

The Arab Spring for Women?

Gender, Representation, and Middle East Politics in 2011

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Draft: not for citation, but for presentation at the Wisconsin International Relations Colloquium. Comments welcome to sjoberg@ufl.edu.

Abstract: A number of news articles, news programs, and pundits have described the “Arab Spring” as an “Arab Spring for Women” - praising a wave of gender liberation coming with the sense of political redress that seems to be coming in waves across the “Arab world.” Gender equality has been a significant issue in the social movements of the “Arab Spring,” both in their advocacy and in their composition. As women demonstrators took to the streets and women reporters accounted for it, proliferating accounts told stories of the modernization of the Arab world through the bodies and the lives of its women. This paper is interested in exploring a number of the gendered dimensions of the “Arab Spring.” First, following Cynthia Enloe's curiosity, it asks “where are the women?” in the Arab Spring – as demonstrators, pariahs, martyrs, caregivers, and citizens, and how women's locations in their societies may be changing with or as a result of these political changes. It finds two distinct media narratives of women's roles in the “Arab Spring,” one which characterizes the Arab Spring as gender-emancipatory and another which characterizes it as gender-subordinating. To understand this dissonance, following Spike Peterson and Anne Runyan, the remainder of the paper looks at the Arab Spring through gendered lenses – asking what questions about gender (and sex and race and culture) are necessary to particular scholarly, media, and pop culture representations of the events of the Spring of 2011, both projected outwards from the “Arab world” and projected onto it.

An article in the April 26, 2011 issue of *The Nation* declared it “the Arab Spring for Women,”¹ suggesting that the mainstream media had “overlooked” the fact that “women have been and often remain at the forefront of these protests.”² Citing examples from Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, the article contends that women’s “bold gestures” should be the subject of media attention, given that “women could not have been more visible in the big demonstrations” and “this should in itself have been news.”³ The article goes on to suggest that there are dangers to “protecting women’s gains,” including most importantly that “Muslim fundamentalist movements will become more influential” and they believe that “women’s rights should not be expanded in the wake of these political upheavals.”⁴ Recognizing that “the Arab Spring has proven an epochal period of activism and change for women” where “the sheer numbers of politically active women” is impressive, the article concludes that “before, women could be marginalized at will by the dictators whenever they made demands on the regime. Now, at least, they have a fighting chance.”⁵ This and number of other news articles, news programs, and pundits have described the Arab Spring as an “Arab Spring for Women” - praising a wave of gender liberation coming with the sense of political redress that seems to be advancing across the Arab world. These reports signify gender equality as a significant issue in the social movements of the Arab Spring, both in their advocacy and in their composition. As women demonstrators took to the streets and women journalists report it, proliferating accounts tell stories of the modernization of the Arab world through the bodies and the lives of its women.

Shirin Ebadi (the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Winner) published a striking counternarrative in the Wall Street Journal, called “A Warning for Women of the Arab Spring.”⁶ Arguing that “Shariah law and women’s rights do not have to be mutually exclusive,” Ebadi compares the revolutions of the Arab Spring to the 1979 revolution in Iran, warning that revolutionary men often take advantage of women’s participation during the movements, but then neglect them in constructing post-revolutionary orders.⁷ She contends that “the true ‘Arab Spring’ will only dawn when democracy takes root in countries that have ousted their dictatorships, and when women in those countries are allowed to take part in civic life.”⁸

For decades, feminist research has recognized the importance of discourses about women in the making and fighting of contemporary conflicts. In recent years, feminist work has talked about the salience of saving Afghan women from Afghan men in United States (and even global) discourses about the invasion of and then military stabilization of Afghanistan.⁹ It has looked through gendered lenses to see the crucial role that saving Jessica Lynch played in the American military operation in Iraq.¹⁰ It has seen women’s bodies as crucial to the narrative justifying American intervention in Libya.¹¹ While strong women’s rights discourses have been present in all of those stories, the results for women have been mixed, at best. Those mixed results have been partly because women’s rights issues are complicated, and fraught with cultural and temporal conflict and context. But they are also because women’s rights are being instrumentalized, where images of women are coopted into public political narratives to achieve political goals or as lenses through which to understand and justify political

conflicts. Critical analysis has suggested that the cross between militarism, state administration, and women's rights has not often resulted in watershed victories for women.¹² Instead, the stories have been read as significantly more complicated, even within explicitly feminist organizations (which no Arab Spring protest movements have been).¹³

This paper is interested in exploring the complex, liminal, difficult space in which women relate to and with the "Arab Spring," both in terms of women's rights "on the ground" and in terms of how those stories are wielded as parts of political narratives of gender, race, class, religion, democracy, and Westernization. It does so through (very preliminary) explorations of a number of the gendered dimensions of the Arab Spring. First, following Cynthia Enloe's curiosity, it asks "where are the women?" in the Arab Spring – as demonstrators, pariahs, martyrs, caregivers, and citizens, and how women's locations in their societies may be changing with or as a result of these political changes.¹⁴ Finding dissonance among gender-emancipatory and gender-subordinative accounts of the "Arab Spring, the remainder of the paper looks at the "Arab Spring" through gendered lenses¹⁵ – asking what questions about gender (and sex and race and culture) are necessary to particular scholarly, media, and pop culture representations of the events of the Spring of 2011, both projected outwards from the Arab world and projected onto it.

The "Arab Spring"

The term Arab Spring has been applied to a series of protests launched by the self immolation of a fruit vendor name Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 in Sidi

Bouazid, Tunisia. His act of self-immolation has been alternately debated, condemned and valorized as creating the Tunisian Revolt referred to colloquially in the Western press as the 'Jasmine Revolution'. This sparked 29 days of protest which effectively deposed Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 15, 2012. After this initial revolution, actors in neighboring Egypt, who had long been striking to achieve some modicum of political freedom under Hosni Mubarak's rule, escalated their actions on January 25th. Sites like Tahrir Square became focal points for the demonstrations, which reverberated around the country to Port Said and Alexandria. Hosni Mubarak eventually stepped down on February 11, 2011.

From there the protests become both more scattered and volatile. The Pearl Square protests in Bahrain claimed the lives of several hundred and were eventually suppressed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Saudi Government in February and March of 2011. A similar tactic was used in Yemen by the GCC but against the Saleh government rather than in support of the protestors. Demonstrations and assassinations in Libya sparked a Civil War, which eventually included NATO bombing raids and the vigilante killing of Moamar Gaddafi on October 20, 2011. The ongoing breakdown in Syria, beginning on January 26, 2011 to date has claimed the lives of thousands and has yielded little in the way of political redress, it is perhaps the most protracted, bloody and dire of them all.

Thus, the Arab Spring is a problematic concept at best with an uneven application across national boundaries. Western academics seem almost desperate to label almost anything that looks like a 'wave of democracy' that may liberate the Middle

East, like *glasnost* 'liberated' Eastern Europe from the Soviet Union in the late 1980's.¹⁶

One is even more skeptical as the first dissemination of the concept occurred during an abortive 'Arab Spring' in 2006. Pundits and politicians were quick to declare the cascading effects that were possible through peaceful demonstrations: socialist protestors in Egypt, who were quickly and effectively suppressed by the Mubarak regime, to the 'successful' expulsion of Syrian forces from Lebanese borders, and all too quick to manically declare Arabs unable to make lasting gains toward democracy when the movements failed.¹⁷

Beyond the simple fact, that the naming of a thing and the achieving of an objective, especially one as problematic as universal rights, suffrage, or gender equality, are at best incredibly different and problematic propositions. The actual process and results of this movement in the Middle East will not be even, nor will they achieve what the West might 'desire' in the Middle East. As noted by Shirin Elbadi, "The 'Arab Spring' is not an accurate description of the popular uprisings that have taken place in the Muslim countries of North Africa. The fall of a dictator does not mean democracy."¹⁸

The Arab Spring is something between a Western aspiration for safe and stable democratic throughout the Middle East and a rhetorical assumption used by disinterested parties to label something they do not wish to accurately understand. The nuts and bolts of actual liberation, whatever that may look like, for women will be a societal negotiation based on the local, national or regional historical trends. In summary, the Arab Spring is not one thing, it is a multitude of different protests that combine labor and human rights, religious and societal actors that run across the

spectrum of class and gender.

Where are the Women?¹⁹

This section identifies two dominant narratives in answer to the question “where are the women?” in contemporary media and political accounts of the “Arab Spring.” The first is the narrative of the “Arab Spring” as a watershed moment for women’s and gender rights in the Arab world which signifies and is signified by the success of (western) liberal democratic transitions. The second is the narrative of the “Arab Spring” as changing little if anything for Arab women, and potentially being a net negative in terms of women’s rights and women’s quality of life. This narrative associates (lack of) progress on women’s rights with incompleteness of an idealized democratic tradition. This section discusses the contents and prevalence of both narratives before analyzing them to look for answers to the questions of where the women are.

The Arab Spring as Gender-Emancipatory

One group of accounts of where women were in the Arab Spring saw both women’s visibility in the Arab Spring movements and the multiple roles that women played in those protests as a success story, and often presented women’s participation as not only evidence of the improvements which the Arab Spring was to usher in for women but also of a general democratization and liberalization that the movement was to bring about. For example, one account says that women’s presence more than doubled in the Egyptian protests in 2011 compared to past protests:

An unprecedented number of Egyptian women participated in Tuesday’s anti-government protests. Ghada Shahbandar, an activist with the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, estimated the crowd downtown to be 20 percent female. Other estimates were as high as 50 percent. In past protests, the

female presence would rarely rise to 10 percent.²⁰

Der Spiegel reported, celebrating that “women protested alongside men on Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis and on Tahrir Square in Cairo.”²¹ The recognition that women turned out to the demonstrations in large numbers is often accompanied by either personal narratives or demonstrative evidence that the women who were present played an important or at least agential role. For example, an *Economist* article reports the story of (female) Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz, who explains that “there was no difference between men and women” since “ALL of us were there, throwing stones, moving dead bodies.”²² While Mahfouz noted that “some men told her to get out of the way,” she also saw that “others held up umbrellas to protect her.”²³ This, in Mathieu von Rohr’s words, “conveyed a new image of Arab youth and Arab women” which resonated in important ways.²⁴

Part of this new image characterizes the Arab Spring as fought in whole or in part of behalf of women who were suffering before it. For example, in coverage and characterizations of the Libyan uprisings, the question of the Qaddafi regime’s abuse of women became a crucial rally cry against the status quo dictatorship. In an Associated Press article titled “Hundreds of Women Report Rapes by Qaddafi Forces,” it is alleged that the regime politicized rape, where “the woman I spoke to say they believe they were raped because their husbands and brothers were fighting Qaddafi.”²⁵ One story became particularly prominent, that of Iman al-Obeidi, who:

burst into a Tripoli hotel full of foreign journalists vociferously declaring that she had been raped by members of Libya's security forces. She had been in a car with her brother-in-law when they were stopped at a checkpoint in the Libyan capital. When her accent betrayed her eastern Libyan roots, security forces

demanded to see her identity card. When they learned she was from the city of Tobruk, where antiregime protests helped spark the ongoing rebellion last month, she was detained. “They even defecated on me and urinated on me,” she cried as hotel staff and government minders frantically sought to whisk her away. Moussa Ibrahim, a Libyan government spokesman, was quick to dismiss al-Obeidi's story, saying ‘this girl is a prostitute.’²⁶

A treating physician for women rape victims called on foreign and domestic help to “throw light on what is really happening in Libya and fight to bring justice for these women.”²⁷ A similar approach was taken when “virginity tests” of protestors in Egypt made the news during the protests, where police arrested women protestors and performed invasive tests of sexual purity.²⁸ Outrage about these tests was used in the media as fodder to support the justice of the protestors’ cause against the standing government of Egypt.

Some accounts go so far as to characterize it not as the “Arab Spring” *for* women, but as the “Arab Spring” *of* women, contending that women’s participation actually galvanized the movements to have the far-reaching effects that they ultimately did. One account frames women as central to each of the major Arab Spring movements:

None of the uprisings in the Arab countries would have been possible without the participation of women. They were among the first to protest at the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain, they organized women's protests in Syria, they were part of the Libyan uprising from the start, and a Yemeni activist was one of the winners of the Nobel Peace Prize this year.²⁹

Even Shirin Ebadi, whose view of women’s gains in the “Arab Spring” is mixed at best, suggests that “in the popular uprisings in these countries, women played a prominent role, and without the presence of women, victory would not have been possible.”³⁰

Images of women as activists and as protestors proliferated on the Internet, particularly on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. This was at least in part because of a sense of identifying the protestors as “like us” because we saw gender diversity. Newspapers and other traditional media followed suit, where “The many photographers in Cairo and Tunis sent their editorial offices images of attractive women taking part in the revolution.”³¹ As Mathieu von Rohr accounts that identification led to this popularity:

People in the West recognized themselves in the faces of the young female protesters, and they were pleased that people in these countries were not as different as many had previously believed. The certainty that Arabs were incompatible with democracy was destroyed, as well as the cliché of the Arab woman as a passive, oppressed being.³²

Accounts like this associate women’s rights with democracy and Western-ness, and therefore with people who are to be identified with and treated as equals. Rather than erasing the Orientalism of the Western gaze towards the Arab world,³³ these narratives effectively “solve” the differences between the Western and Arab worlds by showing that the Arab world has come around to the Western world’s ways of treating women.³⁴ Many of the stories that celebrate women’s agency in the Arab Spring tell stories of women’s agency next to explanations about the gender troubles of the Arab world in recent times. *The Economist*, for example, juxtaposes Mahfouz’s victory with an implied reminder of the ‘bad old days,’ where “in 2002, the first Arab Human Development Report cited the lack of women’s rights as one of three factors that most hampered the region’s progress.”³⁵ Another account notes that “the combined effects of social media

and youthful optimism” have “given women a prominence in the Arab uprisings that they haven’t had in the past” *because* “traditional Arab leadership is a male affair.”³⁶

Michael Rubin’s account of gender progressivism in the Libyan revolution identifies Libya as an extreme case, arguing that “it is perhaps in Libya where the West³⁷ should be most concerned about the plight of women” because of a treacherous history of women’s rights, where:

Infused through the late Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi’s political theory was both racism and misogyny. Libyan teachers have indoctrinated two generations of Libyan youth with quotations from *The Green Book* which referred to women as “the feebler sex.”³⁸

Such accounts simultaneously celebrate the victory of women’s roles in the protest while condemning the previous sex oppression in the Arab world. They play into progressivist narratives of the modernization of the Arab world, in part through and on the significations of women’s bodies.³⁹

A crucial part of those progressivist narratives is the suggestion that women’s participation in the “Arab Spring” protests is a signifier of greater gains to be had and consolidated. Accordingly, a number of news accounts and activists have suggested that it might be relatively simple or straight-forward to translate the gains that women experienced by being allowed to participate in (and actually participating in) the “Arab Spring” movement. For example, Reuters quoted Abdelwahad Radi (the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union) as suggesting that “countries in transition can very effectively take advantage of reforms to guarantee strong participation of women in politics.”⁴⁰

Some accounts take these gains as something that can be easily obtained, while others see them as more difficult and even potentially requiring the assistance of outside actors, such as Western governments and NGOs. *The Economist* accounts for women's rights protests as largely motivated by actors outside of the "Arab Spring," explaining that "those clamouring for change in Egypt and Tunisia today are mostly NGO workers, campaigners, lawyers, academics, and politicians" but that "to their voices have been added those of women protesters who came out in their tens of thousands and demanded an end to the old way of life."⁴¹ Instead of talking about domestic motivation to include women in politics, some of these accounts use terms like making sure that "the new governments of Egypt and Tunisia are made aware of women at the outset," implying that the inclusion of women specifically (and perhaps democratization generally) are likely reliant on states and organizations with positive gender practices serving to demonstrate those practices to new, Arab "democracies."⁴² Other accounts credit NGOs for the progress that has been made for women tied to "Arab Spring" democratization movements. In Moushira Khattab's words (former Egyptian minister of family and population, "women's NGOs played a critical role in pushing the Tunisian government to lift key reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)--the first country in the region to do so."⁴³

The Arab Spring as Gender-Problematic

Though narratives celebrating women's successes in the "Arab Spring" dominated early media accounts of gender and participation in the movements, more skeptical accounts emerged as the movements consolidated into governments and

began the tenuous process of the building of states and governments. Some accounts talk about the “Arab Spring” revolutionary movements as representing either limited gains for women or potential risks vis a vis women’s status previous to the revolutionary movements. Mirroring discourses about the potential gender-based fears about Saddam Hussein’s replacements in Iraq,⁴⁴ these accounts wonder if the new, “democratic” governments in the Arab world will be more conservative on gender issues than the dictatorships that they replace, and express concerns for the exclusivity and violence with which those democratic governments are being installed and supported.

For example, significant attention has been paid to the potentially negative implications for women of the electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood takeover in Egypt, explaining the (relative) gender-liberalness of the Mubarak regime.⁴⁵ The Mubarak regime had a National Council of Women, headed by the former first lady, Suzanne Mubarak. That council was tasked with looking out for women’s needs and women’s rights in evolving Egyptian society. At the same time that it had some impact on women’s lives, the National Council of Women was associated with the Mubarak regime as well as with a set of values to which most Egyptians did not ascribe.⁴⁶ In Amina al-Bendary’s (women’s rights activist and college professor) words, “the old regime appropriated the issue of women’s rights” which created a bias against affirmative work for women’s issues after that regime was overthrown, where “women’s rights ...suffer because of their perceived association with president Hosni Mubarak’s regime.”⁴⁷ This bias has, in this account, translated to significant problems for women, perhaps even more severe than under the Mubarak dictatorship, since

“legislative victories by the Council have been attacked, although they were the achievements of decades-long struggle by feminists.”⁴⁸ Particularly at risk, according to this account, are so-called “personal status laws,” such as laws permitting women to file for divorce.⁴⁹ This and other accounts are concerned with the potential for the return of more conservative notions of gender in post-“Arab Spring” countries. In the words of one account, “at times of great change and as conservative forces appear to be growing in strength, it is vital that steps are taken to establish and protect equal rights between men and women.”⁵⁰

For example, the International Federation for Human Rights suggests that “recent history painfully reminds us that the massive occupation of public space by women during revolutions, in no way guarantees their role in the political bodies of the regimes that follow.”⁵¹ Instead, the Federation continues, “although the situation of women varies across the region, threats to their human rights converge ...[where] women are confronting attempts to exclude them from public life.”⁵² Amnesty international has “expressed concerns about the little positive improvement that the uprisings in the Middle East has brought to women.”⁵³ Evidence of exclusion is used to support this point:

In Egypt, there were no women in the two committees appointed to draft the new constitution. A new law abolished measures guaranteeing women minimum representation in parliament and women gained only 2% of seats in the recent elections. In Libya, the electoral law adopted by the National Transitional Council in January 2012 contains no quota for the representation of women in elected bodies. In Morocco, a law adopted in October 2011 established a quota of only 15% and in Tunisia the 41-member government nominated in December 2011 contains only 3 women.⁵⁴

The results of the recent Egyptian election counts Egyptian women as “unlucky,” where they “saw the parliamentary quota system from the Hosni Mubarak era abolished and female representation reduced from 64 seats to just five” meaning that “Egypt stands above other Arab Spring countries in implementing regressive measures that hamper women’s representation in government.”⁵⁵ A Reuters report suggests that “opportunities from the Arab Spring to boost the low numbers of women in parliaments are being missed.”⁵⁶

In fact, several accounts talk about the “Arab Spring” as net harmful for women. Haleh Esfandiari suggests that “once the ...regimes fell, the old barriers of segregation went up. Women were harassed, beaten, and chased out of public spaces.”⁵⁷ Widney Brown, a representative of Amnesty international, suggests that “women in Egypt had to face discrimination and stronger pressure economic wise during and after the revolution” which is only getting worse, given that “as new governments extend their grip, we can see that, as citizens, women remain firmly in the second class.”⁵⁸ According to Moushira Katteb, “the train of change has not only left them [women] behind, but has in fact turned against them ...dormant conservative value systems are being manipulated by a religious discourse that denies women their rights.”⁵⁹ A *New York Times* story quotes the head of the Association for Development and Enhancement of Women in Egypt as saying that “the product after the revolution is against women.”⁶⁰

Others talk about the “Arab Spring” movement as itself causing or being responsible directly for the abuse of women. For example, controversial feminist figure Robin Morgan⁶¹ tells a story of the “Arab Spring” as just another site of violence against

women.⁶² She suggests gender inequality among participants at every step of the protests, from lines to cross checkpoints to arrests and bail-outs.⁶³ She contends that “men – protesters as well as police – sexually harassed women so severely during the protests that few women demonstrated.”⁶⁴ A *Christian Science Monitor* account of the Tahrir Square protests on International Women’s Day in 2011 describes the democratic protesters as hostile towards women, suggesting that:

almost immediately, they were outnumbered and beset upon by men who gathered. Some of the men were from the protesters' encampment in the middle of the square. Dozens of women engaged in arguments with the men, who said that women had enough rights already ... Some of the men were polite; many were aggressive. “Go home, go wash clothes,” yelled some of the men.... Suddenly, the men decided the women had been there long enough. Yelling, they rushed aggressively upon the protest, pushing violently through the rows of women.⁶⁵

Concerns about the ways that protesters treated women have been sustained as critiques of the new governments that are being built in the wake of the success of the protest. For example, United States Secretary of State Hilary Clinton suggested that women “were harassed, arrested, tortured, and otherwise ill-treated in gender-specific ways” which included police harassment and being turned over to relatives for “control,” torture, and sometimes execution during the protests.⁶⁶ The State Department suggests that many of these practices continue as the new government consolidates power. In the face of the apparent occurrence of these atrocities, Clinton condemned the new government of Egypt on account of women’s situation, arguing that “this systematic degradation of Egyptian women dishonors the revolution, disgraces the state and its uniform, and is not worthy of a great people.”⁶⁷

Gender issues in the Arab Spring revolutions have garnered a fair amount of media attention. For example, recently, a court of the new government of Egypt acquitted the doctor who performed the tests, siding with military officials who “said that the tests were conducted to preclude accusations that soldiers had violated women in their custody.”⁶⁸ The plaintiff in the civil lawsuit against the military suggested that it was “Egypt’s honor that was violated,” but several accounts argue that this is but one of many harbingers that the new governments of “Arab Spring” countries might be as dangerous to women’s rights as the old dictatorships, if not more so.⁶⁹

This sort of account of the Arab Spring is not limited to stories focused on Egypt. In a *Der Spiegel* story about Tunisia, a Tunisian female blogger who has “fought for women’s rights and against censorship since 2007” saw “little hope” after the revolution, and was quoted as saying “today, we have a new battle [for women’s rights] ...and its not going the right way.”⁷⁰ In many accounts, Tunisia (not unlike Iraq a decade ago) is described as a state with a tradition of gender progressivism that is being threatened. While “Habib Bourguiba, the founding father of the modern Tunisian state ... outlawed polygamy, granted women equal divorce rights, and legalized abortions” and “Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia’s toppled dictator, continued Bourguiba’s work,” many describe the future as bleak in comparison.⁷¹

Concerns about the bleakness of women’s futures are often linked to question of whether or not the “Arab Spring” has succeeded in its democratizing goals in these narratives that are more pessimistic about women’s situation after the revolutions. For example, activists like Shirin Ebadi, tie advances in women’s rights that have not

happened yet to progress in the Arab world. Ebadi suggests that “only when women achieve their rights can we say that the ‘Arab Spring’ has commenced” such that “Arab women will not allow a culture of patriarchy to once again trample their rights.”⁷²

Immanuel Wallerstein suggests that women are the “Arab Spring” “forgotten peoples” who are “told that their concerns, their complaints, and their demands were secondary and had to be postponed until some other primary concerns were resolved.”⁷³ While Wallerstein talks about it in terms of greater social dynamics, a story in *The Economist* talks about this as a failing of democracy, where “women’s rights have yet to become an issue that moves the general public.”⁷⁴ Others see the stalling on women’s rights of these new regimes as less apathy and more insidiousness, arguing that organizations like Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood are actively looking to “put women inside a box inside the home.”⁷⁵

Where are the Women in the “Arab Spring”?

The multiplicity of roles that (real, embodied) women actually played in the “Arab Spring” have been streamlined and pigeonholed in both of these narratives. The victorious, progressivist narrative suggests that women’s roles were largely if not exclusively as frontline protesters, whose demands included both democracy and women’s rights. The pessimistic narrative casts women as victims of the consolidation of the movement, where their rights, their voices, and their options are being quickly relegated “back” into the private sphere of an Arab world which is considered (often monolithically) hypermasculine and insensitive to women and gender concerns.

Research shows that the real *experiences* of women in the “Arab Spring” were significantly more diverse, both in terms of the day-to-day life and in terms of political significance.⁷⁶ Some “Arab Spring” women were peace activists, like the better known women at Greenham Common⁷⁷ or of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.⁷⁸ Others supported provided domestic and economy-sustaining services for protestors, much like the American World War II icon Rosie the Riveter.⁷⁹ Still others provided logistical support and health care to protestors, comparable to Clara Barton and the Red Cross.⁸⁰ Still others were active participants in agitating for regime change.⁸¹ Those activists were protesters, but they were also martyrs,⁸² political candidates,⁸³ and bloggers⁸⁴ in service of the cause of seeking democratic change.

But not all women in the “Arab Spring” were “for” the changes that the democracy protestors advocated either.⁸⁵ In fact, a number of “conservative” women have expressed concern that a gender rights liberalization that might happen as a result of or concurrent with democratization is a problem, arguing that “being granted ‘too many’ rights contravene religion and social norms.”⁸⁶ These women, arguing that “work cannot interfere with women’s mission, which is first to raise children and take care of the home,” object to gender-liberal policies and celebrate some of the returns to traditionalism that have come with some of the post-revolutionary governments in the Arab world.⁸⁷

Women had as many different experiences of the “Arab Spring” as they did positions on and roles in it. First, it is well-documented that times of conflict and political upheaval have gender-differential effects. Especially in the “Arab Spring”

movements where significant military violence has occurred, and even in those where it did not, women have *lived* the upheaval. Families are often separated as individuals are arrested, injured, killed, or become involved in revolutionary movements.⁸⁸ Within the family, each member assumes additional burdens as the normal division of labor is overturned.⁸⁹ Health also deteriorates as individuals lack access to health care due to increased volume, a decline in the number of available doctors, and a lack of access to medicines and other supplies, which is often felt in sex-differentiated ways.⁹⁰ Once society's normal institutions have been destroyed by war or cease to function, then politics, culture, production, and protection come to be defined by militarization, which entrenches values associated with masculinities.⁹¹ Household or "domestic economies" characterized by a division of labor that is based on sex are also part of the way in which family units cope with crisis.⁹² The obstacles that women would normally face in terms of gender roles become compounded in light of the disruption to the infrastructure.

Those disruptions do not end when the government transitions from a dictatorship to a democracy, or when the fighting on the ground stops. Instead, the social fabric of "Arab Spring" societies are not automatically healed or restored. In some of the more severe cases, infrastructures remain damaged, families remain devastated and grieving, combatants remain traumatized, and weapons and violence remain available. In some of the places where transitions were smoother, massive political and economic insecurity still remains.⁹³

The question of whether the "Arab Spring" was and/or will be "good for women" (as if there were such a monolithic thing) is far from resolved. On a practical level,

assuming we could know what it would mean for the “Arab Spring” to be “good for women,” the one thing that most accounts of the movements and gender agree on is that “it is too early to tell how women’s rights will ultimately fare in the long term.”⁹⁴ While many think that the net negative of the Arab Spring for women is entrenched,⁹⁵ 74% of a female audience at a Doha debate about the issue argued that women will not be worse off as a result of the changes sweeping the region.”⁹⁶ Searching for “the women” in the “Arab Spring” finds many different instantiations of women and femininity, and as many if not more different significations of what women mean, be it to the movements themselves, to the states experiencing transitions, or to the (Western, liberal) democratic project. This diversity, then, is both *lived* and *represented*, and might (or could or should) be made sense of in both contexts. The next section explores the deployments of women and femininity in the Arab Spring narratives through the lenses of a narrative approach to Feminist Security Studies⁹⁷ to understand the politics of *politicizing* femininity in and around the “Arab Spring.”

Discourses of Women and the “Arab Spring” through Gender Lenses

Parsing and understanding the gendered narratives of what happens to women in the “Arab Spring” is more complicated than reading the news stories or doing quantitative critical discourse analysis to understand the frequency or relationship of terms. This is because, as we discussed in the first section of the paper, there are not only different narratives of what happened/happens to women in the “Arab Spring,” the two dominant narratives are in most ways diametrically opposed in their understanding of how women are related to, and relate to, the “Arab Spring.” While some reports

contained elements of both narratives, most stuck to one or the other, either declaring the “Arab Spring” generally good for women or generally bad for women. This section looks at those narratives in two ways: through the lenses of signification to understand their descriptive elements and through the lenses of narratives to understand how they together form a common, and coherent, idea, about women, gender, and democracy. Following Annick Wibben, it takes a “feminist narrative approach” to social inquiry, looking to use narratological tools to understand the meanings of narratives “intended as an intervention that challenges the politics of security and the meanings for security legitimized in existing practices.”⁹⁸

Accomplishing such a task requires an understanding not only of what a narrative is, but also how a narrative functions to transform an object into a sign, or an object of consumption. In Jean Baudrillard’s understanding:

In order to become an object of consumption, the object must become a sign; that is, in some way it must become external to a relation which it now only signifies, signed arbitrarily and non-coherently to this concrete relation, yet obtaining its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relation to all other object-signs.⁹⁹

Given the infinite information in the world and humans’ limited time and cognitive capacity, our comprehension of even the parts of the world we “know” is based on abbreviations, metaphors, and inherited conceptions.¹⁰⁰ In this understanding, “narrative, if only temporarily, fixes meaning.”¹⁰¹ In such a situation, our understandings of the world around us are often based on shorthand and second-hand accounts. These accounts are not random, but are often structured by a theme which warrants their telling and a “punchline” which underscores their importance. Maarten Hajer has called

these accounts “story-lines,” which are “narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding.”¹⁰² It is these sets of symbolic references that bestow story-lines with common meaning and enable their acceptance and interpretation by diverse actors with diverse political, social, and economic positions and interests. These sets of symbolic references have been identified as “significations,” indicating the production of signs, which some organize into text (medium), story (presentation), and fabula (content).¹⁰³ As the passage from Baudrillard that opens this section explains, signification is a key process on the road to public consumption of information. Objects’ signification provides them with coherence, meaning, and relational value.¹⁰⁴ The process of assigning this meaning, however, is not standard, random, or apolitical.¹⁰⁵ Instead, Hajer explains, “story-lines are political devices that allow the overcoming of fragmentation and the achievement of discursive closure.”¹⁰⁶

Signification, then, is the (intentional or unintentional) telling of a coherent story with wide acceptability to manufacture commonality and produce a desired reaction. As Geertz explains, “analysis, then, the sorting out the structures of signification.”¹⁰⁷ Because the structures of signification of women in the “Arab Spring” are not unified or unidirectional, this sorting out is not a linear process. Instead, structures of signification between the “Arab Spring,” the “Arab world,” and “the West” show what Homi Bhabha terms “ambivalence,” neither the complete acceptance nor the complete rejection of the identity of the other.¹⁰⁸ As such, the discursive result is some sort of “melting pot”

where nothing actually melts—it is hybridity between the actor (here, al Qaeda) and its “Others.” The self (and external) significations of women in the “Arab Spring” are relational. As John Hall argues, “[a]ctual inquiries’ depend on *hybrid* practices that involve extra-logical mediations and formative discourses employed *in relation to one another*.”¹⁰⁹ These extra-logical mediations include emotion, cultural context, gender perceptions, and other socially constituted actions and reactions. Given this complexity and hybridity of meaning of the story-lines around women in the “Arab Spring,” the method by which the story-lines are analyzed and deconstructed must also be complex.

We use hermeneutic deconstruction to look for explicit and hidden meanings in story-lines about women in the “Arab Spring” and read them through their contexts in local and global politics. As Hall explains it, “*hermeneutic deconstruction* balances the power of deconstruction to unmask hidden meaning with the interpretive power of hermeneutics to identify coherent meaning in cultural context.”¹¹⁰ In employing hermeneutic deconstruction to analyze the signification of al Qaeda wives, this article is “fundamentally concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in knowledge” and aspires to “investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized, and so on by language use.”¹¹¹

This critical investigation, then, emphasizes three parts of the signification process. It deals with the characterizations of women in the “Arab Spring” by examining the story-lines’ meanings on face. It analyzes their descriptions, predications, and commonly produced themes to broadly address the question: what is a woman in the

Arab Spring signified as? Second, it addresses the performance of and reaction to that utterance in a specific personal, cultural, and relational context. This “contextual” view is necessary because the discourses that identify and assign roles to women in the “Arab Spring” are cross-cultural, and different contexts assign different meanings to similar concepts. Discourse analysis that does not pay attention to context takes “for granted an object domain which is in fact the product of a complex set of social, historical, and political conditions of formation.”¹¹² In such an analysis, “the political conflict is hidden in the question of what definition is given to the problem, which aspects of social reality are included and which are left undiscussed.”¹¹³ Third, this analysis gives attention to the reception of the discourse. A discourse is consumed only to the degree that it is reacted to—a discourse constructing a role for women in the “Arab Spring” does not affect either women’s lives or global politics until it is accepted and/or acted upon. The discourse itself is a constructing move, but the construction occurs if and only if the audience reacts to the story-line as such.¹¹⁴

Reading the two narratives of the “Arab Spring” as gender-emancipatory and as potentially gender-oppressive next to each other in this context inspires asking questions like what those narratives signify, where they diverge, and where they agree. One of the political conditions of the formation of both narratives is the location of women’s rights progressiveness (or backwardness) with state regime type and state government, where the form of government of a state and the status of government of that state is seen as a signifier of the state’s likelihood to treat women well, and the good treatment of women is seen as an indicator of the existence and success of other

progressive political institutions or values. Particularly, what both narratives share is the association between secularism (particularly secular separation of Islamic religion and state), (liberal) democracy, and women's emancipation, where gender rights serve as a barometer for the genuineness of both democratic and secularist efforts. Using gender rights as a litmus test for a certain view of "success" of the "Arab Spring" is a double-edged sword at best, where women are used as a proxy for other values, and one's view on the implementation of those other values affects how one reads the situation of women.

The signification of the narrative of the "Arab Spring" as gender-emancipatory is that the "old Arab world" of dictators without democratic process was backwards and of less value (generally or for women) than democratic regimes would be. It further signifies that protecting women includes in whole or in part means protecting them from Islamic governance and Islamic governments, implying that a liberal, secularist model of democratic regimes are better for gender. Many of the accounts that constitute the narrative of the "Arab Spring" as gender-emancipatory also strongly imply a model where the "Arab world" follows the West to secularism, democracy, and women's rights. Then, the woman-as-protestor becomes an object and a sign, where the objectification is a female body demonstrably having crossed the (presumed Islamic-only) public/private divide perceived to be built on sex lines and the signification of women's presence is the victory of a set of political values associated with gender equality (if not, or if secondarily, gender equality itself).

Many of the same objectifications and significations can be found in the narrative of the “Arab Spring” as a risk to women. In this narrative, the “Arab Spring” is less successful because it has not translated gains in democracy to secularism and/or women’s rights, and is therefore not actually, genuinely, or meaningfully more democratic. In addition to this general association of the backwardness of the abuse of women and the backwardness of politics, there is a strong a differentiation between the “good old boy” Arab dictators, perceived to have bestowed rights on women voluntarily if instrumentally, and the new, hypermasculine, conservative revolutionaries, who are framed to have a principled objection to the fair and equal treatment of women. Age, sexuality, and mystery go into the building of the new Arab democrat as scarier than the old Arab dictator, though neither meet the criteria implicit in the idealized state that provides the idealized treatment of women.

Conclusion

Asking “where are the women?” in the “Arab Spring” leads to two complicated stories of women’s emancipation and women’s subjugation that have odd tensions and odd commonalities. These can be analyzed in terms of women’s bodies, their presences, and their experiences (as well as men’s gendered experiences) through a gendered organizations analytical framework. In terms of narrative significations, however, the stories get more complicated, drawing lines between those who see the “Arab Spring” as being (perhaps in Fukuyama’s terms) nearer to the ideal-typical Western liberal democratic model (and thereby the “end of history”) and those who see it as a fundamentally politically regressivist movement. What both “sides” have in common is

an implicit endorsement of the privileging of Western, liberal models of democracy and (in Edward Said's terms) an Orientalist gaze towards the Arab "other." All of these different political outlooks on, and politics of, the Arab Spring vary significantly – but each is inscribed on the images, discourses, and bodies of the women that feminist discourses look for in the "Arab Spring" but find blurred in its many gender-appropriating significations.

This is a preliminary work. The later versions will be more sophisticated theoretically, include quantitative critical discourse analysis, and get to know the organizations it is analyzing as gendered organizations better. That said, with all of those shortcomings, it is a project which was started to explore that the image of the "Arab Spring" woman protester *means*, both at the time of the revolutions and as those victorious in those resolutions look to participate in normal social and political life. It has done so, we contend, first and foremost by understanding the complexity of the position of women and the use of gender tropes in "the Arab Spring," and secondly by showing the many ways in which narratives about women are maps for narratives about particular values and rules that dominate (imperial) political discourses among states.

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<http://www.thenation.com/article/160179/arab-spring-women>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

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⁶ Dennis Mansfield, "Arab Spring? Really for whom? Not for women"

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<http://www.dennismansfield.com/business/2012/03/arab-spring-really-for-whom-not-for-women.html>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For an example of work that bites this critique, see, e.g., Jean Elshtain's *Just War Against Terror*, Basic Books, 2003; For feminist analyses, see Miriam Cooke's "Gender and September 11" *Signs*, 28(1) 2002; Laura Shepherd's "Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the US-led Attack on Afghanistan Post-9/11," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8(1) 2006.

¹⁰ Laura Sjoberg, "Agency, Militarized Femininity, and Enemy Others" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9(1), 2007; Jennifer Lobasz, "The Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman," in *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy*, 29(3) (2008).

¹¹ See discussion in Chapters 9 and 10 of Laura Sjoberg's *Gendering Global Conflict: Towards a Feminist Theory of War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹² Catherine MacKinnon, *Are Women Human?* (New York: Belknap Press, 2006).

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¹⁴ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

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¹⁹ A later version of this paper will formalize this as quantitative critical discourse analysis; this description is a placeholder in this early draft.

²⁰ Jenna Krajeski, "Taking It to the Streets: Egyptian Women Protest the Government Alongside the Men Yet Few Images of Women", *The Opinioness of the World*, January 31, 2011. Accessed March 19, 2012. Available at: <http://opinionessoftheworld.com/2011/01/31/egyptian-women-take-to-the-streets-alongside-the-men-to-protest-the-government/>

²¹ Mathieu von Rohr, "Freedoms at Risk: Arab Women Fight to Defend their Rights", *Der Spiegel*, November 29, 2011 Accessed March 19, 2012. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,800447,00.html>

²² “In Egypt and Tunisia women are both hopeful and fearful about what the Arab revolutions might mean for them”, *The Economist*, October 15, 2011, Accessed March 19, 2012.

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²⁴ Mathieu von Rohr, “Freedoms at Risk: Arab Women Fight to Defend their Rights”, *Der Spiegel*, November 29, 2011 Accessed March 19, 2012. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,800447,00.html>

²⁵ Associated Press, “Hundreds of Women Report Rapes by Qaddafi forces”, *Al Arabiya*, May 28, 2011. Accessed March 19, 2012, Available at:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Hundreds+of+women+report+rapes+by+Qaddafi+forces&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>

²⁶ Steven Sotloff, “The Rape of Iman al-Obeidi: The Libyan Regime's Other Crisis” *Time*, March 29, 2011, Accessed March 19, 2012, Available at:

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2062007,00.html#ixzz1pb4eWzBd>

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/01/2012117113758961894.html>

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³⁰ In Haleh Esfandiari, *Director, Middle East Program*, “Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring”, *Middle East Program: Woodrow Wilson Center International Center for Scholars*, March 8, 2012. Accessed March 19, 2012, Available at:

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<http://www.arabianbusiness.com/fewer-women-in-parliaments-after-arab-spring-study-448949.html>

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⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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⁵⁷ Haleh Esfandiari, *Director, Middle East Program*, "Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring", *Middle East Program: Woodrow Wilson Center International Center for Scholars*, March 8, 2012. Accessed March 19, 2012, Available at:

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⁹⁵ Mahnaz Afkhami, "Testimony To The Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Operation and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global Women's Issues and Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Central Asia Affairs," *Women's Learning Partnership*, November 2, 2011.,

⁹⁶ Rana F. Sweis, "Arab Spring Fails to Allay Women's Anxieties", *New York Times*, March 7, 2012 Accessed March 19, 2012. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/08/world/middleeast/arab-spring-fails-to-allay-womens-anxieties.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

⁹⁷ Used Annick Wibben's terms, in *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*, (London: Taylor and Francis: 2011)

⁹⁸ Annick Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*

⁹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. W. Poster (London: Polity, 2001), 134.

¹⁰⁰ An in-depth exploration of the discourse theory behind this point is inappropriate here, but the concept is derived from Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Eva Feder Kittay, *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁰¹ Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*

¹⁰² Maarten Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 62; for discussion of text, media, and fabula, see Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*, citing Bal

¹⁰³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); see also Charles William Morris, *Signification and Significance: A Study in the Relations of Signs and Values* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964); Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1982): 777-795; Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993); and Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹⁰⁴ Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 134.

¹⁰⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

¹⁰⁶ Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," From Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁰⁹ John R. Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry: From Epistemology to Discourse in Sociohistorical Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹¹ Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak, eds., *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 15.

¹¹² Bordieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 5.

¹¹³ Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, 43.

¹¹⁴ This derivation comes from Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde's understanding of securitizing discourses and securitization in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 25.