

**Women's Rights Movements in the 'Arab Spring':
Major Victories for Human Rights, or Symbolic
Accommodations to Strengthen Regime Change Movements?**

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ABSTRACT

American journalist Lara Logan explained on camera how she endured a sexual assault in Cairo's Tahrir Square, but countless Egyptian women never have the chance to discuss their attacks. Libya's Muammar Qaddafi's security services tried to silence Eman El Obeidy, who claimed that she was gang raped by pro-Qaddafi forces, and her vocal claims and the harsh response of the security services were all caught on camera in the Tripoli hotel where foreign journalists camped out. Women have been in the frontlines of assisting the rebels in Libya, and protesting side-by-side with male counterparts in Syria, Bahrain, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, and also in Iran. With the "Arab Spring" uprisings and revolutions, the issue of women's empowerment and rights has emerged as a parallel movement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). What are the implications of the women's empowerment movements in the MENA for improved political representation and rights, especially with major elections about to take place? What has been the impact of the role of women in the Arab Spring on improving women's security? Do these developments contribute to long-term socio-political, legal, judicial, and economic reforms that would improve overall human rights, and especially women's rights in the MENA? This paper is a comparative survey of women's empowerment and rights, especially in terms of general human rights principles, as well as in terms of political representation in post-revolution Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

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Introduction

Women's rights and freedoms have long been critical points of contention and controversy in the Arab and Muslim Middle East. The region has lagged far behind the rest of the world, except in some respect sub-Saharan Africa, when it comes to deficiencies in women's rights, freedoms, and status. Rewarding the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize to Yemen's prominent nonviolent activist, Tawakkul Karman, sent an unequivocal message to the global community that nonviolent activism against tyranny and authoritarianism should be rewarded, and that women in the frontlines of this struggle must be recognized. Yet, attitudes towards women's rights and freedoms are far from progressive, and do not change easily in the Middle East. Apparently, women's participation in anti-regime protests and revolutions in 2011 was deemed acceptable, but changes in misogynist policies and laws toward more progressive and liberal ones encounter fierce resistance, especially from the Islamists, though not limited to them. Therefore, the question of the utility and exploitation of women's participation in the protest movements of 2011 becomes critical.

In 2002, a panel of Arab scholars and analysts published a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report exclusively about the development statuses and deficiencies in the Arab world. This was the groundbreaking *2002 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR)*, which concluded that the region suffers from three major

deficiencies, including in the areas of: 1) creating a knowledge-based society; 2) political freedoms and democracy; and 3) women's empowerment.

With the 2011 Arab Awakening,¹ encompassing revolutions and uprisings that rippled throughout the region upon the overthrow of the Zain Al-Abidine Ben Ali regime in Tunisia in January 2011, respective populations and especially previously repressed opposition groups have enjoyed new political freedoms. With elections in Tunisia and Egypt, we see Islamist parties coming to power. En-Nahda led by Rachid Al-Ghannouchi in Tunisia took the lead, followed by the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party with the election of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. In post-Qaddafi Libya, the situation is less stable and still evolving.

Women have been in the frontlines in the nonviolent protest movements and Tahrir Square sit-ins since day one. In fact, they have played critical roles as organizers, protesters, citizen reporters, medics, bloggers, prisoners, victims, martyrs, and all around activists. As the world watched the events unfold in 2011, many thought that with these uprisings and revolutions an equally effective feminist revolution would emerge, culminating in policies and laws that would finally acknowledge the plight of females. Moreover, many also thought that with women so prominently active in the Arab Awakening, they would be ensured greater political participation and rights and freedoms. The results have been, for the most part, disheartening and disappointing for the women's rights movements in the region, with very few exceptions.

In some cases, as with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt upon the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, sexual assaults and violence against women increased. In addition, under SCAF's rule women detainees were subjected to "virginity

tests” and sexual humiliation in the presence of male officers. Then there was the brutality caught on video of security forces beating an unconscious young woman in Tahrir Square, her *hijab* (headscarf) and clothing ripped open, exposing her blue bra. She came to be known as the “blue bra girl,” and the video and images of her victimization went viral.

Post-regime change elections in Egypt, Libya, and to a degree in Tunisia failed to open the floodgates to women. What does all of this tell us about the viability of the women’s rights movement during and after the Arab Awakening? This paper examines this question, and the causal variables behind the continual suppression of women’s rights and freedoms in the region.

Methodology

This author went on a research trip to Tunisia from February 26 to March 4, 2012, where interviews with scholars and journalists, and local citizens were conducted. General observations about the country’s economy, politics, and socio-cultural and religious statuses and issues were noted. This author first visited Tunisia in November 2003, under the Ben Ali regime, and comparative analyses of Tunisia 2003 and 2012 are also incorporated in this study. The author has also lived in Egypt for four years (2001-2005).

In addition, the author conducted conventional research referring to books, articles, multimedia, and other sources. A comparative analysis of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions as they pertain to women’s rights is also included in this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is conducted from a human rights and political economy perspective, both considered interdependent. The political economy level of analysis involves two variables.

The first is based on the developmental theory of Amartya Sen, recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. His *social choice theory* posits that without freedoms, there will be no socioeconomic progress, and hence, individuals and society cannot progress if they are not granted the freedoms to make choices. This theory is applied to the women's rights movements pertaining to the Arab uprisings of 2011. Dr. Sen combines economics and philosophy, with the premise that "ethics and a sense of common humanity" contribute to social justice and equality.² Specifically, Dr. Sen's theory has –

focused international attention on the significance of fundamental **human freedoms and human rights** for development theory and practice. In the past, dominant approaches have often characterized development in terms of GDP per capita; food security in terms of food availability; and poverty in terms of income deprivation. Emphasis was placed on economic efficiency – with no explicit role being given to fundamental freedoms, individual agency and human rights. In contrast, Sen's research has highlighted the central idea that, in the final analysis, market outcomes and government actions should be judged in terms of valuable human ends. His work has contributed to important paradigm shifts in economics and development – away from approaches that focus exclusively on income, growth and utility, with an increased emphasis on individual entitlements, capabilities, freedoms and rights. It has increased awareness of the importance of respect for human rights for socioeconomic outcomes – challenging the proposition that growth should take priority over civil and political rights, while highlighting the **role of human rights in promoting economic security**, and the **limitations of development without human rights** guarantees.³ (Emphasis added)

The second variable consists of the findings in the groundbreaking *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*, (AHDR 2002) which presents three key challenges for the Middle East region:

1. The lack of a knowledge-based society
2. The prevalence of authoritarian governments that suppress freedoms and rights
3. The lack of empowerment of women

Clearly, the AHDR 2002 and Dr. Sen's social choice theory are interrelated, as they apply to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For decades, we have observed severe repression in these regions, resulting in restrictions and violations of freedoms and rights, as well as constricting individual and societal choices. As a result, we see trends in educational and intellectual deficiencies (i.e., lack of a knowledge-based society); repressive and entrenched authoritarianism; and gender inequalities (especially restrictions on women's choices) that have contributed to lack of socioeconomic progress. Hence, Dr. Sen's social choice theory and the premises and findings of the AHDR 2002 are interdependent.

The human rights level of analysis pertains specifically to feminist theory, which promotes gender mainstreaming in all sectors of society. Specifically, with the MENA region consisting primarily of Muslim societies, feminist theory must be viewed through the lens of Islamic feminism, and contrasted with secular (sometimes equated with Western) feminism. Islamic feminism seeks gender parity and mainstreaming within the context of the religion of Islam, with the intention of precluding any conflict with or violation of Islamic principles. In other words, it is an attempt to reconcile feminism with Islam. The ensuing ideological struggle between secular and Islamic feminists cannot be overlooked.

Margot Badran defines Islamic feminism as follows: "[Islamic feminism] derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence."⁴ Dr. Badran emphasizes that Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon, including in cyberspace: "Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from

countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim Diaspora and convert communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating with increasing frequency in cyberspace -- to name just one site: maryams.com.”⁵

Islamic feminist discourse embodies a contextual *feminist hermeneutics*, which “renders compelling confirmation of gender equality in the Quran that was lost sight of as male interpreters constructed a corpus of *tafsir* (exegesis, or interpretation) promoting a doctrine of male superiority reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal cultures.”⁶

The hypothesis for this study posits the following: Because freedoms and rights have been severely repressed in the region, human development and socioeconomic progress have stagnated (Sen’s social choice theory and the 2002 AHDR apply here). This, in turn, has served as the main causal factor for the 2011 uprisings and revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East, beginning with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia.

In addition, this study posits that substantive progress in women’s human rights and empowerment has not been realized in the region because of being sidelined in the process of regime change and post-regime priorities, despite the prominent roles women have played in the 2011 uprisings and revolutions.

The reasons for the sidelining of women’s empowerment during and after the Arab Awakening are multidimensional. In order to understand these reasons, first, ideological and cultural misogyny must be analyzed. Second, correlated to the first, are human development deficiencies pertaining to women in the MENA region. This is followed by an assessment of the 2011 Arab Awakening and respective women’s rights movements,

beginning with the revolution in Tunisia. Comparative analyses of the status and rights of women in Egypt and Libya are also presented. The conclusion assesses the women's rights movements in the 2011 Arab Awakening, particularly in the contexts of Amartya Sen's Social Choice Theory, the 2002 AHDR, and feminist theory. The analysis has to begin with the ideological and cultural foundations of misogyny and negative attitudes towards women in the MENA region, as they form the contextual backdrop of the study.

Ideological and Cultural Misogyny

In December 2002, a panel discussion was held at an American university in the Middle East. The topic was the *2002 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR)*, and two of its authors served as the panelists in addition to two scholars who critiqued the report. The authors of the report listed the human development deficits in the Middle East region, based on their research findings, which included: (1) a deficit of knowledge, (2) a deficit of women's empowerment, and (3) the suppression of freedoms and rights.

One of the panelists who critiqued the report responded to the findings with a suggestion that *women's empowerment is not a priority*, since wealth and power can "trickle down" to them once there is sufficient economic growth and prosperity by means of implementing economic reforms and liberalization. Here is his direct quote:

It could be argued, for instance, that the question of women's empowerment should not have been included... [as a problem] calling for priority action. For improving the status of Arab women is better regarded as an outcome rather than as a condition of human development. Women's empowerment is bound to increase [from]... improvements in general economic, social, and political conditions rather than [through] women's solutions, political decisions, or legislation.⁷

Of course, this is extremely misguided logic. Human development must progress from the bottom up, as well as simultaneously from government policies from the top down. Human development is based on the prerequisites of literacy and education, good health, and all forms of security for a given population. The panelist's quote reveals more of his own personal gender biases rather than anything that the field of economics posits.

The audience also reacted to the report's UNDP sponsorship. Some in the audience felt that this was Western-sponsored research, and it gives Western-modeled advice for progressive change in the Arab Middle East, and therefore, should be rejected. Specifically, a renowned Egyptian economist, Galal Amin, remarked that: "the [AHDR] adopted criteria for human development which are directly copied from the West," while disregarding cultural sensitivities.⁸

The two authors of the AHDR responded to these reactions by pointing out that the formula for human development is *universal*, and not exclusively Western. Responding to Galal Amin, Dr. Nader Fergany, the lead author of the AHDR, said, "Human rights are the crowning achievement of the human race," adding that the cultural issue should not be taken too far.⁹

Dr. Rima Khalaf-Hunaidi, a co-author of the AHDR, challenged the suggestion that economic growth will take care of women's empowerment, and therefore the latter need not be a priority for development in the Arab world. She retorted:

On women's empowerment...Dr. Issawy said that maybe it shouldn't be a priority, and maybe economic growth will solve it. Ladies and gentlemen, look at our region. You'll see that countries with the highest per capita income are countries where women suffer most. They are countries who have voted to deprive women of their rights. They are countries where women do not have even citizenship, and women are deprived of the basics. So I do not think that economic growth and development in and of itself will solve the women's disempowerment issue, and I actually believe that it is

something that we should give priority for, not only because it's a human rights issue, and because women should be entitled to equal citizenship, because I actually believe that a society deprived of half its citizens will find it extremely difficult to move forward.¹⁰

Here we see an example of highly educated scholars debating the issue of women's empowerment, and the prevalence of chauvinism is blatantly apparent. Hence, chauvinism and misogyny are not exclusive to any particular socioeconomic class or education level.

Often Islam is blamed for cultural and ideological misogyny. Islam never prohibits anyone from getting an education. On the contrary, Islam encourages all "believers," with no gender distinction, to seek knowledge, learning, and wisdom. If a family prohibits girls from attending school, then it is most likely a result of their own traditional and conservative views and attitudes, although religion is often misused to justify such decisions to deprive girls of an education. The illiterate or semi-educated mullahs in parts of Pakistan, India, and areas of the Arab/Muslim world are notorious for cloaking their myopic Islamic teachings with their own personal prejudices and chauvinism against females.

The end result is the suppression of girls and women's human right to literacy and education in substantial populations of the world. That is not a minor issue. It negatively affects the progress and development of numerous countries, and reinforces the cycle of poverty and underdevelopment.

In a BBC News article, Safa Faisal describes the education obstacles for many Arab¹¹ girls in the Middle East:

Girls ... face an added hurdle in that Yemen, as a conservative society, would usually object to the girls being educated by male teachers and mixed sex education.

But in Jordan, enrolment is excellent at 86 percent - however, girls drop out in secondary school because of early marriage. Jordanian society is very conservative with tribal traditions and many girls are pressurized into marrying young. Some still continue their education after marriage - but many of them do not, especially if they have children.¹²

Ms. Faisal also reports that in one Jordanian secondary school 80% of the girls “said that the first role of the woman was to stay at home and bring up her children.”¹³ She also presents this disconcerting quote: “When we asked parents why they did not allow their girls to school, they would say ‘because it's wrong, it's irreligious, it's improper - they should stay at home to prepare for their real life, their married life’.”¹⁴ She encountered many parents who were willing to spend money to educate their boys, but not their girls, or parents who overtly gave boys preferential treatment over girls when it came to education.

In a 2007 article in the journal *Kritiké*, entitled “Gender Jihad: Muslim Women, Islamic Jurisprudence, and Women’s Rights,” Melanie Mejia attributes these patriarchal attitudes to the need for establishing a male-dominated social hierarchy; and, of course, the central component driving this need is the intoxicating attraction to power. According to Professor Mejia, this “hierarchical logic was pushed to such an extreme that the laws were designed to ensure that society places the Muslim woman in a situation where [certain] Quranic conditions for her subordination would automatically be satisfied. This was done by denying her basic right to education and to work, which would make her financially independent from the male.”¹⁵

Professor Mejia even goes as far as to refer to these hierarchical tendencies as “Satanic logic,” as described in the following passage:

Such gender-biased argument employs Satanic logic. Satan’s disobedience resulted from an arrogant [who] believed that since he was created from fire while man was from clay, he is, therefore, superior than [*sic*] man... In opting

for his hierarchical view, Satan chose to make his will supersede God's will. Muslims who are vain and arrogant – whether for individual, racial, economic, or gender-related reasons – engage in Satanic logic.¹⁶

At the same time, Professor Mejia emphasizes the sanctions for women's education in early

Islamic history:

The history of Islam reveals that women were educated together with men. There are even reports that some of the most famous male scholars and jurists were educated by women. There are even cases where women would enter into debates regarding the interpretation of the Quran. A famous story relates about a debate between Caliph Omar and an unknown woman. According to the story, the Caliph wanted to put limits on the amount of *mahr* (dowry) a woman may demand from her would-be husband. A Muslim woman vehemently objected and cited a passage from the Quran supporting her argument. Omar immediately backed out and admitted this error. This is just one story that reveals to us that women during the early Islamic stages were educated not only in literature and art, but in jurisprudence as well.¹⁷

In modern times, ironically, many Muslim societies remain ignorant of this aspect of Islamic history, and the mullahs and imams (religious figures – all men) conveniently exclude it from their pulpit preaching in order to uphold the male-dominated hierarchical status quo. In the end, no one wins from this scheme.

Wahhabism / Salafism

In response to the pro-democracy wave of protests reverberating throughout the Middle East, Saudi Arabia decided to hold municipal elections, while still prohibiting women from voting. No one should be surprised that Saudi Arabia is centuries behind in gender equality. It remains a global human rights pariah for treating women as less than human.

The Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law is based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792).¹⁸ It advocates an uncompromising conviction in *Tawhid*, the oneness of God. This school recognizes the Quran and Hadith (which are the sayings of

the Prophet Muhammad) as the only reliable sources from which divine law can be derived and interpreted. Wahhabi jurisprudence usually takes a literalist approach to interpreting and implementing Islamic law. Hence, if a verse of the Quran prescribes amputation for the crime of stealing, then Wahhabism interprets this literally, and that is why public amputations take place routinely in Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabism is the national ideology (the theocracy cites the Quran as its “constitution”).

The foundation of Wahhabism is found in the teachings and life of Abd al-Wahhab who forged a political alliance with Muhammad ibn Sa’ud, the ruler of a small town in Saudi Arabia called Dir’iyya.¹⁹ Here Abd al-Wahhab began to strictly implement *Shariah*, referring to Islamic law.

It is because of the Wahhabi ideology that Saudi Arabia has become extremely anti-Shiite and anti-Sufi (Islamic mysticism). In addition, Wahhabism has encouraged intolerance towards women. Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabism — which clearly does not represent the Islam practiced by the majority of global Muslims — results in some of the severest restrictions on the freedoms of women in the world. Women are not allowed to drive; they cannot obtain a passport or travel without the permission of a male relative; they cannot interact with men because extreme gender segregation is observed in all spheres of life; and women must observe a strict dress code, enforced by the “moral police.” Overall, Saudi women are abominably subjugated by an absolutely male-dominated society that does not hesitate to use violence against women. Thus, the parallels between Wahhabism and the Afghan Taliban’s ideology are evident. In fact, when the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996, only three countries recognized the regime as legitimate: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan.

In some very wealthy Muslim countries we find prevailing attitudes and policies that can only be described as disgustingly misogynistic. If we put Muslim societies under a microscope and analyze attitudes and practices relative to girls and women, we find that the birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia, is one of the worst violators (if not *the* worst) of female human rights. Saudi oil money may assist in educating Saudi girls, but the kingdom's theocratic social policies are wholly anti-women, to say the least. There are ideological and socio-cultural reasons behind Saudi Arabia's misogyny, despite the claims of Islam's (born in the Saudi city of Mecca in the 7th century AD) revolutionary liberation of women from the appalling oppression of pre-Islamic Arabia. Saudi Arabia, the Taliban, and their cohorts resemble the extreme.

The 2011 Arab Awakening has also emboldened and in some cases empowered the Salafists in Tunisia and Egypt. Salafists are also reported to be fighting against the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria. What is Salafism? The term "salaf" means "predecessors; forebears, ancestors, forefathers."²⁰ Salafiya is "an Islamic reform movement in Egypt, founded by Mohammed 'Abduh (1849-1905)."²¹ This movement has inspired many Salafists throughout the region. Salafists adhere to ultra-orthodox interpretations of Islam, typically requiring stricter enforcement of dress codes and Islamic law that especially affect women. Salafism potentially poses a threat to women's rights and freedoms, and Salafists have already violently challenged new governments in Tunisia and Egypt. Although in small numbers, they often hold protests in front of western embassies and other government symbols. The Tunisian government has faced serious problems and challenges due to the Salafists.

Purity and Honor: A Motive to Kill

"Life every man holds dear; but the dear man holds honor far more precious than life" – William Shakespeare

Some of the norms that regulate the physical and sexual purity of females in Middle Eastern culture are a combination of misinterpreted religious teachings, socio-cultural customs and traditions, and codes of behavior set by respective families, which incorporate all the other norms and apply them to their female members.

The spread of ultra-orthodox ideologies, together with ultra-conservative local traditions and customs pertaining to family honor and female purity, create a recipe for violent suppression of girls, in fear of violating that honor. Often, perceptions of dishonor embodied in a girl's actions or behavior may pertain to her desire to marry someone the family disapproves of, or to refuse to marry someone her family has betrothed her to, or perhaps, in the eyes of the family, tribe, or community, the girl is too "westernized," meaning she has the reputation of dressing provocatively and interacting with boys.

'Honor killings,' as the phenomenon is known, usually involve women being murdered, usually by brothers and fathers, for having sex outside marriage, dating, refusing an arranged marriage, wanting to go to university or even having been raped. The practice is not uncommon in traditional, male-dominated Arab societies.²²

Honor crimes are also found among Kurdish, Turkish, and other non-Arab ethnicities, and often for the same reasons that are articulated above.

Jordan has seen this problem tarnish the kingdom's image. But, activists have made some headway in prosecuting murderers, and even the king and queen of Jordan have supported the creation of special legal committees to prosecute honor crimes. A local journalist and activist, Rana Husseini (also the author of *Murder in the Name of Honor*), describes how in the past "most men served less than a year for killing a woman who had

'dishonored' her family. Now, more than seven months after the government restructured the legal system to deal with honor crimes as normal criminal cases, Jordan has seen at least 10 cases result in prison sentences of seven to 15 years."²³

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Many girls are scarred for life and suffer from debilitating pain and problems in life afterward. Still many others die from infections, complications, and excessive bleeding from FGM. Here is how the World Health Organization (WHO) describes FGM:

Female genital mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

The practice is mostly carried out by traditional circumcisers, who often play other central roles in communities, such as attending childbirths. Increasingly, however, FGM is being performed by health care providers.

FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. It reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. It is nearly always carried out on minors and is a violation of the rights of children. The practice also violates a person's rights to health, security and physical integrity, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to life when the procedure results in death.

Female genital mutilation is classified into four major types:

1. Clitoridectomy: partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small, sensitive and erectile part of the female genitals) and, in very rare cases, only the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris).
2. Excision: partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (the labia are "the lips" that surround the vagina).
3. Infibulation: narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, or outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris.

4. Other: all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area.²⁴

Assuming a girl survives FGM, the mutilation causes numerous serious long-term health problems, and the WHO emphasizes that “FGM has no health benefits, and it harms girls and women in many ways.”²⁵ According to the WHO, immediate complications attributed to FGM –

can include severe pain, shock, hemorrhage (bleeding), tetanus or sepsis (bacterial infection), urine retention, open sores in the genital region and injury to nearby genital tissue.

Long-term consequences can include:

- recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections
- cysts
- infertility
- an increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths
- the need for later surgeries

For example, the FGM procedure that seals or narrows a vaginal opening (type 3 above) needs to be cut open later to allow for sexual intercourse and childbirth. Sometimes it is stitched again several times, including after childbirth, hence the woman goes through repeated opening and closing procedures, further increasing and repeated both immediate and long-term risks.²⁶

Somalia is one of several countries that practice FGM, also called female genital cutting (FGC). It is practiced in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, central Africa, North and East Africa, and parts of the Middle East. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services Project on Women’s Health, “almost one-half of women who have experienced FGC live in Egypt or Ethiopia... To a lesser degree, FGC is practiced in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and India. Some immigrants practice various forms of FGC in other parts of the world, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and in European

nations.”²⁷ According to UNICEF, “an estimated 70 million girls and women living today have been subjected to FGM/C in Africa and Yemen.”²⁸

According to UNICEF, “More than 90% of women aged 15-49 years have been cut in Djibouti, Sierra Leone, Egypt, Guinea, and Somalia. Prevalence of FGM/C among women aged 15-49 years varies widely, from 98% in Somalia, to 1% in Cameroon, Uganda, and Zambia.”²⁹

Why do parents subject their daughters to such cruelty? There are a number of reasons why FGM/C is practiced, including:

Sexual: to control or reduce female sexuality.

Sociological: for example, as an initiation for girls into womanhood, social integration and the maintenance of social cohesion.

Hygiene and aesthetic reasons: where it is believed that the female genitalia are dirty and unsightly.

Health: in the belief that it enhances fertility and child survival.

Religious reasons: in the mistaken belief that FGM/C is a religious requirement.

FGM/C is mainly performed on children and adolescents between four and 14 years of age. In some countries such as Ethiopia however, more than half of FGM/C is performed on infants under one year old.³⁰

Although an anthropological principle called “cultural relativism” explains FGM/C as a culturally distinctive practice that should be accepted as part of one’s culture, I refuse to accept or be silent about this butchery of girls. And, that’s exactly what I call it – butchery. The World Health Organization and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights support my contention that FGM/C is not only harmful, but also constitutes a gross violation of the human rights of girls. Whether or not it’s a cultural custom is completely irrelevant. FGM/C is a crime.

Some countries have passed laws rendering FGM/C a crime, but enforcement of such laws is more difficult. Many immigrant families living in the West, where FGM/C is illegal, arrange for their daughters to travel to their countries of origin in order to undergo FGM/C. Some do it secretly in their place of residence.

In the UK alone, the Foundation for Women's Health and Development "estimates that around 11,000 British-based girls aged between nine and fifteen have undergone the ritual – in the UK or in their parents' home countries."³¹ Educating and building awareness about the detrimental effects of FGM/C in traditional societies serve as the only means to change attitudes and customs. Some progress has been made, particularly in parts of Africa, where numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and governments are actively supporting educational programs to stop the practice of FGM/C. But still, there is a long way to go to persuade many people that FGM/C is wrong. Those traditional societies and cultures in which concepts of chastity and sexual purity and modesty are most strongly attributed to girls are the hardest to persuade. Those cultures imbued with superstitions and suspicions about girls' sexual character and purity are most likely to continue practicing FGM/C. Superstitions and suspicions are deeply entrenched, and the education of generations is required in order to eventually terminate this horrible practice. The lives and wellbeing of millions of girls depend on it.

Violence against Women and Sexual Assaults

Sexual and physical violence is rampant worldwide, and the statistics are disheartening, to say the least. To gain some perspective about the widespread and profound nature of these violent acts against women, consider the following:

- A 1993 study in Alexandria, Egypt, found that 47% of female homicides were 'honor' killings of the victim after she had been raped (El Youssef New Presses, Cairo)...
- A survey by the General Union of Women and UNIFEM found that one in four married women in Syria are abused, in 70% of the cases by her husband or father. Syrian women hold 12% of elected office, the second highest proportion in the Middle East after Tunisia (Reuters, April 2006).
- A senior official announced a 20% increase in recorded incidents of domestic violence in Jordan in 2005 over the previous year—1,800 cases in 2005 (IRIN News, July 2006).
- In Algeria, 7,400 women filed domestic violence complaints in 2005, up 1,555 from the total in 2004. Algeria has more than 30 safehouses throughout the capital (AFP, December 2006).
- In a 1999-2000 survey by the Gaza Community Mental Health Program, a total of 62.5% of women reported having experienced some form of domestic abuse. The highest rate was among divorced women (100%) and in cities, while the rate lowered in refugee camps and villages (IDRC, Canada).³²

These are very sobering facts and data. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports the following:

- Forced marriages and child marriages violate the human rights of women and girls, yet they are widely practiced in many countries in Asia, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa.

Health Effects:

Injuries: Physical and sexual abuse by a partner is closely associated with injuries. Violence by an intimate partner is the leading cause of non-fatal injuries to women in the USA.

Death: Deaths from violence against women include honor killings (by families for cultural reasons); suicide; female infanticide (murder of infant girls); and maternal death from unsafe abortion.

Sexual and reproductive health: Violence against women is associated with sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancies, gynecological problems, induced abortions, and adverse pregnancy outcomes, including miscarriage, low birth weight and fetal death.

Risky behaviors: Sexual abuse as a child is associated with higher rates of sexual risk-taking (such as first sex at an early age, multiple partners and

unprotected sex), substance use, and additional victimization. Each of these behaviors increases risks of health problems.

Mental health: Violence and abuse increase risk of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep difficulties, eating disorders and emotional distress.

Physical health: Abuse can result in many health problems, including headaches, back pain, abdominal pain, fibromyalgia, gastrointestinal disorders, limited mobility, and poor overall health.³³

The United Nations reports that violence against women “is a universal phenomenon.” According to the UN –

- Women are subjected to different forms of violence – physical, sexual, psychological and economic – both within and outside their homes.
- Rates of women experiencing physical violence at least once in their lifetime vary from several per cent to over 59 per cent depending on where they live.
- Current statistical measurements of violence against women provide a limited source of information, and statistical definitions and classifications require more work and harmonization at the international level.
- Female genital mutilation – the most harmful mass perpetuation of violence against women – shows a slight decline.
- In many regions of the world longstanding customs put considerable pressure on women to accept abuse.³⁴

However, Saudi Arabia’s judiciary has no women, and men who abuse their wives often get light penalties, if any at all. This is a familiar scenario, which can be found throughout the Middle East.

Human Development Deficiencies of Women in the MENA

Literacy and education are vehicles of empowerment. The United Nations’ Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has rightly emphasized that: “Literate women are more likely to send their children, especially their girls, to school. By acquiring literacy, women become more economically self-reliant and more actively engaged in their country’s social, political and

cultural life. All evidence shows that investment in literacy for women yields high development dividends.”³⁵ And, the UN reports that, “While global illiteracy rates are falling, it is estimated that about one in every six adults still cannot read or write.”³⁶ For a global population of approximately 6.9 billion (2010), that is a staggering statistic.

Maternal health and rights in the Middle East and many parts of the Muslim world are some of the lowest and damning statistics in the world. Maternal mortality and health constitute a human right, which many countries fail to improve. According to the World Bank, in 2008 the maternal mortality rate (MMR) in Algeria was 120, in Egypt it was 82, in Iran 30, Iraq 75, Jordan 59, Lebanon 26, oil-rich Libya 64, Mali 830, Mauritania 550, Morocco 110, oil-rich Oman 20 and Saudi Arabia 24, Pakistan 260, Somalia a staggering 1,200, Sudan 750, Syria 46, Tunisia 60, Turkey 23, and Yemen 210 per 100,000 live births. Afghanistan’s MMR is the worst in the world at 1,400 (2008).

In the Middle East, Israel’s MMR statistic in 2008 was the only one that represented that of a developed country’s figure at 7 deaths per 100,000. Qatar’s 2008 MMR was also close at 8. There was no data available for Gaza and the West Bank. These statistics tell us that despite some of these countries’ vast oil wealth, women’s maternal health indicators remain at unacceptable levels. This data also indicates the direct and indirect impact of conflicts, instability, insecurity, and poverty and corruption, all pervasive in the Middle East. But, the most glaring point from this is that policy makers are predominantly men, who focus primarily on policies and issues favoring men, and neglecting and perhaps even deliberately suppressing those pertaining to women.

The MMR is just a glimpse of the bigger picture of the plight of girls and women in the region and in Muslim societies. The latter must be included in this critique, because

much of the violations of girls' and women's rights and freedoms are often cloaked in religious terminology and contexts, such as so called personal status laws, or family legal codes, which are based on some aspects of Islamic law, which in turn is interpreted by men. Now that Tunisia and Egypt have elected Islamist parties into power, these variables pose major concerns pertaining to women's rights and freedoms. Issues such as polygamy, inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody rights, child marriages, female illiteracy and denial of education, deficiencies in health care, suppression of women's participation in politics and business and women serving in the judicial system, women's immobility and enforced dress codes, so called "honor killings," and sexual violence, these are all pressing crises in Middle Eastern and Muslim societies.

The 2011 Arab Awakening: Uprisings and Revolutions in the MENA

It all began in Tunisia, when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest of corruption. Tunisians across generations mobilized and demanded justice and accountability. They were fed up with stifling corruption and brutal authoritarianism that ruled Tunisia for decades. In a surprisingly swift departure, Ben Ali was gone, and the revolutionaries emerged victorious. Like dominoes, other uprisings surfaced in Libya and Egypt, and then throughout the MENA region. Tunisia has been the source of inspiration for the 2011 Arab Awakening, but will the post-Ben Ali government and society manage to preserve women's rights and freedoms that originate from the Habib Bourguiba era? That is the critical question for Tunisia's future.

The Islamist En-Nahda party has come to power following elections after the revolution, and while women participate in Tunisian politics, there is deep fear among

secularists and feminists that gradually these rights and freedoms will erode. En-Nahda's religious advisor and head Rachid Al-Ghannouchi has tried to calm such fears. He has said publicly that, in his view, "the essence of Islam is freedom."³⁷ Still, many fear that the progress achieved for women's rights and freedoms in Tunisia might be reversed. It is important to understand the historical context of Tunisia's tradition of upholding women's rights and freedoms, which go back to the Bourguiba presidency.³⁸

TUNISIA

Tunisia under the late President Habib Bourguiba for the most part remained Western leaning, which, some argue, contributed to the most advanced women's rights and social policies in the region. Quoting a former Tunisian Minister of Culture, Tunisia's reference groups "are the French and the Italians, not the Algerians and Libyans."³⁹ Bourguiba outlawed polygamy and granted women equal status as men. "Women's rights are very advanced in Tunisia," according to Radwan Masmoudi, director of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), in an interview.⁴⁰

Bourguiba's secular views and policies pertaining to women sounded very radical for the mostly conservative Muslim region:

Bourguiba believed that old-fashioned clothing encouraged old-fashioned modes of thinking and acting; those who chose to wear [the veil] were, at least subconsciously, expressing their rejection of the modern world. In speech after speech during the first years after independence, he condemned the veil as an 'odious rag' that demeaned women, had no practical value, and was not obligatory in order to conform to Islamic standards of modesty... [he] made similar arguments concerning traditional male garments.⁴¹

In 1958, Bourguiba's Neo-Dustur Party passed the Personal Status Code, which "introduced dramatic changes in the law, banning polygyny, setting minimum ages for

marriage, and enabling women to initiate divorce proceedings. It represented the most revolutionary such legislation in the Muslim world since the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the Turkey of the 1920s.”⁴² A postage stamp of the 1958 Personal Status Code illustrates women’s empowerment with an image of a woman, with the Arabic words “*tahrir al-mar’a*,” which means “freedom of the woman,” next to her. On the bottom of the stamp are the words: “*1st Janv. 1958, Emancipation de la Femme, Republique Tunisienne.*”⁴³

While fierce secularism constituted official domestic policy, many in the populace remained privately faithful to their Islamic identity, which has manifested itself in post-Ben Ali politics after the 2011 revolution, as the Islamic party en-Nahda has won the most seats in parliament. In fact, despite the strict secularism under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, consider the official preservation of Tunisia’s Islamic identity: “*Shariah* (Islamic Law) courts were abolished in 1956, but the constitution declares Islam the state religion and stipulates that the President of the Republic must be a Muslim.”⁴⁴ (See Table 1 for Tunisia’s ethnic and religious demographics).

Table 1: Tunisia’s Ethnic and Religious Demographics

Demographic Category	Data
Population	10,732,900 (July 2012 estimate)
Ethnic Groups	Arab 98%, European 1%, Jewish and Other 1%
Religions	Muslim 98%, Christian 1%, Jewish and Other 1%

Source: *CIA World Fact Book: Tunisia* (updated March 6, 2012):
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ts.html>.

Ben Ali violated Dr. Sen’s social choice theory, as well as denied the masses the fulfillment of basic human development needs, as outlined in the AHDR 2002. The only area where both Bourguiba and Ben Ali made considerable advancements pertains to

women's empowerment. In that regard, Tunisia has remained ahead of the rest in the region. However, authoritarianism and lack of a knowledge-based society, as manifested by intellectual productivity (i.e., translations of literature) and registration of patents, have remained problematic. Denying freedoms and rights, restricting the political process, ruling with brutal authoritarianism, and embezzling the masses are all formulas for arresting socioeconomic development, as Dr. Sen's theory and the AHDR 2002 stipulate. These are also attributes of Ben Ali's legacy.

Also, "women constitute the majority of graduates. Yet only 38 percent of women are employed compared with 51 percent of men."⁴⁵

Now, Tunisians are in the process of formulating their post-dictator political system. Although the Islamist en-Nahda party, headed by Rachid Al-Ghannouchi, dominates the parliament, the new politicians are careful not to cross certain red lines that might infringe on women's rights and principles of secular liberalism. These matters are still being sorted out and debated, but in general, Tunisia is faring far better in its political development than neighboring Libya and Egypt.

According to Tunisia's Minister of Finance, Jaloul Ayed, "it was not surprising that Tunisia's revolution was the first of the so-called Arab spring because earlier in its history Tunisia had been the first Arab country to abolish slavery and to grant equal rights to women. Tunisia had even adopted a written constitution as far back as 1861." He added, "The corrupt old system was bound to fail – and it did fail."⁴⁶

In Tunisia, women freely occupy the public space. In fact, Tunisian women will often be seen in occupations that one seldom sees in other parts of the MENA region, like

café waitresses and traffic police. Tunisia has long held the reputation of being one of the region's most liberal countries.



College Students in Tunis



Waitress in Coffee Shop in Tunis



Female Traffic Police Officers in Tunis

In 2011, the Tunisian parliament consisted of 27.6% seats reserved for women; that is 58 women out of 217 seats, which is considerably progressive compared to other Arab countries.⁴⁷ Still, women in Tunisia continue to protest especially potential constitutional changes that would infringe on women's rights. The Islamist En-Nahda party faces pressures from the Salafists calling for implementation of Islamic law on the one hand, and on the other hand, the secularists who demand secular liberal democracy ensuring rights and freedoms to all. Tunisian activists "are not happy with a stipulation in a draft of the constitution that considers women to be 'complementary to men' and want a pioneering 1956 law that grant women full equality with men to remain in place."⁴⁸

Thousands protested recently in Tunis against possible constitutional changes that would threaten gender equality. One of the protesters said, "Normally, more important issues ought to be tackled like unemployment, regional development. En-Nahda seems bent on making steps backwards but we are here to say that Tunisian women will not accept that. I fear for the future of my daughters who may grow up in a totally different Tunisia."⁴⁹ En-Nahda representatives deny that the draft constitutional amendment would render regressive policies for women. The chair of the assembly's human rights and public freedoms panel, Farida al-Obeidi, explains that the draft stipulates: "sharing of roles and does not mean that women are worth less than men."⁵⁰ However, many Tunisians worry that passing this draft would lead to future policies and laws that threaten gender equality, which would be a significant reversal for women's rights.⁵¹ In Tunisia, the struggle for preserving women's rights and freedoms continues, as activists fear an agenda of greater Islamization on the horizon. They are determined not to give up or let up on the pressure

to maintain the long tradition of women’s equality in Tunisia (see Table 2: Tunisian Feminist Post-2011 Opportunities and Impediments).

It appears that the showdown between the Salafists and activists will continue in the medium and possibly even the long term. For now, En-Nahda has promised to embrace “moderate” Islamism, but Tunisian politics still has complex issues to resolve and reconcile, especially with the two powerful constituencies, the Salafists and activists, who are locked in an ideological tug-of-war. The outcome will see many evolutions of En-Nahda’s platform, as it tries to balance between the two forces pulling it in diverse directions.

Table 2: Tunisian Feminism Post-2011 Opportunities and Impediments

	Opportunities	Impediments
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bourguiba-era feminist policies; • Strong tradition of feminist activism; • Constant public exposure to challenges to women’s rights & freedoms, via media, Internet, and other forms of information technology. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much antagonism of the Islamists, could potentially lead to backlash; • Laws passed without opportunities for checks and balances; • If Islamist government decides to make women’s dress and similar issues priorities over socioeconomic development, it can derail the development focus of post-revolution Tunisia. Feminists can continue to cite this as a major departure from socioeconomic priorities.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicity through media and information technology will help keep the issues alive, especially in the face of adversity; • Claims of Islamist leanings toward orthodox policies can put the government in a critical light. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamists harden their positions & manage to pass laws and policies that constrain women’s rights & freedoms; • The challenge of the Salafists; • Inability to sustain the feminist movement & pressures on the government in the medium and long term.

Women took part in the Tunisian revolution of 2011, and played significant roles in the activism that helped end decades of authoritarianism. Because of the strong tradition of secular policies that granted women freedoms and rights since the Bourguiba era, the pressures for continuing the same policies will keep the Islamist government in check. However, this will not happen without major challenges, including from the Salafists.

EGYPT

"If it wasn't for the fact that Egyptian women were front and center of the protest that led to the revolution, Mohamed Morsi would not be president of Egypt today" – Mona Eltahawy

Asmaa Mahfouz is the young woman who challenged fellow Egyptians to show up at Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011. Asmaa recorded a message in front of a video camera and uploaded it on YouTube. This was part of her message:

The Vlog that triggered the Egyptian Revolution Recorded January 18



*Four Egyptians have set themselves on fire
Maybe we can have a revolution like in Tunisia
We can have freedom, justice, honor, and human dignity
I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square and I will stand alone
Maybe People will come down with me
We want to go down to Tahrir Square on January 25th
This entire government is corrupt
If you think yourself a man, come with me on Jan. 25th
Let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on Jan. 25th
Talk to your neighbors, your colleagues, friends and family and tell them to come*

If you have honor and dignity as a man, come... come and protect me and other girls in the protest

If you stay at home, then you deserve all that's being done to you

Come down with us and demand your rights, my rights, your family's rights⁵²

Asmaa Mahfouz was one of countless women involved in Egypt's April 6th movement, Islamic youth, Coptic youth, and organizers and sit-in participants that led to

the downfall of Hosni Mubarak. Egypt has a stellar history in initiating the feminist movement in the Arab world. Upon the 2011 revolution, hopes were extremely high for the next major wave in Egyptian feminism, but these hopes were dashed quickly. Leading up to the revolution, despite operating underground, the Muslim Brotherhood made considerable gains at the social level to inspire a religious resurgence in Egypt across economic classes and education levels. More women have been wearing the hijab and full burka in Cairo and Alexandria, and college students also visibly seemed to increase their religiosity over the last several years.

Once Mubarak was gone, and both men and women continued sit-in protests in Tahrir Square, the security forces and unknown criminals and gangs viciously assaulted women, including journalists Lara Logan and Mona Eltahawy. Sexual assaults, rape, gang attacks, and the SCAF-enforced “virginity tests” all comprised serious setbacks to women, especially in the public sphere. However, Egyptian women are speaking out and fighting back, including with lawsuits, in the effort to hold perpetrators accountable, even concerning such taboo subjects as sexual assaults. Yet, the current wave of feminism that seemed to gain ground in the context of the 2011 revolution risks being sidelined and marginalized.

In the political sphere, the Muslim Brotherhood and even Salafist parties and politicians occupy parliamentary seats resulting from post-revolution elections. Salafists also triggered violence in various parts of Egypt, at times targeting Coptic Christians.

Coptic activist Mona Makram Ebeid is among those who worry that ‘the Salafis have been brought out from their caves,’ and she has been quoted by the BBC as saying that ‘everyone is frightened’ and ‘there is a lot of fear in society and a lot of concern.’ An equally anxious secularist and editor of Cairo's *Democracy Review*, Hala Mustafa, similarly told the BBC that the

Salafist movement was very influential in Egypt and was trying to 'turn Egypt into an Islamic state.'⁵³

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) considers fears of Islamists as “overblown,” as MB spokesman Essam El-Erian claims, “the Egyptian people are wise enough to have a balanced parliament and are keen to have a civil and democratic state.”⁵⁴ However, MB’s position –

pertaining to women and to the country's Coptic Christian minority remains worrying to many. The group was highly criticized recently for statements saying that it would not accept a woman or a Copt as president, and there have been fears that the Islamists will try to impose Islamist ideas on the country if they dominate the next parliament, such as forcing women to wear veils or banning interest on investments.

[...] The group has [since] revisited many of its former positions, including those concerning women and religious minorities. Women constitute more than 10 per cent of the Brotherhood’s political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, while the party’s vice-chairman is the prominent Coptic intellectual Rafiq Habib.⁵⁵

Interestingly, the organization’s name couldn’t be more patriarchal, to say the least: the Brotherhood. This clearly fails to include female representation, even symbolically and semantically.

In terms of political participation, Egypt has 2.0% of the seats held by women in parliament, that is ten women out of 508 seats in the lower house. In the upper house, women constitute 2.8%, which translates into five women out of 180 seats.⁵⁶ This is considerably less than Tunisia’s female political representation, and yet Egypt’s population is so much larger, estimated at about 84 million (July 2012 CIA World Fact Book estimate).

Egypt’s illiteracy rates, especially of females, are atrocious. The total literacy rate for Egypt’s population is 72%. Male illiteracy stands at 19.7%, and female illiteracy is

36.5% (2010 estimate),⁵⁷ which means that nearly forty per cent of Egypt's female population is illiterate. Forty per cent of 84 million is approximately 33 million. That is an astounding number. This statistic alone is a violation of Sen's social choice theory and poses a significant challenge to feminist aspirations.

Egyptian-American journalist Mona Eltahawy has been front and center in Tahrir Square, reporting on developments, and also enduring a gang-led sexual assault similar to Lara Logan of CBS News. In a July 2012 interview with MSNBC, shortly after Mohamed Morsi was elected president, Mona Eltahawy implied that Morsi must have negotiated a power sharing deal with SCAF (i.e., the military junta), but the onus is on him to come through with "concrete promises that he wants to include everybody, women, Christians, minorities of all kinds, and people who do not belong to the Muslim Brotherhood. This is really important."⁵⁸ Mona Eltahawy also expresses concerns about ideological positions of not just MB men, but also MB women:

When I look at the history of the MB directorate on women's rights, especially as a feminist, I am very concerned.

We've had female parliamentarians who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood who have justified, among other things, atrocities such as female genital mutilation; we've had the woman who heads the women's committee of the political party that Mohamed Morsi used to lead, the Freedom and Justice Party, saying outrageous things such as, 'It's undignified for women to protest, and they should leave their brothers and fathers to protest for them,' conveniently forgetting that if it wasn't for the fact that Egyptian women were front and center of the protest that led to the revolution, Mohamed Morsi would not be president of Egypt today.

So based on their rhetoric of the past, I am concerned.

Had Mohamed Morsi said during his many acceptance speeches: 'I salute the women of Egypt standing here in Tahrir, for example, who were sexually assaulted, who paid with their lives, who paid with such a high price,' I might have said this could be the turning of a new page. But I have yet to hear this.

And also remember that the MB have said in their draft platform in the past that women and Christians could not be president.⁵⁹

There exists a direct linkage between the gender equity issue and Egypt's socioeconomic variables. According to Mona Eltahawy, about 40% of Egyptian households are "women-led households," which means that these households are completely dependent on women's incomes. While the MB adheres to conservative "family values" and moral values-based principles, they remain "completely disconnected with the realities on the ground." Mona Eltahawy points out that the MB's grandiose statements about women's place is in the home because a "good Muslim woman belongs," that is "utter nonsense, because the average Egyptian family cannot afford to have women in the home. And so we have to keep the gender issue front and center here."⁶⁰

Mona Eltahawy also emphasizes the troubling trends of horrendous sexual violence and assaults that women suffer in the streets. If so many women have to go out to work out of economic necessity to support their families, then "they need to feel safe outside in the street, that's the reality on the ground."⁶¹ This is one of many challenges that President Morsi will face to prove that he supports gender equity, and it is likely that Egyptian feminists like Mona Eltahawy and many others will exert persistent pressures for the new government to embrace pragmatism over dogmatism. However, there are some troubling signs: "Not a single candidate made efforts to sit down with the female coalition's movement during his campaign, except for Amr Moussa," said Fatma Emam, who is currently a researcher at Nazra for Feminist Studies and an activist blogger."⁶²

The challenges that Egyptian feminists face today are formidable, particularly in facing off with the Salafists and hard-liners in and outside of the government, not to

mention violence, harassment, and sexual assaults that continue to plague the streets of Egypt (see Table 3: Egyptian Feminism Post-2011 Opportunities and Impediments).

Table 3: Egyptian Feminism Post-2011 Opportunities and Impediments

	Opportunities	Impediments
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long tradition of Arab feminism, since the days of Hoda Sharawi; • Constant public exposure to challenges to women’s rights & freedoms, via media, Internet, and other forms of information technology; • New openness overcoming taboos of the past; • No more fear; • Ability to demand accountability for crimes against women; • Ability to demand policies and laws that do not violate women’s rights and freedoms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backlash from feminist activism; • Not enough (liberal) women involved in politics; • Sexual violence and intimidation targeting women.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicity through media and information technology will help keep the issues alive, especially in the face of adversity; • Claims of Islamist leanings toward orthodox policies can put the government in a critical light. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamist campaigns to undermine feminist movements; • Sexual violence and intimidation targeting women; • The military’s (SCAF) involvement in, and manipulation of, the government/politics.

While feminists may continue to exert pressures on policy makers, the ideological forces within the MB, with women among them, thus far have marginalized the gender equity issues, and have yet to prove them capable and willing to support holistic governance and socioeconomic development for Egypt’s future. The gender equity struggle in Egypt will continue for years to come.

Professor Sherifa Zuhur, a specialist in Islamic Studies and Middle Eastern History, shared her thoughts about the Egyptian revolution and the women’s rights movement. Responding to the question, “In your view, has the women’s rights movement in Egypt been sidelined following Mubarak’s ouster?” Professor Zuhur commented:

I am opposed to the idea that an Islamist-led govt. is automatically a defeat for women's rights or that the situation is a reversal of rights obtained on the order of the Iranian revolution. However, I am more pessimistic than I was previously because the new Egyptian government hasn't made any strong gestures towards women's rights nor has President Morsy made any very strong statement to women, instead his party's social media spokesperson is simply asserting that women (along with everyone else) will now be better off. It also depends how you define the 'women's rights movement'? The old guard, the Farkhonda Hassan, Suzanne Mubarak (obviously) and the National Council figures have been compromised by their roles in the prior regime. However, there were already many grassroots groups - some very much a part of the opposition and pro-revolution and others who have benefited a lot from US and other foreign funding and they are still active.

Also there are female revolutionary figures who aren't particularly active on women's issues, but who have been promoted to act as spokespersons and who interface with the US office most interested in promoting women (Melane Vermeer's office) - Asmaa Mahfouz for ex. However, many other feminists do not wish to have any contact or connection with Americans and are trying to continue their own efforts without too much concern for the decidedly-American trope of 'where are the women?' Morsy might have directly acknowledged the large women's presence in the revolution -- that would have been a useful symbolic action, as well as the problems with physical and sexual attacks which has so crippled women's movement in public space.

These other movements and persons who've worked for many years, or a lesser time on women's issues are not going to cease doing so simply because there is now a government with a large FSJ and salafist contingent. The constitution will not disadvantage women (unless some reframing reference to complementarity as in the Tunisian constitution is adopted). So activism - - whether or not women's political representation is satisfactory and whether or not major legal reform challenges arise is very important and it is present.

The legal challenges that may arise concern such reforms as the khul` law package of 2000 which various Islamist politicians vowed to overturn and maybe they will attempt to do so now. Or the reform of the Child Law by which punishments were inserted to those who order or practice FGM on a child.

There are women political representatives, but too few and most are not persons concerned with advancing women's rights. So a reform of the electoral process and advocating for quota would be important before the next round of elections.⁶³

Responding to the question, “Where do you see the Egyptian women’s rights movement going in the medium and long term?” Professor Zuhur remarked:

I see it regrouping. Now that the priority of driving the SCAF back to the barracks has been mostly accomplished, it is up to activists to determine what their priorities are and which tactics will be effective in the current climate. It seems to me that women's rights activists have very successfully understood and demonstrated ways to combine media coverage, campaigns for legal reform and to demonstrate the need for action on specific issues within an NGO format -- that is, they have been successful at obtaining funding for short term goals which bring an issue into public discussion such as violence against women, but then the events are completed, the year's funding is over and it's not always clear how much has been accomplished.

Their biggest challenge will be to work with the new government to overturn taboos against using public information -- television, not just films and children's pamphlets - to address misconceptions about women's rights and gender itself which are part of public consciousness. It is not clear if the new Ministry of Information or Ministry of Education will be any more open to such endeavors than those of the past. Per legal reform, I predict some showdown over legislation and in such a case, women's groups will have to unite - non-Islamist with Islamist as they have done before.⁶⁴

Although women have been on the frontlines of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, women’s rights movements and activism continue to be sidelined. Feminists also fear the empowerment of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt respectively. Plus, in Egypt, atrocious sexual assaults and violations against women have taken place, including, under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the horrific “virginity tests” of women detainees. These are steps back in the cause for women’s empowerment. In short, the deficiencies that the AHDR 2002 discovered in the MENA region – rampant authoritarianism, lack of knowledge-based society, and lack of women’s empowerment – still exist, but at least authoritarianism has been challenged with the fiercest opposition and intolerance by the masses. And, perhaps, feminist activists will regroup and reassert their demands, but not without fierce resistance by diverse forces.

LIBYA

“Overshadowing the tussle over women’s rights is how post-Gaddafi Libya will handle the widespread sexual violence and rapes that occurred during the uprising, crimes that on the whole were only allowed to speak their names when it served the rebels’ propaganda purposes” – Jamie Dettmer, The Daily Beast

Under the late Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, women played seemingly progressive roles in his personal security detail, as well as some bizarre roles behind closed doors serving as entertainers and nurses for the “Brother Leader” and his family. Qaddafi’s inclusion of women in his surroundings was far from progressive, although his policies did benefit few women among the educated elite. Rather, it appears it had more to do with his own personality and odd quirks, which, following his overthrow in 2011, revealed more about his desire to be surrounded by women in public and private, and his sons’ penchant for hiring western female entertainers for extravagant parties. Now, post-Qaddafi Libya faces daunting challenges in all areas: socioeconomic development, security and stability, establishing political institutions, formulating a new government, wealth distribution, education, alleviation of poverty, health care, post-conflict reconstruction, rebuilding the oil industry, and of course gender equity.

Libya is a very conservative society. Still, women played significant roles in supporting the rebels fighting against Qaddafi’s forces and mercenaries, as well as protesting side-by-side with men in Benghazi and elsewhere. Women suffered from the war in Libya, as many of them were raped, killed, or detained and abused. The most famous face of a woman who was gang raped was Eman Al-Obeidy, who, in the thick of the conflict, entered the Tripoli hotel where all the foreign journalists were lodging and tried to relate the story of her ordeal. Cameras were rolling when the hotel staff, who turned out to be secret agents of the regime, tried to silence her. The video went viral, and major media networks replayed it repeatedly. Eman Al-Obeidy became the heroine of the struggle

against Qaddafi. CNN and many other networks interviewed her while replaying the video of her encounter with the hotel staff in Tripoli.

Countless other Libyan women suffered equally or worse fates. Yet, in the face of such adversity, Libyan women did not back down from their cause. They continued to protest, and provided essential support, including smuggling arms and ammunition at grave risk, and providing medical treatment, supplies, and food to the rebels fighting Qaddafi's forces. They persistently protested against the Qaddafi regime, on and off camera.

The reports of Qaddafi's mercenaries breaking down doors initially in Benghazi and raping women alarmed the Arab world and Libyan civilians in particular. Along with Qaddafi forces pounding residential areas with fierce military assaults, the preponderance of rape as a war weapon became the rallying cry for invoking the United Nations doctrine of "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) civilians from atrocities committed by their own government. The reference to rape is likely embodied in UN Resolution 1973 (March 17, 2011) in the lines that stipulate: "Deploring the continuing use of mercenaries by the Libyan authorities," and "Considering that the widespread and systematic attacks currently taking place in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya against the civilian population may amount to crimes against humanity,"⁶⁵ along with a few other lines that condemn the Qaddafi regime's use of excessive force and criminal violence against civilians.

Arguably, had Eman Al-Obeidy's on camera assault at the hands of the Tripoli hotel staff not happened, the emphasis on the plight of women during the conflict might not have reached the levels of media attention that it warranted. In the post-Qaddafi era, women's rights issues are even more marginalized than in Tunisia and Egypt, because the security

situation is yet to be resolved. While Libyans gradually form their government, and script their new constitution, numerous militias continue to express their dissent over various issues by means of violence.

The Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC) has many messes to clean up before it can address core socioeconomic and policy issues, and at the same time, the latter remain dire issues to tackle. The militia violence must end and disarming campaigns must succeed in ridding the streets of guns and other weapons. Fundamental law and order issues have disrupted Libya's progress in rebuilding the nation. In addition, Benghazi declared itself semi-autonomous from Tripoli: Civic leaders in the region say that "the move is necessary as the region, once known as Cyrenaica, has been neglected for decades. But the move has caused tension with the governing National Transitional Council (NTC) in the capital Tripoli."⁶⁶

In early August 2012, the national assembly selected Mohammed Magarief as its head. He expressed that Libya's new rulers "needed to improve security, promote national reconciliation, tackle 'unacceptable' corruption, and lure back foreign investors after last year's civil war."⁶⁷

The national assembly will direct the country towards "full parliamentary polls once a constitution is drafted next year. One of its first tasks is to appoint a prime minister within 30 days."⁶⁸ Magarief comes from the eastern part of Libya, and some speculate that the new prime minister is likely to be from the west, "possibly the interim deputy prime minister, Mustafa Abu Shagour, who was born in Tripoli."⁶⁹ Moreover –

Wartime rebel Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril, whose liberal coalition won 39 out of 80 party seats in the assembly, has previously called for a grand coalition.

The Justice and Construction Party (JCP), the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, won 17 seats. Independents took the remaining 120.⁷⁰

Once again we see a strong presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in post-regime change politics. So far, we see no women being tapped for prominent government offices, although posters of Nahla Abdelhafeez running for an assembly seat are visible. According to Jamie Dettmer of the *Daily Beast* –

For most ordinary Libyan women, there's domestic drudgery and subordination to their men. For the more educated, drawn from higher ranks and involved in newly minted nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), there's hope of change and greater opportunities.

Listening to NGO women at conferences held at Tripoli's smarter hotels, it is hard not to get swept along. The women spearheading the NGOs and standing as candidates are highly capable and determined to secure great change, despite the conservatism of this North African country. They've been emboldened by exile or study overseas or draw confidence from roles in the ouster of Gaddafi.

They say they will not be content to remain passive spectators in a male-dominated society where outside Tripoli wedding parties, public gatherings, and even restaurants are usually segregated, and where walking outside without a headscarf invites trouble.⁷¹

The election commission has no women, and just one woman serves on the NTC, which totals 102 members, and two ministers who are women.⁷² These are scant numbers when it comes to gender equity.

Said one Libyan woman: “The general feeling among women here is that they are trapped by culture and religion and they can't make decisions for themselves. The state doesn't protect us and doesn't secure our freedom,' she says. Even now she fears the future. 'The politicians pay lip service to our views; they're not really listening'.”⁷³

Others remain more optimistic, drawing comfort from the fact that 625 women are standing in the elections for the National Congress, 540 of whom are party candidates and 85 running as independent candidates.

But how comforting is that figure? There are 1,206 party candidates in the elections and the parties were required to offer an equal number of men and women, something not quite achieved. More disappointing is the tiny percentage of female candidates running as independents—in all there are 2,501 independent candidates. Women make up less than 3.5 percent.⁷⁴

Libyan women face the challenge of influencing the new constitution, which risks being dominated by MB-inspired Shariah (Islamic law). Similarly, another fight “will be over changing the judicial code. Currently, there’s no such crime as spousal rape. Activists want to see that changed and want to see the banning of rape victims being prosecuted for adultery or judges coercing rape victims and rapists to marry in order to restore ‘family honor’, something that condemns a woman to a life of injustice.”⁷⁵

Overall, Libyan women face daunting tasks to overcome misogyny and chauvinism in politics, institutions, employment, socio-cultural contexts, religious contexts, the judicial system, and law enforcement. Post-Qaddafi Libyan institutions so far appear male-dominated. The new constitution will be very telling about the future of gender equity in Libya.

CONCLUSION

“There are only two types of women – goddesses and doormats” – Pablo Picasso

This analysis illustrates the serious implications of the electoral success of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt, and possibly in Libya, that might affect women’s empowerment and political representation and rights. As of the present situation in these countries, respectively, women’s political representation has been limited and

unimpressive. Only in Tunisia do we see a noticeable presence of women in politics, including in En-Nahda, but still in post-revolution Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, gender equity remains a distant goal.

The Arab Awakening has not improved women's security, especially in the streets of Egypt and Libya. Misogynist violence, sexual assaults, and slander targeting women activists and citizens continue unabated. In many cases, perpetrators have not been brought to justice.

The Arab Awakening has compelled governments to acknowledge urgent socioeconomic development priorities, although some politicians have failed to focus on them. Instead, some have focused on ideological differences and polemics. In terms of women's empowerment, one of the three deficiencies that the *2002 AHDR* has articulated, the Arab Awakening has fixed a spotlight on the plight of women in the MENA. How that translates into comprehensive, long-term socio-political, legal, judicial, and economic reforms to improve human rights remain to be seen. The deficiency of women's empowerment being removed from the AHDR's list of deficiencies will not happen anytime soon, as the struggle for gender equity continues. Attitudinal changes will take longer than reformist changes on paper, and many are likely to resist women's rights issues even reaching the paper.

Applying Sen's social choice theory to the women's rights situation in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, then, renders disappointing results. Tunisia's Bourguiba-era laws and policies that empowered women give Tunisian women an advantage over the rest, but even they are not without challenges especially coming from Salafists and hard-liners in En-Nahda. Women in Tunisia occupy public space more freely and openly compared to other

countries in the MENA. Sen's social choice theory mandates freedoms and rights granted to all citizens in society, which would lead to progressive socioeconomic development. The MENA region in general, and Egypt and Libya in particular, are still a long way off in achieving such levels of rights and freedoms for women.

The *2002 AHDR's* assertion that women's empowerment is a major deficiency in the MENA region still holds true. However, the Arab Awakening has inspired some groundbreaking women's activism, including in the most misogynist society of Saudi Arabia, albeit with no substantial results in changing policies beyond the superficial permission granted to Saudi women to participate in the 2012 Olympics for the first time ever. The permission did not coincide with any policy reforms favoring women's rights and freedoms, hence the reference to "superficial."

Feminism in the MENA region has many faces, including Islamic feminism. Yet, gender mainstreaming in the region has not been achieved. In fact, as the data pertaining to some Islamist women in Egypt's parliament indicates, secular feminists are often pitted against Islamist feminists. This ideological struggle will continue.

The hypothesis of this study has been proven: Because freedoms and rights have been severely repressed in the region, human development and socioeconomic progress have stagnated (i.e., Sen's social choice theory). This reality, which has existed for decades, has been the main causal factor for the 2011 Arab Awakening (uprisings and revolutions). Furthermore, substantial progress in women's rights and empowerment has not been realized in the region because of being sidelined, in varying degrees, in the process of regime change and post-regime priorities, despite the prominent roles women have played in the 2011 uprisings and revolutions.

The marginalization of the women's rights movement in the MENA region does not mean it is dead or it has surrendered to the forces that be, but it does require women's rights activists to maintain pressures on the newly formed governments that their demands must be met. The resounding message to these governments is that women who participated in the Arab Awakening are not exploitable, nor are they forgettable. Their sacrifices and activism that helped empower these new governments serve as the mirror in the politicians' faces. The latter ignore this mirror at their own risk, and at the same time jeopardize the socioeconomic progress of their respective country.

ENDNOTES

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