

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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Women after the Arab Awakening

Introduction

*Mona Youssef and Kendra Heideman,
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Amidst the ongoing revolutionary fervor in the Middle East, an undercurrent of frustration and fear runs deep among women. Across the region, women actively participated alongside their male counterparts in protests and demonstrations, and, eventually, years of dictatorial rule began to crumble from Tunisia to Yemen and in between. Their participation was encouraged and welcomed, and women felt, often for the first time, that they may actually have an equal say in the future of their countries. Unfortunately, it would not be so for most women.

As one of many such examples, in Egypt, the women's quota in parliament was scrapped altogether, sidelining women's decision-making potential in that country's transition to democracy. In addition, women are experiencing increased

harassment in the streets, and previously-resolved issues affecting women and their rights are being revisited by the new regimes.

The present marginalization of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is now well documented in the mainstream and social media. The Middle East Program convened a series of meetings to examine the post-revolutionary status of women in the region. The first one, held in May 2012, brought together experienced women leaders from around the region to discuss the implications for women's rights under the emerging Islamist regimes. The second meeting in the series, held in October 2012 and on which this publication is based, sought the views of the younger, up-and-coming generation of activists, journalists, and politicians in the MENA region to describe the current situation on the ground for women and the strategies they can use to organize themselves and move forward in the post-revolutionary phase. The third in the series intends to bring these two groups together

About the Middle East Program

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The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement in the region and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program concentrates on long-term economic, social, and political developments, as well as relations with the United States.

The Middle East Program draws on domestic and foreign regional experts for its meetings, conferences, and occasional papers. Conferences and meetings assess the policy implications of all aspects of developments within the region and individual states; the Middle East's role in the international arena; American interests in the region; the threat of terrorism; arms proliferation; and strategic threats to and from the regional states.

The Program pays special attention to the role of women, youth, civil society institutions, Islam, and democratic and autocratic tendencies. In addition, the Middle East Program hosts meetings on cultural issues, including contemporary art and literature in the region.

- **Current Affairs:** The Middle East Program emphasizes analysis of current issues and their implications for long-term developments in the region, including: the events surrounding the uprisings of 2011 in the Middle East and its effect on economic, political and social life in countries in the region, the increased use of social media, the role of youth, Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy, Iran's political and nuclear ambitions, the drawdown of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and their effect on the region, human rights violations, globalization, economic and political partnerships, and U.S. foreign policy in the region.

- **Gender Issues** The Middle East Program devotes considerable attention to the role of women in advancing civil society and to the attitudes of governments and the clerical community toward women's rights in the family and society at large. The Program examines employment patterns, education, legal rights, and political participation of women in the region. The Program also has a keen interest in exploring women's increasing roles in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction activities.

- **Islam, Democracy and Civil Society:** The Middle East Program monitors the growing demand of people in the region for the transition to democratization, political participation, accountable government, the rule of law, and adherence by their governments to international conventions, human rights, and women's rights. It continues to examine the role of Islamic movements and the role of Islamic parties in shaping political and social developments and the variety of factors that favor or obstruct the expansion of civil society.

The following papers are based on the authors' presentations at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on October 2, 2012. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

to exchange lessons learned and formulate best practices for women in the region.

Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Wilson Center's Middle East Program, moderated the first of two panels. She describes women as the real "losers" in this struggle, drawing parallels between the experiences of women in Iran during the 1978-9 revolution then and in the Arab Spring countries now. In both cases, Islamist parties came into power, thereby eroding the gains women had made in their social, economic, and political lives. Esfandiari is optimistic, however, because the MENA region has undergone an irreversible change that will only serve to empower women to fight for their equal place in society.

Rangita de Silva de Alwis, the director of the Wilson Center's Global Women's Leadership Initiative, moderated the second panel of this meeting. As a lawyer by training, she addresses the legal dimensions of the Arab Spring revolutions and how they affect women. Of particular concern is the issue of new constitutions, as she says it is not enough for women's rights to be enshrined in them, but for women to actually participate in the drafting process. With Arab women's economic and political participation ranking at the bottom of the world, she sees the role of women as decision-makers as critical for the advancement of women in the MENA region.

Hala Al Dosari of Saudi Arabia discusses a society that is living vicariously through the protest movements of its neighbors. Because Saudi women have low economic and political participation, they turn to social media to initiate campaigns such as the campaign to lift the ban on women driving. She emphasizes the vital role that online activism has played in empowering Saudi women. Al Dosari notes that while the country has implemented new restrictions on freedom of expression for fear of public uprising, women continue to work through various networks and media outlets.

Based on years of experience with her Sana'a-based NGO, **Gabool Al-Mutawakel** outlines a four-part strategy for Yemeni women to move forward and advance their position in the post-revolutionary period that saw the overthrow of that country's president. The strategies include focus-

ing on societal issues, not just women's issues or how issues relate to gender; increasing opportunities for women to work in mixed-gender environments; encouraging competition among women; and focusing on training young women leaders. Al-Mutawakel cites the politicization of both Islam and women's issues as the two challenges facing Yemeni women today.

Honey Al Sayed, a Syrian journalist and expatriate, reviews how women in Syria have been affected by the country's violence and chaos and how they have contributed to the revolutionary cause. While Syria is unstable and the future uncertain, Al Sayed says Syrian women must define their role now rather than let it be defined by others. She highlights the need for men and women to work together to secure the goals of the Syrian revolution: "democracy, dignity, and freedom for all Syrians."

Rihab Elhaj of Libya writes about how women have become increasingly marginalized despite their involvement in the country's revolution and civil society. She reviews how such marginalization has affected women with regard to Libya's security situation, sexual harassment problems, and segregation. While women represent approximately 16 percent of parliament, Elhaj indicates that their leadership throughout the country remains low. She argues that women must remain engaged, continue to make contributions, and support other women as Libya progresses.

Representing one of the MENA countries not experiencing regime change during the Arab Spring, **Hanin Ghaddar** of Lebanon describes the country's sectarian system whose laws govern family life in the absence of civil law. This system, divided into 18 religious sects, forms one part of what she calls the "power triangle" in Lebanon—



the others being the religious institutions and the man of the house. Ghaddar notes that the pressure exerted by this system on women makes them the society's "weakest link," forcing them to finally protest in the streets for their rights in the revolutionary spirit of their neighbors. She argues for a separation of religion and state if women are to improve their status in Lebanon.

Omezzine Khélifa of Tunisia analyzes women's role in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) and in the country's overall transition, noting that while there has not been a regression in women's rights, there has not been progress either. During the constitution drafting process, women addressed several issues related to gender equality, most notably the possible replacement of "equality" between men and women with "complementarity." With women representing 27 percent of NCA members, women continue to play a vital role in the democratic transition and in the fight for women's rights.

Dalia Ziada lays out the struggles faced by women in post-revolutionary Egypt. As a women's rights activist, she discusses the importance of including women, in both participatory and leadership roles, in the country's democratic transition period. The patriarchal nature of Egyptian society, however, has marginalized women and largely kept them out of the democratic process. Ziada notes this exclusion of women is not something new in post-revolutionary Egypt but "a continuation of Egyptian women's pre-revolutionary sufferings." She says such exclusion serves to undermine the potential for true democracy in Egypt.

Reviewing Yemeni women's involvement in the country's uprising and transition, **Fahmia Al-Fotih** notes how women have contributed and how they have been exploited. She explains that women's empowerment was sidelined after the uprising; political parties used women to

gain support but neglected to advance women's issues. There have been some improvements: women's organizations have unified their efforts, and women lead the Ministry of Human Rights and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Despite this, women have been attacked, harassed, kidnapped, and detained. Al-Fotih calls for greater cooperation among women, indicating it is still too soon to know whether Yemeni women will experience a true "spring."

Yasmine ElSayed Hani focuses on the nearly two years which have passed since the Egyptian revolution overthrew the Mubarak regime. Women's rights activists are struggling to preserve gains made in the past, prevent lawmakers from revisiting decisions that negatively affect women, and expand their role and level of respect in Egyptian society. The very low representation of women in the current parliament, coupled with its Islamist majority, does not bode well for women's rights. While Hani outlines these challenges, she also points to opportunities women can benefit from. The situation for women in Egypt is still tenuous, though Hani is optimistic about their future.

One after another, these young women describe an environment in the MENA region in which women are increasingly unable to attain equality with their male counterparts. From inheritance to citizenship, to matters of divorce and marriage, to political participation, and to the rights over one's own body, women are, for the most part, losing each and every battle. Is it any wonder, then, that women in the MENA region rank well below their global counterparts in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2012? Despite such obstacles, women throughout the Middle East are working together more and developing strategies to empower themselves and to turn the "Arab Spring" into a "Women's Spring."

Are Women Losers in the Arab Spring?

Haleh Esfandiari, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center*



In December 2012, it will have been two years since the beginning of the Arab Spring. The self-immolation of a fruit and vegetable vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia sent a ripple effect around the region the likes of which we had not witnessed in decades. One autocrat after another fell. Regime change took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. The turmoil spread to other countries. Syria is in the midst of a civil war. Bahrain had to ask for Saudi help to quash Shi'a demonstrators. Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, Morocco, and even Saudi Arabia have not been spared demonstrations either. These countries have been grappling with an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and protest movements.

Looking back, we remember that men and women, old and young, conservatives and liberals, Islamists and secularists, rich and poor worked together to restore the lost dignity of the people who had been treated as minors and fools by their autocratic heads of state for too long. The people, especially the young, who came out into the streets of Middle Eastern cities wanted their voices heard and a say in shaping the future of their societies.

Revolutions have their own momentum, and they ignite a passion and a fever that embraces everyone. But once the euphoria ends and the people start dealing with the realities of post-revolutionary times, winners will emerge and losers will be pushed aside.

As in the 1978-79 revolution in Iran, Islamists have emerged as the strongest parties in the countries of the Arab Spring. Tunisia and Egypt, where the Al-Nahda Party and the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, are in the process of completing the drafting of their constitutions. All eyes are focused on these two countries to see what prominence is given to *shari'a* in their constitutions. Is *shari'a* going to be *a* source of the law or *the* source of the law? In Iran, *shari'a* is *the* source of the law and, therefore, not friendly to women's rights.

Today, women's rights activists in the region feel a sense of unease. They ask if women's rights are being gradually eroded and if women are being marginalized.

For example: what will happen to the personal status law in Tunisia, or the law criminalizing female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt? What will happen to the existing quota system for political participation in Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan? What will happen to the representation of women in national assemblies and local councils? Can women run for president? How many women will join cabinets? What will happen to NGOs?

Women also ask how committed the new regimes will be in adhering to the international conventions they had joined in the past, such as CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UDHR (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and many others.

Another important question is whether the new regimes will revisit the personal status laws in each of these countries. Experience has shown us that the work of women activists over decades can be dismantled with the stroke of a pen.

This is what happened in Iran in 1979. With the stroke of a pen, the Family Protection Law that regulated family relationships was suspended. Once again, the age of marriage for girls was reduced to 9 (i.e., puberty). Divorce, once again, became the prerogative of men. Child custody was given to the father. Polygamy became legal, and many other discriminatory laws that relegated women to second-class citizenship were passed. All this was done in the name of Islam. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states that women's rights are defined in the framework of Islamic Law.

Such a clause in the constitutions of the Arab Spring countries would limit women's rights. One has to make sure that equality between

men and women is embedded in the constitutions with no conditions and no ifs or buts. Nor should women be defined as complementing men, as was suggested in the debate over the Tunisian Constitution. The age of marriage for girls should remain at 18, not 9 as the Egyptian Constitutional Assembly was contemplating. Child marriage should be criminalized as no girl should be married off at 7 or 9. The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets 18 as the age when a child passes into adulthood. FGM should continue to be regarded as a crime committed against a girl child and not revisited, as some members of the Egyptian Constitutional Assembly suggested.

Each of these new constitutions should include an article specifying a high percentage for women's political and economic participation across the board. The Iraqi model where women are allocated 25 percent of the 325 seats in parlia-

ment but where there is only one woman in the cabinet is not ideal; nor is the Libyan allocation of 10 percent of seats in parliament for women adequate. Yemen is considering a 30 percent quota for women across the board, but the inclusion of such a quota in the constitution remains doubtful. Egypt has to reinstate and strengthen the weak quota system that it abolished altogether.

The new regimes in the region may toy with the idea of marginalizing women and excluding them from the decision-making process, but they will not succeed. The region has changed. More women than men enter universities in the majority of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa. These women will fight for their rights, for economic and political participation, and for progressive laws. They will no longer settle for a nominal role and a nominal say in their own future and the future of their countries.




Enhancing the Primacy of the Constitution, the Rule of Law, and Equality before the Law in the Arab Region

Rangita de Silva de Alwis, *Director, Global Women's Leadership Initiative, Woodrow Wilson Center; and Senior Scholar, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College*

Although democratic transitions where women are full and equal participants can provide strategic opportunities to address past inequities, to date, women are not making the breakthroughs in the Arab region that they had hoped for during the revolution. Nation building calls for heterogeneity, cross-cultural dialogue, and discourse in order to expand internal reform. Enlightened constitutionalism recognizes that transnational influences have persuasive authority. Nation building must reflect a capacity to select and modify traditions to the changing needs and aspirations in modernity and diversity.

In March 2011, King Mohammed VI of Morocco called for “enhancing the primacy of

the Constitution, of the rule of law, and of equality before the law”¹ In that spirit, as countries in the Arab region recast their constitutions, it is vital that women be at the decision-making table. As the supreme source of law, the new constitutions in the Arab region will provide the legal foundation for governance, and the constitutional provisions enshrining women's rights will be vital in defining and determining the status of women in the Arab region. Women's participation in drafting the constitution is as important as the constitutional guarantees of women's rights. Women must engage fully and equally in constitution making in terms of both substance and process.



In terms of the substance of the constitution, gender must be included as a prohibited category of discrimination. Moreover, many constitutions around the world have also guaranteed women's participation in decision making. It is only when women are at the table that issues impacting both men and women are addressed. Rwanda, whose constitution enshrines a 30 percent quota in parliament, is the nation with the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world, currently at 56 percent. Women parliamentarians in Rwanda seized the window of opportunity for change by spearheading efforts in the transitional parliament set up after the 1994 genocide to modify discriminatory laws, such as the old laws on nationality and citizenship which were not gender equitable. In Tanzania in 2004, a few years after the constitution was amended to include a minimum 20 percent quota for women, a revision to the Land Act provided equal rights to women to access land, loans, and credit.

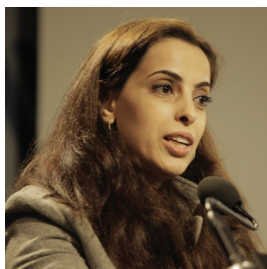
As new systems of governance are built in the Arab region, advancing women in the ranks of public service is as important as achieving gender balance in political participation. Gender balance in public service during times of transition ensures plural perspectives for shaping policymaking and empowers women as decision-makers. Strategies to increase women's leadership positions in public service must include not just targets and quotas but capacity building, networking, and mentoring initiatives. These commitments are part of the Arab states' obligations under the Convention

on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. States' Parties should take measures to ensure that women, on equal terms with men, have the right to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government. In 1995, the Beijing Conference and Beijing Platform of Action reaffirmed that "women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved."²

In 2010, the UN and the Arab League reported that women constituted only 10 percent of the total of parliamentarians in the region—the lowest rate in the world. The economic participation of Arab women remains the lowest of women anywhere in the world at 26.3 percent. The women in the region must not let go of the opportunities to change these statistics.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.morocco-board.com/viewpoint/380-norman-greene/5484-morocco-beyond-kings-speech-a-constitutional-reform>
- 2 <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm>



Spring Blossoms

Hala Al Dosari, *Ph.D. candidate in health services research; and opinion writer*

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. The King is the source of all powers: legislative, regulatory, and administrative. Political parties, civil society organizations, and freedom of assembly are banned. *Shari'a*, or Islamic law, is the basis of legislation. Decision-making in Saudi Arabia is usually made by influential members of the royal family who hold key positions in the government. The Shura Council is an advisory body that provides the King with recommendations on public policies. The Council of Ministers is the executive branch of the government. There is no written penal code in Saudi courts, with few regulatory and administrative laws. Judges who have graduate training in *shari'a* are the only legal instruments within the courtroom.

Earlier in 2011, three public petitions calling for reforms and signed by thousands of citizens were circulated and published online. One made by intellectual leaders specified women's rights as a major area needed to combat poverty and violence. It called on the government to empower women with equal rights through educational, economic, political, and public participation.

Employment

In 2011, Saudi Arabia was ranked 131st out of 135 countries in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report.¹ It outranked only Yemen within the Arab region. The gender gap index measures the ratio of women to men in each country in four sub-indices: economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Economic participation and political empowerment were the two main sub-indices with extremely low scores in Saudi Arabia.

Women's economic participation sits at a very low rate of 28 percent. This has placed Saudi Arabia at one of the lowest ranks in the world in economic participation and opportunities for women, above only Pakistan and Yemen. Expanded educational opportunities for women have not improved their economic participation.


For instance, more than 2,000 female lawyers graduated over the last decade, but the Ministry of Justice denied them the permission to practice. Educated Saudi women are not actively integrated into the economy. Some barriers include the official ban on gender mixing, the lack of safe public transportation, the ban on women driving, and the requirement of guardians' consent. Lately, the Ministry of Labor has revoked the condition of obtaining a guardian's consent to work. In reality, however, banks and other institutions still request women applicants to get consent prior to hiring them, without allowing legal redress for women.

In the wake of regional political unrest, King Abdullah ordered a program of financial aid to ease the impact of youth unemployment. Each unemployed youth, women included, would receive \$500 per month. An overwhelming 85 percent of applications were received from unemployed women, the majority of whom were high school or university graduates. Though more job opportunities were created for women as cashiers and sales representatives at women's and families' shops, the ratio of women to men in economic participation remains modest.

Protests

The spirit of street demonstration in the Middle East provided a model of action to Saudi women without resources. Women challenged the political and religious authorities, with the latter issuing a religious edict in 2011 to ban demonstrations. Protests started with female students objecting to the conditions at King Khalid University, then with teachers for better contractual terms, and finally with female relatives of prisoners held in arbitrary detention. Police forces and members of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) dismissed the protests.² Some women protesters were allegedly beaten and held for interrogations.

In 2005, Saudi Arabia opened half of its municipal seats for elections for the first time. At



the time, women were banned from participation due to logistical reasons, but officials assured women of participation in the second round. In 2011, again, no women were allowed for logistical reasons. Women initiated the “Balady,” or “My Country,” campaign for the municipal elections. A handful of women in Dammam, Khobar, Jeddah, and Mecca headed to voting centers to get voter tickets. One woman managed to get one. The card with her name was symbolic and of no value; however, it created a buzz in the media about women’s participation. Some women were arrested for carrying posters outside the voting centers, but they were later released. Eventually, King Abdullah granted Saudi women suffrage and appointment in the Shura Council. Details were not discussed or given. Many commentators joked that women in the Shura were driven to work by their guardians or drivers.

A campaign to lift the ban on women driving (W2Drive) was initiated online on 2011. Activists welcomed the call on YouTube by Manal Al-Sharif. Shortly afterward, she was arrested and detained for nine days until her father submitted in person a plea to the royal court for her release. Nevertheless, over 60 women across Saudi Arabia drove their cars on June 17. Most women drivers were taken to police stations to sign pledges not to drive again and were later released with their male guardians. Two women were taken to court in Jeddah, and one was sentenced to 10 lashes, but the punishment was not delivered. Though the campaign failed to secure the right to drive, it brought to local and international attention the plight of institutionalized discrimination against Saudi women.

Online Activism

Information is power. Social networks, blogs, and citizen journalism have enhanced communications and networking among like-minded citizens. Despite limited and censored access to the Internet, a new law was passed in 2011 requiring anyone who utilizes blogs, email groups, personal websites, chat rooms, mobile phones’ MMS or SMS applications, or any other forms of online exchange of information to register with the Ministry of the Interior.³ The move signaled a

desperate measure by the government to control public uprising. The main media outlets in Saudi Arabia are owned by members of the royal family, and further tightening of censorship moved many writers to online platforms by 2011. The “Almaqal” website became one of the most notable online platforms for uncensored, independent Saudi commentaries and opinions. Women writers were writing and debating freely on all domains of politics and society. It was ironic that Islamists organized a huge conference on “The Woman: Rights and Duties” in Riyadh, inviting guests from all over Saudi Arabia. The conference was dominated by religious clerics and scholars who enforced the patriarchal, collectivist view of women’s roles. Needless to say, the conference was an all-male event with a minimal representation of women seated in a segregated room.

Observers noted the new restrictions on freedom of expression when several literary and cultural events were repeatedly canceled. Al-Nahdha Youth Forum is an annual conference sponsored by reformed Islamists and held outside Saudi Arabia.⁴ The third year of the forum was planned in Kuwait. Ideally, it aimed to discuss civil society tools and goals. Speakers were selected to represent the diversity in Saudi civil society. Liberals, Islamists, Shi’a, and one woman (myself), were among the speakers. Attacks on the forum were fairly common in the past, but they were taken to a higher level with the current regional unrest. Online and media attacks accused speakers of having foreign agendas, of conspiracy to topple their governments, and, naturally, apostasy. Some Islamist Kuwaiti members of parliament joined the campaign, leading the Kuwaiti Ministry of the Interior to ban the forum. Saudi Islamic scholars issued an online statement to denounce the speakers and the agenda. Ironically, it was Kuwaiti civil society that saved the day. A parallel forum was planned instead. Some of the original speakers, including myself, were able to deliver their lectures to the public. Several other events were banned inside and outside Saudi Arabia, highlighting the limitations on the freedom of speech and expression in the region. A response by youth was spontaneously generated. Over 2,000 young men and women signed an online

statement demanding respectful dialogues and an end to the authoritarian control on thoughts and speech. Freedom of expression gained more ground.

The role that online activism has played in empowering women is evident. Anonymous women have been recording the incidents of abuse with which they were struggling. A video showing a young woman challenging the authority of a member of the CPVPV received massive attention. Later, the chief of the CPVPV issued a modest apology.⁵ In particular, the court system was targeted for the prejudice of judges and the lack of regulatory laws. In many cases, online pressure increased the attention given to cases and brought justice to some of the victims, including one working woman who was placed in prison for refusing to live with her abusive father. After months in detention, the woman was finally released to the custody of her uncle to live with her divorced mother and brother.

Family Law

In 1997, the Gulf Cooperation Council prepared a legal document to be used as a personal status law called the “Muscat Document.”⁶ Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Justice approved the document as a guide in 2000. Twelve years later, the law has never been enacted or implemented. In 2012, family dispute cases numbered 75 percent of all cases. The slow, unresponsive legal system is unmoved by complaints or a boost in additional budget. A draft law aimed at protecting women, children, and migrant workers was introduced to the Shura Council in 2007; to date, the draft is still being discussed.

Meanwhile, an alarmingly high rate of domestic violence cases is continuously reported. One shelter in Riyadh reported an average of 30 cases per month.⁷ Women who seek redress from the *shari’a*-based courts rarely see justice served. For one, fathers usually claim disobedience charges against their defiant daughters, so judges would compel women to obedience. Also, women are reluctant to report their husbands for fear of losing custody of their children or returning to an unreceptive family. Additionally, many courts do not allow entry to women without a male

guardian, even if he is the defendant. Women in prisons, rehabilitation centers, or other institutions are at more serious risk if their family refuses to accept them at the time of their release. They usually end up indefinitely imprisoned in government institutions. Adult women are not legally recognized without their guardians, creating a serious limitation on women’s autonomy and choices.

Conclusion

Activists are working through networks of local and international NGOs and media outlets. The virtual world is the hub for women activists, allowing them to maneuver around official censorship and experience the freedom of unlimited interaction. Women are creating a discourse on gender roles and expectations, social norms, and women’s rights. They are becoming visible despite gender segregation and lack of representation. Sometimes, campaigns created locally and internationally succeed. The inclusion of two Saudi women in the 2012 official Olympic team was one small victory that has not yet translated into sporting opportunities for all Saudi women.

Regardless of Saudi Arabia’s reservation to only adhere to Islamic standards in the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), extremists inside Saudi Arabia have distorted the tenets of CEDAW. However, gender equality is still possible. Activists believe that the alignment of local laws and regulations with the Basic Law of Governance should take precedence. Article 8 of the Basic Law states that the government is based on the premise of justice, consultation, and equality in accordance with *shari’a*.⁸ Aligning local laws with Article 8 is crucial to empowering women in the public sphere. In personal space, a personal status law will be needed. “Om Salama” represents several groups of women in Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam working to reinterpret women’s rights through 60 verses of the Qur’an. The groups were named after a wise wife of the Muslim prophet who once solved a serious political dispute. Their mission is to introduce a new egalitarian concept of women’s rights and to eventually draft a new personal status code.

Grassroots building is a long process, but it is the only possible route available to educated and well-informed women who find the current system unresponsive to their needs. The French writer Anaïs Nin said it best, “There came a time when the risk to stay tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” When the time comes, the Arab Spring will show its blossoms.

Endnotes

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- 2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17304960>
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- 7 <http://www.al-madina.com//node/405655>
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Toward Women Working for Community

Gabool Al-Mutawakel, *Co-Founder, Youth Leadership Development Foundation and co-founder of the Al-Watan Party in Yemen*

It may be disappointing to many women activists in the Middle East, and particularly in Yemen, to witness how their public roles have nearly vanished after the Arab Spring. During the revolution, women's participation was pivotal. They were in the streets demonstrating, protesting, and raising their voices with demands for a better quality of life for all Yemenis. A woman from Taiz said, “I have a vision of a democratic state, which is proud of its religion, with a government that is for all people and not in the hands of one family, where power is ceded in a peaceful manner rather than through war.”¹ However, just as the country started its transition period, women were asked to step aside. “Political parties only support women when they can benefit from it,” expressed a woman from Sada.²

During my participation in the conference “Women after the Arab Awakening” at the Woodrow Wilson Center, a young Egyptian activist revealed the story of her own experiences in founding a new, liberal, all youth party. She

ran for parliament, and the plan was to have her name at the top of the party's ticket. However, a few weeks later, the party's leadership asked her to sacrifice her top spot for the party because the Egyptian people would not accept seeing a woman's name at the top, and, thus, it would be better to put a man first. She struggled to keep her position but, in the end, was convinced to go with the mentality of the people instead of challenging it, which proved to be a mistake and lesson learned. This scenario has been common in Yemen and may be part of a similar trend across other Arab Spring countries as well. The question that arises here is whether this exclusion is a cultural or political act. Some people will say it is cultural and that societies are rejecting women's participation for traditional and religious reasons. However, that cannot be true, as the majority of people who were in the streets accepted women's participation, and in city squares we saw husbands with their wives, sisters with their brothers, and fathers with their daughters.



During the transition period, President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi has made several governmental appointments, very few of which have been women. This defies the quota as stated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative—a minimum of 30 percent of women in all government institutions. On the contrary, women have *not* been assigned as governors, deputy governors, deputy ministers, or ambassadors. Only three women were appointed as ministers. Among them, one is Minister of Human Rights, another is Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, and the third is Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs. These appointments raise the additional concern that women's roles in government are assigned based upon stereotypically gender-based social and human rights issues only. For example, we have seen very few women appointed to positions in the Ministries of Planning, Finance, Oil, or Communication and even fewer in Defense. Again, is this culturally or politically motivated?

There are different ways forward for women in Yemen to combat their current situation. I present four main strategies drawn from my own 10 years of experience working with the Youth Leadership Development Foundation (YLDF).³ At YLDF, the youth population ideally is composed of 50 percent males and 50 percent females.⁴ Based on this perspective, and our strict adherence to the 50/50 model, we have been using the following strategies, which we think have been very useful.


The first strategy forward is to establish women's groups that work on critical issues that affect the needs of all members of the broader community, rather than limited to issues that are deemed specific to women. Removing ourselves from important roles that touch upon real, everyday life will only increase the gap between women and their community. A male friend from Ghana told the story of a woman who was the running mate of a presidential candidate in Ghana. During a radio interview, she discussed the importance of women's involvement in politics. My friend mentioned that he would have preferred to hear about her stance on important policies, without simply linking them to her gender. What is more, when women work for the community and for all, it gives them the opportunity to excel and present a leadership model that is very much needed by

people, especially after the Arab Spring. Such a strategy is assumed to increase women's leadership, popularity, and inclusion.

The second strategy forward is to increase the number of women working alongside men. This will boost women's ability to work in mixed-gender environments and build their self-confidence. At YLDF, we had both mixed and women-only activities and we noted that women's performance increased notably in mixed-gender environments. For example, in our business management courses, women who had been working in mixed groups scored much higher than women who worked in women-only groups. What is more, women's participation in heavily male-oriented activities increases men's awareness of women's capabilities, which is a crucial step for women's progress.

The third strategy is to increase the culture of competition for women. Affirmative action policies are very positive solutions at certain times and under certain circumstances. However, the GCC quota could lead to complacency among women who know that 30 percent of seats are reserved for them. This has taken place in Al-Watan, one of the new political parties in which I participate. As soon as the 30 percent quota was approved for leadership, women did not compete to prove themselves and did not nominate themselves for positions, as they knew that they would be asked to join sooner or later. This strategy suggests that we encourage competition among women along with their male counterparts, and affirmative action should focus on building their capacities.

The fourth strategy is to focus on young women leaders. Young women who were influenced by the Arab Spring do not see themselves in traditional and stereotypical roles. Instead, they have envisioned their roles as revolutionaries, leaders, and change makers. Hence, this is exactly the right time to start building leadership for younger women aged 18–25. However, women must overcome certain barriers. Traditional political parties and other recently-established conservative parties may hinder women's leadership within the party. Moreover, women may not be able to reach leadership positions in government. Yet there are easier channels for young women's leadership in the private sector, in growing politi-



cal parties, as well as through new and existing civil society organizations.

There are two major challenges facing Yemeni women. First is the politicization of Islam—a practice in which religion is used for political interests, which tends to negatively and disproportionately affect women more than men. For example, women’s political participation and their ability to reach high leadership positions are governed by religious scholars and their *fatwas*.⁵ In addition, religious notions are wrongfully manipulated to criminalize politically active women. For example, religion is used in personal attacks that smear a woman’s reputation and question her credibility as a Muslim woman, which can then negatively sway the opinions of

ordinary citizens. The other challenge is the politicization of women’s issues. The best example in Yemen is the issue of early marriage, which was first raised as a human rights issue in the past few years but transformed into a conflict and area of negotiation between the two most prominent parties in Yemen, the General People’s Congress and the Islah Party.

Nevertheless, the opportunities for women in Yemen are enormous during this period of transition. Society is still in the mood for transformation and is anticipating and accepting of change more than ever before. Women should take maximum advantage of this momentum in order to increase their leadership roles within their communities.

Endnotes

- 1 Strong Voices, Yemeni Women Political participation from protest to transition, SaferWorld, 2012. <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/Strong%20voices.pdf>
- 2 *ibid*.
- 3 YLDF is a Yemeni local Non-Governmental Organization established in 1998 and working on capacity building for youth to increase their community participation.
- 4 As a side note, we at YLDF do not run projects until we have reached the 50 percent participation target for women.
- 5 Fatwa: a decree concerning Islamic law issued by an Islamic scholar.

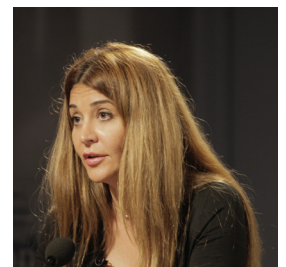
Syrian Women’s Role in the Post-Assad Phase — An Unpredictable Future

Honey Al-Sayed, *Director, Syria Program, Nonviolence International and former host and producer, Syrian radio show “Good Morning Syria”*

What is happening in Syria today is critical, complex, and murky. There are too many chefs—Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, China, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the United States—in one troubled kitchen, in addition to a fragmented opposition inside and outside Syria, all stirring the brew over 19 months of growing chaos and an ever-increasing death toll. There needs to be only one “master chef”—and that is the Syrian people. To achieve this, we need the support of the international community.

We cannot compare the Syrian uprising to the rest of the Arab Spring; it is a whole new move-

ment. For starters, it is important to note that the Syrian revolution has taken far longer than any other during the so-called “Arab Spring.” This is both a testament to the courage of the Syrian people and an indication of President Bashar al-Assad’s refusal to hear what his people have to say. In Egypt, former President Hosni Mubarak resigned rather than subjecting his nation to the type of destruction we are seeing in Syria. In Yemen, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh left rather than be accused of crimes against humanity on the same scale as those now being considered against Assad. In Tunisia, former President Zine



El Abidine Ben Ali preferred to step down rather than subject Tunisians to the type of large-scale devastation we see in Syria today.

However, what we are witnessing across the Arab Spring countries, post-revolution, is the emergence of not just male-dominated societies, but now also Islamically conservative ones.

Given that the revolution in Syria is not the same as other Arab Spring revolutions, I believe the outcome for women of the Syrian revolution will not be the same. We must also keep in mind that Syria is made up of a rich mosaic of ethnicities, cultures and religions, and all must have a voice in our democratic future.

Syria's population of roughly 22.5 million is, as I indicated, a rich mix of heritages. Approximately 61 percent of that population is between the ages of 15 and 64, and approximately half are women.¹ Since Syria's future has been unpredictable at best, defining roles for Syrian women in the post-Assad phase can only be presumed for now. However, we cannot make light of the role women will play across political, economic, and social spectrums in the future.

History

A brief history of the role of women in Syria may be helpful, especially in looking at indicators of where we will go from here. The reason I say "from here" is because we cannot wait until the post-Assad phase to cement our role. Our role—be it economic, social, and/or political—must be initiated, developed, and understood now.

Traditionally, Syrian women have enjoyed rights even before many of their Western counterparts. In the famous Battle of Maysaloun in 1920, Nazik al-Abid fought with the Syrian rebel army against the French military and was dubbed "The Syrian Joan of Arc." The following year, she became president of the Syrian Red Cross, and went on to found the Red Crescent.² Syrian women were granted the right to vote in 1949, ahead of their counterparts in India, Greece, Morocco, and Switzerland.

During my professional career in Syria, I have never experienced any sort of glass ceiling because of my gender. I have not been paid less for doing the same work. Indeed, the concept of women's

equality in the workplace has been institutionalized since Syria's independence from the French in 1936.


Still, there are Syrian laws that undermine the rights of women and conflict with the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). For example, Syrian women married to non-Syrians cannot grant their children citizenship. We do not have total freedom to travel and/or change residence, nor do we have the right to manage marriage and divorce affairs in the absence of a trustee or guardian. Moreover, Syria is second or third in the world in the number of honor crimes, with Article 548 of the Syrian Penal Code lightly punishing the killers with a minimal sentence of two years in prison. Most of the laws mentioned here are derived from Islamic law.³

Present

We can only draw on our history to help predict our future. Today, we know very well that Syrian women are active in the revolution. Some of our top leaders include Razan Zaitouneh, Suheir Atassi, and a host of others. Last October, human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh won the 2011 Anna Politkovskaya Award for defending victims in a conflict zone. Zaitouneh continues to be especially active in Syria, documenting crimes against humanity and playing a central role in the Local Coordination Committees.

Suhair Atassi organized some of the earliest protests in the uprising. In March 2011, Atassi led a sit-in by families of political prisoners in front of the Interior Ministry in Damascus to demand the release of their loved ones. Since then, Atassi has been extremely outspoken, mobilizing thousands of activists through the Syrian Revolution General Commission.

Our women activists include many who have taken on leadership positions within the opposition abroad. For example, Rajaa Altalli is co-founder of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, and she is conducting the project "Women for the Future of Syria." She predicts that "in our new, free, and democratic Syria, women need to work hard to empower themselves and to get their rights."⁴



Still another prominent Syrian activist, Rasha Alahdab, says, “We are mothers at home and activists on the street.” Alahdab is a founding partner of Syrian Women for Syria and a founding board member of Syrian Expatriates for Democracy. An attorney and member of the Syrian National Council’s law office, Alahdab calls herself a devout Muslim but one with “no hijab in my brain.” She said, “Today, Syrian women are equal to their male counterparts in the Syrian revolution in every way.”⁵

Rafif Jouejati, founder of the Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria, and spokesperson for the Local Coordination Committees in Syria, emphasizes the risks Syrian women undertake. “We document crimes against humanity, including rape as a tool of torture,” she notes. “We deliver relief supplies, despite the danger, to vulnerable communities amid ongoing shelling.” She adds, “Since we are demanding equality for all Syrians in the revolution, you can be sure we will achieve it post-Assad. Women will make up more than half of Syria’s population by the time the revolution is over, and we need to mentor our emerging leaders and help position them to play leading roles as Syria heals and rebuilds itself.”⁶

Meanwhile, prominent actresses May Skaf and Fadwa Suleiman, along with an increasing number of media personalities, have publicly denounced the Syrian government’s brutality on repeated occasions. Rima Flihan, the renowned playwright, has taken on a leadership role in the opposition. Many journalists have overcome their fear of the Assad regime, preferring to maintain their journalistic integrity. I see these professionals, as well as the leaders I have referred to, as playing a central role in assuring women’s equality in the post-Assad phase.

Farah Attasi, another leading Syrian activist, indicates “women generally are paying the highest price in this revolution.” And she is not wrong. Women are losing their children, their husbands, and their sisters to the fight for democracy, dignity, and equality. Women are treating the injured and harboring other women on the run from the Assad regime. According to Attasi, “This revolution is not about man and woman, not

about Christian and Muslim. It’s about regaining our citizenship.”⁷

Even women in traditional family roles have been active in the revolution. For example, Syrian women created banners and slogans and have conducted sit-ins in their homes. From the earliest days of the civil resistance movement, women gathered in each other’s homes to sing revolutionary songs and to plan peaceful anti-regime activities. Who among the Syrian opposition can forget when the women of Daraya went out into the streets to stage an anti-regime demonstration shouting, “Daraya, where are your men?” Indeed, these brave women have been at the forefront of demonstrations, hunger strikes, and other acts of civil disobedience.

Nonetheless, we have work to do. Syrian women must overcome the double injustice of a conservative society pre-revolution and the conservative armed opposition in place now. We must overcome the poor representation of women in opposition councils inside and outside Syria. For example, the Syrian National Council’s by-laws call for 30 percent women’s representation. Why not 50 percent? In any event, current representation is at less than 10 percent. In many cases, women’s representation is almost non-existent in local councils and leadership in the revolution in the provinces, except for relief initiatives in the area.

Future

If the past and present are indicators for our future as Syrian women and Syria at large, then Syria may very well experience years of unrest and socioeconomic and political instability. But the price we are paying for freedom is costly, and to honor our dead and other victims, we must avoid the mistakes of other revolutions. Above all, we must not forget that our revolution started for democracy, dignity, and freedom for all Syrians.

The time to heal will be extensive and Syria will certainly never be the same again. I like to think that Syria will be reborn and molded in the image we so crave. I am confident that Syrians will surprise the world in peace, just as they have during revolution. We can alter the extreme, grim outcome of public/political analysis that entails a long-drawn conflict, civil war, a fragmented

Syria, or Islamic extremism. We need to be realistic and prepare contingency plans for the possible trajectories Syria may take.

Whichever scenario will play out, the role of Syrian women needs to be defined today, not post-Assad. We have a chance for change. What we do today determines our future as women and Syrians overall.

We can begin to prepare Syrian women to take an active role across the spectrum of society. We can look to friendly nations for guidance, but we must make our own decisions. To begin with, we must develop civil society organizations and embrace the concept of true non-governmental organizations. Through these organizations, we can educate our women—in fact, all Syrians—and offer training in things like leadership skills, citizenship, and communications. We can teach women how to detect and combat sexism and abuse everywhere—in the home, in the workplace, and on the street. By building our institutions and our capacity, I believe we can start on a massive education campaign that will ultimately create a snowball effect that will support our emerging democracy.

By participating in the political, public health, educational, and economic sectors, I believe Syrian women in the post-Assad phase will continue to be a driving force in the future of Syria. Even today, under the harshest political repression, Syrian women have been able to start the process of their own empowerment. They are educating their children, their neighbors, and yes, their husbands, in equal work and equal rights.

There are more than 15 women's NGOs—a huge accomplishment since NGOs in Syria are directly monitored and controlled by the government. Many of the organizations inside Syria

are focused on the revolution and are working hard just to survive the day-to-day events. Other NGOs, established abroad to help women in Syria, include the FREE-Syria Foundation, the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, and the Syrian Organization for Women. In addition, media need to play a more critical role now and in the post-Assad phase as women marshal their resources. For example, I am working with Syrians from various professions, including the media, to establish an online radio for Syria called "Souriali," which has the double meaning of "surrealism"—as in the situation in which Syria exists—and "Syria is for me." Souriali's objective is the deployment of a more advanced level of awareness relating to the concepts of civil society, democracy, constructive citizenship, and women's empowerment—with 50 percent women's representation.

I would say to women everywhere, from all walks of life: Please help us. Please keep in mind that we will need to rebuild not just our infrastructure, but also our entire society, from scratch. Our people have been traumatized every single day during the past 19 months. We must help our people heal from the psychological and physical wounds inflicted by a chaotic uprising and a regime whose sole focus is to remain in power, no matter the human cost.

We have fought and sacrificed too much to let this revolution ultimately result in anything but our goals. The Syrian revolution will end up a hard-won fight for democracy, dignity, and freedom for all Syrians. This means men and women equally, across socio-economic, political, and sectarian lines. Syria as a nation deserves life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Endnotes

- 1 Syria Demographics Profile 2012 by Index Mundi: http://www.indexmundi.com/syria/demographics_profile.html
- 2 Syrian women on the frontlines, determined not to be sidelined – March 8, 2012 <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Mar-08/165976-syrian-women-on-the-frontlines-determined-not-to-be-sidelined.ashx#axzz2AuGzglcf>
- 3 The New York Times - A Dishonorable Affair – September 23, 2007 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/magazine/23wwln-syria-t.html?pagewanted=all&_moc.semityn.www
- 4 Quoted from a personal interview with Rajaa Altalli

Are Women Marginalized after the Arab Awakening?

Rihab Elhaj, *Co-founder and Executive Director, New Libya Foundation*

While political aspirations remain very delicately-charted territory, Libyan women are whetting their appetites with new careers and business ventures post-Arab Awakening. Having firmly planted their feet in public life through Libya's burgeoning civil society, women are seeking more access and influence yet have been increasingly marginalized in public spaces and through social norms. Although the transitional governments have thus far not moved to limit the participation or progress of women in Libya, very little has been done to protect women and promote their participation in any sector. Likewise, many Libyan women seem to be ambivalent about empowerment, vacillating between resignation to what they perceive as inflexible patriarchal values that persist despite the revolution and the hope and desire for more freedoms and a richer life.

Social/Cultural View

Just as they did throughout the revolution, Libyan women are leading again by building Libya's brand-new civil society, from environmental protection to human rights advocacy and reconciliation. These brave women were behind the protests held on September 22, 2012, in response to the attack on the U.S. Consulate and the killing of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and other personnel. Over 30,000 people rallied to demand the immediate disarmament of all non-state sectors and the dismantling of extremist militia groups.

The wave of unarmed protests ultimately prompted the Libyan government to begin its arms collection program on September 25, 2012. This is just one example of the countless ways that women are behind real and positive change in Libya today.

Despite the undeniable contribution of women to Libya's revolution and civil society, a cornerstone of democracy, women are being increasingly marginalized in social and public

life. This marginalization is not likely due to a subversive plot to keep women oppressed, but rather a default return to pre-revolution cultural and social norms severely deformed by tyranny and cruelty to women.

Among these socio-cultural threats are a deteriorating security situation, incessant harassment in public places, and a culture of gender segregation, all of which threaten to isolate women again—this time from genuine participation in democracy.

Security

Today, illegal arrests, detentions, and abductions are a great threat to both men and women in Libya. Despite government attempts to co-opt armed militias, they often follow their own protocol and are rarely held accountable. One such incident occurred on August 9 in Benghazi during a workshop on the participation of women in the Libyan Constitution Drafting Committee. An armed militia raided the meeting and held participants captive without cause. After hours of negotiations, the militia released some participants, but detained two women for nearly a week.

In a public statement, the head of the government-run Civil Society Support Center, Attia Lowgali, referred to witnessing the detention of one female activist: "I can say with all confidence and certainty that the manner in which she was arrested was a clear violation of her civil liberties as a citizen, and of the dignity which should be granted to civil servants." The women have been released and the General National Congress (GNC) has yet to issue a single statement regarding the incident.

Harassment

Aside from the security situation, Libya has a serious sexual harassment problem. Women are incessantly harassed in public places and often they



are followed and intimidated physically, left with no options but to swallow their pride or stay home.

The harassment of women in public spaces has gone entirely unaddressed. In fact, oftentimes this public form of humiliation is perpetrated and upheld by those that aspire to lead us. One very high-profile instance was during the nationally televised transfer of powers ceremony from the National Transitional Council (NTC) to the GNC, Libya's newly elected body. During the ceremony, GNC representative Salah El-din Badi was disturbed by the sight of the young and unveiled moderator. Ten minutes into the program, he stood from his seat and yelled, "Cover your head!" When the moderator refused to obey, Badi exited the program in an apparent protest. The president of the NTC, Mustafa Abduljalil, proceeded to gesture with his hand for the young lady to exit the stage, presumably out of respect for the now upset representative Badi. She was swiftly replaced and the president then began his speech with: "We respect freedoms and individual rights, but you must understand we have our culture and religion." His comments received applause. While the president respected Badi's rights to the freedom of expression and protest, he denied the young moderator's right to the same freedoms, and left her no dignity in the process. That evening, during an improvised interview with Libyan rights advocate Huda Abuzeid, Badi stated, "She should have known better than to come today... They want to make us look like we have no heritage, that we came from the streets."

The incident was never officially addressed by our newly-elected parliament, keeping the culture of women's public humiliation and degradation unchallenged, indeed, perhaps even encouraged.


These two incidents brought desire for change to a boiling point among Libya's civil and women's rights activists, bringing them together to create the Coalition for Libyan Women's Rights. The coalition prepared a letter of concern to the GNC requesting a statement of position on the two incidents: "we are concerned that the silence of our elected officials following the [two] incidents has set a precedent of intolerance which will likely impact cultural norms and the status and perception of women. Both events consequently

lead to the growing exclusion of women from the public sphere." Unfortunately, the day the letter was to be issued, extremists began an operation to raid the tombs of Sufi sheikhs and demolish the mosques in which they were buried. The prominent and primarily female group of activists immediately mobilized to protect the sites, and the GNC has since become nearly entirely occupied with ever-increasing security threats and prerogatives, including investigating the murder of Ambassador Stevens, building an initiative to disarm militias while establishing a Libyan police force/army, and dealing with several parliament "break-ins" by mobs of citizens desperate to have their voices heard.

Segregation

Another challenge for women is the very common cultural practice of gender segregation in Libya. Whether people are in a private or a public space, they will almost always be segregated by gender. Segregation puts well-educated and empowered women at a disadvantage when they seek to break into typically male-dominated economic and political spheres. Likewise, the general isolation of women from the public sphere prevents women from interacting with other women. Isolation spells doom for any woman seeking a position of greater leadership. For example, when Libyan women run for office, very few men actually know them because it is culturally inappropriate for them to be in the same space as men. Moreover, they have very little opportunity to interact with women whom they do not already know because Libyan women socialize in small, familiar circles within each other's homes. With rare exceptions, the segregation of genders has caused women to suffer from insufficient public interactions, denying them the enrichment opportunities that follow. Some, like the country's Mufti, are calling for greater segregation of males and females in education and in public. Needless to say, this will further isolate women and deny them access to critical new opportunities. Furthermore, through decades of research on segregated societies, we now know that segregation breeds inequality.

Until Libya's public spaces are converted into environments that afford women safety, dignity,



and equal access, arguments for women's progress and empowerment will remain merely rhetorical, giving rise to token policies.

Economic View

Due to the naturally competitive nature of employment, Libyan women tend to do better in the economic sector than in any other. On average, Libyan women are better educated and more disciplined than their male counterparts, and are often sought after by companies and international non-profits that offer greater salaries than the public sector does. In addition, Libyans still value the traditional role of males as the primary breadwinner, but women often enjoy dispensing of their salary as they please. Libya's economy is still closer to a socialist than a free-market economy, so consumption is low and working women are among the many who enjoy significant savings. Despite many women making good strides in the workplace, there are still many who are burdened by socio-cultural realities, some of which are:

- Lack of support or services for working mothers: no daycare, after-school programs, or school bus rides; husbands are often unwilling to share chores.
- Expectations within collectivist cultures that women should fulfill many social and cultural duties: weddings, funerals, graduations, promotions, birthdays, get-well visits, farewell visits, etc.
- The fact that Libyan men also struggle for professional success in Libya, many of whom seek to establish themselves before supporting the women around them.
- Disempowering interpretations of Islamic traditions that are often used as tools to keep women at home or in female-dominated careers such as nursing or teaching.
- Hostility in public spheres, such as harassment and poor security, which discourages women and their loved ones from letting them venture out.
- The romanticized idea in Bedouin culture that an honorable man's wife or daughters

remain strictly at home with a few exceptions like education or family duties.

- Challenges facing businesswomen who seek to venture into non-female clientele-based businesses in breaking into traditionally male-dominated networks and "inner circles" of business owners and government contractors.

Libya's education and training institutions have very limited capacity. Women seeking to enhance their employability by learning a new language or technical skill must contend with limited training and education programs, and very high tuition fees relative to the average household income of \$500 per month.

Three founders of the recently registered Ra'idat Businesswomen's Council are already seeking to create solutions to these challenges with their new businesses in IT training, HR recruitment services, and a state-of-the art day and evening childcare center.

As more women venture into professional roles and launch businesses, they reinforce the need to invest in working women for both and economic growth and capacity building.

Political View

There are 120 seats for independent candidates in Libya's General National Congress. After free and fair elections, the Libyan people elected 119 men and one woman to the GNC. Initially, one might think that women are being intentionally excluded from the process; however, a closer look reveals that of the 1,800-or-so self-nominated candidates, less than 4 percent were women. This suggests that the lack of representation is due to hesitation to self-nominate. This may be due to the following socio-cultural obstacles, in addition to those in the "Economic View:"

- A stigma around women in politics that remains from Muammar Gaddafi's charade of women's "political empowerment," during which many women were appointed positions of high rank and title in exchange for insidious displays of loyalty or sexual favors, and as consolation for being raped.

- Lack of confidence in themselves to take on major leadership roles, and by virtue of projection, lack of confidence in other women seeking to do the same.
- Lack of role models who challenge the pervasive mentality that women do not belong in or cannot succeed in non-traditional or political roles.
- Fear of the social stigmas and gossip that inevitably result when a woman ventures into new, scary, and uncharted territory outside of rigid and widely adhered to social norms.

In addition, a few lawless individuals seeking to enforce their oppressive views of religion have embarked on a mission to desecrate faces of nearly all women candidates on their campaign ads. The offenders have been videotaped by private citizens; however, it does not appear any efforts have been made by the state to capture them.

One attempt to oppress the political aspirations of women in Libya turned deadly in May 2011 when a radical militia leader shot and killed a woman, now simply known as Ms. Shteta, after having mistaken her for a woman that was running for office. The suspected murderer, who is believed to be linked to the murder of Ambassador Christopher Stevens, remains free and there appears to have been no investigation into the death of Ms. Shteta.

The good news is, despite the fact that only one woman was elected for a seat in the GNC, Libya enjoys the participation of 32 women candidates via seats reserved for political parties, putting representation of women in parliament at roughly 16 percent. This is thanks to a “zipper list” policy that civil society and women activists put forth and the transitional government put into effect.

The indication is that, in general, Libyans are open to the participation of women in politics,

but little to nothing has been done to create an environment that genuinely fosters the political empowerment of women. Indeed, the deafening silence of our female GNC members on several incidents that have violated the very basic rights and dignity of Libyan women suggests that although many women have made it into the GNC, very few have begun to lead.

As the Libyan government focuses on its current priorities of security and order, women’s empowerment does not have to take a backseat. Simple protection policies can ensure that the basic civil liberties and dignity of women are upheld; strong public statements and demonstrations of support from our political leaders can dissuade those seeking to debilitate the progress of women.

Libyans at large must acknowledge the great significance and value of women’s contribution in developing a nation. Finally and most importantly, Libyan women themselves must choose to support one another and together take what is rightfully theirs.

It is worth noting that the dialogue on women’s rights in Libya has been expectant and oftentimes extraneous, considering the backdrop of chaos in the newborn democracy and particularly exacerbated by Libya’s institutional voids. Efforts toward promoting just and empowering socio-cultural shifts and policies are mostly bound to be ineffectual due to Libya’s absolute lack of institutions to implement them. Libyans and our allies would best benefit from a collective acknowledgement and dialogue on the urgency and importance of building strong, transparent, effective, and inclusive institutions as an essential first step toward the viability of a democratic state. Ensuring women are fully engaged in the institution-building dialogue and process can guarantee that Libya’s political, civic, and economic institutions work for women as a matter of course.

My Body vs. His Beard

Hanin Ghaddar, Managing Editor, NOW News (Lebanon), and Public Policy Scholar, Wilson Center

Introduction

Ironically, Lebanon has been one of the only Middle Eastern countries in the past couple of years that did not witness a revolution to topple a dictator, simply because we do not have one. Our malady is the sectarian system that provides us with various little dictators, each over his own sect. These little dictators are not just individuals in power; what rules the Lebanese sectarian communities is the power triangle: the sectarian leader, the religious institutions, and the man of the house. And this triangle makes women the common weak link in all communities.

Because of the dominance of this triangle over family life, the sectarian system divides women in Lebanon across all sects without exception, weakening their collective struggle and giving them the worst end of the personal status laws.

Women in Lebanon face a high level of discrimination embodied explicitly and implicitly within the personal status laws. Lebanon has no civil law to govern family relationships. Instead, these are regulated by religious laws belonging to the 18 religious sects that exist in Lebanon—and they all discriminate against women. This hinders women's participation in decision making and subjects them to violence without any special legal protection.

Despite the obvious negative effects of this system on all Lebanese women, depriving them of real citizenship, the Arab Spring did not push us to the street to change this system or demand our citizenship. On the contrary, our disagreements over mundane politics and our fear of each other made most Lebanese seek more than ever the protection of the power systems in their communities.

Of course, Lebanon was not and did not become a haven of stability and prosperity. What is happening in Syria did not stay at the borders; however, the “revolutionary” spirit that swept the Arab street has made its way into Lebanese hearts and minds.

If there was any significant street action or demonstrations, it was by two groups: Islamists in the Sunni cities of Tripoli and Saida and civil society groups in Beirut. Both of these groups used the street to demonstrate in support of the Syrian revolution, each in their own way and for different reasons. However, when it comes to local Lebanese issues, women's civil society groups are the most apparent, the most genuine, and the least politicized.

The Arab Spring opened the streets for women, and in the past 18 months, women hit the streets to demand rights they have been addressing for years. They felt it was time to go to the street and create their own “spring” with a small “s.”

Has this spring been successful so far? Yes and no. It succeeded in creating public and media attention and breaking the silence, but has so far failed in changing any legislation that can make the lives of women in Lebanon easier.

Example: Domestic Violence

Let's look at an example. According to Kafa, a Lebanese NGO against gender-based violence and exploitation of women, one woman dies every month as a result of family violence in Lebanon. This disturbing act of violence is called femicide, and it is often the result of an escalation in violence that goes unreported and unaddressed and eventually leads to a murder.

As long as we don't have any protective mechanisms for women in Lebanon, and in the absence of a legal guarantee, women and girls are constantly reluctant to report abuses and to claim their right to a decent human life.

Kafa worked hard to draft a law against domestic violence, accompanied by a strong lobbying campaign and street action, until the government formed a committee to decide on the issue at hand. However, the committee included a group of parliamentarians dictated by their own parties that, in turn, coordinate strongly with the religious institutions.



In addition to criminalizing marital rape, the original draft bill creates specific sentences for perpetrators of domestic violence and allows women and children to quickly seek restraining orders. The country's highest Sunni and Shi'i religious bodies have both come out against the law. In Lebanon, neither marital rape nor domestic violence is criminalized by legislation. Consequently, a section of an anti-domestic violence law that would criminalize marital rape was removed by the parliamentary subcommittee.

Dividing Lines

The Lebanese example sheds some light on the future of women in the region.

During the Arab Spring, all women joined the demonstrations in the streets because they had one enemy and one goal: to topple the dictator. Now that most of the dictators are out, women will start to realize that what divides them and hinders their success is bigger than what brought them together.

These dividing lines will differ from one country to another.

In Syria, the militarization of the revolution has pushed many of the revolutionary women who were pioneers at the beginning to the background. Their original peaceful calls for freedom and citizenship had to suffer under the unfortunate but necessary militarization of the revolution.

Armed struggle is certainly bad for women's rights and demands. We in Lebanon know this very well. For the past 40 years, our rights were always postponed because there were always more pressing issues.

Another dividing line is religious institutions. Now many women in the region will start to realize that working under religious institutions or with their permission will not lead anywhere, while others will refuse to join certain women's rights campaigns because they honor religious institutions.

This is also something we've learned in Lebanon.

Hezbollah, for example, pretends to be for women's empowerment, always boasting about giving work space for women in all their insti-

tutions. It has been frequently reported that Hezbollah has a more open attitude toward women's roles in society than do many other Islamist organizations. Women have significant space within Hezbollah's social welfare, media, and administrative institutions.

However, we have not once seen a Hezbollah woman assuming a political, security, or military role.


Hezbollah also strongly criticized the late Al Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah whenever he issued a pro-woman *fatwa*. For example, he made a *fatwa* on the occasion of Women's Anti-Violence Day in 2009 saying, "A sane, adult and independent woman does not need a guardian."¹ The *fatwa* reaffirms the right of women to defend themselves against violence, both at the workplace and at home, and states that Islam forbids men from exercising any form of violence against women. "Physical violence in which women are beaten proves that these men are weak, for only the weak are in need of unjust violence," he said.²

Fadlallah's *fatwa* provoked much criticism from conservative clerics and religious figures within the Shi'a community in Lebanon and elsewhere, mainly Hezbollah, which considers women to be under the custody or guardianship of their husbands or fathers.

Despite all, Hezbollah is still considered by many in the region and the West to be strong on Islamic feminism. Hezbollah's feminists did not make a single statement in defense of Kafa's draft bill against domestic violence and marital rape. Silence is sometimes a sign of compliance. Hezbollah's feminists only work and think within Hezbollah's parameters.

When Hezbollah's religious references state that *muta'a* (temporary marriage) is acceptable, then sex for pleasure becomes a religious duty. So when they say that marital rape is acceptable, then forced sex also becomes a duty.

In any case, all Islamic religious institutions, Shi'i and Sunni, rejected the law against domestic violence and marital rape. Religious institutions did not and will not allow this law to go through without amendment because if marital rape were criminalized, women would have full rights and control over their bodies. If this happens, it means men would lose all control, and



that would not be acceptable because the belief is that women's bodies should always be available for men and religious and political powers to use and abuse.

Women cannot and will not be liberated as long as the state's institutions and its laws are linked to religious institutions. That's why the Arab Spring cannot be completed anywhere without a clear separation between the state and religion.

According to religious rules, women are not guardians over themselves or their children. This will not change as long as *shari'a* is used as a basis for family law. For example, on the issue of guardianship, Lebanese law does not enable women married to foreigners to pass their nationality on to their husbands or children. This creates a lot of problems, as these relatives are considered foreigners and so are deprived of access to public services such as schools and hospitals, not to mention faced with complications in marriage procedures or obtaining working permits.

Many women's problems are linked to the issue of guardianship. For example, in Lebanon I cannot open a bank account for my son because I am not his guardian; his father is. And this is also applied in issues of custody, inheritance, etc. All religious courts seem to agree on one thing: women are not free citizens and, therefore, cannot be given guardianship.

Without the power of religious institutions over family laws, many bills and draft laws would have passed in Lebanon. The core of the problem for me seems to be these religious institutions, conspiring against women and their rights.

Economic Empowerment and Financial Independence

Despite these unfair conditions, things are changing. With women assuming more productive and income-generating roles, many men feel their supremacy to be threatened. Women are seeking financial independence and, whether intentionally or not, find themselves more empowered. My mother would never have found the courage to escape and leave my father if not for her financial independence. As soon as she started working and became less financially dependent on my

father, she started to stand up to him, and he also started to feel more threatened and became more aggressive.

But eventually she won because she is powerful and he is weak, although he is protected and she is not. But here's the trick: she became powerful because she was not protected. She had to fight on her own, and that is what will empower women in the region. They are fighting in their own ways, and in their private spheres, parallel to their public fights against laws and institutions.

Hidden Danger

But sometimes the danger is in the hidden margins, disguised by titles such as "Islamic feminism." This is a contradictory term. Islam and feminism cannot work together. Polygamy and feminism cannot co-exist.

These feminists are now growing in the Arab world, presenting themselves as the real agents of change—that is, the change that will happen from within. It is true, change is better when it happens from within, and that is what the Arab Spring is about. However, these Islamic feminists are part of the institutions, and, in many cases, the ruling institutions. They cannot inspire real change.

When Islam becomes part of the political system, rather than a matter of personal or spiritual choice, women's rights always suffer.

In my opinion, the Arab Spring made it obvious to the people that if any change needs to be made, it must be drastic. No more small steps or negotiating with the powers, political or religious. No more compromises and reconciliation. The Arab Spring is about people changing things themselves without waiting for permission or approval.

That's exactly what women should do: make big strides and take what is theirs with their own hands and bodies. In Egypt, Islamists are trying to amend the constitution against women and their rights over their bodies.

In Syria, women and their bodies are used as political tools. For example, the Syrian regime has been using rape as a main tool to contain rebels. Women in rebellious towns and villages have been raped in groups and in front of their families

in order to push their male relatives to the dangerous verge of revenge and violence, so that the regime could confirm its “civil war” theory.

Freedom in the Arab world cannot be complete without the freedom of women, and women’s freedom would still be flawed without the right to one’s body. Islam is certainly not the

solution. Islamic feminism is too slow for our times, and the only solution is a clear and strong path toward separating the state from religion.

Without strong action in this direction, the future will be really bleak for women in the region.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?page=2&ID=184682&MID=0&PID=0&FParentID=0&FFParentID=0&orderdir=desc>
- 2 http://english.bayynat.org.lb/Archive_news/bayan27112007.htm



Women after the Arab Awakening

Omezzine Khélifa, *Politician and Advisor, Tunisian Ministry of Tourism*

To evaluate the role of women in Tunisia today, it is essential to ask the following questions: how is their role evolving on the political scene, and how are women contributing to the transitional process?

Tunisian political context during the democratic transition

One year has passed since the first democratic elections that gave birth to the National Constituent Assembly (NCA). The assembly is entrusted with writing a new constitution in accordance with the revolution’s demands and objectives: freedom, justice, democracy, and dignity. A moral commitment was made that the writing of the constitution should not exceed one year. At present, the NCA commissions have ended their work, and the draft of the constitution has been passed on to the Drafting Committee for final revision before submitting the document to the plenary session for debate.


Ten months have passed since the first democratically-elected government in Tunisian history was formed. The cabinet, whose members come from a three-party coalition, is responsible for preserving domestic peace and security during the period of constitution writing, creating jobs for the unemployed youth in a period of uncertainty

and global economic crisis, and launching the process of transitional justice to hold accountable those who were responsible for crimes committed during the dictatorship.

Deep changes are ongoing in Tunisian society

Women have a weighty and decisive presence in all these fields, in all the arenas where the battle for more democracy is being waged: in civil society, as journalists fighting for freedom of the press; as human rights activists fighting for free speech; as judges, lawyers, and accountability experts fighting against corruption and for the independence of justice as well as imagining a new, independent electoral body; as artists fighting for their right to create without restriction or censorship; and as teachers fighting for the right to instruct without fear.

Tunisian institutions and society are undergoing profound change from within. The days of irresponsibility are over. Tunisians of all walks of life are denouncing injustice and speaking out loud to make their voices heard. Thus, they are the genuine actors of change, slowly but surely moving mentalities and behaviors from post-dictatorship disorder and uncertainty toward



structured and united demands for stability and democracy.

Women stand for human rights and gender equality in the National Constituent Assembly

Since the beginning of the constitution writing process, we have passed through many constitutional perils for women's rights, such as the proposal to have *shari'a* as the unique or main source of the law and the absence of any reference to human rights and fundamental liberties in the preamble. Perhaps the most serious and damaging threat to women's rights is the so-called "complementarity" between men and women, replacing "equality" in the text of the constitution.

These battles are very recent, and we still cannot say that they are definitively won as the constitution is still in draft. The most important point, in my opinion, is that women succeeded in quickly unmasking these issues and adequately responding to them. Women representatives played a major role in declaring war against such regressive concepts. Thus, I mention the initiative of Lobna Jeribi, the Vice President of the Preamble Committee and the Reporter of the Financial Committee. She proposed to inscribe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a reference text in the preamble of the constitution, but such a clear reference to the text brought controversy to the Preamble Committee, and the majority of representatives voted against it. After a Facebook post explaining the opposition she faced in her committee, a radio station invited her to expose the risks we would face if the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were not mentioned in the preamble. Following the broadcast, human rights and women's rights associations issued a statement to denounce the vote of the Preamble Committee, declaring that this decision is "a dangerous regression in human rights in Tunisia." Tunisia ratified this UN declaration, and people are asking representatives to review their position, as they were elected by the Tunisian people to establish a genuine democracy, breaking with the former dictatorial regime and preserving and advancing human rights.

This issue is still unresolved and will be discussed in the National Constituent Assembly plenary session.

In addition, Salma Mabrouk Saada, a member of the Rights and Liberties Committee, the Social Affairs Committee, and the Special Committee to Investigate Martyrs' Day events, initiated a war against the concept of "complementarity" when she realized Article 28's possible interpretations. Indeed, the opposition from within her committee did not vote for full gender equality despite the fact that she explained how dangerous "complementarity" could be for women: restricting their role in the family; potentially differentiating between the rights of single women, single mothers and widows, and those of married women; and offering judges the possibility to decide according to their own beliefs just how complementary a man and a woman should be. The vote also happened in a session where many progressive representatives were absent, and this is another factor that helped the article pass through.

Thanks to her social networking visibility, Salma succeeded in bringing national and international media attention to the Rights and Liberties Committee. The fight she was making in her committee was no longer just her fight, but the fight of all who believe that our society cannot advance unless both men and women have the same rights and the same duties. Political parties and civil society activists protested en masse on August 13, 2012, the anniversary of the promulgation of the Personal Status Code, to show their support for gender equality. The Rights and Liberties Committee refused to reconsider their vote on the article, and the draft moved along unchanged to be reviewed by the Constitution Writing Committee. This committee cancelled the controversial article as it is in contradiction with one of the preamble's principles: equality of all citizens before the law.

According to public opinion, this is a huge relief. We are not changing our legacy of gender equality. However, constitutional experts found a new possible way to introduce inequalities into the law, meaning the article version of the constitution does not prevent the law from being unfair to one gender or another. Indeed, we are

currently in the same situation as under the 1959 Constitution with the Personal Status Code. This law, its main objective being to regulate family affairs, is unfair to women as far as marriage, divorce, and inheritance are concerned. These questions are not debated and are not planned for in the agenda. In conclusion, we did not regress in terms of gender equality, but we have not made progress yet either.

I would like to believe it is still possible to achieve gender equality in the constitution after the discussion of the draft in the plenary session.

Parity in the electoral law allowed women to participate in establishing the basis of democracy

In October 2011, the first democratic elections in Tunisia were regulated by a progressive electoral law that promoted women's participation in the political process. Indeed, it stipulated that all parties should equally represent men and women in their candidate lists. In addition to parity, a zippered list was mandatory, which means that every other candidate on the list is a woman. If a political party or an independent list did not match this vertical parity and zippered order, then the list was rejected.

This progressive law provoked an intense debate within Tunisian society. I can quote my personal experience initiating a petition for parity and equality for the elections of the National Constituent Assembly, which I submitted to the group of young people with whom I organized our protest movements in January 2011.

Although we were united during the protests against the dictatorship, parity later divided us. Some women were even more virulent than men. Many arguments were used against parity, such as there are not enough women in political parties to balance male candidates; parity will stop parties from presenting any candidate list; there are no women with enough experience in politics; competence, not gender, should be the only criteria for women as well as for men; using parity means that women are assisted and cannot reach the top without this assistance; parity weakens women's positions and so on. As a result of this division, I submitted the petition without my group and

found much support from individuals among the elder generation, who probably were more aware of the stakes for our fledgling democracy.

The law mandating parity in party lists passed, and, thanks to its provisions, Tunisia saw about 5,000 women candidates running in the National Constituent Assembly elections out of 10,000 total candidates. Not only did parties and independents succeed in finding female candidates all over the country, but some women led the lists. Their lack of political experience was not used as an argument against women's inclusion, since men were also lacking experience in that domain. Competence should be a primary criterion for choosing a candidate, but, in a democracy, representation by gender, age, regions, and minorities is also sought, and women are more than half of the Tunisian population. Sometimes, mechanisms such as parity succeed to guarantee better representation of a group when mentalities are not ready to accept it naturally.

However, parity in the lists did not guarantee parity in representation: only 27 percent of our NCA members are women. We consider this representation as an important fulfillment of our first step toward building democratic institutions and behavior. We are conscious and proud that Tunisian women are highly represented compared to many other parliaments across the world, including the United States Congress, where women represent only 17 percent of the members. Vertical parity with a zipper list system should be maintained by legislators as a basis for our future electoral law. It could, however, be improved to horizontal parity, which would help increase women's presence and participation in our future parliaments.

This principle is essential, as it allowed ordinary women, new to politics but raised in the spirit of gender equality, to fight for the long-established tradition of equality in Tunisia.

We have moved from state feminism to political feminism led by women

Women are playing a crucial role in the ongoing, overall democratic transition, but their political fight aims also at promoting the cause of women. Indeed, they are displaying vigilance at all times

to block attempts at curtailing women's rights and are on the front lines where those rights come under threat. In sum, we have moved from state feminism to a form of political feminism led and organized by women, which in itself is an essential step in promoting and enhancing Tunisia's emergent democracy.

No Spring without Flowers, No Arab Spring without Women: The Essential Role of Women in Egypt's Democratization

Dalia Ziada, Executive Director, Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies

Introduction

It is not a secret that Egypt's democratic transition in general is hardly moving forward, slowed down and thrown off course by a seemingly endless series of challenges ranging from the military's failure in running the transitional phase, the purposeful undermining of civil society, to the misbehavior of political Islamists, who seem determined to curb individual freedoms and women's rights. The highlight of this decline in Egypt's endeavors for democratization is the disappointing verdict against former President Hosni Mubarak,¹ preceded by the unsatisfactory results of the first-ever uncontested presidential elections.²

Amidst the rapid changes and challenges, women are struggling to secure their space and prove the importance of their role not only in participating in but also leading the process of building up the institutional infrastructure that is needed for democracy to flourish. Rationally, the transitional government cannot brush aside more than 50 percent of the population and still claim to be establishing democracy.³ Women's access to and active involvement in the political, economic, legal, social, and religious spheres of the Egyptian state is essential for the success and acceleration of democratic transition and stability.

The political administration of post-revolution Egypt cannot solely be blamed for women's marginalization. This unfair state of affairs is a

continuation of Egyptian women's pre-revolutionary sufferings. The continued discrimination against women and their underrepresentation in politics could be attributed to the patriarchal nature of Egyptian society. Against the backdrop of cultural norms that support gender inequality, women are being systematically blocked from participation in political decision making. During the transitional period, as much as during Mubarak's era, women are exploited by different political trends. The only difference is that the rise of political Islam has provided fertile soil for the patriarchal social mentality against women to flourish. Furthermore, the fact that most of the legal reforms in favor of women during the past decade were endorsed by the former First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak, made them very vulnerable to attacks by those who do not believe in gender equality.

Egyptian Women's Dilemma

While Egyptian women today have better access to education and employment than before, women remain marginalized. A common issue behind women's unwillingness to engage in productive social activities is that women are not viewed as equal to men.

There are several factors explaining the reasons for lasting conservatism, the first of which are social norms and patriarchal stereotypes that



assume women's role in society is limited to motherhood and domestic activities, i.e., child rearing and household chores are her primary duties. Activities outside the household, such as employment, education, and other social activities, are viewed as incompatible with this conventional image of women. The majority of women leave their jobs after marriage because they are unable to balance family and employment. Unfortunately, some sections of the Egyptian legal code support this stereotype (e.g., Article 11 of the Constitution).

Secondly, patriarchal norms, echoed in extremists' misinterpretations of *shari'a*, consider men the family breadwinners. Accordingly, women are not usually encouraged to seek work or education if they can financially afford not to. In lower social classes, the lack of economic resources usually pushes more women to seek work. But the kinds of jobs available for illiterate, poor women often violate their basic human rights. Most poor women prefer deprivation to humiliation and remain at home.

Thirdly, the perception of women as sexual objects has been perpetuated by the influence of Salafism. Women, Salafis claim, should stay at home out of respect for the "sexual fragility" of men. In Salafi thought, God punishes women who tempt men by wearing perfume, wearing revealing clothing, or simply talking to them. Therefore, when women plan to leave their homes, they should cover themselves with the *niqab* to avoid spreading sin in society.⁴ Some families in rural areas withdraw their daughters from school and deprive them of education using similar justifications.

Lastly, individual or collective incidents of sexual harassment in public places, and the lack of support for legal and social protection for women, prevent activists from being more effective in calling for their rights. Security and safety are essential to pursuing such activities.

Advances in communication technology have offered women new tools with which to call for their rights. Many Egyptians find computers and Internet access fees relatively affordable. Internet access has allowed Egyptian women to step out of their homes without physically moving. In the middle and upper classes, many women are using

social media such as Facebook and other popular forums to meet new people and get involved in various social activities. Although the virtual society of the Internet does assist women by giving them a space to practice social freedom, it may indirectly encourage complacency in calling for their rights in public.


Egyptian Women and Democratization

The infrastructure for democracy is forged through three main channels: the legislature, the constitution, and the presidential system.

By drawing a simple comparison between the status of women in the parliamentary elections of 2005 and 2010 (under Mubarak) and 2011 (after Mubarak's fall), one can hardly identify any positive change in the political access and empowerment of women. The 2005 parliamentary elections marked the lowest presence by female voters and candidates in decades.⁵ On the ballots, there were only 131 women running out of 5,165 total candidates, of which only four were subsequently elected. As a result, Mubarak, in his capacity as a president, mandated the appointment of five more female representatives to Parliament, raising the total number of women to nine, or two percent of total representation.

In June 2009, Parliament approved a controversial bill introduced by Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) proposing to allocate 64 seats for women in the Lower House of Parliament, known as the "People's Assembly" in the 2010 elections.⁶ As historic a law as it may seem, the real motive behind it was not to support women's representation in parliament. Instead, the law enhanced the NDP's majority representation by filling more seats with the party's women to prevent the Muslim Brothers' growing parliamentary representation, thereby exploiting women.

Large opposition forces like the Muslim Brotherhood did not do any better by their women. Regardless of the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood declared in 2007 that they may never allow Egyptian "women or Coptic Christians" in decision-making positions, they did not hesitate to exploit women to help themselves appear more moderate than other Islamist groups and appeal



more to the political scene. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, they put three women among the 133 candidates on their election campaign platform. These women were the wives of prominent members in the group. They were politically weak and generally unpopular. One of them was Makarem Eldiary, who included many items in her political agenda that were clearly discriminatory toward women.⁷ Her equivalent in the post-revolution parliament is Azza Al-Garf, who has been lobbying against the 2003 legislation that criminalizes the savage practice of female genital cutting.⁸ A few weeks after her statements, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party launched a medical convoy that roamed Upper Egyptian cities to circumcise girls.⁹

In the 2011 parliamentary elections, women insisted on being represented, but their parties—rather than empowering them to play this role—merely exploited them to enhance their own images. Even in the most liberal parties, women were mistreated as badly as their peers in Islamist parties. Islamist parties put women at the very bottom of their lists, and some of them refused to mention even the names or ages of their female candidates. Similarly, liberal parties never allowed their women to run at the top of the list, claiming that Egypt's patriarchal society would not tolerate such a bold challenge to traditional gender hierarchies. I ran for parliament and my own party forced me to relinquish my place at the top of the list for a much less qualified man, reducing my rank to the second professional on the list. The placement of women on party lists was largely symbolic, as their low ranking made it virtually impossible for female candidates to secure seats that were allocated on a top-down basis. As a result, women ended up winning less than two percent of the seats in parliament.

On another level, the constitution does not properly guarantee Egyptian women's rights, although it is full of articles that seem to be pro-women's rights. Other legislations related to women's rights are merely ink on paper and do not have any real effect outside the small circle of the upper middle class. Article 40 of the Egyptian Constitution states, "All citizens are equal before the law. They have equal public rights and duties without discrimination due to sex, ethnic origin,

language, religion or creed."¹⁰ In the past decade, legal reforms in favor of women have attempted to reframe this constitutional decree. Activists have been aided by the state's renewed interest in women's rights, thanks to the tireless advocacy of Egypt's then First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak. However, reforms have been superficial and ineffective because they remain opposed by patriarchal attitudes and religious extremists and are not supported by proper enforcement mechanisms.

The participation of women in judiciary proceedings can be used as a measure of the acceptance of women's issues and voices in public matters in Egypt. In 2008, the Supreme Judicial Council gave women the right to hold judgeships for the first time, but women judges were only hired in family courts and were denied seats on criminal and administrative courts. Moreover, in 2010, the Council of State, a judicial body that handles cases involving government, barred women from serving on its board. Not only does this indicate the preservation of prejudices against women's legal authority, denying highly qualified women from serving as judges in state courts, but it also shows a systematic elimination of women's voices from interpreting and enacting law.¹¹

Unfortunately, it is the male judges, tasked with ensuring equality before the law, who have voted against women's right to seek judgeship. When women's rights activists protested this obvious injustice, the Council of State accused them of disrespecting the judicial authority and refused to overturn the decision. Extremists have supported this discriminatory decision, claiming that Islam defines women as "lacking intellect and religion." The Special Assembly, a governing body of the Council of State, overturned this prohibition on female judges on March 22, 2010. However, officials claim that there are no vacancies for judge positions and continue to exclude women from courts.¹²

Even after the revolution, women are still deprived from participating in high profile decision-making committees. While forming the Constituent Assembly, the "revolution" parliament—heavily dominated by Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood—failed to form a committee that accurately reflected the true social representation of Egypt's diverse interest groups,

including women, who were given a paltry six seats on the 100-member Assembly. In a recent statement, the National Council for Women condemned the underrepresentation of women in the Constituent Assembly in particular and in political life overall as “very humiliating.” The Egyptian Women’s Union, a new group aimed at defending and uniting Egyptian women, has joined other women’s organizations to demand that women be given at least 30 percent of the assembly seats. However, their proposal has been completely ignored—even as the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party has caved to pressure to replace several Islamist members with liberals. The severe underrepresentation of women in the Constituent Assembly constitutes a threat not only to women’s rights but also to all Egyptians, because the marginalization of any interest group from the constitutional process will jeopardize the success and integrity of the democratic transition as a whole.

Women were also forced out of the first-ever uncontested, multi-candidate, presidential elections in Egypt’s history. There was only one brave candidate—Bothaina Kamel—who heroically ran as Egypt’s first female presidential contender. She told me she insists on continuing her fight until the very end although she knows very well that her chances for victory are extremely low. “We are breaking the taboo and paving the way for generations of women to come,” she told me. Unfortunately, she could not collect more than 300 authorizations out of the required 3,000 to run for office.

One month after the revolution, we had a referendum on the constitutional amendments. A massive number of Egyptians motivated by their hunger for democracy participated in the poll. As a women’s rights activist, I seized the opportunity to test people’s willingness to include women in their vision of democracy. I ran a survey asking if “it is good for Egypt to have a woman president” outside of poll stations in three areas: Nasr City, Shubra, and Downtown. I surveyed 1,453 people, including 634 women. The answer to my survey question was 100 percent “no.” Ironically, most of the words that followed this “no” were loaded with hatred and discrimination toward women. Despite the impressive role women

played in the revolution, most Egyptians still believe that women are made for the kitchen, not for the office.¹³

Conclusion

Egyptian women’s rights are almost grinding between two large stones. The first is the patriarchal mindset that traps women in stereotypical female roles and stigmatizes any woman who tries to break out of this mold. The second is the rise of political Islamists who perpetuate this patriarchal mentality and are misinterpreting religion to justify the social and political marginalization of women in the name of Islam.¹⁴ However, Egyptian women are heroically struggling to push against the two stones and claim the space to which they are entitled as an essential force behind Egypt’s spring.

Nevertheless, we should remain optimistic about the unlimited powers of the Egyptian woman. Women’s sufferings during democratization are not unique to the Egyptian case and culture. In recent democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa, women suffered marginalization, and it took a long time and much effort to win full equality with men. We have our own story of Hoda Sha’arawi, the first woman activist to lead a protest in 1919 to encourage more women to get involved in politics and the first to take off her *niqab* in 1923 to encourage other women to be more involved in social activities.

Today’s Egypt is full of countless numbers of Hoda’s granddaughters. They have led the 2011 revolution and are currently leading their country through democratic transition. It is only a matter of time before Egyptians realize that the Arab Spring cannot come about without flowers, and, thus, democracy cannot be achieved without women.

Endnotes

- 1 On June 2nd, 2012, the court sentenced Mubarak and his Minister of Interior to death while acquitting them of charges related to corruption.
- 2 Egypt's first ever uncontested, multi-candidate presidential elections that took place on May 23-24, 2012 qualified Ahmed Shafik, Mubarak's Prime Minister and loyal friend, and Mohamed Morsi, a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, to the runoff.
- 3 According to the 2008 (latest statistics) by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, women represent 48% of Egypt's population.
- 4 Dr. Mohamed Abdullah Al-Habdan; The Vices Caused by Women When They Leave Their Homes; Nour El-Islam Network; Accessed June 2, 2012 (<http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1652&Itemid=27>).
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Yemeni Women after the Arab Awakening: Are women marginalized after the Arab Awakening?

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Unlike in other "Arab Spring" countries, women protesting side by side with their male peers in the public sphere is a unique scene in an otherwise conservative society like Yemen. Evidently, the uprising has shaken the country's stagnant cultural and social norms and has unveiled new female revolutionary faces and strong voices from all walks of life in Yemeni society.

Indeed, Yemeni women played an unprecedented strong and public role in the 2011 popular uprising; they were providing food and medical assistance, calling for and organizing protests, and delivering speeches. Women have also taken advantage of the protections that they receive under cultural and customary law in order to be

on the front line and shield male protesters during demonstrations.

Since the very beginning of the protests, talking about women's rights was largely suppressed in favor of the general discussion on leadership change and reforms. That has been true for all other actors who worked in harmony for months while protesting on the ground and who now disagree and fight with each other. All actors usually must compromise to stand and appear unified against the dictator.

It was apparent that Yemeni political parties had mobilized their women supporters into the streets merely to increase the number of protesters, not to grant women more rights. The tremen-



dous presence of women in the streets gave more weight to rallies and protests. Women, as always, have been cards in the hands of politicians and political parties.

Realizing the growing power of women in the street, their impact, and their achievement of international recognition, Yemeni men attempted to silence women and intimidate them. Due to their activism, Yemeni women have been subjected to violence as well as exploitation by both members of the ex-regime and the revolutionary guards. Hence, women were subjected to harassment, attacks, kidnapping, and detention as well as slander and incitement.

Tawakkol Karman was the first woman to be kidnapped and detained in the beginning of the uprising, which sparked and marked the beginning of attacks on women, attacks that have since continued. In one of the protests, a group of women activists were beaten down, and their cameras and mobile phones were confiscated. Media reports revealed the names of these nine women, and it is believed that they were subjected to violence because they wanted to march and mingle with their peer male protesters. Most of those women were not wearing the traditional Yemeni dress code, which is the black *abaya*.


In another incident in Sana'a, four female doctors who were accompanied by protesters were also abducted. Moreover, in one of the protests in the city of Taiz, a group of women activists were beaten and threatened with rape. One of the women in that protest who was raped had an abortion.

A report was produced by Sisters' Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to monitor and record the gender-based violence (GBV) cases that resulted from the civil unrest in four governorates: Sana'a, Aden, Taiz, and Hodeida. It has divulged information about a number of GBV cases in those governorates that took place during the civil unrest. The report highlighted a number of rape cases that have not been reported due to cultural reasons. There are some rape cases where the victim and her family have preferred silence, fearing social stigma or scandal, so cases have gone unreported.

In the second weekend of November 2011, three women in Taiz were killed in an indiscriminate attack on protestors in Freedom Square. The way they were killed was documented by all media and aired on *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* channels.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative signed in November 2011 pushed Yemen out of violence and removed former President Ali Abdullah Saleh from power. It allowed for an election in February 2012 that brought President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi to office to lead the two-year transitional period until elections in 2014. Since then, the interim government has been preparing for the National Dialogue Conference, to be held in November 2012, which will gather all political parties and write a new constitution for Yemen. Yemeni women have realized the critical and historical moment that Yemen has been going through; they have been working to ensure that they are represented in the new Yemen and that their rights are enshrined in the new constitution. Yet the voices of Yemeni women dispersed in a number of initiatives.

For example, Yemeni women were planning to hold a national conference on the occasion of International Women's Day 2012 to gather Yemeni women from all walks of life to discuss their issues, to be included in the National Dialogue Conference. So the Yemeni Women's Union (YWU) held a conference and came up with a number of demands from women in different fields including education, health, economics, and law. In the same vein, the Women's National Committee (WNC) held a big conference at the end of March for the same purpose, with the support of international NGOs and donors in Yemen. The second conference also came up with a list of demands that were more or less similar to those of the previous conference. The two conferences stressed the importance of the 30 percent quota for women's representation in all levels of government. At the end of the day, the two organizations' (YWU and WNC) leaders came to an agreement to unify their efforts in a rare step that has never been seen in 20 years. The two NGOs held another, distinct workshop to set up criteria for selecting women to take part in the National Dialogue Conference.



However, there have been complaints that not all Yemeni women's voices have been represented in all these initiatives toward the National Dialogue Conference. For instance, southern women complain that they are marginalized from all these activities, which usually take place in the capital, Sana'a.

Therefore, the Community Coalition (CC) for active women's participation in the National Dialogue Conference and transitional period has been created, consisting of five local NGOs and active, influential, and professional personalities (both men and women), facilitated by UNFPA and UN Women. The CC's main goal is to expand dialogue with all groups and classes in Yemeni society—urban or rural—to grapple with issues in social development and women's issues. It aims to ensure equal and fair representation of women in all phases of the National Dialogue Conference and its conversations and debates, as well as to ensure women's equal representation in all the requirements and functions of the transitional period.

The new interim government appointed two women to the cabinet, in the Ministry of Human Rights and the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Ministry of Human Rights had been set aside for women by the ex-regime and the new Minister for Social Affairs had been already appointed by the ex-regime in the same position. Nonetheless, the efforts of the new government continue to include women and maintain their representation. When President Hadi formed a Contact Committee, only one woman, Nadia Al-Saqqaf, was among the seven members. Again in July 2012, when the Technical/Preparatory Committee for the National Dialogue Conference was formed, six women out of 30 were selected. However, this representation has not met the expectations of Yemeni women who are pushing for a minimum 30 percent quota in the new government.

Despite these efforts to empower women, Yemeni women have not seen or felt any positive change or fruits of the Arab Spring. On the contrary, four out of five women believe that their "lives have worsened in the previous 12 months," according to a recent survey conducted by Oxfam across Yemen.¹ This year, the situation of women has not been better than it was

last year. Many women have been subjected to harassment, threats, slandering, and incitement. This paper highlights a few examples.

Bushra Al-Maktari, a liberal activist and youth revolutionary figure, was beaten in Change Square in Taiz by women who belong to Islah, the Islamist party, after she published a piece of writing questioning the existence of God. Al-Maktari receives daily death threats—she was accused of "apostasy" by religious authorities who issued a *fatwa* that stated that killing Al-Maktari "is a ticket for heaven."

Amal Basha is a liberal activist and head of SAF. When Basha was selected to be part of the Preparatory Committee of the National Dialogue Conference, religious scholars in Yemen issued a *fatwa* in which they condemned those who chose Basha and other women for this high-profile committee. Sheikh Mohammed Al-Hazmi, a conservative religious scholar, criticized the presidential decree and attacked Basha in person, saying bluntly, "Is Yemen empty of men to the extent that we select Basha as a member of the Technical Committee of the National Dialogue? Amal does not represent Yemeni women."

Houria Mashhour, Minister of Human Rights, was accused of calling for freedom of sexuality, banning polygamy, and cancelling Quranic legislation. Such an accusation in a conservative Muslim country is enough to single Mashhour out and put her life at risk. The ex-regime-owned electronic media further incited the Yemeni community against Minister Mashhour because of the Ministry's efforts in following up with the Human Rights Council's recommendations that condemn granting immunity to those who killed protesters in 2011.

Arwa Othman, a writer, photographer, and activist who participated in the uprising from the beginning and documented all stages of revolution by her camera, was among the group of liberal women who were beaten by revolutionary forces, who confiscated her camera along with her daughter's. She has been calling for a civic state, continually criticizing Islamists harshly and exposing their exploitation of the Arab Spring. Islamists attacked her in response and eventually gathered hundreds of reports in an effort to

block her Facebook page; she had to open a new account and yet she still she does not give up.

In May 2012, Yemeni women activists went into a rage as Hamid Al-Ahmar, a member of the Islah Party, defamed them in an interview with the *New York Times*. “There was bad behavior, which turned the square into a discotheque! Those women wanted to go hand in hand with their boyfriends as lovers in the demonstrations. This is not right and is against our religion.”² Al-Ahmar denied making that accusation, but the *New York Times* has backed it. Yemeni women took the case to court to sue Al-Ahmar, but the court did nothing.

Moreover, there have been attempts to undermine the role of women and deprive them from entering the political arena and being in decision-making positions. For instance, the Arab Spring Party, one of the emerging political parties, is the first in Yemeni history to be established and headed by a woman. However, she has been receiving death threats and faces many difficulties due to being the head of a party.

The situation in Yemen, a country classified as a “fragile state,” is not promising. Amid such uncertainty, women’s issues are being lost and sidelined by political actors who are busy trying to grab their share of the new cake that is Yemen. The UN envoy to Yemen, Jamal Bin Omar, rightly said, “Political parties in Yemen keep disagreeing on everything, but they agree on marginalizing women.”³

It is too early to say that the Arab Awakening has been or can be a “spring” for Yemeni women, as it has not thus far. With prevailing political instability and insecurity, as well as the looming power of Islamists whose agenda toward women is unfriendly, the future for Yemeni women is still unclear. There are many persistent challenges ahead for women in this country, where a majority of women are illiterate and live in rural areas. This makes them economically vulnerable, segregates them from the public domain, leaves them unaware of their rights, and makes them easy and submissive prey—even supporters of Islamist agendas and ideologies.

Yemeni women, whether northern, southern, Houthi, liberal, or conservative, have to stand up firmly as one voice if they really want women to advance. Otherwise, women always will be exploited and underrepresented.

The future of women in Yemen is still unknown because the Islamists and conservatives who took part in writing the constitution 20 years ago are still threatening that they are the ones who will write the future constitution of Yemen. Increasing the fear of this possibility is the lack of female legislators in the country.

The uprisings of the Arab Spring may have been a “blossoming” for some but definitely not for Yemeni women so far.

Endnotes

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Egyptian Women: Two Years after the January 25 Revolution

Yasmine ElSayed Hani, *Wilson Center Visiting Journalist and Independent Journalist, Foreign Desk, Al Akhbar daily newspaper*

Nearly two years after the Egyptian revolution, it is difficult to conclude whether or not the transformative uprisings that took place in Egypt have improved the status of women. The picture in Egypt is not yet complete, and developments are happening too quickly for people to properly perceive, digest, and react to them. It is useful, then, to provide an honest account of these two years and pinpoint constructive opportunities for women's rights activists to pursue for a better and just society.

A New Paradigm for Women's Political Engagement

It is now almost a cliché that the Arab Spring revolutions provided new models for women's political engagement. Since day one of Egypt's January 25 Revolution, female protesters were not fighting for women's rights and gender equality, but, instead, for freedom, just like their male counterparts. In April 2012 in Cairo, I interviewed Mona Ezzat—a prominent Egyptian feminist affiliated with “The New Woman” organization, in operation since 1986—and she told me that women's participation in the protests was not for demands about gender issues; the revolutionary protests were free of any class, sect, or groups' demands. Instead, the protests were a unified call that Egyptians made to rid the country of despotism.

Women's appetite for politics increased after the success of the revolution because of the collective self-confidence they gained. Their sacrifices were recognized and appreciated by Egyptian society. Moreover, their work and vital role during the protests planted the seeds for a good climate in which women's issues could operate, but women still envision much more. Ezzat asserted that the intensive participation of women has encouraged them—particularly the youth among them—to approach politics and to take part in

the political game without basing such participation on a “gender-equality argument.” In other words, the momentum that their participation released put some wind in their sails, as they tried afterward to ground their existence on the map as both political and social actors in Egyptian society.

In Politics: Women against Women

The tracks for women's political participation in Egypt were crafted by women within an acute competitive climate whereby “political polarization” was the result. This polarization operates within a “space of freedom” provided by the revolution for all sides and parties, a space which nobody seems willing to give up. Each side has its own agenda, projects, and vision for Egypt and each is using all the tools at its disposal to gain more supporters: economic (money), cultural (rhetoric), the media, and so on.

In a climate that brought the so-called “Islamist parties” to power, politics and culture became two sides of the same coin. Politicians in Egypt use a cultural discourse, especially since around 80 percent of the population define themselves as conservative. Mona Ezzat also said in the interview that those in power are using the women within their ranks to fight against women's rights. The ruling conservative forces do not want to get directly involved in a confrontation with women activists, so they use their “female wings” to compete with the women activists within that space of freedom that the revolution provided for everyone. This explains why some women in the current parliament, affiliated with conservative parties, were the ones to suggest unreasonable bills to lower the age of marriage for girls to 9, lift the ban on female genital mutilation (FGM), and abolish the sexual harassment law.

Recently, when Omaila Kamel, one of the two female advisors to President Mohamed



Morsi, mentioned the virtues of FGM, diverse segments of Egyptian society harshly criticized her. Those who favor this practice are in fact revisiting traditions that Islamic scholars assert have nothing to do with Islam. The Egyptian Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa even stated that this custom has been scientifically proven to be harmful to girls and women.

Ezzat addressed the ongoing fight of women activists to preserve the legislative and political gains that they achieved prior to the revolution—both in terms of legislation that influenced government policies and raised awareness for their causes. Among the laws they contributed to were *al-khola*, which allowed women the right to self-divorce, and a citizenship law allowing Egyptian women to pass their nationality on to their children when the father is not Egyptian. Ezzat also cited the efforts led by her organization to form a union with 23 other organizations for the cause of fighting sexual violence against women.

Women risk the reversal of these past gains, according to Ezzat, if the new constitution does not justly address women's rights. It is shocking that only seven out of 100 members selected for the Constituent Assembly were women. Only two women were appointed out of 35 ministers in Morsi's first cabinet.

For some, all of the above complicate the prospects for women's rights in Egypt. Yet for others who believe in the slogan "the revolution continues," there is still hope.

Women Activists: Challenges and Opportunities

These developments bring into question the current role of women's organizations and gender issues in Egypt. Women activists face many challenges and must make use of each and every chance to promote women's rights and issues. This includes working in parallel tracks—legislative, cultural, and political—to ensure that the future is not going to be against Egyptian women.

Challenges that might be ahead

- Self-challenges: Among the inherent challenges, Ezzat explained, was that women's organizations always had certain institutional and financial constraints, as well as

the security challenges that come with operating outside the capital in other big cities. Nevertheless, in recent years, those activists sometimes succeeded in their outreach in rural areas.

- Negative linkages: Although Egypt has long-established, distinguished women's organizations, they were publicly portrayed as linked to the elite. Members were criticized for seeking women's rights in a country where the poverty rate is gradually mounting to include half the population. This is due, in part, to the interest the former First Lady Suzanne Mubarak expressed in women's issues, thereby creating a negative association between the former regime and women's issues.
- Culture: There is a general inclination among Egyptian society not to appreciate women's issues and efforts for women's rights, as they are perceived as extraneous compared to the country's other issues. In addition, violations of women's rights take place in the name of long-inherited "traditions." This is common in developing societies, in which the traditions get to be more powerful than the laws.
- A confidence problem: There is a general lack of confidence among women. While they can proceed with their activism for women's rights, they choose not to vote for other women when given the opportunity. This is a deep-rooted problem in Egyptian culture that implies women are not qualified to participate in politics. Only nine out of hundreds of female candidates won in the post-revolution parliamentary elections—constituting around two percent of the legislative body. Combatting an illiteracy rate of nearly 50 percent among women is a prime way to improve their self-confidence.

It is unrealistic to say that Egyptian women are the "ultimate losers" of the January 25 Revolution. There are many optimistic indicators to the contrary.



Potential opportunities

- “Spaces of freedom”: As noted earlier, the revolution provided spaces of freedom that allowed women activists to operate freely, despite all the challenges they were facing. Perhaps the initial negative developments will favor women’s activists in the long term. As the danger facing women’s rights increased, female activists and organizations, as well as prominent supporters, were forced to come together and act collectively, abandoning a previous era of fragmented efforts.
- The “win-win game” of competitive politics: The political polarization that is currently taking place creates an acute form of competitive politics that makes it hard to have a “loser” in the game. Women’s issues will still be raised in the political debate from time to time. In fact, the struggle for women’s rights is part of the struggle for democracy, which is not only tangible—as seen by ballots, votes, and elections—but is also about the existence of a healthy, competitive climate.
- Increasing appetite for public exposure: Though a climate of uncertainty shadows every ongoing development, women’s intense participation during the revolution planted the seeds of their public exposure. Seeing how society recognized and appreciated their sacrifices alerted them to their potential capacities for change. It also boosted their desire for entering the game of politics, and, though not fruitful so far, it still inspires hope. Many women activists turned into social figures, real opinion-makers. Their activism encouraged others to join the same path. Some prominent activists include Nawara Negm (a Twitter figure among youth), Esraa Abd ElFattah (an activist and blogger who co-founded a popular youth movement), Rasha Azab (a journalist who exposed military torture cases), and many others. This growing activism, particularly among women, is very important for women’s organizations to harness for their future efforts.

Conclusion

The ongoing struggle in Egypt is not merely between women’s rights activists and those who want to deprive them of previous gains. Rather, it is going to be between those who struggle for real democracy, which appreciates all the components of society, and those who wish to play politics with old, exclusion-based rules.

The space of freedom provided by the revolution enabled women to act freely—though it made them vulnerable to criticism, if not attacks, as well—because this freedom was given to all parties: moderates and extremists, the right and the left, conservatives and liberals, and so on. During this transitional phase, the rules of engagement in Egyptian society are still being crafted, and it is the most critical time for shaping Egypt’s future.

The domination of certain political ideologies does not determine the “final word” when it comes to the status of women in Egypt. Rather, it is a natural part of the competitive political climate that is rapidly changing. The reasons for optimism outweigh those for pessimism—at least for youth if not for politicians. This optimism is increasingly becoming the air many are breathing, myself included. It is certain, however, that the position of women is embedded in the position of the whole society, whether oppressed or free, developed or underdeveloped, democratic or suffering under a dictatorship. It is still too early to judge any of this.



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