Transnational Public Spheres from 'Above' and from 'Below'

Feminist Networks across the Middle East and Europe

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Abstract: This article examines the emergence of transnational public spheres brought about by women activists in diasporas and countries of origin across Europe and the Middle East. Such activism can take various forms – networks, partnerships, transnational mobilisations against war or for advocacy – which, in turn, have an impact on the ability to provide women with new paths to emancipation. Although globalising states and societies are becoming more interconnected, demarcating inequalities and forms of governance still exist. Parameters based on territoriality and national citizenship reinforce the unequal access to resources that women experience around the globe and thus have a hand in shaping women's agendas. The article concludes that although women may be able to acquire empowering tools through feminist transnational networks, these tools are not always capable of dismantling boundaries or weakening old hierarchies.

Keywords: diaspora, Europe, feminism, globalisation, Middle East, partnerships, transnational networks

Introduction

Out of a total European population of over 830 million, 10 million originate from the Middle East and North Africa. Europe represents the single most popular destination of 'first generation' migrants from North African and Middle Eastern countries, being home to almost half of all emigrants from that area. Of course, migration from the Middle East to Europe cannot be seen as homogeneous. Palestinian and Iraqi refugees in Sweden

and the U.K., Moroccan post-colonial economic migrants in France and Italy, Syrian Christians and Coptic Egyptians in the U.K., and Turkish guest workers in Germany, just to mention a few, give a sense of the variety of identities, histories and reasons for migrating. This heterogeneity hints at the different ways in which the migratory flows have occurred. What these manifold types of mobile populations have in common, however, is that rather than simply assimilating into their countries of residence or birth, Middle Eastern and North African diasporas in Europe are increasingly articulating their lives through transnational social, cultural, religious and political spheres. They are in fact likely to maintain cultural, political and symbolic ties and attachments that are far from disappearing, even among the younger generations, who often display multiple loyalties and identities. In other words, they represent a lived manifestation of the inadequacy of nationally and territorially bounded conceptions of membership, political mobilisation and sovereignty. Women's and feminists' organisations are playing a prominent role in progressively developing agendas aimed at addressing the global and transnational dimensions both of their loyalties and political beliefs and of the forms of oppression to which they are subjected.

This article critically explores the emergence of transnational public spheres engendered by diasporic women activists and feminists across the Middle East and Europe. Examining Kurdish, North African and Iranian transnational activism, the analysis points to the various forms that such activism can take (cross-border networks, partnerships, mobilisations against war or for advocacy) and discusses their potential to provide women with new paths to emancipation from diverse, deterritorialised and yet interlocked layers of oppression. While acknowledging that transnational public spheres and thick networking across borders have enormous political and theoretical potential, particularly in so far as they question classic modernist notions about membership, loyalties and citizenship from a gender perspective, this article, however, adopts a cautious attitude and contends that while women can acquire empowering tools, they are not always able to dismantle boundaries or weaken old hierarchies.

In today's globalised world of interconnected states and societies we are witnessing the emergence of 'overlapping communities of fate' (Held 2003: 470), which are best exemplified by diasporic women's identities and political sensibilities and by transnational forms of collective mobilisation. Yet this process is not coupled by the withering away of previous demarcating asymmetries and forms of governance. Boundaries based on modern forms of membership, such as national citizenship and territoriality, albeit continuously shifting, clearly shape women's agendas and underpin the unequal access to resources that women experience around the globe. Cross-borders sensibilities and political agendas may emerge, while at the same time new hierarchies may come into existence. Moreover, transnational civil societies or public spheres can be both empowered and shattered by liberalism and globalisation.

Notes on Globalisation and Transnational Networks of Resistance

The striking and shared feature of most societies today is that they are characterised by a 'post-national constellation' (Fraser 2008). This is exemplified by the continuous back and forth movements of diasporas from the society of origin to the society of destination and beyond, whether by way of recurrent physical return or through symbolic cultural, social and/or political ties and loyalties. Even more central in the understanding of contemporary diasporas' lived experiences is the notion of 'simultaneity', which sheds light on how migrants, refugees and displaced populations simultaneously engage with and challenge the nation-building processes of two or more countries or communities (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004). Global economic restructuring and neo-liberal agendas are part and parcel of this scenario. They contribute to the deterritorialisation of communication, information, flows and economies, but they also create more insecurity and flexibility for all, leading to the emergence of new border regimes (Ong 1999).

The emergence of transnational civil societies and public spheres, promoted by diasporas, global forums and international activists around the world, is an outcome of globalisation, and yet, at the same time, it underpins the denationalisation of politics and of sovereignty. Indeed, as Held (2003) suggests, global and transnational political mobilisation is challenging the basic assumptions that underlie modern notions of political action. At a spatial level, it blurs the boundaries between domestic and foreign spheres and between the territorial and the non-territorial dimension of collective mobilisation. Moreover, through new technologies of information, local collective action can have immediate impact globally or in other distant areas.

These developments pose new challenges to the nature and forms of collective political mobilisation, the public sphere and models of governance (Held 2003). Indeed, under conditions of globalisation and transnationality, in a context where communication, political communities and sovereignty are no longer confined or confinable within the borders of the national state, the constitutive elements of the national formulation of the public sphere are shown to be inadequate. Nancy Fraser (2008: 89) also argues that the Westphalian nature of public sphere theory and practice is being challenged by the fact that people increasingly hold multiple nationalities and loyalties and that individuals and communities inhabit social, political and cultural spaces across borders. The denationalisation and deterritorialisation of political action run parallel with the emergence of new cosmopolitan principles defined as 'the ethical and political space which sets out the terms of reference for the recognition of people's equal moral worth' (Held 2003: 473; see also Appiah 2006). Meanwhile, cosmopolitan forms of governance and institution building are invoked as tools that are needed to tackle the overlapping communities that are emerging across the globe.

Engaging in cross-border networking, feminists in the South and North have been taking an active part in the development of transnational civil societies

(Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Cockburn 2003; Dominguez 2002; Moghadam 2005; Shapiro 2005). Neo-liberal agendas and global economic restructuring policies can be viewed as partly responsible for both the gendered and the transnational dimensions assumed by contemporary forms of collective mobilisation. The 1990s saw the emergence of a new alliance between women of the South and the North – or at least of a new shared agenda (Moghadam 2005). Neo-liberal economic policies and the decline of the welfare state in developed countries affected women in specific ways, pushing feminists to reorganise their demands around economic policies, welfare, development and recognition (Fraser 2008; Moghadam 2005). On the other side of the globe, the increasing participation of women in the labour force paved the way for the rise of a more demarcated feminist consciousness among women, leading to the elaboration of a more clear-cut gendered agenda (Moghadam 2005).

Transnational feminist mobilisation is also being forged by the increasing awareness among feminists that both the nature and the sources of their economic and legal oppression and discrimination and the 'governance structure of the global economy' (Fraser 2008: 113) have assumed a transborder dimension that needs to be addressed through what I would call 'transnational networks of resistance'. For example, in analysing the transnational mobilisation of women workers between South America and North America, Edmé Dominguez (2002: 217) notes how 'transnational networks among women's organizations are modelling new forms of resistance to the processes of global restructuring'.

Similarly, Middle Eastern women residing in the diaspora, along with global feminists and activists located in the Middle East and Europe, have been very actively involved over the last decade in promoting international campaigns, engaging in advocacy work targeting international organisations and fund-raising for various activities and conferences (Moghadam 2005). The creation of gendered transnational networks is often tied to a twofold agenda: the development of new political subjectivities advocating for change and reforms and, simultaneously, the assertion of the cross-border nature of women's affiliations, loyalties and political sensibilities. Moreover, transnational feminists frame their agendas not only in relation to nationally based gender-biased legislation (whether in their countries of origin or of residence), but also in relation to the transnational and transborder dynamics that produce discrimination and contribute to wars and conflicts, as seen through the lens of transversal politics (Abdo and Lentin 2002; Cockburn 1998; Yuval-Davis 1999).

Examples of feminists' organisations include, among many others, the Mouvement des Femmes Algeriennes pour la Democratie, Nana Beurs, Al-Masoom, Women Living under Muslim Laws, Women in Black and Women against Fundamentalism. These groups work to promote women's rights and solidarities in European countries and also advocate for human rights, pluralism, women's rights and the end of armed and domestic violence in the Middle East and beyond. These organisations often seek to support women in Europe

whose lives are entangled with global patriarchal oppression, on the one hand, and discrimination as a result of gendered immigration laws, on the other.

Moroccan Women in the Diaspora and the Reform of the Mudawwana

The year 2004 was marked by a salient event in the Maghreb: the reform of the Moroccan Personal Status Law, or Mudawwana, after more than 15 years of mobilisation by Moroccan feminists. The reform restricted polygamy, gave women access to more rights in the domain of child custody and divorce, and abolished the institution of women's guardianship (*wali*). Although systematic studies have not yet been conducted on the role of the Moroccan diaspora in shaping political processes back home, there has been some evidence that mobilisation in favour of the reform of the law, which also revised the Family Code, took place in the diaspora among those first- and second-generation women who have managed to enter the European political arena at various local, national and European levels.[1]

During an interview with a young French Moroccan activist who had campaigned for the reform, it emerged that diasporic women's interest in the Moroccan Personal Status Law and its revision stems from intense transnational ties with Morocco, either by way of frequent visits and/or by virtue of maintaining their Moroccan citizenship along with their European one. Moroccan women in the diaspora are thus involved in processes and practices of simultaneous incorporation at cultural, legal and symbolic levels (see Salih 2003). They are aware of the importance of mobilising for their rights, both in Europe and in their country of origin, to which they remain tied. Developments in Morocco are seen as important, since the effects will have an impact on their lives in Europe. Within this framework, Moroccan women gave birth to a transnational public discussion through an initiative titled Moroccan Women from Morocco and Abroad. In September 2003, a conference in Casablanca on the issue of the reform of the Mudawwana saw the participation of Moroccan women from Belgium, France, Holland, Switzerland, England, Corsica, Canada, the United States, Germany and Spain, in addition to Morocco. The event was organised jointly with CIOFEM (Moroccan Women Information and Observation Centre), an association working under the umbrella of LDDF (Democratic League for Women's Rights). The conference outcomes emphasised the impasses that migrant women and men have to face as a result of the conflicts between the personal status codes of their country of origin and those of their country of residence.[2]

Recommendations from the conference included the proposal to apply the law of the domicile to all Moroccans residing abroad – following a decree that was approved in Spain in March 2003 – and the promotion of a campaign aimed at training diasporic Moroccans about women's rights and duties in

mixed or same nationality marriages. The conference participants advocated setting up a network of Moroccan Women from Morocco and Abroad, which would coordinate mobilisation and information through action plans in each country, as well as at the regional and international levels.

The mobilisation of Moroccan women in the diaspora did not end with the reform of the Mudawwana. Indeed, they continued to discuss publicly the effects of the implementation (or lack thereof) of the reform on their daily life, encouraged to do so by the transnational dimension of their lives. For example, in Italy, despite its relatively brief history of immigration, it is not uncommon to attend public events promoted by associations of migrant and native women at which social, cultural and political predicaments are discussed through a transnational lens.

An eloquent illustration of this was a public workshop on the effects of the reform of the Mudawwana on Moroccan women living in Italy and France, which took place in Turin in June 2006. The workshop was organised by the association Almaterra, a well-known 'migrant and native women's organisation', which had been founded in the early 1990s, the first of its kind in Italy.[3] The purpose of the workshop was to present the results of research undertaken in the Piemonte region on the impact of the reform of the Moroccan Family Code on women in the diaspora and on the actual awareness among migrant women about the changes introduced by the reform.

The workshop was also an example of interactions and exchanges between Moroccan activists and intellectuals in Italy and in Morocco that had been initiated by sociologist Fatima Mernissi and her itinerant think-tank, Karawan Civique. Founded at the beginning of the 1990s in Morocco, Karawan Civique was a forum for participation and discussion about Morocco's legal and socio-economic development. It soon reached audiences beyond the borders, contributing to the development of a thick transnational networking between Moroccan women activists in Italy and in Morocco. In Turin, Moroccan activists and intercultural mediators – by virtue of their role as interfaces and facilitators between migrant women and the local social, health and legal services – had, over the years, been particularly concerned with raising awareness among Moroccan women about the reform of the Mudawwana and its effects on their lives and with enacting instruments to make the new Family Code fully operational in the diaspora.

In this light, one of the first actions of Almaterra, which offers a full service of intercultural mediators, was to promote a research project, 'Rights in Movement: The New Moroccan Family Code in the Context of Migration', in collaboration with the regional Commission for Equal Opportunities and a local research centre.[4] The project was in fact initiated by a group of Moroccan and Italian women who had been interested in the cultural, legal and social changes occurring in Morocco and their impact on diasporic communities.

Almaterra itself could be seen as a launch pad for a transnational public sphere. Its board is composed of Italian feminists and ethnic minority women.

The centre administers several initiatives that include legal counselling, measures to promote women's rights and cultures, activities to fund development projects in migrant women's countries of origin and, finally, micro-credit strategies to valorise women's talents and expertise and to promote economic empowerment. Operating at local, regional, national and transnational levels, Almaterra is committed to a feminist agenda that aims to cut across divides and empower women.

The keynote speakers at the 2006 workshop were two young women of Moroccan origin, both attending the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris and in the process of obtaining their PhDs on subjects related to women and rights. Both were also involved in politics 'back home', one as a consultant for the government and for human rights organisations in Morocco, and the other as the first diasporic woman to be elected as a member of the Moroccan Parliament.[5] One of the two presentations was devoted to the results of the research project on the effects of the reform of the Moroccan Personal Status Law on migrant women. The other emphasised women's achievements thanks to the reform, but also elaborated on the discrimination that women face due to obstacles in implementing the reform. The presenter illustrated the particular predicament of women of Moroccan origin living in France, who often face several difficulties in matters related to marriage, divorce and child custody as a consequence of the existing gap between French and Moroccan family codes (see Salih 2004). One speaker concluded by envisaging greater political power in Moroccan affairs for Moroccan nationals living abroad and by proposing what she called a 'European code of Arab Muslim law' for the Arab diasporas residing in Europe. An additional talk was delivered by the Almaterra lawyer who specialises in family codes, a front-line figure offering legal advice to migrant women in the association.

In the audience were sitting several young women of Moroccan origin who belonged to various organisations and associations operating at local, national and supra-national levels. Most of the women worked as intercultural mediators with Arab Muslim and migrant women in different towns in northern Italy. Two women in particular joined in the discussion, passionately contending that the reform of the Mudawwana was just a 'cosmetic' change addressed to the Western world that did not solve discrimination against women. One attendee speaking from the floor grieved over the situation of women 'who have been suffering for more than eight years to get a divorce … These are women who often have met a new and real love in their life. Some have gone to live with Italian men with whom they also had children'. She concluded bitterly: 'How are these children taken into account in the new Mudawwana?'

These and other examples (see Salih 2009) hint at how Moroccan women in the diaspora are becoming actors in a transnational civil society. As intercultural mediators, as active members of women's associations, as students and prominent figures of local, national and transnational organisations, as persons actively involved in politics and reforms in their country of origin, these

women represent the essence of Fraser's (2005) argument about the crisis of the nationally bounded conception of the public sphere. This change is taking place in a context where communities of fate, despite being deterritorialised, maintain a major interest in the political and cultural developments in their country of origin that directly affect their lives in the diaspora.

The Case of Kurdish Women in the Diaspora and Transnational Mobilisation: Troubles of a Borderless Entity

In this section, I examine Kurdish women's transnational networks, which demonstrate the paradox of being a 'borderless' entity in a political context where not only identities but also resources and power are highly constrained by (inter)nationally based and/or nationalist conceptions. Kurdish women in the diaspora, by virtue of their non-state status and borderless identity, have been at the forefront of transnational feminist mobilisation.

Shahzad Mojab and Rachel Gorman (2007) have analysed the impact that women in the diaspora had on the state-building process of the Kurdish region of northern Iraq and how, in turn, politics within the Kurdish region has affected political agendas and mobilisation in and of the diaspora. Their analyses are based on four different organisations located in Toronto, London and Stockholm, and on groups working in the Kurdish region in Iraq. The organisations were chosen on the basis of their interest in addressing gender discrimination and violence against women and because of their independence from Kurdish political parties. In their work, based also on their own personal involvement with Kurdish diasporic women, Mojab and Gorman emphasise the several challenges that the network had to face as a diasporic entity and also the 'impact of the dispersed nationalism of a non-state nation on the life and struggle of Kurdish women in the diaspora' (ibid.: 68).

Kurdish women have managed to create transnational networks, such as the International Kurdish Women's Studies Network. In the autumn of 1996, this body was formed by a number of Kurdish and non-Kurdish women activists and academics, including Shahzad Mojab. The network, described as the first 'transnational Kurdish women's organization' (Mojab and Gorman 2007: 67), included Kurdish women and Kurdish women's organisations active in Europe, North America and the Middle East across the various host lands, including Turkey, Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan. As the group's web site recounts, the network 'started as a response to a growing need for opening a space for Kurdish women in international debates on women's rights, women's studies, and promoting gender justice among the Kurdish communities in the diaspora and the Middle East'[6] (see also Mojab and Gorman 2007). The organisation 'provides a forum for exchange of experience and knowledge among those who are interested in and work for improving the lives of Kurdish women; acts as a liaison for community-based, institution-based, academic and independent researchers and

activists in all parts of Kurdistan and in the diaspora; promotes the theories and practices of feminism among the women of Kurdistan and the diaspora; and promotes women's rights and gender equality in Kurdistan.'[7]

Due to the many challenges it encountered, such as various official languages and dialects, differences in class and status, and contradictions between feminist and nationalist politics, the network faced enormous difficulties in establishing itself as a borderless transnational entity. Mojab and Gorman (2007: 68) report on the struggle to secure funding for the network's activities, especially from the United Nations and other international agencies, such as UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), which are inclined to support state-based women's organisations that are anchored to a specific territory rather than diasporic ones. According to the authors, the non-state status of Kurdish women and their communities has constituted a major problem in raising funds. Moreover, Kurdish women in Europe were not able to receive funding allocated to 'Third World-based' women's organisations, since they were listed as European residents.

Another challenge for Kurdish women in the diaspora is the indifference or sometimes the opposition of nationalist Kurdish political parties and associations, both in the diaspora and in the Kurdish region (Mojab and Gorman 2007), who view the development of a transnational feminist agenda with suspicion. The patriarchal attitude of Kurdish leaders in exile and the privilege given to the nationalist cause are among the major problems encountered by Kurdish women in the diaspora. As Mojab and Gorman (ibid.: 68) underline: 'The network had to take a position against the patriarchal nationalism of Kurdish political parties and rely instead on its own efforts to establish transnational feminist solidarity.' Women's mobilisation in the diaspora may involve issues that include discrimination from host states as well as patriarchal communities. Living in the diaspora may thus subject them to the very painful experience of a double form of exclusion. In fact, by focusing on gender or minority issues, they are often perceived as traitors who prioritise secondary causes over the nationalist agenda, or they are represented as being manipulated by Western powers.

The hegemonic constructions of the host nations impinge upon the forms and substance of diasporic women's mobilisation. Kurdish women's organisations in the diaspora mobilise and focus their agendas variably as feminist, nationalist or internationalist, depending on the way that they are perceived by the host country. Kurdish women in Turkey cannot mobilise as Kurdish, but they are allowed to organise as feminists. In Germany, Kurdish women often mobilise as migrant women because they cannot compete with mainstream male organisations, which monopolise most of the funding. These examples point to the unfeasibility of discarding the state and its hegemonic constructions of identities to which minority women have to conform (Mojab and Gorman 2007). The role of the host state's representations and the ways in which these shape the political action of Kurdish diasporic organisations have been

noted in other studies. Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2002), for example, states that the political strategies of these organisations in Germany show an inward and an outward effect, simultaneously shaping home and host politics, depending on the opportunities that emerge in the local or domestic spaces where minorities live. This, however, does not deny the transnational dimension of political lobbying activities. In her research on political lobbying among Kurds in Germany, Fiona Adamson (2002: 167) highlights how Kurds are often involved in 'forms of political action from below that are neither strictly *international* nor *domestic*, but are rather characterised by political practices which take place within *transnational* spaces'.

Living in the diaspora can be advantageous in terms of providing women with the ability to disengage from conformist and dominant alliances and develop new political transversal positionalities. A woman activist interviewed by Mojab and Gorman (2007: 72) stated: 'I think I am contributing and advocating the plight of Kurdish women more effectively while I am abroad than being in Kurdistan. I am freer here. I do not need to be affiliated with any of the political parties. I have to admit that I am in the diaspora, but in my heart and head I live in Kurdistan every day. I want to know daily what is going on there and what Kurdish women have done. I am in love with Kurdistan and Kurdish women.'

Notwithstanding all these challenges, the work of diasporic women remained focused on gender issues, as witnessed by the campaign that was launched against honour killing following a series of murders of young women, both in the diaspora and in the Kurdish region. The transnational organisations Kurdish Women Rights Watch (KWRW) and particularly Kurdish Women Action Against Honour Killing (KWAHK), which has been active since 2000, were prominent in this regard. These groups, whose official aim is to support and promote women's interests in Kurdish communities in both Kurdistan and the diaspora, and which therefore involve Kurdish women from different areas, campaigned and advocated for amendments to the Personal Status Law and honour killing legislation in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq.[8] The transnational character of their mobilisation is reflected in this statement on the KWRW's web site:

> At present it is often difficult to assess the extent of violence against women, and honour-based violence is particularly likely to be concealed or misrepresented. We believe that it is crucial to build up a research base of evidence through reports in the Kurdish and non-Kurdish press. As we have members who speak Kurdish (Sorani and Kurmanji), Arabic, Turkish and Farsi as well as English, we are coordinating the development of an archive of reports to provide information on women's rights in general, and honour-based violence in particular, to be posted on the website as a permanent record.[9]

In the end, the efforts of these diasporic organisations and networks were perceived and portrayed as downplaying the Kurdish government. As usual, women

were accused of emphasising or exacerbating the issue of honour killing, while shying away from nationalist agendas.

Despite these tensions, diasporic women managed to make an impact on politics back home, as witnessed by the fact that in 2005 the Kurdish regional government, led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), appointed a feminist based in Sweden, Mehabad Qaradaghi, as adviser for women's affairs to Prime Minister Barzani. When asked how a diasporic woman, who had lived in exile for many years, could represent Kurdish women's issues, Qaradaghi replied: 'I have always worked for Kurdistan even if I have lived abroad. All my work is dedicated for the Kurdish community. Living in Sweden for 13 years has given me a different perspective in terms of writing, reading, and feminist work. Me and my experience will return to Kurdistan and as always I will be working in that line' (Mojab and Gorman 2007: 76).

The experiences of the Kurdish diasporic women illustrate how the development of transnational political subjectivities has to face the durability and reinvention of classic national and nationalist constructions, which, in both the host country and the homelands, may shape, hinder or limit the establishment of feminist transnational networks. Nonetheless, being located in the diaspora may provide women activists with a stronger awareness of the intersectional and multi-layered nature of their identities as women and furnish them with tools to diminish the nationalist pressure on their agendas.

Transnational Spaces: Empowerment or Disempowerment? The Case of Iranian Women

Other examples of women's construction of a transnational public sphere are reported by Halleh Ghorashi and Nayereh Tavakoli (2006) in their work on Iranian women from the diaspora and from Iran (see also Ghorashi 2004). These authors are interested in the contested notion of identity within the transnational framework and in the simultaneously enabling and limiting potentials of transnational spaces for the women's movement in Iran.

In the course of the 1990s, after more than a decade of enclosure and isolation due to the politics of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian women gained access to transnational spaces. The new possibilities for Iranian women and activists came from the development of information and communication technologies, such as the Internet, and from a newly established connection with the Iranian diaspora after many years of reciprocal suspicion. During the 1980s, Iranian women in the diaspora who had left their homeland soon after the revolution were indeed very pessimistic about the country's civil society, and they viewed Iranian women living in Iran as collaborators of the regime. On the other hand, women from inside Iran fought to gain rights within the constraining limits of the regime and managed to improve their situation, as witnessed by the proliferation of women's magazines and organisations and by the ever-increasing

number of women in universities and professions (Afshar 1998; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Moallem 2005). Women activists in Iran could not or would not work within a secular framework; instead, they had to adapt and negotiate strategically within the discursive limits imposed by the Islamist leadership. They often defined themselves as Islamic feminists, in opposition to Iranian women in exile, who generally espoused the idea that women's rights are human rights and cannot be achieved from within a religious framework.

Despite the reciprocal suspicious gazes, Iranian women from Iran and from the diaspora managed to create transnational spaces of mobilisation and discussion. One example is the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation (IWSF), whose aim has been to 'provide a forum for the exchange of ideas on issues related to Iranian women' (Ghorashi and Tavakoli 2006: 95). The first meeting took place in 1990 in Cambridge and was followed by annual meetings held in different cities (Los Angeles, Berkeley, Denver, Paris, Stockholm, London, Berlin, among others), which are attended every year by Iranian women from all over the world. This transnational public sphere is not devoid of conflicts. Rather, every year the meeting is dominated by increasingly deep divergences between activists and scholars, on the one hand, and 'secular' and 'Islamic' feminists, on the other.

The cleavages, which cross-cut the diaspora–non-diaspora divide, are concerned with different political cultures that no longer necessarily reflect geographical locations. For example, one point of contention arose between Iranian secular activists and feminist scholars living in the diaspora over the theorisation of Iranian women's work in Iran in terms of Islamic feminism. These scholars have been accused of endorsing postmodernist and culturally relativist views and have been verbally attacked on more than one occasion. Similarly, leftist activists in the diaspora perceived women from Iran, who had been invited to attend the annual meetings, as supporters of the Islamist regime. Ghorashi and Tavakoli report that during the 2003 conference, when Mehrangiz Kar, the lawyer and activist for women's rights from Iran, was awarded the Woman of the Year prize, many attendees raised their voices in protest on the basis that a woman who is allowed to work as a lawyer in Iran cannot be trustworthy. These concerns created bitterness among other women activists, as one participant interviewed by Ghorashi and Tavakoli (ibid.: 96) states:

> Those leftists were saying that Mehrangiz Kar is a betrayer, because she had been working with the regime. This is absurd. The only reason for their accusations is that she has been able to work as a lawyer in Iran and has had her own office. For those people, someone who had stayed in Iran, no matter what that person had been doing, whether that person had been in prison or not, had been raising her voice or not, simply the fact that the person had stayed in Iran is already the symbol of her/his betrayal.

The conflicts reached the highest level of tension during a conference that was held in Berlin in the year 2000. Leftist Iranian activists from the diaspora

interrupted the meeting in protest and prevented the speakers from intervening. A woman and a man improvised a striptease as a form of protest against the Islamist regime. This incident, endlessly reported by the Iranian media, eventually led to the imprisonment of many scholars and activists upon their return to Iran. Accused by a Revolutionary Court in Tehran of having offended Islam and the Islamic Republic, some of them are still in prison. According to Ghorashi and Tavakoli (2006), this event, which resulted in many discussions and much reflection among activists in the Iranian diaspora, is paradigmatic of the contradictory impacts of transnational mobilisation on local activism back in Iran. The authors explain the interconnections as follows (ibid.: 97):

> Transnational connections and incidents could be used by the state in order to limit the space for local activism. On the other hand, transnational allies have also proved essential for the support and safeguarding of civil society in Iran. Having access to the transnational space has been crucial for activists in Iran during the past decade. Transnational connections among Iranian NGOs and non-Iranian organizations and the organization of Beijing + 5 Women 2000 in Iran were sources of inspiration for local activism. Furthermore, the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Shirin Ebadi brought new self-confidence and self-esteem to Iranian women who had fought a twenty-five-year battle to claim their rights and their space.

Another means for enabling women is the increasing use of the Internet and blogs. These communication channels provide women in Iran with the ability to partake virtually in a transnational public sphere, breaking out of both the physical and intellectual isolation to which they have been confined by Islamist conservatives. 'Cyberspace has proven crucial in combining the local with the transnational. In fact, it is sometimes the only space that women living in Iran can escape to in order to express themselves freely, to collect information, to reach other, diasporic Iranians, and the rest of the world' (Ghorashi and Tavakoli 2006: 99).

Problematising Transnational Feminist Networks: Towards the Dissolution of Old Asymmetries or the Creation of New Ones?

In the previous sections I have provided three examples of diasporic women's transnational networks and have highlighted some of the main achievements and critical concerns emerging from these types of collective mobilisation. In this section I want to shift the focus to another type of transnational public sphere and discuss the ways in which asymmetries of power between women across the globe and categories such as South and North go through a double process of fragmentation and reinforcement in the context of the development of transnational partnerships.

One example is offered by Lilia Labidi (2007) in an essay on the crisis and challenges that the Tunisian feminist movement is undergoing in its shift from

a local and national movement to a transnationally oriented network. Labidi notes how the possibilities that emerged from the creation of partnerships with European women's organisations and international donors have had a negative impact on the women's movement for autonomy back home. Moreover, although the development of civil society networks and especially gendered networks and projects across the Mediterranean – namely, through the notion of partnership as promoted by the Barcelona process – was a crucial element in the achievement of women's goals, it did not dissolve hierarchies. In fact, this mechanism reproduced old asymmetries and created new ones.

Two critical issues that accompanied this shift are raised by Labidi (2007). The first revolves around the extent to which 'the establishment of a transnational feminism is the product of internal struggles and/or the result of geopolitical pressures on the region'. The second issue is posed by the question, 'What lessons did they learn from their partnership with promoters of the Barcelona process which, while financing activities to advance women's rights in the Mediterranean south, also support Schengen policies that restrict the movement of people from the South to the countries of the North?' (ibid.: 8). It is true, Labidi underlines, that this shift is what allowed the feminist movements in the region to achieve their main victories, for example, the reform of the Moroccan Mudawwana in 2004. Similarly, Tunisian President Ben Ali, in a speech delivered on the fiftieth anniversary of the enactment of the Personal Status Law, stated his country's determination to support 'all efforts on the regional and international level to propagate the values of equality, solidarity, and modernity … to establish a solid basis for a broad Arab renaissance in which men and women share the same responsibilities on an equal basis' (ibid.). However, these achievements came at a cost, exposing the movement to a new vulnerability, since in both Tunisia and Morocco women lost their independence from the state: '[R]eceiving from the state a guarantee that their rights would be protected, they in turn committed themselves to protect the institutions of the state' (ibid.: 26).

Transnationalising the women's movement also meant that feminists received substantial financial support from international donors such as the European Union, and this had serious implications. The crucial role of Morocco as a new buffer zone for Europe and the consequent efforts of the EU to weaken radical Islamist constituencies were some of the reasons why Moroccan feminists benefited from funding to advance their rights. In this context, the creation of a transnational feminist network obscured other hidden dynamics at work. Indeed, the women's movement, by partaking in such a network, paid a high price in terms of political independence from the state. Also, as Labidi (2007: 26) explains, their participation in a transnational network paradoxically obscured or reproduced existing hierarchies of power across the globe:

> [T]he reform of the Mudawwana, whose success was partly due to the use of modern communications technology, requires significant funds such as few poor countries

can afford. This raises the question of how poor women with scant rights might benefit from such support if they do not live in zones of strategic value to the wealthier countries of the North, which may provide support only in response to perceived threats, security or otherwise.

Concluding Remarks

Transnational feminist networks are seen as avenues through which women's claims and struggles can widen their scope to reach broader audiences, as well as receive support beyond local or national borders (see Cohen and Rai 2000; Moghadam 2005). A nationally bounded notion of the public sphere is subject to question when confronted with transnational practices, identities, mobilisation and spaces of communication engendered by diasporic political subjectivities. As Fraser (2005: 4) also notes: 'The idea of a national citizenry which was supposed to be the subject of public sphere communication is today challenged by transnational identities, binational citizens, migration and identity politics, multiple residency schemes, flexible models of citizenship.' In these circumstances, communication 'can no longer serve its classic function of mobilizing those who constitute a "community of fate" to assert democratic control over the powers that determine the basic conditions of their lives'. Fraser asserts that 'not only do the powers reside elsewhere, but those affected by them do not constitute a political community' (ibid.).

Classic notions of citizenship are being challenged by new, more intense transnational forms of political mobilisation and subjectivities. There is increasing evidence that this mobilisation is being carried out not only by men, as the literature on long-distance nationalism has typically shown, but also by minority women, including women of Middle Eastern origin in Europe. As this article demonstrates, Middle Eastern women in the diaspora, albeit from diverse political standpoints, contribute to the creation of public arenas for discussing the discrimination that women experience by taking into account the local, national and transnational scales that produce their legal, social and cultural conditions. In addition, women promote transnational public spheres aimed at discussing the conditions that sustain discrimination, the ways to change their life circumstances and the possibility of developing political objectives with the goal of challenging gender subordination.

The cases presented in this article emphasise the ability of transnational feminist networks to create a new language for women's rights and to design shared priorities for women across boundaries that seem to have become less divisive in contemporary times. Moreover, the transnational dimension of women's collective mobilisation, along with other transnational fields, reflects and is conducive to time-space compression at one and the same time. Transnational networks provide women's movements with more flexible and less bureaucratic organising structures, resulting in more effective campaigns that have a more immediate impact at local, national and supra-national levels.

Transnational feminist networks are thus giving birth to a new vocabulary, to more effective forms of organisation and mobilisation, and to globalised campaigns that allow women to join forces despite and beyond their still meaningful differences (Moghadam 2005). The ability of individuals to create, join or reinforce advocacy work and campaigns beyond nation states is a major feature of transnational feminist networks and of transnational civil societies. For example, the Beijing Statement of 1995 was reached as a result to women's transnational networks and campaigning. Supporting the idea of women's rights as human rights and the notion of equality between genders as a prerequisite for development, the statement was seen as a critical reference point for women's efforts to bring about economic development and the modernisation of family codes around the world.

However, this article takes issue with the celebratory lens through which networking and mobilising across borders are often perceived and represented. While recognising the surfacing of transnational civil societies and public spheres 'from below' and their potential to empower women, the article also points to the persistence or reinforcement of classic national boundaries and dividing lines between women across the globe, as well as to the paradoxical effects of certain forms of transnational partnerships 'from above', which end up weakening women's movements (Jad 2007) or compromising their independence from national governments or supra-national institutions. For example, it has been noted how the transition towards a transnational form of feminism that seeks alliances with both international and regional feminist groups can stem from and reproduce asymmetries rather than simply overcome them, as was the case in the Moroccan and Tunisian contexts (Labidi 2007).

The Kurdish material provided another critical angle, illustrating the dialectic between national constructions – hampering political organisations and strategies, and conditioning their access to political and symbolic resources – and the transnational sphere, and, in the Kurdish case, also borderless, political subjectivities that strive to promote transnational and gender equality agendas in the public sphere. The Iranian case pointed to the difficulties in overcoming ideological divides and reciprocal mistrust between diasporic and non-diasporic women, but also to the paradoxical outcomes of technologies of communication, which can easily be used to strengthen control and hamper freedom of expression, as well as providing means of empowerment (cf. Mernissi 2005).

Ultimately, the article tries to show that the success of women's transnational mobilisation rests upon its ability to involve women from the grass roots and to change everyday realities on the ground. This, in turn, depends on the potential of these networks to maintain the autonomy of women's movements vis-à-vis the state, to produce equality of access to resources and to blur boundaries that are at one and the same time geographical, political and symbolic.

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Notes

1. On the mobilisation of Moroccans in the Netherlands, see Buskens (2003: 105).
2. See http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B157%5D=x-157-20147 (accessed 2009).
3. See http://www.almaterratorino.org/ (accessed 2009).
4. In 2007, the results of the research project were published in Turin by the Istituto Paralleli in a report titled 'Dal Marocco all'Italia: L'applicazione della Mudawwana in Piemonte'.
5. The statement of the diasporic member of Parliament, Nezha Elouafi, can be viewed at http://www.islamistica.com/nezha_elouafi/islam_e_musulmani_in_una_societa_laica_e_pluralista.html (accessed 2009).
6. See http://www.ww05.org/wows/member/kurdish.html (accessed 2009).
7. Ibid.
8. See Kurdish Women Rights Watch, http://www.kwrw.org/ (accessed 2009).
9. See http://www.kwrw.org/wedo.html (accessed 2009). See also the web site for the Kurdish Women Action Against Honour Killing, http://www.kwahk.org/.

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