

Review

To Arab women: Golden opportunity to stand-up for your rights

Fatma Osman Ibnouf

Assistant Professor, Development Studies and Research Institute (DSRI), University of Khartoum P.O. Box 321, Khartoum, Postal Code 11115, Khartoum, Sudan.
E-mail: fatma_ibnouf@hotmail.com; Tel: 00249 918104669

Accepted 12 October, 2020

This is a revolutionary time for Arab women to stand strong for their rights. Women have been able to make major contributions to the uprisings in Arab world. Their contributions were highly visible as they received wide media publicity. What has been achieved by women in these revolutions and the changes that women have been contributed to make in these countries, is a great lesson for Arab women, themselves, if bringing down is impossible? Critically, it is the right time for Arab women to create and implement a road map for achieving meaningful change and to take concrete steps towards achieving their human rights. Inspired by the Arab Spring, women have already made extraordinary strides in achieving some rights even in Arab countries other than Arab Spring-affected countries. For instance, for the first time ever Saudi women would be given a right to vote in local elections. However, women must be able to take part in transition processes, especially the writing of the new constitutions. Women need to be more involved and to represent themselves at all levels of decision making and to sensitize those in positions of power to their rights and concerns. Women's interests, needs, and priorities have to be mainstreamed in the national plans and strategies, and thus they might succeed to benefit from the Arab spring to establish a real process of gender mainstreaming as the process of rebuilding the nation in the Arab spring's aftermath.

Keywords: Arab Women, Arab Spring Revolutions, Women Rights.

INTRODUCTION

More than a year since a young man Mohamed Bouazizi, the street vendor, in Tunisia set himself on fire in 17th of December 2011 in protest against impossible livelihood conditions and mistreatment by the police-officer. His singular sacrifice ignited a revolution that launched waves of revolts, demonstrations and political upheavals across the Arab world and even the "Occupy Wall Street Movement" in New York inspired by Arab Spring events. There has been much written about the role of women in Arab spring revolutions, since most of these revolts lead by women and the youth. International discourses and media reports both agreed that women have played

central roles in these uprisings, from Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia to Peaceful Revolution in Yemen. Women continue to play the exact positive roles in Syria uprising currently sweeping. Working side by side, marching together, men and women were equal partners in every aspect of these revolutions. Consequently, they had successfully toppled the authoritarian regimes that ruled for tens of years. Life across the region has improved following the Arab Spring, nonetheless such change brings with it mixed possibilities for women. Will women be better off or worse off after the Arab revolutions? This remains subject to be debated for years. Behind the

debates are some fundamental questions that need to be given the specific attention. Will women be able to reap the fruits of the Arab spring revolutions and make a difference regarding their positions and rights in these patriarchal societies Arab region has always been known to be male dominant? And then who is better placed to solve or handle women's problems or can make or influence changes than women themselves?

The female presence in the Arab Spring

Women's presences in the Arab uprising were very visible and well reported by television channels, observers, and the media. Women have been active participants in these revolutions and sacrificed their lives and the life of their beloved ones while on uprisings. Women dominated the front lines in protests and revolts and they were very much affected and a part of revolutions in different capacities. Many women served behind the scenes and in supportive roles. Without the presence of women, victory would not have been possible (Heideman and Youssef, 2012). Many women as men were beaten, risking, arrested, and even losing their lives in these revolutions. Furthermore, women have been suffered more than men during these uprisings. This is because rape and sexual harassment had been used as tools of repression against female protestors by the previous regimes' militia and supporters. The famous case of a Libyan young woman Iman Al-Obedi who told the world she was raped by Qaddafi regime's fighters. These attempts to stop the women had backfired. The abuses angered many other women, including housewives and young mothers carrying babies demonstrating for the first time, and created more magnificently support than ever before. Thousands of Libyan women were demonstrated on the streets in Benghazi when Iman Al-Obedi was tackled by government security guards and bundled away. The brutal treatment of Egyptian woman by military-police in Tahrir Square has been a key motivation behind the biggest women's demonstration in modern Egyptian history as the historians called.

More than a year has passed since the Arab Spring and the winds of change continue to blow all over the Arab world. Notwithstanding what long-term effects will the Arab Spring uprisings have on women status in the region – in terms of whether ongoing political change will results in wellbeing and empowerment of women in their respective countries, Will it improve their stereotypical image and their socio-economic situations? Will it enhance women's presence in the decision-making process? Do women's participations, however, have been shown to influence the overall achievements of Arab Spring? Will the Arab spring revolutions bring changes for women are raising increasing debates regarding women benefits, positions and rights, resulting in conflicting

viewpoints. Some argue that women are in a better position after the Arab Spring. The results of the Doha Debates poll (2012) shows that 8 in 10 people believe Arab Spring revolution will improve women's status. Some perceive that women's voices are silenced and their contributions are marginalized, they argued that their status has not been changed since the revolution. Egyptian activist says "the revolution has only benefited men". The train of change has not only left Egyptian women behind, but has in fact turned against them (Heideman and Youssef, 2012). Some women look anxiously at what has happened in Iraq, where the overthrow of the oppressive regime does not seem to have helped Iraqi women so far. Some claim that women are eager to reap the rewards of full political participation in their respective countries. Critics have argued that currently men are dominating the public and political scene in Arab Spring countries.

This is a journey that has only just begun

This article focuses on how women should invest these transitions to make the systemic changes which will transform the status of women in the Arab region. Although the current situation might not be perfect, however these revolutions are an opportunity for women to move forward to make the desire change in the long run. There is no way for women after these revolutions to accept status quo when it is really unfair and should continue demonstrations to develop their full potential and to achieve ideal situation. Thus, women are expected to play significant role in other very revolutionary changes in these male-dominated societies. The Arab spring revolutions open opportunities for women to strengthen their presence in all spheres of life (public, political, economic, and also social and cultural affairs). There are real opportunities for women who are waging the battle for change in their respective countries to take their rightful place in these transitioning societies. Much needs to be achieved to improve their situation in all spheres of life. Economic and social justice and legal reform centered on the needs and rights of women and institutions that will enable equality as well as guarantee rights. Creating a collective identity, a profound sense of unity of purpose, share experiences, a fierce determination and work together to make positive change are essential for making significant steps. The sooner this begins the better. However, many challenges lie ahead for positive and meaningful changes. While the revolutions form a necessary baseline principle of social transformation, their implementation is completely dependent on women will to proceed and to be agents of change in their community. To proceed, women need to hijack this opportunity to reassurance that the advance women rights of any kind in the region are doable. This can be acted as a pressure tactic and thus states will be

forced to respond. The revolutions provide opportunity for women to raise their voices for themselves and the ones who cannot speak and demand change policies, especially in issues that affect their lives. If women voices are not heard, their needs and priorities will not be addressed with the urgency they deserve.

The immediate impacts of Arab Spring

The impact of these changes has been and will continue to be spread in the Arab region sooner or later although it may take a variety of forms in different countries. The impact of these changes has already started in the region. The frontline role played by women in the Arab Spring has forced the respect and appreciation of their rights within transformed countries and the entire region as well. In Tunisia after Jasmine Revolution, it has been decided that political parties will submit lists of candidates comprising of 50% women for the next parliamentary elections. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2011), the Arab States have the lowest average levels of women in Parliament at 10.7%, compared to a global average of 18.4%. The Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that higher numbers of women in parliament generally contributes to stronger attention to women's issues. Arab Spring benefits Saudi Arabia's women; they have been granted the right to vote for the first time ever. According to Libyan political expert the revolution had removed the threat of systematic sexual harassment and abuse of Libyan women at the hands of the previous regime and the National Transitional Council in Libya had taken steps to ensure that women were participating in politics. National Council for Women (NCW) has been re-establishing in Egypt after 25th January revolution. These new golden opportunities will allow the emergence of women leaders and more successful women.

No change possible without women

"No country can benefit if it leaves half of its country behind," said Melanne Verveer, United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Women must be at the heart of all transition efforts as any endeavor cannot be succeeded that does not bring all relevant stakeholders on board and take into account 50% of the population. The history indicates no change possible without women. Historically, Arab women were participated in the nationalist struggle against colonialism and constituted essential and active parts of the national revolutions that led to independence of their countries. However they were completely marginalized after the independence. Women missed the opportunity to increase their rights in the post-independence period. Today's women are different and definitely do not want the history to repeat itself. If women are going to take part

in the society transition for their future they need to keep an eye on the lessons of the past. A breakdown of structures creates opportunities for reconstruction. Women have to take hand in rebuilding and transforming their countries, even in the countries not reached by the Arab spring revolutions. Women learned from these revolutions that joint work are much more effective in affecting change. The rise of the Islamists in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions has worried some women and liberal parties who fear a decline in women's rights. Sharia will be the main source of legislation in these countries. However, Islam has guaranteed men and women their human rights and duties as individuals in an equal degree. Islam explicitly stands for gender justice and equips women with all the rights given to men. Many of the derogatory laws and customs in Islamic countries are, unfortunately, justified in the name of Islam or have been introduced as Islamic laws when clearly they are retrograde customs and traditions, or ill-informed interpretations that bear no relation to the divine design (Weiss, 2003).

Strive for excellence

Women need to coordinate their efforts and link socioeconomic with political demands, so they can force much-needed change. It is not a onetime effort; it needs proper follow up based on women's action plans. Although, there were a variety of efforts which failed to lead to change, however this is because they were not preceded by a study of the big picture. But how to make the real changes come true? The approach that women shall use in the future to create the depth of the change they want should be based on clear understanding of the issues that need urgent actions; due analysis of the environment; mapping the situation is an important part of the change strategic planning; needs to include collection of accurate information regarding different women groups (without reliable statistics it is difficult to make a plea for activities that seek to make proper change); the barriers that affect and prevent stability of change; priorities for addressing the needs within the context of the country; changes that are culturally sensitive; resources that are appropriate and fit for the task of change; building and enhancing leadership capacities among local women in the community; considering the global picture and exploring the successful examples of change; working to achieve clear and achievable goals and objectives within a specific timeframe; with a plan to monitor and evaluate the impact of the actions undertaken. One question however pops up here: who should lead the changes in the next phase? The educated and illiterate women, from the grassroots to the professionals, women from both lower and middle strata, who have been crucial figures among the protesters, stood side-by-side with their male counterparts at Change Squares all over Arab countries,

demanding the end of authoritarian regimes and demonstrating for freedom of their countries, and sending great lessons to the whole world. These women should remain vital figures in leading change and respond as one to common challenges to build a future free from discrimination. Thus, it can be said that women reap the fruits of these revolts. Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt, the authors of 'Megatrends for Women' write male or female, the effective leader wins commitment by setting an example of excellence. Women have been recognized as engines of changes in these revolutions. Change must be seen as an unending process – defined not by fixed goals or the specific methods of achieving them. But by an approach to create change through continuous efforts to ensure that positive change is occurred in every aspect of women's life. There is a need for women to focus on establishing constructive use of their power to strive for excellence. Women have to break down systematically the myths surrounding their existence. There is a great potential that Arab Spring women will surprise the world and setting examples of excellence again with the quick actions for sensitizing their society and changing of deep rooted cultures and traditions and sensitizing those in positions of power to their concerns.

Getting ready for resistance

Women have been socialized into traditional roles in Arab region (dominated societies). For long time women in such society, even the ordinary ones, are aware that their rights are violated. Such women just lack the means to achieve it sometimes or find that it is too big and difficult to accomplish unless it is put in a tangible way. Participation in these uprisings encouraged women breaking their silence and caused women to know, stand up and fight for their rights of any kind, which includes advocacy, politics, policies and decision making. Women whose reality is much more deep-set marginalization, they will likely fighting for better positions and justice. Thus, women need to keep swimming against the society tide and keep pushing against the gender barriers they face. Resistance actions like these only underscore the importance of encouraging women to advocate for themselves and their rights. The positions of women have changed as a result of the Arab spring revolutions, from submissive and powerless to vocal and effectiveness. This proves that if women are strong enough however, their concerns will be taken into account in policies or processes affecting them. Women in many Arab countries are denied their right to equal citizenship, since the nationality law emphasizes that nationality is acquired only through the father. Woman in such countries, who marries a foreign man, is still denied the right to pass her nationality to her children and husband. The foreign spouse of such a woman and her children are considered

as foreigners by the official authorities; they have not granted a permanent residency, they cannot secure a job without a work permit, and they do not have access to public education and health services. Women proved that they can change the situation which they are forced to take in their communities. Thus, Arab women should coordinate among themselves to push for reforming legal regulations and national rules to enjoy their right to equal citizenship. Often, women do not have spaces in which to reflect their opinions and thus, using social networking will allow them to seize their spaces to reflect their viewpoints, discuss their concerns and encourage dialogue with officials.

Arab Women lead the change

Women surprising the world by defying their stereotype as victims of oppressive patriarchies and they have made their presence a defining feature of the Arab spring revolutions. Women have been emerged as leaders creating positive change for their respective countries. Arab uprisings enhanced the ability of women to involve and to make better use of their full capacity and helped them to realize their full potentials. There are examples of powerful women who were represented extraordinary instruments of change and have played very important and influential roles within and beyond the borders of their countries. Despite constraints and pressure from society, those women have been vital forces for change, managed to break the limits and achieve what they want bringing freedom back to their societies. A Tunisian teaching assistant of linguistics at Tunis University and a blogger, Lina Ben Mhenni, was the first who share information about the Tunisian uprisings in early December 2010 through Twitter and her blogs. The Yemeni activist Tawakul Karman, who was awarded the International Women of Courage Award and she is a one of the three recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, has been a leading figure in the prodemocracy demonstrations in Yemen. Laureate Karman of Yemen has been, with many Yemeni women, camped out for a long period in Change Square, called to overthrow the Yemeni regime. She is known to some as the "Mother of the Revolution". A young Egyptian woman Asmaa Mahfouz who now calls "Leader of the Revolution" on 18th of January 2011 uploaded a short YouTube video called for one-day demonstration. The video went viral and the one-day demonstration became a popular revolution.

The train of democracy has arrived and it is better for women to get on board

So, where do women fit in this era of political change? It is important for women to be looking and intervening in the large political sphere where they usually are

excluded. Those who would be able to take part in these revolutions of change need to work for bringing about change in the political structures in their countries. Which methodologies can help women perceive themselves more as political subjects? The women have opportunity today to organize themselves in political parties, not unions or organizations. The traditional women's organizations and associations were and will not be able to take up the challenge. Needless to say these political parties will promote avenues for increased women participation in the political process. Some may see it not an easy task. But none of any of these waves of revolutions were foreseen just one year ago that brought down four sit-tight rulers. Conversely, women have traditionally been important in investing in the community, what Robert Putnam has called "social capital" – the neighborhoods, social networking, and civil society organizations that help communities work. Therefore, women will be able to create strong political parties, if they have tried to be a key player in the country's transition to democracy. Without strong and dynamic political parties democracy and freedom cannot survive. The question is how well women political parties perform and gain public confidence; especially in countries where they face the influence of the cultural norms. Women's success experiences in similar patriarchal societies may represent important lessons for women in deciding what might work best in their country context. Although, benefiting from the others experiences is necessary however, establishing a new method based on situation emerged after these revolutions is essential. For real change to take place there needs to be cooperation between those at the grassroots and those at the top. Women's participation and perspectives definitely make political process more comprehensive. As the First Lady of Lebanon argues "The woman who raises children on the values and principles of tolerance and cooperation should not be deprived from taking part in making these moral principles a trend in politics". The UN fifth Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar states: "Where women's views and experiences are absent, the political process remains incomplete".

Lessons learned from success experiences

The success stories of Liberia and Rwanda may give valuable lessons to the women in Arab countries. In the aftermath of Liberia conflict, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a joint winner of 2011's Nobel peace prize, emerged as the first female elected head of state in Africa, with the strong support of women weary from years of war. The Liberians elected Ellen because they believe that it will take a woman to fix Liberia. In Rwanda, women made major contributions towards the peaceful resolution of years of conflict. Rwandan women are giving the position they deserve in political life, where currently over fifty percent

of parliamentarians are women. With the increasing number of women, totaling to 56.3 % in the lower house and 34.6% in the upper house or senate, Rwanda is ranked number one in women empowerment. The increased number of women in decision making positions has made a difference and helping in closing the gender gaps in different sectors. The national gender policy in Rwanda concentrated on achieving gender equality through strategic actions and programs which integrated gender mainstreaming into all stages of their process. The preceding review of examples of women in parts of Africa seems to suggest some convergence on the range of practical solutions for women in aftermath of Arab spring.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel

But there is a huge gap between words and deeds when the issues have to be addressed. Experience has showed however that it is a real challenge to make these changes lasting. If they have more support from the general public the future leaders who certainly learnt from the history, will listen to the majority. The example of Arab spring revolutions serve to show the women the road forward and the steps that need to be taken. Popular movements, satellite channels, and social communication websites are methods that gained more publicity and proved to be more efficient than the other then there is a chance that they will be more successful. Women must not miss an opportunity to use these effective instruments. These instruments will be acted as a pressure tactics and the state will be forced to respond. What evidence should I conclude with better than the poetry of the Arab revolutions, which is the most famous poem of a Tunisian poet Abu Al-qasim Al-shabi "If the people will to live ... providence is destined to favorably respond ... and night is destined to fold ... and the chains are certain to be broken ... and who has not embraced the love of life ... will evaporate in its atmosphere and disappear".

REFERENCES

- Doha Debates poll (2012). Will women be worse off after the Arab Revolutions? www.thedohadebates.com
- Heideman K, Youssef M (2012). Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring. Middle East Program Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/International%20Women's%20Day%202012_1.pdf
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (2011). *WOMEN IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS*. <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>
- Putnam RD (2001). Social Capital: Measurement and Consequences. *Isuma: Can. J. Policy Res.* 2: 41-51.
- Weiss AM (2003). Interpreting Islam and Women's Rights: Implementing CEDAW in Pakistan. *INT. SOCIOL.* 18(3): 581-601.