



## **Have the Arab Uprisings helped or harmed women's rights?**

*Women and the Arab Revolutions: from equality in protest to backlash  
in the transition from old regimes to new governments*

**A paper by the Think Tank for Arab Women**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Few people can forget the images of women, standing alongside men with a defiance that shocked the world, undercutting stereotypes of voiceless, invisible oppressed Arab women. On the streets of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, women and men marched together, breaking social norms to demand a new future. But despite this beautiful picture of women alongside men participating in the protest movements demanding freedom, equality, justice and democracy, the topic of women and their place in Arab societies and in the context of Islam is back again at the forefront.

The changes sweeping the region present real opportunities, yet they also present risks of regression. The challenges facing women in the Arab world are tremendous despite the existence of international resolutions drafted to protect women and empower them. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is often described as an international bill of rights for women and sets up an agenda for national action to empower women. Sixteen out of the 22 Arab states accepted CEDAW and are legally bound to put its provisions into practice and committed to submit national reports on measures they have taken to comply with their obligations.

This paper is an effort by different scholars from the Think Tank of the Arab Women to contribute to the ongoing debates on gender equality based on the changed socio-economic and political context of the region. It provides deeper analysis to the status quo of women in the region and touches base on the failed expectations of women from the revolutions and ways forward to address various challenges that would face them.

### **Regional Overview**

The promotion of women's rights in the region has been shouldered by women's organizations and groups that are a part of the growing movement of civil society organizations. Socially liberal NGOs, often headed by middle class, educated Arab women, have dedicated themselves to the global movements towards achieving gender equality. These organizations defer to the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); the Social and Economic Rights Conventions (SERC), as well as the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), to demand equal rights for women. Those conventions have legitimized the demands for gender equity as most of the world's nations have signed and ratified CEDAW.

However, the number of organizations in the region that are using a rights-based approach are too few when one considers the huge dimensions of gender inequality that need to be challenged at the family, community and policy levels. In fact, the majority of women's organizations found in the region tend to focus on addressing women's practical gender needs, such as income generation activities, literacy classes, maternal and child care, and other life skills. Because the region's governments tend not to favour women's rights' organizations with a human rights agenda, they are unable to properly address the structural barriers to gender equality by challenging state practices, policies and laws. In the region, Sharia (Islamic) law is the foundational spirit of the culture, which tends to influence policy. For decades, women's organizations have been in a constant struggle with their patriarchal states; they have attempted to push an agenda for change that is in conflict with the dominant patriarchal culture. There is an apparent paradox in the Arab states' position regarding gender equality: while all Middle Eastern and North African countries have signed and ratified CEDAW, the majority of them have not committed to changing laws and/or setting mechanisms to ensure progress towards gender equality.

In their struggle to influence policy, rights-based women's organizations have used a number of different strategies in their agenda for reform, including research and advocacy campaigns. Many of these organizations have become a part of global feminists' structures. Despite of all these challenges, women's organizations in the region have largely succeeded in the past in achieving progress in changing laws and policies in favor of gender equality. For example, in Tunisia the Code of Personal Status has granted women equality in areas including reproductive rights, nationality rights for children, and equal employment opportunities. However, civil society initiatives have often as well failed to influence some laws (i.e. nationality rights in Lebanon, equal inheritance in most of the countries, quota system in parliament and governance structures).

The Arab Human Development Report of 2005 argues that there has been progress made in terms of social indicators such as the advancement of women in education, including higher education, health and employment. The same 2005 report, however, also indicates that Arab women have made little progress in terms of political participation. Some scholars from Egypt argued that "Autocratic leadership has prohibited liberal women's groups to engage with political parties' actions and women's organizations have been working in the civil field rather than the political arena. The relation between civil society and political parties should be strengthened to allow women's participation and influence on political parties)." This applies whether in autocratic governments or in fully realized democracies; women's rights organizations must push forward to influence policies and ensure gender equality and equal rights and participation for women.

## **II. THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARAB SPRING**

The revolutions that began with Tunisia and continue on in Yemen and Syria changed the operating environment of the Arab region, transforming not only regional politics but also international perspectives and understanding of the Arab countries and women leaders. A new demographic brought to light as a result of the Arab Spring was young women, who were dynamic in organizing protests, building coalitions, using social media and fighting on the front lines for their freedom. Most remarkable was the noted equality seen on the front lines of protests from Bahrain to Egypt, where women stood alongside men in prayer, in chanting, and in martyrdom, and how quickly this moment of inclusion and equality slipped away as transitional governments and new regimes began to take control in the aftermath of old dictatorships. The backlash for women and women's legal rights was not only unexpected, but it was against the virtues and values of the revolutions themselves, and thus ever more surprising.

In Tunisia, despite of the general consensus of equality in participation and representation, this commitment was not really materialized. Women only occupied 27 percent of the seats in Parliament instead of 50 percent<sup>2</sup>. In Yemen, Article 18 about the National Dialogue Conference stipulates that "The elected president and the national entente government shall call for a conference on the national dialogue including all forces and political figures, mainly youth, southern movement, the Huthis, the other political parties and representatives of the civil society and the women sector. Women

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<sup>1</sup> Arab Women's Rights: Past, Present and Future Prospects. Unpublished workshop report, Oxfam GB, May 2012

<sup>2</sup> Safa Raywiah, *The space for Youth in Women's Organizations in the Arab Region*, 2012. Paper presented in Beirut at Oxfam conference on Arab Women's Rights: Past, Present and Future Prospects.

must be represented within all stakeholders).”<sup>3</sup> However, this requires intensive efforts to allow women, in particular young women, to be engaged in the transitional stages. Patriarchy, illiteracy, and an undeveloped civil society has impacted the full inclusion of women.

Beyond the challenges related to women’s equal participation and engagement in the transitional and post transitional eras, the political instability, insecurity and internal conflicts in some countries have resulted in the current deteriorated economic situation, which has significant implications for women. In Tunisia there has been an increase in the unemployment rate in general and for women and postgraduate women in particular. The number of unemployed women reached 400,000 out of 800,000 including 150,000 postgraduates.

In Yemen different reports of the world declared food deficit and poor people are not able to access the market. The deteriorated economic conditions in Yemen left many people unemployed and added to hardships brought about by political turmoil and the continuous war against al-Qaeda. In Egypt, poverty has been escalated as a result of the losses in the tourism sector due to political instability. Development challenges remain central in integrating women in the development plans and to ensure budgets are responsive to their needs including health, economic opportunities and education, and to stipulate laws that would ensure effective participation of women in rebuilding their nations.

The backlash for women and women’s rights was not only unexpected, but it was against the virtues and values of the revolutions—democracy that should ensure inclusiveness—and thus ever more surprising. As new coalitions build upon the existing movements, the political landscape and prevailing attitudes toward women must be reevaluated to inform the critical obstacles and challenges facing women; define new action plans and strategic recommendations to address these areas; promote debates around the wider meaning of democracy and citizenship; and build constituencies to lobby for women’s inclusion, protection, safety, peace and security, and overall equal participation and inclusion in all governance structures and processes and in new societies emerging from the Arab Spring.

### **Tunisian Revolution and Women’s Roles**

Whether in Tunisia or Egypt, the large number of women injured and killed shows their active involvement in the revolutions. They were the protesters who defied tear gas, volunteered as nurses, and wrote blogs. They have been part of every opposition movement that has shaken the Arab world, even on the front lines. However, during the first protests that toppled Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, and until the fall of their regimes, political and social claims of male and female protesters alike have failed to include women and equal rights. Even in Egypt and Tunisia, calls and needs of women have not been considered a priority. Slogans and catchwords were more unifying and uniting: “all unified against the regime...” It is only after reaching these goals that women engaged in campaigns calling for an end to their exclusion and demanding an equal role for them in these transitory periods. This was especially true in Tunisia and Egypt where women’s movements are stronger and are part of a longer running tradition. Women’s campaigns were also present in Yemen and Bahrain on a smaller scale.

In Tunisia, women were very active and present in demonstrations, unions, associations, and political parties. However, they were ignored by the media. Through all of the

discourses, the debates on TV channels, and the press conferences since the 14th of January, the question of equal citizenship for women has never been posed. The systematic inclusion of women following revolutions is well documented in history. In 1789, French women marched in order to protest against the rise in bread prices and to denounce the overtaking of the Versailles royal court, contributing then to toppling of the monarchy. Yet despite the power of the knitting symbol, the revolutionary council quickly banned political parties and associations managed by women.

The same phenomena happened in Algeria after it gained independence, where the participation of Algerian women in the armed struggle had no impact on their inferior legal status or the infamous familial code. In fact, the party praised the role played by women during the bloody period to better stifle their claims for equality. This also occurred after the Iranian revolution in 1979 after the takeover of Khomeini. The idea was the same: In order to appear as an open and moderate movement, politics had always been favourable to women's causes. However, once they took over, they reduced the range of freedom allowed women in order to satisfy the conservatives.

Tunisian women were from the beginning more vigilant. Following the revolution, Tunisia adopted parity in the electoral law, which stipulated that candidate lists must include 50 percent women, though, like Egypt's law, it failed to specify what position women must be included in. In the elections, women won approximately 27 percent of the seats of the new Constituent Assembly. Three women were also appointed to governmental positions out of a 41-member cabinet. While there was no quota, and women are still under-represented, this election represented an increased inclusion of women from previous elections, which seated approximately 23 percent women in parliament.

Tunisia has a long history of women's rights. It was the first Arab state to abolish polygamy; the first to grant women professional rights; and it was at the forefront in establishing progressive family laws. Women took an active role in administering the October election. All parties who won significant seats responded to Human Rights Watch's pre-election survey, indicating their support for the principles of gender equality. However, the battle is not just to include women in decision-making positions, but to ensure that they are supportive of women's rights and advancement.

Tunisia has all the ingredients for becoming a successful democracy including gender equality and it is not a coincidence that the Arab Spring started in Tunisia. Among these ingredients, Tunisia has a strong middle class, a very modern and strong educational system, well-entrenched women rights, a moderate and progressive Islamic movement, and an army that has historically stayed out of politics and out of corruption. For all these reasons, democracy has a very strong chance of success in Tunisia, and probably better and faster than the other countries of the Arab spring.

## **January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in Egypt**

### *Precursors to Revolution*

Similar to the Tunisian revolution, at the brink of the January 25<sup>th</sup> protests and uprisings, Egypt experienced an atmosphere of despondency; men and women of all ages found themselves dissatisfied with the status quo and the majority could see nothing but a black future for themselves and their children. They often described the suffering Egyptians faced because of Mubarak's policies. People reacted with anger and dissatisfaction to the state's weakness towards the Western world and their economic mismanagement. The Iraq war highlighted these feelings and nourished emotions of fear and a sense of hopelessness. The deteriorating conditions of life and the instability in the region

contributed to a loss of control and undermined individual and collective security. Such feelings were embodied and found expression in the form of aggression, frustration and anxiety<sup>4</sup>.

During the Iraq war, youths expressed that it was time for a revolution in Egypt, and a worse one than during the bread riots of 1977: 'Egyptians endure and endure, 'but in the end... [there will be] an explosion, and the time for reaction is here'<sup>5</sup>. It took another ten years. Yet, the Egyptian political subjects have continually been active. In early 2000, it appeared rather as hidden transcripts<sup>6</sup> and not as revolution on the streets. The rules of the state have been acted upon through apathy<sup>7</sup> and depression, but also through cynicism, rumor and humor<sup>8</sup>. The organizations of communities, and familial and informal networks have been a manifestation of political participation. These networks have provided an organizational grid that kept alive alternative visions of politics and strategies to achieve shared goals<sup>9</sup>. Why? People were repressed, fearful and paranoid. Their security and basic needs were dependent on the regime. Hidden forms of actions were crucial since they risked arrest and torture under Emergency law<sup>10</sup>.

### *The 2011 Revolution and Women's Roles on the Front Lines*

Egypt passed through a critical period that changed its future completely. With a new generation of men and women, the underground efforts became overt and galvanized a movement for greater accountability from the State and for greater respect for the basic human rights, freedoms and needs for all Egyptians across the board. The 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution made it possible for Egyptians to call for their rights, defend them and take their destiny into their own hands. While Egyptian women of all races, classes and professional backgrounds were next to men in Tahrir Square calling for freedom and democracy, demonstrating a rare moment of equality, they are not treated this way in everyday Egyptian society.

Egyptian women have always played a significant role in the history of their country. In the early 20th century, specifically in the 1919 revolution and on March 16<sup>th</sup>, two hundred women revolted against the British occupation. Hoda Shaarawi, an Egyptian activist and the leader of the Egyptian feminist movement, was on the front line raising a banner with the crescent and the cross as a symbol of national unity. She was a pioneer in the emancipation of Egyptian women, leading them to join men in the demonstrations for freedom and coming under fire from British occupation forces. That day marked the first time a woman died as a martyr sacrificing her life for her country. The March 16<sup>th</sup> demonstration sparked the foundation of the first Egyptian Women's Union, which called for demanding better conditions and care for women for their education, health, social and political rights.

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<sup>4</sup>Malmström 2012. Maria Frederika Malmström, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, <http://www.rj.se/english>, research proposal. *Young Women after the Egyptian Revolution: Embodying Political Agency*.

<sup>5</sup> Malmström, M. (2009), Just like couscous: Gender, agency and the politics of female circumcision in Cairo (62). Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Social Anthropology. Göteborg, Göteborg University.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, J.C. (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Sharp, J., Routledge, P., Philo, C., Paddison, R. (2000). *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance*. London: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Navaro-Yashin, Y. (2002). *Faces of the State. Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Singerman 1997

<sup>10</sup>Malmström 2012

Since then, Egyptian women pursued their struggle to obtain their full rights as citizens, able to participate in all spheres of life. The 25<sup>th</sup> January revolution is the most recent example of women's struggle, a fact further evidenced by their effective participation in all events of the revolution, defending the rights of all citizens, men and women, to a decent life, freedom and social justice. Egyptian women played a major role during the revolution. They demonstrated in the main squares of Egypt, they spent the nights on streets to make sure that the revolution would not be hijacked or stopped, they nursed the wounded, lamented the dead, chanted and danced when they became victorious and also cleaned the aftermath when they withheld the demonstrations. Women did not push on the agenda of women's rights, but put their lives at risk and faced injury, detainment and death to advocate for a better situation for all Egyptians. They are still active in NGOs, coalitions, political parties, workers' union and professional syndicates to make sure that Egypt is transitioning into a democratic era.

### *Shifting Dynamics for Egyptian Women in a new Political Landscape*

With the beginning of the transition period, some trends appeared to in favor of pushing the social status of women backward, cancelling hard won laws of the last two decades and limiting women's advancement as a full and equal participants in society.

In Egypt, there has been an absence of women from key decision-making positions during the political transition; no women were included on the constitutional committee and only one woman was included in the interim cabinet. Several statements from feminist organizations were sent to the Military Council and to the Prime Minister criticizing the absence of women in important committees and positions. Such statements explain that Egyptian women were an important pillar in the revolution and without them the revolution would not have succeeded. However, women's rights and gender equality was the first issue to be ignored and excluded from the agenda of both the Military Council and the Egyptian cabinet.

Women are hardly represented in the new People's Assembly with only two percent of seats filled by women, though millions of women went to the polls to vote. The 64-seat gender quota was also removed in the new election law leaving political parties to include one woman in each of their lists. However, because the position of women on the lists was not defined, women risked being put at the end of the list with very little chances to make it to the parliament. In practice, few women candidates were nominated and most of them were placed at the bottom of the electoral lists. Women candidates won only eight seats out of 508 seats and another two were appointed. There are no regulations in place to guarantee fair representation of women as in the case of Morocco or Tunisia or Algeria. Also, the Founding Committee for the Drafting of the Constitution included a low representation of women.

### *Advocacy Initiatives and Civil Society in Egypt*

In February, a coalition of feminist organizations expressed concern to both the Military Council and to the Prime Minister that women's participation in decision-making processes and positions has been minimized. They wrote several statements, several of which criticized that Egypt has no official women machinery to defend women's rights in participating in building democratic Egypt. The National Council for Women, formerly headed by the wife of the ex-President, was since the resolution kept with no power. The coalition of feminist NGOs denounced the NCW as illegitimate due to its links to former president Hosni Mubarak and his National Democratic Party. They called for it to be replaced by a transitional council of women's rights experts "To represent Egyptian



women at the local, Arab and international levels and ensure women's participation in shaping the political life during the current period. The coalition reiterated these demands in an open letter to the Prime Minister Essam Sharif, adding calls for the dissolution of State Security, cleansing of police forces, and a 30 percent quota for women in parliament.

In June, the Alliance for Arab Women, a feminist NGO established in the late 80s convened a conference of 3,000 women and men from all over Egypt to announce a charter which Egyptian women had drafted to send to the Military Council and the Cabinet. The charter of Egyptian Women is entitled: "Egyptian Women: Partners in the Revolution and in Building a Democratic Egypt." The charter included women's demands concerning their political/civil and social/economic rights. It called on free representation of women in public life, amendments of discriminatory legislations, and fair and positive image of women in Egyptian media.

In October 2011, a new women's federation was registered in Egypt, representing hundreds of women's NGOs from all governorates. Their first plan was to mobilize four million women to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections (which took place in November/December 2011).

Many women are joining the new political parties. There is hope that these parties will be more organized soon and that they will be more powerful in asserting women's rights. However, the new electoral law did not give a fair chance to the newly established political parties to put many women at the top of their lists. Stipulating in the law that one woman should be put on every list without specifying where her position on the list should be is unlikely to result in a considerable number of women in the upcoming parliament.

The challenge is still evident in nurturing a culture of activism and engagement that includes fighting for women's rights, particularly among the younger generation. Addressing women's rights as part and parcel of the aspired political transformations is what feminist groups should be able to convince young revolutionary youth with. Qualified women committed to the goals of the revolution are trying against all odds to step up to be full participants. They need to be supported through skills training, and networking with one another and with female politicians around the world. A broader awareness among the public is needed to explain how women's political participation benefits the whole society and not only women.

The restructuring of the National Council for Women (NCW) in 19 February 2012, gave a new dynamism to the national machinery in charge of the advancement of women. A workplan was formulated and approved by the Prime Minister. Through it, the council will work hard to improve the human and socio-economic conditions of Egyptian women and to increase their participation in the development of their local communities and through these efforts contribute to the development of society as a whole. The plan focuses on the importance of activating the branches of the Council in the Governorates to reach out to all the local government institutions and to non-governmental organizations and all women in the governorates. This is expected to be achieved through establishing networks of partnerships with the civil society especially the NGOs to support the cause of women, their issues, and their rights.

The NCW has achieved successful efforts in preventing a campaign for young female circumcision at a village in Southern Egypt. The council was against the legislations introduced by the religious extremism in parliament calling for the repeal of the law granting mothers' parental authority and custody of children and the divorce law (khula).

Recently, a popular conference entitled "Egyptian Women and the President—the Future of Women in Post Revolution Egypt" was organized with the purpose of making the voices of women heard and their hopes known, and confirming their position with regard to the new political trends. A clear message reflecting the expectations of Egyptian women from the next president was addressed, calling for the preservation of the leadership role of Al Azhar Al Sharif as a lighthouse representing the moderation of Islam. The Women of Egypt also asked for fair representation of women in the Founding Committee for Drafting the Constitution consisting of no less than one-third of its members. It demanded entrenchment of the rights of citizenship, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, maintaining the Supreme Constitutional Court, and the importance of stipulating in the constitution the principles of equality before the law in rights, freedoms and public duties, and equal opportunities among all citizens, women and men. Additionally, those convened called for taking all the measures necessary to ensure fair civic and political rights of women at all levels and providing a just opportunity for women's appointments in all decision-making positions, for example, vice-president or prime minister.

Participants indicated the importance of creating a legal observatory to monitor and examine the legislations submitted to the parliament, to determine its position vis-à-vis each legislation and to ensure their adherence to women's human rights standards, in accordance with the presidential decree establishing the National Council for Women.

These efforts require the commitment of all members of Egyptian society: governmental, non-governmental, civil society, educational, research and academic institutions, religious leaders, and above all, women themselves who must believe that they can bring about change. Sharing experiences with sisters in the Arab World and at the international level, and applying best practices and lessons learned from others' experiences, particularly those with similar conditions and cultures, will boost these efforts.

### **Women's Rights and Participation in Libya**

Although the situation of women varies across the region, threats to their human rights converge. In countries in transition, women are being excluded from political bodies. In Egypt, there were no women in two committees nominated to draft the new constitution. A new electoral law abolished measures guaranteeing women minimum representation in parliament and women gained only two percent of seats in the recent elections. In Libya and Tunisia, the electoral law adopted by both countries requires parties to alternate between male and female candidates, yet in Tunisia only three out of the 41 transitional cabinet posts went to women and two out of 22 in Libya. Also in Libya, five out of the 62 NTC members are women and out of the 28-member cabinet in the Transitional Government, only two positions went to women. In the case of Libya, all these positions were either self-appointed or appointed.

Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, where the regime change was somewhat peaceful, the struggle in Libya quickly evolved to be an armed revolution and needed international intervention through a mandate from the UN to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973. The armed resistance did not deter women from continuing the support for the revolution, so they changed their roles from protesting and chanting to be relief workers, doctors treating the injured, arms supplier, intelligence informants, and much more. With this kind of commitment from the Libyan women, one would expect to see significant participation and involvement in the new government. However, women are now confronting attempts to exclude them from public life, as well as acts of discrimination and violence, perpetrated with impunity by extremist groups.

The opportunities for the Libyan women are great compared to others in the region. There is a significant sense of a shared identity and pride among Libyan men and women and overall agreement on what is needed for the country to move ahead. Everyone is eyeing the election to be a first step to drafting a new constitution and establishing a new form of government where all stakeholders are participating in the rebuilding of the country. Looking back at the last year or so, one can definitely see progress made by citizens all over the country who organized themselves in a new phenomenon called “civil society” and succeeded several times in pressuring the NTC on a range of progressive issues.

Positive results from these actions proved essential to the importance and vitality of civic engagement, especially for women, with the upcoming elections scheduled to take place on July 7<sup>th</sup> in Libya as a primary example of such victory. When the NTC first issued the first draft of the election law, it proposed a majoritarian electoral system of 200 seats with only a ten percent women quota. Several women’s groups challenged the initial proposed quota considering it insufficient and introduced a proportional representation. That brazen challenge paid off when the Commission issued a revised draft proposing a parallel system in which 120 of the 200 seats would be filled in by individual candidates with the remaining 80 seats filled by proportional representation from party lists alternating male and female candidates. This amendment allowed more presentation of smaller political parties and civil groups and boosts women’s representation from ten to 20 percent.

Again, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, Libya lacked institutions and viable society. Nonetheless, for a country that had never had any parties or elections, there are 2,865,937<sup>11</sup> registered voters for the upcoming 200 seats National Constituent Assembly Elections with 1,294,357 women (about 45 percent). There are 2,639 individual candidates and 374 political parties. No number yet to determine how many women are running for Libya’s first national elections, but one certainty is that more women are running as individual candidates and part of political parties.

Despite all of these challenges, women in the Arab world are voicing their hopes for bigger roles in politics and society in general. With Libya as an example, one see that the Libyan people are religious in nature and outlook, and they will very likely support an Islamic state. However, the vast majority do not like and will not embrace radical Islam. They want a democracy based on Islamic law and Islamic tradition, but not in radical terms because people believe in the importance of Islamic jurisprudence and in the identity of a new Libya as an Islamic one based on respecting human rights in general. With this being said, one must take all necessary measures to continue demanding freedom, equality and justice for all.

### **III. POLITICAL ISLAM AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN THE REGION**

From the Arab revolutions, new religious parties emerged and old Islamist parties consolidated their power at the national-level. In the late 2011 parliamentary elections in Tunisia, a moderate Islamist party Ennahda won the majority of seats; in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party and several Salafist parties together accounted for two-thirds of the new Legislative Assembly and Freedom and Justice party

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<sup>11</sup> Note: All numbers included in this section are taken from the High National Election Commission website: [www.hnec.ly](http://www.hnec.ly).

member Mohammed Mursi declared victory in June 2012's presidential elections; and in Morocco, the Justice and Development Party's victory in 2011 elections led to the appointment of the country's first Islamist Prime Minister. The trend of political Islam is strong following the Arab uprisings, posing the question of what this means for women's rights post-Arab Spring.

### *History of Islamist Political Parties*

The region has a long history with religious political parties and religious influence in governmental matters and legislations. The post-revolution period is not the first time that the region has shown strong support for political Islam. Past examples in Algeria (1990), Egypt (2005), and the Palestinian Territories (2006) have demonstrated a similar surge in the power of Islamist parties. Following the Arab revolutions, however, the void in strong parties and candidates and the opportunity to resurrect suppressed religious parties, some of which were banned under previous regimes, has led to the recent wave of political Islam across the region.

In Tunisia, the majority party in parliament, Ennahda, was also repressed under the regime of former leader resident Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, whose regime tortured, imprisoned and exiled members of Ennahda during its reign, labeling the terrorists<sup>12</sup>. The environment in Tunis, despite a population that largely identifies itself as Muslim, has been much more secular over the years and laws regarding women have been among the most progressive in the region. The recent popularity of Ennahda is thought to be linked to past repression of Islamic sentiment. While members of the party have claimed they will respect secular traditions and will not reverse old laws or impose new ones threatening certain freedoms and liberties, including for women, there is palpable fear.

In Egypt, the power of the Muslim Brotherhood has grown stronger in the post-revolutionary period. The Muslim Brother, formerly known as the Society of Muslim Brothers, was founded in 1928, promoting, in its early days, the slogan "The Koran is our constitution" and "Islam is the solution"<sup>13</sup>. The Muslim Brotherhood reportedly had immense power under the monarchical system in Egypt and people believed it would restore a purer form of Islam back into society. A violent offshoot murdered the third president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, leading to the rise of his Vice-President, Hosni Mubarak, who repressed the Brotherhood under his rule—many say for the explicit reason of having an excuse for not lifting the state of emergency that is still ongoing in Egypt today. He continually pointed to Sadat's murder as proof of the Brotherhood's penchant for volatility and violence. In the 1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood repositioned itself, trying to distance itself from its violent legacy and demonstrate its role in organizing the community, and in 2005, they won about 20 percent of the seats in parliament<sup>14</sup>. Most of the candidates ran as independents, in line with the Muslim Brotherhood's pledge not to field candidates. In 2011, they emerged from the revolutions, throwing their support toward the people,

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.perspectivist.com/business/decoding-tunisia%E2%80%99s-elections>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/what-is-the-muslim-brotherhood>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cfr.org/egypt/muslim-brotherhood-egypts-parliamentary-elections/p9319>

however, they were far from prominent on the front lines, where youth and emerging parties showed strength, and it is unclear how closely they will promote the values of the revolution.

The trend toward political conservatism can be seen from country to country as nations move from revolution to new governments. Morocco's Islamist Party of Justice and Development took 27 percent of seats in the November 2011 parliamentary elections. The Justice and Development Party is also linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, and began as an offshoot of the group<sup>15</sup>.

### *What the Islamic Trend means for Women*

In Tunisia, although Ennahda scored much better than the other parties in the elections, their 1,500,000 votes represent only one-third of the votes cast and one-fifth of the population entitled to vote. Nevertheless, Ennahda's majority is quite strong. However, there remains the serious question whether this majority is representing the nation. Sit-ins, meetings and continuous protests are more than a sign indicating that this changing society is not thrilled about this majority. The way the Constituent Assembly worked and its implications on the opinion reveal both this majority's fragility and the mistrust against it. The mistrust shown towards Ennahda for their greed for power and their desire to take over governmental institutions and concentrate all power in their hands is growing day by day.

Since the National Constituent Assembly of Tunisia began discussing the constitution in February 2012, the role of religion in the state—specifically, whether to make reference to Sharia in the constitution—was poised to be the most divisive political issue. But now that the assembly's leading party, Ennahda, has opposed any reference to Sharia, the way is clear for the discussion in the assembly to turn more technical. It has been decided that the only reference to Islam will appear in the form of Article 1 of Tunisia's 1957 constitution, which states: "Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and its type of government is the Republic."

Ennahda's decision came after weeks of public protests on both sides of the issue and confusion over where the party stood. The party's official platform before the election, as announced by Rached Ghannouchi, its founder and president, was that Ennahda would not seek Sharia. Ghannouchi said that the party would be satisfied with maintaining Article 1 of the 1957 constitution.

According to an Ennahda parliamentarian, the political council made the decision for a number of reasons. One is that the meaning of Sharia is varied and the council did not want to leave a vague reference in the preamble up to judicial or public (mis)interpretation. The question of Sharia is also not that important to the party when compared with other problems facing the country, such as creating a stable and well-balanced government. Ennahda wanted to avoid contradicting its pre-election platform as well as to signal its determination to adopt the constitution by consensus—and the Sharia issue had emerged as a red line for the secular parties. And it wanted to demonstrate to the world that including a reference to Sharia is not necessary for establishing a democracy that is compatible with Islam.

In this vein, leading Ennahda members continue to reassure women they will impose a moderate interpretation of Islam and preserve laws won to date, however, other members

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<sup>15</sup> [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/12/05/moroccos\\_islamist\\_prime\\_minister](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/12/05/moroccos_islamist_prime_minister)

have contradicted such a commitment, demonstrating more conservative viewpoints lurking within the party. A female MP, Souad Abdul Rahim, made controversial remarks regarding a law protecting single mothers who had children outside of marriage and giving these children the same rights as those born to married couples. "Women are to be given freedom within limits and without violating divine rules," she said, also adding, "Such a law gives those women a legitimacy that encourages other women to do the same thing. We should work on reforming them instead."<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, a member of the executive office Ali al-Areed reassured Tunisians that Ennahda has no plans to change the personal status law in Tunisia and will not reform laws related to inheritance or polygamy, which are reflective of Tunisian society and in line with Islam<sup>17</sup>.

Many analysts argue that Tunisia's secular traditions, educated middle class, and history of promoting women's socioeconomic equality are bulwarks against extremism. Still, radical Islamist groups, although marginal, have become more visible in the post-Ben Ali era, as previous state restrictions have been rolled back. From their part, Tunisian women ask for guaranteeing their assets in the new constitution. Many activists in civil society are mobilizing women to not retreat from their rights, which are today menaced by conservative people who want to amend the Code of Personal Status in order to go in line with Sharia.

For groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic law remains at the heart of its mission and can be counted on to be a central part of its legislation. The Muslim Brotherhood has made vague statements in the past and again recently, in a press conference held by recently elected President Mohammed Mursi reassuring citizens that it will remain in line with what Egyptians want. He assured women that women's rights are guaranteed under the law and agreed women provide a key contribution to Egyptian society<sup>18</sup>. The Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party's written program promises to "enable women to attain all their rights in *so much as they do not contradict the basic values of society, and achieve a balance between their duties and rights*"<sup>19</sup>. The statement suggests a conditional freedom, but it is too early to predict how this will be interpreted.

While Mursi asserts women and gender equality will be supported, the new parliamentary assembly in Egypt, of which the Muslim Brotherhood makes up the majority, pushed for shocking reforms in its first few months in power. Laws that were won under the Mubarak regime and deemed in compliance with Sharia were challenged. Islamist MPs have proposed repealing laws such as 'khula,' which allows a woman to divorce her husband if she returns money and belongings she received from him, and revising a custody law that allows women custody of their offspring until the children reach age fifteen<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood has dismissed the National Council of Women in Egypt, appointed during Mubarak's era and serving as a monitor and lobby to ensure women's rights and representations in legislation and decision-making, as a weapon of the former regime to break up and destroy families" in a statement on its website<sup>21</sup>.

That political Islam won the Parliamentary elections in 2011/2012 is not surprising<sup>22</sup>. Mubarak has continued with Sadat's approach to modernization and religion. The market

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/13/176916.html>

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-06-05/brotherhood-s-mursi-lauds-women-ahead-of-egypt-runoff-vote>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-egypt-womenbre85612x-20120607,0,5088723.story>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> New York Times 2012-01-15

orientation entailed a decline in state protection of the poor. The state's inability to manage social and economic problems and to satisfy the populations' needs affected people's life situations in a number of ways. The former Egyptian political system was synonymous with humiliation and impoverishment<sup>23</sup>. This process has created a space for political Islamists who have gained ground during the regime of Mubarak. The Islamists have for a very long time taken care of the people in the poor areas. They stand for morality and self-esteem as well as for the forging of an Arabic identity in contrast to the Mubarak state-promoted 'secular' Islam. The only alternative left for the majority of Egypt's population has been the low-cost health facilities, low-standard public schools and the Islamic charity organizations. The organizations have offered free and inexpensive health services and interest-free loans based on religious education and guidance from Orthodox Islam<sup>24</sup>.

In Cairo in 2011, there was a mixed level of support. Some youths shared they still believe in the Muslim Brotherhood and in the Salafists. They are seen as credible political actors. Some youths, who saw God in Medan Tahir (Liberation square) expressed: "We the Muslim youths can change this world." Others do not trust political Islam anymore: "they show their real ugly face now." Several elite youths complain over the success of political Islam parties in the election, and many activists recently boycotted the parliamentary election: "before any political process can begin in Egypt, the military rule must be completely overthrown." In their view, all the institutions must first be brought under the power of the people and not under the military. The majority does not see any problem with Islamists, who use religion to convince people of their principles rather their problem is with the State, which is still controlled by the army<sup>25</sup>.

Moroccan Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkiran has taken a more conservative stance in pushing Islamic values. His government issued guidelines to eliminate lottery commercials and require state-run broadcast channels to broadcast a Muslim call to prayer, which station representatives argued violated their right to independence from the government<sup>26</sup>. Representatives of the party, however, asserted that rumors they will force women to wear veils or that their rise to power signals a return to a "religious state" are false<sup>27</sup>. Meanwhile, in Libya, it remains to be seen who will rise to power in the July 7th elections. As mentioned above, Libyans would be receptive to Sharia law and Islamist leadership, however, it is safe to say that, across the board, radical Islam would not likely be favored or embraced.

### *Conservative Influence across the Globe*

In many ways, religion and particularly Islam has always been a vital aspect of society and government. Secular structures have historically been influenced by religious leaders and showed deference to religious books and scholars to determine legislation in areas regarding marriage, polygamy and divorce. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, there is apparent tolerance toward other sects and schools of thought, but in practice, Saudi Arabia follows a very strict version of Islam. This tradition goes back years, and has been embedded not only in Saudi power structures but also in social and educational infrastructures. Recent regimes efforts to push out or ban religious parties (e.g. Ennahda in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) did not change the social environment, where religion and

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<sup>23</sup> El-Kholy 2002

<sup>24</sup> Malmström 2009

<sup>25</sup> Malmström 2012

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/24/210033.html>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/27/179463.html>

religious leaders were still favored in discussion on social affairs and in legislation related to these areas, and in some ways, the fact that the authoritarian regimes imposed bans or marginalized Islamist parties made them symbols of the anti-regime movement. Moreover, religion goes beyond politics in the region. It is a central part of social values and norms, and a controversial aspect of debate, particularly with regard to women's rights and discriminatory laws.

There is much trepidation as this trend continues to sweep the region. Women's rights, in particular, tend to come under fire in conservative diatribes and debates. The evidence is seen not only in the region, but across the globe. For instance, right-wing parties in the United States have waged war this year on women's reproductive rights, labeling women who used birth control as morally loose. More recently, in early June, Republicans defeated a bill that would have made it easier for women to litigate to promote pay equality between them and their male counterparts by barring companies from retaliating against workers who inquire about pay disparities. This is the second time such a bill was defeated in two years, and the first time, not a single Republican Senator supported it<sup>28</sup>.

Similarly, religious authorities continue to promote anti-women policies across the globe. The Vatican in 2010 declared that ordaining females into the all-male Catholic priesthood would be a "grave sin" on par with even pedophilia<sup>29</sup>. Meanwhile, a recent case in New York discussed segregation of Jewish men and women in orthodox communities to the extent that woman who sat at the front of a bus, where men implicitly sit, was told to move to the back<sup>30</sup>. Women continue to be scapegoated as part of a conservative platform feeding misogynistic and patriarchal perspectives and justifying behavior on the basis of extremely conservative interpretations of religious doctrine.

Strategies and approaches to address this conservatism in the Arab region now depend on finding common ground and promoting modern, liberal interpretations of the Koran in order to demonstrate that women's rights and religious devoutness are not mutually exclusive. It also requires efforts to ensure to explore relevance and synergy between democracy and Islam as well as building on the already existing literature on human rights and Islam, all of which could contribute to the growing debates and discourses on gender equality and religions.

#### **IV. SPIRIT OF REVOLUTION IN THE REGION**

The revolutions in the region impacted not only the revolting nations, but also the overall regional landscape. Solidarity between people and shared fear among state leaders of challenges to long-standing dictatorships created unique parallels. Men and women across all backgrounds and walks of life felt empowered more than ever before to participate in protests and debate, and voice their opinion in solidarity with others hoping for change, and freedom and dignity above all.

##### ***Saudi Arabia and the Absence of Fear***

Saudi Arabia did not have a revolution, however, the State followed the Arab revolutions cautiously, and even provided controversial support, for instance, to Ben Ali, during the

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/us/politics/senate-republicans-block-pay-equity-bill.html>

<sup>29</sup> [http://ideas.time.com/2012/06/08/the-catholic-contraction/?xid=rss-topstories&utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed:+time/topstories+%28TIME:+Top+Stories%29#ixzz1xCfNmIk8](http://ideas.time.com/2012/06/08/the-catholic-contraction/?xid=rss-topstories&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+time/topstories+%28TIME:+Top+Stories%29#ixzz1xCfNmIk8)

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/nyregion/bus-segregation-of-jewish-women-prompts-review.html>



Tunisian Revolution, by offering him asylum in Jeddah. Many reports following the Egypt uprisings suggested that Saudi Arabia was offering billions to Mubarak's regime and helping them to avoid trial, however the State ultimately yielded to popular pressure and announced that it would not interfere with the Egyptian people's decision.

However, this decision did not hold up for other national revolutions in the region. The Yemeni uprisings were swiftly addressed by Saudi Arabia, which intervened through the Gulf Cooperation Council and engaged the GCC initiative to broker Saleh's resignation in return for immunity for himself, his family, and a long list of supporters. When protests began in Bahrain, Saudis entered the nation as part of the GCC Peninsula Shield in March 2011. At the same time, demonstrations started to take shape in Saudi Arabia as the nearby states heated the wind around the eastern coast and the Shiia of Qateef expressed their support and solidarity to their Bahraini neighbors. The first call for a demonstration was for the 3<sup>rd</sup> March. A post on Facebook called on Saudis to demonstrate after Friday prayer in Riyadh, Qatif and al Ahsaa. The State did not allow for free demonstrations and participants were surrounded and suppressed. This was followed by a larger call for March 11th called the Friday of Anger. The Free Youth Coalition called for this in conjunction with the Facebook account 'Anger Day in Saudi Arabia.' Other groups such as the Ummah party also participated.

Dealing with the protests at home was very disturbing for the Saudis; immediately there was a security alert across the country and a fatwa was issued to prohibit demonstrations, labeling the act "un-Islamic." The media also began criticizing the Arab revolutions and the resulting deviation from peace. The Saudi King appeared on a Friday, one week after the suppression of the March 11th demonstration. He spoke to the people on March 14, 2011, thanking the security forces and religious staff, and afterward announcing there are some changes he wished to make.

### *Saudi Arabia and Sharia Law*

The religious response to the Arab Spring was in issuing a fatwa to prohibit demonstrations and denounce those who called for them for breaking with the *waliy al amr*, the ruler whose oath of allegiance forbids a breach for life unless the ruler is calling for an anti-Islamic quest. This is a fundamental Hanbali dogma, which allows for dictatorships to remain in power.

What is interesting is what followed. In compensation to the loyal position of the religious establishment, one week later the King addressed the people, where he praised the loyalty of the Saudi people who stood by his side against 'disunity' and *fitna*, but above all, acknowledging the Ulama and the security forces of the Ministry of Interior who ensured the protection and safety of Saudi Arabia. The speech was followed by a list of 19 royal decrees worth billions. Out of these, seven decrees were dedicated to reward the religious establishment with all its branches and aspects starting with legislation directed to all media to prohibit any defaming or criticism of the Grand Mufti or the Senior Ulama commission's members. The King also awarded SR 500 million (\$133.32 million) for renovating mosques in the Kingdom and SR 200 million to the expansion of the branches of the "Religious Police." These rewards affirmed the cemented relationship between the State and the Religious establishment in the Saudi state as a continuation of their earlier alliance of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### Saudi Women and their Rights Post-Revolution

During the Arab Spring, stories on the municipal elections, the campaign of driving, and the Royal Decree of 25<sup>th</sup> September 2011 that granted Saudi women the political rights in Shura and Municipal councils dominated the international media headlines. The revolution's most noticeable impact is the spirit of freedom it has transferred upon men and women in the streets. The public, especially the youth used slogans and idioms of the Arab Spring to express urgent needs. Women became more daring to come out in the open and voice their opinions without hesitation.

This spirit is exemplified in the creation of a Facebook page that is called 'Saudi Women Revolution'. Revolution was one of the taboo terms that could rarely be said publically without people feeling uncomfortable. The word became one of the Arab Spring major terms and before long, it became acceptable as long as it was used to describe an outside event. But to have a group of young Saudi women calling themselves or their page a revolution was unheard of.

Beyond this, the campaign *baladi*, which was formed in 2010 to call for women's participation in the Municipal Elections the second term, found itself during the Arab Spring becoming more daring even to go out and enforce itself on the electoral registration centers asking for their right to join. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2011 the first day of the registration, *baladi* members in Jeddah, Makkah, Khobar, Hasa, Qateef, and later Riyadh by Saudi Women Revolution group, went in groups accompanied with the media to register for the list of electoral voters. Women on that day broke the barrier of fear. When this didn't work, the *baladi* campaign took the Ministry to court. The culmination of that mobilization was observed and celebrated in the press. It resulted in the surprising Royal decree of 25 Sept to grant women the right to participate in both, Majlis al Shura and Municipal councils, specifying and spelling the rights of 'voting' and 'running'.

During the Arab Spring, Saudi women also addressed more directly the ban on driving. This was a long-standing issue for Saudi women and represented more than just taking the wheel, but breaking the enforcement of dependency. In November 1990, a group of 47 women went in a demonstration of driving 15 cars in Riyadh for half an hour before they were arrested by the police and shortly, expelled from their jobs and defamed in mosques. Finally a fatwa by the late Grand Mufti, late Sh. Abdelaziz Bin Baz, was issued to prohibit women from driving as it leads to mixing, a forbidden form of gender relation according to the Hanbali/Saudi version of religious interpretation of Sharia.

During the Arab Spring, the driving campaign was reignited by a new generation of women. The Women2Drive campaign was led by Manal al-Shareef, a 32-year-old divorcee and single mother who decided that she could no longer accept or tolerate being harassed by her driver or continue being dependent upon him. With a group of friends, she established a Facebook page and posted a video calling for women to take their rights into their own hands and go and drive. She chose June 17<sup>th</sup> (2011) as a date for women to mobilize together. This was influenced and inspired by Asmaa Mahfouz' video of calling for gathering at Tahrir Square in 25<sup>th</sup> January in Egypt.

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, one woman after the other went driving and filmed herself, later posting it on Youtube. Throughout that day across the country, women were driving and uploading videos, either with their full name or alias listed, opening her face or keeping it veiled. Although the number of women driving did not surpass 70, it was an unprecedented step for women to be that daring and drive publically, demonstrating their own revolution in parallel and solidarity with those sweeping the region.

It is very clear that Saudi Arabia is heading towards some change, but no one has a final solution as to how it will arrive. While there is increased activism, it is still limited. The country has long suppressed political training or civil activism and disallowed formation of independent voluntary organizations, however it is clear that both men and women have grown restless and the spirit spread by the Arab revolutions reinforcing the people's power has pushed them to take more chances and stand up despite the fear of the consequences. The State is clearly trying to polish itself and try to win some popularity, even if through calculated and disingenuous gestures. The question of who will rule Saudi Arabia's future and what it means for women is still largely unanswered, however with the religious influences continuing to grow in power, it will still be a challenging road to come.

## **V. CONFLICT AND WOMEN'S ROLE IN PEACEMAKING**

It has been twelve years since the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. In the region, not only do women remain underrepresented in public office, at the negotiating table and in peacekeeping missions, but they face the brunt of the negative impacts of war and conflict. During the Arab revolutions, women experienced violence in new contexts, from virginity testing in Egypt to campaigns of rape by Qaddafi's soldiers in Libya, however remained largely left out of transitional councils and governments.

This exclusion is a global phenomena for post-war environments; in recent peace negotiations, for which such information is available, women have represented fewer than eight percent of participants and fewer than three percent of signatories. No woman has ever been appointed chief or lead mediator in UN-sponsored peace talks<sup>31</sup>. Such exclusion invariably leads to a failure to adequately address women's concerns, such as sexual and gender-based violence, women's rights and post-conflict accountability. Sexual violence exacerbates conflict and perpetuates insecurity following situations of unrest, exaggerating social, economic, education and health issues for women and their families, including lack of access to food or water supply; lack of safety in traveling to school; and ostracism from families or communities due to sexual violence.

The constitutions in the Arab region lack explicit provisions to gender-based discrimination, leading to institutionalize gender discrimination and reinforcement of the stereotypical image within which women have long been framed. Moreover, family laws or personal status laws are governed by religious authorities, adding to the complexity of the situation regarding custody and movement, among other issues, and leading to frame women's duties in terms of their domestic role to maintain cultural authenticity and religious identity through encouraging them to take care of the private sphere, thus emphasizing their productive and caring roles, which was ultimately reflected in early marriage, and the percentage of women's participation in labor force (not more than 30 percent for the Arab region). This was also reflected in their representation both at the local and parliamentary level (0-30 percent), despite that fact that percentage of enrollment of females in the Arab region at schools (99 percent in some Arab countries) and universities, sometimes exceeds that of males.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.womenwarpeace.org/> UNIFEM's research on women's participation in peace processes (forthcoming, 2010).

One can notice that discrimination practiced against women was a result of dual systems—state and community—that interchangeably positioned women as inferior subordinates trapped and unprotected in their cocoon, perceiving violence practiced upon them, from female genital circumcision, to early marriage and battering as norms. However, the public discourse about women's roles was subject to many socio-economic and political variables, including: economic decline, the influence and power of Islamic parties, and the quest to improve national images (since progress of women is perceived internationally as progress of the nation) and fulfill commitments enshrined in international conventions.

### *The History of Conflict in the Arab Region*

The Arab region has experienced different types of conflicts over the years: the Arab-Israeli conflict, situations in Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan, and most recently, the Arab revolutions. The Arab region is witnessing a time of transformative change. Following the Tunisian Revolution, which saw the defeat of the Tunisian president, the Egyptian revolution began and put an end to the regime of President Mubarak in February 2011. Together, these events galvanized additional situations of conflict between the public and the prevailing regime in other Arab countries, including Yemen, which finally led to the end of the regime of Ali Abdallah Saleh, and Libya, which culminated in the death of Colonel Mouammar Qaddafi. Uprisings are still ongoing in Bahrain, Jordan and Syria, not to mention the unstable, provocative situation in Lebanon.

These conflicts and transformative changes had a negative cast on women in the Arab region; they reinforced patriarchal subjugation, thus rendering women to be more economically, socially and politically excluded. On the other hand, in some cases, women were provided more opportunities to participate in public practice, for example to join or get involved in resistance movements or advocacy to free prisoners. It is worth mentioning that the importance of women's participation during those conflicts or popular movements was soon forgotten or ignored in the aftermath of conflicts, despite the fact that more burden is placed on women as a consequence of conflicts.

### *Case of Lebanon*

Lebanon is considered more liberal than its Arab neighbors, and has been deeply influenced by Western culture, with a complex religious and ethnic make-up. This diversity led to ideological and political views becoming polarized and fragmented between alliances amongst the eighteen recognized sects, which escalated into a fifteen year-long civil war. The most recent incident in this conflict was Israel's attack in July 2006, which displaced 900,000 Lebanese and resulted in the deaths of around 1,200 people<sup>32</sup>.

One result of Lebanon's civil war was an undermining of sectarian diversity among the country. Violence forced people to be confined to their villages, with few opportunities for interaction with other communities of varying religious sects. As a result, generations have grown up self-identifying solely with their town, village or tribe, and countless young have never set foot among Lebanese communities with different backgrounds from their own. According to National Human Development Report 2009, sects in Lebanon are considered moral or incorporeal subjects that enjoy total independence in running their own interests and religious affairs, and the head of each sect (male) is tasked to represents his community toward the state and other religious communities, thus leading to

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<sup>32</sup> [www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int)

reproduction of not only sectarian identity, but also a stereotypical image with women in the shadow, despite the fact that women have shared the same hardships during time of conflict between different sectarian groups during the civil war, or aftermath conflicts.

Lebanon seemed to be a commendable model for improving women's status in the region, as there is a widespread perception that women in Lebanon are liberal and have attained full and equal rights to their male counterparts. Unfortunately, the real situation is completely different; Lebanon, has a unique case in having eighteen personal status laws, thus rendering implementation of CEDAW a dilemma. As a result, women endure different forms of injustice, when it comes to divorce, child custody, inheritance and other matters. Moreover, when it comes to domestic violence, the penal code is characterized by its laxness towards misdemeanors committed within realm of the family<sup>33</sup>. Still there is no law to criminalize domestic violence.

Despite the fact that women have achieved high enrollment percentages in schools and universities, this was not reflected (as in most Arab countries) in economic and political participation, where percentages of women in the labor force is around 25 percent<sup>34</sup>, and about three percent political representation in the parliament<sup>35</sup>.

### *UNSCR 1325 and Implementation in the Region*

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted a historical resolution, UNSCR 1325, and for the first time, the issue of women peace and security and the fact that women and children are most affected by conflicts were enshrined in Security Council resolutions. Four pillars are embedded in the resolution, stipulating the importance of participation of women in decision-making and emphasizing the importance of protecting women and children from violence and abuse. In addition the necessity of adopting measures to prevent violence and violation of human rights for women is stressed. The resolution, stipulates that implementing UNSCR 1325 is a joint responsibility of the UN, governments, and civil society organizations. Unfortunately, until now only 35 countries have developed national action plans (NAPs) for its implementation. Most of them are donor countries, and none is an Arab nation.

An analysis to already developed NAPs revealed the fact that NAPs have different structures, and goals are determined by the following: the role of each specific country during conflicts; the recipient of migrants and refugees; and participation in peace missions or as a mediator country. On another note, most NAPs, lack a timeframe for implementation and have no budget allocated, which might be an indication about the level of seriousness for implementation on the ground.

Developing National Action Plans to implement UNSCR 1325 could be one step forward towards increasing women's participation in the public sphere and towards enactment of laws to criminalize violence against women, which is still perceived even among women themselves as private family matter or even worse, a necessary disciplinary measure. This puts more pressure on women's movements in the Arab region that are working to educate women themselves from one side and advocating for their rights on the other side. In between, these movements are charged with resisting opponent cultural beliefs and traditions, which are visible at the political and decision-making level.

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<sup>33</sup> *Steps Towards Empowerment: A legal Report, Hariri Foundation, Council for Development & Reconstruction, World Bank, 2009*

<sup>34</sup> UNSTAT

<sup>35</sup> IPU

## V. CONCLUSION

In the Arab region, the situation remains complex and contexts vary incredibly between countries. However, the priorities and will of the people are largely the same. In Egypt, where the recent presidential election created a certain lack of clarity, men and women continued to go to Tahrir Square in order to demand fair elections and reject ties to the old regime. In Syria, revolutionaries continue to fight for their freedom, despite the campaign of destruction and death being waged upon them. The values of the revolution demand fairness and freedom. These are the values that brought men, women and youth together, and it is what can reinforce their ties in the right context.

The question today is not whether those Arab women, who stood shoulder-to-shoulder in teargas-filled squares beside their male counterparts this year, changed the course of the Arab Spring; that much is already clear. The question now is whether those same women will be able to sustain their leadership roles as their nations transition into the messy process of forming electoral democracies.

So far, human rights activists say the prospects are looking rather grim, and the consequences could be doubly painful. If women continue to be excluded from transitional councils, elections and constitutional committees, so too will they be left out of the new post-revolutionary societies built in the coming months and years. New constitutions will come from the assemblies constructed in these elections, and it is vital that gender equality be enshrined in the constitutions from the beginning.

Women did not expect such backlash, but they are actively working together, building coalitions, strengthening existing ties, engaging with new constituencies such as youth, and fostering dialogue, discussion and training to address the emerging priorities post-revolution. Only time will tell how the revolutions have ultimately impacted those who incited them, and the women who fought with their blood and sweat on the front lines for freedom, dignity and a better future. However, what is clear is that the revolutions have shifted the spirit of hope in the people, who now believe that they have the collective power to inspire, demand and implement change, and with the right tools, could very well transform the region for a better future.