



Women and the Arab Transition: Winning in Difficult Times

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I. Introduction

The Arab transition has imposed itself as a sticking fact on the universal agenda at the beginning of the 21st century, and it will remain so for decades to come. The transition actually derives its significance as the region had been long stagnated, despite its geopolitical and economic weight. It turned out that these people, the natives of the region, not only do have dreams, ambitions and potentials, but also possess a strong will to realize them.

Like any unforeseen event, the Arab transition revealed that the composition, strengths and weaknesses of the associated societies were unknown of. In this respect, researchers face various levels of responsiveness of other parts of the world to this Transition, at the level of decision-making and the level of diagnostic analysis as well.

Followers of social networks, newspapers, and intellectual forum are baffled by contradictions of stances and comments. The stands range from excessive enthusiasm, to shock, to apprehension. Amongst this realm, the feminist content remains weak whether in visual, written or spoken resources.

Several factors can explain this biased content:

- 1) The prevalence of patriarchal cultures;
- 2) Media's inclination to display the uprising's violent scenes, which is, by nature, a manly practice;
- 3) Focus on the results at the expense of the processes where the efforts of women prevail;
- 4) The shallowness of the top-down legacy previously adopted by Arab women's summits and organizations headed by first ladies; and finally
- 5) The predominance of males in politics and media.

In its first section, the paper will examine select facts and trends regarding the gender dimension in the context of Arab transition. The point of departure is a view of Arab transition as an opportunity of expanding freedoms equally for men and women. This "wish" is based on the postulate that gender quality is a development matter. In its own right, it is a fundamental objective of development. This dimension will be the mirror that reflects the success of the Transition in opening a new era of justice and freedom. The second section tackles Arab women's contribution to the uprising, as per available information, keeping in mind the biased media context mentioned here-above. The third section will present a real-life case, the experience of Imam Sadr Foundation, and thus address the role of Arab women in sustainable social change. This case illustrates the vision of a man who had foreseen the future and held concern on what it would bring about, at a time where all people believed that the status quo was deeply established.

II. Turbulent Backdrop

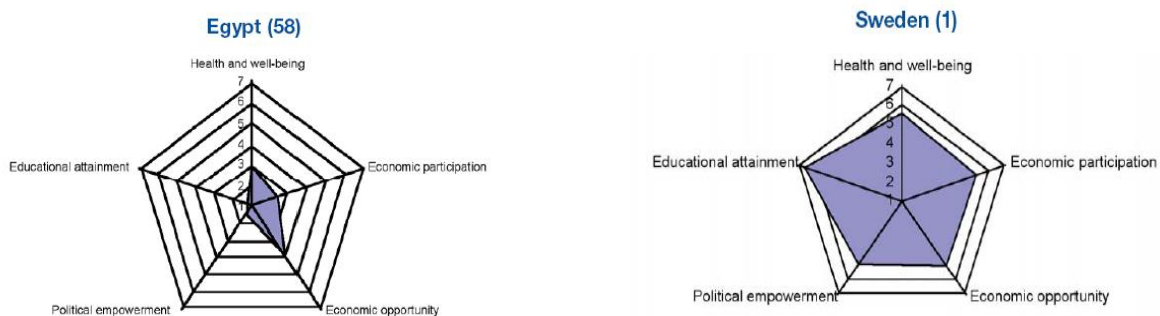
- i. 70% of the 1.3 billion impoverished people worldwide are women;
- ii. Two-thirds of the world's working hours are carried out by women;

- iii. While, they earn only 10% of the world's income;
- iv. Women own less than 1% of the world's propertyⁱ

There is worldwide evidence of low levels of female participation in the various spheres of our contemporary societies despite often-cited positive correlation between female participation and human development. Active participation of women has always been associated with positive outcomes such as prosperity, peace, justice and human realization.

Recent reportsⁱⁱ issued by international development agencies adopt a methodology that defines gender quality in relation to three key dimensions: the accumulation of **endowments** (initially, in terms of education and health; then accumulation of material assets including inheritance acquirments), the use of those endowments to access **economic opportunities** and generate returns, and their application to **take actions**, or agencies, affecting individual and household well-being.

In a model containing five dimensionsⁱⁱⁱ: *health and well-being, education attainment, economic participation, economic opportunity, and political empowerment*; and in which seven represents the maximum gender equality, Egypt ranked the least country (a total of 58 countries were surveyed and scored), with a score of 2.38

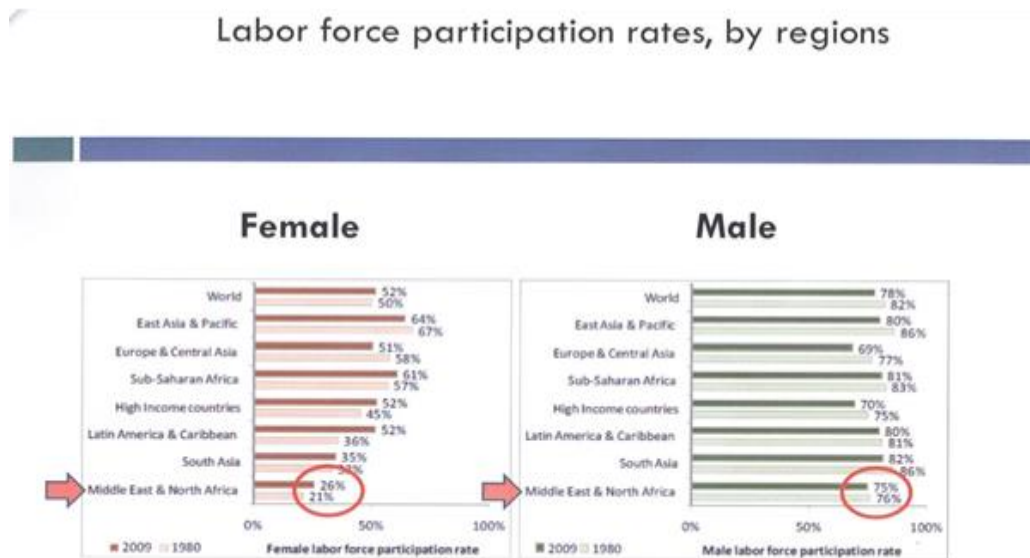


Egypt ranked least, after turkey, Pakistan and Jordan;
 Sweden ranked first followed by Norway, Denmark,
 Iceland, Canada, UK and Germany.

Egypt is being selected herein for its relative weight and representation among Arab countries. The MENA countries have invested impressively in women's education, increasing their productive potential and earning capacity. However, it is clear from the still-low ranks of these countries on labor force participation that the region is not benefiting from the potential returns on the investment. Most of MENA countries lack a coherent strategy for empowering women, despite having ratified the agreements of CEDAW (the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women).

Women's particular vulnerability to violence is the most obvious aspect of reduced physical security and integrity of people, but one which is perhaps the least amenable to accurate statistics.

Women participation in the labor force differs across regions. This diagram^{iv} ranks MENA region at the bottom where only 26% of women are taking part in the labor market against 75% of men. In East Asia and the Pacific those ratios are 64% and 80% respectively.



Creating a system of peace and social justice is a never-ending struggle, whereas there is a clear correlation between increased gender equality and the level of peace, social justice and prosperity. The Arab states failed during last century the struggle to establish the foundations for a sustained development and social justice. This failure included central political issues, gender equality and economic prosperity. Something had to occur; Arab uprising was unavoidable.

III. Arab Women and the Arab Transition

Basically, women's rights should not be singled out from human rights and must become part of a wider movement among the public in general. Keeping in mind that, in the Arab countries, the existing laws for women pose serious complications for them, one should face few crucial questions: what would be the status of Arab women in the post-revolution era? And, Regardless how effective is the women activists' role in the demonstrations, is there any guarantee that their engagement will be turn into longer-term gains?

Women sparked many protests against the regime In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Libya, and were very active in the social media. The participation of women proved that it was a "people" matter, not just some angry, young men issue. Many observers highlighted the fact that women had a pivotal role before, during, and after the revolutions. And to mention few examples:

Lina Ben Mhenni, the Tunisian activist who travelled round the country documenting protests; Tawakul Karman, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2011, has been a leading figure in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Yemen; Bothaina Kamel, announced that she would be the first woman in Egypt to run for the presidential elections. Certain to lose, she proved at least that a woman could contest the presidency of the country. During the demonstrations of last year, Women in Bahrain were ahead of men and bigger in numbers. Lamais Dhaif, the winner of several journalistic awards, said to CNN on February 3, 2012: *"We are the women of the forgotten revolution. Women are punished doubly for speaking out- one time as a rebel, the other as turncoat. If you protest, you're called a prostitute"*.

Tracking the testimonies, reporters highlighted many promising signs attributed to the women's participation in the demonstrations and in mobilizing people. We all know that in the depths of the human soul, people rely instinctively on the women in order to keep life going. And when we see some women covered in blood, we know that tyranny reached its worst. In practice, when it turns bloody with hundreds of young men wounded in the squares, everyone knows that young women are waiting on the corner of the street, with medicines, first-aid and water. The idea of being awaited is an incentive to sacrifice and struggle. One more observation on the daily incidents, Women's participation in the demonstrations reduce the risk of bloody scenes, and restore the nonviolent struggle.

Is there a risk of a setback?

Huge polemics are now taking place in the Arab streets on trivial issues (dresses, gender segregation in public spaces, etc) comparing to a wide neglect of serious challenges such as economic growth, appropriation of technology and adherence to human rights. No one has forgotten the famous declaration in the aftermath of Libyan revolution, and with all of its pressing issues, reinstating polygamy to be on the front burner.

To date, the revolutions have not resulted in any improvement in women's status. The horizons do not degage any immediate promises. Egypt is taken, once again, as an example since women's status in one large Arab country affects how women are perceived in other Arab countries. *"In Egypt, there are now voices saying that women should leave the revolution to men, and during a demonstration on International Women's Day in March, men jeered at the women marching, telling them to go home and feed their babies"*^{iv}. Furthermore, there are no women on the committee that has been tasked with drafting the new constitution. The inspirational images of gender solidarity in the early days of the Egyptian revolution *quickly gave way to ugly episodes of targeted harassment*^{vi}.

Women seem to fare better in Tunisia, where they have long benefited from the most expansive legal rights in the region. This status was progressively gained during the thirty-year-presidency of El-Habib Bourguibeh (1957-1987). However, women are struggling to preserve their rights instead of winning

new ones. Women are worried that discriminatory laws against them in the region will have a negative impact on the few rights they have already gained. They have become skeptical about the Islamic parties who won the elections.

On one side, the current leaders in the Arabic peninsula are more willing to observe the women rights than the parliamentary and the elected political figures. This divide is repeatedly manifested in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. On the other side, the current trend in the revolutionary process doesn't seem to go in alignment with the bottom-up model experienced in Turkey. While emphasizing on economic growth, the civil and tolerant Turkish approach to the practice of Islam prioritized the women's participation in the labor force and the public life. The legislation process is relatively gender-sensitive, as well.

Structural supports, like quotas, is another way to support women's participation in the formal public sphere. Committed leadership at the top and recruiting men to the women's rights agenda, are also important for long-term gains. Additionally, reliable security and the rule of law is a crucial part of ensuring that women are able to participate in political and economic spheres in a meaningful way. However, the litmus test remains in how the revolutions will affect the public institutions while conducting public affairs, managing public resources and guaranteeing the realization of human rights. Also, how the civil society is observing in a manner essentially free of abuse and corruption and with due regard for the rule of law. The true manifestation of "good" governance is the degree to which it delivers on the promise of human rights: civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. Good governance makes sure that the institutions of governance effectively guarantee the right to health, adequate housing, sufficient food, quality education, fair justice and personal security irrespective of gender.

Gender is not a zero-sum game implying the loss for men. Rather, it refers to both, men and women, and their status relative to each other. To win their rights in a society dominated by the supremacy of men, women should overthrow dominance from within their own circle, and need to work constantly with men. The empowerment process starts basically within the woman herself, building self-confidence and self-esteem, then a sense of agency, which is the self within a wider context. It is the concept of "power-with" referring to the ability to associate with each other and realize the synergy.

Are there any promises from the civil society? How Arab organizations plan to induce change and sustain gains? The following section outlines the experience of a foundation trying to build peace among children in a region faced by ongoing violence, in a country that -itself- has been witnessing violence for almost five decades. Equipped with knowledge, skills and opportunities, those children are likely the future makers of peace and prosperity; and the owners of some fundamental values such as freedom, dialogue and diversity.

IV. Building a culture of change

The political tyranny is the top of an iceberg of a deep crisis. It is the socio-cultural system which risks generating a fragile and distorted democracy if it continues to be manipulated by an ideological hegemony by excluding the rights of the minorities, the vulnerable and the women.

Our case study is on Imam Sadr Foundation (ISF), whose core purpose is to consolidate the culture of openness, dialogue and reconciliation. Having built many initiatives with other NGOs to bridge between different groups, the Foundation understood all too well the stakes of peace-building for Lebanon, its area and operation, and potentially for other countries since it can be taken as a model for replication.

According to the Foundation philosophy, the empowerment umbrella covers comprehensive care of physical, psychological and social dimensions, builds cognitive, occupational and communication skills; and includes lobbying and advocacy campaigns to forge the enabling context for people to participate and act.

The Foundation aims to empower beneficiaries to create their own conditions and enhance their ability to organize themselves. In other words, beneficiaries are induced to control their lives, shape their own agendas, feel their internal powers, and trust themselves as well as their entourage. They can, accordingly, exercise their legitimate right to choose among alternatives and to influence the course of their societies and futures.

Case study: Imam Sadr Foundation

The social entrepreneurship is manifested through a consistent postulate to empower the women. While the ISF makes a wide range of contributions in Lebanese life, probably the single greatest value-added is its success emphasizing the importance of women in providing direction and solutions to societal issues. In the conservative context of South Lebanon, a context in which women face challenges of equality, this focus on women is remarkable. Thousands of orphans and vulnerable girls have graduated from ISF programs and have subsequently found an enhanced role for themselves in society. This record reveals a clear commitment to address women's issues and attend to their educational, health and career needs. It has thus gained an important reputation among women, especially the poor, due to its substantial interventions in the lives of women of South Lebanon.

In the 1960s, Imam Moussa Sadr summarized the major issues of that time: *"Despotism and claiming guardianship of the masses, accusing them of being ignorant and incapable of being in charge of themselves, are among the many forms of oppression that crush the energy of a people; as are the use of neglectful policies that reduce the people's opportunities, thus denying them any chance of advancement and even depriving them of good health."*

As early as 1961, and in an attempt to turn his vision into reality, Imam Sadr employed scientific methodology in social work. He:

- Carried out a comprehensive study of the social and economic situation (statistics, benchmarks, etc.;
- Communicated to the concerned authorities the consequences of deprivation, which affect the under served as well as the wealthy classes;
- Focused on institutional capacity as a primary condition of the success of any action;
- Created the required conditions that allow women to participate in social and cultural change.

One of the activities he established was Imam Sadr Foundation, a non-profit, charitable, developmental, and social organisation of public utility. It launched its operations in 1962 and became a public utility organisation as per the Lebanese law. It gained the consultative status of the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations - ECOSOC (2002). The Foundation's headquarter is located in Tyr, South Lebanon. It runs eight socio-medical centres, and has offices in Beirut as well as a representative one in the USA, besides a worldwide network of associates.

The characteristics of the region that the ISF serves are critical to understanding the work of the Foundation. South Lebanon has traditionally been neglected by governments as well as Non Government Organizations (NGOs) in spite of its geo-political importance. The area has suffered numerous military conflicts involving international players and a variety of Lebanese factions. The waves of displacements of people of southern Lebanon have wreaked havoc not only among those directly affected, but also on the rest of the country, as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) cause social and economic pressures on the urban centres. Villages have been historically vacated, or under threat of violence, suffer environmental hazards and demographic distortions. In conditions like these traditional and cultural challenges also add to the social instability and upheaval. It is this challenging and dynamic context in which the ISF does its exemplary humanitarian work.

Women make up about 80% of the working team at ISF. Additionally, every year, hundreds of women participate in ISF programs and receive professional training and social empowerment. In a traditional culture, where disparities and discrimination against woman are prevalent, this venture is unprecedented. It is ISF's contention that fundamental social change happens as women are brought into the social change and the entrepreneurial environment. The solid programs offered by ISF are generally designed to facilitate such change.

A critical factor in serving others is the concept of equal opportunity for all, regardless of their race, color, sex, or social and ideological backgrounds. Any bias contradicts equality and undermines the main principles of human rights and development.

Nurturing the peace

Whereas victims of violence from children across the world have become in billions, this section is limited to the experience of ISF with specific groups of children in South Lebanon. To protect people from violence, or treat them from the complications of violence is the therapeutic approach. The upbringing of children to a culture of peace is the future-oriented strategy to prevent conflicts.

It is worth mentioning that the current confrontations and military actions in the Arab cities would aggravate the situation, which was already stigmatized by a full spectrum of needs, including recurrent crisis and traumas. Aggression stems from the desire to inflict one's pain on others and from dramatic changes in the family, such as death, illness, separation, displacement, homelessness, severe poverty, child abuse and neglect.

Since its establishment 50 years ago, the Foundation has provided services to tens of thousands of beneficiaries, each of whom has endured some form of violence at a point in time. In fact, many were subject to one or more types of violence such as domestic, in the media, at school, on the street, bombing, murder and forced displacement. The ability of the targeted individuals to come to terms with their situation remains tough, as these girls never committed a crime that justifies their painful punishment. Girls grow up to realize that they are in the wrong place (away from their families), which leads them to ask unanswerable questions such as "why me?", "who brought me here?", "where am I going?"

Comprehensive approaches are deployed to respond to the multi-faceted needs of the children in order to interrupt this cycle of poverty, childhood adversity, social exclusion and inequality. Many children endure such sufferance as a result of the psychological effects after decennia of war. ISF considers that achieving significant educational results is contingent upon a delicate formula that balances its vision as an educational institution seeking positive change with dynamic local and non-local demands. In fact, missions expand when local communities find their constituency in need of services and education without having the capacity to attend to these needs. This leaves schools with larger burdens in terms of playing multi-fold roles in order to achieve the aspired results.

As they grow up, preparation strategies can be clustered under two main headers. The first addresses educational, economic, and psychological empowerment that aims to reduce pressure, protect them from avidity and helps them raise their children well. This is realized through double-folded projects: professional training, recruitment and placement projects; as well as empowerment, capacity building and awareness on women's rights projects.

The second header is related to psychological interventions that are aimed at personal stability and preparation for peaceful dialogue. This effort starts with a process that helps absorb the shock, confess grief, recognise identity and respect oneself. Moral and religious education plays a significant role at this level as it brings tranquillity, tolerance, mercy and healing. In addition to the mentioned strategy, ISF adopts integration strategies. The policy is based on admitting students from well-off families in return for flexible fees in

accordance with each household's capability. This yields various results, mainly social dialogue at an early stage in childhood, which contributes to filling the gap between the well-off and the poor children. Another accomplishment was expanding the circle of education-funding partners, which resulted in better equipment, greater capacities of the staff and thus better quality and outcomes.

V. Conclusion

Four days ago, the world celebrated the International Women's Day in which the majority of Arab Women didn't take part. They didn't seem to feel it was theirs. It is an indicator that the Arab transition is still in a suspicious cage^{vii}.

The transition to the cultural and social change is not a simple act of changing the rulers. The victorious Arab revolution should be a choice of nonviolence, a humanitarian choice which derives from a civilized system that allows the participation of all the citizens, and fosters dialogue as a value, and a manner of inducing change. New leadership and a new political order are surely to come, with the possibility to witness other types of oppression and challenges.

And I finish by quoting Imam Moussa Sadr depicting the desired future. He said: *"Lebanon of Tomorrow is a country of justice and equal opportunities, a unified Arab country that carries the message of humanity, civilisation, a place where values and freedom dwell."* ...And the desired freedom: *"There is no way one's freedom would conflict with others', if all would hold on to the principal values for a humane society"*.

The insight gained from the experience of Imam Sadr Foundation is that women' empowerment is a reliable approach for social change and a prerequisite to win the fight against misery and oppression. But most importantly, the work with women is promising because women, in their own right, are indispensable to win difficult times while transiting to the "people spring".

Thank you.

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- ⁱⁱ World Development Report 2012, the World Bank
- ⁱⁱⁱ Women Empowerment: measuring the gender gap, 2005 World Economic Forum,
- ^{iv} World Development Report 2012, the World Bank
- ^v Najat Al-Saeid, Al Arabiya news, " No Arab Transition without women", 25 January 2012
- ^{vi} Isobel Coleman, Foreign Policy, "Is the Arab Transition Bad for Women"? December 20, 2011
- ^{vii} Sateh Noureddine, AS-SAFIR Arabic Daily, March, 10, 2012

The case study is based on the author's experience as a former board member at Imam Sadr Foundation. Its literature that was consulted for the purpose of this paper includes:

- www.imamsadrfoundation.org.lb;
- Forty Years Forward (1962-2002);
- The Arabic Glossary of Development Terms, 2004;
- Annual reports;
- Many conceptual and evaluation reports archived in (*Empowerment Pillar*).