

## *Battling on Two Fronts*

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## *Battling on Two Fronts*

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In April 2019, a photograph of a 22 year-old Sudanese woman wearing a white *thobe*<sup>1</sup> with her hand pointing toward the sky went viral. The woman was Alaa Salah, and she was leading the chants against dictator Omar Al-Bashir in a nationwide antigovernment protest. Salah’s story was covered by every major news outlet, whether national, regional, or global, with headlines referring to her as “Lady Liberty” and “the woman in white,” among other names. Similar headlines have reflected women’s increasing participation in the recent revolutions in Iraq and Lebanon. In October 2019, a video of a Lebanese woman kicking an armed bodyguard—the image that marked the beginning of the ongoing protests—spread quickly across various news outlets and social media platforms. Soon enough, she too became a symbol for protesters demanding the fall of the regime. While we might at first rejoice over photographs of women and girls on the front pages of newspapers, and the buzz across the blogosphere about their increasing participation in political protests worldwide, these photos lend themselves to an oversimplified narrative that understands women’s participation in revolutions in the Middle East as “unusual” and outside of the norm. Today, the image of Middle Eastern women as submissive and passive individuals is so deeply rooted that whenever we are seen taking to the streets and demanding our rights just like any “normal” citizen, the media are startled, as if we were only just now emerging from our “caves.”

Both Western and Middle Eastern media outlets are responsible for reinforcing such negative perceptions of Middle Eastern women. In Hollywood and mainstream American media, Middle Eastern women are portrayed as either the exotic belly dancer or the oppressed woman in desperate need of liberation (see Kahf, 2011). This is due in part to the misrepresentation of the veil or hijab (Qutub, 2013). As for media in the Middle East, the portrayal of Middle Eastern women and men has been so inadequate and stereotypical throughout the years that it has contributed to distorting people's view of Middle Eastern women, who are perceived to be inferior, weak, passive, and thus firmly placed in the domestic sphere, rather than in the public or political spheres. Studies conducted in 2010 to analyze images of women in Arab media showed that 78.68% of the images were negative, and the majority of them used women's bodies as sexual commodities (Allam, 2008). Moreover, the 2010 Global Media Monitoring report stated that only 16% of news subjects in the Middle East were female, far below the 24% world average (GMMP, 2010). Women are thus either invisible or negatively portrayed in the media.

The year 2010 marked a turning point in women's efforts to raise and assert their voices with the onset of the Arab Spring across the Middle East. Women in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria took to the streets to express their demands for the sake of a better future for themselves, their families, and their countries. For the first time, these women received huge attention from both Western and Middle Eastern media outlets, which praised the prominent role they were playing in the protests. It was as if the world was shocked to see the "voiceless and invisible" Middle Eastern woman fighting for her rights and demanding justice. The reality, however, is that women in the Middle East, who make up 48% of the region's population (World Bank, 2019), have historically been active on the front lines of various social and political issues. Yet their accomplishments are often overlooked and undervalued. The history of women's movements in Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries, although well documented, is almost hidden. Brilliant women whose achievements have helped to shape our societies are overlooked and often undervalued. In 1923, Huda Shaarawi founded the Feminist Union in Egypt,

the first organization of its kind in the Arab world, and fought for the reform of Islamic family law. She took off her veil at a railway station in Cairo as a way to communicate her frustration with the political and sexual repression of women. Anbarah Salam Khalidi was a prominent Lebanese feminist who established the Awakening of the Young Arab Women Association to help finance young women's education. In 1926, she also caused a scandal by taking off her veil during a public lecture at the American University of Beirut, contributing to the (un)veiling debates in Lebanon. Fatima Talib Ismail was a founding member and the first president of the Sudanese Women's Union, which dates back to 1951. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim was an activist and campaigner for women's rights who became the first female member of parliament in Sudan in 1965. The list is long and would require more than just this article to document, but the main point is that these women helped to pave the road toward a more gender-equal society, and today women are continuing these efforts. Through collective action, women continue to amplify their voices, dismantle patriarchal power structures, and put an end to inequality between men and women in the Middle East. Although we have been depicted as powerless victims and objects, in reality we are fighting a battle to safeguard the full equality and rights of women for generations to come.

Nonetheless, despite the recognition of women's important roles in society by the media and the public at large during the Arab Spring and the more recent protests in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran, women continue to struggle when it comes to voicing their concerns. The reason is that this recognition, which is long overdue, tends to be short-lived, and is not enough to reshape the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of people who underestimate Middle Eastern women. This is not to say that the prominence of women in media coverage does not lead to great results: Tawakkul Karman, for example, earned international acclaim for her devotion to the protests in Yemen even after facing death threats and prison. She then became the first Arab woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. As for Alaa Salah, she was eventually selected to represent civil society at the UN Security Council's Open Debate on Women, Peace, and Security in October 2019.

In order to eliminate distorted perceptions of women, we need balanced and nonstereotyped portrayals of women in the media, because despite women's efforts in the region, they continue to be underestimated. The findings of a recent report by UN Women, which highlights women's experiences of running for parliament in Lebanon's 2018 elections, are shocking (El Kaakour, 2020). Throughout the electoral campaigning period, female candidates received only 5% of the total press coverage available, and 15.8% of the Lebanese TV coverage. Eighty-eight percent considered themselves victims of media discrimination in regard to the total media time they received and the discriminatory questions they were asked during interviews. Moreover, 78% of those interviewed reported that they had been victims of some form of violence on social media (sexist comments and/or direct threats) during the election period (BRD and Hivos, 2018). It is time for the media to finally put sexist stereotypes to rest, and to portray women in the same light as men.

Shedding light on women as community leaders and peace builders will help to shift public discourse, allowing women to become more engaged in political discourse, and to increase their participation and access to expression and decision-making, in both the public and political spheres. These women might eventually become a source of inspiration not only for other women and girls, but also for men and boys who are influenced by socially endorsed views of gender.

Today, we are battling on two fronts: we are struggling for our basic needs and civil rights as citizens, and for our existence as equal human beings in society. Despite efforts to silence them through intimidation and other forms of abuse, women have been and continue to be vocal about their rights. It is time to change the



Figure 1. Women's march in Lebanon. © ABAAD, 2019.

gender narrative, commit to gender-sensitive reporting, and cover the positive impact made by women, not only during revolutions but every single day. It is time for the media to play a responsible role by offering a more positive representation of women and a counternarrative to mainstream stereotypes, which may become a deterrent to sexual and gender-based violence in our societies.

Until then, women and girls will continue to challenge social norms that limit the possibilities for both women *and* men. We will continue to be vocal about our rights as women and as citizens. As the words of ABAAD MENA's (2019) "#NotYourHonor" song go: "Today, my voice will be heard and break down the walls of this regime. Today, I lead the revolution, our will is the solution."

## Note

<sup>1</sup>An ankle-length robe with long sleeves.

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