Women and Revolutionary Turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa

Elissa Rana Mojtahedi

Abstract:
The recent revolutionary movements in the Middle East and North Africa have presented a unique opportunity for women to exert their influence in shaping the future of women's rights. Specifically, the question arises as to whether social movements help women fight patriarchal structures in the Middle East. This paper has chosen the Green Movement in Iran as a focal point, using the rise of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia as a point of comparison. An extensive literature review was conducted to provide the historical context as well as an analysis of the rise of social movements. Using a transnational feminist lens, both cases were analyzed and it was found that neither the Arab Spring nor the Green Movement in Iran were able to facilitate the improvement of women's rights. This was mainly found to be due to the traditional and patriarchal structures, and it is argued that for women to gain freedom and empowerment, Islam must be detached from the legal system. While the fight for women's rights are seen as an uphill battle on an international level, *Women and Revolutionary Turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa* provides a relevant argument within the realm of international studies.

Résumé :
Les mouvements révolutionnaires récents dans le Moyen-Orient et l'Afrique du Nord ont présenté une opportunité unique pour les femmes d'exercer leur influence afin de construire l'avenir des droits des femmes. Une question spécifique se pose à savoir si les mouvements sociaux aident les femmes à se battre contre les structures patriarcales ou non. Le point focal de cet essai est le mouvement de politique vert en Iran tandis que l'avènement du Printemps arabe en Égypte et en Tunisie est utilisé comme point de comparaison. Les deux cas ont été analysés à travers une lentille féministe transnationale et il en ressort qu'aucun mouvement n'a pu faciliter l'amélioration des droits des femmes. Plusieurs raisons expliquent cet échec, notamment les structures traditionnelles et patriarcales de ces régions. Cet essai fait aussi valoir que pour que les femmes puissent atteindre la liberté et l'autonomie, l'Islam doit être détaché du système légal. La lutte

pour les droits des femmes est souvent considérée comme une lutte ardue au niveau international, et cet essai fournit un argument pertinent au sein des études internationales.

Introduction

The fight for women's rights and empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa revealed a significant rise in revolutionary protest, where women are at the forefront of protests and continue to demand a voice against repressive authoritative governmental regimes. The failure of the 2009 Green Movement in Iran is said to have been a catalyst for the 2011 uprisings of the Arab Spring, attracting world-wide attention through the upsurge of social movements in the region. As 'moderate' Islamist-led governments emerge from the Arab Spring, I argue that due to traditional and patriarchal structures, the Arab Spring cannot facilitate the improvement of women's rights and empowerment in Iran due to Iran's Islamic government. Through a transnational feminist lens, I argue that Islam must be detached from the legal system in order for women to gain freedom and empowerment, while holding true to their religious beliefs.

I will first review the position of Muslim women in the Middle East and North Africa from the perspective of a transnational feminist, followed by the implications of social movements on the improvement of women's rights and empowerment. Through the 2009 Green Movement in Iran and the 2011 uprisings of the Arab Spring, women's demands for rights are evaluated, along with impediments of achieving these rights. The rise of social movements and social media largely affect Muslim women's fight against traditional and patriarchal structures in the Middle East and North Africa, ultimately relating to the bipolarity of values and beliefs in the West versus values and beliefs in Muslim states, as transnational feminist networks collaboratively work towards the achievement of rights for women, while conscious of the fact that values and beliefs in the West will have differences and similarities with those of the Muslim world.

Literature Review

How do social movements help women fight patriarchal structures in the Middle East, specifically Iran?

In studying women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa, the universal discipline of international relations must be formed in order to incorporate the ideas, voices and experiences beyond the West. Furthermore, studies done from an Eastern perspective will have differences and similarities from those done from a Western perspective.[1] Western IR theory fails to represent a universalized theory that can be used to study international relations on a global level. Therefore, it is important to attain the ability to learn different ways of knowing the "international" from different perspectives. Western IR theory for example includes little religion, but in the Muslim world, Islamic studies is the fundamental basis in which learning takes place. In trying to study Islam from a Western perspective, it is heavily argued that this creates significant incompatibility of values and beliefs, ultimately rendering Western IR theory unsound for the study of Islam. The Western versus Eastern dichotomy translates into a non-Muslim versus Muslim divide, or more so, Islamic states versus the West. However, it is important to work towards a common universal to ensure that the study of international relations exits from different perspectives.[2]

This is the reason for which there is a certain amount of difficulty in studying women's rights in Middle Eastern and North African countries from a Western

---

[1] Acharya, Amitav. "Dialogue and Discovery: In Search of International Relations Theories beyond the West." *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 39.3 (2011): 619.

[2] Derrida, Jacques, Mustapha Cherif, and Teresa Lavender. Islam and the West A Conversation With Jacques Derrida. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 82.

perspective, as there is no common language at par with Western thought, and is often heavily discouraged.[3] Regardless of the aforementioned difficulty in adhering to one theoretical perspective due to ideological strife, several feminists have tried to study the rights of Muslim women in the Middle East and North Africa, while claiming that a dichotomy between Western human rights and MENA human rights exist. A 'universal' definition of feminism is a theoretical perspective that criticizes social and gender inequalities, while aiming at women's empowerment and seeking to transform knowledge. [4] Several sources were consulted to conduct research on social movements and its connection with oppressed women and their fight against patriarchal structures in the Middle East. The sources reveal that it contested that social movements enable women to fight for their rights against traditional and patriarchal structures, specifically in the Middle East, where women are faced with severe rights' violations. Moreover, the consulted literature posits the notion that the dichotomy between the Western and Eastern states is a significant contributing factor to the lack of women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa, and will aid in developing women's fight against patriarchy.

Historical Background

Women in the Middle East and North Africa face continued obstruction in their fight for rights against traditional and patriarchic structures, however in contrast with the West, the fight for women's rights is seen as a progressive improvement. It is important to evaluate the historical pretext in which women's rights were fought for on a global level in order

---

[3] Allawi, Ali A. "Human Rights and Human Duties." In The Crisis of Islamic Civilization. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009.192.

[4] Moghadam, Valentine M. "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 27, no. 4 (2009): 1135-171.

to illustrate the difference between the progression of the West and the stagnation and the struggle of the MENA region.

In order to better contextualize women in the Middle East and North Africa, the history of Islam is important in determining how it has impacted, and continues to impact Muslim women and their fight for rights. The position of women in the Middle East and North Africa is often dictated by religion, where the fight for rights is hindered due to the stagnant structure of traditional and patriarchic roles. Women in Islam can be compared to women in Christianity, where the obstructive Islamic law impedes the fight for women's rights, however secular Christianity does not.[5] While the Ottoman Empire was a multi-religious state recognizing both Christians and Jews, it is considered to be the last form of a universal world with that of Islam due to the fact that by the latter 18th Century the Ottomans lost most of their territories.[6]

The lack of women's rights in the Muslim world oppose the ideals of Western progression, because there was significant obstruction by the Islamic governments for women in achieving freedom and empowerment due to gender inequalities in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. As such, the progression of women's rights has been hindered and continues to face obstacles due to traditional and patriarchic structures and Islamic law, also known as Sharia. It is incorrect to think that feminist movements in Islamic states were imported from the West because it was an inevitable response to the ongoing struggles and changes that developed in the region. It was born out of the traditional and religious feudal Ottoman Empire and the rise of the secular and

[5] Ali, Ayaan. The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam. New York: Free Press, 2006.
[6] Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. "Is Feminism Relevant To Arab Women?" Third World Quarterly 25, no. 3 (2004): 521-36.529-530.

modern West.[7] Arab countries under European colonization were faced with the constant pendulum of change, where nationalism and fear of losing their cultural Islamic identity conflicted with Western progress and modernization. This lack of progress can be seen as a backlash against European imperialism rather than an inherent problem of the MENA culture. The fight for women's rights eventually rose out within a religious context, as the Arab countries adhered to their Islamic identity thus resulting in a seeming plight for the empowerment of women.

In the beginning of the 20th century, women in Arab countries were fighting for basic rights such as education and marriage laws, as well as veiling and segregation issues.[8] The fight for women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa continued in the second half of the 20th century where women continued to fight for their rights within a religious context, competing against traditional and religious structures, often translating into a fight against patriarchy. In Iran, for example, women's rights were in constant fluctuation, where post-World War II introduced modernization and freedom for women, including a law against the veiling of women, however this resulted in a wave of backlash and ultimately foresaw the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.[9]

In this view, the fight for women's rights in the West followed an increasing path towards liberation and empowerment, whereas in the Middle East and North Africa, the fight for women's rights is often impeded by religion. Although women in Islam fought for freedom and empowerment, there is still contestation as to whether or not Western human rights and values are compatible with human rights in the Middle East and North

---

[7] Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. "Is Feminism Relevant To Arab Women?" Third World Quarterly25, no. 3 (2004): 521-36.521-36.

[8] Ibid

[9] Girgis, Monique. "Women in Pre-revolutionary, Revolutionary and Post-revolutionary Iran." Iran Chamber Society. January 1, 1996.

Africa. Reza Afshari provides a succinct historical explanation of human rights' violations in Iran to better illustrate his theory of cultural relativism.[10] This is important, as it is necessary to grasp an understanding of the historical context in which recent debates are derived from within the Middle East. The theory of Cultural relativism regarding the Iranian perspective on human rights was introduced and how they differ from other states and a clear distinction is made between Iran's cultural relativism on human rights and Western universal human rights.[11]Afshari posits the notion that cultural relativism in Iran is irrelevant due to the fact that when the issue of culture is raised, its relevance to human rights is simply a negation and a barrier to the emergence of a human rights culture.[12] The author's theory ties into that of other scholars' dichotomizing of countries from the East versus the West, for example, Weber and Barahmitash, and it is important to view differing perspectives, where Carey, Gibney and Poe provide the contrary, a Western perspective of human rights on a global level. Despite claims of "cultural relativism" for MENA countries, where cultural values and human rights are relative to the country and societies and cannot be universal, it can be argued that the Western-created "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" should be universally implemented regardless of the fundamental difference between theocratic Islamic governments and the secular West due to the fact that human rights should be essential for all individuals. In a Muslim country, the human rights issue is irrelevant to their culture or religion; it is protection for the individual whose rights are being violated.[13]

---

[10] Afshari, Reza. "Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism." Project MUSE, 2011.25.
[11] Ibid: 87.
[12] Ibid: 10.
[13] Ibid

Post World War II, in 1946, the rights for women in the West emerged from article 2 in the UN Charter on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The article declared that all persons are entitled to human rights regardless of sex, race, and religion, as examples, ultimately granting women and men equal rights. Although these rights for women were normatively established, there was increased awareness of issues addressing the inequalities and a desire to work towards the empowerment of women in the social, economic political and cultural spheres. In the late 1960's and early 1970's several Western feminists' movements emerged in regards to the gender inequalities on a global level in order to address the oppression of women and work towards liberation and empowerment for women.[14]

Conversely, it is argued that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights is incompatible with the implementation of human rights in the Arab and Muslim world.[15] In 1990 in Cairo, this incompatibility of human rights was challenged, where an alternative Islamic version of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was created for Muslim countries, called the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights.[16] Islamic rights are seemingly fundamentally different according to MENA governmental policy where the focus is on the Islamic understanding of human rights based on the Islamic law. Women's rights, for example, are enshrined in the Quran, but they have little reflection on the real condition of Women under the Sharia.[17] The Islamic world has been significantly poor in meeting its own standards of human rights, claiming that there are

---

[14] Twiss, Sumner B. "History, Human Rights, And Globalization." Journal of Religious Ethics32, no. 1 (2004): 39-70.47-48.
[15] Allawi, Ali A. "Human Rights and Human Duties." In The Crisis of Islamic Civilization. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009.192.
[16] Ibid
[17] Ibid: 204.

several governmental and non-governmental agencies in the Western world monitoring human rights abuses in the Muslim world, however there are none in the Muslim world doing the same.[18] Ultimately, it is argued that Muslims must decide for themselves what it means to have human rights in accordance with Islam, instead of under international pressure and scrutiny,[19] regardless of polarized beliefs and whether or not they are viewed as being incompatible with Western values.

The Rise of Social Movements

Social movements continue to occur on a global level for numerous reasons, whether it is student movements, feminist movements or democratization movements. To remain within the context of the fight for women's rights, feminism as a social movement will be explored. The above-mentioned fight for women's rights in the West saw an upsurge in the 1960's and 1970's internationally.[20] Feminist movements that occur in the Middle East and North Africa challenge authoritarian regimes and repression attributed to theocratic Islamic governments. These social movements often aim for women's rights through democratization, demanding the redistribution of economic resources, recognition of women's roles and representation in the political sphere.[21]

The 21st century revealed a significant rise of technology and social media and played a significant role in Middle Eastern and North African social movements where Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter largely affected the outcome of the protests. This

---

[18] Ibid: 195.
[19] Ibid: 204-205.
[20] Beinin, Joel. Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011.1.
[21] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.71.

allowed for the exposure and public awareness of oppression among Muslim women. Authoritarian governments clamped down on the international exposure in an attempt to block all evidence of state repression, but this failed and worldwide attention was sought.[22] Social media largely facilitated the Iranian Green Movement in 2009 and the uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011. The 2009 Iranian Green Movement criticized the rigged elections creating the international campaign called "where is my vote?" against dictatorship and demanding genuine electoral democracy. Women were at the forefront of this campaign, and set the tone for the demonstrations.[23] The killing of Neda Agha Soltan by a sniper in Iran was captured on a mobile phone and quickly spread through the Internet and became a symbol for the pro-democracy movement against women's oppression.[24] This movement resulted in even more stern state repression following a yearlong upsurge of protests.

The use of social media was also prevalent in the uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011, which criticized authoritarian rule, demanding dignity and rights for women within the economic, civil and political sphere. The outcome is still in progress, resulting in the rise of Islamist bodies in Egypt and Tunisia.[25] On January 18, 2011, Asma Mahfouz uploaded a video to YouTube and Facebook announcing that all women should protest, which resulted in the government shutting down the Internet and marked the first week of revolt in Egypt.[26] The rise of social movements and social media in the Middle East and North Africa has created tremendous volatility and contention where state repression

---

[22] Ibid: 88.
[23] HBO Documentaries: For Neda. By Antony Thomas. HBO: Synopsis. Home Box Office, Inc., 2010. Web.
[24] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.89.
[25] Ibid: 73.
[26] Ibid: 88-89.

continues to impede women's empowerment and liberation, mainly due to the rise of Islamic bodies as the backlash to widespread protest in the region.

Conceptual Framework

While thoroughly analyzing several pieces of literature relevant to the proposed research topic, several concepts and theories were derived from the texts. Barahmitash heavily discusses the role of the Iranian women in the globalization of the Iranian economy in illustrating the lack of women's economic power due to the rise of the Islamic government.[27] Though most of the scholars consult political and social roles of women, for example Metcalfe discusses the role of women's progression in the political sphere, little emphasis is put on the role of women in the economy in the Middle East.[28] Moghadam includes the concept of hyper-masculinities of the political and economic spheres in the Islamic and the Western world, and states that according to a feminist perspective, this is a significant factor contributed to women's oppression and the rise of patriarchal structures.[29]

Ahmari and Weddady present the repercussions of the uprisings of the Arab Spring through a compilation of personal stories and empirical data of those who are directly affected by the events taking place in the Middle East.[30] The diaries of young dissidence due to their fight against authoritarian regimes during the Iranian Green Movement and the Uprisings of the Arab Spring are revealed. A young Tunisian woman

---

[27] Bahramitash, Roksana. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran." International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 16, no. 4 (2005): 551. Accessed October 21, 2012.

[28] Metcalfe, Beverly Dawn. "Women. Management and Globalization in the Middle East."Journal of Business Ethics 83, no. 1 (2008): 85-100. Accessed October 21, 2012.

[29] Moghadam, Valentine M. "Confronting "Empire": The New Imperialism, Islamism and Feminism." Political Power and Social Theory 20 (2009): 201-26.

[30] Ahmari, Sohrab, and Naser Weddady. Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Ira. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

experiences intellectual stagnation as she is denied the right to travel alone because she is a woman.[31] Moreover, a young Iranian woman presents her struggle of being denied her dream of attending college in Iran due to the fact that she is of the Baha'i religion.[32] This revelation is among many of the personal diaries of repressed women who wish to have their voices heard in hopes of gaining freedom and empowerment from revolutionary protests. While highly informative and powerful, unlike most of the consulted literature, a differing perspective is provided due to the fact that the repression of women is expressed from a first-hand perspective.

A contribution from the literature is the concept of protesting against authoritarian regime and how it plays a significant role in revealing the fight for women's rights through revolutionary protests. Marsha Pripstein Posusney posits the works of Edward Said, who believes that there is an incompatibility between authoritarian Islamic values and democratic values. This notion aids in exploring the efficacy of women's fight against patriarchal structures under authoritarian order and the involvement of protesting through social movements.[33] Beinin and Vairel take on a more recent exploration of social movements, specifically related to the Arab Spring revealing women's involvement in the MENA region.[34] The literature on social movements suggests that state repression could have a preemptive effect on collective action,[35] where Moghadam demonstrates that due to the fact that the Islamic states consist of stringent authoritarian values, there is little protest against authoritarian regimes for the sole reason that Middle

---

[31] Ibid: 105.

[32] Ibid: 63.

[33] Posusney, Marsha Pripstein. "Enduring Authoritarianism: Middle East Lessons for Comparative Theory." Comparative Politics 36, no. 2 (2004): 127. Accessed February 2, 2013.

[34] Beinin, Joel. Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011.34.

[35] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.115.

Easterners lack the rights to do so. This clearly demonstrates that women's fight against patriarchal structures is hindered and creates a lag in the rise of social movements.

Michelle Byng addresses women's oppression due to the requirement of wearing the Hijab in the Middle East, as well as the shortcomings attributed to wearing it in the West.[36] There is significant bigotry towards women who choose to wear the Hijab in countries where it is not required by law, which reveals the dichotomy between Western and Middle Eastern values. Veiling is a significant factor in examining the lack of women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Although the veil is strictly governed in Arab and Islamic countries such as Iran, the veil is sanctioned and women could face severe penalties should they decide against wearing it. In other Islamic countries, as well as Islamic women who choose to wear the Hijab in the West, Muslim women wear the veil as a sign of commitment and do not consider it as a sign of oppression.[37] In secular countries such as France and Britain, veiling is seen as a threat to freedom and equality, as well as a disruption to social harmony.[38] In determining whether or not veiling is seen as a sign of oppression, it is important to determine which feminist perspective is taking, as it is subjective to the values and beliefs of each individual women fighting for their rights.

The connection between modernization and Islam was used in most of the consulted literature to illustrate the lack of women's empowerment in the social and political/economic setting. The concept of modernization for Bahramitash, for example,

---

[36] Byng, M. D. "Symbolically Muslim: Media, Hijab, and the West." Critical Sociology 36, no. 1 (2010): 109-29. Accessed November 23, 2012.

[37] Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. "Is Feminism Relevant To Arab Women?" Third World Quarterly25, no. 3 (2004): 521-36.

[38] Byng, M. D. "Symbolically Muslim: Media, Hijab, and the West." Critical Sociology 36, no. 1 (2010): 109-29. Accessed November 23, 2012.116-117.

discusses how Islamic fundamentalism was instigated as a backlash to modernization in the Western states,[39] while Moghadam depicts Islamic fundamentalism as the reason behind the ideological divide between the Eastern and the Western World.[40] Moghadam also goes onto to state that the Americans try to cover their military and economic ambitions with the mask of human rights, women's rights and democracy. Moreover, exemplified in the case of Iraq, where Moghadam posits the idea that feminist scholars believe that the sanctions placed on Iraq worsened the state of women in the country and were only beneficial for American economic ambitions, even though the seemingly positive intention was to put an end to the war.[41]

Bahramitash uses Iran as a case study, illustrating women's limited opportunities in the gain of economic power in the Middle East and North Africa.[42] Muslim Women are demanding the redistribution of economic resources and due to the fact that they are denied rights to engage in the labour force, there is very little advancement for women in the economic sphere.[43] The traditional and religious precepts of the Islamic law hinder women's economic progress, thus creating patriarchic structures, which ultimately act as a catalysts for widespread protest among Muslim women who wish to have a voice in the labour force.

---

[39] Bahramitash, Roksana. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran." International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 16, no. 4 (2005): 551. Accessed October 21, 2012.
[40] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.
[41] Moghadam, Valentine M. "Confronting "Empire": The New Imperialism, Islamism and Feminism." Political Power and Social Theory 20 (2009): 201-26.
[42] Bahramitash, Roksana. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran." International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 16, no. 4 (2005): 551. Accessed October 21, 2012.
[43] Metcalfe, Beverly Dawn. "Women. Management and Globalization in the Middle East."Journal of Business Ethics 83, no. 1 (2008): 85-100. Accessed October 21, 2012.

As Mashayekhi theorizes students as a student movement,[44] the student movement is relevant to the condition of women because they are denied significant educational rights and the involvement of young female dissidence largely affected the Iranian Green Movement and The Arab Spring. For example, women of the Baha'i religion in Iran are denied post-secondary educational rights and must be expelled from universities.[45] It can be argued that women lacking educational rights in the MENA region are unaware as to what their rights are as women due to the limited knowledge that they receive and this contributes to the overall lack of progress for Muslim women.[46] These women lack the information regarding women's leadership and global achievements, which may hinder their drive to fight against traditional and patriarchal structures.

Theoretical Perspective

Feminist theories were greatly explored in most of the consulted literature, where Metcalfe summarizes that the main constraint for women's rights in the Middle East is due to the notion that women must stay true to their traditional roles. Women are expected to uphold their domestic responsibilities and have little representation in the public sphere due to the precepts of the Islamic law and will face barriers in advancing in economic and political globalization.[47] Several feminist theories are rebuked, such as neoliberal feminism and Islamic feminism, due to the fact that these theories are

---

[44] Mashayekhi, Mehrdad. "The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran." International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society 15, no. 2 (2001): 283-313. Accessed October 21, 2012.

[45] Ahmari, Sohrab, and Naser Weddady. Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Ira. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.63.

[46] Metcalfe, Beverly Dawn. "Women. Management and Globalization in the Middle East."Journal of Business Ethics 83, no. 1 (2008): 85-100. Accessed October 21, 2012.

[47] Ibid

counterproductive and futile to the fight for women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa. The liberal feminist perspective sets out to take more of a Western stance on women's rights in the Middle East, holding true to Western values. Where on the other extreme, Islamic feminists explore women's rights within the stern Islamic sphere, holding true to their religion and believing that Islam's influence on governmental policies does not have an effect on their fight for rights. It is important to identify competing views on Islamic feminist perspectives due to the fact that several scholars, including Margot Badran, theorize Islamic feminism in a more positive light stating that it is the means of fighting for Muslim women's rights only within the realm of religion and Islam.[48] Although these scholars view Islamic feminism in a different light and believe that women's rights are attainable under Islamic law, I argue the negative aspects to Islamic feminism due to the fact that the Islamic influence in the political sphere is the main impediment in the fight for women's rights.

As a middle ground between neoliberal feminism and an Islamic feminist perspective, I explore the contribution of a transnational feminist perspective, in light of the work of Valentine Moghadam. Moghadam describes these networks as transnational feminists who take part in several different organizations and who generally "advocate for women's participation and rights while also engaging critically with policy and legal issues and with states, international organizations and institutions of global governance."[49] Moreover, strategies deployed by TFNs include; grassroots organizing, research and analysis, lobbying, public advocacy and education, coalition building,

---

[48] Badran, Margot. "Between Secular and Islamic Feminisms Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond." Journal of Middle East Womens Studies 1, no. 1 (2005): 6-28.
[49] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.145.

humanitarian action, international solidarity and public protests.[50] The transnational feminist networks work together within several countries to form a common agenda, joining the local and the global, while drawing attention to the negative aspects of the world-system. Examples of these networks include MADRE, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Network Women in Development Europe (WIDE), and Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLULM).[51] These transnational feminist networks are at odds with both imperialism and militant Islam, as well as hegemonic forms of power, whether neoliberal, militarist, authoritarian, or religious fundamentalist.[52]

Hamid Dabashi views the uprisings of the Arab Spring as a rise of transnational networks, as the uprisings that began in Tunisia paved the way for the following Middle Eastern and North African countries to take part in a transnational network movement. Dabashi argues, "diverse forms of democracy, civil rights or women liberation can only come out of the creative responses of local subaltern epistemologies."[53] Similarly, these transnational feminist networks facilitate Muslim women in their fight for rights against traditional and patriarchal structures. As Islam is the main impediment in the fight for women's rights, I argue that transnational feminist networks work towards a government in which Islam does not play a major role in political decision-making so that women, regardless of their religious beliefs, are able to attain freedom and empowerment.

---

[50] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.145.
[51] Moghadam, Valentine M. "Confronting "Empire": The New Imperialism, Islamism and Feminism." Political Power and Social Theory 20 (2009): 201-26.
[52] Ibid
[53]Dabashi, Hamid. The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism. London: Zed Books , 2012.

Shahrzad Mojab posits a critique of the Islamic feminist perspective, labelling it as an oxymoron and inadequate due to the fact that Islam is the main impediment in fighting patriarchy, specifically in the case of Iran.[54] Transnational feminists rebuke the Islamist feminist theory due to the fact that the fight for women's rights from a radical Islamists feminist perspective has created an oppressive patriarchy that is irreplaceable through legal reforms in Middle Eastern and North African countries. Moreover, Islam plays a significant role in gender inequalities and Mojab states that without the reorientation of the Islamic legal system, more so the Sharia, the oppressive patriarchal structures against women, cannot be challenged.[55]

Beverely Metcalfe claims that transnational feminist networks largely affect the status of women. The emergence of extremist Islamic organizations presents a threat to the gains women have achieved as well as to the possibilities of reform. She claims that Islam has been used globally to reinforce patriarchal social and work systems.[56] Due to the fact that Islam is an important factor in determining gender relations and inequalities, Metcalfe states that understanding the role of Islam is essential in addressing violations of women's rights and their fight against patriarchy in the Middle East. Following Mahnaz Afkhami, Islamic feminism should not attempt to place feminism in the Qur'an due to the fact that Islam is contrary to women's rights. Afkhami's view is explained in stating, "I call myself a Muslim and a feminist. I'm not an Islamic feminist—that's a contradiction in terms."[57] A woman can remain a Muslim and hold religious beliefs, but fighting for

---

[54]Mojab, Shahrzad. "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism'." Feminist Review 69 (2001): 124-46.
[55] Ibid
[56]Metcalfe, Beverly Dawn. "Women. Management and Globalization in the Middle East."Journal of Business Ethics 83, no. 1 (2008): 85-100. Accessed October 21, 2012.
[57] Moghadam, Valentine M. "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 27, no. 4 (2009): 1135-171.1152.

women's rights in the economic, social, and political spheres, while believing that Islam should influence governmental policy is counterproductive.

Moreover, Moghadam argues that neoliberalism cannot help fight patriarchal structures due to the fact that these two concepts feed off of each other and thus taking a neoliberal feminist perspective cannot aid in the alleviation of women's rights violations in the Middle East. While arguing against Islamic and neoliberal feminist perspectives, Islam acts as the main impediment in the fight for Muslim women's rights against traditional and patriarchal structures due to the fact that Islam inherently positions Muslim women as second-class citizens. Gayatri Spivak's study of the subaltern woman supports the theoretical perspective of the transnational feminist, where she believes that feminists must have a "transnational consciousness" in order to obtain gender justice.[58] She emphasizes the importance of understanding that women have social, cultural and political differences and that a transnational network can create an alliance between Western feminists and post-colonial feminists.[59]

Transnational feminists rebuke the neoliberal feminist perspective due to the fact that this perspective entails the assimilation of Western values and norms with that of the Arab and Muslim states. Transnational feminist networks embrace the discourses and values of human and women's rights. However, they reject the dominant values of consumerism, commercialization, and privatization.[60] There is a degree to which Islamic values and norms under the Sharia are incompatible with the values of the West, and this

---

[58]Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.399.
[59]Morton, Stephen. Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and The Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.126.
[60]Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.205.

notion is also supported by Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern woman, where she argues that there is an ethical problem with investigating a different culture based on seemingly universal concepts.[61] Ultimately, while remaining conscious that Western values and beliefs are different from that of Middle Eastern and North African values, transnational feminist networks work towards detaching Islam from the legal system in order for Muslim women to achieve their rights and empowerment while holding true to their religious beliefs.

The Arab Spring

The uprisings of the Arab Spring created a wave of revolutionary protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), beginning with the owner of a small fruit vendor. On December 17th, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi made history in Tunisia after a policewoman publicly slapped him and confiscated his merchandise for illegal vending. Humiliation acted as a catalyst for Bouazizi to pave the way for reform through self-immolation as he was fed up with the lack of rights in the repressive state, thus fostering the courage for countries in the Middle East and North Africa to follow suit.[62] As Arab nations slowly began to follow this wave of protest against authoritarian regimes, the civil society within each of these autocratic states revealed a desperate cry for democracy. The authoritarian regimes that ruled before the revolutionary protests significantly challenged human rights, as well as women's rights and the uprisings of the Arab Spring is argued to have had little impact on women's empowerment due the emergence of

---

[61] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Can the Subaltern Speak? Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.
[62] Beinin, Joel. Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011.238.

Islamic governmental bodies, where Islam dictates much of the region's political decisions.[63]

It is argued by liberal scholars that there are two types of Muslim faith. The first being the traditionalists, seen as the "authentic" Muslims who abstain from alcohol or pork consumption, dress conservatively. Secondly, the moderate, "inauthentic" Muslims, who adopt Western norms and attitudes and who do not represent their traditional Muslim societies.[64] After the revolutionary protests in Tunisia and Egypt, 'moderate' Islamist-led governments emerged, including the Tunisian Ennahda Party and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Party[65]. I argue that 'moderate' Islamist-led governments will eventually repress women's rights and that the revolutionary regimes of the Arab Spring are ineffective for the advancement of women's empowerment due to the Islamic ruling parties. As these Islamic ruling parties will have most of the government's authority, the traditional and patriarchal values attributed to Islam will impede the fight for women's rights. This chapter will examine the drawbacks of the Arab Spring due to the emergence of Islamist-led governments in Tunisia and Egypt and will ultimately confirm that women's empowerment remains stagnant due to traditional and patriarchal structures. Although the imposition of Western values in the MENA region is highly opposed, the overarching issue is that Islam must remain separate from the legal system in order to advance the empowerment of women.

---

[63]Reguly, Eric. "In Tunisia, Cradle of the Arab Spring, Reformers' Hopes Are Thwarted by Strident Islam." The Globe and Mail. February 3, 2013. Accessed March 19, 2013.
[64] Ahmari, Sohrab, and Naser Weddady. Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Ira. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.73.
[65]Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.100.

Transnational feminists seek to attain women's rights through networking bodies of women on a global scale who are demanding basic rights and empowerment for women. While tackling policy and legal issues, transnational feminist networks seek to alter the Islamist-led governmental policies in order for Islam to remain separate from the legal system while allowing women to uphold their religious beliefs. The Arab Women's Solidarity Association in Egypt (AWSA), for example, facilitates feminists in the fight for women's rights in the Arab World, while assessing the negative aspects to Western imposition due to the incompatibility of values and beliefs. When moderate Islamist-led governments detach Islam from the legal system, traditional and patriarchal structures will have less of an effect on the fight for women's rights and empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa, specifically in Tunisia and Egypt.

First, it is important to identify the repressive state that women in the Middle East and North Africa face and what rights they are demanding. These include poor access to education, lack of career opportunities, domestic and external violence, forced marriages, restricted participation in public life, and unequal inheritance rights.[66] Women have long lagged behind dominant patriarchal structures in the economic, political and social spheres; therefore the region's overall success has been hindered due to the lack of opportunities for women in the political sphere.[67] The empowerment of Muslim women would entail several factors including the redistribution of economic resources (across women and men more broadly), recognition of women's roles and contributions, and

---

[66] Wing, Adrien K. "The "Arab Fall": The Future of Women's Rights." U.C. Davis Journal of International Law & Policy, 2012.

[67] Giacomo, Carol. "Women Fight to Define the Arab Spring." The New York Times Sunday Review The Opinion Pages. November 10, 2012.

demands for representation in the political process as well as other domains.[68] Personal diaries of repressed women in North Africa and the Middle East expose the ample amount of voices that are desperate to be heard internationally. The precarious state of women's rights is revealed in the diaries, where the lack of access to educational and economic opportunities reinforces the fabric of patriarchy. Honour killings along with how travel restrictions and laws targeting immigrants prevent women from fulfilling their full potential.[69]

Now, the question remains as to where women are in the context of protest and revolution against authoritarian regimes. Women have been at the forefront of protest long before the uprisings of the Arab Spring, where there has been successive generations of women's rights pioneers, social historians, imaginative theorists, community organizers, public educators, political activists, revolutionary leaders, poets, filmmakers, and artists.[70] Arab and Muslim women are portrayed by the West as being docile and compliant, while patiently waiting for their seemingly imminent liberation in Afghanistan and Iraq by the American military, as examples.[71] However, this image is merely propaganda fed on an international level. In actuality, women protesting in Tunisia and Egypt were nothing like the Western stereotype. They were fully engaged "front and centre," heavily involved in news clips and on 'Facebook' forums.[72] Regardless of the fact that women are heavily involved in protests against dictatorial regimes, their fight for rights and empowerment are hindered due to traditional and patriarchal structures, which

---

[68] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.71.
[69] Ahmari, Sohrab, and Naser Weddady. Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Ira. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.9.
[70] Dabashi, Hamid. The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism. London: Zed Books , 2012.190.
[71] Ibid
[72] Ibid

has been reinforced due to Islamist-led governments emerging out of the uprisings of the Arab Spring. I argue that the following examples of Tunisia and Egypt's newly 'moderate' Islamist-led governments reveal the counter productivity of the outcomes of the Arab Spring.

Tunisia

The gap between the rights of men and women is the most visible in Middle Eastern countries, where resistance to women's equality has been the most challenging.[73] Specifically in Tunisia, where there are significant ideological clashes between the secularists and the Islamists, the fight for women's rights are being revised by opposing government beliefs, creating uncertainties in the drafting of the constitution.[74] The Ennahda Islamist-led government wants language in the constitution that claims men and women are complementary, however the secular government wants language that claims men and women have equal rights.[75] If the constitution were drafted in favour of the Islamists, this would present a flaw in Tunisia's gender equality, thus rendering women's empowerment futile due to traditional and patriarchal structures.

The post-revolutionary elected and Islamist-led government in Tunisia, the Ennahda party,[76] deposed the authoritarian Ben Ali regime[77] and demanded a review of the constitution, which consequently requests the revision of the rights for women. Of the

[73]Metcalfe, Beverly Dawn. "Women. Management and Globalization in the Middle East."Journal of Business Ethics 83, no. 1 (2008): 85-100. Accessed October 21, 2012.

[74] Reguly, Eric. "In Tunisia, Cradle of the Arab Spring, Reformers' Hopes Are Thwarted by Strident Islam." The Globe and Mail. February 3, 2013. Accessed March 19, 2013.

[75]Giacomo, Carol. "Women Fight to Define the Arab Spring." The New York Times Sunday Review The Opinion Pages. November 10, 2012.

[76] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.100.

[77]Beinin, Joel. Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011.242.

countries that followed suit in the uprisings of the Arab Spring, for example, Morocco and Egypt, Tunisia emerged with greater social freedoms, as gender inequity was not strictly the law of the land.[78] Regardless of this, Tunisian women were granted these rights long before the uprisings of the Arab Spring. After Tunisia's independence in 1956, the secular authoritarian President, Habib Bourguiba, granted free rights for women through a Personal Status Code, which included equal divorce rights for men and women, abolished polygamy and access to birth control, as a few examples.[79] However, once revolutionary protests are successful and governmental reform is achieved, men often revert back to their old role pattern of the 'double standard', rendering women accepting of traditional female submission.[80] Revolutionary protests in Tunisia demanded parliamentary democracy as well as a stronger voice among repressed women, however the contested issue is that reverting back to traditional Islamist-led governmental policies discard the secular rights that Tunisian women embraced.[81] For example, the headscarf that was once banned in public places in Tunisia[82] is now being forced among female university lecturers following the aftermath of the Arab Spring.[83]

---

[78]Ahmari, Sohrab, and Naser Weddady. Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Ira. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.105.

[79] Coleman, Isobel. "Are the Mideast Revolutions Bad for Women's Rights?" Washington Post. February 20, 2011.

[80] Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. "Is Feminism Relevant To Arab Women?" Third World Quarterly25, no. 3 (2004): 521-36.536.

[81] Reguly, Eric. "In Tunisia, Cradle of the Arab Spring, Reformers' Hopes Are Thwarted by Strident Islam." The Globe and Mail. February 3, 2013. Accessed March 19, 2013.

[82] Coleman, Isobel. "Are the Mideast Revolutions Bad for Women's Rights?" Washington Post. February 20, 2011.

[83]Wing, Adrien K. "The "Arab Fall": The Future of Women's Rights." U.C. Davis Journal of International Law & Policy, 2012.

Egypt

On January 25th, 2011, revolutionary protesters gathered in Tahrir Square in Egypt and deposed the authoritarian regime led by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.[84] Egypt is a similar case to Tunisia in that the 'moderate' Islamist-led government in Egypt also requested the revision of the constitution, which has impeded the empowerment of women.[85] Egypt however, is a more stern case due to the fact that the revolutionary protests of the Arab Spring led to the emergence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood party, which is described as being more of an extremist Islamic-led government.[86] Egyptian secularists have little voice compared to Tunisian secularists, giving more power to the conservative Islamist-led government.[87] This has created significant turmoil in the country and has rendered the fight for women's rights stagnant and ineffective. The Islamist-led government's revision of the constitution has largely left out women's rights,[88] where women should balance their duties towards family and work.[89] The Islamist party has never put in any serious effort in tackling violence and discrimination against women, claiming that their protection would be an attempt at modernization.[90] Women candidates only won two percent in the 2011 Egyptian elections, which illustrates severe underrepresentation of women in the political sphere.[91] These examples

---

[84] Beinin, Joel, and Frédéric Vairel. Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2011.242.

[85] "Arab Spring Should Advance Women's Rights Too." Globe Editorial. The Globe and Mail, 31 Jan. 2013. Web.

[86]

[87] Coleman, Isobel. "Are the Mideast Revolutions Bad for Women's Rights?" The Washington Post. The Washington Post, 20 Feb. 2011. Web.

[88] Wing, Adrien K. "The "Arab Fall": The Future of Women's Rights." U.C. Davis Journal of International Law & Policy, 2012.

[89] "Arab Spring Should Advance Women's Rights Too." The Globe and Mail. January 31, 2013.

[90] Mahmoud, Nervana. "The Muslim Brotherhood's Treatment of Women Reveals Its Agenda for Egypt." The Globe and Mail. March 23, 2013.

[91] Wing, Adrien K. "The "Arab Fall": The Future of Women's Rights." U.C. Davis Journal of International Law & Policy, 2012.

depict vast gender inequalities as the constitution is revised solely under the Muslim Brotherhood Party. Ultimately, the traditional and patriarchal structures in Egypt will act as overarching forces that will not aid in the fight for women's rights and empowerment.

Recent events reveal that an Egyptian female activist, Mervat Moussa, was slapped by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood Islamist party due to the fact that she was demonstrating in front of their headquarters. As this act was against a religious woman who wears the headscarf,[92] a flaw is revealed in the argument claiming that the only contentious binary in the region is the secularists versus the Islamists.[93] Furthermore, it is argued that the battle for women's rights is not between secularists and Islamists, it is between governments using religion as a tool, and equally religiously devout governments who wish to detach religion from the legal system.[94] In states where the Islamic law, or more so, the Sharia, is the dominant force against dissidence among civilians. The civil society is at odds with any successful protest against repressive autocratic regimes, creating a troubling atmosphere for women.[95] It is for this reason that transnational feminist networks address women's rights abuses within Islam, while tackling policy and legal issues for an ultimate detachment of Islam from the Islamist-led governments.

"God is Great, so is Freedom",[96] Dabashi describes the events taking place in Tahrir Square in Egypt as a historic face-off between Islamists and Secularists. Whether the contention in Tunisia and Egypt is due to a secularist/Islamist divide or a divide

---

[92] Mahmoud, Nervana. "The Muslim Brotherhood's Treatment of Women Reveals Its Agenda for Egypt." The Globe and Mail. March 23, 2013.
[93] Dabashi, Hamid. The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism. London: Zed, 2012.173.
[94] Mahmoud, Nervana. "The Muslim Brotherhood's Treatment of Women Reveals Its Agenda for Egypt." The Globe and Mail. March 23, 2013.
[95] "Arab Spring Should Advance Women's Rights Too." The Globe and Mail. January 31, 2013.
[96] Dabashi, Hamid. The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism. London: Zed Books , 2012.200.

between two religious governments, Islam must remain separate from the political system. Simplistic slogans like "Islam is the solution" are not enough to alleviate the vast human rights violations in the Middle East and North Africa.[97] Once Islam is detached from the legal system, the battle for women's rights and empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa can be achieved, thus allowing women to uphold their religious beliefs without its negative influence on governmental policies.

As this chapter examined the drawbacks of the Arab Spring due to the emergence of the Ennahda Islamist-led government in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood Islamist-led government in Egypt, it is argued that women's empowerment remains stagnant due to traditional and patriarchal structures. Human rights in Egypt are adopted for their own purposes, however there is no strong sense of a fusing element between international human rights standards and Islamic values.[98] Transnational feminist networks, such as AWSA work towards the collaboration of feminist demands in the West and the Muslim word in order to improve the rights and empowerment of women from the local and the global. Although the imposition of Western values in the MENA region is highly opposed, the overarching issue from a transnational feminist perspective is that Islam must remain separate from the legal system in order to advance the empowerment of women. While Islam continues to rise within the political sphere of the Middle Eastern and North African countries, traditional and patriarchal structures will be reinforced rendering women without a voice. With the new implementation of the Egyptian constitution under Islamic law, Egyptians fear that the victory would become another

---

[97]Manhire, Toby. The Arab Spring: Rebellion, Revolution, and a New World Order. London: Guardian Books, 2012.XIII.
[98]Beinin, Joel. Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011.160.

Islamic Republic of Iran.[99] A year after the uprisings of the Arab Spring, Iranian officials funded a conference In Iran's capital to promote the unity of Islam through the 'Islamic Awakening.'[100] Although a year ago it was argued by Western media that Iran's system is unlikely to prevail in the Arab region, the Iranian conference uniting Islam reveals the encouragement for Islamist-led governments in the Middle East and North Africa. Iran is solely governed by Islamic law and has not only severely impeded women's empowerment, but there are significant violations of women's rights in the country as well. The following chapter will examine women's rights violations in Iran and will reveal an even more stern case than that of Tunisia and Egypt.

Iran and The Green Movement

As the drawbacks of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions during the Arab Spring have been examined in the previous chapter, it has been revealed that governmental policies in Tunisia and Egypt are advancing more so in the direction of an Islamist-led government strictly ruled by Islamic law. The Arab Spring was known to be an 'Islamic Awakening' by the Iranian government, in hopes of spreading Islamist-led governments.[101] While the battle for women's rights in Egypt and Tunisia is largely obstructed due to the fact that Islam is used as a political instrument, it will be argued that it is for this reason that women's rights conditions in Iran remain stagnant due to the traditional and patriarchal structures of the theocratic Iranian government. Similar to Tunisia and Egypt, Iran is fundamentally based on the Sharia creating a lack of compatibility between Iranian and Western human rights, where transnational feminists question the efficacy of the

---

[99]Dabashi, Hamid. The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism. London: Zed Books , 2012..172.
[100]Worth, Robert. "Effort to Rebrand Arab Spring Backfires in Iran." The New York Times. February 3, 2012. Accessed March 2, 2013.
[101]Ibid

imposition of Western values in the country. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that the uprisings of the Arab Spring did not facilitate the alleviation of human rights violations in Iran due to the fact that the rise of Islam in Middle Eastern and North African countries has furthered the gender inequalities in the region and has not contributed to the improvement of women's rights and empowerment in Iran. Moreover, I argue that Islam must remain separate from the stern Islamic legal system in Iran in order for women to obtain freedom and empowerment.

Transnational feminist networks seek to reframe the Islamist-led government in order for Islam to remain separate from the legal system. The religious influence on the Iranian political system strengthens traditional and patriarchal structures, hampering any advancement for the rights and empowerment of Iranian women. While the Islamist-led governments in Tunisia and Egypt are worsening the rights of women, the revolutionary protests of the 2009 Green Movement in Iran were repressed and failed to overthrow the Islamist-led government, which not only re-established stern Islamic governmental policy, but also implemented stricter laws due to protest and revolt in the region that worsened the fight for women's rights. Moreover, transnational feminist networks seek to address the issue of Western and Muslim incompatibilities, where the International Civil Rights Action Network (ICAN) seeks to address the severity of Western sanctions imposed on the Middle East.

Iran's fight for human rights is described by Western scholars as being one of the principle instances where human rights activism occurred in the Middle East during the 1979 Islamic Revolution,[102] and has been criticized to uphold the title of one of the

---

[102]Beinin, Joel. Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011.83.

gravest human rights abusers in the Middle East.[103] This title has raised international awareness post the 2009 'rigged' elections due to the impact of social media and the exposure of vast human rights' violations, specifically violence against women.[104] The Green Movement during the 2009 elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran was severely repressed and paved the way for immense protest and dissidence among Iranians who wished to implement new governmental reform. Some scholars argue that the revolutionary protests seen in Tunisia and Egypt were aspirations for Iranians a year and a half earlier via the Green Movement.[105] Moreover, it is argued that the uprisings of the Arab Spring may have been a response to the Green Movement in Iran.[106] A clear distinction is made between the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and the Iranian Green Movement. The Green Movement was interpreted as feminized and weak, where as the Arab Spring was seen as masculine and nationalistic.[107] The Green Movement and the "where is my vote" campaign in Iran incited tremendous protest of women in the streets of Tehran due to the symbolic 26 year old, Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot in the street by a sniper, while attempting to have her voice heard.[108] Neda, meaning 'voice' in Farsi, became the symbol for Iranian women wanting basic rights against traditional and patriarchal structures, while also revealing the heavy involvement of women protesters fighting for their rights in Iran.[109]

---

[103] Carey, Sabine C., Mark Gibney, and Stephen C. Poe. The Politics of Human Rights: The Quest For Dignity. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
[104] HBO Documentaries: For Neda. By Antony Thomas. HBO: Synopsis. Home Box Office, Inc., 2010.
[105] Dabashi, Hamid. The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism. London: Zed Books , 2012.133.
[106] Ibid: 214.
[107] Ibid: 177.
[108] Bashi, Golbarg. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role." In The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future, edited by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel. Brooklyn: Melville House Pub., 2010.37-40.
[109] HBO Documentaries: For Neda. By Antony Thomas. HBO: Synopsis. Home Box Office, Inc., 2010.

An incitement for the revolutionary protests of the Green Movement is due to the fact that women have been severely repressed and targets of rights violations in Iran due to the fact that once the Islamic revolution of 1979 emerged, the Islamist-led government's first target was a woman.[110] The feminist movement in Iran is composed of "robust children of decades of sustained grassroots struggle," where Iranian women, who are seen as "second-class citizens in the realm of family and penal law," have been relentlessly expanding their demand for rights for an end to gender inequality.[111] When situating women in the context of rights' abuses and inequality, only 12.3 percent of Iranian women are in the public workforce, where marriage would be their only ticket into the public sector.[112] The unemployment rate for women is 30 percent due to gender discrimination, where this is only among one of the abused rights for Iranian women, where drug abuse, runaway girls, child labor, prostitution, and human trafficking are also critical issues due to the economy and gender-imbalanced policies.[113]

Moreover, as the husbands of Iranian women must discipline their wives, this is a prominent factor in revealing the disempowerment of Iranian women.[114] In order for women to feel as though there are no gender inequalities in society, women should not be subject to being disciplined by their husbands as the concept alone is clearly patriarchal and negates any liberty for women. Women are barred from running for President,[115] which clearly relegates women to second-class citizens and depicts them as inadequate.

---

[110] Ibid

[111] Bashi, Golbarg. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role." In The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future, edited by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel. Brooklyn: Melville House Pub., 2010..37-40

[112] Ibid

[113] Ibid

[114] Afshari, Reza. "Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism." Project MUSE, 2011.11.

[115] Ahmari, Sohrab, and Naser Weddady. Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Ira. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

The Baha'i religious minority of Iran is also subject to severe disempowerment, especially for women. The religion is fundamentally based on the precept that there is unity among all humankind and that all world religions are valid, and it is for this reason that it is subject to violence and discrimination in Iran and the surrounding region. The religion is banned from all universities and has become a significant demand for women's rights in the country.[116] Iranian women have continuously faced the struggle of identity and their societal, political, and economic roles in fundamentally Islamic states, where patriarchy and the disciplining of women have been and are presently an impediment to the empowerment of women.

The Green Movement challenged these abused rights against Iranian women, with a direct challenge to the repressive authority of the Islamic state and the status quo.[117] The Islamic Republic of Iran uses repressive means for state security, as well as in their rejections and denials of human rights violations.[118] After the murder of Neda Agha Soltan raised international awareness, the government of Iran attempted to neutralize the event by first claiming that Neda was alive, then claiming that she was killed by BBC news, and finally claiming that Neda was an actress and that the video was fake.[119] Regardless of the government's attempt at underplaying the severity of the event, the repression of Iranian women was exposed on an international level, revealing the cruelty of the Islamist-led government. Although the repression of the Green Movement resulted in the failure of the improvement of women's rights and empowerment in Iran, the

---

[116] Ibid: 63.
[117] Moghadam, Valentine M. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013..83.
[118] Afshari, Reza. "Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism." Project MUSE, 2011.11.
[119] HBO Documentaries: For Neda. By Antony Thomas. HBO: Synopsis. Home Box Office, Inc., 2010.

revolutionary protests acted as a catalyst for the uprisings of the Arab Spring in raising awareness for the demands of repressed women in the Middle East and North Africa.

Through a transnational feminist lens, the problem of Islam dictating the legal system remains the overarching issue of women's rights violations in Iran. The emergence of the theocratic regime in Iran had an impact on the struggle for women's rights. The Sharia implemented by the 1979 revolutionary Supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini instigated stern Islamization of gender relations.[120] An example of this is a women's right to judge, where this right is denied due to the fact that according to Islamic principle, women's "special physical and psychological state, are not able to be rational, cautious and neutral therefore the Islamic Republic of Iran justifies the dismissal of all women judges."[121] Islamist movements are virulently antifeminist, where their perception of the ideal woman in society is "the veiled wife, supporting her husband's jihad, rearing committed Muslims at home, and transmitting religious and cultural practices."[122] Women who do not support this societal image are deemed as having been corrupted by the West. These women are thus subjected to Islamist bullying such as warnings, verbal abuse, corporal punishment, assassination, and in the case of Iran due to the extremist Islamic law, they could be subject to imprisonment or execution.[123]

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran includes several western concepts, where Article 3 includes securing rights of all citizens, both men and women as well as judicial security, however religion clearly shapes the status of women, not as

---

[120] Mojab, Shahrzad. "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism'." Feminist Review 69 (2001): 124-46.
[121] Ibid
[122] Moghadam, Valentine M. "Confronting "Empire": The New Imperialism, Islamism and Feminism." Political Power and Social Theory 20 (2009): 201-26.
[123] Ibid

citizens, but as subjects of Islamic patriarchy in Iran.[124] As seen in the case of the Arab Spring, the attainment of women's rights under the Islamic Law is futile and counterproductive. Many scholars believe that stern traditional values and forceful patriarchal religious laws are the main impediment in women's empowerment. An ultimate victory in reversing gender inequality in the Islamic Republic of Iran would imply a legal system in which Islam and culture are separate from governmental policies.

While transnational feminist networks are aware of the fact that Western values and beliefs are different from Muslim values and beliefs, Western imposition is seen as a means of worsening women's rights violations in Iran, hampering any possible victories for the empowerment of women. The severing of Iranian and American relations have been apparent long before the 1979 Iranian revolution, where the spread of Islamic fundamentalism is seen as a backlash to the imposition of Western values in Iran.[125] The Iranian government uses language to instil guilt in women for succumbing to imperialist temptations including the use of western cosmetics to paint their faces similar to Western women.[126] The events taking place on September 11th disrupted social harmony and paved the way for irreversible bipolarity between the West and the Middle East.[127] The revival of cultural and religious traditions seen in the uprisings of the Arab Spring is an alternative to the failure of Western modernization and clearly illustrates the heightened hostility towards the West.

---

[124] Mojab, Shahrzad. "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism'." Feminist Review 69 (2001): 124-46.
[125] Bahramitash, Roksana. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran." International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 16, no. 4 (2005): 551. Accessed October 21, 2012.
[126] Afshari, Reza. "Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism." Project MUSE, 2011.
[127] Byng, M. D. "Symbolically Muslim: Media, Hijab, and the West." Critical Sociology 36, no. 1 (2010): 109-29. Accessed November 23, 2012.

One of the main issues regarding human rights in Iran is how they are viewed on an international level. More recently, Iran has taken the spotlight as being one of the most contentious states in international affairs with the pursuit of their nuclear ambitions and is seen as a threat on a global scale. Iran is facing severe sanctions due to their nuclear ambitions, thus creating more rights' abuses for women as the stern sanctions worsen the social, political, and significant economic conditions of the state.[128] The concept of 'hyper-masculinities' regarding Saddam Hussein in Iraq and George Bush in the US is a contributor to the negative impacts of the sanctions on Iranian women. This dichotomy is described as a clash of heroic masculinities, which is ultimately a contributing factor in women's oppression.[129] This can be seen through the sanctions placed on Iraq in the 1990's, which were punitive and received very little attention. In regards to women, the sanctions affected gender inequalities, the deterioration of women's social roles, legal status and family position.[130] Due to the predominantly Muslim and authoritarian condition of the Middle East, "it allows the American ruling elite to try to cover its military and economic ambition with the mask of human rights, women's rights and democracy."[131] The notion of democracy is undermined when there are egregious rights' violations in the country that are paradoxically worsened by American intervention.

Regardless of whether or not Iran's nuclear ambitions are of harmful intentions or not, it is contested that the sanctions are having a negative effect on women's rights in Iran, similar to Iraq. Similar to the sanctions placed on Iraq, the corollary of Western

---

[128] "What the Women Say: Killing Them Softly: The Stark Impact of Sanctions on the Lives of Ordinary Iranians." International Civil Society Action Network. July, 2012.
[129] Moghadam, Valentine M. "Confronting "Empire": The New Imperialism, Islamism and Feminism." Political Power and Social Theory 20 (2009): 201-26.
[130] Ibid
[131] Ibid

intervention is invariably as harmful in Iran. ICAN, a transnational feminist network focusing on women's rights, peace and security, demonstrates the impact of sanctions on the Iranian society.[132] The sanctions placed on Iraq are put forward by the ICAN organization, claiming that the sanctions in Iraq resulted in the withdrawal of girls from education as well as increase child marriage, where Iranian girls are at risk of similar developments.[133]

The ICAN organization posits the notion that the sanctions not only further isolate women from the international sphere, but they also undermine women's empowerment for several reasons. The international imposition of sanctions are severely worsening women's rights violations in Iran and will not aid in the fight against traditional and patriarchal structures, and it is for this reason that transnational feminist networks must collaborate the local with the global in order to ensure that Western imposition no longer worsens the abused rights of women in local Muslim societies. Women's access to higher education is limited due to the economic hardships, and are experiencing staggering unemployment rates due to the economic sanctions and are being pushed out of the job market.[134] Furthermore, Iranian women are at risk of governmental regression of the social agenda in order for the women to return to the domestic sphere, hindering their ability to advance in the public sphere and worsening the gender inequalities.[135] Violence against Iranian women is also an increasing issue as men's inability to live up to social standards leads to tumult in the household, depression and ultimate assault on women.[136]

---

[132] "What the Women Say: Killing Them Softly: The Stark Impact of Sanctions on the Lives of Ordinary Iranians." International Civil Society Action Network. July, 2012.
[133] Ibid
[134] Ibid
[135] Ibid
[136] Ibid

As the Islamic Republic of Iran is fundamentally based on the Sharia, lack of compatibility is created between Iranian and Western human rights where the imposition of Western values in the country is argued to be ineffective and worsens women's oppression in the region. This chapter has demonstrated how the uprisings of the Arab Spring did not facilitate the alleviation of human rights violations in Iran due to the fact that the rise of Islam in Middle Eastern and North African countries has furthered the gender inequalities in the region and has not contributed to the improvement of women's rights and empowerment in Iran. Transnational feminist networks seek to tackle legal issues in order for Islam to ultimately remain separate from the legal system to ensure that traditional structures of the Islamic government refrain from impeding the improvement of women's rights and empowerment in Iran. The failed revolutionary protests of the repressive Green Movement can be seen as a harbinger for the failure of the Arab Spring due to the emergence of Islamic governments. Due to the significant amount of death, violence, and harsh repression against women resulting from the trauma of the Green Movement, Iranian women live in fear, ultimately hampering any spilling over of the revolutionary protests from the Arab Spring.

Conclusion

The fight for women's rights and empowerment during the 2009 Green Movement in Iran acted as a catalyst for the 2011 uprisings of the Arab Spring, attracting worldwide attention through the upsurge of social movements and the use of social media in the region. As the failure of the Green Movement reinforced the Iranian Islamic government, it acted as a precursor to the failure of the Arab Spring due to the emergence of Islamist

bodies in the Middle Eastern and North African region. 'Moderate' Islamist-led governments emerged from the Arab Spring as exemplified in Tunisia and Egypt, further worsening women's rights and empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa. Due to traditional and patriarchal structures, the Arab Spring did not facilitate the improvement of women's rights and empowerment in Iran due to Iran's stern Islamist-led government under the Sharia. The 'Islamic Awakening' through the Arab Spring is seen in a positive light according to Iranian officials, however Islam is the main impediment for the improvement of women's rights. Through a transnational feminist lens it is evident that Islam must be detached from the legal systems in Muslim states in order for women to gain freedom and empowerment, while holding true to their religious beliefs.

As Western values and beliefs are incompatible with those of Muslim values and beliefs, Western imposition is counterproductive to the fight for women's rights, where transnational feminists networks argue that international sanctions worsen women's repression in authoritarian states. Iran is a clear example where sanctions hinder the fight for women's rights, and should not be implemented in states where there are vast gender inequalities and grave women's abused rights, as sanctions undermine the notion of democracy and rights for women. Transnational feminist networks seek to collaboratively work towards the improvement of rights and empowerment of women, conscious of the fact that values and beliefs will have differences and similarities in the West versus the Muslim world. It is for this reason that the local and the global must co-operate together to address the flaws in the legal systems of Islamist-led governments while refraining from the implementation of international sanctions on local Muslim communities.

Furthermore, the Iranian government has clamped down on governmental policies and regulations due to the revolt and protest in the region, worsening the repressive state for women in the country. In more recent events, the Iranian government is clamping down on human rights violations, where Iranian women are being banned from more than 30 universities, restricting women's access to education and disengaging them in society so that they return to domestic responsibilities.[137] Moreover, despite the fact that Islam does not require girls to be veiled until they are nine, the governor of Tehran is stressing the importance of veiling in kindergarten before reaching that of higher education.[138] The road to the empowerment and greater rights for Middle Eastern and North African women is heavily obstructed and stagnant, and this is due to the stern traditional Islamic and patriarchal structures. If transnational feminist networks succeed in fighting for the detachment of Islam from the legal system, Muslim women in the Middle East and North Africa are one step away from achieving rights and empowerment that are rightfully deserved.

---

[137] Sahraei, Fariba. "Iranian University Bans on Women Causes Consternation." BBC News. September 22, 2012.

[138] Iran Tackles 'inappropriate Dressing' by Teaching Chastity and Hijab to Toddlers." Tehran Bureau. February 26, 2013.

Bibliography

Acharya, Amitav. "Dialogue and Discovery: In Search of International Relations Theories Beyond the West." *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 39.3 (2011).

Afshari, Reza. "Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism." *Project MUSE*, 2011.

Ahmari, Sohrab, and Naser Weddady. *Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Ira*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Ali, Ayaan. *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

Allawi, Ali A. "Human Rights and Human Duties." In *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009.

"Arab Spring Should Advance Women's Rights Too." *The Globe and Mail*. 31 January 2013. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/editorials/arab-spring-should-advance-womens-rights-too/article8068199

Badran, Margot. "Between Secular and Islamic Feminisms Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond." *Journal of Middle East Womens Studies* 1.1 (2005): 6-28.

Bahramitash, Roksana. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16.4 (2005).

Bashi, Golbarg. "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role." In *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future*. Edited by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010.

Beinin, Joel. *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011.

Byng, M. D. "Symbolically Muslim: Media, Hijab, and the West." *Critical Sociology* 36.1 (2010): 109-29.

Carey, Sabine C., Mark Gibney, and Stephen C. Poe. *The Politics of Human Rights: The Quest For Dignity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Coleman, Isobel. "Are the Mideast Revolutions Bad for Women's Rights?" *Washington Post*. 20 February 2011. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/ article/2011/02/18/AR2011021806962.html.

Dabashi, Hamid. *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*. London: Zed Books, 2012.

Derrida, Jacques, Mustapha Cherif, and Teresa Lavender. *Islam and the West: A Conversation With Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Giacomo, Carol. "Women Fight to Define the Arab Spring." *The New York Times Sunday Review The Opinion Pages*. 10 November 2012. http://www.nytimes .com/2012/11/11/opinion/sunday/woman-fight-to-define-the-arab-spring spring.html?_r=2&.

Girgis, Monique. "Women in Pre-revolutionary, Revolutionary and Post-revolutionary Iran." *Iran Chamber Society*. 1 January 1996.

Golley, Nawar Al−Hassan. "Is Feminism Relevant To Arab Women?" *Third World Quarterly* 25.3 (2004): 521-36.

HBO Documentaries. *For Neda*. By Antony Thomas. 2010.

"Iran Tackles 'Inappropriate Dressing' by Teaching Chastity and Hijab to Toddlers." *The Guardian Tehran Bureau*. 26 February 2013. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/iran-blog/2013/feb/26/iran-inappropriate-dressing-chastity-hijab-toddlers.

Mahmoud, Nervana. "The Muslim Brotherhood's Treatment of Women Reveals Its Agenda for Egypt*." The Globe and Mail*. 23 March 2013. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/the-muslim-brotherhoods-treatment-of-women-reveals-its-agenda-for-egypt/article10052979.

Manhire, Toby. *The Arab Spring: Rebellion, Revolution, and a New World Order*. London: Guardian Books, 2012.

Mashayekhi, Mehrdad. "The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15.2 (2001): 283-313. Accessed October 21, 2012. http:/http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/stable/pdfplus/20020116.pdf?acceptTC=true.

Metcalfe, Beverly Dawn. "Women. Management and Globalization in the Middle East." *Journal of Business Ethics* 83.1 (2008): 85-100.

Moghadam, Valentine M. *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Confronting 'Empire': The New Imperialism, Islamism and Feminism." *Political Power and Social Theory* 20 (2009): 201-26.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27.4 (2009): 1135-71.

Mojab, Shahrzad. "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism'." *Feminist Review* 69 (2001): 124-46

Morton, Stephen. *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and The Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

Posusney, Marsha Pripstein. "Enduring Authoritarianism: Middle East Lessons for Comparative Theory." *Comparative Politics* 36.2 (2004):.

Reguly, Eric. "In Tunisia, Cradle of the Arab Spring, Reformers' Hopes Are Thwarted by Strident Islam." *The Globe and Mail*. 3 February 2013. http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/in-tunisia-cradle-of-the-arab-spring-reformers-hopes-are-thwarted-by-strident-islam/article8281780.

Sahraei, Fariba. "Iranian University Bans on Women Causes Consternation." *BBC News*. 22 September 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19665615.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.

Twiss, Sumner B. "History, Human Rights, And Globalization." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32.1 (2004): 39-70.

Weber, Cynthia. *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2001.

"What the Women Say: Killing Them Softly: The Stark Impact of Sanctions on the Lives of Ordinary Iranians." *International Civil Society Action Network*. July, 2012. www.icanpeaceworks.org.

Worth, Robert. "Effort to Rebrand Arab Spring Backfires in Iran." *The New York Times*. 3 February 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/world/middleeast/effort-to-rebrand-arab-spring-backfires-in-iran.html?pagewanted=all.

Wing, Adrien K. "The 'Arab Fall': The Future of Women's Rights." *U.C. Davis Journal of International Law & Policy*, 2012.