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DOI:

[10.1215/1089201X-3426421](https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-3426421)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Sukarieh, M. (2015). The first lady phenomenon: Elites, states, and the contradictory politics of women's empowerment in the neoliberal arab world. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 35(3), 575-587. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-3426421>

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# **The First Lady Phenomenon: Elites, States & the Contradictory Politics of Women's Empowerment in the Neoliberal Arab World**

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## **Introduction**

“How can a revolution as great as the Egyptian one lead to a First Lady who is veiled from head to toe?” asked an engineer in his thirties, commenting on a widely circulated image on the web that contrasted Nazli, the Queen of Egypt in the 1930s, in “modern dress” with her hair done and fully made up, and Naglaa Mahmoud, the wife of Mohammed Morsi, the first elected president of Egypt after the 2011 revolution, in traditional dress, wearing a headscarf and abaya. After the election of Morsi – who was subsequently ousted in a military coup in 2013 after just one year in power – the social media in Egypt circulated this and other pictures, comparing Naglaa to previous Egyptian first ladies: the unveiled Jihan el Sadat and Suzanne Mubarak. Jokes were widely posted that made fun of Naglaa’s traditional dress and popular accent; and Egyptian elites worried about Naglaa’s – and Egypt’s – image abroad. For them, she represented the backwardness and provincialism they fear<sup>1</sup>. Parallel discussions of Naglaa spread through the Western media. A profile in the *New York Times*, for example, noted that “unlike former, elegant, half-British first ladies, Egypt’s presidential palace is welcoming a small-town home-maker who loves to be called with a traditional nickname identifying her as the mother of her eldest son.”<sup>2</sup>

This media and internet chatter about Naglaa Mahmoud forms part of a broad discourse about the desired representation of Arab and Muslim women that has been dominant in both the west and among Arab elites for decades. In this discourse, the Muslim/Arab woman stands in as a figure for the state of Muslim/Arab society. The image of the veiled Muslim woman, in particular, is linked with traditionalism, but also with backwardness, lack of freedom and empowerment; freeing, empowering and modernizing Arab and Muslim women have been a rallying cry and entry point for interventions in Arab and Muslim societies, both by the nation-state itself, and by foreign powers and international aid and development organizations. In this context, Naglaa Mahmoud stands in as failure, as the return of the traditional image of the Muslim/Arab woman at the head of one of the largest, most important states of the region.

There has by now been an extensive critique of this discourse of the traditional Muslim and Arab woman. But what has received less critical attention is the figure of the modern and liberated Arab/Muslim woman who is supposed to replace this traditional woman. In this paper, I look at the representations and practice of two Arab First Ladies who, in a period stretching from the late 1990s through to the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings in late 2010, were held up, in the Arab world and the west, as the epitome of the modern Muslim and Arab woman: Queen Rania of Jordan and Asma Al-Assad of Syria. More than any other

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<sup>1</sup> See El Sheykh, “Egypt Everywoman”; And CNN Arabic, “Who is Nagla Morsi.”  
<sup>2</sup> See Kirkpatrick and El Shayk, “An Egyptian Everywoman.”

individual in the region during this period, these two women were embraced by Arab, western and international media, politicians and development organizations as the most prominent symbols of the new Arab woman.

Together, the figures of Rania and Assad offer an important opportunity to critically interrogate the discourse of women's empowerment and modernization, in the context of the Arab and Muslim world. Not only do representations of Rania and Assad as idealized "modern" Arab women need to be critiqued for their sexism, materialism and classism; but also these representations need to be linked with the actual policy roles undertaken by Rania and Assad in Jordan and Syria, in which, paradoxically, they are involved in promoting quite different roles and representations for women from other class backgrounds. In other words, an analysis of Rania and Assad helps to illustrate the ways in which gender roles and representations, in the Arab and Muslim world as elsewhere, are always multiple and contradictory, varying across lines of social class, and intimately connected to and shaped by the ever changing political and ideological projects of states and elites. As such, there is a need, when addressing gender politics in the Arab and Muslim world, to move beyond simple stances of contesting or inverting gender representations (whether "traditional" or "modern"), and instead move towards constructing grounded analyses of how constellations of gender roles and representations are constructed and negotiated within the context of regional and global political economy. The analysis of Rania and Assad in this paper draws on a number of sources: media representations in western and Arab newspapers, magazines and websites; institutional documents from the Jordan River Foundation and Syria Trust, which are the most important NGOs run by Rania and Assad in their respective countries; and interviews with clients and employees of the Jordan River Foundation and Syria Trust, conducted during multiple short periods of fieldwork carried out in Jordan between 2006 and 2008, and in Syria in 2009. In the following pages, I also make some observations on the more recent work of these NGOs, that are based on follow up email conversations with interviewees, as well as analysis of media reports.

## **Women, Empowerment & Modernization in the Arab World**

In a recent review article, Charrad argues that the growing literature on women and gender in the Arab World has tended to take "two objectives as its mandate: first, to dismantle the stereotype of passive and powerless Muslim women and, second, to challenge the notion that Islam shapes women's condition in the same way in all places."<sup>3</sup> In this, the literature is responding critically to long-standing colonialist and Orientalist discourses, in which representations of "backwards", "traditional", "oppressed" and "disempowered" Muslim and Arab women have been consistently deployed by both western and indigenous elites in order to assert the superiority of western cultural and political practice, and legitimize invasion, occupation, colonization and other forms of modernizing intervention and development projects in the region.<sup>4</sup> Critique of this discourse, as Charrad and others have

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<sup>3</sup> See Charrad, "Gender in the Middle East."

<sup>4</sup> See Abu Lughod, *Remaking Women*; Ahmed, *Women and Gender*; and Moallem, *Warrior Brother*.

pointed out, is by now well developed, and representations of traditional Arab and Muslim women as being universally and uniformly disempowered and oppressed have been widely challenged by numerous ethnographic and social historical studies, that have sought to document both the complexity of gender relations in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and the resourcefulness, power and agency of Arab and Muslim women, in both individual and collective capacities, and within both private, domestic and public and political spheres.<sup>5</sup>

In comparison to the critical literature on roles and representations of traditional Arab and Muslim women, critical reflection on the counterposing roles and representations of “modern” or “westernized” Arab and Muslim women is much less developed. There is a long critical tradition that contests the oppositions of tradition/modernity and east/west themselves, and that purports to show that “traditional” Arab and Muslim women are, in fact, themselves “modern,” both in the sense that their identities and practices are of the contemporary era and not relics from some unchanging past, but also in the sense that they possess the characteristics stereotypically associated with the “modern woman”: i.e., they are liberal, liberated and empowered.<sup>6</sup> There has also been a long tradition of anti-western politics throughout the Arab world that critiques images of “modern” and “western” women and their claims to liberalism, liberty and empowerment. For decades, both leftists and Islamists in the Arab region have scorned “the frivolous, empty-headed modern woman, exploited and manipulated, financially and sexually, by Western capitalism and its corrupting culture,” basing their critiques not just on indigenous Arab and Muslim practices and values, but also “on Western critiques of modernity and capitalism from Friedrich Nietzsche, Marx, Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre.”<sup>7</sup>

A third and more recent tradition, on which this article builds, moves beyond broad oppositions and inversions of traditional/modern and east/west binaries, to look more closely and critically at the ways in which multiple and often contradictory gender roles and representations for Arab and Muslim women have been mobilized and promoted across different social classes, geographical sites and institutional locations, by states, elites and capital operating in specific institutional and ideological contexts.<sup>8</sup> As we look at the history of debates and conflicts over the roles and representations of Arab and Muslim women, we can see that while initially these were driven by the projects of state formation and development, in the context of colonialism and national liberation movements, more recently, in the neoliberal era, it has increasingly been civil society and NGOs that stand at the heart of discussions about women, empowerment and development.<sup>9</sup> Initially, the rise

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<sup>5</sup> See Abu Lughod, “Dialects of Women empowerment”; Adley, *Educating women for Development*; Ghannam, “Mobility, Liminality and Embodiment”; Hafez, *An Islam of her Own*; Hale, *Gender, Politics in Sudan*; and Moghadam, “Islamic Feminism and its Discontents.”

<sup>6</sup> for example, Hatem’s study of Aisha Taymur<sup>6</sup>, an Egyptian poet in the early twentieth century; or Badran and Cooke’s edited collection of stories of Arab feminists from throughout the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> It is also characterized by ethnographic studies such as Deeb’s work on women in Hezbollah in Lebanon<sup>6</sup>, and Mahmood’s work on women’s participation in the Islamist movement in Egypt, both of which argue that these supposedly traditionalist organizations in fact constitute alternative forms of modernity

<sup>7</sup> See Zubaida, *Beyond Islam*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> See, A special issue of the *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* in 2010, for example, examines the rise of the “Islamic culture industry” and analyzes the ways in which “contemporary Muslim femininities are increasingly mediated through the market forces of consumer capitalism, impacting Muslim women’s identities, lifestyles, and belonging in complex ways.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Kassam draws on Mamdani’s “good Muslim, bad Muslim” framework to analyze how media marketed to Muslim women in the west construct idealized images of the modern Muslim woman who is “Western and Muslim,” and “portrayed as liberal, educated, fashionable, a ‘can-do’ woman, who is also committed to her faith.”

<sup>9</sup> See Bernal and Grewal, *Theorizing NGOs*.

of NGOs during the 1980s was celebrated as promising to usher in a brave new world of women's liberation and empowerment across the globe.<sup>10</sup> However, there is by now a well developed critical literature on the decidedly mixed and even harmful significance of many NGOs for women and development throughout the global South. For the rise of NGOs has often not been experienced by poor and low income women as being empowering and liberating; rather, NGOs have worked to produce continued dependency and subordination, while depoliticizing the women's movement.<sup>11</sup> Critics have focused attention on the problematic ways in which NGOs serve the top-down interests of foreign donors and nation-states;<sup>12</sup> on the domination of leadership positions within NGOs by elite and middle class women;<sup>13</sup> on the promotion by NGOs of neoliberal subject positions – the entrepreneurial and responsabilized individual – that cover for the withdrawal of the state and consequent loss of rights and entitlements;<sup>14</sup> and on the ways which NGOs often endorse and accommodate, rather than contest traditional forms and relationships of patriarchal power.<sup>15</sup>

This article builds on this critical literature on NGOs, women and development, while seeking to extend it in two ways. First, much of this literature has been produced in countries characterized by weak states (such as Bangladesh), where international and national NGOs have stepped in to fill a void left by state absence. In both Syria and Jordan, however, NGOs have developed in national contexts characterized by strong states, with extensive security apparatuses, and have been used by the state itself in support of its interests. Second, many studies of NGOs, women and development have tended to focus on the engagements of NGOs with women from single social classes (in most cases, the poor). This study argues for the importance of widening our analytical gaze. In order to understand the significance of neoliberalism, NGOs, and gender roles and representations in the contemporary period, we need to look across lines of social class, to examine how different roles and representations are mobilized simultaneously for women of different class backgrounds, as they participate and are forced to participate in conjoined projects of social, political and economic reform.

### **First Lady Media Representations: Promoting Arab Modernity**

If the standard representation of the traditional, disempowered Arab and Muslim woman is a generic, anonymous, veiled woman dressed in black, two of the most iconic representations of her ostensible opposite – the modernized, empowered, liberated and educated Arab and Muslim woman – have been the First Ladies of Syria and Jordan. For more than a decade at the start of the twenty-first century, Queen Rania and Asma Al-Assad were two of the most widely pictured Arab and Muslim women in the western media, showing up not just in foreign news sections, but in fashion magazines, popular culture and celebrity literature such as *Vogue Magazine*, *Paris Match* and *Elle*. A simple search for

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<sup>10</sup> See Appadurai, "Deep Democracy"; Fisher, *Nongovernments*; and Abdulrahman, *Civil Society*.

<sup>11</sup> See Bernal and Grewal, *Theorizing NGOs*; And Karim, *Microfinance and its Discontents*.

<sup>12</sup> See Jad, "The Demobilization of a Palestinian Woman."

<sup>13</sup> See Bernal and Grewal, *Theorizing*; Clark, "Women and NGO Professionalization," 2013; And Jad, "the NGOisation of Arab Women."

<sup>14</sup> See Brand, *Women, the State*; And Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession*.

<sup>15</sup> See Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession*; Ghodsee, "Feminism by Design,"; and Karim "Politics of the Poor."

journalistic articles results in 4 million hits for Queen Rania and around 800,000 for Asma Assad. Rania has 200,000 images posted on the web, compared to 22,000 for Assad. In almost all of these media depictions, Rania and Assad are explicitly and repeatedly referred to as “modern” women who are trying to “modernize” their own countries. *Vanity Fair*, for example, referred to Queen Rania in 2003 as being an “ultra-modern monarch”<sup>16</sup>; while *Vogue* described Rania in 2009 as “modern, hip, and ... demure”.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, NBC presented Assad in 2007 as being a “surprisingly modern first lady,”<sup>18</sup> while a high profile *Vogue* article on Assad in 2011 portrayed her as “glamorous, young, and very chic – the freshest and most magnetic of first ladies.”<sup>19</sup>

Such portrayals of the Syrian and Jordanian First Ladies as being modern, liberated and empowered were not solely the product of popular media. Rather, they were closely tied to western state interests and agendas within the Arab region: as western states pursued policies of engagement (in the case of Jordan) and rapprochement (in the case of Syria), their elected politicians, diplomats and civil servants played an active role in promoting such popular culture celebrations of Rania and Assad; and as they moved, in the wake of the Arab spring uprisings, into a stance of distancing and outright opposition to Jordanian and Syrian state elites, both political and popular enthusiasm for the ostensible modernity of Rania and Assad quickly disappeared from view. US Congressman Mark Kirk thus told *Vanity Fair* in 2003 that when he meets with King Abdullah and Queen Rania, “it feels like you’re talking to a modern American couple,” since “she talks as much as he does, taking a very large role – with the same educational level and confidence. When Queen Rania takes the lead, his body language is ‘Yeah, Rania, go! Tell him!’”<sup>20</sup> The French ambassador to Syria, meanwhile, told *Vogue* in 2011 of the political importance of Assad, explaining how “she managed to get people to consider the possibilities of a country that’s modernizing itself, that stands for a tolerant secularism in a powder-keg region.”<sup>21</sup>

The particular version of the idealized modern Arab and Muslim woman that is promoted by these representations of Rania and Assad is a stereotype that has long been criticized by western feminists, Arab nationalists, leftists and Islamists alike. First, these representations have been highly sexualized, fetishized and objectified. Media accounts of both Rania and Assad during this period almost always focused closely on their bodies, body parts and physical appearance. Rania is described as “willowy,” “swan-necked,” “glamorous, stunning, beautiful, tall, slim, skinny, [with] slender fingers, thick, mahogany hair, dark eyes,” a “prim smile,” “wide brow” and a “smooth, heart-shaped stretch from the cheekbone down to the neck [that] sings in milky harmony.”<sup>22</sup> Assad, likewise, was regularly referred to as being “beautiful,” “glamorous” and “chic,” with comments made about her “rosy cheeks,” natural hair, natural smile, long thin legs, “thin long limbs,” and model-like walk.<sup>23</sup> Second, media representations construct the First Ladies’ identity and achievement in terms of their

<sup>16</sup> See Bennets “Star of Jordan, 253”;

<sup>17</sup> See Woods, “Queen Rania: Modern Appeal,”

<sup>18</sup> See Vogue, “Power Monarch,”

<sup>19</sup> See Buck, “Asma el Assad,”; And Williams, “First Lady Asma,”.

<sup>20</sup> See Bennet, “Star of Jordan,” 252.

<sup>21</sup> See Buck, “Asma el Assad,”.

<sup>22</sup> See Bennetts, “Star of Jordan,”; *The New Zealand Herald*, “Royal Beauties,”; *Telegraph*, “Top Five Royal”;

And the Star, “King and Queen,”).

<sup>23</sup> See Buck, “Asma al Assad,”; Malek, “Syria’s First Lady,”; *Saeed*, “Asma el Assad,”; and the *Huffington Post*, “Asma el Assad,”.

consumerist choices, focussing obsessively on their clothing, luxury branding, fashion and shopping.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, as western political relations with Syria shifted dramatically in wake of Syrian uprisings of 2011, such consumerism became dramatically inverted, now portrayed as a sign not of modernity and liberation, but of backwards and boorish behavior.<sup>25</sup> This is just one striking example of how gender roles and representations of Arab and Muslim women are contingent, and continually shaped and re-shaped by broader relations of regional and global political economy. Third, media representations of the First Ladies of Syria and Jordan also celebrated them as ideal, modern Arab and Muslim women to the degree that they could be seen as products not of the Orient but of the west. Portrayals that celebrated Rania and Assad's western upbringing and education, their command of the English language, and their employment histories in some of the leading capitalist firms of Europe and North America.<sup>26</sup>

The promotion of Rania and Assad as iconic images of the ideal, modern Arab and Muslim woman, it needs to be recognized, also involves the promotion of a very particular class-based culture that is linked with Arab elites in Syria, Jordan and the rest of the Arab region. This is a culture that is largely inaccessible to most of Arab female popularion, due to its excessive costs – and indeed, could be argued to linked to broader processes of impoverisation of Arab women as a whole. But it also reflects particular culture choices and preferences of Arab upper and professional middle classes, centered around extravagant and conspicuous consumption of designer goods, life histories of study and employment in western schools and corporations, and fluency in and extensive use of the English language in everyday interactions.<sup>27</sup> By promoting these images as ideal of modern, empowered, liberated Arab and Muslim woman, media and political figures works both to legitimize these classes, and hold their wealth and practices out as being something not to question and contest, but rather to aspire to as the route to joining the modern age writ large.

### **First Lady NGO Practices: The Contradictory Forms of Arab Women's "Empowerment"**

The class-based and class-delimited nature of the roles and representations of the modern Arab and Muslim woman that is exemplified by media representations of the Jordanian and Syrian First Ladies becomes even more apparent when we examine the actual political engagements and practices of Queen Rania and Asma Assad. Both Rania and Asma have been deeply and centrally involved in the launching and operation of NGOs in their respective countries – an engagement typical both of the contemporary neoliberal era, and of the longer-standing associations of the westernized "First Lady" role with charitable endeavours.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is precisely because of this deep involvement that the First Ladies provide such a useful lens for seeing up close the contradictions and multiplicities of gender roles and representations that often exist within single political-economic reform

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<sup>24</sup> See Carbonnel Vogue Magazine Dumps Asma," ; Bennets " The Enigma of Damascus,"; And Malik," Syria's First Lady," )

<sup>25</sup> See Malek, " Syria's First Lady,"; And Ramadani, " Asma el Assad is no reformer,".

<sup>26</sup> See Buck, "Asma el Assad,".

<sup>27</sup> See Beal, " Real Jordanians Do not Decorate":And Schwedler."Amman Cosmopolitan."

<sup>28</sup> See Erikson& Thomson, " first Lady International Diplomacy,"; Gould, *American First Ladies* ; Gutin, *The President's Partner*.

projects in the Arab world, stretching across differences of social class. While political and economic contexts in Syria and Jordan over the past decades have been very different – both internally, for example in terms of state type (i.e., republic vs. monarchy), and externally, for example in terms of roles played in the US-led war on terror – the roles of the First Ladies, and the social function and significance of NGOs in both countries has been quite parallel. In both cases, the introduction and spread of NGOs has been closely linked to the neoliberalization of the economy; NGOs have been closely controlled by the state, as a way to control social movements and absorb tensions created by the withdrawal of the state from providing social services; and NGOs have focused their energies, in particular, on women, youth and the poor.

In Jordan, which has long been one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, with few natural resources, a limited private sector, and a heavy dependence on foreign aid – which it is able to attract, in large part, due to its geopolitically strategic importance for British and later American foreign policy interests – economic crisis and a growing debt burden led in the 1980s to the imposition of a World Bank structural adjustment program and the forced neoliberalization of its economy.<sup>29</sup> As elsewhere in the world, these reforms led to growing economic inequality in the country, and a consequent rise in social unrest; NGOs were introduced to Jordan during this period, with the direct goal of containing this unrest, and protecting the continued neoliberalization of the economy.<sup>30</sup> Unlike other countries in the global South, NGOs in Jordan are dominated by the state, even as they are heavily dependent on international, and, in particular, US funding and guidance. The most important NGOs in the country, which control more than 70% of civil society funding, are known as Royal NGOs (or RONGOs), which are established by royal decree, patronized by individual members of the royal family, and not subject to the same legal restrictions as other NGOs.<sup>31</sup> Queen Rania directs the largest RONGO in Jordan, the Jordan River Foundation (JRF), which in 2009 had an annual budget of 10 million Jordanian dollars, and which targets disadvantaged social groups, especially women, through capacity building, education and training, and the provision of micro-credit.<sup>32</sup> The JRF was actually founded by Queen Noor in 1995, the stepmother-in-law of Rania and consort to King Hussein; but Rania took over the foundation upon King Abdullah's ascension to power in 1999. In many ways, the roles and representations of Queen Rania in Jordan represent a continuation of images and practices that had already been established earlier by other members of the royal family, including Queen Noor and Princess Basma, who started the first NGO in Jordan, the Jordanian National commission for Women, which developed to include work with youth, children and the disabled.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike Jordan, Syria has long positioned itself as an anti-imperialist state, opposed to western influence and intervention, officially embracing state socialism and having close ties with the former Soviet bloc.<sup>34</sup> However, in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and facing growing economic crisis and debts, Syria, too, embarked on a

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<sup>29</sup> See Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*; Brand, *Women, State*.

<sup>30</sup> See Brand *Women, state*; Seif, "Middle Class in Jordan,"; Robinson "defensive Democratization."

<sup>31</sup> See Brand, *Women, State*; Robinson, "Defensive Democratization,"; And Clark and Michuke, "Women and NGO professionalization."

<sup>32</sup> See Brand *Women, State*; And Clark and Michuke, "Women and NGO professionalization."

<sup>33</sup> See Wiktorowicz "the Political Limits."

<sup>34</sup> See Dahi, "Understanding the Political Economy,"; And Haddad, "The Syrian Regime."

process of neoliberalizing its economy under the banner of social market economy.<sup>35</sup> As elsewhere, privatization of state-run industries, opening the country to foreign investment and – especially after the ascension to power of Bashar Assad in 2000 – extensive cuts to state subsidies and health and education provision, led to dramatic increases in economic inequality.<sup>36</sup> In response to concerns about the potential for social unrest, the Syrian state sanctioned, for the first time, the creation and operation of NGOs in the country – however, this process occurred much later than in Jordan, with NGOs proliferating only since the start of the twenty-first century.<sup>37</sup> As in Jordan, the voluntary sector in Syria is dominated by government organized NGOs (or GONGOs); and Asma Assad, as Syrian First Lady, created in 2007 and then ran the largest of these GONGOS, which is known as the Syria Trust. The Trust had a budget of three million US dollars in 2010, which constituted about 80 percent of the funds for civil society groups in the entire country. Like the Jordan River Foundation, the Syria Trust targeted primarily the poor, women and youth, through a range of funded projects that provide education and training, promote entrepreneurship and celebrate cultural heritage; in doing so, it worked with government ministries and municipalities, the Syrian private sector, international funding agencies and the World Bank. Unlike Queen Rania in Jordan, however, the image and role adopted by Asma Assad as a civil society promoting First Lady had to be created essentially from scratch in Syria, as there had been little precedent for such representations or practices.<sup>38</sup> Also, Unlike Rania who runs the NGO from the royal court, Asma directs the NGO herself and “ she is present in the office like all employees from 9-5 to receive reports, discuss ideas and help writing proposals.”<sup>39</sup>

What is particularly striking when we look closely at the work of Rania and Assad in their respective NGOs are the contradictions and differences in gender roles and representations that are promoted across lines of social class.

As is the case with NGOs elsewhere in the world, Jordan and Syria’s RONGOs and GONGOs tend to be dominated by professional, middle class women, who are employed to work on and with poor women; as such, these NGOs tend to be strongly shaped by the interests and perspectives not only of the donors but also by that of middle class women.<sup>40</sup> Clark and Michuki’s study of NGO staffing in Jordan thus found that “the labour force in Jordan’s advocacy NGOs tends to be dominated by highly educated women, many with post-graduate degrees from the West, whose motivations are guided not solely by gender considerations but rather by a combination of career aspirations and support for the NGOs’ objectives.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Kabbani’s study of the Syria Trust reports that the Trust “attracted mostly middle class women who either studied in the UK or US, or in the English language schools in Syria. One of the conditions of working for the Trust was proficiency in writing and reading English, and this restricted the pool to upper middle class women.”<sup>42</sup> These trends at least raise the question of whose interests – those of middle class or poor women – are most fully being served by these NGOs.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Joya “ the Syrian Revolution.”

<sup>36</sup> See Dahi, “ Understanding the Political Economy,”; And Joya, “ the Syrian Revolt.”

<sup>37</sup> See Kabbani, “ civil Society in Syria.”

<sup>38</sup> See Kabbani, “ Civil Society”

<sup>39</sup> Personal Interview with Kabbani, April, 12, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> See Abdel Rahman, *Civil Society*; Bernal & Grewal, *Theorizing NGOs*; And Vasan, NGO as Employer.”

<sup>41</sup> See Clark and Michuki, 330)

<sup>42</sup> See Kabbani, “ Civil Society,”11)

<sup>43</sup> See Abdel Rahman, *Civil Society*

There is, however, much more to the story of gender and class divides in Jordanian and Syrian NGOs than the simple staffing predominance of the professional middle class. Both the Jordan River Foundation and the Syria Trust, like NGOs elsewhere around the world in the contemporary neoliberal period, are deeply involved in promoting entrepreneurialism as a central solution to social problems, and in fashioning what has been described as the “entrepreneurial subject” – that is, a subject who is a “self-entrepreneur,” has or seeks “economic independence,” and is characterized by being “self confident and self reliant.”<sup>44</sup> However, the gendered and entrepreneurial roles being promoted by these NGOs vary across lines of social class: in order words, there is not just one neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject being created among the women involved with these NGOs, but multiple such subject-positions, each shaped by gender and class.

There are, in fact, at least three distinct tiers of entrepreneurial subjects in the JRF and Syrian Trust. At the top level, both Queen Rania and Asma Assad are referred to and refer to themselves as “social entrepreneurs.” It is not just that they seek to train and support the poorest citizens of their countries to become “successful,” “self-reliant” and “productive” individuals, moving out of the trap of “hopelessness” and “dependence;” rather, both women are widely represented as themselves being independent, working women, who constructed high level careers for themselves in finance and technology, before creating and running their own large scale NGOs with the ambitious agendas of radically reshaping social attitudes and practices among the general.<sup>45</sup> As one Syrian journalist (and former consultant to Asma Assad) wrote in 2008:

For over 60 years, the role of Arab first ladies was confined to ... charity organizations, intellectual forums, and official ceremonies.... Things changed dramatically, however, in recent years with the coming of ... young first ladies to power in ... Amman and Damascus. They enchanted Arab societies with their grace and elegance, but soon enough, began to take on increasingly active roles as businesswomen, entrepreneurs, and nation-builders. (Moubayed, 2008)

But the entrepreneurial roles that Rania and Assad occupied as First Ladies up until the Arab spring uprisings were strongly shaped by their gender and class identities. Their privileged positions as heads of two of the most significant NGOs in their respective countries came as courtesy of their marriage to the ruling heads of state, and would not otherwise have been accessible or possible; while their relatively marginalized status in civil society rather than state leadership positions was shaped by the clearly gendered division of power and labour between state and civil society within Jordan and Syria, a pattern similar to many other countries around the world.<sup>46</sup>

At a second level, the professional middle class women who comprise the bulk of the paid workforce of the Jordan River Foundation and Syria Trust themselves constitute a different kind of neoliberal, entrepreneurial, flexible citizen-subject. In a previous era, these are

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<sup>44</sup> See Karim, “Politics of Poor,” pp. XXX; And Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession*.

<sup>45</sup> See King 2012; Malik, “Syria’s First Lady,”; And Moubayed, “A queen, A sheikha.”

<sup>46</sup> See Abdelrahman, *Civil Society*.

women who would have worked directly for the state in secure, permanent positions; now, however, they must construct themselves as flexible, enterprising subjects, who must be willing to recreate themselves constantly, as they move between various short-term, insecure, contract-based positions in the voluntary sector. Haifa Dia Al-Attia, the CEO of Queen Rania's Foundation for Education and Development (within which the JRF is situated) is a typical example: Al-Attia began her career in Jordan working directly for the Ministry of Education, before moving into independent consultancy, and then later joining Queen Rania's Foundation; Al-Attia insists on defining success not in terms of money earned or status or position of prominence achieved, but rather in terms of a more protean commitment to continually building "her expertise and experience," and focusing on "the value you add to your life and the lives of others" (quoted in Anderson, 2014). Similarly, a contract researcher who worked for the Syria Trust for three years, from 2007 to 2010, explains that:

I have worked on projects that range from mobile libraries for kids to microcredit for women in rural area, and I worked as an administrator and as a trainer. This gives me a chance to keep learning and keep recreating myself, unlike work in public or private sectors. (Personal interview, May, 2, 2009)

Clark and Michuki's study of NGOs in Jordan found that flexibility and entrepreneurship were experienced by these women as both an attraction and liability of NGO work: while NGO employees complain of the lack of job security, they also speak of being attracted to the non-profit sector for its challenge and variety: "An NGO career grows differently from careers in the private sector: horizontally and not vertically. While in the private sector you would move up the ladder, but the job would remain the same. In an NGO you are able to move around to different jobs."<sup>47</sup> Unlike Rania and Assad, these professional middle class NGO executives, employees and contract workers tend not to create or invent new projects and enterprises, but must be enterprising in their willingness to continually execute the projects and enterprises of their funders and employers. And unlike the mostly poor women of Jordan and Syria who constitute these NGOs' principal subjects and clients, they are salaried employees; and they are primarily English speaking, highly educated, and westernized in their dress and consumer tastes, forms of cultural capital which are highly shaped by their wealthy, middle and upper class family backgrounds.

Finally, on a third level, are the mostly poor women who are the primary concern and clientele of the Jordan River Foundation and Syria Trust. Both NGOs provide training and micro-finance grants to poor women to help these women develop themselves as entrepreneurs, creating small handicraft-based businesses that can form the heart of "healthier, self-reliant, aspiring communities."<sup>48</sup> Cut off from the state largesse on which Rania and Assad themselves continue to be able to draw, and blocked by a combination of poverty and state defunding of public education from being able to access even the salaried employment of the professional middle class contract employees who run the Jordan River Foundation and Syria Trust on a day-to-day basis, these women are taught by these NGOs

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<sup>47</sup> Clark and Michuki, "Women and NGO," 336.

<sup>48</sup> See Jordan River Foundation, 2004, 19; Firdos Microcredit Programme, (Website).

to look instead to themselves and their own communities for sources of economic sustenance in the contemporary neoliberal world. As one middle aged rural peasant woman participating in a JRF microcredit program reflects, NGO staff “are constantly telling us how great our culture is, and how much we can make out of it, if we just learn how to market it. We are constantly told to depend on ourselves and our communities and to think locally” (personal interview, June, 20, 2012). As a Trust trainer in Firdos Program in Syria explains,

teach rural women what they already used to do, like making pickles, provisions, jams, or even growing bees for their families, with subsidies from the state to sell in the market. The difference is now they have to live on the little money, if ever they get from these, to pay for their family’s education, their health and everything, while they used to be covered before. (Personal interview, 20 April, 2009).

This raises a further contradiction in the different gender roles and representations mobilized by Rania and Assad’s NGO projects in Jordan and Syria. It is not just that poor women are trained to expect a different relationship with the state and formal employment systems to that enjoyed by the First Ladies and their professional middle class employees; nor just that the levels of social, political and economic wealth that are attached to claims of “women’s empowerment” vary dramatically between the First Ladies, NGO staff and poor women clientele. It is also that NGOs such as the JRF and Syria Trust teach poor women in Syria and Jordan that the path to women’s empowerment lies not in turning away from “traditional” forms of Arab culture and social practice and embracing western and “modern” forms of culture and practice – as both the First Ladies and NGO staff tend to do – but rather by embracing, exploiting and more fully embedding themselves within the realm of Arab traditionalism.

Most of the microcredit programs run by both the JRF and Syria Trust are tailored to reinforcing traditional women’s work: weaving, embroidery, handicrafts of all sorts, as well as making provisions. What poor women do in their own homes becomes a commodity to be sold through the NGO to urban consumers or international tourists, through centers and fairs that promote and celebrate traditionalism and village life. In some cases, like the promotion of traditional dresses, women who weave the dresses cannot afford to buy them themselves, instead they make them for sale and consumption by upper middle class women in the cities. More than this, NGOs such as the JRF and Syria Trust seek to promote and embed neoliberal cultures of responsabilisation within the general population, by linking these cultures explicitly and directly with forms and practices of “traditional” Arab culture. Common capacity building workshops thus often start with a focus on how “Arab culture” is a “collective culture,” in which Arab people help each other and take care of each other. Queen Rania refers to traditional Arab culture as a “culture of empathy,” while Assad refers to it as a “culture of cooperation and exchange.” “We try to work within the structure of the family by providing women with work they can do inside their households and in a way to keep the traditional role,” says Maha Khatib, the CEO of the Jordan River Foundation (personal interview, April, 20, 2007). This is the same traditional Arab culture, however, that in other contexts may be criticized for its backwardness, patriarchal nature, and disempowering and oppressive impacts on Arab and Muslim women (see Karim (2014)

and Elychar (2006) for discussions of similar contradictions in NGO work with women in Bangladesh and Egypt). Ironically, then, the two First Ladies of Jordan and Syria, who are so widely held up to be the epitome of the modern, empowered and liberated Arab and Muslim woman, not only are participating directly in introducing new, neoliberal forms of governance that many argue are deeply disempowering of women (and men) in their countries, but they also turn out to be directly promoting traditional forms of women's status and work in the region – only in service of introducing and embedding a new, neoliberal form of governance.

It is important to mention, finally, that despite the similarities discussed above, there are differences in the work of the JRF and Syria Trust resulting from an array of different factors, including the different make-ups of the national economies in Jordan and Syria, different histories of political institutions and relationships, and different impacts of neoliberal reforms on the populations. These differences, however, are not the focus of this paper, and to be elucidated fully, would require further empirical research to that already conducted.

## Conclusion

At the end of her review article on the academic literature on gender in the Middle East, Charrad argues that “in many ways, scholars of gender in the Middle East are still caught in the discourse of Orientalism,” and calls for researchers “to overcome the Middle Eastern tradition/ Western modernity false binary once again ... and to be aware of the complex ground we tread on at this particular historical time.”<sup>49</sup> The period that has been analyzed here lasted only from the late 1990s through to the start of the Arab Spring uprisings at the end of 2010. In the face of widespread, popular demands for democracy throughout the Arab region, western political elites moved to distance themselves from autocratic regimes such as the Jordanian monarchy and Syrian Republic. Media portrayals and public appearances of Queen Rania declined dramatically in the wake of the uprisings; while Asma Assad, in the context of the outbreak of a brutal civil war in Syria, was vilified in the western media as being the wife of a cruel dictator, and condemned for many of the same consumerist practices for which she had previously been celebrated (Guardian, 2011). Queen Rania's Jordan River Foundation continued to operate, while the Syria Trust was closed down in 2012, after operating as a humanitarian organization for a year (Guardian 2012, Qabbani 2012). These sudden reversals and changes of fortune are clear indicators of how closely tied gender representations are to the workings of regional and global political economy.

As the region moved into a new and uncertain period post-Arab spring, new contestations over the appropriate roles and representations of Arab and Muslim women came to the foreground. One of these were not restricted to the concerns of Nagla discussed at the beginning of this article, but extends to others. For example, discussions abound about the role of women in protests especially that women participation occupied western media depiction of the revolution; claims about sexual harassment and violence in protests and

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<sup>49</sup> Charrad (2011, p. 431)

the formation of NGOs and groups to protest this; decision by the young Egyptian woman to pose naked which was depicted as liberation of the body and contested by others as enslavement of woman's body. As scholars and others move to analyze and understand these new claims about Arab and Muslim women's roles and representations, what is vital is that we move beyond a simple politics of focusing on, contesting and inverting single images, whether these be of ostensibly "traditional" and "oppressed" women, or "modern" and "liberated" women. Instead, what this article has argued for is the importance of the simultaneous analysis of different images of women in order to better understand the political economy of women images in in certain historical context.. The simultaneous analysis enables us not only to examine how different roles and representations are mobilized simultaneously for women of different class backgrounds, as they participate and are forced to participate in conjoined projects of social, political and economic reform, but also such images are subject to change and are not fixed depending on the interest of capital.

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**“ In the rural area, the trust depended on the existing organizational structures of the unions of peasants in which rural women actively participated. These women became the link between the trust and local women, either as employees or as volunteers,” according to Kabbani.<sup>50</sup> While this was not the case for JRF who had to establish these links and relations. Second, by the kinds of products produced by these NGOs, which is itself a result of the different social structures of the rural areas of Jordan and Syria. The products of Jordanian women are more textile and other Tribal artifacts, some desert herbs packaged for the tourists, while the products of the Syria trust is all sorts of food provisions, such as dried fruits and vegetables, different sorts of jams, olives produce that rural women find in abundance in the agricultural areas of Syria besides, textiles and other artifacts. “ It is important to**

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<sup>50</sup> Personal Interview with Kabbani, April, 12, 2009.

**mention here that the Syrian women who used to work in their own land before the adoption of social market economy, lost access to land due to the reverse land reform and the introduction of agribusiness to rural Syria. Most of these women were now agricultural labourers for multi national corporations, and our role in Trust was to help them create ideas around remnants of agricultural waste such as the wheat and rice stalks," says Abir, one of the rural development employee in the trust<sup>51</sup>.**

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<sup>51</sup> Personal Interview March 17, 2009.