

## Women and the Arab Spring: a missed opportunity?

01 March 2013, Friday / ÖZLEM MADİ, BİLKENT UNIVERSITY ,



0

Tweet 0

Share



Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman (C) during an anti-government protest in Sanaa, Yemen. 29 Jan. 2011 (Photo: Khalid Abdullah, Reuters)

***Were the demands of Arab women met by the post-revolution regimes or was the Arab Spring a missed opportunity for them? And if so, what are the main obstacles to the liberation of women in these countries? By looking at the opinions and perceptions of***

Archive

Search



***Arab women, with particular reference to Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, this report hopes to answer these questions. It also addresses perceptions of the post-authoritarian regimes by both religious and secular Arab women.***

The pervasive Orientalist<sup>1</sup> image of the Arab woman as maternal, private, passive, apolitical, ignorant and veiled was radically shaken by the start of the Arab Spring in 2010. On Dec. 17, 2010, Tunisian fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire, triggering protests across the country against President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's regime. The ensuing months saw the emergence and development of anti-government demonstrations and protests in almost every authoritarian Arab regime, initiated by men and women from a variety of backgrounds, demanding democracy, social justice, freedom, dignity and equality. As a result, Arab women began to be perceived as modern activists; capable of using social media very efficiently and speaking at least one foreign language.<sup>2</sup>

Two years on from the collapse of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen can we say that Arab women have gained what they wanted and became more visible in the newly established governments? Before delving into the discussion, it should be clarified that there is no one category of Arab women; they run the gamut from lower to upper class and illiterate to highly educated. In general when this report refers to Arab women it mainly refers to hitherto repressed and subjugated women whose ideas and presence were formerly not felt in the public sphere. Similarly, one cannot treat women's rights as a monolithic entity. While there are common features, every Arab country has a highly specific socio-political context and its own gender regime.

### **What happened to women in the post-Arab Spring era?**

The 20th century witnessed heavy participation of women in independence movements. But women's power in those movements did not necessarily translate into the post-independence periods. As International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) Deputy Secretary-General Sophie Bessis noted, "Recent history painfully reminds us that the massive occupation of public space by women during revolutions in no way guarantees their role in the political bodies of the regimes that follow."<sup>3</sup> For example, women played a major role in Tunisian and Algerian independence movements in the 1950s, but their role was marginalized following independence.

As if echoing the past, there was no gender segregation in the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square, in Tunis or in Sana'a. However, with the fall of the entrenched regimes, the barriers of segregation reappeared. Compared to their role during the Arab Spring, women's

participation in politics, decision making, state affairs and public life became almost non-existent. Indeed, it is ironic that the Arabic words for revolution, freedom and uprising (thawra, huriya and intifada, respectively) all have female gender: Women were harassed, beaten and chased out of public spaces.

The number of female PMs in Arab parliaments dropped.<sup>4</sup> Only nine women were elected to the Egyptian parliament; meanwhile Kuwait, also the scene of unrest, had four women MPs before the most recent elections in 2012 but now has none. Despite the Arab Spring, by the end of 2011, women represented only 10.7 percent of parliamentarians in the Arab states. The region is the only one in the world that has less than 30 percent female political participation.<sup>5</sup> In Yemen and Libya the political arena remains heavily dominated by men. Only in Tunisia, thanks to positive discriminatory electoral rules, are women comparatively better off. Tunisian women gained 23 percent of the seats in the Parliament in the latest election in 2011.

Today many Arab women are very disappointed, and worry their rights will be discarded by patriarchal liberals or Muslim fundamentalists alike.



*Women protest in Tahrir Square, Cairo. 25 Jan. 2013 (Photo: Mohamed Abd el Ghany, Reuters)*

### **Women's rights in the post-Arab Spring era**

The reason for the relative regression of women's rights is much broader and more complex than one might first think; it has deep roots in history, culture, economics, religion and modern

politics.

First of all, Arab and Muslim women's rights never gained legitimacy at the popular level in modern history. At the time of national independence movements against the colonial powers, women also fought for women's rights under the influence of nationalism. With the formation of new sovereign nation-states, a new "ideal woman" as loyal citizen was in the making. This new woman should be educated, nationalist and should raise the enlightened new generation. Even in the most progressive Arab countries, it was state feminism through the hands of modernizing leaders like Tunisia's Habib Bourgiba that contributed to the expansion of women's rights. Women had access to education, gained the right to vote and became citizens of the nation. However, all these rights were given from above by the state, once again putting women under state control. These governments abolished independent women's associations, setting up women's organizations that were subordinate to the state.

In fact, many kinds of identity formation in the modern Middle East have developed somewhat unnaturally due to the colonial impact, with its reshuffling of traditional societal power relations. For example, although proto-nations and nationalities existed in the 20th century, the full-fledged idea of nation and nationality was superimposed by the colonial powers on most Middle Eastern people as they became citizens of artificially created nation-states. With the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, Europe, along with Russia, created artificial nations out of the Ottoman Empire. As a result, the states of Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine were defined by boundaries formed without consideration of ethnic, religious, or linguistic elements of any national identity. The forces and ideologies of the early ruling elite in Arab countries, who were endorsed by the colonial powers, were largely secular and nationalist. These rulers were responsible for modernizing their countries at every level through top-down reforms.

The reliance of some of these countries' economies on oil has also played a role in the regression of women's rights.<sup>6</sup> The rentier state structure and the immense power oil revenues put in the hands of the state obstructed the development of democracy and civil society -- and with them women's rights. The resulting all-powerful state is not accountable to its citizens.<sup>7</sup> Oil economies also perpetuate the patriarchy since they depress the number of women in the labor force and hence reduce their political influence. Without large numbers of women participating in the economic and political life of a country, traditional patriarchal institutions go unchallenged.

Religion and culture are another potential source of gender inequality in the region. However, it is critical to not isolate religion in this analysis. Factors such as class relations; state-citizen relations; globalization with its flows of people, products, and ideas; and interactions with imperial, colonial, post-colonial, and neoliberal capitalist regimes also play a role. Nonetheless,

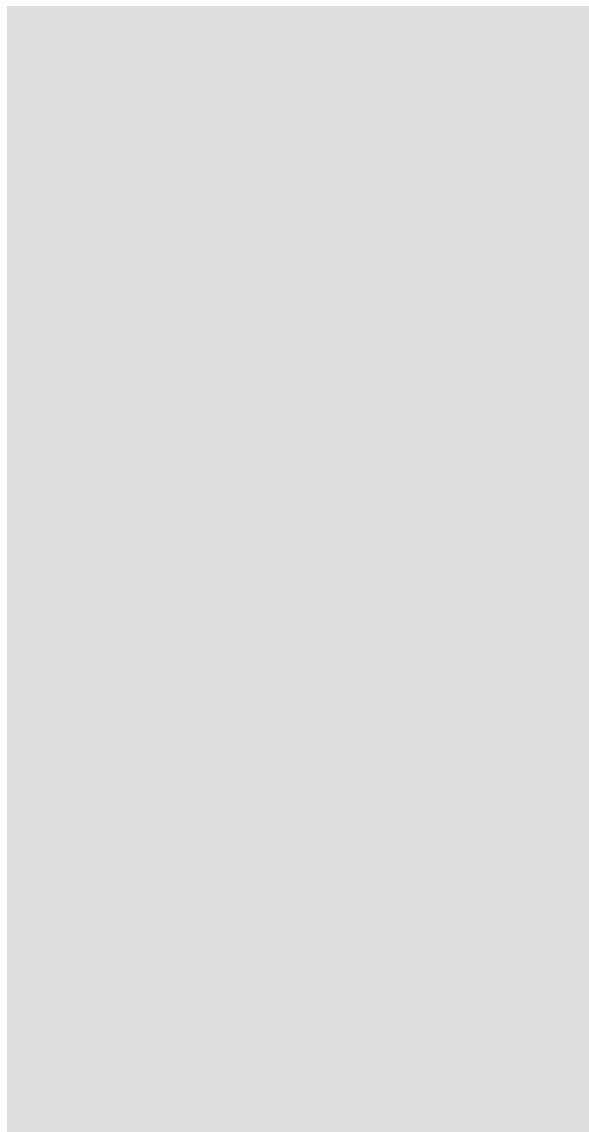
the patriarchal interpretation of Islam in these states has been a major factor in their gender segregation and inequality. The past two centuries in particular have seen Muslim interpreters of Islam devote their energies first to fighting colonial powers and then to overturning the subsequent repressive secular regimes. As Sophie Bessis noted, “demands for equality tend to be set aside, while the efforts of protesters focus on bringing down regimes and dismantling oppressive state institutions.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Feminism in the Middle East**

There have generally been insufficient educated, powerful and willing Muslim women able to challenge the patriarchal interpretation of Islam in these countries. In the 1990s, with Islamic feminism, Muslim women demanded to be educated in religious studies. Many female preachers and religious scholars emerged from this process, but their number did not reach the critical mass needed to change the existing picture. Furthermore, these women often prefer not to be labeled “feminists,” as the term is associated with Westernism, secularism and lesbianism. For some people, thanks to centuries of Western colonialism, invasions and occupations, gender equality is still seen as another form of imposition of the West.<sup>9</sup>

Women’s rights are also associated with former authoritarian rulers and their wives. For example, many human rights activists distanced themselves from the women’s rights agenda in Egypt because it was so closely tied to Suzanne Mubarak, wife of President Hosni Mubarak. When the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) abolished parliamentary representation quotas for women in Egypt, this sparked no resistance and was even received as a popular move. In such contexts, justifying curbing women’s rights on the basis of “cleaning away the remains of the old regime” and returning social gender relations to their Islamic roots has found support on the left and right due to populist concerns.

For a better grasp of the post-Arab Spring events, it is necessary to examine some particular cases through the eyes of Arab women.





*Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni. 6 Oct. 2011 (Photo: Zoubeir Souissi, Reuters)*

## **Tunisian women and the Arab Spring**

The Tunisian revolution ended 23 years of the Ben Ali regime and set off the Arab Spring with repercussions throughout the region. Since it gained independence from colonial power in 1956, Tunisia's women have benefitted from the abolition of repudiation and polygamy, as well as the right to judicial divorce, equality in education, and work outside the home. Although Tunisian women had far-reaching rights compared to other Arab states, the country's women sought broader reform. During the Arab Spring demonstrations, banners were unfurled reading, "We don't want theocracy, we want democracy," or, "Tunisian women defend the revolution." Women's voices were not left unheard and in 2011 the electoral laws for a future Tunisian Parliament were changed resulting in the strengthening of women's rights. Electoral lists are now prepared with equal number of men and women.

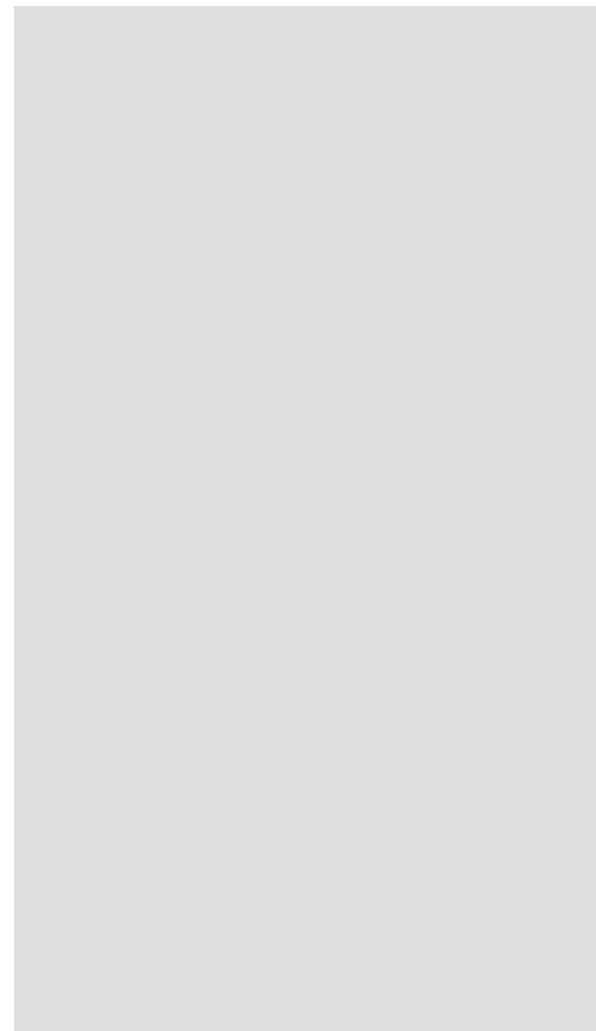
However, there is still a long way to go for Tunisian women. In November 2011, Souad Abderrahim, member of parliament for the governing Ennahda party, declared that single mothers were a disgrace in an Arab Muslim society. The president in February 2012 declared that the law on adoption needed to be changed as it was un-Islamic. In early February, Minister for Women and Family Affairs Sihem Badi said that religious customary marriage (urfi), which used to be forbidden by law, was a "personal freedom." One day after the electoral victory of Ennahda in November 2011, leader Rachid Ghannouchi announced that "polygamy is possible in Tunisia."<sup>10</sup> At a societal level, Salafi Islamic groups are pushing hard for implementation of their version of Shariah and even act sometimes violently against women, for example launching attacks on women teachers and students in universities in

efforts to impose religious dress on unveiled students and teachers.

Such developments make Tunisian women concerned for the future of their country. For example, Lina Ben Mhenni (28), blogger, and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, said: "I hope to see my country build a true democracy. I want to see things really change, not just slogans. That's all I want: real change."<sup>11</sup> Mhenni was very active during the revolution and provided ground-level reporting on the Tunisian uprising on Facebook and Twitter. As seen in the images that accompany this report, educated and activist Arab women are inseparable from their computers or smart phones, which connect them to the social media and thence the world. Mhenni has been awarded the Deutsche Welle International Blog Award and El Mundo's International Journalism Prize. She was also nominated for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

Mhenni is aware of the fact that the job is not done, and Tunisia's women activists have to work harder to change the traditional patriarchal and political system in order to find a fair place for women. "We got rid of the head but the whole system is still here and still corrupted. I don't think the people elected are trying to change things. Instead of giving importance to the main demands of revolution -- employment and social justice -- they are talking about things like identity, dividing Tunisian into seculars, atheists and Muslims. I don't think Tunisians died for things like this [...] I can't judge the [Tunisian Ennahda] Islamist party, despite the fact that some of leaders gave worrying declarations about single women and polygamy -- but they are asking for time to act and show what they have to offer, so let's keep an eye on them."<sup>12</sup>

But she still has hope for the future, albeit with some caveats: "Women are the protectors of this revolution. I am fully confident about Tunisian women -- they are educated, they work in all fields, they were very active before, during and after the revolution. For now, everything is OK, but there may be attempts to limit freedoms."<sup>13</sup>





*Egyptian activist Esraa Abdel Fattah. 7 Nov. 2011 (Photo: Lucas Jackson, Reuters)*

## **Egyptian women and the Arab Spring**

Protests in Tunisia inspired those elsewhere, and in January 2011 massive protests broke out in Egypt, calling for social and political reforms and an end to President Mubarak's 30-year rule. Egyptian women followed a similar trajectory in the protests as their Tunisian counterparts. They actively used social media tools and were in Tahrir Square demanding a fundamental change in the political system.

Egyptian women activists' demands also included more complex human rights frameworks. Some women coupled their demands from the state with gender-specific demands for dignity in the face of sexism and patriarchal violence, for representation and inclusion in the new government, for greater access to education, health care and food, and for increased opportunities.

On March 8, 2011, a large demonstration was organized by women in Tahrir Square under the slogan "Million Women March." The main demand of women was to be involved in constitution writing and legislative changes processes. But they were beaten and had the clothes ripped from their bodies.<sup>14</sup>

After the revolution, unlike Tunisia, the quota for women's representation in Parliament was abolished. Women run as independent candidates and only constitute 6 percent of party lists. As a result, there are only six women among the 100 members of Egypt's Constitutive Assembly and they make up less than 2 percent of Parliament. In the 2010 elections, 64 seats



were reserved for women, constituting 12 percent. There were no women on the constitutional reform committees.<sup>15</sup>

Under current Egyptian law, men can divorce their wives by saying “I repudiate you” three times and registering the announcement at a religious notary office within 30 days. To divorce, women are obliged to go before a court and prove the husband’s illness or impotence; failure to provide maintenance or financial support; absence or imprisonment; or harmful behavior, such as mental or physical abuse. The testimonies of two women are equivalent to that of one man in family courts. These laws are based in classical Islamic jurisprudence.

Esraa Abdel Fattah (33), an Egyptian human rights activist, blogger, co-founder of the April 6 Youth Movement and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, was among those protesting the lack of women’s representation in the post-Arab Spring Era. Esraa was very instrumental in the mass protests in Tahrir Square. She is the media director of Egyptian NGO the Egyptian Democratic Academy. She was arrested and detained for 18 days at the beginning of the Egyptian protests as she was reporting the events on her Facebook and Twitter accounts. In her own words: “Eventually, this successful use of Facebook to mobilize people led to my arrest. They accused me of disturbing the peace, inciting to strike and disrupting traffic. Those 18 days in prison changed my life completely. I was no longer just a girl from a small town north of Cairo. I was no longer Esraa the teacher, the girl with a few simple dreams for her future, but without any real hope that they would ever materialize [...] In those 18 days I found the real me [...] I remember I woke up in my cell one morning and realized: ‘From today there is no more fear.’ I wanted freedom for myself, but most of all, I was inspired to fight for an Egypt where every Egyptian could feel justice and freedom forever.”<sup>16</sup>

In an interview after her release in February 2011 she spoke out in support of a democratic Egypt.<sup>17</sup> In another interview in October 2011 she said: “I cannot go back [...] I will not stop now until we find Egypt a very democratic and free country. We will stay in opposition, we will stay (sic) monitoring, we will stay making pressure. We need all the world to talk about Egypt, as they talked about Egypt in the revolution.”<sup>18</sup>

Esraa and many other female demonstrators still describe the early anti-government demonstrations on Tahrir Square with great emotion and amazement, as their first taste of what real gender equality could feel like.<sup>19</sup> But this optimism slowly faded during the formation of the new government. Now many Egyptian women fear that the Islamic fundamentalist groups and patriarchal liberals desire to limit women’s rights. In a disappointed tone, Esraa described what happened to Egyptian women after the revolution as follows: “During the protests at Tahrir Square, women were organizing, demonstrating, and calling for [President] Mubarak’s ousting (sic). Many revealed their deep appreciation and respect for women as partners. But

after toppling the regime, women lost lots of political and social gains. Only one woman had been selected to the interim cabinet, the quota of 64 parliamentary seats for women had been abolished and one of the proposed amendments suggested that future presidents could only be male.”<sup>20</sup>

The only solution for women to change the existing gloomy picture is to participate in social and political life, to be active participants in parties, movements, coalitions and syndicates. She added: “We should not wait for someone to invite us to get involved in public life. We had to stand up for our rights.”<sup>21</sup>



*Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman during an anti-government protest in Sanaa, Yemen. 26 Jan. 2011 (Photo: Khalid Abdullah, Reuters)*

### **Yemeni women in the Arab Spring**

Soon after Tunisia and Egypt, the heat of the Arab Spring started to warm up the streets of Yemen. As in other countries, women took part in public demonstrations against the president’s regime. In April 2011, president Ali Abdullah Saleh said that the joint protests by men and women were un-Islamic and called for women to be removed from the streets. In response, in October 2011 women burned their veils as an act of protest and demanded the president’s resignation. After a comparatively long struggle and further bloodshed, Saleh had to hand over power to a transitional government in November 2011 and his government was disassembled on Feb. 27, 2012. As Janine di Giovanni demonstrated, Yemeni women too were very much part of the Arab Spring but gained no visibility after the revolution.<sup>22</sup> Indeed,

Yemen consistently comes bottom in the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report, measured in terms of access to education, health, economic opportunities and decision making.

Tawakkul Karman was one of the participants and observers of the Yemeni Arab Spring. Because of her leading role in women's liberation in Yemen and the greater Islamic world, in 2011 she was one of the recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of just 32. She graduated from law school in Sana'a and is the founder of the organization Women Journalists without Chains, of which she is also chairwoman. In solidarity with the Tunisian people, Karman was one of the first to call on Yemenis to rise up against the corrupt regime.

Her activities meant she was constantly threatened via phone calls, letters and other means of communication. But she insisted on maintaining her right to express herself. She was taken into custody as the protests intensified but had to be released after protests intensified. Nonetheless, she persevered.

In her Nobel speech, she laid emphasis on describing the status of Arab women's human rights: "I see the great number of Arab women, without whose hard struggles and quest to win their rights in a society dominated by the supremacy of men I wouldn't be here. This supremacy has caused a lot of injustice to both men and women. To all those women, whom history and the severity of ruling systems have made unseen, to all women who made sacrifices for the sake of a healthy society with just relationships between women and men, to all those women who are still stumbling on the path of freedom in countries with no social justice or equal opportunities, to all of them I say: thank you."<sup>23</sup>

As for the future of the women rights in Yemen, Karman did not lose her hope, stating, "We will refuse any traditional roles for women. She must feature in our new lives as a leader, in all fields and I am sure she will do it -- now she knows and has practiced something different, she will never go back. Past revolutions around the world have ignored women but no, not this time -- we will not make the same mistakes."<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The collective memory of how women were at the forefront of the Algerian revolution for independence from France from 1954 to 1962, only to be relegated to the margins of politics thereafter, still casts a long shadow.<sup>25</sup> Women's rights are the first to be sacrificed by politicians out to please the conservative segments of society.

Although the current situation is not so bright for Arab women, and the Arab Spring is in many ways a missed opportunity for them, it seems many are determined not to allow a culture of

patriarchy to once again trample on their rights in the long run. The Arab Spring sowed the seeds for women's liberation and gender equality. The Arab uprisings have redefined the political landscape of the region. There has been a shift from state feminism to more grassroots youth activism thanks to access to social media tools that empower individuals regardless of their gender or social class.

Given the fact the islamists and traditionalist are playing dominant roles during the formation of the new governments in the Arab countries, the developments in women's rights will have more to do with patriarchy and overly conservative social norms. Since the political conditions are not uniform across the region, the results of this liberation will manifest themselves in different forms. In any case however, Islam and patriarchal culture remain potent forces and Arab women must take this into account as they push to expand their rights in these new environments.

---

## Endnotes

1. Here I refer to both Western and local scholars/authors who internalized the Orientalist approach in their analysis.
2. Juan Cole and Shahin Cole, "An Arab Spring for Women," *The Nation*, April 26, 2011. For more on the role of women in the Arab Spring see: Cheryl Benard, "Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring," in *Middle East Program, International Woman's Day* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center International Center for Scholars, 2012); Isobel Coleman, "Why the Arab Spring Hasn't Been Better for Women," *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2012; Haleh Esfandiari, "Reflections on Women in the Arab Spring," *Middle East Program, International Woman's Day* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center International Center for Scholars, 2012); Jenna Krajeski, "Taking It to the Streets: Egyptian Women Protest the Government Alongside the Men Yet Few Images of Women," *The Opinions of the World*, Jan. 31, 2011; Mathieu von Rohr, "Freedoms at Risk: Arab Women Fight to Defend their Rights," *Der Spiegel*, Nov. 29, 2011; Rana F. Sweis, "Arab Spring Fails to Allay Women's Anxieties," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2012.
3. FIDH, "Women and the Arab Spring: Taking Their Place?," 2012. The full report is available online: <http://arabwomenspring.fidh.net/>
4. Reuters, "Fewer women in Parliaments after Arab Spring," *Arabian Business News*, March 8, 2012.
5. "Women in the Parliament, inter-parliamentary union," <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmnpersp11-e.pdf>.

6. Michael Ross, "Oil, Islam and Women," *American Political Science Review* 102:1 (2008): 107-123.
7. Michael Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics*, 53, 3 (2001): 325-361.
8. FIDH, "Women and the Arab Spring: Taking Their Place?"
9. While some scholars in the West have denied the possibility of an indigenous feminism in the Middle East, the conservatives and others in the Middle East argue that feminism is anathema to the region, considering it an importation of Western and colonial ideas. For more see, Sherine Hafez, "Review of Margot Badran's *Feminism in Islam*," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 7:2 (Spring 2011): 114-117. Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Zed Books, 1999).
10. Cited in Naji Kheshnawi and Sundus Zarouki, "Tunisia: Shaking the Foundations of Secularism," *Al Akhbar*, March 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/4771>.
11. Cited in Rachel Shabi and Laura Collins, "Women of the Arab Spring Give Voice to their Hopes and Aspiration", *The National*, Jan. 14, 2012, <http://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/women-of-the-arab-spring-give-voice-to-their-hopes-and-aspirations>.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. See: Shahara Amin, "Mobs use force to keep women away from Tahrir," *Daily News Egypt*, Oct. 24, 2012, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2012/10/24/mobs-use-violence-to-keep-women-away-from-tahrir/>; Adhaf Soueif, "This year let's celebrate... the women of Egypt's revolution," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/08/egypt-revolution-international-womens-day>.
15. See the Quota Project entry for Egypt: <http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/countryview.cfm?country=69>.
16. Cited in Rachel Shabi and Laura Collins, "Women of the Arab Spring Give Voice to their Hopes and Aspiration."
17. An Interview with Esraa Abdel Fattah: "I want a democratic Egypt," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Feb. 27, 2011, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=24>
18. Cited in Kristen Chick, "Egypt's Esraa Abdel Fattah awaits possible Nobel Peace Prize,"

The Christian Science Monitor, Oct. 6, 2011.

19. For more Egyptian female voices, see Katherine Zoepf, "A Troubled Revolution in Egypt," The New York Times, Nov. 21, 2011. Also see the blog by Alyse Nelson, "Women's Voices on the Arab Spring" available at <http://vitalvoices.org/blog/2012/01/womens-voices-arab-spring>.

20. Cited in Rachel Shabi and Laura Collins, "Women of the Arab Spring Give Voice to their Hopes and Aspiration."

21. Ibid.

22. Janine di Giovanni, "After the Arab Spring, Yemenite women were left behind", Newsweek, December 10, 2012.

23. Nobel lecture by Tawakkul Karman available at [http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1519:women-nobel-peace-laureates-2011-speak&catid=20:intermovements&Itemid=231](http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1519:women-nobel-peace-laureates-2011-speak&catid=20:intermovements&Itemid=231).

24. Cited in Rachel Shabi and Laura Collins, "Women of the Arab Spring Give Voice to their Hopes and Aspiration", The National, 14 January 2012.

25. Juan Cole and Shahin Cole, "An Arab spring for women."

**Reports** **Other Titles**

God, gender and political religion in the US and Turkey

CLIPPINGS

Culture and Art Clippings

Press freedom in Turkey

Children's rights in Turkey

Marash: remembering anew

Turkey and the Arab Spring: lessons from Kemalism

Syrian sparks light tensions in Lebanon

Culture & Art Clippings

Active depth: Diplomacy in the field and the new Turkish diplomat

Lessons to learn? Different approaches to education policy

Nabucco: pipeline or pipedream?

© Feza Gazetecilik A.Ş. 2007, Ahmet Taner Kışlalı Cad. No: 6, Bahçelievler - İstanbul 34194 Turkey, 90 (212) 454 1454, 90 (212) 454 1497(fax)

[ABOUT US](#) [CONTACT](#)