

Viewpoints
No. 8

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women

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October 2012

Middle East Program





"I'm with the uprising of women in the Arab world because for 20 years, I wasn't allowed to feel the wind in my hair and my body," wrote Dana Bakdones, a female Syrian activist who removed her veil right after the Syrian revolution started. For Dana, the revolution in Syria was not only against the regime; it was a revolution against social norms and traditions that chained women and considered them second-class citizens. Dana took off her veil because she wanted to challenge all that and declare the revolution in Syria to be more than just toppling Bashar al-Assad. It was also about getting rid of the chains around women and their bodies.

Dana wrote her statement on a banner and published a photo of herself without the veil, holding the banner, on Facebook. But this act of expressing a personal choice was received with a wave of insults, indicating a major impediment the region is still facing; another kind of dictatorship: sexism. With the rise of Islamists in the Arab world, women are eventually going to realize that the revolutions did not give them freedom. They need to take it with their own hands.

There have been a few initiatives aimed at shedding light on the issue of women and revolutions. So far, these initiatives are still focused on discussing ideas and expressing opinions. They still need structure and strategy.

On October 1, 2012, one year after creating the Facebook page "The Uprising of Women in the Arab World,"ⁱ a group of women activists from Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine launched a campaign on Facebook and Twitter called "I am with the uprising of women in the Arab world because...", where they asked people (both women and men) to send a picture of themselves with the reason why they need this uprising.ⁱⁱ

According to their press release, the women's initiative was an urgent reaction to the social and political developments in the region because they did not want the Arab Spring to be aborted. "Arab revolts were led in the name of dignity, justice and freedom, but we cannot reach these values if women are being ignored or absented from the main scenery."

The photo campaign aims to highlight the various kinds of discrimination against women in the Arab world, to emphasize their common struggles, to create common ground for feminist activism, and for women to build on each other's experiences. In addition, they used social media to re-open the debate on women's conditions, especially that women have suffered serious attacks after the success of the revolts of the Arab Spring countries.ⁱⁱⁱ

These women's ambition is to continue, after removing dictators, to eliminate patriarchy that authorizes each man to be a dictator over the women in his family. "We, women and men together, must continue revolting against oppression and put forward our feminist demands. We will not accept any priorities imposed on us, we will not practice self-censorship and we will not compromise on our rights," the campaign's press release also stated.

This initiative succeeded in getting regional media's attention, and it seems that a women's spring is developing, at least behind computer screens. The huge participation in the photo

campaign was surprising even to the organizers. Many men and women sent their pictures and messages, and, in a few days, the Facebook page's "likes" had risen from 20,000 to over 49,000.

This eagerness to participate is a good sign that many young people feel that the revolutions in the Arab world failed to address the issue of women. The tone and language used in the participants' photos indicated anger, resentment, and an urge to change the status quo when it comes to Arab women. It seems that the revolutionary energy has not expired.

But the desire to change, although vital, is not enough if it is not accompanied by strategy and determination. Many feminist groups in the region seem to share the determination but not the strategy. Some prefer to negotiate, like Islamic feminists. These feminists acknowledge the religious institutions and value the partnership between religion and state institutions. Because they do not want to hamper this partnership, they tend to compromise on issues such as polygamy and the sexual rights of women.

Others are more radical and prefer a clear line between state institutions and *shari'a* (Islamic laws). But both groups share the desire to advance equality between men and women in the Middle East.

The good news is that elections are coming to a number of countries in the region, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon. Women constitute almost half of the votes in Arab countries, and, in the upcoming elections, candidates will try to gather as many voters as they can. These are going to be decisive elections and every vote will count. Women can use this power to make a statement.

Candidates should not be given a chance if they do not support women's rights, and they need to give serious guarantees that they will respect women's votes and their rights as equal citizens. In addition, women should demand representation on electoral lists with reasonable quotas, or threaten with blank votes.

For example, Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia should know that women have power to change the course of elections. Women, if united over their own interests, can sway the results of elections in one direction or another.

Of course, women are not that united, and, even if they try to overcome their political differences, a collective effort in this sense would probably be the only way to tell political forces that women are not silent partners and cannot be used as tools. They will have to reconsider before pushing women back into the private sphere after opening the streets for them during the uprisings. At least, passing laws against women would not be that easy.

Women should use the opportunity to push their demands onto political parties' agendas. Women's rights activists and grassroots organizations need to take the lead and use the media to spread the word. Many of these women helped break the fear and mobilize the streets; an example is Razan Zeitouneh from Syria.

In Syria, the peaceful protests were mainly organized by Local Coordination Committees, mostly led at the beginning by women. When the uprising turned into a military conflict, women were asked to go back to the private sphere. The rebels requested this out of protective

instincts, while the regime launched a rape campaign against Syrian women in order to harm the peaceful aspect of the uprising.

Currently, Syrian women are either active from outside Syria, or are pushed back to perform tasks related to social relief or media. When women are no longer in the role of leadership, they are not expected to have a say when the future of Syria is on the table. However, women still enjoy a power that no one can conquer: the power to vote.

Women's votes are the main tool to pressure those who make decisions on their behalf. If they do not use it to protect themselves, they cannot expect anyone to protect them. Women have a chance to stop playing the victim and take action.

Will women abstain from voting? Many would say that women in the Arab states worked very hard to obtain suffrage, not a long time ago, and that it would be unwise to give it up. However, there is a difference between giving this right up and choosing to use or not use it wisely. Why should women vote for someone who will use it against them? Women can use this power wisely and abstain from voting without guarantees to their rights. A blank vote is, in this case, the best message.

A better understanding of women in the region is required. There are many layers, and women can express confusing opinions only because they are baffled. The Arab Spring opened many possibilities and at the same time caused real concerns. Women want to be independent and free, yet at the same time are afraid of the consequences.

For example, according to the findings from the Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa (SWMENA) project,^{iv} data collected on women's political and civil participation and legal rights in Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen showed that although a majority of women polled in all three countries said they would support women as political candidates, a large percentage of those same women believe men make better political leaders. This belief was shared by 46 percent of women in Lebanon, 35 percent in Morocco, and 85 percent in Yemen.

Women want to be free, but many of them in the region still do not understand their power and ability to lead. This is a result of ages of intimidation and patriarchy. But there is hope, thanks to modern communication tools and social media.

In the photo campaign organized by the "Uprising of Women in the Arab World," many women expressed their desire to be free with their choices and bodies, including the right to wear the veil. The body has been a very common concern among these women. Some wanted to be liberated from the chains; others defended their choice to keep the veil. But in both cases, the choice over one's body was a common factor.

This fixation on the body is also linked to women's fear of the abuses of patriarchal society. Female genital mutilation, young girls' marriages, marital rape, sexual harassment, and rape as a weapon (in Syria, for example) are all topics that have become main issues for women after the Arab revolutions, all with a woman's body as the common denominator of fear. Men fear its manifestations and women fear the physical abuse.

To protect the right over one's body and sexual rights, women must manifest power, intimidate, and refuse to compromise. The first step toward that is using one's vote wisely, until the ideal situation of separating the state institutions from religion is achieved.

In Lebanon, for example, the women's quota in parliament of 10 percent is very low and violates international agreements for more women's representation. More than 50 percent of the voters are women, and they are only getting one seat in each electoral list. During the 2009 elections, a Lebanese group called the "Feminist Collective" initiated with a web campaign a new slogan for women: "Be Intelligent and Vote Blank: No one cares about your rights."

This campaign was very successful in attracting media attention and went viral on social media. But if it had been coordinated with other women's organizations and accompanied by street action and a media strategy, it could have been a real success.

Now the awareness regarding women's rights in Lebanon is greater, thanks to more cooperation and lobbying by women's organizations such as KAFA (Enough) and Nasawiya. Accompanied with the discussion started by the group "The Uprising of Women in the Arab World," which is very popular in Lebanon, such an initiative can raise women's demands to a different level.

During the upcoming elections in the region, another spring, a women's spring, is a must.



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

ⁱ <https://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.awid.org/Library/Civil-Society-initiative-The-uprising-of-women-in-the-Arab-World>

ⁱⁱⁱ On November 7, 2012, [Facebook attempts to shut down the page "The Uprising of Women in the Arab World"](#)

^{iv} <http://www.ifes.org/Content/Publications/News-in-Brief/2011/August/New-Challenges-Opportunities-for-Womens-Political-Participation-in-the-Middle-East.aspx>

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