

# The Role and Status of Women after the Arab Uprisings

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The Arab Spring/Uprising/Revolution will go down in contemporary history as the season of short-lived hopes and aspirations of a people, both men and women, who wanted dignity and change. They sought freedom, respect for human rights, the rule of law and accountability. Women in the region were advocates for such reform, but more than four years after the Arab uprisings began, many of their desires have yet to be achieved. Despite escalating turmoil and the rise of extremist groups in the region, women have maintained their focus and continue to fight for greater rights.

## **Women's Participation in the Arab Uprisings**

From the start of the Arab uprisings in early 2011, women across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region actively participated in demonstrations alongside men. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere in the region, women were on the frontlines in demonstrations that expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo. Women activists played influential roles in these uprisings, and anticipating their involvement would help stimulate reforms in a region dominated by autocrats and, in turn, improve the status of women. These women initially did not ask for women's rights, as their wishes and desires

for regime change were the same as those of the rest of the population. Although women were detained, beaten, and raped in squares and streets across the region, they remained in the vanguard of the struggle over the future of their countries.

Women's participation in these uprisings did not, for the most part, translate into their participation in the transitions that took place in a number of countries. Once dictators had been overthrown and protests had subsided, women who took part in the Arab uprisings and women activists were sidelined. As countries transitioned after their revolutions, women were largely excluded from the negotiating table and decision-making positions, and their rights and political participation diminished. Most transitional bodies, including the Syrian National Council, had no women representatives. The number of women participating in drafting the new Egyptian constitution was minimal (women and youth shared 10% of the drafting committee's representation). Egypt also, for example, abolished its quota for women's parliamentary seats, which reduced women's representation from 12% in the 2010 parliament to less than 2% of seats before the 2012 parliament was dissolved. Despite standing side-by-side with their male counterparts in public squares during the protests, women were once again relegated out of the public space and subjected to the regression of many of their rights. Moreover, women suffered (and continue to suffer) from an increase in sexual harassment, violence, and other security challenges. Four years later, we are seeing that although women supported the Arab uprisings, it appears the Arab uprisings did not support women.

While many countries witnessed a regression in women's status, some managed to prevent the rolling back of the clock on women's rights. Tunisia, for

example, provided a model for other countries in the region of a seemingly successful transition. Prior to the revolution, the country already had a progressive constitution and a personal status law that was the envy of the region. Women's involvement in society and public affairs was well established. Following the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in 2011, Tunisia elected the National Constituent Assembly and more than 20% of the deputies were women. Since the uprisings, Tunisia and Morocco have implemented gender parity in nominations. Algeria also has a parliamentary quota and ranking on nomination lists for women's seats, which means that women now hold 146 parliamentary seats (more than 31%). After Libya's 2012 elections, 33 women held seats in its 200-member parliament. Libyan women also held six of 60 seats on the constitutional drafting committee. In Yemen, during the period of constitutional drafting and before the country descended into civil war, women secured four of 17 seats in the country's constitutional drafting committee. In Egypt, women made sure that the second draft of the constitution had a strong component on women's and human rights.

### Regional Chaos and the Rise of Extremism

Today, four years after the Arab uprising, we are witnessing a region in chaos. Syria is in a civil war, with more than three million refugees fleeing to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Yemen is also engaged in civil war. Libya has two governments that are fighting one another. Egypt is run by a military government. Tunisia's peace was shattered after a bomb at the National Bardo Museum in the capital killed 20 tourists in March 2015.

The falling apart of the Arab Spring resulted in the rise of the militant group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham), also known locally as Daesh. ISIS is in control of territory in Iraq and Syria and is active in a span of countries stretching from the Middle East to Africa. The region is in turmoil and, as usual, women and children are the first victims, experiencing the deterioration of their rights in a time of upheaval and the rise of extremist movements. ISIS – the most notorious and barbaric of these groups – has carried out particularly heinous acts against women in Iraq and Syria, including their kid-

napping, raping, trafficking, selling and sexual enslavement. For ISIS fighters, women are the spoils of war. ISIS members have 'married' or raped girls as young as nine years old. In ISIS-controlled territories, women are subjected to such inhuman treatment and forced to abide by ISIS-imposed restrictions based on the group's narrow interpretation of the sharia. The group has in particular targeted Yazidi women and girls among other religious and ethnic minorities. A recent UN report indicates ISIS may have committed genocide against the Yazidis, as well as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Those who have managed to escape ISIS-controlled areas and the Syrian conflict have often ended up in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraqi Kurdistan, where insecurity and violence are common. The majority of refugees are women and children; the UN Population Fund reports that approximately 7.5 million Syrian women and girls have been displaced. Women in refugee camps in the camps are particularly vulnerable and report frequent instances of domestic, gender-based and sexual violence. However, accurate statistics are difficult to obtain, and women face significant obstacles in their ability to report such violence. In addition, families in refugee camps are sometimes forced to marry off their young daughters in order to survive. The vulnerability of this population is intensified by the lack of adequate healthcare and social services. Moreover, the refugee camps could result in a lost generation of children, especially girls, who have no access to education. ISIS remains, of course, a significant threat in the region. Surprisingly, there are not only women who fight the movement but also women who have joined it. Some of these 'joiners' have been organised in the all-female al-Khansaa and Umm al-Rayan brigades that are responsible for enforcing sharia law, carrying out punishments and monitoring checkpoints for women in ISIS-controlled territory. A number of women from the region and elsewhere in the world, including Western countries, travel to Syria to marry ISIS fighters. In striking contrast to these obedient and domestic jihadist brides are the women fighting against ISIS: the female members of the Kurdish peshmerga. These women are anything but symbolic. They have been serving alongside their male counterparts for decades; and now they serve on the frontlines in the battle against ISIS.

## Women's Progress since the Arab Uprisings

Women, as noted, have been victimised across the region as a result of the advance of ISIS, by turmoil and civil war, or by forced displacement and refugee camp conditions. But women are pushing back. In Iraq, women's civil society groups help women rescued from ISIS territories to return to normal life. Women activists are also instrumental in providing care for those in refugee camps, especially women and children. All over the region, women actively work to claim their rightful place in society. In some countries, progress has come in leaps and bounds, while in others through incremental steps.

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Statistics on the condition of women in the region are both disheartening and encouraging. On the downside, the Global Gender Gap Index (in which higher numbers indicate a worsening of women's conditions) ranked the UAE at 115 in 2014, down from 103 in 2010; Tunisia at 123, down from 107; and Yemen at 142, down from 134.<sup>1</sup> The figures for women's employment, on the other hand, are mixed. According to World Bank statistics, Syria and Algeria – at 13% and 15% respectively – have the lowest rate of female employment; the figures are much better for the smaller Persian Gulf states, with Qatar at 51%, the UAE at 47%, and Kuwait at 44%.<sup>2</sup> Algeria has one of the lowest rates for employment of women but the highest percentage of women in Parliament in 2015 (31.6%), followed by Tunisia with 68 women Members of Parliament (31.3%).<sup>3</sup> Yemen and Oman, with one woman in Parliament each, are at the bottom of the list. On

the whole, the regional average for women's representation in Parliament has increased since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. The good news is that the region has done well in providing women with access to education. In Iran the ratio of female to male enrolment in higher education is 100, in Lebanon 107, and in Bahrain 198.<sup>4</sup>

Does female education automatically lead to female employment? Not necessarily. In most of these countries the rate of unemployment for young men and women is high; when it comes to hiring, men are preferred to women. The cultural taboo against working women continues to be the main obstacle to higher rates of women's employment.

## Women's Constitutional Rights in the Region

The Islamist governments that came to power after the Arab uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia did not exactly open up the gates to women. The influence of the sharia on the first Egyptian constitution led to their marginalisation. In Tunisia, however, the Islamist Ennahdha party quickly discovered that women activists and society as a whole would resist such new impositions on women. The eventual fall of the Islamist governments in these two countries vindicated the women who had fought against a contraction of their rights – even if in the name of religion. In Libya, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and other countries in the MENA region, the sharia remains the dominant source of law where women's rights are concerned.

In Saudi Arabia, 30 women now hold seats on the consultative Shura Council, Saudi women will finally participate in the upcoming local council elections and restrictions on women's employment have been eased. These are welcome developments, but Saudi women still have a long way to go before they achieve equality under the law. In Iran, 36 years after the Islamic revolution, women continue to fight to reinstate the rights they had under the monarchy, including the right to sue for divorce, a ban on polygamy, child custody in case of divorce and the res-

<sup>1</sup> *Global Gender Gap Index 2014*, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/rankings/>

<sup>2</sup> World Bank data on labour force participation rate, female (% of female population aged 15+), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>

<sup>3</sup> World Bank data on unemployment, female (% of female labour force), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS/countries>

<sup>4</sup> World Bank data on ratio of female to male tertiary enrollment (%), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ENR.TERT.FM.ZS/countries>

toration of marriage age for girls from 13 back to 18. Women in Iran today also face the danger of an abolishment of the very successful family planning programme that lowered Iran's growth rate to 1.3% (as of 2013).

### Promoting women's rights in some Gulf countries may be considered somewhat symbolic and perceived as a means to demonstrate a country's wealth and modernity rather than its commitment to women's progress

In Iraq, women hold more than 25% of parliamentary seats, as required by a constitutional quota, but Iraqi women are still excluded from most decision-making positions both inside and outside Parliament (there are currently two women ministers). The country's personal status law was among the most progressive in the region when it was implemented in 1959, but in 2014 Parliament attempted to roll back a series of women's rights related to the age of marriage, women's mobility and child custody, among other issues. Although a number of Gulf states have taken gradual steps to improve women's legal rights following the Arab uprisings, the number of women in political decision-making positions remains low. Promoting women's rights in some Gulf countries may be considered somewhat symbolic and perceived as a means to demonstrate a country's wealth and modernity rather than its commitment to women's progress. In addition to countries' constitutions, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is another important tool that, when implemented properly, can provide expanded rights for women. Although most countries in the region have ratified CEDAW, the majority have existing reservations to a number of articles in the document. Morocco has declared its intention to withdraw its reservations to CEDAW but has not yet deposited the instruments of ratification. Tunisia is

the only country that has withdrawn all its reservations; it issued a decree in 2011 under the interim government, though the reservations were not formally withdrawn until 2014. Iran is the only country in the MENA region that has not ratified CEDAW.

As 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, women in the MENA region had hoped that the last two decades would have yielded more progress for women. Advances in women's rights, however, have been more or less disappointing. Women in the region need peace, security, justice, and stability to make any headway. They need to live in societies that believe in gender equality. They need governments that are willing and able to give women protection and equality under the law out of conviction – and not as a form of window dressing.

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