

## Selected Articles



## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE ARAB SPRING

Claudia Derichs  
Khadija Arfaoui  
Ulrike Bechmann  
Viola Raheb  
Zekiye Demir

Edited by  
Colin Dürkop  
Suna Güzin Aydemir

# **Women's Empowerment in the Arab Spring**

## **Selected Articles**

### *Contributors*

Claudia Derichs  
Khadija Arfaoui  
Ulrike Bechmann  
Viola Raheb  
Zekiye Demir

### *Edited by*

Colin Dürkop  
Suna Güzin Aydemir



Konrad  
Adenauer  
Stiftung



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 5 | **PREFACE**
- 7 | **TOOLS INCREASING AND STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S  
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB SPRING**  
*Claudia DERICHS*
- 15 | **JASMINREVOLUTION AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT IN TUNISIA IN THE POST-  
REVOLUTIONARY ERA**  
*Khadija ARFAOUI*
- 31 | **WOMEN'S POLITICAL PROTESTS IN THE "ARAB SPRING"**  
*Viola RAHEB - Ulrike BECHMANN*
- 41 | **CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION TO  
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: TURKEY – A CASE STUDY**  
*Zekiye DEMIR*
- 55 | **LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS**
- 59 | **IMPRINT**



## PREFACE

The idea to publish this compilation was born during the preparatory phase of the workshop "Regional Meeting on Women's Empowerment in the Economic, Social and Political Transformation of the Middle East" we jointly organized with KAGİDER on 20th December 2011 in Istanbul.

There were two aims in organizing this meeting:

1. To listen to firsthand accounts and observations on conditions that gave rise to the uprisings and revolutions from the women and experts of the region and to share these with the world public.
2. To create an opportunity to share ideas and experiences on the various ways in which the women of the region can become more powerful in all areas (political, social and economic) in the post-revolution period as women who have made undeniable contributions to the protests and revolutions.

We believe that the four articles in this compilation serve a function with regard to both of these aims. Khalida Arfoui authored her article as both an activist and an observer of the transformation experienced in Tunisia. Arfoui relates - in a to the point language - the concerns of circles with secular sensitivities regarding the religious elements and actors of

the Jasmine Revolution. We believe that the article by Claudia Derichs is very valuable in that it represents a clear and critical standpoint regarding the methods for women's political empowerment. Derichs gives us an account of the experiences of various countries. The article co-authored by Ulrike Bechmann and Viola Raheb is an essay on the nature of women's participation and contribution to processes of large scale social change. On the other hand, it contains clues as to how the world perceives the recently increasing political visibility of women. And last but not least, the paper by Zekiye Demir is immensely valuable because it is written in a context about which little has been said until now. It is an article conveying the experiences of Turkey on how religious institutions can contribute to women's empowerment through religious services.

As Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, we would like to express our gratitude to each of the authors for making this compilation of selected articles possible. We once again thank KAGİDER for the essential contributions they have made to the workshop and hope that our cooperation will continue in future projects. We stress that we are open to initiatives that will serve to empower women in Turkey as well as in the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to these articles we invite you to read our workshop proceedings and workshop report, which you may obtain from the same source as this publication. We leave you now to enjoy these articles.

Ankara, 21 June 2012  
Dr. Colin Dürkop  
Suna Güzin Aydemir

# TOOLS INCREASING AND STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB SPRING

*Claudia Derichs*

Gender studies and social sciences have identified a broad range of tools which may be used to strengthen women's political participation. When these tools are examined in the context of the so-called Arab Spring, two questions arise: Can these tools be employed regardless of the specific political and social situation at hand? Can a respective discussion of the employment of these tools do justice to the various national and local contexts? I would like to contribute to this discussion from my perspective of a comparativist, a political scientist, an Arab-speaking scholar of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and a politically concerned woman.

## **Can we compare?**

The political context in each Arabic country is highly specific, and each country has its own gender regime. Despite these specific contexts, there are common features in each country. Additionally, much may also be learnt from revolutions in other countries with a Muslim majority, such as Indonesia. For instance, the Indonesian people toppled the dictatorial regime of then-president Suharto in 1998, demanding an end to the politics of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (korupsi, kolusi, nepotisme or KKN). More than a decade



after this revolution and its resultant change in regime, Indonesia is now an established democracy that has implemented the following features, among others,

- a decentralised administration with considerable local autonomy for the district level;
- a Ministry of Women's Empowerment (now called the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection);
- police stations staffed with female officers in order to encourage reports of violence against women;
- a national commission on violence against women (KOMNAS Perempuan);
- a quota regulation for political parties whose candidates are running for the national parliament.

Indonesia also had a female president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, from 2001 until 2004. The list of policy results in Indonesia looks impressive and seems to serve women's rights and empowerment. However, as I have spelled out elsewhere (Derichs 2006), policies that are ostensibly deemed to promote women's rights at first glance merit a closer look. In Indonesia, decentralization is in many places accompanied by by-laws discriminating women and privileging men; the budget for the women's ministry is comparatively low for the tasks at hand (namely, gender equality and gender mainstreaming); police stations with female officers are often located in districts far from the residential areas of women suffering from domestic violence or rape; the national commission on violence against women has a tremendous workload; and the quota regulation for political parties has no teeth. Moreover, the trickle-down effects that could have occurred during Megawati Sukarnoputri's presidency, such as an increase in women's political representation at all levels of formal political institutions, did not take place. The issue of universal tools enhancing women's political participation thus occupies a contested discursive field when applied to national or local contexts. Applying these tools to the context of the Arab Spring societies is not an easy matter. It requires caution and careful attention. Also, clichéd conclusions have to be avoided. Yet, from a comparative perspective, three aspects merit reflection and discussion: (i) quota regulations, (ii) vertical alliances, and (iii) the participation and representation of women before and after the political transition. While quota regulations are technical and temporary instruments, the formation of alliances and the question of formal political representation after a transition are depen-

dent on long-term support systems for women's participation. To better understand these facets, I will address the question of quota in greater length before outlining some basic thoughts on the importance of a viable support system.

### **Quota systems as a tool to increase and strengthen women's participation**

Quota regulations for women's political representation in Parliament are a welcome tool. But they are also problematic. This is because there are different types of quota regulations, and each type has its advantages and disadvantages. Quota regulations vis-à-vis political participation and representation can take the form of a constitutional provision (legislated quota), a voluntary instrument of the political parties, or a reservation of parliamentary seats. (For more information on the different types of political participation and representation quota regulations, see [www.quota-project.org](http://www.quota-project.org).)

The electoral law of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, for instance, provides for a legislated candidate quota with a clause stating that no less than 25 percent of the seats in the national assembly shall be held by women. Pakistan's constitution reserves 60 of the 342 national assembly seats (slightly over 17 percent) for women. Australia's Labor Party adopted a quota regulation demanding a representation of no less than 40 percent of either sex on the party's electoral lists.

As a voluntary instrument of political parties, quota regulations are a frequently found yet weak instrument. When, for instance, a political party dedicates itself to a 30 percent quota for female candidates, this looks very good on paper. But in reality, two questions arise: What position do these female candidates receive on the party list? Are they the foremost candidates running for office (that is ranked in high positions on the list), or are they included towards the end of the party list as an afterthought?

Even an election law stipulating a certain quota for women in parliament and reserving a certain number of seats for women can turn out to be problematic. It might appear advantageous to women at first glance due to the reservation of a (high) number of seats for women. But there are some potential pitfalls lurking beneath the surface. Since these parliamentary seats are "reserved" for women, the female candidates holding

these seats are not deemed to have really faced the rigours of political competition. As the women in these “reserved” parliamentary seats are not perceived to have faced real political competition, they are deemed to be mostly ignorant of the harsh business of politics. Consequently, female members of parliament in reserved seats are deemed to be “less skilled” at politics and not considered to be “really elected”. When the women on these seats do not form a coalition or a caucus across political parties, their voices are very weak. Thus, having a certain number of female members of parliament does not automatically translate into a strong voice for women or into high quality female representation in parliament. The oft cited necessity that female political representation should make up a “critical minority” of 30 percent has to be weighed against the qualitative mass and the women’s voices in formal political institutions.

On the balance sheet, quota systems can be effective and powerful (temporary) tools. However, the respective regulations have to be chosen carefully so as to give a meaningful voice to women in parliament. Since the issue is well known and has been researched by feminists and other colleagues within gender studies and social science, the development of quota regulations all over the world is now monitored. The best and most informative data base and encyclopaedia for parliamentary quota regulations is the Swedish website, [quotaproject.org](http://quotaproject.org), a collaborative effort of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Stockholm University.

### **Alliances between top and bottom**

So as to reinforce the importance of women’s rights, the women’s movement on the ground (in the form of non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations such as KAGIDER etc) and women’s representatives in formal politics (parliament, senate, cabinet etc) have to unite or engage each other in debate. Without support on the ground, women in formal politics often lack influence in politics. This is most evident in cases where a female head of state leads to little or no trickle down effect vis-à-vis the participation and empowerment of women in the country. Also, female heads of state and government officials mostly come from elite families and have a high social standing regardless of their gender. Fleschenberg & Derichs (2008) have researched this phenomenon extensively and published a handbook of top female politicians worldwide. A globally concomitant feature of female leaders – exceptions notwithstand-

ing – is their high social status before they entered the top level of politics. Regional patterns such as strong dynastic leaders in South and Southeast Asia were also discerned. The MENA region, however, has yet to produce female heads of state or government. If women were to climb the top of the political ladder in an Arab country, they would need an effective support system within the wider society and among the female citizenry so as to maintain their position and stay in power. Therefore, the women's movement of a country is a strong player and serves to set the pace for the social acceptance of ideas of gender equity and women's rights. As Anne Marie Goertz and Shireen Hassim point out:

The place and power of the gender equity lobby in civil society, its power to mobilize resources and public concern to support its demands, its power to challenge gender-biased conceptions of women's needs, roles, and rights – in other words, the strength and autonomy of the women's movement – will be influenced by the general political and cultural environment for associational activity. (Goertz and Hassim 2003, 39)

In other words, the push for a full implementation of women's rights will not likely happen unless women in formal politics are supported by the women's movement of that country.

### **After transition is before transition ...**

As may be seen in numerous cases around the world, women are empirically proven to be very active in demonstrations, in the logistics and in the organization of reform movements during periods of transition. They are a very important component of the protest movement. However, women often lose out to men when it comes to the implementation of a new political order and the distribution of positions of power.

Women stay active after transitions, but more often than not, they do so in informal politics rather than in formal political institutions. Opportunities for engagements arise in the shape of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or welfare organizations. Although women's involvement in these organizations is seen as "unpolitical", their contribution to the wellbeing of society has ultimately strong political implications. A welfare state, for instance, cannot function without caring for the weaker members of society. To demonstrate its commitment to looking after the less fortunate in society, a welfare state needs policies attending to the concept of care. Regardless of the fact that many forms of social engagement are not rec-

ognised as political activity, women continue to immerse themselves in social issues through informal channels like NGOs and welfare organizations. As a result, the official decision-making positions are dominated by men, and women's voices in formal political institutions diminish. In some cases, radical voices and parties gain momentum so much so that they silence organizations and individuals fighting for gender equality and women's rights. In her seminal study on women and transition, Georgina Waylen (2008) analysed the roles women played during transition periods and examined the impact of transition on gender relations. Her assessment is not very optimistic:

Although women's movements were not prominent actors in all transitions, in a significant number of cases, women organized, as women did play an important part in the activities that helped to bring an end to non-democratic rule. And many women activists were keen to ensure that women's claims were taken seriously in the post-transition phase. Yet disillusionment has frequently resulted. In a number of instances, it was felt that the promise of earlier phases was not fulfilled. (Waylen 2008, 1)

Waylen (2008, 2) traces the reasons for the scarcity of women in formal political institutions in the post-transition phase to the pathways of gendering institutions and politics, and to the nature of the non-democratic regime before transition.

The findings about the relegation of women to the informal arena of political activism after transition are empirically rich. The thoughts I have put forward here are not exhaustive and cannot claim validity in a scientific sense. However, as they are not drawn from exceptional cases, they might help us to further consider the other things that could be done to brighten the future of women in the Arab world as well as preserve their rights and their equal status.

### **Summarizing remarks**

The politics and polities in Arab states have borne witness to revolutionary change, for dictators have been toppled, people are still struggling with day-to-day life, and threats of civil war loom. Even though there is ample evidence to suggest that comparisons may be drawn from similar cases, the specific context of each state and society has to be taken into account. Thus, while the MENA region is not the only region in the world to experience revolutionary and transitional phases, any prediction as to the future situation of the Arab states is a risky speculation. I have tried to reflect on

some aspects relating to women's political participation which might merit a closer look in the context of the Arab Spring and its future development. I am convinced that cultural and religious features of a society exert a particular influence in the future political development of the Arab Spring countries. The same goes for entrenched beliefs and traditions shaping the values of a society or certain communities within society. I would not, however, stretch this argument to the extreme and ignore the empirical evidence provided by numerous cases of political transition around the world. Rather than placing cultural and religious factors at the centre of my analysis, I posit that simple technical tools such as quota systems can equally strengthen women's participation. Moreover, the findings of scholarly work referring to the importance of vertical alliances, women's movements and the gap between women's participation and representation in pre- and post-transition phases seem plausible to me. I would support their discussion and reflection in the search for tools increasing and strengthening women's political participation in the context of the Arab Spring.

## References

*Derichs, Claudia. 2006. Snapshots: Women's Struggle for Change in Post-Suharto Indonesia. Panorama 2, 2006: 9-18. Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.*

*Fleschenberg, Andrea, and Derichs, Claudia. 2008. Handbuch Spitzenpolitikerinnen [Handbook: Female Top Politicians]. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.*

*Goertz, Anne Marie, and Hassim, Shireen, eds. 2003. No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making. London and New York: Zed Books.*

*Waylen, Georgina. 2008. Engendering Transition: Women's Mobilization, Institutions, and Gender Outcomes. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*

*Quota Project. Global Database of Quotas for Women. <http://www.quotaproject.org> (accessed February 22, 2012).*



# JASMINREVOLUTION AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TUNISIA IN THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY ERA

*Khadija Arfaoui*

On Saturday Dec 17, 2011, Tunisia celebrated the one year anniversary of the Arab Spring which had started in Sidi Bouzid, a small town in the centre of the country. The immolation of 26 year old Bouazizi, that fuelled the event, ousted 3 dictators. The winners in this event, however, were not those who had instigated it, mainly youths and democrats against dictatorship, corruption and injustice; but Islamists who were totally absent from the social landscape then. Surprisingly, they are all described as "moderate Islamists" and the term "moderate" seems to be highly applicable when compared with the aggressiveness of Salafist groups urging for the introduction of Shari'a Law in the new constitution.

For over half a century, Tunisia lived under a dictatorial regime with a single powerful political party. The other parties, allowed in-between, had no power, being restricted in their movements and actions and only served to make the world believe that Tunisia was indeed democratic, as daily reported by Ben Ali's media.

But on January 14, Tunisia went through a state of revolt. It was a grassroots movement launched in the underprivileged regions of Western Tunisia by educated, qualified youths un-



able to find work in the system set up by Ben Ali. They all called for the fall of the regime, but they did not believe it would happen. The slogan is still heard today. Two days ago, I was amused to hear a ten-year boy chant it (al shaab yurid sukut al nidham). Except for this slogan, the Revolution had no leader, no name, but never, except during the country's independence from French colonial rule, had the Tunisian people felt so united. It was the intensity of this bond that ousted their dictator.

The revolt had started from a strictly social origin. Indeed, Mohamed Bouazizi had immolated himself out of despair for not even being able to sell fruit and vegetables to provide for his family. The revolt then became political with people surging against the unequal distribution of revenues of development, and denouncing corruption and nepotism. This non-violent revolution launched a deep democratic movement with a domino effect both in the Arab world and the whole at large. The United for Global Change movement that called for a better fabric of life and protested against the power of the banks materialized on October 15 in several important world capitals: from Wall Street in New York, to Spain, Italy, etc. Indeed, many people who had never taken part in marches were on the streets worldwide, demanding drastic changes (Rezvanpour 2011). Like their counterparts in Libya, Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, Tunisian women were present everywhere in that which was later known as the Jasmine Revolution.

"Just look at how Tunisian women stood side-by-side with Tunisian men... They came out to the streets to protest in headscarves. They came out in miniskirts. It doesn't matter. They were there," said lawyer Bilal Larbi to reporter Eleanor Beardsley (2011).

### **Women's place in the new democratic state**

Tunisian women are pioneers in terms of women's rights, having been granted significant rights on a tray as some like to say (Arfaoui), since the independence of their country from colonial rule in 1956. The autonomous feminist movement that had emerged in the 1970s consolidated into two organizations, the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD). In 1989, the Tunisian feminist movement increasingly dissociated itself from the State endorsed feminism of the National Union of Tunisian

Women (UNFT),<sup>1</sup> and later, the Ministry of Women, children and Family Affairs.<sup>2</sup> Working in tough conditions under Ben Ali's dictatorial regime, being constantly spied upon, and having no access to the media, prevented feminists from organizing meetings in public places and from creating branches in other regions. Although they were sometimes physically harassed and victims of slander by state media, they continued to work towards raising women's awareness of their rights, be they in the home or in the workplace. Prior to the Arab Spring that suddenly changed the landscape of the country, the autonomous feminist movement had been working on several issues.

The Code of Personal Status (1956) had given women significant rights through the abolition of repudiation and polygamy, the right to judicial divorce, equality in terms of education and work outside the home. Women had also been encouraged to get rid of the veil, which they did. As a result, sefsaris gradually disappeared from the Tunisian landscape when women of all age groups adopted the Western way of dressing and chose to go unveiled. Interestingly, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, women of all age groups got rid of their veils, as seen in a New York Herald Tribune article in 1965 titled, "From Veil to Bikini in Tunisia."

"History shows that countries are more prosperous and more peaceful when women are empowered," President Obama stated in his speech of May 19, 2011, adding that the Arab world must "insist that universal rights apply to women as well as men . . . by standing up for the right of women to have their voices heard, and to run for office." That had been Habib Bourguiba's philosophy too, for he believed there could be no development without the emancipation of women. Accordingly, he spared no effort to grant women as many facilities as he could, being prevented from going further ahead by religious scholars who would not accept anything contrary to the Qur'an.

Habib Bourguiba, President of the Republic of Tunisia (1956-1987) and the liberator of the country, promulgated the revolutionary Code of Personal Status with the support of enlightened religious scholars such as Mohamed

<sup>1</sup> UNFT is the French acronym for the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development and Tunisian Association of Democratic Women.

<sup>2</sup> In August 1993, the State Secretariat for Women and Family (formed in 1992) became a government ministry. Its mission was to develop government policy in the field of women and the family, and to coordinate the action of the different parties working for women's and family affairs. In September 2002, it was renamed the Ministry of Women, Family and Children's Affairs.

Fadhel Ben Achour. Had Bourguiba not done so, had he waited first for the formation of the government and the launching of this young republic, it is very likely the Code of Personal Status (CPS) would not have been promulgated and the status of Tunisian women would have very different today.

To institute the changes he had in mind, Bourguiba used the Qur'an. For example, to justify the end of polygamy, Bourguiba said the Qur'an stated a man could have up to four wives provided he treated them equally. As it is impossible to treat all four wives equally, a man should therefore only have one wife. Bourguiba could promote such views then, Charfi argues, because the Islamists (who are in the forefront everywhere now) did not exist in the 1950s and the body of Ulemas had been weakened because of their lenient stand towards colonialism (Charfi 2000, 137).

Although Habib Bourguiba had been an enlightened president, he was also a dictator. Ben Ali, the second President of Tunisia, most certainly followed Bourguiba's example. Bourguiba though, was not interested in material things. In fact, he owned nothing at his death.

The Jasmine Revolution put an end to Ben Ali's dictatorship. With the end of the dictatorship, all exiled political dissidents of the former regime as well as Islamists could return to Tunisia, and those in jail were freed. Meanwhile, dozens of political parties and organizations formed. Against this backdrop came the unexpected sudden aggressiveness of bearded or beardless men armed with cudgels, hitting women and brutally ordering them to go home and take care of their kitchens. In the meantime, the increasing number of Muhajabat (women wearing a hijab) had become a cause of concern. This eventually escalated to a growing number of younger women choosing to wear the niqab, and students asking for a mosque in their university as well as for separate classes for boys and girls, and for female teachers to teach girls and male teachers to teach boys. Others asked for separate buses and beaches for men and women. Recently at a secondary school, two girls stood up to go out during a class. When the teacher asked where they were going, they answered they were going out to pray. No such thing had ever happened before in the country, and the teacher refused to let them go. This example shows the working of the adage, "if you someone an inch, they will want to take a yard." More importantly, this example also highlights the main concern surrounding the increased presence of Islamism in the country.

Obviously, these Islamists want Tunisia to formally institute Shari'a Law, which is absolutely against feminist aspirations to equality.

Tunisian activists have been relying on Ijtihad (interpretation of the Qur'an) to change that which thwarted their rights and claims to equality. They based their claims on the analyses made by open-minded men of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, such as Mohamed Kabadou, Kheireddine Tounsi, Mohamed Snoussi, Ahmed Ibn Abi Dhiyf, Abdelaziz Thaalbi,<sup>3</sup> Tahar Al Haddad (1899-1935), and Habib Bourguiba, who advocated women's rights. In 2011, they held a key position in terms of women's rights in the Arab world, and had just a few obstacles they had yet to overcome (like the reservations made by Tunisia on the CEDAW and that were presumably lifted on August 16, 2011).

The revolutionary state prevailing in Tunisia did not meet their expectations, as evinced by the poor representation of women in key positions. It is ironic that while a Tunisian woman's place in society remains the most enviable of the Arab world, the transition period post-Jasmine Revolution was dominated by men. Out of the 23 members of the provisional transitional government led by Beji Caid Essebsi, only two ministers were women. Eventually, only one remained, Dr. Lilia Labidi, at the head of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Women also played a minimal role in party leadership. Among the 51 party leaders, there is only one woman, Maya Jribi, a biologist and leader of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP).

At a press conference given on April 26, 2011, Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi made the reassuring statement that there would be parity in the elections lists:

"... equality between man and woman, and woman and man (in alternation), is a key gain and banishes the so far patent discriminations in a fallacious official discourse on equality between the sexes." (Khalsi, April 2011)

---

<sup>3</sup> In 1905, Thaalbi wrote *The Liberal spirit of the Qur'an, claiming education for women and the eradication of the veil that Tunisian women used to wear then.*

Curiously, even Ennahdha<sup>4</sup> (a political party strongly opposed to the CPS in the 1980s and openly declaring that women's place was at home) announced it was in favour of the principle of parity, the CPS and more women's rights. However, Ennahdha has yet to clarify what it means by "more" women's rights.

The parity decree should have made for equal representation of males and females in the Constituent Assembly. It was not the case though, as only 49 women were elected, representing 24% of the 217 members elected on October 23. 42 of these women belonged to Ennahdha (Leaders 2011). Of course, the majority of these women are Islamists. If Souad Abderahim (Islamist) was pleased with the results, Saida Rached (ATFD) said the results had been anticipated: "It is a great achievement but it is not enough... If it were not for the Principle of Equal Share, women would not have gained this percentage. Not all parties obeyed the principle" (Ajmi 2011). It is hoped though that these women will defend women's rights.

Many fear the growing influence of the Islamists. "It's hard for women right now. Every day, I'm afraid the Islamists will impose wearing the veil," sighs Maha Issaoui. On April 1, the Tunisian government allowed the veil on ID pictures; and for the first time, under the pressure of minority Salafist groups, women wearing the niqab came out in Tunis' medina.

The Women's Manifesto signed by the Tunisian Women's Association for Research and Development, the Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité and the women's chapter of the Tunisian Human Rights League was issued in response to these happenings, out of concern that they "... are threatening women's rights because of religious or cultural factors." In other words, Tunisian women have to fight to keep the rights they already have before fighting for new ones.

Very few women were appointed in decision making positions. This has been a source of concern to women activists, especially since they deserve

<sup>4</sup> *Ennahdha used to be affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. It was founded in 1861 by Abdelfattah Mourou, who ran in an independent list in the recent elections (Tariq Essalama) and, curiously, did not get any seat. Rached Ghannouchi joined the movement ten years later and took the reins to its leadership in the mid-1970s. It then became Ennahdha (Renaissance) in 1989, two years after Ben Ali became the second president of Tunisia. The movement was banned by Ben Ali in the 1989 elections that had given it one fifth of the vote. Around thirty thousand of its members were jailed. Several were tortured, while others had to live in exile. The movement keeps stating that it is a moderate Islamic party desirous of preserving Tunisia's identity as an Arab and Muslim nation, presenting a model close to the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP). Consequently, in this election, it won overwhelmingly in all districts but one, gaining 90 seats, including half the seats abroad. (Al-Amin 2011)*

a 50% representation in the different spheres throughout the country. Tunisia now has a new government, one that has been elected democratically even though many are not pleased with the results. Despite its promises of respecting women's rights and the CPS, the strong religious impact of the new government is a source of serious concern among the secular population. Only 4 women have been appointed in the government out of a total of 51 members. Indeed, Tunisia is a long way away from the early sixties when its women traded their veils for bikinis!

Violence committed by students and members of the public unto female and male professors has also been a source of concern. As a matter of fact, Manouba University of Arts and Letters has been closed for almost one month now because of Salafists bearded men and women in burkas occupying the grounds, vowing not to leave until burkas, separate classes for boys and girls and so on are imposed in the university.

### **Threats to the construction of a new democratic Tunisia.**

The country had thus experienced nothing but censorship for the past 60 years. There were acts of violence made by Salafists against a cinema theatre that was going to show a film made by Tunisian female film maker, Nadia El Fani, initially titled "Neither Allah nor Master" and consequently changed to "A secular country, Inch'Allah" (Gozlan 2011). Likewise, similar acts of hostility were levelled at the headquarters of Nessma TV as well as the home of its director, Nabil Karoui, for broadcasting "Persepolis," an Iranian film made by Marjane Satrapi (Gozlan 2011).

The Democratic forces actively pushing for democracy and gender equality knew that terms like *laïcité* or secularism, equal inheritance for women and men, would meet resistance. But they certainly did not expect to see women being harassed in the streets for not wearing a headscarf, ordered to wear the niqab, and ordered to stay home in their kitchen. Indeed, women were the first to be attacked, followed by people in the arts and cultural scene.

### **First target: Women**

Of course, such actions give way to panic. In 1989, Souhayr Belhassen had expressed early fears in "Are Tunisian women afraid of Islamism?" Indeed, Souhayr Belhassen could see that Tunisian men disliked the emancipation of women in the country because it meant women would be clearly visible

in every sector of public life. Belhassen reported the electoral campaign taking place between 15 March and 1 April 1989 was an indicator:

...to measure the significance taken by women in the debate that is agitating Tunisia today. A debate between two society projects, two visions of the world: a modernist, secular one, aspiring to democracy and in any case, attached to freedom, men's freedom as well as women's; the other one that refers to Islam as well as to religion, civilization, culture and way of living. (Belhassen 1989, 37)

While Tunisian women were perceived as "modern and free" in 1989 (thirty years after the promulgation of the CPS), the appearance of the headscarf at the general election that year countered that image. Belhassen interprets the appearance of the headscarf in the 1989 general election as a public rejection "not only of the attributes of modernity imported from abroad but also from the values that are assigned to it" (Belhassen 1989, 38). For most of these headscarf-clad women, Islam represented "a refuge and a revolt against westernization, against the 'degradation' of morals" (Belhassen 1989, 41). When they don the hijab, Women are free because they are no longer objectified by the scrutinizing and lustful gazes of some men (Belhassen 1989, 41-42). A blogger named Ahmed makes the same argument on April 27, 2011 on his Facebook account: "Islam should not be reduced to a detail of Islam, because there are things that are more important... But the hijab is also important and you must know that the hijab is not a scarf... the hijab is a loose uniform that does not show the details of the body ...and that it also hides the entire body except the face and hands... it's very easy to wear, and it makes a woman more beautiful and more respectable."

### **Second target: Culture and Arts**

Exhibitions, theatre performances, cinematic screenings were the second target of ultra-Islamists. Attacks against art first appeared at Ras Jedir (Libya-Tunisia frontier) when Islamists refused to allow a group of artists to perform for the entertainment of the refugees. Adel Latrech (2012) reports that these Salafists are strongly against any form of art, be it cultural or creative, because they deemed such expressions to be prohibited by Islam. The head of this group of Salafists, Emir El Moominin, refused to see the artists or talk to them. When pressed for explanations, he finally agreed to see a female artist who had to cover her entire body under a djellaba. Despite his talk with the female artist, he still refused to

countenance any artistic performances. In Tunis, Abdelghani Ben Tara, a comedian and owner of a cultural space in the Medina, was attacked by a group of Salafists wielding swords who wanted the space converted into a mosque. These same people rushed into El Teatro, (a theatre) to prevent Gilbert Naccache, a Tunisian politician and writer, from speaking because he was not Muslim. Film-producer Nouri Bouzid also came under Salafist attacks because his movie, "Making Of", highlighted how the work of Salafists could transform young men into terrorists and suicide bombers. Similarly, Nadia El Fani met resistance and violence when she tried to screen her film, "Neither God nor Master".<sup>5</sup>

Violence also followed the screening of the Iranian film "Persepolis" on Nessma TV, for the owner of the television station had his house burned down. Although the violence shocked the democrats in the country, it won the support of the conservatives who believed that the representation of God in a human image was a sin. There is no doubt that the resurgence of Islam in the country has led to this violence and irreverence for the freedom of expression. These acts of hostilities culminated in a huge march denouncing the Salafists' threat to the Tunisian people's freedom of expression. One slogan used by protesters in the march was, "Before the Revolution, everything was forbidden; after the Revolution, everything is 'haram'."<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Tunisia has led the way in the Arab Spring. It is hoped that it will continue to do so by inspiring the other Arab countries in issues of gender equality (Hudson 2011) and democracy. Should Tunisia manage to inspire other Arab countries to relook their gender issues and their approach to the democratization process, the term "Arab Spring" will maintain its positive connotation.

In the current socio-political turmoil in Tunisia where hardline Islamists threaten the secular population, moderate Muslims, women and artists on grounds that women should be veiled and stay at home, and art is haram and against the precepts of Islam, many observers have suggested Tunisia follow the example of Turkey. This is because Turkey, though officially

<sup>5</sup> A group of Salafists stormed a showing of the film, "Ni Allah Ni Maitre" (Neither Allah Nor Master), at the Africa cinema hall in Tunis on June 26. Tear gas was used to disperse the cinema goers at the theatre, and chants of "Tunisia is an Islamic state" were heard by fleeing bystanders. El Fani later changed the name of the film to "Laicite Inch' Allah" (Secularism, If Allah Wishes).

<sup>6</sup> Haram means sinful in Arabic



secular with a clear separation between religion and politics, still has an Islamist government. In order to determine the merits of this suggestion, Mohamed Charfi conducted a comparative study of Turkey and Tunisia as well as the historic circumstances leading Kemal Ataturk and Bourguiba to adopt different constitutions in their respective countries. Ataturk, he stated, led the liberation war against foreign invaders and the caliphs. He continued the work of his predecessors (i.e. the reformers in the second half of the 19th century and the Young Turks in the early 20th century) by fighting against the religious regime imposed by the Caliphate. With the abolishment of the Caliphate, Ataturk put an end to religious power in Turkey and therefore secularized the country. In Tunisia, the struggle had been against France as a colonial power and religion (i.e. Islam) was used as a means of achieving freedom from colonization. In other words, Tunisia's fight for independence from the French "... was not a revolution for freedom against a religious power" (Charfi 2000, 138).

To this difference between the Turkish and Tunisian struggle for independence, Charfi adds:

One must not impose a right that is against a society's religious beliefs, but one can reform a law to give it a different meaning if sufficient mechanisms are in place ... The Tunisian people accepted the new code because it was in line with Islam and offered a better understanding of Islam. (Charfi 2000, 138)

Before elections took place, Tunisian historian and Islamic scholar Mohamed Talbi stated that Muslims lived without Shari'a for two centuries. The Medina Constitution, he explains, had been negotiated by the Prophet in the first year of Hejira "between all the social components of the State-City, polytheists, Jews and Muslims. Nowhere, in its 47 articles, does the question of a state religion arise. It was a secular Constitution" (Talbi 2011). However, this view is only propounded by modernist thinkers, and hard Islamists remain blind to it.

Tunisia has a rich heritage and many people in the country are working to preserve it. Although there are people opposed to the CPS, it remains an accepted fact throughout the country, contributing to the positive image of Tunisia. Its inalienability has to be imposed and confirmed in the National Pact, an agreement committed to preserving and defending the rights that the Tunisian people have gained since the revolution of January 14, 2011.

This pact, compiled by Tunisian experts, had 6643 signatories as of April 18, 2011.

Though Tunisian women have enjoyed the most enlightened CPS in the Arab World for over 50 years, it is feared their rights might be curtailed by the religious groups currently dominating the country's political landscape. Tunisia's achievement is historic. Indeed, few Tunisian watchers could have imagined the change wrought in the country. Just as Tunisians led the way forward in the Arab Spring, they hope to do the same for women's rights and female political participation in the region. True and sustainable democracy cannot be built on a foundation of stark inequality between men and women. Owing to the parity decree adopted by all the lists of candidates running for seats in the Constituent Assembly, 49 out of the 217 elected assemblypersons were women. Although 49 elected assemblywomen is a step forward for female political participation in Tunisia, 42 of these 49 women belong to Ennahdha, an Islamic political party. This is a source of alarm because progressive activist women are underrepresented.

While Tunisians expected a new form of democracy following the revolution of January 2011, they had not anticipated an Islamist one. A large number of Tunisian women from various women's organizations attended a meeting organized by ATFD to discuss the exacerbation of an alarming situation, namely, the threats by bearded men against unveiled female university students and university lecturers. Ghannouchi, they claimed, intended to substitute the phrase "abandoned children" for the word "bastards". Unsurprisingly, this shocked many feminists. The Tunisian people seek a new social, economic and political order, one that will allow their voices to be heard. Even though Tunisia has always been open to all other cultures and people, its people wish for fair trade with the world at large, the continued flourishing of their ancient culture, and to prosper without forcibly submitting to any particular model foreign to them (Guella 2011). But they have other concerns now.

It was a shock to learn Libya had adopted Shari'a Law and permitted polygamy. As a result, Tunisian women no longer feel secure. This is more so given the double meaning behind Ennahdha's electoral proposals where Ghannouchi claimed Shari'a Law was enshrined in Tunisia's legal code and that he would rather see the implementation of a mild form of Shari'a Law

than the “neo-laicism” promoted by Turkey’s Prime Minister. Ghannouchi also added:

What is meant by secularism is different between the Arab world and Turkey. In the Arab world, secularism has been linked in recent decades to dictatorship and with oppression, whereas secularism in Turkey is linked to democracy and freedom of choice. (Yezdani 2011)

Feminists and democrats are working very hard to ensure the separation of religion and politics in the face of Ennahdha’s opposition. But they appear to be fighting a losing battle because of the drastic changes in Tunisia’s socio-political situation. In spite of growing pessimism, they will not stop their efforts to preserve the values of the revolution for dignity, equality and justice.

While the bewildered Tunisians are celebrating their freedom, they still feel that they have first to protect their gains (enshrined in the CPS), human rights, freedom of the press, and separation of power between the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The separation of religion and politics is a salient issue that is undergoing intense debate. Islamists want religion to hold more sway in the Tunisian way of life, while democrats insist that the practice of religion is a private affair and rules need not be imposed to promulgate it. Regardless as to whether Tunisia has a presidential or parliamentary government, it should only govern for the people and has to be controlled by the people. When the Tunisian people started the movement, they did not know they “could” topple the dictator. Their quest for freedom and dignity is also a quest for equality and justice. In the months to come, they will have to be vigilant so as to ensure that the values of the revolution are respected. By working towards the protection and enhancement of individual liberties, Tunisians are able to safeguard the country from the emergence of another dictatorship.

## References

Ajmi, Sana. 2011. *Women’s Status in the Constituent Assembly*. *TunisiaLive.net*, October 28, <http://tunisia-live.net/2011/10/28/women-status-in-the-constituent-assembly/> (accessed May 2, 2012).

Al-Amin, Esam. 2011. *Flowering of the Arab Spring: “Understanding Tunisia’s Elections Results.”* *Counterpunch*, October 28-30, Week-

end edition, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/10/28/understanding-tunisia%E2%80%99s-elections-results/> (accessed May 2, 2012).

Beardsley, Eleanor. 2011. *In Tunisia, women play equal role in revolution*. National Public Radio (NPR), January 27, <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/27/133248219/in-tunisia-women-play-equal-role-in-revolution?ps=cprs> (accessed May 2, 2012).

Ben Aballah, Jalal. 2011. *La plume et le dictateur ou la revanche de Bourguiba*. *Le Monde*, March 29, Idées, [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/03/29/la-plume-et-le-dictateur-ou-la-revanche-de-bourguiba\\_1499521\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/03/29/la-plume-et-le-dictateur-ou-la-revanche-de-bourguiba_1499521_3232.html) (accessed May 18, 2012).

Belhassen, Souhayr. 1989. *L'islamisme fait-il peur aux Tunisiennes?* *Jeune Afrique Plus 2*: 34-45, September-October.

Bender, Larissa. 2007. *Quelling the current of terrorism: An interview with Nouri Bouzid*. *Common Ground News Service*, July 24, 2007, <http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=21387&lan=en&sid=1&sp=0> (accessed May 2, 2012).

Ben Romdhane, Hmida. 2011. *Pierre inaugurale?* *La Presse de Tunisie*, May 15, <http://www.lapresse.tn/15052011/29168/pierre-inaugurale.html> (accessed May 18, 2012).

Charfi, Mohamed. 2000. *Islam et liberté: le malentendu historique [Islam and Liberty: The Historical Misunderstanding]*. Algiers: Casbah Editions.

Gozlan, Martine. 2011. *Nadia El Fani, "Un pays laïc: Inch'Allah"*. *Marianne*, October 15-21: 59-60

Guella, Hedi. 2011. *Lettre ouverte à Hillary Clinton*. *La Presse de Tunisie*, March 17: 10, <http://www.lapresse.tn/17032011/24857/lettre-ouverte-a-hillary-clinton.html> (accessed May 18, 2012).

Hudson, Valerie M. 2011. *Egypt, Tunisia Offer Stark Contrast for Women in Arab Spring*. *World Politics Review*, May 20, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/8914/egypt-tunisia-offer-stark-contrast-for-women-in-arab-spring> (accessed May 2, 2012).

*Khalsi, Raouf. 2011. Je ne suis pas pour une liquidation politique sommaire... Le Temps, April 27, <http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-55413-27042011.html> (accessed May 18, 2012).*

*Larbi, Kaouther. 2011. Gender parity at the ballot box, another Tunisian revolution. AFP, April 20, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5icD3yMhhqD20YheyK7AUEYc8z\\_aQ?docId=CNG.2efde55ac14a0e0eb95a75523290ec86.301](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5icD3yMhhqD20YheyK7AUEYc8z_aQ?docId=CNG.2efde55ac14a0e0eb95a75523290ec86.301) (accessed May 2, 2012)*

*Latrech, Adel. 2011. Tunisie: Les obscurantistes multiplient les exactions - Quand la culture est prise en otage. La Presse de Tunisie, March 31, <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201103310532.html> (accessed May 18, 2012).*

*Le Pacte Tunisien. Pacte des compétences Tunisiennes engagées, <http://pactetunisien.org/> (accessed May 18, 2012).*

*Mandraud, Isabelle. 2011. Arab Spring: The Female Factor. Le Monde, May 3, <http://www.worldcrunch.com/arab-spring-female-factor/2999> (accessed May 18, 2012).*

*Messaoudi, Abdelaziz. 2011. L'union sacrée du peuple pour défendre la patrie et la révolution! Attariq Al Jadid 232: 1, May 21-27.*

*Newton, Alastair. 2011. MENA: Uncertainties Multiply. Nomura.com, April 1, Issues Which Keep Me Awake At Night interim update. <http://www.thegulfintelligence.com/Docs.Viewer/b73e5228-f105-475b-8256-55ce-ae806a2d/default.aspx> (accessed May 19, 2012).*

*49 femmes élues à l'assemblée constituante: 24% des 217 sièges. 2011. Leaders, October 28, <http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/49-femmes-elues-constituante-24-des-217-sièges?id=6785> (accessed May 18, 2012)*

*Rached Ghannouchi, président du mouvement Ennahdha: Le Programme du parti est fondé sur la liberté de penser, de croyance et d'expression. 2011. La Presse de Tunisie, October 29, <http://www.lapresse.tn/29102011/39457/le-programme-du-parti-est-fonde-sur-la-liberte-de-pensee-de-croyance-et-dexpression.html> (accessed May 18, 2012).*

*Rezvanpour, Raphaël. 2011. Historique! 85 pays et 981 villes entrent dans la révolte ce samedi. Actualutte, October 14, <http://www.wikistrike.com/article-historique-85-pays-et-981-villes-entrent-dans-la-revolte-ce-samedi-86578223.html> (accessed May 2, 2012).*

Talbi, Mohamed. 2011. *Tunisie: la première laïcité musulmane?* *Jeune Afrique* 2648: 35, October 9-15, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2648p035.xml0/tunisie-election-musulman-islam-tunisie-la-premiere-laicite-musulmane.html> (accessed May 18, 2012).

*Tunisia to seek \$25 billion support at G8 summit.* 2011. *Magharebia*, May 22, [http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/newsbriefs/general/2011/05/22/newsbrief-04](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/newsbriefs/general/2011/05/22/newsbrief-04) (accessed May 2, 2012).

*Un plan économique pour soutenir la transition démocratique en Tunisie.* 2011. *Le Monde*, 18 May, [http://www.iza.org/press\\_files/20110518LeMonde.pdf](http://www.iza.org/press_files/20110518LeMonde.pdf) (accessed May 18, 2012).

Yezdani, Ipek. 2011. *Tunisian Islamist in favor of mild Shariah.* *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 7, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=tunisian-islamist-in-favor-of-mild-shariah-2011-10-07> (accessed May 2, 2012)



# WOMEN'S POLITICAL PROTESTS IN THE "ARAB SPRING"

*Viola Raheb/Ulrike Bechmann*

The Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded for more than 110 years and, since it was first bestowed in 1901, the prize has been given to a total of 98 people and 20 organizations, including 15 women. The first woman to receive the prize was the Austrian pacifist Bertha von Suttner in 1905, who in 1891 founded the Austrian Society of the Friends of Peace over which she presided, and who established the German Peace Society in 1892. Von Suttner also attended the International Women's Conference in 1904, as well as subsequent peace conferences, and engaged internationally in opposition to militarism, in support of women's rights, and for entente cordiale.

The spring of 2011 was marked by protests in several Arab countries which ultimately led to the collapse of a number of dictators. Unexpectedly in the fall of 2011, a group of women who were committed to democracy and opposed to violence moved to the centre of global attention. The Norwegian Committee for the Nobel Peace Prize nominated three women who were advocates for peace in their crisis-ridden countries. One of them was the Yemeni journalist Tawakkul Karman, who had for years supported the protests in Yemen in favour of greater democracy and justice but had only be-



come more widely known outside the borders of Arab countries since the spring of 2011. The other two women who received the Nobel Peace Prize were from Liberia which like Yemen is another crisis-ridden country. Here, in the midst of a civil war, Leymah Roberta Gbowee established a peace process through prolonged protest action in conjunction with many other Christian and Muslim women from Liberia.<sup>7</sup> The women also accompanied the elections in Liberia in which Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was established as the first African women to be elected as president, and among the many important issues she is now pursuing are the consolidation of Liberia and the protection of women.

In another respect, however, these three women are simply representatives of the countless women who are committed to peace and whose action continues to encourage women everywhere. The award for Tawwakul Karman gave strength to Arab women in their ongoing demands for more democracy and equal rights. It is important to understand that all peace initiatives combine two dimensions: they are a commitment to something, and a protest against prevailing conditions; be they political, social, economic or cultural. The protests of the "Arab Spring" are, therefore, not only the demand for formal democracy but also the rejection of existing conditions, such that people no longer have to live in poverty, have the chance to receive a decent education, and can actively participate in shaping their societies. In short, the protests represent the struggle for a multitude of structural changes. The adequate participation of women in these developments and decision-making processes is a sign of success on the way to greater peace in the broadest sense. Many women's organizations around the world work according to this political understanding.

In 2005 a list nominating 1,000 women for the Nobel Peace Prize was submitted by activists in order to draw attention to women from around the world who are brave, creative and innovative every day, at different levels and through various methods, and who are committed to peace, social justice and a secure future. What is interesting is that it was not a single woman who was nominated but 1000 women, thus highlighting the collective character of this initiative and of women's struggles more generally. While political protest and a commitment to peace by women is not new, it is an exception that such commitment becomes known outside of

---

<sup>7</sup> The film "Pray the devil back to hell" (Fork Films, 2008) clearly demonstrates the struggle of women. All the information about the uprising can be found on the website: <http://praythediavil-backtohell.com>

the local context. The great majority of the women who have fought and continue to fight for civil society and political change, remain anonymous and receive little public attention. This raises questions about the nature and forms of expression women adopt to express their protest and why they receive such little public attention.

One fundamental characteristic of these women's protests is their specific perspective on the need for social change, which often differs radically from the status quo and thus informs the kind of peace which women envisage. Frequently, they focus not on the replacement of rule, but to fundamentally change the nature of the rule, and such changes do not come about via a political contract but by long-term structural changes on many levels. The commitment to peace and the collective nature of these women's movements testifies to the fact that agendas for social and political change do not need "supermen" but, rather, such change requires committed people in everyday life. It is precisely for this reason that peace cannot be brought about by just one person or the commission of a singular action, but can only be achieved through a tireless and interconnected effort. Furthermore, any such collective perspective contains within itself a global dimension, meaning that the action and commitment of women in their respective everyday contexts is not only a local initiative but always contains within itself a global dimension: what is achieved for peace in one place has an influence on world peace, and vice versa.

When comparing Bertha von Suttner with the women honoured by a Nobel Prize in the present context, it seems that over this period of more than 100 years women have been confronted with the same choices. What unites them is their energetic and personal commitment to securing peace and justice, their opposition to poverty, and their refusal to resign themselves to the injustice and violence in their respective countries. Like Bertha von Suttner, who decided on a stance of non-violent resistance to war in a world where the dominant political forces were deliberately based on the military option, the other female Nobel Prize laureates made a similar commitment. These women knew, and know, that their dedication to peace often comes with a high personal price and not infrequently it means to place themselves in mortal danger.

### **Women and their Protests in the "Arab Spring"**

For anyone who has followed the reports of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, the

images of the large demonstrations are likely to remain in the memory. Many people of all ages took to the streets in protest against the respective dictatorial governments which in many cases had held office for more than 30 years. But the images of the demonstrations did not always clearly show the significant contribution made by women in the overthrow of the respective dictators: they were a crucial part of the movement of the so-called "Arab Spring" and remain so today. The developments in the Arab world show that women in most Arab countries no longer want to be dominated politically. Tawakkul Karman stands as an example that even in more traditional and conservative societies such as Yemen or Libya, many women overcame existing cultural barriers in order to participate in political events. While these protests began in Tunisia, they have become known as the "Arab Spring".

### **a) Women's Protests in Tunisia**

As the protest movements in Tunisia grew increasingly stronger they soon reached the attention of the media implying that the primary aim of protesters was the overthrow of President Ben Ali. Yet, many women in the country longed for broader and more profound socio-political changes in Tunisian society. Even though Tunisia had the most far-reaching women's rights among all the Arab states, women were no longer content with the mere existence of these rights but wanted to substantially expand them. In March 2011, women organized a large demonstration at the airport for the return of the previously exiled chairman of the Islamic-Nahda party, Rachid Ghanouchi, to express their unequivocal opposition to possible backsliding on women's rights. The protest banners designed by women carried slogans such as: "We don't want theocracy, we want democracy," or "Tunisian women defend the revolution". A committed group of women went so far as to use Facebook to call on women to receive Ghanoushi at the airport wearing bikinis.

These movements are not simply about public protests, however. For example, in the summer of 2011 women set about changing the electoral laws for a future Tunisian Parliament which eventually resulted in the adoption of a new law strengthening women's rights. The preparation of electoral lists now requires equal numbers of men and women, whose names must be listed alternately, and only by conforming to this rule will future electoral lists be accepted. In practice this creates a quota for women which exceeds the scope of similar initiatives in most European

countries, an outcome which was made possible only through the constant engagement of women after the fall of Ben Ali. That their protest was able to bear fruit was due in no small part to the fact the Ministry for Women in the transitional government was taken over by Prof. Dr. Lilia Labidi, for decades a committed women's rights activist, who was able to effectively feed these concerns into the political process.

During preparations for the elections many women's organizations and the transitional government itself realised that the adoption of a "gender parity" law on its own would not suffice to achieve equal participation. Therefore, several campaigns were launched by women's organisations to encourage women to exercise their right to vote, and campaigning was organised around slogans such as: "We must go". The result of the resolute commitment by women through these campaigns paid off and was demonstrated by the extremely high turnout in the Tunisia elections. Be that as it may, while a total of 49 member seats out of 217 in the constitutive assembly were won by women, numbers and percentages alone can give a potentially false picture and obscure the wider perspective, such as that 43 of the 49 women elected are members of the an-Nahda party. In this new context of the post-revolutionary era and the new political constellation, it is clear that the methodology of women's commitment in Tunisia must change. Following the November 2011 elections, the focus shifted from securing a role for women in the political process towards a substantive contribution in the formation of new basic social structures. A good example is the recently conducted debate on the status of Sharia law in Tunisia's new Constitution. It was not until the end of March 2012 that the triumphant an-Nahda party decided that it would maintain Article 1 of the Constitution, and that the Sharia would not be mentioned in the Constitution.<sup>8</sup> However, Salafist forces have appeared with increasingly radical demands and, among other actions, they blocked the work of the humanities faculty at Manouba University and demanded separate prayer rooms and the admission of women to examinations wearing Niqab (face-veil). What this suggests for women is that the struggle to secure rights which they already have and to gain further participation is only just beginning.

## **b) Women's Protests in Egypt**

Even if the political context in Egypt is fundamentally different from Tu-

---

<sup>8</sup> Gl. Schmid, Thomas, *Wo alles begann. Tunesiens demokratische Aussichten [Where it all began. Tunisia's democratic prospects]*, in: *Edition Le Monde diplomatique* 11, 2012, 29-31.

nesia, similar trends and directions in the women's protests can be recognized, such as women using blogs to call upon others to demonstrate. Importantly, many of the women involved in the protests at Tahrir Square realised from the beginning that the revolution was not just a question of overthrowing Mubarak, but rather fundamentally changing the political system. On the occasion of International Women's Day on the 8th of March 2011, only a few days after the overthrow of President Mubarak, a large demonstration was organised by women in Tahrir Square under the slogan "Million Women March". Central to the demands of the organizers was, above all, that women must be involved in the drafting of a new constitution and legislative changes which must include the question of gender equality. A real change in a democracy results from fundamental structural change and not simply a change in power, and for this reason it is the position of women in society, that for many, provides an indicator of true democracy. Unlike in Tunisia, however, the processes of change in Egypt are still in flux and the question remains open about if, and how, the military council will hand over power. There also exist other conditions in Egypt which will make it very difficult to implement similar approaches to those seen in Tunisia. One of these is the use of violence against women. For example, during the demonstrations against the military in December 2011 women turned out in large numbers only to be beaten and have the clothes ripped from their bodies. As news reports and videos brought the situation to light, the use of violence against women quickly became an issue in itself and a protest march of thousands of women and men forced an apology for the outbreaks of violence against the women demonstrators.

Meanwhile Egypt has gone through various election processes. Looking at the parliamentary elections, a total of 376 women were among the candidates for Parliament. Unlike in Tunisia, however, where a law enshrined gender equality on the party lists, in Egypt there was no such system in place which meant that many women had to run as independents with the result that they accounted for only six percent of the party lists while they represented thirty one percent of all candidates. It is therefore not surprising that there are only six women among the 100 members of Egypt's Constitutive Assembly. The frustration among active and committed women is extremely high, but they do not remain silent:

"We are furious. We participated in every part of the revolution, and then as soon as it ended we were completely isolated. The constitutional com-

mittees were all old men, so young people are also angry. But we re-established the Egyptian Women's Union and we are organizing day and night. We are demanding at least 35 percent female participation in all committees to be formed to change the constitution, at every level, as well as a secular constitution, a secular family code and total equality before the law."<sup>9</sup>

The election results in Egypt have shown, just as in Tunisia, that political Islam is a major beneficiary of this revolution. It is the overarching victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the elections which characterises the new Egyptian Parliament, representing more than forty percent of the seats, in addition, to the presence of the Salafists in the parliament as well. In the face of this, however, various women's organizations have made it clear that they will work on actively shaping future developments: "We have rediscovered our voice, our identity, and we understand that only we ourselves can win our rights and should not wait until someone gives them to us."<sup>10</sup> At the moment no one can say how women's interests can be enforced within the new context.

### **c) Women's Protests in Yemen**

Women achieved a significant contribution to political change even in a more traditional context such as Yemen, despite this having not currently prevailed. Women took part in public demonstrations against the president's regime and his system, but as early as April 2011 they called for a special demonstration against the misogynistic message of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. He had declared the joint protests by men and women to be un-Islamic and called for women to be removed from the streets—apparently women were for him not only visible but also dangerous. The demonstration was organised around the principle that the President's statement was not only an insult to women but to the entire Yemeni society. Women took this one step further, however, and in October 2011 as an act of protest they burned their veils in the middle of the capital city, Sana'a. With this symbolic act—which comes from traditional Yemeni Bedouin culture—women expressed a cry for help, and communicated two important messages: they urged the president to resign, and they asked who would protect women against criminal attacks. Following the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Yemeni journalist and lawyer Karman Tawakkul,

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Nawal El Saadawi in: *The Nation* 21.03.2012.

<sup>10</sup> Yasmine El Rashidi, Letter from Cairo, in: *Edition Le monde diplomatique* 11, 2012, 69.

the women's protest in Yemen became front page news in the international press and on television screens across the world. Tawakkul Karman is the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize at 32 and graduated from law in Sana'a where as a young woman she became involved in women's rights, democracy and justice in Yemen, long before the "Arab Spring".

For her, the unbearable conditions in Yemen—established by decades of President Saleh's regime—include the evictions of families from their land, unemployment, poverty, corruption and the lack of press freedom. She founded the organization "Journalists without Chains" and was elected as the chairwoman of the organization which has been fighting for years against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, not merely since the "Arab Spring", and organized demonstrations and became well-known with Yemen as a critic of the regime. When Tawakkul Karman was subsequently arrested, so many people protested that she had to be released. Like many others, she does not see herself as a lone fighter, but one among many women who are fighting for similar concerns. In her speech she said: "I see the great number of Arab women, without whose hard struggles and quest to win their rights in a society dominated by the supremacy of men I wouldn't be here. This supremacy has caused a lot of injustice to both men and women. To all those women, whom history and the severity of ruling systems have made unseen, to all women who made sacrifices for the sake of a healthy society with just relationships between women and men, to all those women who are still stumbling on the path of freedom in countries with no social justice or equal opportunities, to all of them I say: thank you."<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, she dedicated the award to the revolutionary youth in Yemen and the Yemeni people. Today Yemen has a new president after Saleh handed over power to a transitional government on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2011. This does not mean that the women's struggle is finished, however, and their demand to change, or rather abolish, laws which discriminate against women is perhaps more relevant today than ever before. While the government of President Saleh was brought down, the political conditions that were connected with it were not.

### **Women's Protests in the Process of Change in the Arab World**

Thousands of women in the Arab world are fighting diverse struggles for changes in their societies in favour of more democracy, more women's

<sup>11</sup> See the statement on the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize: [http://nobelpeaceprize.org/en\\_GB/laureates/laureates-2011/karman-2011/](http://nobelpeaceprize.org/en_GB/laureates/laureates-2011/karman-2011/)

participation and more justice. Examples also show, however, that in countries where elections have already taken place (Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt), women still have many reasons to take to the streets, and in some cases even more so than before. The increasing influence of political Islam in these countries brings huge challenges, especially for the women themselves. This influence is not felt in a spectacular campaign, but gradually, in the social and legislative processes, in individual decisions and exclusions, in the attributions of qualities and skills, and in the opening or closure of the public spaces. What is required at this juncture is to remain vigilant and, above all, stamina, active networking, and the solidarity of many in order to make this ongoing commitment to civil society a permanent one.

As different as the conditions are for women in their own countries, they consistently intervene actively in social and political developments. They are fighting for a space as well as for ways to be able to exploit their potential and play an effective role in the democratization process in their countries. The engagement of women in conflict resolution is necessary to achieve a lasting peace in these countries. Even if the forms of protest differ contextually, the biographies of these dedicated women show that women promote similar options and concerns. They take to the street because they want to create a different world for future generations. They are not naive, they know exactly what the price is for this commitment, a price for which there are, unfortunately, more than enough examples of around the world. Nonetheless, women have for many decades been actively engaged, often at great personal sacrifice, each day anew, for an end to wars and conflicts, for democratic political change, for peace, justice, non-violence and compassion. These women stand for a peace that is characterized by passion, fragility, vulnerability and ultimately by humanity. For this commitment they deserve recognition and respect. Simultaneously, it is important to look out for women in other regions of the world, to recognise them and give them and their visions a voice, presence, and a hearing, so that suffering and violence may end.





# CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: TURKEY – A CASE STUDY

*Zekiye Demir*

## **Introduction**

Turkey is a country of rapid transformation. Since the Tanzimat (Reformation Period of the Ottoman Empire), such transformation efforts have been partially intentional. In this process of transformation, women have taken up significant positions both as subjects and actors of transformation. Whilst the roles women assumed as actors have been frequently overlooked, their presence as the subject of transformation have been approached in a reductionist manner for the most part. Moreover, deliberating on women's existence by isolating it from the socio-economic environment – an approach frequently encountered in women's studies – would mean eliminating many issues that would shed light on the subject at the outset. Therefore, an effort must be made to view women, not only as actors or subjects of change, but as a more concrete existence and a part of social life as well.

The western world's image of Islam may be seen in the way in which it interprets Islam's presentation of women. The West sees Islam as a religion that looks down on women.

The reason for this prevailing prejudicial Western view is due to Islam's definition of women through religious codes. The West believes it is problematic of Islam to view all issues related to women vis-à-vis religion tenets. Indeed, the West believes religion (i.e. Islam) is responsible for every situation that puts women at a disadvantage. Instead of cleaving to this reductionist viewpoint, an objective outlook should be adopted.

The status of women in society is determined by history, tradition, geography, economics, politics, education and religion. When speaking of women, we must take all the other factors governing their status into consideration and not simply concentrate on religion alone. In so doing, it will be seen that economic and social conditions as well as tradition and customs play a more influential part in problems of women than religion. In other words, women's education, working life, politics and general public participation are shaped by their country's traditions, customs and socio-economic conditions. Therefore, we should not adopt the Western view of analyzing women's issue in Turkey from the standpoint of religion alone.

It is equally shortsighted to leave religion out of any discussions of women's issues. This is because religion plays an influential role as one of the founding systems of a society. Religion is also a reference system in all matter of subjects, including issues related to women. Although religion and religious institutions can play important roles in developing the status of women, other factors influencing the lots of women must also be taken into consideration. However, this does not change that fact that religion can make a contribution in developing women's status through its followers and institutions.

### **Women – Social Development – Religion**

The progress of societies is directly correlated with their production abilities. Human beings, who are at the heart of all kinds of production, enable the progress of societies. Economic, social and cultural development can only be achieved through well equipped human resources.

Approximately half the population of all societies is made up of women. The development of women's rights is dependent on women's contributions to the economy, society, politics, as well as cultural and religious life. However, the different prevailing cultures of the Arab world and the West notwithstanding, the place and role of women in the society have always

been subjects of discussion. Religion, as underlined above, has had a notable role in such discussions.

Education is the most important means of producing trained human resources for society. Indeed, education plays a critical and key role in getting individuals to actively participate in social processes and contribute to the development of the country. In developed countries, women and men have more or less equal access to education. Therefore, support should be given to ensure that women and girls have access to all forms of education. Education is a fundamental human right, necessary not only for finding a better job and achieving a better standard of living, but also for individual self improvement. Indeed, the Holy Koran states, "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?"<sup>12</sup> Our Prophet also says, "Seeking knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim."<sup>13</sup>

Islam is a religion that does not prevent women from either receiving an education or working in legitimate environments. One of our Prophet's wives, Khadija, engaged in trade. Another of his wives, Zaynab, was a craftswoman with her own sewing workshop. Yet another of the Prophet's wives, Aisha, was an educator and scholar. During the time of our Prophet, a woman tells him that she provides for her family because her husband and children do not work. She goes on to ask if this was a good deed worthy of reward. Our Prophet replied, "Of course, it is a good deed worthy of reward."<sup>14</sup> In other words, our Prophet and Islam "approves" of a woman who works at a job.

A comparison of the first periods of Islam with the current interpretation of Islam shows some Muslim societies today lag behind in granting women the rights that were granted to them 1400 years ago. There may be many reasons behind this situation, but we believe this shift in perception among Muslims is primarily due to the fact that tradition and customs have assumed a place at the forefront of religion today. To ensure the development of Muslim countries, there must be a shift in perception regarding the status of women. In short, women in Muslim countries today must be empowered in both the society and the family. Individuals and institutions must take responsibility if this is to be achieved. We believe that the great-

---

<sup>12</sup> Zümer,39/9

<sup>13</sup> İbn. Mace, "Mukaddime," 17

<sup>14</sup> Rıza Savaş, Hz. Muhammed (sav) Devrinde Kadın, Ravza publications (3. bs.), İstanbul 1991, pp.224.

est responsibility rests with religious leaders and institutions in societies. At this point in time, the Presidency of Religious Affairs must intervene.

### **The Presidency of Religious Affairs and Women**

Religious services in Turkey are coordinated by the Presidency of Religious Affairs. The Presidency is a constitutional institution. It has the distinction of being one of the first institutions established in the Republic of Turkey. Its mandate is: 'To carry out activities related to the beliefs, principles of worship and morals of Islam; to enlighten the public on religious affairs and manage places of worship.' To perform its duties, the Presidency employs a series of instruments and methods. Among these are services for mosques, education, publications and foreign country services.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs has to intervene now. It has done so in cases where religion is set as a reference point in issues regarding women. The Presidency also has an obligation to produce and disseminate the right information about women as an institution. The Presidency has served to spread the correct understanding of religion since its establishment. Conscious of its duty and mission, the institution has made an effort to create policy for women in recent years. This said policy is based on a point of departure affecting the problems faced by women of Turkey and women all over the world. This point of departure is the problem of the status of women and how they are perceived. The policy for women outlined by the Presidency touches on two general aspects. Firstly, it seeks to promote activities changing the perception of women and raising awareness among women. Secondly, it seeks to engage in activities raising the status of women.

### **The Presidency of Religious Affairs' Activities to change Perceptions of Women and raise Awareness among Women**

The perception of women varies in different societies due to differing social dynamics. Despite this variation, women are perceived in most societies as being secondary to men. Such a mindset is also evident in our society, for the education of girls is not deemed to be as important as that of boys. This is because society believes that girls will become women and mothers sooner or later. Mothers are perceived by society to be the ones who stay at home and look after the children. Since mothers are thought to be ones who keep house and bring up the children, men have to go out to work. As women will eventually be bound to the home, there is no need to

educate them as well as men. Well educated men on the other hand will find good jobs and will consequently be able to provide for his wife and children. Thus, the education of girls is not seen to be as important as that of boys. Another perception of women stems from the concept of chastity and honour. Men are not held to the same notions of chastity and honour as women. For instance, women are supposed to preserve their chastity and honour if they are to be respected, and the honour of the men in a women's life is dependent on her maintaining her chastity.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs is currently carrying out activities to change these negative perceptions that have no place in religion. Much of these activities involve spiritual guidance and information dissemination. Within this framework, the Presidency of Religious Affairs has acted in matters of domestic violence, promoted the importance of educating girls, as well as spoken out against early marriage of girls, violence against women, honour killings etc. Informative notes are prepared on these issues and sent to the offices of the mufti in 81 provinces so that they may be preached during sermons.

The Presidency makes an effort to address the male sex in the society and prevent the unjust legitimization of religion as a tool against women. Through sermons and occasional informative meetings, the institution tries to inform women as to their own status and attempts to raise women's awareness on issues such as the right to inheritance and education.

Emphases have been made in sermons that the same commands and prohibitions apply equally to both sexes instead of only to women.<sup>15</sup> Although the emphasis is on the equality of women with men with regard to religious responsibilities, it is important to note that the stress on equality would be positively associated with other areas of life.<sup>16</sup>

When the issue of raising girls arise in sermons, the Presidency emphasizes treating them with compassion and calls for the rejection of the favouritism of boys. Furthermore, rights of the husband and wife within the family are emphasized. Neither one nor the other should dominate each other. Indeed, our religion teaches us that a person who deserves to be

<sup>15</sup> The following are the verses especially shown as reference during sermons: *Tevbe*, 9/71, *Hucurat*, 49/13, *Nur*, 24/30,31, *Ahzab*, 33/35, *Ali İmran*, 3/195, *Nisa*, 4/127, *Nahl*, 16/97, *Zariyat*, 51/49. The hadith most referred to on the subject is as follows: 'People, you should regard the rights of women.'

<sup>16</sup> *Zekiye Demir, Cuma Hutbelerinde Kadın Söylemi (2001-2011). Unpublished article, 2012.*

treated well would become a mother and that heaven lies underneath the feet of mothers. By instilling such doctrines of Islam in people, society will soon be inspired too protect and praise the female sex from childhood and will continue to do so at all stages of life. Going against these rules of Islam constitutes a wrongful act in both this world and on judgement day. As of 2007, women have had a hand in writing and giving sermons. Women have been given the opportunity to preach to nearly 15 million men in some 80 thousand mosques on Fridays. Although the figures are small compared to the total population of the country, it is a significant step forward in changing the perceptions of women.

To ensure that the muftis adhere to the Presidency's policies on women's issues, the muftis of 81 provinces have to submit a report every six months on the pro-women's activities they have carried out. These mandatory regular reports propel the muftis forward vis-à-vis women's issues. These reports, which are submitted to the Directorate General for Religious Services in the Presidency, are compiled into a single report and used as input in projects about women.

The activity reports of the muftis focus on meetings, conferences, sermons, radio-TV talks etc. where women's issues are discussed. In most of these activities, the subjects covered are the education of girls, women's rights, the problems and responsibilities of women, honour killings, and the reasons for which well informed women are essential for a strong family and society.

The activities conducted by the Presidency at the national level through the muftis are performed via the Religious Consultancy Departments and Religious attachés. The Religious Consultancies have established 'women and family' working groups within the mosque associations in their jurisdictions. Some of their activities include changing the wrong impression that foreign women and organizations have of Islam, as well as explaining the causes of domestic problems and the importance that Islam attaches to women, the family, women's education, girls' education and so on. These working groups also carry out joint activities with civilian or official women's organizations and institutions. The working groups prepare reports on their activities and send them to the Directorate General for Foreign Relations in the Presidency. These reports are used as a data source in the Presidency's activities regarding Turkish women and Turkish families in foreign countries.

The Presidency's emphasis of the importance of the education for girls is not limited to preaching and sermons. Various efforts have been made in this regard. In the Final Declaration of the Provincial Muftis Seminar, held in 2006, the Presidency called for no girl to be left without schooling. As a part of this rallying cry promoting female education, the Presidency (with the support of its staff) bore the costs of basic education of girls whose families were in economic difficulties. Most of the girls were in the Eastern and South-eastern Anatolian regions, and were brought to the attention of the Presidency by provincial muftis. Most of the muftis offices undertaking this reform to educate all girls achieved good results. Families with young girls who were not sent to school were convinced and scholarships were given to girls whose families could not afford schooling. From 2006 to the end of 2011, the schooling costs of a total of 10,401 girls were covered under this initiative.<sup>17</sup>

Through its publications, the Presidency explicitly forbids the use of religion as a tool for legitimizing negative perceptions of women. Women assume duties at all stages of the Presidency's publications. The editor of the Presidency's official monthly publication is a female colleague of mine. From time to time, this magazine also features special supplements on women.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to periodicals, the publications department has also compiled women-centric studies. The most notable of which, *Turkish Women Living in Germany, Their Situation, Problems and the Perception of Religion and the Presidency of Religious Affairs*, was published as a book in 2010.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the Presidency of Religious Affairs organized a Religious Publications Congress between on December 2-4, 2011 titled, 'Religious Publications on the Subject of Women'. This congress was a resounding success, as 45 writers, academics and researchers, 26 participants and 13 publishing house owners participated.

In an effort to respond to the intense demands of information on women and the family as well as the deliverance of direct services to women,

<sup>17</sup> Presidency of Religious Affairs data from the Directorate General of Religious Education.

<sup>18</sup> "Gelenek ve Hakikat arasında kadın," Presidency of Religious Affairs Monthly magazine, March 2007. "Kadın Dindarlığı," Presidency of Religious Affairs Monthly magazine, March 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Zekiye Demir, *Almanya'da Yaşayan Türk Kadınları, Durumları, Sorunları, Din ve Diyanet Algıları*, DİB publications, Ankara 2010.



the Presidency of Religious Affairs opened Bureaus for Family, Guidance and Counselling in 6 provinces in 2003. To date, these bureaus are active across 75 provinces and 149 districts. These bureaus serve to spread the Presidency's religious enlightenment services, explain the value that our religion attaches to women and the family, nurture religious values in the family, and correct the misconceptions among the public regarding honour killings, domestic violence, discrimination against women etc. These bureaus also seek to impart sound, accurate and relevant knowledge free from superstitions and prejudices. They also directly apply to other relevant persons, organizations and institutions for cooperative ventures when the need arises.

The sensitivity that the Presidency of Religious affairs has shown on the subject of women and their activities is supported by its official announcements and press statements. An important example of this may be seen in the statement issued by the former President of Religious Affairs, Ali Bardakođlu, on March 8, 2004, International Women's Day:

"...This understanding (patriarchal mentality) of refusing to accept women as individuals with rights to their own existence and continually labelling women as inferior to men has to change. Religion should not be used to endorse this erroneous view because Islam describes men and women as equal individuals before the Creator. The Koran also explicitly condemns such an understanding in society (Nahl, 58-59; Zuhruf, 17-18; Tekvir, 8-9)."<sup>20</sup>

Such statements made by the Presidency of Religious Affairs have been covered in many national media outlets with much praise. In fact, Ali Bardakođlu has made several similar statements to the press. He stresses:

"The religion of Islam does not separate people as men and women. The distinction is in our heads. The mentality that sees women as second class individuals has its roots in our tradition, our culture and the conditions in which we live."<sup>21</sup>

At the general assembly of the East Austrian-Turkish Islamic Association, he said:

<sup>20</sup> This press statement was published on March 8, 2004 in national newspapers such as *Akşam*, *Milliyet*, *Sabah*, *Türkiye*, *Vakit* and *Zaman*.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by the following newspapers, *Milliyet*, *Haber Analiz* and *Gözcü* on May 4, 2006.

“Women must also take part in the management of NGOs. The rights of women should not merely be rights granted by men. Women have to earn these rights through their own effort.”<sup>22</sup>

He has also spoken out against the patriarchal mindset in Muslim societies:

“Men must abandon the conception that Islam approves of the discrimination and violence they inflict on women. Religion does not endorse something like that. There are no human rights violations in religions. There may be problems in how religions are reflected in history, society and the mentality of believers. But religions do not condone violence. This misunderstanding of religion stems from the believers. Unfortunately, there is discrimination and violence against women in various sectors of our society. As the Presidency for Religious Affairs, we will make an effort to contribute solutions.”<sup>23</sup>

The current president of the Presidency, Mehmet Görmez, follows his predecessor’s enlightened policies. He has revealed this in the various meetings he attended and in the various speeches he has given. At a meeting with the representatives of women’s NGOs on March 8, 2011 (International Women’s Day), he drew attention to the fact that no scripture in any religion speaks of the woman as the ‘other’. President Görmez summarized Islam’s view of women as follows:

“The fact that many of the current problems experienced are believed to originate from religion is just as disturbing as the problems faced by women. Our glorious religion goes far beyond honouring humanity through women. It also seeks to develop our opinions, and restore our mentality in all times and periods.”

At the same meeting, President Görmez emphasized that women have equal rights to education because Islam attaches great importance to literacy and places literacy on par with freedom.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in newspaper, *Türkiye*, May 23, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in the newspaper, *Hürriyet*, March 5, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.diyenet.gov.tr/turkish/dinhizmetleriweb/giris.htm> (erişim: May 19, 2012).

His speech of March 8, 2012, International Women's Day, was covered by many online newspapers. In it, he states: "Only those who are gracious honour and respect women. Only the lowly see women as inferior."<sup>25</sup>

The Presidency's Activities to Increase the Number and Status of Women  
At the outset of this paper, we stated that women have played roles as actors and subjects in the social transformation process. Despite the many difficulties women encounter in the private and public spheres, the social transformation experienced by the Republic of Turkey would be unthinkable without the existence of women actors. Indeed, women do not only play a determining role in social life, they also play an important part in religious institutions.

The employment of women in religious institutions is important on two accounts. Firstly, the Presidency employs women so as to create the impression that women are capable of working in the public sphere. Secondly, the institution actively contributes to women's employment as an organization.

The last decade has witnessed a boom in the positive policy of the Presidency regarding women's employment. There are presently many women working in different departments in the Presidency. Prior to 2006, the statistical reports of the Presidency's staff were broken down according to gender in matters of Koran Course Teachers and preachers. There are two possible reasons for this. It might be possible that there were no women working in other areas or that the women working in other fields were too few to make up any real statistics. Another more probable reason lies with the dearth of well trained staff capable of producing high quality statistics. The first statistics of female employment in the Presidency in 2006 was conducted in 2007. These figures were broken down according to professions and conducted by a female statistician. It is highly significant that the first statistician appointed to the Presidency in 2007 was a woman.

It is important for women to be employed in many positions and areas in the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Five of these positions carry special importance for the Presidency and women. These are the Office of the Deputy Mufti, Membership in the Supreme Board of Religious Affairs and the post of expert in the same board, the position of legal advisor, Head of

---

<sup>25</sup> See [www.tumhaberler.com/haber/index.pl?haber=9048412](http://www.tumhaberler.com/haber/index.pl?haber=9048412) (erişim: April 15, 2012)

Department, and preachers. The Office of the Deputy Mufti provides women with the authority to speak for religion while handling administrative affairs. The placement of a woman member and expert in the Supreme Board of Religious Affairs sends an uplifting message to women throughout the country and helps the cause of female empowerment. Having a woman as head of department demonstrates that women are capable and effective managers. Preachers are responsible for guiding society in religious affairs. The office of the legal advisor defends the Presidency against private and corporate entities externally, while providing advisory services and guidance to the different departments internally. Excluding female preachers, the number of women working in the positions listed above is actually very low. But they nevertheless drive home the message that women are just as capable as men in the public sphere.

Additionally, female staff members enjoy positive discrimination within the Presidency. The Presidency unreservedly explains this practice of positive discrimination thus:

“We are in need of women preachers and experts in our society. In the near future, every major province will have a female provincial deputy mufti. We will continue to employ positive discrimination in this area.”

By appointing women to said offices, the Presidency raises the status of women as religious authorities and managers in administration. Moreover, the Presidency has increased the number of women employed both at the provincial and central levels. In fact, the Presidency now employs more women than it did five years ago.<sup>26</sup>

Between 2001 and 2006, 3% of the Presidency staff were women. In 2011, female employees made up 10.4% of the Presidency staff. The table below shows the number of women in the various positions of the Presidency women in 2006 and 2011:<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Reported in the newspaper, *Yeni Şafak*, September 3, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> The number of female employees in various administrative positions within the Presidency was first recorded in 2006.

	2006 <sup>28</sup>	2011 <sup>29</sup>
Membership in the Supreme Board of Religious Affairs	1	-
Expert position in the Supreme Board of Religious Affairs	-	1
Deputy Mufti	5	10
Legal Advisor	-	1
Head of Department	-	2
Director of Koran Courses	1	-
Expert (financial, language religion, training and training officer)	53	75
Division Head	2	2
Civil servant, data preparation	9	31
Preacher	227	440
Koran Course Teacher	2719	9678
Health Services Class	9	9
Technical Services Class	7	16
Auxiliary Services Class	38	34
Total	3071	10299

There is also a striking increase in the number of women employed in the Presidency's foreign offices in recent years. For example, in 1999,<sup>30</sup> the number of female staff members working abroad was 52. But in 2012, 93 female employees were working abroad. However, women have yet to breach the high level administrative positions of advisor or attaché in the Presidency's foreign offices.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs is expected to continue this trend of increasing the number of female staff members in the foreseeable future. So doing will enhance the status of women in both the public sphere and in society at large. The history of Islam shows that, though rare, women have served in influential positions. Likewise, the history of Islam has a few instances where women were chosen for influential positions. Many women, such as Hz. Ayşe, have gained significant positions in the history of Islam and contributed greatly to religious knowledge. Women have to take up similar positions today to ensure the continued progress of the Islamic world.

<sup>28</sup> Presidency of Religious Affairs 2006 Statistics. Department for Strategy Development. p. 22

<sup>29</sup> Presidency of Religious Affairs Statistics 2011, Department for Strategy Development, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Zekiye Demir, *Almanya'da Yaşayan Türk Kadınları, Durumları, Sorunları, Din ve Diyanet Algıları*, DİB publications, Ankara 2010, p.33.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has shown that the Presidency for Religious Affairs serves to create awareness of women's rights vis-à-vis Islam and society. It does so knowing that it is difficult to change the traditional mentality of the masses. As the Presidency cannot change the mindset of the masses on its own, it engages with religion as a means of disseminating information on women's rights to the public. This is because religion has the most direct influence on its believers.

This paper has continually asserted that every facet of society is related to women. The problems faced by women can only be solved if the various socio-political systems in place function for the advantage of women. In order for women to be free, productive and responsible individuals, false beliefs of women have to be weeded out, and opportunities must be provided for women to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to empower themselves in society. A woman who is aware of her own abilities and who has received an education augmenting her abilities will play a positive role in both her family and society. A society composed of confident, educated and productive women is a prosperous and happy one.



## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

### **Claudia Derichs**

Claudia Derichs is a full professor of Comparative Politics and International Development Studies at the University of Marburg in Germany, as well as an appointed member of AcademiaNet (<http://www.academia-net.de/>), a network profiling Germany's most outstanding female scientists. She has studied Japanese and Arabic in Bonn, Tokyo and Cairo; and she holds a PhD in Japanology that she obtained in 1994 from the University of Bonn in Germany. Her professorial dissertation addressed the topic of nation-building in Malaysia. Her research interests are political Islam and transition in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, as well as gender and development studies in Asia and the Middle East. She has published various books and articles on Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and the Arab world. She is also an advisor to several academic and political institutions, journals and think tanks. Prior to her studies of Japanese and Arabic, she worked as a journalist. Her most recent book publication is:

Andrea Fleschenberg and Claudia Derichs, eds. *Women and Politics in Asia: A Springboard for Democracy?* Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011.



More information on her research interests may be found at her homepage (<http://www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/politikwissenschaft/institut/lehrende/derichs>).

### **Khadija Arfaoui**

Khadija Arfaoui was born in Tunisia, and she still lives there today. She earned her B.A. in English and American Literature from Tunis University. She also obtained a Certificate in Aptitude to Research with a research paper entitled, "The Double Jeopardy of Afro-American Women" from Tunis University. She earned an M.Phil. at George Washington University and her doctorate from the University of Manouba in Tunis in American and Women's Studies. Prior to her retirement, she taught English, American Studies, Women's Studies and Human Rights at the Higher Institute of Languages of Tunis. Before lecturing at the Higher Institute of Languages of Tunis, she was vice-principal and principal of secondary schools in the Tunis area. She was also a Teaching Assistant and a Ph.D. candidate at George Washington University. Her research interest has always focused on women and human rights.

She joined civil society organizations in the early 1980s. She was a founder of the Association for the Development and Protection of the Environment (ADPE) in Tunisia, and chaired it for ten years. She is part of the Tunisian League of Human Rights as well as an active member of Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development (AFTURD). She is also a part of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), Amnesty International and the Tunisian Association of the United Nations (TAUN). Additionally, she is a feminist activist and researcher, residing in the Tunis area. She has published several articles, the most notable of which are listed below:

- 1) "Femmes, développement et environnement: la prise de conscience internationale: 1994," which was presented at a seminar organized by ADPE on women, development and the environment, with the support of the Ministry of the Environment, ANPE and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.
- 2) Jane D. Tchaicha and Khadija Arfaoui, "Tunisian women in the twenty-first century: Past achievements and Present Uncertainties in the Wake of the Jasmine Revolution." *Journal of North-African Studies* 17, no. 2 (2012): 1-24.

3) Hafidha Chekir and Khadija Arfaoui, "Tunisia: Women's Economic Citizenship and Trade Union Participation." In *Making Globalization Work for Women*, edited by Valentine M. Moghadam, Suzanne Franzway, and Mary Margaret Fonow, 71-92. New York: State University of New York Press, 2011.

4) Khadija Arfaoui, "Women on the Move for Gender Equality in the Maghreb." In *Feminisms, Democratization and Radical Democracy: Case studies in South and Central America, Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Graciela Di Marco and Constanza Tabbush: 85-115. Buenos Aires: UN-SAMEDITA, 2011.

### **Ulrike Bechmann**

Ulrike Bechmann is a professor of Religious Studies and has been Head of the Religious Sciences Department at Graz University in Austria since 2007. She was born in 1958, in Bamberg, in Bavaria, Germany. She studied Catholic Theology at the Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg. She also holds an M.A. in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Her post doctoral thesis in Biblical Theology and Religious Studies, written at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, touched on the figure of Abraham in interreligious dialogue. In 2006, Professor Bechmann's thesis was awarded the Science Award for Intercultural Studies at Augsburg. From 1989 to 1999, she was the executive director and theological consultant of the German Committee at the Women's World Day of Prayer.

### **Viola Raheb**

Viola Raheb was born in 1969 in Bethlehem, Palestine. She obtained her master's degree in Education and Evangelical Theology from the Ruprecht-Karls University in Heidelberg, Germany. She began her career in formal and informal education in 1995. She was the Deputy Schools' Director of the Evangelical Lutheran Schools in Jordan and Palestine from 1995 to 1998, and managed the Public Relations Department of the International Center of Bethlehem. From 1998–2002 she headed the educational work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and Palestine.

In 2002, she moved to Vienna, Austria, where she now works as an independent consultant on development cooperation and cross-cultural dialogue. She conducts lectures at various universities and teacher-training institutions in Austria and Germany. She is also a member of many com-

mittees on intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and has published various books and articles.

### **Zekiye Demir**

Zekiye Demir graduated from Middle East Technical University, Department of Political Science in 1991. She worked at Kırıkkale University as a research assistant between 1994-1998. She received her PhD. from Sakarya University in Political Science in 2002. She then graduated from Ankara University, Faculty of Divinity in 2010. She has been working as an expert in the foreign relations department of the Presidency of Religious Affairs since 2006. She is interested in women's studies, politics and religion. Some of her publications are *Modern and Postmodern Feminism*, 1997, *Turkish Women in Germany*, 2010, *A Diary of Headscarf: Memories of METÜ*, 1996, *Happiness in the Family*, 2008.

## IMPRINT

Published by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)  
Turkey Office

Ahmet Rasim Sokak No: 27  
06550 Çankaya – Ankara / TÜRKİYE  
Telefon : +90 312 440 40 80  
Fax : +90 312 440 32 48  
E-mail : info.tuerkei@kas.de  
www.kas.de – www.kas.de/tuerkei

Responsible Dr. Colin Dürkop, KAS, Ankara

Coordination Suna Güzin Aydemir, KAS, Ankara

Print OFFSET FOTOMAT  
+90 312 395 37 38, Ankara

ISBN 978-605-4679-01-0

*Translators of the Publication: Aysegül Bahçivan, Coady Buckley*

*Editor of the Publication in English: Sharon Loo*

---

© 2012, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

All rights reserved. This book may not be reprinted or reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher.

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

