THE WOMEN WANT THE FALL OF THE (GENDERED) REGIME: IN WHAT WAYS ARE SYRIAN WOMEN CHALLENGING STATE FEMINISM THROUGH AN ONLINE FEMINIST COUNTERPUBLIC?¹

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ABSTRACT⁴

The post-2011 breakdown of state media authority in Syria exposed a multi-layered terrain of competing counter-discourses, in which citizen journalists were positioned as narrators of events on the ground.⁵ Conceptualized in this paper as Emerging Syrian Media (ESM), the rapid pluralization of Syria's media landscape has irrevocably transformed how citizens engage with the discourse disseminated by the al-Assad regime.⁶ However, this phenomenon has not been examined through

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⁴ Abbreviations: ESM – Emerging Syrian Media; SANA – Syrian Arab News Agency

⁵ Yazan Badran, "The Uprising and Syria's Reconstituted Collective Memory," *Open Democracy*, September 22, 2014, <https://perma.cc/DD8J-X3VS>; Yazan Badran and Kevin Smets, "Heterogeneity in Alternative Media Spheres: Oppositional Media and the Framing of Sectarianism in the Syrian Conflict," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 4232, <https://perma.cc/8LK5-HLKJ>; Enrico De Angelis, "Rethinking Syrian Media," *Open Democracy*, September 22, 2014, <https://perma.cc/45AU-N3Y4>

⁶ Rima Marrouch, "Syria's Post-Uprising Media Outlets: Challenges and Opportunities in Syrian

a gender-based approach. Employing a feminist post-structuralist perspective and utilizing subaltern counterpublic theory, this paper examines whether the opening-up of a virtual space has enabled the creation of an online feminist counterpublic, through which Syrian women are able to challenge the dominant representations of gender within the Syrian state feminism discourse.⁷ A Critical Discourse Analysis of texts produced by two state-affiliated media outlets reveals the intrinsically patriarchal nature of Syrian state feminism, while a narrative analysis of seven interviews with women participating in Emerging Syrian Media explores the ways in which such a discourse is being challenged. Through their performance of ‘active narrator’ identities, production of anti-regime discourses, and participation in women’s discussion groups, all seven women expressed an ability to counter the gender discourse of the regime. The occurrence of such challenges within confined spheres of activity results in the theorizing of a specifically ‘inward-oriented’ online feminist counterpublic within the ESM online space, whereby alternative discourses on gender can be both established and enacted.⁸

INTRODUCTION

A gendered approach to examining the substantial shift that has occurred in the Syrian media landscape since the 2011 uprising against President Bashar al-Assad remains significantly under-theorized. Resulting from growing scepticism in the accuracy of government-run news outlets, a media vacuum emerged within Syria, in which ordinary citizens took to the online ‘streets’ to broadcast their stories of the conflict. This research explores the phenomenon of ‘Emerging Syrian Media’ (ESM), the blossoming of predominantly citizen-run, small-scale, independent news outlets within Syria’s online space.⁹ While scholarly attention has thus far been primarily focused on the credibility, technological, and sectarian debates surrounding ESM, this paper aims to highlight the gendered

Radio Startups.” University of Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2014): 9. <https://perma.cc/FX47-RFH9>

⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 26.25 (1990): 56-80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

⁸ Florian Toepfl and Eunike Piwoni, “Targeting Dominant Publics: How Counter-Public Commenters Align Their Efforts with Mainstream News,” *New Media and Society* 20.5 (2018): 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817712085>.

⁹ Marrouch, “Syria’s Post-Uprising Media,” 9.

nature of both ESM, and ‘mainstream’ Syrian media.¹⁰ Employing a feminist post-structuralist perspective and utilizing the literature surrounding digital subaltern counterpublics, this research analyzes how the unique virtual space of ESM has engendered an online feminist counterpublic. The research will be guided primarily by the subaltern counterpublic theory of Nancy Fraser. Within such theorizing, groups that have historically been excluded from the public sphere congregate within parallel discursive spaces, which facilitate the (re)production of counter discourses and identities to those established in the public sphere.¹¹ This paper will examine the ways in which Syrian women are able to utilize ESM as a discursive space to challenge dominant gender representations constructed within the discourse of Syrian state feminism.

Syrian State Feminism

Globally, gendered imagery has long been employed in the construction of nationality and citizenship across a variety of country-specific contexts.¹² In the late 20th Century, state feminism emerged as a developmental project in which women’s empowerment was co-opted by a number of states in an attempt to forward national agendas.¹³ Particularly in post-colonial contexts, the symbol of the ‘modern woman’ as “unveiled, educated and emancipated” has been developed in several nation-building projects to symbolise the rejection of a colonial past and the promise of independence.¹⁴ In the Syrian case, a similar format has been largely reproduced. This paper approaches Syrian state feminism as a mediated discourse,

¹⁰ Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon and Sean Aday, “Syria’s Socially Mediated Civil War, Peaceworks No. 91,” *United States Institute of Peace [ISIP]* (2014): 10. <https://perma.cc/AYK7-N7TZ>; Badran, “The Uprising and Syria’s Reconstituted”; Antoun Issa, “Syria’s New Media Landscape: Independent Media Born Out of War: MEI Policy Paper 2016-9,” *Middle East Institute [MEI]* (2016), <https://perma.cc/8Y3D-SRM7>; Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti Mervi, “The Media Work of Syrian Diaspora Activists: Brokering Between the Protest and Mainstream Media,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), <https://perma.cc/GYG6-HDKB>.

¹¹ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 67.

¹² Silke Wenk, “Gendered Representations of the Nation’s Past and Future,” in *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann and Catherine Hall (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 63-81.

¹³ Karima Omar, “National Symbolism in Construction of Gender: Transformed Symbols in Post-Conflict States,” *Seton Hall’s Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 5.1 (2004): 49-50, <https://perma.cc/Z748-2BWF>

¹⁴ Sara Lei Sparre, “Educated Women in Syria: Servants of the State, or Nurturers of the Family?” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17.1 (2008): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920701862468>

through which symbolic imagery of the ‘liberated woman’ has been utilised by the al-Assad regime as a means of maintaining both legitimacy and authority.

Assuming power in 1963, the Syrian Ba’ath Party has worked to fashion a state feminism discourse in which the symbolic ‘emancipated woman’ is positioned as a devoted servant of the state.¹⁵ Women’s bodies have simultaneously represented both the ‘progressive modernity’ of the regime and the virtuous obedience required by the authoritarian state.¹⁶ Through the adoption of a gender-equal constitution and a public rejection of what it terms the ‘feudal, tribal and patriarchal’ values associated with traditional Islamic institutions, the Ba’athist regime has constructed its image as a ‘modernizing’ force with regard to women’s rights.¹⁷

Notably, the regime has relied on state-run media to disseminate a discourse celebrating the ‘progressive secularism’ of the president and the subsequent ‘emancipation’ of Syrian women.¹⁸ This has been exemplified through the regime’s use of high-profile females as role models, most notably First Lady Asma al-Assad and current Political and Media Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban, who are portrayed as the epitome of the ‘modern Syrian woman.’¹⁹ As university graduates with a secular and cosmopolitan fashion sense, they symbolize the ability of the regime to uphold a ‘progressive’ stance on women’s issues while dismissing ‘conservative’ religious values.²⁰

Noticeable within this discourse is the co-construction of women as loyal devotees of the Syrian state. This is particularly evident in the use of familial tropes throughout regime-run media, whereby the depiction of women as both

¹⁵ Sparre, “Educated Women in Syria,” 16.

¹⁶ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria: with a new preface* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015): 61-65, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226345536.001.0001>.

¹⁷ Annika Rabo, “Gender, State and Civil Society in Jordan and Syria,” in *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, eds. Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn (Oxon: Routledge, 1996): 158.; Sparre, “Educated Women in Syria,” 7; Nawal Yaziji, “Civil Society and the Gender Issue,” in *Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia: Syrian Voices from Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against All Odds*, ed. Salam Kawakibi (The Hague: Hivos, 2013): 51. <https://perma.cc/4S9K-9VAL>

¹⁸ Edith Szanto, “Depicting Victims, Heroines, and Pawns in the Syrian Uprising,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 12.3 (2016): 312-13, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-3637532>

¹⁹ Szanto, “Depicting Victims,” 311.

²⁰ Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2013): 199; Szanto, “Depicting Victims,” 311.

‘mothers of Syria’ and ‘obedient daughters of the Ba’athist regime’ carry undertones of filial piety and obedience.²¹ Similar representations of womanly patriotic virtue have been noted both in the Syrian state education curriculum taught in public schools and the regime-manufactured videos of female singers and fighters.²² While the complexities and implications of such depictions will be explored in greater detail throughout the analytical section of this paper, it is crucial to establish an initial picture of Syrian state feminism as a discourse that intricately interweaves the interests of women with those of the state.²³ Henceforth, the discourse will be viewed as one that has co-opted imagery associated with the women’s ‘liberation’ and female patriotic obedience in an attempt to maintain and reinforce its own legitimacy and authority.

Syrian Media

Before 2011, Syrian media under the Ba’ath Party was predominantly characterized as a system of “authoritarian populism,”²⁴ in which independent outlets were banned and all news, official reports and social commentary were circulated by government-run news agencies.²⁵ Heavily-censored newspapers were restricted from publishing potentially destabilizing ‘taboo’ subjects, resulting in a media environment in which the Syrian government had total control over public discourse.²⁶ As such, the overwhelming narrative disseminated during this period was constructed upon the supposed-merits of the Ba’athist regime and the Syrian Republic as a whole.²⁷ While the Damascus Spring of 2001, in which

²¹ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 27, 63.

²² Lama Rageh, “How Women Are Depicted in the Syrian Curricula,” *SyriaUntold*, August 22, 2019, <https://perma.cc/EM5H-3H69>; Szanto, “Depicting Victims,” 307.

²³ Totah, “The Memory Keeper,” 11.

²⁴ Samer Nassif, *Syria: Hot Spots in Global Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018): 38.

²⁵ Akram al-Bunni, “Syria’s Crisis of Expression,” *Arab Insight* 2.1 (2008): 100, <https://perma.cc/G3C7-GF3U>; Lorenzo Trombetta and Caterina Pinto, “Syria,” *Media Landscapes: Expert Analyses of the State of Media*, <https://perma.cc/P3WC-TUP5>

²⁶ Ayham al-Hussein, Layla Abyad, Rand Sabbagh, and Raheb Alwany, *Peace Journalism or War Journalism? Role and Impact of Alternative Media Groups on the Syrian Conflict* (Istanbul: Badael Foundation, 2016): 13; Badran, “The Uprising and Syria’s Reconstituted”; Amjad Baiazy, “Syria’s Cyber Wars,” *Media Policy* (2012): 2. <https://perma.cc/62VU-57UM>

²⁷ Judith Pies and Philip Madanat, “Media Accountability Practices Online in Syria: An Indicator for Changing Perceptions of Journalism, mediaACT Working Paper No. 10/2011,” (University of Tampere, Finland: Journalism Research and Development Centre, 2011): 5. <https://perma.cc/Y28N-3BA8>

reformist policies and the awakening of civil society resulted in calls for greater media liberalisation,²⁸ provided a brief period of optimism, this strategy was soon replaced with policies of journalistic censorship, Internet restrictions and social media bans.²⁹ Despite this, many areas of Syrian civil society remained inspired by the Damascus Spring and were committed to subverting state media institutions.³⁰ Partly achieved through the use of web proxies, the number of Syrian Internet users grew from 30,000 to 3.9 million between 2000 and 2010.³¹

On the eve of the uprising in February 2011, governmental bans on Facebook and YouTube were lifted, enabling a virtual space for Syrians to express dissatisfaction with the status quo.³² The collapse of state media authority resulted in the establishment of a more “open media culture”³³ in which ordinary citizens were, for the first time, able to partake in the production of a coherent counter-discourse. Individuals used online platforms to document their experiences of the Syrian protests in an attempt to challenge the narrative of the regime.³⁴ This post-2011 pluralist digital media space; encompassing a variety of small-scale, independent online media outlets, as well as a broad spectrum of citizen journalists, will be termed in this paper as ‘Emerging Syrian Media’ (ESM). A 2016 study of ESM outlets in Northern Syria revealed that most employ between 10 and 20 staff members who consider themselves either ‘activists’ or ‘citizen journalists’.³⁵ The majority are concerned with reporting on ‘civil and local

²⁸ Al-Bunni, “Syria’s Crisis of Expression,” 105; Najib Ghadbian, “The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria,” *Middle East Journal* 55.4 (2001): 636-638, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4329687>; Trombetta and Pinto, “Syria, Media Landscapes: Expert Analyses of the State of Media.”

²⁹ Al-Hussein, Abyad, Sabbagh, and Alwany, “Peace Journalism,” 14.

³⁰ Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg, *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Volume 2: Culture, Society and Religion* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015): 6-7.

³¹ Baiazy, “Syria’s Cyber Wars,” 11.

³² Baiazy, “Syria’s Cyber Wars,” 12; Lorenzo Trombetta, “Altering Courses in Unknown Waters: Interaction between traditional and new media during the first months of the Syrian uprising,” *Global Media Journal* 2.1 (2012): 4, <https://perma.cc/8DYF-JX4Z>

³³ Issa, “Syria’s New Media Landscape,” 5.

³⁴ Al-Hussein, Abyad, Sabbagh, and Alwany, “Peace Journalism,” 15; Badran, “The Uprising and Syria’s Reconstituted Collective Memory”; Badran and Smets, “Heterogeneity in Alternative Media Spheres,” 4232; De Angelis, “Rethinking Syrian Media”; Lynch, Freelon and Aday, “Syria’s Socially Mediated,” 7.

³⁵ Al-Hussein, Abyad, Sabbagh, and Alwany, “Peace Journalism,” 15, 19; De Angelis, “Rethinking Syrian Media.”

society affairs,' and consider the Internet, particularly social media sites, to be their most popular communication tool.³⁶ The fragmented nature of the Syrian conflict, however, has led to large geographic, technological and ideological variation, making a strict categorization of media outlets a challenging task.³⁷ While financial sustainability remains one of the principal obstacles facing ESM outlets,³⁸ there has been a noticeable trend towards greater professionalisation following the establishment of several NGO-funded training programs.³⁹ Many, such as ASML/Syria and the Syrian Female Journalists Network, have been instrumental in offering specific projects for women working within ESM.

Through an application of subaltern counterpublic theory to the Syrian media landscape, this research aims to explore the ways in which Syrian women participating in ESM are situated within an online feminist counterpublic. While Syrian state feminism will be understood as the dominant gendered public discourse, it will be investigated whether the flourishing of ESM outlets has provided a space in which women are able to challenge such dominant constructions of gender. The focus of this research rests upon the lived experiences of Syrian women participating in ESM, collected through a series of seven interviews that occurred between January and May 2020, with the approval of the university ethics committee. Following such guidelines, the names and personal details of all the women participating in this research have been removed from this paper. An analysis of these lived experiences will be situated within a wider discussion of Syrian state feminism, as disseminated through regime-run media. Such an approach will result in a conceptualization of the Syrian media landscape as a gendered terrain, consisting of multiple competing publics attempting to influence the dominant narrative of the al-Assad regime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Performative Subject

Ontologically grounded in post-structuralist theory, this research will be guided by the anti-essentialist conceptualisation of the subject as a performative

³⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁷ Trombetta and Pinto, "Syria, Media Landscapes: Expert Analyses of the State of Media."

³⁸ Al-Hussein, Abyad, Sabbagh, and Alwany, "Peace Journalism," 19.

³⁹ Issa, "Syria's New Media Landscape," 20; Trombetta and Pinto, "Syria, Media Landscapes: Expert Analyses of the State of Media."

entity; informed both by a Foucauldian understanding of language as a productive tool in the formulation of discourses and the theory of performativity as forwarded by Judith Butler.⁴⁰ Accordingly, analytical focus will be placed upon the relationship between micro “linguistic processes and strategies” and macro systems of ‘discourse’ in which social knowledge is produced, meaning is ascribed, and subject identities are enacted.⁴¹

Recognizing the productive power of language will be crucial to a critical deconstruction of the Syrian state feminism discourse. A focus on the functioning of micro-level linguistics will highlight the strategies employed by regime-run media to continually reproduce dominant understandings of gender. Removing essentialist notions of subject identity will also enable an exploration of how the female subject assumes meaning within this gendered discourse. Ultimately, such a post-structural analysis will reveal how women working within ESM are able to challenge such subjectivities through their own processes of linguistic self-representation and the performance of counter-identities.

Discursive practices can be broadly understood as social phenomena, through which dominant understandings of ‘reality’ are constructed.⁴² Linguistic and symbolic processes such as conversation, writing and representational practices work to produce social ‘texts’ which constitute discourse.⁴³ Through a constant process of reformulation, hegemonic ‘ideologies’ emerge within discourses such as those surrounding gender, race and class.⁴⁴ The unchallenged and ‘natural’ status of these ideologies then determines what is deemed acceptable knowledge and behavior within society.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006); David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000): 82.

⁴¹ Stewart Clegg, *Frameworks of Power* (London: SAGE Publications, 1989): 151, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446279267>; Tim Dant, *Knowledge, Ideology and Discourse: A Sociological Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1991): 153; Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin and Michael Bamberg, “Introduction,” in *Discourse and Identity*, edited by Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin, and Michael Bamberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511584459.001>; Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*, Second ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997): 21.

⁴² Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *Discourse as Social Interaction*, ed. Teun A. Van Dijk (London: SAGE, 1997): 258.

⁴³ Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, 151; Fairclough and Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 258.

⁴⁴ Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 34.

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1*, trans. Robert Hurley

Conceptualizing a world constituted through discourse refutes the positivist assumption that a subject has a pre-given or 'natural' identity. Instead, subjects acquire meaning through micro-level linguistic practices and are defined by their subsequent positionality within a discourse.⁴⁶ Within post-structuralist theory, this conceptualization of identity as a relational process, whereby a subject assumes meaning through their positioning within a particular discursive space, can be broadly defined as 'subjectivity.'

In her theorizing on gender identity, Butler contests the notion of a fixed subject essence, arguing instead that the gendered body comes into existence through the "performance" of an identity within the wider discourse on gender.⁴⁷ Butler defines performativity as a continuous process of symbolic self-representation, whereby identity is constructed through a "stylised repetition of acts,"⁴⁸ demonstrating that subjects simultaneously enact, and are a product of, the discourses within which they are situated.⁴⁹

This conceptualisation of subject identity will be utilised throughout this paper in conjunction with Nancy Fraser's theorising on subaltern counterpublics.⁵⁰ While both scholars approach subjectivity from differing theoretical standpoints,⁵¹ this paper argues that by adopting a middle ground approach,⁵² it is possible and indeed advantageous, to reconcile the anti-essentialist post-structuralism of Judith Butler with the more emancipatory elements of Nancy Fraser's critical theory. While both scholars broadly conceptualize subject identity as discursively constructed, Fraser challenges Butler's focus on the overly-abstracted individual and dismissal of

(London: Penguin Books, 1998): 5-7; Howarth, *Discourse*, 76-7; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, "Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory and Methodology," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2nd edition. eds. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: SAGE Publications, 2009): 8.

⁴⁶ Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, *Discourse and Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006): 8; Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, 151.

⁴⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

⁵⁰ Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere."

⁵¹ Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *Social Text* 52/53 (1997) <https://doi.org/10.2307/466744>; Nancy Fraser, "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler," *Social Text* 52/53 (1997) <https://doi.org/10.2307/466745>

⁵² Nancy Fraser, "False Antitheses," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Routledge, 1995): 71.

collective identities as inherently oppressive categories.⁵³ Instead, Fraser considers a ‘weaker’ post-structural subjectivity, whereby identity is (re)produced through processes of social interaction and discursive contestation.⁵⁴ This position demonstrates both the analytical utility and emancipatory potential of collective identities such as ‘women’. Fraser argues that in order for the term ‘women’ to hold analytical value, it is crucial to recognise the specific sociohistorical context and maintain an anti-essentialist standpoint. If understood within this framework, such collective identities hold the potential to recognize individual difference *and* support the conceptualization of identity as a performative and discursively-constructed act.⁵⁵ This paper will be guided by such a nuanced approach, which appreciates the analytical value of ‘women’ while retaining the performative elements of post-structuralist identity formation.

Online Feminist Counterpublics

To determine whether the ESM phenomenon can accurately be characterised as constituting space for an online feminist counterpublic, this research will utilise the literature surrounding subaltern counterpublics,⁵⁶ emerging from a critique of Habermas’ conceptualisation of the public sphere. Rather than acknowledging the public sphere as an open discursive arena⁵⁷ encouraging “rational public debate,”⁵⁸ this paper will consider it as an exclusionary and hierarchical space serving to silence the voices of marginalised groups.⁵⁹ Fraser argues that such exclusion encourages the alignment of subaltern groups into counterpublics. These are spaces where hegemonic discourses can be challenged and alternative identities, which oppose dominant representations

⁵³ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁴ Estelle Ferrarese, “Nancy Fraser and the Theory of Participatory Parity,” Books and Ideas, 2015. <https://perma.cc/C2B5-HHD3>

⁵⁵ Fraser, “False Antitheses,” 70.

⁵⁶ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”; Ann Travers, “Parallel Subaltern Feminist Counterpublics in Cyberspace,” *Sociological Perspectives* 46. 2 (2003): 223-237, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2003.46.2.223>

⁵⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

⁵⁸ Nick Crossley and John M. Roberts, *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 2.

⁵⁹ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 59-60.

found in the public sphere, can be constructed.⁶⁰ The positioning of subaltern counterpublics as oppositional yet parallel to the public sphere invites the theorizing of multiple temporally and spatially co-existing publics,⁶¹ an ontology that will be employed throughout this research.

The proliferation of computer-mediated communication has resulted in a wealth of literature regarding the channels through which ordinary citizens are able to disseminate discourses, curate content and partake in self-representation online.⁶² In his discussion on the identity of Dutch-Moroccan youth, Leurs⁶³ demonstrates how the digital infrastructure of online forums and social media platforms allows for the creation of non-mainstream cyberspaces, in which subaltern groups are able to perform oppositional group identities and counter hegemonic narratives. Employing the term “space invaders,”⁶⁴ it is explored how formerly-marginalized voices are able to inhabit areas of online space and project into the wider digital public sphere, as well as facilitating the establishment of “forums for resistance.”⁶⁵ The constant evolution of social media platforms as “identity workshops”⁶⁶ has provided considerable impetus for empirical investigation. Eckert and Chadha recount how Muslim bloggers in Germany were able to engage in positive self-representation online in response to the dominant process of ‘othering’ that occurred in the public sphere.⁶⁷ It is evident that the “networked publics” of the Internet era offer increasing virtual space for the creation of multiple co-existing digital communities.⁶⁸ Such infrastructure supports the argumentation that Fraser’s

⁶⁰ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 67; Einar Thorsen and Chindu Sreedharan, “#EndMaleGuardianship: Women’s Rights, Social Media and the Arab Public Sphere,” *New Media and Society* 21.5 (2019): 1125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818821376>

⁶¹ Travers, “Parallel Subaltern Feminist Counterpublics,” 229-30.

⁶² Larry J. Diamond, “Liberation Technology,” *Journal of Democracy* 21.3 (2010): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0190>; Stine Eckert and Kalyani Chadha, “Muslim Bloggers in Germany: An Emerging Counter-Public,” *Media, Culture and Society* 35.8 (2013) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713501930>; Bruce Etling, John Kelly, Robert Faris, and John Palfrey, “Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics and Dissent Online,” *New Media and Society* 12.8 (2010): 1225-1243, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810385096>

⁶³ Koen Leurs, *Digital Passages: Migrant Youth 2.0 : Diaspora, Gender and Youth Cultural Intersections* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015): <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089646408>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶⁶ Amy Bruckman, “Identity Workshop: Emergent Social and Psychological Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Reality,” *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, dissertation (1992).

⁶⁷ Eckert and Chadha, “Muslim Bloggers in Germany,” 931.

⁶⁸ Bryce J. Renninger, “Where I Can Speak My Mind’: Networked Counterpublics in a

notion of subaltern counterpublic(s) can successfully be translated to the online sphere.⁶⁹

Viewed from a feminist perspective, digital subaltern counterpublics provide parallel discursive arenas in which hegemonic patriarchal social relations can be challenged, alongside the construction and performance of oppositional gender identities.⁷⁰ Much literature has highlighted the impact of online feminist counterpublics in disputing stereotypical gendered assumptions in traditional media through the construction of visible self-representations, while widening the scope for participation in a variety of country-specific contexts.⁷¹ Investigating the work of female ‘cyberactivists’ during the Arab Spring, Radsch and Khamis note the importance of digital infrastructure in creating communities of contestation, whereby stereotypical depictions of gender presented in traditional media were challenged and the relationship between ‘public’ and ‘private’ was reformulated.⁷² Through their dual character as places of both identity construction and discursive contestation, online feminist counterpublics thus hold great potential as both safe and emancipatory spaces.⁷³

The Syrian Context: Provincializing Europe

A final, yet crucial, consideration is the question as to whether the model of online feminist counterpublics can be accurately theorised within the Syrian context. Indeed, the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, which forms the

Polymedia Environment,” *New Media and Society* 17.9 (2015): 1513-4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814530095>

⁶⁹ Nathaniel Poor, “Mechanisms of an Online Public Sphere: The Website Slashdot,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10.2 (2005): <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00241.x>.

⁷⁰ Travers, “Parallel Subaltern Feminist Counterpublics,” 232-233; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002): 118-119, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-49>.

⁷¹ Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya* (London: Zed Books, 2018): 138-9; Thorsen and Sreedharan, “#EndMaleGuardianship,” 1125.

⁷² Courtney C. Radsch and Sahar Khamis, “In Their Own Voice: Technologically Mediated Empowerment and Transformation Among Young Arab Women,” *Feminist Media Studies* 13.5 (2013): 881-883, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838378>

⁷³ Loubna H. Skalli, “Communicating Gender in the Public Sphere: Women and Information Technologies in the MENA Region,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 2.2 (2006): 37-9, <https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2006.2.2.35>

very roots of theorising about subaltern counterpublics, has received considerable criticism for its Eurocentric bias.⁷⁴ Habermas' focus on the bourgeois public of 18th Century Europe as the initial impetus for the emergence of a rational discursive sphere places significant emphasis upon "an ideal abstracted from early modern and modern Western experience."⁷⁵ As such, concerns about the applicability of the model to a 'non-Western' context with differing sociohistorical conditions, merit considerable interrogation.

This research will utilize the postcolonial work of Dipesh Chakrabarty⁷⁶ concerning the 'Provincializing of Europe' to demonstrate how subaltern counterpublic theory can be translated to the contemporary Syrian context. Chakrabarty notes how concepts bound up with 'political modernity,' including that of the public sphere, are laden with traditions and histories originating in Western Europe.⁷⁷ Through focusing on a *translational* rather than *transitional* process of modernity, Chakrabarty rejects Western historicism and demonstrates how such Eurocentric concepts can be "renewed from and for the margins"⁷⁸ through recognizing a diverse range of sociohistorical systems of organization. He thus contests the notion of a singular, universal, and aspirational modernity, replacing it with an appreciation for the ways in which concepts such as the public sphere can be *translated* into a variety of non-European contexts.⁷⁹

The translational process involves recognizing that public spheres are essentially contested and "negotiated practices"⁸⁰ that need not be tied to specific institutional arrangements or empirical criteria. This results in the theorising of a

⁷⁴ Shelton A. Gunaratne, "Public Sphere and Communicative Rationality: Interrogating Habermas's Eurocentrism," *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 8.2 (2006): <https://doi.org/10.1177/152263790600800201>

⁷⁵ Philip C. Huang, "'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China? The Third Realm Between State and Society," *Modern China* 19.2 (1993): 216–240, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009770049301900207>

⁷⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, 46.; Gunaratne, "Public Sphere and Communicative Rationality," 100.

⁸⁰ Adrian Rauchfleisch, "The Public Sphere as an Essentially Contested Concept: A Co-Citation Analysis of the Last 20 Years of Public Sphere Research," *Communication and the Public* 2.1 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047317691054>; James Tully, "On the Global Multiplicity of Public Sphere: The Democratic Transformation of the Public Sphere?" in *Beyond Habermas: Democracy, Knowledge and the Public Sphere*, eds. Christian Emden and David R. Midgley (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013): 171, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qczk9.12>.

‘general public sphere’ premised upon the ordinary discursive interaction that occurs amongst individuals.⁸¹ The reduction of the public sphere to this basic framework of deliberative contestation leads to its appropriate translation into multitudinous forms; local and global, unofficial and institutionalised, physical and digital, and indeed Western and non-Western.⁸² Conceptualising the public sphere as simply an arena for critical conversation, shaped specifically by the very institutional context within which it finds itself, invites the application of counterpublic theory to the Syrian media landscape.

While public discourse has historically been monopolized by the regime, the existence of multiple publics as sites for discursive interaction separate from the state have long bubbled below the surface of official public discourse.⁸³ Fear of arrest and imprisonment, however, ensured that only ‘safe’ apolitical topics were discussed in such spheres, with any government criticism heavily disguised within ‘harmless’ artistic and cultural production.⁸⁴ The uprising of 2011 provided the impetus for the emergence of fully-fledged critical counterpublics within the Syrian media landscape in the form of ESM outlets. Established amid the uprising with the aim of “advancing critical perspectives”⁸⁵ and “promoting the peaceful resistance,”⁸⁶ these platforms have transferred the subtly critical conversations previously held amongst Syrian individuals to a consolidated and professional sphere. This research focuses upon the ways in which such counterpublic activity has presented a challenge to the al-Assad regime’s narrative of Syrian state feminism.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Informed by post-structuralist scholarship, this research considers reality as constructed through a series of competing discourses, in which dominant systems of societal structure and organization are normalised.⁸⁷ This research

⁸¹ Tully, “On the Global Multiplicity of the Public Sphere,” 175.

⁸² Ibid., 170.

⁸³ Salamandra and Stenberg, *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, 6-7.

⁸⁴ Miriam Cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822390565>; Interview with Rima, the founder of an online photo-sharing project. Interviewed, February 24, 2020, Whatsapp call.

⁸⁵ “About,” *SyriaUntold*, <https://perma.cc/V8UE-P3ZA>

⁸⁶ “About Us,” *Enab Baladi*, <https://perma.cc/GU3E-87MT>

⁸⁷ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Harlow:

is concerned with the dominant representation of gender found within Syrian state feminism, as disseminated by regime-run media. While an analysis of gender representations within this discourse will form the contextual background for this research, the central focus will be placed upon the lived experiences of women participating in the ESM phenomenon and the ways in which they are challenging such representations through an online feminist counterpublic. An investigation into lived experiences was conducted through a series of semi-structured ‘active’ interviews in order to place maximum emphasis on the voices of the participants.⁸⁸

A qualitative interpretivist methodology was adopted both in the decoding of ‘texts’ produced by Syrian state media, as well as the implementation and analysis of interviews. Within post-structuralist ontology, there exists no objective or empirical reality, only the subjective reading of discursive practices. Hence, an interpretivist methodology was employed to study and deconstruct the meaning that arises from individual ‘texts’ and lived experiences. It is crucial to acknowledge that such a research design can be criticized for its subjectivity. Taking this into consideration, this research will adopt a self-reflexive approach throughout and recognise how individual positionality and experience will affect the reading of ‘texts’ and interview responses.⁸⁹

Critical Discourse Analysis of Syrian State Feminism

A focus on the ideological nature of language resulted in a Critical Discourse Analysis being chosen as the most appropriate means of deconstructing and interpreting meaning from state media ‘texts’ in terms of their gendered structure, language and imagery.⁹⁰ Critical Discourse Analysis can be best understood not as a singular analytical method, but rather an area of study which aims to uncover the way in which dominant discourses are constituted and sustained

Addison Wesley Longman Ltd, 1995): 23; Ruth E. Page, David Barton, Johann Unger, Michele and Zappavigna, *Researching Language and Social Media, A Student Guide* (London: Routledge, 2014): 81, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315771786>; Teun A. Van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” *The Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* 2nd edition, eds. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton and Deborah Schiffrin (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015): <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch22>.

⁸⁸ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* 2nd Edition (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007): 20; David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 2nd Edition (London: SAGE Publications, 2005): 154.

⁸⁹ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 21.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

through micro-level linguistic practices.⁹¹ In order to investigate the ways in which gender is represented within the state feminism discourse, two sites of discursive construction will be analysed: the ‘Her’ segment of the *Syria Times* e-newspaper and the ‘Culture and Arts’ section of the *Syrian Arab News Agency’s* (SANA) online platform. Both outlets are English-language news distributors with close links to the Syrian regime. *Syria Times* is published by the Al-Wehda Establishment for Press, Printing, Publishing and Distribution and affiliated to the Ministry of Information, while the *Syrian Arab News Agency* is the official news outlet for the al-Assad government.⁹² They will therefore feature texts that have been constructed, produced, distributed and approved by the regime and thus provide the most accurate depiction of state feminism as enacted through the Syrian state media apparatus. A focus on the ‘Her’ and ‘Culture and Arts’ segments was chosen because they are the sites where representations of gender are most frequently deployed and include stories consciously aimed at a female readership. They are therefore the most likely to be interpreted by a female audience and work to inform self-representations and subjectivities within the discourse. While other sections such as ‘News,’ ‘Society,’ and ‘Economy’ are also sites where gendered imagery is produced and consumed, these were not selected for analysis within this paper. Though the content of these sections may also be interpreted by a female audience in a variety of ways, the articles in these sections appeared to place gender in secondary focus and were not consciously designed for female readers. This research chose to solely focus on the sites where representations of gender appeared the *most* and where they were deliberately constructed for a female audience. Placing emphasis on these sections helps elucidate the techniques and strategies utilised by the regime in the dissemination of a targeted gendered discourse. To include a more comprehensive picture of gendered imagery within Syrian state media was beyond the scope of this paper, but is encouraged in further research.

Articles published between January and April 2020 will be analyzed and coded thematically to identify repeated linguistic constructions and representations of gender. A ‘three-dimensional’ framework, will guide the method behind this analysis, through linking micro-linguistic constructions to macro structures of

⁹¹ Dant, *Knowledge, Ideology and Discourse*, 153; De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, “Introduction,” 1.

⁹² “About Us,” *Syria Times*, <https://perma.cc/X2VH-HYBE>

patriarchal power.⁹³ First, the *textual dimension* of the document will be analyzed, involving an examination of ideologically-loaded semiotic and rhetorical strategies such as extended metaphors, objectification, pronoun usage and stereotyping.⁹⁴ Second, an exploration of the *discursive practice dimension* will involve situating these linguistic practices within the discourse of state feminism to analyze the ways in which they create and convey meaning to audiences. Finally, an account of the *social practice dimension* will reflect upon the wider social context and the subject positionings that result from the dissemination of such a discourse. This indexical framework, focusing on how linguistic choices work to situate subjects within discourse, will enable a thorough reading of the gender constructions within Syrian state feminism that pays appropriate attention to crucial contextual factors.⁹⁵

Active Interviews

Against this backdrop I will situate the lived experiences of seven Syrian women, documenting their participation in ESM and their views on gender representation within Syrian media. Participants were selected based on their online reporting of the Syrian conflict, either through an ESM outlet or personal social media account. Initial contact was established via email or direct message on social media, predominantly Twitter. The sample selection was chosen to reflect women working across a broad spectrum of media, ranging from informal blogs to more established outlets such as radio and print organizations. It is crucial to note, however, that the women included in this study were those with a vocal online presence, as they were most accessible for an interview. This research is therefore limited to an analysis of women who are active participants in the ESM phenomenon and as such, solely reflects the experiences of those with Internet access, a degree of media experience and the financial means to partake in online reporting. The relatively privileged position of these participants will affect how they describe their experiences working in ESM and will thus influence how this paper conceptualizes the emancipatory potential of this online space. The exclusion of those with a 'quieter' or less-established voice from the sample is an important limitation that should be addressed in future research.

Sampling was originally focused on Syrian female journalists. However during interviews it became clear that several women did not self-identify as

⁹³ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 540.

⁹⁴ Benwell and Stokoe, *Discourse and Identity*, 114-115.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 38.

journalists, and thus the scope of interview participation was widened to include those identifying as online activists. Snowball sampling was used to ensure trust between interviewer and interviewee, maintain security and privacy, as well as to allow access to hard to reach populations.⁹⁶ Three interviewees acted as gatekeepers, putting me in contact with journalists and activists they believed would be interested in participating in the research. Due to a large number of respondents wishing to remain anonymous, pseudonyms have been used throughout the analysis, with personal narratives removed.

Interviews were conducted over Skype, Whatsapp and GoogleMeet. Interviewees were asked before the call whether they consented to it being recorded, as this encouraged a natural flow of conversation and ensured an objective and durable record.⁹⁷ Arising out of concerns for personal or familial security, however, several respondents asked for calls not to be recorded. Accordingly, notes were taken instead to document these interviews. The geographical location of participants was varied – three speaking from inside Syria and four working for ESM outlets from Western Europe. All interviewees were English-language speakers, which appeared to be relatively common upon sampling ESM platforms.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized, focusing on three areas of inquiry: the background of the participant, their views on the representation of gender within Syrian media, and their experience participating in the ESM online space. An open-ended, semi-structured format was used in order to allow participants to express their experiences and interpretations as fully as possible, while also providing a degree of comparability amongst responses.⁹⁸

The purpose of the interviews was to investigate how Syrian women felt they were able to challenge dominant representations of gender through participating in an online feminist counterpublic. There was therefore a particular interest in how participants both viewed and represented themselves within the gendered discourse. A ‘methodology for listening’ was employed while conducting and analyzing the interviews in order to better understand the

⁹⁶ Fabiola Baltar and Igansi Brunet, “Social Research 2.0: Virtual Snowball Sampling Method Using Facebook,” *Internet Research* 22.1 (2012): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662241211199960>

⁹⁷ Jerry Wellington and Marcin Szczerbinski, *Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (London: Continuum, 2007): 61.

⁹⁸ David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* 2nd Edition (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 167; Wellington and Szczerbinski, *Research Methods*, 61.

worldview of participants and explore the narratives of self-representation present in responses.⁹⁹ Such an approach to interviewing has often been utilized in feminist and subaltern research to study voices and experiences that may previously have been ignored or misrepresented.¹⁰⁰ Through conducting a narrative analysis of the experiences presented by women participating in ESM, it will be possible to identify both how they perform their identity, as explained by Judith Butler, and view their positionality within a gendered discourse. This will enable an analysis of whether dominant representations of gender are being challenged by an online feminist counterpublic and the ways in which such challenges occur.

GENDER REPRESENTATIONS IN SYRIAN STATE MEDIA

A coded thematic analysis of 14 articles from the Syria Times and five from the Syrian Arab News Agency reveals the intrinsically patriarchal nature of the Ba'athist state feminism discourse. While attempting to position themselves as champions of the 'modern Syrian woman', a critical analysis of state-run media exposes how the regime has constructed a *patriarchal* discourse, where the female subject only assumes meaning within simplistic narratives of servitude.¹⁰¹ This section will explore the two most frequently reproduced female subjectivities within the texts: those of 'women-as-mothers' and 'women-as-makers'. Their prominence indicates that they are the tropes most utilized by the regime in the construction of female subjectivities and are therefore most likely to accurately reflect representations of gender within the Syrian state feminism discourse. Moreover, the continued repetition of these representations within state media suggests that they are the most likely to be interpreted by the target audience and thus work to inform self-representations. Through deconstructing each subjectivity, this research will examine how both have contributed to the positioning of women within a wider 'narrative of giving' that forms the basis of the regime's gender discourse.

Women-as-Mothers

⁹⁹ Barry Glassner and Julia Loughlin, *Drugs in Adolescent Worlds*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987): 16-40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-18809-3>

¹⁰⁰ Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 167; Mary Maynard, "Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate About Feminism and Research," in *Social Research Methods: A Reader*, edited by Clive Seale (London: Routledge, 2004): 466.

¹⁰¹ Noted by six women interviewed.

"Like many other steadfast Syrian women, the wife of martyr Ali As'ad expressed her only wish, which is to be strong and patient enough to continue bringing up her children" - Hamda Mustafa, Syria Times.¹⁰²

The positioning of women within familial narratives has long been a rhetorical device utilized by the Syrian regime in the construction of a state feminism discourse built upon obedience and filial piety.¹⁰³ In the sampled texts from SANA and the Syria Times, women were positioned within patriarchal familial settings – situated exclusively in relation to their husbands and sons – on 15 occasions in the period of analysis. The use of male-oriented labelling, whereby the female subject only assumes meaning through their positioning as “the wife of...”¹⁰⁴ or “the mother of...”¹⁰⁵ a male family member, works to construct ‘the woman’ as a subordinate identity, establishing them as a secondary focus within the text. A notable example concerns a woman interviewed by the Syria Times, whose account of being held hostage by ISIS is obscured by the events of her husband’s death on the battlefield, which provides her with “a source of pride, hope, strength and steadfastness.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the construction of a narrative in which women only ‘come into being’ as a result of the actions of their male relatives is a recurrent theme within the texts. This is particularly evident in the linguistic framing of women’s experiences in the passive voice, with several accounts claiming that a husband or son’s heroism “has strengthened [them]”¹⁰⁷ or “turned [them] into a creative woman.”¹⁰⁸ The construction of such a narrative, in which the woman is granted agency only within reference to male family members, provides little room for a female subjectivity beyond the patriarchal family.

In her work surrounding the rhetoric used by the Syrian state, Lisa

¹⁰² Mustafa, “Syrian Women Show Unique Steadfastness,” *Syria Times*, March 10, 2020, <https://perma.cc/F3J3-2EQZ>

¹⁰³ Szanto, “Depicting Victims,” 18; Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 32.

¹⁰⁴ Mustafa, “Syrian Women Show Unique Steadfastness.”

¹⁰⁵ Rawaa Ghanam, “Syrian Women Recount Stories of Their Kidnapping by ISIS Terrorists,” *Syria Times*, March 15, 2020, <https://perma.cc/7PQB-AW4K>

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Mustafa, “Syrian Women Show Unique Steadfastness.”

¹⁰⁸ Rawaa Ghanam, “Rural Women Empowerment One of Priorities of Syrian Government Development Programs,” *Syria Times*, February 9, 2020, <https://perma.cc/82PC-B3S8>

Wedeen notes how the extension of such gendered narratives has historically been employed by the al-Assad regime in the construction of a patriarchal national family, with the president situated as the “ultimate father.”¹⁰⁹ An analysis of the Syria Times and SANA reveals the continuation of this ‘national family’ discourse within state-run media. The visual representation of the subservient female subject in relation to the presidential father figure is most striking in the images chosen to accompany articles. Demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2, the watchful ‘president-as-patriarch’ is depicted as an omnipresent paternal force, physically positioned as ‘head of the family’ above the women photographed.

Figure 1: Image showing ‘Business Women Committee Exhibition’ in Syria Times Article: “Supporting Women’s Activity: Exhibition for Women Empowerment.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 27.

¹¹⁰ Amal Farhat, “Supporting Women’s Activity: Exhibition for Women Empowerment,” *Syria Times*, March 10, 2020, <https://perma.cc/Z6AH-G6RD>

Figure 2: Image showing an ‘Event Marking International Women’s Day’ in Syria Times Article: “Syrian Women Recount Stories of Their Kidnapping by ISIS Terrorists.”¹¹¹

Moreover, the representation of women as mothers of martyrs is a gendered trope used extensively throughout SANA and the Syria Times, contributing to a wider narrative of female giving and servitude. Interviews with bereaved women whose sons have been “martyred”¹¹² and “sacrificed to defend the Syrian people”¹¹³ work to tie the subjectivity of motherhood to patriotic service, as it becomes a woman’s role and duty to provide sons for the protection of the Syrian state.¹¹⁴ This is further reinforced by the tone of ‘wilful sacrifice’ with which the interviews are framed. Figure 3 depicts a woman who spoke “proudly” of her son’s military service, while recalling how Syrian women have gladly “taught their sons how to love their homeland and how to defend it tirelessly.”¹¹⁵ Through the construction of a discourse in which women both *produce* and are *protected by* their sons who die on the battlefield, women become synonymous with the Syrian state and are thus further embedded within a patriotic narrative of giving and servitude.

¹¹¹ Ghanam, “Syrian Women Recount Stories.”

¹¹² Mustafa, “Syrian Women Show Unique Steadfastness.”

¹¹³ Ruaa Al-Jazaeri, “A Book By a Martyr’s Mother Documents story of al-Kindi Garrison Heroes,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, February 9, 2020, <https://perma.cc/3GAH-6S6E>

¹¹⁴ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 60.

¹¹⁵ Mustafa, “Syrian Women Show Unique Steadfastness.”

Figure 3: Image Depicting The Mother Of Two Martyrs, in Syria Times Article: "Syrian Women Show Unique Steadfastness Despite Deep Wounds."¹¹⁶

Women-as-Makers

"My participation at the permanent marketing centre has given me hope again to produce something useful for my country" - Rawaa Ghanam, Syria Times.¹¹⁷

The Syrian state feminism discourse has historically used women's bodies as dual signifiers: simultaneously representing the 'modernity' of the Ba'ath Party and the dutiful obedience required by the authoritarian state.¹¹⁸ Such dual portrayal can be best illustrated by the regime's depiction of women as *muwazzafin*, or public sector employees.¹¹⁹ These women are shown as both 'emancipated' through their role in the Syrian workforce, and 'obedient' through their service to the state. The trope of the female *muwazzafin* is a discursive strategy deployed throughout the sampled texts from SANA and the Syria Times, in which women are frequently portrayed in state-mandated workplaces and depicted according to their productive capabilities. Through repeated references to a woman's role in "building

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ghanam, "Rural Women Empowerment."

¹¹⁸ Totah, "The Memory Keeper," 3; Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*.

¹¹⁹ Sparre, "Educated Women in Syria," 8.

her country”¹²⁰ and “serving the homeland,”¹²¹ the female subject assumes a patriotic and dutiful essence, whose very agency is derived from partaking in productive work for the country. Within such a discourse, women are granted little autonomy beyond the boundaries of state-run employment programmes and are positioned in a relationship of dependence to the state. This is further reinforced by the passive language used, where women are depicted as being “given”¹²² and “provided”¹²³ with opportunities for productive employment.

While female workers are depicted in a variety of professional settings such as union work, architecture and the arts, they are repeatedly positioned in deference to the Syrian state and shown only to work within the limits of state-mandated regulations.¹²⁴ Thus, while the ‘women-as-makers’ discourse appears to empower a heterogeneous group of modern women through their situation within the Syrian workforce, a critical examination reveals their constructed positionality as a homogenous group of dutiful actors, assuming agency only through processes of giving and servitude.

In sum, a Critical Discourse Analysis of texts produced by SANA and the Syria Times revealed the dissemination of a homogenizing and patriarchal ‘state feminism’ discourse, in which the female subject is constructed as a largely passive actor within an overarching narrative of giving and state servitude. Whether depicted as ‘mothers’ or ‘makers’, women’s bodies are repeatedly positioned in subordinate relation to the overbearing al-Assad regime, symbolizing the patriotic devotion required by the wider Syrian citizenry, or ‘family’. Acknowledging the context of ongoing conflict within Syria helps elucidate this shift towards favoring existing narratives of obedience and sacrifice within the discourse.

EXPERIENCING THE ONLINE FEMINIST COUNTERPUBLIC

A narrative analysis of seven interviews with women participating in

¹²⁰ Farhat, “Supporting Women’s Activity.”

¹²¹ Haifaa Mafalani, “On International Women’s Day..Syrian Women in Trade Unions Have Proved Dedication, Diligence, High Sense of Responsibility,” *Syria Times*, March 8, 2020, <https://perma.cc/LM7G-MQZV>

¹²² Ghanam, “Rural Women Empowerment.”

¹²³ Mafalani, “On International Women’s Day.”

¹²⁴ Farhat, “Supporting Women’s Activity”; Hybah Sleman and Ruaa al-Jazaeri, “‘Syrian Woman...Victory Icon’ Festival Starts Activities,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, March 11, 2020, <https://perma.cc/9XZD-UDBG>; Mafalani, “On International Women’s Day.”

ESM investigated whether the flourishing of online alternative media post-2011 has provided a space for Syrian women to challenge dominant constructions of gender in state-run media. This section will be grouped according to recurrent topics that emerged over the course of conversations in order to build a picture of ESM that reflects the themes deemed most significant by participants. After situating women within ESM more broadly, the analysis will focus on how the interviewees have been able to utilise these online platforms to construct counter-hegemonic identities and challenge gender stereotypes. Rather than providing a generalized and optimistic account of women's digital activity, this analysis will remain conscious of the range of lived experiences when considering how a diverse group of women work within this virtual landscape. Taking into account the various limitations and challenges raised by participants, this section will end by theorizing an 'inward-oriented'¹²⁵ online feminist counterpublic within the ESM online space.

Situating Women Within ESM

All of the interviewees discussed the increased opportunities for women to participate in media production following the Syrian uprising and development of ESM in 2011. When relaying their own experiences partaking in journalism or online activism, three women actively positioned themselves within narratives about the frenzied journalistic activity constituting the early days of the Syrian uprising. Using the pronoun 'we' to refer to the group of citizen journalists that formed the initial impetus for ESM, it was clear that these women saw themselves as situated within the wider phenomenon of independent reporting that was taking shape across the media landscape. Rima, a former student of journalism who established an online photo-sharing project in 2012, recounted how:

At the beginning, everyone was reporting on Facebook. We were the news kind of. When everyone was in Syria, it became a space where everyone gave their opinions.¹²⁶

Similarly, when asked to share her thoughts about the impact of alternative news outlets on the Syrian media landscape, Naima, a freelance journalist working

¹²⁵ Toepfl and Piwoni, "Targeting Dominant Publics," 2014.

¹²⁶ Interview with Rima, the founder of an online photo-sharing project. Interviewed, February 24, 2020, Whatsapp call.

in Damascus, situated herself firmly within this narrative:

It has given a voice to new journalists and young journalists to work and say that ‘we are here, and we are working, and we are reporting’.¹²⁷

The use of group labelling in these accounts, whereby participants self-defined as a ‘we’ amongst the larger group of Syrians working within ESM, demonstrates how the interviewees, as female journalists, felt they had been able to infiltrate the wider collective of independent, online reporting within Syria. By situating themselves *within* ESM narratives, each of these participants confirmed opportunities for participation and illustrated a level of inclusion within the phenomenon.

A recurrent theme that surfaced when discussing opportunities for women in ESM was the expansion of ‘space’ for women’s voices to be heard. Indeed, four participants explicitly mentioned there was “more space” to tell their stories as a result of the increasingly pluralized media environment. In the counterpublic scholarship of Koen Leurs, the idea of ‘space *invaders*’ is used to signify how formerly-marginalised voices are able to occupy and establish critical forums within digital environments.¹²⁸ The multi-layered infrastructure of the Internet allows for such an ‘invasion’ of space, as the proliferation of virtual channels for communication enables a plurality of voices to be heard simultaneously.¹²⁹ This is certainly evident within ESM, where several women’s blogs on platforms such as Syria Stories, Ayny Aynak¹³⁰ and SyriaUntold have emerged, intending to incorporate formerly silenced voices and expand space for “issues that receive little attention in mainstream media.”¹³¹ Beyond the blogosphere, digital radio sites such as Rozana and Radio Souriat have provided “a platform to women in

¹²⁷ Interview with Naima, a freelance journalist for independent media outlets. Interviewed, April 10, 2020, Whatsapp call.

¹²⁸ Leurs, *Digital Passages*, 104.

¹²⁹ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 383, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444319514>

¹³⁰ A blog that brings together written, audio and visual reports and contributions by Syrian women.

¹³¹ “Ayny Aynak: A New Blogging Platform For And By Syrian Women,” ASML/Syria, <https://perma.cc/Y3SC-NW3V>

Syria to make their voices heard.”¹³² This indicates the multiplicity of virtual arenas that have been established within ESM to enable the infiltration of digital space by women’s voices.

While all the interviewees acknowledged increased opportunities for female journalists, several were wary of over-emphasising the significance of women’s participation. When discussing the effect that ESM has had on women’s ability to enter journalism, Rima adopted a sceptical tone:

From what I see and what I discuss with friends, yes it’s opened a door. But I can barely name two or three names. It’s pure luck that they were some point, somewhere. There was nothing planned, there was no goal...it’s pure coincidence.¹³³

Rima’s mention of “pure luck” to describe how women enter the ESM workforce indicates her view that it is predominantly an opportunistic occurrence. Within this narrative, the inclusion of women’s voices within ESM seems to be a positive side effect of its pluralist nature, rather than a concerted effort to raise the profile of formerly marginalized voices. Thus, instead of being *provided* greater discursive space within ESM, women must work vigorously to craft their own critical forums in order to have their voices heard. Moreover, Rima’s admission that she can “barely name two or three names” highlights that female journalists may struggle to experience the same level of success or recognition as their male counterparts within ESM. This was an outlook shared by many of the women interviewed. Fatima, the co-founder of a successful online radio station, shared her continued experiences of gender-based discrimination within the wider workforce:

The Newsroom leaders, managers and executive boards are still male-dominated despite more female journalists. When I go to conferences, I have less opportunities because I am a woman.¹³⁴

Such insight reveals the heavy gender bias dictating the distribution of

¹³² “Radio, Feminism and Syria,” *Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* (WILPF), <https://perma.cc/VT2H-T8QJ>

¹³³ Rima, February 24, 2020.

¹³⁴ Interview with Fatima, co-founder of an online independent radio platform. Interviewed, January 31, 2020, Whatsapp call.

employees amongst ESM outlets. A study of alternative media in Northern Syria shows how men continue to dominate high-level positions, predominantly due to numerous security concerns affecting primarily female journalists.¹³⁵ This was corroborated by all the women interviewed, many of whom claimed that threats to their safety existed while working both on and offline, by virtue of being a woman in a male-dominated environment. Kadijah, the co-founder of an association for Syrian female journalists, explained how her new safety training program aimed to improve the “digital, physical and psycho-social safety of women journalists.”¹³⁶ Security concerns for female journalists, she clarified, was one of the primary barriers preventing women from accessing high-level positions within new media outlets.

Situating women’s voices within the critical space of ESM thus requires a nuanced and measured approach. While the pluralization of media has certainly ‘opened the door’ for female journalists to enter online space, it appears the door remains only slightly ajar. What’s more, when observing the distribution of gendered bodies amongst the top levels of ESM outlets, it is evident that such opportunities remain out of reach to the majority of women.

Countering The Passive Woman: Performing The Active Narrator

Exploring the role of communication technologies in the Syrian uprising, Billie Jeanne Brownlee notes how digital tools have enabled women to perform active roles through their narration of events on the ground.¹³⁷ Through producing their own online counter-discourse, Syrian women have articulated identities as “complex protagonists rather than caricatured onlookers”¹³⁸ of the conflict. This was certainly reflected in the accounts given by the interviewees when talking about their motivations and roles within ESM. Through their

¹³⁵ Al-Hussein, Abyad, Sabbagh, and Alwany, “Peace Journalism,” 17.

¹³⁶ Interview with Kadijah, the co-founder of a programme connecting and training Syrian female journalists. Interviewed, April 12, 2020, GoogleMeet call.

¹³⁷ Billie Jeanne Brownlee, “Revolutionary Damascene Roses: Women and the Media in the Syrian Conflict,” *Arab Women and the Media in Changing Landscapes*, eds. Elena Maestri and Annemarie Profanter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 231, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62794-6_13

¹³⁸ Karel Asha, “Mothers at Home and Activists on The Street? The Role of Women in the Syrian Revolution of 2011-2012,” *The McGill International Review* 2.30 (2013): 52, <https://perma.cc/6QSH-57BE>

active involvement in story-telling, all women expressed the ability to perform an oppositional identity to that of the 'passive woman' disseminated by state-run media.

Of the women interviewed, five had been involved in founding their own online platforms since 2011, which had granted them a large degree of agency in curating and disseminating an independent narrative of events. When asked about their motivations for taking part in independent journalism, the theme of 'narration' emerged on several occasions, alongside a feeling of responsibility to "tell what happened"¹³⁹ in Syria. This sentiment is revealed in the following comments given by Naima, the freelance journalist, and Aliye, an active blogger and social media reporter:

Naima: I have some kind of role to tell what happened, I felt I needed to tell stories. For me, journalism is the best way to do it, to make sure the stories are reaching people.¹⁴⁰

Aliye: I feel a responsibility to try to communicate, and try to ease some of the misunderstandings and things like that. To act kind of as a bridge...between what's happening on the ground in Syria and its representation outside.¹⁴¹

By expressing their sense of duty to communicate events on the ground, both women positioned themselves as active mediators of information, with an ability to transfer critical knowledge and vital insight to their readership. In contrast to the female subjectivity constructed by regime-run media, whereby women are frequently situated as *passive* bystanders to events, the women interviewed expressed their capacity to perform *active* identities within ESM. Through assuming roles as narrative curators, all seven women noted how their experiences within ESM had granted them a greater ability to contribute to the discourse, while positioning them as informed and influential 'protagonists' within the reporting of the conflict.

¹³⁹ Referenced in interviews with both Naima and Lubna, a freelance journalist for independent media outlets. Interviewed, April 9, 2020, Whatsapp call.

¹⁴⁰ Naima, April 10, 2020.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Aliye, a blogger, social media reporter and author. Interviewed, January 26, 2020, Skype call.

This represents a significant challenge to the gendered subject positioning found within Syrian state-feminism and illustrates a key feature of digital counterpublic activity.

A prominent characteristic of the ‘active narrator’ identity, practiced to some extent by all the women interviewed, was the desire to empower others by “giv[ing] the civilians a voice.”¹⁴² Four participants explicitly referenced the promotion of citizen voices as one of the main motivations behind their journalism. By *giving* civilians a voice, rather than *being given* a voice themselves, the women working within ESM actively work to resist, and indeed overturn, their passive positionality within the gender discourse of the regime. Moreover, through their brokerage of citizen’s stories, independent female journalists have been instrumental in communicating counter-narratives to those produced by the Syrian state. By positioning themselves as ‘truth-tellers’ in opposition to regime-run media, each of the women interviewed evidenced their ability to carve out a different relationship to the state as that constructed within Syrian state feminism. Rejecting a state feminism discourse that utilizes the symbolism of ‘the obedient woman’ to engender a subservient and devoted citizenry, women working within ESM have thus been able to construct an oppositional gendered subjectivity that instead works to *undermine* the authority of the al-Assad regime.

Through the performance of an ‘active narrator’ identity within the ESM phenomenon, all the interviewees demonstrated an ability to challenge the construction of the ‘passive woman’ within the Syrian state-feminism discourse. The verbalization of a responsibility to project silenced voices and defy the narrative of the state exemplified their capacity to partake in oppositional self-presentations online, whereby the female voice is established as a critical force and not simply an obedient mouthpiece for the regime.

Women’s Discussion Groups: Talking To Yourself?

Crucial to the functioning of subaltern counterpublics is the existence of alternative discursive arenas in which the hegemonic discourses of the public sphere can be challenged.¹⁴³ All of the interviewees noted the presence of such communities within the ESM phenomenon, whereby critical conversations about gender and women’s issues could take place.

¹⁴² Fatima, January 31, 2020.

¹⁴³ Fraser, “Rethinking the Ppublic Sphere”; Travers, “Parallel Subaltern Feminist Counterpublics.”

Kadijah and Aliye, who are both involved in community-building projects online, noted how the social media platforms of ESM outlets had been effective in connecting the diasporic Syrian population and establishing cross-boundary forums for conversation. Rima, who uses Facebook and Instagram for her online photo project, remarked on the capacity of social media sites to offer virtual space for “group[s] of people who think the same”¹⁴⁴ to congregate and share their views. When asked about the existence of *gendered* forums for discussion, both Kadijah and Fatima referenced the efficacy of ‘closed Facebook groups’ in facilitating critiques of the regime’s gender discourse, through their nature as secure virtual spaces:

Kadijah: We’ve had a Facebook group from the beginning, a closed one, a secret one. It’s only for members and it’s the only way where we can communicate.¹⁴⁵

Fatima: We’ve established a digital community for women, using Facebook within Syria. We have a Facebook and a Whatsapp group. People can meet online and take part in conversations. The focus of these groups is the ‘taboos’ surrounding women.¹⁴⁶

The language of “taboos” in Fatima’s account is particularly notable given that this is the vocabulary most commonly used to describe the list of subjects deemed threatening to the al-Assad regime.¹⁴⁷ By employing this term, her comments about women’s discussion groups assume subversive undertones, implying a challenge to the dominant constructions of gender found within the state-feminism discourse. When asked about the existence of such oppositional tendencies, Fatima responded:

Yes, we are working to challenge the representation of women... both sides [of the conflict] use women a lot, particularly the regime, as a form of propaganda.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Rima, February 24, 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Kadijah, April 12, 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Fatima, January 31, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Baiazy, “Syria’s Cyber Wars,” 2.

¹⁴⁸ Fatima, January 31, 2020.

The use of women's bodies as a "tool" in the construction of legitimacy for the regime was something noted by all the women interviewed. Indeed, it was the homogenizing nature of this discourse, in which the female subject is depicted as either 'a modern supporter of the regime' or 'a victim,' that the interviewees aimed to challenge through their participation in women's discussion groups.¹⁴⁹ Through connecting a plurality of women's voices, the social media platforms of ESM outlets have made space for a diversity of female subjectivities to emerge and develop. Iman, who works for an independent radio platform, spoke about its 'anti-stereotyping project' launched in 2017, which aimed to display a variety of women's life experiences within their social media groups:

Right now we're delivering a project to show the many issues affecting women from different perspectives, using the voices of women in society. We have around 40,000 Facebook followers who are very engaged...we try to encourage them to reflect and give their opinions about what they saw and read.¹⁵⁰

Analyzing the utility of virtual discursive communities in countering hegemonic gender norms, Radsch and Khamis demonstrate how the creation of online spaces, where a diversity of female subjectivities can be displayed, works to break down certain 'truths' about the appropriate performance of a gender identity.¹⁵¹ Through the acknowledgement of a plurality of life experiences and perspectives, these forums operate according to "different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying."¹⁵² This enables critical conversations where counter-hegemonic identities and alternative 'ways of being' are encouraged to take place. Within the women's discussion groups of ESM, Aliye, Kadajah and Iman all noted how the exchange of differing life experiences, knowledge and opportunities helped to facilitate conversations about previously 'off-limits' topics, such as sexual violence against women and LGBTQ+ issues. Moreover, all of the women interviewed agreed that the emergence of a dialogue

¹⁴⁹ Two tropes commonly cited in conversations, when interviewees were asked to give their thoughts on gender representation in regime-run media.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Iman, an employee at an independent radio platform focusing on women's rights. Interviewed, April 15, 2020, Whatsapp call.

¹⁵¹ Radsch and Khamis, "In Their Own Voice."

¹⁵² Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 56.

which included “women from all walks of life”¹⁵³ helped challenge the reductive discourse on gender disseminated by the regime.

When asked about the wider impact of this pluralized dialogue, however, Naima stressed that the ability to open up critical conversations to the broader public remained limited to specific issues and careful timing. Drawing upon her experience as a freelancer for outlets that do not ‘specialize’ in the promotion of women’s issues, Naima recounted how many of her colleagues shut down conversations about gender in favor of reporting on more ‘important’ topics such as the economy and military. This was certainly a view shared by Kadijah and Iman, who both agreed that critical discussions about gender most often took place within closed circles or “bubbles” of like-minded activists.¹⁵⁴ The existence of gendered echo-chambers within the ESM phenomenon became apparent from conversations with all seven women interviewed, many of whom expressed concern about the wider impact of their work. Most aptly summarised in the words of Naima:

The audience is always the same. The people who follow these websites are always the same circles and you feel you are talking to yourself.¹⁵⁵

The isolated impact of such critical conversations within ‘secret’ groups and ‘gender-specific’ platforms highlights the ‘inward-oriented’ nature of feminist counterpublic activity within the ESM online space. While still contesting the hegemonic discourses of the public sphere, the primary function of inward-oriented counterpublics is not necessarily to *reconstruct* mainstream discourses, but rather to provide “safe, secluded communicative spaces”¹⁵⁶ for the configuration of new identities and agendas. The women interviewed all outlined the capacity of closed social media groups to act as “identity-workshops,” whereby a range of female subjectivities could be simultaneously enacted and reproduced.¹⁵⁷ This, in turn, presented a conscious challenge to the homogenizing discourse of Syrian state feminism. Yet the ability of such challenges to infiltrate the wider discursive

¹⁵³ Aliye, January 26, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Kadijah, April 12, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Naima, April 10, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Toepfl and Piwoni, “Targeting Dominant Publics,” 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Bruckman, “Identity Workshop.”

community remains somewhat limited, as ‘gender and women’s issues’ continue to be disregarded by many ESM outlets. Ultimately, while the development of ESM as a pluralized online space has generated room for virtual discursive arenas in which gender ‘taboos’ can be challenged; these appear to exist as ‘inward-oriented’ challenges, occurring largely within confined spheres of activity.

Discussion

The conversations that took place with Syrian women participating in ESM revealed a complex digital terrain of competing counter-discourses; a landscape which was by no means easy to navigate for those situated within it. Although presented with greater opportunities to partake in online journalism and activism since 2011, every interviewee stressed the continued security threats and gender discrimination faced by female journalists working in a male-dominated media environment. Despite this, the phenomenon of ESM has certainly engendered space for an online feminist counterpublic to emerge and manifest in a multitude of ways. All the women interviewed expressed an ability to perform oppositional identities to those constructed in state-run media, both through their positioning as ‘active narrators’ of the conflict and their production of anti-regime discourses. Furthermore, all noted the existence of virtual discursive arenas in the form of ESM social media groups, in which ‘taboos’ could be broken and a plurality of gendered subjectivities could be imagined and enacted. Yet, what became apparent over the course of conversations was the relative isolation of such critical discussions within the wider ESM phenomenon. It is therefore most accurate to conceptualize an ‘inward-oriented’ online feminist counterpublic, in which the communicators of counter-hegemonic gendered dialogues remain, for the time being, deliberating amongst themselves.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The opening-up of online space that occurred alongside physical protests against the al-Assad regime irrevocably transformed the Syrian media landscape, exposing a digital environment of multiple counter-discourses aimed at challenging the hegemony of the Syrian state.¹⁵⁸ Until this point, however, little had been said about the gendered implications of this phenomenon.

¹⁵⁸ Al-Hussein, Abyad, Sabbagh, and Alwany, “Peace Journalism,” 15; Lynch, Freelon and Aday, “Syria’s Socially Mediated Civil War,” 7.

Through an application of subaltern counterpublic theory to the Syrian media landscape, this paper set out to investigate whether the virtual space of ESM had engendered an online feminist counterpublic, within which Syrian women are able to challenge dominant gender representations within the state feminism discourse. The discussions within this paper have found the Syrian media landscape to be a multi-layered and gendered terrain, in which the ESM phenomenon has provided new space for an 'inward-oriented' feminist counterpublic to emerge. It is essential to note, however, that the theorizing of such counterpublic activity resulted from discussions with women who already have active voices within ESM. These women generally have the socio-economic stability to produce online content and have received some degree of media training. There are many voices that remain silenced due to financial, social and personal constraints; most particularly those who do not have electricity, stable accommodations, computer literacy or live in an environment where it is acceptable for a woman to report online. Moreover, continued fears for personal and familial safety both within and outside Syria suppress the voices of many would-be activists.

This paper first employed a Critical Discourse Analysis to deconstruct representations of gender produced and disseminated by *SANA* and the *Syria Times*. Such an analysis exposed Syrian state feminism as a patriarchal discourse, in which the female subject is depicted as a passive and homogenous actor within a wider 'narrative of giving.' In this way, imagery of 'the woman' is used to serve as an exemplar of obedience and devotion to the wider Syrian citizenry.¹⁵⁹ A narrative analysis of conversations with seven Syrian women participating in ESM then demonstrated the existence of an online feminist counterpublic, whereby representations of the 'passive' and 'devoted' woman could be challenged. Through their performance of 'active narrator' identities, production of anti-regime narratives, and participation in women's discussion groups, all the interviewees remarked how the opening-up of online space had enabled the configuration of alternative gendered ways-of-being. The sheltered positioning of such challenges resulted in the final conceptualization of an 'inward-oriented' feminist counterpublic within the ESM virtual space.

Despite being contained within gender-specific echo chambers and reaching a somewhat circular audience, the implications of such counterpublic activity remain significant. The creation of safe online spaces that encourage the contestation of gender norms and deliberation of 'taboo' subjects has considerable

¹⁵⁹ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*.

emancipatory capacity. Moreover, the connection of like-minded voices within women's discussion groups holds potential to act as inspiration for future collective action, through which calls for a more inclusive civil society could be articulated. It should be stressed, however, that the aim of this research was not to make generalizable claims about the emancipatory potential of women's online presence in Syria, but rather to explore in detail how individual women experience ESM. As previously stated, this paper focuses its analysis on those women who have been able to project their voices online due to opportunities arising from Internet access, media experience and sufficient financial stability. As such, a significant portion of Syrian women still do not stand to benefit from the development of the ESM phenomenon. Thus, these conclusions should not be used to inform overly-simplified or optimistic judgements about women as a whole in Syrian media and society, but instead function as the impetus for further investigation. The constant evolution of the Syrian media landscape provides continued relevance to such studies.

Conceptualizing an online feminist counterpublic within the virtual space of ESM invites the application of subaltern counterpublic theory to a variety of contexts. Broadening the definition of the public sphere has demonstrated the possibility of theorizing multiple counterpublic formations. The institutional arrangements of these may be neither directly comparable nor uniformly successful.

Particularly in the Syrian context, when considering the possibility of a post-conflict settlement, it is crucial to reflect upon the role that marginalized voices can play in challenging hegemonic discourses. This further reiterates the importance of employing a gendered approach to studying Syrian media. Listening to the voices of women who are working to challenge the discourses of the al-Assad regime is vital to gaining a better understanding of how subaltern groups can more generally navigate the complexities of confronting the authoritarian state. A linguistic analysis of state-run media revealed a shift in the regime's discourse towards privileging narratives of patriotic obedience in the context of ongoing conflict. Monitoring the impact of ESM as a counter-hegemonic space will therefore become increasingly relevant as civil society groups continue to resist and undermine this oppressive discourse. At the end of our conversations, many of the interviewees were keen to discuss their role in shaping Syria's future, although for all the women this represented significant

uncertainty. Contemplating the lasting impact of both ESM and her involvement in feminist counterpublic activity, Naima reflected: “2011 broke a lot of things, including the media. It’s now impossible to go back.”¹⁶⁰

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWS WITH SYRIAN WOMEN WORKING IN ESM

Aliye. 2020. *Interview with Aliye, a social media reporter and author*. [Skype Call]. Interviewed by the author. January 1, 2020.

Fatima. 2020. *Interview with Fatima, co-founder of an online independent radio station*. [Whatsapp Call]. Interviewed by the author. January 31, 2020.

Iman. 2020. *Interview with Iman, employee at an independent radio platform focusing on women’s rights*. [Whatsapp Call]. Interviewed by the author. April 15, 2020.

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ETHICS DECLARATION

Title: The Women Want The Fall Of The (Gendered) Regime: In What Ways Are Syrian Women Challenging State Feminism Through An Online Feminist Counter-Public?

Methodology: Semi-structured interviews/social media observation

Ethical Considerations:

- Pseudonyms used and identifying narratives omitted from interview data
- All data stored in a password-protected and encrypted document
- Informed consent of participants secured before commencing with interviews

'I declare that the research contain herein was granted approval by the Ethics Working Group on the 9/12/2019.'