Arab Spring and the Contribution of Arab Women: Expectations and Concerns.

Isam M Shihada
Al Aqsa University, Gaza Strip, Palestine

Abstract

The Arab Spring seems to represent a new era of emancipation for women in the Arab world. Yet, it remains to be seen whether women will be afforded the opportunity to play substantial roles in the futures of their respective countries, or whether they will be marginalized, secluded and silenced. In this paper, I try to examine and chronicle roles played by Arab women during Arab Spring, the concerns and challenges they face and what strategies women should adopt to ensure their rights, in post-revolutionary periods. The researcher also argues how the new model of young women leaders like Ms. Karman and Asmaa Mahfouz deconstructs the prevalent narratives concerning the representation of Arab women which centers upon notions of women's sexuality, reductionist interpretations of religion and Orientalist representation of women to justify women's subordination. Finally, this paper concludes with the fundamental questions which need to be answered and the strategies which should be adopted regarding whether and how Arab women will indeed benefit from the ongoing change in the Middle East.

Keywords: The Middle East, Arab Spring, Arab women, Role, Empowerment, Challenges.
Introduction

In December 2010, the world turned its attention to Tunisia after a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire to protest the government's unjust treatment of the Tunisian people. His self-immolation sparked what is now called the “Arab Spring” which led to the fall of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen while others may fall in Syria, Bahrain and Sudan. In the Arab world, thousands of women have taken to streets protesting for change and freedom after enduring centuries of oppression where, in several contexts, they have been deprived of social, economic and educational equality, freedom of speech and the right to participate in elections. Women's engagement in the Arab Spring negates the myths that Arabs cannot establish civil and democratic societies without resorting to violence and that they are incompatible with democracy.

The Arab Spring seems to represent a new era of emancipation for women in the Arab world. Yet, it remains to be seen whether women will be afforded the opportunity to play substantial roles in the futures of their respective countries, or whether they will be marginalized, secluded and silenced. In other words, fundamental questions need to be answered regarding whether women will indeed benefit from the ongoing change in the Middle East. Hence, in this paper, I try to examine and chronicle roles played by Arab women during Arab Spring, the concerns and challenges they face and what strategies women should adopt to ensure their rights, in post-revolutionary periods.

Arab Spring: Causes

In the Arab world, dictators, from Hosni Mubarak in Egypt to Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, have accumulated enormous wealth earned by plundering foreign aid budgets, lavish military weapons contracts and corruption. Power is also being centralized where they use secret police to terrorize, kill and counter any dissent to keep the people cowed and under complete control. For example, in Egypt, we find that feelings of humiliation, lack of democracy and endemic destitution (or literally an absence of bread), have driven them to rise up and revolt against the oppressive Egyptian regime which has deprived people of their freedom, dignity, and basic daily needs and violated their rights. Within this context, Ashraf Ezzat argues that Egyptians don’t even have to get arrested to feel degraded; all they have to do is to, queue up in a long line that could drag out for hours just to buy a loaf of bread or sign the endless papers to apply for an ID card or a driving license or wait their turn to get examined in a hospital which has no beds or medication for them. Moreover, the Egyptian regime has “a million and half well-trained soldiers whose sole mission is to keep the Egyptian people down.” For instance, during the Egyptian revolution, the military has killed protesters, persecuted and imprisoned thousands of them including women. We see that most of protesters, in Egypt, are young women, men and university students who find themselves with neither hope nor future since they are unable to find work and marry. Put
differently, they are driven by “an untamable anger and a profound sense of injustice to change the regime.”

In the Arab world, uprisings have really taken regimes by surprise since they have not paid attention to the sweeping technological transformation. Social websites like Facebook and Twitter have been beneficial for political and social groups who can interact freely and even revolt when organizing and assembling on the streets would put people’s lives at risk like facing detention and physical threats. In this regard, Alaa Al Aswany argues that in Egypt, demonstrations have been organized through Face book “as a reliable source of information; when the state tried to block it, the people proved cleverer, and bloggers passed on ways to bypass the controls.”

Furthermore, social media creates history by giving the world a new means of communication. In the past, while journalists had to be physically present on the ground to interview people about their experiences, Twitter and Facebook, today, have made numerous eyewitness accounts possible which have revealed “how fragile a totalitarian regime can be in the face of a widely used simple communication technology.” Besides social websites, channels like Aljazeera have played prominent roles in covering the sufferings of the ordinary Arab man and woman and shedding light on the oppressive means used by the dictatorships to keep their people down.

Women and Arab Spring

During the Arab Spring, we have witnessed women protest alongside men where they “were harassed, tortured, shot by snipers, and teargased”. We also find that female social media organizers and journalists tweeted, filmed and reported the revolutions. I argue that women have just been instrumental in bringing down dictators like Zin Abidin Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Their active participation in the revolutionary Arab Spring not only shatters the traditional stereotypes about Arab women, viewed as oppressed, passive and voiceless, but also sheds light on their determination to chart and reshape their own destinies. Similarly, Soumaya Ghannouchi argues that the type of the woman that has emerged out of Tunisia and Egypt in the Arab Spring deconstructs “the perception of the Arab women as powerless enslaved, invisible and voiceless.” Furthermore, none of the uprisings in the Arab countries can be possible without the participation of women. They were among the first to protest at the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis, Tahrir Square in Egypt and Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain.

Tunisian women have indeed set an inspiring example to all women in the Middle East by toppling Ben Ali and taking part in building a new civil and democratic Tunisia. For example, in Tunisia, Saida Sadouni has led the historic Kasbah demonstration that succeeded in forcing Mohamed Ghannouchi’s interim government out of office. During the Kasbah demonstration, Sadouni told protesters “I have resisted French occupation. I have resisted the dictatorships of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. I will not rest until our
revolution meets its goals." In another case, one may say that the blogger Lina Ben Mhenni is probably the first Tunisian woman to inform the world about the Tunisian uprising in December, 2010, and continues blogging despite being threatened, censored and terrorized.

One of the memorable scenes of the Arab Spring is that of female demonstrators donning headscarves or jeans, protesting, camping and sleeping in tents in front of government offices. Within this context, Magda Adly states that during the Egyptian revolution we have seen women of all castes and ethnicities, wearing veils and jeans, come to rallies in thousands and leading what is happening on the ground. Concerning the participation of veiled women in the Arab Spring, one may argue that this is yet another stereotype, one which falsely links the veil with submissiveness that is being dismantled. For example, we find many Arab women activists choose to wear the veil, yet they are “no less confident, vocal or charismatic than their unveiled sisters.”

If we take the example of the Egyptian revolution, we find that women assemble, organize, protest, guard tents and patrol streets for security at Tahrir square. It is the leader of the Egyptian revolution Asmaa Mahfouz, a representative of her young generation, who has been inspirational in turning a one-day demonstration into a raging revolution. For instance, she has uploaded a short video on Facebook in which she challenges whoever says that women should not go to protests because they will get beaten.

In Yemen, demonstrations against the rule of President Ali Saleh have been led by a young charismatic woman, Tawakul Karman. Karman has been campaigning since 2007 demanding political reform in Yemen. When she was arrested in January, 2011, the Yemeni authorities were forced to release her following a wave of angry protests in Sana. Speaking about her experience in jail, Karman says,

> After a week of protests in the Yemeni revolution media outlets reported my detention and demonstrations erupted in most provinces of the country; they were organized by students, civil society activists and politicians. The pressure on the government was intense and I was released after 36 hours in a women’s prison, where I was kept in chains.

In a powerful statement of international support for the Arab Spring and the important roles played by women proclaimed by the peace Prize citation, “We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society.” Tawakul Karman has recently been awarded the Noble Peace Prize for her efforts to advance democracy and human rights, and equality for women in her country. We find that Karman has been honored for her nonviolent struggle for women’s rights in Yemen which represents the right moment for women to achieve basic and equal rights. As a liberal Islamist, Karman seems to represent the idea that Islam is not against peace and women Islamists can also fight for human rights, freedom and democracy and will play
a vital role in modernizing Arab societies. To be awarded the Noble Peace Prize can also be seen not only as a message of support and endorsement for the Arab Spring which has empowered the disadvantaged women and down trodden people, but also as a victory for Arab women in their struggle to end oppression and dictatorship.

What has inspired Arab women and thrust them into the heart of protest is their yearning for change and political freedom. They have played crucial roles raising hopes that their meaningful contributions would translate into social, civil, democratic and political rights. Not only women participate in the protest movements raging in Arab countries, but also they assume leadership roles there. Arab women prove themselves through continuous action on the ground at Kasbah, Tahrir Square and Pearl Roundabout.

I argue that the new model of young women leaders like Ms. Karman, Mona Eltahawy, Saida Sadouni, Lina Ben Mhenni and Asmaa Mahfouz deconstructs the prevalent two narratives concerning the representation of Arab women. The first narrative centers upon notions of women's sexuality, family honor and reductionist interpretations of religion and conventions to justify women's subordination. The second is the Orientalist narrative which views Arab and Muslim women as oppressed and miserable objects of pity in desperate need of Western intellectual, political and military intervention to save them from darkness and lead them to enlightenment.

Hence, we find that Arab women's participation in the Arab Spring deconstructs both narratives, where we find Arab women refusing to be degraded, isolated and silenced. Instead, we see women who are determined to liberate themselves as they liberate their societies from dictatorship. Put differently, they take care of their own future, a future which they seek for themselves and is thus an authentic one, defined only by their own needs, choices and priorities.

**Arab Spring: Women’s Concerns and Challenges**

Historically speaking, women have been the most consistent and staunch advocates of democratic and civil society values across the Arab world. If we take the example of Tunisia, which has the most progressive personal status code in the region, we find that the Tunisian government abolished polygamy and enacted women's equality in marriage, divorce and child custody after independence in 1956. Yet, women have tangible reasons to worry about their future since national revolutions betrayed them in the past. If we take the case of the Algerian revolution against French colonialism, we find that women participated, fought and were killed beside men in war. Yet, by the time the Algerian independence was won, women were sent back home by their revolutionary male fighters.

Though the Arab Spring certainly presents positive changes, there are many challenges women face. There is indeed more to be done when it comes to supporting women's rights throughout the Arab world and there are also reasons for intensifying efforts to ensure that women's rights are not compromised during political transitions. In the Arab world, the rise of Islamists to rule and sexual assaults against women
demonstrators have made women not only feel afraid about their safety but also concerned about their hard-earned rights obtained under previous toppled dictatorships. The challenges women face, in fact, pose crucial questions about what will the status of women be in post-revolutionary societies like Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen? And what roles can women play to protect their rights? In other words, will the women who supported and participated in the 2011 revolutions “be pushed aside by military, Islamist, or other leaders, or will they be allowed to take part in governing in the judiciary, and in making autonomous decisions about their own lives?”

The disturbing reports of virginity tests and the sexual assaults on women protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square have intensified women’s fears. For example, at Tahrir Square, Mona Eltahawy has been held for hours while blindfolded, sexually groped and one of her arms broken. Recounting her painful trauma, Eltahawy writes:

> Besides beating me so monstrously, my left arm and right hand were broken; the dogs of (central security forces) subjected me to the worst sexual assault ever. Five or six surrounded me, groped and prodded my breasts, grabbed my genital area and i lost count how many hands tried to get into my trousers.

In another case, we find that the scene of dragging the unconscious young woman in the blue jeans, with her upper-half stripped, through the streets of Egypt testifies to the brutality of the military in Egypt using the weapon of shame to subjugate women. Yet, sexuality can no longer be used against women due to rising levels of feminist consciousness in Egypt in particular and in the Arab world in general. For instance, when the military in Egypt has subjected young women to degrading virginity tests, women sued them and used social media like “Facebook and Twitter to expose their brutal actions, an endeavor which demonstrates women’s persistence to continue their struggle for freedom.” In her article, “the unknown woman shows the struggle is not over,” Ahdaf Soueif points out that one of the disgusting patriarchal techniques used against women is grooping them sexually in a way to insinuate that “females who took part in street protests wanted to be groped,” which consequently led women to develop counter techniques like wearing multiple layers of light clothing without buttons to avoid sexual harassment while protesting.

To add more, it is deplorable and outrageous to see that women, in Egypt, have been left out of the political dialogue since Hosni Mubarak’s fall. For example, the committee assigned to rewrite the constitution in Egypt does not even have one single female legal expert. In this regard, Nawal El Saadawi argues to counter any attempt to exclude women from being part of ongoing changes in the new Egypt, it is very important for women to unite as a strong political power.

In the Arab world, women still continue to face public and private discrimination on a daily basis. If we take Saudi Arabia as an example, we find that Saudi women still suffer from gender segregation, unequal educational and economic opportunities and the prohibition from driving. Though King Abdullah's announcement that women will be
granted the right to participate in the 2015 local elections, this reform can be seen as only one positive step out of many necessary steps that the Saudi government must make to ensure equal rights for Saudi women. Yet, the vast majority of Saudi women are still waiting for their Arab spring. Within this context, Christoph Wilcke argues that “women are even forcing change in calcified Saudi Arabia, where the so-called guardianship system requires them to obtain permission from a male relative to travel, work, study, or take part in public life.”

On the other hand, in Tunisia, the Islamists under Rashid Ghannouchi try to appease the fears of women by making it clear that there is no contradiction between Islam and women's rights and they would not seek to reverse women's equal rights. They are also neither interested in polygamy nor in forcing women to wear the veil. They also intend to take progressive, modern and moderate Turkey as an example to follow. However, Shirin Ebadi, drawing on the bitter experience of women and the Iranian Revolution in 1979, warns that women should demand their rights now during the popular uprisings sweeping the Arab world to “avoid being short-changed by post-revolutionary governments,” since if women cannot gain equality now, then this cannot be a real revolution and won't lead to democracy.

In order to avoid past errors committed by feminist and political groups during the period of nationalism in 1950s and the Iranian revolution, where they put off their demands for equality until after the overthrow of regimes, the women's rights movement should move fast to secure constitutional rights. Hence, women must sustain an uprising before it is too late and redouble efforts to ensure that their rights are not sacrificed during political governmental transitions. They should also persevere in forming political parties with clear programs, run in elections and demand their quota according to international law.

Women, in fact, must adopt a new political discourse based on emphasizing women's leadership. Ideally, male revolutionaries should not stand by or shy away but support and recognize the right of women to dignity, equal rights and freedom of expression since it will not be possible to develop Arab societies without women. It is, undoubtedly, foreseen and expected that there will be real challenges to this process of women's emancipation, as recent attacks on female demonstrators indicate. But the dynamic process of revolutionary change is irreversible and those who have started the Arab Spring will continue in rebuilding their new societies. Finally, there is no doubt that this is the right moment of transformation in the Arab world for women and men, but any revolution that fails to achieve equality for women will be incomplete.
Notes and references

1 Mohamed Bouazizi was a Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010, in protest of the confiscation of his wares and the harassment and humiliation that he reported was inflicted on him by a municipal official and her aides. His act became a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and the wider Arab Spring, inciting demonstrations and riots throughout Tunisia in protest of social and political issues in the country. The public’s anger and violence intensified following Bouazizi’s death, leading then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to step down on 14 January 2011, after 23 years in power. The success of the Tunisian protests inspired protests in several other Arab countries, in addition to several non-Arab countries. The protests included several men who emulated Bouazizi’s act of self-immolation, in an attempt to bring an end to their own autocratic governments.


3 For more information on this topic, see Nicola Christine Pratt, Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2006); Ibrahim Elbadawi and Samir Makdisi (eds.), Democracy in the Arab World: Explaining the Deficit (New York: Routledge, 2010); Gerd Nonneman (ed.), Democracy, Reform and Authoritarianism in the Arab World (New York: Routledge, 2010); Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism (New York: Routledge, 2010).

For more discussions on the brutality of Arab regimes, see, James Petras, *The Arab Revolt and the Imperialist Counterattack* (n.c: Clarity Press, 2011).


Ibid, 4919.


Al Aswany, “United by an injustice and anger that won’t be tamed,” 4948.


On 14 January 2011, following a month of protests against his rule, Zin Din Ben Ali was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia along with his wife Leïla Ben Ali and their three children. The interim Tunisian government asked for Interpol to issue an international arrest warrant, charging him with money laundering and drug trafficking. He and his wife were sentenced in absentia to 35 years in prison on 20 June 2011. In June 2012, Ben Ali was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in absentia for inciting violence and murder.


Soumaya Ghannouchi grew up in London where she worked as a journalist writing for the Guardian.


Avenue Habib Bourguiba is the central thoroughfare of Tunis, and the historical political and economic heart of Tunisia. It bears the name of the first President of the Republic of Tunisia and the national leader of the Tunisian independence movement. During the protests of 2011, many demonstrations calling for the downfall of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and that of the national unity government were held on the avenue.

For more details on the significance of Tahrir Square, see Hoda Rashad, *Rising from Tahrir* (Seattle: CreateSpace, 2012).

Pearl Roundabout was a roundabout located near the financial district of Manama, Bahrain. The roundabout was named after the pearl monument that previously stood on the site and was destroyed on March 18, 2011, by government forces as part of a crackdown on protesters during the ongoing Bahraini uprising.

Mohamed Ghannouchi resigned as prime minister of the post-revolution government amid further clashes between police and protestors. The interim president, Fouad Mebazaa, named the former government minister Beji Caid-Essebsi as Ghannouchi’s replacement.

Soumya Ghanoushi, “Female protesters are shattering stereotypes,” 6493.

Lina Ben Mhenni is a Tunisian Internet activist, blogger and university linguistics teacher. In 2011, Mhenni was reported to have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her contributions and activism during the Tunisian Revolution.

Magda Adly is the director of the El Nadim Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence to Inter Press Service.


Soumaya Ghannouchi, “Female protesters are shattering stereotypes,” 6493.

Asmaa Mahfouz is an Egyptian activist and one of the founders of the April 6 Youth Movement. She has been credited by journalist Mona Eltahawy and others with helping to spark mass uprising through her video blog posted one week before the start of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. She is a prominent member of Egypt’s Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution and one of the leaders of the Egyptian revolution.

Tawakkul Karman is the head of Women Journalists Without Chains.


37 For more discussions on the status of women in the Arab world, see Edward Said, Orientalism ( London: Vintage, 1979); Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations:


For more discussions on the rise of Islamists to rule in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, see, John R. Bradley, *After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Wadah Khanfar, “Islamist parties: We should welcome the rise of political Islam,” In *The Arab Spring: Rebellion, Revolution and a new world order*, edited by Toby Manhire (London: Guardian Books, 2012).


Mona Eltahawy is an Egyptian-American journalist.


For more discussions on sexual harassment against women by the Egyptian military, see, Ahdaf Soueif, “The unknown woman shows the struggle is not over,” In *The Arab Spring: Rebellion, Revolution and a new world order*, edited by Toby Manhire (London: Guardian Books, 2012).


48 Ibid, 5040.


52 Rashid al-Ghannushi is a Tunisian Islamist politician who co-founded the Ennahda Movement, currently the largest party in Tunisia. He has been called the party's "intellectual leader”.

53 Shirin Ebadi is an Iranian Nobel peace laureate. She was Iran’s first woman judge but lost that job following the Islamic revolution because the country's new leaders said women were too emotional to be judges. She became a human rights lawyer but, after suffering harassment, she left the country in 2009.

