

# Women and the Arab Spring: A Window of Opportunity or More of the Same?

Written by Fatma Osman Ibnouf

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FATMA OSMAN IBNOUF, MAY 21 2013

The Arab Spring Revolutions showed the importance of a more inclusive approach to transitional processes. The Arab uprisings enhanced the ability of women to involve themselves and to make better use of their capacity and their full potential to contribute to change. For example, the success of the Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya during 2011 could not have been possible if not for the women (Von Rohr 2011).

Women activists of the Arab Spring have come from all social classes. From my experience, they were well-organized and actively participated in Arab uprisings – some came to protest with their children – to demand change. Thousands of men joined the demonstration out of solidarity with the women. During the revolutions, women's participation side-by-side with their fellow male protestors helped in creating a sense of equality and lessened gender differences. Women have made their voice heard in the Arab spring revolutions at many levels; however, the 'gains' for women in terms of gender roles can be lost in the post-revolutions period, when 'going back to normal' is the priority.

Women need to explore the political, strategic and analytical dimensions of the uprisings if they want to ensure that when democracy works, it works to the present and future benefit of all women and men. It isn't a question of women 'winning' over men but being given equal footing with men. In the wake of the Arab Spring, there is an emergence of new opportunities for the mobilization of women. Women's involvement in transitional processes will contribute to the advancement of women's rights, to giving a voice to voiceless women, to initiating legislation that concerns their gender, as well as to pushing for law reforms and justice in the society. For this to be sustainable, the changes should develop alongside practical strategies to empower women and build their leadership capacity.

### Women in Transitional Processes

Democratic systems can be stable and legitimate only if all the segments of a society are represented with a commitment to gender balance. In the wake of the Arab Spring, a number of Arab countries are now experiencing political transitions from revolution to democracy. However, the Arab Spring countries are not all at same stage of transitional processes; they take on different forms in each country. Generally, emergency laws are lifted, constitutions are drafted, elections are held, and interim governments are formed. The transitional process does not need to be a competition for power but can rather be a partnership between men and women. In such a process women need to keep working on many fronts. To ensure that women's diverse needs and interests are taken into account, they should be part of the policy and lawmaking, implementing, monitoring and evaluating.

The participation of women in the transitional processes means more progress in laws that affect gender equality and policies that address key women's human rights concerns. Women's involvement in transitional processes is a window of opportunity for women to challenge the policies and laws that violate their human rights. It also offers the possibility of challenging gender discrimination and gender stereotyping which oppress women and continue to reinforce their subordinate position. Further, there is the potential to challenge entrenched gendered practices, those deep-rooted structures that are not easily changed. Despite real and significant needs, the realization of women's

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human rights has not been made a benchmark of success in transition phase, which tend to have poor female representation. Attainment of the basic rights of women politically, socially and economically is of paramount importance to the future security and development of the Arab world. Thus, women at all levels must collaborate and organize joint actions because this will secure more support from the community; it is the best way to secure the critical mass capable of influencing the decision-making processes of leaders and officials.

Currently women make up nearly half of the population in Arab Spring countries but very limited numbers are in positions of power where they can make or influence change. However, already women's access to some key positions has proven to contribute to women's empowerment and advancement with positive, but limited, results. Some of their achievements include the increased awareness of the importance of gender equality and an increase in girls' enrolment in primary and secondary education to some extent.

## **Making the Most of the Climate of Change**

Women's involvement does make a difference and at least increases the chance that women's issues will be on the agenda. Women need to preserve the gains they made and they should work hard for equal rights and refuse to be sidelined and marginalized in aftermath of the Arab Spring.

I believe that another Arab Spring revolution is not likely to happen again in the foreseeable future. Change does not happen overnight, but is a process that takes place gradually over time. In the transitional processes women need to be better included not only in politics, but in education, economy, social and all levels of public life. At present gender is a dimension that is routinely added on as a component to most programs, partly because international agencies have come to insist on its inclusion. The first action priority is promoting women's human rights and mainstream gender equality at various levels. Women's involvement in these processes is essential for lobbying to establish institutions, such as women's affairs ministries, to address women's direct concerns.

Changes need to be made: laws addressing violence against women need to be enacted, many family laws need to be modified, gender equality needs to be mainstreamed in policies and legislations at all levels, gender-responsive budgeting needs to be adopted and the number of women in elected bodies need to be increased. There is an urgent need to adopt laws prohibiting marriage before the age of majority and laws to criminalize female genital mutilation (FGM). Lobbying for the reform of legal and social rights and policy and promoting gender equality can challenge patriarchal practices of societies and states. All these can best be sorted by women; therefore women's involvement in transitional processes would make a difference for the better.

## **The Transition Phase: A Unique Opportunity to Introduce Gender Mainstreaming**

Moreover, transition phases offer a unique opportunity for transforming institutions, structures and relationships that hinder gender equality and justice. Women's involvement in the transitional process is essential to dealing with issues of women's oppression and exploitation in a number of ways. There are real opportunities for women to demand change in their respective countries so as to take their rightful place alongside men in all tiers of democracy.

During the past decade, women's and human rights 'language' has moved from the margins to the 'mainstream' of international law and politics. For example, the fifth UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar recognized that: "Where women's views and experiences are absent, the political process remains incomplete" (see Ibnouf 2012). Gender perspective is therefore a vital element for the success of any strategy designed to promote social justice, and gender mainstreaming can have a significance influence on the future of women's status in and contribution to societies.

## **Successes and Failures During the Transition phase**

First, there should be room for accepting and learning from failures. Every action, no matter how small, can inspire others and move others to act.

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Some progress has already been achieved. For example, women in Egypt have begun to push for an equal rights amendment to the constitution, but there is still more work to be done before there will be equality for all citizens in the constitution, regardless of gender, race, or religion. Similarly in Tunisia, the draft constitution guarantees non-discrimination on any grounds, including gender (Munn and Cleminshaw 2013). Protests continue over the implementation of Tunisia's Article 28 which describes women's roles in the family as "complementary" to those of men's (Munn and Cleminshaw 2013).

Another change that I have perceived in the wake of the Arab Spring is that the image of the Arab woman appears to be undergoing a remarkable transformation. Ordinary women protestors challenged their traditional gender roles on the front lines of the revolutions. These images challenge old images of Arab women and some misperceptions the world might have about women in the Arab region. Women have therefore started to break some of the traditional barriers that exist in the tradition structures of most Arab Spring societies.

## **Women and Political Representation**

More than 50 years have passed since Egyptian women won the right to vote (in 1956 – third in the region after Lebanon and Syria in 1952), and the first Arab woman elected to parliament was in Egypt in 1956 (Soufi, 2009, p. 256). However, so far, the current transition has not been inclusive of women as is evidenced by the recent Arab Spring.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in 2012 Arab States still had the lowest representation of women in Parliament, with women holding only 13.2% of parliamentary seats throughout the Arab region. In the Sultanates of Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, there was no female representation due to the absence of elected parliaments in these countries (Soufi 2009, p. 258).

The Inter-Parliamentary Union also found that the January 2012 parliamentary results in Egypt saw a dramatic drop of 10 percentage points from the 2010 results, with only 10 women out of 508 members (2%) gaining seats. Libyan women were largely excluded from politics during the previous regime; at present, in Libya in the National General Congress elections, women won 33 seats out of 200. There are currently 59 women in the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly out of the 217 members. Women have only three out of 72 seats in the new Syrian Opposition Coalition. That means the number of women in national parliaments and cabinets in the transitional governments is significantly smaller than that in the pre-revolution governments. Nonetheless, I am of the opinion that women still have a fighting chance for achieving both better positions and justice.

## **The Major Challenges**

Women in the Arab spring countries face many challenges. This situation of gender injustice and inequality has been perpetuated so far because of the current laws, the patriarchal nature of the Arab society, and the continuous violation of women's rights.

The conventional approach of treating people as individuals with equal rights under the law does not suffice when women still face violations of their rights socially, politically, and economically. The first Arab Human Development Report in 2002 indicated that the lack of women's rights, lack of political freedoms and poor education are the main factors that hindered progress in the Arab region.

The gender inequality of access to education has led to the widening of all existing forms of socio-economic inequalities between men and women. Studies have also shown that women's lack of access to education and health services hinders attempts to alleviate poverty (See, for e.g., Bentley 2004). The World Health Organization published a foundational module on poverty and gender, in which it was noted that the current understanding of poverty indicators includes multidimensional aspects such as education, health, and political participation (WHO, 2007, p. viii). However, the rights to education and health, which are fundamental human rights, are frequently denied to females due to social policies and the prevalence of gender-biased traditions in societies.

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According to a World Bank report in 2013, women in the Arab world have the lowest rates of employment of any region. Female illiteracy rates are high in the Arab world; in 2006, UNESCO found that, women accounted for two thirds of the region's illiterate population. It was estimated that gender parity in education in the Arab world stood at 0.69 in 2004, one of the lowest rates in the world (UNESCO 2006).

According a report published by UNWomen in 2011, there is no legislation in place that prevents violence against women (VAW) in Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen; the only exception is Egypt. This is notwithstanding that all these countries have ratified the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Weiss 2003, p. 597). The challenge is therefore not to make new commitments but to distil a more consistent framework from what already exists and to encourage action accordingly.

## **Women and the Law**

Legal provisions relating to the family in most Arab countries regulate marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, custody and citizenship rights. Many provisions are detrimental to the interests of women. For instance, in some Arab countries such as Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, and Lebanon, men and women who are married to non-nationals are treated differently (Tabet, 2005, see also the Equality Now Report 2011). Men married to non-national women enjoy the full protection of the law and their children are granted citizenship rights whereas children of women married to foreign nationals are not citizens and are accordingly not entitled to socio-economic or political rights and privileges (Equality Now).

A woman is legally obliged to seek approval from her closest male relative – be a father or husband – for some decisions concerning her life, which is contradictory to international human rights standards. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the law prevents gender equality by restricting women's freedom to travel, to education, and to work by requiring the agreement of a male relative (Vidyasagar and Rea 2004, p. 262). These practices are widely-known as 'male guardianship rules'. On the basis of family law, in most Arab countries the age of marriage is ranged between 13 to 15 years for girls and as young as 10 years in Sudan (Sudanese Personal Status Law of 1991, Article 40-2). According to the Gender Development Research and Studies Centre in Sana'a, in Yemen girls may be married as early as 12 or 13 and sometimes as young as eight years old. In 1999 the government of Yemen made the situation worse by removing the legal minimum age for marriage – which had previously been 15 years old.

In Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen women are victims of cultural and deeply rooted social practices that are regarded by many as legitimate practices, such as domestic violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), honor killing and child marriage (see for example Douki et al. 2003; Faqir 2001; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999). Studies indicate the prevalence of FGM in Upper Egypt is among the highest worldwide and the law has not succeeded in adequately decreasing, let alone eradicating, its prevalence despite the fact that FGM was made illegal in Egypt in 1997 (Hassanin and Shaaban 2013).

In almost all Arab countries there is the absence of a specific law protecting women from violence, including intimate violence, and there is a lack of prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of violence against women (Equality Now Report 2011). Crimes committed in the name of honor continue to be treated differently from other violent crimes in terms of investigation and prosecution, as well as prevention efforts. Perpetrators of "honor" crimes often benefit from a reduction of penalty under laws in most Arab counties (Equality Now). Moghaizel (1986), who examined a number of legislative measures dealing with crimes of honor in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia, found that while the penal code condemns the perpetrator of intentional homicide to punishment as serious as execution, provisions concerning the crimes of honor may permit a full or partial excuse which could reduce the penalty or even totally exempt the murderer from punishment.

This gender inequality is not sanctioned by Islam, although the patriarchal attitude is usually fed by sanctimonious claims in the cloak of religion. It is rather attributed to Arab traditions that maintained a hierarchical order in the family, where the dominance of male over female is a normal attitude (El-Islam, 2000). The Arab Human Development Report for 2005 found that there was no relation between religion and any erroneous practices towards women; describing the state of our Arab society as one where 'custom has triumphed over worship, and

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discrimination towards women has no basis in either the noble Quran or the sound Hadith’.

## Men and Women’s Rights

Human rights arguments alone are often not enough to achieve change in patriarchal communities. It is not easy to battle entrenched norms, beliefs, practices and power relations. It is convenient for men to keep women disenfranchised, because they feel threatened when women seek to enforce their rights, or look to take up decision-making positions. The attitudes of men to any reforms introduced will remain a big challenge for women. Without the wider change in social attitudes, discrimination remains. However, women must realize that building a gender-sensitive society is a long-term process.

Unless men contribute to promoting women’s rights, equality between men and women will be strongly resisted at the level of the household and the community, if ever being accepted. It will be a bit trickier to get men over the border, but it is most definitely possible. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. The majority of populations in Arab countries are youth (ages 15–24), comprising about 60% of the current population (Khalifa 2009). These younger people are better educated than older counterparts. Thus they hold the potential to challenge the patriarchal society and should therefore be included as an integral part of the social changes.

## Time to Seize the Opportunity: ‘Agents of Positive Change’

Women can act as agents for transformation and empowerment in the transitional process as it moves forward. They need to cooperate and coordinate their activities regardless of their divergent interests, ideologies and political affiliations. To push for a reform within the area of women’s rights, women need to work with each other rather than against each other. They should embrace the concept of “more numbers more voices”, increasing the possibility that they will be heard.

One way forward is the formation of political parties by women, which would lead to a gradual but continuous change, address women’s direct concerns, and contribute to adequate representation in legislative and decision-making bodies. Even at this preliminary stage, such political parties would promote avenues for increased female participation in the political process.

Another way women can act as agents of change is through civil society organizations. There are already a number of women’s rights organizations, activists, advocate groups, and even individuals working on women issues in transition countries. The demands of the various groups differ in terms of approaches, collaboration and, in some circumstances, competition. Women’s issues are too complex for any single group or organization. For real change to take place there needs to be cooperation between those at the grassroots and upper and middle class women. Thus, a broad coalition that unites a variety of different women groups and organizations and individuals needs to be established for maximum success in this transition phase. As a coalition works together and agrees on a common way to deal with the issue and on common goals, they are much more likely to make headway. They can therefore **advocate for reforms that have so far been elusive.**

## Using the Media to the Advantage of the Women’s Movement

Women’s movements during the Arab revolutions received wide publicity, through television coverage and websites. Women must not miss any opportunities to further utilize these effective instruments. Women have the opportunity to advance their interests and benefit from social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. They can share and discuss their concerns with other women around the world, learn how other women confronted and responded to similar problems and exchange innovative practices. Women can also initiate dialogue with policymakers and officials, which can act as a pressure tactic whereby the state is forced to respond.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the rest of the world can learn from the experiences of women in the Arab Spring. However, if women

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do not seize the opportunities offered to them in the aftermath of these revolutions, then they will lose the chance to gain empowerment and participation. Thus, they will remain grounded on the same terrain.

During the phase of the fighting for *independence*, women came out in large numbers and participated actively. However, afterwards, the position of women differed sharply from the active and purposeful role they played and they were once again rendered invisible and marginalized. There is now the possibility of bringing women's concerns to the forefront of society. It is only by doing so that we can make the most of this chance to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

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