

CARE INTERNATIONAL POLICY REPORT

ARAB SPRING OR ARAB AUTUMN?

**Women's political participation in the uprisings and beyond:
Implications for international donor policy**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the aftermath of the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, CARE International commissioned research in 2012 and 2013 to understand the new context and the implications for our work on gender and women's rights, as well as identify ways in which we need to adapt and respond.

More than 300 women and men were interviewed in the course of the research. They included women and men active in the popular uprisings; representatives of political parties, civil society organisations, the media, the private sector, and development programmes in the areas of education, health and agricultural livelihoods; as well as policy-makers and officials working for international organisations, including bilateral donor, UN and regional entities. Different research methods were used including individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups and group discussions.

This paper draws on country reports conducted by teams of researchers in Egypt, Morocco, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and Yemen, and a regional synthesis paper authored by Maha Aon.

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Cover image: Women carry banners with slogans like *don't tell me it doesn't matter* and *don't marginalise women* outside the Journalists Syndicate in Egypt on International Women's Day 2012.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“To join the protests on Friday mornings and pray Al Juma’a with other women, I had to take shortcut routes by walking through rugged mountains every Thursday night. After what I had done, no force on earth dares to neglect me.”

A woman who lives in a remote rural village in Ibb, Yemen

After decades of rule characterised by dictatorship, patronage and violence, in 2010 young people in the Arab world began to rise up and demand a new kind of politics. Women played their part as leaders and participants, and were not spared the backlash – suffering arrests, sexual harassment and even death. Though many commentators have warned that the Arab Spring is turning into an Autumn or Winter, with human rights rolled back and hopes for change dashed, CARE International’s research presents a more complex picture. As the dust continues to settle, there are both challenges and opportunities to expand the role women play in shaping the forces that affect their lives. The continuing upheaval in Egypt suggests that failures to address the root causes of the uprising and open up politics to new actors may not be sustainable over the long term.

The outlook for women remains uncertain, with much to gain or to lose. In the World Economic Forum’s 2012 Global Gender Gap Report, Middle East countries ranked

poorly, with the best (the United Arab Emirates) at 107 out of 135 countries and the worst (Yemen) in last place. Disappointingly, almost all Middle East countries scored more poorly than in 2011, in large part due to low political participation for women. During the uprisings, the old regimes used gender stereotypes to delegitimise the protestors. Mubarak in Egypt and Saleh in Yemen claimed to be ‘father of the nation’, and alleged that the protests provided cover for transgressive behaviour between men and women. Subsequently, women’s rights became a political symbol to be fought over. In transition processes, political factions have competed to outbid each other’s conservatism, undermining women’s rights in the process. Women who seek to take part in public life have encountered harassment and intimidation.

Women’s groups face a number of challenges in adapting to the new politics. The old regimes had made some progress on women’s rights at the level of policy. Countries in the region had endorsed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), changed some discriminatory laws, and increased women’s participation in parliament. But these changes turned out to be largely cosmetic, failing to influence the deeply patriarchal nature of Arab politics and society. To influence the old regimes, feminists often needed to operate via elite networking. As a consequence,

less attention was given to building support at grassroots level or addressing the everyday needs of ordinary women. Established women's rights actors and the new youth activists are beset by age, ideological and class divides which stand in the way of their ability to work together.

And yet, despite these challenges, our research has uncovered an explosion of new activism by women, both during the uprisings and in the political processes that have followed. Young and old women, many of whom had never previously taken part in politics, have sought with courage and creativity to change their societies for the better. Women in established women's groups are making their voices heard in transition processes, such as the National Dialogue Conference in Yemen or deliberations on the new order in Egypt. Even within Islamist groups, women are at work, forging new roles and gaining in influence.

These developments pose new challenges for donors. Their political allegiances and focus on short-term 'stability' meant they failed to anticipate the uprisings, and were perceived as complicit with the old regimes. Donors now prioritise democratic transition and jobs, but it is not clear whether these policies will truly address the root causes of the uprisings. Neither is it clear how far donors are willing to go to make a priority of women's rights. Such attempts are complicated by the fact that work on gender is often perceived as an illegitimate foreign imposition – but CARE's research uncovered a range of ways in which a smart approach to women's rights in aid policy can make a difference.

What is clear is that donors and development NGOs must make radical changes if they are to form meaningful partnerships with a new generation of politically active youth groups. At a policy level, 'mutual accountability agreements' between donors and new governments in the region could be established, or strengthened where they exist, to place women's rights benchmarks at the heart of political dialogue, aid and trade relations. On the ground, development NGOs have built up programmes and trust with communities, which could help with the grassroots outreach by women's groups. And as youth activists look for ways to move from 'street politics' to influencing government, entry-points exist in projects addressing good governance and social accountability. Over the longer term, engaging with religious institutions on women's rights will be most effective when integrated into community development programmes and starting with less contentious entry-points, such as girls' education and maternal health. Reforms in national policies and

women's participation at the level of national institutions are critically important. Yet the experience documented in this report points to the need for women's rights actors to invest more in building grassroots support and creating an enabling environment for a wider spectrum of women to participate in public life. It is at this level that enhanced partnerships between women's rights groups and development actors have most to offer.

Research methodology

In the aftermath of the popular uprisings, CARE commissioned research in 2012 and 2013 to understand the new context and identify ways in which we need to adapt and respond. More than 300 women and men were interviewed in the course of this research in Egypt, the occupied Palestinian territory, Morocco and Yemen. Interviewees included women and men active in the popular uprisings; representatives of political parties, civil society organisations, the media, the private sector, and development programmes in the areas of education, health and agricultural livelihoods; as well as policy-makers and officials working for international organisations, including bilateral donor, UN and regional entities. Different research methods were used including individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups and group discussions.

Key recommendations

This report extracts the findings of relevance to other actors, in particular international donors, national authorities and civil society. Doubtless we have not captured all the complexity of the issues at stake in a very dynamic situation. Based on our research, we make the following over-arching priority recommendations:

- 1. Place women's rights at the heart of the new political settlements across the region.**
Give women's rights actors and youth activists a voice in decision-making. Quotas should be adopted to secure greater women's participation in political parties and public institutions. An environment should be supported in which women, including female politicians and women's rights activists, can work freely and be protected from attack and intimidation. National legislation should guarantee freedom of expression, assembly and association so that women's rights organisations, and wider civil society, can thrive.
- 2. Include women's rights in 'mutual accountability frameworks' between donors and aid recipient**

governments to regulate political dialogue, aid, trade and wider economic relations.

These should outline clear commitments on both sides to ensure that policy and funding in these areas address root causes of the uprisings. Specific benchmarks on civil society freedom and women's rights should be included. Women's organisations, alongside wider civil society, should be part of consultations to set benchmarks as well as processes to monitor their implementation.

3. Broaden the support base for women's rights movements, with a focus on engaging new youth activists and women in rural and urban slum areas.

Established women's organisations need to develop ways of partnering with the new actors that played central roles in the uprisings, especially youth and trade union activists. This will require a readiness to be challenged by new ways of working, including a willingness to open up decision-making to younger activists, to articulate how women's rights relate to wider reform agendas, and to hold duty-bearers accountable. Investment in overcoming the gaps within women's movements is also essential, in particular rural-urban, generational, religious-secular and economic/class divides. NGOs can support this outreach by partnering with women's organisations on community development at grassroots level.

4. Support initiatives to bridge the religious-secular divide on women's rights.

Regional and national groups which promote progressive interpretations of Islam, such as Musawah, and prominent religious institutions, such as Al-Azhar, can use their unique authority to espouse moderate views of Islam and the role of women. For development actors, initiatives to bridge the divide should focus on practical needs prioritised by communities themselves, and less sensitive entry-points, such as maternal health, livelihoods or girls education, to avoid backlash. Ensure partnerships are informed by a 'do no harm' analysis and supportive of diversity and moderate religious actors, as well as secular voices. Watchdog civil society organisations (CSOs) can monitor the manipulation of faith and religious institutions for political purposes.

5. Transform development programmes to embed gender equality, women's participation and youth empowerment.

Donor support for ad hoc women's rights initiatives should be complemented by increased investment in longer-term and multi-sectoral programmes to change the norms, attitudes and practices which shape women's ability to participate in the decisions which affect their lives. Projects should be designed with greater attention to fostering women's participation. Political participation often starts with involvement in development initiatives, such as parent-teacher committees at schools. Engaging men and boys (a 'gender' approach rather than one focused only on women and girls), and fostering champions at community and national levels, are critically important. Increased support for youth activists will require the provision of smaller-scale grants involving less bureaucracy and a greater emphasis on shared values.



KEY TRENDS CONFRONTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Risks of roll-back?

“The utopia of Tahrir is now facing the harsh test of reality.”

Female activist in Egypt

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the outlook for women's rights remains mixed and uncertain. In the World Economic Forum's 2012 Global Gender Gap report, Middle East countries ranked poorly, with the best (the United Arab Emirates) at 107 out of 135 countries and the worst (Yemen) in last place. Disappointingly, almost all Middle East countries scored more poorly than in 2011, in large part as a result of low political participation for women. It is true that the Arab Spring saw some gains for women in politics. In Tunisia, women comprise 27% of parliament due to mandated equal representation on electoral lists. And, in Yemen, a 30% quota for women was set at the National Dialogue Conference, the formal post-uprising transition process. But similar gains have not been seen elsewhere, and may turn out to be fragile. Overall, women account for just 14% of members of Arab parliaments.¹

Two other areas – government policy on women's rights, and levels of gender-based violence – also suggest discouraging trends. Although all but two Arab countries had ratified the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) before the uprisings, each had done so while registering major

reservations that undermined the treaty's spirit. Since 2011, there have been further worrying developments. In Egypt, a new constitution riddled with ambiguities on gender issues was controversially pushed through an assembly dominated by men and Islamists.² Activists feared that the constitution, which defined women's role in terms of motherhood and family, could “pave the way for occupational discrimination”³ and posed a risk to existing laws against child marriage, human trafficking and female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C).⁴ Indeed, after the uprising, enforcement of the ban on FGM/C appeared to have deteriorated.⁵ The deposing of the Morsi regime does not remove the need for women's rights advocates to make the case for them, and counter the more conservative positions in the constitution of December 2012.

Since the uprisings, there has been an alarming increase in gender-based violence, particularly in Egypt. Many believe that, just as sexual harassment was used to discourage women from participating in the revolution, it has since been used to exclude women from street

1. Calculated on 1 February 2013, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Women in National Parliaments: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

2. Tahany El Gebali, first Egyptian female Judge and former member of Supreme Judicial Court at CAWTAR / CARE Constitution event, 18 February 2013

3. Nihal El Banna. 'Women and Labour Participation', briefing paper for CARE Egypt Arab Spring research, 2012

4. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/constitution-draft-raises-concern-about-women-s-rights>

5. Shorouk Newspaper, Issue 1221, 5 June 2012 and interviews with CARE staff and other NGO workers

protests in an attempt to put an end to the revolution.⁶ In response to criticism from the UN and Egypt's National Council for Women (NCW), the Ministry of Justice asked the NCW to draft a new law on sexual harassment, but it is yet to be seen whether this will have a serious effect.⁷ Domestic and sexual violence remains widespread throughout the region, where women are married young and marital rape remains legal.

These trends play out against an uncertain and changing political background. The Arab Spring shook up political structures that had seen little change in decades, and the pieces are still in flux. Various groups with different agendas are competing to shape the outcome of the transitions that are underway, with unpredictable consequences for women's rights. In order to make sense of this turbulent new reality, it is necessary to understand two political forces in particular: the amorphous movement of youth activists whose protests sowed the seed of the uprisings; and political Islam, which in its various guises is attempting to reap their rewards. If actors interested in promoting women's rights are to achieve any success in the post-uprising period, they will need to find ways of working with both groups, finding common platforms and negotiating differences.

A new generation of female activists

"We want real, radical change: a civil state, a democratic regime, a real popular constitution. We want good education and a good system of justice. Stop arresting people for their ideas and have equality between the sexes in all fields. [...] My grandma, every time I meet her, she says don't protest, you will go to jail, they will beat you. But I'm not afraid. I really believe in it. If I don't do this, no one will do this for me."
Female activist in 20th February movement, Morocco⁸

The Arab Spring was in large part a product of the courage, creativity and sheer numbers of young people – both men and women – working together to demand political change. While women's rights were not always their primary motivation, the uprisings enabled young women to rise to prominence as protest leaders. In

Egypt, the first person to be arrested after a major labour strike in 2008, which helped prepare the ground for the uprising, was the female activist Israa Abdel Fattah. In Yemen, the uprising was labelled the 'peaceful and popular youth revolution', and both male and female university students were at its forefront. The Yemeni, Tawakkul Karman, who is variously identified as an independent activist, a civil society leader and a member of the Islah party, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 for her role in shaping the uprising. In the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), the Arab Spring inspired young activists to take to the streets and call for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas to enable new elections to be held. Though women's rights did not feature in the demands of the so-called March 15th movement, men and women participated on an equal footing. Women even made surprising use of traditional norms, occasionally using their gender to prevent violence. For example, in Yemen, women sat on the floor and recited the Quran as soldiers approached, drawing on tribal values prohibiting violence against women on the battlefield.

Even in countries which had featured relatively high levels of female political participation, the type of women engaged in such activism was new. With a few exceptions, women in politics were older, wealthy and well educated. The uprisings, however, saw the participation of women from poorer neighbourhoods and those who had not been politically active before. In Yemen, for example, almost all manifestations of 'street politics' focused on women's rights over the past two years have been led or co-led by young women, including protest graffiti campaigns like *Colour Your Street Walls* and *Walls Remember Their Faces*. Additionally, Islamists (previously marginalised from the political scene), including women, were strongly present in the uprisings, especially during elections. Women who participated did not just help bring on major political changes: they also helped bring on social changes and experienced personal revolutions. Egyptian families talk in the media about how they are more prone to engage with their teenagers about political issues, and some of our interviewees in Yemen spoke of a growing acceptance within families of daughters continuing to secondary education and beyond. In Yemen, which features at the bottom of the World Economic Forum global gender gap listing, a young woman in one of our focus groups said: *"The common proverb saying that a woman does not leave her house except to her husband's or her own grave has been broken."* Another teenager in that group added: *"I can now argue with my father and grandfather when they quote the phrase that women's minds are not capable of truly understanding religion or politics."*

6. Nicole Pratt, 'Egyptian Women: Between Revolution, Counter-Revolution, Orientalism and Authenticity'. *Jadaliyya*, 6 May 2013

7. Egypt Independent, 'State should apologize for sexual harassment, says NCW chief', 4 February 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/state-should-apologize-sexual-harassment-says-ncw-chief>

8. Interview with Kamilia Raouyane, 25 April 2012, cited in <http://womensenews.org/story/leadership/120424/young-moroccans-keep-arab-spring-spirit-alive#.Ug0Y3JJ0TWw>



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One example of youth mobilisation in Egypt is the NoonNeswa Initiative, which links graffiti to activism. This image was made in solidarity with Samira Ibrahim – a survivor of the ‘virginity tests’ imposed on female demonstrators by security forces.

YOUTH ACTIVISTS AND WOMEN’S GROUPS: COMMON GROUND?

The emergence of young female activists represents both a challenge and an opportunity to traditional women’s rights groups in Egypt, Yemen, Morocco and the oPt. Many established women’s organisations are dominated by an older generation, and are perceived by some young activists to have been co-opted by the old regimes. Young activists questioned their willingness to open up to a new generation, while older activists frequently described their younger counterparts as fragmented and unclear in their demands. In the words of a female activist in Sana’a: *“The established women’s movement is not renewed. There is a challenge for the old and traditional section of the women’s movement to reach out to younger activists.”* A young male activist in the same group said: *“I grew up and saw the same faces of activists since the 80s.”* And a Palestinian academic told us: *“The Palestinian national movement has failed to produce new generations and engage younger women.”*

Youth activists have not, on the whole, articulated an explicit women’s rights agenda. One of the overarching demands of many young people who took part in the uprisings was the demand for a ‘civil state’ or ‘dawla madaniyya’, based on the rule of law, social justice and

a guarantee of basic freedoms. The concept of dawla madaniyya is inevitably broad, and its relationship to women’s rights is not yet defined. But its emphasis on pluralism and wider participation in politics suggests the possibility of common ground between youth activists and women’s rights groups.

Some young female activists told us they were prepared to put women’s rights to one side as part of their involvement in youth movements. *“Many female activists within the new youth movements don’t want to be boxed into a feminist label. Issues of equality and justice are front and centre – women’s rights is sometimes part of the conversation, but not always.”* On the other hand, many young women told us that their participation in the revolution was partly motivated by a sense of gender injustice.

Many of the young activists we interviewed spoke of a willingness to collaborate with women’s groups. But, in some cases, such partnerships have faced challenges. In Morocco, women’s groups were at first reluctant to join forces with the 20th February movement due to its links with Islamists. When they did reach out, the results were questionable. One member of the 20th February movement spoke of a meeting with female activists by saying: *“Honestly, we did not learn anything. It was not*



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Female supporters of ousted President Mohamed Morsi gather in Cairo in August 2013.

interesting.”⁹ Another (female) member of the youth movement agreed, saying of women’s rights: “We have a general idea of the issue, but no precise knowledge. We don’t really know the women’s rights NGOs.”¹⁰ Other barriers to engagement between the two movements include the higher social class of most women’s rights workers, and perceptions that women’s groups are linked to the old regimes.

The rise of political Islam

Though the uprisings were initially the work of largely secular youth seeking new and progressive forms of politics, when elections came, people voted overwhelmingly for Islamist parties. How these new regimes will approach women’s rights remains unclear. Some of the indicators are worrying. But CARE’s research has found a wide spectrum of positions on the status of women amongst Islamist organisations and a variety of ways that women are participating in them. In fraught contexts of political transition, opportunities for engagement between women’s rights actors and Islamist

groups have been few. Yet a number of lessons have been learned which can inform how engagement can promote women’s participation and how to manage the risks involved.

Political Islam is not homogenous, and Islamists espouse a variety of views on women’s rights. In Egypt, for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood supports, and the Salafi Nour party opposes, women’s right to work. Moreover, the divide between Islamist and secular parties is not always clear-cut: the winner of the 2012 Egyptian election, the National Forces Alliance party, is often described as secular – but nevertheless speaks of implementing Sharia law.

As many interviewees told us, Islamist parties’ policies are influenced as much by political considerations as theology and scripture. This can push a party in a conservative direction, as in the case of Egypt’s Nour party, whose call for a repeal of the ban on FGM/C, for instance, was viewed by some as part of an attempt to outflank the ruling Muslim Brotherhood by espousing a ‘fundamentalist’ form of Islam. During the uprisings in Yemen, Islamist factions imposed gender segregation amongst the demonstrators in the protest square in Sana’a, physically assaulting and intimidating women’s rights activists who complained

9. Member of 20th February movement interviewed for CARE Morocco, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

10. CARE Morocco, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

against such measures. Religious fatwas were issued in Aden, Ma'rib and other governorates forbidding women from going out, removing a face veil or mixing with men. In relation to the National Dialogue Conference in the country, one interviewee told us: *"We fear a competition between Islamist factions racing to declare more and more fundamentalist positions in a bid to seem 'more Sharia than the other'. This would actually have nothing to do with religion and everything to do with the struggle for power."*

But political considerations can also have the opposite effect, pushing parties in a more moderate direction. In Tunisia, the Ennahda party's relatively liberal statements on women's rights are at least partly due to the strong opposition any shift in a more conservative direction would encounter. Likewise in Egypt, then President Morsi's March 2013 initiative on women's rights was seen by some interviewees as a successful result of national and international pressure.¹¹ In Morocco, the state's adoption of an Islamist agenda has been understood by some as a tactic to counter radicalisation and political opposition. It also enabled the passing of reformist legislation, such as in the area of Islamic family law, which might not otherwise have been possible.

FAITH AND FEMINISM – A SPECTRUM

The 300-plus women and men we interviewed in the course of our research spanned a spectrum from secular to religious, and liberal to conservative. Many identified as both Muslims and advocates of women's rights, and cited faith as a motivation for their involvement in social and political issues. Some conservative interviewees spoke of *"different but complementary"* roles for men and women, and stressed *"equity"* between the sexes rather than equality. For these women, women's rights were balanced by women's responsibilities towards the family. At the other end of the spectrum are progressive Islamic women's groups such as Musawah ('equality' in Arabic). Musawah is an international movement that promotes faith-based reinterpretations of gender issues drawing on Islamic scripture and teaching.

A number of the women we spoke to belonged to Islamist political parties and civil society groups. Some Islamist parties boast higher rates of female political participation than non-Islamic parties, and in some instances women have made efforts to challenge their parties' position on women's rights and change them from within. In Yemen, a number of female cadres of the Islamist Islah party,

including Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman, have pushed for more senior roles and in successfully doing so have managed to challenge more conservative hardliners. However representation does not always translate into progressive policies. In Egypt, though women are relatively well represented in the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) – with one, Saban al-Sakkari, even running for the party leadership in 2012 – interviewees expressed scepticism about their influence, and pointed out that female FJP members have often called loudly for restricting women's rights. In the words of one Egyptian activist: *"The women within the FJP are junior politicians, not feminists. They serve an important function for the party, but they have no influence within it. They serve a role and fill a space, but don't have a voice."*

Islamic institutions and women's issues can interact in surprising ways. Our research found a growing spread of popular forms of religious expression that are not necessarily restrictive for women. Across the region, many women go to mosques to hear 'waethat', female lay preachers, who advise them on matters of religion and daily life and often act as counsellors on issues such as marital infidelity and male violence – often with a pragmatic interpretation of religious norms.¹² Islamic philanthropic organisations also play an important role in all the countries we researched. Though they do not focus explicitly on women's empowerment, they provide much-needed social support for many ordinary women, and have sometimes played a role in the genesis of women's movements. Those we interviewed said development agencies should pay *"closer attention to these organisations, which are filling an important gap by reaching out to ordinary women in need of support"*.

The battle for political control of how Islam is interpreted also impacts across a range of civic, educational and religious institutions with consequences for how women's roles are defined. Interviewees in Egypt and Yemen described how Islamist factions were seeking to place their sympathisers into senior positions in different institutions. For example, one Egyptian interviewee pointed to how the head of the education ministry in their governorate had been replaced by a junior supporter of an Islamist party, leaping over the usual career path into the position. In the same period, changes were proposed for school textbooks to include imagery of men in beards and women in hijabs, as these were perceived to constitute 'more Islamic' forms of dress.

11. 'Egypt: Shura Council Reproached for Blaming Sexual Assault Victims', Aswat Masriya, All Africa Global Media, 13 February 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201302141308.html>

12. Julie Elisabeth Pruzan-Jørgensen, 'Islamic women's activism in the Arab world – potentials and challenges for external actors'. DIIS REPORT, 2012:02, p44



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Women walking in Taroudant, Morocco.

The prestigious Al-Azhar University and its affiliated institutions are based in Cairo, but its influence extends throughout the Sunni world. In a case brought by a Salafi cleric challenging the criminalisation of FGM/C in Egypt, key evidence provided by Al-Azhar helped ensure its failure.¹³ And an attempt by conservative groups to challenge the 'khul' law, which protects women's rights to divorce, failed in part due to Al-Azhar's argument that the law is compatible with Sharia.¹⁴ As a result of Al-Azhar's unique position and influence, more conservative forces have attempted to erode its independence. From April 2013, certain Islamist factions attempted to force the removal of the university's head, the Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb. These moves appear to have backfired, with a range of supporters mobilising in the institution's defence. The struggle over the independence of Al-Azhar is likely to continue. As Khairi Abaza says: *"It is the only 'pan-Sunni' religious institution that survived the fall of the Caliphate in 1924. [...] Whoever controls Al-Azhar will reign*

*over its global network, taking advantage of the legitimacy of the organization."*¹⁵

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTORS AND ISLAMISTS – BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND POLARISATION

As different forces have competed to shape the post-uprising period, Islamists and women's rights actors have grown increasingly polarised. In Egypt, during the early period of the Morsi regime, feminists and female FJP members engaged in processes of dialogue, such as on the drafting of the constitution. However, once the constitution was controversially pushed through by the regime, the space for dialogue shrank and the political situation became increasingly adversarial. The state-linked National Council for Women clashed with the ruling FJP party at the UN Commission on the Status of Women conference on Violence Against Women and Girls in March 2013. While the NCW supported Egypt's signature to the declaration, the FJP issued an alarming statement accusing the UN of seeking to *"destroy the family"*.¹⁶

13. Interview with Vivian Fouad, National Population Council, 2012
 14. 'Egypt Independent', <http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=334450>

15. 'The Battle for Control of Al-Azhar', Khairi Abaza, Fikra Forum, May 15, 2013, <http://fikraforum.org/?p=3314>

16. 'Muslim Brotherhood Statement Denouncing UN Women Declaration for Violating Sharia Principles', March 14 2013, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30731>

Some women's groups we interviewed were sceptical of prospects for negotiation with Islamists, whether moderate or conservative. In this view, women's rights are incompatible with Islamist agendas. In Morocco, women's groups have been reluctant to engage with the 20th February movement due to its links with Islamists, who, according to one interviewee, "believe in a society that is not acceptable to us".¹⁷ Moroccan civil society once enjoyed a close relationship with the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development, but a number of NGO workers said they distrust the new Islamist minister and expect to enter an "era where women's NGOs will play an 'opposition' role".¹⁸ Yet CARE staff and other interviewees also pointed to the important role played by cross-party caucuses of female parliamentarians in contexts such as Iraq and Pakistan, as well as the recent experience of joint mobilisation by Islamist and secular activists during the popular uprisings. How these dynamics play out will have major ramifications for women's rights activism in the region.

DEVELOPMENT ACTORS AND ISLAMISTS

A remark about development actors made by a Muslim Brotherhood representative we interviewed in Egypt points to the ambiguities of working with Islamist groups: "We welcome all kinds of collaboration with all types of civil society organisations," she said, before adding: "as long as they respect the peculiarities of our culture." How far a women's rights agenda is compatible with the "peculiarities" of Arab culture as defined by Islamists is, of course, the key question.

NGO staff emphasised to us that development actors must not lose sight of their core goals, and that certain principles – such as equality before the law, women's right to education, and the unacceptability of gender-based violence – are non-negotiable. At the same time, past experience shows it is possible to find areas of common ground. For example, Dr Omaima Kamel, the then FJP Presidential Advisor in Egypt, told us that she believed the priority issues facing women in Egypt were socio-economic ones.¹⁹ Development actors can highlight instances where progressive positions on gender do not conflict with religious norms, engaging initially on concrete, uncontroversial issues while avoiding ideological debate – before moving on to explore points of difference.

The choice of partners is important. Groups such as Musawah, which promote progressive ideas on the role

of women in Islam, are obvious choices. Prominent Islamic bodies, such as Al-Azhar in Cairo, can use their unique authority to espouse more moderate and pluralistic views of Islam. A third group of possible partners is grassroots religious leaders (see case study of work on FGM/C in Egypt below) who command respect among local populations. Interviewees emphasised the importance of investing time to build such relationships that take account of local needs and sensitivities. The girls' leadership project in Yemen (described on page 25) required more than a year to undertake such acceptance-building activities before the project engaged with girls themselves.

While bridging the Islamist-secular divide is important, some interviewees warned against addressing women's rights issues through a solely religious framework. In the words of one activist: "If such alliances are not chosen carefully, they can be counter-productive by reinforcing the power of regressive forces in society that has far-reaching adverse consequences for both women's and minority rights." There is a risk that development actors might play into a dynamic of Islamisation by neglecting moderate and secular voices. Women's rights must be addressed through a variety of prisms – tribal, regional and ethnic, and secular as well as religious.

Case Study: Engaging with Islamic stakeholders to prevent FGM/C

The practice of female genital mutilation or cutting is based on inherited cultural misconceptions, partly justified by religious pretexts. It is widespread in Egypt, but not in many other Middle East countries, underlining that it is a cultural practice, not an Islamic one. CARE, and others including UNFPA and UNICEF, have developed extensive experience in addressing both religious and cultural factors that perpetuate the practice.

Together with religious institutions, NGOs have jointly produced written guidance on how to address religious beliefs about FGM/C (both Muslim and Christian). It explores scientific, physical and psychological implications of FGM/C and how these conflict with precepts of Islam which safeguard human dignity and integrity. Influential Islamic scholars helped develop the guidance, and have since made reference to it in their public pronouncements. Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, Egypt's then supreme religious authority, issued a fatwa in 2007 condemning the practice following the death of a young girl due to FGM/C. Such statements contributed to the criminalisation of FGM/C in 2008 and were critical in defeating an attempt by an ultra-conservative Salafi cleric to challenge the law on FGM/C in 2013. This challenge was struck down by Egypt's Constitutional Court in February 2013 largely as a result of the written guidance.

17. CARE Morocco, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

18. CARE Morocco, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

19. Interview with Dr Omaima Kamel, 28 March 2013

Translating policy into practice at the local level has been harder. Various initiatives have sought to train local religious leaders using the anti-FGM/C written guidance. However, clerics have faced extensive challenges from conservative groups who maintain that FGM/C is 'dignity for women' (makrama), or who politicise the issue by pointing to Western influence behind the anti-FGM/C campaign.

Initiatives on FGM/C are most effective when integrated into wider community-based health, education and development programmes. When anti-FGM/C efforts were led by NGOs that are not highly integrated in the community, they faced strong opposition. Creating spaces in which community members can come together to debate FGM/C practices is also important. Likewise, support for champions – especially youth activists and sympathetic community leaders – has also proven

essential. For example, in Minia, Assuit and Sohag, CARE has worked with local religious leaders by exploring their ideas on social problems and how they might be addressed during the Islamic Friday prayers, the Coptic Sunday sermons and other religious classes. Their leadership proved critical to the success of the project, which addressed a wider spectrum of gender-based violence than just FGM/C.

Progress on FGM/C in national policy appears vulnerable in the fluid situation following the Arab Spring. At the community level, integrating such programmes into wider development strategies appears to be a prerequisite for success. This forces development actors to think beyond the short-term timelines of typical project assessments. There are no 'quick fixes' in the effort to transform the beliefs and practices perpetuating FGM/C.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS

“Women thought that their presence and participation in the protest squares brought them close to decision making, where they could learn about what was happening to their country and help to shape it too. Yet, after signing the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative to make a deal between power-holders at the elite level, all of that disappeared.”

Female activist in Yemen

Across the Arab world, women's rights groups are taking bold steps to shape what will follow the uprisings. Some are engaged in street-level activism, such as the Yemeni women who gathered outside the Old Mosque in Sana'a on International Women's Day, chanting adaptations of traditional folk lyrics that called on men to stand against violence. Others are participating in formal state-linked institutions, such as the National Council for Women in Egypt. But their ability to advance women's rights depends on how they adapt to changing circumstances in the post-revolutionary period. In order to succeed, they will need to combat perceptions that their agendas are linked to previous regimes and Western governments, deepen grassroots support and overcome internal divisions.

Widening the support base for the women's rights movement

'STATE FEMINISM' AND THE NATIONAL COUNCILS

The old regimes in Egypt, Yemen and Morocco each pursued women's rights agendas. Though such policies were often cosmetic, progress was made in areas such as repealing discriminatory laws and increasing women's participation in parliament. However, so-called 'state feminism' failed to win widespread support in society as a whole. In Egypt and Yemen, quasi-governmental national councils on women's issues were established. Both were criticised for their perceived subservience to government, and their association with the old order poses a challenge to their legitimacy today.

In Egypt, the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), the National Population Council and the NCW provided an interface between civil society and government. But they were widely viewed as tools of previous governments *“to polish their image as pro-civil rights”*.²⁰ The NCW in particular was viewed *“as the playground of the previous first lady”*.²¹ After witnessing several 'waves of reshuffling' since the revolution, the NCW has improved its standing under its new head Ambassador Mervat Al Tallawy. The NCW has signalled its independence issuing unequivocal statements on

20. CARE Egypt, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

21. Ibid.

sexual violence and FGM/C, among other issues, and pushing for stronger language on women's rights in the constitution.²²

In Morocco, the new constitution called for the creation of a 'high authority on equality and the fight against all forms of discrimination' to oversee the implementation of the clause calling for gender equality. Two years on, it has yet to be created, and women's groups have voiced concern over the delay. Morocco has in place a Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development, led by Bassima Hakkaoui, the government's only female minister, which oversees the so-called Governmental Plan on Gender, IKRAM. But women's groups have criticised the inclusion of the word *Ikram* ('honouring' in Arabic) in the plan, as it implies notions of charity rather than a right to equality.

The national councils can play a crucial role in promoting women's rights under the new regimes. But their success depends on how far they are able to navigate the space between government and civil society without being co-opted by the former or dominating the latter, and their ability to renew their legitimacy by escaping their association with the old regimes. As one former member of the Egyptian NCW put it: *"The revolution was supposed to be about changing the way things are run, not just changing the people in positions of influence. I had thought that we could change the way that the Council worked. The NCW should become a sounding board for a range of activists on the ground. Instead, it has sometimes competed with other women's rights actors for space and profile on issues. It needs humility in relation to the wider spectrum of women's rights actors, not seek to compete or dominate. The relationship needs to be reinvented."* Similar sentiments were shared in oPt, Yemen and Morocco on the need for women's rights structures at national level to renew their accountability and relevance for a wider base of women in society.

After years of undemocratic rule, it is unsurprising that the national councils and other women's organisations are struggling to adapt to the new context. In Yemen, a UN official spoke of a *"tendency to think President Hadi can just decree an end to violence against women"*. He added: *"People talk in terms of having a powerful person decide. Deliberative democracy is so far from their reality."* Before the uprising in Yemen, a few women's groups were able to exert influence via informal political networks in the capital, Sana'a. For example, in 1997, conservative

proposals on the Personal Status Law were overturned by the President following a phone call from the female deputy minister of information to the President's legal advisor. In Yemen and elsewhere, women's rights groups will need to find new ways to build their support base and navigate the power dynamics unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to advance their agenda.

CLAIMS OF A WESTERN AGENDA

A common problem faced by women's rights groups is that they are often accused of promoting alien, Western values, or even that they are neo-colonial agents. In the words of one senior female member of the Muslim Brotherhood and director of an international NGO lobbying on women's rights issues from an Islamist perspective, international conventions such as CEDAW are intended *"to undermine the Muslim family and recolonise the Middle East"*.²³ Addressing such perspectives on women's rights requires that the principles adopted at international level are translated into language and practices that can be understood locally. But it also requires a willingness on all sides to overcome the increasing polarisation characterising the wider transition in Egypt and elsewhere in the region, and a spirit of engagement and reconciliation that appears far from the current political climate at the time of writing.

To counter these allegations of foreign manipulation, women's rights groups can also gain legitimacy by raising awareness of the key role women have played at several junctures in Arab political history, including within anti-colonial struggles. Women's rights activists interviewed by CARE spoke with pride of this legacy. In the Yemeni struggle against British rule, schoolgirls demanded the 'Arabisation' of the curriculum, women took control of the Aden Women's Association over a ban on celebrating the birthday of the Prophet, and women whose relatives had been jailed occupied the Asqalani mosque in Crater, a district of Aden. Likewise, in the oPt, women played a leading role in the First Intifada and earlier phases of resistance to the occupation. Greater awareness of this history could help to counter false allegations that women's political participation is a foreign imposition.

22. Interviews with NCW members and NCW official website; www.ncwegypt.com, accessed Sep 15 2012.

23. Conversation with a female NGO representative and Muslim Brotherhood member at the UN Commission on the Status of Women conference, March 2013



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Egyptian women carry banners showing older generations of female activists, 2012.

Harnessing diversity, overcoming divisions

DIVISION AND DIVERSITY – A WOMEN’S MOVEMENT OR MOVEMENTS?

Civil society is by definition pluralistic, and in the wake of the Arab Spring a range of women’s rights groups with diverse and sometimes overlapping agendas, tactics and ideologies have emerged. Much attention falls on the divide between religious and secular actors, but even within these two categories there are significant differences. Differences reflect regional, tribal and ethnic identities as well as generational divides. There are state-aligned, grassroots and more radical groups; and there are those focusing exclusively on women’s rights and those which address a wider range of governance and human rights issues. Such diversity brings strengths, but there are also challenges.

One major divide is between civil society elites and ordinary women, particularly in rural areas. In our discussions with female interviewees, capital city-based NGO workers named their priorities as political empowerment and employment, whereas rural women ranked basic needs such as food, education and health more highly. In the oPt, for instance, interviewees complained NGOs were “*elite and isolated*” and said the

issues they considered most important were day-to-day concerns: electricity cuts in Gaza, freedom of movement, jobs and the cost of living – as well as political issues such as the Fatah/Hamas split. In Egypt, questions were raised over how women’s organisations might more effectively engage with the independent trade union movement. Unions played a critical role in the Egyptian revolution, and both Mubarak and Morsi attempted to constrain them. Interviewees saw a challenge for liberal, middle-class feminists to build bridges with the unions. Yet doing so is seen as critical to increasing popular support for women’s rights, particularly among the poor. Union representatives we interviewed could point to only one serious attempt by women’s rights groups to map women’s working conditions in Egypt: a report by the New Woman Foundation entitled ‘Women at Work’ in 2009.²⁴ In Yemen, civil society activists made reference to conceptual frameworks for women’s empowerment derived from development programmes or feminist theory. In contrast, women in political parties stressed the importance of quotas. But women in rural and tribal areas spoke of community development both as a primary goal and as a means to enable women’s participation. As a result of these different priorities, NGOs working at the national level often appear to lack support at the grassroots.

24. New Women Foundation, Egypt: <http://nwrcegypt.org/en/>



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D'eyer and three of her daughters, Nur, Hiba and Yasmin in Gaza. She is a widow whose family could not survive without a weekly food basket from ECHO/CARE.

In countries fragmented by regional, communal or tribal divides, the coherence of women's movements is affected. A case study is Yemen, where some factions in the south, who push for independence, do not even wish to participate in a national political process. After the country's unification and civil war in the 1990s, the relatively progressive women's rights policies of the socialist south were dismantled. Women from the south who we spoke to were strongly committed to this secessionist agenda. As one activist said: *"I can't say there is a southern women movement, but there are women activists in the southern mobility movement."* Southern women argued they were not well represented by Sana'a-based groups, citing the belated invitation to southern women activists to the National Women's Conference in March 2012 as one example of this.

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Under the old regimes, many women with the means and confidence to be politically active responded to their lack of opportunities in mainstream political parties by creating their own CSOs and NGOs. Such groups have often become platforms for charismatic and well-connected individuals, but sometimes lack grassroots support. As the academic, Yadav, warned in relation to Yemen, this risks *"leaving women particularly vulnerable to the regime's*

politics of co-optation and patronage, providing another arena to which it can extend its well-honed strategy of divide-and-rule".²⁵

In the oPt, several interviewees said that women's groups had fallen into the trap of what they called 'NGO-isation'. In the words of one specialist on civil society in the oPt: *"NGO-isation ... limits the participation of women at the local level to 'their' organisation. NGO-isation also limits the struggle for national causes to 'projects' ... set by an international discourse without diversity, and fragments the accumulation of forces for social change."*²⁶

Yet the growth of civil society was also seen in a positive light by many interviewees. In all countries researched, women described how the expansion of civil society had created opportunities to network on women's rights and push for progress at different levels. For example, in the oPt, NGOs were seen as having played a key role in local, presidential and legislative elections through awareness-raising and election monitoring, as well as advocating in support of quotas for female candidates. One political

25. Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Janine A. Clark, 'Disappointments and New Directions: Women, Partisanship and the Regime in Yemen,' *Hawwa: International Journal of Women in the Middle East and Islamic World* 8 (2010)

26. Islah Jad, 'The NGO-isation of Arab Women's Movements', in *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* 35.4, 2004, p.34

party representative said: *“The quota was ratified largely thanks to the efforts of the women’s movement.”* And in Yemen the expansion in civil society is perceived as creating opportunities to establish networks to mobilise against conservative agendas.

REGIONAL WOMEN’S RIGHTS ACTORS

A number of regional civil society groups take joint action across borders and seek to influence international actors like the Arab League and United Nations. Under the auspices of the Arab League, which has a women’s rights department, the Arab Women Organisation was established. Karama (‘dignity’ in Arabic) is headquartered in Cairo and works on violence against women across Arab countries. The Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) works in twenty-two countries and is overseen by influential regional actors that include the Arab League, the Arab Gulf Fund for development and three UN bodies.²⁷ Musawah is an international network that promotes progressive interpretation of Islam, with regional offices in Egypt, Sudan and Bahrain.

According to our interviewees, the remoteness of such groups can pose particular challenges. To take one example, some perceived Karama primarily as a donor, rather than a partner in activism against domestic violence. What is more, a study by one feminist academic found that it practised more accountability upwards to its donors than to its members.²⁸ And some groups, such as the Arab Women’s Leadership Institute and the Arab International Women’s Forum, are based outside the region and exist largely to advance the interests of women in the upper echelons of the corporate world. Most of our interviewees were unaware of their existence.

Nevertheless, regional actors can offer real benefits. Some groups are able to make use of the freedoms afforded by relatively liberal states, such as Lebanon, to advocate from a more radical perspective than is possible for their colleagues elsewhere. At the UN CSW talks in 2013, such activists were able to criticise the regressive stance some Arab countries took during the talks. And by enabling networking across borders, they can support successful civil society actors to share their knowledge and experience with fledgling groups. As one activist in the oPt, whose relatively advanced civil society provides useful models for others, told us: *“I want to share what I have learned in the struggle for dignity and rights in Palestine*

27. 2012 programme donors include UNFPA, UNDEF, UNWomen, WB, OECD, GIZ, MEPI, OFID, Ford Foundation, OSI, ACT, Oxfam, and IDRC
28. February 2011, The Developmental Leadership Program Research Paper, Mariz Tadros, ‘Working politically behind red lines: structure and agency in a comparative study of women’s coalitions in Egypt and Jordan’

with my Arab sisters in other countries. And I want to hear from them too. We can be stronger together.”

Protecting the space for civil society

THREATS TO THE POLITICAL SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

To add to these difficulties, in several of the countries we researched, the freedom of civil society is under threat, with new NGO regulations and bureaucratic obstacles. Some Islamist political groups have made attempts to increase the state’s control over civil society.

In Egypt, draft proposals on NGO regulation would require organisations to re-register annually, declare sources of funding and be subject to restrictions on possible domains of work, which could discourage groups from speaking critically of government for fear of being closed. Moreover, a number of human rights NGOs have had their funds frozen or have seen delays in government approval. The current (pre-uprising) Libyan Constitution simply does not contain a guarantee of the right to association. NGOs were altogether banned before the revolution.²⁹ Libya is now looking to draw-up a new constitution and to pass a new NGO law, though the process is moving slowly.³⁰

In Morocco, the NGO law provides for the dissolution of NGOs that ‘are incompatible with the law or good morals or which might aim to tamper with the unity of the national soil or the royal system of government.’³¹ NGOs engaging in ‘political activity’ face further conditions including prohibition on foreign funding. In Tunisia, the country suffered one of the most repressive NGO laws in the region during the Ben Ali reign. NGO registration was difficult and ‘human rights and democracy’ were not permissible categories for NGO registration.³² But, after the revolution, Tunisia passed a new law granting NGOs more freedoms. As a result, a number of new NGOs with different ideologies emerged, and this was accompanied by a widening of public debate and increased willingness of the press to tackle taboo subjects.³³

29. September 2005, International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law / vol. 7, no. 4, Kareem el Bayyar, ‘NGO laws in selected Arab states’

30. 21 February 2012, UNSMILPICS, In post-revolutionary Libya, preparing the new NGO law (Youtube)

31. As quoted in September 2005, International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law / vol. 7, no. 4, Kareem el Bayyar, ‘NGO laws in selected Arab states’

32. June 2011, The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, Global Trends in NGO Law, Volume 3, Issue 1, ‘The Arab Spring: An Opportunity for Greater Freedom of Association and Assembly in Tunisia and Egypt?’

33. 2010, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Fractured wall...New horizons, Human Rights in the Arab Region, Annual Report 2011



HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL ACTORS HELP?

“International programmes for women’s political empowerment couldn’t achieve in decades what social and political change we have achieved independently in less than one year during the public uprising of 2011 in Yemen.”³⁴

Our research identified the following themes as key challenges and opportunities for international actors – both donors and NGOs – in promoting women’s political participation in the region:

- The geo-politics of aid
- Political influence through diplomacy and conditionality
- The need for dedicated funding for women’s rights
- Mainstreaming gender into wider development programmes
- Maximising donor good governance strategies for women’s participation
- Short-term political timetables versus long-term approaches to gender
- Focus on economic growth and ‘jobs creation’ – pro-poor and pro-women?
- Role of Middle East and Gulf regional donors.

34. Interview with Eshraq al Makhedhi, CARE Yemen, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

The geo-politics of aid

International actors’ work on women’s rights in the region is complicated by the history of colonialism and more recent events, such as support for Arab dictators, failure to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and drone strikes in Yemen. This has resulted in extraordinary levels of hostility against Western foreign policy and foreign influence in general.

Our research found that women were often as critical as men of the perceived motives behind international aid. In the words of one woman in Ma’rib, Yemen: *“Foreign aid is stupid enough to support corrupt tyrants instead of helping the poor.”³⁵* And Akhlaq al-Shami, a Yemeni female activist, criticised the *“patriarchal attitude”* of donors and their *“lack of transparency, political interests, supporting traditional powers, and dealing with elites not grassroots”*.

The ways in which political positions shape aid policy also provoke resentment in the region, with consequences for how donors support women’s political participation. In Yemen, for instance, interviewees told us that donors should in principle support civil society participation in transition processes. Yet, in practice, they are reluctant because they fear that such groups may not align with donor positions on key political issues.

35. Female activist in Yemen, 2013

The most striking example of how geo-politics impacts on support for women's political participation is found in the occupied Palestinian territory, where donors have boycotted the Gaza government since the election of Hamas in 2006. Instead, Hamas is dependent on Islamist and Arab sources of funding, which rarely focus on issues of gender equality. Western donors have imposed restrictions on their funding in the oPt, banning INGOs from even interacting with Hamas. As a consequence, Western aid to the oPt is largely skewed towards a very basic level of humanitarian projects to help Palestinian communities cope with the results of occupation, and funding for the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority. Interviewees in the oPt criticised the way in which aid was perceived as having turned national leaders into "employees" of an illegitimate quasi-state created by the Oslo Accords, which had neither halted Israeli settlements nor brought the conflict closer to resolution.³⁶ What is more, the skew towards humanitarian approaches appears to have distracted donors from effective support for the Palestinian National Gender Sectoral Strategy, with a recent EU survey finding that two thirds of European donors were unaware of its existence.³⁷

Political influence through diplomacy and conditionality

Donors have various ways of exercising influence on aid recipients, from imposing conditions to more subtle kinds of encouragement. In theory at least, donors could use this leverage to promote women's rights. And, yet, donors are caught in a catch-22 situation. On the one hand, they obviously have a right to set expectations on how their aid funds will be spent. On the other hand, they are wary of feeding a conservative discourse which portrays women's rights as a foreign imposition.

Many international policy-makers have spoken of women's rights as an indicator for the success or failure of the Arab Spring. On a visit to Egypt in 2012, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton said: "Women's rights will be the litmus test of a successful transition."³⁸ In Yemen, interviewees told us that international pressure – in particular the work of UN Special Advisor Jamal Benomar – played an important role in securing the 30% quota for women in the transitional process. The importance of international

policy was underlined by the appeal Benomar was able to make to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Fatima al-Khatri, head of the women's department in the General People's Congress, a political party in Yemen, said: "If there had not been enough foreign pressure ensuring women's political participation, we would not have reached what we have reached today." And Amat Al Salam al Haj from the Islah party stated: "Foreign policies embarrassed parties in Yemen and this is why they started to support women in order to satisfy foreign powers."³⁹

In the countries we researched, interviewees highlighted three donor initiatives of relevance to promoting women's rights through political dialogue linked to aid: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan deliberations in Egypt, the European Union's 'More for More' framework and the 'Mutual Accountability Framework' in Yemen. None of these were perceived as effectively linking political dialogue, benchmarks on women's rights and incentives associated with aid or trade – although each offers lessons to build on. A common theme emerging from all three is the importance of linking such processes more effectively to civil society consultation on defining the benchmarks and monitoring progress on them. This was seen by interviewees as critical to both demonstrating that the priorities are not externally imposed, and in holding actors accountable for implementation.

Case Study: International Financial Institutions – IMF loan in Egypt

Egypt's economic problems appear to have given international financial institutions (IFIs) a greater influence in formulating Egypt's financial and economic policies, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁴⁰ Yet, democratic transformation is not a priority in the IMF framework. During a visit to Mauritania, Christine Lagarde, the IMF's managing director, said: "The Arab Awakening must also lead to a private sector awakening," but terms like democracy or government were not mentioned once in her speech, which focused instead on what she said was a need for the Maghreb region to do more to attract foreign investment.⁴¹ Indeed, the IMF's own mandate precludes political conditionalities which could link its loans to progress on democracy or women's rights.⁴² Furthermore, interviewees said there are only a few CSOs with expertise on trade agreements and IFIs (e.g. Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), and

36. Interviewee based in Jerusalem, CARE West Bank and Gaza, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

37. Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy (occupied Palestinian territory): Promoting Gender Equality and Equity 2011-2013

38. 'Egypt: Ashton announces four million euro boost to EU funding to support women's rights', EU Neighbourhood Info Centre, News, July 20th 2012 <http://www.ceeba.org/news2.asp?id=82>

39. CARE Yemen, Arab Spring Country Study, 2012

40. 'In the Absence of a Comprehensive Economic Strategy and Planning: Is Egypt's Debt Policy a Recipe for a Disaster?' Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) http://eipr.org/sites/default/files/pressreleases/pdf/policy_brief_on_debt_0.pdf

41. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/03/201332653645288688.html>

42. Interview with Amr Adly, Director of the Social and Economic Justice Unit at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) 2 April 2013

Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)). Activists we spoke to called for support to build civil society capacity in this area across the Arab world so that they could make the case for specific benchmarks related to good governance and women's rights.⁴³

Case Study: EU 'More for More' Framework

The EU's 'More for More' concept establishes a quid pro quo, whereby aid recipient states receive funding if they succeed in implementing democratic reforms.⁴⁴ The benchmarks include free and fair elections, freedom of association, free media and various aspects related to the rule of law, such as an independent judiciary and democratic governance of security forces. These are not explicit about women's rights, and we heard of no consultations to disaggregate gender-specific indicators within these during our research. However, the EU's own assessment of its European Neighbourhood Policy states that the *"partnership had been much stronger in sectoral reform and economic integration than in promoting democratisation and good governance ... and pointed to the need for the EU to engage with increasing determination and ambition with its nearest neighbours on the basis of democratic values, the rule of law and the respect for human rights"*.⁴⁵

Civil society critics, both in the EU and MENA region, have argued that the conditionality mechanisms and benchmarks are vague, and warn that they may be similar to the pre-Arab Spring era where states did not suffer any significant loss of assistance when trends in governance worsened.⁴⁶ A study in the oPt found that only 40% of European donors placed gender issues on the agenda of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. In relation to Egypt, the EU parliament declared that it would terminate funding in March 2013 because of the worsening rights situation. Yet no action was taken and funding continued to flow. In fact, despite the EU rhetoric on 'more for more', the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which is to provide €2 billion towards EU budget support to Egypt, does not explicitly link its operations to the commitments on standards of democracy and human rights stipulated in Article 1 of the bank's charter. Indeed, Egyptian civil society activists monitoring the bank's plans in Egypt, which push for privatisation of public services, criticise them for contributing to the erosion of social and economic rights. In the words of Amr Adly, Director of the Social and Economic Justice Unit at the EIPR: *"They realise that the chances for democratic transformation are weak in Egypt and North Africa while they*

*want to invest in the region. Their operations are linked to the EU's interests in the region of being a source of energy and a site for labour intensive industries and achieving a level of stability that will stem the migration from the south to European shores."*⁴⁷

A key moment in the EU position on women's rights will be a ministerial conference between the EU and MENA governments planned for September 2013. The conference is set to review progress on a six-year action plan addressing women's rights developed at Istanbul (2006) and Marrakesh (2009), and to agree a new plan for the future. In the same period, various key decisions will be taken on EU trade and aid agreements with governments of the region. These decisions will become tests for the EU's resolve to place women's rights as a priority in their engagement with the region.

Case Study: 'Mutual Accountability Framework' (MAF) in Yemen

The Mutual Accountability Framework (MAF) in Yemen was negotiated between international donors and the Yemeni government to hold each other accountable in delivering on objectives outlined in an over-arching aid strategy for the country: the 'Transitional Programme for Stabilisation and Development' (TPSD).⁴⁸ In theory, MAFs are supposed to ensure accountability by establishing mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and reporting on agreed benchmarks on the side of both aid donor and recipient. MAFs are also supposed to give civil society a role throughout the process. In principle such an approach can help get away from the negative connotations of previous approaches to aid conditionality which placed all the conditions on the recipient state. Though women's issues are not addressed explicitly in the Yemeni MAF, if implemented its principles could create a productive environment for fostering women's rights. For example, it calls for monitoring *"to enhance accountability and sustainability and the monitoring should include citizens' representatives"*. One component addresses 'Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights' and another 'Civil Society Empowerment and Partnership'. A new government body to lead the MAF process and overall aid management was supposed to be established and serve as a flagship for reform in other ministries.

However, it appears that the MAF process has been left to drift. Agreed in advance of a donor aid pledging conference in September 2012, civil society actors complained that by Spring 2013 key parts of MAF implementation were yet to start. The provisions of the MAF are technocratic and abstract, and there are questions over the donors' willingness to use the leverage the MAF offers them. Interviewees complained that donors were placing stability over accountability or reform. As a consequence, holding the government to account on the MAF principles was not being prioritised: *"When you don't have a looming donor conference, then immediate political imperatives dominate, such as getting the National*

43. Interview with Noha El Shoky – member in the Popular Campaign to Drop Egypt's Debt, 2012

44. Following the Arab Spring, the 'more for more' principle was set out in two 2011 EU documents: 'A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' and 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy'.

45. Action Fiche for the Southern Neighbourhood Region Programme Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/aap/2011/af_aap-spe_2011_enpi-s.pdf

46. <http://www.iss.europa.eu/fr/publications/detail-page/article/a-democratic-transition-in-trouble-the-need-for-aid-conditionality-in-egypt/>

47. Interview with Amr Adly, Director of the Social and Economic Justice Unit at the EIPR, 2 April 2013

48. Mutual Accountability Framework (MAF) <http://menablog.worldbank.org/files/maf.pdf>



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Fadwa Hassan Al Shawaf – a mother, livestock farmer and entrepreneur in the Gaza Strip.

Dialogue Conference process started. The MAF needs political ‘championing’ by major donors or it will wither. Its leverage diminishes in relevance every day as elections come closer and the NDC comes to the fore.” Another analyst with government connections stated: *“All the government is hearing is: get through the NDC, get through the NDC. This implies that the other processes are less important. We have seen no serious action by the government to address corruption or transparency, and there has been little pressure from the international community to do so. Yet these were key driving factors in the revolution and continue to be major problems.”* In principle, the mutual accountability approach in the MAF offers a model for accountability on both sides – donor institutions and the national government – which could help overcome the power imbalance and negative associations of past experiences with aid conditionality in the MENA region. But implementation continues to lag, and an opportunity to bring women into the policy process is being missed.

The need for dedicated funding for women’s rights

Global research has pointed to the importance of indigenous women’s movements in fostering local support for women’s rights. For this to happen, dedicated funding to support such networks is essential. While general donor interest in the region has definitely increased, it is not clear if this will extend to supporting women’s participation. Donor interviewees noted that, since the

uprisings, there has not been much change to the way donors work on women’s participation.

Sadly few donors specifically cite women’s participation as one of their areas of focus in the region. The Open Society Foundation and US Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) are two exceptions, both focusing explicitly on women. And the Dutch government earmarked an additional €2 million to support gender equality in the MENA region in the aftermath of the uprisings, in addition to its existing global initiative *Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women* (FLOW). Other donors have been criticised for not giving the same weight to women’s participation. The UK House of Commons issued a report to its government assessing the UK response to the Arab Spring, in which it recommended the prioritisation of ‘particular concerns of women’.⁴⁹ The UK is now supporting two regional programmes on women, and

49. The report cites Amnesty International’s critique of the UK Arab Partnership Programme: “Amnesty International has registered concern that women are being shut out of the political process in Egypt and Libya, and a Salafist occupation of university campuses in Tunisia, in support of the demand that women wear headscarves, has surprised and concerned observers in a state that has been known for its relatively advanced approach to women’s rights ... Amnesty International has called on the UK to ensure that there is a “clear gender component” to the Arab Partnership Initiative.” July 19th 2012, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, British Foreign Policy and the ‘Arab Spring’, Second Report of Session 2012-13

country programmes in Egypt, Morocco and Algeria.⁵⁰ The EU launched the regional €8.2 million *Spring Forward for Women* initiative jointly with UN Women targeting all southern Mediterranean countries with the aim of women's economic and political empowerment, and continues to fund gender issues through its Investing in People fund and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).⁵¹

Nonetheless, donor commitment to women's participation in the region remains questionable. First, it is not easy to tease out the exact funding for women's programmes in the case of many donors. Where it is possible to do so, the proportion of funding allocated to women's programmes is usually quite low. For example, EIDHR funding to women and gender issues was just 14% in the MENA region in 2007-2010 and actually decreased to 11% in 2011.⁵² Second, despite donors' insistence that women's participation is vital in their work, the fact remains that it is often not listed as a clear priority area in their funding programmes.

Mainstreaming gender into wider development programmes

One of our most consistent findings in all four countries was the importance of embedding women's rights into wider development programmes. In the oPt, interviewees criticised the way in which donors engaged women in 'soft' activities like lectures and workshops, rather than embedding women's empowerment into programmes with tangible outcomes. As one gender specialist in Yemen said: *"It's more effective to talk about women in the public sphere. If NGOs take as their starting point getting women into politics or leadership roles, this is immediately perceived as a Westernising agenda. It tends to stir up a lot of opposition, whereas an integrated approach avoids this."*

Critics of so-called 'mainstreaming' claim that issues that are mainstreamed are everywhere and nowhere. But our

50. The Arab Partnership Programme is composed of an Economic Facility and the Arab Participation Fund. Under the latter, two regional programmes focus on women, namely: Women Participating in Public Life in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia funded through the British Council over 3 years for a total of US\$1.86m, and Strengthening Women's Public Voice in Egypt, Libya and Yemen funded through Saferworld over 2 years for a total of US\$763,000. Some country-level programmes on women's participation are also supported in Egypt, Morocco and Algeria. The Economic Facility supports wider development programmes which may include a gender component.

51. €57 million for the period 2007-2013 for all partners in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean

52. While the allocation to 'Democracy and the Rule of Law' and to 'Fundamental Rights Protection' almost doubled. Source: 24 September 2012, European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), Delivering on the Arab Spring: highlights of the Semester July-December 2011

interviewees consistently pointed to how programmes that primarily address women's rights risk backlash, and the wisdom of an integrated approach within wider development programmes which can more easily win community acceptance. In the words of one NGO worker: *"The problem is that outside donors for women's rights come from a very European perspective. They impose conditions. If you want funding, you must work in that way, for example. There is a perception that outside agencies want to destroy Islam. This is what people in the community hear from their leaders. They don't invest in understanding the local culture and philosophy and understanding how they might better win acceptance for work that can bring benefits for women and girls."* Furthermore, NGO staff admitted that gender mainstreaming needs much more focus across all the research contexts.

Certain less sensitive issues – such as maternal health, education and employment – are more palatable than others as entry-points for engaging women. In Yemen, a deputy government minister is an active member of the global 'White Ribbon' campaign on maternal health. More controversial issues, such as early marriage and FGM/C, can be addressed under the banner of less controversial themes like education and health. Women in rural areas in particular emphasised that developmental projects are much more likely to gain local acceptance than those which explicitly focus on political empowerment or notions of gender. Yet, as illustrated by the case study (page 25) on CARE's programme promoting girls' leadership in Hajjah governorate, INGOs have experience in programming that can empower women even in the most remote areas. Doing so requires that they invest in efforts to build up good relations with communities, framing their efforts in ways that are sensitive to local norms.

Donors are quick to point out that they stress the importance of gender in their normative documentation including strategic plans and general policy papers such as the gender guidance note for the UK Arab Partnership Programme.⁵³ Donors interviewed also pointed to steps they were taking to ensure a basic level of gender mainstreaming at the project level in their funding. DFID Yemen, for example, encourages its NGO partners to include targets within livelihood programmes to ensure that female-headed households are reached. Denmark's approach to gender mainstreaming through its gender equality rolling plans has been singled out as a good example for other donors to follow. The rolling

53. Arab Partnership Programme Fund and Arab Partnership Country Facility – Country Impact Fund Short Subject Matter Guidance Note: Gender, Engaging with men, women, girls and boys



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Children at a school in Hajjah Governorate in Yemen, constructed by CARE's Improving Access to Quality Primary Education project in partnership with Dubai Cares.

plans include benchmarks and indicators for all support exceeding €1.5 million.⁵⁴ Yet across each of the countries researched, interviewees pointed to a mixed picture in terms of how effectively donors or INGOs mainstream gender concerns into development projects. Both in the perception of many interviewees and in the evaluations of donors themselves, it seems that gender mainstreaming and specific indicators on women's rights are only very inconsistently implemented.

Case Study: Shifting entrenched attitudes about girls' participation in Yemen

"I used not to be able to organise my time. I used to spend my whole day doing house chores. I can now set my priorities. My way of dealing with my family and friends has improved too. Before, I used to have fights with them. Now I listen to their advice with respect. I can also now differentiate between what is good and what is bad for me. Also, I can read! ... I hope in the future ... I can go to other communities and help other girls."
Rana, age 16, grade 8, Algaroob

The challenges facing girls in Hajjah are enormous. It is one of the poorest governorates in Yemen with illiteracy rates at 85.4% for girls and women, 73% of girls dropping out of school (mostly between grades three and six), and an average marriage age of 12. Restrictive attitudes have long prevented girls from taking part in any school or community activities. Between 2008 and 2011, CARE undertook a holistic

54. May 2012, Office of the European Union Representative in the West Bank and Gaza, UNRWA, S. Azzouni, Mapping Study of European Union Donors' Strategies on Gender in the occupied Palestinian territory, Final Report

programme of work to foster increased participation of girls in extra curricula activities and civic action.

A crucial strategy for the project's success was to foster an enabling environment in the community prior to starting any activities with girls themselves. For over a year CARE met with community leaders, eliciting the opinions and cooperation of the community at large, and training school teachers and directors. For example, in Algaroob, the mosque imam conducted an awareness campaign emphasising how women were half the community and addressing their needs was important and legitimate.

Next, boys and girls aged 10 to 14 years were given life and leadership skills. Student councils were activated in which both boys and girls became class and student presidents. Girls took on roles as support teachers and community library managers – roles which were unimaginable prior to the project. Parent-school committees, which are mandated in the Yemeni education system but rarely functional, were also formed. These got parents involved in the education of girls and wider school affairs. In the words of one mother: *"Now that we have the committee, going to school to ask about my daughter is considered normal."*

Most encouragingly these changes have lasted beyond the end of the project. Of course, challenges also occurred. Resistance arose from some in the community, often in the form of rumours about what the activities entailed, especially where engagement of boys or the wider community had been less strong. Whilst the Yemeni national authorities are not currently promoting the strategies CARE used more widely, it is possible to imagine that, with reform of ministry of education policies at national level, similar efforts could one day be scaled up across the country.

Maximising donor good governance strategies for women's participation

In the aftermath of the uprisings, donors rushed to declare 'good governance' and 'democratic transition' as priorities for their work the region. The EU allocated €26 million through its 'Civil Society Facility' annually for strengthening non-state actors' engagement in policy-making and strengthening their capacity to monitor reform and implement programmes.⁵⁵ The UK's support grew from US\$8 million for policy research through the Arab Partnership Programme in 2010 to US\$175 million over four years for political participation, public voice and good governance.⁵⁶ The place of women within these efforts is worth examining.

In recent years, donors have provided increasing support for 'social accountability' (SA) approaches to build civic engagement by bringing together ordinary citizens and state authorities to jointly define and monitor local or national development plans and budgets. The case study from CARE's experience in Egypt below points to how such initiatives can reap benefits for women's political participation.

Case Study: How social accountability can increase women's political participation

In Luxor, Beni Suef and Qena governorates in Egypt, CARE has used social accountability approaches, including public hearings and community scorecards, to monitor the performance of basic services and other functions of local government. In the words of one participant: "The power relations shifted. Relations between elected representatives and the people changed. Now it's a culture. They are now dealing in a different way."⁵⁷

Relations within the community itself also changed, especially with respect to women's participation. For the majority of women involved, their training marked the first time that they travelled outside of the governorate, worked closely with men on civic initiatives, or interacted with policy-makers. The project instigated a new sense of political awareness for the women, issuing them with election cards and registering them on election lists. As a consequence, several female participants gained sufficient confidence, networking and leadership skills to contest and win elections for the Local Popular Council on village and district levels in 2008, others went on to establish their own NGOs, such as

INTELAKA.⁵⁸ Local efforts were also linked to national-level advocacy through 'youth-led platforms' in which young people prioritised and analysed pressing issues, including the new NGO Law and Local Administration Law.

Yet a number of challenges confront efforts to realise the aspirations of donor good governance strategies and women's participation within them.

One challenge is in the balance between donor funding to central government and to civil society whose role it is to hold the state to account. Interviewees in all countries said that aid had been imbalanced and driven by the donors' interests in propping up dictatorships. In North Africa, Western governments' counter-terrorism agendas have made countries such as Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt among the highest global per capita recipients of aid. Though this influx of cash has had some success in strengthening civil society in these countries, most funding went to governments. It is not yet clear how the balance in donor funding will be addressed in the wake of the Arab Spring. The World Bank, which in the past provided loans and grants directly to governments, introduced a fund for civil society in the MENA region. France encouraged its NGOs to apply to work in the MENA region.⁵⁹ The League of Arab States, which had previously avoided ruffling government feathers, is planning a three-year region-wide programme on women's political participation in partnership with UNWomen and the EU. Sweden, on the other hand, which had tended to focus on support for civil society, increased its funding to governments to aid with transition to democracy.

Another challenge and opportunity lies in how donors frame their aid agreements with national governments and connect this with social accountability or other approaches to supporting the demand-side of good governance. A new regional civil society network – the 'Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in the Arab World' (ANSA-AW) – is starting to link up learning and innovation on multi-stakeholder approaches to promote good governance across the MENA region. Beginning in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, the oPt, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen, with aspirations to expand to other countries, the network focuses on 'social accountability' approaches to promote access to information, freedom of association,

55. May 15th 2012, Press release, EU bolsters its support to reformers in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods

56. Interview with C. Alcock, United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2012. Note: this information relates to development funding. Some donors provide separate funding for humanitarian programmes often targeting countries such as Iraq and the oPt.

57. Interview with Amr Lashin, Governance and Civic Engagement Program Director, CARE Egypt, 2012

58. Evaluation PPDG (2006-2012) Citizen Lead Social Change, December 2012 p.24

59. The Agence Française de Développement (AFD) offers an annual pot of €42 million to French NGOs partnering with local NGOs. A policy was introduced to work towards ensuring at least 20% of this funding went to the MENA region, but according to AFD staff, they were unable to fulfil this due to the low level of applications from French NGOs to work in the region. Source: Interview with Hélène Willart, Division du partenariat avec les ONG, AFD, 2012



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Palestinian women participate in a meeting on preventing violence against women, as part of a CARE project.

budget transparency and service delivery. How donors approach good governance in their wider aid agreements will impact on the space in which ANSA operates. Alignment across donors and NGOs promoting social accountability will be the path to ensuring that their efforts add up to more than the sum of their parts.

Lastly, while social accountability and other good governance tools have demonstrated their effectiveness, they cannot be applied in a cut-and-paste fashion. The forms of activism and demand for radical changes witnessed in the popular uprisings are quite different from the institutions, tools and approaches used by development actors. Reforms also cannot be engineered from the outside. Informal power dynamics – patronage and patrimonialism – can also permeate governance mechanisms supported by donors.

Young male and female activists pointed to how donors and NGOs will need to change their ways of working to involve them in good governance initiatives. This will involve reaching out to smaller, newly emerging groups at different stages of development. Doing so will look very different to traditional partnerships with local NGOs. For example, the new ‘Baheya’ network of female activists in Egypt rejects donor funding and institutionalisation for fear that this would lead to a loss of its independence and legitimacy. Small project grants, which do not involve extensive grant management procedures or require formal

NGO registration, are important. Several youth activists pointed to a proliferation of formulaic approaches to the training on offer. Concerns were raised that the emphasis on endless ‘capacity-building’ is disempowering and feeds into the discourse of national elites who use the youth’s ‘lack of capacity’ as an excuse to exclude them from decision-making. Demonstrating long-term commitment, shared principles and solidarity through global advocacy in support of their policy goals is as valued as project-based funding. Yet several of the youth activists we interviewed – including those who participated in the popular uprisings – expressed a keen interest to engage. They saw approaches like SA as a practical next step in their efforts to campaign for more transparent and accountable politics.

Short-term political timetables vs long-term approaches to gender

The uncertain nature of the transitions in the Middle East is getting in the way of longer-term donor funding. Donors are largely unwilling to support programmes that extend beyond key moments in the political calendar such as, for example in Yemen, the decisions in the National Dialogue Conference on the constitution and structure of the state. One donor official stated: *“The timeline for the political transition frames everything. The start and end dates for the NDC are like bookends. That constrains us in terms of thinking about longer-term goals and approaches.”*

Yet interviewees in Yemen also pointed to a range of opportunities for women's political participation, such as elections and a potential decentralisation process, which are likely to occur after the 'bookend' of the NDC and require that preparation starts now. Political flux is preventing support for the strategies required to enable women's political participation over the longer term.

This is problematic as, in the words of one female NGO staffer in Egypt: *"A three-year project is never going to result in sustainable change on its own, and yet donor funding is limited to these kinds of short-term horizons."* To the extent that there have been positive developments on women's rights over the past decade in the region, many interviewees described what they perceived as a long-term cumulative contribution by development projects that had variously 'mainstreamed gender' or supported micro-level initiatives to promote human rights among marginalised people. Examples were cited in Egypt of the many years of projects addressing early marriage, or projects in Yemen to empower marginalised 'Akhdam' (former slave) communities. These have contributed to generations of Egyptians and Yemenis that have grown up understanding issues like early marriage or their own rights as a discriminated-against community differently. To build on these achievements, development actors will need to fund, plan, monitor and evaluate their efforts over a much longer-term horizon. Yet, in the words of one Egyptian NGO staffer: *"The methods and metrics for measuring and evaluating such long-term changes are simply not there."*

Focus on economic growth and 'jobs creation' – pro-poor and pro-women?

Poverty and inequality – the call for jobs, bread and dignity – were key mobilising demands in the popular uprisings. As donors looked to increase their aid allocations to the region in the aftermath, job creation and economic growth featured high on the list of their priorities. How these policies take shape will have implications for women's empowerment, including their ability to participate in politics. The EU Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) programme allocated €540 million between 2011 and 2013 to all southern European neighbours for 'democratic transition' and 'sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development'.⁶⁰ The G8 process in 2013 included a specific focus on economic growth in the Middle East,

60. September 2011, European Union, Press Release: EU response to the Arab Spring: the SPRING programme; 2012, Hivos, Kawa Hassan, Briefing Note 2: 'Dignity revolutions and western donors: redefining relevance'

including a strand of consultation on women's economic empowerment. Yet civil society activists questioned whether such funds would simply continue the previous agenda of privatisation and liberalisation, which had worsened inequality and contributed to the frustrations that fuelled the uprisings.

For example, in relation to the IMF negotiations in Egypt, civil society analysts pointed to how economic and social rights should be factored into IMF policies and loan conditionalities, and how the process should be made more transparent.⁶¹ The failure to do so runs contrary to the calls for economic and social justice that resonated in the Egyptian revolution.⁶² In the words of Amr Adly of the EIPR, the IFI policies in general *"aim at ensuring the reproduction of the same economic settings that existed under Mubarak and ensure the continued neo-liberal policies and capitalist transformation in Egypt"*.⁶³

A DFID study provides an overview of barriers to women's economic participation in the MENA region, which include poor quality education, the demands of the care economy, disincentives to working in the private sector after marriage, cultural perceptions of women's domestic role, views on what are culturally-appropriate sectors and roles for women to occupy, discriminatory labour laws and practices, limited access to capital and finance, and restrictions on women's mobility and freedom of association.⁶⁴ The study also notes that the evidence base on each of these barriers is generally weak and inconsistent, pointing to the need for increased research and learning to better understand the challenges and identify ways of addressing them.

A number of the above barriers to economic empowerment are the same as those identified by our interviewees as barriers to women's wider participation in the public sphere. This again resonates with the recommendation by many of our interviewees that donor efforts to support women's political participation be embedded into wider programming to promote social and economic empowerment. As outlined in a recent evaluation of CARE's partnership with Barclays bank in supporting women to establish village savings and loans groups in Egypt: *"There is no doubt though that social empowerment*

61. EIPR Report: 'In the Absence of a Comprehensive Economic Strategy and Planning: Is Egypt's Debt Policy a Recipe for a Disaster?' p. 4 http://www.eipr.org/sites/default/files/pressreleases/pdf/policy_brief_on_debt_0.pdf

62. <http://eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2012/12/16/1563>

63. Interview with Amr Adly 2 April 2013

64. McLoughlin, C. 'Women's economic role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)'. Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, (2013) 26 pp.

and economic empowerment are closely inter-linked, where one could not be achieved successfully without the other. Village savings and loans groups provided women with the opportunity to achieve both. Gaining financial power has given them self-confidence, decision-making power, and a realisation of self-worth. And similarly, self-confidence, decision-making power, and the realisation of self-worth have encouraged further involvement in financial activities."⁶⁵

The primary obstacle to women's economic empowerment is not weak growth. Economic crises in the region have specific gendered consequences, which international donor strategies need to do more to understand and address. Furthermore, over the longer term, donors will need to invest in learning and innovation to address the range of institutional, cultural, social and political obstacles to women's economic empowerment linked to wider efforts to support their participation in public life.

Role of Middle East and Gulf regional donors

The levels of funding, understanding and political influence exercised by regional actors far outstretches that of Western donors. In relation to Yemen, for example, Saudi Arabia hosted the major donors' conference in Riyadh in September 2012 and pledged US\$3 billion to support the Transitional Programme for Stability and Development, about 50% of the total aid pledged.

As much as Western donors, regional actors are also driven by geo-political imperatives, and this has consequences for the status of women. Regional support for conservative political factions, and the tensions which play out in sectarian and tribal conflict, affect the positions that are taken on the role of women, and the extent to which gender becomes a political symbol to be fought over. Yemeni women's rights activists described with great sadness how militant elements sponsored by regional players and the Saleh regime had waged a campaign of intimidation and violence against women active in public life in southern Yemen, from judges to bus drivers, and their husbands, in the 1990s.

Aid from Gulf donors often emphasises 'hardware' projects which reflect their own paths to development, such as the construction of roads and desalination plants. In the words of one official: *"Gulf donors generally want to see something physical they can touch, such as a road or building. It's a kind of mindset. We*

need to work with them to understand other important dimensions of development." INGOs have gained some positive experiences in partnering with Gulf donors to complement their 'hardware' projects with 'software' social development interventions. The case study of the CARE project supporting girls' empowerment in Yemen was actually packaged around a Gulf-sponsored school construction project.

Interviewees also highlighted concerns regarding the general lack of transparency surrounding what Gulf donors finance and their lack of coordination with the wider donor community. The opacity in their priorities and decision-making on aid partly reflects the highly personalised nature of aid management. However, there have also been positive examples of outreach on both sides. For example, Kuwait and Qatar participated for the first time this year in the UN humanitarian appeals process in Yemen. Western donors and the UAE also recently hosted a workshop to share experience in promoting aid effectiveness. As of yet, these initiatives have not addressed issues related to gender or women's rights.

There are a few examples of small regional funds – mostly grant-giving foundations – to support human rights initiatives and even some gender and women's rights focused agendas. Examples include the Mediterranean Women's Fund, the African Women's Development Fund, the Arab Women's Fund, FRIDA: the young feminist fund, and the Arab Human Rights Fund (AHRF). To the extent to which major regional donors address gender issues in their aid funding, it tends to focus on women's maternal health and family roles, thus reinforcing conservative norms. Women's political participation and more sensitive gender-related themes are largely not addressed.

65. p29 'Banking On Change - Egypt Ziada participatory programme review', Final Report, October 2012



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO SPECIFIC ACTORS

The popular uprisings and their aftermath in the Middle East and North Africa present manifold challenges and opportunities for all concerned with women's rights. The following recommendations draw on our findings to propose ways forward for national power-holders, international development actors, and women's rights organisations.

To national policy-makers

1. Place women's rights at the heart of new political settlements across the region. Give women's rights actors and youth activists a voice in decision-making institutions and processes, such as the constitutions and legislative processes that follow.
2. Quotas should be adopted to secure greater women's participation in political parties and representation in public institutions at national and local levels, supplemented by programmes to build their capacity in policy processes over time and enable their effective participation.
3. Foster the conditions – including freedom of expression, assembly and association – that allow civil society to thrive. Create an environment where civil society groups can form and work freely, and protect their workers from attack and intimidation.
4. Support the efforts of National Councils for Women's Affairs and similar bodies to improve legislation of relevance to women's rights, including by enshrining women's rights principles agreed at the international level into constitutional and legal frameworks. Also support such bodies to form links with grassroots actors and bring them into policy processes, bridging political, religious and economic divides. Take steps towards a political shift that will allow government and national councils to engage with voices from outside capital city-based elites.

5. Partner with the National Councils and women's rights organisations to bridge the religious-secular divide on women's rights. This will include expanding the cadre of officials trained and competent in supporting such processes, such as within Ministries of Religious Affairs and Gender/Social Development.
6. Provide youth with practical entry-points to participate in community- and national-level good governance efforts, such as through social accountability and participatory development programming initiatives.
7. Develop cross-political party caucuses of women parliamentarians to share experience and identify shared agendas for furthering women's rights over and above party interests.

To women's rights organisations

1. Broaden the support base for women's rights movements, with a focus on engaging new youth activists, unions and women in rural and urban slum areas. Investing in bridging divides – rural-urban, generational, religious-secular, and economic – in women's movements is critical. National Councils for Women's Affairs in particular should be supported to reach out to the grassroots.
2. Strengthen partnerships with youth activists. This will require a readiness to be challenged by new ways of working, including a willingness to open up decision-making to younger activists, to articulate how women's rights relate to wider reform agendas, and to hold duty-bearers accountable.
3. Promote women's participation at grassroots level through programmes addressing practical needs identified by local communities and less contentious issues such as maternal health, livelihoods and girls' education. Develop partnerships with development NGOs towards this end.
4. Bridge the religious-secular divide on women's rights. Develop initiatives that convene credible scholars, activists and policy-makers to devise policy responses to specific issues, such as the reform of discriminatory laws against women. Ensure that such processes are informed by a 'do no harm' analysis and support moderate and secular voices. Partner with CSOs that monitor and provide critical analysis of the distortion of faith for political purposes and counteract the political manipulation of religious institutions.
5. Address the gaps in capacity of women's and development groups to dialogue and negotiate with Islamic institutions on gender issues, particularly at sub-national level. Towards this end, explore partnerships with moderate and progressive faith-based organisations such as Al-Azhar.
6. Articulate how women's rights feature within calls for the 'civil state', linking this into advocacy on constitutional and legislative frameworks.
7. Invest in innovation in media, information and communications strategies, with a particular emphasis on expanding the information/communication/technology (ICT) access of women and youth in rural and poor urban areas in a way that is complementary to wider programmes addressing gender, including access to information, monitoring of gender-based violence and/or enabling participation in civil society networks. ICT tools need to be embedded in wider empowerment programmes to enable their effective use.

To international donors and development NGOs

1. Shift foreign policy and aid strategies away from short-term stabilisation towards addressing root causes of the uprisings, placing women's rights at the heart of good governance and human rights agendas. Consultation of civil society to define priorities and monitor progress should be at the heart of this shift.
2. Establish 'mutual accountability frameworks' between donors and recipients to govern political dialogue, aid, trade and economic relations. These should outline clear commitments to support progress towards addressing the root causes of the uprisings, with benchmarks on civil society freedoms and women's rights. Women's rights groups and wider civil society should be included in all stages of this process.
3. Embed a more rigorous approach to enabling women's civic participation and gender-mainstreaming into development programmes, investing in longer-term and multi-sector strategies to change the norms, attitudes and practices which shape women's ability to participate in the decisions which affect their lives.
4. Promote a 'gender' approach, rather than one focused only on women and girls, in development programmes with attention to building the engagement and acceptance of men and boys, and fostering champions for reform within relevant institutions at the community and national levels.
5. Recognise and support the diversity in women's movements in the Middle East – from National Women's Councils and women's rights NGOs to human rights CSOs and new activist networks – in the choices made regarding partners for funding and policy engagement.
6. Support established women's rights organisations to shift away from focusing on international frameworks and elite networking to building grassroots support. Offer entry-points for such moves through partnerships with women's rights groups in community development schemes.
7. Find new ways of working with youth activist networks, and foster partnerships between youth and women's movements. This will involve providing smaller-scale grants involving less bureaucracy and greater emphasis by INGOs on demonstrating shared values and political solidarity with activists – acting less like donors and more like partners.
8. Support regional networking and cross-country learning initiatives by women's rights actors, including in other regions, such as Asia, which have experienced similar political dynamics in recent decades.
9. Strengthen the focus on women's economic empowerment within economic programmes; increase the support for coping with gender-specific consequences of political transition, conflict and humanitarian crisis; and reform macro-economic and trade policies to factor in social and economic rights, with deliberate attention to their consequences for women.
10. Strengthen engagement of Middle East and Gulf donors in global processes to define aid effectiveness principles, exploring options for joint work to include social development in the infrastructure projects they support. Identify common agendas related to women's rights, starting with less contentious issues such as maternal health and girls' education.

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After decades of rule characterised by dictatorship, patronage and violence, in 2010 young people in the Arab world began to rise up and demand a new kind of politics. Women played their part as leaders and participants, and were not spared the backlash – suffering arrests, sexual harassment and even death. In the aftermath of the popular uprisings, CARE commissioned a study in 2012 and 2013 to understand the new context and identify ways in which we need to adapt and respond. More than 300 women and men were interviewed in the course of this research in Egypt, the occupied Palestinian territory, Morocco and Yemen. This report outlines the key findings and recommendations of relevance to international donors, as well as national authorities and other actors involved at the regional and country level.

Founded in 1945, CARE is a leading humanitarian organisation fighting global poverty and providing lifesaving assistance in emergencies. In 84 countries around the world, CARE places special focus on working alongside poor girls and women because, equipped with the proper resources, they have the power to help lift whole families and entire communities out of poverty. To learn more, visit www.careinternational.org.uk