Helpdesk Research Report: Women and Girls in the MENA Region
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Query: What is the political and economic situation for women and girls in the MENA region and how has it changed as a result of the Arab Spring? What is the contribution of women to the political uprising in MENA?

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1. Overview

Women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have seen positive changes in their economic and political rights between 2005 and 2010. According to research carried out by Freedom House, 14 out of the 17 countries recorded some gains in the status of women, with the Gulf States recording the highest degrees of improvement with women having become more visible participants in public life, education, and business during this period. Overall conditions for women worsened in Iraq, Yemen and the occupied Palestinian territory (West Bank, including East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip), which is partly related to the uncertain security situation (Kelly 2010).

The MENA region cannot be described as homogenous, with socio-economic and political indicators showing different achievements in different countries. However, in general, patriarchal interpretations of cultural norms and practices, coupled with conservative interpretations of religious law, both Islamic and Christian, limit women’s empowerment. Local social construction of gender roles and expectations imply lesser opportunities in terms of access to employment, economic empowerment and access to justice for women. For example, women and girls are granted unequal inheritance and divorce rights in Islamic law and in the political sphere women continue to be underrepresented, despite now holding equal voting rights to men in all countries including, more recently, in Saudi Arabia.

Women and girls in the MENA region also experience discrimination of the upholding of their existing rights. Kelly (2010:3) highlights that ‘[t]hroughout the region, persistent patriarchal attitudes, prejudices, and the traditionalist inclinations of male judges threaten to undermine new legal protections’. This is exacerbated by women and girls’ lack of awareness of their rights, stemming partly from (deliberate) educational weaknesses where girls are not taught about their rights (Nazir...}


undated), as well as lack to access to a fair and equitable justice system. Despite the efforts of civil society in lobbying and advocating for changes in legislation, policies and practices, rule of law and access to justice in the MENA region seems to resist pushes for reform.

The status of girls in the MENA region is closely linked to that of women and thus this report focuses more on women than on girls. However, the section on the economic situation is applicable to both women and girls. As girls are increasingly spending more years in school, it may therefore be assumed that girls' involvement in the employment sector is not likely to start until their late teens. The issue of child labour, though prevalent in MENA, especially within the context of domestic work, is beyond the scope of this report.

While women have been extensively involved in the Arab awakening and have played key roles in many countries, the outcomes of their involvement are still unclear. While progress has been made in Tunisia with regards to political representation in parties and the removal of restrictions on CEDAW, in Egypt and Libya activists are worried about new limitations on women’s political participation and rights (Khalife 9 August and 22 September 2011). In Egypt the committee set up to draft the new constitution lacks female representatives, omitting a key perspective in the promotion and protection of women’s rights and in Libya no women are currently represented in the National Transitional Council.

2. The political and economic situation for women and girls in MENA

Political rights

Political representation

The Arab region has the lowest representation of women in parliament (Jamal 2010). However, this conceals significant variations between countries, from 27.6 percent in Tunisia to zero percent in Saudi Arabia (Dahlerup 2009). Table 1 below shows the representation of women in the MENA.

Table 1: Women in Arab Parliaments (Lower or Single House) as of 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Women in Parliament in % (Most Recent Election)</th>
<th>Women in Parliament in Numbers (Women/All)</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
<th>Party Competition in Elections</th>
<th>Gender Quotas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tunisia</td>
<td>27.6 (2009)</td>
<td>59 / 214</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Iraq</td>
<td>25.5 (2005)</td>
<td>70 / 275</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Morocco</td>
<td>10.5 (2007)</td>
<td>34 (325)</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Algeria</td>
<td>7.2 (2007)</td>
<td>28 (389)</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>2005 (%)</td>
<td>2003 (%)</td>
<td>Prop. Type</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Further Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>8 (442)</td>
<td>Plurality/maj.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1 (301)</td>
<td>Plurality/maj.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comoros</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0 / 33</td>
<td>Plurality/maj.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0 (84)</td>
<td>Plurality/maj.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0 (35)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Women cannot vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0 (150)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Women cannot vote</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dahlerup, 2009, pp. 32.

Some countries in the MENA region have introduced quotas to increase the participation of women in elected bodies and in political parties. This currently includes Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Palestine and Iraq as well as Somalia, Djibouti, (North) Sudan and Mauritania. The quotas are, however, very small with women represented from a high of 25 percent in Iraq (in 2005) to 6 percent in Jordan (in 2003) (Dahlerup 2009). Through the use of these quota systems, women’s representation in the MENA region has increased (Kelly 2010).

The types of quotas in use can be divided into three types:

- Reserved seat quotas, which require the election of a certain number of women;
- Legislated candidate quotas, where the law require a certain minimum number of female candidates among all parties competing in the election; and,
- Voluntary party candidate quotas, where individual political parties have written into their statutes that a certain minimum number of women/men must be on the party’s electoral lists in all of the districts (Dahlerup 2009).

While Tunisia shows the most progressive achievements in terms of women’s political and economic rights, progress can also be interpreted as regime consolidation and an exercise in PR. Goulding argues that ‘including more women in its party lists is not a threat to the RCD [former president Ben Ali’s party]: rather, their presence can do nothing but add national and international legitimacy to the RCD’s cause by making the party appear more receptive to the demands of their female constituents’ (2009:76).

Additionally, Kelly (2010) points out, despite quotas, very few women are able to achieve electoral success in their own right. Rather the typical female lawmaker is closely related to a prominent male leader or is a member of a traditional political family.

However, it must also be noted, as emphasised by Kelly, that progress on women’s political participation in the region ‘is stymied by the lack of democratic institutions, an independent judiciary, and freedoms of association and assembly’ (Kelly 2010:3). This makes it more difficult for women’s advocates to organise and effectively lobby governments for change.
Political participation and electoral rights
Women now have equal voting rights in all countries in the MENA region. This followed the Saudi King’s announcement on 25 September 2011 that from 2015 Saudi Arabian women would be allowed to vote and stand in municipal elections (The Economist 27 September 2011).

In Kuwait, since 2005, when women were granted the right to vote, more women are registered voters than men. This situation was caused by the automatic registration on the electoral roll of all Kuwaiti females of eligible age. Men, on the other hand, have to register voluntarily and in addition the Kuwait’s military, almost entirely made up of men, is prohibited from voting (Gorvett 2006).

Notably, many women in the MENA region appear to support political parties and candidates that work against women’s rights. However, Blaydes and El Tarouty (2009) find that there are often rational decisions for this. For example client-based voter recruitment can empower women economically, while ‘women who vote for Islamist candidates may be able to increase the influence of their political support by creating common knowledge about the popularity of their candidate and by reducing the effectiveness of government violence’ (2009:364).

Women’s campaigning and involvement in political parties
In addition to political and socio-cultural barriers women running for political office are also constrained by financial limitations. El-Helou argues that these are ‘most apparent in the high cost of electoral campaigns that may be beyond the reach of many women, mainly those who lack financial independence’ (2009:64).

Moreover in Kuwait women can only attend separate, women-only campaign meetings, leaving political parties to run two parallel campaigns (Gorvett 2006).

In Yemen, women have successfully participated in the main opposition party, the Islah Party. Women members of the party have gained support from the younger, reformist cadre of the party leadership whilst at the same time, more conservative social messages have also appealed to the centrist voters. Though women’s full integration in the party has been opposed by Salafist cadres, women have earned enough credibility through successes in women-only public debates across the political spectrum to push for partial integration within Islah. They have also managed to secure a role in key decision-making bodies through their participation in competitive electoral processes (Philbrick Yadav 2010). However, due to the inefficiency of the opposition alliance in Yemen (before the Arab Spring), women’s efforts have also focused on ‘associational life in ways they hope will produce change without incurring the considerable costs and bitter disappointments of partisan activism’ (Philbrick Yadav and Clark 2010).

Socio-cultural constraints against women’s political participation
Moreover socio-cultural constraints continue to hamper women’s participation in politics. El-Helou (2009), looking at women’s political representation in Lebanon, identifies three reasons for their low participation: i) the patriarchal, religiously-based culture and the resulting gender-based role perceptions; ii) the perception of women as being incapable of representing and protecting, the interests of groups within a sectarian system; and iii) the perception of politics as a dirty field from which women have to be shielded.
Economic

Labour participation
The MENA region has the lowest level of women’s labour force participation in the world (Moghadam 2007). Women’s participation is limited by several factors including low levels of education and literacy, restricting their entry to the labour market, inadequate access to money or credit, and limited access to markets (Willman Bordat, Schaefer Davis and Kouzzi 2011). However, women’s progress has been greatest in the areas of employment, literacy rates and enrollment in areas of study previously deemed inappropriate (Kelly 2010).

Notably, women in the Gulf countries, despite restrictions to their political rights, enjoy higher labour-force participation rates than their counterparts elsewhere in the MENA region. Despite higher education and literacy rates as opposed to the rest of the region, Kelly (2010) argues that this is most likely as a result of the overall lower unemployment rates, which translates into less competition with men for jobs. Government policies to reduce dependence on foreign labour have lead to the private sector aggressively recruiting female workers to increase the percentage of local employees. However, Kelly (2010:6) points out that ‘although such policies have increased the overall number of working women, they have also highlighted the cultural limits placed on female professionals’. Women still struggle to advance beyond entry-level positions, despite holding relevant qualifications and performing well on the job, leading to perceptions that many women have been hired only to satisfy the government quotas (Kelly 2010).

In addition, female unemployment rates are very high in MENA, including for college-educated women (Moghadam 2007). However, a high percentage of women are also neither in employment nor looking for work. For many women, particularly the wealthier, staying at home is a symbol of prestige and thus a preferred option (Abdelali-Martini 2011).

Formal employment
Formal sector employment mirrors educational levels: middle class women tend to be employed in office jobs, with the exception of Morocco and Tunisia, whereas working-class women and girls tend to take up jobs in the textiles and garments sector, and in the domestic sector, as maids or nannies (Moghadam 2007).

Despite labour laws mandating equal pay rights and equal opportunities for training and promotion for men and women, women still earn less than men and employment perks, such as housing allowances, are often violated (Kelly 2010). Women also face gender-based restrictions in labour laws and can legally be denied employment in certain occupations (ibid).

Public sector employment
Although there are large variations within the MENA region, women’s participation in the public sector is generally very high when compared to women’s total participation in the labour market. For example in Algeria more than 85 % of the female labour force was employed in the public sector in 1990. The expansion of women in public employment is a reflection of the absence of women-friendly policies and conditions in the private sector. In the public sector and large enterprises labour legislation grants women paid maternity leaves, crèches and childcare facilities as well as early retirement, perks not enjoyed by workers in the agricultural or domestic sector, or those in small enterprises (Moghadam 2007).
Despite women’s low representation in elected and appointed positions, they are better represented in the civil service. Lebanon ranks 4th in the world in terms of number of women civil servants and the UAE Ministry of Planning reported that it had 16,223 women workers in 2001, and only 9,518, men (Jamal 2010). Additionally Egypt employs women as prominent judges in the Female Shura Assembly and Bahrain and the UAE appointed their first women judges in 2006 and 2008, respectively (Jamal 2010; Kelly 2010).

**Agricultural employment**

Women play a central role in the agricultural sector in the MENA region. The roles they play are, however, almost all informal, often not adequately protected by regulations and are not represented in formal statistics and therefore easily rendered invisible (Abdelali-Martini 2011).

Women are mainly concentrated in the production of crops requiring high intensity manual labour, such as legumes and vegetables. Men carry out the more mechanised aspects of these processes such as plowing (Abdelali-Martini 2011).

Wage labour in agriculture is rapidly growing in the region and more women are being drawn into it. This is as a result of rapid population growth, a limited natural base, and low wages in agriculture drawing men out of the sector and attracting women to it, mainly because women have less flexibility than men to relocate. Women’s share of the agricultural workforce has thus increased from 34 percent during the period 1990-1995 to almost 45 percent in 2011 (Abdelali-Martini 2011).

**Informal employment**

Women in informal employment are particularly vulnerable as they often lack employment rights and decent work conditions. Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable, as they tend to be very young (including minors) and come from very poor families. While in the Gulf countries domestic workers tend to come from Africa or Asian countries, in other MENA countries, these jobs are often taken up by rural girls from poor families (Moghadam 2007).

**Entrepreneurship**

While the agro-industry and rural industrialisation has increased the possibilities for women to become self-employed or to set up rural enterprises, women entrepreneurs still face many barriers. These external barriers are based on cultural norms, values and customs regarding female presence in the public sphere and include lack of financing, exclusion from male-dominated informal networks and the social attitude that business ownership is a male activity (Abdelali-Martini 2011; Hattab undated).

**Asset ownership and inheritance**

Many women in the MENA region suffer from limited access to physical assets, particularly land in rural areas and financial assets. Social norms and custom dictate women’s lack of equal inheritance rights. Typically a Muslim woman inherits half of what her brother inherits (The Economist 15 October 2011). However, Tunisia has enacted legal reforms which specify that when the deceased leaves no son, the line of succession ranks the surviving spouse first, then daughters, then granddaughters (UN Women undated).

Furthermore, women who have assets may be obliged to abandon them for the benefit of their brothers as they constitute their fall-back positions in case of divorce or widowhood (Agarwal, 1997 cited in Abdelali-Martini 2011). For low-income women, being divorced can thus mean loss of both children and home, and consequently a life of destitution (Moghadam 2007).
In addition, many women and girls are not remunerated for family work, and when they are, including as a result of working as wage labourers in non-family farms, they often do not control their income, especially when their families are very poor (Abdelali-Martini 2011).

Consequently Abdelali-Martini argues that 'strengthening women s access to and control over productive resources/assets such as land, capital, knowledge, information and technologies remain important factors of an enabling environment for women s empowerment' (2011:7).

3. Women's role in the Arab awakening

Women's participation in the protests

The Arab awakening has affected, to a larger or lesser extent, most countries in the MENA region. Women have played important roles throughout these events, participating in protests, nursing the wounded, hunger-striking, blogging and organising practical details around the uprisings. Even in Saudi Arabia, women have protested by launching a driving campaign through social media this year to push for their right to drive. The Women2Drive campaign has gained support of prominent women around the world, including the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton (Buchanan 21 July 2011).

While women activists of the Arab Spring have come from all social classes, Cole and Cole (2011) argues that their focus have been different. Middle and upper class women have focused on issues of political representation and on laws affecting women's equality, seeking constitutional guarantees of electoral parity as one possible way of responding to any patriarchal political backlash. Working class women, on the other hand, have been particularly concerned with wages and workers' rights.

Egypt

Women participated alongside men in the Tahrir Square protests and have been credited with much of the nitty-gritty organisation that turned Tahrir Square from a ‘moment into a movement’ (The Guardian 22 April 2011).

Syria

In Syria women have staged both mixed-sex and female only demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad. In some cases women have also brought their children with them. Near the town of Bayda, thousands of women cut off a coastal road to protest the arrests of their male relatives (Cole and Cole 2011).

Tunisia

In Tunisia, women played both active and visible roles in the revolution as bloggers, journalists, tweeters and demonstrators (Goulding 14 June 2011). However, their role in the revolution has not received a great deal of attention in the media, and especially not Western media. This has lead one blogger to suggest that the 'lack of attention to the role of women may partly be because Tunisia's revolution focused on issues [other than women's rights], with little attention paid to the importance of circulating images of “liberated” women to get the West on its side’ (Tasnim, 17 January 2011).

Yemen

In Yemen, women have played a great role in starting the protests against the long rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh. The first demonstration on a university campus was led by, Tawakul Karman, who
was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work on women’s rights in Yemen. However, it was not until President Saleh announced that it was un-Islamic for male and female protesters to march side by side, that women turned out en masse in Yemen (The Guardian 22 April 2011). What many have found surprising according to Antelava (2011: unnumbered) ‘is not the fact that Yemeni women have found strength to defy tradition, it is that many Yemeni men seem to have accepted it’.

The cost to women of participating in the uprisings

As a result of their involvement in the Arab awakening, women have also been subjected to their share of the repression. In Tunisia women were beaten by security thugs and there were reports of women being raped by police after demonstrations. Bahraini women have also been seized by the authorities. In Egypt women protesters have been detained by military troops and subjected to mistreatment and “virginity tests”, that authorities claimed were to protect soldiers from rape allegations (Leyne 19 June 2011; El Deeb and Al-Haj 7 October 2011). Scores of women have also been detained or disappeared (The Guardian 22 April 2011). In Yemen, the first female protestors was killed on 16 October 2011. This prompted thousand of women to take to the streets marching to the foreign ministry demanding UN intervention in the ongoing unrest (Finn 2011).

However, there are also reports that in some cases women were able to protest with relative impunity and were able to use this to their advantage. In Bahrain activists report that while the police initially acted brutally towards women, their attention shifted towards men as women continued to stand their ground, leading women to take advantage of the situation and increase their number in the protests (The Guardian 22 April 2011).

Women’s position in the transitional period

Despite the centrality of women activists to the Arab awakening, they have not been widely recognised as of real significance by most of the male politicians who stand to benefit from what they have accomplished (Cole and Cole 2011). While many of the Islamist parties are now publicly talking about women’s rights to some extent, many women activists are worried about the true extent of their commitment to women’s rights (The Economist 15 October 2011; Mahdawi 6 July 2011). With Islamist parties gaining in popularity, many activists fear a backlash against women’s rights.

Egypt

In Egypt, women have had few reasons to celebrate after the fall of the Mubarak regime. The number of women in the cabinet has since fallen from four to one and no woman is a member of the committee drafting the new constitution, despite many being qualified to be (The Economist 15 October 2011). Women’s organisations in Egypt have actively called for increased representation both on the National Council of Women and the constitution drafting committee, but to little avail (The Economist 15 October 2011; Statement from the Coalition of Women’s NGOs in Egypt 20 February 2011).

Tunisia

Tunisia has made the largest progress in terms of gender equality during the Arab awakening, including the following:

- The electoral commission has adopted a gender-parity system for candidate lists for the constituent assembly, which required parties to alternate men and women on their lists from
top to bottom. Any list that does not adhere to this rule can be rejected by the Electoral Commission. This makes it more likely that women will have a more representative seat at the table when the next constitution is written and this will also help sets the rules for the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections (Khalife 9 August 2011).

- On August 16 2011 the Council of Ministers voted, as the first country in the MENA region, to lift all key reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This includes removing reservations to giving women equal rights to nationality, and to equality within the family in matters of marriage, divorce, and custody (Khalife 22 September 2011).

However, as in other countries in the region, there are still concerns among Tunisian activists that conservative religious parties may oppose more rights for women and may advocate a rollback of gains already made (Khalife 22 September 2011).

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Lisa Blaydes, Stanford University.
Mounira M. Charrad, University of Texas at Austin
Claudia Lo Forte, Social Development Direct
Soenke Ziesche, UN Libya
About Helpdesk research reports: This report was based on 4 days of desk-based research. The helpdesk research reports are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues, and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.