

KEYWORDS: democracy, gender, liberalism, feminism, post-colonialism

# Postcolonial Approaches to Democracy and its Impact on Gender in Jordan

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how women experience Western democracy in Jordan. Citing dramatic religious, cultural, and social differences to the West, some academic discourses assume that the Middle East is incompatible with democracy. This paper seeks to contribute to a body of scholarship exposing this understanding of Middle Eastern governance as reductive by 1) establishing a theoretical framework that distinguishes the concept of Western democracy from liberalism and 2) analyzing this framework in relation to the lived experiences of women in Jordan. Primary research was principally conducted through interviews and surveys with women in Jordan. The majority of responses indicated that the participants desired greater levels of democracy catered towards the Middle Eastern region and Jordanian culture. Results also suggest that the majority of participants did not desire Western imposed democracy, as it aligns with neither the government nor the culture. While the survey responses gave quantitative expression to this sentiment, interviews revealed a richer and more nuanced understanding of its significance. This paper contributes to scholarship on postcolonial democracy and gender by exploring the frequently ignored experience of Middle Eastern women in “alternative” democracies.

## INTRODUCTION

Since our world is constructed around the concept of a state, that which governs the governable, we must understand why and how the people came to be governed, and by what means the state administers governance. Framed simply, a powerful actor determines what happens to the body politic, and we must understand why that is, who that is, and what avenues for improvement exist. This determination predicated fields such as political science, philosophy, and economics because the concept of the transfer of power, and the transfer of consent, carries universal relevance. The concept of the state in the Western world was founded by white men who relied on the subjugation of women and people of color to build wealth and stability. The state was not made for women, and subsequently, women have continuously fought for recognition from and equal treatment by the state. Many scholars, politicians, and media outlets view democracy as the most suitable form of governance despite its many apparent flaws. The West blames inequality and conflict around the world on the lack of democracy and suggests the appropriate mechanism for improving socioeconomic conditions internationally is democratization. Imposing Western democracy, however, has a notoriously

violent and ineffective past, specifically for women. Western democracy (referred to throughout this paper as simply “democracy”) should be dissected and critiqued so we can understand its impact on non-Western nations, beginning with the very ideas of its inception and extending to how it is practiced today.

Democracy is based on social contract theory, which rests on the idea of a universal “liberal individual” who submits to the contract in exchange for security and enough freedom to be placated. This “individual” is presented as being classless, sexless, and raceless. Social contract theory functions because this universal “liberal individual” represents all citizens who experience contractarianism the same way (Pateman, 1988). The *Sexual Contract* by Carole Pateman dismisses the presence of such a universal figure on which liberation is based, arguing that there is not a “one size fits all” model of liberation. Her critique of contractarianism is predicated on the notion that when anyone who is not a man submits to the contract, they are not afforded the same privileges for doing so (Pateman, 1988). The idea that social contract theory is universally applicable is inconsistent with the realities of social identity and demonstrates how democracy--and states built on democracy--were not created for women and consistently fail to take

women into account (Pateman, 1988).

This raises the question of if there even can be liberation under a state that operates under contractarian democracy. Democracies are thought to be inherently tied with classical liberalism, which is generally defined as respect for civil liberties (Zakaria, 1997). Since democracy enables citizens to vote, and thereby exercise one type of liberal freedom, both political actors and general public opinion erroneously conflate democracy and liberalism. Systems exist in which citizens vote in elected officials, but are afforded very little freedoms. While democracy and liberalism are not mutually exclusive, Zakaria (1997) stresses we cannot assume that with one inevitably comes the other.

With the difference between liberalism and democracy underscored, we can return to addressing whether or not contractarian democratic freedom truly constitutes “freedom.” As discussed by Guven (2015), the state shapes and contextualizes “choice,” meaning that socialization of choice is an inherent given of democratically structured states. We exchange some level of freedom to live under the social contract, and our ideas of “free choice” are based on the state’s definition of the parameters of choice. Essentially, even in Western nations functioning under Western democracy, “choice” is not necessarily always free (Guven, 2015). Democratic systems tout freedom of choice as a foundational value despite extending this freedom only within a pre-established radius—just enough to make citizens feel freedom, but not actually practice it.

The faults of democracy are further articulated when framed in the Middle Eastern context. The Middle East struggled under colonization by the British and the French until the mid-20th century, resulting in violent conflict, deposition of rulers, sectarian division, water scarcity, rentierism, and countless other issues. The region’s struggles under imposed democracy has led to problematic and reductionist dialogue about the Middle East being “incompatible with” or “not ready for” democracy. Evidence of a predisposed intolerance towards freedom in the Middle East is unpersuasive, and arguments that locate the cause of authoritarian rule with the region’s people are largely baseless. Studies on the “robustness of authoritarianism” (Bellin, 2004) confirm the faults of these hypotheses. Building on these similar works, this investigation argues that a more compelling exercise is to analyze the way non-Western forms of democracy function in non-Western societies. This requires relocating attention and criticism towards the system itself and away from the people experiencing the system. Democracy holds a significant degree of theodician grammar (Guven, 2015), which normatively subscribes it as “true,” thereby limiting analyses of it from an empirical standpoint. Based on this conceptual framework, this paper seeks to analyze the flaws of democracy and the failure of its imposition by refocusing

these theories around the lived experiences of women in Jordan. Through primary interviews and surveys, I aim to contribute to a broader dialogue on how women engage with systems modeled on Western democratic institutions in the Middle East.

Examining gender complicates this analysis and warrants particular attention at the outset, especially given my own identity as a white American woman. The lens of gender reveals an inclination within the West to “save” Middle Eastern women by bringing democracy to “liberate” them. The imposition of democracy in Middle Eastern states affects the entire population, but women experience the reverberations of these impositions in a more acute and unique way.

In her foundational piece titled, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” Leila Abu-Lughod (2002) dissects hypocrisies in the U.S. approach to democratization. Abu-Lughod specifically cites examples from a speech by Laura Bush in support of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, in which Bush asserted that “the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women and girls” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). This rhetoric reinforces the narrative that when the U.S. invades Muslim nations, it is doing so both to instill democracy and to “save” oppressed women. This narrative perpetuates views of Middle Eastern countries as antiquated traditional societies that infantilize and subjugate women, and dismisses the agency of women living in these societies. This perspective furthermore posits the U.S. as the sole bearer of democracy and the sole entity capable of bringing liberation. Bush’s statement also conflates liberalism and democracy by claiming that democratization is inherently tied to women’s liberation. The track record of U.S. intervention on behalf of democracy does little to support the idea that such intervention brings women’s liberation. The deposition of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 reveals how U.S. intervention can create long-term, and specifically gendered, violence and conflict. When the U.S. deposes a ruler, the subsequent power vacuum gives way to sectarian conflict or civil war, all of which are characterized by mass rape as weapons of war. Additionally, the creation of such conflict creates mass migration and refugee crises, which women suffer acutely from due to resource scarcity and prioritization. It is therefore imperative to problematize moral claims informing Western intervention and recognize the capacity in which these claims mobilize public support and frame public perception of the Middle East in politically contentious decisions.

This moral narrative is widespread and normalized in the Western world. Laura Bush is but one example in a sea of misled rhetoric and ideas that are spread about Middle Eastern women and democracy. It is crucial to consider the negative consequences of this rhetoric on the lived experiences of Middle Eastern women. Women are often pushed and pulled between justifying the imposition

of democracy with a savior narrative appealing to the alleged “subjugation” of women and the critical analysis of the imposition that ignores women entirely.

Furthermore, the concept of democracy is contradictory in expressing concern for the plight of Middle Eastern women when it was founded on ideas that exclude women. Critics of democracy are equally hypocritical as they seldom address the role of women in fighting for liberation and the way gender functions within the imposed system. We must study gender in both of these contexts because it is critical to understand the social identities present within government systems; otherwise, we will not understand the faults of that system nor how to progress.

My interest in this area of research stems from the question: *Who has power over women, and why?* The existence of Western influence and politics is deeply and persistently pertinent to the Middle East. Women live under systems of government, democratic or not, that routinely diminish their civil liberties and challenge their inalienable rights. The experience of women living under Western colonial democracies in the global south or Eastern nations with gender-based oppression is unique and often under-examined in public discourse. The goal of my research is to align these experiences at the intersection of postcolonial studies, gender studies, and democratic theory through primary fieldwork.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Postcolonial democracy is by no means a new topic of study and has ignited intense debates concerning the complexities of examining an omnipresent practice regarded by most observers to be the best course of political action. This literature review aims to analyze, in a logical procession, the critiques of democracy and proposed alternatives, in a way that distinguishes criticisms of democracy from disregard for human rights and emphasizes the necessity for adapted and reformed democratic processes in societies where traditional Western practices have not sufficed.

One of the most foundational theorists of postcolonial democracy is Fareed Zakaria, who wrote a groundbreaking piece titled, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” (1997). In this piece, he discusses the difference between liberalism and democracy. He claims that our biggest fault is assuming the two go hand in hand, when in reality they do not always coincide with one another. When we associate democracy with liberalism, we limit our ability to critique democracy as an institution that is not inherently liberal. Zakaria also points out key examples of hypocrisy within discourse about democracy by explaining how we avoid critiquing countries that are liberal but not democratic. We often make statements about what constitutes a “good” government without critically engaging with those assertions. This overall dissonance can be summarized

by the West’s “obsession with balloting” (Zakaria, 1997) rather than with liberal human rights, which he believes is more important. The distinction and dissonance between democracy and liberalism is key to this study, because it is important to distinguish that my critique of democracy does not translate into a critique for general human rights. My paper relies on the idea that democracy does not inherently provide human rights and that variations of the system warrant further consideration.

Ferit Guven, another popular theorist, wrote “Decolonizing Democracy: Intersections of Philosophy and Postcolonial Theory” (2015). In this paper, he describes democracy as a “theodicean grammar” (Guven, 2015, p. 4). This term explains the effort to reconcile “omnipotent goodness” with “omnipotent iniquity” (Guven, 2015, p. 4). In this way, “political failing cannot be the consequence of the system’s order; rather, it is an aberration or the result of poor execution” (Guven, 2015, p. 4). Here, Guven (2015) essentially describes the way democracy is never held at fault. The system of democracy is always perceived as right, even when it is wrong. When democracy fails, it is never because of the system itself, but because it was not executed properly.

This connects to Zakaria’s study while deepening the critique of democracy as a separate, and failing, practice and institution. According to Guven, we have accustomed ourselves to democracy as the inherent good to the extent that we blind ourselves to critiquing it. Guven goes even further with his critique to the core of democracy, being the concept of “individual choice.” He explains that democracy, and politics in general, tends to reshape and contextualize our “individual choices” within the system itself. Therefore, socialization is an intentional process, thereby reducing the influence of true “individual choice,” the supposed baseline of liberal democracy. Freedom is always tied to some level of “influence,” which can be perceived as “subjugation” (Guven, 2015). Guven’s critique mirrors the feminist critique of social contract theory, which emphasizes that there is no such thing as true “consent of the governed,” and that the basis for such consent is inherently sexist, classist, and racist. Guven’s analysis of democracy as a colonial power and its relation to the failures of contractarianism reveals what “democracy” stands for and the flaws of its inception. This analysis follows Zakaria’s in distinguishing between illiberal and liberal democracies, allowing us to properly understand the faults of both.

Carole Pateman (1988) delivers the core feminist critique of social contract theory in *The Sexual Contract*. In this piece, she explores the idea that freedom is instilled upon a “classless, raceless, and sexless” “liberal individual” (Pateman, 1988). However, this disregards the importance of factoring social identity into liberation movements. She also critiques the overly generalizing language to describe populations that often erases gender, such as simply “the public,” or “civil society” (Pateman, 1988). The

contract is the most fundamental way the patriarchy is upheld, she argues, because it redistributes and reassigns power amongst those who already have it.

Beyond baseline theorists, I looked next for a work that used a case study to prove the validity of “alternative democracies.” In “Rethinking Postcolonial Democracy: An Examination of the Politics of Lower-Caste Empowerment in Northern India” by Jeffrey Witsoe (2011), he explains that it is necessary for the field of anthropology to “theorize democratic difference” (Witsoe, 2011, p. 621) by questioning the idea of universality and normativity. His work is built upon the work of David Nugent (2008) who studied “divergent state formations” which necessitate divergent forms of liberalism and/or democracy. He says because modern-day “alternate democracies” emerged from different state formations than that of Western democracies, they must be measured on their own trajectory. We cannot speak about them comparatively, as though they are “emerging,” “developing,” or even as “transitional”; we must only refer to them as “alternative” (Witsoe, 2011). These terms are reductionist and ignorant of historical and cultural perspectives, both of which are key aspects of modern government structure. He uses the caste system of northern India to explain how democracy can be viewed as being “illiberal” by Western standards because it is not focused on the idea of “individual rights.” However, this does not mean it is a bad democracy. It simply reflects a culture that is not individualistic, as expressed by their government. This work incorporates ideas from Zakaria (1997) and Guven (2015), yet expands upon them in an anthropological sense by analyzing the concept of “divergent state formations” and its relation to culture.

“Non-Western Theories of Democracy” by Mark Chou and Emily Beausoleil (2015) aims to highlight democratic innovations and achievements in non-Western nations and societies. This article describes three reasons to expand scholarship on non-Western democracy, being the normative demand, the practical argument, and an epistemological need. The normative demand says in order to be democratically inclusive, we must also be inclusive to that which is not democratic. The practical argument states that studying alternate democracies may shed light on problems that our own Western democracies are facing. We stand to learn much about ourselves by studying others, especially in a time of Western democratic crisis. The epistemological need stems from the need to “update” our readings and studies because critical scholarship requires constant evolution (Chou & Beausoleil, 2015). This article also describes how unfortunate it is that even people who have “practiced or lived under or fought for democracy” have trouble “identifying” with its label because it is so tied to the West (Chou & Beausoleil, 2015, p. 4). It cites Zakaria, showing a clear connection between my readings. Chou and Beausoleil’s work is significant specifically because

it is not theory-heavy, and instead presents a concrete argument as to why it is imperative to study non-Western forms of democracy within academia.

I chose these works to reveal the far reaching extent of the work in this field, and to establish a wide base for my study. The primary shortcoming of these works is their failure to address gender in general. We cannot discuss culturally sensitive and socially critical democracies without addressing cultural relativism, social identity, and the specific case of Muslim and Middle Eastern women within Western liberal discourse. Leila Abu-Lughod wrote the highly popular and intelligent piece entitled, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” (2002). She unpacks stereotypes about Muslim and Middle Eastern women held by “colonial feminists”—usually described as white Western women whose brand of feminism is ignorant of non-white women’s needs (Abu Lughod, 2002). She also effectively dismantles the Western justification for intervention in the Middle East and the way they often exploit supposed Middle Eastern weakness to defend military action. She devotes significant time in her piece to the idea that “veiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786). Acknowledging that Muslim women find empowerment within the veil is a key aspect of intersectional feminism, as it reaffirms Muslim women’s right to choose despite what some Western women may view as “oppressive.” Abu-Lughod says during her 20 years of fieldwork in Egypt, she never once came across a woman who was jealous of American women. If anything, she writes, they are “suspicious of” and “confused by [American women’s] lifestyles and beliefs” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 788). Abu-Lughod’s piece represents eons of work done by Muslim women about feminism and liberation within an Islamic context. This work is necessary, given that many Western and colonial feminist scholars do not believe Islamic feminism even exists. This work is a perfectly packaged example of Middle Eastern postcolonial feminism and serves as a baseline source for such ideas throughout my study.

These sources serve as a foundation for complex theories about democracy and liberalism. However, a significant portion of my paper attempts to connect these postcolonial theories to postcolonial gender theory. I reference many other works outside of those in this review to further the depth of my discussion. My own field research exemplifies how these theories are not only exhibited in intellectual circles but actually felt by women living under postcolonial democratic systems.

## METHODOLOGY

To research women’s experiences under Western imposed democracy, I conducted interviews with five women: a student, a journalist, an academic, a business owner, and an activist. I connected with my interviewees

through organizations in Amman that focus on women and prominent individuals in the gender equality field in Jordan. The youngest woman (the student) is 20 years old, while the rest are between the ages of 30-50 years old. All are educated (graduated from or are currently attending university). Three of them are Palestinian-Jordanian, one is Syrian-Jordanian, and one is Jordanian-Jordanian, which reflects the general demographic of Jordan; according to the World Population Review, there are about 1.95 million Palestinians and over 500,000 Syrians living in Jordan. I also administered a survey to an introductory biology class at the University of Jordan. I chose the class specifically because it is a core requirement with a variety of students. This aimed to reduce bias in the answers I received, as the students ranged from being unknowledgeable to being well versed in the topic. The surveys and the interviews followed the same script of questions, excluding a few minor changes I made to the interview questions because of time constraints or relevance to the conversation.

I developed specific questions with carefully constructed wording, which I used for both the interviews and surveys. I repeatedly used the word “democratic” and did not distinguish between democracy and liberalism. Most people do not differentiate the two, and I felt it may be too cerebral and confusing for people who may have no exposure to the topic. For the purposes of this survey, when my questions use the word “democracy,” it references the general idea of liberal democracy. When analyzing my findings, I recalled that when an interviewee says she wants more democracy in Jordan, she means more liberal democracy. This is specified so that my findings do not seem as though I am backtracking in original claims.

I was fortunate that no one I interviewed required a translation service. However, the surveys had to be translated out loud by a professor in my program. I had three interviewees sign consent forms, while the other two gave verbal consent because they did not want to be “tied” to their responses; I will not be naming them or providing any identifying information. At the beginning of the interview, I explained the purpose of my paper, asked if they would like to read more about it, if they would like me to send the finished work to them, and if I could use their name in the paper. I took notes during the interviews and followed up via email with the interviewees afterwards.

One major obstacle I did not anticipate was the extreme variance in the understanding of the word “democracy.” Some people knew I was referencing the process of voting in elected officials, but some interviewees answered by giving examples of how they practice democracy in their lives. For example, one interviewee described a decentralized system of running her company that involved invoking majority vote to make changes. To understand the way they experience

the former interpretation of democracy rather than the latter, I reframed the question. After my first interview, I learned how to better phrase my questions, changing the wording and adding some questions that were tailored to the individual interviewees’ experience and life (for example, I asked the journalist specifically about what it is like to be a female reporter asking difficult questions about gender).

Another obstacle I did not anticipate was the backlash from one of my interviewees. In my fifth interview, the professor I spoke to immediately dismissed the relevance of my topic, saying that she “really hates working with women” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 27, 2018). In the entirety of the interview, she critiqued my questions and made our interview difficult by refusing to answer my questions. I did not expect to meet a woman who did not want to talk about this issue because I reached out to mainly professionals. Although, in retrospect, it is perfectly reasonable for a woman to not feel strongly about women’s issues, regardless of her profession. This assumption is problematic in that it homogenizes all women into one group of thought and suggests that women all think the same way. I will address this notion more in my findings section.

It was also slightly difficult to confirm interviews with organizations. There were many groups whose opinion would have been valuable to include, but it was difficult to secure their participation. Instead, I am relying on secondary research about their organizations to contribute to my study. The most significant barrier as a researcher was my own identity and position. Studying gender in the Middle East as a white American woman played into many stereotypical tropes about gender research and theory. It was important that I distance myself from the negative history and connotations of white women traveling to the Middle East and conducting research in pursuit of Orientalist colonial-feminist self-affirmation. I tried to phrase my questions with such wording that did not exhibit pre-conceived, expected bias from a white woman. I spoke to my interviewees before we began the interview about how my study was focused on centering their experiences as opposed to my beliefs for this project to encourage honest responses. To avoid negative assumptions, I also tried to present my work not as a study of “women,” but as a study of “Western democracy.” Framing my work outside of gender made people talk to me differently and allowed me to avoid many stereotypes about people studying gender when conducting my research.

Additionally, I am not fluent in Arabic. This presents a translation issue, even though I was fortunate enough to have interviewees that all felt comfortable speaking English. Regardless, there is no way to translate everything--especially not emotion--into English, so there may have been issues with tonality, phrasing, and colloquialism, among others, that may have affected my

understanding of the interviews and of the surveys.

I tried to seek out varied experience with people both removed from and within the field so I could gain a more accurate view of people's understandings and feelings of their democratic situation. I expected to receive different responses, given the sensitive and highly individualized nature of the topic of the questions. While some have violently radical beliefs about women's liberation under the oppression of Western government, many do not. Data collected by those indifferent towards the topic is just as relevant and significant as the more extreme findings. Based off of this research, I have been able to piece together enough information to formulate a coherent analysis explaining my findings and how they support my theoretical framework. It is important to emphasize that though the data may appear digressive in some capacities, it is beneficial in advancing an understanding of women's experiences under Western imposed democracy.

## FINDINGS

### Survey

Throughout my research, I paid close attention to the experiences of women living in Jordan. In addition to conducting individual interviews and surveys for the study, informal ethnographic research through everyday encounters also informed the conclusions. To be a woman in the Middle East bears much weight, and thus many women in Jordan are acutely aware of it, even if that acute awareness entails rejecting the social implications of that identity entirely. One cannot understand a society--or be a good scholar--without understanding or studying its women. I believe my experience in Jordan and the findings of my research help evidence this assertion.

To begin, I will analyze my survey findings. I put slightly more weight in my survey findings than my interview findings for several reasons: the responses were anonymous, the participants were randomly selected and were explicitly not professionals, and the language, question type, length of interview, and other written factors were consistent. When presented with a question about the government's address of gender, there were three choices: "not at all," "somewhat," and "very much." The overwhelming response, contrary to expectations, was "somewhat." In addition, at times there were handwritten comments in the margins of the paper with comments such as, "Well, this depends on..." or "I think this could work in theory, but not in practice," or "I'm not sure about this answer." The graph in Figure 1 displays the responses, measured out of total responses received in the survey.

While it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from such data, these findings reveal the capacity in which gender and democracy are hidden. More often than not, respondents did not have extremely strong views on this topic. It can be difficult to ascertain a strong response

for that reason. The variety of responses represents how complex these questions are, to the point where "somewhat" may have been the only feasible response, as it may have been too difficult to make a definitive claim. This is also evidenced by the additional responses written in the margins. I was reaffirmed in this belief when three female students from the class thanked me afterwards for doing research on a hidden and complex topic. They said, "Not many people in Jordan are talking about this, so I'm glad you are."

A question on my survey that warrants particular attention is question number three, which asks, "To what extent do you feel Western culture has influenced your ideas of democracy?" This question had the most varied response of any question on the survey. The graph in Figure 2 shows the distribution of the responses.

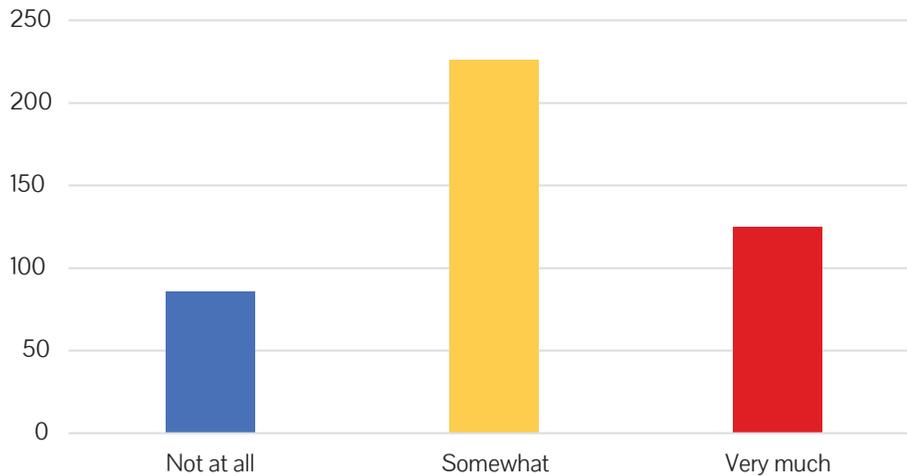
"Somewhat" had the highest number of responses at 27. However, the two extremes--"not at all" and "very much"--had 13 and 12 responses, respectively. This is the most equal division of responses between the two extreme answers throughout my survey. Three people left this question blank.

From the variety of responses, this question was one of--if not the most--controversial questions on the survey. People are more familiar with or have more extreme views on the topic, which further accounts for the more extreme responses. The three blank responses further indicate the complexity of the topic. Based on ethnographic observations, this reflects the general attitude of Jordanians to the idea of "changing culture," wherein the influx of refugees from Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, as well as an increase in Western funding and influence, has changed Jordanian culture for the better or for the worse, depending on one's perspective. It was compelling that the class randomly selected to survey had an overwhelming majority of women; this was not intentional and the presence of men in the class was a valuable contribution to the study.

### Interviews

Since the interviewees were passionate, intelligent, and interesting, results were rich and varied. The interviews could capture emotion, tonality, facial expression, environment, and the specificity of vocabulary used to describe the participants' experience. Though the interviews were centralized on one experience or individual, the narratives were valuable to the research because of the depth and breadth conveyed.

The first interview was with Lina Khalifeh, the founder and owner of SheFighter, a women's self-defense and empowerment studio in Amman. Khalifeh teaches boxing, kickboxing, martial arts, self-defense, and general fitness. Her studio is the first of its kind in the Middle East and has won countless international awards and recognition. Khalifeh travels around the world to teach and speak about women's empowerment. She has



**FIGURE 1.** | Cumulative responses to survey questions



**FIGURE 2.** | Responses to perception of Western influence in Jordan

a tenuous relationship with the government as a female business owner, saying she “[doesn’t] want any support from [the government], [she] just want[s] [them] to not talk to [her]” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 9, 2018). She explained that the government does not support businesses like SheFighter despite claiming to support education because “they do not see this as education” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 9, 2018). She emphasized this point, saying she contributes to one of the government’s goals, but because it’s focused on women, they do not approve of it. When asked whether or not Western democracy should be implemented in Jordan, her tone changed. She talked less about the importance of SheFighter and more about the Arab world as a whole. “We saw what happened in other Arab countries,” she said. “It’s so hard to give people who

have been oppressed for so long freedom,” describing the way Arab governments turn democratic and usually fail. “If the current system were to be changed, there would be chaos” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 9, 2018). Khalifeh described what is already well documented in academic literature--the track record of Western forces turning Arab states democratic is notoriously violent, as evidenced in Iraq with the deposition of Saddam Hussein.

The next interview was with a female journalist at a prominent daily newspaper. Since she preferred to not sign a written consent form for this interview, she will remain unidentified. When asked about the implementation of Western democracy in Jordan, she said, “I don’t know if U.S. democracy should come to Jordan because there is not necessarily a true democracy anywhere...You cannot

find this truly in any country; there’s always something” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 15, 2018). By “something,” she is observing a seemingly persistent impediment to democracy in some way or another. This woman was educated in the U.S. and works as a professional journalist, and therefore had previous exposure to such topics. Her tonality and expression during the interview reflected how dialogues about democracy are presented differently in the East and the West. In the U.S., such a statement would either not be understood or not received well. She went further to clarify that “the culture” does not need to be altered, but “worked on,” correcting the false dichotomy between culture and democracy. She said, “People interpret culture wrongly and use it as an excuse. It takes time for people to realize that empowering women reflects on the entire society” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 15, 2018).

The next interviewee was a woman who works for a women’s rights organization funded by the government. She works on projects implemented by the government related to women’s rights, which implies her leanings may be relatively more pro-government. She also did not sign a written consent form, so she will remain anonymous. From the outset, she had many contributions to articulate. Before any questions were asked, she interrupted the description of the project, saying, “Well, democracy cannot be represented without women. If women aren’t engaged, then it’s not a democracy” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 19, 2018). She opened, “It’s very important to understand that Jordan has no resources, all we have is human resources, so we must invest those resources in women” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 19, 2018). This statement reflects a widely held belief among development professionals that gender equality reflects economic development successes and investing in women yields large economic returns that are indicative of other societal metrics of success (e.g. greater levels of education, increased levels of healthy births resulting in healthier people, and greater involvement in the workforce (World Economic Forum)). Our conversation moved to discussing what democracy means in her life. She gave a unique answer, saying, “I feel democracy is not political. It affects every aspect of my life and my work and is represented in everything I do. It doesn’t change the way politics does” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 19, 2018). This answer reflects how not all of the interviewees interpreted democracy in the same way. For this woman, democracy was something pervasive in her life. It was always around her, so she never thought of it as something tied to only governance. After pressing further and asking how Western thought influences her beliefs, she responded, “No, I have my own thoughts about democracy” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 19, 2018).

1.	To what extent do you feel the government addresses the needs of your gender?
	a. Not at all
	b. Somewhat
	c. Very much
2.	How much change needs to occur for you to feel like the government is addressing the needs of your gender?
	a. Not much
	b. Some change
	c. Very much change
3.	To what extent do you feel Western culture has influenced your ideas of democracy?
	a. Not at all
	b. Somewhat
	c. Very much
4.	Do you feel that Western styles of democracy should be implemented in Jordan?
	a. Not at all
	b. Somewhat
	c. Very much
5.	To what extent do you wish Jordan was more democratic?
	a. Not at all
	b. Somewhat
	c. Very much
6.	To what extent do you feel your experiences living in Jordan would be improved if Jordan was more democratic?
	a. Not at all
	b. Somewhat
	c. Very much
7.	Do you feel that your culture needs to change in order for Jordan to become more democratic?
	a. Not at all
	b. Somewhat
	c. Very much
8.	Do you feel that your gender prevents you from participating in democracy?
	a. Not at all
	b. Somewhat
	c. Very much

**TABLE 1.** | Survey Questions

-	To what extent do you feel the government addresses the needs of your gender?
-	How much of a democracy would you consider Jordan to be?
-	How important is democracy to you?
-	To what extent do you feel Western values have influenced your understandings of democracy?
-	To what extent (if any) do you feel your culture needs to change for Jordan to become more democratic?

**TABLE 2.** | Interview Questions

The fourth interview was with a woman who requested to be interviewed while at SheFighter. She signed a written consent form, but preferred to go unnamed. She is a junior at Petra University majoring in English and the granddaughter of pre-Assad Syrian immigrants. She began by clarifying the wording of my first question, saying, “You can’t say ‘Jordanian democracy,’ you have to say ‘Jordanian/British democracy’” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 21, 2018). She continued, “The West affected me enough, but we’re not able to practice it the same way. It’s a whole different system here, a whole different ideology. It serves the same purpose, just in a different way” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 21, 2018). She paused and explained that she was struggling to formulate the right words in English, which was one of the more prominent examples of research limitations associated with the language barrier. Finally, she said, “Okay, I’ll give you an example. Both shawarma and burgers are good, but you don’t have to like both. Arabs aren’t good at making burgers and Americans aren’t good at making shawarma, but this doesn’t mean that either one can’t cook” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 21, 2018). This analogy encompasses ideas of cultural relativism and alternative democratic systems that are frequently discussed in academic literature. Next, I asked her if she feels that “Arabs should learn how to make burgers,” to draw on her analogy. She said, “Maybe you can make Arabs learn, but then it’s not democracy because it’s enforced. If it was, it wouldn’t be Arab, so it wouldn’t work for Arab people.” I continued to ask how the culture and the government can connect to create a stronger democracy. She said, “The culture is not mistaken, it’s misused. It doesn’t have to change--if anything, it has to be revived” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 21, 2018). She closed the interview by saying, “I just wish the whole region was more peaceful. Then we can focus on democracy” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 21, 2018). This observation arguably carries the most importance in the interview. In the West, we associate peace with democracy. There is a prevailing idea that when we bring democracy, peace inevitably follows. Her comment suggested the opposite to be true. For people living under such brutal oppression and war, establishing a democracy is secondary to having food on the table and being able to sleep at night without fear of being bombed. This reveals a fundamental disconnect between the way the West and East view themselves. The differing value system is reflected in our politics and our rhetoric. This connects directly to the Witsoe piece referenced in the literature review, which asks: if one culture is not individualistic, why should its government be?

The fifth and final interview was with Dr. Oroub Al Abed, an author, activist, and professor at the University of Jordan. She immediately expressed reluctance in exploring the topic, saying, “I really hate working with

gender. I don’t like women’s issues. I’m not a big fan of this topic” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 27, 2018). For the duration of the interview, Dr. Al Abed did little to address the pre-set questions and reconstructed specific formulations in the questions. In one instance, she requested I use the term “public participation” instead of “democracy.” She subsequently described her perspective on the fault of British rule in Jordan, and her experience working with women in Irbid. She explained how she met several women whose only motivation for employment was to leave home and find a husband. After concluding her narrative, she asked, “What do women’s rights people say of this? Is this empowerment?” (E. Anderson, personal communication, November 21, 2018). This raises a question that is representative of major divisions in gender theory. Her critique represents precisely how varied and widespread the beliefs on gender in Jordan are. It was valuable to gain an opposing viewpoint, as it is indicative of the larger debate within gender theory across the globe.

## CONCLUSION

There is an important distinction in the dissonance and consonance between academics and activists, theories and real lives. I predicted my research would echo the hypothesis and existing theoretical frameworks since oppressed people are often acutely aware of their oppression, generally understanding these theories as an inherent truth. These theories take academics years to develop and articulate despite being reflected in the everyday lived experiences of the subjects of their research.

One of the most notable conclusions from the field research came from a frequent informal exchange. Upon hearing the subject of my research, many in Jordan would ask, “So what’s your point?” I responded that the project essentially aimed to demonstrate how Western democracy was both ineffective in the Middle East and harmful to women in this context. This description was met with unquestioning affirmations. Western scholars struggle to understand how democracy in the Middle East functions and why it is failing in the region. The approach ought to shift in order for Western scholars to find clarity. The experiences of common Jordanians combined with critical analysis of existing scholarship help the answers start to come out of the woodwork. The conclusions of this study provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence that Western imposition of democracy has a limited ability to function in contrasting cultures. Since this knowledge may be inherent to some but hidden to others, this research remains a necessity. The conclusions furthermore suggest that the theoretical foundation could be advanced if studies were more frequently centered around the voices of the women directly impacted by the structures we examine. Women

bear so much, and when given the space, they teach so much.

Much of my research revealed tangible examples of academic divisions in gender theory, which is another connection that predicated the findings. The emphasis on lived experience in framing the study yielded results that were consistent with academic theory, thereby legitimizing the findings. These sources of legitimacy established the significance of quantitative data in this field and supported the overall thesis regarding gendered experiences under alternative democracies.

During a press conference at the Jordanian National Commission for Women on the first day of the United Nations 16 Days of Action to End Gender-Based Violence in late 2018, the Canadian Ambassador to Jordan spoke. He delivered his speech in fluent Arabic, then again in English. He was wearing an orange scarf, the color to symbolize the 16 Days of Action, and spoke confidently

and emphatically about the plight of women across the world. Towards the end of his speech, he began to discuss the ways in which Canada can support Jordan to continue to be a “leader” in the Middle East on gender equality. After saying this, he paused slightly and added, “We’re not here to impose on you, we want to empower the work you’re already doing.” His awareness of issues with the idea of “imposition” was striking, especially when I learned it was not written in his original speech, but added on by him as an afterthought. This demonstrated impulse of sensitivity towards culturally relevant forms of gender empowerment is encouraging and hopefully will continue to inform both political and academic discourse. While it is difficult to assess whether this reflects Canadian policy or merely the intellect of an individual, his words hold a great deal of meaning to anyone who was listening close enough.

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## About the Author

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Emma is a junior from Nyack, New York majoring in International Affairs with minors in Arabic and Gender Studies, and an alumna of the Women's Leadership Program. Her research interests are democracy, gender, and development. Emma is currently an intern at Freedom House and studied abroad in both Jordan and South Africa. She also has a weekly talk show on WRGW District Radio as well as a podcast published with the Elliott School.

She would like to thank her mom, Dylan Jones, and Eslam Waheed, for making her a better feminist.

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