

12-23-2014

## Feminist Advocacy and War on Terror Militarism

Isra Ali

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ali, Isra (2014) "Feminist Advocacy and War on Terror Militarism," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication/vol26/iss2/10>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Communiqué by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

*Democratic Communiqué 26, No. 2, Fall 2014, pp. 160-178*

# Feminist Advocacy and War on Terror Militarism

**Isra Ali**

*In the era of the War on Terror, female U.S. service members and veterans have successfully advocated for formal recognition of their combat service. These women are able to articulate an anti-misogynistic, anti-racist, anti-homophobic message that is highly critical of the military, while remaining palatable to mainstream media and successfully engaging the support of some military leaders and politicians. Their success is due to organizations like the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN). The use of Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan and The Lionness Program in Iraq give women specific ways of documenting their combat experience, contributing to SWAN's ability to gain visibility and pursue changes in law and policy. A critical discourse analysis of SWAN's use of digital/social media and web presence illustrates how SWAN uses War on Terror militarism to effectively advocate for marginalized groups within the military. Though they invoke the participation of female soldiers in global warfare, however, a discussion of the impact of this militarism on populations of women in Iraq and Afghanistan is almost entirely omitted. The result of this is an advocacy that relies on characterizing female service members as exceptional soldiers, and frames feminist values as in line with the project of boosting military strength, rather than diminishing it.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Militarism, War on Terror, Digital Advocacy

## Introduction: War and Feminism

**T**he War on Terror has deployed feminism and feminist principles to support United States (U.S.) militarism in ways that warrant close examination. It is important to understand how feminism is co-opted into the rationale for the use of military force in other countries. The most obvious cooptation of feminism happened when the liberation of Afghan women was used as a rallying point by President George W. Bush's administration (with broad support from a bi-partisan coalition of politicians) to garner support for military action and the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> However, the liberation of Afghan women is not the only instance in which feminism and militarism have intersected. The War on Terror has given female service members and veterans in the U.S. military grounds to argue for formal recognition of their roles in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, which in turn gives them access to resources allocated for combat veterans. The Lionness Program in Iraq and Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan deployed female sol-

diers to the front lines to accompany all male platoons in the field, in order to engage with female civilians. These initiatives by the U.S. military utilize the notion of cultural sensitivity to gender norms in Afghanistan and Iraq to more effectively wage war there, and in doing so, create a niche occupation for female soldiers in that warfare. *The New York Times* refers to this work as “tea as a weapon” missions, because their primary goal is to engage civilians in conversation in order to promote the aims of the U.S. military.<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines the advocacy of the Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN), via their web presence, to better understand the relationship between the advocacy for female service members’ and veterans’ equality in the military and War on Terror militarism. The analysis focuses on SWAN’s website, the lists of their followers and who they follow on Twitter, the narrative laid out in their Facebook posts, as well as biographical materials and interviews retrieved from other websites, interviews given on mainstream media outlets online and on television, editorials contributed to high profile publications, and transcripts of testimony given before the United States Congress. Taken together, these materials provide insight into the network of relations that this organization functions within and how this organization views itself and its potential impact on the lives of women. Applying what can be broadly described as a critical discourse analysis,<sup>3</sup> the material retrieved about the organization and the female service members and veterans they advocate for allows us to better understand how SWAN’s anti-misogynistic, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic message—one that is highly critical of the military as an institution—manages to move from the margins to a more central position in the public discourse on militarism in the U.S.

SWAN have effectively utilized their digital presence to force the recognition of women’s participation in U.S. combat operations on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq, and argue successfully for changes to military policy in regards to women’s participation in the military. It is War on Terror militarism that has enlisted the service of women on the front lines, ultimately forcing the U.S. Department of Defense to rescind The Combat Exclusion Policy (CEP) in 2013. First instated in the mid-nineties by President William Clinton, the CEP did not necessarily prevent women from being active in combat situations, but it did prevent the formal recognition of that service and denied female veterans combat related benefits upon their return. SWAN was formed in 2007, by two veterans: Anuradha (Anu) Bhagwati (Executive Director) and Jennifer Hogg (Vice Chair and Secretary). Today, the organization is often at the forefront of social, political and legal actions in the U.S. aimed at giving women recognition for combat service, changing policies in regards to military sexual assault, and affording women previously denied opportunities to advance professionally in the military. They also tackle racism and homophobia in the military; they participated in the organized movement to end Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, a military policy that required queer identified soldiers to keep this identification secret, or risk discharge. SWAN have effectively utilized this moment, in which digital social media advocacy has become ubiquitous and War on Terror militarism engages the U.S. in a number of global military operations, to advance a feminist argument for the recognition of women’s combat service.

SWAN explicitly characterizes its mission as a feminist one. On its website, SWAN lays out its four-pronged strategy: Litigation, Policy Reform, Community Organization and Me-

dia Advocacy. The emphasis on community engagement is arguably a component of feminist and progressive approaches to enacting social change, a strategy aimed at developing productive relationships amongst people who collectively suffer the impact of institutional policies and creating collective resistance to power. The organization's Honorary Board includes prominent feminist activists Gloria Steinam and Robin Morgan, and feminist activist Shelby Knox recently joined their Board of Directors.<sup>4</sup> Knox is experienced with the use of social media for organizing and advocacy purposes and is well versed in the vernacular of online activism. SWAN is joining forces with a cross-generational set of feminist allies who are adept at utilizing digital and print media in their feminist activism, and who connect their media usage to the act of community building. The emergence of this feminist discourse on women in the military warrants a critical feminist analysis, in which the power relations that permeate this form of advocacy are closely examined. In particular, I am concerned with the way in which SWAN's advocacy for women in the military circumscribes the discussion of militarism's impact on women to those women who are enlisted to work for the military.

Explicit discussion of the impact of U.S. militarism on populations of women in other parts of the world is almost entirely omitted, and simultaneously the implicit presence of the oppressed women of Iraq and Afghanistan are ever present in the accounts of these soldiers' combat service. To serve in the military as soldiers on the front line these women have already broken social barriers in regards to gender, and their progress is that much more apparent when placed against the image of the Muslim woman cloistered in her home and disengaged from public life. Recognition of female soldiers' presence on the front lines may be disruptive to the internal misogynistic social structure of the military, but it plays well into a broader narrative in which U.S. society is at the forefront of modern liberal social configurations while Muslim societies languish, unable to extricate themselves from medieval social attitudes.

The explicit omissions and implicit presences are significant when we consider how U.S. military presence and warfare profoundly impacts the lives of women (and all people) in the nations they are deployed to. There is a tradition of feminist scholarship that is skeptical of the ways in which feminism, particularly Western liberal feminism, comes to rely on the figure of the beleaguered Third World or Subaltern other in various discourses. The most well known of these critiques is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes,"<sup>5</sup> but this tradition continues to the present day in the work of Lila Abu-Lughod<sup>6</sup> and Saadia Toor<sup>7</sup> who have raised this question specifically in relation to the War on Terror. Abu-Lughod and Toor challenge the use of Afghan women's oppression by the Taliban to rally feminist support for the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, particularly when the lack of security engendered by warfare creates physical, mental, and economic, vulnerability and instability for those women. The analysis undertaken here provides another perspective on this critique by identifying how productive War on Terror militarism has been for the feminist movement aimed at securing gender equality in the U.S. military.

SWAN's advocacy is possible at this historical moment mainly because War on Terror militarism gives rise to specific initiatives that use female soldiers to access Afghan and Ira-

qi civilian women on the front lines. This matters a great deal when their advocacy and their experiences filters into the realm of public discourse and policy, as it helps shape liberal feminist perspectives on the military in the public discourse. A primary effect of this kind of advocacy is the way domestic and global/transnational issues are segregated in female service members' and veterans' advocacy. It's the distinction of the domestic and the global in this feminist discourse that makes it possible for feminists in the U.S. to find themselves advocating for policies that improve the lives of women and girls on the home front while supporting U.S. militarism in other nations. In the advocacy discourse on and around female service members and veterans there is a deliberate framing of these women's advancement as a domestic issue, but when the weight of the impact of U.S. militarism is felt primarily by populations outside of the U.S., then it is particularly important for those who identify as feminist to consider what it means to advocate for women's advancement in the military. This domestic focus is a significant reason why SWAN has been able to transition from a marginalized group of advocates with very few resources into a visible and effective advocate for women in the military on both the political and media main stages in the U.S. By circumscribing the issue of gender equality in the U.S. military as a national project that supports the notion that the U.S. society continues to move in a progressive trajectory, SWAN and their allies are able to position ending misogyny (and racism and homophobia) in the military as a constructive project that will strengthen the institution of the military rather than damage it.

Even as they take the military to task for the entrenched misogyny, racism, and homophobia, and for policies whose sum effect is to formalize these forms of bigotry, SWAN and other organizations argue that women simply wish to be able to fulfill their desire to serve in the armed forces. The inclusion of women, the lessening of homophobia and racism, are all framed as ways in which the U.S. military can become more progressive, a message that fits well with the state's insistence that it engages in military action reluctantly, and the increasing trend of framing warfare as a humanitarian endeavor focused on protecting vulnerable people, building infrastructure, and developing democratic principles. A socially progressive military that is more accepting of gender, racial, and sexual difference, also falls in line with the technological fantasy of the military as a clinical and efficient tool that does its best to avoid violence, especially the killing of civilians.

That said, there is no doubt that SWAN's advocacy on behalf of women in the military is necessary. Approximately 14 percent of the military's 1.4 million current service members are women,<sup>8</sup> and as of 2012 more than 280, 000 women had served in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>9</sup> As long as the military provides one of the few opportunities for people in the U.S. to achieve economic stability, access to health insurance, and to attend college without incurring crippling debt, women will continue to join the military. Once there they are subject to discrimination, and in some cases verbal, physical, and sexual assault. SWAN's presence is necessary to ensure that female service members and veterans are not being subjected to abuse without consequence for their attackers, are given opportunities to advance professionally, and are not being denied resources after their service is complete. Their success is heartening. They have been able to

bring forward feminist, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic discourse and force commanders at the highest echelons of the military to contend with their critique. SWAN's visibility in mainstream media has proven that it would be ill advised to ignore them. However, the reform they pursue is also an investment in the military as an institution. Combined with the reliance on continued warfare in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places, to advocate for gender equality, this advocacy functions as part of a longer problematic history in which marginalized groups mark out social progress by gaining entry into and recognition by the military. An examination of SWAN's online presence illustrates how the organization at once embraces and espouses socially progressive values, employs feminist organizational strategies, and engages in an intersectional advocacy, while actively working to expand the archetype of the "good soldier" to include previously marginalized people and advocating for strengthening the military.

### Service Women's Action Network Online

The website [www.servicewomen.org](http://www.servicewomen.org) was established in 2009. It is an animated illustration of the ways in which SWAN works, and the bridges they've built across media platforms. A running head highlights top stories, rows of tabs at the top and bottom of the page refer the reader to detailed information about the history of the organization and the people involved, as well as the main issues they're concerned with, archives of media appearances, and links to resources for service members and veterans, and there are the now familiar symbols directing the reader to their social media presence.

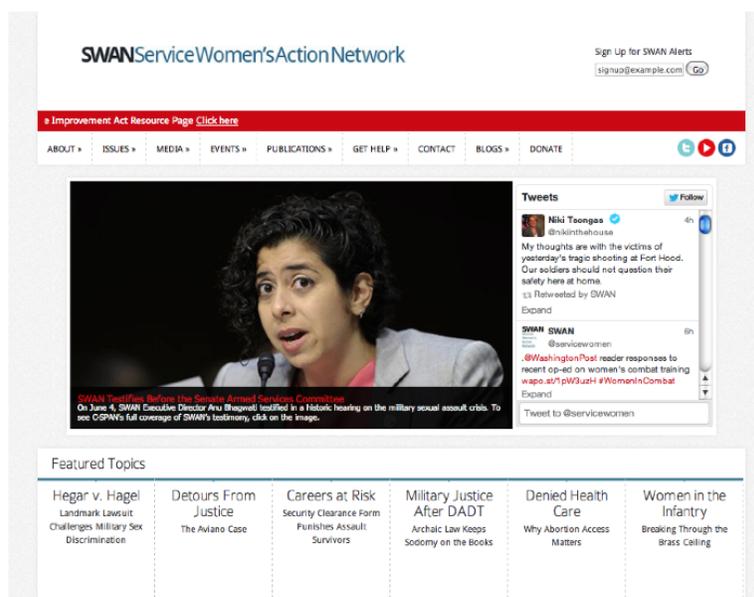


Fig. 1. Service Women Action Network Website Home Page 2014

The central, prominent, position on the website is occupied by a carousel that rotates between images of Policy Director Greg Jacob on CNN with Anderson Cooper discussing fitness standards as a barrier to women's entry into combat training, Bhagwati being interviewed by journalist Lou Dobbs on Fox News and by Gwen Ifill for a *PBS NewsHour* special on rising rates of military sexual assault, and SWAN representatives Capt. Lory Manning (ret.) and Sarah Plummer on MSNBC discussing the Military Justice Improvement Act. These are interspersed with slides showing Bhagwati and Jacob testifying before congressional committees on combat integration and sexual assault, as well as links to a study the organization has conducted with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) showing discrimination against female veterans with PTSD, an image of SWAN's co-plaintiffs in a discrimination lawsuit against the Department of Defense, and a slide showing advocates meeting with White House representatives. This cluster of visual images illustrates their continual presence in various mainstream media outlets in the role of pundit/expert, making the case for policy changes and legislative action.

Alongside the homepage carousel, the Twitter feeds of SWAN and its Executive Director update automatically. SWAN's social media presence is illustrative of how this organization situates itself within an online cohort of feminist identified activists, including other veteran women's advocacy organizations, as well as media producers and outlets, and political actors.

With around 12K tweets as of March 2014, the organization has still not accrued more than 5000 followers on Twitter, and on Facebook just under 9,000. This hardly constitutes a ground swell of public support; however, when we examine "who" follows SWAN and "who" they follow, it becomes apparent that though large numbers of the public aren't actually tracking their activity online or even sharing the materials they've created, strategically placed people and organizations are aware of them. SWAN's followers include an array of laypersons, activists, academics, non-profits concerned with gender, LGBT and veteran's rights, and journalists, media producers, media organizations and state entities. Individual reporters and producers of news media (like MSNBC's Rachel Maddow show and Melissa Harris Perry, both of which SWAN has appeared on) far outweigh the number of organizations in SWAN's followers; they range from independent journalists to those working for established internationally recognized media outlets, including CNN Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr, *CBSNews.com* reporter and editor Jessica Hartogs, Diane Dimond of *The Daily Beast*, Joyce Hackel BBC and National Public Radio contributor, and investigative journalist Jenny Nordberg whose work on Afghanistan has been published in *The New York Times*.

While it is not conclusive that SWAN and their advocacy have impact on the actions of those who follow them, the fact that these individuals and organizations follow SWAN on Twitter does mean that they register the presence of the organization and view the information that the organization distributes as worth noting and relevant to contemporary public discourse on foreign policy. What is clear from their regular media appearances in and on news media outlets that cover a span of conservative and liberal outlets, is that journalists, television news producers, and newspaper editors view SWAN as a body that can act as rep-

representatives of female service members and veterans and who are part of a broader spectrum of feminist advocacy.

Alongside these media entities, SWAN's followers include feminists and feminist organizations that are part of a new wave of digital feminism: Crunk Feminist Collective, Young Fems and Allies, and the website *Feministing*, as well as prominent feminist organizations such as the National Council of Women's Organizations, the Feminist Majority Foundation, Women's Media Center and Equality Now. These are feminist organizations concerned with amplifying the voices of women in the public sphere. Many of them are concerned with and involved with global issues related to women, though this global focus sometimes reifies the narrative in which Western nation states represent modern, progressive values and non-Western states lag seriously behind. A global focus does not always mean a transnational approach aimed at identifying how oppressions experienced by women in different parts of the world are related to, or depend upon one another. SWAN in turn follows numerous organizations dedicated to gender equality, as well as individual feminists like Naomi Wolf and media organizations with feminist aims such as the Feminist Press, *Ms. Magazine*, and the Women News Network. They also follow different news outlets that cross the spectrum of conservative and liberal, local and global, as well as elected officials, and state agencies, all of whom the organization hopes to reach with their message. While scholars such as Christian Fuchs caution against overstating the political potential of Twitter and Facebook, and reminds us that the aim of these commercial platforms is primarily to generate content for profit,<sup>10</sup> the connections displayed in SWAN's Twitter can tell us something about how the organization sees itself, what communities it sees itself belonging to, and who its intended audiences are beyond the general public. SWAN's membership on Twitter is based around connections with organizations that are characterized as progressive, and organizations they can partner with to increase media visibility.

There are tangible ways in which their influence can be measured, via their relationship with particular political actors. SWAN has made some success in their goal to enact policy reform by reaching out and allying with specific political agents who are in positions to push for new policies and introduce legislation for consideration by the congressional and executive branches. A Facebook post dated October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009 marks the moment when Bhagwati and Hogg met with Junior Democratic Senator from New York Kirsten Gillibrand and began forming SWAN's most productive political relationship. Today, the website features a running head and a slider image on their homepage advertising the Military Justice Improvement Act and its accompanying hashtag #MJIA, as well as a separate page of detailed information about the bill, and the obstacles to its passage. Gillibrand, who has served on the House Armed Services Committee and now serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee, sponsors the bill. She has used considerable political capital to push for its passing. The bill would change the procedure through which military sexual assault is prosecuted, effectively removing the chain of command from the process. This would avoid leaving that task to the sole discretion of a commander whose priorities are sometimes dictated by interests other than that of punishing criminal action.<sup>11</sup> The web page provided by SWAN not only provides an explanation of the bill, but charts its progress through the legislature

and provides the reader with strategies for activism they can engage in using social and other media. There are links to Bhagwati's appearance on the MSNBC television news show *All In with Chris Hayes* alongside Senator Gillibrand, in which the women co-author the argument for more external oversight of sexual assault cases. The page also features links to "Twitter storms," coordinated tweeting at politicians who have yet to throw their support behind the bill, or who are actively blocking it. SWAN not only encourages site readers to participate, they provide a step by step action plan for using social media to participate in a Twitter storm. They also provide instructions on emailing and telephoning to advocate for the bill, including stock language and links.



**SWAN** Service Women's Action Network

**IAVA** I AM A VETERAN  
THE MILITARY'S WOMEN  
VETERANS OF AMERICA



**Action 1: Tweet at Senators (Click [here](#) for name, Twitter handle)**

**.@ [handle]: 53 senators do not yet support MJIA. Let's take that number down to 0.**  
<http://bit.ly/Vets4MJIA> #MJIA53

Have you called your senator yet today to urge support for #MJIA? <http://bit.ly/Vets4MJIA> #MJIA53

**.@ [handle]: Of the 26,000 sexual assaults in 2012, only 3,374 were reported and only 302 were brought to trial. We want better justice. #MJIA53**

**@ [handle]: Support military sexual violence survivors. Our troops deserve justice. <http://bit.ly/Vets4MJIA> #MJIA53**

**.@ [handle]: Secretary Hagel said our military justice system is "broken." Let's fix it. <http://bit.ly/Vets4MJIA> #MJIA53**

**.@ [handle]: MJIA lets military lawyers lawyer and commanders command. Take out the bias. <http://bit.ly/Vets4MJIA> #MJIA53**

**.@ [handle]: I stand with vets. #SWAN, @IAVA & Vietnam Vets support MJIA. <http://bit.ly/Vets4MJIA> #MJIA53**

**.@ [handle]: Vets know the military. And vets support MJIA. <http://bit.ly/Vets4MJIA> #Vets4MJIA #MJIA53**

**Action 2: Call Senators (Click [here](#) for name, telephone number)**

Fig. 2. SWAN Instructs its Readers to Use Twitter to Petition Political Representatives

SWAN and Gillibrand also find common ground on issues such as reproductive rights, gender equality, and LGBT rights. Gillibrand was already engaged in an effort to rescind Don't Ask Don't Tell when she was first introduced to SWAN in late 2009, an issue that has also become important to SWAN's mission. They align the fight against homophobia in the military with that of enacting gender equality in the military. These issues then, prosecuting sexual assault, advancing women's professional and economic opportunities, and LGBT rights, are related to one another.

### **An Intersectional Approach, and the “Good Soldier”**

A particularly feminist characteristic of SWAN’s advocacy is their intersectional approach, and their recognition of “intragroup differences” in the experience of U.S. soldiers.<sup>12</sup> The intersectional perspective they adopt attempts to elucidate the relationships between the particular circumstances faced by women, people of color, queer, and trans soldiers. When she appears as a public spokeswoman for SWAN, Bhagwati overtly includes a critique of racism and homophobia in the military. She also articulates how these forms of oppression work with one another. In a November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010 blog post published on the independent media channel WYNC’s website, Bhagwati explains the connection between racism, sexism and the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy. In the post, she points out that though women made up 14% of the military, they constituted 39% of DADT related discharges from the military. People of color made up 29% of the military and yet, constituted 45% of DADT related discharges. The disproportionate enforcement of DADT showed commanding officers were using the policy as a way of ousting minorities. In this way, Bhagwati explains, racism, misogyny and homophobia have cumulative effects on soldiers who are female, raced, and/or queer.<sup>13</sup> Bhagwati is articulating a rather radical critique of how the structure and policy of the military creates an environment in which misogyny, racism, and homophobia commingle well.

On their website, SWAN features a page on LGBT Equality under the Tab ISSUES, alongside their other flagship causes. In the transcript of a Human Rights Conference (HRC) press conference Bhagwati spoke at in 2009, she talks about her best friend, a fellow Marine who is also a lesbian. In her comments it is evident that Bhagwati understands that LGBT service women experience military life differently from their heterosexual counterparts, and that this aspect of their identity creates an additional burden. She describes the difference between her own experience as a heterosexual service woman who “could walk down the street holding the hand of my male partner, (while) she could not do the same with her loved one, for fear of being outed.”<sup>14</sup> This particular press conference was part of an organized effort by LGBT service members and allies to target DADT, a policy implemented in the same period in the mid-nineties as CEP. This advocacy raised the visibility of LGBT service members and shifted public discourse in a way that made the rule itself appear outdated and divorced from the realities of military service. It simultaneously relied on LGBT service members and veterans to speak out about their experiences to refute the notion that DADT was a neutral policy that had no real negative impact. SWAN utilized similar strategies to advocate for dispensing with the CEP, and is now implementing them in pursuit of policy changes regarding military sexual assault. This intersectional approach is one of a number of ways in which SWAN as an organization utilizes a progressive feminist approach to promote socially liberal policy.

However, this intersectional analysis is contained within a domestic framework, and so the discussion does not encompass a consideration for the global political context of the War on Terror on the soldiers they advocate for, nor how these soldiers may participate in the oppression of other women (and people of color and queer people) through their participa-

tion in War on Terror militarism. Though there is often no mention of it in the initiatives pursued by the organization, the War on Terror figures prominently in the experience of service for these soldiers, beginning with their decision to enter into military service. According to the narratives that emerge online in interviews and testimonies of female soldiers, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 functioned as a pivotal moment in the lives of military personnel SWAN advocates for, and for many simultaneously provided their first opportunity to enter into a war zone and made them more aware of discriminatory practices. For SWAN Co-founder Jennifer Hogg going into combat galvanized her to consider military policies that had previously been acceptable:

When I was called up on September 11th, I did not know what we were headed for or when I would be back. This is when the policy hit me hard the first time: everybody in the Buffalo Armory had family, husbands, wives, girlfriends, boyfriends, wishing them luck, expressing emotion and love. I couldn't. I could only sneak a quick hug with my partner. It was not allowed by policy, even though I was heading into active service and could and would make significant sacrifices.<sup>15</sup>

Information on SWAN's website shows that Sgt. Jennifer Hunt of the Army Reserves, their co-plaintiff in *Hegar et al. v. Hagel*, enlisted after the 9/11 attacks and was deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq as a result. All of the co-plaintiffs seeking to have their combat experience recognized are referencing their experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. Part of this reference is to emphasize the patriotism of these young women, whose response to an attack on their nation was to join the military and fight on the front lines on behalf of their nation.

Only when making the case for the recognition of combat service does the SWAN website explicitly discuss how war in Iraq and Afghanistan creates a demand for service women on the front lines, and they use this point to argue for the lifting of the combat ban. The oppression of women in the war zone they emphasize is that of service members':

Commanders on the ground have conducted operations on asymmetric battlefields, where the potential for engagement in direct ground combat is ever-present, and the absence of a clear line between enemy and friendly territory means that every soldier regardless of gender must be combat-ready. In fact, in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. service women have regularly participated in ground combat as members of Forward Support Companies (FSCs), Lioness Teams, Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) and Female Engagement Teams (FETs), making the 1994 policy meaningless.

Though Hogg and Bhagwati do not appear to have served in these particular programs, their co-plaintiffs in *Hegar v. Hagel* did. Sgt. Hunt went to Afghanistan to serve as a Civil Affairs Specialist in a hybrid civilian-military operation, and both Captain Colleen Farrell and Captain Zoe Bedell held leadership positions on FETs. These missions are often described in

humanitarian terms, as part of “reconstruction” efforts aimed at building infrastructure. The goal of the engagements with civilians however is characterized as “outreach and intelligence.” This suggests that failure to suppress insurgencies against U.S. occupation militarily has inspired military strategists to employ a “cultural” approach to winning the hearts and minds of civilians. They rely on a long-standing Orientalist fascination with gender segregation in Muslim societies. A by-product of this strategy is that female service members in the U.S. military now accrue value in the context of militarism they would not necessarily be able to if gender weren’t such a primary framework through which “the Middle East” and “the Muslim World” are thought about and discussed in contemporary American discourse.

Not only does articulating their experience as members of Female Engagement Teams and the Lioness Program provide evidence of the roles they play in combat zones, it gives these women the opportunity to talk about their competency and excellence at soldiering. SWAN and its cohorts use the figure of the “good soldier” to stake a claim on resources such as combat veteran benefits and opportunities for training and promotion within the military. This is not necessarily a new concept. Leisa D. Meyer argues that the establishment of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in 1942 helped to formulate a new conception of the ‘female soldier’ in the popular imagination, a woman who could contribute to the fight. Alongside the emergence of this figure a public discourse also emerges in which the role of women in war is hotly debated. For some, greater participation by women in the military indicated a broader social acceptance of women as citizens with full rights. For others, expanding women’s roles in the military threatened the “natural order” of things by constructing a role for women outside of the bounds of normative femininity.<sup>16</sup> Today SWAN build on this nebulous figure in the popular imagination to present a new ‘female soldier’ who now goes everywhere on the front lines her male colleagues go. In fact, political and media advocacy for female service members and veterans requires SWAN and its allies to make the argument that women can in fact be exceptional soldiers, excelling in unanticipated ways. The abilities they emphasize focus on three elements: physical prowess, leadership ability, and heroism. These three components are fundamental to the argument SWAN makes: establishing gender equality in the military will boost military power, not diminish it.

The biographies of female service members and veterans housed on the ACLU website (one of SWAN’s partners in advocacy) emphasize the women’s combat readiness, and the ways in which they excel in that environment. Sgt. Hunt’s story does not focus on the diplomatic engagement she did with female civilians, it focuses on her experience fighting alongside her male colleagues in violent military operations (“Hunt also accompanied combat arms soldiers on “door-kicking missions,” searching villages for insurgents,”) and the danger she faced on the front lines (“While serving there her Humvee vehicle was hit by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), which resulted in shrapnel injuries to her face, arms, and back. Staff Sgt Hunt was awarded a Purple Heart in connection with this attack.”) Farrell’s story also emphasizes the risk she and her fellow female marines undertook, and the ways in which they rose to the occasion:

Like the infantrymen they served with, the women in Capt. Farrell's charge were regularly in danger of drawing enemy fire, being ambushed or hit by IEDs. Three teams of women Marines under Capt. Farrell's charge were awarded Combat Action Ribbons for receiving and returning fire or being hit by an IED.<sup>17</sup>

Helicopter pilot Major Mary Hegar's story is one of physical prowess and heroism. Her training "required (her) to hike up mountainous terrain carrying heavy gear on her person and complete other physically and mentally arduous tasks."<sup>18</sup> Hegar was shot down by enemy fire in 2009 as she was flying in to rescue wounded soldiers, and despite being injured by a bullet she was able to return fire. She was awarded both the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Flying Cross. Advocates for gender equality in the military understand that these narratives are especially important for combating cultural perceptions that women don't engage in combat, and once in combat will not be physically or mentally ready enough to protect their fellow soldiers. In an editorial published in *The New York Times* in January of 2014, Bhagwati urges President Barack Obama to invite Hegar to the State of Union to be nationally recognized for her valorous acts on the battlefield and her role in getting the ban on women in combat lifted as the lead plaintiff in *Hegar et al. v Hagel*.

These strategies illustrate SWAN's core argument, that women want to 'join in' not deconstruct the institutional character of the military. Accounts of successful stints in leadership positions accompanied by descriptions of physical prowess round out these stories of heroism to create a sense that female service members can literally add strength to the military, and are capable of taking command. These elements are particularly important in an institution where physical strength is idealized, and the structure of command is all encompassing and the main source of power. In biographical profiles of Bhagwati, her physical strength is offered as a credential. On the SWAN website Bhagwati is described as a Marine officer who rose to the rank of "Captain" and "Company Commander." In her official biography Bhagwati is described as only the second woman to have completed the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program Instructor School, "earning a black belt in close combat techniques."<sup>19</sup> The biography posted on the Petra Foundation website when she was awarded a fellowship in 2010 reads, "Still sporting her USMC tattoo on her muscled upper arm, Bhagwati sees her challenge as engaging the public in a country where only 1% serve in the military." Her physicality, and her exceptional ability is also linked to her activism:

Having been eagerly recruited for Officer Candidate School, rising to the rank of captain, having proved her mettle at every assignment – becoming only the second woman in the history of the corps to complete close-combat instructor training – Bhagwati battled it out for five years before concluding that the only way to win, her fight against the systematic misogyny, racism and homophobia in the Marine Corps was to take it outside.<sup>20</sup>

To be anything other than exceptional would be to subject her advocacy to accusations that

the women who ‘complain’ about inequality simply cannot hack the physical and psychological stress of military service. Descriptions of her achievements and the physical strength of her body emphasize her ability to ‘hang’ with male military counterparts.

The media narrative deployed by Bhagwati and SWAN is that racism, homophobia, and misogyny drive out these potentially valuable soldiers, soldiers who excel in the requirements necessary for combat warfare. The desire of these soldiers to serve is thwarted by commanders who refuse to pursue action against perpetrators of violence and abuse. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Bhagwati testified before the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee:

My experiences came to a head while I was stationed at the School of Infantry at Camp LeJeune, North Carolina from 2002-2004, where I witnessed reports of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment swept under the rug by a handful of field grade officers. Perpetrators were promoted or transferred to other units without punishment, while victims were accused of lying or exaggerating their claims in order to “ruin men’s reputations.”

As a Company Commander at the School of Infantry, I ultimately chose to

sacrifice my military career to file an equal opportunity investigation against an offending officer. I was given a gag order by my commanding officer, got a military protection order against the officer in question, lived in fear of retaliation and violence from both the offender and my chain of command, and watched in horror as the offender was not only promoted but also given command of my Company.<sup>21</sup>

Framing their argument for gender, racial and sexual equality in the military in terms of the loss of an exceptional labor force is also a central strategy in their media advocacy. Co-founder Hogg tells a similar story of how DADT forced her to accept an honorable discharge rather than return after diagnosis of a medical condition:

There is a sign in every armory and recruiting station and barrack. There is a mirror below it, and it says, ‘Remember why you serve: to defend freedom,’ but I can’t kiss my loved one goodbye, even though it is not inconceivable I might not come back. How can I defend freedom if I can’t have my own?<sup>22</sup>

The story of rising star Bedell ends similarly. After completing officer training she found the only position available to her was Logistics Officer where she trained others to serve on FETs. The story emphasizes that her stewardship allowed other female marines to successfully serve with male infantry units where “patrolled...carried the same heavy gear...and lived for weeks on end in the same sparse conditions.”<sup>23</sup> However, because Bedell was una-

ble to find opportunities for professional advancement within the Marines, she left to join the Marine Corps Reserves.

## Conclusion

Though the U.S. Department of Defense has officially rescinded the Combat Exclusion Rule, SWAN and their co-plaintiffs are still pursuing their lawsuit against the United States government. Their rationale for doing so is that simply lifting the ban will not change an entrenched military culture that views women as incapable, and if they were to abandon their legal action women will still be precluded from taking up a range of combat positions. The deadline for opening all positions to women is January of 2016, and so SWAN continues to place pressure on the military to move apace to make this goal a reality. SWAN's continued commitment illustrates that they are invested in reforming the military beyond making superficial changes in official policy; they are invested in transforming the internal culture of the military to accept diversity in terms of gender, race, and sexuality. However, in this context, accepting diversity is argued from the standpoint that contrary to stereotypes, women and other marginalized groups are as capable of engaging in the strenuous violent labor of warfare as their white male heterosexual counterparts, and are capable of leading other soldiers in life or death situations. This viewpoint is turned framed as the progressive outlook and the military is characterized as an institution that is woefully behind the times. In this discourse, the claim to equality functions as part of a larger linear narrative in which women, and other marginalized populations, continue to make steady forward progress in American society. Full integration into the military is seen as one of the last vestiges of prohibition on women's full and equal participation in U.S. society, and the figure of the exceptional female soldier is designed to illustrate how unnecessary this form of prohibition is. In this way, the figure of the "good soldier" that emerges in the advocacy discourse on gender equality in the military comes to be seen as representative of the rapid progress made in liberal Western societies. This is why an organization like SWAN can be as overtly critical as they are of the military as an institution and introduce anti-racist and anti-homophobic and anti-misogynistic messages, and still counter criticism that would characterize them as a radical left-wing movement whose aim is to weaken the military. Arguing for the inclusion of women in combat from the patriotic standpoint that their aim is to boost military power makes their message that much more palatable to mainstream media outlets, who often rely on support the troops rhetoric.

From a localized point of view SWAN's work is a profound success, and their strategy of supporting the military's missions overseas is an effective form of advocacy that other feminists can utilize to think about their own movements and campaigns. From a global or transnational perspective, however, the use of overseas military operations as the basis from which to argue that women are valuable agents in combat looks like a less appealing form of advocacy, because it does not consider how these exceptional soldiers will impact women on the ground in places where the U.S. military is deployed. But, if we are attempting to

think about feminism as a global project, rather than one that is bounded by the borders of nation states, then SWAN must be evaluated in a global/transnational context that aims to think about women's oppression as the consequence of a number of conditions. This avoids the urge to reduce explanations for women's oppression in any given context to a single condition such as culture or religion. This has an impact on how we think of solutions to women's oppression.

Sgt. Hunt uses her experience of kicking doors in alongside her male colleagues as a point of pride, to exhibit her willingness to get into dangerous situations. However, the relatively scant description of her participation in these events omits certain details: whose home did she enter? Who lives on the other side of that door? Nor does it call into question these methods of engagement. When Hogg describes the cognitive dissonance she experienced as a queer soldier who could not openly express who she was and who was simultaneously being asked to "defend freedom," she is able to identify the disparity between the rhetoric and the reality. However, she does not appear to experience the same dissonance when she participates in military interventions that diminish the freedoms of women in Afghanistan and Iraq, and contributing to cycles of poverty and violence. In fact, the presentation of these "good soldiers" acts as a counter point in the media discourse to the always oppressed Muslim woman, making the "good soldier" an exemplar, an ideal that less autonomous women should hope to emulate in their desire to achieve. Once DADT is lifted, and there is a growing acceptance of queer service members and veterans, Hogg's statement suggests there will no longer be a conflict between the rhetorical mission of the military to "defend freedom," and the impact of their actual actions in the world. And so, this form of advocacy uncritically validates militarism.

SWAN's advocacy on the political stage, in the courtroom, and especially in the realm of media gives the appearance of a robust feminist discourse circulating throughout different realms of society. But, this is a feminist discourse that limits its scope in order to achieve short term goals within an existing institutional structure, and is not aimed at making significant structural change beyond opening the mindset of commanders to the notion that marginalized groups can serve as well as their white male counterparts. SWAN's strategies, and the networks they have built amongst feminists, suggest that there is a component missing from the articulation of feminist goals when we consider the status of women in one place. In the case of gender equality in the military it is a specific choice, one that refuses to acknowledge that while the U.S. military is a national entity, the impact of militarism is felt outside of the United States. What was absent from the rich networks of journalists and feminist activists and veterans SWAN interacts with on social media, and from the accounts of service by the female service members and veterans, are the voices of the Afghan and Iraqi women these soldiers are there to access. As such, there is one major component of the conversation that is ultimately overlooked: the same racism, homophobia, and misogyny, that cause the military as an institution to discriminate against its own members also feed the logics that justify military action (in the era of the War on Terror) in 'the Muslim world.' The relationship between the two, which could really disrupt how the institution functions, cannot be made visible when combat in "the Muslim world" is used to argue for the recogni-

tion of women in the military and so, the discourse itself is designed to be limited.

## Bibliography

- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). "Hegar, et al. v. Panetta – Plaintiffs." *ACLU.org*. <https://www.aclu.org/womens-rights/hegar-et-al-v-panetta-plaintiffs>.
- Abu Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Abu Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others." *American Anthropologist* 104 (3) (2002): 783-791.
- Bhagwati, Anu. "Sexism and Racism Lurk in Don't Ask Don't Tell Enforcement." *WNYC.org*. 2010. <http://www.wnyc.org/blogs/its-free-blog/2010/nov/30/sexist-and-racist-lurk-dont-ask-dont-tell-enforcement/>.
- Bhagwati, Anu. Speech to Human Rights Conference Press Conference. 2011. [http://servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/HRC-Press-conference-\\_\\_7\\_27\\_09.pdf](http://servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/HRC-Press-conference-__7_27_09.pdf).
- Bhagwati, Anu. Hearing Testimony of Anu Bhagwati, Executive Director, Service Women's Action Network, Before the Military Personnel Subcommittee Of the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 13, 2013. 2013. <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/statement/2013/03%20March/Bhagwati%2003-13-13.pdf>.
- Bumiller, Elisabeth. "For Female Marines, Tea Comes with Bullets." *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 2010, sec. A.
- Frank, Meghan, Jamie Farnsworth, Sabrina Esposito, and Jessica Hopper. "Victims of sexual assault in military say brass often ignore pleas for justice." *Rock Center with Brian Williams*. NBC News, September 27, 2012. <http://rockcenter.nbcnews.com/news/2012/09/27/14123062-victims-of-sexual-assault-in-military-say-brass-often-ignore-pleas-for-justice?lite>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color in *The Legal Response to Violence Against Women*. Oxford: Routledge, 2007.
- Fairclough, Norman. "Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language." 2010.
- Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage, 2013.
- Hirschkind, Charles and Saba Mahmood. "Feminism, the Taliban, and the politics of counter-insurgency." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (2) (2002): 339-355.
- Hogg, Jenn. "Don't Ask Don't Tell Story Project." *KristenGillibrand.com*, 2013. <http://www.kirstengillibrand.com/act/dadtstoryproject/stories/jen-hogg-former-sergeant-n-y-army-national-guard>.
- Lazar, Michelle, M. "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Analysis." *Critical Discourse Studies* 4 (2) (2007): 141-164.
- Lyle, Amaani. "Work Continues to Open Military Occupations to Women." U.S. Depart-

- ment of Defense, 2014. <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=121995>.
- Lewis, Reina. *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Meyer, Leisa D. *Creating G.I. Jane: The women's Army Corps during WWII, vol. 1*. Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison Press, 1993.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary 2* 12 (3) (1986): 333-358.
- National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics and Department of Veterans Affairs. *America's Women Veterans: Military Service History and VA Benefit Utilization Statistics*. Washington D.C, 2011.
- O'Toole, Molly. "Military Sexual Assault Epidemic Continues to Claim Victims as Defense Department Fails Victims." *The Huffington Post*, Oct. 6, 2010. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/06/military-sexual-assault-defense-department\\_n\\_1834196.html?](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/06/military-sexual-assault-defense-department_n_1834196.html?)
- "Petra: Leaders for Justice." Fellows. 2010. <http://petrafoundation.org/fellows/anubhagwati/>.
- Roulo, Claudette. "Defense Department Expands Women's Combat Role." *The U.S. Department of Defense*, Jan. 24 2013. <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=119098>.
- Said, Edward. *Culture & Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.
- Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
- Service Women's Action Network. (SWAN). "Women in Combat." *Servicewomen.org*. <http://servicewomen.org/women-in-combat/>.
- Stabile, Carol and Deepa Kumar. "Unveiling imperialism: Media, gender, and the war on Afghanistan." *Media, Culture & Society* 27 (5): (2002): 765-782.
- Toor, Saadia. "Imperialist Feminism Redux." *Dialectical Anthropology* 36 (3-4): (2012): 147-160.
- Wodak, Ruth and Michael Meyer. *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage, 2009. (2<sup>nd</sup> Revised edition).

## Notes

1. Lila Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Lila Abu Lughod. "Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others," *American Anthropologist* 104 (3) (2002): 783-791; Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and the politics of counter-insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (2) (2002): 339-355; Carol Stabile and Deepa Kumar, "Unveiling imperialism: Media, gender, and the war on Afghanistan." *Media, Culture & Society* 27 (5): (2002): 765-782.

2. Elisabeth Bumiller, "For Female Marines, Tea Comes with Bullets," *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 2010, sec. A.
3. Discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis, is generally thought of as an interdisciplinary approach to studying language or knowledge production in the context of power relations, from Michel Foucault, to Edward Said's excavation of the literary, scholarly and cultural production of Orientalism (1978, 1981, 1994) to Reina Lewis' gendering of Orientalism in her analysis of European women's knowledge production (1996). Critical discourse analysis is concerned with systemic inequality (Fairclough 2010, Wodak & Meyer 2009). The feminist critical discourse analysis employed here thinks about the ways in which "gendered subjects are affected by (power) in different ways," resulting in "relations of asymmetry (that) are also produced and experienced in different ways, by different groups of women" (Lazar 2007, 144-147).
4. Knox first gained public notoriety as a teenage activist fighting for gay rights and better sex education in her small Texas town and as the subject of the 2005 documentary *I am Shelby Knox*. Now Knox works as a proponent of using online media to do feminist activism and make change in the world. Her work with SWAN will focus on this type of activism
5. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12 (3) (1986): 333-358.
6. Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*
7. Saadia Toor, "Imperialist Feminism Redux," *Dialectical Anthropology* 36 (3-4) (2012): 147-160.
8. Amaani Lyle, "Work Continues to Open Military Occupations to Women," U.S. Department of Defense, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=121995>.
9. Molly O'Toole, "Military Sexual Assault Epidemic Continues to Claim Victims as Defense Department Fails Victims," *The Huffington Post*, Oct. 6, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/06/military-sexual-assault-defense-department\\_n\\_1834196.html?](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/06/military-sexual-assault-defense-department_n_1834196.html?)
10. Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2013).
11. In a Huffington Post article, SWAN legal director Rachel Natelson explains that commanding officers are allowed to consider the value of the accused to military operations when making judgments on whether to proceed with charges. In other cases, accusers have been told to refrain from bringing charges to preserve the military's reputation, and in some cases have been threatened with retaliatory action (alongside verbal and physical harassment) if they file or filed charges.
12. Kimberle Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color in *The Legal Response to Violence Against Women*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).
13. Anu Bhagwati, "Sexism and Racism Lurk in Don't Ask Don't Tell Enforcement," *WNYC.org*, 2010, <http://www.wnyc.org/blogs/its-free-blog/2010/nov/30/sexist-and-racist-lurk-dont-ask-dont-tell-enforcement/>.
14. Anu Bhagwati, Speech to Human Rights Conference Press Conference, 2011, <http://>

- [servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/HRC-Press-conference-7\\_27\\_09.pdf](http://servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/HRC-Press-conference-7_27_09.pdf).
15. Jenn Hogg, “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Story Project,” KristenGillibrand.com, 2013, <http://www.kirstengillibrand.com/act/dadtstoryproject/stories/jen-hogg-former-sergeant-n-y-army-national-guard>.
  16. Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating G.I. Jane: The women’s Army Corps during WWII* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison Press, 1993).
  17. American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), “Hegar, et al. v. Panetta – Plaintiffs,” *ACLU.org*, <https://www.aclu.org/womens-rights/hegar-et-al-v-panetta-plaintiffs>.
  18. ACLU, “Hegar, et al. v. Panetta – Plaintiffs.”
  19. Service Women’s Action Network, (SWAN), “Women in Combat,” *Servicewomen.org*. <http://servicewomen.org/women-in-combat/>.
  20. “Petra: Leaders for Justice,” Fellows, 2010, <http://petrafoundation.org/fellows/anu-bhagwati/>.
  21. Anu Bhagwati, Hearing Testimony of Anu Bhagwati, Executive Director, Service Women’s Action Network, Before the Military Personnel Subcommittee Of the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 13, 2013, 2013, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/statement/2013/03%20March/Bhagwati%2003-13-13.pdf>.
  22. Hogg, “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Story Project.”
  23. ACLU.

Isra Ali is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, New York University. Email: [isra.ali@nyu.edu](mailto:isra.ali@nyu.edu)