# Social Transformation in a Digital Age: Women's Participation in Civil AND Political Domains in the MENA Region

**Dr. Valentine M. Moghadam**
Professor of Sociology and International Affairs
Northeastern University, Boston

Women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have a long history of participation in social transformation projects, including social movements, political protests and revolutions. The early 20th century, for example, saw women involved in constitutional and revolutionary movements in Egypt, Iran and Turkey; the mid-20th century saw even more political activism in the context of independence movements in the Maghreb and then left-wing movements in Yemen and Palestine. MENA women's legal status and social positions, however, did not necessarily improve afterwards. Perhaps for that reason (although the emergence and spread of Islamist movements in the 1980s was another motivating factor), MENA women began to form independent women's rights organizations while also taking part in the proliferating associations of civil society. As women's civic engagement grew, women's rights organizations began to make political claims (Moghadam, 2013). The era of globalization facilitated communication within and across countries first through the fax, then the Internet, and finally social media. The presence of thousands of women among the Green protesters in Iran in June 2009, the Arab Spring protesters in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, the Gezi Park protesters in Turkey in 2013, and the Algerian protests of February-April 2019 reflected the transformations in women's social positions that had already occurred. This massive presence, however, was also made possible by the extensive deployment of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in those mobilizations. In these, and other cases, bloggers and citizen journalists were able to provide news and appeals via video clips taken from mobile phones and transported into web 2.0 sites. The high rate of mobile penetration in MENA shows the changing milieu of communication and collective action. In 2014, Morocco and Egypt reported mobile penetration rates that exceeded the worldwide average of 40%.

In this article, I examine the broad social and gender transformations that have taken place in the MENA region, and the opportunities but also risks and constraints afforded by the digital era. There is a focus on Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, as these are countries where the most progress has been made in terms of political empowerment through feminist mobilizations and accommodating government action (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) or through women's rights initiatives in a difficult socio-political environment (Egypt). Libya and Syria, unfortunately, are still mired in conflict and Palestine has seen regression because of Israel's punitive actions, US disinterest and internal disputes. Jordan elected its first woman to parliament in 1993 (Toujan Faisal), and laws punishing "honour killings" were strengthened in the new century as a result of feminist advocacy. But, Jordanian women's economic and political participation, and government support for gender transformations, fall behind those of the Maghreb countries; moreover, Jordan has had to contend with large waves of Syrian refugees since at least 2013. Lebanon, too, has struggled with integrating the large influx of Syrian refugees. Although survey research shows that Lebanese attitudes and values are among the least conservative (Moaddel, 2019; El-Feki et al, 2017), women's political participation remains much lower than in the Maghreb countries; in fact, there has been no change to the multiple legal systems that codify women and family affairs. In the 1980s and 1990s, Turkish women formed a vibrant movement that helped bring about legal and policy reforms, and they made

significant gains in educational and professional attainment, although most Turkish women remained outside of the workforce. However, the country's ruling party has taken a very conservative turn in recent years. A trend that has also taken place in Israel. It is, therefore, in the Maghreb countries where major social transformations have occurred, in terms of democratizing trends, women's civic and political engagement, and legal and policy reforms for women's participation and rights.

## Social Changes and Women in MENA

Over the past three decades, most MENA countries have experienced significant improvements in women's age at first marriage, fertility, maternal health and educational attainment, all from a very low base (Karshenas, Moghadam, and Chamlou, 2016), in a part of the world notable for "neopatriarchal" political regimes and gender relations (Moghadam, 2013). With urbanization and a growing involvement in the professional world came the proliferation of independent women's rights organizations, facilitated by aspects of globalization – ease of international travel, norm diffusion by international organizations such as the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and rapid communication via the new ICTs. Along with the Internet, the introduction of satellite TVs in MENA opened up the possibility for marginalized or dissident groups to be connected to their peers and counterparts in exile elsewhere in the world and outside of state limits. In the new century, women's rights activists increasingly turned to satellite TV stations such as al-Jazeera, al-Arabiyya, CNN International, and the BBC to help counter the state's monopoly over the news. Al-Jazeera was the first professional news organization to launch a Creative Commons repository in 2008, and in 2009 the station hosted the first Creative Commons Arab Meeting. Since 2008, Arab Techies Meetings have been held in Cairo, and the first meeting of Arab Women Techies, a womens' subgroup, took place in 2010 in Beirut. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube also became the social networking media of choice for

women's civil and political activism. Today, there are numerous websites, social networking sites, blogs and tweets on the topic of women's voices, with popular Facebook pages such as "The Uprising of Women in the Arab World," available at www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a. Media, such as *al-Monitor*, *Morocco World News* and similar sites, disseminate news about the region, including women's civic and political activism as well as its repression.[1]

Algera, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, are countries where the most progress has been made in terms of political empowerment through feminist mobilizations and accommodating government action or through women's rights initiatives in a difficult socio-political environment

ICTs are particularly important in authoritarian societies where states control the mass media; the free flow of information and communication enables political contests to take place over people's aspirations, values and claims. This has allowed MENA activists to plan ahead, communicate with the outside world and circumvent state censorship and control. In Syria, activists engaged with the National Campaign against Honour Crimes collected signatures from thousands of citizens on a petition that was sent to the President, the Parliament, the government and the media in 2009. In Tunisia, in 2010, many bloggers and tech community members supported the organization of "*Nhar 3ala 3ammar*," a rally against online censorship that took place on 22 May 2010. In January 2011, the street demonstrations were captured on cell phone cameras and then uploaded as videos on known opposition sites and blogs, such as *atunisiangirl.blogspot.com,* created by blogger Lina Ben Mhenni, *nawaat.org*, or *les Ré-*

---

[1] *Al-Monitor,* a media site launched in February 2012 by an Arab-American entrepreneur and based in Washington, DC, provides reporting and analysis from and about the MENA region through both original and translated content, and has media partners from Arab countries, Iran, Israel, and Turkey. It provides a wealth of information on women's issues.

*volutionaires de la dignité*, whose contents served as news feeds for satellite networks like al-Jazeera. In Egypt, Asma Mahfouz's protest appeal to Egyptians through YouTube went viral. In Morocco, the *Mouvement 20 février* used YouTube to spread its call for social justice and government accountability.

## ICTs have allowed MENA activists to plan ahead, communicate with the outside world and circumvent state censorship and control

Debates have taken place both on the significance of the Internet and social media in the Arab Spring uprisings and their outcomes, and on the role of social media in protest activity more generally. There is some consensus that ICTs are no less vulnerable to surveillance and state repression than are more traditional types of movements. Nevertheless, the digital age encompasses all ways of communication and mobilization for women's rights groups, from the diffusion of information and data to advocacy and lobbying; from recruitment of members and supporters to petitions and alerts. What follows are snapshots of women's participation in civil and political spheres in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

*Algeria*

In Algeria, a "new feminist movement" emerged when the Chadli Bendjedid government introduced a draft family law in 1982 that many educated and employed Algerian women found regressive and an affront to their dignity, given that it allowed polygamy and male guardianship of women and children. Protests were held and the government rescinded the bill, only to adopt it surreptitiously shortly after. Feminists mobilized again in the late 1980s when the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), which became a powerful political presence, took them to the streets in protest against political Islam/*intégrisme*. When the FIS won most votes in the 1990 elections and the military intervened to annul the results, the feminist organizations were relieved, but their leaders became the target of a vicious Islamist assassination campaign

during the civil conflict that lasted a decade. During that time, feminists in Algeria and the diaspora used transnational links and especially email to communicate, publicize atrocities, and express solidarity. A vehicle in this effort was the transnational feminist network Women Living under Muslim Laws. Afterwards, involvement in the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité enabled interaction and mutual learning with members in Morocco and Tunisia, resulting in a joint 2003 book, *Dalil pour l'égalité dans la famille au Maghreb*, along with mutual learning around feminist initiatives such as equal inheritance laws in Tunisia and the legalization of abortion in Morocco.

With the defeat of the Islamist terror, the government rewarded the Algerian women's movement with cabinet seats and some reforms to the family law in 2005, and, following the Arab Spring protests, the adoption of a quota that led to a dramatic increase in women's parliamentary representation, along with the appointment of more women as high-ranking military officers (Moghadam 2017). Women's online and offline activism has continued. During Ramadan 2018, a young woman in Algiers was verbally assaulted and beaten for jogging along the beach. When she went to the police to complain, they asked why she had been jogging and did nothing. She then took to social media to complain, after which hundreds of women and men as well as NGO activists came out to run with her in protest. In the midst of the February 2019 protests against a fifth term for President Bouteflika, *HuffPost Algérie* helped disseminate a statement from prominent Algerian women intellectuals calling for democratization, social justice, and gender equality (*HuffPost Algérie*, 2019).

*Tunisia*

In Tunisia, the Internet opened up space for dissidents through blogs, discussion forums and music. The Tunisian blog aggregator site www.nawaat.org was created in 2004, highlighting the work of high-profile bloggers and connecting the bloggers' community. In 2008, *l'Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD) founded the Ilhem Marzouki Feminist School (*Université Féministe Ilhem Marzouki*), a recruiting tool for young women and a project to raise knowledge and skills regarding women's human rights and the integration of gender in legislation, strategies and policies. That same year,

l'*Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement* (AFTURD) issued a press release stating that "no development, no democracy can be built without women's true participation and the respect of fundamental liberties for all, men and women." Two years later, as Lina Ben Mhenni blogged, tweeted and reported on Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, protests erupted across Tunisia, resulting in the resignation and exile of President Ben Ali. The democratic transition enabled Islamists, notably Salafists, to emerge and to call for "Islamic" or "traditional" practices that Tunisian feminists deemed misogynistic. In 2012, conservatives within the National Constituent Assembly sought to replace the constitutional language of women's and men's *equality* with *complementarity,* but Tunisian feminists and cyberactivists launched national protests and a transnational petition that gathered over 30,000 signatures. The conservatives were compelled to back down. When in September 2012 a young woman sitting in a car with her boyfriend was detained on a "morals" charge and raped by police, cyberfeminist protests and petitions as well as street rallies continued until the police were finally sentenced to prison terms in March 2014 (Arfaoui and Moghadam, 2016).

In March 2015, a group of Tunisian women from five regions attended the WSF and also met with officials to raise women's socio-economic development priorities, such as more transparent access to social services, better roads between villages and urban centres, and monitoring committees of local men and women. They are supported by Oxfam/Tunis, the League of Tunisian Women Voters, ATFD, and AFTURD. A new group, Amal, is working to empower rural and marginalized women in a number of low-income regions.

In 2012, Tunisia's parliament came to be ranked second in the region (after Algeria) and 40th globally in terms of percentage of female MPs. More progress occurred with an amendment to Article 49, approved by 127 of 134 of Tunisia's MPs, including a lobbying bloc of 73 women MPs. The change required both horizontal and vertical parity in electoral lists and was applied to Tunisia's March 2017 parliamentary elections. Seventy women's groups formed the Tunisian Coalition for Equality in Inheritance and led hundreds of protesters in a demonstration on 10 March 2018 in front of the parliament to call for a law

guaranteeing equal inheritance rights. President Essebsi appointed a Committee on Individual Rights and Liberties (French acronym COLIBE) that included four women, two of them well-known feminists, and legal scholars Iqbal Gharbi and Bochra Bel Haj Hmida, who advocate for equal inheritance in the face of much opposition from pious Tunisians, including the Ennahda party.

## Egypt

In the new century, Egypt's virtual public sphere and cyberactivism began expanding. A few weeks after the 2005 sexual harassment of women who were protesting at the Journalists Syndicate in Cairo, prominent blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah posted a blog entry under the title "Towards popular journalism" (Manalaa.net), and later printed it as a pamphlet, distributing it during street demonstrations. In 2008, the young Egyptian "Facebook girl" Israa Abdel Fattah, used the new social medium to organize a campaign of civil disobedience to protest the deteriorating conditions of the average citizen. On the morning of a general strike scheduled for 6 April 2008, she was arrested and detained for 18 days. The violent suppression of the workers' strike resulted in the formation of the April 6 Youth Movement. On 18 January 2011, the young woman Asmaa Mahfouz uploaded a short video to YouTube and Facebook in which she announced: "Whoever says women shouldn't go to the protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honour and manhood and come with me on January 25." The same day, Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page in honour of Khaled Said, a young Egyptian blogger who had been killed by police in Alexandria. The Mahfouz video went viral, countless Egyptians learned about Khaled Said, and the planned one-day demonstration became a mass uprising that deposed the President and ushered in democratic elections.

The experience of online and offline activism was empowering for many Egyptian women who had never before participated in a community with equal access and rights. That feeling, however, was short-lived, as women who came to Tahrir Square to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March, and to call for greater participation and rights for women in the new democratic Egypt, were assaulted by men who found their presence and demands objectionable. In De-

cember 2011, women protesters were assaulted by police. The scene of a young woman being dragged away by police, her top clothing stripped to reveal a blue bra and a policeman seemingly about to stomp on her stomach, immediately went viral, causing waves of outrage across the globe. This and subsequent indignations led to the formation of HarassMap, an Egyptian feminist group devoted to documenting violence against women and ensuring gender justice (see http://harassmap.org/en/). Their activism continued during the presidency of Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and after his ousting in July 2013 and the onset of a military-run government. National and international pressure resulted in amendments to the electoral law, with a record-breaking 89 women entering Egypt's parliament in January 2016.

**The experience of online and offline activism was empowering for many Egyptian women who had never before participated in a community with equal access and rights. That feeling, however, was short-lived**

*Morocco*

Moroccan women have mobilized for women's rights, online and offline (Skalli, 2008), and have worked with allies in political society to adopt quotas for enhanced political representation and other initiatives. In 2004, a national network of 17 Moroccan women's organizations and centres for battered women launched the website Anaruz (www.anaruz.org) to promote women's freedom from violence as a right and not a privilege. In May 2011, the *Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc* (ADFM), in collaboration with a number of international partners, organized a regional seminar in Rabat on Women and Democratic Transitions in the MENA region. The seminar was publicized online and diffused globally by its US-based partner,

the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP). Moroccan feminists' involvement in the Collectif and the WLP, their advocacy, and the proliferation of a women's press helped constitute a certain "feminization of the public sphere" in MENA. After the 2011 protests, and because of a new quota law, the female share of seats in parliament rose to 17 percent, up from 11 percent. Nabila Mounib – a critic of the Islamist agenda and of the power of the *makhzen* (royal palace), and an activist in M20F – became the first woman leader of a major Moroccan political party, the United Socialist Party.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reservations were removed as part of measures to harmonize domestic laws with each other and with the international women's rights agenda. Women's rights groups in the Springtime of Dignity Coalition continued their advocacy to lift the criminalization of abortion and remove the legal loophole allowing a rapist to escape punishment by marrying his victim. In June 2014 they held a press conference and a rally to protest against the Prime Minister's comments that "women's role" should be focused on the family. Morocco's penal code on abortion is very restrictive, and especially hard on poor women, who are often abandoned after *urfi* or customary marriages. A public debate called for broadening the definition of "women's health" to include psychological, physical and social aspects, such as rape, incest, poverty and ageing. In March 2015, Morocco's King asked religious scholars and justice officials to revise the law in order to reduce the number of illegal abortions. Women's rights groups in Algeria followed the Moroccan debate with a view of adopting some of its aspects.

Also in 2015, Moroccan women protested online and offline against the arrest of two women in Inezgane, a suburb of the southern city of Agadir, accused of "gross indecency" for wearing "tight and immoral" clothes. Two Facebook pages were created to support the women, and participants in the virtual protest posted pictures of themselves on social media wearing miniskirts to support the two young women hairdressers, with the hashtag "*mettre une robe n'est pas un crime.*" Three sit-ins also took place in Agadir, Rabat and Casablanca to denounce their trial.[2]

---

2 See www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/06/161855/moroccan-women-wear-mini-skirts-in-protest-against-arrest-of-two-women.

## Conclusion

To conclude, women's civil and political participation in the digital age has increased throughout the western Mediterranean, and especially in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Women's use of new media technologies, cyberactivism, citizen journalism, and their self-organization contribute to and reflect the social and political changes that have occurred in the region. Another conclusion is that women's rights movements and broader movements aimed at social change are intertwined phenomena. However, some issues need greater advocacy and policy attention, notably low female labour-force participation and high female unemployment. Educated women have good professional positions, but young college graduates have been finding it difficult to secure such jobs. Many women, especially from working-class and lower middle-class households, avoid the private sector because of its lack of job security, benefits and safety. This could be addressed through support structures for working mothers – paid maternity leave of appropriate duration, quality and affordable nurseries and kindergartens, and the enforcement of the anti-sexual harassment law. In a political context far less amenable to democratization than the Maghreb countries, and with many more restrictions on civil society activities, Egyptian women struggle to make themselves heard. And then there is the Algerian anomaly. According to international datasets and other sources, women make up 20% of judges in Algeria's constitutional court and about 30% of all judges, 26% of members of parliament, four female generals, and 38% of university teaching staff. Yet, polygamy and male repudiation remain; women cannot marry without a *tutelle;* and the identity card is given automatically to the male household head while a woman needs to apply for one separately. Given the strength of women's presence in civil and political domains, can we expect that such discrepancies in Algerian women's legal status will be overturned soon?

## References

Arfaoui, Khedija and Moghadam, Valentine M. "Violence against Women and Tunisian Feminism: Advocacy, Policy, and Politics in an Arab Context." *Current Sociology,* vol. 64, no. 4. July 2016: p. 637-653.

El Feki, S.; Heilman, B. and Barker, G. (eds.) *Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa*. Cairo and Washington, DC: UN Women and Promundo-US, 2017

*HuffPost Algérie*. "Femmes Algériennes pour un Changement vers l'Egalité (Déclaration)." 20 March 2019. Available at www.huffpostmaghreb. com/entry/femmes-algeriennes-pour-un-chang ement-vers-l-egalite_mg_5c920e18e4b07e05 729fe545?ncid=fcbklnkfrhpmg00000008&fb clid=IwAR06Op5UvuU9UfY99yHLRVzpFljiS JU-0leq3M9DB3Yv3EB25l0-k0aQHCQ.

Karshenas, Massoud; Moghadam, Valentine M. and Chamlou, Nadereh. "Women, Work and Welfare in the Middle East and North Africa: Introduction and Overview" in Chamlou, Nadereh and Karshenas, Massoud (eds.), *Women, Work and Welfare in the Middle East and North Africa: The Role of Socio-Demographics, Entrepreneurship, and Public Policies.* London: Imperial College Press, 2016, p. 1-30

Moaddel, Mansoor. *The Clash of Values in the Middle East and North Africa: Islamic Fundamentalism versus Liberalism – A Study of People and their Issues.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Feminist Movements in the Maghreb" in Basu, Amrita (ed.), *Women's Movements in a Global Era.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017, p. 333-360

*Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (3rd. ed.). London and Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013.

Rizzo, Helen; Price, Ann and Meyer, Katherine. "Anti-Sexual Harassment Campaign in Egypt." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* Vol. 17, No. 4 (December 2012): 457-475. http://mobilization journal.org/loi/maiq.

Skalli-Hanna, Loubna. *Through A Local Prism: Gender, Globalization and Identity in Moroccan Women's Magazines*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.