



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman Assistant Editor: Brandon Friedman

Volume 12, Number 1 January 10, 2018

#Ana_Kaman

Heidi Basch-Harod

On October 15, 2017, American actor Alyssa Milano tweeted a plea to use the Twitter hashtag “#MeToo” to promote awareness of sexual abuse. Her call to tweet #MeToo was made in the context of supporting women in her industry who were coming forward and exposing Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein as having engaged in sexually abusive behavior for decades.¹ Her 140-character missive helped ignite a global social media movement that ripped away the veil concealing worldwide sexual assault, harassment, and abuse of women. From October through December 2017, the #MeToo movement (its Arabic counterparts being #AnaKaman and #Ana_Kaman) breathed new life into popular discourse on violence against women in the Arabic-speaking world.

The Arab uprisings in 2011 presented a unique opportunity for activists and movements to address the profound and fundamental violations of women’s human rights throughout the region. As authoritarian rulers succumbed to popular pressure in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, fear of the same fate forced cosmetic changes in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan. Women played a prominent role in demonstrations and organized against the establishment. A look at policy reform in succeeding years indicates power holders’ and seekers’ recognition of the potency of the female demographic. Indeed, in the countries not classified as failed states, 2017 appeared to be a watershed year for the women’s rights agenda regardless of whether the motivations were economic, political, or to rally domestic or international support.

During summer of 2017, the Tunisian, Jordanian, and Lebanese parliaments repealed penal code provisions allowing rapists to escape punishment by

¹ [“Harvey timeline: How the scandal unfolded,”](#) *BBC News*, December 20, 2017.

marrying their victims.² The regional precedent for this reform came from Morocco, when in 2014 the Moroccan parliament unanimously amended Article 475 of its penal code that permitted rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying underage victims.³ In August 2017, Tunisia rid itself of a similar provision entirely and the lower house of Jordan's parliament approved the full repeal of Article 308.⁴ On August 16, 2017, Lebanon's parliament repealed Article 522, which mitigated a rapist's sentence for marrying the violated woman.⁵

Tunisia in particular experienced a revolutionary summer regarding the protection of women. On July 26, 2017, the country passed its first law to combat violence against women, including the development of a support system for survivors.⁶ In an August 2017 speech on National Women's Day, President Béji Caid Essebsi made a controversial statement: "We must state that we are moving toward equality between [the rights of men and women] in every sphere. And the whole issue hinges on the matter of inheritance."⁷ In making such a statement, he acknowledged the elephant in the room – the dynamic conflict between "mosque and state," i.e., "the collision between civil laws and religious laws."⁸ (According to Islamic law, women may generally inherit only one-half of the amount of men of the same degree of relation to the deceased person.) Essebsi started to make good on his words when, in mid-September, he revoked the 1973 administrative order prohibiting women from marrying outside of the Muslim faith,⁹ a law upheld by interpretations of Islamic scripture and *shari'a*.

On September 26, 2017, Saudi Arabia announced an end to the ban on women drivers. A state television announcer read the royal decree signed by King Salman that relayed the change in policy, set to go into effect in June 2018.¹⁰ Activists who carried out driving demonstrations as far back as the 1990s, as

² Rothna Begum, "[Middle East on a role to repeal 'marry the rapist laws'](#)," *Al Jazeera*, August 24, 2017.

³ "[Girl's Death Highlights Flawed Laws](#)," Human Rights Watch, March 23, 2012.

⁴ George Sadek, "[Jordan: Repeal of Controversial Article in Penal Code](#)," Library of Congress, August 8, 2017.

⁵ "[Lebanon rape law: Parliament abolishes marriage loophole](#)," *BBC News*, August 16, 2017.

⁶ Catherine Powell and Maiya Moncino, "[Women's Rights Reforms in Tunisia Offer Hope](#)," Council on Foreign Relations, December 4, 2017.

⁷ Kamel Daoud, "[The Next Arab Spring? Women's Rights](#)," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2017.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Catherine Powell and Maiya Moncino, "[Women's Rights Reforms in Tunisia Offer Hope](#)," Council on Foreign Relations, December 4, 2017.

¹⁰ Ben Hubbard, "[Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive](#)," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2017.

well as in 2011 and 2013, touted the decree as a victory. Optimists interpreted the move as a harbinger of a more open Saudi society in development.¹¹

In December 2017, amidst the #MeToo momentum, Egypt's parliament passed a law granting women's inheritance rights on an equal basis with men.¹² Amending a 1943 personal status law that permitted women only half the property inheritance of men, the amended law stipulated that any individual who attempts to deny a woman her fair share of assets or property faces imprisonment and a fine. The Egyptian government views this policy as a potential game changer for the often precarious status of Egyptian women.¹³

For a number of reasons, particularly in Egypt, the #MeToo movement reinvigorated popular demonstrations against gender-based violence.¹⁴ Coincidentally, in mid-October, a poll published by the Thomson Reuter Foundation determined Cairo to be the [most dangerous megacity for women](#), with conditions having worsened since the 2011 uprising.¹⁵ The National Council for Women (NCW), the Egyptian government body charged with addressing the concerns and rights of women, countered that the opposite is true, citing President al-Sisi's declaration of 2017 as "the year of the Egyptian woman."¹⁶ In an interview with [BBC Arabic](#), Sanaa el Sherif, a representative of the NCW, referred to a female governor and women deputies and generals in the army as proof that Egyptian women are being politically and economically empowered.¹⁷ From el Sherif's point of view and that of others in her type of position, women's rights in several Arab countries since 2011 have rapidly and substantially improved. However, el Sherif and others in power miss the point of the unifying plea of #MeToo, a movement much more pervasive than those fighting for access to economic opportunities or political participation for women. The #MeToo movement seeks to expose, challenge, and eradicate manifestations of misogyny, the ultimate hindrance to the dignity, respect, and advancement of women the world over.

¹¹ Rachel Vogelstein, "[Women Can Drive Now in Saudi Arabia, Here's What They Still Can't Do](#)," *Fortune*, September 28, 2017.

¹² Rachel Vogelstein, "[Women Around the World: This Week](#)," Council on Foreign Relations, December 15, 2017.

¹³ Walaa Hussein, "[Inheritance plan could be game-changer for Egyptian women](#)," *al-Monitor*, July 11, 2016.

¹⁴ "[#MeToo: Egypt Joins the Global Trend To Speak Up Against Sexual Abuse](#)," *Egyptian Streets*, October 16, 2017.

¹⁵ "[The world's most dangerous megacities for women 2017](#)," Thomson Reuters Foundation, accessed December 28, 2017.

¹⁶ Shahira Amin, "[Egyptian women speak out amid global focus on sexual harassment](#)," *al-Monitor*, October 23, 2017.

¹⁷ Abdulbasir Hassan, "[Reuters survey designates Cairo the most dangerous city for women](#)," *BBC Arabic*, October 17, 2017.

A closer look at the legislative victories and declarations of 2017 indicate merely battles won while the wars still rage. Behind the recent legislative reforms in Jordan, Tunisia, and Egypt, both the justification and resistance to policy reform is often explained in terms of the concept of women's (society's) "honor,"¹⁸ which is often a euphemism for the continued primacy of patriarchy, subscribed to by men and women alike. Regarding the penal codes, although Jordan's King Abdullah II ordered a committee to consider the repeal of Article 308 in 2016, it has yet to come to a vote in the upper house of parliament, where it must be approved before being signed into law by the king.¹⁹ In Lebanon, advocates that fought to repeal Article 522 warn of rape law loopholes in Articles 505 and 518 that deal with the fate of victimized minors.²⁰ In Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, the Palestinian Territories, Libya, Iraq, and Syria, no reform of laws handling the issue of rape has occurred.²¹ Despite exciting proclamations from the Tunisian president and a legacy of being the most progressive Arab country in the realm of women's rights, in November 2015, Amnesty International reported that the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women had determined that almost 70 percent of Tunisian women have been physically or sexually abused in one form or another.²² In Upper Egypt, where the issue of inheritance injustice is particularly acute, custom keeps women from demanding their inheritance rights, an important reminder that tradition isn't modified merely by legislative changes made in the capital.²³ While women in Saudi Arabia will soon be able to obtain a driver's license from state authorities, the system of male guardianship remains in place²⁴ and, more potently, the patriarchal mentality that such a structure perpetuates.

Seven years after the Arab Spring upheavals, significant change for women in the region has come about in the legislative sphere, but the day-to-day experience of women has not. One vivid example illustrating this gap comes from Egypt. In

¹⁸ Kendra Heideman, "[Five Years after the Arab Spring: What's Next for Women in the MENA Region?](#)," Wilson Center, March 8, 2016; Walaa Hussein, "[Inheritance plan could be game-changer for Egyptian women](#)," *al-Monitor*, July 11, 2016; George Sadek, "[Jordan: Repeal of Controversial Article in Penal Code](#)," Library of Congress, August 8, 2017; BBC News, "[Lebanon rape law: Parliament abolishes marriage loophole](#)," *BBC News*.

¹⁹ George Sadek, "[Jordan: Repeal of Controversial Article in Penal Code](#)," Library of Congress, August 8, 2017.

²⁰ "[Lebanon rape law: Parliament abolishes marriage loophole](#)," *BBC News*, August 16, 2017.

²¹ Rothna Begum, "[Middle East on a role to repeal 'marry the rapist laws'](#)," *Al Jazeera*, August 24, 2017.

²² "[Tunisia: Rapists Given A Way Out While Their Victims Are Blamed and Punished](#)," Amnesty International, November 25, 2015.

²³ Walaa Hussein, "[Inheritance plan could be game-changer for Egyptian women](#)," *al-Monitor*, July 11, 2016.

²⁴ Rachel Vogelstein, "[Women Can Drive Now in Saudi Arabia. Here's What They Still Can't Do](#)," *Fortune*, September 28, 2017.

October 2015, in a mall in Heliopolis, an eastern suburb of Cairo, a man sexually harassed Somaya Tarek Ebeid, who became known in Egyptian media as “the mall girl.”²⁵ Ebeid chased down her assaulter, Hany A., who then physically attacked her until security guards removed him. Captured on security cameras, Hany A. was arrested and imprisoned for two weeks, after which he was acquitted of sexual harassment charges.²⁶ Shortly after posting the incident on Facebook, Ebeid was invited to tell her story on the Egyptian television show, Sabaya al-Kheir, hosted by a female anchor, Rihad Saim. Believing her appearance on the show would elevate the discussion of Egypt’s sexual harassment problem, Ebeid instead was blamed for the attack and Saim illegally aired intimate pictures to “prove” Ebeid was at fault.²⁷ In October 2017, two years after the incident, Hany A., waited for Ebeid outside a pharmacy, slashed her in the face with a sharp instrument, and then ran off.²⁸

In the era of social media movements, the buzz, hype, and enthusiasm surrounding “trending” issues tend to be short lived. It is easy to become skeptical and cynical regarding the effectiveness and longevity of these very exciting moments in social history, and to wonder if change is really on the horizon. Since 2011, social media movements in the Arab world have transitioned from the virtual space to the streets. Regarding women’s rights issues, these movements have brought about the tipping point for many of the legislative victories in the last few years. In 2011, Saudi Arabia experienced the #Women2Drive international social media campaign to pressure the Saudi monarchy to lift the ban on female drivers. In 2013, Morocco’s #RIPamina led to public pressure on the government to repeal Article 475 in 2014.²⁹ In 2016, 63 women’s rights organizations in Jordan launched a social media public awareness campaign to lobby house members to abolish Article 308, which allows rapists to marry their victims, rather than amend it.³⁰ In Lebanon in 2016, online campaigns with #Abolish522 and #Undress522, as well as the use of viral videos, helped apply popular pressure on the government to repeal Article 522 in 2017, which also mitigated the punishment for rapists.

²⁵ Shahira Amin, “[Egyptian women speak out amid global focus on sexual harassment](#),” *al-Monitor*, October 23, 2017.

²⁶ “[Mall girl sexual harasser who revenged victim referred to trial](#),” *Egypt Independent*, November 10, 2017.

²⁷ “[Riham Saeed’s Television Show Suspended After Airing Private Photos of Abuse Victim](#),” *Egyptian Streets*, October 30, 2015.

²⁸ “[Mall girl sexual harasser who revenged victim referred to trial](#),” *Egypt Independent*, November 10, 2017.

²⁹ “[After #RIPamina, Morocco considers change](#),” *Al Jazeera*, January 23, 2013.

³⁰ George Sadek, “[Jordan: Repeal of Controversial Article in Penal Code](#),” Library of Congress, August 8, 2017.

While it is too soon to know the long-term outcomes of the international #MeToo movement in the Arab world, another inspiring story comes from Kuwaiti academic and women's rights activist Alanoud Alsharekh. The chairperson of Abolish 153, a campaign to end honor killings in Kuwait and the region at large, she shared that since the #MeToo movement began, more discussions of harassment are being aired on traditional media such as radio stations. Acknowledging that the effects won't be immediate, Alsharekh affirmed that civil action often leads to policy change.³¹

The paramount significance of the #MeToo movement, however, is the indication of a globally shared understanding among women that what is needed is a cultural revolution. For women in the United States where #MeToo originated, this realization seems to have come on a large scale only in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, reaching a boiling point with the Harvey Weinstein revelations and the domino effect in its aftermath. In the Arab world, legislative victories are important, but these have been ongoing since the 1850s. The evolution that will truly improve the status of women in all spheres of life, from the public to the private, is something that laws cannot alter. Concerted and coordinated efforts made by policy makers, political leaders, media personalities, advertisers, educators, and activists tackling views and practices manifesting in the abuse of women must be ongoing, for decades to come. The personal accounts shared in the millions of tweets declaring #MeToo are a promising start, but they will not suffice.

Heidi Basch-Harod serves as the executive director of [Women's Voices Now](#), a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization advocating global women's rights through film, education, and activism. She is a junior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. She is the author of the study, [The Kurdish Women of Turkey: Building a Nation, Struggling for Gender Parity](#) (The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2017).

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.

³¹ "[#MeToo Hashtag also Trending in the MENA Region: 'Modesty Doesn't Stop Harrassment,'](#)" *Fanack.com*, October 31, 2017.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at
<http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."