

## **Converging and Diverging Images of Arab Women in Western Media during the Arab Spring: A Corpus-Based Study**

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**Abstract:** This study relates the general images of Arab women in news discourse during the Arab Spring to specific ones in different Arab countries. We used a self-compiled complex corpus and its 20 subcorpora, each consisting of articles published about women from a specific Arab country by British and American news media during 2010–2014. These articles were categorized into four datasets according to the political stability in the countries they are associated with: Arab Spring, conflict, semi-stable, and stable countries. Each subcorpus was analysed for the occurring collocates of woman/women, which were then classified according to the topical frames they reflected. The themes were compared within and across the four categories and to those identified earlier in the complex corpus. The results indicate discrepancies between the general depictions of Arab women and those particular to women of different nationalities. Despite the commonalities among all Arab women, images of those from specific nationalities provide evidence for profound variations among them.

**Keywords:** Arab countries, Arab Spring, Arab women, stereotypes, topical frames, western media

### **1. Introduction**

Research on using news corpora in discourse analysis has considered print media (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery 2013; Blinder and Allen 2016; Haider and Olimy 2019); digital news (Torkington and Ribeiro 2019); and, more recently, social networks (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016; Altoaimy 2018; Siapera et al. 2018). The importance of investigating the discursive aspects of news comes from the effect of the media on public opinion. It is well established that through manipulation of language, journalists tend to disseminate messages that could

influence the values, mindsets, and world views of their audiences (Fowler 1991; Wanta, Golan and Cheolhan 2004).

Major issues of investigation include media coverage of minority groups (Baker et al. 2013), social phenomena and activist movements (Gupta 2013; Tobin and Lyddy 2014), or gender issues (Aull and Brown 2013; Jamel 2014), including violence against women (Santaemilia and Maruenda 2016), and women's rights (Altoaimy 2018). Specialized news corpora concerned with women of particular cultural or religious backgrounds have been used to investigate stereotyping processes (Al-Hejin 2015).

More attention has been given to the depiction of Arab women in media discourse because of their central role in the Arab uprisings that took place during the period 2010–2012 (Khamis 2011; Al-Ali 2012; Newsom and Lengel 2012; Radsch 2012; Özcan 2013; Samie and Sehlikoglu 2015). However, such studies have mostly continued to deal with them as one monolithic body, ignoring differences between the various Arab identities (Mustafa-Awad and Kirner-Ludwig 2017; Mustafa-Awad, Kirner-Ludwig and Sawalha 2019).

The present paper builds and expands on an earlier study of ours (Mustafa-Awad et al. 2019) pertaining to the images of Arab women in the news during these uprisings and explores variations, if any, between the depiction of women from different Arab countries, including those who witnessed or are affected by such events and those who did not, in British and American news media.

To this end, we use tools from Corpus Linguistics (henceforth CL) (keywords and collocations) to decompose a complex corpus of news discourse into 20 subcorpora, each consisting of articles about women in a particular Arab country, and to analyze them for the most significant collocates of “woman”. Then, we apply Discourse Analysis (henceforth DA) approaches to identify the themes linked to women from each country and to compare them across the different categories of Arab countries. We adopt Fairclough's (1995) view of critical discourse analysis as an approach that bonds a text with the discourse and sociocultural performance that it echoes, underscores, and produces to relate the portrayal of women from various Arab countries in news discourse to the socio-political situation in each. This combination of CL tools with Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) approaches allowed us to use quantification as a starting point for documenting the linguistic patterns in our data and guided our explanation of the presence of such patterns.

## **2. News corpora and discourse analysis**

The use of news corpora in discourse analysis has attracted a lot of attention in the last decade. Some scholars, including Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013), focused on the depiction of minority groups in general news outlets. They studied the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in British newspapers and how it relates to media attitudes around related topics, including Muslim women who wear the veil. Others, like Partington and Marchi (2015) looked at the representation of Arab nations in media during political conflicts. They examined

how different social actors were portrayed during the Arab Spring by press releases in *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, CNN, and the White House.

Works on media discourse have also dealt with news stories on social phenomena and activist movements. For example, Gupta (2013) investigated the depiction of the women's suffrage movements in articles published in the *Times* newspaper between 1908-1914, while Tobin and Lyddy (2014) studied the representation of depression that affects young adults in Irish newspapers during the period 2007 and 2011. In addition, discourse studies have considered the coverage of gender issues in the media. For instance, Aull and Brown (2013) looked at framing gender in the sports section of American newspapers. Their results showed that there were major variances in the narrative focus, which contributed to the "othering" of women in general and female athletes in particular. More recently, Santaemilia and Maruenda (2016) investigated Spanish newspapers' representations of violence against women (VAW) in articles published from 2005 to 2010. They focused on the type of attitude reflected in the reports by using terms collocating with "battered woman" They found such terms denote the protection of those women by specialized institutions. Also, Almujaivel (2017) analyzed discourse patterns related to feminism in a corpus composed of news reports published in Arabic. He found that the extracted patterns can be negative or positive, and they highlight socio-cultural and eco-political topics. The former refers to driving, male guardianship, discrimination, veil, sports and municipal elections, while the latter to education, employment, travel, and political participation.

The significance of such research derives from the effect of media on audiences' mindsets through journalists' biased manipulation of language (Fowler 1991). Newspapers, according to Greenslade (2005), tend to include materials that are in line with their editorial views and exclude those that are not based on their political affiliations. Although the structure of information in news discourse usually reflects the journalists' intentions, its interpretation by the audience affects their world view (Lee 1992; Simpson 1993; Fairclough 2003; Montgomery 2013). Some scholars, including Von Sikorski, Matthes and Schmuck (2018), attribute the new trends of Islamophobia and populism in several Western societies to the negative, inaccurate coverage of Muslims in the news and to the pejorative stereotypes of them created by the media (also cf. Saleem and Ramasubramanian 2017).

Specialized corpora have been compiled to study specific issues, including media depictions of women with a special reference to certain cultures, religions, or historical periods. For example, Al-Hejin (2015) compiled two large corpora to study the differences in depictions of Muslim women in articles published by the Arab News BBC and the BBC between 2001 and 2007. His results showed that the depictions of Muslim women are mainly restricted to regional coverage, with the topical frames of conflict and crime being dominant. More recently, Altoaimy (2018) compiled a corpus of tweets, published in Arabic over the course of three months in 2015, on banning Saudi women from driving. She argued that such debates on Twitter had significantly contributed to raising awareness of the

restrictions imposed on Saudi women and later played a major role in granting them the right to drive.

A lot of attention has recently been given to the portrayal of Arab women in global media because of their substantial participation in the revolutions referred to as the Arab Spring. Most works on the topic have dealt with their rebellions and fights for more rights. For instance, Khamis (2011) investigated how women activists effectively participated in the protests. Her study showed that such participation ranges by age, religion, ideology, dress code, and economic status, which signifies efforts of unity, solidarity, and cohesion. Similarly, Al-Ali (2012) concentrated on the significance of Arab women activists' involvement in political transitions during that period as reflected in news discourse. She demonstrated how global media gave a lot of attention to individual women activists such as Asma Mahfouz (Egypt), Munira Fakhro (Bahrain), and Tawakul Karman (Yemen)<sup>1</sup>. She concluded that they have pushed the boundaries when calling for gender-specific demands while participating in the wider calls for reform, democratization, and human rights.

The role that social networks and online media have played in women's contributions to the uprisings has been emphasized by several scholars. Radsch (2012) explored cyber-activism where young women, leading protests in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and Yemen, used social media to promote the 'Arab Spring' and to influence mainstream media around the world. She demonstrated how they used social networking to counter the official state media in Arab Spring countries and to reshape the public image and expectations about the political role that women can take. She concluded that educated and well-trained Arab women who have been expanding their legal and political rights will continue supporting the socio-political gains of the Arab Spring. On the other hand, Newsom and Lengel (2012) addressed the engagement of women activists in social change by using online social networks during the protests in Tunisia and Egypt. They investigated the local and global impact of online activists by utilizing a schema of information production and consumption called digital reflexivity. They concluded that this digital reflexivity process contributed to the clash between the representation of the central role of Arab women during the uprisings and the lack of social changes related to gender.

Using news corpora for exploring Arab women's representations in the media during the uprisings, however, has so far been done by only few recent studies, including Mustafa-Awad and Kirner-Ludwig's (2017) work on news headlines in German and English-speaking news media. Their findings show that new images of Arab women as fighters for their rights did emerge in the media during the Arab Spring and gradually superseded their more conservative depictions as victims of society. In a later study, Mustafa-Awad et al. (2019) constructed two comparable complex datasets of news stories published in German and English so as to study the changes in Arab women's stereotypes in Western media during that period. Their results suggest that, despite the general change in Arab women's portrayal in the media, some discrepancies in their

representations have surfaced depending on the country these women specifically come from.

In the present study, we expand on the methods and findings proposed by Mustafa-Awad et al. (2019) and further investigate the variations in the portrayal of women from different Arab countries in the Western press during the uprisings. To do so, we examine 20 subcorpora within a self-compiled complex corpus of English news discourse, each pertaining to one individual Arab country. We analyze each sub-corpus using corpus linguistics techniques to identify the most significant collocates of "woman" and relate them to the salient themes reflected based on general discourse analysis approaches. The results are compared to those deduced from the complex corpus as a whole.

We are aware that our data are not large compared to those used in other corpus linguistic studies, but that is due to the specific historical era we are focusing on. We believe that analyzing such data is important for studying the representations of women from different Arab countries in the coverage of the uprisings that took place in some of them. We are also aware that it is important to relate such media depictions to the status of women in different Arab countries before the Arab Spring, but this is beyond the scope of this study.

We adopt Fairclough's (1995) notion of critical discourse analysis as uniting a text with the discourse and sociocultural practices that it reveals, emphasizes, and constructs. This notion was illustrated later by Fairclough and Wodak (1997) by a number of principles on which critical discourse analysis is based. These include social and political issues that are constructed and reflected in discourse; power relations are negotiated and executed through discourse; and ideologies are constructed and reflected in the use of discourse. While we consider these principles in our data analysis, we concentrate on the first one, which highlights the focus of CDA on addressing social and political concerns and scrutinizing ways in which these are raised and mirrored in the use of certain discourse strategies and selections.

### **3. Approach**

We combine quantitative tools from corpus linguistics (CL) with qualitative approaches from critical discourse analysis (CDA). The merits of such combinations have been established by several scholars, including Baker and McEnery (2005), Baker et al. (2013); and Partington (2010). CL tools provide statistical data, including frequency, keyness, and collocation, which help in identifying discursive patterns in a large corpus. What is more, CDA approaches allow for a qualitative, less subjective analysis of the numerical results.

#### **3.1 The complex corpus and 20 subcorpora**

Our complex corpus consists of news stories published in English during the period from October 4, 2010 to June 30, 2015. We have considered this period in our analysis despite the fact that the uprisings started on a large scale in December 2010 in Tunisia and continued to occur in some other Arab countries till mid-2012. Yet, less intense and infrequent forms of protest had been taking place in

some Arab countries before that date and had continued to do so for several subsequent years in others.

As for the articles considered in our study, we focused on those published by two prominent newspapers with high circulation, namely; *The Guardian*<sup>2</sup> (UK; henceforth *Guardian*), and *The New York Times*<sup>3</sup> (USA; henceforth NYT). These news outlets are considered the top two most frequently read newspapers according to the International Media and Newspapers ranking website<sup>4</sup>. These two newspapers represent influential and contrasting Western perspectives. The *Guardian* is known for its liberal and left-leaning stance while the NYT is known for its centrist and authoritative voice. Both are highly relevant for this study as they have a long-standing tradition of covering news of the Middle East, particularly the Arab Spring and movements of Arab women's rights. Their widespread played a major role in shaping public opinion in Western societies through their portrayals of Arab women.

Overall, our corpus comprises 819 related news reports (677,132 words), collected via the LexisNexis<sup>5</sup>. A first browse of the corpus was done for the search phrases "Arab women/woman". In a second round, we identified all such references to *woman* with specific indications of their nationalities, i.e. "Egyptian woman", "Iraqi woman", etc. These phrases were first searched in the headlines and the bylines to make sure that we only focused on articles explicitly and specifically addressing Arab women's nationalities. Following Mustafa-Awad et al. (2019), we took into consideration personal names that would point to certain national conventions.

The twenty datasets we designated based on the Arab countries they were concerned were classified into four groups according to the political situation (i.e., the intensity and frequency of protests as reported in global media). We refer to the first group as the 'Arab Spring countries' sub-corpus, which consists of articles about Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria, where intense protests started in December 2010 and continued till mid-2012, leading either to the transition of power as in Egypt and Tunisia or to the struggle over power, as in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. We called the second dataset of news stories about Palestine, Sudan, Somalia, and Bahrain the 'conflict countries.' This is where fights over power had been going on for years before December 2010 and continued after mid-2012. We named the third group the 'semi-stable countries' sub-corpus of news reports about Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and Mauritania, where demonstrations were infrequent and less intense calling for reforms rather than a transition of power. The last group is the 'stable countries' dataset; it consists of articles about Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Oman, which have not witnessed any significant public demonstrations during that period. The table below shows the distribution of word counts according to every country and the group we have assigned it to. (Note that a total of 34,910 words covered Arab women in general without any specific reference to a particular country).

Distribution of word counts according to subcorpora and political group

Political group assigned to	Arab country	Word Count		Total Word Counts	
		<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times</i>		
Arab Spring Countries	Tunisia	11,628	24,464	36,092	
	Egypt	39,518	62,675	102,193	
	Libya	17,547	9,583	27,130	
	Syria	54,516	16,266	70,782	
	Yemen	16,435	11,857	28,292	
<b>Total word count and percentage</b>				<b>264,489</b>	<b>39.06%</b>
Arab Conflict Countries	Iraq	24,384	17,608	41,992	
	Sudan	28,589	19,506	48,095	
	Somalia	29,851	12,533	42,384	
	Palestine	14,807	14,860	29,667	
	Bahrain	11,832	3,993	15,825	
<b>Total word count and percentage</b>				<b>177,963</b>	<b>26.28%</b>
Semi-stable Arab countries	Jordan	5,713	9,415	15,128	
	Morocco	11,266	11,763	23,029	
	Algeria	4,935	982	5,917	
	Lebanon	15,471	14,230	29,701	
	Mauritania	3,040	2,250	5,290	
<b>Total word count and percentage</b>				<b>79,065</b>	<b>11.68%</b>
Stable Arab countries	Saudi Arabia	51,157	29,567	80,724	
	Kuwait	6,303	965	7,268	
	UAE	8,883	5,705	14,588	
	Qatar	9,393	2,631	12,024	
	Oman	5,090	1,011	6,101	
<b>Total word count and percentage</b>				<b>120,705</b>	<b>17.83%</b>
	unspecified countries	21,827	13,083	34,910	5.16%
<b>Grand total</b>		<b>392,185</b>	<b>284,947</b>	<b>677,132</b>	<b>100%</b>

As is clear, there are clear differences in the coverage of the four groups in the *Guardian* and the NYT, with the Arab Spring countries being the largest (39.06%), followed by conflict countries (26.28%), stable countries (17.83%), and finally, semi-stable countries (11.68%). These results were expected since news platforms tend to give priority to covering war and political conflicts in international news. So, women from Arab Spring countries received more representation in the global media during the uprisings than those in other countries.

The discrepancy is also observed in the number and length of articles published about countries within each category, with those about Egyptian women scoring the highest word count (102,193) in the first category and those about Saudi women (80,724) in the last one.

These differences in the intensity of reporting on the different Arab countries during that period were also salient between the two newspapers under investigation, cf. Figure 1 in Appendix 1.

Overall, the coverage of the different countries was more intense in the *Guardian* than in the NYT, except for Egypt and Tunisia. Yet, the distribution of the size of coverage across the 20 Arab countries seems to be similar for the two newspapers.

### 3.2 Text handling

We processed our general corpus and the sub-corpora using Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014). The texts were uploaded and labeled for each by country and newspaper source. Each of our datasets was formatted using XML containing the news reports about every country published by the two newspapers. Apart from the text of each article, the file contains the related metadata, including its number, title, source, author, and section (cf. Figure 2 in Appendix 1).

We processed each sub-corpus separately to extract the related word frequency lists (excluding function words). Table 2 in Appendix 1 lists the most frequent 20 content words in each dataset.

One of the salient themes during the Arab Spring was women's rights. In addition, Saudi women were extensively covered during that period. Particularly this finding confirms that the Arab Spring had an impact beyond the countries that witnessed the uprisings<sup>6</sup>.

We followed the same procedure we used in extracting the collocates of “*woman*” from the general corpus in identifying those in each sub-corpus (cf. Mustafa-Awad et al. 2019). In our analysis, we considered the most significant terms based on co-occurrence counts (CC), that is the number of times the collocation occurred in the corpus; Mutual Information (MI-score) and T-score, which reflects the extent to which words occur together compared to the times they occur separately. MI-score and T-score (with a cut score of 1.5) were used to calculate collocational behavior without the involvement of grammatical relations. These statistics are accessible from the concordance window<sup>7</sup>.

Table 3 in Appendix 1 shows a sample of the relevant and significant collocates of “*woman*” in the whole corpus. The lexical items referring to *women* from the different country groups are among the most frequent and significant expressions in our corpus. For instance, terms referring to *Arab Spring* countries, *Syrian*, *Libyan*, *Tunisian* and *Egyptian*, which scored the highest (CC 105, MI 9.716, T 4.271)<sup>8</sup>. Expressions linked to the conflict group include *Iraqi*, *Somali*, *Palestinian* and *Sudanese with the highest scores* (46, 6.426, 4.249). However, lexical items associated with the semi-stable and stable groups did not feature among the most significant 51 collocates except for *Saudi* (221, 14.150, 4.376).

#### **4. Data analysis**

We classified the collocates of “*woman*” in each dataset into the themes they reflect, with each collocate semantically tagged with the topical frame it responds to. We identified the following themes: *rights, activism, empowerment, marriage, oppression, dress, violence, conflict, othering, religion, and highlights*. Except for *conflict, othering, and highlights*, these themes have been discussed by Mustafa-Awad and Kirner-Ludwig (2017) and Mustafa-Awad et al. (2019).

##### **4.1 Collocates of “woman” in the Arab spring countries dataset**

The most significant part of our subcorpora is the one related to Arab Spring countries (i.e., Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria), with the extracted collocates of *woman* indicating the following themes: *activism, rights, violence, oppression, highlights, empowerment, religion, dress, conflict, and othering*. Note that we consider conflict a central topic, overlapping with and inherently included in all other themes. It was reflected by the word *conflict* itself in news about Syria and Libya; also cf. *revolution, protest, and ISIS*.

Tables 4 and 5 (cf. Appendix 2) show the expressions reflecting the topical frames of *activism* and *rights*. *Activism* was identified by *revolution* in reports about Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, and *protest(s)* in those about Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. *Rights* was represented by the term *right*, which featured in the news about all the countries in this group. This is not surprising since women in these countries still do not enjoy the same rights as their male compatriots do. Like women in most Arab countries, they are not given the right, for instance, to confer their citizenship on their children if the father has a foreign nationality. However, there has been some recent development, particularly in Tunisia, where a new law was drafted in 2014 to grant women equal rights before the law.

Other major themes identified in this dataset are *violence* and *oppression*. Although these two topical frames were observed in the coverage of all countries in this group, there were obvious discrepancies in the frequencies and significance of collocates in the concerned dataset. For instance, *violence*, as indicated by the word *violence*, occurred mostly in reports about Egypt, and, to a lesser extent, in those about Syria, and Yemen (cf. Table 6 in Appendix 2).

The same can be said about *oppression*, which was reflected by words like *sexual* (in association with sexual harassment) ([Egypt]: 36, 5.88, 5.65) and, to a much lesser extent, in the news about Libya and Syria. Sexual harassment, in this context, refers mostly to that practiced by the Egyptian police against women protestors. The irony is that sexual harassment is considered a criminal offense in most Arab societies, but it is committed here by the law protectors. Other related expressions are *detained, banned, conservative* and *illiteracy* (cf. Table 7 in Appendix 2).

Oppression of Arab women here is linked to the authorities (*detained* and *banned*) as opposed to being generally associated with their male compatriots as oppressors (*conservative* and *illiteracy*) and often connected in news media to Islam as a strict religion (Razack 2004; Afshar 2005).

In addition to these themes, the identified collocates revealed topics associated with women's empowerment and highlighted key issues in the coverage of the Arab Spring.

*Empowerment* featured in reports about all Arab Spring countries (cf. Table 8 Appendix 2); it was reflected by terms such as *empowerment* itself in the news about Egypt and Syria, *awarded* and *Nobel* in that about Yemen, *play* about Libya, and *progressive* about Tunisia.

Women's empowerment in most of these countries has achieved some progress in certain areas, including education and leadership, but it is still lagging behind when it comes to participating in the labour force. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (WEFGGGR) (2010), the female unemployment rate is nearly four times the male unemployment rate in Egypt and Yemen.

As for *highlights* (cf. Table 9 in Appendix 2), it was indicated by expressions designating places where most of the protests took place (*Tahrir Square*) in Egypt or camps Syrian refugees fled to (e.g., *Za'tari*). This theme was also expressed by lexical items referring to prominent figures either in the regimes (e.g., *Mubarak* [Egypt], *Qaddafi* [Libya], *Saleh* [Yemen]), activists in the uprisings (e.g., *Karman* [Yemen], *Alobaidi* [Libya], *Ibrahim* [Egypt]) or political parties (e.g., *Ennahda* [Tunisia]). Some of the collocates observed in this dataset indicate *Othering* of ethnic (e.g., *Kurdish*) or religious groups (e.g., *Alawite* [Syria]).

Other topics raised in the coverage of these countries, though not very frequently, are *religion* and *dress* regulations.

*Religion* was mentioned in the reports about all of the countries in this category except for Libya. It was indicated by *religious*, groups—*Muslim*, *Coptic*, *Christian*, and *secular*—with *Muslim* scoring the highest in reports about Egypt. Other terms linked to political aspects of religion were *Islamists* featuring in news about Yemen, and *extremist* in that about Syria (cf. Table 10 in Appendix 2). Such terms are often linked to the strict Islamic fundamentalism that receives most of the attention in the news media, as noted by Baker et al. (2013: 166) about the British press. This is not to deny that Islam as a religion is usually distinguished in the media along a spectrum ranging from moderate to extreme.

As for *dress*, it also appeared in the articles published about all these countries except for Libya and was reflected by terms like *veil(ed)*; *veils*, *hijab*, and *scarves* scoring highest in the news reports about Egypt and *scarves* lowest in those about Tunisia (cf. Table 11 in Appendix 2). It is not surprising to find these terms, which are usually associated with the Islamic dress code for women, in reports about Arab women, who are generally referred to as Muslims.

Another theme that was observed in this dataset is *marriage*; it only occurred in articles referring to Syria and Egypt: cf. *marry*, *marriage*, *married*, *unmarried*.

It is clear that despite the variations in collocates' frequencies and significance, most of the themes they reflect are common to all countries in this category except for *marriage*. Thus, Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) CDA view

of discourse as a mirror of social and political issues in related situations, is clearly at play here. This is in addition to their notion of discourse as a reflection of ideology when it comes to associating Islam with fundamentalism.

#### **4.2 Collocates of “woman” in the Arab conflict countries dataset**

The second dataset is associated with Arab conflict countries (i.e., Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Palestine, and Bahrain). Out of the 11 themes identified earlier, only nine were revealed by the lexical items describing women in the news reports about these countries: *oppression*, *violence*, *rights*, *activism*, *religion*, *othering*, *conflict*, *empowerment*, and *dress*. Again, conflict represents a central theme that overlaps with the other topical frames; it was reflected by violence, ISIS, displaced, camps, and imprisoned.

The themes of *oppression* and *violence* were reflected in the largest numbers of collocates compared to other themes. *Oppression* was observed in the datasets related to all countries in this group as indicated by *(im)prison(ed)*, *FGM*, *barred*, *detained*, and *sentenced* with *prison* featuring in articles about Sudan (cf. Table 12 in Appendix 3). The same can be said about *violence* that is observed in news stories about all of these countries except for Bahrain. It is reflected by the terms "*violence*, *rape(d)*, *arrested*, *killed*, *kidnaped*, *beaten*, and *victim*," with *raped* being the most frequent in reports about Somalia, and *violence* in those about Palestine (cf. Table 13 in Appendix 3).

Other themes featured in this dataset are *rights* and *activism* (cf. Tables 14 and 15 in Appendix 3).

Both *rights* and *activism* were reflected by the collocates of “woman” across these sub-corpora and were linked to all countries in this group; the former was represented by the word *rights*, itself featuring mainly in reports about Iraq while the latter by *activists*, *support*, *role*, *lead*, *leadership*, *with activist* in reports about Iraq and *support* in those about Sudan.

Less prominent topical frames identified in this dataset are *religion* and *othering* (cf. Tables 16 and 17 in Appendix 3). *Religion* was observed in the news related to all the countries in this category except for Bahrain; it was reflected in words such as *Islamic* (Iraq), *Islam* (Somalia), *religious*, *apostasy with Muslim* and *Christian* being the most frequent occurring in reports about Sudan. Such an occurrence is strongly linked to the so-called religion-based military conflict that Sudan witnessed during that period. *Othering* was associated mainly with Iraq (*Yazidi*), Palestine<sup>9</sup>, and Sudan (*Darfur*).

Other minor themes reflected by the expressions occurring with *woman* in these sub-corpora were *empowerment* and *highlights* (cf. Tables 18 and 19 in Appendix 3). *Empowerment* was represented in news articles about three countries: Iraq (*parliament*), Sudan (*empowering*), and Somalia (*gender*).

Women in some of these countries are relatively empowered in certain sectors, including political leadership (e.g., parliament in the case of Iraq), but they are far from empowered, like women in the Arab Spring countries, when it comes to employment. According to (WEFGGGR) (2010), the lowest

employment rate among females in the MENA region is recorded in Iraq (15%) and Palestine (17%).

Similarly, *highlights* were linked to three countries; it was reflected by terms referring either to exceptional women, (Sudan: *Ibrahim* and *Meriam*)<sup>10</sup> or activists (Palestine: *Mona Shawa*)<sup>11</sup>, Somalia: *Hawa Abidi*)<sup>12</sup> that made the headlines.

Again, our analysis, in line with Fairclough's and Wodak's (1997) CDA principles, demonstrates that news discourse echoes and underscores the socio-political situation in these countries.

As it appears from the discussion above, the differences in the occurrence of the collocates of *woman* in these subcorpora echo both the topical frames that are shared by all of the related countries and those connected to specific ones. *Oppression*, *rights* and *activism* appeared across this dataset; the same can be said about *violence* and *religion* except for the subcorpus pertaining to Bahrain. On the other hand, *conflict* and *empowerment* appeared in news stories about Iraq, Sudan, and Somalia, while *othering* was only observed in those about Iraq, Sudan, and Palestine.

#### 4.3 Collocates of “woman” in the semi-stable Arab countries dataset

Our third set of subcorpora is related to semi-stable Arab countries (Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, Algeria). The extracted collocates from this dataset were arranged according to seven topical frames: *rights*, *empowerment*, *activism*, *violence*, *religion*, *marriage*, and *oppression*. It should be mentioned that some collocates were categorized under more than one theme. The most common themes observed in this category are *rights* and *empowerment*, as appears in Tables 20 and 21 (cf. Appendix 4).

*Rights* is a major concern for women in these countries, as it is in all Arab countries, since there are still discriminatory laws against them, especially when it comes to conferring their nationality on their children if the father has a foreign nationality, as mentioned earlier. Lexical items revealing *rights* occurred in all news stories about these countries; it was indicated by the term *rights* itself. On the other hand, those reflecting *empowerment* appeared in the data associated with Jordan (*empower*) and, to a lesser extent, with Algeria (*parliament*) and Lebanon (*gender*). Although women in these countries are considered fairly empowered (having the right to vote and to run for parliamentary elections), their political participation is still restricted by being excluded from important economic and security policymaking.

Other themes observed in the articles published about this group are *activism* and *violence*. *Activism* was identified by lexical items occurring in the news, mostly about Morocco: *support*, and to a lesser extent, about Lebanon: *feminist*, and Jordan: *struggle* (cf. Table 22 in Appendix 4). Similarly, *violence* appeared mostly in reports about women in Morocco and much less frequently about them in Lebanon (cf. Table 23 in Appendix 4).

Less frequent topics reflected in this dataset are *marriage* and *religion*. The former was observed in collocates such as *divorce* (Morocco) and *marry* (Jordan).

The latter was indicated by *Muslim* (Lebanon and Algeria) as well as *Islamic* (Morocco).

The last theme identified in this subcorpus was *oppression*, which occurred only in the data linked to Morocco (e.g., *discriminate*).

In contrast to the previous two groups, only one theme (i.e., *rights*) was shared across the datasets; others occurred only in reports about specific countries. *Empowerment* and *activism* appeared mainly in the news about Jordan and Lebanon (in addition to Algeria for the former and Morocco for the latter). On the other hand, *violence* was observed in the news stories associated with Lebanon and Morocco, but *oppression* was linked only to the latter. Other themes, like *marriage*, were identified in the articles about Morocco and Jordan, while *religion* occurred in those concerned with Lebanon, Algeria, and Morocco. Such variations in the themes associated with women within this group provide further evidence that news discourse reflects the socio-cultural situations it is linked to (Fairclough and Wodak 1997).

#### **4.4 Collocates of “woman” in the stable Arab countries dataset**

Our dataset is associated with the stable Arab countries (i.e., Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman) and features expressions that indicate the following themes: *rights*, *oppression*, *activism*, *empowerment*, *violence*, *religion*, and *dress*.

*Rights*, the most dominant theme in this group, occurs quite frequently, with the highest frequencies in articles about Saudi Arabia (*driving*: 155, 12.39, 7.77), and (*rights*: 101, 9.80, 5.34). These figures mean that women’s right for driving is a very important issue in Saudi Arabia and is frequently discussed in Western media as an indication of oppressing women by depriving them from one of their basic rights. It should be mentioned that Saudi women have been banned from driving for decades and were finally given the right to drive in 2018. Other rights that Saudi women have been recently granted are voting and running for municipal offices in 2015. Other expressions associated with this theme are *teams* (UAE), *sports* (Qatar), *education* (Kuwait:), and *sailing* (Oman) (cf. Table 24 in Appendix 5). In particular, Arab women’s right to education has witnessed significant improvements as reported by (WEFGGGR) (2010)<sup>13</sup>, closing 90 per cent% of the gender gap in education.

Another related topical frame that occurred in reports about all of these countries except for Oman is *empowerment*, which is featured by *compete* (Saudi Arabia), *sport* (Qatar), *finance* (Kuwait), and *empowering* (UAE). (cf. Table 25 in Appendix 5). Low women's empowerment in these countries is salient in the gender gap of employment, which is the largest for females in the UAE and the lowest in Qatar. As for unemployment among females, it is nearly four times than among males in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (WEFGGGR) (2010).

Other prominent topics identified in this dataset are *activism* and *violence* (cf. Tables 26 and 27 in Appendix 5). While *activism* appeared mostly in news reports about Saudi Arabia (*campaign* and *participation*), *violence* appeared in

those about Kuwait (*violence*) and the UAE (*attacked*), in addition to Saudi Arabia (*arrested*).

Other themes observed in this subcorpora are *oppression*, *religion*, *dress*, and *highlights*, which are mainly associated with Saudi Arabia.

It is striking that *oppression* stands out, being reflected by words such as *ban*, *restrictions*, and *discrimination* (cf. Table 28 in Appendix 5).

These expressions are associated with different forms of oppression that Saudi women have been, until recently, suffering from, including driving bans (*ban*) and male guardianship laws (*restrictions*), which require women to obtain a male guardian's permission to exercise certain rights, including marriage, travel, and getting passports; these laws were softened in 2019.

*Religion* is indicated by *religious* and *Muslim*, and the theme of *dress* is indicated by *dress* itself. As for *highlights*, it is observed in names referring either to prominent Saudi women activists (cf. Manal Alsharif) or bloggers (cf. Eman Nafjan; cf. Table 29 in Appendix 5).

Again, variations in the occurrence of the identified topical frames as reflected by collocates of *woman* were salient in our dataset. *Rights* appeared in news about all countries in this category; the same can be said about *empowerment* (except for Oman) and *violence* (except for Qatar and Oman). On the other hand, *activism* was observed in articles about Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while *oppression*, *religion*, *dress* (cf. Table 30 in Appendix 5), and *highlights* (cf. Table 31 in Appendix 5) occurred only in those about Saudi Arabia. The word cloud (cf. Figure 2 in Appendix 5) shows the most frequent and significant words occurring with *women* in the dataset associated with Saudi Arabia.

These results clearly show that the news under investigation mirrors the social and cultural issues in these countries (Fairclough and Wodak 1997).

## 5. Summary of results and discussion

By dividing a complex news corpus published about Arab women during the Arab Spring into 20 subcorpora, we have identified prominent themes associated with women from each Arab nationality. Based on the most significant terms co-occurring with *woman* in every dataset, we were able to carve out the topical frames in each and relate them to those observed in our complex corpus: *rights*, *activism*, *empowerment*, *marriage*, *oppression*, *dress*, *violence*, *conflict*, *othering*, *religion*, and *highlights*. We have shown that there are salient variations in the occurrence of such themes within and across the four datasets; Arab Spring; conflict; semi-stable and stable countries (cf. Figure 3 in Appendix 5).

It is clear that the dominant topical frames featured in the news discourse on the Arab Spring countries occurred also, to various degrees, in that on the other three groups. While *rights* featured across all our datasets, other themes (i.e., *activism*, *empowerment*, *oppression*, and *highlights*) were reflected in different degrees in those groups. For instance, *activism* and *oppression* appeared in the news associated with conflict countries and, to a lesser extent, with semi-stable and stable countries. *Empowerment*, for instance, was salient in articles about the latter and to a lesser extent about the former. *Highlights* featured in the news about

the conflict countries but was absent in the other two groups except for that of Saudi Arabia. Other prominent topical frames revealed by the Arab Spring data (i.e., *dress*, *violence*, and *religion*) also appeared in various degrees in the other three datasets. While *violence* and *religion* occurred in the articles about most countries in the other three groups, *dress* featured only in those about Iraq and Bahrain in the conflict group and only in those about Saudi Arabia in the stable group. Similarly, less dominant themes (i.e., *othering*, *conflict*, and *marriage*) in the news about the Arab Spring countries were also less salient in that about the other three groups and sometimes not even visible. For instance, *othering* and *conflict* appeared only in the dataset associated with the conflict countries, while *marriage* occurred only in Morocco and Jordan of the semi-stable group and Saudi Arabia of the stable group.

Thus, Arab women's images highlighted in British and American media during the Arab Spring were not limited to countries that witnessed the uprisings but were echoed to various degrees in those that experienced other forms of unrest or even those that did not. At the same time, some issues specific to women in individual Arab countries surfaced in the press, indicating that Arab women cannot be considered one homogeneous group. So, while women across the Arab world are becoming more active in their fight for more rights and empowerment, some still have to struggle to face challenges in their own social systems.

Our findings are in line with Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) CDA notion of discourse as a reflection of cultural, social, and political issues at play in the related situations and as an echo of dominant ideologies in specific societies.

## **7. Conclusion**

Our study shows that the change in Arab women's depiction in the British and American press from passive victims to active social agents of change and fighters for their rights during the Arab Spring was not limited to the countries that witnessed the uprisings. It resonates with those of women in other Arab countries that experienced a lower degree of political change, or even those that did not; those countries are categorized as conflict, semi-stable, or stable compared to Arab Spring countries. This was evident through the reflection of similar themes by the collocates of the lemma *woman* in both the complex corpus and its constituent subcorpora. These topical frames (i.e., *rights*, *activism*, *empowerment*, *marriage*, *oppression*, *dress*, *violence*, *conflict*, *othering*, *religion*, and *highlights*) occurred in various degrees in the 20 datasets depending on the political, social, and demographic factors specific to each country and the category it belongs to. Our results suggest that the positive change in Arab women's portrayal in Western media during the Arab uprisings has various echoes across the Arab world. At the same time, our findings provide discursive evidence against the monolithic image of Arab women by showing that although women in each Arab country are celebrating their particular achievements, they are still facing their own specific challenges.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Tawakul Karaman from Yemen, who was internationally recognized by being granted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, along with other two African activists, for her leadership in the protests that took place in her country.
- <sup>2</sup> The Guardian is a left-leaning British paper that offers free access to its website and has received numerous awards, including the 2014 Pulitzer Prize.
- <sup>3</sup> The New York Times is a leading American newspaper that has been known for avoiding bias in its news coverage. However, in the last few decades, it has been accused of supporting the left-leaning political spectrum.
- <sup>4</sup> International Media and Newspapers <https://www.4imn.com/top200/> (accessed on January 15, 2025)
- <sup>5</sup> Visit the LexisNexis website at <https://www.lexisnexis.com/>.
- <sup>6</sup> We used a concordance, tool to search for the keyword *woman* in its various contexts. Figure 3 (cf. Appendix 1) shows samples of the concordance lines of ‘*woman*’ of different Arab nationalities extracted from our dataset.
- <sup>7</sup> The T-score is considered more useful than the MI-score in most cases because frequency strongly affects the MI-score, such that low-frequency words could sometimes have a misleadingly high MI-score.
- <sup>8</sup> Note that we provide the CC, MI, and T-score in this exact sequence in all cases.
- <sup>9</sup> *Jewish* indicating both *religion* and *othering* in news stories about Palestine.
- <sup>10</sup> *Meriam Ibrahim*, was convicted and given four days to repent and escape death.

<sup>11</sup> *Mona Shawa*, an activist working for the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights in Gaza.

<sup>12</sup> *Dr. Hawa Abdi*, confronted the armed militias.

<sup>13</sup> World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2010) (WEFGGGR)  
<https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2010/>

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### **Conflict of interest**

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Appendices

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