Networking for Political Voice among Women in Disrupted Societies of the Middle East and Africa

A Preliminary Study

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In 2003 a seemingly ordinary woman in Liberia mobilized the women of her country to regain peace and eventually elect a new government headed by Africa's first female president. Across the Middle East in 2011, women played a very visual and vocal part in the Arab Revolution and continue to mobilize for women's rights. At present, some African countries are struggling with social and political disruptions that threaten to bring down governments. This article asks if women can effectively act as agents of information diffusion about women's issues throughout the Middle East and Africa to mobilize for peace and gain political voice. Secondly, it compares the efficacy of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with that of women in sub-Saharan Africa. We find that as women's social networks establish themselves in one country, they diffuse regionally as proponents of conflict resolution and state rebuilding, resulting in growing civil society on the African continent. The pathways and mechanisms for mobilizing women socially and politically, however, remain little understood. Our preliminary article is a small study of 33 cases examining infor-

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mation pathways that occur through both woman-to-woman and women-to-public contact, which transmits information in a broader sense from women's organizations country to country and to the international community. The study serves as our theoretical and descriptive focus for the larger project. At a later time, we will apply social network analysis and geographic information system (GIS) mapping to discover patterns of interaction and diffusion, seeking viable commonalities that may lead to a theory of women's social networking and diffusion in conflict resolution.

Gender Roles, Culture, and Social Movement Theories

Gender roles represent a salient component of cultures throughout the world. As members of a culture and society, individuals are taught the importance of gender and the roles associated with being male and female. The question facing sociology and other social science disciplines is the degree to which gender is linked to social movement participation and leadership. This section explores the cultural significance of gender and its relationship to the development of and participation in social movements by discussing gender roles and culture, social movement theories, and MENA culture.

As stated previously, gender roles are significant and become so through the process of gender socialization, defined as "the process by which individuals learn the cultural behavior of femininity or masculinity that is associated with the biological sex of female or male."[1] Hence, as Linda Lindsey suggests, gender socialization emerges from a process of social construction reflective of culture, from which gender roles develop, thereby providing measures of social control.[2]

Because gender is related to culture and culture is related to social change, it is important to understand the role of gender in creating and/or perpetuating social change, which often occurs due to advances, class conflict, and political action. Hence, economic and political development may be related to changes in women's status or family.[3] Further, a framework developed by Janet Giele promotes understanding and assessing the position of women in different societies. The framework identifies six variables that represent significant factors in understanding women's status: (1) political expression, (2) work and mobility, (3) family, (4) education, (5) health and sexual control, and (6) cultural expression.[4] Social movements, then, are related to the concept of gendering consciousness.[5] According to M. Bahati Kuumba, "Social resistance often fosters an awareness of gender roles and relations even when the target and ultimate objectives of the movement have nothing to do with gender equity."[6] Thus, gender struggles play a role in creating new types of action, affecting society at large.

Political sociology depends upon theories to guide research and analyze and interpret society.[7] In regard to gender and social movements, several theoretical perspectives further the comprehension of social processes involved in the development of, participation in, and leadership of social movements. Kuumba notes that the use of sociological theory has emerged more recently to study women's role in social movements.[8] Three major theories address gender and social movements: (1) the political process model, (2) resource mobilization theory, and (3) new social movement theories.

According to the political process model, certain conditions exist that allow a social movement to develop and become successful. However, this theory has underemphasized the role of gender in regard to power relations, which play a role in creating political opportunities. This model also includes a subjective component: "Constructions of gender can mediate between social conditions and the movement by qualifying 'what is' and 'what is not' perceived as a political opportunity."[9]

Whereas the political process model focuses on political opportunities, resource mobilization theory emphasizes resources and the organizational structure that must exist in order for a social movement to be successful. Thus, this theory deals with official structures, tangible resources, and the rationality of organizers versus emotion and gender ideologies.[10]

New social movement theories depart from the class-based basis for activism. Rather, these perspectives address collective framing and identity, emphasizing social psychological components as well as subjective factors regarding social movement processes. As observed by Kuumba, "The fact that new social movement theories emphasize collective identity and social location, both of which are central to the construction of gender, makes them conducive to a gendered analysis, on one level."[11]

The role of women is directly tied to status, a fact demonstrated in the MENA regions. Specifically, status related to domestic roles, education, and literacy reflects rates of success regarding women.[12] Thus, "high fertility, low literacy, and low labor force participation are commonly linked to the low status of women, which in turn is often attributed to the prevalence of Islamic law and norms in Middle Eastern societies."[13] Further, the belief that women are different and inferior often creates barricades to their achievement and success. Hence, women are expected to refrain from roles considered inappropriate: "Women's reproductive function is used to justify this segregation in public, their restriction to the home, and their lack of civil and legal rights."[14]

Some areas in the MENA have seen the development of a strong working class and trade unions. Consequently, many types of movements (e.g., reform,

religious, and so on) have emerged in these regions, and some of the most crucial agents of change—both legal and political—have been led by women.[15]

Women Leaders as Agents of Change

Can women make a difference in the face of seemingly never-ending conflict? Does the simple art of communication truly help ease tensions and foster cooperation for political change and peace? The women introduced here believe that the answer is yes. They hail from countries throughout the MENA and sub-Saharan Africa, developing networks to realize a common goal: peace. This section examines how these remarkable individuals seek to attain this collective, desired outcome on a country-by-country basis.

The Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel

Beneath the bellicose statements of politicians in both Israel and the Palestinian Territories, women have taken up the mantle of leadership in an effort to create peace within and between their nations. In Palestine, Issam Abdul-Hadi, Amneh Kamal Sulaiman, and Zahira Kamal are inspirations to Palestinian Arab women who are struggling to define their newly emerged identity in a global world.[16] Abdul-Hadi attended the first Palestinian National Council, which led to creation of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) in 1965, and was elected the union's president—a position she still holds. She received the Ibn Rushd Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2000.[17] In the refugee camps of Lebanon, Sulaiman suffered greatly yet worked her way to become a refugee camp adviser and deputy chairwoman of the GUPW. Amneh networks with refugees to organize social and patriotic work as she fights for peace. She is also a member of the Palestinian National Council.[18] Kamal held the post of director general of the Directorate of General Planning and International Cooperation at the Palestinian National Authority from 1995 to 2005. As director general, she formed an interministerial coordination committee for the advancement of women. Zahira is also the founder of Palestinian Women's Action, the first grassroots organization dealing with women's empowerment issues. She is affiliated with many women's nongovernmental organizations (NGO) in Palestine and has worked as a spokeswoman for the Palestinian Federation of Women's Action in many countries, including Russia and the United States. Furthermore, she is a member of both Israeli and Palestinian Networking and the Jerusalem Link, two cooperating women's centers located in east and west Jerusalem. Zahira has written extensively on women's empowerment, women's political participation, and the peace process.[19]

In Israel, theatre director Angelica Livne, playwrights Betty Shamieh and Misha Shulman, and actress Yael Drouyanoff promote peace through the arts and civil society.[20] Livne is an advocate for peace through the arts, focusing on children of different religious and cultural backgrounds through the Rainbow Theatre. Involving children of all faiths, the theatre engages the children to use their bodies to narrate what goes on in the mind of an adolescent living in a country at war and to express their thoughts and desires to accept others and be accepted as they are.[21] The stage is fast becoming a place for advocates of change in the Arab-Israeli conflict. *Roar*, a play by Shamieh, a Palestinian, highlights the experiences of a Palestinian family living in a Midwestern American city that has a large Arab community. Shulman's play *Fist* examines the turmoil of an Israeli family whose son refuses to continue serving in the military because of the injustices he witnesses as a result of the occupation of Palestine. Founded by Drouyanoff, the Peace Child Israel project allows Jewish and Arab teens to act out their own versions of plays to dramatize the issues they face.[22]

Rela Mazali and Ronit Avni are civil society activists who promote peace. Mazali is one of the founding members of the New Profile Movement for the Civilization of Israeli Society, which promotes peace among young Israelis through mutual respect and understanding by challenging the militarization of Israeli education, creating public opportunities for discussion and learning, and providing young people who refuse to enlist in the military with information as well as moral and emotional support.[23] Avni, Just Vision founder and chief executive officer, launched a program in 2003 designed to widen the influence of journalists, policy makers, and supportive communities by connecting them to one another. She publicizes the work of Israeli and Palestinian peace builders because she has observed that the media ignore these individuals and groups. Just Vision aims to highlight the work of these individuals and bring it into the mainstream. Thus far, the project has interviewed 180 civil leaders in Hebrew, Arabic, and English with the object of teaming up with educators to create curricula for the classroom that addresses how each person can become an agent of change.[24]

Women from both sides have participated in the Global Peace Initiative of Women Conference, which—since 2002—has explored peace initiatives between Palestinians and Israelis. The conference "was founded to mobilize spiritual and religious communities around the world to address key global issues, focused on climate change, the environment, promoting women's leadership and interfaith dialogue."[25] During the summits held from 2002 to 2008, three facts became clear: (1) reconciliation is not a political exercise but an effort that will leave the past behind and build for the future, (2) women must have a leading role in the

peace process, and (3) reconciliation is a people-to-people process that begins at the grassroots level.[26]

At this time, the political impact of the efforts discussed above on empowering women to wage peace between Palestine and Israel remains unclear. Certainly civil society must broaden among Palestinians, and women must become full partners in attaining peace and reconciliation. In Israel, it is equally unclear whether women and civil society peace groups are making any political gains towards peace.

Lebanon

Rather than peace, women's groups in Lebanon emphasize their political and civil empowerment. Women in Lebanon can vote and run for office, enjoy freedom of speech and assembly, and may advocate for issues; however, they are heavily discriminated against in the area of public employment. Women find themselves lacking in empowerment in specific societal and human rights issues such as equal treatment under the law—particularly in the domestic arena.[27] The Lebanese Council for the Prevention of Violence against Women has staged marches and other public protests while the Lebanese Women's Council has organized conferences aimed at convincing both politicians and religious leaders to reduce legal restrictions and improve women's access to political decision making.[28]

Women are poorly represented in Lebanese politics. Only elite families can seat a woman in parliament. Bahia Hariri, who holds one of only four women's seats out of 143 in the Lebanese parliament, is head of the Education Committee in the Arab Parliamentarian Union and has taken on a number of pilot projects in varying fields of study. By utilizing those positions, she has committed herself to fighting to empower women and address gender inequality. Hariri strongly believes in developing partnerships between civil organizations and the government, at both the local and national levels, as a means of pursuing human development projects in Lebanon.[29]

Syria, Jordan, and Other Countries

Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban of Syria and Haifa Abu Ghazaleh and Laurice Hlass of Jordan have dedicated their lives to addressing social injustices that have befallen women in the Arab world. Dr. Shaaban is the author of three books about the lives of Arab women as well as the media and political adviser to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Over the past 10 years, she has set a strong example for women who desire to enact reforms and who want to participate in Syrian politics.[30] Through her work as regional program director at UniFem, Abu Ghazaleh has

developed many programs and projects that support peace, women's rights, and political participation. She strives to apply the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals, and the International Human Rights Legal Legislation to the organizations of which she is a member, such as the Jordanian Ministry of Education and the General Federation of Jordanian Women.[31] Hlass has inspired many Jordanian women to further their education and improve their domestic situations. She reaches out to women, offering vocational and skills training at such NGOs as the Young Women's Christian Association, where she is president, and the UN Relief and Works Agency, among others.[32]

Other significant women and women's groups from Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, and Saudi Arabia are part of the case studies. Some of these include the Iraqi Women's League and the Women's Cultural and Social Society in Kuwait. Women leaders who have made significant social and political gains for women in the region include Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, the first woman minister of the UAE, and Tiba Al Maoli, the first woman nominated for the Omani Legislative Council. As a member of the council, she helped draft the Silk Alqadi Law and the Al Ahwal Al Shakhseyya Law.[33] Writer Laila Nabih Alnamani is a founding member of the Women's Welfare Society in Saudi Arabia, which represents more than 35,000 individuals and provides a range of services and skills to improve the standard of living for women.[34] Dr. Haifa Jamal Al-Lail, president of Effat University in Saudi Arabia, is directly involved in the development of women's higher education in that country. She works with diverse organizations such as the Jeddag Chambers of Commerce and the World Economic Forum and has labored internationally to voice her concerns over stereotypes about Muslim women, the need for dialogue, and her commitment to peace.[35]

The "Arab Spring" Countries

Women's rights and the viability of women's groups vary greatly from one North African country to another. The gains of the past 30 years or so have largely been lost since the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.[36] Yet, women leaders and women's rights organizations have been active in the two years hence.

Women's rights issues engage more than 20 women's groups in Tunisia, such as the National Union of Tunisian Women and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women. Since June 1991, the Women and Development Committee has scrutinized development plans to guarantee respect for gender equality. The Center for Arab Women Training and Research, based in Tunis, promotes gender equality through advocacy and workshops.[37]

Award-winning women's rights activist Dalia Ziada, executive director of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Egypt, is one of eight women leaders across the Arab world engaged in a movement dubbed the "Pink Hijab."[38] Although Ms. Ziada lost her run for parliament in 2011 as a candidate of the political party that she cofounded with other revolutionaries, she continues to train activists and bloggers from her organization.[39] Other Egyptian women involved in the women's rights movement are Rebecca Chiao, founder of HarassMap, a website that tracks sexual assaults and other violence against women by cell phone and Internet; activist Soraya Bahgat; and Abeer Abo El'ela from the media office of the National Council for Women. These women, who believe that attacks on women activists are increasing and deliberately launched as a defamation campaign against them, are instrumental in keeping political violence against women in the public light.[40]

Algeria and Morocco

Women's rights in Algeria have improved since the 1970s but are hampered by religious and secular differences as well as women's overall legal illiteracy. Women's rights groups have grown in number since 2005 as more women are engaging in activism and civic involvement.[41] Human rights activist Louisa Hanoun, leader of the Algerian Workers Party since 1990, has demanded the drafting of a new constitution that stipulates the irreversible adoption of democracy. In 2004 Louisa was nominated by her party and ran unsuccessfully as a presidential candidate; nevertheless, this was a watershed moment for women in Arab countries insofar as she was the first woman in the MENA region ever to do. Hanoun considers her action a breakthrough in the region with regard to the status of women.[42]

Women's empowerment in Morocco resembles that in Algeria. The cultural setting there remains a major impediment to women's socioeconomic advancement. Their productivity is undervalued in both the public and private sectors of the country. Fawzia Talout Meknassi—a journalist and director of the Press Marocaine, a leading Moroccan press agency—established the Salon for Mediterranean Women in 1997 and the International Forum for Women in 1999, which she also directs. Moreover, Fawzia is a staple figure of the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women. She believes that women's progress in Morocco depends upon a radical change that must occur within the ethos of her country. Meknassi tirelessly works to see this change occur by creating social networks for the advancement of women.[43]

Award-winning Moroccan activist Najat M'jid is a member of the Commission on the Rights of the Child of the Moroccan Consultative Council on Human Rights. She is the founder and an active member of BAYTI, an NGO and

the first program addressing the situation of Morocco's street children. She is responsible in part for Morocco's national policy on the protection of children. Najat was appointed the special rapporteur on the sale of children in May 2008 by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.[44]

Women's Civil Society Networking in Africa

The main thrust of our research addresses how women network with other women for the purpose of gaining a political and social voice. How do they transmit information to women across borders? We also need to ask what inhibits information transmission and political success. Transmission via word of mouth is the simplest mode, but it does not necessarily lead to collective action. Winning political office as president, prime minister, or parliamentarian is a significant gain, but without the multiple voices of civil society, change remains problematic. Earlier we examined motivated women leaders and women's groups who forge pathways for MENA women to obtain political voice and policy outcomes. This section examines the broader women's civil society networks in Africa, their successes, and the difficulties they endure.

The approach to women's human rights (gender violence and sexual discrimination) occurs in a fragmented, piecemeal manner using various international conventions. Gender-blind-centered justice and political decision making create an atmosphere of "justice-avoidance and evasion" by countries and regions, maintaining an abstracted view of postconflict and peace-building agendas that ignores women-specific issues.[45]

Dr. Annie Chikwanha found that problems with equal treatment in conflict resolution appear politically linked through long-standing cultural institutional arrangements such as traditional chiefs/elders/mediators (30 instances); armed forces and police (34 instances); local administration (17 instances); local courts (14 instances); family, friends, and neighbors (14 instances); and others to a lesser extent. She notes that women do not know how to obtain justice, that they lack literacy and access to technology because of limited information and high prices, and that they are culturally inhibited.[46]

The extent to which women's initiatives are viable in obtaining justice and political voice is not clear. One can measure the number of seats they obtain in parliaments and track their civil society associations, but it is also necessary to undertake a study of these associations' policy initiatives and follow a number of them to completion. Many NGOs assist women in conflict-ending and peace-building efforts, but the collection of data is neither harmonized nor coherent and, therefore, not comparable. Women's networks, such as Akina Mama wa Af-

rika's (AMwA) Women's Leadership and Movement Building in Conflict and Post-Conflict Countries in Africa Project, are occasionally successful in their efforts to pass laws in various African countries. Women's civil society groups struggle with sustainability due to a paucity of resources for capacity building and individual assistance.[47] AMwA—a women's advocacy network by and for African women between the ages of 25 and 45 that shares information, advice, and expertise—also reports that women's rights activists are targets themselves because of their outspokenness and the nature of their work. Nevertheless, the agency of African women working for women remains paramount.

Inherent in the patrimonial societies of African nations is a failure of the African media to recognize the gender of female African leaders. Dismus Nkunda writes that "when Ellen John Sirleaf rose to the highest office of her country Liberia through a democratic election, this feat saw her being described as 'the best man for the job.'"[48] In Kenya a woman serving in the coalition government cabinet as the minister for justice was noted as "the only man in the coalition."[49] When women occupy positions of power that are not considered the domain of women or promote women's issues and when patriarchal society refuses to recognize their leadership, Nkunda advises that women leaders need to continue to strategically engage society in "unpacking how social roles, norms and responsibilities continue to re-write narratives of women's leadership."[50]

AMwA offers lectures, training sessions, intergenerational dialogue, and workshops for the purpose of developing the next generation of women capable of taking leadership roles in society and politics. Information campaigns help to inform the general public about their organization and garner support for the women's movement. AMwA engages these future leaders in the Women's Leadership and Movement Building in Conflict and Post-Conflict Countries in Africa Project, supported by the MDG3 Fund, an initiative of the Dutch Foreign Ministry.[51] The project seeks to train young women in feminist leadership "for effective participation and representation in decision-making processes in conflict situations" and to work for "gender responsive policies and programmes" in their respective countries.[52]

Western Africa

In the 1990s, women from Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea had already begun organizing themselves in groups to teach each other how to speak out for their rights and demand education. Shirley and Viola, Liberians who lived in the Oru-Ijebu refugee camp in 1995, began a women's group in the camps to teach women their rights and facilitate their education. They hoped

that someday women would properly organize themselves throughout Africa and cry for peace.[53]

When women organize themselves for peace, they significantly affect the peace process. The Mano River Women's Peace Network, for example, began when women from the West African countries of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea desired to put an end to the suffering and fighting caused by conflict. They successfully participated in and influenced the outcome of the peace process in their region and within their respective countries by dispatching a delegation to appeal to the feuding heads of states and by staging sit-ins in Monrovia, Liberia.[54]

That country's National Women's Commission was founded in 1991 as an NGO with roughly 41 different women's groups attached to it. The commission focuses on structures of women working at the grassroots level by providing funding and technical assistance; further, it serves as an intermediary among the women's groups, country governments, and other international women's groups.[55] Through the commission, Liberian women started a program for abused women and girls, supplied legal aid and rights education, and generated income for female combatants and their families. Following that organization's success in Liberia, women in Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea began their own branches in their home countries. One local women's group, the Slipway Women Development Association, operates out of one of the poorest neighborhoods in Monrovia. Since its beginning, neighborhood women have held fundraising rallies, and each week they attend the National Women's Association meeting to discuss their issues.[56]

Eastern Africa

Women in war-ravaged Sudan have been actively working for peace, women's empowerment, and development. Amna Abd El Rahman Abd El Rasoul is the founder and an active member of the Peace and Development Center in the Kedalu, one of the most underdeveloped areas of the country with no access to telephones, road networks, or marketing facilities. Because of the center's concern with issues about women's and children's rights to education, the percentage of girls enrolled in basic schooling has significantly increased.[57]

Writer and founder of the Community Based Organizations, Bakhita Osman works for peaceful coexistence between multiethnic communities through her talents as a storyteller. Bakhita's efforts to implement "the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) [*sic*] [goals], women's empowerment, poverty alleviation, and establishing the culture of peace and coexistence in the Sudan" are hampered by a lack of financial resources, the unstable and violent atmosphere, and the political ideology of the rulers.[58]

Other women leaders who empower women to establish networks for peace building, gender equality, and equal political representation include Fatima Ibrahim, Ester Rahal, Rachael Paul, and Anita Amiro. Ibrahim, the first woman elected to the Sudanese parliament, is president of the Women's International Democratic Federation, and "Mama Ester" Rahal is the first woman to represent the Nuba Mountain region in parliament. They are involved in policy regarding issues of gender equality in the decision-making process. With the Sudanese Women's Union, they strive to support women's participation in political life and the building of civil society.[59] Activist Paul participated in concluding a peace agreement between North and South Sudan, ending the longest phase of the civil war.[60] Singer, dancer, and actress Amiro is one of the pioneering women behind the Kwoto Cultural Center, whose work is prominently featured at international festivals and film competitions. She works to promote peace and reconciliation for the displaced citizens of Southern Sudan by giving them an outlet for the exercise of free speech through works of art.[61]

Information Pathways

The methodology for this preliminary study entailed collecting case-study evidence of the activities of individual women leaders and women's civil society groups involved in peace building, women's empowerment, and political activities promoting women. In the 33 cases, we examined leadership and organizational activities native to the African continent as well as those initiated from abroad and active on the African continent and in the Middle East:

Code	Pathway	Cases
WW	Woman to Woman	10
WP	Woman to Public	8
WI	Woman or Women to the International Community	9
WOW	Women's Organization to Women	4
WOP	Women's Organization to Public	7
W2G	Women to Government: Direct Involvement	4
Overlaps		9
Total Cases		33

In 27 of the 33 cases, information pathways occur through woman-to-woman contact (10 cases); woman-to-public (8 cases), which transmits information in a broader sense from woman-to-woman; and women-to the-international-community (9 cases), by which we mean transmittal between women from

country to country. In 15 cases, we find transmittal from a women's organization to women, to the public, and to the government. In eight cases, we have multi-modal information transmission. In all cases, we do not yet have a count of how many women are reached, nor do we have a grasp of the reach from community to community. Since we can draw no substantive conclusions, it appears that information transmission woman to woman, even across borders, is the primary pathway—but not the only modality of transmission.

Conclusions

We tentatively conclude that women in African countries are much more politically active and successful in obtaining political voice than those in the MENA. While we can speculate that the nature of Islam may have some correlation with this observation, in African countries, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Animist women labor side by side to achieve peace and political voice.[62] So perhaps it is culture and society that matter. The nature of society in the MENA is patrimonial, as is much but not all of sub-Saharan Africa. These issues are important but were not addressed in this study. What about the numbers of women in parliaments? It is well known that women serving in governments and parliaments in the MENA are members of elite families—not always the case in sub-Saharan countries. Yet, those numbers are small and not good measures of the viability of women's political voice.

Another conclusion holds that women organizing themselves in civil society groups and reaching out to other women enjoy more success than those who work on their own. Some men are involved in promoting women's rights, empowerment, and voice, but the vast majority of successful women's movements are by women only and for women only. The next steps in this research, which will help answer questions regarding diffusion and success, involve creating and sending out a survey that will allow us to discern the numbers of women reached and their location. To the greatest extent possible, we will also gather geocoordinates so that we can analyze this data using ArcGIS software and network analysis to story-map the findings.

Notes

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