

WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE BAHRAINI UPRISING - AGENTS OF CHANGE?

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Introduction

Since the Arab Uprising¹ started in 2010 there has been an exceptional media attention on Arab women and their role during the unrests (Al-Ali and Pratt 2015). Women were either represented as heroines or victims of neo-patriarchal politics who were sexually harassed in public. Many scholars (Al-Ali 2014; Kandiyoti 2013; Pratt 2013) emphasised on gender aspects during the protests and the various images that were applied on Arab women marching on the streets across the MENA² region. The uprisings created a new space for women to be active in the public spheres as protesters, mobilisers, volunteers, doctors, feminists, activists etc. However, the impact of the outcomes on womanhood and gender norms had different effects on women's conditions and rights which varied according to national contexts (Al-Ali and Pratt 2015, 8).

In this paper I will look at the case of Bahrain where especially women's participation received big attention in media as it broke the orientalist stereotype of "the Arab Gulf woman". Bahraini women had to negotiate with tradition and modernity during the protests while looking for a collective identity. I aim to look at women's agency and empowerment during the Bahraini uprising in 2011 by asking what was women's role during the uprising and what were important outcomes for them? I will discuss women's participation of social change during the unrest by focusing on the discourse of empowerment and the concept of agency. Hereby, I want to emphasise on the importance of women's participation on various levels that aimed to achieve a democratic discourse. I am aware that democracy, women empowerment and gender equality have Eurocentric connotations that need to be cautiously questioned within different contexts. Yet, I believe that secular and religious values are possible to combine in order to create a new discourse within a postcolonial framework as different discourses of women's agency intersect.

The socioeconomic status of Bahrain improved over the last decade which positively influenced women's role in society and economic participation. Female empowerment is important on the government's agenda, however their public and political participation is still limited, that is why Bahraini women used the uprisings and new social media to be heard (Aljishi 2013, 55).

Due to limitations I will not go into detail on women's parliamentary participation, but rather on their agency in public during the major unrests from February until May 2011³. Also, I will not discuss women's agency representation in media as this would be an essential topic for a separate analysis especially with the importance of Facebook and Twitter during the uprising⁴. This paper gives a very general overview of the political history of Bahrain in order to understand the reasons for a social uprising and will be followed by a short summary of the uprising in Bahrain from February until March 2011. Furthermore, I will analyse women's role, agency and struggles during the uprising, whereby I will focus on the discourse of empowerment of female narratives in the social movement. I want to stress here that the uprising was not a women's movement but a social protest for social equality regardless of religious and class backgrounds, thus the primary concern was of Bahrainis as suppressed citizens of an authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, the movement had unlikely consequences for Bahraini women.

Short Overview of Bahrain's Political History

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy that has "a bicameral parliamentary system with a fully elected lower chamber, and appointed upper chamber" (Aljishi 2013, 57). Compared to its neighbouring countries, Bahrain seemed rather progressive when in 1999 King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa promised to allow political associations, abolished the special courts, released political prisoners, permitted an opposition press and expanded civil rights. In 2001, he initiated the National Action Charter which was perceived as a contract between the King and his people. This "contract" was supposed to lead to democratic reforms (Aljishi 2013, 57). Yet, there are still limitations to that since Bahrainis can only vote for one chamber, while the upper chamber is appointed by the King who tends to elect members of the royal family. Hence, the sovereign has the final word. The kingdom still does not fulfil the qualifications of a democratic state neither is it a totalitarian regime, but rather a more or less authoritarian regime between democracy and totalitarianism (Schmidmayr 2011, 13). Moreover it is an island between the two biggest Islamic factions, the Sunni Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran. This locates Bahrain, which means "two Seas", in a hot spot of the Middle East. Additionally,

the regime that dominates politics and economics, is Sunni while the majority of the population (60%) is Shi'a. Bahrain attained independence from Britain in 1971 and established a constitution in 1973 (Al Gharaibeh 2011, 96). The power of the Sunni Khalifa family persists almost unchanged since their annexation in 1783 despite different protests during in previous decades⁵ (Al-Mdaires 2002, 21). Over the years, the ruling family brought Sunni tribes to Bahrain who had special privileges and divided the island into Sunni and Shi'a quarters⁶. This imaginary strip line is still visible between the poor Shiite villages and the clean wealthy Sunni areas. In the years of 2004 and 2005, first indicators of an upcoming revolution were visible when thousands of protesters demanded a fully-elected parliament. The uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia inspired Bahrainis to join the "Arab Spring". Yet, there were major differences between Bahrain compared to other upheavals in the Middle East because Bahrain infrequently experienced protests and thus the protests were not as unexpected as in other Arab countries. Hence, the uprising in 2011 can be seen as a continuity of earlier unrests (Karolak 2012, 5). The date of February 14th, 2011 marked the tenth anniversary of the National Action Charter which seemed to be a good date for opposition leaders to go out on the streets and demand constitutional reforms and resignation of the king. The upheavals were analysed as sectarian issue, even though demonstrators emphasised that this is not a Shi'a movement but a civil movement whereby also Sunni supporters demanded for reforms (Karolak 2012, 5). Many female activists used the media attention of the unrest to emphasise on gender issues e.g. discrimination, women quota or personal status law (Karolak 2012, 11).

The Uprising

Before the discovery of oil in 1932, pearl trade was very important in Bahrain's economy. This historic significance was mirrored in the monumental sculpture in the Manama Pearl Roundabout, which was the scene for one of the biggest demonstrations in Bahrain on the 14th of February 2011 when thousands of people were protesting against the regime. Due to the parliamentary elections there was a Facebook call two weeks before the 14th of February, to gather around the Pearl Roundabout for a demonstration, which promoted two slogans: Firstly the protests should be peaceful and secondly it was a call for political reforms focusing on instituting

the constitutional monarchy that discriminates the Shi'a majority (Marlowe 2012, 21). Young and old, women and men gathered on the streets in hope for change. But the Bahraini regime destroyed the people's hopes for a peaceful solution and social improvements when they imprisoned⁷, killed and injured many protesters and invaded the demonstration (Marlowe 2012, 21). Thousands of Bahrainis camped for days around Pearl Roundabout, which was supposed to symbolise the Bahraini Ta'rir square, demanding the resignation of the prime minister and the end of Khalifa rule (Hasso 2014, 16). In March 14th the Saudi Arabian troops entered Bahrain sent by the GCC to attack the Pearl Roundabout and destroyed the monument as this place was deemed to be a security threat, police forces barricaded the area and renamed it Farooq Junction (Hasso 2014; Marlowe 2012, 21). Up until now there are small demonstrations in Shi'a villages all over Bahrain that are shut down by police force and tear gas regularly (Marlowe 2012, 21).

Women's role in the Uprising

This chapter discusses women's participation during the uprising by focusing on the discourse of agency and empowerment.

From the start, women were an active part of the uprising protesting in the front row, holding Bahraini flags, shouting slogans such as "No Shiites, no Sunnis,



Arrest of a female protester in Manama, Bahrain

only Bahrainis” to emphasize that they are frustrated with the regime. Jihan Kazerooni, a member of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights said (2012) that women were an important partner during the protests and made up about 50% of demonstrators (Marlowe, 21). Hasso states (2014) that without Bahraini women it would have been impossible to sustain the revolution (21). Not only the number, but also the power of women presented in the public space made them significant participants. Among the female protesters were also many female human rights activists, lawyers, photographers, film makers as well as female doctors and nurses who went to the demonstrations to help wounded protesters. Some female medics even set up underground clinics (mostly hidden in narrow Shi’a villages) where they treated injured protesters (Marlowe 2012, 23). Women organised demonstrations and were often presented as speakers shouting slogans, demanding freedom, emphasising on Human Rights violations and demanded release of political prisoners (Alfoory 2014, 7).

Gender issues occurred during the uprisings as Bahrain has a habitus of gender segregation⁸ and male dominance. Previous protests where gender segregated, meaning that men and women protested in different spaces⁹ which echoed conservative notions. Especially the opposition group Al-Wefaq stressed the significance of gender segregation in large public gathering (Hasso 2014, 6 and 19). The difference of the uprising in 2011 was that women walked alongside men in the front rows for the first time. Al-Ali and Pratt claim (2015) that “[w]omen’s access to economic and political resources, as well as social support networks vary according to social class, place of residence, citizenship status, ethnicity, generation, and political and religious affiliation” (2), meaning that Arab women are not a homogenous group who have the same access to resources in order to perform protests. Nevertheless, during the uprisings there was a generational shift visible because many young women and men were marching together in contrast to gender-segregated protests from previous generations. Internet and the use of social networks such as Facebook or Twitter impacted activists as it engendered the discourse, as well as national and ethnic contexts.

Agency

When speaking hereafter of women’s agency, I refer

to the ability of a female narrative to make her own free choices which will eventually follow in empowerment. Agency is influenced by factors such as class, religion, ethnicity etc. which can also limit women’s decisions (Barker 2003, 448). Yet, women’s agency can also modify structures through different strategies that allow women to transform existing patriarchal and political restrictions (Bespinar 2010, 525). In Bahrain many women are struggling for agency especially in public spaces. The uprising in 2011 gave them an opportunity to use their agency as a collective to express their demands for social justice as pro-democratic agents. Bahraini women were not only agents of the uprising, but are also agents of political repression with different means as protester, policewoman, doctors, activists, lawyers etc. Therefore, Bahraini women’s agency is multi-dimensional, complex and varies from agents of change, who have different approaches between each narrative, to pro-government agents who aim to maintain the current status quo. Depending on their background Bahraini women represent different agents of progress, struggle and repression (Alfoory 2014, 3). I will not discuss every different agency of Bahraini women as there are too many variables, but I want to highlight that Bahraini women have different demands and do not necessarily represent a homogenous group as it is often misrepresented. Therefore, we have to differentiate between collective and personal empowerment through different women’s agencies. By that I mean to separate the “practical” and “strategic” gender interests in the concept of empowerment (Bespinar 2010, 225). Bespinar (2010) defines “practical” gender interest as “practicable alternative” to cope with structural and cultural restrictions which do not change those constraints (225). Whereas, “strategic” gender interests can improve structural restrictions by creating a collectivist approach for an alternative, gender equal society (Bespinar 2010, 225). Of course those interests can overlap. Nevertheless, even if female protesters had their own view on empowerment and reform building processes, during the protests they started to create a collective community that marched together under slogans that concerned and connected them commonly. The protest symbolised an informal task-oriented collective that formed a new public sphere with its own power where also women were involved in the organising committees and medical and media institutions (Hasso 2014, 18). This strategy was not only empowering the society as collective, but could also give individuals an empowering agency within the community.

Empowerment

When using the term empowerment, I borrow Kabeer's definition of empowerment as an interconnection of agency, resources¹⁰ and achievements that enable women to exercise actual choices through which they gain agency. The ability to choose between different options by agents that had not had the possibility before is a key element in Kabeer's definition of empowerment (Kabeer, 2012, p. 217). Empowerment is seen as a process that strengthens agency and resources in a reciprocal relation (Tadros 2010; Yadav 2010; Kabeer 2012). Furthermore, Goldman and Little (2015) claim that empowerment should be assessed as a multidimensional development that seeks to measure growth on a multitude of levels (personal, economic, political) through different discourses i.e. individual (mind and body), domestic (family) and community (society), because it is at the intersection of these discourses that women's individual narratives are found (762). Through a processual kind of active citizenship, women gradually gain the empowerment it takes to co-build the institutions that govern their lives, and that are at the same time forming and formed by their ability for opposition (Kabeer, 2012, p. 230). In the case of Bahraini women, their agency of an active citizen who went out on the streets, opposing the government alongside with men and addressing their concerns out loud (on individual but also societal level) created a discourse of empowerment. Kazerooni states (2012) "women are the power and the strength of our revolution" (Marlowe, 21) because due to their braveness and strength they played a central role in the uprising. But women not only publicly spoke about their demands, but also created information tents around the roundabout that informed women about the need for freedom, democracy and equality. During the uprising the organisation "Women for Bahrain" was established which aims to unite Bahrainis against sectarian separations. It stresses that the uprising was a Bahraini not a Shi'a movement (as the government tended to label it). Activists claimed it to be an inclusive, pro-democratic and nationalist movement which aimed to empower Bahraini citizens (Alfoory 2014, 8). Yet, women used the protests not only to speak up, but also took this opportunity to empower other women from lower classes to become aware of their status. In this case women's agency grew and more women started to demand equal rights and felt like being part of something that could enable change (Marlowe 2012, 22). Zainab Al-Khawaja, daughter of a

prominent political prisoner, described how men told her to go to the back of the march for her own safety, but stopped after realising who she was. Some were even thankful to her for breaking the gender barrier and started to support women to go in the forefront (Marlowe 2012, 22). This move may make some men aware that women can be as strong and powerful as men. However, not everyone supported women's participation. Some opposition leaders degraded women for "crossing the gender line" (Marlowe 2012, 22). But this argument was resisted by the people as the revolution continued in a mixed crowd that did not enforce a segregation because the marches were seen as a public space that enabled to express a sense of freedom and equality (Hasso 2014, 21). A collective protest was seen as a tool to achieve empowerment by different sectarian and gendered agents.

Gendered Violence

The down side of women's participation was that they have been subjected to torture and arrests. Doctors and nurses were arrested for treating wounded protesters¹¹ and teachers were dismissed from schools and universities or even arrested and threatened for speaking up for Human Rights. Al-Ali and Pratt (2015) state that "women's bodies are central to political transformations" (5). Thus, women are often used as embodiment for control since women's behaviour symbolically reflects societies' honour. Legislations implement rules such as dress codes, controlling sexual behaviour or limited access to public spaces (Al-Ali and Pratt 2015). Violence against women by state agents is a counter-revolutionary tactic to silence protesters (Al-Ali and Pratt 2015), here regime apparatuses use sexualized actions such as rape, sexual assault, forcing hostages to undress, removing women's hair covers or monitoring sexual behaviour to blackmail activists in order to control activists through shame (Hasso 2014, 26). Various repressions against women particularly can be termed as "gendered violence" in order to discourage women to join protests, but also as a strategy of control. Out of "security reasons" the government advised parents to protect their daughters from illegal acts (i.e. large protests) to preserve their dignity (Alfoory 2014, 10). This gives a notion of the space of protest to be masculine and aims to limit women's presence of protest activities. State agents use violence towards women to assure their authority despite activists challenging hegemonic gender norms (Al-Ali and



A Bahraini woman holds her national flag during an anti-government protest in solidarity with jailed political activist, Hisham Al-Sabbagh on April 30, 2013. (AFP Photo/Mohammed Al-Shaikh)

Pratt 2015, 9). Kandiyoti claims (2015) that this marks a “masculinist restoration” of patriarchy (in Al-Ali and Pratt, 7). To some extent I agree that the regime may have feared a loss of authority and patriarchy is still an important discourse in Arab societies, yet I disagree with the term “masculinity” as it also needs to be taken into account that different social and class backgrounds perceive “masculinity” differently, thus it need to be contextualized. Furthermore, not only men injured women but also policewomen were sent to (violently) remove women from the protest grounds as well as female doctors were tortured by female security officers (Alfoory 2014, 9 and 13). This stresses that women were likewise violent against other women which underlines my previous claim that Bahraini women are not a homogenous group as different social and economic backgrounds influence their agency. However, both agencies, the pro-government violent agents and the oppositional activist agents, act outside traditional roles and expectations because women are often believed to be kind passive and just caretakers (Alfoory 2014, 14). But this shows that women in power positions can commit a crime out of different agencies such as economic, discrimination or punishment.

Women entering the public sphere are considered to be an important aspect for empowerment, democracy and freedom, since equal access reflects social justice and equal principles. Thereby, discrimination against women is a key element for failure of political systems regarding democratic processes (Al Gharaibeh 2011, 96). There are two views on women’s role in Bahrain

the religious discourse that prefers woman to preserve traditional domestic roles and the ‘modern’ liberal view that promotes women’s participation in public spheres (Al Gharaibeh 2011, 97). The Bahraini constitution could be seen to be in between those principles as it calls for women empowerment, but on the other hand limits there access to certain spheres through legal barriers of Shari’a law such as equal right to grant citizenship to their children, personal status law, violence against women (Al Gharaibeh 2011, 99-105).

Results after the Uprising

Women’s participation in the Arab uprising has been important at all levels. After the uprising the King initiated a National Dialogue which aimed to find compromises with the opposition on social, political, economic and human rights levels (Karolak 2012, 12). Also women associations were invited to express their concerns. The regime pretends to support women empowerment, but has not been able to show actions. The results of the National Dialogue were formed into recommendations that the King has to approve before the implementation meaning that the National Dialogue itself has no power. Regarding women issues the recommendations included “greater protection of for women against violence, equal rights in the workplace and political and economic empowerment” (Karolak [2012, 12). Furthermore, women asked to grant citizenship to their children and equal salary.

In October 2011, three female MPs participated in the

elections. Hence, women make up 10% of the lower house of parliament (Karolak 2012, 13). However, posters of female candidates were vandalised and women's participation remains quiet due to a low number of candidates. Yet, their presence in Parliament is at least a starting point to have a representative female agency and maybe come closer to a women quota in the time to come. But it also needs to be mentioned that those elected women all represent "modern" agents who support the government that do not necessarily represent the Shi'a majority (Karolak 2012, 13). Even though governmental authorities developed women empowerment, whereas some opposition women reject reforms due to the fact that those come from the ruling regime and the opposition does not propose gender-specific issues. The biggest opposition party Al-Wefaq did not support women's quota as it stated it feared to lose seats in parliament if they would include women (Karolak 2012, 12). But I believe they did not take into account that they may win female supporters and voters if they would include women in their political program. However, female empowerment can only occur through governmental policies as female activists are not able to generate enough pressure to implement reforms that can empower women" (Karolak 2012, 13). Using women's empowerment is a big advantage of authorities against the opposition on national but especially on international level. The government should assist women when running elections or publicising women's associations (Al Gharaibeh 2011, 110). Politically Bahraini women are more active than ever before, but women lack funding and support for running elections.

Additionally, religious leaders have a big influence on voters (Al Gharaibeh 2011, 109). Traditional attitudes in Bahraini society limit women's role in public. Therefore alternative solutions must be found to advance women's empowerment within Islamic culture. Religious and modern standpoints need to find a common framework that allows women to be equal citizens. Legal protection, changing Personal Status Law and bigger involvement of women in political and economic spheres are steps to achieve the discourse of empowerment and equality. Traditions and religion are important in Bahraini society. Yet, the legal constitution has the ability change laws in order to promote equal rights and enable women to participate in public sphere. This could change societies' attitude towards traditional aspects such as divorce, honour crime, inheritance etc. This shift will

not happen rapidly, but can change slowly through education and political processes whereby religious leaders may re-think their views on traditional roles of women.

Conclusion

This paper provided a general understanding of women's different agencies during the 2011 uprising in Bahrain. It emphasised on various activities women took. While some activists aimed for change other women aimed to maintain the status quo through governmental control and violence. Women were used to silence other women and eradicate her from political participation (Alfoory 2014, 15). This eradicates the notion of Arab woman being passive and apolitical. I do not make a demand of being complete since each agent is unique and agents of change can differ in their strategy of involvement. Thus, this paper represents a self-selected choice of examples to emphasize on different possible agents and the multi-dimension of women's agencies in Bahrain. This intended to eliminate the dominant image of "The Arab Gulf woman", "The female protester" or "The Bahraini woman".

Even though the demonstrations did not yet significantly change legal regulations, some women still perceive their participation as a step forward towards liberalism. Strength and willpower illustrated that women have the ability for change. However, up until now Bahraini women ask for empowerment, waiting for authorities to react on their demands (Karolak 2012, 13). Bahrain's case shows ambiguity regarding women empowerment. Even though women were in the front rows during the protests they seem once more marginalised. The pro-democratic uprisings were unable to develop women's rights and politics remains male dominated. Also religious leaders oppose female candidates which are another influential factor for women's empowerment as conservative electors would not vote for women (Karolak 2012, 14). There are many barriers in the private and public sphere that prevent an advanced empowerment of women. Even though women and men were mutually protesting for reforms there is still a "lack of commitment towards women's rights" (Karolak 2012, 13) which is needed for a pro-democratic movement.

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1. I avoid using the term "Arab Spring" as it tends to unite the diverse processes and outcomes of the different countries in the MENA ranging from reforms and protest movements to civil war .

2. The Middle East and North Africa

3. Even though Bahraini women have full political rights since the 1973 Constitution, they remain disadvantaged as the Election Law of 1973 was perceived to apply only to male citizens due to conservative and religious agents' visions (Aljishi 2013, 59). As example, in 2002 the first municipal election took place whereby 30 women stood for elections, but none of them were elected, which surprised the Bahraini society (Aljishi 2013, 60). For further details on possible reasons why female candidates in Bahrain fail to enter parliament see Aljishi, Bahiya J. (2013) . 'Reforms and Political Participation of Women in the Kindom of Bahrain.' In *Turkish Policy Quarterly*. 11(4), 55–67.

4. Social media activity was widespread during the unrests and also offered a platform in uncovering stories from the uprising, give it an international public attention and helped organising the protests.

5. In 1938, 1950s, 1965, 1970s and mid-1990s, mostly demanding for reforms by working classes (Hasso 2014, 5-7).

6. Naturalization policy: They still bring non-Bahraini Arabs and Pakistanis to Bahrain, to grant them Bahraini Passports and recruit them into the army or police, to increase/shift the number of Sunnis in Bahrain and to avoid employing Shias for higher positions.

7. For further information on arrested Bahraini Human Rights activists see <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/human-rights-defenders-targeted-bahrain-2> [accessed May 02, 2015]

8. But compared to other Arab countries such as Egypt or Lebanon, sexual harassment in public spaces is rare in Bahrain.

9. Often on the other side of the street or behind the men.

10. Resources can be material, legal, relational and knowledge (Kabeer 1999)

11. See "Bahrain: Shouting in the dark" You Tube video, 50:55. Posted by "Al Jazeera English," August 4, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaTKDMYOBOU>

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