

Chapter 1

Cultural Values, New Media Technologies, and Globalization

Each chapter in this book delves into a different aspect of contemporary social media, highlighting its affordances and the ways in which women from diverse backgrounds have managed to use these new technologies to empower themselves. As ample ethnographic literature is available on the cultural and social aspects of women living in the MENA region, this book focuses instead on mapping new media outlets and their roles in changing the lives of women. I argue here that new technologies are assisting in creating predominately positive change, though sometimes negative consequences appear as well. In this regard, I am not an advocate of “technological determinism” (TD), which refers to the way technology determines the development of cultural values, along with subsequent social or political structural changes, or even of “soft technological determinism” (Smith & Marx, 1994), which sees technology as having a more passive role. Generally speaking, the three prevailing positions on TD include “norm-based accounts,” which explain TD as a “chiefly cultural phenomenon” independent of other social forces; “unintended consequences accounts,” which regard TD as part of the “unexpected social outcomes of technological enterprise”; and the “logical sequence accounts,” which view TD as part of “universal laws of nature” (Bimber, 1990, p. 333). Overall, I find debate over which account of TD is most influential to be irrelevant to my purposes, as I see technology as only a facilitator, where the real changemakers are women with agency and courage enough to create a better future for themselves. First, to provide proper context for the study at hand, it

is important to present background information on the lives and challenges of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Arab Women and Their Sociocultural Context

Gender inequality is regarded as a pressing issue worldwide, as global differences between males and females continue in terms of the human development index (HDI); the largest gaps are found in South Asia, where “the HDI value for women is 17.8 percent lower than the HDI value for men, followed by the Arab States with a 14.4 percent difference and Sub-Saharan Africa with 12.3 percent” (UNDP, 2016, p. 54). Gender inequality is regarded to be the “most severe” in Arab states. UNICEF cites numerous challenges faced by women in the MENA region, including in education, legal rights, equality in inheritance, and protection from child marriages. Many countries still lag behind norms that have become conventional in most areas; for example, Sudan has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (UNICEF, 2011). Further, the UN Women Report states that although women in the MENA region have property rights in marriage similar to those in developed countries, they do not enjoy the same inheritance rights as those that female spouses and daughters have in other countries. In fact, the inheritance rights of women in the MENA region are regarded as the worst in the world (UN Women, 2015, p. 31), as Islamic jurisdiction generally stipulates that a female gets half the amount of a male's inheritance (Ahmed, 1992; Engineer, 2008; Esposito & DeLong-Bas, 2001, p. 38). Judith Tucker asserts that the “privileged female access to property through the dower system was counterbalanced, however, by an inheritance law that discriminated against females” (2008, p. 138).

In addition, MENA countries have the largest gap in the world between males (75–76%) and females (20–22%) in relation to labor force participation. The world average for males' labor force participation is 77 to 81%, whereas for females it is 50 to 52% (UN Women, 2015, p. 76). Also, the World Economic Forum (WEF) frequently publishes its annual global gender gap report in which countries are ranked based on four indicators: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment. According to WEF's 2016 report, all Arab countries lag behind the majority of

other nations in the world. Qatar ranks first among Arab countries at 119 (of 144 globally), whereas Yemen, commonly regarded as the worst country in the world in terms of gender gap, ranks dead last (World Economic Forum, 2016). According to the 2015–2016 annual report of the UN Women agency, the average female adult literacy in the MENA region is 71.16%, with wide differences across Arab countries since female literacy rate is 44% in Morocco and 45% in Yemen but 82% in Libya and 89% in Jordan (UN Women, 2015–2016). The report pointed out how women’s capabilities and rights are “economically, socially and politically disempowering” in the region with poverty influencing women’s “education, health, economic access, participation and decision making, and human rights’ enjoyment as a whole” (UN Women, 2013a, p. 13).

In addition, armed conflicts, sectarianism, civil wars, and the refugee problem in the Arab world drastically increases the suffering of people in general and in particular women (Al-Rawi, 2010), who sometimes have more responsibilities than males, especially when the latter are killed or detained (UNHCR, 2014). In fact, women are often employed as weapons of war just for being females (UN Women, 2013a, p. 13); for example, UNHCR states that the majority of Syrian women refugees feel insecure and isolated, while the situation of Syrian women under the Assad regime is considered by Amnesty International (2016) to be horrendous. Partly due to the civil conflict that erupted in Yemen in 2015, many Yemenis face serious humanitarian challenges; for example, there have been “an estimated 17 million people at ‘emergency’ or ‘crisis’ levels of food insecurity” since early 2017 (FAO, 2017). In Iraq, ISIS enslaved non-Muslim women and allowed them to be raped with impunity for rapists; revenge rapes were then orchestrated by Shiite militias against detained women believed to be affiliated with ISIS (Taub, 2018). In short, many women living in the Arab world face multifaceted difficulties in their lives, especially those from poor families or from war-ravaged countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

On the other hand, for the situations of many women, slight improvement has been seen in the MENA region in recent years, as will be discussed in later chapters. For instance, in 2016 “Qatar, Algeria and the United Arab Emirates each . . . closed approximately 64% of their gender gap” (UNHCR, 2015, p. 20). Saudi Arabia has seen a 48% increase in the number of employed Saudi women since the year 2010, partly due “to petitions and legal reforms that enable women to work in formerly

closed sectors, including law, to go outside unaccompanied by men, to exercise voting rights and to be elected at certain levels of government” (UNDP, 2016, p. 113). In the following section, a brief overview of the cultural stigma surrounding the female body is presented followed by the influence of globalization and the use of traditional and social media.

As stated above, the majority of Arab women face tremendous socioeconomic challenges in their lives since most, if not all, Arab societies are characterized by their gendered relations, spheres, and roles, which shape the way people live their entire lives (Sadiqi, 2006). Within such a context, the female body has a special status as it is connected to many cultural taboos, such as the epidemic issue of *‘ayb* (shame), sexual freedom, and family honor, while the values of *hayaa* (shyness) and modesty are important norms highlighted in both offline and online practice (Stanger, Alnaghaimshi, & Pearson, 2017). In this regard, Moroccan author Layla Al-Sulaimani rightly argues that sexual literacy in the Arab world is nonexistent since it is regarded as a taboo associated with pornography. Al-Sulaimani believes that this kind of ignorance leads to sexual desperation that ultimately results in enhancing the rape culture and street harassment (HuffPost-Arabi, 2017c). Further, Egyptian scholar and activist Nawal Saadawi emphasizes how Arab patriarchy is represented in its obsession with women's virginity, resulting in some parts of the Arab world in a cultlike milieu (Ghanim, 2015) in which midwives are tasked with checking to confirm that a girl's hymen is “intact on her wedding night” (Cooke, 2015). (Note that this particular cultural practice has been documented in only a few Arab countries that do not include Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan.)

In some Arab regions, the hymen is regarded as “the most cherished and most important part of a girl's body, and is much more valuable than one of her eyes, or an arm, or a lower limb” (Abu-Odeh, 2004, p. 155). According to Layla Al-Sulaimani (HuffPost-Arabi, 2017c), a woman is often labeled as a “slut” if she is not a virgin before marriage. In some countries, including Tunisia, social pressure on Arab women who dared to have premarital sexual relationships force some of them to pay about \$400 (in US currency) to “restore” their hymens (Hassaini, 2017). Such practices indicate a social hypocrisy that exists in many Arab societies, where men are permitted to have sex before marriage, and to marry multiple wives (Al-Krenawi, 2013), while women must abstain from sex, suggesting that men are in full ownership and control of women's bodies.

In addition, many women in the Arab world have special status in society because they are expected to be protected and shielded from real and imagined dangers. The beginning of the 20th century witnessed many debates about the role of women in society in many parts of the Arab world, including Syria. In the early 1930s, some male leaders in Tripoli, Aleppo, and Latakia, for instance, wanted to ban women from attending movie theaters and entertainment events, as Hama's mufti had mentioned that cinema could corrupt women's virtues. This led to a partial leisure ban for women in 1939 (Thompson, 2001, pp. 205–207). In Saudi Arabia, cinemas have been until recently banned because they were regarded as unIslamic (House, 2012), while gender segregation inside cinemas continues to be enforced in many other Arab countries. The Egyptian cleric Yousif Al-Qaradawi, for example, “recommends that men and women should be separated when they attend cinemas” to “prevent Muslims from committing illicit activities in the darkened cinema halls” (Larsson, 2016, p. 95). Further, regular censorship of websites, including covering women's body parts in album photos (Lakritz, 2017) and banning sexually explicit (and sometimes implicit) materials in traditional media outlets, is widespread in most Arab countries (Sakr, 2010). Media productions perceived to “threaten the social fabric, traditions, and values” (Al-Samarai, 2016) are prohibited. For example, in 2011, the Kuwaiti TV series “High School Girls” was banned on all Emirati channels during the holy month of Ramadhan. Mohammed Hayef, a Muslim thinker, mentioned that the “series portrays Kuwaiti schools as dens of vice and corrupt manners, making the girls appear to be lewd and shameless” (Calderwood, 2011). TV drama, then, according to some, is expected not to depict social reality but instead to provide a false reflection of it.

Globalization and Women's Lives

The Arab world's increasing contact with the West through globalization, colonization, and the postcolonial period has enhanced women's freedom movements in the MENA region because these elements have assisted in establishing more contact with the outside world and created more awareness about women's rights. The spread of feminist ideas coincided with the writings of famous Muslim and Arab thinkers during the Nahda period (Awakening), such as Rifa'a Tahtawi (1801–1873),

Buturs Al-Bustani (1819–1883), Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammed Abduh (1849–1905), Qasim Amin (1863–1908), and many others, who called for giving women different levels of freedom so that Arab societies can progress (Haddad, 1984; Karmi, 2005; Zachs & Halevi, 2009). For example, the Iraqi poet Jamil Sidqi Al-Zahawi (1863–1936) wrote poems encouraging women to remove their veils, often citing gender equality in the West (Masliyah, 1996). In this regard, one of the pioneer Arab feminists is Zaynab Fawwaz Al-'Amili (1860–1914), a Lebanese female writer, who detailed the lives of 455 Arab women that created positive change in their cultures. Al-'Amili also found women to blame for their deteriorating conditions since they mostly saw “themselves and their lives from the perspectives and opinions of men . . . [and] that they came to recognize themselves only through them” (Traboulsi, 2003). Other prominent feminists include Huda Sha'rawi (1879–1947), who publicly unveiled, especially in her efforts in establishing the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 (Badran, 1988; Shaarawi, 1986). In the same year, the Women's Awakening Club, regarded as the first women's organization to be established in Iraq, was created “by a group of secular Muslim-educated middle- and upper-middle-class women, many of whom were married to political leaders and intellectuals” (Al-Ali, 2012a, p. 94). The Club was headed by Asma Al-Zahawi, Jamil Sidqi's sister. Several other Arab countries witnessed similar awakening movements, such as Morocco, whose feminist organizations emerged “as early as the 1940s during the French Protectorate” (Ben Moussa, 2011, p. 139). These feminist efforts in the MENA region coincided with the rise of women's press. Hind Nawfal, for instance, published *The Girl*, the first women's magazine in Alexandria (1892), followed by *The Beautiful Woman* in Lebanon in 1909, *The Bride* newspaper in Syria (1910), and *Layla* magazine in Iraq (1923) (Ibrahim, 1996, p. 11; Al-Rawi, 2010). The latter was published by Paulina Hasoon who with Maryam Narmah are regarded as the first Iraq female journalists, their careers beginning in the early 1920s (Al-Rawi, 2010, p. 77). In the following section, a discussion is provided on the role of globalization and local influences in women's lives in the MENA region.

Indeed, the increasing contact with the outside world paved the way for new types of freedom and change in the Arab world. In this regard, the term “globalization” has become an ambivalent concept due

to its different and often opposing interpretations (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 273; Siapera, 2012, p. 24). In this book, globalization refers to the compression of the world and its global interconnectedness (see Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992), which can be linked to the concept of cultural convergence and the increased sharing and exchanges of knowledge, information, and agreement on blending the West with the East. In the Arab world, globalization and cultural homogenization have some levels of impact on different facets of life, yet local elements, especially the influence of cultural values, remain powerful forces in any society. In other words, there is an ongoing process of cultural hybridization as cultures are regarded as hybrid forms of various elements (Canclini, 1995). Here, Arjun Appadurai uses the term “disjunctive globalization,” which refers to the notion that there is no central cultural dominance for any country as there are multiple actors and forces, that are often local in scope, which shape globalization and its impact on specific countries (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 27–29). Also, Marwan Kraidy discusses the concept of hybridity in that all cultures borrow from each other, for various regional and global influences play roles in shaping cultures (2006). Kraidy’s concept of hybridization can be linked to cultural diffusion (transmission) that occurs when a culture learns or adopts new ideas or practices from each other. For example, Femen, the global feminist movement, has become active in some Arab countries despite their general conservative nature. Some female Arab activist members of Femen protested the patriarchal nature of Arab societies by posing naked, such as the case of Amina Tyler from Tunisia and Aliaa Elmahdy from Egypt, who posted nude photos of themselves on social media to express their rejection of the misogynistic nature of their societies (Associated Press, 2013; Fahmy, 2011). The actions of these activists indicate that they want to reclaim their bodies by asserting their ownership, but they have created public anger, especially among conservative and religious circles. Kraidy defines Elmahdy’s action as a “creative act of insurgency,” with the female body becoming the site for activism and social change (2016).

Regarding the influence of globalization, Herbert Schiller (1975), Hamelink (1983), and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi (1997) cite the concept of cultural imperialism to refer to the hegemonic Western cultural domination over peripheral countries by imposing cultural products, homogenizations, cultural synchronization, and the destruc-

tion of indigenous cultural values. In the context of this book, Arab women and their compelling issues and concerns are often linked to different aspects of globalization, for they are mostly viewed in the West “as a barometer for the success of Westernization, liberalization, and democratization” (Sjoberg & Whooley, 2015). The social media campaign “Muslim Women against Femen” is relevant here, as movement members equate Femen with Western hegemony and cultural imperialism in the sense that “foreign” social values are allegedly being imposed on Muslim societies without consulting them (see Chapter 3). A second example is related to a film produced by the *New York Times* in 2016 entitled “Ladies First,” which deals with the social and political conditions of Saudi women by highlighting some of the challenges and injustices they face in their daily lives (El-Naggar & Bolt, 2016). The long video report highlights how the new mobile technologies assisted Saudi women running for political positions in the municipal elections to reach out to their constituents. About 980 women were able to run (out of 6,900 total candidates), though they were not allowed to use their photographs in their election campaigns or to talk directly to men (Stancati & Al Omran, 2015). The film was later accompanied by an online survey for Saudi women in both English and Arabic to get their feedback on various relevant issues (*New York Times*, 2016). As a reaction to this campaign, Saudis divided into two main camps. The first held antagonistic views, viewing the campaign as part of a hegemonic Western crusade linked to cultural imperialism. They also expressed clear anger and frustration against the film, considering it a distorted media production aiming at creating division in the Kingdom and tarnishing the country's image abroad. Some Saudi women tweeted comparisons in the treatments of women in America and Saudi Arabia, using the hashtag “crimes of America against women” (#جرائم_امريكا_ضد_المراه). In contrast, the second camp viewed the online survey favorably, especially those who supported the Twitter hashtag campaign launched by Saudi women on canceling the man's guardianship rule over women (سعوديات_نطالب_باسقاط_الولاية_1) (Al-Turki, 2016). The hashtag, actively used by many Saudi female activists, including Manal Al-Sharif (see Chapter 4), is marked by specific numbers to document the number of days it started trending on Twitter.

In connection to the above argument on cultural imperialism, a number of Western liberal feminist organizations and groups have

developed a sense of “rescue mission” to assist women in the MENA region, for there is an obvious “missionary zeal of proselytizing, converting, saving, and rescuing . . . [them] from their misogynistic Muslim captors” (Massad, 2015, p. 110). Most of the above efforts seem to be good intentioned, yet many feminist groups solely blame Islam to be behind the problems that women face while disregarding local cultural influences and the economic, historical, and political contexts. Marnia Lazreg, for instance, discusses the precarious position of Muslim women in the West:

On the one hand, they have been represented as oppressed by their religion, typically understood as being fundamentally inimical to women’s social progress. From this perspective, the veil has traditionally been discussed as the most tangible sign of women’s “oppression.” On the other hand, Muslim women have been described as the weakest link in Muslim societies, which should be targeted for political propaganda aimed at killing two birds with one stone: showing that Islam is a backward and misogynous religion, and underscoring the callousness or cruelty of the men who use Islam for political aims. (2009, p. 1)

Further, Afkhami and Friedl (1997) assert that there are various “local cultural traditions that historically cannot be justified with reference to Islam” (p. xiii) since each country in the MENA region should be examined separately because various aspects must be considered in assessing and understanding the different situations of women. As mentioned, Arab countries are not homogenous, despite sharing the same classical Arabic language, history, and some cultural values. Rather, numerous local and national factors shape and define individual Arab countries, such as each country’s traditional views on marriage, women, sexuality, and homosexuality. Further, many cultural nuances must be closely examined when women’s treatment is analyzed. For example, Hanna Papanek observes that women in Pakistan who wear purdah are not as seemingly persecuted or passive as many Westerners believe. “Despite its forbidding appearance, [the purdah] can be considered a liberating invention, since it provides a kind of portable seclusion which enables women to move out of segregated living spaces while

still observing” their gendered rules (Papanek, 1971). Abu-Lughod agrees on the partial liberating function of the *Purdah* in Pakistan as well as the way the veil functions in other Muslim countries (2013). To give another example, the liberal Lebanese channel LBC aired a controversial interview in 2009 with a Saudi man called Mazin Abdul Jawad who mentioned how he used to successfully flirt with many Saudi women in Jeddah. He was later imprisoned for five years for publicly discussing his sexual adventures, while some of his friends received lashes for appearing with Abdul Jawad on TV (CNN Arabic, 2014a). Most importantly, Abdul Jawad highlighted in the televised interview how new mobile technologies like Bluetooth assisted him in flirting and establishing initial contact with women in public places like shopping malls. Incidentally, some women who wear the *niqab* (face veil) find it easier to establish romantic relationships because it is difficult to identify them publicly, for the *niqab* can be considered, in this specific context, an empowerment tool used by some women as part of their sexual liberation aided by new media technologies.

Old/New Media and Cultural Change

Though this book's focus is on new media, it is impossible to overlook or ignore the role of traditional or old media in creating cultural change, for many television and radio outlets have repeatedly challenged the status quo and traditional norms by presenting ideas that often discuss women's empowerment and equal rights. Indeed, they assist in changing people's social behaviors, norms, and interactions in the Middle East (Larsson, 2016, p. 111).

In this regard, Judith Butler (2004) refers to the concept of performativity, with a focus on repetition and familiarity, which shapes the foundations of gendered identity often replicated and highlighted in mass media. As Tuchman notes, there has been a systematic symbolic annihilation of women in Western media (1979), and Goffman has observed that women are mostly represented as sexual commodities in advertising through the ritualization of subordination (1976). Though there is a clear gap in literature on the representation of women in Arab media, the same kind of “symbolic annihilation” of women is widespread in mainstream Arab media, as the main focus is on their

bodies (Al-Malki, Kaufer, Ishizaki, & Dreher, 2012; Obeidat, 2002). For example, the two liberal Lebanese channels, LBC and Future, which began broadcasting in the mid-1990s, “used women anchors in low-cut attire in a bid to woo Gulf audiences, who were unaccustomed to seeing women on their own television screens” (Sakr, 2007, p. 94). Numerous Arab female singers tried to use sex appeal to draw more listeners and viewers to their video clips, such as Rola’s “I’m Rola” (2016) and Amar’s “kiss my lips” (2017) (Abdulahakim, 2017). As part of the globalization influence, a number of global television channels have been launched in the Arab world, including SkyNews Arabia, BBC Arabic, and CNN Arabia, that can be regarded as a positive turning point in diversifying opinions, enhancing democracy, and encouraging freedom of expression, yet the values that some of these new channels spread do not appear to be focused on promoting gender equality. For example, MTV Arabia released several promos to advertise for the channel, and two of them are highly problematic because they clearly enhance the street harassment culture that prevails in many parts of the Arab world (e.g., see MTV Arabia 2008a, 2008b). Finally, there has also been an opposite trend that is concerned with assigning traditional media roles to women due to the influence of some powerful Islamic parties (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 244; Dönmez-Colin, 2004). These conservative voices are increasingly using media to spread their messages (Moghadam, 2003, p. 157) by insisting, for example, that women must wear the veil on TV, while many Arab magazine advertisements highlight gendered roles by featuring women wearing long robes (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000).

Despite the problematic trends, many Arab female artists from Lebanon and elsewhere are, in fact, pushing cultural boundaries by disseminating unconventional ideas about sexual freedom, romance, and love in traditional media, such as the case of Haifa Wehbe and Nancy Ajram, who have become leading figures in the MENA region. Most of their music video clips and sponsored TV advertisements show seductive, partially naked, and sexually implicit scenes far different from traditional videos aired on mainstream Arab TV channels (Cestor, 2010, pp. 103–104; Abdel-Nabi, Agha, Choucair & Mikdashi, 2004). Indeed, these music videos, which often resemble Western productions, show the impact of globalization and the diffusion of ideas while also boosting the brand of the female artists and improving album sales.

Other media outlets played significant roles in spreading new social values and raising awareness about women's issues. For example, some news reports and concerns were voiced in the Arab world due to the potential impact of Arabic dubbed Turkish soap operas on young people, for these media productions have often been blamed, whether directly or not, for the increasing rate of divorce in Arab countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq (*Al Ahrām*, 2016; *The Economist*, 2016; Hayatouki, 2012). Most of these TV series highlight the importance of love relationships and suggest higher romantic expectations that are different from customary notions of romance and marriage life in mainstream Arab cultures. Further, in December 2014, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Ghamdi, the former head of the Saudi Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, brought his veiled wife for a televised interview on MBC to challenge the idea that Saudi women should publicly wear the niqab. Al-Ghamdi's decision was viewed as brave and controversial, and he subsequently received many threats sent to his mobile phone (Al-Awad, 2014; CNN Arabic, 2014b; MBC, 2014).¹

As discussed above, the majority of Arab countries are patriarchal and conservative in nature, and women generally take marginal or secondary roles in society. This gap, in fact, can be observed in the online sphere as well.² There have been several attacks by religious clerics on traditional and social media platforms, especially in conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, and these types of criticism are meant to inhibit any changes that might occur in people's traditional social values due to globalization and the advent of new technologies (Alsharif, 2012). For example, the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Baz (1910–1999), issued a fatwa (religious decree) against the so-called different dangers of satellite dishes and new technologies because they air “various kinds of transgressions, immoralities, false beliefs, calling for polytheism and infidelity” such as showing “images of women, alcohol drinking scenes, moral corruption, and other types of evilness that exist abroad” (Imam Bin Baz, n.d.). A similar type of ideology is echoed by the current mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al Al-Sheikh, who stresses in another fatwa the dangers of using social media outlets and internet sites; he warns Muslims against accessing them due to the potential dangers that they contain in allegedly corrupting men and women's morals and spreading polytheism, apostasy, and moral degradation. For example, he points

out that mobile devices can lead to “immoral crimes” because they can “facilitate meetings between girls and boys, exchange photos and phone numbers, and lead to illicit relationships” (Al Al-Sheikh, 2012). In other words, there is a clear mistrust among salafi (orthodox) and highly conservative Muslim circles in new media despite the fact that the same clerics often use these technologies to reach out to their publics. For example, Tara Fares, a young Iraqi female model, was assassinated on September 27, 2018, shortly after receiving death threats for Instagram posts and YouTube videos that were regarded as obscene in conservative circles (Hassoun, 2018). Though she never posted nude photos, Fares was regarded as someone who crossed the lines (BBC News, 2018b). I argue here that the killing of Fares is a form of terrorism because it creates an atmosphere of terror intended to warn other women to behave according to masculine conservative standards.

Within this difficult social context, globalization and new media technologies have assisted women in creating change in their lives by empowering them in a variety of ways. New technologies with their convergence and affordances have assisted in what is known as globalization from below, especially with the rise of transnational liberation movements (Brecher, Costello & Smith, 2000; Della Porta, 2006; Evans, 2012; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; McEvoy & McGregor, 2008). Many scholars have identified the way ICTs (information and communication technologies) have assisted in enhancing citizenship participation, political engagement, activism, and democracy (Deibert, 2000; Flew & Smith, 2014, p. 119; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Other technologies have assisted in enhancing activism, such as fax machines and photocopiers, believed to have helped strengthen the anti-Soviet Union movement (Brown & Duguid, 1996), while Usenet was used during the coup in Moscow in 1992, and SMS texting helped in overthrowing the political leadership in the Philippines (Rafael, 2003).

With the advent of social media, many scholars started referencing Habermas’s notion of the public sphere more than before, as interactive social media sites tend to function as alternative media outlets for ordinary people (Al-Rawi, 2014). Manuel Castells calls this new collective and connective phenomenon the “global network society” that is “built around the media communication system and internet networks, particularly in the social spaces of the Web 2.0, as exemplified by YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and the growing blogosphere” (Castells, 2008, p. 90). This global network society creates a participatory culture that

offers new opportunities for online users to use horizontal modes of communication in which there is more peer-to-peer and equal flows of information including access, dissemination, and sharing (Castells, 2001). In this regard, ordinary users have more agency in this new networked society, for online messages can reach global audiences while their production is self-generated, self-directed, and self-selected in what is called mass self-communication (Castells, 2007).

In terms of the Arab world, the emergence of Arab Spring events has been increasingly mentioned as evidence of the impact of ICT on people's political activism, especially in connection to women's movements. It has been argued that social media outlets provided empowerment for women in different fields of their lives (Arab Social Media Report, 2011), especially with more than 125 million individuals using the internet (see Table 1.1) and more than 53 million actively using social networking technologies, as of 2013 (Dubai School of Government, 2013).³ Through their participation in these popular protests, women have become involved in the fourth wave of feminism in the region (Almahasheer, 2018), developed with the assistance of technology (Zimmerman, 2017), for the "internet has created a 'call-out' culture, in which sexism or misogyny can be 'called out' and challenged" (Munro, 2013, p. 23). It is also claimed that a new image of Arab women has emerged in the West: "women who are courageous, independent, and technologically savvy" despite some of the leading figures being perceived as passive veiled women, such as Tawakol Karman (Eltantawy, 2013). For example, Esraa Abdel Fattah, nicknamed "the Facebook girl" and nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, is another veiled Egyptian woman well known for her social media activism. She was responsible for co-establishing the April 6 Youth Movement that led to the mass protests that toppled Honsi Mubarak's rule (Greenslade, 2016). Also, the Arab Spring events showed how women from different secular and religious groups became united under mutual emancipatory objectives (Khamis, 2011) as their activities increasingly converged (Lewis, 2012) through a clear transnational feminist dimension achieved via the influence of globalization (Cooke, 2016). Further, the use of "modern information technology, particularly social media in the forms of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and smart phones" assisted Arab women in avoiding "stifling government controls" of mainstream media (Odone, 2013). In short, social media and new technologies allowed women to freely voice their concerns and to express their social aspirations and political goals during

Table 1.1. Internet & Facebook Usage in the Arab World*

Arab World Countries	Population 2017 (estimated)	Users, in December 31, 2000	Internet Usage March 31, 2017	Facebook June 30, 2016
Bahrain	1,418,895	40,000	1,278,752	800,000
Iraq	38,654,287	12,500	14,000,000	14,000,000
Jordan	7,876,703	127,300	5,700,000	4,800,000
Kuwait	4,099,932	150,000	3,202,110	2,300,000
Lebanon	6,039,277	300,000	4,577,007	3,100,000
Oman	4,741,305	90,000	3,310,260	1,500,000
Palestine	4,928,225	35,000	3,007,869	1,700,000
Qatar	2,338,085	30,000	2,200,000	2,200,000
Saudi Arabia	32,742,664	200,000	20,813,695	14,000,000
Syria	18,906,907	30,000	5,502,250	n/a
UAE	9,397,599	735,000	8,515,420	7,700,000
Yemen	28,119,546	15,000	6,773,228	1,800,000
Algeria	41,063,753	50,000	18,580,000	15,000,000
Comoros	825,920	1,500	60,000	60,000
Djibouti	911,382	1,400	150,000	150,000
Egypt	95,215,102	450,000	34,800,000	32,000,000
Eritrea	5,481,906	5,000	71,000	63,000
Libya	6,408,742	10,000	2,800,000	2,800,000
Mauritania	4,266,448	5,000	714,132	370,000
Morocco	35,241,418	100,000	20,207,154	12,000,000
Somalia	11,391,962	200	660,000	660,000
Sudan	42,166,323	30,000	10,886,813	n/a
Tunisia	11,494,760	100,000	5,800,000	5,800,000
Total	413,731,141	2,517,900	173,609,690	122,803,000

*Data retrieved and compiled by the author from World Internet Stats (www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm) on June 18, 2017.

the Arab Spring event and afterward (Radsch & Khamis, 2013), and were especially useful in disseminating ideas (Rane & Salem, 2012) and reaching out to broader audiences (Gaby & Caren, 2012). Indeed, the degree of impact of the Arab Spring on women's lives varies depending on the unique local circumstances across Arab countries. For example, the general social issues that concern women in Oman, the UAE, and Qatar are far different in their intensity and urgency than those that

concern women in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. This is because the latter countries have witnessed civil wars and armed conflicts, which generally shape the social lives of women and their general concerns. The same argument applies to local and geographical differences. For example, Iraqi women who live in Kurdistan, which is relatively safer and more stable than the rest of the country, have different concerns from those of Sunni women living in internally displaced camps in Western Iraq, for whom the Arab Spring events had probably little or no impact.

Further, social media outlets such as #MuslimahPride, #FreeAmina, or women's communities on Facebook have provided women with opportunities to create their own online initiatives, such as mobilizing people for certain causes or social movements, that have proven to be extremely popular among users. At the same time, mobile apps such as "Know Your Rights," launched in July 2016 by Nasreen Alissa, a Saudi female lawyer, have served to empower women in the region. Using animated videos to discuss important and relevant issues such as "divorce, custody of children, inheritance and domestic violence," Alissa's app has been downloaded more than 50,000 times since its release (Alkhalisi, 2017). It is also important to note here that social media alone can never be solely responsible for the various anti-government protests that occurred in the Arab world, as mainstream media outlets, "domestic factors, and broader geopolitical contexts" remain very relevant and must be taken into account in understanding these protests (Rane & Salem, 2012).

Despite the numerous positive outcomes of new technologies, many challenges and negative impacts on users remain, especially for women living in the MENA region; these include harassment and threats online privacy (Dubai School of Government, 2014; Nihal, 2011). In an interview by the author with Dareen Hasan, the head of the feminist organization Nasawya, Hasan elaborately discussed the online bullying against women that occurs frequently on social media; some of her views were shared by Thuraya Ruffaat, the manager of Iraqi Women's Rights NGO (see Chapter 5 for more details). Hasan affirmed that there were fierce attacks against her public page and its pro-feminist messages and that "many posts were removed" by Facebook due to the number of users reporting them. Hasan revealed that she routinely receives insults, curses, and threats with sexually explicit photoshopped images, but stressed that these threats do not hinder her from pursuing her project. Most importantly, she has noticed a change in attitudes toward her women activism efforts, for obscene messages and threats

have recently decreased, though some men continue to try to ridicule feminists' objectives and efforts in the MENA region.

Other types of negative outcomes include the increasing popularity of revenge porn against women and sometimes men. This is, indeed, not an exclusive Arab problem that is caused by the emergence of new technologies, for sextortion is well known to be widespread on social media outlets such as Facebook. However, the problem has been magnified in most of the Arab world due to its general conservative nature as "smartphones and social media are colliding head-on with traditional notions of honour and shame" (BBC News, 2016a). For example, the WhosHere app has been reportedly used by many men to sexually blackmail Saudi women after arranging private meetings with them in what is called "legitimate privacy" (الخلوة الشرعية) (Adan Al Ghad, 2015). Another controversial mobile app called Sarahah (frankness) that allows users to anonymously send messages to others has been increasingly used to "bully vulnerable people and spread hate." The app was developed by Saudi programmer Zain al-Abidin Tawfiq and became one of the top iPhone apps in the world in 2017 before being shut down (Griffin, 2017). In general, conservative voices who oppose women's freedom almost always equate moral degradation with intellectual liberation and gender equality (Al Haj, 2017), and new technologies are sometimes used to inhibit women's freedom, citing local cultural traditions "to deny women rights in the name of Islam" (Afkhani & Friedl, 1997, p. xiii). Finally, when using a Google autocomplete search in Arabic for "A woman should" (يجب على المرأة), we find that the majority of statements carry submissive connotations in relation to women. The autocomplete function provides an indication of the collective searches that people make on Google. The following are the main results: (1) A woman should obey her husband; (2) A woman should take permission from her husband in . . . ; (3) A woman should obey her husband (different format); (4) A woman should wash; and (5) A woman should wash after sexual intercourse.

To conclude, globalization and the emergence of new media technologies have influenced many cultural values in the Arab world and provided new opportunities for women to become more empowered. Women have generally become more effective in expressing their views and better connecting with each other, yet social media have also inhibited some women, as many conservative circles use these new technologies to maintain power over women, often in the name of

Islam. Due to the influence of globalization and continuous international pressure, as well as internal calls for reform, some Arab governments have made improvements in women's lives, such as in the case of Tunisia, which recently allowed Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men and share equal inheritance rights (Cordall & Mahmood, 2017). This can be regarded as a good example for other Arab states to follow. The following section on the book's methodology concludes this chapter.

Note on Methodology

Several social science computational methods are used in this book, and this section attempts to briefly summarize them. In terms of data collection, a number of webometric tools have been employed in order to retrieve data from YouTube—Netvizz and Webometric Analyst 2.0 (Rieder, 2015; Thelwall, 2009); Facebook—NVivo's N-Capture and Netvizz; as well as Twitter—Crimson Hexagon and the Boston University Twitter Collection and Analysis Toolkit (BU-TCAT; Borra & Rieder, 2014; Groshek, 2014). In some cases, data collection has been done manually, such as in the case of some Instagram images. Metadata on social media use and number of followers is taken from SocialBakers and/or Crimson Hexagon, while the social networking analysis of Facebook pages was conducted using Gephi software.

Regarding data analysis, the textual examination of large data sets has mostly been conducted by using QDA Miner-WordStat computer software, which provides the means to find the most common frames, words, and phrases as well as offering visualization of the text corpus. The details of this software can be found in previous peer-reviewed studies that employed it (e.g., see Al-Rawi, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). Other approaches include using Microsoft Excel's filter and pivot table options to identify the most retweeted posts, most active users, and most likes and comments (e.g., see Al-Rawi & Fahmy, 2018). Selecting only the top posts is a well-established method in social media analysis because there is a lot of "noise," and researchers need to focus on what online audiences are primarily engaged with. Further, interviews with NGO officers and managers were conducted using WhatsApp messaging, email correspondence, and Facebook messages. All data analysis has been complemented through proper social, political, and cultural contextualization and theoretical discussion.