

# Women and the Arab Revolutions: Changes against All Odds

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Today, no-one can question the degree and importance of women's participation in the process of change in Northern Africa and the Middle East, in what was at first called the Arab Spring but later became known as the Arab Awakening. Women dared to defy all taboos and conservative mindsets by taking to the streets to protest and fight against the corruption and tyranny of authoritarian regimes. Whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain or Yemen, they were present throughout the process, making themselves visible on all levels. They filled all spaces, making it difficult to ignore their presence. Young women thus also dared to defy the Arab tradition according to which a young woman should not spend the night away from her family by daring to spend many a night camped out in the protest areas. "My parents attempted to lock me in the house to prevent me from taking part in the protests, but they didn't succeed. I simply had to take part." This statement has been recurrent among interviewed young women, whether from Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen or elsewhere. Yasmin Galal, a 24-year-old woman participating in the Tahrir Square protests for the 18 days preceding Mubarak's departure, proudly recounts that she and other women did not leave the scene where the confrontations with the forces of order took place even for an instant. Even at the point when the clashes were the most violent. "We stood our ground just like the male protesters. Yes, at the moments of confrontations, the men would move forward to fight whereas we would remain further back. But there were also many young women who dared to move to the front line during fighting with the police." Other women present on Tahrir Square were not spared the violence of the forces of order, as was the case with Mona Prince, a writer of fiction and univer-

sity professor. She told how she had been flung to the ground by a police officer during the protests and was kicked repeatedly in the stomach. "Not satisfied to see me nearly fainting, he made sure to put his boot on my face, pressing my head against the ground, and began insulting me." An activist to the bone, Mona was also one of those women who, like Bothaina Kamel, expressed the intention of running as a presidential candidate in the Egyptian elections. "I know I don't have much chance of becoming president. But by attempting to run I hope to raise some awareness on the paternalist and discriminatory nature of our society, as well as the problems women face here." Unfortunately, neither Mona Prince nor Bothaina Kamel succeeded in obtaining the 30,000 signatures from eligible voters necessary for officially launching their candidacy. Whether in Northern Africa, the Gulf States, Yemen or elsewhere, women managed to prove to the world and their male compatriots that they would not be absent from this page in the history of the region, since they decided to become stakeholders in the construction of the democratic process. From the start, through their presence in the protests, they wished to send the world a message indicating that the defence of their rights is also intrinsic to this process. "There is no democracy possible without women having political representation proportional to their number," exclaimed Mona Prince. "We make up half the population." In the field, their representativeness was unquestionable. They were there before the entire planet, young and old, mothers, wives, from cities and rural areas, they came from all walks of life, from the lower classes, often illiterate, to the middle class and educated. Whether with a more modern appearance, without the veil and wearing jeans, as in Tunisia or Egypt, or covered from head to foot in more conservative societies as in Bahrain or Yemen, they were there, explaining their points of view and positions to the cameras and the media of the entire world, as well as recounting the

plight of living under the despotism and injustice imposed by the regimes of their respective countries. Moreover, by showing their commitment and willingness to participate in the process of change, they demonstrated that a leader could emerge from among their ranks. Perhaps the most renowned example is that of Tawakkol Karman, a remarkable 32-year-old human rights activist and former leader of student movements in Yemen, thus having the baggage of a courageous history of confrontations with corruption and tyranny in her country. Tawakkol was granted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 together with two African women leaders, demonstrating that the world has recognised the role of women in the Arab Spring.

### **The Dilemma: Democracy versus Women's Rights**

Yet as the irony of fate would have it, despite the changes produced by the Arab Spring, by rendering the governments of countries such as Tunisia, Libya or Egypt more democratic, or at least more representative of the movements existing in their societies, it contributed nothing to improving the status of women. As we well know, for several decades, these societies had been dominated by increasingly stronger and more widespread Islamist movements, financed in part by money from the Gulf States or institutions having a strong penchant for the Wahhabi movement. And the positions of these groups towards women's rights and the role of women in society are well known. Therefore, despite their presence in the streets and all the efforts of Arab women to attain positive changes for their countries and the situation of women there, immediately after the revolutions, the latter have only met with an increasingly adverse situation.

Indeed, the fundamental dilemma that has surfaced with the transformations caused by the Arab Spring is related to the results of the establishment of a more democratic order. This was well expressed through the question posed by Shadi Hamid, Director of Research at the Brookings Doha Center: "What if the majority of Arabs do not want to be liberal?" In fact, we can see that this is exactly what happened in the first parliamentary elections held in Egypt and Tunisia. In other words, we have witnessed how in these countries, Islamist movements have won significant majorities in their respective parliaments. In Egypt, for instance, the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood combined took 70% of the seats, and women ob-

tained only 2% of seats. However, as Hamid well stated, it is these very women who have contributed in large part to this situation by voting for Islamists, given that they represent half of the electorate. He also showed how, in the case of Tunisia, where a quota system was established obliging parties to alternate male and female candidates on their electoral lists, women obtained a higher percentage of seats in Parliament, but despite this, the great majority of candidates elected belonged to the Islamist Al Nahda party. Hamid added that, though the same quota system was used in Egypt, 90% of the women elected to Parliament were representatives of the ultra-conservative Al Nour party. Hence we can draw the conclusion that, whether we like it or not, the societies themselves reject the values of liberal parties that defend women's rights, values which are far from being those of the majority of the population.

Yasmin Galal, who has worked for years in an NGO providing support to Egyptian women in rural areas, explains this phenomenon: "when we speak to vulnerable women and explain to them that they are oppressed or that they should demand their rights, they look at us as if we came from another planet. It is absolutely impossible to communicate with them if we use this language. For the majority of them, for instance, it is clearly preferable to remain in a marriage in which they are beaten every day by their husbands than to divorce them." The reality is that conservatism and patriarchal values are just as rooted among women as among men. Azza El Garf, for instance, one of the eight female representatives elected to the Egyptian Parliament, in this case for the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, has made numerous declarations against granting women greater freedom. She clearly declared herself against the Khulea, a law passed in 2000 allowing a woman to leave a marriage if she gives up all her rights derived therefrom, by qualifying it as a law encouraging divorce and therefore against family unity. El Garf likewise made extremely controversial comments on the law prohibiting genital mutilation of girls, asserting that such a law was unnecessary.

### **The Scourge of Patriarchy**

In fact, beyond the ideologies of groups advocating political Islam, the very idea that there would now be greater room for the expression of opinions and the realisation of political tendencies made the patriarchal spirit so strongly rooted in these societies from time

immemorial re-emerge. The truth is that the oppression of women in the Arab-Muslim world has very deep roots in such institutions as patriarchy, religion, imperialism, race relations, the different social classes, etc. It is impossible to observe the situation of women in Arab and Muslim countries without noticing that the militarist structures upon which these societies are built reinforce patriarchy. And the latter obviously reproduces, propagates and even institutionalises the subordination of women.

As we well know, the phenomenon of democracy and the exercise of fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of expression are practices that have not yet been fully assimilated in the Arab world, a region having experienced only despotism and tyranny for centuries. It is obvious that the fact that these peoples live constantly subject to authoritarianism is likewise reflected in male-female relations, creating a hierarchy of subordination inside families themselves, where women and children must naturally submit to the patriarch. In addition, there is clear discrimination between girls and boys as of a certain age. Traditionally, we know that it is a world in which women are not encouraged to play a leading role. Very early on, girls are taught to have an attitude of deference and submission towards the men of the family. They are sometimes even encouraged not to show their intelligence during discussions with male partners and above all, not to have a critical attitude towards them. "From a very young age, we are taught that we have very different roles in society. The role of the woman is to become a wife and mother, while that of the man is to develop his skills in order to be able to work and one day maintain his family," says Yasmin sharply, and she continues: "And our societies reproduce the dynamic that we experience within the family. That is, they are extremely patriarchal and paternalistic." For Yasmin, this paternalism existed even in the Arab Spring political protests, where we saw how men and women remained supportive of one another during confrontations, especially during the most violent ones with the dictators' police forces. "In fact, despite the spirit of solidarity between men and women on Tahrir Square, at no time did one feel that men and women were considered equal," asserted Yasmin Galal, explaining that "it is true that on Tahrir Square, girls and women felt safe and did not experience harassment. But this did not happen because we were considered equals. On the contrary, it was so because the male protesters thought they had to protect the women against the attacks by the police forces. This was another way of expressing their paternalism."

But beyond this "friendly paternalism" mentioned above by Yasmin, the patriarchy prevailing in the Arab world constantly turns against women, attempting to punish them in the most heinous, severe manners whenever they dare to defy or question the rules and hierarchies, demanding a change in the status quo. During the Arab uprisings, there were many shameful examples of this. In Egypt, for instance, on 8 March 2011, when activists from feminist groups arrived at Tahrir Square with their posters and banners, they were surrounded, insulted and attacked by throngs of men who seemed to reject the idea of seeing them protest or demand their rights. That day on Tahrir Square, there were at least a dozen small protest groups representing different groups or categories of society, such as workers or trade unions. But only the protests by women were attacked, the women being physically harassed and yelled at, with slogans such as: "Go back to the kitchen, since that's where you belong!"

### **The End of the Silence**

Worse than that, on 9 March 2011, this same Tahrir Square was the stage of renewed violence against women, this time through the heinous "virginity tests." On that day, a group of 18 feminist activists was arrested by the Egyptian army and brought to the Cairo Museum. They had remained on the square the day after 8 March to continue to demand gender equality. Among the activists detained, the first to have the courage to recount her ordeal was Salwa El Hosseini, a 20-year-old hairdresser. "We were handcuffed, beaten with sticks and pipes, subjected to electrical shocks in the chest and legs and called prostitutes," she recounted. Later, she was forced to completely undress in front of the officers present on the premises and was subjected to a "virginity test" by a man (later it became known that it was an officer) in uniform. Samira Ibrahim was also among these young women. A 25-year-old, she was subject to the same humiliations as Salwa and the others. The difference is that she had the courage to bring charges against these thugs, having received the support of her father, a former opponent of the Mubarak regime as a member of Gamaa al-Islamiyya, a radical Islamist movement. Receiving no support from political parties, organisations or the media at first, she reported being immediately subject to intimidations and anonymous phone calls threatening her with death. Numerous public figures,

including those supporting the revolution, at first asked Samira to withdraw her charges. She refused, determined not to flinch at the threats.

Yet Samira, supported at first by a handful of activists, gradually succeeded in mobilising public opinion in her favour all over the world. The result is that, despite the repeated denials of the Egyptian army, which has not officially acknowledged practicing virginity tests, she succeeded in having this type of test declared illegal by the High Administrative Court on 27 December 2011. A first victory in court for Samira, which was unfortunately followed by a defeat, for the officer that had abused her was acquitted by the military court to which her case was referred and that tried the officer. Samira was unable to obtain legal or financial compensation in Egypt, but she is determined to take her case before an international court. Moreover, on the moral and public levels, she has certainly emerged victorious. Thus, on 17 April 2012, Times Magazine included her in its list of the 100 most influential people of the year. "It takes a strong person to stand up for what is right in the face of ostracism and public scrutiny. Samira represents the model of how to stand up to fear, and the impact she has made reaches far beyond Egypt. It takes just one woman to speak out, and thousands of others around the world will listen and feel inspired to act," wrote Charlize Theron.

Elsewhere, in Libya, for instance, Iman El Obeidi, another woman who was the victim of sexual abuse under Gaddafi's dictatorial regime, also had the courage to break the silence, placing her life in danger to tell the world about the torture and abuse she had endured. This 32-year-old woman from the city of Tobruk was detained at a road block due to her accent, which showed she was from the same region as the rebels. She was allegedly held for two days and raped by some fifteen men, who also beat her and defecated and urinated on her.

A lively, extremely determined woman, Iman used a great deal of courage and intelligence to successfully cross the security checkpoints and enter the hotel in Tripoli where international journalists were meeting. The cameras of the ensemble of media on the premises managed to record the account she gave of what she had had to endure. The cameras also recorded disturbing scenes of how the hotel staff (apparently working for the Libyan security service) immobilised her and covered her head with a black hood to prevent her from continuing to speak, scenes that speak for themselves insofar as the barriers and obstacles faced by any woman having decided to break the taboos and

defend their honour in public. Yet despite the dimension of the challenges that the young Egyptian activists or Iman El Obeidi have had to face, their cries and appeals have been heard and have had repercussions throughout the world. This has shown the governments in power in their respective countries that from now on, the atrocities committed against women with government consent will be denounced.

## Perspectives

In light of this complex scenario brought about by the changes in the Arab world, the fundamental question that arises is how these changes will continue to affect women's status. If we believe that patriarchy and the subordination of women are the result of hierarchies produced by the authoritarianism imposed on populations in the region for centuries, we can at least expect that the dynamic of male-female relations will gradually change with the advent of an order where respect for fundamental freedoms prevails. Contrary to authoritarianism, democracy makes room for questioning the status quo and struggling against injustice. The obstacles to such change are still many, of course. Archaic mindsets and customs as well as conservatism are still extremely strong and could interrupt the process of change at any time, again imposing the age-old logic of hierarchies.

In any case, progress towards a new order will depend on women themselves. Today, it is up to them to choose whether to accept the current state of things or continue to struggle for their rights and dignity. One can clearly see that women such as Salwa, Samira or Iman have made the choice to speak of the humiliations they suffered (where so many others in the same situation remain silent), insisting that this subject be openly discussed and condemned by society. They are fighting against the silence, denial and refusal to speak about a real problem of society with a view to publicly acknowledging its existence and only thus being able to change the situation. What we need at this point are therefore other agents of change like these three young women. A famous young Egyptian columnist, Bilal Fadl, recently writing about his reaction to the phenomenon of harassment and violence against women, which seems to have increased immediately after the Arab Spring, appealed to women to raise their voices and speak out to defend their dignity and their place in society. For as he well said, "if you do not do this yourselves, no-one will do it for you."