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Women, Citizenship and Change: The Role of the Women's Movement in the Arab World

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I. Introduction

In recent decades, international academic research, official policy and civil society practice have highlighted a simple, neglected yet obvious truth: women are critical to human development in all its dimensions – economic, political, social, cultural and environmental. Women perform complex and critical roles at all levels of society, despite the fact that much of their contribution remains unrecognised, unquantified and unheeded in official statistics. Focusing investment and policy on women yields significant dividends in health and nutrition, education, children's rights, demography, community development and care, local and national politics and democracy.¹ As was elegantly captured in the 1995 Human Development Report '*...human development, if not engendered, is endangered.*'

In their 2003 analysis of the state of women's rights in the MENA region, Naciri and Nusair argue that:

'... promotion of women's rights is indivisible from human rights, democracy and development. For, how can women's rights advance, if the human rights dialogue does not apply equally to men and women? In the same vein, how can women's rights be promoted if fifty per cent of the population is

¹ See United Nations Development Report (UNDP), 1995: *Human Development Report: Gender and Human Development* (New York: UNDP), Chapters 2 and 3, especially pages 97-98; Coleman, Isobel, 2004: "The Payoff from Women's Rights", in: *Foreign Affairs*, 83,3: 80-95.

systematically marginalised from equal participation in society's decision-making processes? And how can there be real development if half the population does not share in the improvement of the quality of life?'.²

The role of women across the Arab World in terms of human development and the struggle for human rights and democracy has been the subject of intense discussion and debate within the region itself, as well as, internationally.³ Major controversies and debates have included the ongoing insistence by some, that 'feminist' or 'gender and development' perspectives are 'external' artificial constructions inappropriate to the region, conceived in 'Western' society and subsequently imposed on the Arab World, and are therefore not attuned or relevant to local needs; that women's central role is primarily in the 'private sphere', rather than the public (essentially focused on the family and on 'caring'); historical western images and perceptions of subordinate and 'exotic' Arab women with its accompanying one-dimensional view, and more recent and re-invigorated debates on secularisation, human rights, culture and the identity and place of women⁴. These debates have once again been highlighted by recent western 'proscriptions' for women in the post 9-11 world,

² Naciri, Rabéa; Nusair, Isis, 2003: *The Integration of Women's Rights into the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Women's Rights in Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia* (Copenhagen, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network):1.

³ See for example Zuhur, Sherifa, 2003: "Women and Empowerment in the Arab World", in: *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 25,4: 17-38; al-Hassan Golley, Nawar, 2004: "Is feminism relevant to Arab women?", in: *Third World Quarterly*, 25,3: 521-536; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): 2006, *The Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, (New York: UNDP) 55-66; Hatem, Mervat, 2005: "In the Shadow of the State: Changing Definitions of Arab Women's 'Developmental' Citizenship Rights", in: *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1,3: 20-45.

⁴ See Sayigh, Rosemary, 1981: "Roles and functions of Arab women: a reappraisal", in: *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 3,3: 258-274; UNDP, 2005, art.cit, Part 2; Toubia, Nahid (Ed.)1988: *Women of the Arab World: The Coming Challenge* (London: Zed Books).

best exemplified by American strategy in Iraq (the so-called ‘*democracy promotion*’ agenda).

Yet, despite arguments to the contrary, the authors of the 2005 Arab Human Development Report insist:

*‘... an enforced separation between what is deemed local and what is deemed foreign is no longer possible in this age. What is called ‘foreign’ culture actually thrives within Arab communities – particularly in terms of values and styles of behaviour – owing to the increasing globalisation of Arab communities. Nor is such a separation beneficial, for there can be no doubt that the aspiration for progress in the Arab world – which is an authentic aspiration – has been positively influenced since the beginning of the Arab renaissance by the best human accomplishments of Western civilisation’.*⁵

In recent months, women have played a pivotal and ongoing role in the popular demonstrations and movements that led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in the ‘first wave’ of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt; they have been a consistent voice in the demands and agendas for democracy, best exemplified for example by the Coalition of Women’s NGOs in Egypt, who articulated clear demands for a place in decision-making in the process of democratisation. Kandiyoti argues that in this process, women are continuing to pursue a broader historical struggle to regain or reinforce previously established rights and positions, which had been eroded in more recent and repressive times. An earlier women’s movement associated with state-led development (*‘state feminism’*), which generated an active cohort of educated and professional women, has now been joined by *‘a diverse and savvy younger generation of women, both religious and secular’*

⁵ UNDP, 2005, art.cit: 61.

within the struggle, not just for women's rights, but for human rights more generally.⁶

This article briefly sketches some key dimensions of the role of women in Arab society in recent decades, highlighting their intrinsic involvement in the independence struggle and in the immediate aftermath of independence; the various forms their engagement has taken in different countries and regionally; outlines the nature of some key struggles today and, finally offers some comments on their more recent role in the 'Arab Spring'.

II. On the rise of the women's movement in the Arab World

The literature on the rise of the women's movement in the Arab World generally recognises at least three key associated periods. The first is linked directly to the experience and legacy of imperialism and its impact on women, their families and immediate communities. The second pivots around the building of the post-independence nation state, the challenges, nature and dimensions of this process in individual circumstances (for there is no one 'typical' experience or model), while the third relates to the emergence of a new women's consciousness arising internally within Arab society itself. This consciousness is and based upon well-established and recognised roles played by women historically and on dissenting voices challenging many traditional practices that discriminated against women and externally from the general rise of consciousness associated with the women's movement worldwide and focused on women's 'liberation', empowerment and equality.⁷

Contrary to many Western and regional views, the women's movement in the Arab World has a long and distinguished history

⁶ Kandiyoti, Deniz (2011, March 8). *Promise and Peril: women and the 'Arab Spring'*. Available at: [http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/promise-and-peril-women-and-'arab-spring'](http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/promise-and-peril-women-and-'arab-spring).

⁷See Zuhur, Sherifa, 2003, art.cit.: 19-21.

rooted in the realities of the anti-colonial struggle, national independence and the struggle for economic, political and social rights in the region and, more recently for democracy and human rights. Arab women have routinely been active in political, cultural and religious groups nationally and internationally, and at conferences and movements that have sought to promote women's rights worldwide. This international involvement also encouraged and supported more recent mobilisation around issues such as raising the minimum age for marriage, outlawing 'honour' crimes and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as, challenging Arab states' reservations to CEDAW.

The activism of the women's movement has taken many different forms within different contexts and with different objectives. Some activists and movements have focused on promoting women's equality and on ending gender discrimination embedded in many Arab laws and practices in both the 'private' and 'public' spheres (for example, around Personal Status Codes, access to equality in education and employment or nationality rights). Many others have been directly involved in charitable development work around basic needs issues, income generation, women's health and education etc. And yet, others have become directly involved in mobilising women, and with women's empowerment more generally.

Some examples serve to highlight many of these points.

In Algeria, women were active in the independence movement itself, as well as in the years following independence in 1962 while more recently, women have organised around the Personal Status Code (PSC) in 1984 and for amendments in the Family Code to be made, ensuring greater rights for women in personal status matters, such as divorce. In 1997, women's rights organisations again began demanding revision of the PSC with 14 associations, launching a national petition seeking one million signatures in favour of 22 amendments to the Family Code. The petition entitled '*a million signatures for women's rights within the*

family' enabled the women's rights movement to unite and take up women's rights issues directly.⁸

In Morocco, the women's movement has been active in civil society since before independence, but became more explicitly 'feminist' in the mid-1980s.⁹ The women's movement remains one of the country's most active civil society strands and has effectively allied itself with other political and civil groups, allowing it to achieve real, albeit limited, change. Women's rights activists organised around the change in government in 1998 and the succession of Mohammed VI to the monarchy in 1999, to campaign for changes in laws and practices that upheld discrimination against women. In spite of strong opposition, in part from Islamist groups, the women's movement became even more pro-active in recent years.

In 1997, the movement published a critical report on the implementation of CEDAW and in 2000, thousands of women marched to denounce government inaction on the integration of women in development. Women's rights organisations have also been active in campaigns on discrimination and violence against women and have established centres for legal and psychological counselling for women who have been victims of violence.

In 1999, the women's movement managed to unite more than 200 NGOs across the country in a network, to support the demand for government action on integrating women in development and in the spring of 2001, nine women's rights NGOs united to create the network 'Springtime for Equality' (Printemps de l'Égalité, 2001) seeking ongoing reform of the Personal Status Codes.

Overall, Naciri concludes:

⁸ Naciri, Rabéa; Nusair, Isis, 2003, art.cit: 36; Cheriet, Boutheina, 2010: "The Ambiguous State: Gender and Citizenship as Barter in Algeria", in: *Diogenes*, 57,1: 73-82.

⁹ Naciri, Rabéa, 1998: "The Women's Movement and Political Discourse in Morocco", *Occasional Paper*, 8, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and United Nations Development Programme, Geneva.

‘One of the most characteristic realities of Morocco today is the fact that women, who were still secluded four or five decades ago, have entered the public sphere. The strategy used to achieve this transition was that of performance on a professional and familial level... the women’s movement has thus helped to promote political debate. It has also focused attention on fundamental questions challenging society as a whole such as modernity, universality and difference in a country reputed to be deeply traditional.’¹⁰

In Tunisia, the creation of two key independent women’s rights groups directly challenged a political regime, hostile to the creation of associations that were not directly in its control (other than those created by the state). The *l’Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche en Développement* and the *l’Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* played a pivotal political role beyond women’s issues and rights alone. The women’s movement became a forceful voice of opposition to the government’s continued attacks on freedom of association and expression. In this way, women’s NGOs in Tunisia have worked on two fronts - promoting women’s rights (particularly in combating violence against women and discrimination against women in inheritance laws) and in promoting democracy and human rights.¹¹

The women’s rights movement in Egypt has a long history and is among one of the oldest in the Arab world. In the 1920s the Egyptian movement inaugurated an era of open and organised feminism that was locally rooted, crossed class lines and was

¹⁰ Ibid.: 23.

¹¹ Naciri, Rabéa; Nusair, Isis, 2003, art.cit.: 37, Labidi, Lilia, 2007: “The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women’s Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD”, in: *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 3,1: 6-34.

independent. Despite its deep local roots, Egyptian feminism has faced the combined opposition of conservatives, Islamists and the government because of its direct challenge to Egyptian patriarchy. As a result of ongoing repression and recent legal restrictions, the women's movement has concentrated on women's right to education and on reforming laws that discriminate against women. Campaigns to change the Egyptian Personal Status Code have also continued (often led by individual women) and in January 2001, the Egyptian parliament passed a new law on divorce – the *Khôl* law which, for the first time (and despite significant restrictions), allowed women to request divorce unilaterally on grounds of incompatibility.¹²

Since the 1960s and 1970s, women's rights activists in Israel have been organising to combat discrimination and violence against women, establishing shelters for battered women and campaigning for law reform on abortion and employment. Women's rights organisations have continued to campaign against the trafficking of women and sexual harassment, and despite only limited legal success on core women's issues and the 'NGO-isation' of the movement, their message and core values remain intact.¹³ Additionally, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Palestinian women inside Israel started forming their own independent organisations to address discrimination and violence against women, including 'honour crimes', and eventually succeeded in introducing legal provision allowing Palestinian women (Muslim, Christian or Druze) to choose between civil or religious courts in cases of divorce. Women's rights activists still continue to campaign against polygamy and under-age marriage.

In Jordan, the women's rights movement benefited from the liberalised atmosphere of the 1950s and in 1954 established the

¹² For a historical perspective, see Guenena, Nemat; Wassef, Nadia, 1999: *Unfulfilled Promises: Women's Rights in Egypt* (New York: Population Council); Naciri, Rabéa; Nusair, Isis, 2003, art.cit.: 37-38.

¹³ Herzog, Hanna, 2008: "Israel's Road to Feminism, 1973 – 2000", in: Rabinovich, I.; Reinhard, J.: *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics and Foreign Relations* (Massachusetts: University of New England Press): 287-296.

Arab Women's Federation. The Federation called for improvements in the status of women and for the right to vote. However, the termination of the democratisation process in 1957 with a ban on all political parties, led to the dissolving of the Federation and an end to the early period of women's public activism. During the 1960s and 1970s, while the country was under martial law, state-sponsored women's organisations dominated the agenda and essentially acted as the voice of government policy. This restricted the development of the movement which only began to recover in the 1990s. Despite this, the Jordanian women's rights movement has since highlighted equality and gender-based violence issues. In 1999 women's rights activists mobilised a national campaign against honour crimes, organising a petition demanding an end to the law that allows a reduction in, or even exemption from, punishment for perpetrators of honour crimes.

Despite the refusal of the Jordanian Parliament to reform the law (as occurred previously in 1999 and 2000), King Abdullah II changed the law in question by royal decree in 2002 having dissolved the Lower House, but the enforcement of the decree remains problematic.

In Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen and Syria the women's movements have been active and organised, despite the challenges posed in the region from continued conservative opposition, the insistence on the division between the 'private and public' spheres, and ongoing conflict and external aggression. For example, in 1998, NGOs seized the opportunity of the establishment of the Palestinian Authority to found a coalition entitled 'Model Parliament, Women and Legislation', holding symbolic parliamentary sessions with equal representation from men and women, which debated laws and practices that discriminate against women. Despite extensive opposition and the ongoing Israeli occupation (and the restrictions it imposes), Palestinian women continue to campaign against discrimination and the restrictions of Personal Status Codes. In Yemen, women's groups have come together to demand a quota system in employment and

in political representation. The women's movement in Syria dates back to the establishment of the Syrian Women Association in 1948 and the 1967 General Union of Syrian Women.

Regional networks promoting women's rights in the MENA have also gained momentum and influence. Set up in 1991-1992, the Maghreb Equality 95 Collective was the first network of independent women's rights associations and focuses on drafting parallel reports to CEDAW on Algeria and Tunisia's compliance with the Convention, as well as on research on Maghreb societies' acceptance of the values of equality. *Aisha* is another prominent regional network established in 1993 and includes independent women's organisations from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia. *Aisha* has focused on developing a regional feminist agenda, which challenges discriminatory laws and practices while focusing directly on the experiences of Arab women; it has monitored Arab countries' compliance with international obligations; documenting abuses and supporting the independence of women's rights organisations from governments and political parties and reviewing the representation of women and girls in textbooks and in the media.¹⁴

The Court of Arab Women established in 1996 in Lebanon by NGOs from several Arab countries' organised campaigns on violence against women and legislation, seeking to take the issue out of the private sphere and bring it into public view. In 1999 the Court of Arab Women organised a campaign for gender equality, especially in access to divorce.

Two additional important networks have also emerged. The 'Sisterhood is Global Institute', established in Jordan in 1998, operates as a technology and communication training centre on the use of the Internet and maintains the hugely utilised website www.amanjordan.org. The 'Maghreb/Mashrek Network for Information and Training On Gender', established in 2000, includes members from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia,

¹⁴ Naciri, Rabéa; Nusair, Isis, 2003, art.cit.: 39-40.

Yemen and campaigns on nationality laws and on the right of women who are married to foreigners, to transfer their nationality to their children.¹⁵

Overall, the main goals of the women's movement has been to organise and campaign for changes in those laws that discriminate against women, to fight against institutional, social and domestic violence against women and to contribute to the struggle for democracy and democratic states, which fully recognise and respect the rights of women.

III. A New Era?

'The women's role has been huge, not just in the revolution, but for years before it, from supporting the miners' strikes to staging sit-ins in textile factories. That role must now be recognised through gender equality on the political landscape.'

So insisted Tunisian sociologist and university professor Khadija Cherif, a member of the Association of Women Democrats and of the Commission drawing up the procedures for elections (some 20% of the Commission members are female). While the Arab Spring is not about gender equality *per se*, it is clear that it presents an opportunity to advance the position and rights of women while, at the same time, representing the danger that old traditions and discriminations will remain in place and could be reinforced if some of the most conservative Islamist parties and candidates consolidate their position in the coming months and years. The outcome is by no means certain.

In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria, local and international reports highlighted the key role played by women in the uprisings that initiated the Arab Spring. Highly educated and

¹⁵ Ibid.

experienced doctors, lawyers, university and school teachers, as well as large numbers of unemployed university graduates, were joined by a new ‘internet’ generation of women on the streets and in online discussion forums that helped fuel the protests. In this, it became clear that older, more traditional regional and western images of Arab women as deferential, subservient and primarily concerned with family and community, were substantially wide of the mark, as had been the case in the past.

In Cairo, women participated directly in the uprising, as well as in the organisation of the detail and logistics of the protests in Tahrir Square. According to local estimates, at least 20% of the crowds that thronged the Square in those first weeks were made up of women, who also turned up in large numbers for protests in the Mediterranean port of Alexandria.¹⁶ In Yemen, it was a young woman, Tawakul Karman, who first led demonstrations on a university campus against the long rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh and later, emerged as one of the key figures of the campaign. On 15 April 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh chided women for ‘inappropriately’ mixing in public with men at demonstrations being staged in Sanaa, as well as in the cities of Taiz and Aden, inadvertently highlighting women’s role in the protests. The women’s response was clear – they came out in huge numbers across the country, demonstrating and accusing the President of ‘besmirching their honour’.

In Syria, women blockaded roads to demonstrate for the release of their husbands and sons from prison, even when faced with armed secret police. In Bahrain, women were among the first protestors in Pearl Square demanding change. The Bahraini movement was significantly led by Zainab al-Khawaja, who had been on hunger strike to protest at the beating and arrest of members of her family. In Libya women were ‘on the frontline’, as the mothers, sisters and widows of men killed, tortured or detailed

¹⁶ Refers to the Facebook album of Leil-Zahra Mortada on the power of their participation.

in a prison massacre in 1996 protested outside a courthouse in Benghazi, following the arrest of their lawyer. In Syria, hundreds of women marched through the town of Beida to deplore the indiscriminate detention of many of their men.

In Bahrain, when police fired teargas at Shia women in chadors chanting anti-government slogans, the women sat down, and only after the police fled the resultant fumes did they leave. In Algeria, feminists marched, chanting 'Away with the family code!', while in Gaza many Palestinian women protested, insisting that Hamas and Fatah unite, while others such as feminist Asma al-Ghoul called for a secular Palestine. In Libya, the rising continues its violent course, having been in part, sparked by a sit-in at the Benghazi Attorney General's office organised by lawyers and judges led by Salwa Bugaighis, a lawyer in her mid-40s.

The number of women who have been active, and the scale of their activities in recent years and months, has led to the suggestion of a potential 'new era' in the women's movement than heretofore, as many of these women have not participated through traditional channels alone but have also emerged via the internet, Facebook and the 'mobile generation' (although it is important not to overemphasise this dimension, as more traditional focal points of protest and organisation remain hugely important). There is little doubt, that women have been empowered by advances in education and the professions; by the empowerment and capacity-building actions of NGOs and networks; by the emergence of women 'anchors' on satellite television networks such as Aljazeera; as well as by the rise of the Internet and social media. Now, women can assert their rights and their leadership without being dominated by men. Some typical examples of this 'new' combined approach are the Women of Egypt Facebook group, the Facebook intervention of Tunisian film star Hend Sabry warning President Ben Ali of the consequences of government violence despite the dangers this posed for her, her family and relatives in Egypt, the passionate video blog (or 'vlog') of Asmaa Mahfouz mobilising Egyptians in January 2011, a blog that went 'viral' internationally. Another example of this new generation of women

activists is Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni, who played a pivotal communications role in alerting the world as early as December 2010.¹⁷

The protests are still continuing across the region in Jordan, Morocco, Libya, Oman, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon and Djibouti. International Women's Day rallies were organised in Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen and Egypt, and in Iran, (which is Persian not Arab), thousands have demonstrated against the theocracy there, and even Saudi Arabia has not been immune to protest.¹⁸

However, it is also crucial to remember that not all women are for either women's rights or regime change. Across the region, members of ruling elites and their allied women's movements continue to organise in support of dominant regimes and interests. A typical example was that of Aisha Gaddafi, the 34-year-old daughter of the Libyan leader and Minister for Women's and Children's Affairs, who is seen as a high-profile woman, who is 'modern' and well-educated with a 'sense of style' (often referred to as the Claudia Schiffer of Libya).

Women's participation in the uprisings has not come without costs however. According to Najeel Rajab of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, women played a hugely influential role but also put themselves in danger, '*...they treated the injured in the streets and nursed them in their homes when they were too afraid to go to hospital*'. They have confronted soldiers and militia in many countries with reports of deaths, the use of rape and sexual intimidation and many have been detained, or 'disappeared' (including doctors and nurses). In a notorious incident reported by

¹⁷ Mhenni, Lina Ben: "A Tunisian Girl". Available at: <http://www.atunisiangirl.blogspot.com>.

¹⁸ See the Op-Ed piece by Farzaneh Milani in the New York Times on Saudi Arabia's Freedom Riders (12 June 2011).

Amnesty International, women protestors in Egypt were forced to undergo ‘virginity tests’ following their detention.¹⁹

IV. The ‘Democracy Paradox’

Iranian-born Valentin Moghadam, Professor of Sociology, Purdue University has coined the phrase ‘democracy paradox’ to contrast the active and engaged role of women in initiating and sustaining protest and yet, the lack of their participation and visibility in subsequent negotiations and structures.²⁰ The lack of strong female voices in Tunisia’s transitional government and the absence of women from the Commission to redraft Egypt’s Constitution, in addition to Islamist youth opposition to women celebrating International Women’s Day in Tahrir Square, highlight the paradox. For many, the biggest challenge now faced by women is that of claiming ‘their place’ in the Arab Spring as traditional ideas and practices, as well as Islamist beliefs and interests re-assert themselves. Writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in April 2011, Juan Cole and Shahin Cole argue that:

‘The collective memory of how women were in 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 weighs heavily.’²¹

Yet, there are countervailing trends and movements – in Tunisia politicians in the transitional government have moved to

¹⁹ Amnesty International (2011, May 31). *Egypt: Admission of forced Virginity Tests must lead to justice*. Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/egypt-admission-forced-virginity-tests-must-lead-justice-2011-05-31>.

²⁰ Goulding, Kristina (2011, June 13). *Tunisia. Will democracy be good for women's rights?* Available at: http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/kristine-goulding/tunisia-will-democracy-be-good-for-womens-rights?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_med.

²¹ Cole, Juan; Cole Shahin, 2011: “An Arab spring for women. The missing story from the Middle East”, *Le Monde Diplomatique English Edition* (26 April).

protect women's rights and their public role by ensuring they are well represented in the new legislature. The High Commission for the planned elections has announced that contesting party lists will have to contain parity between male and female candidates. Such a list system will ensure higher numbers of women to be elected, as has happened in some Scandinavian countries.

Current debate and analysis suggest that in the coming period when the Arab World is potentially at a key turning point in its development, a series of key factors will strongly mould and determine the future role of women.²² The first of these factors is the character and make-up of post-rising governments, as different groups jostle for power and position amongst them radical Islamist movements. There are ongoing uncertainties about the political future of countries, such as Egypt and Syria, and even relatively 'liberal' countries like Lebanon are facing greater political participation by conservative Islamist groups. The secular versus religious composition of new governments will play an important role, in shaping the future political and social empowerment of Arab women.

The second factor of importance is the recognition, that women were not the only ones who were excluded from active politics and civil society in so many Arab countries in recent decades. Under the repressive and authoritarian regimes of many countries, broad political and civil rights were severely restricted. In such a context, change is likely to be slow and difficult as political systems attempt to 'integrate', not just the agendas of women but also those of men and young people (bearing in mind the current demographics of the region); the priority is unlikely to be women's rights. In such circumstances, the role which women

²² See for example, Kandiyoti, Deniz, 2011, art.cit; Cole, Juan; Cole, Shahin, 2011, art.cit; DeLong Bas, Natana, 2011: "The women of the Arab spring: from protestors to parliamentarians", *Guardian Newspaper* (Common Ground News Service, 22 April 2011), Available at: <http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=29898&lan=en&sp=0>.

play is likely to be restricted as the transition occurs over time; the struggle for women's participation, visibility and rights is likely to remain difficult.

A third significant issue involves the scale and robustness of local support for the change agenda (especially that at grassroots level). It is crucial support for necessary reforms in women's rights (including the debate over quotas for women in parliament) continues to be nurtured at grassroots level if desired changes are to be effective in terms of daily life and sustainable into the longer-term. Given the tendency to link women's rights with 'western' values and practices (especially in a context where western powers are proactively promoting this agenda for their own ends), it is vital that this issue achieves a greater degree of 'indigenisation' if the ongoing resistance to the agenda is to be overcome. It is important that this is done not only among men but also among women, in order to challenge the established 'patriarchal bargain' of earlier times, where key women's rights were realised but without offering a fundamental challenge of patriarchy itself.²³ In the past, the 'gap' between the leadership of the human rights movement and the realities of life 'on the ground' especially for women, has been too wide; it is crucial that it is narrowed. In this context the role of the media and of civil society is pivotal.

V. Conclusion

It is a truism to argue that the process of transition is fluid and fraught with difficulty, contradiction and challenge. Aside from the risk of ongoing violence and resistance, as well as a stalled process of democracy building, the emerging 'fault lines' within the democratic movement itself may place the pro-democracy

²³ See Kandiyoti, Deniz, 1991: *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).

agenda under significant strain. In this context, the rights of women are likely to emerge as a 'divisive' issue that some may wish to put aside until other broader objectives are achieved, while others insist that it remains fundamental to the process itself. The issue is centred, for example, around the issue of drafting a new constitution in Egypt. The question arises whether such a constitution should assert that Islam is the religion of the state and that Islamic law should form the basis of legislation? These are fundamentally contested issues that reflect the power play among opposing political movements and actors. The more traditional the successor regime in Egypt remains in terms of defending established vested interests and agreements, the more likely the issue of women's rights will focus on compromise or negotiation between competing parties.

There is no clear or automatic path to a new era in women's rights in the region or to activism by the women's movement and an inclusive democracy. Nor is there a clear path on the aspiration to equality and its realisation in daily life. The nature of the political agreements and compromises that are emerging in successor regimes will be pivotal in influencing and shaping the degree of gender equality, as well as broader equality overall. Indeed, as a concluding remark it is important to point out that one of the most immediate threats to the realisation of gender equality, is the degree to which women's rights *per se* become a 'compromise' item on the reform agenda.