

Democracy, Like Revolution, is Unattainable Without Women

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Citation to Publisher Aziz, Sahar F. (2013). Democracy, Like Revolution, is Unattainable Without Women. *United States Institute of Peace: Peace Brief 152*. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB152.pdf>.

Citation to this Version: Aziz, Sahar F. (2013). Democracy, Like Revolution, is Unattainable Without Women. *United States Institute of Peace: Peace Brief 152*. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7282/T36113WK>.



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June 27, 2013

SAHAR F. AZIZ

E-mail: sahar.aziz@gmail.com

Democracy, Like Revolution, is Unattainable Without Women

Summary

- The biggest challenge facing women in Arab Spring countries is transforming their leadership and attendant influence during the revolutions into high-level governance positions, both elected and appointed, after the revolutions.
- To achieve this goal, reform efforts should include: 1) amending election laws to increase the proportion of women represented at the local, state, and national levels; 2) increasing high-level employment opportunities; and 3) using public education to highlight the role of women and counter perceptions of traditional gender roles.

Introduction

Contrary to popular media coverage, the Arab Spring was not the first time Arab women took on leadership roles in populist uprisings. As far back as the 1919 Egyptian revolution against the British occupation, women in the Middle East have played pivotal roles in both political movements and mass protests. Indeed, women constituted a significant proportion of street protesters during the 1960s Algerian revolution, the Iranian revolution of 1979, and in Palestine during the First Intifada. This Peace Brief posits that the biggest challenge facing women in Arab Spring countries is transforming their leadership and attendant influence during the revolutions into high level governance positions, both elected and appointed, after the revolutions.

Despite their involvement in past revolutions, whether against native dictators or foreign occupiers, women in the Middle East have yet to attain the degree of political representation that reflects the scope of their contributions in deposing regimes. As soon as the conflicts end and the revolutionary fervor is over, society has reverted back to traditional gender roles wherein women are expected to stay out of the political process beyond exercising any voting rights they may have. Their social and political positions remain largely unaffected notwithstanding their sacrifices. However, without women's participation in social and political institutions, nations are unable to develop healthy and sustainable democracies. And as a result, democracy repeatedly eludes the nations of the Middle East.

What will differentiate the Arab Spring revolutions from past ones is the degree to which the political revolution triggers a social revolution wherein women gain meaningful access to and representation in political institutions. Notwithstanding their increased participation in the public sphere as workers,¹ women's interests have been woefully underrepresented in the political process. Thus, women's participation in the formal workforce, albeit at disproportionately lower rates than men, should not be mistaken for political representation and equal treatment before the law.

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Accordingly, those concerned with achieving substantive equality should focus on the following three key measures: 1) amend election laws to increase the proportion of women represented in local, state, and national politics; 2) increase high-level employment opportunities for women; and 3) reform public education curriculums to highlight the role of women in the revolutions and the various professions to counter perceptions of women's inability or disinterest in roles outside of the home and to communicate to the youth how sustainable democracies depend on equal participation by women. In combination, these steps will increase the likelihood of a more equitable society wherein women are sufficiently empowered to minimize gender disparities and meaningfully contribute toward the nation's progress.

Amend Election Laws to Promote Political Representation

At less than 10 percent, the proportion of women representatives in Arab parliaments remains the lowest in the world.² While post-revolution amendments to election laws improve transparency and independent oversight of electoral processes, additional legislative amendments are needed to establish a fair, free, and accessible electoral process for all citizens.

Historic biases coupled with unequal access to elected office nearly guarantee women's inability to obtain adequate representation in pursuit of their diverse interests. As a result, remedial programs such as quotas or gender ordering on party lists are warranted. As women's participation in electoral politics normalizes over time, remedial measures can be phased out.

A comparison of Egypt and Tunisia highlights the importance of proactive measures to ensure adequate representation of women in political office. After decades of international advocacy calling for more female representation in parliament, as well as a U.N. recommendation for special measures to increase women's representation in Egyptian public life,⁴ the Mubarak government relented in 2010 and mandated a quota for 64 women to serve in the People's Assembly. As a result, female parliamentarians increased from five members in 2005 to 64 in 2010.

Soon after taking control of the executive branch in 2011, Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces eliminated the quota and replaced it with a requirement that political parties participating in proportional representation districts include at least one female candidate anywhere on their party lists. As a result, only 12 women were elected or appointed to the now dissolved 2012 People's Assembly and five in the Shura Council. Political parties exacerbated this regression even more after they refused to list female candidates at the top of their party lists, nearly guaranteeing women's exclusion from parliament.

In contrast, Tunisia's post-revolution caretaker government crafted an innovative gender ordering system to increase women representatives in the new Tunisian parliament. Candidates for 217 seats divided among thirty-three districts ran as members of party lists under a proportional representation system. The electoral rules mandated that every other candidate on a party list be a woman.⁴ Despite these remedial measures, in 2011 only 49 women (22.5 percent) were elected to Tunisia's 217-member National Constituent Assembly, which was the body tasked with drafting a new Tunisian constitution after President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was deposed. Although Tunisian women candidates fared better than their counterparts in Egypt, full representation eluded Tunisian women candidates because parties consistently listed women second in districts where only one seat was available, thereby guaranteeing the male candidate a seat upon the party's victory.

Until the election of women is normalized as part of a nation's political experience, remedial measures are necessary to overcome entrenched cultural, religious, and social biases against women seeking political office.⁵ Their political participation will inform governance processes with the diverse perspectives and interests of women who may otherwise lack spokespersons in the male-dominated halls of power.

Increase High-Level Employment Opportunities

Without economic empowerment through access to high-level jobs, women are unlikely to translate their influence in society into political representation in parliament. But women's political representation is not the only cost of gender disparities. The nation's economic development hinges on women's education and meaningful participation in the workforce. Neglecting women's access to employment and consequent political participation, thus, undermines the revolutions' aims to improve the quality of life for all citizens.

Women in the Arab world face disparities in economic and employment opportunities. While Arab women are not far behind the United States in gender pay disparities, their nations are among the lowest ranked in terms of equal access to employment, especially executive or high-level positions.⁶ According to a 2012 Women's Economic Opportunity study, no country in the Middle East has a female labor participation rate above 50 percent. Similarly, the World Economic Forum's 2012 Global Gender Gap Report found Arab countries ranked among the lowest in the world in providing equal employment opportunity to women. In Egypt, for example, 28 percent of women are unemployed while only 9.1 percent of Egyptian men are unemployed.⁷ These disparities exist notwithstanding a legal framework that facially protects women from such discrimination.

Egypt's new 2012 constitution, for example, provides a general framework for advancing women's economic opportunities. The Preamble guarantees "equal opportunities... without discrimination" for all citizens. Additionally, Article 63 explicitly states "[w]ork is... guaranteed by the State on the basis of the principles of equality, justice and equal opportunities" and guarantees for every worker "the right to fair pay." While Egypt ranks the highest in the "wage equality for similar work" category in the World Economic Forum's study, Egyptian women experience significantly less access to employment opportunities in comparison to their male counterparts.

Similar to Egypt, Yemen's laws on paper appear to promote women's equality in the workplace, but the facts on the ground show otherwise. Yemeni women's unemployment rate in 2012 was a staggering 41 percent of those seeking employment while their male counterparts experienced a 12 percent unemployment rate.⁸

Reform Public Education Curriculum

Deeply embedded cultural stereotypes in the Middle East also impede women's ability to win seats in parliament or serve in high-level government positions. In general, society continues to view women's rightful place in the home, with work outside of the home permissible so long as it does not interfere with her domestic responsibilities to her family. Meanwhile, political office is viewed as reserved for men. Not only does it compromise her domestic responsibilities, but political roles require cunning and callous decision making beyond the capacity of women perceived as emotionally weak. Despite the advancement of women, albeit in modest numbers, in the professions and business, such negative stereotypes persist. Until the population is educated at a young age about the significant accomplishments of Arab women both past and present, women will remain at the margins of political decision making.

As a first step in eliminating such stereotypes, and the attendant obstacles to women's advancement, school textbooks should be updated to portray women as doctors, engineers, business executives, and politicians. Portrayals of women and girls in school textbooks can have a major effect on both a society's perceptions of women and on girls' educational and occupational aspirations. Two studies of Arab textbooks conducted in the 1980s found that women tended to be portrayed mostly in gender-based roles inside of the home.⁹ These studies found that when women were portrayed

in ways other than as mothers or little girls, they were still relegated to traditionally feminine occupations, like teaching, nursing, and agricultural work. In Yemeni textbooks, women were portrayed as being responsible for both domestic and agricultural work.¹⁰ In Tunisian textbooks, when women were portrayed in “income-generating” professions, their activities were given a traditionally-feminine bent, such as “baking cakes at home for their sons to sell in the market.”¹¹

With the assistance of the United Nations, Tunisia and Yemen started updating their textbooks in the 1990s.¹² In 2005, Morocco commissioned a study of textbooks following the passage of its new Family Code. The report concluded that women were “clearly marginalized” in the textbooks with men being prioritized over women in photos and attributing negative characteristics to women and girls.¹³ Moreover, men were shown in positions of authority almost six times as often as women, and men were portrayed in professions requiring specialized training or skills eight times as often as women.¹⁴

In a troubling reversal of the trend to portray women in their various societal roles, the Egyptian Ministry of Education in January 2013 removed from textbooks the picture of one of Egypt’s famous women’s rights pioneers, Doriya Shafiq, because she was not wearing a headscarf.

Aside from the secular-religious ideological controversy surrounding this decision, the removal of indigenous women leaders from textbooks sets the nation backward. As empirical studies demonstrate, a nation cannot prosper without meaningfully including its women in education, employment, and politics.¹⁵ For that to happen, Egyptian officials and other Arab leaders have an obligation to increase portrayals of accomplished Arab women from various walks of life to disprove the fallacies of negative gender stereotypes and educate citizens about the importance of gender equality for the nation’s welfare.

Conclusion

Despite earning their rightful place in leadership roles, Arab women have been pushed back into the private sphere where their ability to make systemic change is significantly constrained. Thus, the same tenacity and courage they exhibited during the revolutions must now be directed towards creating permanent places for them in high government office, political party leadership, media, and civil society.

It remains to be seen if the Arab Spring revolutions will bear all of the fruits of the people’s labor, but one thing is quite clear. Democracy, like revolution, will not come to fruition without the full participation of women.

Notes

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Sahar F. Aziz is an associate professor of law at Texas Wesleyan School of Law and a fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. She also serves as the president of the Egyptian American Rule of Law Association where she works on rule of law projects with Egyptian lawyers, judges, and civil society advocates. Aziz is a prolific writer and frequent speaker on Egypt's ongoing transition to democracy. Professor Aziz thanks Derek Clinger, Nancy Khalil and Danielle Jefferis for their research assistance.

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