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Women and the Arab Spring

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What are opportunities for women in the current transitions in the Arab world right now?

This month Tunisian authorities ruled that parties will be required to have equal numbers of men and women in the electoral lists that are being drawn up in preparation for the election of a constituent assembly on July 24. The ruling makes [Tunisia](#) the first country in the region to ensure gender parity. Tunisian women already enjoy more rights than almost any other women in the region, but the new ruling opens up unprecedented opportunities for women to participate in the public life of their country.

In post-Mubarak [Egypt](#), political parties are also courting women. While some Egyptian feminists, who are generally well organized, have expressed concerns that women will lose ground should the Muslim Brotherhood gain power, there are signs that among the younger generation within the movement there is support for increased participation for women in the party leadership. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood is holding discussions about including

women in their Consultative Council. Most importantly, for the first time in Egypt's history, a woman, Buthayna Kamel, is running for president. Few believe she has a chance of winning. But she is establishing an extremely important precedent.

In Yemen, President Saleh stated in his April 15th speech that the mingling of men and women who are not relatives during demonstrations was un-Islamic and called for women to go home. The next day, more than 5,000 women in the capital city of Sana'a and almost 5,000 in the industrial city of Taiz, took to the streets in protest. On the following day, hundreds of thousands of men and women came out in protest in ten cities throughout the country, including Sana'a, Taiz, Ibb, Aden, Dhammar, Baitha and Shabwa. The main opposition party, the Islamist Al Islah party, also condemned Saleh's speech and asserted that it is not un-Islamic for women to be active in the public sphere. Likewise, the conservative tribal coalition of Mareb and Jawf said that tribal culture has always given women the right to lead if they wish to do so.

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While there are reasons for optimism, what concerns that should be kept in mind?

The expansion of women's rights in post-authoritarian Arab countries is on the agenda, but cannot be taken for granted. Referring to the Tunisian gender parity ruling, Sana Ben Assour, president of the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats, told Al-Jazeera that the move was "only right in a country where men and women fought side by side for democracy." However it remains to be seen whether the parties will genuinely support women candidates and whether a majority of citizens will actually vote for women. Also even in Tunisia, women confront, the same social, cultural and psychological barriers to participation in public life that exist elsewhere in the region especially in the countryside.

In Egypt, even as women protested with men for Mubarak's ouster, there was not a single woman in the committee for changing the constitution, and just one woman was included into the newly sworn-in cabinet. Essam Sharaf, Egypt's new prime minister, has instead announced the creation of committee that deals with the advancement of women. "I appreciate the prime minister's acknowledgement of women's role but I do not agree that this is the solution. I highly doubt this newly created committee will have any power," Marwa Sharaf-el Din, an Egyptian student and activist, told [Al-Jazeera](#). A recent survey of Yemeni youth, by Women without Borders, found that women are still largely confined to the private sphere and discouraged from participating in public life, despite support among both male and female youth for changed gender roles. The report states, "The same challenges that Yemeni women face in entering the labor market impede their participation in the political arena, namely illiteracy, a lack of training opportunities, official and social biases towards their participation, and unawareness of their political rights."

In Libya, where violence continues to escalate, the alleged false imprisonment and violent sexual assault of a Libyan woman from Benghazi was a tragic example of gender-based violence employed as a weapon of war. In an interview with NPR, Iman al-Obeidi -- the postgraduate student who in March gained international attention for saying on camera that she had been gang-raped by Qaddafi's troops -- alleged that her one of her assailants told her that she had been victimized for no other reason than that she was from Benghazi. But al-Obeidi's is only the most publicized case. The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, told the Security Council on April 27 that troops loyal to Qaddafi were increasingly engaging in sexual violence. The longer the violence in Libya continues, the greater the risk that extremists will make inroads among the population. It is widely recognized that if that were to happen, women's rights would likely be one of the first casualties.

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What can women in the region do to ensure their rights and participation in public life during the current transitions and turmoil?

How women will fare as a result of the Arab Spring is uncertain. Nadwa al-Dawsari, executive director of Partners for Democratic Change office in Yemen, views the current interest of politicians in women's issues with a measure of cynicism. She told Muslim Women News: "All parties in Yemen, says, " use women to cultivate votes. This revolution-in-the-making is not about women. Their rights are not on its agenda¹." For this reason, Halima Gellman, an expert on gender issues in Yemen, told USIP, "Women in the region need to recognize their common needs and interests, achieve consensus on key issues, build coalitions and organize campaigns around them, in order to ensure that the promises that politicians are making to gain their support during the transition and are translated into concrete action when the dust settles."

One of the biggest challenges facing the women's movements involves the need for initiatives to build consensus between secular women and Islamist women in order to achieve common goals. Some women in the region believe that secular governance is the only way to ensure women's rights. Khadija Cherif, a Tunisian feminist activist, told NPR, "The force of the Tunisian feminist movement is that we've never separated it from the fight for democracy and a secular society. We will continue our combat, which is to make sure that religion remains completely separate from politics."

Other women disagree that political Islam is necessarily incompatible with women's rights. In Yemen, the Islah party offers women more opportunities than any other political movement. Indeed, it was the liberal wing of the Islah party that initiated legislation to raise the minimum age for marriage to 18 (the conservative wing has opposed the legislation). "women are very active in Islah, they are very active in organizing and also in campaigning for women's rights." Al-Dawsari told Muslim Women News².

Ultimately, women in the region will have to negotiate the roles of women and the role of religion in public life. Many Muslim feminists assert that whether or not Islamist or secular parties are in power, there is a need to promote a greater acceptance of a diversity of interpretations of Islam. This includes changing archaic, culture-based interpretations of women's status in Islam. But in order to be able to do so, they believe that women are going to require the same training and education as men in both civil law and Islamic law.

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What kinds of support could the international community offer women at this moment?

The international community can contribute to these goals by supporting dialogues among women from different constituencies within countries, and by supporting networking and information sharing between countries. There is much that nascent women's movements in countries such as Yemen, and the more mature women's movements of Tunisia and Egypt, can learn from each other, and many ways that they can support each other.

In the short-term, the international community and more mature women's movements in the region can offer training in advocacy, coalition-building, civil society-strengthening, and civic education to women in countries or regions of countries where women's movements are nascent. The Women without Borders report "suggests that opportunities exist for women for engagement with educated young men and women through gender equality training, human resource development, and professional skills training" in Yemen. The report emphasizes that both boys and girls must be educated about gender equality.

Interestingly, it is in Yemen, one of the most conservative countries in the region, that women have claimed public space on a previously unprecedented scale. Women have exploited the opportunity provided by the uprising to increase their participation in public life. Referring to the uprising in Yemen, al-Dawsari told Muslim Women News³ "it has already brought about a massive change. Every day in Sana'a's Change Square, dozens of women get up on stage and tell tens of thousands of men what they think. Just three months ago, this was simply unimaginable." Many women in Yemen and elsewhere in the region will be loathe to give up their newfound civic roles and responsibilities.

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