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In search of a new vanguard

Women and digital activism in the *Global South*

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Abstract

This study explores the historical relevance social movement vanguards within the framework of Marxian scientific socialism, while ascertaining the emergence of women as drivers of connective action in digitally enabled movements (DEMs). While the rhizomic structures of social movements have thrived on the spontaneity of emerging cells of social activist leaders, this study contests the claims of contradictions between spontaneity and vanguardism in DEMs. The study adopts the case study methodology to establish how technology affords more visibility to female icons of social movements by drawing examples from Sudan, Lebanon and Nigeria. Data was sourced from primary literature, digital archives and newspaper reports to tease out the history and current dynamics of women's roles in social movements. It uses vanguardism as the conceptual framework for teasing out the intersections of gender, age, identity and technology as observed in DEMs. The study thus contends that technology plays important roles in restructuring the power dynamics of social action by showcasing how women such as Alaa Salah (Sudan), Malak Alawiye Herz (Lebanon) and Aisha Yesufu (Nigeria) emerged as icons of DEMs. It concludes that the weaponization of female bodies has become a potent form of resistance against the gendered biopolitics of sexual objectification and the necropolitics of state repression. The study thus advocates an all-inclusive approach to understanding the structures of social movements in recentring the iconic roles of women during connective action and physical protests. This is to enable the balance between vanguardism and spontaneity that is requisite for effective social action in the digital age.

Keywords: Vanguardism; Connective Action; Women and Digitally-enabled Movements (DEMs)

1. Introduction: Vanguardism at the intersection of gender and age

'As to the authority of the husband, this has always been weaker among the poor peasants because, out of economic necessity, their womenfolk have to do more manual labour than the women of the richer classes and therefore have more say and greater power of decision in family matters. With the increasing bankruptcy of the rural economy in recent years, the basis for men's domination over women has already been weakened. With the rise of the peasant movement, the women in many places have now begun to organize rural women's associations; the opportunity has come for them to lift up their heads, and the authority of the husband is getting shakier every day.' (Tse Tung 1967, pp. 46-47)

Chairman Mao Tse Tung's 1927 report on the peasant revolution in Hunan Province indicated how the changing economic dynamics were redefining gender roles in China. He specifically highlighted the leadership roles been assumed by women in terms of organizing, in order to sustain the revolutionary turn of the era. There is no doubt that women have been an integral part of the notion and drive for revolutionary change over time across different geographies. However, their roles have been predominantly underscored as subservient within patriarchally dominant accounts of social history (see Sklar and Dublin 2011; Ardener, Armitage-Woodward and Sciama 2016). In recent times, the democratization of information dissemination, and by extension historical documentation, has enhanced the visibility of women's leadership roles within social movements. As such, with the proliferation of multiple avenues for documentation, as afforded by the technological turn of the digital age (even in real time), women now have better visibility for their narratives that were hitherto repressed by patriarchal gatekeepers (see Crymble 2021). This thus provides them leverage to serve as new vanguards amidst the spontaneity of digital activism of the present. This study attempts a historical contextualization of social activism through the hermeneutical interpretation of vanguardism across time and space. Data was sourced using primary literature, digital archives and newspaper reports to establish technological affordances of female iconography amidst the spontaneity of collective action.

The relevance of this to the present context has been underscored by Tarrow's (2011, pp. 5-6) observation that the prevalent drives of social activism across the globe have led scholars to postulate that the world was becoming a 'social movement society.' More than a decade after, this assertion holds true due to the fact that social activism has evolved into a borderless reality, where digital mobilization efforts defy geographical, class and gender boundaries. Within the latter consideration, it is important to reflect on how women are changing the dynamics of social movements today. As activists continue to contend policies and demand change from governments across societies that are plagued with the contradictions of class-dependent hierarchies of inequality, women have continued to determine the iconic turn of emerging movements by leveraging the digital media. In exploring the increasing visibility of women and their role as vanguards within social movements in the digital age, this study situates the evolution of social activism within certain historical considerations. As a start point, Larmer's (2010, pp. 252-253) assertion that there is no agreed framework for characterizing what social movements entail is quite instructive. According to him, these movements evolve as enduring institutions (such as trade unions and civil society organizations), spontaneous temporary agitation groups, or a combination of both. Within the *Global South*, the high rates of job insecurity in the formal labour sectors have led to the professionalisation of activism in different countries. This has resulted in the extension of demands beyond workers' rights to other causes like the protection of environmental rights, women rights, and religious freedom; often led by labour activists laid off from formal employment. In recent times, these protests have been shaped by the spontaneity characterizing new social movements. This is such that they accommodate rhizomic structural engagements in expressing what Gerbaudo (2017) christens citizenism. This concept explains how citizens constitute independent yet interconnected cells, without centralized leadership structures, for mobilization, organization and coordination of social action. One major reason adduced for the emergence of these spontaneous structures is the distrust of institutional leadership within movements; resulting in what Castells (2012) calls 'antiestablishment tendencies,' whereby trust in individuals[1] displaces institutional trust. This individualization of action, thus, paved the way for the deconstruction of structured gendered norms and actions, based on the affordances of technology as will be detailed in subsequent sections.

Following from the above, Sapkota (2021, p. 6) noted a shift in the theoretical paradigm of social movements leading to the postulation of the New Social Movement Theory that became dominant in the 1960s and 1970s, and was detailed in Melucci's 1984 *Altri Codici*. He specifically highlighted how new

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[1] This expression of trust within the digital media is captured in the creation of influencers, who play dominant roles in digital mobilization as agenda setters of today. The influencer role is often determined by the large number of followers and activities on social media handles and pages, mostly due to celebrity status.

actors became independent of formal institutions in creating new engagement strategies, networking procedures, group identities (see also Johnston 2019) and interests, within mainly decentralized structures. This decentralization enabled the democratization of power, which could be wielded in multiple locations irrespective of gender, racial or class affiliation. The evolution of decentralized structures within social movements has also influenced their ideological components as Veltmeyer (2017, pp. 66-67) documented in his study of new movements in Latin America. According to him, activist causes have evolved from 19th Century class activism of the first industrial revolution, through countering neoliberal policies of the second and third industrial revolutions, to the environmental rights struggle (including the management of E-wastes) characterizing the fourth industrial revolution. This evolutionary trend, though, has yet to reflect the needed revolutionary turn capable of challenging subsisting strongholds of global capitalism, which continues to dictate the pace for economic engagements. He subsequently advocated for the reinvigoration of global political leftist traditions through vibrant and effective vanguardism. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s likewise leveraged decentralized leadership structures through the development of community-based leadership, strong grassroot bases, and rotational executive leadership; following Ella Baker's proposition that 'strong movements don't need strong leaders.' The committee thus provided equal access to leadership positions, which was to the advantage of minority groups, and subsequently stimulated more commitments from members (see Robnett 2002, pp. 269-270).

Earlier, Mandel (1983, p. 3) postulated that the path to success for socialist revolution, far from being spontaneous, ought to be premised on societal restructuring. This entails organizing to abolish bourgeoisie suppression towards attaining a classless society, and requires a high level of consciousness. This approach led to the successes of Germany's Revolutionaire Obleute during the 1918 revolution, and the Bolshevik party in Russia's 1905 and 1917 revolutions (Madel 1983, pp. 9-10). Lenin was also critical of the view that the spontaneity of the proletariat movement could propel it to state leadership. He rather maintained that spontaneity would only perpetuate bourgeoisie ideology among the proletariat. Subsequently, he reiterated the need for an effective vanguard comprising intellectuals and professionals within revolutionary movements to facilitate the cultivation of consciousness among the working class (Birnbaum 1985, p. 63).

Similarly, Larmer (2010, p. 260) noted how the pessimism that characterizes civic engagements in Africa is based on the ineffective antecedence of constituting vanguards from the urban working class, rural peasants and westernized intelligentsia. More so, the attempts at adopting more decentralized approaches have been undermined by elite infiltrations. He therefore proposed that the quest for unison in the organization of counter-hegemonic struggles be replaced by organic indigenous models characterized by the spontaneity of recent activist movements. This change is important in reasserting the central role that vanguards of social movements play, as the proximity to the grassroots would help to understand emerging identities and interests among new activist groups. Furthermore, the model would facilitate more in-depth understanding of shifting contextual frameworks for diagnosing social problems, identifying major stakeholders and developing actionable plans for social change. This is such that the dialectical relations between social movement vanguards and mass self-organization would be synthesized into a sustained revolution that leads to integral societal changes. The sustainability of these changes would be dependent on how the revolutionary dialectic leverages the intellectual vanguard as a nucleus within working-class infrastructure for counter-action against elitist exploitation (see Mandel 1983, pp. 13, 15).

Oliver (1983, p. 160) noted that the potential for resource mobilization was another important determinant of the structures, methods and successes of collective action. She, however, concluded that while material conditions clearly constrain collective action, activist groups also derive their motivations from ideological beliefs and values that shape their identities beyond material benefits. Activists have continued to adopt methods in line with available resources, inclusive of the use of art that is one of the easily accessible and implementable tools for collective action. Variants of creative art methods have

been utilized for activism. These include graffiti, uniforms, symbolic gestures, as well as rhythms and lyrics. As Lake (2006, p. 310) puts it while describing its use by the Black Panther Party, art's subtlety helped in stimulating the imagination of citizens while passing provocative messages on the need for systemic changes. The group's resources also determined its methods for implementing survival programmes, which included the provision of free breakfast and clothing for children, free medical care and free education. These people-driven initiatives helped to attract commitment from the black community as it kept mobilizing support for a new system of revolutionary governance (Lake 2006, p. 315).

In more recent times, new movements have continued to experience the emergence of youth leaders who defy age, racial, gender and class biases as afforded by their creativity and growing digital infrastructure. In his study of the cognitive elements of social mobilization and action, Johnston (2019, pp. 2, 9) emphasized the critical efforts of youths (mostly 18-25) as vanguards for social movements. This is evidenced across different activist causes including civil rights protests, women's movements, anticolonial protests, and the struggles for economic and sociopolitical rights. He observed that indices such as physicality, creativity, intellectuality, high risk valence and malleability are important in defining the tactical impacts of youths in countering repressive strategies. For instance, their dexterity at innovating and using digital tools for mobilization and organizing within encrypted virtual spaces has helped in navigating the dangers of state voyeurism. Nonetheless, Gwala's (1991, p. 9) observation that the lack of intellectual guidance among youth activists impoverishes their theoretical understanding of the teachings of Marx and Lenin holds true in an age prevalent with spontaneous activism. This consequently impedes the potential for sustained political organization due to the departure from the methods of scientific socialism, which helps in the drive towards democratic socialism.[2] This study is thus focused on exploring the intersections of age and gender as embodied by young female activists, who have assumed leadership roles within new spontaneous DEMs. It explores how these women have become icons of national revolutionary efforts, while contending the need to harness these efforts in creating sustainable vanguards for digital activism.

2. Vanguardism from the lens of history

In the preface to the 1890 edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, Friedrich Engels discussed the need for the International Working Men's Association (comprising cells of workers' unions) to serve as the vanguard of the revolution in Europe and North America (Marx and Engels, 1969). The vanguard's importance became prominent during the Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union, as it ensured the education of the working class on communist ideologies tailored towards national liberation from bourgeoisie oppression, and the realization of a simultaneous global revolutionary process. The success of mass mobilization for action was, thus, dependent on realizing a global revolutionary alliance facilitated by the vanguard, and based on historical determinism (McAdams, 2017). The global ambition of institutionalising social change underscored the earlier phases of Marxism, and thus influenced the perception of vanguard roles. The success of the Paris Commune in France, as described by Marx, was because the government was essentialised by the working class. It was therefore able to provide universal suffrage for workers, peasants and members of the middle class who had been disenfranchised by capitalist policies. Similarly, Engels and Kautsky remarked that proletariat revolutionaries led by a working-class majority would enjoy the legitimacy to govern because of the potential support of other minority groups in the society (Birnbaum 1985, p. 55). However, because of the volatility that characterizes the uneven development of class consciousness and action among working-class party

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[2] Following Lenin, Gwala (1991) describes democratic socialism as an amorphous formation that incorporates non-proletariats into the workers' movement to form a mass party, unlike the vanguard party. This new party structure, according to him, has a disadvantage of possibly hampering the revolutionary trajectory; especially, if negatively impacted by the non-proletariats who choose to perpetuate the oppressive system of bourgeoise democracy.

members, Mandel (1983, pp. 5-7) maintained that it behoves the vanguard organisation,[3] constituted by a group of individuals with high levels of consciousness, to provide theoretical education and facilitate political engagements around its ideology. This is necessary to sustain historical awareness among members through learnings on the different phases of a revolution, as was exemplified by the Fourth International (see also Lake 2006, p. 318).

Within the Asian context, it has been well documented that the peasant movement facilitated the Chinese revolution. However, Tse Tung's (1967, p. 31) report of the peasant revolution in Hunan province is quite instructive regarding the three categories of peasants in China. These included the rich, the middle class and the poor peasants. The rich peasants largely constituted the inactive members of the movement due to the fear of the consequences of its methods, while middle class peasants had a lukewarm disposition and required motivation through enlightenment that was driven by scientific socialism. However, the masses of poor peasants provided the reliable force needed by the vanguard to sustain the revolution. They constituted about 70 percent of the movement's membership, and remained consistent through the different phases of the revolution; having suffered from either partial or complete economic dispossession (Tse Tung 1967, pp. 32-33). They mobilized against social ills (like gambling and banditry) by encouraging organizational discipline[4] and respect for public morality, while holding the Lumpenbourgeoisie (see Gunder 1970) to account for corrupt practices (Tse Tung 1967, pp. 34-35).

The peasant revolution in Hunan is credited with the 14 great achievements[5] that included sustainable organising; political victory; establishment of a peasants' military; economic, judicial, cultural (gender), religious and educational reforms; as well as infrastructural development (Tse Tung 1967). Suffice to state that the foundations for the peasant revolution had been laid by Dr Sun Yat-Sen, who developed the Three People's Principles to include nationalism[6], democracy,[7] and the livelihood of the people[8] as the operational guide for the Kuomintang. These three principles subsequently influenced the development of Three Great Policies of the Kuomintang to include the alliance with Russia, collaboration with the Communist Party, and support for workers and peasants (Yat-Sen 2000). Yat-Sen thus provided the ideological foundation for the revolutionary peasant vanguard of the Chinese revolution.

In the post WWII period, the vanguard party of the Soviet Union and the International Communist Movement courted postcolonial leaders in the *Global South* as part of the strategy for realising their mission of establishing socialist governments in charting a non-capitalist path to development. Their political ideology was focused on establishing participatory democracy led by national vanguard parties that were constituted by workers, in collaboration with leaders of other minority groups including the peasants and petit bourgeoisie (see Glaser 2013, p. 179; Mandel 1983, p. 10). While these efforts yielded in terms of generating socialist groups that engaged in several debates against imperial capitalism, the establishment of democratic socialism through systemic changes was not as successful, especially in Africa. Among other things, the inability to create effective structures impeded the potential for synergising different socialist ideologies and groups within national boundaries on the continent (see von Holdt 1991). In line with this, McAdams (2017, p. 9) critiqued centralised structures within social movements by noting that they allowed for impunity among members of the vanguard. This is because they are enabled to exercise the exclusive right to provide directives without defined mechanisms for accountability. This challenge could also be traced to the preoccupation of Marx and Lenin with the

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[3] Mandel (1983, p. 8) distinguished between a vanguard party, which consists of a few ineffective self-acclaimed people without the legitimacy of the masses; and a vanguard organization that is more enduring having been consciously developed over time, and has legitimacy within a significant minority working-class group through their membership.

[4] The slogan 'strengthen discipline' resonated with the project of public education on the need for moral probity, and internal control of deviating members.

[5] Albeit in different stages depending on the county.

[6] His model of nationalism entailed accommodation of foreigners while exporting Chinese civilisation; as well as absorbing the best world civilisation initiatives towards the growth of China as a country.

[7] This model entails five arms of government through the addition of China's Civil Service Examination and Censorate Systems to the judiciary, executive and legislature within a direct participatory democratic republic.

[8] This was an economic model premised on state ownership of properties to forestall economic inequality among citizens.

ambition to create a global revolutionary movement, with little consideration regarding the internal workings of the International Workers Movement. Their efforts were thus limited to ascertaining that agreed principles and creed were developed as codes for validating membership (See Debrizzi 1982).

As it were, certain scholars who support the practice of liberal democracy oppose the model of vanguard democracy because it could amount to totalitarian communism; especially where the ruling party wields absolute power. Such power derives its legitimacy from the assumption that the vanguard is a representation of majority of the working-class members, who ought to abide by its directives. However, it could also create bureaucratic disillusionment while reproducing systems of oppression (see Williams 2013, p. 18; Noah 2008). In managing this, Mandel's (1983, p. 20) proposition of internal party democracy that leverages Marx's scientific socialism becomes relevant. This entails mobilising for participatory democracy, where ordinary citizens are engaged in decision-making and implementation processes. This has been exemplified by the Brazilian Workers' Party in the 1980s and the Communist Party of India in the 1990s (see Williams 2013, pp. 26-28). In creating broader social relevance, Marx cautioned against delimiting the mandate of vanguards to just the interests of party members as practiced by trade unions. This is in order not to neglect the global objective of wealth redistribution. Within this broader objective, Burawoy (2018, pp. 20-21) reiterated the need to recontextualize social movement theories within extant practices of neoliberalism. He made a case for a sociological method that is focused on the relations of the civil society with the state. This is because these relations help in either countering or reinforcing dictatorial market structures. His advocacy was premised on the trend of excessive commodification that is evidenced in the uncontrolled marketisation of labor, land, money and education. He classified this as the third wave of marketization. This wave of marketization is one in which the dispossession of the factors of production is materialized when capital is embodied by the state (Burawoy 2018, pp. 30-32). New forms of marketization, however, leverage digital infrastructure that democratises the relations of power; whereby decentralized transactions help in neutralizing state hegemony as capital becomes equally embodied by other segments of the society, at times beyond state boundaries.

The importance of digital infrastructure to vanguards in the development of a mass party[9] cannot be downplayed. This is because it facilitates mobilisation for sustainable action by bridging the spatio-temporal divide. Von Holdt (1991, p. 20) posited that the vanguard should be an intelligentsia collective, comprising members of the skilled working-class[10] that operate socialist principles with an understanding of current realities. This partly implies the operationalisation of internal democracy with the use of information and communication technology to ensure the roles of youths become more visible and better appreciated. This has become inevitable because of their dominance in the creation and use of technology. It also helps in reversing the trend of undermining the efforts of young adults in the narratives of social movements, despite usually constituting the substantial mass of initiators and mobilizers of social action; especially when they are female. In one instance, the generational gap between youths and influential adults creates a divergence in terms of preferences for methods and goals of the movement. While this could be quite challenging, it could also create the needed balance when the radicalism of youths is brought into conversation with the moderate disposition of adults to enable sustainable action (Johnston 2019, pp. 12-14). This is also in line with the need to build and consolidate internal party democracies in an era of digital activism. This era has witnessed a 'post-bureaucratic' shift, where material infrastructure has been displaced by information infrastructure (internet) that characterises operations in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Mosca 2014, p. 5). Civic engagements on social media platforms have become dominated by youths, especially with the professionalisation of their role as influencers because of large audience bases. This followership, beyond commodification, creates a ready pool that could be mobilised for social action.

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[9] The mass party for von Holdt (1991) is a fusion of the members of the intelligentsia and the masses.
[10] These include thinkers such as teachers, lecturers, researchers, journalists, editors, students, church leaders, musicians, playwrights, lawyers, doctors and engineers

Grillo's Five Star Movement (FSM) in Italy presents a successful attempt at using technology as a basis for structuring regional political parties, which could subsequently become dominant in national politics. The movement developed from the digital Meetup Platform that evolved from followers on Grillo's blog, after Italy's socialist government's censorship led to his ban in the 1980s. The democratisation of information dissemination on digital platforms, therefore, paved the way for the continuation of his dissidence and subsequent political success (see Mosca 2014). Despite its usefulness for social action, Kidd and McIntosh (2016) cautioned against the value-based essentialisation of technology due to what they termed techno-ambivalence. This is because, while technology could provide cover for dissidents and critics of government, it has also been appropriated by authoritarian regimes for surveillance, censorship and ban on dissident groups and individuals. This ambivalent use of technology is indicative of a neutrality that subjects it to proactive use by activists within social movements, and antagonistic use by the state and its agents, at times in collaboration with big tech companies.

3. Connective action as a digital shift in identity-based organising among social movements

Affiliation with group and individual identities is a major motivation for participation in activist causes, and this is important in understanding the intersectional dimensions of social movements. Robnett (2002, pp. 267-268) elaborated on this in her study of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1960s. She highlighted how race, gender and class influenced the formation of a collective identity, through a knowledge-driven cultural template that allowed the group to define itself and structure its membership. For her, the ownership and distribution of this cultural capital were influenced by the relations of power dependent on interplaying internal and external factors, such as nature of actors, access to resources, political opportunities, recruitment patterns, ideologies and organizational strength. It is arguable that a movement's structuring and methods of organising are important determinants of its identity. While certain groups are noted for their emphasis on nonviolence as derived from the Gandhian Satyagraha, others have more radical approaches to press home their demands. These identities are, however, often malleable based on contexts and goals. The SNCC, for instance, evolved from its nonviolent approach to radical self-defence in the bid to assert racial dignity in the United States (see Robnett 2002, pp. 269-270). As shall be discussed in the next section, women from the working class have increasingly become integral to the formation of collective identities by becoming icons of DEMs. As traditional purveyors of culture, they have continued to facilitate the creation, sustenance and transmission of group identities that defy spatial and temporal barriers. As Lake (2006, p. 308) contended, the indices of class, gender and race evolve across time and space in shaping identities; espeically as they are not predetermined by meaning(s), but defined based on changing contexts.

In understanding new and evolving contexts, Burawoy (2018, pp. 23-24) identified five notable characteristics of social movements in the 21st Century. These include those: with the traditional perception of the mismanagement of democracies by the bourgeoisie class; with the demand for a shift from parliamentary representative to direct participatory democracy; that manage repressive response from the state through liquid protests;[11] that complement virtual with physical spaces for mobilization and strategic planning; and with national and/or regional specificity within which the objects of economically-induced[12] political struggles are produced. Nonetheless, while the launch of a movement can be national or regional, developments in information and communication technology have facilitated wider interconnectedness, especially where there are similar causes like those against police brutality, gender stereotypes and racial discrimination. Lake (2006, p. 307) exemplified this in his study through

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[11] This entails the adaptation of fluid structures for protest actions within hostile civic spaces in order to prevent mass arrests and incarceration by repressive governments, along with other resilient measures.
[12] This implies deprivation, displacement and dispossession

the activities of the Black Panther Party. He asserted that transnationalism has defined the vision and structuring of African American social movements over the years. To continue this vision, social media tools have been deployed for the mobilization, organization and reorganization of these movements. In line with this, Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 743) posited the emergence of a new logic of connective action as enabled by digital networks that encapsulate decentralized structures of personalised social communication. Connective action has reinforced recent protests such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #BringBackOurGirls, #Metoo, #TasgotBas, #Lebanonrisesup and #EndSARS movements amongst others. As Vardeman and Sebesta (2020) advocated, the sustainability of connective action could be facilitated by digital intersectional communication frameworks that incorporate the solidarity-discord components of mass action, as well as self-reflexive leadership that promotes internal democracies.

Pimlott (2015, pp. 33-39) documented how strategic communication has become important for the sustainability of connective action. According to him, social movements have embraced the use of strategic communication for mobilization, in the same way that government and corporate administrators deployed it for shaping public agenda. The use of alternative media[13] in the stead of establishment media for external communication has helped activists in shaping public consciousness and building communities for connective action. The use of digital technology-enabled alternative media has thus provided avenues for evading gatekeeping by state-controlled media, with remote dissemination platforms helping to undermine acts of state repression. In other words, the new media has created a more elaborate means of communication owing to its decentralized model of networking, especially where there is the possibility of complementarity with the establishment media. This complementarity is important considering the power tussle between the state and social activists, as they contend to dominate and shape the minds of citizens using technology-enabled social communication networks in conditioned communication environments (see Castells 2015, pp. 5-6).

As Ilten and McInerney (2019, pp. 201-202) observed, the new media has also enabled the formation of collective identities within virtual communities. This is often achieved through micromobilization, which leverages the use of digital tools and symbols for small-scale interactions based on issues of common interests (see also Gerbaudo and Trere 2015). Nonetheless, Wall (2007, p. 274), in her study of the expression of online identities, concluded that though the digital media helps in organizing and educating activists, its platforms have limited capacity for the expression of identities; especially because they are unable to sustain the intensity that is needed for the commitment, participation and trust of members. Social movements have thus become characterized by hybridity, where virtual mobilisation is complemented by physical action. This was witnessed during the 2019-2020 Hong-Kong anti-extradition protests, as digital mobilization through an online petition led to the creation of a successful movement. Identities that developed from cells of persons with similar interests evolved into a coalition movement to protect Hong Kong's legal freedom. The Jyoti Singh - inspired 'Nirbhaya' movement in India also harnessed digital tools to incorporate the subalterns from the poor lower class into the middle class-led protests. The movement succeeded in transforming the identity of 'victims' to that of 'survivors,' which enabled it instigate reforms of legislations against rape in the country (see Bakshi, 2017, p. 46; Dey 2018).

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[13] The alternative media contributed to the success of the Bolsheviks' revolutionary efforts, where available means of technology for mass communication was used to create 'a party paper' for external communication outside the movement.

4. The iconic shift: female vanguardism at the digital turn of revolutionary movements in the *Global South*

4.1 Preamble

The vulnerabilities of women have often been the emphasis in patriarchally dominated narratives of violence and conflicts, which often characterize revolutionary engagements of social movements. While there is enough historical evidence on the contributions of women to revolutionary endeavours, the mechanisms for decentralizing visibility, characterizing information dissemination for micromobilization on the social media, have created more spotlights for women in terms of their leadership of anti-hegemonic struggles. In her study of the movement in Sudan, which began with the 2019 protests against President Omar al-Bashir's repressive government, Zunes (2021) noted that decentralization was a major factor for its success. This was because the barriers of gender and age were broken to recentre women and youths as leaders of the process. History is replete with notable female revolutionary leaders such as Harriet Tubman, Winnie Mandela, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Angela Davies, Fannie Lou Hamer, Gloria Steinem, Rosa Parks and Ella Baker, who confronted the status quo as drivers of change within their different contexts. Likewise, Arab women have continued to push for political, legal and social reordering across different geographies in the Arab world (see Khamis and Mili 2017). In more recent times, the recognition of Malala Yousafzai's efforts at the age of 17 with the Nobel Peace Prize, because of her advocacy on the education of the girl child that put her life at risk, was a defining moment of having a female as the youngest Nobel Prize Laureate. In defiance against the age and gender barriers, Malala began to use technology for advocacy at the age of 11 by blogging about her experience as a young girl in a conservative Islamic society, and has continued to push for girl child education[14] despite the earlier assassination attempt on her life by members of the Taliban.

Having been living in exile since a Fatwa was proclaimed against her by the Taliban, the young Pakistani lady has emerged as the icon of the right to education of the girl child. In respect of this, July 12 has been earmarked as the Malala Day following her 2013 speech at the United Nations. During her speech to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in September 2021, Malala pointed out how Afghan women and girls have begun to speak for themselves, while emphasizing her embodiment of the female experience of extremist violence (Yousafzai 2021). Afghan women have also embraced cultural activism to foster economic empowerment as reflected in some entrepreneurial efforts, including traditional embroidery inspired by Rangina Hamidi (see Hamidi, Littrell and Lerner 2017). Similarly, they are using interventions in education, politics and health to develop counter-cultural motifs against the Taliban sexist order (see George W Bush Institute 2016). Women have continued to define the momentum of activism, especially within the digital age. This is partly because they often emerge as icons that ensure the sustenance of efforts amidst the spontaneity of new movements. The subsequent parts of this section will explore case studies from Sudan, Lebanon and Nigeria to situate women within the iconic shift that negates perceived frictions between vanguardism and spontaneity in DEMs.

4.2 Alaa Salah and the women of Sudan's 2019 revolution

When Lara Haroun took the picture of Alaa Salah during one of the protest marches in Sudan, little did she realize that it would become an iconic definition of how people came to understand the Sudanese revolution; and subsequently influence Alaa's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. In October 2019, the 22-year-old architectural engineering student was invited to address the UNSC during its debate on women, peace and security, while she represented a coalition christened Women of Sudanese Civic and

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[14] She cofounded a foundation focused on girl child education, which operates in at least 8 countries spread across different continents. See https://malala.org/

Political Groups (MANSAM).[15] The 2019 revolution had been sustained through the defiance of resilient Sudanese women who resisted intimidation by state agents.[16] Tonnessen (2020) documented that women participated from different strata of the society without recourse to class, religion, age, ethnicity or educational affiliations. This vanguard leveraged the use of the digital media alongside creative arts to express their grievances, which at the time was against unbearable economic policies amidst rising inflation rates and scarcity of essentials. The creative geniuses at play during the protests defined a historical legacy through symbolisms that asserted the relevance of the female folk in Sudan's political history, with the hashtag #TasgotBas (#FallThatIsAll) driving the micromobilization for a revolution that resulted in regime change (see Nugdalla 2020).
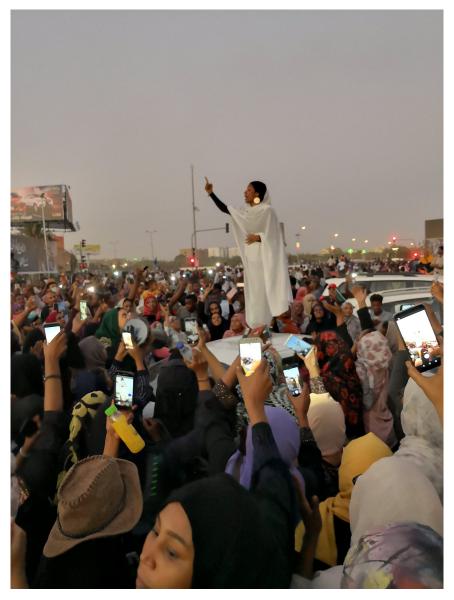

Figure 1. Alaa Salah addressing protesters during the 2019 Sudan Revolution
Source: Lana H. Haroun - Twitter/ @lana_hago

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[15] MANSAM fosters the efforts of the Sudanese Women's Union in the fight to advance gender equality and rights of women in general. Notably, it demands 50% affirmative action to empower women. It consists of 28 groups including 18 CSOs, eight political women groups and two youth groups (see Swann 2020)

[16] The deployment of Janjaweed inspired Rapid Support Forces (RSF), alongside the police, by the Transitional Military Council to disperse the sit-in protest camps during the demand for a return to civilian rule on June 3 2019 led to sexual assaults and close to 120 fatalities. This happened at the end of Ramadan, which has been christened Eid Shahid - the Eid of Martyrs (see Hendawi 2020; AbdelAziz 2019).

In her speech to the UNSC, Salah (2019) discussed the vulnerabilities of women under President Omar al Bashir's 30-year rule, during which he instituted a sexist public order that policed female bodies, voices and appearance under the guise of religious adherence. This clampdown was later extended to social media platforms as a way of curbing dissent. The need for a sustainable vanguard came through in her submission on how regime change did not translate to progress for Sudanese women, despite their pivotal roles during the revolution and its aftermath. An effective vanguard could have pushed for the presence of women in decision making on state affairs (Salah 2019). Tonnessen (2020) corroborated this when she asserted that the political contributions of women in ousting military dictatorships before al-Bashir hadn't been properly documented. These contributions inspired their leadership of the protests to reject the public order law that was designed to reinforce decades of economic and political disenfranchisement and indignity. Nonetheless, the structural exclusion of women in the post al-Bashir era, especially within government, serves to affirm why decentralized vanguards are needed to sustain the reversal of the gender-biased status quo (see Reilly 2019; Nugdalla 2020). In her analysis of the symbolism of Alaa's address to protesters atop the roof of a truck, AbdelAziz (2019) explained Alaa's donning of the Tobe[17] as a signification of the restoration of women's pride. This appearance reenacted the historical leadership role of the Women's Union in the struggle for Sudan's independence, even if it accentuated the visual subjugation of women from other minority groups beyond the Nile Valley and Central Sudan. Class distinction was also reflected in Alaa's christening as Kandaka (a Nubian queen), as it projected an arabicized version of Sudanese female royalty over women of other multiple racial extractions that comprised the Sudanese movement. The bridging of the gender and class divide noticeable in social movements thus requires the functioning of an inclusive vanguard. This inclusivity would be a significant step to further blur the religious and ethnic divides in the country. It could also have served to consolidate the efforts of Alaa and the women's coalition in the push for a 50% stake in leadership roles for women in the post-al Bashir era (Nugdalla 2020; Reilly 2019). The dominance of women in the movement, who constituted up to about 70% of its members, also helped in defining its nonviolent methods, which included the use of Zaghareet[18] for mobilization. They also inspired the symbols for the revolution, themed by mantras such as 'You women, be strong,' and 'This is a women's revolution' (see Zunes 2021). Their efforts at organizing were also rooted in the principles of scientific socialism, through the combination of education and activism, which have been continued in the post-transition period by the Sudan Women for Change[19] (Nugdalla 2020).

4.3 Malak Alawiye Herz as the amazon of the Lebanese Women's 2019 Movement

The Lebanese protests of October 2019 also exemplified a new dynamic in women's leadership within digitally-enabled collective action. It entailed the use of creative arts as a method for defining countercultural engagements, similar to the impact of Ceyda Sungur's 2013 confrontation with the Turkish police (Harding 2013). The participation of youths contributed to the creativity that characterized the protests.[20] This was expressed through graffiti,[21] as well as in the symbolism of marriage. In defying the state's repressive response to the protests, Malak Alawiye Herz got married to her husband on October 23, 2019; in the protest ground, surrounded by members of the movement. This gesture became symbolic,

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[17] This is a white veil that loosely covers the head and body.

[18] This is the ululating sound made by women in the Arab world.

[19] The organisation held a press conference that was streamed live on Twitter (now X) with demands on enshrining the rights of Sudanese women within the Constitution, as well as socio-economic and political responsiveness to the disadvantaged conditions of women.

[20] The protests were triggered by the government's introduction of new taxes on WhatsApp and other internet calls amounting to $0.20 per day, to compound the already dire state of the nation's economy. However, it happened that the issues of agitations were beyond the introduction of new taxes as the reversal did not deter the protesters (see Azhari 2019).

[21] Art played a symbolic role in mobilizing support for the Lebanese October 2019 revolution, and an Instagram account with the name Art of Thawra (Art of Revolution) was created by Paola Mounra to document the different symbolisms of the revolution. These were themed around women, as well as other major actors and events including corrupt officials, the military, Malak's bravery and the postrevolutionary dream (see Stoughton 2019; Humran 2020, p. 31).

especially as Malak went viral to assume an iconic status as the face of the Lebanese struggle after kicking an armed bodyguard to defend protesters in Beirut.[22] The latter had shot in the air to scare protesters away.

This act of bravery by an unarmed woman served as a motivation for fellow protesters on October 19, the first night of the protests.[23] Malak's action was a reversal of the gender norm in Lebanon, and this was affirmed during an interview with *An Nahar* where she recounted: "He was a big man, in a black t-shirt, holding a gun…I am a woman, and that is my weapon…In this part of the world, women's rights are not given, they are taken" (Matar 2019).[24]

Figure 2. Malak Alawiye Herz kicking a bodyguard during the protests
Source: Timour Azhari – Twitter/ @timourashari

In spite of Malak's action trending as a motivation for protesters, Humran (2020, p. 30) observed that women engendered peace despite displaying resilience while leading the protests in the face of state repression. Women, who defied the class, age and gender barriers to occupy frontline rows, displayed their readiness for political integration by challenging the government to bring an end to corruption and sectarian politics (see Ayoub 2019). They took charge of different sit-in sites; and projected their demands

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[22] This was one of the bodyguards of the Education Minister, Akram Chehaveb
[23] This was not Malak's first confrontation with security agents. There is a reported case of punching a policeman in the face for seizing her phone during a 2018 demonstration in front of the Ministry of Education (Matar 2019).
[24] Malak would subsequently be summoned in February 2020 to face the military tribunal later in November of the same year.

through megaphones, musical rendition, roadblocks, graffiti and belly dances during protest marches (Elbasnaly 2019; Diab 2021, p. 129). In establishing their leadership role, women who occupied the frontlines used their bodies to shield other protesters during confrontation with state agents. This represented a twist from the chauvinistic order that imposed a degrading perception of victimhood on women through their vulnerabilities to assault. This line of defence thus became a proactive performance by the women's vanguard, as protagonists deploying the use of nonviolence to sustain the revolution (see Diab 2021, p. 129; Ayoub 2019; Humran 2020). The contrasting imageries of the same woman in the wedding gown holding a Lebanese flag on the one hand, and kicking a bodyguard to protect fellow protesters on the other, during the same collective action, showcase the blend of cultural and countercultural motifs that characterized the clamour for change in Lebanese gender roles. These efforts were consolidated by the connective action of the Lebanese diaspora, foreign sympathizers and LGBTQ+ community that sharpened the progressive nature of the movement in its demands for a more gender responsive and inclusive polity (see Ayoub 2019, p. 8).

Figure 3. Malak's wedding to her husband Mouhamad Herz in front of the protesters
Source: Middle East Online https://middle-east-online.com/en/lebanese-woman-who-kicked-armed-bodyguard-face-trial

The media was also important in pushing for a reversal of gender roles and defining the methods for Lebanon's 6th revolution. It championed the method of nonviolence by giving visibility to women as the frontliners of the struggle. The nation's leading newspaper, *An-Nahar,* published the 'New National Anthem,' with the revision of describing the nation as 'the birthplace of men' to 'the birthplace of women and men.' It also dedicated the front page of its October 2019 edition to women with the headline caption as 'Naharouki,' which means 'Your Day.' The new anthem became nationally accepted with women across the country, notably at Martyrs' Square in Beirut, using it as the song of the revolution. Based on this legitimacy, the song was also rendered across the nation on Independence Day.[25] The call for national unity also trended on social media with the pioneering hashtag #.ينتفض_لبنان# (#Lebanonrisesup) driving connective action. The Lebanese example detailed how nonviolent protests through women's leadership led to the revision of national gender roles. In the first instance, four ministers affiliated with the Lebanese Forces Party resigned a day after the protest began, while Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned nine days later (Ayoub 2019, pp. 7-8).[26] More importantly, women gained more representation in the new Lebanese

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[25] See The New National Anthem Edition. https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/the-new-national-anthem-edition
[26] The demands during the protests also included early parliamentary elections, electoral reforms, and the investigation of corrupt officials.

government which comprised six women (a 400% increase); including the first ever female Minister of Defence in the Arab World.[27]

4.4 Aisha Yesufu and the Feminist Coalition in Nigeria's #EndSARS Campaign

The prominence of Aisha Yesufu within the Nigerian civic space predates the October 2020 #EndSARS Campaign, as she is one of the conveners of the #BringBackOurGirls Movement. The latter campaign was initiated to demand the rescue of the Chibok schoolgirls who were abducted by Boko Haram insurgents on April 14, 2014. Micromobilization for connective action during this decade-long campaign has been enabled by the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. The conveners also endorsed the use of the red and white colours to symbolize danger and passion, and innocence respectively.[28] The campaign's success as a connective action is evidenced in the support it garnered from celebrities globally, as they joined the call for the release of the schoolgirls through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, as well as during physical events.[29]

The involvement of Aisha in the #EndSARS movement is quite instructive and relevant for analyzing Johnston's (2019) discussion on the psychosocial dimensions of the capacity for risks within activist movements. Her display of bravery by confronting the Nigerian police, while they threatened to assault her physically on October 10, 2020, reflected a contrast to the reservation of high-risk strategies within the age bracket of youths. Even though this was not her first confrontation with state agents during public protests, the particular moment of a raised fist in defiance of threats by the police became iconic for young protesters pushing for police reforms in the country. The gravity of such defiance was confirmed ten days later at the Lekki Toll Gate incident of October 20, 2020. Soldiers had combined forces with the police at the toll gate to shoot at harmless protesters while they were waving the Nigerian flag and singing the national anthem (see Busari et al. 2021). The incident revealed a differing perception on the utilization of national symbols for non-sectarian identities of collective action, as was the case with Lebanon. The violation of Nigeria's national symbols in an orchestrated darkness by soldiers sworn to protect the citizens, after a premeditated removal of security cameras, was proof of how national interests can be subjected to the whims and caprices of corrupt elites.[30] Suffice to state that the burden of evidence for the shooting was majorly shouldered by a female Nigerian disk jockey celebrity, Obianuju Catherine Udeh, popularly referred to as DJ Switch. In the face of danger, the young lady livestreamed the shooting to mobilize support for protesters, as well as provide evidence before going on self-exile (Kenechi 2021). For one, the social image of Niqab wearing women in conservative Northern Nigeria was one of vulnerability and public invisibility. Aisha defied this through the unconventional poise of a grey hijab donning middle-aged woman, with fists raised, using her body to shield young protesters from attacks by the marauding police; in a similar fashion to the efforts of Malak and the women of Lebanon.[31] These acts consolidate the perspective on females taking control of their bodies and asserting them as protective shields on protest grounds. Aisha's intervention, as were those of Alaa and Malak, validated the spontaneity of leadership positions during digitally-enabled collective actions. These women took responsibility for the protesters, and became leading icons for micromobilization during subsequent connective actions.

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[27] See The New National Anthem Edition. https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/the-new-national-anthem-edition

[28] Of the 276 girls that were kidnapped, 107 were released while 57 escaped; and 112 girls were still missing as of July 28, 2022. The Nigerian Army confirmed the release of two of the girls on July 25, 2022. See #BringBackOurGirls Advocacy Movement. https://bringbackourgirls.ng/about-us/

[29] Notable among those that joined the campaign within the first month include Michelle Obama (former US First Lady), Ricky Martin, Antonio Banderas, Wesley Snipes, Mel Gibson, Sylvester Stallone, Salma Hayek, Angelina Jolie, Bob Geldof, Mary J Blige and Madonna. See Celebrities Join Worldwide Calls to #BringBackOurGirls. https://theirworld.org/news/celebrities-join-worldwide-calls-to-bringbackourgirls/

[30] The final report of the Judicial Panel of Inquiry and Restitution of Lagos State led by a female judge, Justice Doris Okuwobi, indicted the soldiers as culpable for the shooting and killing of harmless protesters without provocation.

[31] See Like #EndSARS, Youth Are the Game Changers in 2023 —Aisha Yesufu. *Ripples Nigeria,* Monday June 27, www.ripplesnigeria.com/like-endsars-youth-are-the-game-changers-in-2023-aisha-yesufu/

Aisha's bravery was complemented by the organizing ability of the Feminist Coalition (FemCo), just as Alaa enjoyed the support of the Sudanese Women's Union. FemCo spearheaded fundraising for the protests, while providing accountability platforms for the #EndSARS movement. Funding support was harnessed through micromobilization that resulted in raising about N147m used for providing water, food, legal services, medical aid, relief for victims and their families, as well as some memory initiatives. The success of the coalition's efforts also depended on technology, with the use of both fiat[32] and crypto currencies facilitated by Flutterwave (a Nigerian Fintech company) between October 8 and 22, 2020. This helped in navigating the repressive acts of the government, which included freezing its bank account and harassing its members[33] (see Desmond 2020). The effectiveness of these efforts reveals that flexibility of protest funding essentializes the window that democratized technology provides to evade repression of social movements by autocratic states.

Figure 4. Aisha Yesufu with the iconic gesture while putting her body between the protesters and security agents
Source: Duffy – Twitter/ @EramehOdufa

The coalition had been formed earlier in July, 2020 by a group of 14[34] young women in their 20s and 30s drawn from the technology, medical, civil society and finance sectors. Its goal was to empower women

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[32] They raised funds using different denominations including the US and Canadian dollars, Euro, Ghana Cedis and Kenyan Shillings.
[33] They were indicted in a lawsuit alleging support for unrest in the country; and had their movements restricted, travel documents seized, communication monitored, homes bugged and phones inundated with threats.
[34] The initial founders have been identified as Damilola Odufuwa and Odunayo Eweniyi, who also cofounded Wine and Whine; a safe space for women to discuss the management of various forms of gender-based violence. Other members of the group include Layo Ogunbanwo, Ozzy

through education, financial liberation, security and political participation (see Nwakanma 2022, p. 5; Ijioma 2021, p. 21; Areo 2020). The manner of collaboration between members of FemCo also affirmed the effectiveness of connective action for social change. This is because most of their engagements were carried out virtually, facilitated by a well-coordinated helpline that aided their role as the primary financier of the #EndSARS Movement. Its fundraising initiative also enjoyed official support from Twitter's former CEO, Jack Dorsey; an act that further legitimized its template for accountability. As Ire Aderinokun, a founding member of FemCo reiterated, the plan for the group's intervention was as spontaneous as the emergence of the protests. In spite of this spontaneity, the group was still able to organize by designing a logo and website, accumulating assets, creating social media and donation accounts, and developing request forms and tracking sheets. These became 'reality overnight' through the focus and dedication of its members (Desmond 2020). The logo of FemCo also became iconic for the movement, as it was endorsed by supporters who used it as display photos for motivation and to show solidarity on the social media. The logo embodied a black female power fist against layers of white and yellow backgrounds, which resonated with Aisha's iconic image that spotlighted the role of women in the coordination of the #EndSARS Movement. Beyond this, the countercultural approach to transparency and accountability, within a national context where public fundraising schemes have been scrutinized for fraud, enhanced the legitimacy of FemCo among protesters. More specifically, the public was briefed on a daily basis about the inflow of cash, currency of payment, as well as the items and processes of disbursement (Dark 2020; Desmond 2020). Its conduct was thus more of an affirmation of the readiness of women to cement their status as the vanguard of sustainable activism amidst the spontaneity of the digital age.

Figure 5. The Logo of the Feminist Coalition
Source: feministcoalition -Twitter / @feminist_co

5. Conclusion

This study establishes the historical role of women amidst the changing dynamics of social movements in which connective action is incorporated into collective action. It asserts that the spontaneity of new

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movements does not necessarily negate the need for vanguards, even if they operate within rhizomic structures of autonomous groups. The digital affordances of connective action have enabled more visibility for women within recent socio-technical considerations that defy gender, racial, ethnic, age, class and religious biases amidst the formation of new digital identities. As this study shows, women have been influential in determining the emergence and sustenance of these new identities, as they redefined sociocultural contexts through their iconic roles. This was exemplified in Sudan by Alaa Salah, Lebanon by Malak Alawiye Herz and Nigeria by Aisha Yesufu; with the support of women groups. As such, while women have always played significant roles within social movements, the digitization of these movements has recentred them in public discourses; as opposed to previous embedment within hidden transcripts (see Scott 1992) of patriarchally controlled narratives.

Debates on the control of the female body have often been dominated by resistance to male subjugation, reminiscent of the Foucaultian biopolitics (see Foucault 2010). An ancient reference for this is the narrative of Aristophanes (2003) on the body politics of Greek women that helped in ending the Peloponnesian War. The protagonist, Lysistrata, led the weaponisation of female bodies as tools for denial; first, of access to sexual pleasure, and then of access to the state treasury in Acropolis. While the former counters a micro-level gender-inspired hegemonic control, the latter exemplifies a resistance of necropolitics (see Mbebe 2019); as women not only used their bodies to shield the treasury behind the barred gates, but also to protect younger colleagues from potential death. While some have argued against the feminist value of his play, such advocacy as far back as 411BCE, is arguably a progressive turn from the prevalence of identifying subservient roles and imagery with women at the time. Nonetheless, the use of the female body for social reordering is not peculiar to Ancient Greece, as Alexandre (2006) shows in her use of the term 'body protest' to expatiate on the resistance performance of Trinidadian women. This form of resistance was displayed through nontraditional cues of 'maquerading,' polyandry, and dance. The case studies examined above affirm how the female body reverses the order of power dominance through the physical resistance of the forces of necropolitics. Malak's kick, Aisha's iconic pose and the formation of the Maydanik (meaning her space) during the Lebanese protests, all exemplify how women have continued to use their bodies to shield fellow protesters from state violence. The significance of body protest is further accentuated by the fact that it also defies assault from erring male protesters, who sexually objectify women on protest grounds based on gendered biopolitics, but often go unpunished due of organizational solidarity (see Nugdalla 2020).

The participation of women in physical protests as a sequence to connective action has also been effective in terms of its methods (see Diab 2021). Recent digitally-enabled women's rights protests including those by the #MeToo, #SayHerName, #BringBackOurGirls and #BlackLivesMatter movements have basically involved nonviolent activities such as marches, sit-ins, roadblocks, graffiti and musical rendition. However, Beckwith (2002, p. 75) contended that the reasoning behind the characterization of these women-led protests by nonviolence results from a combination of factors. These include their socialization towards nonviolence, political perception as victims of violence, historical alliance with methods of past female-led protests, and a gendered difference in the ideological perception of the concepts of peace and war. In conclusion, it is important to revisit the other intersecting layers of identity including class, ethnicity, age, religion and race, beyond the isolation of gender. This would facilitate a proper contextualization of women's iconic leadership of digital activism in multiethnic contexts. While the digital space provides a platform for decentralization of narratives, netizens remain products of their social conditioning within specific information environments. Protest iconography, therefore, remains vulnerable to influences of class, religion, ethnicity, age and race; with the potential for marginalizing people at the fringes of society, especially where there is restricted access to the internet. Subsequently, an all-inclusive approach through internal democracy ought to guide the adoption of protest symbolisms during connective action.

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