

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

ONE WOMAN, MANY HEADLINES: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF TAWAKKOL KARMAN
BY ARAB AND WESTERN MEDIA

by
IMAN ALEXANDRA AZZI

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Center for Arab and Middle East Studies
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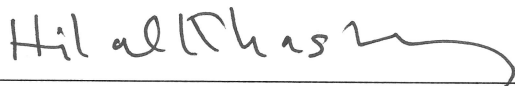
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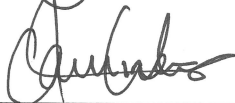
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Iman Alexandra Azzi for Master of Arts
Major: Middle East Studies

Title: One Woman, Many Headlines: A comparative study of media coverage of Tawakkol Karman by the Arab and Western media

This thesis analyzes the representation of Tawakkol Karman – a Yemeni journalist, activist, and Islamist opposition leader – before and after she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. Using content analysis of newspapers, and selected social media, from the Arab and Western press the first part of the research project asks how the Arab and Western press covered the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Karman. In the second half, it attempts to give an answer to the question of whether the coverage of Karman influenced the ongoing conversation on gender in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

While both Arab and Western press praised Karman for her achievements, it is clear that the Arab and Western press were focused on different achievements and covered her actions during 2011. In the West, reporting framed her a women’s rights activists, closely following the script provided by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee who selected Karman and two Liberian women’s rights activists “for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work”¹ Overnight, the Western media cast a spotlight on Karman, the first Arab woman and, at the time, the youngest recipient ever of the Nobel Peace Prize and the international, primarily English-speaking, women’s movement claimed it as a victory for women. Western coverage of Karman, who represented a feminine face of “Arab Spring,” overshadowed her co-Laureates, Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee.

The Arab press, however, and Karman herself, interpreted the Nobel Peace Prize differently. In Yemen, Karman, was already a household name as an opposition protester seeking to oust Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Nobel Peace Prize, according to the Arab media, symbolized the West’s acceptance of her struggles against such oppression. Using Karman as a case study, I hope to contribute to a growing dialogue about women’s political participation and representation in the Middle East and show that Karman’s award ultimately did not bring about a new level of cultural understanding between Arab and Western press.

¹ “Tawakkol Karman – Facts,” Nobel Prize, last accessed December 9, 2015, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-facts.html.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

In 2011, Tawakkol Karman won the Nobel Peace Prize, sharing the honor with two Liberian women. On the day the prize was announced, local and international reporters found Karman where she had been living for the past eight months: in a tent, pitched in Change Square, located in downtown Sanaa, Yemen. Karman said she had not even known she had been nominated and accepted the award as a victory for the “youth of Yemen” and those fighting oppression.¹ Officially, the award was for a different type of activism in her community. The Nobel Peace Prize Committee said Karman and her co-recipients, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee, had been chosen “for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work.”² The ways she has come to be defined in the public sphere and media are many and differ depending on the culture of the media. In the press, how Karman’s victory was reported depended on where the publication was printed and who the intended audience was; media largely reported for the audience instead of capturing the essence of who Karman was and introducing their readers to the actual events and actions of the peace prize winner.

¹ “Nobel Lecture by Tawakkol Karman,” *Nobelprize.org*, last modified December 10, 2011, accessed November 30, 2015, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture_en.html.

² “The Nobel Peace Prize 2011,” *Nobelprize.org*, last modified 2014, accessed November 30, 2015, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture_en.html.

By comparing and analyzing the Arab press coverage with the international press coverage, this thesis hopes to contribute to not only to a discussion of Karman's role as an activist in Yemen before, during and after the Arab Spring but also to a larger discussion on the role of women in politics in the Middle East. The coverage of Karman highlights a fundamental disparity in how the discourse on gender is framed in different regions of the world. In Western press, the rights of an individual woman – idealized as liberated, equal, and empowered – stand in contrast to beliefs some hold in the Middle East that believe the best way to empower women is to join a larger community struggle against injustice and fight oppression. In Arab press, Karman's activism made her the leader of a movement of the youth and Yemenis looking for change.

Using Karman as a case study, I hope to contribute to a growing dialogue about women's political participation in the Middle East and show that there is an ongoing debate over how gender development is seen in English and Arabic media. In Western, predominantly English, media, I argue that the press did not cover Karman as a nuanced individual but merely portrayed her as the type of gender activist they believed she was, crafting her almost as a poster girl for the "Arab Spring" without examining her achievements in her own words, her past work and intentions, or what her local society was saying about her. That a woman was symbolically leading the revolution in Yemen was a romanticized version of the truth for the international press corps. As Karman had done in her interactions with foreign governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) before her award, she knew that being a woman was attractive to the West and used their interest in gender politics to advance her own agenda. It should be noted that her agenda

does include a pro-woman element and that Karman is in favor of increased rights for women in Yemen and the Arab World but this was not her main endeavor when the Nobel Peace Prize Committee honored her in 2011.

By revealing the differences in how Arabic and English media portrayed Karman's work and aspirations, I argue that the Western media used Karman as a medium to promote already entrenched notions about women in the Middle East while the Arab press quickly sought to cover her as a political leader and activist and minimized her gender; both communities of press missed a crucial chance to deepen the discussion on women in the Middle East, especially what it means to be a gender activists as opposed to a female political activist. Allowing these two roles to blur – although there are women who do both – detracts from the necessary roles both play in pushing for sustainable and empowered change in the region.

Both Western and Arab press cemented a portrait of Arab women during the Arab Spring, later more popularly known across the region as the Arab uprisings, on which they had already been reporting. Karman was a Yemeni politician and journalist long before she was a poster child for the “Arab Spring” – to portray her as only a gender activist both belittles her efforts as an opposition leader but also clouds those women and men who have dedicated themselves to prioritizing gender reforms. While the Arab press treated her as they would treat any Arab public figure, for the most part, where gender was less important than her party politics, ideological beliefs, and past acts and alliances, the Western press reduced Karman to a one dimensional woman and failed to use the moment to introduce to

the Western audiences the current multi-dimensional views taking places not only about women's rights in the Middle East but about regional politics more generally.

1.2. The research questions

After a break of many years from my studies at the American University of Beirut – during which time I earned a scholarship to obtain an MA in Gender and Women's Studies from the American University in Cairo – I was able to return to the program to write the thesis. Knowing my interest in gender politics of the Middle East, several friends had sent me articles after the Nobel Peace Prize Committee awarded their prize to Karman. “Isn't this wonderful!” They exclaimed. Others wrote: “An Arab woman won the Nobel Peace Prize. How incredible! What a moment!” They expected me to share in their unquestioning positivity of the situation.

Indeed, I was proud of Karman for being recognized for her achievements but, as I had only vaguely come across her work, I was curious as to why she shared the prize with the Liberian women when it appeared she was doing different kinds of campaigning. Unprompted, she spoke about youth. She spoke about unseating then Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. She spoke about gender when asked about gender. I asked my friends why the Nobel Committee did not honor the Arab Spring leaders, which could have included Karman. Or the reverse: why did the committee not focus on Arab women working on increasing access to rights for Arab women? Why was it assumed that any woman working would be doing so with gender concerns as their primary motivation? Why was it that regardless of geography it was assumed that all women shared the same goals and, therefore, should be rewarded collectively?

The more articles I read, the less Karman appeared to be only a gender activist. As she remained in the English press, her role as gender activist solidified. I began to research her. I struggled to find her own voice as there were no articles online written by her during her time as a journalist. I read the Arab press and realized that they painted her as a much more dynamic figure than the features I had been reading in English. It was then that I decided to use Karman as an example to explore her representation in different cultural media publications to compare the coverage and examine how this international award may have impacted the ongoing debate about gender justice in the Middle East.

Using content analysis, this study analyzes how Arab and Western media portrayed Karman before and after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, comparing and contrasting the coverage, and ultimately asking what her Nobel Peace Prize came to represent to both groups of press and their readers. This thesis is a comparison of media on the events leading up to, and following, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Tawakkol Karman in 2011. The two guiding questions are stated below.

1. How did the Arab and Western press cover the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Tawakkol Karman?

Like any major news item, the journalists, editors, and publishers of media outlets have several choices to make when covering the receipt of an annual award. Obviously, the names of the people who win and the date the award was announced and other basic facts of an event will be reported accurately, there are choices in how to present this information to the public. For the most part, coverage of the Nobel Peace Prize is a positive event, with outlets looking to praise the year's winner(s) and introduce their readers to a person's or

persons' accomplishments. The winner's quotes are often reproduced accurately and the statement released by the Nobel Peace Prize committee is also quoted. However, after that, the media can make several choices in presentation. This thesis will examine those choices and analyze the words used, the photographs run, the people quoted, and the version of Yemeni and Arab history provided as context, to see how one woman's story was presented to millions of readers around the world.

2. Did the coverage of Tawakkol Karman affect the ongoing conversation, in either press circle or larger cultural community, on gender in the Middle East? How does the coverage of Tawakkol Karman inform the current discussion on gender politics in Yemen in the wake of the Arab uprisings?

In framing Karman as a revolutionary hero, not a gender activist, the Arab media focused on different aspects of Karman than the Western press. This research looks at the role of the press in aiding the global discussion on gender rights and justice in the Middle East and raises several sub-questions on this necessary and timely discussion. How should the media cover the topic of human rights and women's rights in their pages? If papers seek to be neutral or unbiased, what does that look like when covering these kinds of social issues? Instead of lack of bias, are these papers actually just promoting traditional beliefs or stereotypes? This question is touched on throughout but will be the main focus of later chapters that seek to put Karman's media coverage in a broader context of women, the media and the Arab Spring. By focusing on Karman, this research does what many newspaper outlets attempt to do to attract readers to a story – they focus on the plight of an individual to raise questions about a society as a whole.

1.3. Background and context

By most metrics, Yemen ranks close to the bottom of quality of life rankings, for men and, especially, for women. Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab World, with almost half its 23 million people living on USD\$2 or less a day. Yemen, an ancient land, has a fractured and violent modern history. At the start of the 20th century, Yemen was a land occupied by the British and the Ottomans and divided into north and south. Both foreign powers were only interested in Yemen's coastlines so indigenous tribes controlled the rest of the nation. In 1918, North Yemen gained independence from the Ottoman Empire and formally became the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1962.

The port city of Aden and the rest of South Yemen did not gain freedom from British colonialism until 1967. After independence, South Yemen adopted a Communist governmental system and was called the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Although the two halves agreed to unite in 1972 it was not until May 22, 1990, that the Republic of Yemen was declared and all Yemeni people were brought under one rule. The leader of the YAR, Ali Abdullah Saleh, became the first president of united Yemen, a rule that would last over twenty years. Saleh remained president until 2012 – his departure caused in no small part by Karman and the other non-violent protesters who flooded into the streets in 2011 to oppose his continued rule.

That Saleh, along with most of the people in positions of power in Yemen, held patriarchal views had little to do with the mass mobilization that was credited with his ouster but he had made some conservative alliances and imposed a stricter way of life than many in South Yemen had grown up knowing when he took control over both halves of

Yemen. His rule had ushered in more conservative societal laws than women and men in South Yemen had become accustomed to under semi-Communist rule. Women, especially, saw many of their freedoms curtailed as Saleh bowed to tribal pressures and demands from his conservative followers. A civil war in 1994 temporarily looked to derail unification until northern forces squashed the South's attempt to secede and Saleh's rule continued to run on a mixture of corruption and patriarchal tribal feudalism.

From unification until 2012, Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) remained the dominant political party. The two major opposition parties were the Islamist party Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party. In the 2003 parliamentary elections, the GPC secured 238 lower house seats while Islah won 46 and the Socialists secured eight. While an election in name, Saleh and the GPC held a tight grip over selection of the candidates and how people could run, so their majority victory was just an authoritarian rule term extension with the stamp of a mock election put over it.

In 2006, Yemen held its second presidential election since unification and the GPC allowed opposition parties to field their own candidates against Saleh's reelection campaign. However, Saleh managed to hold his post, winning 77 percent of the vote. Two years later, Yemen held elections for 20 governorships; this was the first elections of this kind as, in the past, the president had appointed these positions. This was the first sign of oppositional struggle against Saleh as opposition parties refused to participate and Islah and the Socialists joined into an opposition coalition called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). With the newly formed coalition the JMP was able to pressure Saleh's GPC into postponing the 2009 elections to give both sides the time to come together for a national

dialogue. Tension only increased two years later when, in 2010, Saleh looked ready to ignore the JMP demands for dialogue and electoral reforms and seemed committed to grooming his son, Ahmed, as his successor with no more attention paid to increasing transparency or government accountability.

In addition to the delayed elections and the growing discontent of the JMP, Yemen is also a corrupt country with severe restrictions on individual freedoms. According to Transparency International, Yemen was ranked 156 of 176 countries surveyed in 2012. Most media is government-owned or run by another political party and articles within the Press and Publications Law banned direct criticism of Yemen's head of state or the publication of any material that could foment dissent and division.

In the first half of 2011, the battle over freedom of the press was one front of the Arab Spring. Yemeni journalists pushed back against laws and worked to cover the uprisings from the peoples' perspectives. The Yemeni Journalist Syndicate and the Center for the Rehabilitation and Protection of Freedom of the Press estimated nearly 500 cases of government harassment against local journalists.³ Tawakkol Karman's January arrest was one such incident and inspired a mass protest against her detention. This incident will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. She was released into her family's care, who pledged she would stay out of trouble; however, she went on to help lead a movement that toppled Saleh and became the most recognizable face in Yemen to the international crowd. While the Arab Spring, sparked by the self-immolation of Muhamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian

³ "Yemen," Freedom House, last modified 2015, accessed November 30, 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/yemen?gclid=COSTgvmZ0MICFYgsjgodPqgAvA#.VJMahCd9TZs>.

vegetable vendor, caught Arab leaders, international foreign policymakers and journalists by surprise, the fact that the people were disenchanted by their country politics and desperate for change surprised no one. Karman was one of those millions who marched in the streets but with one major difference: she had been in the streets long before the masses were joining her.

1.4. Overview of the media's coverage

While it provided global recognition to a deserving and courageous Yemeni activist and gave Karman an international platform for her voice, and all her causes, it was for a constructed triumph – one the Nobel Peace Prize wanted her to have accomplished not one that she had been pursuing at the time. Karman and her peers throughout the Arabic press appreciated the spotlight and used it to further their agenda, mostly in support of Karman's efforts, but the Western press molded Karman's success into a headline of women's empowerment only. Awarding Karman the Nobel Peace Prize was an achievement but it did not affect the current realities of women's rights in the Arab World.

Few Western papers had full-time Sanaa-based correspondents prior to the people's revolution, which began in January 2011. The Western press sent foreign correspondents or international experts to cover the news and repeated the Nobel Committee's praise that Karman had been working for women's rights. They hailed her as an individual committed to improving conditions for women. They minimized, misrepresented or neglected to mention, her affiliation with and membership to Islah. Some Western freelancers based in Yemen were able to write in English for the local press and also sold articles to foreign-

based publications so occasionally the two stories overlapped although editing often prioritized different parts of the same story.

In Western, predominantly English-language publications, Karman was heralded as the latest example of an empowered Muslim woman, fighting the cultural norms and gender oppression of her society. Prior to Karman, the press had sought out other individual women to profile and use as examples of a whole society – think the death of Neda Agha-Solhan in 2009 Iran; founding member of Egypt’s April 6 movement Asmaa Mahfouz or Manal al-Sharif who challenged the female ban on driving in Saudi Arabia.

The stories looked at her through a gendered lens, as if the only fight Arab women took part in was one focused on their gender. She was labeled a gender activist with notable mentions of the other hats she wears – journalist, opposition leader, Islamist party member, transparency and anti-corruption activist. How did the Arab press recognize Karman? This research finds that Arabic media generally responded to Tawakkol Karman’s Nobel Peace Prize positively, but did so as she represented a fight against oppression not as a symbol for women’s equality. Karman was a strong activist first – that she was a woman was interesting but not the main story.

Findings show that neither the English media nor the Arabic media appear interested in viewing how the other reports news. This was a chance for intersecting narratives but neither seized it. This is especially detrimental for English media, who barely reported how Karman was discussed in her country and in the context of her struggle, instead choosing to prop her up for the vision of women they thought their readers would

be most interested in. Karman claimed her win as a victory for the youth of Yemen, for the Arab Spring, for the opposition party and for those fighting against oppression. By the time she started speaking, the West was no longer listening to her – they had already defined her as the symbol of women’s liberation they understood her to be.

If politicians, humanitarian aid workers, journalists and gender academics wish to really get their “feet wet” over the battle for women’s empowerment in the Middle East, it must not be grounded in American female liberation language from the 1970s but in a vibrant discourse already happening in Arabic – one about freedoms from oppression not only for expression. It’s not that Karman should not have won the Nobel Peace Prize, it’s that Karman received the prize for a “wrong hat”. Until the Western press understands the gender battlefield through Karman’s perspective they can write about her as much as they want but they won’t be forwarding either her cause or their own.

In Yemen, Tawakkol Karman had been making and writing headlines for years – sometimes as a gender activist but more recently as an opposition leader during Yemen’s chapter of the Arab Spring. In the Arabic press, Karman wears many hats – gender activist, journalist, opposition leader, Islamist opposition leader, good politician, bad politician. In English, Karman was seen to wear only one – even when she translated her star power into an international speaking tour, the West was no longer listening to her message. They were only focused on her gender.

The Arab press, however, and Karman herself to an extent, interpreted the Nobel Peace Prize differently. In Yemen, Karman, was already a household name: a prominent

member of their fourth estate, a “thorn in the side”⁴ of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and a leading figure within a key Islamist opposition party. According to the Arab mass media, her Nobel Peace Prize was not about women but social justice and support for the revolution. Karman’s win in the Arab media was portrayed less as a victory for women’s rights, and more as support for Karman’s cause against Saleh, and the desire of the “Arab Spring” to overthrow oppression and occupation. The Nobel Prize, according to the Arab media, symbolized the West’s acceptance of this struggle against such oppression, against notorious rulers often viewed as pawns of the Western powers. Meanwhile, in the West, she was hailed as an individual success story, one that had received Western funding and support for her previous projects, and a sign that gender barriers across the Middle East were eroding as the Arab Spring spread across the region.

1.5. Methodology

This paper’s approach is to use content analysis, adopting a purposive sampling selection on several newspaper articles written between January 2011, when Karman’s protests against Saleh intersected with the regional spread of the revolutions, and February 2012, when he stepped down. This timeframe allows an analysis of Karman before she was thrust into the Western spotlight. It also limits the scope of the research so that the analysis of the two main questions can be seen in context of a specific moment in Middle East history. While bookended nicely by global events the dates were selected by me and based on preliminary research conducted mostly in English. I then realized that to fully

⁴ Tom Finn, “Tawakul Karman, Yemeni activist, and thorn in the side of Saleh,” *The Guardian*, March 26, 2011, accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/25/tawakul-karman-yemeni-activist-saleh>.

understand the Arab media, looking earlier than 2011 would be useful as many important pieces about Karman were written before she took to the global stage.

It purposefully stops with Saleh's resignation as the next chapter of Yemen's political history, in which Karman is actively participating, is still being written. Initially conceived as a study of Arabic-language only, the study has been expanded to include local Yemeni publications in English after initial research showed it was not language but culture and publication location that had adopted this view of Karman.

By using data that is publicly available, this project limits the risk of harm to research subjects as no one was directly consulted or investigated for this research. While one limitation of using purposive sampling is that the researcher risks only selecting information they know and that there is a danger in overlooking unknown pieces of information, I feel confident that this research was able to look at Karman from several angles in the press. However, one limitation of using print media and articles found online is that it represents a much larger element of Western press than Yemeni articles due to the fact that many Yemeni publications do not have online archives.

The research was conducted primarily over the Internet. The research began with the creation of a list of Yemeni and Arab newspapers. The researcher then explored which of these newspapers were still operational during the research period and which had access to archives online. A trip to Yemen to look at hard copy newspapers was not possible. In Arabic, I searched for Tawakkol Karman as her name only has one way of spelling in Arabic. Other search terms involved key dates such as her arrest, her protests, the Nobel

Peace Prize Committee's announcement of the winners, and the award ceremony. Often a key date led to several articles in different sources. Many websites also had suggested or related links so the researcher was able to increase the articles organically as well. All translations in the following chapters are the authors; I am not trained in translations but am confident the meaning has remained intact.

In English, I developed a key list of Western publications which conduct their own ground reporting in Yemen and the Middle East, including the major wire services. Key dates were the same as in the Arabic searches although I usually searched just with her last name "Karman" and the word "Yemen*" or "Nobel Peace Prize" as there is no standardized way of spelling Tawakkol in English. I chose the spelling "Tawakkol" as that is the way the Nobel Peace Prize committee spells it on their site and tried to remain consistent throughout the research period.

When reading the research discussed in following chapters it is important to remember that this is not a biography of Karman nor is it seeking to establish the best way to cover activists during times of revolution or conflict. It is an analysis of media to probe at a larger discussion on what role the media can play in aiding or shaping the images of activists in conflict zones. There is much work to be done in Yemen on the issue of gender rights. Currently, there are two lively debates happening on the question of if, and how, women should be present in the post "Arab Spring" Middle East. One is in English and the other in Arabic. This study will explore both in Chapter Two. If the international community is serious about engaging in a discourse over gender roles in the wake of the Arab Spring, it is imperative that the research crosses language borders.

Later chapters have taken on slightly different methodologies, dependent on time and need. A third chapter examines Karman's own quotes and writings. For a journalist it was hard to find a body of her work, which was not the expectation as I had originally thought to look for her articles in the same content analysis format as earlier chapters. She has an active Twitter and Facebook account, and occasionally wrote opinion pieces but I was unable to access any stories she wrote before her work on the revolution began.

That I did not, and could not, travel to Yemen and therefore had to use what media was available online or in Western archives made access challenging and limited my source material. It made researching the chapter on Arabic media harder as many of those websites do not record past press the way Western sites do. Another limitation is that this is not a comprehensive study – I have analyzed a slice of the media's representation of Karman during 2011 and early 2012 in hopes of showing how media's representation of a public figure is often more how the media chooses to display them than how they package themselves. Occasionally, in the course of my research I came across an article outside of this time frame but which contained relevant information. This was especially the case as I looked into the Arabic media, which I did after the Western media.

The majority of Yemenis hear their news and analysis from television. Many Yemenis are illiterate and so newspapers are not the primary source of global news. A follow-up study using television data would be interesting but it would take many more research tools than were available for the duration of this course of research. Despite this, there were enough articles online to be able to draw conclusions about how different cultures reported on Tawakkol Karman.

I have also supplemented official news articles and features with elements from social media, which I have not researched to the same exacting degrees. Weaving in an occasional blog or Tweet is not to be used as primary evidence but to support arguments I am making about the traditional media. A lot has been said about the role of social media during the Arab Spring but it was not my intention to give it equal status in this study; nor, did I think it useful to ignore it entirely.

Originally this project was conceived, and the thesis proposal approved, in 2013. It had only been a year since Karman had rocketed to international fame and Yemen was in the midst of a transition. As this project took longer to complete than expected, the history of Yemen did not sit still or neatly play out and, in 2015, Yemen remains embroiled in a violent conflict over the future of the state. An additional chapter was added to the thesis, out of scope of the original methodology, as I produced a chapter aimed at understanding Karman's relationship with the media, her country, and the international stage in 2015. This chapter is not an exhaustive summary of articles but serves as an important final note in an analysis of a living political activist who is still very much in the headlines and commanding a certain degree of power over some individuals in her country.

1.6. Limitations of the study

It is important to note that although this thesis examined media in both English and Arabic, the research project itself is aimed at contributing to a dialogue on women's rights in the Middle East that is happening in English academic and activist circles. The review of the literature is based on primarily English texts and this is the field in which the author has studied. The goal of this project is not to be a definitive source on media coverage but

rather to present the moment of Tawakkol Karman's rise to international fame from many perspectives to raise questions about how the media culturally covers women and what that has done to the debate on women's rights after the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012.

The sources used are from print media that were accessible from websites, archives and blogs – namely articles that were searchable online in English or Arabic from roughly a period of 2013-2015. As a purposive content analysis piece these sources were picked for the material they could present in a comparative manner. While the author was aware of the challenges of literacy facing the Yemeni public, especially the women of Yemen, the articles were not selected because they were seen to be more representative of the debate. No articles found were purposefully ignored although I do not claim to have been able to find every article on Karman ever published.

1.7. Thesis outline

In Chapter Two, a comprehensive literature review will focus on literature of the representations of women in politics and in the media across the Middle East and the challenges facing women in the region. The literature review will explore what research has been done on the women of Yemen, in particular, and the women of the Middle East during the GAD (Gender and Development) period of gender activism. While the focus is on how women are researched and documented in the Middle East, there will also be an exploration of the less documented field of women, media, and culture in the Middle East. The paper will aim to contribute to this body of gender research in the Middle East by using newspapers and articles as primary source material.

Chapter Three will examine the coverage of Tawakkol Karman's Nobel Peace Prize in the Arabic media. Sources are limited to the major Arabic daily and weekly newspapers that have online website archives – this is one of the limitations of the research's sources as the researcher was unable to travel to Yemen to peruse archives on paper. However, the research looks at government and independent sources, including religious papers and secular publications so there remains a range of voices that came out of Yemen concerning this issue. It also looks at a few, but certainly not all, Arabic language regional sources, such as the Arabic BBC and Al-Jazeera, which provide a direct comparison with their English language counterparts). This chapter is in no way comprehensive of all articles written but will provide context and evidence that Karman was hailed for her work, as an activist first and a woman second, if at all – and that many papers treated her as part of the political landscape of Yemen and saw this either as another achievement or as part of her partisan politics from before.

Chapter Four presents research on Karman found in online major English language papers, primarily from the United States and the United Kingdom. This chapter will argue that English papers were focused on presenting Karman as a hero of women's rights in the Middle East. Many papers noted her role in the opposition of Yemen during the Arab Spring but few sought to report her as a multi-dimensional figure or to publish stories that contextualized her activity from 2011. Both chapters three and four make use social media to emphasize or highlight points but those should not be seen as the foci of these chapters.

Chapter Five is a brief account of Tawakkol Karman in her own words. For a journalist, articles of hers are hard to come by online. It appears the title of journalist was

on Karman adopted for herself to help her network and connect with likeminded people in Yemen and internationally. A journalist to Karman appears to be someone who works in the media and she uses this term loosely. This profile instead looks at quotes of hers in articles as well as some social media information. It becomes clear that Karman sees herself as a revolutionary and as one of Yemen's opposition youth. She is a woman, and she acknowledges that women should have a strong place in society. However, she avoids making the kinds of specific gender policy demands that other gender activists usually employ and does not speak using the discourse most gender activists use. She is a female activist and understands that both those things support each other and help give her a platform on which she speaks but she is not primarily a gender activist. On the specific issues of what kind of gender reforms are needed in Yemen, she is much like her political party, Islah – vague on details and big on party headlines.

Chapter Six was an unplanned addition that came about after this research project was delayed by a few years. In 2015, the world is over four years past Karman's win in Oslo and it benefited this project to take a brief glimpse into how Karman has utilized her global fame in the years following her award.

Chapter Seven concludes with a brief analysis of what chapters three, four and five argued to show that while Karman earned her place on the national stage and deserved international recognition for her work as an activist in Yemen, during the Arab Spring and for years before, it was a disservice to make the reward contingent on her gender alone. This is not how Karman wants herself to be defined; this is not the role for which she was known in her community (indeed there are some serious, scholarly, gender theorists and

activists working in Yemen at the same time who could arguably be said to have achieved peacefully more gender goals than Karman during this time.). Indeed, a voice on the national stage is priceless and Karman benefitted from this spotlight. However, the case of Tawakkol Karman shows that there remains a bridge on how different culture understood, processed and consumed the news coming out of the Arab World in 2011-12. Instead of media bringing narratives together, this paper argues that papers wrote for their audiences first and for accuracy and comprehensiveness second.

1.8. Conclusion

It is the hope that this paper will add a perspective to the ongoing debate over the role of Arab women in politics. Since the Arab Spring, the role of women in public and politics of the Middle East has been hotly debated and it is this research's intention to focus on one woman in two different medias to focus on the language being used to mark and highlight their accomplishments.

Did Karman's win help challenge traditional gender notions of Yemeni women in politics? In framing Karman as revolutionary hero, not a gender activist, the Arab media focused on different aspects of Karman than the western press. I argue that her win was seen less as a victory for women's rights, and more as support for Karman's cause against Saleh, and the desire of the "Arab Spring" to overthrow oppression and occupation. The Nobel Prize, according to the Arab media, symbolized the West's acceptance of this struggle against such oppression, against notorious rulers often viewed as pawns of the Western powers. It did not help to bring foster understanding between the English and the Arabic debates on women in politics as the Western press have claimed. The media

coverage of Karman cemented positions both media communities held about women and politics in the Middle East without exploring new perspectives.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview

To say there is gender inequality in Yemeni society is an understatement. It consistently ranks at the bottom of gender equality indexes and overall quality of life surveys. In terms of access to education, healthcare, and politics, the women of Yemen are blocked or denied entrance. The 2005 Arab Development Report paints a bleak picture of the status of the average Yemeni woman.⁵ Yemeni women have the highest rate of illiteracy in the region and the highest rate of mortality surrounding childbirth. There is no minimum age for marriage with some girls married off at the age of ten or eleven. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2006 Multiple Indicator Cluster, nearly 52 percent of Yemeni girls marry before the age of 18. In 2011, Yemen placed near the bottom of most global equality rankings such from World Bank or United Nations reports. For example, Yemen came in fifth from the bottom – ranking above Sudan, Djibouti, Mauritania, and Somalia – on maternal mortality rate with just under 600 women for every 100,000 dying from labor and ranked absolute bottom on percentage of births attended by skilled personnel – about 25 percent in a period 1993-2000.⁶

⁵ *The Arab Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2006), accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2005e.pdf>.

⁶ *The Arab Development Report 2005*, 70.

In 2010, UNICEF, found that Yemen ranked last in the Gender Gap Index, not just in the region but also out of all countries in the study.⁷ Since unification, the rights of women in Yemen have not seriously improved nor have women seen much legislative or cultural progress since the uprisings in 2011. Yemen's constitution is based on Sharia'a (Islamic Law), which overrules any previous articles on equality. A woman's testimony is worth half of a man's in court; in cases of adultery, a woman's testimony is not accepted at all. In the event of divorce, women are only granted custody of boys until the age of nine and girls until the age of 12. There is no law against domestic violence or prohibiting the act of female genital mutilation (FGM). In terms of women and politics, women can vote but are excluded from many other political and social rights, which remain heavily monitored by tribes, especially outside major urban areas. On the eve of the Arab Spring, there was only one woman, of 301, in the lower house of parliament and two in the upper house, of 111.⁸

There are several women's rights activists operating in Yemen. One of the challenges is that there are many ways to envision gender rights, some draw inspiration from Islam while others pursue rights similar to those stated in documents from the United Nations, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Like many Yemenis, most women in Yemen will point out that Yemen's history is filled with strong, leading women including Bilqis, Queen of Sheba and Queen Arwa of the Islamic capital of

⁷ "Yemen Gender Equality Profile," UNICEF, last modified 2011, accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Yemen-Gender-Eqaulity-Profile-2011.pdf>.

⁸ UNICEF. "Yemen Gender Equality Profile," 5.

Jibla. Within Yemen's modern history, women, and men, actually lived under two separate laws for most of the twentieth century until unification in 1990 with the society living in South Yemen experiencing, for a time, greater levels of equality than many other neighboring Arab societies.

This literature review aims to provide context and highlight earlier debates in two key areas that pertain to Tawakkol Karman representation in the media. While many in the West saw Karman's Nobel Peace Prize as the recognition of a woman's individual achievement, it is important to look at Karman in the greater societal context. The chapter begins with a brief history of modern Yemen with a focus on gender relations within the country especially how women have pushed for greater rights since the unification of 1990. It also introduces some of the other prominent women working in Yemen at the time of Karman's jump to the international stage. I will then examine a broader discussion of women's rights in the Arab World, with specific focus on the debate between religious and secular activists, and how these arguments collided with other calls for social justice during the first year of the Arab Spring.

2.2. Women in Yemen

The history of modern Yemen begins with a nation divided by opposing foreign occupiers. Britain settled Aden as a rest stop for their ships en route to India. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1839, the port of Aden's popularity and wealth increased. To avoid a lingering power struggle over the region, the British and the Ottomans agreed to split Yemen in 1904 but neither empire looked to establish much beyond the coastline, allowing internal Yemeni power struggles to ensue and no dominant party controlled the

entirety of the region. After the Ottoman collapse, the British maintained a presence in Yemen and worked to consolidate power, especially in the face of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's push to end European colonial rule in the Middle East. Tensions increased throughout the 1960s and, with the closure of the Suez Canal in 1967, the British lost their reason to stay and started to remove their colonial presence. This led the way to the establishment of North and South Yemen, two countries that set up radically different governments to lead the Yemeni people until unification in 1990.

The Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) united on May 22, 1990 to bring together land that had been divided, in numerous ways since the 19th century when the Ottomans and the British first starting taking parts for their own empires. Unification was rocky and the young nation descended into civil war in 1994, which ended "with the victory of the close circle of tribal, sectarian and military groups led by Ali Abdallah Saleh, who had ruled North Yemen since 1978."⁹

North Yemen was ruled as a tribal-military polity while South Yemen, following independence from the British in 1967, established a Marxist regime. Politics in Yemen leading up to the Arab Spring were dominated by President Ali Abdullah Saleh's General People's Congress although political allegiances were tense and the political layout of the country since 1990 remained unstable.

⁹ Elham Manea. "Yemen," in *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*, ed. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (Lanham, Maryland: Freedom House, 2010), 545.

The unification of North and South Yemen brought all Yemeni women under the same laws and the southern women saw many of the freedoms they had enjoyed under the Marxist government curtailed as a codification of family law provided a conservative and patriarchal interpretation of gender rights.¹⁰ The original draft of the 1990 unification constitution declared: “All citizens are equal before the law, and they are equal in public rights and duties, and there is no discrimination between them on the basis of sex, origin, language, profession, social position, or faith.” However, this clause was eventually replaced in 1994 with shorter, more ambiguous language that eliminated the text specifying the unconstitutionality of discrimination, and Article 41 now simply states: “All citizens are equal in public rights and duties.”

In the newly revised constitution, Article 3 of the 1994 constitution identifies Sharia’a as the source of all legislation. And Article 31 appears to supersede the stated equality language, in practice, as it defines women as “sisters of men” and gives them only the rights provided to them under Sharia’a. Under Sharia’a, women’s testimony in court is not equal to a man’s testimony and is void in any case related to adultery. Under the current law, women have equal access to all occupations but according to Elham Manea, in practice, most women must get approval from male relatives before seeking work outside the home and, then, at best, can only work in professions that are deemed “appropriate” for women – such as teachers or nurses.

¹⁰ Manea, “Yemen,” 546.

Most of the analysis on women's roles in the public sphere of Yemen, specifically in politics, is outdated and was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s (Carapico 1993, Swagman 1988, Dunbar 1992). While there has always been limited political participation in Yemen from women, it has not been specifically prohibited as in many of the neighboring Gulf States. Women in Yemen were the first women in the Gulf to gain the right to vote in 1967. However, socio-economic issues, primarily access to education, lack of literacy skills and a deficit in adequate healthcare, have blocked women from entering the public sphere. Culturally, religion, tribal culture and historical gender separation also prevent women from feeling as comfortable in politics as their male counterparts. Yadav points out that while women are discussed at length in politics, they are rarely the ones involved in the conversation and this is a trend across party lines.¹¹

In many ways, Saleh's victory was a balancing act between old tribal allegiances and the increased attention to Islamist parties. President Saleh's victory "depended in part on the support of the Islamist party Islah and the Hashid tribal confederation. Both of these factions were hostile toward women's rights, and as a result, the 1991 constitution was modified to eliminate anti-discrimination provisions."¹² But by 2000, the honeymoon between Saleh's tribal coalition and the Islamists was over and the 2000 elections became a battle between the government and the opposition, which Islah had now not only joined but had become a leading voice. Both sides fought to reach the average Yemeni, with the

¹¹ Stacey Philbrick Yadav. "Does a Vote Equal a Voice? Women in Yemen," *Middle East Report*, no. 252, (Fall 2009): 42.

¹² Manea, "Yemen," 546.

government ultimately winning after implementing a major campaign that delivered public services, such as electricity and cleaning crews.¹³

While many reports say women are left out entirely from Yemeni politics, the opposite is true. Political parties pay close attention to using women in politics, especially as voters, but have shown little interest in empowering women to be decision makers in politics. Most parties have formulated women's branches that do not have as much access to the rest of the branches of the party. In the 2000s, "the Islamist party Islah undertook internal changes that led to the first election of women to its higher decision-making bodies."¹⁴ In past elections, more women have voted for Islah than for any other party in Yemen even though most officials within the party still reject the idea that women could actually run for office.¹⁵ And the GPC has been known to force women drop out of a race if their victory is not assured before election day. Indeed, the stance of most Yemeni parties is so anti-women that the majority of women who run for office do so as independents.¹⁶ Freedom House estimates that women comprise only two percent of the upper level of political party posts.

On the eve of the next elections, held in 2006, Freedom House gave a summary of the political situation as it related to Yemeni women: "Yemeni women do not have access to most of their economic, social, and cultural rights and still face many challenges in

¹³ Wedeen, Lisa. "Seeing like a citizen, acting like a state: exemplary events in unified Yemen," in *Politics of the Modern Arab World*, ed. Laleh Khalili (New York: Routledge, 2009), 84.

¹⁴ Yadav. "Does a Vote Equal a Voice? Women in Yemen," 43.

¹⁵ Manea, "Yemen," 546.

¹⁶ Yadav. "Does a Vote Equal a Voice? Women in Yemen," 42.

exercising their full political and civil rights. Women are vastly underrepresented in the government and the labor field, and only 8.2 percent of women report paid employment.”¹⁷

In 2006, local council elections saw 131 women running alongside 28,498 men for 7,000 seats. Thirty-seven women won seats and 33 of those were candidates from Saleh’s ruling GPC.¹⁸ That same year one woman was elected to the 301-seat House of Representatives in Sanaa and two women, of 111 places, sat on the Consultative Council. Five percent of Yemeni women say they are members of political parties compared to nearly 47 percent of men, according to a 2010 IFES survey.¹⁹

While, collectively, women were not able to gain much political exposure, several individual women made in-roads. A Yemen Polling Center report documents a few women who gained access to Yemen’s political sphere in the twenty-first century:

“In 2001 Waheeba Farea was made the first woman to hold a cabinet post as Minister of State for Human Rights Affairs. Later in 2003 the Ministry of Human Rights was established with Amat Al Alim Al Soswa as its first minister. The ministry remained in the hands of a female minister with Khadija Al Haysami and Huda Al Ban filling the post consecutively. In 2007 Amat Al Razaq Ali Humad was made Minister of Social Affairs. In parliament, only one woman was successful in the 2003 elections.”²⁰

A campaign to codify a 30 percent parliamentary gender quota has been underway since 2001.²¹ It was started by the Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF), a local Yemeni NGO, and other Yemeni leaders helped organize a national campaign. By 2004,

¹⁷ Freedom House, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa – Yemen*, 14 October 2005, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/47387b712f.html>.

¹⁸ Manea, “Yemen,” 564.

¹⁹ (<http://www.ifes.org/Content/Publications/Papers/2010/Focus-on-Yemen-Civic-and-Political-Participation-Topic-Brief.aspx> IFES 2010)

²⁰ (YPC 2014, 12)

²¹ Freedom House, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa – Yemen*.

the Women's National Committee had adopted the quota as a major issue but nothing has progressed on this front and I found no evidence of Karman actively pursuing this issue or commenting on it publicly.

Enter Tawakkol Karman – a young Yemeni woman, raised by educated parents in a family of politicians and liberals. Tawakkol Karman was 16 when Yemen united; she had spent her childhood living in the only Marxist regime in the Arab World where men and women lived in a relative degree of freedom compared to their Gulf neighbors. This foundation must have had a huge impact on how she would come to envision her ideal Yemeni society although no interviews seem to ask her to describe either her childhood or the evolution of her beliefs an education. Karman left Taiz for the capital Sanaa, for university where she studied politics. She became a journalist and later formed an organization advocating for press freedoms and against government corruption. She was physically blocked when attempting to cover a political opposition strike in November 2008.²² The previous year her NGO had applied for a license to publish a newspaper and the application was rejected.

That she sees herself as a champion of gender equality and believes that women have a place in politics, in media, in public is clear. That she sees Islam as integral to Yemen's future and her personal faith is clear from her membership in Islah, Yemen's largest opposition Islamist party. However, she has held her political beliefs close to her chest, choosing to publicly voice concerns over corruption, transparency and accountability

²² Manea, "Yemen," 566.

more than calling for gender reforms or Islamist politics. That Islah as a political party lacks a clear platform does not help.

In 2010, Karman’s NGO received USD\$55,000, “to promote the use of new media to document human rights violations. WJWC will train 20 activists to use new media to document human rights violations, help activists post their own videos and blogs on its website, and produce a documentary film on the exceptional court for journalists and a television program on freedom of expression in Yemen.”²³ While this NED grant did not specifically highlight development for women, at least four other NED grants, all over USD\$20,000 were given in the same year to NGO specifically targeting women’s access to rights in the country.²⁴ This shows that there were several interested parties actively committed to gender justice in the country and had made gender their primary concern. In 2010, Karman’s primary cause was press freedom, something important but it shows gender was not her main target.

At the time of her Nobel acceptance, Karman was not the most famous gender activist in the Middle East, or even in Yemen. For those who knew her, she was seen as part of the fabric of the Yemen’s political opposition. Her views on gender in the Middle East, like the views of Islah – the Islamist party to which she remains affiliated – remain cloudy. With all the outpouring of media attention on Karman, one could be mistaken for believing that Tawakkol Karman was the first woman to establish herself as an active

²³ 2010 NED Annual Report. Online.

²⁴ The groups were: Madar Legal Foundation, \$24,000; Yemen Foundation for Social Studies, \$28,300; Aswan Center for Research and Study, \$26,200; Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation, \$20,000. Source: NED, 2010 Annual Report.

member of Yemen's civil society. Indeed, most articles in both English and Arabic neglected to put give her context in the women's sphere. But, while it is true, that the majority of women remain marginalized, under-educated and discriminated against in Yemen, a dedicated core had been carving out a space for women, gender equality and citizenship discourse since unification. It was in this background that Karman was able to find space to push for her own causes.

Tawakkol Karman is an extraordinary exception, not the rule, when it comes to women in Yemen. She should be praised for her accomplishments but it should not be confused as a vanguard to the next generation of women leaders. A self-described journalist, member of Yemen's youth, and political activist, she has been labeled "mother of the revolution" and "a thorn in the side" of Saleh and was a fixture upon Yemen's political stage for several years prior to the Arab Spring. Born in 1976 to a political, liberal, and educated family from outside of Sanaa, she had the encouragement and support from male relatives to enter the public sphere from a young age. While she will speak out for women when prompted, it is rarely her first objective in interviews or speeches as will be detailed in following chapters. She is not the only woman activist in Yemen – arguably there were more passionate women's rights activists operating away from the international spotlight in the country in 2011 – but, for the majority of women, Yemen is a difficult place to live and does not provide adequate gender support in either the law or the culture.

2.3. Woman, Islam, and the Arab Spring

Gender, in the eyes of the West, tends to be a secular fight. In the Middle East more scholars are engaging gender within the context of Islamic scholarship and theory. Barlas

argues that in order to empower Muslim women, scholars must first recognize the ingrained cultural patriarchy surrounding Islam and works to reread the Quran in a more egalitarian light. (Barlas 2002). Leila Ahmed goes even further by arguing that it is not only traditional Arab cultures but also the legacy of European colonialism that has helped enshrine the gender imbalance across the Middle East. (Ahmed 1992).

In 2011, there were two dominant types of women's activism in the Middle East – liberal or secular women's rights and Islamic women's right. There was also a debate known as Islamic feminism which is used occasionally interchangeably with the latter and also discussed as a different concept depending on the audience. The first term I employ to refer to activists who refer to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other conventions and treaties – especially the Convention on the Elimination on All Form of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – and find legitimacy through these codified documents and certain strands of Western philosophical thought. While they believe rights should be granted to those regardless of religion, to be a secular women's rights activist does not imply one is areligious.

South Yemen acceded to the terms of CEDAW in 1984, although withholding certain reservations on the interpretation of the convention. When North and South Yemen united, technically the treaties signed were supposed to be upheld by the united Yemen but UNICEF and other UN agencies have expressed a need for clarification and continually push for greater clarity on the status and tools for implementation of CEDAW in country.²⁵

²⁵ UNICEF. "Yemen Gender Equality Profile."

In recent years, some women's rights activists in the Middle East have sought to push for gender reforms through the lens of children's rights, as they believe it to be a less controversial path. Yemen ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, and subsequent optional protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, all with no reservation.²⁶ Although the government has not made greater protection for Yemeni children a priority either before or after the uprising.

The second type of women's activism in the region draws its inspiration from Islam and views women's rights in the context of social justice, not equality as most of the individually-focused international documents highlight. Islamic women's rights activism is focused on advancing women's status through Islam and can be male or female as many scholars have worked to refute the notion that feminism is a "western" and "anti-Islamic" term (Ezzar 2007). These two groups of women's rights activists differ not only in their vision of a "perfect" society, but in the methods they wish to employ, their frames of reference and the partners they seek out (Bahi 2011). Many scholars have already documented the divide between secular and Islamist reformists, taking different stances on if the two can be reconciled or which would be most effective for the Middle East (See Leila Ahmed, Margot Badran, Mulki al-Sharmani among others).

Islamic women's activists remain wary of words that have become loaded, either with association of colonialism, neo-imperial interference, perceived threats to Islam or

²⁶ UNICEF. "Yemen Gender Equality Profile."

Arab cultures and indigenous traditions. The word many Islamic women activists avoid is “equality” instead choosing to promote “equity” or “complementary”. Feminism and gender are also met with skepticism, especially as gender has no real Arab counterpart and many NGOs or debates choose to translate gender phonetically, helping to reinforce the “foreign” nature of the word.

According to Badran, the term “Islamic Feminism” started gaining popularity in the 1990s. Badran says that the roots of the term were more popular, early on, in Iranian academic literature, especially from Afsaneh Najmabadi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini.²⁷ Saudi academic Mai Yamani used it in her book, *Feminism and Islam*, in 1996.

Even within the field there is a debate over what exactly constitutes Islamic feminism. Badran states: “Some Muslim women...describe the articulation and advocacy of a Qu’ran mandate gender equality and social justice as Islamic feminism. Others, however, do not call this Islamic feminism, but describe it as a woman-centered rereading of the Qur’an and other religious texts by scholar-activists.”²⁸

And while the definition remains up for debate, Badran goes on to explain there are several ways activists have sought to integrate Islam into a gender debate:

“Thus a priority of Islamic feminism is to go straight to Islam’s fundamental text, the Qur’an. However, while some women center their attention on interpretation of the Qur’an (Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan, and Saudi Arabia Fatima Naseef), others scrutinize formulations of Shari-backed laws (Lebanese Aziza al-Hibri, Pakistani Shaheen Sardar Ali), while yet others reexamine the Hadith (Moroccan Fatima Mernissi, Turkish Hidayet Tuksal).”²⁹

²⁷ Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 244

²⁸ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, ”244.

²⁹ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, ” 248.

Dominant Western views of women and Islam are marked by stereotypes such as the view that Islamist women “reject” feminism.³⁰ There is ample evidence to say otherwise; however it is clear the Islamist feminism values gender justice over the Western notion of gender equality. Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, writing in the foreword to the *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women*, mentions the risk academic take when discussing certain issues related to gender in the Middle East. Alsoswa, a Yemeni journalist and member of the Yemeni Socialist Party writes: “An Arab intellectual who today brings ‘Western’ ideas of gender equality into such polarized arenas faces outright dismissal.”³¹ On the reverse, many secular women’s rights activists refuse to recognize that Islamist movements have anything positive to contribute to this debate.³²

Through research, mostly in Jordan, Egypt and Morocco, Jorgen attempts to paint a picture of the average Islamic woman activist: educated (often times in the West), well-traveled and plugged into international networks. These women are aware of the debates occurring in the West, at UN conferences, and over the Internet yet they see much of these debates as colonially-charged and secular. The legitimacy derived from international treaties such as CEDAW do not appeal to them as they see them as Western and not in harmony with their understanding of Islam. These Islamist women activists look to Islam and their traditions to protect the rights to which they believe women – and men – are entitled.

³⁰ Omayma Abdel-Latif and Marina Ottaway, “Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women’s Activism”, *Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Middle East Center, July 2007, 7.

³¹ Amat Al Alim Alsoswa, foreword to *The Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, by UN Development Programme (UNDP) (New York: UNDP, 2006), iii.

³² Abdel-Latif and Ottaway, “Women in Islamist Movements,” 1.

There was a revival of attention, even before the Arab Spring, on the construction of the “Muslim woman,” some of which was prompted by the debate following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when many women’s right activists also joined the calls to invade Afghanistan with the intention of “liberating” Afghan women from the Taliban rule. Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, who has researched extensively the labels applied to women in Tunisia, argues that no one is innocent from shaping the construction of the label “Muslim woman,” including other Muslim women. “The ‘Muslim woman’ as a fixed category has always been invented and produced to serve various political ends.”³³ Indeed, Margot Badran goes further and argues that the expectation of exporting one vision of women’s rights can be “threatening to national unity.”³⁴

It is important to note, too, that the terms “secular,” “Islamist,” and even “women’s rights” have remained flexible in meaning and connotation. I have sought to define these terms above as they will be used in the text and how they are currently viewed in Yemen and the Middle East but terms do not have one meaning and therefore it remains limiting to try and define such calls for women’s rights as the terms, demands and visions are constantly changing.

Within the subfield of women in Islamist politics, Karman’s strong presence is rare but more common than many would realize. Ottoway and Abdellatif, in a study focusing on

³³ Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating text, history and ideology*. (New York: Lexington Books, 2005), 173.

³⁴ Margot Badran, “From Islamic Feminism to a Muslim Holistic Feminism,” *Special Issue: Gender, Rights and Religion at the Crossroads* 42, issue 1 (January 2011): pages 78–87, accessed December 8, 2015, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/idsb.2011.42.issue-1/issuetoc>.

women members of Lebanon's Hizbullah and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, show that women are working for positions of party power and are refusing to be seen simply as "dedicated organizational foot soldiers."³⁵ Further, they argue, women are looking to have a voice in the party, not just in the women's branch of it.

Whatever their aspirations, women within Islah have made strides but have not broken in main party leadership. Yadav argues that women's success within the partisan framework of Yemen have been able to "do so at the associational level."³⁶ The most senior woman in Islah is not Karman but Amat al-Salam, head of Islah's Women's Directorate, also a professor of theology and jurisprudence at Sanaa University. While many women, from Yemen, the Arab World and the international community, wrote to support Karman or were quoted in articles, al-Salam was silent and stayed away from Karman's limelight in 2011.

While much literature has been written documenting this dichotomy of beliefs, less work has been done to reconcile the two or to add nuance to the debate. This is where I argue Karman's role as a female political activist could have really contributed. While secular women's rights activists tend to remain skeptical that women in Islamist movements have anything to contribute to the field many secularists supported Karman.³⁷ They did this by minimizing her ties to Islah not exploring them.

³⁵ Abdel-Latif and Ottaway, "Women in Islamist Movements," 1.

³⁶ Yadav. "Does a Vote Equal a Voice? Women in Yemen," 44.

³⁷ Abdel-Latif, Omayma and Ottaway, Marina "Women in Islamist Movements," 2.

Karman is at once a feminist and an Islamist – a notion that tends to confuse those outside of the Arab World (and even some in it). Former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi is an Islamist. Deceased Saudi terrorist Osama Binladen was an Islamist. To the West, Karman could not be an Islamist because she's a gender activist – to credit her with both would be to add a layer of nuance that remains lacking in Western mass media. Of course, one of the major challenges of labels is that they can rarely be applied in broad strokes. One of the reasons the West so easily labeled her a women's rights activist is because Tawakkol Karman is a woman doing extraordinary work in a country dominated by men. This fact was enough evidence for outsiders to simply assume that as a woman pushing cultural gender norms, Karman would be eager to adopt and support all associations that role comes with in the West – namely a Western-agreed definition of feminism and aims of that movement.

Traditionally, at least throughout the 20th and early 21st century, the international community has sought to enshrine women's rights in a series of international treaties, doctrines and conventions – namely CEDAW. While this framework has provided millions with a list of goals to work for, other women and men have felt excluded as the UN conventions continued to press against their cultural norms and beliefs. Muslim women have been active in the Islamic community since the days of the Prophet Muhammad, whose wife, Khadija, was the first convert to Islam, and whose daughters were early believers in the religion.

A collective Muslim voice appeared in the 1990s which sought to define and demand collective rights within an Islamic framework (Badran 2009). But some Islamist

activists are seeking to define women's rights in their own right, not taking suggestions from the international community. The Arab Spring was a prime space for this sort of debate as citizens, those political active and those less so, were faced with the prospect of crumbling authoritarian regimes and the uncertain futures that would come next. The media's role could help provide context to this debate. But, in the case of Karman, I argue that the media sought to portray her to strengthen established arguments not present new ones.

2.4. Women, the media, and the Arab Spring

The majority of recent research on women in the modern Middle East is taking place in three fields: political science, anthropology and sociology, and public health. In political science, scholars are concerned with the number of women in politics, sometimes as Islamist supporters or candidates. They look at election days, ways women have run as candidates and the success they have. In certain countries, like Iraq and Jordan, studies on gender quotas have been produced. Women are often studied as part of ethnographic studies – they are interviewed and assessed. When conducting academic literature searches of women in Yemen, the majority falls into the last category – public health.

Research on women and the media has been less academic and has been produced mostly by international nonprofits, such as Transparency International, Amnesty International. This study hopes to contribute to the academic understanding of the ways the media has aided the public's construction of the 'Muslim woman,' in the Middle East and internationally, and also seeks to challenge the current views. While women, more specifically women's lack of access to rights, are often the subject of newspaper articles

from the Middle East, this portrayal has not often been the focus of academic research. In the last ten years, the study of gender and the media has increased in the Middle East but often the research looks at the number of women working in the media not how they are being portrayed by it. According to Freedom House, women journalists in Yemen prior to the Arab Spring were not specifically targeted for harassment as a result of their gender. The number of women journalists in Yemen is small, approximately ten percent of the total number of journalists.”³⁸

The research field of media, religion and culture was initiated in the mid-1990s in order to facilitate and develop cross-disciplinary research between sociology of religion/religious studies, media and communication studies and cultural studies but a review of literature shows gender remains a neglected theme. (Hoover and Lundy 1997a) While, there is most likely agreement that notions of gender are at the “heart of culture,” the “ways in which gender is represented and interpreted in media texts and practices are becoming more complex.”³⁹ It seems the West is happy to judge Karman only by her actions as no one seems to dig deep enough to find her words pre-Arab Spring. Mia Lovheim characterizes Karman as one of those hailed “for raising their voices against military violence and dictatorship, but also against religiously informed social and political structures upholding inequality and oppression of women’s rights.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Freedom House, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa – Yemen*.

³⁹ Mia Lovheim, *Media, Religion and Gender: Key issues and new challenges*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁴⁰ Lovheim, *Media, Religion and Gender*, 3.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

There is an overwhelming amount of literature on women in the Middle East, from many angles and many fields of academia. In recent years, increasingly the trend in quantitative studies is to measure gender equality in the numbers of women in elected office, in political parties, in voting booths, in various other roles of active citizenship. These numbers are one way to display the challenges facing women in the Middle East and the accomplishments they have made in terms of accessing and achieving rights. There has even been increased attention to women in the media, often in terms of analysis on the treatment of women in the field or the challenges facing women reporters. However, there remains a lack of research on how the media aids the dialogue on women in the Middle East. This research is but one way to begin that discussion although there is an obvious need for more analysis on the way women activists, and traditional gendered causes, are published in regional or international publications.

What is less prominent is literature that looks to introduce debates to other audiences. It becomes clear in the literature that many groups are concerned or interested in the future of women in the Middle East. It is less clear that they are looking to hear what other believe and many research projects seem to “preach to the choir” and confirm beliefs already held. In the years that it took this project to be completed this gap remains but this thesis aims to draw attention to the role that media coverage can play in introducing new argument and pushing the boundaries on the current discussion on the role of women and politics in the Arab World.

2.6. Conclusion

Women's empowerment in the Middle East is a timely and popular debate and a brief overview of the subject is challenging as its being discussed in many fields from political science to anthropology/sociology to public health studies. In the last ten years, several universities across the Middle East have even seen the establishment of their own gender studies department. This chapter has presented some key debates and sought to clarify some terms that will support the arguments made in the following chapters. It has also sought to show that while coverage of women and women's issues in the Middle East is popular in Western, English press it remains under-studied in English academic circles. There is a need to examine how the media's representation of women activists and activists for gender justice contribute to the understanding of these issues.

CHAPTER THREE

KARMAN IN THE ARAB MEDIA

“The Nobel Peace Prize honor for Tawakul Karman came late, but when it arrived it came with a consensual recognition of our revolution by the free world.”⁴¹

– Naji Gazali, Yemeni journalist

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I focused on national Yemeni papers including *Al-Sahwa* (Islamist), *Al-Thawra* (Government-owned), *Al-Thawri* (Weekly Socialist Party), *Yemen Observer* (Independent), *The Yemen Times* (Independent weekly). The last two are local publications published in English. The headlines and articles found in those more closely aligned with their Arabic counterparts than with the international press. I also looked at pan-Arab outlets such as BBC Arabic, Al Jazeera, al-Ahram, and Al-Hayat. I end with some brief excerpts of bloggers and Twitter users in Arabic whose social media presence was reported on in other media publications. A major limitation of conducting this chapter was that the Arab press’ presence online is not as thorough as the Western media. In order for a comprehensive list of Karman’s mentions in the news searching the physical archives would be necessary. However, I believe that enough of a pattern emerges to support the thesis.

While Tawakkol Karman became a media presence in both Arab and Western press, one of the major differences was when she made headlines. In Western media, Karman was profiled heavily, in an apparent snowball effect after one or two international reporters

⁴¹ Naji Gazali, “February 21: A Day of Change,” *The Yemen Times*, February 23 2012, accessed June 2 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1549/readersviews/453/February-21-a-day-of-change.htm>.

traveled to Sanaa looking for hooks and features on the emerging Arab Spring. Karman's presence in Yemeni and Arab media leading up to the announcement of her Nobel Peace Prize was largely kept to short news pieces – those dealing with her arrest or short quotes in support of the opposition. The Arab and Yemeni press did not highlight her work in any way except to use her as a voice from the opposition while Western features from February to October 2011 were largely focused on her role as an individual leader of the opposition. There was a spike in Western attention in October, following the announcement, and then again in December, when Karman traveled to Oslo and then started campaigning for Yemen on an international stage. She traveled around Europe and the United States, using her prominence as a Nobel Laureate to gain an audience for the youth back in Yemen.

In the Yemeni and Arab press, there was also a spike in new coverage in October and December but then Karman remained a lasting figure in news articles on the Yemeni conflict. When the president spoke, Karman was lifted into a position to speak against him and be quoted. It became clear that the original parameters of this study (January 2011 – February 2012) were less ideal when monitoring the Yemeni and Arab press than when monitoring Western press, where coverage and excitement of Karman decreased once Saleh stepped down and the next phase of Yemenis trying to reorganize their nation began.

As was mentioned in Chapter One, the research project's initial timeframe was created after preliminary work conducted in English. Once the Arab media research began it became clear that there were some important observations that occurred outside this window. One of the most relevant discoveries was that after her Nobel Peace Prize, Karman was more likely to be quoted as a major political player within internal Yemeni political discussions. She was often quoted in articles concerning Saleh or his successor Abd

Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. These stories did not often make the non-Arab press so while Karman rose to international fame this did translate into being a louder voice in her own country as well.

3.2. Arab press before October 6, 2011

There was significantly less attention on Karman during the months between her arrest in January and the Nobel Peace Prize announcement in October 2011. The press reported Karman as news, not a feature. She was already a known figure in local politics, a member of a known party and in the months before October 2011 she was exhibiting known behavior. Karman had established herself as a career opposition protester in Sanaa for years. So while the revolution was news, that Karman was in the streets encouraging the youth was not.

In January 2011, they reported her arrest and subsequent release. The stories were minimal, and quoted government sources on her status. They introduce her as a leader of the NGO, Women Without Chains. She is not quoted and given a chance to express her side of the incident. Her arrest is not used as a sign of her strength but is displayed to warn others not to follow the same path. The government news agency SABA published a blurb, which was reprinted in several outlets on January 23, 2011, confirming her arrest. It is reprinted in full:

“A security source at the Interior Ministry said on Sunday that Tawakul Karman, who heads the Women Without Chains Organization, was arrested Saturday under a warrant of the Public Prosecution. Karman was arrested on charges of organizing unlicensed rallies and marches legally and incitement to commit acts of rioting and chaos and undermining the public social peace, the source added. Investigation with Karman is taking place before referring her to the public prosecution for the completion of investigations and taking necessary legal actions, the source explained to Saba. The source reiterated warning that any demonstration or march organized without following

legal procedures and getting necessary approvals are prohibited by law, and the violators would be subject to legal accountability.”⁴²

Karman, described as the leader of the Women Without Chains, was being used as a warning to others in this article. The last sentence reminds readers that Karman was breaking state law and warned readers not to participate in any demonstrations. Clearly, agitated by the people’s protests in Tunisia and elsewhere, Saba turned Karman’s arrest into a warning and did not offer her a voice in the story.

It was a warning that the government was prepared to back. Her arrest was not the only attack on members of the press or leaders of NGOs sympathetic to the press. While Karman was not described as a journalist in Saba, it is a role she claims for herself and a professional community to which she belongs. Following Karman’s arrest, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) documented 588 violations against media workers in Yemen, over half of these were physical.⁴³ The CPJ also pointed out that the majority of reporting in Yemen was “emotional” and “lacks journalistic objectivity.”⁴⁴

Karman’s January detention lasted 36 hours and she was released without charges.⁴⁵ Some sources reported that during her detention, Karman’s brother received a telephone call from a senior Yemeni official. The brother was never directly quoted but it was alleged that the call warned him to make sure Karman stayed at home or she would wind up dead.⁴⁶

⁴² “Security source: Karman arrested for organizing illegal rallies,” *Saba News*, January 23, 2011, accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news234002.htm>.

⁴³ “Media in Turmoil: An assessment of the media sector in Yemen,” Committee to Protect Journalists, December 2012, accessed November 30, 2015, http://i-m-s.dk/files/publications/media_in_turmoil_yemen_IMS_2012.pdf, 7.

⁴⁴ Media in Turmoil,” 7.

⁴⁵ “Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders Annual Report 2011: North Africa/Middle,” Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, last accessed December 8, 2015, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/obs_2011_uk-mmo.pdf, 581.

⁴⁶ “Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders Annual Report 2011,” 582.

On March 23, 2011, the Yemeni Parliament, in a vote contested by civil society and opposition leaders, declared a state of emergency and granted further powers to the security forces to take measures against protesters and suppress the press.

This was not Karman's first arrest. In 2010 she had been arrested with over 40 other people, including the executive director of Women Journalists Without Chains, Bushra al-Surabi. In Western press, these arrests will be documented as signs of strength as a symbol that Karman stood up to injustice. In the Arabic press, in the months before her Nobel Peace Prize, they were published as announcements. These arrests and her releases without charges or physical abuses also showed the public that Karman was protected. She spoke out against the government but was never too strongly punished. In a country with minimal press freedoms, this was because of her family connections. This level of protection helped Karman have the space she needed to learn how to use her voice to harness the people against the regime she was fighting.

For different reasons, this history of arrests and public protests went under-reported in both medias during 2011. It was as if Karman's January 26 arrest was its own incident and not one of many in a long line of public acts of protest committed by Karman. After the arrest, Karman was not shy of the media – she published her own op-eds, largely aimed at Western publications and spoke at protests and to journalists who visited her tent in Change Square. During this time, there were no articles penned by Karman in Arabic in the local press. To reach her supporters in Yemen, Karman was relying on social media.

3.3. Arab press October 6 – December 7, 2011

When news came that the Nobel Peace Prize had awarded Karman their top honor, the Arab press corps celebrated but not for the same reasons. Few articles explored the roots of her victory, they did not reflect on her win as a win for nonviolent struggles against gender oppression. They saw her victory reflected in their own causes.

Writing for Al Jazeera, Ibrahim Al Qadami, on October 8, 2011, focused not on Karman, the person, but on how multiple parties within Yemen understood her award. Instead of portraying Karman, or listing her life achievement, he focused on how the news of the award was celebrated by activists but largely down-played by government sources.

He writes:

While Yemeni activists welcomed the victory of human rights activist and journalist, Tawakkol Karman in the Nobel Peace Prize, the NCP (Party of the Ruling People's Conference) and the Yemeni government had reservations in dealing with the news of the prize (award).

While activists counted Karman's win as an overwhelming victory for the people's revolution, confirming the peaceful and triumph of modernity and all justice and humanity, the source "Conference Net" – the mouthpiece of the ruling party – settled to broadcast a brief news address...on Karman's win shared with Sirleaf and Gbowee on the prize...⁴⁷

Al Qadami called her a human rights activist and journalist. There is no mention of her work for gender equality. A short Arabic video clip from Shorouk News on October 8, 2011, linked to an article, refers to her as “mother of the Yemeni revolution” and mentions that US publication *Time* said she was one of the most revolutionary women in history to win the Nobel Peace Prize. This video gave a brief biography, stating that she is from Taiz

⁴⁷ Ibrahim Al Qadimi, “The Victory of Tawakkol Karman in the Eyes of Yemenis,” Al Jazeera, October 8, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/4b4aa7a6-fb6d-46a9-997a-ad7b9b08de35>.

and mentions that she is the daughter of politician Khaled Abdel-Salam Karman. It credits her for fighting human rights violations and issues of financial and administrative corruption within the Saleh regime.⁴⁸

In the weeks following Karman's Nobel Peace Prize victory, she became a key part of most political debates in Yemen. While the Western media focused on profiles of Karman, highlighting her past work the Yemeni media placed her in opposition to President Saleh. With international attention on her side, thus adding an additional layer of protection against those she was protesting, she had suddenly become more of a threat against the president.

On October 8, 2011, two days after Karman was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, President Saleh gave a televised speech to the House of Representatives and the Shura (consultative) Council, announcing that he would be stepping down in the next few days. Several articles and social media commentators linked Saleh's timing to Karman's award, accusing the President of attempting to gain back the spotlight and minimize the win. This could be found on Twitter as well. Two Yemeni social media users wrote:

– [@Dima_Khatib](#) a well known journalist and big supporter of the Arab Spring and Yemen tweeted:

When a dictator gets jealous from a 32-year-old courageous honourable mother-of-3 revolutionary...Expect anything ! #YallaSaleh #YEMEN

– [@tota770](#) tweeted:

I don't believe #Saleh, he is a liar, he just want to get attention because he felt jealous yesterday from #Tawakul who won #Nobel price :P

⁴⁸ Muhammed Shousha, "Tawakkol Karman dubbed (Balkis Queen II) and (mother of the Yemeni revolution)," Shorouk News, October 7, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015. <http://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=07102011&id=ada48128-295b-4feb-91ec-f587aef5fec3>.

Not only did Saleh's speech invoke cynicism in the Yemeni people, it cemented Karman's position as leader of the opposition. Most papers quoted her reaction to the speech, where she said Saleh knew the "revolution was winning."⁴⁹ Citizens and the press starting turning to report her reaction follow Saleh's speeches as the reaction from the people; whereas before she would have still been commenting whenever the president spoke, now people were listening. She was speaking for others. The Nobel Peace Prize elevated her status and made a woman, for the first time in modern history, a major political force.

3.4. Arab Press on December 10, 2011 and later

When Karman flew to Oslo to accept the award on December 10, 2011, the Arabic media followed her. They continued to praise her as the leader of the youth and the voice of oppressed people fighting during a revolution. The Arabic press wanted to write about her role as an opposition leader. They were impressed that a woman was commanding so much attention but they were not concerned with the rights of women. In fact, they were more interested in exploring how Islam could be accommodated in this revolutionary vision.

When the BBC ran an article on her award, they quoted the most political parts of her speech, and referenced nothing about her gender. They called her a "Yemeni activist" and reported that she said: "The Youth of our revolution are not isolated and cut off from the Arab revolutions, but unfortunately they did not find any financial support."⁵⁰ Further,

⁴⁹ "Yemen – Saleh Stepping Down Unlikely," Global Voices Online, October 11, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/10/11/yemen-saleh-stepping-down-unlikely/>.

⁵⁰ "Tawakkol Karman receives Nobel Peace Prize," BBC Arabic, December 10, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2011/12/111210_nobel_tawakkul.shtml.

the BBC quoted Karman as saying: “no immunity for killers, and that the Yemeni revolution which faced killing machines all impressed the peaceful world.”⁵¹

What is interesting about the BBC article is not only the excerpts of Karman’s speech it quoted but also the words of Nobel Peace Prize Committee chair Thorbjørn Jagland. In the final two paragraphs, under a sub-heading called Syria, the BBC article ends with Jagland’s support for the people of Syria and Yemen fighting their country’s leaders “who kill their own people in order to retain power.”⁵² This excerpt of the speech, where Jagland does appeal to the broader Arab context will disappear in the Western coverage of Karman as they sought to build up her image as a strong individual actor.

A few articles, in Arabic, have been included that were outside this timeframe to show how Karman was being portrayed and since this element of comparing the dates, not only the words, of focus on Karman was one not previously discussed. None of the articles in 2012 in Arabic press focused on Karman as an activist for women’s rights. For instance, Saba reported when Saleh’s successor welcomed Karman to his office. The brief news article mentions that Hadi congratulated Karman on being appointed to a UN committee to develop a vision of development priorities.⁵³ In this article she was quoted as supporting Hadi, claiming that he helps remove “Yemen from the difficult circumstances to safety.”

⁵¹ “Tawakkol Karman receives Nobel Peace Prize,” BBC Arabic.

⁵² “Tawakkol Karman receives Nobel Peace Prize,” BBC Arabic.

⁵³ “President receives Nobel's winner Tawakkol Karman,” Saba News, September 5, 2012, Last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news279918.htm>.

3.5. Karman and religion in the media

While BBC Arabic and Saba were focusing on Karman as a political opposition leader, other publications sought to explore how her work challenged, or complemented the region's largest religion – unlike many Western countries which legally claim a separation of religion and state, Islam has been a major political power in the Arab World since its beginnings in the 7th century. An Arabic Reuters article, published in the Egyptian daily *al-Ahram*, selected excerpts of Karman's interview to focus on how she views Islam. Interestingly, the article does not mention her ties to the Yemeni Islamist party, Islah, but they do refer to her as “mother of the revolution” and gave her partial credit for forcing President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down.

On religion, *al-Ahram* quotes Karman as saying:

“Tawakkol Karman said active Yemeni winner of the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday that Islam, like other religions, does not represent a threat to democracy, and all religions respect democracy and respect for human rights and respect all the values that he believes libertarians, the problem is not in the religion itself, but in a narrow understanding of some of its followers.

She added that the only problem lies in a misunderstanding of some of the adherents of Islam, Christianity and Judaism and other religions, where all of them believe that religion is the right religion

The rise of Islamic parties to be the biggest winner after the Arab Spring revolutions effects alarmed some in the West, especially after the victory of the Islamists in the elections in Tunisia, Morocco, and their success in achieving significant progress in the first phase of parliamentary elections in Egypt.”⁵⁴

As Karman sought to negotiate equal space for Islam, democracy and revolution in her vision, Islah sought to physically bring Islam into the protesters camps by segregating

⁵⁴ Gwladys Fouche, “Islam is no threat to democracy – Nobel Winner Karman,” Reuters, December 9, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://islam.ru/en/content/story/islam-no-threat-democracy-nobel-winner-karman>.

the protesters. Ten months after the initial calls for change in Yemen, jumpstarted by Karman's arrest, Islamists from Islah constructed a wall in Change Square to partition the revolutionary space by gender. Shatha al-Harazi, writing in *The Yemen Times*, confirms that even after Salah accused women of "mingling with men" the women stayed in Change Square, organizing women's marches and sleeping in tents.

One female protester told *The Yemen Times*: "It is not only a wall, it has a political and social meaning beyond it. It is a way to measure the changes in women's mentality after ten months of protests. Will they rebel against the wall or will they obey orders and keep it?"⁵⁵ Karman supports women in the streets and ignored her own party in this matter but did not publicly confront the Islah representatives trying to implement a more fervent strand of Islam into the protests.

Al-Harazi interviews a male protester, Mohammed al-Taeab, who insists that Islah constructed the wall to "grant them [the women] more freedom."⁵⁶ This protester goes on to mention Karman and say that others "brag" about her and claim she led the revolution but al-Taeab is skeptical of Karman, implying that she is not fully on the side of Yemen: "She was also the one who delivered Saleh's crimes to the International Criminal Court after the political opposition signed an accord granting him immunity," al-Taeab said.

After several women complained, Islah conceded slightly, decreasing the initial height of the wall but left it there. While the article doesn't quote any Islah members or say

⁵⁵ Shatha al-Harazi, "Women's Wall Will Not Limit Women's Role in Change Square," *The Yemen Times*, February 7, 2012, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1525/report/333/Women%E2%80%99s-Wall-will-not-limit-women%E2%80%99s-role-in-Change-Square.htm>.

⁵⁶ Al-Harazi, "Women's Wall Will Not Limit Women's Role in Change Square."

why this wall was constructed nearly a year after the first protests of the Arab Spring, and several years after Karman's first protests for press freedoms in Change Square, one can only infer that Islah, seeing that Saleh's days were numbered, was making a calculated power grab to fill Saleh's leadership vacuum by claiming legitimacy from Islam, playing on the people's cultural and patriarchal customs of male domination (in family and in public).

3.6. Conclusion

In that same week, when Islah was dividing male and female protesters, *The Yemen Times* was inspired from a Facebook Group asking Yemenis if they would vote for Karman for president and took this question to youth in the street. While the article's first finding found that more women than men would support Karman's attempt to gain office, the second finding showed that several woman wanted to look past her gender to her "credentials."

An educator, Najat Hassan said her vote would go to the best platform: "I would not vote for her just because she is a Noble Peace Prize winner. I have to see if her program is better than others, then I would decide." Besides gender and platform, *Yemen Times* raises an issue that is rarely discussed— Karman's regional support. Marwa Najmaldeen of the *The Yemen Times* writer:

"Hana Naser, a female teacher in Sana'a, said she would not vote for Karman, but had her own reasons. "I have a problem with Tawakul being a member of the Islah party and I have my suspicions regarding her receiving aid from Qatar or elsewhere," she explained. "I would not vote for a president whose reputation is full of rumors."

*Another Yemeni woman, a housewife, voiced similar concerns. She said she feels that Tawakul Karman has not been honest about her sources of funding – especially that Qatar itself is not a democratic country so there is an issue of hypocrisy.”*⁵⁷

A succinct quote that sums up the position of the Arab World media’s attention on Karman comes from *The Yemen Times*, by Naji Gazali:

*“Indeed, we were able to defeat the stereotypes that haunted us throughout our peaceful revolution – the stereotype and the image that our “Mr Ex president” had painted and tried repeatedly to sell to us and the world: that we are a ticking timebomb ready to explode... The Nobel Peace Prize honor for Tawakul Karman came late, but when it arrived it came with a consensual recognition of our revolution by the free world.”*⁵⁸

The prize was not a “consensual recognition” of any revolution but by as the previous pages have shown the real reason for the prize was pushed aside very quickly. It was Karman’s prize that mattered, not why they gave it to her.

⁵⁷ Marwa Najamaldeen, “Tawakkol for President?” *The Yemen Times*, February 6, 2012, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1529/report/321/Tawakul-for-president.htm>.

⁵⁸ Naji. “February 21: A Day of Change.”

CHAPTER FOUR

KARMAN AND THE WESTERN MEDIA

“As we in the West research and write about Arab women, is it possible to do so without defining and objectifying? ... To what extent do we end up robbing women of a voice as we present our knowledge of them?”

– Judith Tucker, *The Arab Studies Journal*, 1993

4.1. Introduction

Few in the West knew of Tawakkol Karman before the Nobel Peace Prize Committee selected her as one of three recipients of the 2011 award. Karman, a self-described journalist and activist from Yemen, alongside Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee, were recognized for “their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work.”⁵⁹ Overnight, the Western media cast a spotlight on Karman, the first Arab woman and the youngest recipient at the time of the Nobel Peace Prize; she quickly overshadowed her co-Laureates on the international media circuit at a time with the revolutions across the Middle East were dominating the headlines. This chapter focuses on reaction and representation of Karman in English-language publications based in Western Europe or the United States. To these media outlets, Karman was a much-desired individual face to run with headlines about women’s equality in the Arab World in a time when the actual story about the masses.

Tawakkol Karman, in any language, is an empowering, independent woman fighting

⁵⁹ “The Nobel Peace Prize for 2011,” Nobel Prize, last accessed December 8, 2015, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/press.html.

for gender equality, and the breakdown of other social norms. She was – to use a term from the current American popular debate – “leaning in” and had been for several years. But, in the West, she quickly became molded into a one-dimensional figure – a woman. Prior to 2011, Karman had been in the Western print sporadically; through her work with Women Journalists without Chains, she had been receiving funding for democracy promotion projects from the USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), among other international and governmental aid agencies. Gender studies is important and we need to look closely at the role of women before, during and conflict as well as men. When she turned her attention to the youth and people of Yemen, against Saleh, the Western media kept to their already defined personality they had applied to Karman and continued running the same themes through the stories. The Western media missed the opportunity to look at the Arab Spring through Karman’s eyes – to look at her fellow opposition fighters in Change Square and to really praise her for all her accomplishments.

Few journalists were in Yemen when Karman was first arrested in January 2011 although throughout the spring, many Middle East-based journalists would fly in to write a story or two. Starting in March or April 2011, Karman was often the feature of one of those stories written by a visiting journalist. There were some foreign reporters living in Sanaa, working with Arab media outlets, who also increased their freelancing during this time and sold to Western media as well. They are also included in this chapter and it will show how their stories were altered depending on whether they were writing for local or international audiences.

4.2. Western press before October 6, 2011

Tawakkol Karman, as she had nearly every week since 2007, took her frustration with the government to a major square in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa, Change Square. Only this time she stayed. It was not until she was arrested on January 22, and thousands rallied for her release, that Western journalists started a slow trickle of features from the ground on Yemen. Karman, who was released 36 hours later, had had experience with the international media and NGO networks previously but now they were coming to Yemen for her. In January 2011, the Arab Spring saw protest movements emerge in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen.

For the first half of 2011, a steady stream of foreign correspondents, few actually based in Sanaa or the Middle East, came to interview Karman, some made her the star of a feature and some introduced her as one of many players on the Yemeni political stage. They called her a human rights activist, a journalist, an opposition party supporter, an anti-government activist but the selling point to readers that she was a woman. The US radio station National Public Radio (NPR), which also publishes articles online, called her “the woman behind the revolution.”⁶⁰ Yet, she was featured as an individual in the crowd of protesters. She was not included in news articles as a main political voice or political expert in Yemen analyzing the situation on the ground but was kept separate.

Time magazine listed her as one of “16 of History’s Most Rebellious Women” in honor of International Women’s Day 2011. In the slideshow, she was described as a

⁶⁰ “In Yemen, a woman leads the call for revolution,” NPR, April 15, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2011/08/15/139652128/yemeni-protest-movement-darling-frustrated-by-pace-of-change>.

“modern-day mother of three who became a key democracy activist in Yemen” and her goal is to “change the regime by the slogan we learned from the Tunisian revolution.”⁶¹ Rebellious yes. A mother of three, even better. Pushing gender boundaries in one of the most patriarchal societies in the world is an incredible and rebellious act but it was clear to *Time* magazine she was doing so for society and not working towards gender equality as her primary goal.

However, when a woman makes headlines in politics – even in the West, but especially in the Middle East – it is usually a given that the reporter will make the headline about her gender. She was quickly becoming the face Western audiences saw when they read about Yemen’s contribution to the Arab Spring and her female face was making photos but it was her actions as a protester and her anti-Saleh position which were making the headlines.

While, Tawakkol Karman was largely unknown in the West, except in gender and international development circles where she had been working with USAID and other agencies for several years, she skyrocketed to fame with the award from the Nobel Peace Prize committee. Articles focused on Karman, the woman. Journalists portrayed her as a female individual forging ahead in a patriarchal and tribal society. While true, they did this at the expense of other aspects of her identity.

Karman became a name known to the international development community after she co-founded Women Journalists Without Chains in 2007. In the first year, WJWC was

⁶¹ “16 of History’s Most Rebellious Women,” *Time*, March 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2057714,00.html>.

already challenging the Saleh administration over rights of press freedom and assembly and calling the government to account over detained journalists and alleged torture cases. The US Embassy in Sanaa nominated her for a Courage Award in 2009 and the WJWC was a recipient of many international grants, some from governments. Karman was making alliances abroad and some in Yemen wanted to know more about her motivations and her partners.

4.3. Western press October 6 – December 7, 2011

On October 6, 2011, the Nobel Peace Prize committee disclosed the year's winners, combining Karman's win with two gender activists from Liberia. The official announcement declared:

*"The chairman of the Norwegian Nobel committee, Thorbjorn Jagland, told the Associated Press that Karman's award should be seen as a signal that both women and Islam had played an important part in this year's Arab uprisings. 'The Arab spring cannot be successful without including the women in it,' he said."*⁶²

In a different article, Jagland told the BBC that "the oppression of women was "the most important issue" in the Arab world and that awarding the prize to Ms Karman was "giving the signal that if it [the Arab Spring] is to succeed with efforts to make democracy, it has to include women."⁶³

The same article quoted her understanding of the award, such as this response:

"She called her award 'a victory for the Yemeni people, for the Yemeni revolution and all the Arab revolutions.

"This is a message that the era of Arab dictatorships is over. This is a message to this regime and all the despotic regimes that no voice can drown out the voice of freedom and

⁶² Esther Addley, "Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman win Nobel prize," *The Guardian*. October 7, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/07/johnson-sirleaf-gbowee-karmen-nobel>.

⁶³ "Nobel Peace Prize recognizes women's rights activists," BBC, October 7, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15211861>.

dignity. This is a victory for the Arab spring in Tunis, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Our peaceful revolution will continue until we topple Saleh and establish a civilian state.”

Despite the contradictory nature of these two responses, the disparity was not pointed out in the article.

Most sources heavily focused their Nobel Peace Prize coverage on Karman. Karman learned she won the Nobel Peace prize in her tent, which made a great story. When news articles listed the winners, Karman got a lot of space compared to the two women from Liberia. They were talked about very distinctly, with no journalists trying to weave a common theme between the Liberian woman and Karman. Karman herself is rarely quoted speaking about Johnson Sirleaf and Gbowee.

While the articles gave brief biographies of the winners, the location of where they were when was won was only reported for Karman. “Mrs Karman heard of her win from protest camp Change Square in the capital Sanaa, where she has been living for several months calling for President Ali Abdullah Saleh to stand down,” reported the BBC.⁶⁴ CNN, along with others, also focused on this geography: “Karman...said she heard the news while demonstrating in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa.”⁶⁵

The following day, mainstream media was loudly publishing the news, and Karman overshadowed the other two as people saw her as the symbolic victory for the whole of the Arab Spring, especially as the media made it sound like she was a success story for women in the Arab Spring. However, Karman’s empowerment did not come from the Arab Spring

⁶⁴ “Nobel Peace Prize recognizes women’s rights activists,” BBC.

⁶⁵ Laura Smith-Sparks, “Three women’s rights activists share Nobel Peace Prize,” CNN, October 7, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/07/world/world-nobel-peace-prize/>.

– she was a major opposition party member and activist before the Arab Spring; in fact, it was her experience as a protester and the networks she had across opposition party lines, both Islamist and secular, which allowed her to capitalize on the moment as well as she did.

The Guardian was one of the few articles to introduce Karman as a member of an Islamist party, however they called it a “Muslim movement with links to the Muslim Brotherhood.” They did not mention Islah by name, nor speak about their politics nor explore her commitment to the party. By calling it a movement, it confused her political allegiance with the ongoing protests and crowds of people participating in the revolution.

According to Jagland, “It was not easy for us to pick one from Egypt or pick one from Tunisia, because there were so many, and we did not want to say that one was more important than the others.” He noted that Karman had “started her activism long before the revolution took place in Tunisia and Egypt. She has been a very courageous woman in Yemen for quite a long time.” Most articles in English quoted Jagland and probed him or other committee members for a deeper reflection on their choice. This kind of conversation was not as loud in the Arab media. Most sources had stuck to news that Karman had won the prize but did not look at the official reasons too closely.

Al Jazeera English quoted Geir Lundestad, director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, who told Al Jazeera that it was a “conscious decision” to award women.” We want to point to the role of women and the inferior role of women and how this role can be improved,” he said. “I mean, women suffer in wars and if we are to have peace, we have to

have democracy with full rights for women and we also have to have women as peace builders. So this year, it was the year of the women.”⁶⁶

Later in the same article, Al Jazeera quoted Shadi Hamid, director of research at the Brookings Doha Centre, who was “surprised” by the decision to honor women going one step further and almost contrasting the choice of Karman with the option to award the Arab Spring. He said: “People were very excited and thought this year would be the year of the Arab Spring. I am not sure what the rationale was exactly, but I think this might be interpreted as a slight to the Arab world.”⁶⁷

How is the choice of Karman a slight to the Arab World? It was a provocative comment that seemed to go unnoticed. Hamid was implying that had the Nobel Committee wanted to award the Arab Spring for their actions, Karman would not have been one of the leaders to have been selected. To honor Karman only because she was a woman was never their intent but this comment took the opposite and equalling unappealing choice: that Karman’s actions would not have stood up to other players if they were being judged on achievements in the Arab uprisings regardless of sex. However, a related point Hamid did not make but would have been stronger would have been to question Karman’s association with career gender activists and politicians instead of associating her with Arab leaders working for political change. This would have been a more constructive way to question the decision.

⁶⁶ “Three women share Nobel Peace Prize,” Al Jazeera English, October 7, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2011/10/201110773943904523.html>.

⁶⁷ “Three women share Nobel Peace Prize,” Al Jazeera English.

In the following weeks, after October 7, 2011, Karman went on an international speaking tour, speaking out to anyone who would listen about Yemeni politics. The Western papers continued to quote her and slowly started introducing her as a Nobel Peace Prize winner who pushed through gender rights in Yemen.

4.4. Feature writing

With a few exceptions most features, both when they were announcing Karman as a 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate and, also, when profiles were written about her work in the winter and spring of 2011 followed a similar pattern.

Features usually began by setting the scene. Most put her in the tent she had been using as the hub of her protests since 2007. Some put her in her office, making sure to mention the frames photographs of her three heroes: Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Ghandi, and Nelson Mandela. They almost always referenced her headscarf and the fact that she was an “unlikely” activist because of her looks or because she was a mother of three. They tell the reader that she was in jail and stress that she has been threatened, potentially even from the president himself. A few paragraphs in the writer would explain that she founded Women Journalists Without Chains – they would not explore the funding received from WJWC and they rarely discussed it more than saying it would set up text alerts on freedom of the press.

Features occasionally quoted her father and always quoted other protesters. Usually they quoted other female protesters talking about what an inspiration Karman has been to the movement. They never interviewed other WJWC or members of Islah. In terms of

Saleh only about half the articles even mentioned that she belonged to a party, and almost none explored what it means to be a female in Islah or even tried to explain the party platform of Islah. Unlike politicians in the West, she was never photographed with her children but it is not clear whose choice this was. She was the feature. They quoted Karman expressing her rage at Saleh but the pieces were always about her as an individual.

4.5. When local and international overlap

One of the most nuanced reports on Karman found in the Western press was published in *The Guardian* and written by Tom Finn, a British freelancer who was based in Yemen from 2010-12. While Finn is British he also worked as an editor at *The Yemen Times* and so was therefore introduced to Karman from a local perspective much earlier than some of the other foreign correspondents. When Karman won the Nobel Peace Prize, it was not even the first time Finn had profiled her as he had devoted a long feature to her opposition work on March 26, 2011.

Writing in *The Guardian* on October 7, 2011, he reuses, with attribution, selections from his interview with Karman from March 26 writing:

“Karman identifies herself first and foremost as a campaigner for Yemen’s alienated youth, but she is also a member of Yemen’s leading Islamic opposition party, the Islah, which has been co-ordinating many of the protests against Saleh and buying food and medical supplies for the thousands camped out in Change Square. It has caused alarm in the west, mainly because of its most notorious member, Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, a former adviser to Osama bin Laden considered a terrorist by the US.

But Karman’s relationship with the Islah is complicated. She maintains it is the best party in Yemen for supporting female members, but last October ran into trouble after publishing a paper condemning ultra-conservative party members for blocking a bill to make it illegal to marry girls under the age of 17. ‘The extremist people hate me. They speak about me in the mosques and pass round leaflets condemning me as un-Islamic. They

say I'm trying to take women away from their houses,' she told the Guardian in March."⁶⁸

In another section, Finn touches on Karman's party affiliation as a possible source of tension within the opposition movement. This is one of the few posts in the Western press that shed light on internal division and perhaps challenge the notion that all Yemenis unequivocally love Karman. In addition, the following excerpt shows that Karman is aware of the how to market her protests for the outside world. She understands the wariness the West has with Islamism and seeks to downplay it perhaps to mollify her international supporters. Finn writes:

"Some student protesters have accused her and her party of trying to hijack their movement in a bid for power. Karman responded: 'Our party needs the youth but the youth also need the parties to help them organise. Neither will succeed in overthrowing this regime without the other. We don't want the international community to label our revolution an Islamic one.'"⁶⁹

Finn cites a corruption scandal in the city of Ibb, a governorate south of Sanaa, as the inspiration behind Karman's involvement in political activism quoting her as saying: *"I watched as families were thrown off their land by a corrupt tribal leader. They were a symbol to me of the injustice faced by so many in Yemen...It dawned on me that nothing could change this regime, only protest."*⁷⁰ Either other Western journalists never pressed Karman for her previous experiences or reasons she become political active or they did not add this anecdote as it detracted from the larger picture being painted as a women's rights activist. It seems odd that journalists would not dig below a Nobel Prize Laureate's major

⁶⁸ Tom Finn, "Tawakkul Karman – Profile," The Guardian, October 7, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/07/tawakkul-karman-profile>.

⁶⁹ Finn, "Tawakkul Karman – Profile."

⁷⁰ Finn, "Tawakkul Karman, Yemeni activist, and thorn in the side of Saleh."

achievements but few other Western features would ever be this thorough at covering Karman from all sides.

Even Finn modified how he referred to Karman over the span of 2011 as he wrote for *The Guardian*. His first article of the year, dated January 23, 2011 describes her as an “anti-government activist” in the headline and as a “member of the Islamist party Islah”⁷¹ in the first mention of her in the text, in paragraph three. In later months, she would lose these various attribute in his articles.

Finn secured a prescient quote from a Yemeni professor of political science at Sanaa University, Abdullah al-Faqih: *“The arrest of a woman in the middle of the night is something very uncommon here and it's insulting to the people of Yemen. If they don't release her soon she may become a figurehead like Mohamed Bouazizi [whose self-immolation inspired the Tunisian revolt].”*⁷² There was nothing about Karman’s work as a gender activist in the article. Simply the act of being a female protester was enough to set off the anger and resentment bubbling across the Yemeni street.

4.6. Conclusion

Letta Taylor, a Human Rights Watch researcher based in Yemen called Karman an “irrepressible force and one of the pivotal figures behind the Yemen protest. She’s also one of the few role models for women in Yemen. I think that for providing this award to a Yemeni activist a woman at that provides a jolt of energy and inspiration whose 8 months

⁷¹ Tom Finn, “Yemen arrests anti-government activist,” *The Guardian*, 23 January 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/23/yemen-arrests-protest-leader>.

⁷² Finn, “Tawakul Karman, Yemeni activist, and thorn in the side of Saleh.”

struggle has been largely forgotten in the midst of other world crises.”⁷³ Alone that could be most articles but as Taylor continued she began to paint a more nuanced version of Karman as a political activist: “I believe Tawakol Karman is a controversial figure. I think that’s because she is a women in a male-dominated society. There is some resentment. She is also very publicity savvy...she is a shrewd and gifted communicator in a country where this is unusual...”⁷⁴

To call Karman shrewd seems to be an appropriate word, in the positive sense. Because out of all the articles, Karman was certainly the one choosing her words, selectively answering questions (and then journalists did not press if she avoided an answer) and speaking her mind. She was savvy and was able to use her Nobel win to promote her cause onto the international speaking circuit and to keep herself there.

⁷³ “Yemeni Activist Tawakul Karman Among Three Women Nobel Peace Prize Winners,” PRI The World, October 7, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.pri.org/person/letta-taylor>.

⁷⁴ “Yemeni Activist Tawakul Karman Among Three Women Nobel Peace Prize Winners,” PRI.

CHAPTER FIVE

KARMAN IN HER OWN WORDS

“Peace does not mean just to stop wars, but also to stop oppression and injustice,”
- Tawakkol Karman, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, December 2011⁷⁵

5.1. Introduction

This section provides a short biography of Tawakkol Karman to show that her family, society and professional choices all helped shape her beliefs and the choices that led to her receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. It then examines Karman’s quotes on three main areas: Islam, gender, and the Nobel Peace Prize.

5.2. Karman’s childhood and family

At 32 years old, Tawakkol Karman had achieved more than most people do in a lifetime. While most of her achievements were the product of hard work and determination, it is necessary to look at the external factors that helped shape Karman into the woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. Karman was born into an educated, prominent, and political family in a village on the outskirts of Taiz, the third largest city in Yemen and one that is considered more liberal than the rest of the country. Her father, Abdel Salam Karman, is a lawyer and politician and served in the Saleh regime, as legal affairs minister before resigning in the 1990s. He is also reportedly a member of Islah.⁷⁶ Karman studied

⁷⁵ “Tawakkol Karman – Nobel Lecture” Nobel Prize, last accessed December 8, 2015, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture_en.html.

⁷⁶ C. Jacob, “Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Tawakkul Karman: A Profile,” MEMRI, last accessed December 8, 2015, http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/5744.htm#_edn1.

commerce at the University of Science and Technology before obtaining a graduate degree in political science from the University of Sanaa.⁷⁷

After school, she started working with *Al-Thawrah* in Sanaa.⁷⁸ Her first major foray into the Yemeni political scene was in 2005, when she and seven other female journalists established an NGO that eventually became known as Women Journalists Without Chains.⁷⁹ WJWC was denied the right to publish a newspaper or operate a radio station. One of their first major programs was to set up an SMS messaging service, which delivered news updates to individual's cellphones. The government banned this practice after a year so the WJWC transitioned into researching and publishing annual reports on the status of press freedoms, corruption and government accountability in Yemen. The ban on the SMS new updates also inspired Karman to take the streets and stage semi-regular protests calling for press freedoms starting in 2007, in Sanaa.⁸⁰ For these protests and other incidents, she was detained in jail several times and made many headlines in local Yemeni press.

Her political work has earned her many fans within Yemen, the Arab World, and the international community. The US Embassy in Yemen recognized her in 2010 for her work and, after her Nobel Peace Prize success, Foreign Policy magazine named her one of 100 top influential foreign policy thinkers. However, it has also made her enemies. She told

⁷⁷ Jacob, "Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Tawakkul Karman: A Profile."

⁷⁸ "IFJ Welcomes Nobel Peace Prize Award to Yemeni Journalist," Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.cpbf.org.uk/body.php?id=2571>.

⁷⁹ The original name of the group was Female Reporters Without Borders but shortly after established the government set up an organization under the same name and they were forced to rename their group.

⁸⁰ Nadia Al-Sakkaf, "Renowned activist and press freedom advocate Tawakul Karman to the Yemen Times: 'A day will come when all human rights violators pay for what they did to Yemen,'" Women Journalists Without Chains, June 17, 2010, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.webcitation.org/5w8NYbYFU>.

reporters she has received several death threats and, in 2010, a woman tried to stab her.⁸¹ After her last detainment, an official – in some reports, President Saleh himself – called her brother to warn him: “‘Control your sister,’ the President said. ‘Anyone who disobeys me will be killed.’”⁸²

5.3. Karman and Islam

In addition to speaking out against censorship of the press and Saleh’s regime, Karman found another political outlet through her party membership with Islah, Yemen’s major Islamist political party. Often described as an umbrella Islamist party, Islah’s party platform remains vague on several social, political and religious issues and supporters seem to come from a wide swath of Yemeni society ranging from Salafis and conservatives, sympathetic to Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, to more liberal followers of Islam.⁸³ One of Islah’s more famous and controversial members is Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, head of Yemen’s Muslim Brotherhood, head of Islah’s Salafi wing and an associate of Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni killed by US drone strikes after the US accused him of having ties with Al-Qaeda. Once an ally of Saleh’s GPC, it took a larger opposition role in 2005 protesting Saleh’s treatment of elections.

It is not clear when Karman’s membership with Islah began but, since her father is also a member, one can infer it came early in her career, or possibly even began during her

⁸¹Jacob, “Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Tawakkul Karman: A Profile.”

⁸² Dexter Filkins, “After the Uprising: Can Protesters find a path between dictatorship and anarchy?” *The New Yorker*, April 11, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/11/after-the-uprising>.

⁸³ Leslie Campbell, “Yemen: The Tribal Islamists” in *The Islamists Are Coming: Who They Really Are*, edited Robin Wright (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace Press. 2012).

student days. Although she has a seat on Islah’s Shura Council, her position in the party is controversial and many conservative members do not agree with her role in politics or her social choices, including her decision, in 2004, to remove the niqab face veil before delivering a speech. This was a major move to assert her identity, especially on the international NGO circuit, and she has appeared in public only with the hair-covering *hijab* since that time. She has spoken out against the practice of child marriage, the high rate of illiteracy and malnutrition of Yemeni women but has not actively campaigned on these issues of gender.

Fellow female Yemeni journalist and Editor of *The Yemen Times* Nadia al-Sakkaf, writing not in her own newspaper but for the Western news blog The Daily Beast, asked Karman if being a member of the Islah party was “a contradiction with your role as a freedom fighter.” Karman responded:

There are two points here. One is the relation between religion and political and public activities. The religion you follow should not be a barrier or anybody’s business when it comes to the political activities and fight for freedom because this is universal and everybody’s right regardless of their religious affiliations.

About Islam in particular, I am so glad that this [Nobel Peace] prize was given to me being the person who I am because it will help the world break the stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women. Islam is a religion that encourages freedoms and was based on the liberation of the bodies and the minds from slavery, oppression, and fanaticism. It is high time it is recognized as a religion for peace as it truly is. This is also a chance to teach all those who thought their problems could be solved by violence that this way will never solve anything.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Nadia al-Sakkaf, “Interview with Tawakkol Karman: ‘There Is No Turning Back,’” *The Daily Beast*, October 9, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/10/09/tawakul-karman-interview-nobel-peace-prize-could-help-arab-spring.html>.

This is one of the longest answers she has given when asked about religion. The interview was most likely conducted in Arabic but it was published in English and I did not find it in Arabic. It is commendable of Karman to try and keep her religion separate although it is not normally the stance one takes when one is a member of a religious political party. That she is a Muslim is clear from her answers and also that she is more progressive than many within her country. However, due to the murky nature of Islam in general and Karman's relationship with it, it seems interesting that no journalist took the time to push Karman to really explore what it means to be a female member of an Islamist Party in Yemen pushing for democracy and greater transparency.

5.4. Karman and gender politics

As a woman, Karman can rarely get through an interview or media appearance without being asked to comment on her gender and the challenges women face in Yemen. However, it is never her first concern and she answers the questions dutifully but her actions give it away that this is not her priority.

Some of the most explicit quotes on Islam and gender come from the above-mentioned interview with al-Sakkaf who asks about rights of Muslim women and whether women can be "fully free" in a Muslim society. Karman's response is all about justice. She also mentions the need for democracy but goes on to claim that women were "free in older times when the Islamic nation was strong," the early centuries of Islam were not democracies so it is unclear how these two points are related and al-Sakkaf does not ask for clarification.

Again, like religion, to not press Karman on specific ideas around gender justice was a lost moment. To express gender in terms of justice is a concept well understood within Islam and the Middle East and it could have served as a bridge between Arab and Western gender activists. However, as the uprisings raged on Karman made it clear that first she wanted to free the country.

5.5. Karman and the Nobel Peace Prize

The Nobel Peace Prize is one the five Nobel Prizes established by the inventor and armaments manufacture Alfred Nobel. Nobel died in 1896 and his will stipulated that the Peace Prize should be awarded to the person who in the preceding year “shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.” Unlike the prizes in the other four Nobel categories – Chemistry, Physics, Physiology or Medicine, and Literature – the criteria for this award is vague.⁸⁵ Nobel’s will also mandated that a five-member committee appointed by the Parliament of Norway would select the prize. The prize has been awarded nearly annually since 1901, missing only 19 years due to various reasons.

Prior to 2011, 12 women had won the Nobel Peace Prize, which is more women than won any of the other Nobel Prizes. The three women recognized in 2011 brought the total to 15 women out of 101 individual honorees in the history of the prize.⁸⁶ Only one of

⁸⁵ The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel was added in 1968 by Sweden’s Central Bank.

⁸⁶ In 2014, Pakistani Malala Yousafzai became the 16th woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize and replace Tawakkol Karman as the youngest recipient.

the previous recipients, Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi, was awarded the prize for work specifically focusing on the rights of women and children. All other female recipients of the prize won for more general contributions to sustainable development and peace such as: clearing of anti-personnel mines, non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights, distinguished career as a diplomat, leader of missionaries, founding the Northern Ireland Peace Movement, working as a sociology professor.⁸⁷ At the time, Karman was the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and the first Arab Muslim to gain the honor.

Karman was not even the most controversial winner in 2011. Karman was nearly universally celebrated albeit for several different reasons. Meanwhile, Liberia's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, was a more controversial choice not only because the announcement came a day before a tight national re-election campaign but also because some people called into question her commitment to nonviolence due to her past affiliation with Liberia's former president Charles Taylor, who, in 2012, was sentenced to 50 years in prison by the International Criminal Court at the Hague.⁸⁸ In defense of the committee's selection, Jagland remarked: "We cannot look to that domestic consideration. We have to look at Alfred Nobel's will, which says that the prize should go to the person that has done the most for peace in the world."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Two early female recipients, Jane Addams and Emily Greene Balch, received award in 1931 and 1946 respectively and both co-won with a man, were International President and Honorary International President of the women's International League of Peace and Freedom. However, their work was recognized in the field of non-violence and was not gender specific.

⁸⁸ Finn, "Tawakul Karman, Yemeni activist, and thorn in the side of Saleh."

⁸⁹ Finn, "Tawakul Karman, Yemeni activist, and thorn in the side of Saleh."

5.6. Conclusion

In her acceptance speech, Karman spoke about her victory as one for social justice not for women's individual freedoms in apparent contradiction to the specific reason she was presented the Nobel Peace Prize. She accepted it on behalf of "the people of Yemen." In the same acceptance speech, she mentioned fighting "injustice" six times and "oppression" three times. The term "equality" is mentioned only once when she listed the causes her protests support. Her speech was in perfect harmony with her previous media appearances and those she gave following. She is clear on her message, her priorities, and her motivation, even if the Nobel Peace Prize Committee is not. This set the tone moving forward. Regardless of headlines attached or title bestowed on her, Karman set her agenda in quotes and interviews. She successfully used this award to increase visibility to the causes she most supported even if those were not what she was being given the credit for.

CHAPTER SIX

KARMAN, THE MEDIA AND YEMEN IN 2015

Der Spiegel: *Yemen suffers from the presence of terrorists belonging to al-Qaida. How do you foresee solving this problem?*

Karman: *Once Saleh has lost power, they will disappear.*

- Tawakkol Karman, interview with *Der Spiegel*, October 2011 ⁹⁰

6.1. Introduction

While the original aims of this research project sought to limit the resources used to the years 2011-2012 it seems relevant to expand the scope of the project as Karman remains a major voice in Yemeni politics. While Karman was active for years leading up to the Nobel Peace Prize, it was the award, which cemented her as a credible speaker on the Yemen scene. As the earlier chapters show, the media focused on her for reasons other than the Nobel Peace Prize committee had intended. What this chapter will begin to show is that even three years following her award, the media remains committed to covering Karman.

This chapter focuses on Western media in 2014 and 2015. It argues that the media outlets that were intent on making Karman the face of gender protests during the Arab uprisings and ignored the fact that Karman herself was choosing to accept the award for Yemeni youth in general are more recently using Karman as the voice of a pro-Western Yemeni politician. That she is a member of the Islah Party is mentioned more frequently in earlier features but is not explained or analyzed. This chapter attempts to begin a

⁹⁰ Volkhard Windfuhr, "Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakkul Karman: 'The Prize Will Accelerate Our Revolution's Victory,'" *Der Spiegel*, October 10, 2011, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/nobel-peace-laureate-tawakkul-karman-the-prize-will-accelerate-our-revolution-s-victory-a-790877.html>.

conversation on the legacy of Tawakkol Karman's prize, not only for her as an activist but also on the country of Yemen, the women of Yemen and the Arab World, and the nature of international media and prize ceremonies.

6.2. Yemen post-Arab Spring

After Karman accepted her Nobel Peace Prize in December 2011, she embarked on a global speaking tour, harnessing the energy into a platform for the youth and people of Yemen. Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh had signed the Gulf Cooperation Council agreement in November 2011, which laid the foundation for his departure as president. After obtaining immunity from prosecution from the Yemeni parliament, Saleh left Yemen. Saleh's vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi took control of the country on February 27, 2012, after an election in which he stood unopposed and Karman supported.

Following the succession of power, a transitional dialogue process, known as the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), convened, taking place at the Movenpick Hotel on the edge of Sanaa. Although scheduled to begin in November 2012, the NDC began on March 18, 2013, lasting until January 2014, after originally being scheduled to conclude in September 2013. During the final months, fighting between Houthi and Salafi tribes began, including the assassination of a Houthi representative to the NDC – the second Houthi representative to be targeted that year.

More than 565 representatives from across Yemen gathered. The GPC held the largest bloc of seats (112) followed by the 85 for the Southern Movement, 50 for Islah, 40 to represent various youth organizations, 37 for the Yemeni Socialist Party, 35 for the

Houthis with 64 seats going to various parties in the legislature, and another 62 to ‘tribal dignitaries, religious leaders, and representatives of the religious minorities.’⁹¹

In 2015, Karman and Yemen continued to make headlines not for the peace she was promoting but for the warzone Yemen had become. Karman has become a vocal opponent of the Houthis, a Shia Yemeni tribe that was initially part of the post-Saleh political talks but eventually turned violent and stormed the capital Sanaa in 2014. Saudi Arabia has actively been fighting the Houthis and several other international and regional players are involved at various levels. By October 2015, estimates say at least 4,000 civilians have been killed in fighting across the country.⁹²

6.3. Karman in 2015

A search for “Karman Yemen 2015” yields 160,000 Google hits. This was the preferred searching method since, as previously mentioned, there is no English consensus on how to spell her first name. In 2015, Karman remains popular and has over two million and 500,000 Facebook and Twitter followers, respectively.⁹³ She has given speeches across the world, notably in the US, and frequently speaks on television channels, mostly Al Jazeera English. Her English is more confident but her talking points remained unchanged. For all the visions of Karman painted by the world’s press, she remains as determined on

⁹¹ Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud and Andrew Reynolds, editors, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 151.

⁹² Hakim Almasari and Jethro Mullen “At least 30 killed after airstrikes hit wedding in Yemen, officials say,” CNN. October 8, 2015, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/08/middleeast/yemen-violence/>.

⁹³ Adel al-Ahmadi, “Most ‘liked’ in Yemen: Meeting Tawakkol Karman,” Al-Araby,. January 12, 2015, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2015/1/13/most-liked-in-yemen-meeting-tawakkol-karman>.

her revolution as always, including women as part of the solution but never as the immediate answer.

A search for Karman and NDC yields dozens more hits from local Yemeni papers. The only Western paper to come up in the first 50 hits was a general article about the start of the NDC from BBC News.⁹⁴ The BBC reports that Karman boycotted the opening of the dialogue protesting the presence of officials who served under Saleh. The BBC quotes Karman as saying:

*“I will not participate in the dialogue, due to the obvious imbalance in the representation of the youths, women and civil society groups and the participation of people who have the blood of the revolution youth on their hands,” she told AFP...Ms Karman also criticised the national unity government for not having restructured the security forces, released detainees and investigated the killing of opposition protesters during the uprising, as required by the UN-backed power-sharing agreement. ”*⁹⁵

However, Karman eventually did enter discussions at the Movenpick in June as a representative of the Reconciliation Party. This was not reported in media outside of Yemen although she did sit down for an interview with *The Yemen Times*. Like past interviews, she kept answers general and actually did not really get into the details about what got her back to the table:

“I took part in the Preparatory Committee of the national dialogue in order to push the electoral process forward. When the National Dialogue Conference kicked off, I announced my withdrawal for several reasons. First, [I wanted to see] the uniting of the army and security, second the exclusion of Saleh from the politics, and third the [empowerment of] the youth, the women and the civil society organizations to effectively partake in the NDC. In fact, the most important term, namely integrating the army and security, is fulfilled. This

⁹⁴ “Yemen national dialogue conference begins,” BBC, March 18 2015, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21828527>.

⁹⁵ “Yemen national dialogue conference begins,” BBC.

*term is very important. Therefore, when President Hadi fulfilled his promise to me and the nation, I have no justification to continue boycotting the dialogue.*⁹⁶

Karman was present in the discussion and decision to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 for girls in opposition to the Islah Party, whose official representative left the meeting.⁹⁷

When the dialogue concluded, the NDC releases a report with about 1,400 recommendations. It was praised for being progressive but now that Yemen has descended into a state of violence there has been no follow up to see how many of these recommendations have actually been taken up.

6.4. Karman's role in 2015 Yemeni politics and in Saudi cables

During the uprising, many articles and much attention was placed on the women who protested for Saleh's departure, including Karman. Once Hadi took the presidency, analysts kept talking about the importance of keeping women in the political discourse. Women were included in the NDC to a varying degree. Women led three of the nine working groups and 28 percent of all members were female. One woman is in the nine-person NDC Presidium.⁹⁸ Maria Saleh analyzes the gender component of the NDC remarking that their achievements are "impressive" but there is more to be done. She writes:

"There is no guarantee that the women comprising the 30% will advance women's rights. Although men in tribal and religious fundamentalist groups have often obstructed efforts, many Yemeni women actually oppose progressive reform. Recently, hundreds of

⁹⁶ Sadeq al-Wesabi, "Tawakkol Karman: 'Saleh and his aides obstruct the transitional process, their immunity will be annulled,'" *The Yemen Times*, June 10, 2013, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1684/interview/2476/Tawakkol-Karman-%E2%80%9CSaleh-and-his-aides-obstruct-the-transitional-process-their-immunity-will-be-annulled%E2%80%9D.htm>.

⁹⁷ "18 years for girl marriage, NDC," *The Yemen Observer*, October 5, 2013, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.yemenobserver.com/front-page/704-18-years-for-girl-marriage,-ndc.html>.

⁹⁸ The woman is Nadia al-Sakkaf, publisher of *Yemen Times*.

veiled women from Islah (the Muslim Brotherhood's Yemeni party) protested the representation quotas. 'It's a mere imitation of the West. Those secularists are only trying to blindly copy everything the West does,' said Yasmin Rajeh, a college student at the rally. Mona Ali Kulaib, from the Islah Party said she 'will not agree to issues that oppose Islamic Sharia.'

Even Tawakkol Karman, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner glorified by the West for championing women's rights has been criticized by Yemeni activists for promoting Islah's agenda over women's rights."⁹⁹

In 2015, it also became known that Karman was the subject of one of the leaked Saudi cables. A cable, marked classified, and dated December 7, 2011, described a meeting that took place between Tawakol Karman and the Saudi representative to the UN. The cable claims this meeting was Karman's idea.¹⁰⁰ According to the blog, Saudi Cables Leak:

"Karman lavished praise on the Kingdom for pushing through a transition agreement that for many reformers, was seen as a deep betrayal of the revolution. The letter cites a few key points raised by Karman, including her deep distrust of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, whom she accused of supporting the Houthis and Al Qaeda. She also complained that the Kingdom was not paying enough attention to Yemen's Sunni parties and the "people of the South," who represent the "natural allies" of the Kingdom."¹⁰¹

This cable reveals interesting insight into Karman as a political operative because in interviews she remains vague on policy and big on general statements, mostly in the form of negatives towards Saleh and calls for greater transparency and an end to corruption.

When Al Jazeera pressed Karman on why she wasn't criticizing the Saudi air strikes, she dodged several questions, finally saying: "I oppose them both."

⁹⁹ Maria Saleh, "Yemeni Women in the National Dialogue: the 'Critical Minority,'" Global: Together for Democracy, January 17, 2014. Partners, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://blog.partnersglobal.org/yemeni-women-national-dialogue/>.

¹⁰⁰ "Tawakul Karman turns to Saudi in 2011," Saudi Cables Leak Blog, June 27, 2015, <https://saudicableleaks.wordpress.com/2015/06/27/tawakul-karman-turns-to-saudi-in-2011/>.

¹⁰¹ "Tawakul Karman turns to Saudi in 2011," Saudi Cables Leak Blog.

Karman dodged several questions directly asking her to condemn Saudi's involvement. She switched to broad examples such as "I am against all the crimes happening in Yemen..."¹⁰²

Al Jazeera followed up asking her about the leaked Saudi Cables, which said her advice was to ally with Sunnis – she denied this: "No don't say I am Sunni. I am Muslim, that's it." Finally, like several interviews, the final question turned to the question of women:

Al Jazeera: *What role can women play in battle against extremism?*

Karman: *"Women is the key for solving most of the problems...she must do something.*

Al Jazeera: *"What do you say to men who think it's ok to control men?"*

Karman: *"You should know who you are. All the problems came from you. All the solutions came from us [the women]."*¹⁰³

6.5. 2015 Nobel Peace Prize Laureates

In 2015, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee awarded the prize to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet "for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011."¹⁰⁴ The quartet includes four organizations: the Tunisian General Labor Union, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts, the Tunisian Human Rights League, and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers.

In *The New York Times* article announcing the Quartet's win, the third to last paragraph referenced Karman, continuing to categorize her in the way that the Nobel Peace

¹⁰² "Headliner: Yemeni Nobel Laureate Tawakkol Karman," Al Jazeera, September 19, 2015, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2015/09/headliner-yemeni-nobel-laureate-tawakkol-karman-150918164148752.html>

¹⁰³ "Headliner: Yemeni Nobel Laureate Tawakkol Karman," Al Jazeera.

¹⁰⁴ "The Nobel Peace Prize for 2011," Nobel Prize.

Prize committee had wanted and not how she sees herself: “The last winner of the prize from the Arab world was Tawakkol Karman, a women’s rights activist, who shared the prize in 2011 with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and the Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee.”¹⁰⁵

6.6. Conclusion

As this chapter shows, Karman is, arguably, one of the most well covered Yemeni politicians in the current 2015 Western press. She remains vocal at an international level and continues to use social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter in Arabic, to champion her causes. In English media, she speaks in general sentiments, scant on policy details and evades personal questions about religion and only mentions gender policies in Yemen when asked. Even in Arab media, she is not often pressed for policy details or specifics. Karman’s position has remained unchanged since she won the prize and her arguments have not developed since she first starting opposing Saleh in Change Square, although she had added some new rivals to criticize along the way.

When *The Yemen Times* asked her if she was satisfied with the progress of the uprising, Karman said no. When they suggested that people had “doubts” about her receiving the Nobel she replied: *I don’t want to talk about myself. I have said earlier that the Nobel Prize wasn’t meant to honor me only, but to honor the great people who took to streets peacefully. It’s an honor for women, for the Arab Spring and for Islam.*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Sewall Chan, “Nobel Peace Prize Is Awarded to National Dialogue Quartet in Tunisia,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2015, last accessed December 8, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/europe/national-dialogue-quartet-tunisia-nobel-peace-prize.html?_r=0.

¹⁰⁶ Al-Wesabi, “Tawakkol Karman.”

Her presence is important as there remain too few women making headlines in the Middle East and around the world. However, the Western media has handled her gently and has not pushed her for details and specifics. Usually Karman chooses to participate in interviews in English, which is noticeably her second language so that has allowed her not to get into a certain level of nuance. It can be noted that while she has successfully transitioned into an international activist she has yet to be able to affect real post-uprising change on the ground in Yemen and has, arguably become embroiled in sectarian politics which remain under-reported and misunderstood in Western press. Unfortunately, again, the West remains focused on her role as a woman speaking about politics and does not push her or point out her gaps in a way that would further the dialogue on women in the Middle East.

Karman has managed to keep the spotlight on herself longer than several other political activists who have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, this has not led to the trickle down gender empowerment in Yemen hoped for by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee. As previously mentioned the fact that she became a “role model” should not be overlooked or trivialized. That she is proof that a woman – albeit elite, protected and educated – can stand on equal political footing in a patriarchal world is impressive but she should be lauded for her actual achievements, which have not directly targeted the improvement of women’s lives in Yemen or the Middle East. As this chapter shows, Karman, even in 2015, is never the first in the interview to bring up the question of gender. She answers in general platitudes, always positively but the fact that she is not as vocal about women as she is about corruption or transparency should not be overlooked. Just because she is a woman does not mean she should be labeled a women’s rights activist.

In many cases, the portrayal of Karman in Western media is demonstrative of a bigger issue. The Western press often covers the first part of a story, especially if it is a headline that fits in with current understanding of the country at hand. For instance, all major Western publication prioritized Karman's win over the win of her two Liberian co-Laureates as it played into a bigger narrative about the Arab Spring and lent a female face to a larger, regional story. However, when Karman stopped being the main story and started being an major player in Yemeni politics, the papers lost focus. They did not cover her internal negotiations or focus on her political beliefs on Yemeni politics.

The same happened with the NDC. Her withdrawal of participation made headlines. It was taken as a sign that the NDC was doomed, or perhaps exclusionary. But when she re-entered the discussion in June the only coverage that received was in the local press. When the international press only covers the start of a story, without committing to its lifespan, the readers see only one side of the activity. In fact, Yemen is also an example of this. There were articles when the Royal Saudi Land Force began its bombing campaign but it rarely makes headlines several months later and the press has not focused on covering the step by step action. And Karman, like others, have not taken it upon themselves to educate outsiders on their country's internal politics. Rather, she is trying to recruit people to her side in the battle but she uses energy and slogans than or facts.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7.1. Introduction

This paper's stated aim was to examine the press coverage of Tawakkol Karman around the time she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 from two cultural perspectives – media from Yemen and the Middle East and media from the Western press. I asked what her Nobel Peace Prize meant to both groups and asked how they portrayed her. It was not meant to rank portrayals – there is no right way to portray a human being in the media. But media makes choices every day. They choose which stories make front pages, they choose the key words being used in headlines meant to target specific readers and audiences. They choose photos to run next to the stories. They do not necessarily make the news but they package it for public consumption and that a goal is always to have their story read.

7.2. Review of research questions

This thesis sought to answer two questions concerning the news and reporting on the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize award to Tawakkol Karman. Below I review the questions and how this research project worked to accomplish its stated goals.

Question 1: How did the Arab and Western press cover the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Tawakkol Karman?

This paper reviewed selected articles from Arab and Western press. The research phase of the project involved an Excel sheet comparing and contrasting articles by sources, dates and key words. As the research grew, this thesis picked up on several key findings.

The first finding was that the Western media, while initially unsure of how to introduce Karman in their articles – human rights activist, journalist, mother, opposition party member, political activist, all of the above – eventually settled on highlighting her as a gender activist or an activist who has worked to empower women in the Middle East. They bought into the story sold by Jagland and the Nobel Peace Prize Committee that she won for nonviolent activism for gender equality without exploring what that means. In 2015, she is seen as a gender activist in international circles.

Karman is also still quoted and available for talks outside of Yemen, in fact as the Houthis have more control over Yemen they have threatened political opponents to the point where her life could be endangered within the country. Karman does not correct people because she understands that it is her gender activist title that in many ways keeps her on the main stage. This was also a reason to call her NGO, Women Journalists Without Chains, when this was a female-led organization that actually worked to promote freedom of speech for all members of the press.

The Arab press initially reported on Karman in a manner that was closest to how she saw her own activism and success. They were less interested in the reasoning behind the Nobel committee and happy to support an activist they saw as representing the Arab World. There were no negatives remarks about Karman being a women; in fact, most media sources in Arabic praised “the mother of the revolution” but they did not focus on her gender beyond that. They saw her as representing a bigger movement and believed it meant the West was doing so as well. Perhaps most importantly, the information in the two cultural media communities rarely overlapped. The English sources, such as Al Jazeera or

BBC, would occasionally quote from their Arabic counterparts, but would emphasize different aspects when using such quotes. This point is also relevant to the next key question as well.

Question 2: Did the coverage of Tawakkol Karman affect the ongoing conversation, in either press circles or larger cultural community, on gender in the Middle East? How does the coverage of Tawakkol Karman inform the current discussion on gender politics in Yemen in the wake of the Arab uprisings?

The answer to this question is split but leans to no. On the positives, she became an inspirational female face and a female Arab role model. Perhaps the next generation of strong Arab women will happen because they grew up watching Karman fearlessly take on a political cause that was important to her. However, the West remains ignorant of the element of justice most Arab women use to discuss gender in their region. Karman did not ultimately change any rules in Yemen, although there was a bit where she came out against child marriage somewhat contentiously against other Islah members.

The coverage of Karman has brought another woman into the political debate and this should not be underrated. It is important that women be part of every dialogue and every political discussion. However, just because she is a woman does not mean she should be expected to be the voice of all women. Karman will speak about women when asked. She will also include them in generalizations, such as that she support “the youth, the men, the women, and the children of Yemen.” She believes in women although is not as nuanced or analytical about what this means as other gender activists. She rarely recognizes her privilege or graduate-level education.

7. 3. Voices of women working for gender justice

While this research project focused on Karman and the media it seems unfinished to not discuss how other gender activists viewed Karman. Are they in-line with the media's portrayal or do they offer a third, or fourth, way of acknowledging her Nobel Peace Prize? In an article published on the Muslim feminist collective Musawah (together) blog, Karman is called an opposition leader and her role with Islah is mentioned as one of uncertainly. She is not an example of empowerment but of the increase in Islamist politics noted in the post-2011 Middle East:

"It all began with Islamists' coming to power in the state that first began the revolutions in Tunisia... And close to this picture is Yemen where an opposition leader and a winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace, Tawakul Karman, is perceived as being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood Islah Muslim Party, although this latter picture is not fully clear.

"But the vital question from the perspective of half the society – women – is: how do these successful parties regard women? And why is this question posed to every group that comes to power? Why is it the first question that is asked by the host of any TV political talk show? It is clear that there is a crisis between Islamist parties and women. Of course, there are millions of women who are members and supporters of these parties. But there are also many other millions who feel that the future is not safe under the rule of forces who monopolize religion and speak in its name. There women feel that they no longer have a voice. They feel that the revolution in which they took part in and for which some of them died, has been hijacked. They also feel that the kind of state which they have fought for (i.e. one that is free from corruption and is based on gender equality) has been stolen from them."¹⁰⁷

When *The Yemen Times* asked four prominent women's rights activists, both liberal and Islamist supporters, for interviews on the status of post-uprising women in Yemen, Karman's voice was not one of them. It is unclear if this is because she was too busy on the international stage or if *The Yemen Times*, a newspaper run by a prominent Yemeni

¹⁰⁷ Hatoon Ajwad Al-Fassi, "The Islamist Ascension and Muslim Women," Musawah, December 26, 2012, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.musawah.org/the-islamist-ascension-and-muslim-women>.

woman, did not consider her voice a strong enough one for gender reforms but the absence is striking. She received the world's top peace prize, supposedly for her work on women, but inside her own country she is not seen as an active participant on the gender debate.

7.4. Karman's legacy

For Tawakkol Karman, the events of 2011-12 brought her immeasurable success, an international platform, and allies across the Middle East and the globe. Turkey granted her honorary citizenship, after she claimed her roots could be traced back to Turkey (not surprising since the Ottomans controlled most of Yemen for over 300 years). The world was optimistic that this accolade to one successful Yemeni woman could help success and empowerment trickle down to one of the world most disenfranchised collective group of women. However, the average woman in Yemen has not seen her status in society improve. Arguably, with the ongoing conflict, most women in Yemen have seen a deterioration of their daily life.

In 2014, there is one woman in Yemeni elected politics and it is not Karman. There is little debate about pushing through the gender quota reform bill as the government is on the brink of collapse. Following the uprising, in which Karman was instrumental, the post-uprising government has not successfully tackled social, economic, or political reforms. In 2013, the World Economic Forum's ranked Yemen 130 out of 130 on the global gender gap – a position it has held several years in a row.¹⁰⁸ According to an Oxfam in-country focus

¹⁰⁸ Qaed Samar, "Palpable disparity: 'Opportunities afforded to women are not many,'" *The Yemen Times*, November 12, 2013, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1728/report/3120/Palpable-disparity-%E2%80%98Opportunities-afforded-to-women-are-not-many%E2%80%99.htm>.

group: “Four out of five women consulted by Oxfam in a series of focus group discussions say that their lives have worsened over the last 12 months.”¹⁰⁹

In 2015, Karman remains on the speaker circuit. At a recent event in Washington, DC, she spoke to an American audience making a case for larger US involvement in Yemen. An excerpt by Washington Report writer Kevin Davis from the write-up after the event makes two interesting points about what Karman represents today in Western circles: “A great spokesperson for human rights and especially women’s rights in the region, her sectarian rhetoric continues to be an obstacle for peace—although at this point her audience is likely larger in Washington, DC than in Yemen itself.”¹¹⁰

In Davis’ nearly 600-word summary of Karman’s 30-minute speech and question and answer period, women are only mentioned twice. Once in the label used in the previous quote and once after it was brought up in a question. Davis writes that Karman “answered numerous questions and spoke briefly on the importance of the role of women in Yemen, the prevalence of counter-revolutions across the region, and the role dialogue can play in resolving the current conflict.”¹¹¹ However, in Karman’s assessment on the state of Yemen, women were not the primary concern.

7.5. Conclusion

Karman may be playing the “long game” for women’s rights. This is the belief by some activists that women should help push for societal and political reforms – less

¹⁰⁹ “Still Waiting for Change: Making the political transition work for women in Yemen,” OXFAM, September 24 2012, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/still-waiting-change-making-political-transition-work-women-yemen>.

¹¹⁰ Kevin A Davis, “Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize Winner Visits Washington,” Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. October 8, 2015, last accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.wrmea.org/events-blog/yemeni-nobel-peace-prize-winner-tawakkol-karman-visits-washington.html>.

¹¹¹ A Davis, “Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize Winner Visits Washington.”

corruption, better education, more transparency, fairer elections, etc – before “demanding” specific rights for women. But the long game in the Middle East has been proven ineffective, starting with the hopes of the women of Algeria. Women were an integral part of Algeria’s war for independence against France and they did not press for specific rights, hoping their contributions would be “rewarded” in the new state. Instead, conservative Islamists seized control and sought to align women’s rights with French Imperial control and actually pushed back the rights women had in society. As a member of an Islamist party, Karman should be aware of the history these parties have had with women’s right, both under Islamic and Western interpretation. No Arab society has yet to empower women successfully by making the women of their citizenry wait until the country has a stable government.

Karman’s role in Yemen’s history books, both those written in Arabic and English, has been secured but her legacy is not finalized. The West did not use Karman as a jumping off point to delve deeper into the intricacies, complications, and conflicting viewpoints of the vibrant debate happening across the Arab World by secular and Islamist women’s rights activists. The world is still waiting for the woman, or man, who can bridge that divide.

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