

WOMEN AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE IN THE ARAB WORLD

Well before the Arab Spring, agents of change in the Arab world were slowly, but successfully removing cultural constraints on gender equality through education, entrepreneurship and political empowerment, thereby linking economic strategy with broader plans for societal progress. As a result, gains made by and for Arab women in the last 15 years had significantly narrowed the gender gap in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with particular improvements in literacy, women's entrepreneurship, and political empowerment. But what were the impacts of the Arab Spring on gender equality and political representation in the MENA region? What can be done in order to maintain momentum for change, and achieve real, lasting empowerment for Arab women and youth?

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In today's Arab World, women are exerting a powerful, positive and lasting influence in their communities, societies and economies. They are doing so as educators, academics, journalists, judges, lawyers, media figures, business owners, bankers, and medical professionals, with an ever-increasing number of women holding ministerial-level positions and other roles in public life.

According to UN statistics, women outnumber men in higher education in nearly two thirds of MENA countries. A recent OECD-MENA report indicates that women represent 50 percent of the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector in the MENA region.¹ The number of women choosing entrepreneurship over traditional employment speaks volumes about the improved and more equitable climate for women in business in the region – in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone, 13,000 women own 20,000 companies.² Furthermore, the Boston Consulting Group recently estimated the wealth held by women in the MENA region at 500 billion dollars, while MEED, a Middle East business media company, estimates that 385 billion dollars of that wealth is managed by women in the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries alone (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and UAE).³

Though these figures indicate that barriers to equality in the Arab world may be falling, gender and income inequalities are still rising. Despite the remarkable increase in parliamentary representation in many MENA countries over the last decade, as well as the outstanding achievements of women in the private sector, gender barriers still prevent women from having any major impact on some of the region's key institutions. It has not been possible to successfully erode the societal norms and traditions that impose pressure on Arab women and youth.

The global financial crisis and the Arab Spring have underscored the fact that in some parts of the Arab world, fast-track economic growth in recent decades simply did not translate into inclusive economic opportunity for Arab citizens, nor has it resulted in any noticeable social improvement.

Overall, women in all sectors of all Arab countries are currently struggling more than ever for access to capital, technology, networking or marketing opportunities, skill building, and specialist training. Even before the Arab Spring, women were overall vastly under-represented in the region especially in sciences, sports,

¹ "Empowering Women-Led SMEs: Economic Development and the New Arab World," *OECD-MENA Investment Programme*, May 2012, <http://www.oecd.org/mena/investment/Empowering%20women-led%20SMEs.pdf>

² "Why Emirati Women Entrepreneurs Start Businesses," *Gulf News*, 28 August 2012, <http://gulfnnews.com/life-style/education/why-emirati-women-entrepreneurs-start-businesses-1.1053378>

³ "GCC Women: Challenging the Status Quo," *Al Masah Capital*, http://almasahcapital.com/uploads/report/pdf/report_19.pdf

media, medicine, engineering, and law. For example, Qatar has a relatively high rate of women participating in the labor force at 35 percent, ahead of Bahrain with 30 percent; whereas Oman stands at 25 percent and Saudi Arabia at merely 17 percent. While these numbers do represent progress, they are still far below equivalent OECD averages.⁴

At present, the uncertainty in the region threatens to take women back at least a decade, if not more. Thus, more must be done in order to close the gap between the social, political and economic opportunities available to men and those available to women. Furthermore, it must be ensured that the gains made by women in recent decades are not lost in this difficult time of social, political, and economic transition.

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How Are the Complex Dynamics Unleashed by the Arab Spring Affecting Women’s Rights?

To those who witnessed the remarkable professional and entrepreneurial ascent of Arab women in the last decade, it came as no surprise to see women as critical actors in the process of democratizing the Arab world. Women participated as journalists, bloggers, activists, rally leaders, community organizers coordinating opposition materials and social media outreach, all playing an undeniable role in the frontline of the upheavals and demonstrating side by side with men to demand democracy, empowerment, and a new era of equality.

Indeed, some of the most enduring images from the Arab Spring were of Arab women marching for change, often with young children in tow, delivering speeches to crowds of tens of thousands of people, protecting the wounded in makeshift hospitals, and arranging demonstration logistics such as food, water, and first aid.

In Tunisia, women and students played a significant role, using social media to mobilize support, in organizing the demonstrations that eventually became the “Jasmine Revolution”. From the very beginning of the uprisings, it became especially clear that stereotypes of Arab women were no longer applicable.

⁴ OECD-MENA Investment Programme (2012).

In Egypt, women stunned the world when they took to the streets alongside their brothers, sons, and husbands to protest, braving gunfire and risking assault and arrest. The uprisings in Egypt were sparked by a video posted on Facebook by a young female blogger with an impassioned calling for the demonstration in Cairo's Tahrir Square that resulted in three weeks of million-strong protests, which ultimately forced President Hosni Mubarak out of office. Women in Cairo turned the Square into a command center; organizing food, water, blankets, projection media, a stage, first aid, and turning up in their millions to celebrate when the President eventually resigned.

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In Yemen, tens of thousands of women marched in the streets of Sana'a to demonstrate against corruption and the disempowerment of Yemeni citizens. In Libya, women were critical and motivating participants in the struggle for democracy, and were at the frontlines alongside men to set up makeshift kitchens, clinics, and command centers. In Morocco there was the February 20th

Movement, a youth-led coalition to support democratic change. Demonstrators demanded a new constitution that would guarantee human rights and gender equality.

The Arab Spring brought to light a number of socio-economic challenges. These included corruption, elitism, an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, the widespread negative effect of the 2008 global recession which had a marked economic impact on the region, limited support for entrepreneurship, decades of discontent with the political *status quo*, and –at the forefront– the key issue of youth unemployment being amongst the highest in the world.

After the disappointing election results that followed, in which, female candidates were marginalized if not ignored, the key concern for civil society in the region is whether women will be able to successfully carve a space and a voice for themselves in the new Arab world. As *The Guardian* put it, “Women may have sustained the Arab Spring, but it remains to be seen if the Arab Spring will sustain women.”⁵

Of utmost concern is the high possibility that the new political frameworks in place will regress past initiatives to narrow the gender gap, such as quota systems for ensuring women's participation in parliament. Unfortunately, this is already the case in many countries.

5 “Women Have Emerged as Key Players in the Arab Spring,” *The Guardian*, 22 April 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/22/women-arab-spring>

In Kuwait, the victory of the Islamist-led opposition in recent parliamentary elections resulted in an all-male chamber. Women, who won four seats in the 2009 elections –making the Kuwaiti Parliament the first in the Gulf region with four elected female members– lost them all in this last election.

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Egyptian women accounted for nearly 50 percent of the protestors on the streets during the demonstrations in 2011. However, today they are seeing gains of the last decade slip away, and are barred from taking high political office or executive positions. Egypt’s constitutional committee, appointed by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, included no women. Furthermore, in parliamentary elections held earlier in the year, women won fewer than 10 of almost 500 seats. In general, conditions for women in Egypt have become far worse than they were under the previous regime.

There appears to be a backlash against the progress made in the two decades preceding the Arab Spring towards gender equality in the region. Women who took significant risks to fight for, and shape a new Arab future are now being told that, “now is not the time for women’s rights.”

Of all the countries affected by the Arab Spring, Tunisia is where women seem to be making the most positive inroads into political power, and the country appears to be well on its way to becoming a vibrant, inclusive democracy. However, Tunisian women had the advantage of enjoying a far greater degree of empowerment and equality, significantly longer than women in Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen – all countries that are still in a delicate and formative phase when it comes to women’s rights.

Last October, Tunisia’s first democratic, multi-party elections were held with an extraordinary 90 percent of registered voters casting ballots. Under the election rules, women had to constitute half of the candidates of all political parties. Ultimately, 49 women were elected to the constituent assembly, taking 22 percent of the 217 seats. To the rest of the world, Tunisia’s elections were viewed as an important indicator of how the Arab Spring might affect regional politics. Souad Abdel Rahim, one of Tunisia’s leading businesswomen and the female figurehead of Tunisia’s Ennahda party, which won 90 out of 217 seats, said after the election: “The doors are open for women now.”⁶

6 “Tunisia’s Islamist Victory Good for Women, Says Female Figurehead,” *The Telegraph*, 1 November 2011, <http://>

Libyan women have always been very active as doctors, engineers, lawyers, and university professors (in Benghazi, for example, 40 percent of lawyers are women); however, women overall still account for merely 25 percent of the workforce. Within days of the collapse of the Gaddafi government, female lawyers immediately got to work by linking civil society and women's groups with the National Transitional Council. Promisingly, in February 2012, a new electoral law was passed, guaranteeing women at least 40 seats in the 200-member Constituent Assembly which will draft the country's new constitution.

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In Morocco, the path to change was notably peaceful compared to those in many other Arab countries. It was a clear, concise and non-violent response to the call for change by Moroccan citizens. In the last decade, the country witnessed a thriving civic activism, especially among women's associations and human rights groups. In this period, Moroccan women have also increasingly taken up national and local political positions, as well as becoming more

involved in entrepreneurship and the judiciary. Morocco's family code, which governed the status of women under civil law, already heavily emphasized equality and joint responsibility between husband and wife.

Among Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF) members in Morocco, there is a great confidence that the new constitution will further enhance the rate of political participation for women. Article 19 of the 2011 constitution states that men and women are equal citizens under law, guaranteeing both sexes equal social, economic, civil, and political rights. Furthermore, in Morocco's November 2011 elections, 305 of the Lower House of Parliament's 395 seats were elected from party lists in 92 constituencies, and the additional 90 seats were elected from a national list with two-thirds of it reserved for women.

Does Islamic Conservatism Necessarily Limit Women's Role in Public Life?

It has already been seen that throughout this transitional period, the role of women in the new Arab world has been and remains a controversial issue. A significant challenge arises for us all in ensuring that ultra-conservative elements in the region do not exploit the upheaval to further platforms that will ultimately prove detrimental to gender equality, thereby reversing decades of progress in this regard. In truth,

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/tunisia/8862963/Tunisia-Islamist-victory-good-for-women-says-female-figurehead.html

it is not possible to fully examine the role of women in Arab economies and society without understanding the roles, rights, and responsibilities of women in Islam.

From its earliest years, Islam has been recognized for welcoming women into all spheres, as well as actively encouraging the participation of women in society and culture – at a time in history when these rights were not yet even enjoyed by women in the West.

Women in early Islamic cultures had prominent and important roles in shaping and governing Arab societies. It is well documented, for example, that the Prophet Mohammad's first wife Khadija was a very successful businesswoman in her own right and in fact employed the Prophet before she became his wife.

The reality is that Islam holds women in high regard and provides many rights. In fact, The Prophet specifically says “God enjoins you to treat women well, for they are your mothers, daughters, and aunts.” Islam provides protection, value, and rights to women in ways that many non-Muslims do not fully comprehend.

Those who know little about the region or Islam can mistakenly assume that Arab women are oppressed and uneducated because of religion, when in fact in many countries it is the culture, not religion that oppresses women. The Prophet said, “The rights of women are sacred. See that women are maintained in the rights assigned to them.”

Hence, when interpreted properly, Islam is a religion that supports, reveres, and empowers women. Restrictions placed on women in the region are purely cultural and these barriers can only be removed with a greater focus on education, and creating opportunities for women and youth to make a viable contribution to their communities.

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How Can Governments and Civil Society Most Effectively Support Women?

AIWF firmly believes that if the Arab Spring fails to empower women and youth, it will fail in its mission to establish democracy in the region. This is a crucial opportunity not to be missed. So how can it protect women's rights in this sea of change?

First and foremost, efforts must be renewed to reform and invest in education. More can and should be done to enhance women's access to a quality education, offering girls the opportunity to excel in the sciences, engineering, and mathematics, as well as to respond to the needs of future employers. Several AIWF members, who are working on the ground to advocate for the inclusion of women in the shaping of new political frameworks in Egypt and Tunisia, generally agree that outside assistance should be primarily targeted at education and job training.

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With over half of the Arab world's population under the age of 30, AIWF sees job creation and capacity building as being of critical importance. Arab governments have been largely successful at incentivizing and enabling the private sector to support women's integration in the workforce. However, there is still a lot to be done in order to overcome the challenges and barriers to improved entrepreneurship, better access to world-class training, and on-the-job experience for women in the region.

In addition, this is where public-private partnerships can bear the most fruition for women and youth. The region needs a dynamic Arab private sector of businessmen and businesswomen open for business and engaged in trade.

Taking into consideration the present political and economic situation in the region, AIWF believes that a greater role for women in civil society and public life must be secured, the private sector must be empowered, and women-owned SMEs must be supported as engines of economic growth. AIWF wishes to see women involved in drafting the new constitutions and engaged in their implementation. In this regard, AIWF applauds the recent appointment of three women to the newly elected Kuwaiti Parliament in December 2012, and the very important decision to include 30 Saudi Women in the newly appointed Shura Council, as announced by the King of Saudi Arabia in January 2013. Without more women in politics, finance, and civil society, with concrete roles in shaping the new Arab future, there will never be any real and sustainable social or economic development in the Arab world.

A renewed emphasis on the importance of social and human development issues such as health, youth, and women's issues would be a monumental step forward,

making a real impact in the critical areas of economic participation, opportunity, and political empowerment. In working towards achieving gender equality in the MENA region, Arab governments must approach sustainable development strategies with a rights-based focus on the Arab world's most precious resource – its people, and especially its women and young people.

AIWF is calling on Arab governments, regional development groups, and the Arab private sector to work together to establish and support investment funds that will benefit women in business and facilitate cross-border networking initiatives. AIWF believes that entrepreneurship and creating a viable business climate, where job-creating SMEs can flourish, are at the heart of the sustainable development process. Arab and international funds must be allocated to support practical programs, including training centers in rural areas and microcredit for small businesses. Focused investments will ensure that women and young people (of both genders) receive an equal voice and access to opportunities.

Although every MENA country faces uncertainty in the years ahead, there are unprecedented opportunities for women to claim a critical role in shaping the frameworks that will set legal, political, and social precedents for the decades to come. This is a critical time for the Arab world. Now, more than ever, gender equality and economic opportunity for all citizens are the keys to successful, inclusive, and sustainable development for the MENA region.