

# Women Rights in the Arab Spring: discussion on unity, Political and the Socio-Cultural uprising in Egypt and Tunisia

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## Abstract:

Social movements over the last couple of decades across the globe on civil societies have assembled to leave a lasting impression. The Arab Spring disputed older thoughts of repressive regimes and signaled potentials for change, beginning in Tunisia and spreading to other countries throughout the Middle East. This paper investigates the literature on political, social and cultural prospects as a means to comprehend the question on women Rights. How did cooperative action among the people during the Arab Spring outline the debates on women rights? With the Arab Spring of 2011, the concern of women's empowerment has appeared as a similar movement in Tunisia and Egypt. What are the repercussions of the women's empowerment movements in Tunisia and Egypt for better political representation and rights? This paper also seeks to know that these long-term contribution to developments throw light on social, political, judicial, legal, and economic change that would progress overall human rights, and particularly women's rights in the Tunisia and Egypt ? This paper is a comparative study of rights and women's empowerment and, particularly in terms of universal human rights principles, as well as in terms of political representation in post-revolution Tunisia and Egypt.

## Introduction

Across the North Africa, Middle East, and the Gulf region successful uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in the last year have flashed movements against dictatorships. These movements demands for new constitutions, democratization, that guard free speech, equality, fair elections and assembly. Marching and organizing alongside men Women have been an important part of these revolutions. Women's activists know they must struggle to play a substantial role in the process of building new governments, now, as countries in the region.

The Women's rights promotion in the region has been shouldered by women's groups and organizations that are a part of the ongoing movement of civil society organizations. Socially that are liberal headed by middle class educated women have devoted themselves to the global movements towards achieving gender equality.

Immediately as before the Arab Spring, today, women's rights groups in these countries are fighting for their rights put onward in the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the most inclusive women's rights treaty, and are using it to require action by the government action. CEDAW has been endorsed by 187 nation-states, written in 1979 and came into force in 1981, together with every countries of the Arab except Sudan and Somalia. Nevertheless, each state of the Arab country has ratified the treaty with considerable reservations that weaken the treaty's spirit.

An alliance of women's rights organizations based in the North Africa and Middle East and has been working to attain full execution of CEDAW in the state, which would effect in a leap onward for empowerment of women. As part of this attempt, from across the region feminists in May 2011 met in Rabat, Morocco to analyze regional changes and direct for the future in the awaken of the Arab Spring transitions. Collectively, they are closely monitoring alterations in the region and functioning to make sure that constitutional reforms without a doubt protect equality between men and women in both the public and the private sphere, legitimize the role of women in public affairs and politics, and incorporate implementation mechanisms to achieve these effects.

**Egypt:**

Women in Egypt for decades, as elsewhere in the region have been closely concerned with the reform movement from organizing the strikes of labor union and affirming their right to freedom of speech, to participating in the protests that led to the dismissal of the Mubarak regime. But after playing a fundamental role in the revolution, women are being vigorously barred from the reform process.

Constitutional amendment committee consists of the ten-person accountable for revising the constitution preceding to the forthcoming elections was all men. No women were selected to be governors, and only one woman of a likely 34 was selected to the new cabinet, and she was a holdover from the Mubarak regime. Cabinet established a committee on women overseen, but it is likely to have little power. One activist called the committee's creation condescending: "It's like saying, 'You women can have your little committee while we men do the serious business.'"<sup>1</sup> According to The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), "The exclusion of women in Egypt turned into a systematic policy."

Founder of Egypt's New Woman Foundation, Activists such as Amal Abdel Hadi are making demands that were rooted in CEDAW principles. For fair, equal representation and for freedom of expression of women and young people in all representative bodies she calls for women to be added to the constitutional committee. The latter, she says, be supposed to allow women to participate more efficiently in all areas of public life and will offered them with the opportunity to give their perceptions on environment, health, working conditions and the economy, etc.

Using CEDAW Activists have achieved some major successes, as a foundation of their demands. The government issued a decree on May 2, after a long fight by Egyptian women's rights activists, that allowing Egyptian women married to Palestinian men to pass their nationality to their children. Forum for Women in Development Executive Director Enas El Shaffie, a Cairo-based women's rights organization, said CEDAW was key to leveraging government action on the nationality law.<sup>2</sup> Article 9(2), of CEDAW, which affirms the rights of woman to pass her nationality on to her children, three years earlier, the government had withdrawn its reservation. The 2011 verdict brings Egypt one step closer to fulfillment with its treaty requirements. According to El Shaffie, CEDAW is widely used by Egyptian women's rights and democracy activists to pressure the government to live up to its obligations and take action on domestic reforms (*ibid.*)<sup>3</sup>

**Tunisia**

After removal from power in January 2011, the dictatorship of Ben Ali, inspiring the Arab Uprising across the region, Tunisia to begin with seemed path to ensuring inclusion of women in the new regime and was regarded as by some to be a model for women's empowerment. The Tunisian transitional government, on April 11, 2011, the Tunisian transitional government passed a revolutionary law that established full uniformity and required alternation of female and male candidates on all of its lists for the election of the Constituent Assembly of October 23 that will outline the new constitution. In 94 percent of the electoral lists, still, men were listed first. After Minister of Women Lilia Laabidi submitted a draft decree, on August 16, Tunisia withdrew all precise reservations to CEDAW. This was a important landmark for Tunisia, which signed the Convention in 1985 and is the only nation in the region other than Morocco to eradicate all specific reservations. On the other hand, women's rights groups such as Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) resist the government statement that it will not put into effect CEDAW provisions believed contrary to Article One of the Constitution, which specifies Islam as the state religion. Women's rights activists declare that this caveat destabilizes the legal implication of the removal of reservations and is particularly troublesome in regard to decree on family law, such as inheritance. Women of Tunisia are now seeking for withdrawal of this affirmation and removal of all the prejudiced provisions from Tunisian law.

<sup>1</sup> The new Egypt: Leaving women behind, AL-JAZEER, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/03/201138133425420552.html>

<sup>2</sup> Post-Revolution, Egypt Establishes Right of Women Married to Palestinians to Pass Nationality to Children, WOMEN'S LEARNING PARTNERSHIP, <http://www.learningpartnership.org/lib/post-revolution-egyptestablishes-right-women-married-palestinians-pass-nationality-children-1>.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

The elections of October 23, resulted in a majority vote for An-Nahda, considered by some to be a reasonable Islamic party. While the leaders of the party have said that they will sustain the rights of the women achieved under Ben Ali, rights of the women and democracy activists are seriously concerned that the party will act in a different way once in power. Tunisia, the country that ranked highest in all four categories of a 2010 Freedom House report on Rights of the women in the region. As in Egypt, though, some people connect women's rights with the old government, so this intermediary period is decisive to guarantee that the gains of the past numerous decades are maintained.

### **Discussion on unity in uprising in Egypt and Tunisia**

Women of these countries push for equality among all women involved in the fight for freedom during the Arab Spring due to which Collective Unity has become dominant. The organization that sustained participation throughout the Arab Spring is based on unity. Surrounding "the youth of the Arab Spring, women and the Arab Spring, and the women of the Arab revolutions," a prominent Yemeni feminist, Tawakul Karman, describes that harmony among the women of the Arab Spring as a means of "staking their claim to the public sphere in societies which have often sought to keep them out of it" (Fielding-Smith 2011). This led many women of these countries to build inclusive coalition with one another because of their combined desire for equality. Despite the challenges that were faced by the Arab women, "when the revolution came, no one asked about anyone's background, religious affiliation, political affiliation, regional affiliation, and ethnicity" (Ibid)<sup>4</sup>. Throughout this time, it is the most interesting to monitor how women portray the process of transitions that took place concerning the unity that bonded the women for the reason that it did not always look as promising as it did well into the movement. What started as an "age of innocence" for Arab women in the Arab Spring, later shifted to an "age of wisdom" as women gained more and more momentum in the public sphere (Bagnall 2011).

As with the happening of these transitions, equal rights, for both the men and women, was center stage. Egypt and Tunisian activists and organizers no longer accepted having their human rights dishonored by the regimes in power in their particular countries. Slowly as feminist in these countries stopped fearing their governmental regimes, they more self-confidently took to the streets as a means of attaining their dream for freedom (Bagnall 2011). Women took to the streets in Tahrir Square, on International Women's Day in 2011, Egypt "calling for democratic reforms and making sure that equality is part of the new Egypt" (Ibid)<sup>5</sup>. Across the region whether it be Tunisia and Egypt, one thing was primarily clear that women do not want to be like men, instead women want "choice and equal protection under the law" (Rice 2011). The deliberate discourses on unity and harmony expression of the women in the form of equality allows in understanding that women are calling for their rights, and of everyone for the reason that their demands are similar to those of men. This is particularly based on principles of basic human rights that is equal citizenship, freedom, and a larger role in society. Still the men who were involved in the revolution of the Arab Spring permitted "women to be what they want" and contributed in the practices of the Arab Spring because they too think in the dilemma of the Arab feminists. These women proved to be unstoppable hand in hand, surpassing borders, inspiring women to engage in movements of equality across the North Africa and Middle East.

### ***Political Uprisings***

Arab women' desire for greater representation in politics due to which Political uprising became dominant. Founded in the academic premises of the political opportunity structure<sup>6</sup> and the theory, this assertion is based on the documented representations of women standing in unity and fighting for equal representation and democracy all through state elections in Tunisia, at protests at Tahrir Square in Egypt (Fielding-Smith 2011). The prospects of these elections turn out to be a reality following the Arab Uprisings because it allowed women to outlook the meaning and significance of the elections in a definite way. The change in the mindset was wrought by the accusations the women faced so as to led them to confront the authority, status quo, policies and laws. Going into the political revolt women understood that the involvement of women into politics was the first battle. Different states have different approaches and they approached

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Political opportunity structure promises a means to "predict variance in the periodicity, style, and content of activist claims over time and variance across institutional contexts". The framework that this structure provides is focused on the principle that context influences the choice of protest strategies and the effect of social movements on their environment

their transitions to democracy very differently. The goal, on the other hand, was the same to light a political revolution that would resound locally and globally.

The political revolution discourse is about the Tunisian and Egyptian women depiction of politics, as a explanation to discrimination, in an election cycle about freedom of religious expression. The women played very immense role in the revolution, so now the women wanted that to be interpreted into political representation. The Personal Status Code of 1956, in Tunisia, is consecrated for many women (Bagnall 2011). The Personal Status Code had forbidden polygamy in Tunisia, which is the first country in the Arab world to set such an example. It made divorce legal, and integrated that a agreement of marriage required the permission of both parties, and had an adjustment concerning the prosecution of domestic violence (*Women and the Arab Spring* 2011). At the time of the Arab Spring, Women in Tunisia questioned the commitment of their government to their rights. The women did all this by presenting a more "accessible model of 'Islamist feminism'" to many rural and socially conservative Tunisian women, throughout the social and cultural uprising (Marks 2011). Personal laws were introduced in Egypt, but throughout the Arab Spring and yet before were referred to as "Suzanne's laws," a critical reference to the first lady of Egypt, Suzanne Mubarak (Fielding-Smith 2011). Egyptian women engaged in protests at Tahrir Square to fight for their rights and status as women in spite of being fought and cleared out by army officers (Ibid). These protest that took place proved to be revolutionary because the women acted out in unanticipated ways. United throughout collective action, women transform the political structures in their states.

In an outline, the discussions on women of the Arab Spring the unity, the socio-cultural uprising, and the political uprising reflect two things. First is the portrayal of women during the Arab Spring. Second is the influence of the Arab Spring on the expression of women. The unity help out in considering those women's social movements of the Arab Spring had given their idea of equality. The social and cultural uprising symbolizes the confrontations that women made to the ways in which they were being culturally and socially and portrayed. Last but not least, the political uprising is a means by which the women questioned the political arrangements in place to further promote for their agenda of equal political representation and social status.

### **Social and cultural uprising**

Social and Cultural uprising became governing because of the move in the role of traditional Islamic principles in Tunisia and Egypt. During the Arab Spring, Women, challenged socio-cultural rules rooted in Islamic foundations. Originated in the theoretical idea of, this assertion is based on the policies employed by Arab women all through the Arab Spring from marching alongside men, rather known to be "un-Islamic," to staging sit-ins, even dying and hunger strikes (Rice et al. 2011). The problems that were faced by women are not with their religion, but to a certain extent with the "patriarchal and undemocratic culture" (Ghafour 2012). Women rights for many women are a "quest for justice" (Ibid). Islam, the trust practiced by many women, is also about justice (Ibid). Therefore, the Arab Spring was a figurative time for all the women put forward their agenda and challenge historically engrained social and cultural norms within their Islamic societies.

During the Arab Spring, Women Rights redefined the role and status of women because they were more than just women with a lower status than their male counterparts. This is based on a newspaper headline published during the Arab Spring that reads, "She is the Muslim, the mother, the soldier, the protester, the journalist, the volunteer, the citizen" (Rice 2011). The anxiety between modern and traditional practices of Islam became perceptible in social and cultural norms of marriage because "while Sharia law does not openly state the minimum age of marriage, attitudes vary greatly" (Ghafour 2012). In Arab society Marriage at a young age has become common so much so that girls who are young are being referred to as "brides of death". Tawakul Karman Arab feminists challenged this by demonstrating to lift the minimum age of marriage. Regardless of being overcome by ultraconservatives in Parliament, her spirit amongst the other women of the Arab spring inclined the social and cultural revolution taking place.

The social and cultural uprising does two things. First, the challenging aspect of women 'demanding of Islamic traditions which "shakes the foundations of fundamentalism" in political Islamist parties (Fielding-Smith 2011). Secondly, the

women battle in Tunisia and Egypt is symbolic because it allows the reformation movement in Islam to take rise "after a thousand years of containment of modernization and persecution of whoever challenge to believe outside rigid and ancient religious constructions and dogma" (Weekly Blitz 2011). Women have made great progress and it is ongoing as each woman seeks to conquer the social and cultural norms of her community. The difference leading up to the Arab Spring was one of tradition and culture, and some argued that "tradition will win out over the law," but women proved differently by working hard to be active and contributing members of society (Bagnall 2011).

## Conclusion

The contexts vary incredibly and the circumstances remains complex and between these countries. Nevertheless, the will and priorities of the people are mostly the same. In Egypt, where the new presidential election make a certain lack of lucidity men and women sustained to go to Tahrir square in order regulate their demands for the fair elections and rejection of ties of the old regime. The principles of the Arab uprisings demand freedom and fairness. These are the principles that brought women and men altogether and it is what can strengthen their ties with each other in the right context.

For today the question is not whether those women who stood shoulder to shoulder alongside their male counterparts in teargas filled squares altered the path of the Arab spring that much is already clear. The question for now is whether those same women will be able to carry on their dictatorship roles as their nations change into the disorganized process of forming the electoral democracies.

So far, prospects of human rights activists say that they are looking quite severe and the consequences could be even more painful. If women remains continues to be excluded from transitional councils, elections and constitutional committees, so also in the coming months and years they will they be left out of the new post-revolutionary societies. Assemblies constructed new constitutions in these elections, and it is vital that gender equality be preserved in the constitutions from the beginning.

Women did not anticipate such repercussion, but they are vigorously working together, structuring coalitions, escalating existing ties, engaging with new constituencies such as fostering dialogue, and youth, debates and training to deal with the up-and-coming priorities post-revolution. Only time will tell how these revolutions have eventually crashed those who provoked them, and the women who fought with their sweat and blood on the front lines for dignity, freedom, and a better future. On the other hand, what is apparent is that the revolutions have changed the spirit of hope in the people, who now consider that they have the joint power to motivate, implement and demand change, and with their right tools, could very well change the county for a better future.

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