The 2011 Bahraini Uprising: Women’s Agency, Dissent and Violence

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The 2011 Bahraini Uprising: Women’s Agency, Dissent and Violence
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Executive Summary

Media coverage of the Arab Spring protests has given us a new, if meager, conceptualization of Arab women as citizens of political dissent. The internet is peppered with photos of women carrying banners and marching in solidarity for freedom and democracy. These photos and articles show women as agents with pro-democratic motivations. However, the scope of women’s agency offered remains inadequate. The idea of these women as helpless, passive victims of an overarching oppression prevails. Moreover, even if we can begin to view woman as a capable agent of democratic change, her role and capacity are still confined within expected feminine characteristics; as a nonviolent and benevolent actor.

This paper takes a gendered analysis of the case of Bahrain’s 2011 uprising beyond examining women’s role in the uprising. It analyzes not only women in the grassroots, pro-democracy and human rights movement but also women who occupy an official capacity and who act to further the regime’s anti-democratic and violent actions. It intends to show women in a variety of capacities: as agents of the uprising, as victims of political repression, and as agents of that same political repression. It will look closely at instances where these different roles women occupy meet; a policewoman and a protestors, an activist and a regime spokesperson and discuss the regime’s methods for repression and violence.

The analysis reveals that the idea that ‘Bahraini women’ as a unit played a singular role in the uprising is inaccurate. In fact, women’s roles in a political crisis are varied, contradictory and complex. Women can be agents of change whose methods of participation are unique and different from one another. In Bahrain, women activists helped provide the movement with a solid and united base. But women can also work against progressive aims in order to maintain the status quo and as wielders of a particularly gendered form of repression and violence against other women. Women’s political participation is therefore multi-dimensional; different groups of women participate in a crisis depending on their background, experiences and choices. These findings run against the assumption that women in general are peaceful, that Arab women are passive, that Arab Gulf women are apathetic and that Bahraini women played a singular role in the uprising. They importantly show women as agents of progress, struggle and oppression.

Introduction

February 14, 2011 marked the beginning of a three-year uprising against the Al-Khalifa ruling regime. Inspired by revolutions taking place elsewhere in the Arab world – namely Tunisia and Egypt – Bahrainis chose the tenth anniversary of the National Action Charter’s referendum and the ninth anniversary of the Constitution of 2002 to demonstrate for political and electoral reforms. Initial demands focused on a rewriting of the constitution and the establishment of a fully elected body with lawmaking powers. In response to the call to protest, the Bahraini government acted to physically impede the protestors and weaken crowd interest: it placed checkpoints and increased security forces around the capital, and days before the protest was to take place King Hamad Al-Khalifa announced increases in social spending as well as a gift of 1,000 Bahraini Dinar (2,650 USD) to every Bahraini citizen.\footnote{“Bahrain doles out money to families.” \textit{Al Jazeera}, February 12, 2011.} Notwithstanding, the protest began as scheduled and was met with immediate force in the form of tear gas, rubber bullets and birdshot pellets. Injuries and deaths sustained, the protest continued for weeks, as did the

government’s efforts to quell them. Exactly a month after the uprising began, the Peninsula Shield, an agreement among the six Arab Gulf states to protect each other’s internal security, was activated and Saudi and Emirati forces entered Bahrain. The next day the Bahraini government declared a state of emergency. As the violence escalated and the number of deaths increased among activists, more Bahrainis joined the movement in outrage over the government’s harsh response. And as the numbers of dissidents increased, the movement’s demands shifted from a constitutional monarchy to the abdication of the ruling family and the release of the many prisoners arrested. In one journalist’s words: “What began as a euphoric movement for freedom is today a grinding cross-societal conflict that has taken some six dozen lives, sent hundreds more to prison, and left entire communities traumatized.”

Up until this report went to print in August 2014, protests have continued, especially with regards to the deteriorating human rights situation for the detained activists as reports of torture have emerged.

The aforementioned summary of the Bahraini uprising is typical of coverage and analysis of significant political events in its gender-neutral language. Readers may assume they have a general picture of the situation in Bahrain: the demands of the people, their grievances, the response of the rulers and the violence that ensued. However, this type of summary fails to acknowledge and describe the strong presence of Bahraini women who participated, organized and played a large role in the uprising. It is an unfortunately established pattern, historically and globally, that women are often removed from records of social movements:

The absence of gender analysis (except, of course, in research on the women’s movement) stands out starkly in almost all academic works on social protest. Interested readers are hard-pressed to find the mention of women...

Cognizant of the marginalization of women and their experiences from such historical accounts, the primary motivation behind this paper is to provide a gendered analysis of the Bahraini uprising. The paper will illustrate the roles and struggles of women in this national crisis, including how women mobilized and directly participated. In doing so, it draws attention to women’s agency: their capacity to act and/or challenge the status quo. Various and distinct dimensions of women’s agency and action will be mapped: their exceptional levels of dissent as activists, and as officials attempting to repress the uprising. Thus it intends to show women in a variety of capacities: as agents of the uprising, as victims of political repression, and as agents of that same political repression. The paper will also look closely at instances where these different roles women occupy meet; a policewoman and a protestor, an activist and an official spokesperson.

A narrative about ‘women’s role in a revolution’ can be problematic as it might lead readers to assume a) that women were dormant or passive prior to their participation in the movement and b) that they acted together as a homogenous group. Bahraini women in fact have a long and varied history of political activism, thus the paper begins with discussion of this alongside a general review of the country’s history of dissent. After discussing different forms of women’s participation, the consequences women’s actions are depicted here as well as their

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exposure to a gendered form of violence. Case studies are narrated to present individual and varied experiences. The paper delves into another form of women’s agency; as actors of violence and repression and concludes with an analysis of findings and implications for Bahraini women.

Apart from a review of social science literature relevant to the topic, the findings in this paper are based on a critical review of newspaper articles, social media sources and NGO reports, both local and international. Social media sources used, such as blogs, YouTube and Twitter, allowed for the experience of women activists to be clearly articulated, and for their voices to be heard in their own words. Social media activity was widespread during the uprising and the activists’ usage of it inspired further mobilization. Information used here concerning the arrest or detention of activists was provided by organizations such as Amnesty International, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and the Bahrain Forum of Human Rights – groups which played an essential role in illuminating and uncovering stories from the uprising. As it seeks to bring focus to the multifarious roles of women in crisis, this research is supported and based on Bahraini women as key informants; thus local sources are utilized. Their efforts to bring the situation into international public attention, through interviews, social media, op-eds, news articles or organizational documents, undergird this research and analysis.

The Crisis: A Historical Background

It is important to consider the uprising of 2011 against a long and continued political unrest in Bahrain. Among the first documented social movements was one which occurred in 1938, when working class employees in the oil industry held widespread demonstrations petitioning for reforms in several areas: judicial, legislative, changes to the police department, and employment reforms in the petroleum industry. Some scholars believe that the 1938 movement spurred the popular, anti-colonial movement of the 1950s, which subsequently cultivated a political awareness among youth and students. The 1950s and 1960s in Bahrain saw a proliferation of anti-colonial discontent and demonstrations against the British regime featuring leftist national movements. In 1965, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) laid off hundreds of workers which led to what was called the March Intifada; an uprising against British presence which included women, some as prominent leaders and mobilizers. Women were also members of prominent activists groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf, the National Liberation Front, and the Socialist Arab Baath Party.

After Bahrain’s independence in 1971, its newly written constitution established the National Assembly – a legislative body consisting of 30 elected members (through universal men’s suffrage) and 14 appointed members by the Emir. It is the 1970s where the roots of Bahrain’s 2011 uprising can be traced. After establishing a National Assembly, the government proposed a law to allow for the arrest and detention of people for up to three years without trial. The assembly refused to ratify the proposal and so in 1975 the Emir dissolved the assembly, ratified it by decree, and established the State Security court, whose judgments were not subject

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to appeal, to deal with cases of threats to state security. Bahrain was then placed and run under emergency law in 1975; a state which lasted until 2002.

Limitations placed on civil society organizations and the establishment of a weak, consultative body in the mid-1990s led to calls for social and economic reforms. Citizens lacked avenues for engaging in direct political participation and an uprising began in 1994 when a group of workers outside the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs demonstrated to demand jobs. Protestors, including a considerable percentage of women, wrote a petition to the Emir outlining issues faced such as unemployment, forced exile of activists, and restrictions on freedom of expression and on the press. The grassroots protest also called for the reduction of corruption and imported labor, and an expansion of social and economic opportunities for citizens. Munira Fakhro, a longtime Bahraini activist and academic, writes that the marginalization of women’s civil society activities under the new laws encouraged women to join the 1994 uprising by joining groups and signing a petition sent to the Emir. Of the total number of signatories to the first petition in 1994, Fakhro estimates about 20 percent were women. Later, a group of women submitted their own women’s petition in 1995, reiterating calls for reforms and a restoration of democracy. The government summoned all signatories to the second document, demanded written apologies and the withdrawal of the women’s signatures. During these campaigns, women and men demonstrated at universities which led to cases of their arrest, disappearance, denial of medical attention and family and lawyer visitation rights. Bahrain’s longtime social activists, both men and women, have been exiled as political prisoners and were allowed back into Bahrain in the early 2000s. Though women were granted suffrage and the right to stand in elections in 2002, reprisal for their activism continued. Sophia Pandya’s research on Shia women, uncovered the refuge politically vocal Shia women sought in their religious centers. The uprising of 2011, and women’s participation in it, should be seen in light of this history of dissent and repression. Additionally, the economic disadvantage of large groups of Bahrainis was a mass mobilizer of the uprising.

Despite official narratives of a sectarian divided uprising, many of Bahrain’s uprisings and demonstrations have been motivated by lack of economic opportunity and have featured both Sunni and Shia advocates, though more Shia due to their obvious marginalization. Opportunity in Bahrain has historically been divided along class and sectarian lines. The Bahraini Shia have faced deliberate governmental discrimination; the state has overwhelmingly excluded them from security jobs, reserved particular housing areas for Sunnis only, naturalized Sunni foreigners to alter the Shia/Sunni balance (Shia are a majority of the population) and engaged in gerrymandering electoral districts to ensure majority Sunni representation. These sectarian practices undoubtedly fueled the 2011 uprising. In 2004, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights released a report which highlighted high unemployment rates in the country among

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10 See 9.
individuals who had no access to financial assistance. The Center estimated that a quarter of employed Bahrainis live below the poverty level and in total about a half of Bahrain’s population suffer from poor living conditions. Further it stated that “…the poverty rate is increasing in Bahrain at the same time as the average income is increasing.” Aside from an unequal distribution of wealth, the report described a trend of land areas being taken over by influential individuals which led to an increase in land prices and rents. Thus though the official narrative of the Bahraini uprisings is one of sectarian strife, it is important to note that the economic difficulties particular groups face, and the class and sectarian divisions created by government policy, underpin people’s grievances.

**Bahraini Women in the 2011 Uprising**

Magdalena Karolak, a long-time scholar on Bahrain, writes that during the 2011 uprising women’s political participation took on a new, distinct character than prior forms of dissent: “…during the gatherings around Pearl Roundabout (women) addressed mixed gender audiences and proved themselves as leaders within the movement.” According to Karolak, women’s participation became so palpable that female martyrdom became a leitmotif of the opposition’s social media. Indeed women’s efforts and input into the uprising was substantial and ubiquitous and continued for years after the initial protest began. The following section covers three areas of women’s activism during the crisis: their on-the-ground presence as street protestors and campaigners, the role they played in relaying information to the international community and documenting human rights violations, and the categorical effort they put forth to define the uprising as inclusive and nationalist.

**Protest and Campaign Work**

The number of women in political and social organizations markedly increased as the crisis progressed. Through their capacities as group leaders and members, women helped organize many of the demonstrations and were often featured as speakers at rallies. Women organized and strongly participated in successive campaigns against the annual Formula 1 races; protesting the continued and deteriorating human rights situation and detention of activists. Along with men, women founded efforts such as the ‘Wanted for Justice’ campaign which named government officials responsible for the torture of activists. Women-only protests became frequent especially as the uprising progressed; for example, in 2013 to mark the anniversary of the February 14 revolution, a group of women held a demonstration called *The Bahraini Woman… Revolution* during which they demanded the release of detained women, protested the continued arrests and violation of their rights and an overall oppression of women. Similarly,

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the Women’s Affairs Unit of the Al-Wefaq society, an oppositional Shia group, marked the International Day to End Violence against Women in November 2013 with a call for international attention to the plight of female prisoners detained during the uprising. Many women in non-activist capacities also played a role in supporting or aiding the movement as nurses and doctors who treated the wounded when protests were forcibly dispersed.

**Reporting and Documentation**

In addition to an evident presence of women at street protests and as members of organizations; women’s activism across the Arab world and in Bahrain specifically took on a non-institutional, de-centralized type of ‘cyberactivism’.

Reviewing North African women’s impacts in the Arab Spring, scholar Andrea Khalil points to a shift in women’s activism to “atomized forms of cyberactivism and street action” where women are no longer affiliated with particular associations and instead take their non-institutional activism to the streets and to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

Two Bahraini sisters have been notable dedicated cyberactivists during the uprising. In addition to heading the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and being involved in several human rights campaigns, Maryam Al-Khawaja used Twitter to document human rights violations and deaths. Her sister, Zainab tweets as Angry Arabiya (Angry Arabian woman) and used the social media platform to publicize her street activism, hunger strike (see below) as well as the developments of the uprising. These and other activists who documented human rights violations also used social media to connect those injured by security forces during protest to medical professionals. The importance of these types of ‘atomized cyber activism(s)’ must be underscored considering the deliberate blackout of information and cordon of information coming out of Bahrain. These activists, whose efforts went beyond cyberactivism as will be discussed later, played a large role to bring the revolution to a global audience and to draw international attention to Bahrain when no other sources of information were available.

**(Re)Defining the Uprising**

‘Women for Bahrain’ was a group initiated in 2011 by women to unite Bahrainis against sectarian divisions propagated by the government during the uprising. Attempts to redefine the uprising as ‘Bahraini, not Shia’ became necessary for activists in the face of the Bahraini regime’s attempts to label the uprising as sectarian, wherein Shia were attacking Sunnis as a result of Iranian interference. Women activists responded by claiming an inclusive, nationalist and pro-democratic movement over a variety of platforms: through social media and in interviews with foreign media; they carried this banner in their campaigns as well. Refuting accusations that the protests were Iranian fueled, one activist firmly stated:

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... (W)e don’t need Iran to tell us that the Prime Minister holds his position unelected to the parliament for the longest time in history, and that the parliament is a parliament without actual authority, and that the media is not independent, and that the theft of Bahrain’s resources and land continues.25

In a similar vein, women saw in the uprising a fight for all of society, not just for a particular sect or for themselves as women. Political activist Mounira Fakhro, mentioned earlier, was a leader, organizer and spokesperson for the demonstrations. She strongly campaigned for an uprising that was ethnically integrated and not divided by sectarian lines. Addressing the presence of women in the uprising Fakhro stated in an interview: “Right now you cannot speak of a separate women’s movement. It's not a gender upheaval; (this is) an upheaval of the entirety of society, of which women have long been an active segment.”26

Fakhro, who has a long-standing history of political activism in Bahrain and was a parliament candidate in 2006 for the opposition party Waad, points to the inseparability of women’s issues from social struggles at large. She and several other activists relentlessly advocated for a wholly inclusive movement; regardless of gender or sect. Women who engaged and participated in the framing of the uprising thereby played a direct role in defining it.

Women’s participation is covered here only under a few main themes of direct impact. Their efforts are of course too varied and numerous to count. The power of their activism was already beginning to be felt less than a year after the uprising began. Some women saw their participation in the revolution as a release from an ideological conflict which pitted liberalism against Islamism. Others saw their contributions changing perceptions about women in the Gulf who are oft-assumed to be “women of petrol and (malls).”27 A member of the Al-Wefaq, the main opposition Shia party, gave a speech under the title The Bahraini Woman and the Pearl Revolution in the Shadow of the Peaceful Women’s Movement in 2013, in which she detailed and emphasized women’s various and multiple roles in the uprising.28 Another activist’s speech in March 2012 called for acknowledgement of women’s roles in the revolution and the success of ‘will and organization’ over the assumption that change could only happen through “mustaches and muscles.”29 These examples point to women’s consciousness of their efforts effectively changing prevailing ideas about gender roles and capacities. The repercussion of their participation was however, not without adverse outcomes.

**Consequences of Activism and Gendered Repression**

As a result of their participation activists faced severe government repression. Stun grenades were used on protests, including on women-only protests, as they marched to convey solidarity with jailed human rights activists. Authorities specifically sent policewomen to deal with female protesters and remove them from the protest arenas to allow for a physical handling of the women. Nurses, doctors and teachers were also primary targets for the authorities, for the

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26 “The women of Bahrain take to the streets in protest.” *Al-Arabiya*. March 6, 2011.
27 See 25.
29 “Wala’ Al-Mula Speaks about women’s role in the Bahraini revolution.” *YouTube*, March 5, 2012.
role they played in aiding the protesters.\textsuperscript{30} Hundreds of young women were dismissed from universities, schools were raided by security forces and teachers and students in the schools were beaten and arrested.\textsuperscript{31} Jalila Al-Salman, deputy president of Bahrain Teacher’s Association, was arrested three times and was threatened with rape during a raid on her home. She was dismissed from her position in the Ministry of Education, after she spoke about human rights in Washington, D.C. Jalilah was sentenced for inciting hatred against the regime, calling for a strike and participating in, and calling for, illegal gatherings. Speaking after her release, she stated:

I was in solitary confinement; it was very, very dirty. The walls were covered in dry blood. There was a hook hanging off the ceiling. There were no windows. I was forced to stand for almost all of the time. Every five minutes someone would come inside my cell. I was not allowed to lie down or even to go to the toilet or to have water. Because of that I had to be treated for kidney problems.

Jalilah’s struggle was not unique. Groups of women who had gathered to attend a pro-reform protest were often apprehended without arrest orders, interrogated without lawyers, not granted access to legal counsel or contact with families, at times were given no food and were barred from prayer.\textsuperscript{32} Two women were arrested in April 2013 for protesting at the F1 race and asking for the release of imprisoned human rights activists. One was tortured to extract confessions during which she “lost consciousness many times during detention”.\textsuperscript{33} She was charged under the terrorism law with planting a fake bomb at the F1 race.

Accounting for the numerous and varied types of repression women faced, one begins to notice a \textit{gendered} form of violence which they were often subjected to: threats of rape, sexual harassment and assault and personal humiliation method used on women and young girls: removing their scarves to dishonor their image and appearance. Moreover, to specifically discourage women from the space of protest, parents were advised to keep their female family members at home. After receiving criticism for the maltreatment of women in detainment, the Interior Ministry Assistant Under-Secretary for Legal Affairs released a statement in September 2011 which read: “(T)he ministry call(s) on parents to abide by the Bahraini customs and traditions to protect women and preserve their dignity by not encouraging them to take part in illegal acts.”\textsuperscript{34} This official statement defined the space of protest as masculine, gendered the right to be present at the protest, as well as the freedom of choosing to be there, as masculine. In the following section, cases of women protestors, prominent activists, will be discussed. The methods and severity of the repercussions of their activism is discussed in detail and these themes of gendered violence emerge, especially in cases where woman as an activist and woman as an official meet.

**Cases of Dissent and Violence**

1. Ayat Al-Qurmezi

\textsuperscript{32} “Torture fears for Bahraini women and girls in detention.” \textit{Amnesty International}, September 26, 2011.
\textsuperscript{33} “Nafeesa Al-Asfoor – Political Prisoners’ Health at Risk, Denied Adequate Medical.” \textit{Bahrain Center for Human Rights}, August 2013.
\textsuperscript{34} “Interior Ministry Statement.” \textit{Bahrain News Agency}, September 26, 2011.
Ayat Al-Qurmezi was a student at the University of Bahrain majoring in education. A poet, she often wrote and recited her own poetry at protests and rallies. Her words spoke of the regime’s oppression and brutality. In the early weeks of the revolution, she recited to mobilize Bahrainis into protest. In one of her most popular verses, she decries corruption, responds to the regime’s framing of the uprising as sectarian by reclaiming it as peaceful, inclusive and nationalist:

We do not want to live in a palace, nor do we want the presidency  
We are a people who murder degradation and assassinate misery  
We are a people who destroy injustice with peace  
We are a people who do not want the nation to remain in its stagnation

In March 2011, Ayat read a poem in which Satan asked King Hamad to end his injustice against the Bahraini people. Her poems, especially her comparison of the King to Satan, were viewed by authorities slander and an insult to the king. Security forces entered Ayat’s house later that month. When they did not find her, they threatened her family forcing Ayat to turn herself in to protect her family. Her mother later reported that on the way to the detention center, officers (male and female) beat her and threatened her with rape, sexual assault and vowed to spread degrading photos of her online. She was detained in a cell, where she was reportedly tortured by electric cables and eventually placed in the military hospital due to her physical state. Pictures of her began to show up on dating and pornographic websites. A fake video of her circulated online in which she stated her name and her hatred for Sunnis, an attempt to divide the opposition against her. Ayat later made a televised apology to the king and the prime minister. She was sentenced to a year in jail for incitement to hatred of the regime, insulting the royal family and illegal assembly. She was released on an unofficial pardon soon after, however she maintained her stance after she was released: “I am not sorry. I only said what all Bahrainis feel and I haven't done anything against my country. What I am doing, I am doing for my country.”

2. Zainab Al-Khawaja

One of Bahrain’s most famous activists of the uprising is Zainab Al-Khawaja, mentioned briefly earlier. YouTube is awash with videos which show her chanting and shouting “Down, down with Hamad.” Zainab is the daughter of long-time human rights activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja who was arrested and sentenced to life in jail in June 2011 for his alleged intention to overthrow the regime. Since his detention, his daughters Zainab and Maryam, have both become major vocal activists against the royal Al-Khalifa family as pro-democracy and human rights activists Zainab conducted a hunger strike to protest of both her father’s and husband’s detainment and torture at the hands of state officials. She used Twitter to publicize the strike, hoping international interest would pressure the Bahraini government into freeing her family. Zainab’s story as a mother to a nursing, 18 month-old baby during her hunger strike became a

35 “The women’s revolution in Bahrain continues.” Al-Badi: The Voice of the Oppressed.
40 For an example see ManamaPress. “Zainab Al-Khawaja provokes security officials.” YouTube, February, 12, 2012.
focal point of her story. When asked if she were ready to die for this cause, she drew attention to her government’s actions and to the world’s silence on the repression her movement faced:

It is difficult with a child but I am willing to make that sacrifice. My daughter has great aunts and grandmothers who will look after her if anything happens to me … We have the feeling that sacrifices are necessary to bring changes to our country, but what is making it harder is the way the world is reacting.\(^{42}\)

Zainab ended her hunger strike after convincing from family and human rights groups.\(^{43}\) However, her protest continued. Zainab could often be found at Pearl Roundabout, sitting in a large grassy area, typing messages of protest on Twitter. On one of these occasions, she was with a group of women when security forces arrived and dispersed the women leaving Zainab alone. The police (all male) threw a tear gas canister near her to remove her from the site. She refused to move and continued chanting. When female officers arrived they began by shouting at Zainab and hitting her. They forcibly handcuffed her and dragged her body by her arms to the police bus. This scene, caught on video and posted to YouTube\(^{44}\) circulated the web. The force with which Zainab was removed from the roundabout drew attention to state-sanctioned violence on protesters and the video became a rallying point for the Bahraini resistance. Zainab was detained several times and spent nearly a year in prison until she was freed in mid-February 2014.\(^{45}\)

3. Zahra Al-Shaikh

A young university student majoring in media studies, Zahra Al-Shaikh was caught by the police taking photos of a gathering of Al-Wefaq members in January 2012. Zahra was stopped by the police, hit in the face and stripped of her hijab within minutes. In reaction to a policeman grabbing her chest, she bit an officer’s hand and was subsequently arrested. Like Zainab, Zahra’s violent arrest was caught, publicized and quickly spread on social media, showing blood on her face and without her hijab. Photos and the arrest video caused an outpour of anger and frustration. Fellow activist Ayat Al-Qurmezi wrote on Twitter: “The arrest of Zahra Al Shaikh in such a brutal manner breaks the heart. It is painful to live in a country which shows off about women's rights when at the same time it crushes the dignity of women.” Bahrainis in the village of Nuwaidrat took to the streets under the banner “The Day of Retribution is coming” to protest the security forces’ violation and harsh treatment of Zahra as an innocent woman.\(^{46}\) During her detention, Zahra was offered the opportunity to be released from prison, condition upon her giving a false testimony against human rights activist Nabeel Rajab. She refused, given she had no personal connection to the activist.\(^{47}\) In an interview with journalist Lamees Dhaif, who was in exile after the revolution, Al-Shaikh talks about her experience in the prison:

…they strip us naked whenever they take us to the interrogation… They separate our legs and examine us shamelessly. If the walls of the prison had the chance to speak up, they would have recited the atrocities taking place behind them.\(^{48}\)

\(^{42}\)Booth, Robert. “Bahraini woman willing to die if family is not released.” *The Guardian*, April 13, 2011


\(^{44}\)The video can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwYzTvt_7C4


\(^{48}\)Ibid.
After repeatedly refusing to offer a false testimony, Al-Shaikh was physically beaten by members of the police force; she reported having her stomach kicked and experienced severe physical violence and was later moved to the hospital.

These three women’s experiences are glimpses into what individual women activists experienced as a result of their participation in the crisis. The ways in which women were present on the ground and through the use of social media come into focus. For their participation, mobilizing and drawing local and international attention to their cause they became political targets and thus were subjected severe methods of control: threats, incarceration, and physical violence. Just as arbitrarily as they were arrested and sentenced, Ayat, Zainab and Zahra were released before they completed their terms in jail. Their detention had less to do with violating a state law, and more to do with them posing a threat to the regime’s position – the point was to silence them. In each of these stories methods of punishment included rape, sexual assault, the forcible removal of the hijab and the posting of degrading photos of an activist online to shame and humiliate her as a woman. These methods are used on women only; they are used specifically for their expected utility in silencing women as women. Conversely, physical violence to female activists was carried out by other women, thus it is policewomen who coercively removed Zainab from the site of protest and often policewomen who tortured the detained. The following section explores this theme in more detail and brings forth the position of women, as security officers and as government spokespersons to the forefront to explore another dimension of women’s role in the crisis.

Women as Agents of Repression

Violence, especially state sanctioned and security-driven violence, is often conceptualized as a masculine enterprise. It is used on and against women as a method of control and as discussed above, this was certainly the case in Bahrain. However, women were also the perpetrators of such violence. Zainab Al-Khawaja’s forcible removal from Pearl Roundabout by female officers who beat her and dragged her away is an example. This and other incidents go against the assumption that women are peaceful and lack aggression. Many of the cases from Bahrain reveal women committing violence against other women. Women who were arrested reported being tortured specifically at the hands of female security officers while in detention. Ayat Al-Qurmezi, discussed earlier, was one of these women.

In February 2013, a member of Bahrain's royal family, Princess Noura Bint Ebrahim Al-Khalifa, was brought to trial on charges of torturing three prisoners during the 2011 protests in order to obtain confessions. Al-Khalifa, who served in Bahrain’s Drugs Control Unit, reportedly tortured two women doctors while they were in her detention. The doctors, as a result of the torture, gave forced, false confessions which led to their sentencing of five years in prison. The third prisoner Al-Khalifa was charged for torturing was Ayat Al-Qurmezi, the poet discussed earlier. Ayat was repeatedly slapped in the face, tortured with electric shocks, spat on by Al-Khalifa while shouting anti-Shia slurs.49 Al-Qurmezi narrated to the Bahrain Forum for Human Rights the following of her encounter with Al-Khalifa:

When (Noura Al-Khalifa) was screaming, cursing and slapping me hard on my face, the blindfold came down, off my eyes and I saw her face a bit but they rushed to lift it and

cover my eyes. She surprised me with electric shocks on my face until I collapsed from the intensity of the beatings…. The following night the same woman who shook me with electricity, came and I was not blindfolded. When she entered she began to slap me hard on my face for a long time, screaming ‘raise your head otherwise I will put a shoe in your mouth’ and she continued to slap and curse me with the ugliest words that pained my honor and she spat on my face. She went out after she left a severe pain in my ear and swelling and pain in my nose…

Al-Khalifa denied all charges and was acquitted. According to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights which interviewed several activists, Al-Khalifa also electrocuted another doctor, beat her feet and threatened her with rape. The doctor was forced into confession by rape to admit she stole bags of blood and gave them to demonstrators to pretend injury.

This case was significant to Bahrainis as it brought to focus a woman as a violent actor. In an instance such as this, and in the many stories about policewomen discussed earlier, stereotypes of women as pacifist and compassionate were disrupted. Finding gender parity in instances of violence is important as it shows women as multi-dimensional; capable of committing violence against others.

Women also contributed to the government’s repression of the uprising in less visceral ways. As government officials, they served to maintain the regime’s stance at home and abroad. Minister of Human Rights and Social Development Fatima Al-Balushi, received an Irish delegation investigating the stories of torture, and publicly claimed that the doctors who were facing trial were being punished for their failure to care for the wounded; thereby completely denying reports of kidnaping, detention and torture of the protestors. A more notorious example of women who were embedded in the state’s agenda was Samira Rajab, Minister of State for Information Affairs. Rajab, when justifying new government laws to combat the alleged misuse of social media, blamed the uprising’s activists for misconstruing the deaths of fellow protestors and distorted the reality: “It is these activists who have labelled drowning victims as those killed by torture. They have labelled sickle cell victims as being killed by security forces and they have used these media to completely distort the true picture of Bahrain.” Rajab, because of her position as a government spokesperson, stands out among the women who contributed to the battle for the narrative over the uprising. Her case and Noura Al-Khalifa’s story are relevant here as they serve as examples of the many women who are part of the state as an establishment. These examples challenge (mis)conceptions about women in positions of power who are often believed to be benevolent and just.

**Conclusion**

This paper provided a gendered assessment of the 2011 uprising in Bahrain. It accounted for women’s capacity as agents of democratic change, and the many and varied actions different activists took. Women mobilized, protested on foot whilst facing off suppression tactics, ensured that the uprising was documented, held the regime accountable for its violations, and contributed

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50 Ibid. P. 39
51 “Some members of the Bahraini royal family beating & torturing political prisoners.” Bahrain Center for Human Rights, August 17, 2011.
to the redefinition of the revolution as authorities sought to cast it as sectarian and vacantly rebellious. At times activists were subjected to severe violence. Whilst they acted as agents of change, other women worked to maintain the status quo and stifle the movement. Others contributed to physically silencing female protestors. Women specifically were subjected to forms of control and shaming which deliberately aimed to affect their standing as women. Bringing to light a gendered analysis of violence in Bahrain shows how gender is used against a woman in order to silence and remove her from the space of political participation.

Though this essay stresses women’s role in the uprising, it simultaneously shows that asking what women’s role was is too simple a question to account for their multiple realities and experiences. Women’s roles in a political crisis are varied, contradictory and complex. Women can be agents of change whose methods of participation are unique and different from one another. In Bahrain, women activists helped provide the movement with a solid and united base. And women can also work against progressive aims in order to maintain the status quo and as wielders of a gendered violence against other women. Women’s political participation is therefore multi-dimensional; different groups of women participate in a crisis depending on their background, experiences, and choices. These findings run against the assumption that women are peaceful, that Arab women are passive, and that Arab Gulf women are politically apathetic. They also invalidate the idea that Bahraini women played a singular, easily identifiable role in the uprising. They importantly show women as agents of political preservation, and as leaders of progress and struggle.
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