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Voices of Women in the Arab Spring

This paper attempts to analyse the new and exciting times occurring currently in the Middle East. I will be examining the role of women during the Arab Spring by taking a community psychological approach, by assessing the issues of marginalization, concientization, and empowerment presented by the media articles under analysis written by female Arab journalists, bloggers and activists. I aim to find analyses in Islamic feminist literature which deal with the issue of religion, gender, and patriarchy within specific cultural and religious backgrounds.

Keywords

Feminism, Islamic feminism, Arab spring, community psychology, media, social networking

1 The Arab Spring

'Arab Spring' is the term generally used in the media in reference to the turbulent and yet exciting changes currently occurring in the Middle East. The recent uprisings were initially sparked by a young Tunisian fruit seller, Mohammed Bouazizi on the 17th December 2010. In sheer desperation over unemployment, corruption and lack of freedom of speech afforded to Tunisians under the despotic rule of president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Bouazizi set himself alight and died as a result of his injuries. This tragic incident led to surges of Tunisians coming out in huge protests against the corrupt regime. Despite an initial crackdown, the uprising in Tunisia led to the ousting of the Tunisian president and calls for democracy and free elections.

These events in Tunisia sent shock waves across the Arab region, and Egypt was the next country to hold a popular uprising. This was undoubtedly assisted by what has become known as the "Facebook generation" (Springborg 2011). Young protestors began an online campaign that encouraged thousands of Egyptians across the whole country to come out to protest in desperate hopes of achieving the same outcome that the Tunisians were able to bring about. The instant access to information provided by the internet and the vast numbers of people with access to mobile phones, allowed the popular uprising to spread like wildfire. Once again, despite an initial brutal crackdown, President Hosni Mubarak was forced into exile (Tadros 2012).

A Facebook campaign began in Libya, which culminated in huge demonstrations in the city of Benghazi on 17th February 2011. However, what is less well known perhaps is that initial protests in Benghazi were started on the 15th February by the mothers and families of 1,200 men who were brutally massacred by machine gun fire in the Abu Saleem prison in 1996 in Tripoli. These mothers had come out in protest after the lawyer they had

appointed to ensure that those who killed their sons and husbands were brought to justice was imprisoned by Gadaffi forces the previous night.

This led to a general uprising in Benghazi which, following the usual pattern, was subjugated by a brutal crackdown. As Gadaffi prepared for a final brutal assault on the city of Benghazi, a United Nations resolution, 1973, was immediately implemented by NATO in support of the Libyan revolutionaries. Gadaffi was killed by rebel forces in the city of Sirte where he was hiding out on Sunday October 23rd 2011. Celebrations ensued to announce the liberation of Libya, which were held in Benghazi, called the cradle of the revolution.

1.1 Feminism

Feminism has fought for the rights of women throughout history, to allow women's voices to be heard and to have political and social relevance, so that attitudes as well as laws can be changed to support women. As Conrad and Peplau (1989, 381) state, 'feminism is both an ideology - a set of beliefs and values about women and gender relations - and a social-political movement for social change'. However, there are differences between different types of feminists and how they work towards ensuring that women are heard.

Pre-1980, issues related to feminism were subjected to a world-wide generalisation that assumed that all types of women's activism against oppression was the same and that women everywhere faced the same problems. This premise was put forward by western feminists who assumed that their political aims were universally applicable to all women and that oppression against women was common to all. This assumption of commonality failed to take into account the many divisions and differences apparent when feminist issues take into account race, class, religion, nationality, region, language and sexual orientation (McEwan 2001).

These divisions were not previously considered and feminism in general was based on 'Western' theories that were often not applicable in other settings, divisions and differences were neither acknowledged nor anticipated. Today, feminism is viewed not only as an ideology, but also as a movement for social change, and this has been

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highlighted by the role of women in the Arab Spring.

Feminism in relation to social change is a political movement where the main aims are the improvement of women's lives and to bring gender equality into every aspect of public life. However, there is no doubt that there are many individual definitions of feminism and this is often reflected in the actual commitment to social activism (Conrad & Peplau 1989). This issue of diversity and difference amongst women is clearly illustrated in Peplau and Conrad's (1989, 385) quote:

'As some have put it, the notion that there is no universal man, implies that there is also no universal woman - women's lives and experiences are varied'.

Feminists themselves often differ and fail to agree on certain aspects of feminism and often have rigid views based on their own experiences and perspectives which take no account of diversity of experience and opinions. Western feminists can often view 'their' feminism as being a universal view that all women should follow and agree with. In recent years, this has been questioned by feminists from other cultures (Burman 1990).

Black feminists view the notion that 'women fitted into a unitary group' to be simplistic when considering their other struggles (Davis 1992; Bjavani & Coulson 1986). The argument put forward by black feminists is that since the main objective of feminism is to emancipate all women from the constraints placed upon them, then feminist ideology should not only theorize the similarities found amongst women, but should also include the differences between them (Burman 1990).

This same argument can also be put forward by feminists in the Islamic world who are often perceived as oppressed by western feminists without consideration for the differing and diverse set of challenges that Muslim women face in their countries.

It is inevitable that women within devalued groups tend to question any negative inferences towards their group. There is a tendency for such groups to try to redefine feminist ideologies that view their differences as being problematic. It has often been the case that feminists who choose to define specific social dilemmas purely from their own personal viewpoint are often completely removed from the actual problems they are attempting to define. It could even be argued by some that such disregard for, and ignorance of the issues faced by other groups of women, is actually just another form of oppression that needs to be addressed (Burman 1990).

What is important to note is that to women of other races and cultures, the issue of patriarchy was not of the utmost importance since they suffer oppressions due to race and class as well as gender, and therefore, their experiences as women were more complex and differed greatly from those of white Western women. Much like black women, Arab women's experiences differ greatly, and therefore what they want to challenge will differ when dealing

with a range of conflicting issues which surround them which will be under discussion.

1.2 Islamic feminism

Islamic feminist readings are an integral part of the process to enable an understanding of the issues facing Muslim women in the Arab world and elsewhere. This is often viewed as being 'paradoxical' and many Western secular feminists find issue with the very notion of 'Islamic' feminism, as they often view religion in itself to be patriarchal in nature and therefore inherently misogynistic towards women in general.

This view is also linked to the general perception in the West that Islam treats women badly, a view that is often encouraged by the press and media. This pervasive view of Islam propagated by the West and leapt upon by secular feminists is often a point of contention for many Muslim women. Many such derogatory viewpoints towards Islam's alleged treatment of women are fuelled by ignorance about the religion, culture, and customs. Katherin Viner (2000) refers to the use of feminism to gain political support as the 'theft of feminist rhetoric', to make women a cause for international politics.

Even so, for many Muslim women who perceive themselves as feminists, the labelling of Islamic feminism is problematic for them also. Asma Barlas comments about her own issues with being labelled an Islamic feminist by others and questions the whole notion of Islamic feminism:

'As Margot has defined it, Islamic feminism is a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.' (Barlas 2004, 1)

The problem highlighted by Barlas (2004) is that even though the definition as given by Margot should mean all devout Muslims must, by definition, also be Islamic feminists, differing interpretations of the Quran means that opinions differ amongst Muslims and often Islamic practice is intertwined with cultural practices and the lines become blurred.

This issue of interpretation is one which many Islamic feminists have contended with. Many believe that the major issue with the perception that Islam is problematic for women and women's rights is primarily due to the interpretations which have limited the rights women have within Islam, and that this is quite often primarily due to the more strict and conservative interpretations of Islam that would appear to treat women as less than equals.

1.3 Islam and patriarchy

Barlas (2004) believes that the main reason the Quran is patriarchal is simply due to the fact that readings and interpretations of the Quran have

traditionally been undertaken by men who were living within an already existing patriarchal system where men were perceived as being dominant over women. Within this context, many of the traditional Quranic interpretations have been skewed to meet the needs of men, thus ensuring the continuance of male domination and culture.

One of the questions that needs to be answered - whether from a religious or a secular viewpoint - is who has the authority to interpret texts and which interpretations are then accepted within a particular society, who decides upon the nature of authority and how it derives its legitimacy.

Historically, Muslims have read the Quran and accepted the general view of scholastic interpretations that Islam is a patriarchal religion. However, in recent times, contemporary scholars argue that Quranic interpretations are related to who has read the Quran and in what context. Traditional conservative Muslims will always read the Quran with a patriarchal perspective that they feel comfortable with. For this reason they are unwilling to consider alternative interpretations because these threaten their traditional roles within society. As a result, customs and traditions become more entrenched in their restricted view of Islamic teachings and practices in order to continue with the traditional gender roles they are comfortable with, regardless of the rights of women granted to them in Islamic law.

Islamic feminism challenges these conservative, traditional interpretations of Islam and highlights the ideology of equality and liberty for all.

1.4 Hybrid feminism

Ahmed-Gosh (2008) goes further in discussions regarding the limitations of secular and Islamic feminism and instead introduces us to a new form of feminism referred to as 'hybridized feminism', which presents an amalgamation of both secular and Islamic feminist viewpoints in an attempt to rid both of their individual limitations:

'Hybrid feminism could be the analytical tool to address women's issues as affecting them regionally and culturally. This flexibility is defined through women's real lives in their communities as dictated by their social norms and local and national politics. Such grounded reality of women's lived experiences varies not just from region to region but also rural through urban, class, tribal and ethnic identities.' (Ahmed-Gosh 2008, 102)

This new way of looking at women's issues and how best to resolve them by pinpointing them within the regional and cultural positions in which women live is vital in looking at the Libyan and Egyptian revolutions. Although these two countries are neighbouring, both are Arab, North African, and predominantly Muslim countries, the specific cultural and regional norms vary drastically. Even within those countries, cities are often perceived socially more open, whereas rural areas tend to be more

conservative in dealing with issues related to women.

In being able to understand the differences in women's needs and the issues which effect their daily lives, this form of hybrid feminism is a step forward from the often enclosed space of understanding provided by Islamic and secular feminists.

Charrad (2006) emphasises the importance of the multidimensionality of Muslim countries, and the cultures within them. It is important to note how different each individual country is and not to pigeon hole Muslim countries and women as one homogenous group who act, think, and experience the same culture in the same way. However, what Charrad (2006) does bring forward is that women are looking for change through the use of religion, in order to guide them and bring change.

1.5 Politics of the veil

One other crucial way in which Muslim women are politicized is through the veil, which is an issue of contention across the Western world. According to Charrad (1998) the veil is often used to 'evoke images of passivity and subordination' which is often the problem between liberal feminist and Islamic feminists. However, for many Muslim women the veil, which is so often politicized and deemed negative, is for them a sign of 'resistance, protest, empowerment and entry into male space', as has become apparent during the Arab Spring. Women were standing side by side with men in protest, were camping out all night, which was culturally a taboo in the conservative Muslim countries, and its through the veil that these women were able to show resistance, not only to the changing government but also to all those who deemed Muslim women as silent and passive.

Abu-Lughod (2002), in an aptly named article asks the important question, 'Do Muslim women really need saving?'. She questions the 'obsession with the plight of Muslim women' in the West.

She notes how throughout colonial history women have been used as an excuse to justify the actions of ruling global powers. In her view '...the significant political-ethical problem the burqa raises is how to deal with cultural 'others'' (Abu-Lughod 2002, 786). The 'other' has been perceived a problem throughout colonialist history and literature, and the veil has acted as a means in which women in the Middle East have become mystified in the West.

It is important to understand the context that women's lives are being presented from, and to understanding the cultural, religious, and historical aspects related to them. This will guide our understanding in how women's voices have been presented during the revolution and what roles they played.

1.6 Methodology

In this study I will be employing a multi method approach, using thematic analysis through the use of various mixed media articles found through the

internet using a qualitative approach. The use of a qualitative methodology allows a more in-depth investigation and analysis of the texts. Thematic analysis is used to bring out themes present in the documents under analysis.

The following articles, video transcript, and interview were chosen to be analyzed in this research:

1. Dalia Ziada transcript on video shown on vimeo.com in a British feminist blog called *The f-Word*

2. Eman El Obaidi, 'our logo' article, in a website called *Peace X Peace- Raising Women's Voices*

3. The Guardian article '*Libya will only become inclusive when women are given a say in its future*' by Farah Abushwsha is a Libyan-Irish writer and film-maker and a member of Women for Libya

4. Article printed in The Guardian and presented in Mona Eltahawys blog titled, '*These virginity tests will spark Egypt's next revolution*'

These texts were specifically chosen to have an all-female and Arab voice from the two countries under focus in the study, which are Libya and Egypt. These women are activists, bloggers, and journalists and present the voice of some women in the Arab revolution.

One reason the internet was chosen as a means to collect data for this research was the sheer number of sources available for this topic. The popularity of the internet during the Arab Spring sparked a huge interest to find out how useful the internet had become in pushing forward popular revolts, such as those seen in the Middle East, and understanding the role of women during these times.

These media texts will be approached using thematic analysis, which will enable me to pull out major themes which are present in the texts and which are important to the writer (Feredy, Muir, Cochrane 2006). Rubin and Rubin (2002) suggest that thematic analysis is important within research because themes are discovered during any analysis of data. However, despite its wide application, there is a certain amount of discussion as to what the definition of thematic analysis is and how to actually use it.

One approach, that was highlighted by Weber among others, is known as 'verstehen' or 'understanding'. The basis of this approach is to adopt an interpretive view of social and cultural events which is founded upon understanding (Hayes 2000, Gergen 1985).

According to Miller and Banyard (1998) the use of qualitative approaches to research follows the community psychology 'core values' in research methodology. This is primarily because it offers an opportunity to find out the 'why' questions of human life and behaviour, in order to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of others. These developments led to specific research into feminist psychology in the 1980's. The conventional norms of psychological methodology were questioned by feminists who placed greater emphasis on the

significance of human behaviour and experiences in psychological research and analysis. The foundations of the feminist proposals were that new research could be meaningful and rigorous without the previous need for dependence upon statistics to achieve academic recognition (Hayes 2000).

In order to give a 'voice' to the women who have written the articles as well as those they represent, a qualitative approach in methodology presents the researcher with ample opportunity to discover more depth within each piece analysed. In fact, Feminists recommend greater reliance on qualitative data techniques as a way to correct the biases of traditional quantitative methods. Qualitative techniques are seen as a way to encourage researchers to focus on the entire context and to be open to multiple, interacting influences. It also allows the researcher to be more spontaneous, altering the focus of observation as the situation changes (Peplau & Conrad 1989).

The themes which have emerged through the research have been based on a community psychology outlook in order to understand how the voice of women has been influential throughout the Arab Spring. Community psychology is the understanding of how individuals impact the societies in which they live. Themes which are discussed here and are of great importance to community psychologists include marginalization, social change, conscientization, empowerment and participation, the self and agency, gender roles and politics as well as looking at how women's voices are perceived through the internet and the media.

2 Analysis

During analysis of the articles certain themes were discovered which will be under discussion. A community psychological approach is presented in dealing with the themes which have arisen from the mixed media documents.

2.1 Marginalization

Marginalization is at the very centre of exclusion within society and prevents the fulfilment of full and active social integration on individual, interpersonal, and societal levels. This exclusion through marginalisation basically disenfranchises people, leaving them with little control over their own lives and circumstances, nor over the resources and services they can access (Burton & Kagan 2003).

In many cases, stigmatization within society can result in negative public attitudes towards those who are marginalized, which serves to further entrench them within the fringes of society. As a direct result of their forced exclusion from society, such individuals have few opportunities to make any form of social contribution. This inevitably leads to the invasive development of low self-esteem and self-confidence (Burton & Kagan 2003).

In the interview with a Libyan activist, Amani Mufta Ismail, where she is asked about the case of Iman Obaidi, who was brutally raped in Libya by Gadaffi forces during the conflict, she talks about the struggles for Arab women to discuss such a sensitive issue as sexual abuse:

'It's so hard for the Arabic woman to say that. It's not easy. Maybe there are thousands of Eman Al-Obeidi — not thousands, millions of Eman Al-Obeidi in the Arab world — but they never say that because maybe our traditions, our culture, our families, we can't say that.' (2011)

However, in many situations, people who are oppressed can also present great resistance and resilience which can open up opportunities to reclaim and reinvent their circumstances. For many individuals, exclusion and isolation with a denial of their basic, fundamental rights can push for a desire to remedy the situation and an improvement of circumstances (Kagan & Burton 2003).

The resilience shown by this young activist towards such a sensitive issue at such difficult times, is very revealing. She goes on to say that *'We are all Eman Al-Obeidi, not she, just she, but all of us, even me. I am Eman Al-Obeidi because we are sisters, we are all Libyans, we are all Arab, we are all human'* (2011). The resilience and support towards Eman Al Obeidi and the thousands of other women who have suffered during the revolution, as well as before and after, to sexual abuse has proved a new shift in subjects which have become important to discuss without the regular cultural stigma placed on them.

Liberation psychology involved the application of a rather different proposition which served to challenge gratuitous academism by looking towards the popular masses, or what has been referred to as 'the oppressed majorities' by Martin-Baro, for the truth (Burton 2003).

According to Burton (2003), people become marginalized within a society or community because of the manner in which the society discriminates against them as a result of attitudes towards age, disability, nationality, ethnicity, sexual preference and of course gender. Within a feminist framework, it would be viewed that women in general hold a marginalized position within society and this is clearly depicted in the articles and blogs under discussion.

Eman Al Obeidi's story is an emotional look at the way women were treated during the revolution in Libya, where there was systematic sexual abuse of women by Gadaffi's forces to bring shame and dishonour to families within the religiously conservative country. She says *'It's so hard for the Arabic woman to say that. It's not easy.'*

Also in Mona Eltahawy's article on the virginity tests, which were forced to shame women by the Egyptian police, it shows the extent to which women's sexuality is used to keep them marginalised and silenced within society. She urges that *'this must be our moment of reckoning with the god of virginity. The rage against the military must also target the*

humiliation brought by those tests, regardless of who carries them out.'

In Dalia Ziads transcript she also mentions the struggle they've had with male protesters after the revolution, she describes 'the reaction from the male protesters was very bad' when women came out fighting for their rights in Egypt.

2.2 Social change/Process of change

Much of the work involved in community psychology is concerned with how to improve and bring about social change in order to initiate positive advances with regard to social deprivation, social disadvantage, and social inequality (Kagan 2005).

The main aim of emancipatory action is to raise collective consciousness to provide participants with the means to identify specific problems. This involves the investigation of a core-existing social phenomena and explores the options for bringing about social transformation (Grundy 1987)

The main aim of community psychology is to examine and analyse how social problems impact on the individual and to encourage a focus on the positive aspects relating to both the community and the individual. There is a huge focus in community psychology with Rapport's (1981, 1984, 1987) ideas on empowerment, ensuring that people understood the reasons behind the very structural issues which were disempowering them, and how to overcome them. Although, many psychologists understand that many inequalities within communities are related to their economic well being (Prilleltensky 2001).

This is very apparent in the Arab Spring and the way that the population understood the reasons why they were disempowered by the regimes. Now that those brutal regimes have been dismantled, women continue to struggle to gain their rightful position in society, as the young activist Dalia Ziad found out when she decided to participate in a women's day in Egypt. Her argument is, *'we want to be equal, we want to end, we want us to get our dignity as women, not only as Egyptians'*.

According to Hercus (1999, 41) *'feminist activism, whatever form it takes, signifies anger and reveals a deviant identity'*. Although the Arab revolutions were not initially started within a feminist backdrop, the very rights that women have been asking for as a result of the revolutions, has made this a feminist cause in nature, which was fuelled by anger at the injustices and suppression of their rights.

However, it is important to note, as Makkawi and Jaramillo (2005, 51) state, that to these female activists *'it is equally important to emphasise their deep and unquestionable commitment to the national struggle in general'*.

As well as this, *'Many women's rights advocates in the Islamic world demand empowerment within a changing Islamic culture'* (Charrad 1998, 75). Although women are looking for change much like Mahmoods (2004) work in the Mosque movement in Egypt, many women are looking for it within their own culture and religion.

Moghadam (2005) discusses the role of 'trans-national feminist networks', which connect and organise women from a variety of countries beyond a national level in order to support the issues affecting them all. Both Egypt and Libya have similar issues affecting women and would benefit in working together in order to deal with the inequalities present.

2.3 Conscientization

The main issue with much of the information related to women in the Arab world revolves around letting others know what is affecting women. This is to educate others of the problems and dilemmas women face, at a national and international level.

Part of the work that the four journalists and bloggers under discussion here are doing is bringing across those issues in order to publicise them and raise awareness within the public realm in order to bring about conscientization by educating people through social networking sites and media outlets:

'...man [sic] as being who exists in and with the world. since the basic condition for conscientization is that its agent must be a subject (that is, a conscious being), conscientization...is specifically and exclusively a human process' (Freire 1974).

The rape and sexual assault of Eman Al Obeidi and the role of other women in supporting her plight is of great importance to making relevant changes and educating others about the plight of women suffering from these issues.

Similarly, Mona Eltahway's article on the issue of forced virginity tests on female protestors in the '*hope it would shame them back home*', (2011) gained a lot of media attention, unlike the sexual assaults that occurred in Cairo years before the Arab Spring, which wasn't mentioned in mainstream media even though it sparked a huge social networking campaign.

2.4 Empowerment/Participation

According to Zimmermann (1990) and Rappaport (1984) it is not difficult to describe the lack of empowerment one has. They note 'alienation, powerless, helplessness', as characteristics of lacking power, but that it is more difficult to provide a succinct description of empowerment as it differs so greatly for every individual. Research on participation was found to be beneficial to individuals' empowerment as people are 'learning new skills, gaining information, helping others, increasing social contact, and fulfilling obligations' (Zimmerman 1990, 171).

Abushwasha (2011) points out the need for women's involvements in the formation of a new Libya, '*Women are a beneficial and vital force in Libya's future. We must be openly and transparently included in discussions and supported to participate*

at all levels. To neglect this is to dishonour the legacy of the brave Libyan men and women who have given their lives for basic human rights' (2011).

These Arab women have found themselves empowered through the revolution, their voices have been heard and presented more widely across the internet and national and international media, and they have ensured that their roles as women are presented in the rebuilding of their nation.

We can clearly see in the interview with the young Libyan woman that the tragic incident involving the rape of Iman Obeidi has formed a relationship among women across Libya as 'sisters'; it gave them a cause to support in order to feel a sense of collective empowerment.

This is also the case in Egypt where the young activist Dalia Ziad talks about the community gathering together for the same cause on the same side to oust Mubarak from power. She remarks '*it was amazing what the Egyptian [people] has achieved in these protests. We never thought it's gonna turn into a real revolution when we first started it*'.

Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005), looked at how communities can work together in order to change the issues which oppress them. We can see in the Dalia Ziad transcript on Vimeo, that she brings across her excitement at the revolution and what she perceived to '*turn into something really big*' because of the numbers of people as well as the difference in the types of people who turned out to the protests. It was her realisation that it went beyond the cyber-activists and that '*it is the whole population is coming out*' (2011).

However, like many Egyptian women, she realizes that simply participating in these protests is not enough to change the situation of women in Egypt. Although these women felt empowered through their participation in the revolution, at the end of it there is still more that needs to be done in order for their voices to be valued and listened to in a legal and political context.

Dalia Ziad mentions the example of an Egyptian law which prohibits a woman from working outside the home if she is unable to 'balance' her home life with her work life and therefore her traditional role as a woman would be deemed more valuable for her than her life outside the home. As well as this, although Egypt has a very highly educated female population, Ziad mentions '*we have female judges in Egypt, but none of these judges, although they are highly qualified, none of them was invited for example to participate in the committee that helped moderate some articles in the constitution*'.

Rappaport's (1995, 796) work on empowerment and narratives suggests that through listening to the narratives of others it 'tells us not only who we are but who we have been and who we can be'. Often those who lack power have a narrative written for them by others. The experiences of Muslim women in the media tend to be written by often male Arab or Western journalists. Through the articles and blogs presented in this research, we are able to empower the voices of Arab women in allowing their

narrative to be presented.

Interestingly, Riger (1993), in her paper titled 'What's wrong with Empowerment', believes that the study of empowerment is heavily focused on the individuals sense of empowerment rather than the actual increases in power, thereby making the 'political personal'.

In some ways, the study of empowerment can mask the actual lack of power that marginalized and oppressed people within society have. Feeling empowered to make changes through social activism like the women under study are doing, and providing a voice for those who are in similar conditions highlights a problem, but can often have no effect in reality.

However, I would argue that this step in empowering individuals in order to make change facilitates bigger changes. In considering the Arab Spring, we can clearly see how communities and nations have come together to make drastic changes which would have never started had they not felt empowered to make change. Although women such as Dalia Ziad recognize that there is opposition towards their need to bring forward women's issues after the revolution, she still believes 'it's our time now to call for our rights, *it's our time now to say: we want to be equal, we want to end, we want us to get our dignity as women, not only as Egyptians.*'

2.5 The self/agency

According to Mahmood (2001), for any individuals to be considered truly free they must have freedom of choice as a prerequisite for that freedom and should not feel obliged to blindly follow what are considered to be the norms in any particular society. Mahmood (2001, 207) argues that 'individual autonomy' or individual freedom must occur through 'her actions' and '*...must be the consequence of her own will*' rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion.'

However in arguing this, how does one know when an individual's actions accord to its own will and to what extent the tradition or social background of that individual plays a role in shaping the decisions they ultimately make? Gender identity is a permanent fact but that does not mean that it is resistant to change (McNay 2000). Many new ideas regarding gender view gender norms to be intrinsically unstable and are therefore susceptible to change brought about as a direct result of resistance and displacement (Butler 1999).

In the video transcript with Dalia Ziad she says, '*Nobody cared whether they are Muslims, Christians, whether they are men or women: during the protest women participated perfectly. They stood side by side by men, they faced this exactly like their colleague male protesters; they witnessed everything and participated effectively in everything*'. Even though women's place in society wasn't always so openly visible, during the revolution this changed.

In the interview with the young activist Amany Mufta Ismail, she also refers to the plight of

Eman Al Obeidy and describes her as the '*courageous one, she was the strong one. She said no to the people who do that, to Gaddafi's men - she has all the courage to that.*' She was courageous because there were many other girls and women in the same position as her, '*There are other girls in Benghazi that got kidnapped, at Ajdabiya they were kidnapped, at Brega, at Misrata*', and she stood up and allowed people to see what was happening and to take note.

For many Muslims, men and women, an individual's understanding and comprehension of Islam and the directives of the Quran are a vital and positive influence on their sense of worth as a human being. Muslims often feel and gain a positive strength of their own self-hood through their understanding of their religion (Barlas 2006).

As a definition of the self, or agency, Tajfel (1978) said that social identity can be considered as how the individual view of 'the self' can originate in the membership of, and insight into, a social group in addition to the emotional importance that comes as part of that membership. Abushewsha comments in her article: '*Libyan women have created an intricate web of mutual co-ordination, and - whether resident in Libya or forced to live in exile - have been involved in nearly all aspects of the nation's uprising*'.

The manner in which a social group was initially formed and the resultant status achieved by the group has a major influence on the affective commitment to that group. This inevitably means that when individuals have self-selected their membership to a particular social group or when the group is afforded a particularly advanced status, then the group commitment is generally strong and more visible to others. (Kortekas & Ouwerkerk 1999) This, I argue, is perhaps why such a positive turn on Arab and Muslim women was undertaken in the Arab Spring.

2.6 Gender and politics

It would seem that women in underdeveloped countries are of constant focus, according to Gibson (2001, 2), 'Increasingly, it seems, it is the figure of woman that has emerged in *'third world countries'* as the new subjects of development, the *"desired beneficiaries and agents of progress"*. Zine (2002) also discusses the Western literary viewpoint where the numerous transformations of the stereotypical view of a Muslim woman have been entirely the product of the male imagination.

I argue that interest in women's affairs isn't just about concern for women in Muslim countries, but in fact an interest in women in general has been ongoing for a long time and used as an issue to pursue the political agendas of other nations.

Eltahway asks a reasonable question where discussing the role of women in revolution: '*What revolution worth its salt can be fuelled by demands of freedom and dignity and not have gender nestled in its beating heart - especially in a country replete with misogyny, religious fundamentalism (of both*

the Islamic and Christian kind) and which for 60 years has chafed under a hybrid of military-police rule?"

Most discourse on the subject of post-colonialism are inherently based in European culture and tend to project a world view that is dominantly Western in character. Post colonial approaches tend to create a challenge to the previous assumptions that totally failed to acknowledge the values, traditions and meanings of other cultures around the world. Post-colonial discourse aims to destabilize and dismantle this dominant discourse prevalent in imperial Europe by calling into question the previous preconceptions found at the core of Western disciplines (McEwan 2001).

There is a school of thought that implies that the feminist gaze is a reflection of the masculinist gaze, particularly in the colonial era where 'other' women were viewed as different by both the feminist and male gaze. It has often been the case, and possibly still is to a certain extent, that Islamic women were viewed as caricatures based purely on an outdated idea of Islamic identity (Zine 2002).

There is a viewpoint that suggests that the western expectance of all women to conform to Western dress codes only serves to further alienate Muslim women who should be provided with an opportunity to express their own opinions on such matters rather than be denied them, not only from male dominance but also from western feminist ideals that pressurize them into conforming to the expectations of others. Muslim women should be encouraged to define their own definitions of liberation and empowerment rather than having it imposed upon them (Zine 2002).

Even the definition 'Muslim women' serves to stereotype the identity of millions of women who are Muslims but who nevertheless present a widely diverse community that is bound by religion but undoubtedly presents a vastly diverse group with regard to nationality, culture, economics, geographical position, etc. (Tohidi 1998).

Even so, there are some radical Western feminists who totally disregard the contributions of Islamic feminists because they view their efforts as flawed and insignificant because they believe Islam is in itself totally incompatible with feminist ideology. There is an unwillingness to gain knowledge and insight into Islam as a religion and a way of life which only serves to further marginalize and oppress other women from different cultures and backgrounds, rather than progressing towards a greater solidarity amongst women worldwide (Tohidi 1998).

A critical role for Muslim women is to strive to create a dialogue that can help to breakdown misconceptions on the part of western feminists, and indeed others, by a continuous programme of education to dispel such simplistic conceptions which are so common in the west and therefore promote a greater understanding amongst women the world over (Tohidi 1998). Abushwasha states that *'the Women for Libya campaign aims to mobilise and encourage Libyan women to take their*

rightful place and be included as equals for the purpose of shaping a better Libya. We do not want tokenistic representation'. She believes that women within Libya need to take a stand and take on important roles in the rebuilding of Libya.

Through the Arab Spring a new outlook on women in the Middle East is taking shape not only in the region but in the West. Perceptions of women's roles are changing, and the work of activists in the region is starting to make drastic changes on the shape of women's roles in the new era of Egypt and Libya. These revolutions have worried many Arab countries into making changes for women's rights to avoid similar ousting of leaderships. One example of this is of the Saudi King allowing women in Saudi Arabia the right to vote (Chulov 2011).

2.7 Voice and the internet

'Since voice implies agency, it gives speakers on the Internet "the opportunity to be the agents" of their own meanings' (Brouwer 2006, 3)

The role of social networking sites has played a huge part in both organising protests and also in highlighting events to a global audience, despite attempts by the various regimes to prevent information and evidence of their crimes against humanity reaching the outside world (Owais 2011).

What has become evident is that the internet and social networking sites have provided a much needed platform for many women around the Middle East. Blogs, twitter, and Facebook have become very popular amongst the younger generation to enable them to document their daily lives, thoughts, struggles, and to communicate these with others who may be experiencing a similar situation (Tadros 2012).

Mona Eltahawy has a very successful blog where major topics in public policy and related subjects are discussed. The topic of her article which appeared in The Guardian was also discussed in great detail in her blog as well as elsewhere online and in the media.

For women, the internet offers anonymity and protection where they can be free to discuss issues of concern without worrying about the backlash it might create. Along with this, within an online community, gender and sexuality are protected. They do not become the primary focus and therefore women are provided with an equal platform in which to have their voices heard and not be judged negatively for it.

Stoeger (2006) also discusses the voices of women in cyberspace by looking at cyberfeminism as a theory. Feminists, as she suggests, view computer mediated communication (CMC) as a positive shift to empower women. Feminists such as Haraway (1991) see the online interactions of women as an opportunity for non identity where gender has no real significance. Although this maybe true, it would be naive to suggest that gender does not play a role in all interactions we

have including those interactions online (Harding 1986).

It also brings to question as to why gender should be neutral if women such as those presented in this study want to deal with issues of oppression, seclusion, marginalisation, and so on, then surely gender should be the primary concern in their interactions, and not hidden from view. We can see that the work of the four activists and journalists under study all focus specifically on gender related issues in order to ensure that woman's issues are at the forefront of their efforts.

Light (1995) also perceives CMC as an opportunity for women to be empowered in making use of this tool in a way which best suits their needs and this she believes includes 'political mobilization and advocacy'. Through the use of CMC the women under study have made use of technology to push for their political and social positions within their communities. They continue to shed light on issues which are of infinite importance to themselves and other women in order to educate people of their challenges.

There has been a general recognition in the post-colonial era that the voices of the oppressed throughout history should be heard. There has definitely been a greater importance placed upon an acknowledgement that differing perspectives should be included in a wider discourse. The concept of agency is now given greater worth and is a central part of discourse. In this day and age, there is a general consensus that there should be a programme to overcome inequalities and that this can be achieved by the inclusion of non-Western people and how other cultures and nations have progressed their own knowledge of development and advancement (McEwan 2001).

The view that women can speak for women and that women listen to each other differently from men has come under review and has been challenged in some circles. Tavis (1994) has openly challenged the view of relational feminists who hold a geocentric perspective with regard to communication between women. She also questioned the validity of conclusions relating to certain unique aspects of women's experience. Travis highlights the fact that not all women hold the same opinion under the same experiences and there is no single voice for all women. This is of particular importance when we see how prevalent women activists were in Egypt within the media, whereas women in Libya weren't always physically seen in the media. This has a lot to do with the cultural differences between the two countries and the way in which the revolutions took place.

2.8 Media

It can be said that the media can often present biased views of events which can be very influential upon how readers or listeners perceive the news they receive. There is usually no attempt to gain any insight into alternative views and the voice of

women is generally presented to us through the eyes of Western journalists.

Jafri (1998) suggests negative stereotypes of Muslims in general and specifically Muslim women are the norm within Canadian media, and that this negative stereotype is often blamed on Muslims for not creating a better example for mainstream media to pursue. However, it is also noted that certain writers suggest that it is due to lack of understanding of Islam as a religion and the cultural context of Muslim countries which allows a negative stereotypical image to be present in the West. Imtoul (2005) argues that often during times of conflict where Muslims are involved that women become the central issue for Western media. Often focussing on backward traditions, the oppression of women, the veil and other questionable practices which affect women within Muslim countries.

This however, has changed tremendously since the start of the Arab Spring, when the full black veil had previously been a sign of oppression; we saw rows and rows of women in Yemen in full black veils representing the voice of women within their country. The veil was no longer a symbol of oppression, but in contrast it was finally a symbol of strength, of power, of revolution and freedom within their homelands. As Tohidi (1998, 289) argues, 'Not wearing the hijab means much more restriction in their social space and mobility, since without the hijab they would be unable to engage in economic and social activities outside the home'.

As stated by Stabile and Kumar (2005, 775), '*by consenting to an orientalist logic that paternalistically seeks to protect women, and that serves primarily as a cover for imperialist arms, progressive individuals and organizations risk distancing themselves from the struggles of ordinary people around the world.*'

It has been noted that the West's focus on the rights of women in Afghanistan is simply a rather cynical approach that is cited as a reason for the West's aggression in Afghanistan. Women's liberation is in effect a rallying call used to justify Western military intervention. This use of human rights as a justification for wars, according to Stabile and Kumar (2005) needs to be challenged. Actually, Stabile and Kumar (2005) argue, the western media are limiting human rights for women in the same way as the fundamentalists do - by preventing women from having a voice in their own destiny.

This is perhaps why the phenomenon of social networking has become such a crucial aspect in the Arab Spring. Social media has become a response to this organisational structure. Social networking sites have become a tool that enables a population to organise themselves independently without the necessity of a central leadership. The rebellions amongst the Arab youth that have been fuelled by access to social networking sites and the speed at which information can be quickly disseminated, highlights the need for a form of democracy that is based on the needs of the population. The use of social networking sites to share common experiences is quite a refreshing change from the routine discourse of a dominant media that is usually con-

trolled by political elites and used as a propaganda tool (Hardt & Negri 2011).

What is different and interesting about the Arab spring is that the large media outlets have allowed and presented the voice of women to be present in national media. The article written by Abushweshah (2011) about the inclusiveness of women and its importance in the new Libyan government was printed in the British national newspaper *The Guardian*. Mona Eltahwy, has not only had articles printed in newspapers but also established news websites online and interviewed extensively by worldwide news networks such as CNN and the BBC.

3 Conclusion

Riger (1992) quotes Naomi Weistein's critique that psychology is the '*fantasy life of the male psychologist*'. This is primarily due to the choice of topics and issues and even representations of women within psychology which are controlled by patriarchal assumptions of women's roles within society. When researching Muslim women, and specifically Arab women, where research is slim (Varghese 2011), these patriarchal assumptions are more pronounced, even when the researcher is female herself (Ali 1999).

It was my attempt in this study to research women beyond the stereotypical boundaries they are often placed, be it within their own cultural contexts or within the Western perceptions of Muslims and Arab women as passive and oppressed, to present a time of huge change and sacrifice which has had women at the forefront fighting for some of the biggest changes in their nations' histories. It has been problematic however, to assume that women have only suddenly become an important player in their country's history or in social change movements. Women have always played a role. However, it has not been recognized, be it within their own home countries, or within Western media. Activists, bloggers, and journalists as those presented in this study have been fighting for women's liberation many decades before the Arab Spring began.

According to the Gloria Declaration (Moghadam 2005, 5), there are 'two major systemic obstacles to achieving women's health and rights: globalization of the market economy and religious fundamentalism'. This is also suggested by Inglehart, & Norris (2003) who perceive that although women's lives have improved due to gender equality, that this is still effected by 'cultural legacy' such as 'Islamic heritage'. This does limit or slow down the progress that women within the Arab world will make and this does relate to the way in which Islam is currently effecting women's progress in Egypt and Libya.

A limitation of the study is that the women chosen in this research are part of a smaller percentage of Libyan and Egyptian women who have been highly educated, and can communicate clearly in English. They also represent some of the few women in those countries who have daily access to a computer and the internet (Stoeger 2006) as well as the ability to

live and work abroad. However, they are very much involved in the struggles of the revolutions in their countries and more so after.

The issues researchers choose to study and the frames of reference they use to structure their enquiries are often products of their individual interests and dominant social constructions of important issues (Burman 1990). This is clear in the texts presented in this research that were specifically chosen in order to analyse particular issues involving women's voices during the Arab Spring within a Libyan and Egyptian context. In having this frame of mind, I am conscious of my own position as a researcher as I read the texts.

This does lead to the researcher taking on a reflexive role in understanding that their positioning will very likely affect their interest in the topic under research, and will effect(affect) part of the outcome as it relates to our interests and what we hope to achieve from the research. My own cultural and religious background as well as gender has affected the research question chosen and the route my research has taken.

Although many researchers have suggested that information found on the internet does not invade a persons right to privacy as it is accessed by a large number of people, I still feel that it would be inappropriate and morally questionable to use social networking sites where people have used them for their own personal use as opposed to those directly inviting people to join their cause such as the work of activists or journalists writing on these issues. According to the the British Psychological Society's guidelines for ethical conduct in online-psychological research '*researchers should be aware that participants may consider their publicly accessible internet activity to be private*'. One of the other major issues when dealing with research online, specifically when using social networking sites on the internet is informed consent. The problem arises because it is often difficult to gain informed consent from those writing in social networking sites, as well as it is problematic to ensure that all those in the research study are over the age of 16 as there is no way to verify age online.

For many Arab women, their anonymity is an important aspect of their experiences in social networking. For many it is the safest way in which they can vent frustrations, and share opinions openly and honestly without any backlash from their families and communities. It would be irresponsible for a researcher to then draw attention to individual blogs, or other social networking pages, whereby women have attempted to stay anonymous.

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Appendix 1

Transcript: Dalia Ziad: Women in the new Egypt
It was amazing what the Egyptian [people] has achieved in these protests. We never thought it's gonna turn into a real revolution when we first started it. I thought it's going to be a protest like usual, like you know, at the end of the day we will go back home and that's it.

On that particular day, January 25th, I realised it's gonna turn into something really big when I saw in the streets with me, women who are older in age, who are dressing in a way that tells you they are from, uh, sectors in society that are more? [something I can't catch] and less educated. This sector of society is usually apathetic, not interested in politics. So at that time when I saw them in the streets I realised it's not us cyber-activists any more; it's more than that, it is the whole population is coming out.

Nobody cared whether they are Muslims, Christians, whether they are men or women: during the protest women participated perfectly. They stood side by side by men, they faced this exactly like their colleague male protesters; they witnessed everything and participated effectively in everything. But unfortunately after the protests happened and, um, We were able to bring Mubarak down and the revolution succeeded to some extent, unfortunately all, everything is happening in the country now during this transformation phase, women are completely marginalised from.

Also in this phase, we are ruled by the military high council. This is 100% men and they are having a military mentality, so they can hardly include women. We have female judges in Egypt, but none of these judges, although they are highly qualified, none of them was invited for example to participate in the committee that helped moderate some articles in the constitution. 90% of the law related to women's rights or the stipulations related to women in our law and constitution are completely against women.

For example, in our constitution, we have a clear article in the constitution, it's very funny but it's crazy and awful as I consider it, and very discriminative. It says if [a] woman cannot balance - I'm using my language of course - if woman cannot balance between her work, her household work, household activities like cleaning, washing and this stuff, and her work outside the house, then she should abandon her work outside the house. Don't you think this is crazy, yeah, it's ...

Women on the Women's Day, March 8th, wanted to go to the street as women, not as Egyptians, and call for more rights for women. But unfortunately the reaction from the male protesters was very bad. They kept telling, "It's not your time, it's not time to talk about your rights, go back home. We are now looking for democracy." But I don't really understand what they mean: if they are looking for democracy, then women's rights should come first, at least because we have been there, we have made this revolution, we have made this success. And it's

our time now to call for our rights, it's our time now to say: we want to be equal, we want to end, we want us to get our dignity as women, not only as Egyptians.

Appendix 2

Libya will only become inclusive when women are given a say in its future

Having played a key role in Libya's revolution, women must be fully included in the rebuilding and reconciliation process

Guardian, Farah Abushweshah

At this week's conference on Libya in Paris, the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) and the international community talk about "inclusive-ness" in the new country's future. It seems strange, then, that half of the population - women - seem to be excluded from the discussions on the future of their country.

It is not commonly known, but Libyan women started the revolution when the mothers, sisters and widows of prisoners killed in the 1996 Abu Salim massacre took to the streets in Benghazi on 15 February to protest outside the courthouse after their lawyer was arrested.

Since then Libyan women at home and abroad have protested, smuggled arms beneath their clothing, founded countless civil society groups, tweeted, blogged, fed, nursed, mourned, mothered, raised funds and awareness, and sent in humanitarian aid and medical staff for the cause. Women have taken a central role alongside men and it has united us.

Libyan women may not have been visible on the streets with guns, but they have played an equally important role, displaying courage and strength that has been invaluable to the success of the country's revolution. Only now are some of the harrowing stories starting to emerge. We have seen the iconic images of Iman al-Obeidi, who spoke out about the sexual violence inflicted on so many who have otherwise suffered in silence; the elderly lady praising rebels at a lay-by and giving them her blessing; and Malak, the five-year-old amputee from Misrata - to name a few.

Libyan women will no doubt continue to play a vital part in the national reconciliation and rebuilding process, but the time has come for this role to be fully recognised, encouraging them to step forward. The Women for Libya campaign aims to mobilise and encourage Libyan women to take their rightful place and be included as equals for the purpose of shaping a better Libya. We do not want tokenistic representation.

Women for Libya is calling for the full inclusion of Libya's female population in accordance with United Nations security council mandate 1325, which emphasises the important role women play in peacebuilding. We are also calling for: aid to be ringfenced to support women's rights; financial aid to be accessible to civil society and grassroots initiatives set up by women, for women; and negotiations

and meetings on the future of Libya to be inclusive of all tribes and regional representatives, which should include sufficient numbers of women.

Sara Maziq, one of Women for Libya's founders, recently said: "We are facing an enormous challenge of rebuilding Libya and to exclude women is to ignore a vast resource for transitioning from conflict to stability. We can be a powerful unifying force in the aftermath of the conflict."

Libyan women have created an intricate web of mutual co-ordination, and - whether resident in Libya or forced to live in exile - have been involved in nearly all aspects of the nation's uprising..

Women are a beneficial and vital force in Libya's future. We must be openly and transparently

included in discussions and supported to participate at all levels. To neglect this is to dishonour the legacy of the brave Libyan men and women who have given their lives for basic human rights.

To exclude women is to exclude a vital force in the reconstruction of a stable, representative and democratic Libya.

Appendix 3

These "virginity tests" will spark Egypt's next revolution

Thursday, June 2nd, 2011

By Mona Eltahawy-The Guardian

There's a thin line between sex and politics, and it is nonsense to keep repeating the mantra that Egypt's revolution "wasn't about gender". What revolution worth its salt can be fuelled by demands of freedom and dignity and not have gender nestled in its beating heart - especially in a country replete with misogyny, religious fundamentalism (of both the Islamic and Christian kind) and which for 60 years has chafed under a hybrid of military-police rule?

If the "it wasn't about gender" mantra is stuck on repeat so that we don't scare the boys away, then let them remember the state screwed them too, literally - ask political prisoners, and remember the condoms and Viagra found when protesters stormed state security headquarters.

Lest we forget, we replaced Hosni Mubarak with a supreme council of Mubaraks - aka the supreme council of armed forces (SCAF) - a general who recently spoke to CNN kindly reminded us how the patriarch sounds. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he admitted that female activists detained during a Tahrir Square demonstration a month after Mubarak's overthrow had indeed been subjected to "virginity tests" - as the women have insisted all along. "The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine," the general said. "These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square, and we found in the tents Molotov cocktails and (drugs)."

I have no doubt he genuinely believed that explanation would actually make sense. It is, after all, very rare for Egyptian women to spend the night outside their home, and couples must present

a marriage certificate if they want to book a hotel room together. But even the patriarch misfires.

Almost exactly five years ago, Mubarak unwittingly politicised many previously apolitical Egyptians when his security forces and their hired thugs began to deliberately target for sexual assault female activists and journalists at demonstrations. In conservative Egypt, where most women endured daily street sexual harassment in silence, the regime was determined to fondle and grope women in the hope it would shame them back home. Instead, women held up their skirts torn into pieces for the media to see. It's one thing to be groped and harassed by passers-by, but when the state gropes you, it gives a green light that you are fair game.

The next year, mass sexual assaults in downtown Cairo targeted girls and women during a religious festival. The police watched and did nothing. The state denied the assaults took place, but bloggers at the scene exposed that lie; this encouraged women to speak out and forced men to listen. For many Egyptian men, this was the first time they realised what it meant for their mothers, sisters, wives, daughters to navigate the battlefield that Egyptian streets had become. More than 80% of women now say they've been street sexually harassed, and more than 60% of men admit to having done so.

And with the virginity tests, here is SCAF retracing that thin line between sex and politics again, in the hope of shaming women away from demonstrating. The council has already replicated many of the other sins that had Mubarak facing the wrong end of a revolution: military trials for civilians, detentions and torture (by military police now, state security then), and an intolerance of critics.

Let's be clear, "virginity tests" are common in Egypt and straddle class and urban/rural divides. Be it the traditional midwife checking for a hymen on a bride's wedding night, or a forensics expert or doctor called in after a prospective bridegroom's suspicions, young women are forced to spread their legs to appease the god of virginity. But no one talks about it.

But it's different when the state/SCAF is the one forcing women's legs apart. A protest is planned for Saturday. It's a perfect time for gender to come out of the revolution's closet.

This must be our moment of reckoning with the god of virginity. The rage against the military must also target the humiliation brought by those tests, regardless of who carries them out.

So far, Egypt's Arab-language media has largely looked the other way. As Fatma Emam, a young revolutionary, told Bloomberg soon after Mubarak was forced to step down: "The revolution is not only taking place in Tahrir, it is taking place in every Egyptian house. It is the revolution of fighting the patriarch."

Appendix 4

*Eman Al-Obeidy: A "Libyan Logo" for the Women of East Libya**Interview with Amany Mufta Ismail by Anna Therese Day*

In late March, 29-year-old Libyan student Eman Al-Obeidy caught the world's attention when she burst into a Tripoli hotel to inform Western media of her alleged detention, torture, and rape at the hands of Gaddafi's forces. After a series of further police detentions, heavily censored interviews, and virtual house arrest in Tripoli, it was announced earlier this week that Eman Al-Obeidy has successfully fled Libya with the help of two defecting military officers. Her story has put a face to the many crimes against women and children committed in times of war while also breaking the silence on a strict taboo in Arab culture.

In an interview with Anna Therese Day, 22-year-old Amany Mufta Ismail, a woman activist in rebel-controlled East Libya, describes her reactions to the story of Eman Al-Obeidy as well as her feelings surrounding attacks on Libyan women during this war.

Anna Therese Day: What was your initial reaction when you heard the story of the attacks on Eman Al-Obeidy?

Amany Mufta Ismail: First of all, I want to say that she is so strong because she went there and she said that. It's so hard for the Arabic woman to say that. It's not easy. Maybe there are thousands of Eman Al-Obeidy — not thousands, millions of Eman Al-Obeidy in the Arab world — but they never say that because maybe our traditions, our culture, our families, we can't say that. But she is so strong to go out to all the TVs and saying how "15 men doing blah blah blah to me..."

It was something so hard because she was going to Tripoli to complete her studying, to work there, to help to build the society but she was treated so bad. But she is so strong to say that. I support her. She's like a logo for us, she's a Libyan logo for us.

Anna: What was your reaction to the initial claims of Gaddafi's government that Eman Al-Obeidy was mentally-ill or drunk when she burst into the hotel in Tripoli?

Amany Mufta Ismail: Yes, actually we know about him and we heard about other girls. So when he say that about Eman Al-Obeidy, we know his ways to avoid the truth. It was something that maybe we have background to. Actually when we heard that I was laughing, I was just laughing, "Oh my god she was drunk? Come on!" She is not, because we heard about her and the other girls. But we couldn't say that because of, as I said, our tradition. But when she go out on the TV and she said that, then we all go out and say "Gaddafi, just go!"

Anna: What are your hopes for Eman Al-Obeidy in light of her escape from Tripoli?

Amany Mufta Ismail: There are other girls in Benghazi that got kidnapped, at Ajdabiya they were kidnapped, at Brega, at Misrata. There's women and girls, and sometimes children, you know. But she was

the courageous one, she was the strong one. She said no to the people who do that, to Gaddafi's men — she has all the courage to do that.

I just want her to know that we support her. We are all Eman Al-Obeidi, not she, just she, but all of us, even me. I am Eman Al-Obeidi because we are sisters, we are all Libyans, we are all Arab, we are all human.