

# Women in the Arab Spring

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*This paper is dedicated to the brave women all over the Middle East who stood up against the repressive regimes, voiced their frustration with the existing situation and called for change during the Arab Spring. 2011 marks the year in the Middle East where thousands of women from Morocco to Yemen were demonstrating on the streets side by side to men starting one of the greatest revolutions that swept through the whole continent and resulted in change in political power in several Arab countries. This article seeks to document the role women played in the Arab Spring, give voice to their demands and expectations, and assess if the position of women in the Middle Eastern societies improved as a result of the Arab Spring.*

## INTRODUCTION

During the past decade the Middle East has gained its importance in the global sphere. It is in the interests of global peace, trade and prosperity that the region should be politically stable, with evidence of economic and social development. For a while the region seems to have been in a state of confusion. Globalization and modernity mixed with the need for preserving traditional and Islamic values creates conflicts not only on individual but also societal level. Economic instability, rising unemployment and growing government corruption all added to the state of dissatisfaction that needed a solution.

It is argued that societal changes are best reflected by the changes in women's lives. The life of Arab women has become one of the most rapidly changing elements of Arab societies. The westernization, globalization and modernizations have had an impact on increased educational attainments, positive employment experiences and a loss of idealism about the traditional female role. Traditionally, a woman's world is perceived to include a particular genre of work activity, such as caring for others and maintaining their relationships, whereas a man's world has an emphasis on individual thought, independent achievement and success based on competition and hierarchy (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). The traditional role of Muslim women is a source of conflict for the more aware, educated women, trying to balance the modern world and a traditionally conservative social background (Metle, 2002). The growing dissatisfaction with the current status of women in the Middle Eastern societies has been awaiting for a change and resolution.

The self-immolation of a fruit and vegetable vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia sent a ripple effect around the region the likes of which we had not witnessed in decades. One autocrat after another fell. Regime change took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. The turmoil spread to other countries. Syria is in the midst of a civil war. Bahrain had to ask for Saudi help to quash Shi'a demonstrators. Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, Morocco, and even Saudi Arabia have not

been spared demonstrations either (Esfandiari, 2012). The whole Middle East was shaken by the 2011 Arab Spring awakening; which effects are yet to be seen.

The 2011 Arab Spring uprising was characterized by the notion of "Selmya," a peaceful means for addressing injustices in society. The activists came together in response to social, political, and economic deterioration. Corruption, growing unemployment, and lack of access to basic resources led to the general population's indignation and taking to the streets. The peaceful struggle and campaign of civil resistance was comprised of a series of demonstrations, marches, acts of civil obedience, and labor strikes. By engaging nonviolently, the protesters ensured that they did not provide the government with an opportunity to utilize force, an instrument that had been used on occasion in previous displays of discontent in order to keep citizens in a state of fear and passivity. Through peaceful means, the indignant population protested to denounce the government and its policies (Ali and Macharia, 2013).

But, above all, these popular social movements are a clear indication that the wall of fear from despotic rulers and repressive regimes in these countries is irreversibly broken. The Arab Spring appeared to offer a clean slate upon which to remold social relations through the ending of an abusive authoritarian regime and the embrace of democracy (Johansson-Norgues, 2013).

The protesters from around the Middle East formed structured networks using the Internet and social networks as a means for communication and civil mobilization. For example, during the Egyptian uprising, Facebook had 34 million users and there were 2,313 active pages between January 11 and February 10, 2011 where participants discussed resistance strategies. At the same time, between January 10 and February 10, 93 million tweets on the revolution were exchanged within Egypt, and between Egypt and the outside world (Ali and Macharia, 2013). Although the government controlled the Internet and several times shut down both cell phone towers and internet providers, they were not able to destroy the self-organization of the protesters.

Although the Arab revolutions were not initially started within a feminist backdrop, the very rights that women have been asking for as a result of the revolutions, has made this a feminist cause in nature, which was fueled by anger at the injustices and suppression of their rights (Abdullatif, 2013). Women were at the forefront, and their active involvement was visible and vocal. They stood side-by-side with men in the squares of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain. They demanded freedom, dignity, equality, and social justice for all citizens – not just for women (Kassem, 2012).

The purpose of this article is therefore to locate women before, during and after the Arab Spring in order to assess the impact that the 'democratic revolutions' have had on the position of women in the Middle Eastern societies. My objective is to document women's role in the Arab Spring and give voice to their demands and expectation during the revolution. But once the euphoria ends and the people start dealing with the realities of post-revolutionary times, winners will emerge and losers will be pushed aside (Esfandiari, 2012) and we aim to see if women came out as winners or losers as a result of the Arab Spring.

For this purpose, a thematic content analysis is used to bring out themes present in the documents under analysis. Descriptive content analysis is especially useful for obtaining an overview of the main results reported in journal articles, conference publications and media reports. Due to the scattered nature of the information available on the Arab Spring, we are specifically interested in documenting women's role and expectation during the revolution. Furthermore, this paper aims to see how the situation has changed regarding women's position and if their expectations were met.

### **Women in the Arab Middle East**

Women in Arab countries are not the same. However, there are cross-cutting issues facing women with differing intensities. Although modernization has assisted development in economic and social spheres all over the Arab world, the cultures and customs, such as the tribal honor system that prevails in the region prior to Islam, continue to contribute to the conservative orientation towards women (Alajmi, 2001). For instance, in the politico-economic and patriarchal systems, the role and place of women in society is gendered and limited to the private sphere. When women do participate in work force or engage in public life without authorization from the government, husbands, or elders, their actions are

considered an obstruction, a threat to law and order, and in direct disobedience to societal norms (Ali and Machaira, 2013).

For example, in Saudi Arabia, for decades, women have endured many restrictions on their personal freedom and participation in the public sphere. Under the so-called “guardianship” system that prevails in the kingdom, women must have the written permission of a male relative, usually father, husband, or brother, to do a great many things women elsewhere can do on their own, including travel abroad, attend university, get married, appear in court, and even have some types of surgery. Saudi women are still being prosecuted and jailed for the crime of “disobeying” their fathers (Murphy, 2012).

The economic participation of Arab women remains the lowest of women anywhere in the world at 26.3 percent (De Alwis, 2012). According to Shah and Al-Qudsi (1990), a combination of family and career is possible only insofar as it does not interfere with one’s role as a mother and wife. Literacy rates in the Middle East are among the lowest in the world. In 2006, UNESCO found that women accounted for two thirds of the region’s illiterate population. It was estimated that gender parity in education in the Arab world stood at 0.69 per cent in 2004, one of the lowest rates in the world (Ibnouf, 2013). Some countries are exceptional, such as Jordan, which has an overall literacy rate of 91 %. Most, however, are closer to Iraq’s overall rate of 40 %. Female literacy rates also vary: these are as high as 85 % in Jordan but remain below 50 % in many other countries (El-Husseini, 2015).

Improvements in education, health, and employment have been observed, but less so in politics. In 2010, the UN and the Arab League reported that women constituted only 10 percent of the total of parliamentarians in the region—the lowest rate in the world (De Alwis, 2012). Furthermore, Arab women’s participation in the legislatures of these nations is one of the lowest in the world, 13.3 % in 2012 when female parliamentarians comprise about 20.3 % of national legislatures worldwide.

Another element that disadvantages women is limited access to information technology. More specifically, only 37 percent of women are Internet users compared to 63 percent of men. This is due to various factors, including fear of street harassment and the fact that few women work outside of the family and therefore lack access to computers and cyber cafes (Ali and Machaira, 2013).

Illiteracy, poverty, and conflict remain major challenges facing women. Nineteen Arab countries are party to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but their reservations to CEDAW make the convention ineffective. Morocco and Tunisia withdrew reservations to CEDAW in 2011. At the same time, women acquired partial suffrage rights in Saudi Arabia to be exercised three years later for local government (Kassem, 2012).

In almost all Arab countries there is the absence of a specific law protecting women from violence, including intimate violence, and there is a lack of prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of violence against women. Crimes committed in the name of honor continue to be treated differently from other violent crimes in terms of investigation and prosecution, as well as prevention efforts. Perpetrators of “honor crimes” often benefit from a reduction of penalty under laws in most Arab countries (Equality Now, 2011).

In Egypt, more than 80% of women now say they’ve been street sexually harassed, and more than 60% of men admit to having done so. Ali and Machaira (2013) describe how women experienced severe oppression and sexual harassment during Mubarak's regime, which, unfortunately, has continued even after the fall of Mubarak. Other unequal legal policies that women face include discriminatory marriage, divorce, and child custody laws. There are a number of social phenomena that have been consistently used by the present-day political system to oppress women and exclude them from participating in politics. These are sexual harassment and "virginity tests." Sexual harassment entails touching a woman's body, stripping off her clothes, and even using sharp objects, while "virginity tests" involve confirming whether or not a girl/woman is a virgin. These two social phenomena have affected women in Egypt regardless of their age or location and have been repeatedly carried out by men at all levels: the military, army, colleagues, and family. Furthermore, studies indicate the prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Upper Egypt is among the highest in the world and the law has not succeeded in adequately decreasing, let alone eradicating, its prevalence despite the fact that FGM was made illegal in Egypt in 1997 (Hassanin and Shaaban, 2013).

Legal provisions relating to the family in most Arab countries regulate marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, custody, and citizenship rights. Many provisions are detrimental to the interest of women. For instance, in some Arab countries such as Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, and Lebanon, men and women who are married to non-nationals are treated differently (Tabet, 2005; Equality Now, 2011). Men married to non-national women enjoy the full protection of the law and their children are granted citizenship rights whereas children of women married to foreign nationals are no citizens and are accordingly not entitled to socio-economic or political rights and privileges (Equality Now, 2011).

Most Arab countries have not set the minimum age of marriage, leaving the matter upon parents' discretion. The age of marriage for girls in Sudan is as young as 10 years. In Yemen, girls may be married as early as 12 or 13. In 1999 the government of Yemen made the situation worse by removing the legal minimum age of marriage – which had previously been 15 years old.

It can be said that women and youth have experienced forms of structural violence engineered by the state (political system) or state apparatus such as the military, the modern economic system, and the patriarchal system in their society (Ali and Machaira, 2013). The above mentioned injustices led thousands of women all over the Middle East to demonstrate on the streets to call for a change in totalitarian regimes.

### **Women's Participation in Demonstrations and Expectations from the Arab Spring**

Women's place in the Arab society had not always been visible and this changed during the Arab Spring. During the revolutions, women's participation side-by-side with their fellow male protestors helped in creating a sense of equality never witnessed before. In Egypt, tens of thousands of women joined men in Cairo's Tahrir Square, spending 24 hours a day there. Women felt safe and secure in a city known for its sexual harassment of women. For a brief moment, Tahrir Square became a symbol for the possibility of equality and a dignified relationship between men and women. This scene was repeated on Change Square in Yemen and on Pearl Square in Bahrain (Esfandiari, 2012). Rallying around the same slogans of 'dignity' and 'enough', the men and women of the Arab Spring seemed to act in such unison, even when faced with the authoritarian regimes' violent repression, that generations of ingrained social taboos about unrelated men and women mixing in public places appeared to be temporarily forgotten and gender roles suspended (Johansson-Nouges, 2013).

The January 25 revolution represented many firsts for Egypt. Not only did the people of Egypt stage a mass popular revolt numbering millions in a model civilized manner, but women were also treated as equals throughout the revolution. The truly pragmatic and focused nature of the revolution saw men and women work together to defend Tahrir Square, transport supplies, care for the wounded, man barricades, shout slogans, lead debates, and even work together to clean up the streets of the country that brought them all together. Women played an instrumental part in the revolution, and their efforts – representing roughly half of all protesters – were vital to its success (Khattab, 2012).

However, what is less well known perhaps is that initial protests in Benghazi were started on the 15th February by the mothers and families of 1,200 men who were brutally massacred by machine gun fire in the Abu Saleem prison in 1996 in Tripoli. These mothers had come out in protest after the lawyer they had appointed to ensure that those who killed their sons and husbands were brought to justice was imprisoned by Gaddafi forces the previous night (Abdullatif, 2013).

In Tunisia, the January "Jasmine" revolution illustrated that men and women had equal stakes in the transformation of their political and social reality and were equally committed to bringing about that change' (Mulrine, 2011).

In Jordan, over 1300 demonstrations against corruption and unemployment poverty, arrests of political activists and lack of freedom took place in 2011 alone. One of the demonstrating groups were Jordanian mothers struggling for equality in the citizenship law. The Jordanian Citizenship Law states that only a Jordanian male may pass on his citizenship to his children. A foreign wife can obtain citizenship after three years of marriage if she is an Arab, and after five years if of another non-Arabic nationality. Jordanian women cannot pass on their nationality to their husband or to their children (Kowalska, 2014). According to the 2009 data from the Ministry of Interior, 65,956 citizens of Jordan

were the wives of foreigners. Citizenship is a guarantee of a whole range of rights. From political rights, tenure in public office, participation in political life: voting or starting in the elections, to rights about the quality of everyday life, access to education, health care, social services, or employment in the public sector. A female citizen of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan not only cannot guarantee citizenship for her offspring, but even the right of residence.

In Syria, the government reacted heavily against protesters sending country quickly into civil war. Women had been active at the forefront of demonstrations of and high profile protests to free detained prisoners and have played a major role via social media reporting. They have created many secret circles to coordinate relief aid, including money collection, providing medical attention and medical kits, food and basic items. Many prominent women have spoken out against the regime, including actors, bloggers, artists and doctors. Thousands have been killed, jailed, forced to flee the country or go into hiding (Charles and Denman, 2012).

There is convincing evidence of the use of torture, often leading to death, and deliberate attacks against unarmed protesters. In 2012 evidence grew over the use of torture by the regime in a network of detention facilities. Information was gathered from 200 former detainees, including women and children, giving first-hand accounts of the severity of the abuse suffered (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

At the time of writing this article, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, over half of the Syrian population has been forced from their homes, 6 million have internally displaced and nearly 5 million are refugees outside of Syria. Women continue to be at the center of the geopolitical change, which in case of Syria hasn't shown many signs for stability.

In Saudi Arabia, the 2011 driving campaign took place in which on June 17 more than 60 Saudi women, in locations all over the country, drove cars to protest the ban on female drivers. Many of them videotaped their driving and then tweeted what they had done, which is how journalists knew there were 60-plus participants. It was the first time in many years that so many women had participated in a high profile public protest. It was evident that police had been ordered not to stop women drivers, and for the most part, police looked the other way when women were driving. Of course, there were some exceptions, including a few arrests. In addition, one judge in Jeddah issued a verdict of ten lashings for one young woman who was taken to court by prosecutors. But this verdict was annulled and never carried out. Then, in early 2012, female university students led campus protests at universities in Abha and Al-Qassim to complain about the condition of their facilities and how they are treated. Male students joined in later. Although campus protests such as this were fleeting, they did signal rising consciousness among young women (Murphy, 2012). In addition, female human rights activists have been vocal in the press about the need for the kingdom to adopt a law prohibiting child marriage, and to set minimum legal ages for marriage. Although the government says it is studying this issue, no mandate has yet been announced.

In Kuwait, protesters stormed and occupied the Kuwaiti National Assembly on November 17, 2011 demanding the resignation of the prime minister and the dissolution of the corrupt assembly (Olimat, 2012). Women were integral partners in the struggle, demanding change and reform to achieve social justice, human dignity, freedom, and civil and political rights.

In Morocco, several thousand rallied in the streets in more than 60 cities and towns in Morocco on February 20th 2011 and since then the movement had been staging weekly protests throughout the country. The wide scope of demands encompasses political claims such as dissolving the Parliament, the government and the constitution, social demands including access to housing and free education, economic demands such as better wages and access to jobs, and cultural demands, notably the recognition of Tamazight as a national language. In a nutshell, the activists want to see truly representative institutions and a modern political regime in which the King reigns, but does not rule (Salime, 2012).

There were rows and rows of women on the streets of Yemen in full black veils representing the voice of women within their country, there were women protesting in Bagdad, Iraq or in Bahrain calling for a change. During the uprising, women expressed themselves in the public as demonstrators, mothers, and breadwinners.

Although the revolutions started with men and women standing side-by-side against the government forces as equals, the demonstrations were not always safe for women, sometimes paying the price for

participation with their bodies. Female activists were harassed, assaulted, violated, and subjected to various forms of violence. The idea was to intimidate women and keep them out of demonstrations. According to Khamis (2011), International Women's Day march in Egypt, which was supposed to attract a million women to rally for women's right, only managed to get five hundred women out to the square. They were shouted at by some men who told them to 'go back to the kitchen'.

In Tunisia, when the country's female lawyers appeared in demonstrations together with their male homologues on 6 January became victims of sexual harassment or rape at the hands of the security forces. The target for the gendered violence was mostly (devalued) women in poorer areas, but it can be inferred that the regime was trying to send a clear, systematic message of dissuasion to the emphasized woman lest they be next in line for such acts (Johansson-Nogues, 2013).

In Libya, hundreds of other women were raped during the conflict, many more were kidnapped. The systematic sexual abuse of women by Gaddafi forces was to bring shame and dishonor to families within the religiously conservative country. Aggression towards women in Libya was used to humiliate the male enemy and to compromise his male honor. As the intra-Libyan conflict wore on, the fear of rape would prompt many women to flee the country. The International Federation of Human Rights and the Tunisian Association of the Democratic Women documented testimonies by Libyan female refugees who overwhelmingly stated that it was not the war and armed violence that had caused them to flee, but rather their fear of being sexually assaulted by Gaddafi's forces. Another concern that such interviews reveal is the attendant consequences of sexual violence: rape victims may be killed by male family members to restore family honor, while some men might even resort to killing their female relatives in order to prevent rape. International media, for their part, picked up on the case of Iman Al-Obeidi, a lawyer from Benghazi who burst in on a set of foreign journalists gathered in a hotel in Tripoli in March 2011, relating her horrors at the hands of Gaddafi's troops. Al-Obeidi was arrested by security forces while still speaking to the journalists present, and in later statements by the government she was accused of being drunk, a prostitute or mentally ill, and threatened with defamation proceedings in a clear attempt to undermine her personal credibility (Johansson-Norgues, 2013).

In conservative Egypt, where most women endured daily street sexual harassment in silence, the regime was determined to fondle and grope women in the hope it would shame them back home. Instead, women held up their skirts torn into pieces for the media to see. It's one thing to be groped and harassed by passers-by, but when the state gropes you, it gives a green light that you are fair game. Furthermore, Egyptian female demonstrators were forced to take virginity tests. In case of refusal, women were accused of prostitution. This only shows the extent to which women's sexuality is used to keep them marginalized and silenced within society.

Amar (2011) reports how on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 in Egypt, the women demonstrators were violently attacked by the state-paid thugs who dispersed the demonstration and reportedly detained at least 19 female protestors. The women were taken to different state dependencies and subsequently subjected to torture, sexually degrading treatment and so-called virginity tests. The women were sexualized and had their respectability wiped out: not just by innuendo and accusation, but literally, by sexually assaulting them in public and by arresting them as prostitutes, registering them in court records and press accounts as sex criminals and then raping and sexually torturing them in jail.

Women did not only face sexual abuse from state, but also from male demonstrators. When the famous Egyptian feminist Nawal Al Saadawi went to Tahrir Square in an effort to raise awareness about the necessity of having a parallel fight for women's rights in Egypt, that move was not welcomed by many in the square, who considered it either inappropriate or at least badly timed (Khamis, 2011). In 2012, mass sexual assaults in downtown Cairo targeted girls and women during a religious festival. The police watched and did nothing. The state denied the assaults took place, but bloggers at the scene exposed that lie; this encouraged women to speak out (Abdullatif, 2013).

For many Arab women, their anonymity is an important aspect of their lives, therefore many women turned to the internet not only to voice their concerns but also to expose government and male wrongdoings during the revolution. The internet provided a safe platform without worrying about the backlash from their families and authorities that might create. Along with this, within an online

community, gender and sexuality are protected and women's role on social media during the Arab Spring cannot be underestimated.

The main issue with much of the information related to women in the Arab world revolves around letting others know what is affecting women. This is to educate others of the problems and dilemmas women face, at the national and international level. For example, Mona Eltahwy's article on the issue of forced virginity tests on female protestors in the 'hope it would shame them back home', gained a lot of media attention, unlike the sexual assaults that occurred in Cairo years before the Arab Spring, which wasn't mentioned in mainstream media even though it sparked a huge social networking campaign (Abdullatif, 2013).

Women's participation in the Arab Spring was remarkable and not given the attention that it deserves. There were issues that united them with their male co-demonstrators – to 'end the regime'. Yet, there were gender specific issues that separated women from their male colleagues. Women fell into two categories in this. The first was fighting for a regime change and didn't want gender to be part of the revolution, hoping that the regime change will also bring changes to women's lives. The second, used the revolution as an opportunity to fight for improvements for women now. Women in Egypt, Libya and other parts of the Middle East understood that little will be done to improve women's position in the society, from the right to work outside home or drive a car to sexual abuse and violence, unless women are included in the decision making. For example, as in Libya, the Karama organization maintained that 'the new Libya will fail to eradicate many of the abuses and discrimination perpetuated by the former regime without a strong commitment to responding to the legitimate demands of women' (Johansson, 2013).

### **The Results of the Arab Spring on Women's Position**

In the wake of the Arab Spring, a number of Arab countries are now experiencing political transitions from revolution to democracy. However, the Arab Spring countries are not all at the same stage of the transitional process. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, despots and life-long rulers were toppled in response to peoples' loud calls of "down with the regime." In Syria and Bahrain, and, to a much lesser extent, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, popular demands are being crushed or co-opted by ruling autocrats and monarchs.

The autocratic regimes were replaced by transitional councils, boards, and committees. Political parties mushroomed once they were allowed to form and compete. Islamists started gaining ground, and the role of religion in the new states started taking shape in elections. Skepticism grew as the uprisings appeared to be opening a window of opportunity for Islamist and Salafist parties of varying religiosity to step-in and takeover – or rather, hijack – the revolts. Indeed, the uprisings unleashed the powers and influence of these religiously-led groups, which have been repressed under the ancient régimes. Lacking visible leadership and failing to organize, the uprisings opened a vacuum in governance, which the moderate Islamists and extremist Salafists quickly filled. Thus, women's apprehensions of Islamists have risen as they are perceived to be antithetical to women and hostile to their assumption of leadership positions. To add insult to injury, democratically-held elections gave Islamist parties the upper hand with a majority vote: in Egypt's parliament 72 percent and Tunisia's constituent assembly 40 percent. Even when these parties nominate women –per legislated quotas – female representation remains tokenistic and cosmetic, at best, in terms of its effectiveness – an issue of quantity versus quality (Kassem 2012). Similarly, after the 2011 elections in Morocco, there were 60 women and 345 male representatives in the Moroccan Parliament. Additionally, there was a sharp reduction of the women members of the Moroccan government from seven to one (Salime, 2012).

Saudi Arabia has leapt ahead of almost all other Gulf Co-operation Council states by introducing a 20% quota for women in Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia (Majlis Al-Shura). Although the Assembly has limited power, it was a huge step forward in women's political participation. In Oman, only 1.3% of the elected Majlis Al-Shura are women; none in Qatar, and 11 out of 40 in Bahrain. Kuwait has four female MPs, three of those elected, and in the UAE, just seven of the 40 members of the Federal National Council are women.

As the dictators fell, the political parties that have been allowed to form are conceivably more concerned with consolidating their foothold than with fulfilling women's aspirations for gender equality. Such an item lies low on their agendas, especially those of conservative and extremist parties with high religiosity. In addition, women were soon less likely to participate in politics once the Islamist parties were gaining popularity. Khamis (2011) highlights the fact that the number of women who were nominating themselves for the upcoming parliamentary elections in Egypt was fewer than the number of women who were nominated in the previous parliamentary elections under Mubarak.

The 2011 Egyptian parliamentary elections produced a doomsday scenario for women. Female representation dropped from 12 percent to less than 2 percent. Moreover, four out of the nine women who won in elections are affiliated with the Islamist Freedom and Justice Party. These women are not gender-sensitive or women-friendly. They called for strict adherence to shari'a and for revisiting The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), family laws, and laws related to violence against women (Kassem 2012). The share of female members of the constituent assembly in Tunisia was maintained at around 27 percent. This was the highest among the Arab countries until Algeria surpassed it in May 2012 with female representation standing at 31.4 percent.

In Morocco, the share of female MPs grew from 10.7 percent to 17 percent. Both Tunisia and Morocco withdrew reservations to CEDAW in the post-2011 period. In Morocco, the prime minister stood by his promise not to impose Islamic dress or the veil on women. In Libya, the 2012 elections saw more than 600 Libyan women running for elections to the General National Congress and obtaining 33 seats out of 200 (16%). However, subsequently only two women ministers (of 40) were appointed in the new Libyan cabinet, and the presence of women in the Congress has elicited concerns on the part of certain male parliamentarians about men and women 'mixing' in public (Johansson-Norgues, 2013). In Syria, women have only three out of 72 seats in the new Syrian Opposition Coalition (Ibnouf, 2013). In Kuwait, the 2012 "Arab-Spring" Parliament did not produce female members. In fact, women lost the four seats gained in the 2009 assembly (Olimat, 2012). By far, Islamists were the biggest winners in Kuwaiti in the 2012 elections, when they won over half of the assembly's seats.

That means the number of women in national parliaments and cabinets in the transitional governments is significantly smaller than that in the pre-revolution governments. The election campaigns and results show that parties support women's leadership when it is in their interest to do so even by overlooking traditions or shari'a. They often look at women as a "symbol of the modern and change", hoping to gain women's votes by promising token seats for women in the parliaments.

As soon as the countries had their new parliaments elected, women quickly saw that they were again marginalized and left out of decision making and drafting the new constitutions. Women have made their voice heard in the Arab Spring revolutions at many levels; however, the 'gains' for women in terms of gender roles can be lost in the post-revolutions period, when 'going back to normal' is the priority (Ibnouf, 2013) The hope for change that had lit bright during the Arab Spring was quickly fading and there was a growing worry that countries are slipping back into pre-revolutionary era.

For example, according to Kassem (2012), as soon as the major uprisings cooled down, female activists were sent back home by the male-dominated political arena. Their previously gained rights were threatened: khul' (divorce) law, age of marriage for girls, female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt, return to polygamy in Libya (and possibly Tunisia), and even doing away with CEDAW and its emphasis on gender equality. Furthermore, the media focus has been on ultra-conservative religious groups with their backward, "dark age" views of women, brainwashing a large proportion of the 97 percent of Egyptians who get their information from television.

Tunisia's 2012 draft constitution is openly ambiguous about safeguarding women's equality in public and private spheres and about guaranteeing non-discrimination of women in the economic, social or legal spheres (United Nations, 2013). Moreover, women in the street have been harassed for their dress codes, for smoking, for drinking, for walking unaccompanied by male relatives or for participating in different types of protest marches. At different Tunisian universities, there have been incidents in which 'individuals have tried to impose religious dress on unveiled students and teachers and, in some cases, used violence and intimidation', while others report violence against veiled students (Ben Hassine, 2012).



Egyptian legal experts as well as United Nations (UN) specialists are in agreement that the male-drafted Egyptian Constitution, adopted in December 2012, did not prevent discrimination against women or safeguard the limited women's rights inherent in the PSL (e.g. marriage age, divorce, inheritance or the right to pass on citizenship to their children) (Johansson-Nogues, 2013) Similarly, Libyan or Yemeni opposition groups that negotiated the transition after the fall of Moammar Qaddafi and Ali Saleh did not include any women.

In the newly-elected Egyptian parliament, there has been a call for the decriminalization of female genital mutilation, for lowering the age of marriage for girls from 18 to 14, and for the abolition of a woman's right to file for divorce. Oddly enough, one of the MPs behind these calls was Azza al-Garaf, a woman member of the Muslim Brotherhood party (Esfandiari, 2012).

The male respect that women demonstrators from all walks of life reported from the anti-Mubarak Tahrir protests also appears to have vanished. Women's organizations report that sexual harassment in the streets is on the rise in Egypt, independently of whether the women being victimized are dressed in a Western style or wearing either the hijab (headscarf) or the niqab (only revealing the eyes). In addition, numerous acts of sexual violence have been committed against female journalists or participants in demonstration marches against the Muslim Brotherhood government. (Johansson-Nogues, 2013). Heba Morayef, the Egyptian director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch, notes that when such attacks have been reported to the authorities there 'has been zero response' in terms of finding the culprits or prosecuting them (Voice of America, 2013).

Similarly, El Baradei and Wafa (2013) state that there is a general perception that women are losing many of their earlier won rights, those gained before the revolution, and there is a general set-back in their footing in society. Evidence to that effect include, in no specific ranking order: the increasing incidence and violence of sexual harassment cases reported against women on the streets, the diminishing role of the National Council of Women that was earlier headed by the first lady of Egypt whose husband – president Mubarak - was toppled through the Revolution, the abolishment of the quota system in parliament, the heightened voices of the extremist Islamists groups with views totally against active women participation in society and in the public sphere, and the poor performance of some of the women Islamists political party members in the first post revolution parliament with outrageous views against liberal women's rights.

Violence against women has also been a factor in Libya. Newspapers report that 'sexual harassment is used as a strategy to intimidate and threaten women who want to be politically active. Women are being beaten and arrested, harassed, and subjected to virginity tests and body searches. They are being chased out of public squares and polling stations on the basis that, being women, they should not mingle with men in public (Tripoli Post, 2013). Women's help centers, such as one managed by the nongovernmental organization Voice of Libyan Women, have also been targeted for acts of vandalism. However, such attacks go largely unreported as well as unnoticed, given that there are no specific laws to protect women from acts of violence and hence victims have no way of seeking redress from the authorities. (Johansson-Nogues, 2013). The new Libyan interim leader, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, announced that restrictions on polygamy will be lifted from Libyan law. He faced a barrage of protests by women, forcing the Libyan interim prime minister, Abdel Rahim Al-Kib, to be more nuanced by remarking that women have an important role to play in the new Libya (Esfandiari, 2012).

With the rise of Islamist parties and their electoral successes at the ballot boxes, the most intense hegemonic-masculinity discourses have so far emanated from many of the post-revolutionary countries. Although the overall picture looks grey, there are a few examples from the Arab Spring where women had some of their pleas answered.

The most important changes took place in Saudi Arabia, which together with Vatican City, were the last countries in this world not allowing women to vote. In 2011, as a result of Arab Spring, the Saudi King Abdullah granted women's suffrage and the right to run as candidates in local elections in 2015. But perhaps the most important step for women, since the Arab Awakening, has been that the Saudi Labor Ministry has redoubled its efforts to get Saudi women, who now make up over 60 percent of university graduates, into the workforce. In June 2011, King Abdullah ordered owners of lingerie shops to replace

all their male salesclerks – mostly expatriate men – with Saudi female clerks. He gave them until January 2012 to implement the order, which was done. This step opened hundreds of jobs to women, and they are set to soon replace male clerks in cosmetic stores as well. Increasingly, too, women are getting more opportunities in the higher education sector, with females now able to study law, engineering, pharmacy, and architecture at some Saudi universities. In addition, a significant percentage of Saudis studying overseas on government scholarships are women. Finally, the new head of the “morals police” (the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a force that famously patrols public places such as shopping malls to enforce gender segregation and modest dress), has announced that his officers would no longer harass women for not covering their faces. Now, those who choose not to cover their faces will not be harangued (Murphy, 2012).

In other Middle Eastern countries, women were also able to break into political circles and make a change. Tunisia was one such example, where the transitional government invited Lilia Labidi, the most eminent scholar on gender issues in the Maghreb, to join the cabinet. She lived up to her reputation, and among the changes she introduced was removing the objection to a number of articles in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Esfandiari, 2012).

In more general terms, women as a result of the Arab Spring are not voiceless anymore, and are more vocal in their demands. They are more connected with regional and global networks within civil societies. They are aware that they can tap into global support for gender equality. Indeed, women are more organized, assertive, and aggressive in their demands (Kassem 2012). This is irreversible. The civil resistance gave women an opportunity to break through the ceiling of fear and silence, which are the two greatest threats to freedom, dignity, peace, and social justice (Ali and Macharia, 2013). Furthermore, some topics such as sexual harassment are no longer taboo to talk about voice via social media. Thanks to social media, abuses and violence against women gains more attention than it has ever before.

Although Middle Eastern women felt empowered through their participation in the revolution and a few changes have been made, there is still more that needs to be done in order for their voices to be valued and listened to in a legal and political context.

## CONCLUSION

While most of their demands are yet to be fulfilled, such as the inclusion of women in the government and an end to police brutality, overall, the people were able to break through the glass ceiling of fear and intimidation. The fall of the regime does not yet signal the attainment of "bread, freedom, and dignity"; rather it marks the beginning of a long continuous journey toward a sustainable development and culture of peace (Ali and Macharia, 2013). The journey for women's rights has just began in the Middle East and the Arab Spring was the perfect opportunity for change. Change however needs to be continuous. Arab Spring should not be viewed as a static event in the past but rather a catalyst for radical change. The female activism in the Middle East faces obstacles unimaginable to the rest of the world and hence the least that can be done is to give voice to women in the Middle East, hence the purpose of this article.

Overall, a grey cloud hangs over the future of women's rights in the countries of the Arab Awakening. The Islamists feel emboldened and will try to use their newly gained votes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Kuwait to limit women's rights and push for the implementation of the shari'a. Tribal customs not hospitable to gender equality might reemerge (Esfandiari, 2012). On the other hand, there are also indications of Islamists' gradual fall out of favor with the public (e.g. in Egypt and Tunisia), which may result in more favorable position for women in the society.

Recent years have seen changes in the discourse on women among male religious scholars, as well as an increasingly vocal presence of Muslim feminists. Pragmatically speaking, activists are using Islam as a basis to argue for more legal rights for women by reinterpreting Islamic religious texts and Muslim feminist scholars are working to integrate their belief in gender equality with their religion. Moreover, the presence of female activists has become much more noticeable in Islamist social services and charitable organizations (El-Husseini, 2015).

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