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**A Change of Seasons for Arab Women?**

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## **Foreword**

It is with great pride that we present the first issue of our online Journal of Women and Human Rights in the Middle East, "A Change of Seasons for Women in the Middle East?" The objective of this student publication is to provide a platform for young scholars to investigate a variety of topics within our main research areas and to produce valuable studies of gender and human rights in the region. The journal offers a unique opportunity for rising scholars to lend their voices to a dialogue that has been considerably overlooked throughout the last few decades. Our ultimate goal is to make a real difference in the lives of women throughout the Arab world, as every voice raised leads to greater awareness and change.

For our first issue, we asked our contributors to address the state of women in the Middle East since the Arab Awakening. Despite the bravery and sacrifice of so many women who flocked to the streets and social networking sites to inspire change, the post-revolution environment remains formidable for those seeking representation and rights. The first paper, "Consequences of the Arab Spring for Women's Political Participation," explores women's involvement in politics through social media, and the factors that have delayed women's progress post-revolution, using Egypt and Tunisia as case studies. The second article, "An Unfulfilled Promise? The Role of Women in the Arab Awakening," highlights the diverse participation of women throughout the revolutions and how the U.S. and other international actors can support women's empowerment. The final article, "Remembering Their Role: Keeping Women Involved Post-Arab Awakening," looks at Egypt's and Tunisia's histories of women's rights and how those countries can build upon their previous progress.

The Women and Human Rights in the Middle East Program at Rice University's Baker Institute aims to increase awareness of major issues of concern to Middle Eastern women and to advance their socioeconomic roles through innovative research, substantive policy recommendations and effective outreach. By virtue of the generous funding from the Kelly Day Endowment, we are able to launch new research initiatives in the region and further promote student-focused activities, both regionally and internationally. We very much look forward to this new opportunity to create a significant impact, both for our program and for young scholars interested in the study of gender and human rights in the Middle East.

# **Consequences of the Arab Spring for Women's Political Participation**

## **By Julia Retta**

### **Abstract**

Women played a prominent role in the Arab uprisings, but as the protests led to political transitions and societies entered a state of flux, the future of women's political empowerment became uncertain. This leads to the following questions: How did the women who took part in the popular uprisings overcome the barriers to this form of unconventional political participation, and have women made similar gains in more conventional forms of political action? This paper uses case studies of Tunisia and Egypt to explore the role of social media in women's participation in the protests and to explain the uneven gains of women post-revolution by social, economic, and cultural factors. The Arab uprisings show evidence of a declining gender gap in unconventional forms of political participation, but the post-revolution environment demonstrates that significant barriers, such as inequalities in education and employment levels, as well as cultural attitudes, still exist for women and limit their participation in traditional forms of political behavior. Therefore, broader efforts at economic and social development must be the starting point for women's rights.

### **Introduction**

The world's eyes turned to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region when popular uprisings began to take root and spread through the region. These popular movements, collectively referred to as the "Arab Spring" or the "Arab uprisings," successfully toppled dictatorships in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries. Perhaps one of the most striking features of the uprisings was the prominent presence of women who participated through protests, demonstrations, and social media. In Egypt, activist Asmaa Mahfouz recalls, "All of us were there, throwing stones, moving dead bodies ... There was no difference between men and women."<sup>1</sup> In Tunisia, female student Khaoula Rachidi bravely defended the Tunisian flag at her

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<sup>1</sup> "Women and the Arab awakening: Now is the time," *The Economist*, October 15, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21532256>.

university when Salafist protestors attempted to remove it.<sup>2</sup> In the words of *The Economist*, “Defying their stereotype as victims of oppressive patriarchies, Arab women have made their presence a defining feature of the Arab Spring.”<sup>3</sup> The prominent role of women in the Arab Spring came as a surprise to many given that the Arab region ranks the lowest on a global scale of gender equality as a whole, especially in regards to political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity.<sup>4</sup>

Optimistic statements about women’s participation in the Arab Spring abounded throughout the early months of the revolts. But now, more than two years later, it is worth exploring exactly what the gains were, and what they mean for women’s political empowerment in the region. It is well established that Arab women played a significant role during the demonstrations, but this begs the question: How did women overcome the obstacles to participate in the protests, strikes, and demonstrations that characterized the Arab Spring, and will this political empowerment bring about lasting gains for women in the political sphere?

### *Literature Review*

The body of research that addresses women’s political participation can provide some insight. French politician Maurice Duverger found that “[t]he small part played by women in politics merely reflects and results from the secondary place to which they are still assigned by the customs and attitudes of our society and which their education and training tend to make them accept as the natural order of things.”<sup>5</sup> Duverger believed that real change would only come if societies succeeded in framing the political discourse differently and destroying the “deeply-rooted belief in the natural inferiority of women.”<sup>6</sup>

Nearly half a century later, political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris also found that a gender gap exists across nearly all societies in levels of political participation, with women being less active than men in both traditional forms of activism (political interest and discussion,

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<sup>2</sup> Ali Larayedh, “Khaoula Rachidi, symbol of Tunisian woman,” *Tunisian News Agency*, March 13, 2012, <http://www.tap.info.tn/en/en/politics/11878-qkhaoula-rachidi-symbol-of-tunisian-womenq-ali-larayedh.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, eds., *The Global Gender Gap Report 2011*, (Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum, 2011), 17 – 21. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-2011/>.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Duverger, *The Political Role of Women* (Paris: UNESCO, 1955), 130.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

voting turnout, party and union membership) and unconventional forms (protests, demonstrations, and boycotts).<sup>7</sup> They explained this gap as a result of a variety of factors: structural (divisions related to age, education, socio-economic status, etc.), cultural (attitudes and values), and agency (mobilizing networks and organizations).<sup>8</sup> However, when examining protest activism in particular, they found that the gender gap in post-industrialized societies disappeared after controlling for social differences such as access to education and level of religiosity.<sup>9</sup> Inglehart and Norris also postulated that the gender gap in political participation is decreasing when it comes to protest activism—more so than other forms of participation—and that societal modernization, secularization, and the rise of younger generations are helping to close the gender gap in the political realm.<sup>10</sup>

Expert scholars such as Ruth Santini at the Brookings Institution and Isobel Coleman at the Council on Foreign Relations have expressed doubts about the situation of women's rights in post-Arab Spring countries. They believe that cultural and religious factors had much to do with the marginalization of women once demonstrations began to wane and the political transitions began.<sup>11</sup>

### *Research Questions*

The two main questions this paper seeks to explore are: How can we explain the prominent political involvement of women in the Arab Spring, and will this progress continue through the democratic transitions and become institutionalized through more traditional, formal methods of participation? This paper will explore two arguments: 1) Social media empowered women to participate in the Arab Spring by providing them with social networks and organizational means; 2) Although the gender gap in protest activism has diminished more than in other forms of

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 126.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> See Isobel Coleman, "Why the Arab Spring Hasn't Been Better for Women," *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/why-the-arab-spring-hasnt-been-better-for-women/254150/> and Ruth Santini, "What Women's Rights Tell Us About the Arab Spring," The Brookings Institution, November 10, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/1110\\_arab\\_awakening\\_women\\_santini.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/1110_arab_awakening_women_santini.aspx).

participation, women's political power will not necessarily see gains in more traditional forms of political action due to inhibiting structural and cultural factors.<sup>12</sup>

### *Methodology*

To answer these questions, this paper will examine two countries: Egypt and Tunisia. It must be noted that these societies are still in flux, and much remains to be seen about the future of democracy and women's rights. This paper will examine what the Arab Spring has meant for women's political participation by analyzing women's involvement in both traditional (e.g., running for public office) and unconventional (e.g., taking part in and organizing demonstrations) political processes to determine what kind of progress has been made as a result of the Arab Spring. Progress in women's participation in unconventional political activism will be determined by analyzing press articles that describe the Arab Spring protests. Data from the Dubai School of Government's *Arab Social Media Report* will be used to analyze the role of social media in women's participation.

Progress in women's traditional political participation will be determined by examining the number of parliamentary seats female candidates won in the most recent elections, and thus the role they are playing in the formation of new governments in their countries. The gains women have made in the traditional political sphere in Egypt and Tunisia will be contrasted, and the difference in post-revolution political power of women will be explored through the lenses of cultural, economic, and social factors.

The limitations of this paper are related to insufficient data. There is no reliable or consistent data to measure how many women compared to men participated in the protests, and the *Arab Social Media Report* does not provide a country-specific gender breakdown of social media users, which would have been useful in contrasting the cases of Tunisia and Egypt. There are also no reliable sources to measure voter turnout before and after the Arab Spring protests, which could have been used in addition to numbers of women elected to parliament in order to measure levels of formal political participation.

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<sup>12</sup> Jane I. Smith, "Women in Islam: Equity, Equality, and the Search for the Natural Order," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47, no. 4 (Dec. 1979): 517-537.

## Women's Voices in the Arab Spring Protests

It is clear from news reports and interviews with activists that women were active in non-traditional forms of political participation—the protests, strikes, and demonstrations that characterized the Arab Spring. A Gallup survey shows that 30 percent of Egypt's revolutionary protestors were women, constituting a significant minority within the movement.<sup>13</sup> Isobel Coleman, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, claims that women's role in the Arab Spring has been equally important as men's, pointing out that women's participation in the beginning stages “brought critical legitimacy and attention to opposition movements.”<sup>14</sup>

Everywhere from Egypt to Yemen, women were active in the streets and online, protesting and blogging alongside men.<sup>15</sup> Egyptian female activist-blogger Eman Hashim noted that women played an important role in encouraging and sustaining the protest movement: “I remember all the old women who came to us with food and drinks in [Tahrir] square ... When it became so bloody that it was really hard for women to be in the front row, men knew that women were waiting meters away, with medicine, water, and words of support.”<sup>16</sup> Another woman activist recalled, “You can see Egyptian women everywhere, shoulder by shoulder with men at squares, in protests, supplying others with all what they need such as food, drinks and medical supplies.”<sup>17</sup> These women were not only remarkable for protesting against their authoritarian governments, but also for leaving the safety of their homes and communities in order to make their voices heard in the public sphere.

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<sup>13</sup> Gallup, *After the Arab Uprisings: Women on Rights, Religion, and Rebuilding* (Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc., 2012), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Isobel Coleman, “Women's Voices on the Arab Spring: Isobel Coleman,” *Vital Voices Blog*, January 26, 2012, <http://vitalvoices.org/blog/2012/01/womens-voices-arab-spring-isobel-coleman>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Eman Hashim, “Women's Voices on the Arab Spring: Eman Hashim,” *Vital Voices Blog*, January 26, 2012, <http://vitalvoices.org/blog/2012/01/womens-voices-arab-spring-eman-hashim>.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Othman, “Women's Voices on the Arab Spring: Sarah Othman,” *Vital Voices Blog*, January 26, 2012, <http://vitalvoices.org/blog/2012/01/womens-voices-arab-spring-sarah-othman>.

## The Role of Social Media in Increasing Women's Political Participation

The question raised by these observations is: How do we explain the prominence of women in the Arab Spring? Egyptian activist Dalia Ziada noted that what led to the uprisings were ties between families, neighbors, and clans: “the strength of human links ... these communications were speeded by Facebook ... The human connection is essential, civil society is important, but social media was the tool, the messenger, when people finally found one another.”<sup>18</sup> Much of the media coverage of the Arab Spring focused on activists' use of social media to organize and mobilize against the regimes; the relevant question for this paper is how social media served the purposes of women activists.

The Dubai School of Government conducted a study of twenty-two Arab countries that suggests social media played a role in mobilizing women during the Arab Spring by helping them overcome the obstacles created by conservative societies and religion. The report found that “social media allowed women to take on a new form of leadership focusing on utilizing connections and networks.”<sup>19</sup> Survey data about protestors' primary use of social media during the uprisings showed that Arab men and women used social media in similar ways, and that nearly one out of ten women who did so used the platform to organize and manage activities.

The report also cites the examples of HarassMap, an Egypt-based online resource to raise awareness of and prevent sexual harassment, and the Women2Drive campaign in Saudi Arabia to demonstrate that women are increasingly realizing the potential of social media for their political platforms.<sup>20</sup>

Then there is the additional effect of youth. In both Egypt and Tunisia, youth (citizens between the ages of 15 and 29) comprise 75 percent and 73 percent of Facebook users, respectively.<sup>21</sup> This supports Inglehart and Norris's argument that younger generations are closing the gender

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<sup>18</sup> Mike Eckel, “Egypt's leading female voice for change warns that revolution is backsliding,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 5, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2012/1005/Egypt-s-leading-female-voice-for-change-warns-that-revolution-is-backsliding>.

<sup>19</sup> Dubai School of Government Governance and Innovation Program, “The Role of Social Media in Arab Women's Empowerment,” *Arab Social Media Report 1*, no. 3 (2011): 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

gap and leveling the playing field as far as political activism is concerned.<sup>22</sup> Although protestors came from all age groups, the youth formed a majority of those using social media to organize and track the demonstrations.

Finally, the Dubai School of Government study asked respondents in all Arab countries except the United Arab Emirates and Qatar about the role of social media for women in order to determine attitudes and possible criticisms of social media as an empowerment tool. The study found that 85 percent of women agreed that social media makes it easier for Arab women to express themselves; 83 percent said social media can enhance Arab women's participation in civil society; and 76 percent believed that social media can advance women's rights. The statistics on men who agreed with these statements were only a few percentage points behind women.

The survey supports the idea that both men and women in the Arab region view social media as a very positive platform for Arab women's participation in society. However, the study also found that there was still a gender gap with the use of Facebook in the Arab region, where women represent only 37 percent of users in Egypt and 42 percent in Tunisia; in the whole Arab region, women only constitute a third of Facebook users.<sup>23</sup> When asked to identify the main barriers holding Arab women back from fully utilizing social media, the majority of respondents pointed to the societal and cultural constraints women face in the Arab world.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps because social media is viewed as a form of expression and participation in public dialogue, it represents a threat to conservative attitudes towards women and their role in society.

The study concludes that social media served as a gender equalizer for political participation during the Arab Spring, given that Arab men and women showed largely similar patterns in their use of social media as well as their opinions on its implications for women and civic participation.<sup>25</sup> However, women's civic participation in strikes and demonstrations does not guarantee gender equality in all areas of politics. To achieve sustainable, meaningful change and

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<sup>22</sup> Inglehart and Norris, *Rising Tide*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Dubai School of Government Governance and Innovation Program, "The Role of Social Media," 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

secure opportunities for women, they must be included in the decision-making bodies. The next part of this paper will examine women's role in post-revolutionary politics and whether or not their increased participation in protest activism corresponds to increased participation in the traditional realm of political activism.

### **Uneven Political Gains for Women Post-Arab Spring**

Unfortunately, women did not fare as well in traditional processes of political participation post-revolution. Not only have transitional councils failed to include women or prioritize their involvement, but also women running for public office have suffered at the polls. In Egypt, Dr. Nihad Abu al-Komsan served for all of one month as the chair of the Council for Women established by the Supreme Military Council before resigning in despair after realizing the council was “nothing more than a window-dressing aimed at presenting an illusion of equal rights but in fact had no power or budget.”<sup>26</sup>

The democratic elections in Egypt were hailed by many Western observers as a great triumph, but female candidates saw very little success at the polls due largely to the Supreme Military Council revoking the quota of 64 women in the parliament that former President Mubarak had established in 2009.<sup>27</sup> The results of the elections are that only nine out of the 508 members of parliament are female (less than 2 percent, compared to the 12 percent under Mubarak's quota), only three out of thirty cabinet members appointed by the transitional government were women, and the committee to amend the constitution excluded women entirely.<sup>28</sup> Although under Mubarak the quota was used to give seats exclusively to women from the ruling party, it at least ensured the representation and participation of women in the political system. Finally, the sole female presidential candidate withdrew from the race, unable to garner the required signatures to register for candidacy.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Zvi Bar'el, “For Egypt's women, the Arab Spring does not spell freedom,” *Haaretz*, April 18, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/for-egypt-s-women-the-arab-spring-does-not-spell-freedom-1.424962>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Claire Read, “Bothaina Kamel vows to continue her fight against corruption in Egypt,” *Al Arabiya News*, April 10, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/10/206768.html>.

Besides the removal of the quota, female candidates in Egypt faced additional challenges. The new electoral rules did not stipulate where female candidates' names should be placed on the list of candidates running under each particular party. As a result, women running for office were placed far down on the party lists for Islamist as well as liberal parties, reducing their chances of being elected.<sup>30</sup>

Female candidates fared better in Tunisia's elections, where they garnered 26.73 percent of parliamentary seats in the post-revolution election compared to 27.57 percent in the pre-revolution election.<sup>31</sup> Ennahda, the Islamist party that won a plurality of seats in the legislature, presents itself as a moderate party willing to operate in a secular system. In fact, 40 of the 56 women in the parliament are members of Ennahda, and women fill several leadership roles in the party.<sup>32</sup> In conclusion, the number of women in the Egyptian parliament dropped significantly after the post-revolution elections, whereas in Tunisia, there was only a slight decrease.

### **The Role of Economic, Social, and Cultural Factors**

Thus, despite the evidence that the gender gap in protest activism is diminishing and that women were a prominent force in the Arab Spring, there are still barriers to traditional forms of political power. Ruth Santini at the Brookings Institution finds that due to marginalization in the political sphere, during the post-revolution transition processes, "women are losing the battle to turn their ideas into political influence and to sustain the active role they played initially."<sup>33</sup> However, she notes that this phenomenon is occurring to differing extents in each country. In examining the strong performance of female candidates in Tunisia's elections, Santini notes that Tunisia is far from being a standard Arab Muslim country in terms of gender equality, due to its long history of women's rights and women's organizations.<sup>34</sup> She admits there is strong evidence that a

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<sup>30</sup> Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, "In Egypt's New Parliament, Women Will Be Scarce," National Public Radio, January 19, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/19/145468365/in-egypts-new-parliament-women-will-be-scarce>.

<sup>31</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union PARLINE database on national parliaments, accessed June 18, 2013, <http://www.ipu.org/parline/>.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Mitchell, "Tunisia's Islamist victory good for women, says female figurehead," *The Telegraph*, November 1, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocan/tunisia/8862963/Tunisia-Islamist-victory-good-for-women-says-female-figurehead.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Ruth Santini, "What Women's Rights Tell Us About the Arab Spring," The Brookings Institution, November 10, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/1110\\_arab\\_awakening\\_women\\_santini.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/1110_arab_awakening_women_santini.aspx).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

conservative attitude towards women is the main impediment to women's political empowerment in Arab countries.<sup>35</sup>

A few specific examples illustrate that religious conservatism is a significant barrier to women's rights. A women's march held in Egypt on March 8, 2011, to celebrate International Women's Day ended poorly when protestors were harassed and beaten by a mob of angry men who told them that women's rights contradicted Islamic principles. Around this same time, the Egyptian military "rounded up scores of women demonstrators, and in a show of raw intimidation, subjected many of them to 'virginity tests.'"<sup>36</sup> Then a female protestor was brutally beaten in December of 2011 by Egyptian military forces. In the latter case, however, the response to this brutality was overwhelming—thousands of women marched in Tahrir Square to protest the victim's treatment. This became the largest female protest in Egypt since 1919. Vigilante groups have formed to patrol the streets of Cairo and stop men from harassing women. These groups have been criticized for resorting to violence and encouraging vigilantism rather than a government response to harassment, but many Egyptians recognize the need to bring the problem of violence against women into the public debate.<sup>37</sup>

However, even relatively secular Tunisia is not without its problems. Since the revolution, reports of sexual, verbal, and physical violence against women has multiplied, and some blame the growth of Salafism as a main reason.<sup>38</sup> The director of Human Rights Watch in Tunisia said that, while the legal reality is unchanged, "acquired rights are being threatened by repeated attacks by Salafist groups on those they consider infidels or on behavior they deem contrary to Islamic morality."<sup>39</sup> But it's not only the Salafists that represent a threat to women's rights: a young woman was allegedly raped by police officers in September 2012. She was later charged

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Isobel Coleman, "'Blue bra girl' rallies Egypt's women vs. oppression," *CNN*, December 22, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/22/opinion/coleman-women-egypt-protest/index.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Kareem Fahim, "Harassers of Women in Cairo Now Face Wrath of Vigilantes," *New York Times*, November 5, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/06/world/middleeast/egyptian-vigilantes-crack-down-on-abuse-of-women.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/06/world/middleeast/egyptian-vigilantes-crack-down-on-abuse-of-women.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>38</sup> Anne Wolf and Raphaël Lefèvre, "Tunisia: a revolution at risk," *The Guardian*, April 18, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/18/tunisia-revolution-at-risk>.

<sup>39</sup> Aida Alami, "Women Face Fight to Keep Their Rights in Tunisia," *New York Times*, February 20, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/21/world/middleeast/women-face-fight-to-keep-their-rights-in-tunisia.html>.

with indecency and faced six months in prison before the charges were dropped after an uproar from citizens.<sup>40</sup>

Public opinion surveys demonstrate that conservative attitudes about women's political power hold strong in both Tunisia and Egypt. A Pew Research Center study in 2012 found that 75 percent of Tunisians and 42 percent of Egyptians said that men make better political leaders.<sup>41</sup> Though there is broad support for gender equality in principle (74 percent of Tunisians and 58 percent of Egyptians believe women should have equal rights as men), there is also recognition that not enough has been done to achieve such equality. Among equal rights supporters, 34 percent in Tunisia and 61 percent in Egypt believe that more changes need to be made to secure equal rights.

Setting aside the influence of cultural attitudes and religion, structural factors such as education and labor participation may also play a significant role in shaping women's civic participation. Education and labor participation are key factors in explaining the difference in success rates of female candidates in Egypt and Tunisia. According to the World Economic Forum, in 2011 Egypt ranked 123 out of 135 countries for gender equality. Egyptian women's literacy rate was 58 percent; their enrollment in tertiary education was 24 percent; and their labor participation rate was 24 percent.<sup>42</sup> Tunisia ranked slightly better at 108 out of 135 countries, with a female literacy rate of 71 percent, tertiary education rate of 42 percent, and labor participation rate of 28 percent.<sup>43</sup>

On the societal level, a Gallup survey found that "the greatest barrier to women's participation in public life may be their perceptions of lack of safety and respect," noting that Arab women's perception of safety was loosely connected to their confidence to openly express their views and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Pew Research Center, "Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life: Few Believe U.S. Backs Democracy," *Global Attitudes Project* (July 2012), <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/07/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Project-Arab-Spring-Report-FINAL-Tuesday-July-10-2012.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, eds., *The Global Gender Gap Report 2011* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2011), 164, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-2011/>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 332.

participate in civic discussions.<sup>44</sup> On the economic level, the study found that across the Arab world, men's support for women's rights was strongly linked to men's level of life satisfaction, employment, and other measures of economic and social development.<sup>45</sup> Although cultural and religious factors influence attitudes about women's capacity to be political leaders, the more immediate factors may be more related to economic conditions and living standards. It is important to ensure women's access to higher education and labor participation, but development efforts should target societies on the whole and not just women, making sure to include men in the conversation about women's civic participation.

The Western media frequently worries about the growing power of conservative Islamist political parties in newly democratizing Arab countries and the threat they pose to women's rights. Rather than simply critiquing cultural attitudes and beliefs about women, however, the conversation about women in the public sphere should emphasize the importance of development efforts to increase education, economic opportunities, and public safety for all members of society. Political transitions can be prolonged and turbulent states of flux for societies, but they represent the opportunity to reorganize priorities and focus on the well-being of all.

## **Conclusion**

The Arab uprisings show evidence of a declining gender gap in protest activism, but the post-revolution environment demonstrates that significant barriers still exist for women in traditional forms of political behavior. Social media played an important role in empowering women's participation by providing them with networks and mobilization strategies, but the significant barriers for women's empowerment and the prevalence of gender inequality in the region cannot be overcome with social media alone.<sup>46</sup> Women's political participation through more formal, institutionalized methods, such as election to public office, continues to lag behind in the region. Instituting quotas and other institutional mechanisms can ensure that women are represented in the decision-making bodies that have the power to put women's rights on the political agenda.

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<sup>44</sup> Gallup, *After the Arab Uprisings*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Dubai School of Government Governance and Innovation Program, "The Role of Social Media," 12.

But these mechanisms should only be a temporary, transitional practice. In an interview with the Voice of Russia, Dr. Azadeh Kian, professor of sociology and director of the Center for Gender and Feminist Studies at the Université Paris Diderot, observed “the main problem is to forge alliances, to create links with ordinary women in order to improve the situation on a general scale.”<sup>47</sup> Women’s inclusion in the public sphere depends on the unity of women at the national, regional, and local levels; women from all socioeconomic backgrounds from urban and rural contexts must unite and organize themselves in order to achieve lasting and deep-rooted political and social changes. Since there are fewer barriers to participate in protest activism and other unconventional forms of political participation, a good place to start would be forming civic organizations and starting education initiatives to encourage more women to vote and run for office.

There are also cultural barriers to overcome, as noted by the argument that secularized countries will see more lasting and tangible political gains for women than countries that are more religiously conservative. Policies themselves do not result in a change of attitudes, so along with quotas and other measures, the newly democratizing countries must seek to find effective strategies for reconciling gender equality with cultural and religious attitudes, particularly encouraging women’s civic engagement. However, as the Gallup study indicates, broader efforts at economic and social development must be the starting point for women’s rights, so emphasis must be placed on promoting women’s education and participation in the workforce in order to improve their civic participation.<sup>48</sup> Civic education must be incorporated in the curriculum at all age levels, and governments should consider funding programs to select girls and women with the potential to become civic leaders and activists and provide them with the necessary training and networking opportunities.

Despite the success stories, the growing concern for women’s rights post-Arab Spring is clearly warranted. In her talk regarding the return to Islamic law and the marginalization of women as political actors, Nobel Peace Prize winner and human rights activist Shirin Ebadi expressed her fear that Egypt could end up regressing dangerously in women’s rights in the wake of the

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<sup>47</sup> Eva Bertrand, “Political and social rights: women after the Arab Spring,” The Voice of Russia, March 25, 2013, [http://english.ruvr.ru/2013\\_03\\_25/Political-and-social-rights-women-after-the-Arab-Spring-203/](http://english.ruvr.ru/2013_03_25/Political-and-social-rights-women-after-the-Arab-Spring-203/).

<sup>48</sup> Gallup, *After the Arab Uprisings* 13.

revolution. She recommended that Arab women work towards strengthening civil society and familiarize themselves with religious discourse, stating “the true ‘Arab Spring’ will dawn only when democracy takes roots in countries that have ousted their dictatorships, and when women in those countries are allowed to take part in civic life.”<sup>49</sup> The Arab Spring has brought about pivotal political change for many countries, but there are still many obstacles ahead, especially for women.

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<sup>49</sup> Shirin Ebadi, “A Warning for Women of the Arab Spring,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203370604577265840773370720.html>.

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# **An Unfulfilled Promise? The Role of Women in the Arab Awakening**

## **By Rebecca Satterfield**

### **Abstract**

From protesting on the front lines of Tahrir Square to calling for reform on Facebook and Twitter, women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region became actively involved in all aspects of the 2011 Arab Spring. This paper seeks to examine the different roles women played as protestors, social media advocates, and international symbols of democratic reform in the region. When observing the consequences of women's activism in the Arab Awakening, it remains unclear whether women will obtain lasting benefits from recent democratic reforms. Nevertheless, the continued empowerment of MENA women rests on a commitment by the United States and other international actors to support women's rights to equality and access to education.

### **Introduction**

When describing the protests and government overthrows that characterize the 2011 Arab Awakening, scholars highlight social media as a catalyst in the regional movements toward greater freedom and government reform.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most importantly, social media mobilized a key player in Arab society that truly signified dramatic change in the region: the modern Middle Eastern woman. Women played a significant role throughout the Arab Awakening in calling for reform, from leading street protests to internationally symbolizing the importance of women in society.

Through this paper, I seek to explore the various roles women have played in the Arab Awakening and examine the state of MENA women in political society today. While much progress has been made since the Arab Awakening, I argue that ensuring the socioeconomic success of future generations of Arab women remains contingent on a commitment to women's

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<sup>1</sup> Courtney C. Radsch, "Unveiling the Revolutionaries: Cyberactivism and the Role of Women in the Arab Uprisings" (research paper, James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, May 17, 2012).

education and women's rights in MENA by both their own nations and the international community.

### **Taking Control of Tahrir: Women on the Front Lines of the Arab Spring**

*Time* magazine's 2011 Person of the Year cover portrayed an anonymous female protester, demonstrating the global significance of MENA women in advocating for government reform. As female voices joined public outcry for change from Tunisia to the Persian Gulf, they legitimized the demands of a population historically stereotyped as oppressed. Joining men on the streets, women in the MENA region protested and demonstrated their commitment to change despite dangerous situations.<sup>2</sup> Women such as 26-year-old Asmaa Mahfouz from Egypt helped organize demonstrations, mobilizing fellow protesters in Tahrir Square through social media.<sup>3</sup> Mahfouz's viral videos on YouTube show her and fellow organizers bravely leading a crowd in the square, calling for Egyptians to "tell the regime to wake up."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to voicing their opinions in protests, women also organized the logistics of demonstrations that would later make headlines. In the *Al Jazeera* article "Women of the Revolution," Egyptian activist Gigi Ibrahim describes women's roles in managing the safety of protests, despite constant interaction with pro-Mubarak "thugs" attempting to attack protesters. The night of February 2, Ibrahim recalls women serving on the front lines, warning fellow protesters about nearby danger, and setting up makeshift clinics.<sup>5</sup> In helping to organize mass demonstrations, MENA women joined with men to form united fronts against tyrannical policies. As protester and filmmaker Salma El Tarzi stated, "When the men saw that women were fighting in the front line, that changed their perception of us and we were all united. We were all Egyptians now."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nadje Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5 (2012): 29.

<sup>3</sup> Fatima Naib, "Women of the Revolution," *Al Jazeera*, February 19, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Contrary to what scholars of gender politics of the Middle East expected, women of all ages and socioeconomic status took part in the protests.<sup>7</sup> Scholar Courtney Radsch makes an important point in arguing that both educated, media-savvy female protestors and “grassroots, uneducated women from rural cities” called for reform in the Arab Awakening.<sup>8</sup> This combination of women from all social classes in MENA states demonstrates the dramatic scope of women’s involvement in Arab Awakening protest society.

Two years after the revolutions, however, women have yet to truly achieve equal representation and rights in post-Arab Spring governments. Despite reforms, countries such as Morocco have reneged on their promises to women by failing to represent women equally in governmental bodies. Morocco’s cabinet post-Arab Awakening only included one woman, while the cabinet prior to spring 2011 had eight.<sup>9</sup> And while on paper governmental changes may appear to show progress for women, implementation seems to be a different story. Jordan enacted significant constitutional reforms, but some major policy changes affecting women have been slow or nonexistent to realize. For example, despite a promise from the Jordanian constitutional reform committee to add gender as a protected class in the constitution, the implemented draft neglected to include this change.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, traditional gender roles in MENA states failed to prevent female protestors from changing the status quo of women’s involvement in the political culture. While nations such as Egypt possess a stronger history of female activists, women in Syria and Bahrain defied their government’s oppressive policies in an unprecedented way. As scholar Nadjie Al-Ali notes, “women in repressive societies utilized the Arab Spring to make their own, gender-focused demands as well as advocate for greater human rights and democratization.”<sup>11</sup> While women’s rights and representation still have a long way to go, women’s prominent role in the Arab Spring, particularly through their use of social media, represents a small—but significant—step in the right direction. By joining demonstrations to advance their own rights, Arab women blazed a

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Ali, “Gendering the Arab Spring,” 27.

<sup>8</sup> Radsch, “Unveiling the Revolutionaries.”

<sup>9</sup> Moha Ennaji, “Arab Women’s Unfinished Revolution,” *Project Syndicate*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/women-in-politics-after-the-arab-spring-by-moha-ennaji>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ali, “Gendering the Arab Spring,” 28.

trail for future generations to achieve not only more democratic governments, but to also gain greater political equality.

### **From “Twitterati” to Toppling Dictators: Women’s Impact Through Social Media**

While off the political battlefields at Tahrir Square, women in the Middle East contributed frequently to the logistics and public mobilization of their causes through social media. Utilizing Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media sites, women ensured that the world understood their dedication to new, more representative governments. Arab women endured harsh treatment while fighting, as seen in the painful yet salient example of Iman al-Obeidy, a Libyan protester who was raped by Qaddafi-loyal military forces. Rather than remaining silent, al-Obeidy rejected her society’s “prevailing notions of shame and codes of honor” and publicly expressed her suffering.<sup>12</sup> Through viral videos showing the horrors of her experience, al-Obeidy successfully demonstrated the importance of women’s issues in the context of human rights and regime reform.

While traditional, mainstream media sources in the Arab World, including print media and television, tend to be male-dominated,<sup>13</sup> social media has allowed the alternative voices and opinions of women to be more significantly valued.<sup>14</sup> In her popular blog “A Tunisian Girl,” protestor Lina Ben Mhenni tells people around the world about her experiences in Tunisia. By including images of wounded protestors and demonstrations in Tunis, Mhenni provides a crucial, first-hand perspective on events that powerfully express the reality of a society in turbulent times.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than allowing media from the West to describe their situations, women in the Arab Awakening acted as journalists and historians by telling their own stories, sharing their own pictures, and blogging their personal opinions. Social media created an opportunity for women to speak against their governments to an international arena and spread the latest news of conflicts

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Radsch, "Unveiling the Revolutionaries."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Women and the Arab Awakening: Now is the time,” *The Economist*, October 15, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21532256>.

and revolutions. In this way, these women are playing an essential role in creating a democratic future in their home countries and ending the stereotypes the Western world holds of MENA women as a domestic, voiceless victims of patriarchy.<sup>16</sup>

While women from diverse social classes united against tyranny during the Arab Awakening, it should be noted that there was no singularly agreed upon route or eventual goal of reform, and MENA women were not homogeneous in their desired outcomes. To perceive all women in the region as educated, liberal, and media-savvy would lack a full understanding of women's involvement in Arab Awakening society.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the elite "Twitterati," who were highly involved in protests and online organizing, should not be mistaken for the overwhelming majority of women in MENA society, as many lack social media access or possess different views on a woman's place in political society. However, it appears clear from the number of videos, blogs, and Facebook posts from spring 2011 forward that a vocal segment of MENA women eagerly seeks to be involved in the process of democratic reforms in their nations.

Taking their causes public through social media, Arab women served as symbols for change in the region as a whole. Society in the Arab Awakening was multifaceted and diverse, allowing women to voice their opinions and female activists to gain global acclaim for their actions. Tawakkol Karman served as the female face of Yemen's revolution, organizing demonstrations for greater freedom of the press.<sup>18</sup> Karman's leadership of protests in Change Square ultimately led to the spread of a national revolution and the downfall of Yemen's dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Karman, who went on to win the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, represents the struggle that many Yemeni women face against patriarchal traditions that seek to keep women away from positions of political power. As the first Arab woman to win the prestigious prize, Karman sets an example for future generations of women in Yemen and neighboring countries to reject their society's view of women and to define their roles themselves.

From following live Twitter feeds of female protest leaders and watching YouTube videos of women in Tahrir Square, international scholars and governments began to understand women as

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring," 29.

<sup>18</sup> Janine Di Giovanni, "In The Land Of Invisible Women," *Newsweek*, December 17, 2012.

key players in uprisings and governmental change throughout the Arab Awakening. In turn, this has forced the governments of the “Twitterati” and other online activists to recognize the political influence of their own female citizens. Nevertheless, MENA governments as well as international players must still consider women’s rights concerns in enacting reforms in order to truly realize the promises of democracy and equal rights demanded in the Arab Awakening.

### **One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? The Impact of the Arab Awakening on MENA Women**

As seen through female social media organizers and protest leaders, women in the MENA region contributed significantly to the revolutions of the Arab Awakening. Even following the tumultuous uprisings of spring 2011, female activists remain intent on seeking democracy and equal rights in their societies. However, the empowerment of women in future generations depends on whether states will be able to make credible commitments to actively involve women in politics.

While globally scholars and policymakers may recognize these symbolic women as powerful in modern society, their own countries continue to form regressive policies toward women. In an interview with PopTech, a network that brings innovators from various fields together to share ideas, Egyptian organizer and activist Shima’a Helmy discusses her transition from biotechnology student to protest leader and full-time human rights activist.<sup>19</sup> Helmy makes a key point in arguing that the social media aspect of an uprising may be valuable internationally, but can only go so far in improving a society based on censorship and inequality.<sup>20</sup> Women’s activism through protests and social media must be accompanied by a commitment from their own nations and the global community to help women realize their demands for reform. These reforms should involve enacting policies aimed at increasing women’s participation in government and improving female access to education in rural or impoverished parts of the MENA.

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<sup>19</sup> Michelle Riggen-Ransom, "Interview: Shima'a Helmy and the future of revolution," *PopTech Blog*, October 22, 2011, [http://poptech.org/blog/interview\\_shimaa\\_helmy\\_and\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_revolution](http://poptech.org/blog/interview_shimaa_helmy_and_the_future_of_revolution).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

An important criticism following the uprisings has been that women, though active in protest society, have less political power and little representation in post-Arab Awakening governments. Despite optimistic media coverage of female participation in Egypt's Tahrir Square, the post-Mubarak interim government had only one woman as cabinet minister, and the Egyptian Constitutional Committee, directly appointed by the military, had zero.<sup>21</sup> Other policies appearing favorable to women have been difficult or unsuccessful in implementation. Although Libya instituted a 10 percent quota for women in the national assembly in early 2011, the policy has since been eliminated.<sup>22</sup> Now, two years later, it remains unclear as to what degree the democratization and reforms in MENA states have benefited women.

Post-revolution political parties in the Middle East have varied in their inclusion of women, from a wavering commitment to women's rights in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to the favorable treatment of women by the Ennahda party in Tunisia.<sup>23</sup> In Al-Ali's opinion, MENA state governments often "compromise women's rights in order to shore up support among socially conservative constituencies."<sup>24</sup> The most conservative Islamic parties, when seen by voters as a viable alternative to secular authoritarianism, can easily sideline issues of women's political participation and access to education in favor of more "relevant" political problems.<sup>25</sup> Other states lack the basic capacity or legal framework to allow women to play a role in transforming post-conflict society.

While many Arab women argue for greater women's rights, including the right to own property and freedom from forced marriage and dress, progress will be slow as long as governments fail to perceive women's rights as human rights. As previously mentioned by Helmy, in unequal states with wide gaps between modern cities and rural underdeveloped regions, sitting behind a computer and engaging through social media will not have much lasting success in empowering women in daily life.<sup>26</sup> Media images of "Twitterati" upper class and elite MENA women may

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<sup>21</sup> Isobel Coleman, "Middle East: The Future Of Women." *The World Today*, August 1, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Ennaji, "Arab Women's Unfinished Revolution."

<sup>23</sup> Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring," 31.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> Rikken-Ransom, "Shima'a Helmy and the future of revolution."

also create a false impression to the West that all women in the Middle East enjoy a high quality of life and are major players in politics.

Though the revolutions of early 2011 have provided gains for women in writing, in reality MENA countries are left no better than before. Impoverished women in Morocco must face not only dangerous housing and working conditions, but also a justice system that still sides with wealthy, upper class men rather than their victims.<sup>27</sup> After the energy of reform has passed, Arab women must continue to actively call for change within their societies. By running for and serving in political office and calling global attention to women's rights issues, MENA women can equalize representation and create more democratic governments.

Al-Ali presents an interesting argument that the worst disappointment in the post-Awakening society of Egypt was not the lack of women leaders in political bodies, but the sidelining and ignorance of women's rights issues.<sup>28</sup> Demonstrated in the violence against women in Tahrir Square on International Women's Day, women's issues were treated as unnecessary and irrelevant to the more "major" concerns of democracy. Issues such as protecting women from coerced marriage and enforcing penalties for gender-based crimes should have been included in the overall discussion of democratic change. This failure to include women's rights when calling for reforms may prove fatal for the ultimate transition to substantive democracy in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt.

### **A Call for Global Support: The Role of the United States and Global Community in Empowering MENA Women**

Following the calls for democratization in the Arab uprisings, it is more important than ever to support the inclusion of women in Middle Eastern society via international pressure. To motivate change, developed democracies such as the United States should consider incentives tied to the implementation of women's rights through the promotion of equal female access to education and female representation. Implementing such policies in Arab societies, however, will be highly

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<sup>27</sup> Samia Errazzouki, "Being a Poor Woman in Morocco: The Intersectionality of Oppression," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/03/201332719369713593.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring," 31.

controversial and should be tailored to the true beliefs of women in MENA states. The United States and other nations should not seek to institute a democratic culture in the style of Europe and North America, but rather actively support basic human rights for women, according to those outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>29</sup> Such support for women's rights will not only improve the quality of life for MENA women, but also provide a necessary foundation for the future success of democracy in the region.

A key policy for the United States and other nations should be advocating for women's equal access to primary education in post-Awakening states. Goals of democracy, reform, and development from the Arab Spring cannot be realized without including and empowering half of MENA populations. Researchers from the International Monetary Fund in 2012 found that closing education gender gaps in developing countries benefited societies as a whole by leading to greater economic performance and continuing a state's progress toward development in future generations.<sup>30</sup>

Improving women's access to education can be accomplished through many different policies, such as tying US foreign aid to increases in female enrollment in schools or creating economic trade incentives for raising girls' graduation rate from secondary school. When asked what she would tell the world about Egypt, Helmy stated that though Egypt receives the second highest amount in US foreign aid, it is often spent on military training rather than needed infrastructural development in education.<sup>31</sup> US financial support of NGOs and government policy in favor of education rather than simply military aid would benefit and advance women while improving the state's overall economic conditions.

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<sup>29</sup> *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations, December 10, 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ana Revenga, and Sudhir Shetty, "Empowering Women is Smart Economics," *Finance and Development* 49, no. 1 (March 2012): 1.

<sup>31</sup> Rikken-Ransom, "Shima'a Helmy and the future of revolution."

## **Conclusion**

From tweeting and blogging to fighting on the front lines, women in the MENA region actively participated in the democratic changes that swept through the Middle East in early 2011. Women played significant roles as protestors, background organizers and mobilizers, and international symbols of the movement for human rights and governmental change. Protestors including Mahfouz, Karman, and the Twitterati demonstrated to their governments and to the world that women were committed to establishing a greater role in society as well as creating a better quality of life in post-conflict MENA states.

While setting a positive example for the future involvement of women in the politics of Arab states, the success of future generations of girls and the population as a whole depends on the government's commitment to promoting women's rights as human rights, most notably women's political participation and equal access to education. To turn hopes of democracy and change into reality, women representatives and political leaders must make such policy reforms. The United States and the international community should join forces in support for MENA women's rights. The promise of a truly democratic society after revolution, for both MENA women and men, will remain unfulfilled as long as governments fail to actively acknowledge the equal rights of women.

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# **Remembering Their Role: Keeping Women Involved Post-Arab Awakening**

**By Sevita Rama**

## **Abstract**

Like many regions of the world, women in the Middle East and North Africa are often considered mothers and homemakers before their capacity as leaders and organizers is recognized. In recent years, the norms for women in society have been subject to change with each Arab uprising. Though many fear that the Arab Awakening may actually be a time of regression regarding women's rights, some Arab countries have used revolutions in the past as a platform for positive change. Egypt and Tunisia have set a precedent of using their independence from colonial powers to set a clear path for women's rights. A discussion of the institutional mechanisms to support women's rights post-Arab Awakening in light of this precedent will allow us to critically evaluate barriers to reform and assist women in reclaiming their roles in leadership and politics in the Arab world.

## **Introduction**

The situation of women in the developing world,<sup>1</sup> particularly that of Arab women, has been subject to narrow-minded approaches focused heavily on the notion of liberation. Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al Missned has referred to such initiatives as “colonial feminism,”<sup>2</sup> which occurs when people from the West force their own cultural ideals onto Arab women. For example, under the guise of looking out for the “best interests” of Muslim women, former President Nicolas Sarkozy used French secularism, or *laïcité*, to defend the “*burqa* ban” when he famously stated that *burqas* and *niqabs* are a “sign of enslavement and debasement.”<sup>3</sup> Such

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by the Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Program. Khalid Malik, et al., *Human Development Report 2013* (New York: United Nations, 2013), [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2013\\_EN\\_complete.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2013_EN_complete.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al-Missned, “The ‘Woman’s Issue’ in Context: Deframing the Discourse on Middle Eastern Women” (speech, James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, Houston, May 21, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> David Gauthier-Villars and Charles Forelle, “French Parliament Passes Law Banning Burqas,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703376504575492011925494780.html>.

viewpoints lead to erasure of choice for women who elect to wear a veil or other religious garb out of personal desire and are not forced to do so.

Similarly, it is incorrect to assume that there are no longer women in the Middle East who suffer the horrors of female genital mutilation or honor killings. Most recently, in May of 2013, three women were killed in Luxor, Egypt for “violating traditional morals” by ten men who were protecting their family’s honor.<sup>4</sup> These kinds of incidents still occur in more conservative parts of the countries in the Middle East and contribute making a society unsafe for women.

The Arab Awakening provides a platform for the progress of the Arab world, as well as for Arab women to become an integral part of decision-making processes in the region. In order to assist these women gain further rights and political participation, it is necessary to form policy that empowers women from within their societies. Analyzing Egypt and Tunisia’s histories and current states post-Arab Awakening will provide a framework to remedy gender gaps in the Arab world. This paper aims to show that women’s history of involvement in leadership and politics in post-revolution Egypt and Tunisia indicates a potential to create and sustain policy and opportunities that help women actively reclaim their societies.

### **Egypt Pre-Arab Awakening**

The feminist movement in Egypt is frequently considered the impetus for several women’s rights movements in the Arab world.<sup>5</sup> At the forefront of this campaign was the publication of “The Emancipation of Women” by Qasem Amin, an Egyptian author and attorney, in 1899, and later the foundation of the Egyptian Feminist Union by Hoda Shaarawi in 1923.<sup>6</sup> In 1951, Egyptian feminist Doria Shafiq and 1,500 other women stormed parliament demanding full political rights,

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<sup>4</sup> Sara Smyth, “Mother and two daughters dumped in Nile were murdered in honour killings by 10 male relatives who believed they were having affairs,” *DailyMail Online*, May 26, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2331229/Honour-Killings-Mother-daughters-dumped-Nile-murdered-honour-killings-10-male-relatives-believed-having-affairs.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Nadjie S. Ali-Ali, *The Women’s Movement in Egypt, with Selected References to Turkey*, Civil Society and Social Movements Programme, Paper No. 5 (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2002), [http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/0/9969203536f64607c1256c08004bb140/\\$FILE/alali.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/0/9969203536f64607c1256c08004bb140/$FILE/alali.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Claudia Derichs, ed., *Diversity and Female Political Participation: Views on and from the Arab World* (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2010), 47-62.

a reform of personal status laws (legislation regarding marriage duties and rights), and equal pay for equal work.<sup>7</sup> After independence following the British occupation, “Arab Socialism” led to many social reforms, such as women’s suffrage in 1956, and women’s ability to run for political office.<sup>8</sup> In 1962, Egypt’s National Charter nominally granted men and women equal rights.<sup>9</sup> Although the legislation was poorly enforced and mentalities were not completely overhauled, these changes signified the government was willing to at least initiate a change in its language.

Religious and political forces often used women’s rights as a platform of contention to promote more conservative Islamic character or regain control of the next Egyptian government, respectively. This has led some observers to mark the 1980s and 1990s as the beginning of Egyptian women’s “endangered rights.”<sup>10</sup> The amended 1980 constitution under Anwar Sadat made Sharia law “*the* principle source of Egyptian legislation.”<sup>11</sup> Any dissent, especially from the perspective of personal status laws (implemented in both Egypt and Tunisia after periods of conservatism), was considered to be not nationalistic and influenced by Western and leftist ideals.

In addition to religious concerns, in 2002 Egypt passed a law known as the “NGO law” that made establishing a non-governmental organization a more difficult process, as organizations now have to be approved first by the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs.<sup>12</sup> This process gives the government the right to choose which NGOs are allowed in the country, thereby limiting freedom of thought and idea, and affecting women’s ability to participate in activist movements. In one instance, The New Woman Research Center, an organization focused on

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<sup>7</sup> C. Nelson, *Doria Shafik Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1996), 168-177.

<sup>8</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Chelsea, MI: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Denis J. Sullivan and Sana Abed-Kotob, *Islam in Contemporary Egypt: Civil Society vs. the State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Prior to this amendment, Article 2 of the Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt stated: “Islamic Shari’a is a principal source of Egyptian legislation [emphasis added].” See Clark Benner Lombardi, “Islamic Law as a Source of Constitutional Law in Egypt: The Constitutionalization of the Sharia in a Modern Arab State,” *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*. <https://litigation-essentials.lexisnexis.com/webcd/app?action=DocumentDisplay&crawlid=1&doctype=cite&docid=37+Colum.+J.+T+ransnat'l+L.+81&srctype=smi&srcid=3B15&key=72cb6b1780132d0b705dd63472524dc3>

<sup>12</sup> “Draft NGO Law Will Cripple Egyptian Civil Society,” Freedom House, April 26, 2013, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/draft-ngo-law-will-cripple-egyptian-civil-society>.

raising awareness about human rights issues with respect to women, was rejected from registering with the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs.<sup>13</sup> Instead of allowing NGOs to flourish, the Egyptian government pushed for the promotion of the National Council for Women,<sup>14</sup> a partisan organization headed by first lady Suzanne Mubarak that did little to criticize legislation that was disadvantageous to women.

Despite numerous challenges, women won some legal battles prior to the revolution, including nationality rights for children of Egyptian mothers born to non-Egyptian fathers, revisions of family law that included a no-fault divorce law, and a newly established family court.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Egypt had a woman judge at the Constitutional Supreme Court level and a gender-ombudsman office to which women victims of gender discrimination can send confidential complaints.<sup>16</sup> Although progress was made, some issues still remain. For example, women's testimonies in property disputes are less valued than male testimonies, and issues of "honor crimes" and gender violence—which are punishable by law—are not always enforced by local authorities.<sup>17</sup> For instance, courts have the right to reduce a criminal sentence based on how valid the crime is deemed. In two cases in Qena in the 1990s, men convicted of murder were given short sentences due to their ability to justify their actions morally.<sup>18</sup> Although progress is visible in these laws, women still struggle to easily access all of their legal rights.

## Arab Awakening in Egypt

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<sup>13</sup> Farida Deif, *Egypt: Divorced from Justice: Women's Unequal Access to Divorce in Egypt*. *Human Rights Watch short reports, the Middle East and North Africa* 16, no. 8. Human Rights Watch. <http://books.google.com/books?id=opgFl0RI64EC>.

<sup>14</sup> The National Council for Women (NCW) was described as "[A body] to propose public policy matters for society and its constitutional institutions on development and empowerment of women to enable them to play their economic role, and to integrate their efforts in comprehensive development programs." However, Human Rights Watch and other organizations reported women feared that their funds were being redirected to an organization that would not support women's rights like the NGOs. See "Presidential Decree," The National Council for Women, March 29, 2012, <http://www.ncwegypt.com/index.php/en/about-ncw/presidential-decree>.

<sup>15</sup> Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa — Egypt," Freedom House, October 14, 2005, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/47387b6a46.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Fatma Khafagy, "Honour Killing in Egypt," (paper presented at the "Good practices in combating and eliminating violence against women" expert group meeting, Vienna, Austria: United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2005).

Young, college-educated women were an important and formidable force of the Egyptian uprising.<sup>19</sup> These young women utilized social media to voice their dissent during the eighteen days of revolution.<sup>20</sup> Many of the developments took place with the help of female bloggers like Leila Zahra Mortada, who risked abuse and imprisonment by keeping the world informed of the daily scene in Tahrir Square and elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Asma Mahfouz, credited with writing “the blog that started the revolution,” created an impassioned video calling her fellow Egyptians to action and to protest on January 25. She continued her activism despite receiving death threats as a result of her activity.<sup>22</sup>

Many women demanded equality with men during the protests, but Egypt’s problems with violence against women escalated during this time of transition. Public awareness ended the violent practice of “virginity tests” that occurred during the 2011 revolution. The Cairo administrative court made such tests illegal after the heavily publicized case of Samira Ibrahim, a woman who was tested and kept at a military detention center.<sup>23</sup> After the revolution, on March 8, women gathered again in Tahrir Square in light of International Women’s Day, but were attacked and harassed by a male counter-protest group.<sup>24</sup> Though women were involved in the revolution and after, ongoing threats of harassment and violence from both supporters and opposition groups tempered their impact.

Women’s activism during the most critical eighteen days in Tahrir Square was heavily publicized, but they were excluded from many subsequent political reforms. Nehad Abou El-Komsan, head of the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights (ECWR), points out that the presence of only one woman in the previous cabinet of Prime Minister Hisham Qandil “[was also] the case

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<sup>19</sup> Troy Camplin, “Egypt’s Revolution and Higher Education,” The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, February 6, 2011, <http://www.popecenter.org/commentaries/article.html?id=2474>.

<sup>20</sup> “Women and the Arab Spring,” International Federation for Human Rights, p. 18. <http://arabwomenspring.fidh.net/index.php?foreword>

<sup>21</sup> Naomi Wolf, “The Middle East’s Feminist Revolution,” Project Syndicate, February 28, 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-middle-east-s-feminist-revolution>.

<sup>22</sup> Staff Report, “Revolutionary blogger Asma threatened,” *Gulf News*, February 5, 2011, <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/egypt/revolutionary-blogger-asma-threatened-1.757171>.

<sup>23</sup> “Women and the Arab Spring,” p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

60 years ago during President Nasser's time."<sup>25</sup> She also notes that even during Mubarak's presidency, there were four female ministers. According to a Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme (FIDH) report on women in the Arab Spring, the 2011 elections in Egypt left women with only 2 percent of the lower house, and only four seats in the Shura Council, or the upper house, due both to the lack of women in constitutional reform committees and quotas for women's representation.<sup>26</sup>

Statistics also indicate that the state of women's rights in Egypt has declined, implying there is a lack of women involved in rebuilding the country's social, economic, and political domains, despite their role in the revolution. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* states that Egypt ranks 126 out of 135 countries, falling from its previous position of 123 in 2011. Additionally, the nation ranks first among countries witnessing a decline in the political status of women,<sup>27</sup> and women are unable to be promoted to or apply for various judgeship and district attorney positions, thereby limiting their legal effectiveness. Though the opportunity exists for women to be involved in reforms, barriers to their involvement, such as unfair elections and limited competition between political parties, decrease their ability to contribute.

### **Tunisia Pre-Arab Awakening**

In 1956, Tunisia won its independence from France under Habib Bourguiba, who would later become the country's first president. For women, Tunisian independence led to the establishment of the Code of Personal Status (CPS) in 1956. The CPS is a series of laws that allow women to avoid polygamy, repudiation, child marriages (with a minimum marriage age and consent of both spouses), and permits women to ask for a divorce.<sup>28</sup> Tunisia's CPS served as an example for personal status laws in other Arab countries, including Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The choice to adopt the CPS indicated the government was willing to consider a modern

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<sup>25</sup> Dina Samir, "Egyptian women still struggling for rights 2 years after revolution," *Ahram Online*, February 12, 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/150/63114/Egypt/-January-Revolution/Egyptian-women-still-struggling-for-rights--years-.aspx>.

<sup>26</sup> "Women and the Arab Spring," p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi, eds., *The Global Gender Gap Report 2012*, (Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum, 2012), <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2012>.

<sup>28</sup> Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, eds., "Tunisia," in *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

approach to addressing women and human rights. As something Tunisian's so frequently note as progressive,<sup>29</sup> the Code of Personal Status had the potential to pave the way for women to be protected and supported as an integral part of the public sphere.

Women gained suffrage in the year after Tunisia's independence and were able to seek office by 1959.<sup>30</sup> Women's equality was written into the Tunisian Constitution and a number of other legal texts such as the labor code, the electoral code, and the code of nationality.<sup>31</sup> This allowed women to enter the work force through a variety of sectors including engineering, medicine, and the army. Women in Tunisia even had access to contraceptives by 1965, and the government legalized abortion three years later (eight years before American women gained limited access).<sup>32</sup>

Although all of this legislation points towards progress on paper, Tunisia's hesitation in signing the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 indicated that the country was not fully ready to implement gender equality.<sup>33</sup> After the Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement and the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) presented a document in which they demanded the full implementation of the treaty, the Tunisian government ratified the agreement on September 20, 1985. Coinciding with International Women's Day, the government announced on March 8, 2008, that it would adhere to an additional protocol of CEDAW, but it is still not fully incorporated into Tunisian law. Abiding by CEDAW and the CPS are necessary in giving women political and leadership opportunities in Tunisia.

## **Arab Awakening in Tunisia**

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<sup>29</sup> Eleanor Beardsley, "In Tunisia, Women Play Equal Role In Revolution," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio (January 27, 2011), <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/27/133248219/in-tunisia-women-play-equal-role-in-revolution>.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly and Breslin, eds., "Tunisia."

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> "Tunisia: Government Lifts Restrictions on Women's Rights Treaty," Human Rights Watch, September 7, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/06/tunisia-government-lifts-restrictions-women-s-rights-treaty>.

Women in Tunisia were imperative in setting a standard for women across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region during the Arab Awakening. Cited as the “mother of Tunisia’s revolution,” Saida Sadouni, 77, protested for two weeks in front of the prime minister’s headquarters and was a key member of the movement that made the interim government step down.<sup>34</sup> Other women, such as Lina Ben Mhenni, blogged about the revolution from rural areas from the beginning and brought the events to an international audience.<sup>35</sup> Despite being the origin of the Arab Awakening, Tunisia faces many challenges in reintegrating women into political positions and civic influence after the revolution. Many Tunisian women worry that Islamist groups will take over the government and any political progress for women’s rights will regress to circumstances similar to those before the establishment of the code.

Before the revolution, women represented nearly 15 percent of the government—28 percent of the elected members of the Chamber of Deputies (elected in 2009),<sup>36</sup> 27 percent of municipal councilors, and 18 percent of the members of the Economic and Social Council. After the revolution, a principle of parity was adopted for the 2011 election of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly. This principle required that an equal number of men and women would have to be listed as candidates for the assembly. Tunisia also implemented the “zipper rule,” alternating the names on the ballot by gender. Ultimately, these rules were established to guarantee that approximately 25 percent of the Constituent Assembly’s seats would be held by women.<sup>37</sup>

Despite its secular background, Tunisia has recently elected the Ennahda Movement, an originally conservative Islamist party that now aims for a moderate state. In order to gain a wider range of support for the elections in 2011, the party focused heavily on jobs and building grassroots connections to display a more moderate front. The majority of women who took part

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<sup>34</sup> Soumaya Ghannoushi, “Perceptions of Arab women have been revolutionised,” *Soumaya Ghannoushi Blog*, March 11, 2011, <http://soumayaghannoushi.com/?p=287-more-287>.

<sup>35</sup> Yasmine Ryan, “Tunisian Blogger Becomes Nobel Prize Nominee,” *Al Jazeera English*, October 21, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/2011106222117687872.html>.

<sup>36</sup> *Report on the 2009 Parliamentary Elections* (Inter-Parliamentary Union, April 1, 2013), <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Duncan Pickard, “How well did women really fare in Tunisia’s elections?,” *Power & Policy*, December 6, 2011, <http://www.powerandpolicy.com/2011/12/06/how-well-did-women-really-fare-in-tunisia%E2%80%99s-elections/#.Ujsoerxqr0>.

in the 2011 election ran for the Ennahda Movement<sup>38</sup>: Of the forty-nine women elected to the Constituent Assembly, forty-two ran with Ennahda, leaving only seven women to run without a religiously affiliated party.<sup>39</sup> While promoting religious freedom is important for Ennahda,<sup>40</sup> it is also important they prioritize other issues of women's rights in terms of financial and political freedom. Ennahda leaders have mentioned that wearing a veil will be a matter of choice for women in Tunisia as it has been in the past, but they have not addressed promoting freedom for women in the public sphere beyond what they do or do not wear.

### **Policy for Equality in Egypt**

After its 1952 independence, Egypt created and pursued opportunity for women's involvement in reform. With new legislation and institutions set in place to benefit women, it is possible that this post-independence mentality may also influence women's role after the Arab Awakening. All policy recommendations for Egypt's future should come from within, as they did after 1952, and international support should prioritize these internal movements. Progress for women post-Arab Awakening should be examined through legal standing, youth empowerment, civil society organizations, political participation and representation, and the economic role of women.

Knowledge of legal rights, such as voting procedures, and of religious rights are necessary to better-equip women to advocate for reforms in legislation. Public discourse about Islam and the role it plays in women's lives is vital for Muslim women in order to prevent extremist groups from using the Qur'an to incorrectly justify their actions. If the government itself is not undertaking programs to raise awareness about women's rights, it should provide financial support for civil society organizations or remove unnecessary barriers to their foundation and operation. Establishing internal organizations focusing on increasing literacy rates, stopping child marriage, eliminating gender violence, ending female genital mutilation, and encouraging support systems for victims and survivors of such acts is the first step to making sure women are not part of a second-class citizenry in Egypt. As Sussan Tahmasebi asserts in *The Unfinished*

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<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Fair, "The Election of Ennahda and the Future of Tunisian Democracy," *Stanford Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2011): 40–42.

<sup>39</sup> Pickard, "How well did women really fare?"

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

*Revolution*, “To subordinate women’s rights is a mistake. If women’s equality is not viewed as a prerequisite to achieving democracy, the prospects of realizing true democracy later will be all the more difficult if not impossible.”<sup>41</sup>

One of the biggest prospects for promoting a lasting change for women in Egypt is the country’s youth. Organizations and people that empower the youth population are vital to helping younger generations create a better future for Egypt. One such organization, the non-profit Egyptian Democratic Academy, was started by Esraa Abdel Fattah, a blogger who was arrested and interrogated for creating a youth movement through Facebook to support textile workers. The organization aims to promote the development of democracy, human rights, and political participation of all citizens in Egypt.<sup>42</sup> After viewing the November 2011 election results, Fattah notes that only “three women earned seats in parliament, out of 212 female candidates running for 168 seats.”<sup>43</sup> She thus established the Free Egyptian Women group, “bringing well-known, well-educated, and well-qualified women into parliament.”<sup>44</sup> The government should support these kinds of organizations by reducing the barriers to operation. Similarly, leaders of such groups should not be persecuted for their work, as it would hinder the progress of these organizations and subsequently thwart opportunities for the youth and a lasting revolution.

A joint project between International IDEA, an intergovernmental organization that promotes democracy worldwide, and the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND),<sup>45</sup> finds three points of concern to address wider political participation in Egypt, as well as Jordan and Yemen: political participation of women, electoral system reform, and the development of political parties. Possible reforms for the election process and representation issues include the implementation of electoral systems, affirmative measures, and gender quotas for political parties and other institutions.<sup>46</sup> The report specifically highlights two areas where women’s

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<sup>41</sup> Minky Worden, *The Unfinished Revolution: Voices from the Global Fight for Women’s Rights* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), p. 67.

<sup>42</sup> Worden, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Worden, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 76.

<sup>45</sup> Halah Mustafá, Abd al-Ghaffar Shukor, and Amre Hashem Rabi, *Building Democracy in Egypt: Women’s Political Participation, Political Party Life and Democratic Elections* (Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the Arab NGO Network for Development, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

political participation can be greatly influenced: the legal and constitutional framework, and the political climate in various facets of society and culture.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, expanding the electoral process may contribute to the development of political parties and help bring new opinions into the Parliament, which can then influence the laws.

Despite the constitution's early support of women's ability to enter office, the various political parties, even liberal ones, do not have many women in leadership positions. There are also few statistics to keep track of women's involvement within the parties, but the lack of nominations indicate they are not able to make active contributions. In order to encourage equal representation, the government should provide incentives to parties that support women's campaigns. Reporting demographics of the particular groups should also be mandatory in order to design a system that is in line with the population. Creating opportunity for women in political parties through government incentive and requiring accurate representation of gender in various branches of the government will help women become involved in the political domain.

Although women are not prominent players in the political sphere, they continue to play an important role in labor groups in Egypt. According to the joint report by IDEA and ANND, "Women are most strongly represented in the nurses' union, where they make up 92 percent of members, followed by the union of social professions (55 percent), the teaching unions (52 percent), and the labor unions (3.4 percent)."<sup>48</sup> Women have long held leadership positions in these areas, making them strong channels through which to influence policy. Beyond the existing contributions of women in civil society, it is necessary to expand their reach into political participation and discourage the neglect of women's rights issues by prominent political parties.

Finally, additional funding should be provided to civil groups such as Fattah's that strive to promote women to elected positions. Facilitating discourse by increasing government funding or civil society efforts is key to the advancement of women in the political sphere and the public eye. With a newly elected government, it may be possible for women to gain more resources to

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

further their impact in civil society organizations and establish a more permanent revolution through less restrictive legislation.

### **Prospects for Progressive Policy in Tunisia**

Tunisia's prospects for progress regarding women's rights can be addressed through areas such as access to justice and equal opportunity, influence in civil society, and political participation. With these focuses, The National Democratic Institute conducted a study after the Arab Awakening in Tunisia with focus groups from all over the country to understand the future of democracy and political participation.<sup>49</sup> According to the report, "despite initially expressing support for equality among Tunisian citizens, participants struggled to reconcile support for gender equality with religious doctrine and with the country's patriarchal social and political structures that simultaneously give women a privileged and discriminatory status."<sup>50</sup>

To ensure justice and legal equality, women must be afforded the same rights as other citizens in regard to nationality and family laws, gender violence, and through the government's compliance with CEDAW. Like Egypt, Tunisian women do not have the ability to transfer their nationality to foreign-born husbands.<sup>51</sup> Amending this will help women gain an equal legal standing. Although gender violence is penalized in Tunisia, many women fear reporting their cases due to potential harassment by officials or members of the family. If a complaint is withdrawn, it will terminate any proceedings.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to provide a space where women can report crimes without being coerced into recanting their statement.

Finally, Tunisia ratified CEDAW in 1985, but with restrictions on nationality rights, property and inheritance laws, and the right of women to choose their place of residence.<sup>53</sup> Thus, despite ratifying the convention, Tunisia has not really abolished gender discrimination in all aspects of

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<sup>49</sup> Gabriella Borovsky and Asma Ben Yahia, *Women's Political Participation in Tunisia after the Revolution, Findings from Focus Groups in Tunisia* (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2010), <http://www.ndi.org/node/18858>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Valentine Moghadem, "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa — Tunisia," Freedom House, October 14, 2005, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/47387b702f.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

the law. The country also has not signed an optional provision of CEDAW that would allow a woman to “file a complaint of gender discrimination directly with a CEDAW committee if she had exhausted all possible domestic remedies.”<sup>54</sup> The Tunisian government should adhere to CEDAW and create legislation based on the non-discrimination premise of the convention in order to remove any potentially discriminatory language from the constitution. Ensuring the constitution does not hold any gender-specific language would ideally mean women would be equal under Tunisian law and they would not be barred from any opportunities or positions in the government.

Though civil society organizations are touted as the most impactful way for women to participate in their communities, it is imperative that they also be present in the public eye to effect any change. The Tunisian government heavily monitored these organizations prior to the revolution,<sup>55</sup> but promoting awareness of them now is vital to their success. Women from Gafsa, Medenine, and Sidi Bouzid who were interviewed in the NDI study expressed a strong desire to participate in women’s organizations and said they would do so if they knew better how to access them.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it may be wise to provide funding to these organizations so they can reach out to more rural areas and adapt or expand their initiatives to incorporate more people into their cause. Amending any laws that monitor or hinder the progress of positive civil society organizations would also be essential. Creating subgroups within these organizations to focus on outreach and publicizing activity in various parts of the country will strengthen the impact women can have in the country.

At this time, there are forty-nine women who hold seats in the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia. However, an overwhelming majority of these women are a part of the Ennahda Movement, and furthermore, none of them were elected to the top three leadership positions of the Assembly.<sup>57</sup> The percentage of women in the Constituent Assembly is impressive compared to the rest of the Arab world, as well as the United States, but upon further investigation, the lack of diversity among the female representatives does not accurately reflect the ideological range of Tunisian

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Shelley Deane, *Transforming Tunisia: The Role of Civil Society in Tunisia’s Transition* (International Alert, 2013), <http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/Tunisia2013EN.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Pickard, “How well did women really fare.”

women. This may begin to be remedied through legislation requiring quotas proportional to demographic distributions. However, political parties looking to use women as placeholders and default supporters of their agendas should not misuse quotas. The positive use of quotas can open the door for more women to be politically active, rather than as a tool for fulfilling a minimum.

## **Conclusion**

Egypt and Tunisia have many opportunities for women to be active and recognized within policy and as political actors post-Arab Awakening. Although barriers to women's participation still exist, they can be addressed in new discussions that seek to encourage women's involvement. There are many women who have already participated in the revolution and have made their goals clear. However, there is not one comprehensive agenda for all Egyptian women or for all Tunisian women. Women's issues must be addressed by individual countries, as well as on a more local level. By incorporating women into local municipalities and organizations, they may begin their ascension to higher political offices or other influential positions. In order to get to these positions, women must combat the mindset that they should not be active political participants, which could easily overshadow their aspirations. Changing a mindset is an arduous task, but reinventing norms through the Arab Awakening and its subsequent reforms of institutions may provide the opportunity needed for women to succeed in the roles they take to empower themselves and one another.

In order to use institutional mechanisms to empower women, a combination of education, media, and public policy must be utilized. Education about the opportunities and rights of women can foster greater notions of acceptance and reshape notions of equality. This education will work within the framework of particular cultures while also explaining notions of equality in the context of different religions. The ideologies that started the revolutions should become the permanent value system in each country, and if there is not transparency from the new governments, it is likely that these nations will be in a continuous state of revolution until this goal is accomplished. The youth population is vital to maintaining the revolution and constantly reacting to new regimes and laws. A youth population dedicated to achieving equality will help make the transition easier for women in the long run. Successful revolutions require the

utilization of various institutions, such as education, media, and government, where women can be encouraged to take part.

Women in the Arab world need to be acknowledged for their diversity in demographics and in thought. Although analyzing Egypt and Tunisia may provide a basic idea of the areas in which progress must be pursued, each country will have to target their particular areas of disparity and their plans for change. Egypt and Tunisia have been models for feminist and revolutionary ideas since before their independence and hopefully will continue to be so. Post-Arab Awakening societies must deliver on resolving the issues from which the revolutions grew while also creating permanent solutions. Opportunities for leadership and a presence in the political domain in both countries exist, but women must feel encouraged and able to seize them with the help of their governments and domestic organizations.

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