'to be subject to the criticism that resistance is a peculiarly western preoccupation that leads to the ethnocentric discounting of other types of active agency where women in nonsecular societies create meaningful identities for themselves within, not against, the dominant cultural norms" (McNay, 2015, p. 39). However, ensuing political arrangements in most cases, disregarded women's display of resistance, preferring instead to "intimidate women from participating".

It is also worth reminding ourselves that these momentous events took place almost 15 years ago and we can now see that, although women have not, on the whole, been sustained by the "Arab spring", they have, to some extent, been empowered and many have been emboldened to develop their own activism; in places, post-revolutionary feminist strategizing has resulted in improved laws; in Egypt, for example, the National Council for Women drafted a law to combat violence against women and other women's groups and NGOs have drafted laws to reform personal status law and to criminalize violence against women in the private sphere. Such developments have been apparent across the region. Nonetheless, one has to ask whether a single, undifferentiated notion of "patriarchy", so often mentioned as an explanation for violence against women, continues to be a salient factor in the policies of individual MENA states.

[8] Interviews, Tunisia, March 2013.

A "Methodology That Sustains Patriarchy"

Is there some commonality among "women", as Butler (1990, p. 5) asks, or do "women" have a bond "by virtue of their oppression alone?". During interviews conducted in the MENA region for a project on violence against women, I tried to find out why, in the view of participants, men continue routinely to use violence to discipline and control women, both family members and strangers. The answer was often a single word: patriarchy, identified by some scholars and practitioners as "the core obstacle to equality and democracy in the Arab world" (Barakat, 1993; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001, p. 2; Sharabi, 1988). A gender scholar in Lebanon supported this sentiment, arguing that a woman cannot claim political rights if she is being beaten at home, a state of affairs related to the "patriarchal and religious culture" of the region.[9] A Palestinian NGO worker agreed that women face oppressive domestic conditions "as a result of patriarchal rules"[10].

A definition of "patriarchy" is "social arrangements that privilege males, where men as a group dominate women as a group, both structurally and ideologically" (Hunnicutt, 2009, p. 557). It takes several forms and "is woven throughout Arab society" (Joseph, 1996, p. 17). A particular form identified by Suad Joseph (1996, p. 18), is "patriarchy in the self", according to which individuals internalize and perform patriarchal principles, seemingly of their own free will. This builds on Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) theory of a "patriarchal bargain", whereby a woman voluntarily surrenders some of her rights in exchange for the security and protection of family life. The "patriarchal bargain", for women, is inevitably a violent process, whether it is actual physical violence and a sense that one's life is permanently threatened, or the violence felt by a woman in knowing that she is bound by an unequal and unspoken agreement. However, it manifests itself, violence "is both a symptom of patriarchy and its cause"; it is a typical consequence of patriarchy, but also "one of the most effective means to maintain a patriarchal system" (Mrsevic, 2001, p. 42), which highlights "the reliance of patriarchy on violence and coercion to ensure that women stay in 'their place'" (Erturk, 2016, p. 31). Patriarchy consigns men's violence within the home to being

[9] Interview, Beirut, October 2019.
[10] Interview, Ramallah, June 2019.

"a private family matter" (Mladjensovic & Hughes 2001, p. 270). Legal systems in many Arab states tend to display the same attitude, with police officers refusing to interfere in domestic disputes and judges reluctant to punish perpetrators.[11] It is a system that is sustained by and bolsters authoritarian politics and undoubtedly contributed to women's exclusion from post-revolutionary nation-building in Arab societies.

But patriarchy is neither set in stone nor a globally uniform system; indeed, some scholars have questioned whether the single measure of patriarchy provides an adequate explanation; Nira Yuval-Davis (1997, p. 7), for example, describes it as "a much too crude analytical instrument", and Judith Butler (1990, p. 5) concludes it "no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did". Lindsay Benstead (2016, p. 8) agrees that there needs to be an improved conceptualization and measurement of patriarchy. Noting that most research studies tend to focus on a single dimension or measure of gender equality, such as cultural factors or economic modernization, she insists on the need to appreciate "the extent to which patriarchy is a multi-dimensional concept with different causes and consequences" (2016, p. 8). Kandiyoti (1988, p. 274) herself has discussed some of the conditions "leading to the breakdown and transformation of patriarchal bargains". While in the west, the patriarchal system has become a way of life that is considered "eternal", Kandiyoti "opens up opportunities for women to see patriarchy as an entity that is not eternal" (Ruslin, 2022, p. 141).

During the 2011 revolutions, many women appeared to transgress the boundaries of the "patriarchal bargain", thus threatening men's privilege. Some men responded violently, both at the time and later, with the tools of authoritarian politics, thereby raising the question of what violence is intended to achieve and whether it is ever an appropriate method. Butler (1990, p. 20) refers to the "violence of gender norms", suggesting constraints on human agency. The question of "why violence?", as Swati Parashar (2016, p. 373) notes, "remains unresolved", although its "everydayness continues to trouble feminists". Veena Das (2007, p. 9) too has written about the violence of the everyday, "violence in the weave of life", so normal as to be not worth mentioning. How then should we distinguish between types of violence? Johan Galtung (1996, p. 40) has

[11] Interview, Beirut, September 2017.

delineated several forms: *direct* violence, which abuses the basic needs of others, *structural* violence, which incorporates such abuses into social and world structures, and *cultural* violence, which legitimizes direct and structural violence. Patriarchy, he adds, often emerges "as direct violence with males as subjects and females as objects" (Galtung, 1996, p. 40).

A manifestation of direct violence is the exclusion of women from meaningful political participation in most of the Arab states, which results in their absence from decision-making processes. The reasons for this include cultural factors, women's relatively lower self-confidence and the numerous shortcomings in the institutional and legal frameworks of individual states (Al Maaitah et al., 2011, p. 7), but the result is the normalization of structural violence. Speaking shortly before the "Arab spring" protests, Yemeni human rights campaigner Tawwakol Karman who, in 2011, was the first Arab woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, remarked on the lack of women in politics, which is particularly noticeable in Yemen. In her view, ruling regimes attempt to exclude women which, she said, is a form of violence. If more women were permitted to participate in political life, "this would send a strong message to young people, especially girls, who would be able to see positive role models"[12].

It is important to emphasize again the wide differences between MENA states and their policies concerning women. The "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia, which started at the end of 2010 and succeeded in overthrowing the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, provides an illuminating example of patriarchy, revolution and violence against women. Tunisia is the home of an active feminist movement and, well before 2011, enjoyed relatively progressive attitudes towards women's rights and legal status. However, it remains a traditional and patriarchal environment and has "one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world" (Roberts, 2017) because, according to an activist, "men believe it is their right to control women". She attributes this belief to the construction of relationships in patriarchal societies, whereby daughters are raised to believe they are less than sons.[13] Following the revolution, Tunisian society embarked on a wide-ranging process of reform, a key objective of which was to eradicate violence against women. In 2017, the

[12] Interview, Sana'a, February 2010.

[13] Interview, Association Tunisienne des Femme Democrates, Tunis, September 2019.

government passed the Law on Eliminating Violence against Women, described as "the best in the Arab world"[14] and by human rights groups as a "landmark" of progress (Roberts, 2017).

Under this law, domestic violence is recognized as a crime; there is also a provision which abolishes former legislation that allowed a rapist to escape punishment if he married his victim. While this very progressive law has been widely welcomed, problems remain both in terms of implementation and social attitudes. According to a lawyer, even if a case of intimate-partner violence reaches court, judges have a tendency to be quite conservative and are not always comfortable complying with the law. Instead, they say women complain too much; they should just live with their families. These attitudes, she concluded, are "perpetuating the normalization of violence"[15]. A woman judge agreed that 'the law does not go hand in hand with the mentality of society'. Although the law itself is excellent, it is not always correctly interpreted, for example if the judge comes from a religious background. It demonstrates, she concluded, that a country can have a law, "but it is only on paper"[16].

The experience of Tunisia illustrates, on the one hand, the power of civil society groups, policymakers and feminists to improve legal conditions for female citizens; but, on the other hand, the resistance of a traditional society, reinforced by religious dogma and patriarchal structures. While a state may be open to embracing international norms, for example global attempts to curb violence against women, its internal politics sometimes provoke a backlash whereby a perceived imbalance needs to be righted and movements promising to "restore order" to a situation perceived as chaotic seek to impose "more stringent controls on women" (Papanek, 1994, p. 47), including the use of violence to discipline women's bodies. This reaction is also in evidence in the case of occupied Palestine, where civilians have been subjected to frequent and destabilizing episodes of Israeli assault and, as a result, domestic violence has risen dramatically; women feel powerless against violence from both within and outside

[14] Interview, Tunis, September 2019.
[15] Interview, Tunis, September 2019.
[16] Interview with Membre du Conseil Superieur de la Magistrature, Tunis, September 2019.

their society.[17] Such outcomes can be attributed to a patriarchal response to the entry of the female body into public space and are being robustly contested by an activist Palestinian women's movement.

A Performance of Feminism

In a conversation about women's roles in the Egyptian revolution, Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi discussed the symbolic significance of the "Middle Eastern/Muslim women" question. El-Mahdi (2011, p. 684) admitted that she found the conundrum of women's role in the revolution "deeply troubling". In her view, the "new version" of the question about "women's rights post-January 25" reveals a limited – "white, liberal – understanding of feminism". In reality, she insisted, there were almost no feminists present at protests where women took part "as workers", and "no talk about how the economic problems of impoverished women and subalterns lie mostly outside the legalist realm of constitutions and law" (El-Mahdi, 2011, p. 687). Her words illustrate an important truth; narrow understandings of what "feminism" means and what a "feminist" looks like are context-specific and culturally determined.

Gender, as Butler (1990, p. 15) observes, "is performative" and "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body". Women in the 2011 Arab revolutions performed a "sustained set of acts", acts that were not ostentatiously feminist but, rather, called for "freedom, equality and justice for all". However, because they were gendered acts, they provoked a male backlash, in both public and private life. Some have argued that the issue of women's empowerment emerged as a parallel movement in the MENA region in 2011. As events unfolded, according to Hayat Alvi (2015, p. 295), many thought that "with these revolutions an equally effective feminist revolution would emerge, culminating in policies and laws that would finally acknowledge the plight of females". But this "revolution" has not yet occurred, even in Tunisia where it is now in retreat.

However, for a woman taking part in a later Arab revolution, the Lebanese protests against government corruption that began in October 2019, women's involvement was a call for gender equality within a highly

[17] Interview, Ramallah, June 2019.

discriminatory system. Mae Chokr (2020) writes of being "stirred by the solidarity of young women uniting together against sexual harassment and gender discrimination". As a result, her own understanding changed; as she says, she "discovered feminism". In other words, for many women in Lebanon, it was a performance of feminism and some of the participants exhibited what Badran called a "new feminism". As gender is performative, so too is feminism. Through performing "a sustained set of acts", the women of the "Arab spring" drew attention to the gendered nature of revolution. Although many of them may not have identified as "feminists", and indeed would have found the label irrelevant, inauthentic or even offensive, their activism nonetheless highlighted their participation as feminist actors, thus challenging traditional politics. In the post-"Arab spring" phase, Arab feminists are required to fight on two fronts; they must "join forces with other civil and human rights activists in the region to protect the critical cyberspace they have carved out" and must also "develop an intersectional feminist critique of Arab societies and states to include neoliberalism, occupation, war and displacement along with cultural patriarchy as key Arab feminist issues" (Al Atiyat, 2020).

I think we can understand women's participation in revolutionary movements as two phases. First, I agree with Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi that the 2011 uprising in Egypt was not a significantly *feminist* moment. Women took part in the uprising as citizens rather than as women, as Badran observed. Like men, they acted out of anger against an overbearing regime and were able to overcome their fear of violence and of reprisals in order to make their voices heard. They were motivated by a sense of communal solidarity. Second, however, after the initial success of the revolution, and this was noticeable in all sites[18] as future constitutional arrangements were debated, many women started to feel betrayed by the resumption of what felt to them like traditional and patriarchal attitudes; men were once again assuming positions of control and excluding women's concerns for representation and greater equality. It was at this moment that forms of feminism, that were both authentic and necessary, began to emerge, and this was also evident in later uprisings such as the anti-government demonstrations in Lebanon in 2019, as experienced by Mae Chokr.

[18] I observed this myself during visits to Tunisia and Egypt in the wake of the "Arab spring" and in reports coming out of Yemen.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed women's participation in the "Arab spring" as a challenge to the traditional authoritarian politics of the MENA region and also a performance of feminism. Outside observers, especially in the west, surprised by what they interpreted as the unprecedented visibility of Arab women, dubbed it "feminism", but many of the participating women themselves refused the label, insisting instead that they acted as citizens seeking "freedom, equality and justice for all". But it seemed that not everyone supported these objectives. In this case, a backlash was conveyed through the responses of some men to the presence of female bodies and female demands, both during the revolutionary period and afterwards as new ways of doing politics were negotiated. Men at all levels of society resorted to violence in order, first of all, to impose more stringent controls on women, as a method of restoring order to a chaotic situation; second, because violence is a habit routinely exercised by the patriarchal establishment to restrict women's choices; and third, to claim exclusive control over the mechanisms of power so as to maintain the status quo.

But there were also some positive outcomes for women, such as the 2017 Tunisian domestic violence law and women's confidence to raise their voices in the public sphere. Moreover, the freshly kindled interest from outside the region in Arab women's agency provides "a crucial corrective to scholarship on the Middle East that for decades had portrayed Arab and Muslim women as passive and submissive beings, shackled by structures of male authority" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 115). Indeed, it has become abundantly clear that gender roles and relations, and women's rights in the MENA region, "are not fixed, not given, not absolute. They are negotiated and changing cultural constructs, produced in response to lived realities" (Mir-Hosseini, 2000, p. 6). Feminism, too, is as shifting concept. Ibtesam Al Atiyat (2020) has identified new modes of activism in today's Arab feminism as the definition expands; these include "protesting social injustice by using dramatic spectacles and artistic displays, as well as social media campaigns and individual protests termed 'micro-rebellions'".

As I have sought to illustrate, female agency is dependent on history and context. Forms of Arab feminism emerged in an environment of colonial

control and national liberation struggle and were split from the start between western-oriented rights-based feminism and more authentic local forms, often rooted in Islam. Arab women's lives, in common with women around the globe, are framed by patriarchal gender systems and multiple forms of violence. There is a tension between the instinct for activism, on the one hand, and the dangers of the public space and male-dominated politics, on the other, and this was the case with the "Arab spring" and later revolutions. While public protest was experienced as a communal endeavour in which citizens united to overthrow a tyrant, it unfolded in spaces not conventionally associated with female spheres of activity. By occupying these spaces, women threatened to disrupt the "patriarchal bargain". In response, men asserted their power by resorting to violent verbal and physical tactics and, in that sense, the revolutions showed that nothing has really changed. Perhaps, in the end, whatever label they prefer, women had "no choice but to become feminists" and now we know that a "feminist" looks like the thousands of women in all their variety and diversity who streamed out on to the streets in 2011 and in subsequent Arab revolutions.

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