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## Women of the Middle East

### *The Jihad Within*

**Heidi Basch**

The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of International Women's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup> is being marked around the Middle East by only a small number of events, according to the International Women's Day (IWD) 2011 website, in stark contrast to other parts of globe. Nonetheless, the consistent and visible participation of women in the popular protests which have been cascading across the region during the past two months puts paid to the long held image of Middle Eastern women as passive and powerless beings. What this means regarding the struggle to improve the status of women in the region remains to be seen.

As in the rest of the world, the struggle for women's rights in the Middle East is ongoing. Arguably, though, the region poses especially formidable challenges. Nowhere else are the gains already achieved so precarious, or as reliant upon a particular regime and its ability to steer power away from forces opposed to expanding women's rights. The 1979 Iranian Revolution provides prime evidence to that effect: in its aftermath, women of all social classes, religious backgrounds, and political ideologies were forced to conform to restrictive socio-political and economic roles dictated by Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters.

A more recent example is the issue of women's suffrage in Kuwait, which was finally granted in 2005, 43 years after the ratification of Kuwait's first constitution that promised equal rights for all. This initiative was pushed through by the unelected

Kuwaiti prime minister, who declared the issue "an act of urgency," thereby eliminating the usual requirement for two separate votes in two different parliamentary sessions in order to pass a bill. According to Shaikh Mishel Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah, a member of the ruling family, the government paid fifty million dollars in bribes to women's rights opponents in the lead up to the adoption of the law.<sup>1</sup> The subject might well be reopened in the event of political instability in the country (certainly a conceivable development these days), as the liberal faction in Kuwait's parliament possesses only minimal influence on decision-making.

In the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, the power vacuum left in the wake their former presidents' departures has placed women activists in these countries on the defensive. Using the media to spread their message at home and abroad, women like Sihem Ben Sedrine, a Tunisian journalist and human rights activist, has been demanding the creation of a constitutional council to rewrite the constitution in a way that secures women's participation in Tunisia's political future. (On March 3, it was announced that elections for such a council would be held in July.) On the face of things, her efforts may appear unnecessary. After all, since achieving independence in 1956, led by President Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia has been the most liberal of all Arab states on the issue of women's rights: polygyny was forbidden, despite its sanctioning by the Qur'an, forced marriage was forbidden, and unilateral repudiation (divorce) was rendered illegal. However, Ben Sedrine's own experience taught her to be wary: during the late 1980s, she had been exiled for her efforts to engage President Ben Ali's regime in more democratic public debate. In order to discredit her, she was accused by government agents of being a prostitute. Such attacks belie Tunisia's progressive image regarding the status of women in the country.

Bochra Bel Haj Hmida, a Tunisian lawyer and former president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, insists that despite relatively great gains throughout the Middle East, the majority of the region's women are still treated as second-class citizens. In some countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, while quotas ensure that women are elected to legislative bodies, once there they

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<sup>1</sup> Doron Shultziner and Mary Ann Tetreault, "Paradoxes of Democratic Progress in Kuwait: The Case of the Kuwaiti Women's Rights Movement," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, Article 1, 2011, Berkeley Electronic Press.

find their efforts to advance pressing economic, legal, religious, and social reforms stymied by entrenched forces and mentalities which have historically marginalized the female halves of their societies.

Female illiteracy is a particularly acute problem in some places. In Yemen, which consistently ranks at the bottom of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index and where only one parliamentarian out of 301 is a woman, sixty-seven percent of women are illiterate. Unlike Yemen, Morocco has a guaranteed ten percent of its parliamentary seats reserved for women. Nonetheless, the illiteracy rate for women is nearly as high – sixty-four percent. Thus, although there are women who have managed to establish a public role for themselves, and Middle Eastern women do appear to be empowered and engaged in the public sphere as never before, grinding poverty, illiteracy, and social and legal discrimination indicate that a gender revolution, if it is in fact underway, is only in its initial stages.

For example, according to the most recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Social Institutions and Gender Index, fifty female judges currently preside in Jordan's courts system. However, continued negligible enforcement of the penal code with regard to incidences of battery and assault, rape, honor killings, and female genital mutilation leaves a large proportion of Jordanian women feeling stigmatized and helpless before state and society alike. Moreover, where women have achieved access to the public sphere and use their standing to raise awareness of the plight of women, they often face strong criticism by powerful conservative sectors of society. In fact, women from all levels of society serve as convenient political targets for opportunist politicians and movements. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, *Al-Arabiya* TV exposed the recent scrutiny of Jordan's Queen Rania by hard-line East Bank Jordanian nationalists who take issue with Rania's Palestinian background. As part of their political struggle, they find it useful to express discontent with a woman's highly visible role in the country's male-dominated society.

In Egypt, a country with a long history of women's activism, women's organizations presently enjoy the freedom to criticize the movement that was dominated by Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak for the past three decades. Following her husband's ouster, *al-Ahram Weekly* reported criticism by her former employees of the National Council of Women

(NCW), who bemoaned the fact that her work had failed to address core socio-economic issues including sexual harassment, equal pay in the workplace, and proportional representation in government. In opposition to the NCW, a separate coalition of Egyptian women's NGOs is currently coordinating efforts to expand the numbers and social categories of women involved in shaping the country's political future. To that end, they are seeking technical expertise from United Nations programs in the region. These circles have already expressed grave concern over the complete absence of women from the newly established Constitutional Drafting Committee, and that no women have been invited to sit on any of the committees being established to shape the new government and its institutions.

Regardless of socio-economic status and degree of political efficacy and agency, it is clear that at least a portion of Middle Eastern women have acquired significant resources and tools. For young women in Saudi Arabia, whose economic independence has marginally risen, an increasing tendency to refuse arranged marriages may illustrate a growing sense of empowerment. The 2010 Freedom House Report on Saudi Arabia describes an increasingly popular alternative to marriages based on family alliances: two satellite television channels broadcast personal ads where men and women describe their physical attributes, career choices, and ideal family sizes to find suitable matches of their own volition.

A more gruesome story is that of Fadwa Laroui, a Moroccan single mother who sought to secure property for her family in accordance with a government development fund for the poor, but was denied because she lived with her parents, thus making her father the head of the household. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, Laroui died in a Casablanca hospital two days after setting herself alight. As her gasoline-soaked clothing became engulfed in flames, Laroui's words, recorded on a cell phone camera and later posted on YouTube, expressed the hope that her self-sacrifice "would make people 'take a stand against injustice, corruption, and tyranny.'"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Newcomb, "One Moroccan Women's Fiery Protest," *The Huffington Post*, February 28, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-newcomb/fadwa-laroui-morocco\\_b\\_829467.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-newcomb/fadwa-laroui-morocco_b_829467.html).

For more than a century, women in the Middle East have struggled against entrenched social norms and economic and political marginalization. Their core demands are for better access to education at all levels, employment in the professional fields in which they are trained, and personal status rights over their bodies, partner choices, offspring and property, albeit negotiated within the framework of their countries' social and religious customs. While men, as well as women, are beset by poverty, tradition and class divisions, women carry the extra burden of having been born female. As protests continue to spread throughout the Middle East and the issue of women, represented by and for women, persists in the media, it remains to be seen how the women of the new Middle East will fare.

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