

Will the Arab Spring backfire on women?

Aline Sara

While the Arab Spring has provided women with space to make their voices heard, "It has also become clear that there are real risks, especially [for woman] in places like Egypt and Libya," said Head of Human Rights Watch's Women Division Liesl Gerntholtz.

"[Arab] women were visible, they went out and demonstrated for changes, but unfortunately right after the ousters of [Tunisian President Zeineddine] Ben Ali and [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak, we saw a backlash," added her colleague, Nadya Khalife, the Middle East North Africa researcher in HRW's women's rights division.

From Tunisia to Yemen, Libya, Egypt and Syria, NOW Lebanon looks into whether the uprisings will have a positive or negative role on women.

Tunisia

With a female literacy rate close to 70 percent, legalized abortion, equal divorce rights for both sexes, and with polygamy outlawed, Tunisia is regarded as a bastion of women's rights in the MENA region. But the win of a moderate Islamist party in last month's elections has some women's rights activists worried.

Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates. "The presence of Islamists is something new for us. We are wary of what comes next, but we are happy that for the time being, they are not changing [laws relating to] the civil code," she said.

Nonetheless, some students have been forbidden entry into classes for not wearing the veil, while last October, dozens of protesters stormed a television station that aired *Persepolis*, a film about a young Iranian girl at the time of the Islamic Revolution.

The station's director was subsequently put on trial for "undermining" the sacred values of Islam.

Still, Tunisian women are probably better off than those in Libya and Egypt, says Khalife. "[Because] women's rights are so advanced, it will be hard to take away the rights they have won over the years," she said.

The announcement of the gender parity law last April was also worthy of praise and in line with the fact that Tunisia boasts the region's highest rate of female political representation. "So we are in a state of caution and vigilance, waiting [to see how things pan out]," said Zeghidi.



Tunisian women hold a banner that reads: "All Together for Our Gains, Don't Touch My CSP [Personal Status Code]." (AFP photo/Salah Habibi)

Egypt

Women and children have been the victims of the Egyptian revolution, according to Omar Ahmed from Egypt's Women's Union (EWU).

"Before the toppling of the regime, Egyptian legislation showed positive signs of progress for women. but after the revolution.



many people are trying to erase them,” he said.

There are worries of a takeover by Islamists, who frequently view women’s rights as a Western import. It does not help that Egyptian women themselves do not feel much pressing concern about their situation, Ahmed added.

Over the course of the years, a cultural regression has worsened the status of women, said Dina Amiri, president of the temporary board of the EWU. “The virginity tests are another game played by the regime to intimidate women,” she said. In spite of this, Amiri remains positive: “The revolution did not end, and I am optimistic,” she told NOW Lebanon.

Libya

“Under the Qaddafi regime, women’s rights were progressive,” Khalife told NOW Lebanon.

But last October, Mustafa Abdul-Jalil, chairman of Libya’s National Transition Council, irked a number of liberals when he declared that Sharia law would be the main source of legislation in post-Qaddafi Libya. He alluded to the possible re-instatement of polygamy, which had been banned.

However, signs of hope were realized during the country’s first international women’s conference in November, which highlighted the need to ratify international conventions that safeguard the rights of women and children and ensure the participation of both sexes in the country’s political arena.

Ultimately, “Libya is somewhat of a mixed bag,” said HRW’s Gernholtz. “And as a place where there has been no history of civil society in 42 years, women in Libya are organizing themselves.”

Yemen

“Yemini women have a very low social status. There are lots of discriminatory laws and practices, and despite civil society organizations working to improve the situation, not much has been done,” said Khalife. “These next few months are going to be crucial,” she added.

Efforts to improve the status of women have been muted by a very traditional Islamic society and extremely conservative parliamentarians. Khalife pointed to the example of the minimum marriage age. In rural areas, girls as young as eight are being married, she said.

But women are coming out and making their voices heard. Last month, Tawakkul Karman, often dubbed the “mother of the revolution,” won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

Indeed, experts estimate that approximately one-fifth of those taking to the streets in Change Square are women, which in and of itself represents a metamorphosis in a country that came last in the 2011 Global Gender Gap report.

Yemeni activist Dalkis al-Lahabi said that the number of women activists had grown tenfold as a result of



Egyptian women protest in Cairo’s Tahrir Square in spite of claims female activists have been harassed. (AFP photo/Mahmud Hams)



Libyan women celebrate following the capture of slain leader Moammar Qaddafi’s son, Seif al-Islam. (AFP photo/Abdullah Doma)



Yemeni women burn their veils in Sanaa last October protesting the Saleh regime’s crackdown on female demonstrators. (AFP photo/Marwan Naamani)

the uprising. "It brought the women back to the Yemeni civil and political society," she said. Indeed, in October, hundreds of women marched into Sanaa, burning their veils in a sign of protest against the Saleh government.

Syria

Because of the media blackout since the uprising began in the country in March, it has been difficult to talk to women activists in Syria, many of whom are in hiding.

"I think it is really hard to tell with Syria. We are really struggling to get information out. The crackdown is brutal and severe," said Gertholtz. "But in some of the pictures that emerged women are clearly participating in the demonstrations, and many of the doctors who treated the protesters are women," she said.

Minority Rights Group International says that Syrian women have enjoyed some level of emancipation under the Baath regime, with females present in parliament and other high-ranking posts. At the same time, "Social attitudes toward women are extremely varied, especially in the countryside," the report said.

"If you want to look at family or penal codes, similarly to what we have in Lebanon, there are still discriminatory laws," said HRW's Khalife.

Additionally, unlike Lebanon, where women's rights groups are commonplace, President Bashar al-Assad's iron grip means Syria has a very limited civil society.

As such, "I'm not quite sure how women's rights will pan out, or whether they will improve," said Khalife.



Syrian women living in Turkey protest against the Assad regime in front of the Syrian consulate in Istanbul. (AFP photo/ Bulent Kilic)



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