

The Critical Role of Women in Egypt's Revolution and its Aftermath – Dr. Moushira
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Morocco, May 16-17 2011

Our meeting takes place at a historical time of sweeping and drastic change engulfing the Arab world with my country at the heart of it. The Egyptian revolution; unprecedented in our modern history; owes its success to men and women equally. Women voiced their concerns, fought and slept in the streets alongside men, challenging traditional expectations of their behavior. Whereas in past protests, female presence would barely rise to 10%, some estimates place the number of female participants in the revolution as high as 50%. The central role of women in the making and success of the revolution made us all proud. It adds to their notable achievements over the past decades. It is also a continuation of the active role played by Egyptian women since the times of the Pharaohs where Queen Hatshepsut led the armies. On January 25th; Women joined men in calling for justice and freedom. They did not raise banners asking for their rights. Yet the challenge now for women; as the nation lurches forward; goes beyond maintaining their achievements but rather attain their full equal rights.

The struggle of Egyptian women over the past decades was frustrated and hampered by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and narrow interpretation of religion. Women have legitimate expectations that the revolution organized and led by secular groups will support and enhance the cause of women. They expect the revolution's transitional government to accelerate moving forward and building on previous achievements. Nevertheless; the transitional period is confronted with many burning economic; security and sectarian issues.

Women who constitute 50% of the population; are excluded and their issues seem left behind while the country is attending to all other aspects of democracy. Women were excluded from the committee mandated to draft constitutional amendments; representation of women in the cabinet dropped from 4 to just one; the formulation of the constitutional stipulation seems to exclude women from running for presidency. The Prime Minister announced the establishment of women commission. While the announcement casted doubts on the legitimacy of the existing National Council for Women; three months down the line nothing happened. Yesterday; Abulkomsan, a leading women activist accused the new government and the Prime Minister of being anti- women, complaining that despite several requests; civil society women organizations could not meet with the Prime Minister to present their case.

Extremists; manipulated by wickedly portraying all the gains achieved by women as the "corrupt laws of the previous regime". Threats are flagged nowadays to repeal achieved gains; among those are family courts; the right of women to seek divorce; banning child marriage and criminalizing FGM.

Women civil society organizations are under severe pressure to unite to face such a threat. On June 4th there will be a meeting for over 1000 representative of such

organization agreeing on the way forward. To prepare for such a meeting; very strong networking is currently taking place at the grass roots level to energize women to be the defenders of their own rights. I am confident that our civil society organizations fighting for women's rights will emerge stronger and will not relinquish easily their gains.

What made matters more difficult is that the revolution's quest for democracy and freedom of expression has brought banned activities of Islamic groups opposing women's rights to the fore front. It gave them strength and bigger space to present itself. They threatened relapse into more traditional ways of thinking and silencing advocates for women's rights. They called for **installing an Islamic state**; applying Shariaa and the **implementation of Islamic punishments**, which alarmed Egypt's secularists, women and minority Christians.

Egyptian Liberal forces and intellectuals are very concerned over the rise of religious fundamentalism. Newspapers carry every day an unprecedented number of articles; talk shows carry similar concerns over tens of interviews every night. It mostly deals with Islam and modernity; are they in conflict? A question Egyptian raised since the sixties. Last week Egypt's Minister of justices said "Egypt is a nation in danger" commenting on the repeatedly erupted clashes between Muslims and Christians. Some flared because 2 or 3 Christian women converted to Islam and allegedly held captives by the churches.

Rania El Malky of Egypt Daily News on 14 May 2011 put the crisis in the right context. She wrote that "Women in Egypt, despite having made enormous leaps in access to education and jobs and through their activism in the public arena, continue to be exploited by religious extremists from both sides to further their own political agendas. The simple truth is, socially, Egyptian women are often terrorized by their families and their extended social circles into behaving along a certain strict path, often being forced to make very private decisions that would have an immense impact on their social and psychological well-being.

Should they choose to go against the grain, the backlash, as we have often seen, can be fatal. In the case of Abeer (and before her Camilia Shehata and Wafaa Constantin, the alleged converts who were married to Christian pastors) has once again proven that the issue is not simply sectarian; it's a question of the fundamental human and gender rights of mature women to make decisions that could upset their families.

If this incident has proven anything, it is that we need a social revolution to put an end to the exploitation of women Egyptian society is in complete denial of how the role of women in society has changed over the decades. Continuing to impose such flagrant social and religious restrictions can be easily abused to the detriment of the future of Egypt and its religious cohesion"¹.

I must caution however that the concerns I am raising deal with a transitional stage of a revolution still in the making. Yet it is very important to follow what happens in Egypt; as it will impact the entire region. Egypt situation is not unique. Mashary Al Thaidy; though in a different context; said if Egypt; which is the oldest Nation State in the region; is suffering from sectarian strife; one expects this to afflict the entire

¹ Rania El Malky- Egypt Daily News 14th May 2011 "Egyptian women and sectarian strife"

region. Al Thaidy finds that the sectarian strife sweeping Egypt reveals a real crisis in understanding the basis of citizenship; and in ensuring that the State finds its basis in neither religious; racial nor sectarian grounds. According to Al Thaidy; the only solution is the relentless application of the rule of law².

In a positive development; Egypt's ruling Supreme Council for Armed Forces declared on May 13th 2011 that Egypt seeks to establish a democratic civil state that treats all citizens equally. Such a statement assures Egyptian women; at least legally; equal rights.

In conclusion; Our States have ratified the UN human rights instruments such as CEDAW and CRC. States Parties to such Conventions are legally committed to take measures to implement and fulfill the rights enshrined in the Convention equally without any discrimination. Harmonization of domestic laws with such human rights instruments is a legal obligation that will ensure the rule of law. While good steps have been taken they remain inadequate. Many countries; including mine still have reservations that put a damp on this commitment. Our round table must urge our States to fully implement its commitments by assuring women their full citizenship rights without any discrimination.

² Mashary Al Thaidy- "Egypt a nation in Danger"-Alhayat newspaper edition 10.5.2011