

## Veranstaltungsbericht

**Workshop: „Frauen- und Freiheitsrechte in der MENA-Region“**

**20.-22. Juni 2014, Fes**

**Partner: ISIS Center for Women and Development**

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**The ISIS Center for Women and Development and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organized from the 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>th</sup> of June an international workshop, at which experts and lecturers from the MENA region, Europe and North America participated. The topic of the event was the state and future perspectives of women's rights in the region.**

The role of women, their rights as well as their political participation have been subject to much political debate and legislation in many countries of the MENA region. In Morocco, for example, the government initiated various initiatives, starting in 1999, which aimed at improving the standing of women in the political sphere. Have such measures really achieved their aim? What influence has the Arab Spring had on the role of women in their respective societies and what are the future perspectives for women's rights in the region? In order to shed some light on these issues, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the ISIS Center for Women and Development organized an international workshop from the 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>th</sup> of June in Fes. Participants were experts and lecturers from the MENA region, Europe and North America. The event was a follow-up workshop from the last year's international conference on women's rights in the Mediterranean.

The different topics discussed at the workshop were political participation and economic empowerment of women, cultural and linguistic rights, women in (social) media, and masculinities in the post-Arab Spring era.

In her opening speech, Ellinor ZEINO-MAHMALAT from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung remarked that in times of crisis and turmoil, like during and after the Arab uprisings, women have always become the first victims. Since the status of women and gender equality is at the very basis of society, women's rights have always been a barometer of the respect of liberty rights in society. She mentioned that three years after the so-called Arab Spring the MENA region has reached another turning point with regard to the outbreak of (also sexual) violence and identified an ambivalent influence which the Arab Spring has had on the situation of women. Yet, gender equality and female inclusion is both a question of social justice and a pre-condition of human development. The societies MENA region hence urgently need a new social contract with regard to gender equality.

The first session of the workshop was devoted to the political participation of women. According to Hanane DARHOUR of the Ibn Zohr University in Ouarzazate the rise of Islamic parties represents a critical question for the future of women participation in politics. These would still display a twofold attitude towards this issue: while female MPs can be found amongst their rows, they often deny an overall societal valorization of women.

Moha ENNAJI of the INLAC Institute in Fes remarked that the share of female MPs and ministers has continued to rise in recent years and that various political reforms such as that of the Family Code (*mudawana*) have improved the situation for women in Morocco. As a result of that reform, women can now, amongst others, become an heiress. The

new Moroccan constitution of 2011 guarantees the political participation of women. Since 2011, 60 seats in parliament (about 17%) are reserved for women, a percentage that is still below the international benchmark of 30%. Despite the judicial progress in Morocco, women are still marginalized in the political process, and state reforms have not been followed by a substantive change of a respective mentality. As a consequence, women should have access to better education and training in order to increase their self-esteem and, thereby, their commitment, allowing them to promote their cause themselves.

With regard to Moroccan Islamist party in Power (PJD), Ennaji has made out a growing reactionary position of the Moroccan Prime minister Benkirane concerning women and family norms. While the PJD has found itself in a powerless position and proved to be unable to fight corruption, it still aims to "moralize" the Moroccan public.

Ginger FEATHER from the University of Kansas presented her research on the different advocacy coalitions dealing with the situation in Morocco. While one can be described as western-secular, the other one has a clear base within the Islamist movement. Unsurprisingly, both try to influence the debate about reform in different directions. This disunity led, amongst others, to the 2003 reform of the penal code which includes various negative changes for women. Article 488, for example, distinguishes victims of rape by virginity and age, while Article 490 criminalizes extramarital sex.

The second session dealt with institutional issues in relation to women after the Arab spring. Annette BORCHORST from the University of Aalborg in Denmark mostly dealt with research-related issues. For example, she recommended more comparative studies on the MENA-region as a tool to better understand the problems that women face in this part of the world.

Kahina BOUAGGACHE from Manaar Legal Consultancy in Algiers focused on the role of NGOs. According to her, these organizations can play a vital role in a process to improve the situation of women in the region. In addition to that, she demanded that states should orientate their work more on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDOW), whose implementation is still lacking in North Africa and the Middle East. There is also need for reforms in the economic area, providing women with more and also high-level jobs.

Finally, Mohamed MOUBTASSIME from the University of Fez presented the results of his research on factors preventing the political participation of women. Most interestingly, he found out that meta-stereotypes play a vital role in this. Not only do men feel women to be unable to work in politics. Women themselves identify politics to be a male domain. Thus, it is not only necessary to change the mentality of men, but even more importantly of women in Morocco in order to increase their commitment to politics.

In the third session, economic empowerment of women before and after the Arab spring were discussed. Mohamed YACHOULTI from the Moulay Ismail University Meknes acknowledged that women's share of the Moroccan workforce has risen in the past years from 24,9 % (2004) to 28,7 % (2008). This, however, is still not parity with men and, on balance, still less than in 1999, where this number was at 30%. In addition to that, women mostly take on lower position without responsibility. Also, trade unions have criticized the fact of "invisible labour" by women as well as high female poverty. Although Morocco has signed the CEDOW convention and pledged improvements, little substantive policies were implemented to follow up this commitment. This is an area where the government can and must do more to improve the economic situation of women in the country and valorize their contribution to the Moroccan economy.

Lisa BOSSENBROEK from Wageningen University in the Netherlands gave a presentation on new gendered agricultural labour modalities in the region of the Sais in Morocco, giving vivid insights into the difficult situation of female workers in agriculture. In this way, women often take on various, physically demanding jobs, but mostly under the control of male supervisors who withhold recognition of this work. Even though female rural workers in Morocco suffer from low wages, sexual harassment and discrimination, they also become more independent by "going out to work". The work of rural women is therefore both a burden and a form of empowerment.

The fourth session focused on violence against women, which has risen significantly and in various ways after the Arab spring, as Bakhta ABDELHAYE and Amina BABOU from the University of Mostaganem in Algeria stated. Since the Arab Spring and also due to the civil wars, violence and the number of rapes has risen to an alarming level in Syria, Libya, Egypt and also Tunisia. At the same time, so-called "virginity tests" in Egypt have been an infamous method of Egyptian security services to humiliate female protestors and were only stopped after a court case against the Egyptian military. Abdelhaye pointed out that there is no typical female victim, but that women of all ages, social and local backgrounds can become victims of violence. Babou described how the situation of poverty and unemployment creates a position of weakness and offends the men's masculinity and their idea of superiority, and as a result oftentimes leads to violence against women.

Further examples were given by Sara KHORSHID, a freelance writer and journalist in Cairo, who described various rather indirect ways of gender bias and discrimination of women in the Egyptian society. Especially right before and after marriage, Egyptian women are subject to constant and humiliating forms of psychological and social pressure. While women are expected to please men and marry early, men are given the feeling of "doing a favour" to a woman when marrying her.

As a consequence of these problems, Dina WAHBA from the Ikhtiyar Center for Gender Studies and Research in Cairo demanded a reform of the judicial system, more data collection efforts on violence against women, an increased inclusion of women in political processes as well as the implementation of international obligations by the Egyptian government. In Egyptian laws, for example, the offence of domestic violence does not exist. Wahba also stressed the importance of law enforcement and ending impunity for sexual violence. Even though the Egyptian society also needs a stronger awareness of sexual violence, Wahba pointed out that the Egyptian state tends to use the "awareness argument" in order to make society and its traditions responsible for the drawbacks.

The fifth session dealt with taboo-issues after the Arab spring such as the relation between religion and sexuality, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and female saints in Islam. Amina ARFAOUI from the Association Tunisienne des femmes démocrates (ATFD) in Tunis identified the relation of sexuality and religion as a taboo issue. Even though the 2011 revolution was not religiously motivated, Islamic parties soon took to the stage in the aftermath, promoting an extreme interpretation of the Quran. According to Arfaoui, prescriptions in behaviour such as the wearing of a full veil and a subordination of women to men are nothing but the outbreak of sexual suppression of women wrongfully justified on the grounds of Islam.

Aziza OUGOUIR dealt with the role of women as religious agents in the teaching and practicing of Islam. Ougouir described how women saints and female religious agents have had a long tradition in Moroccan Islam. Especially in Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, women have had the opportunity to freely live and practice their

religiosity. In contrast to orthodox versions of Islam that define religion as an exclusively male space, Sufism is gender neutral. In Moroccan Islam that has been largely influenced by Sufi ideas, there have been major historical female figures and saints. Only the following authoritarian regimes have stopped and hindered the religious agency of women. However, the Moroccan Kingdom has a history and tradition of female religious agency that it can build upon. The Moroccan King has, for example, supported the practice of female religious teachers (*murshidat*) who teach Islam outside of mosques and are widely respected as scholars of Islam.

Fatima SADIQI reminded the participants not to concentrate on women only. Other dimensions such as the Berber (Amazigh) element must be included when looking at feminist movements and the process of (female) empowerment. After all, it should not be forgotten that cleavages do not only run through gender lines but also through ethnic divides. Similarly to (rural) women, the Amazigh language that is largely spoken in the poor and rural areas of Morocco has been marginalized for a long time. While Amazigh used to be treated as a language of discord against the central power, it is now perceived as a language of modernity and has been recognized in the Constitution of 2011. In addition, the Moroccan Amazigh movement has been strongly influenced by female figures and has (wrongly) created the image of being at the same time a feminist movement. Moroccan Islamists, which are mostly Berber, tend to downgrade Amazigh as a "secular" language" in contrast to Arabic as the language of the Holy Quran.

The sixth session dealt with women in (social) media. Soumaya BELHABIB from the Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, Morocco, presented her research on videogames as a source for aggressive behaviour. She found a descriptive relation between the consumption of violent video games and physically or verbally aggressive behaviour by teenagers. She therefore warned of video games as a source for violence, in particular in schools, where teachers can become the victim of attacks by male pupils.


Mohamed TANDJAOUI from the University of Mostaganem in Algeria took a closer look at the different ways of communication of men and women in social networks. He found out that women communicate with a greater variance of vocabulary and foreign languages than men.

Finally, Kamal ELAISSAOUI from the University of Meknes offered a presentation of his research on female artists in the MENA region and on their use of art as a sort of expression and empowerment.

The seventh session focused on new masculinities after the Arab spring. Hanne PETERSEN from the University of Copenhagen illustrated the feminist struggle in Europe in the past decades. She described it as a process which moved forward and backward, but overall she recognized a steady progress on this issue in Europe which gives hope for similar struggles in the MENA-region.

Khedija ARFAOUI of the Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement warned of the negative impact of the rise of Islamist and particularly Salafist parties in Tunisia on women's rights. These political parties promote classical sexist stereotypes that describe women as irrational and as the "weaker sex". In both urban and rural areas, religious schools (*madrasas*) controlled by radical Islamists play a vital role in this dangerous process.

Looking at the example of Morocco, Mira MILADINOVIC-RAMHOJ from the University of Copenhagen identified clearly defined roles in the Moroccan society, where men are mostly seen as breadwinners and authorities within the family, whereas women's main responsibility is supposed to lie within taking care of day-to-day family life. Although



legislative changes such as the reform of the family code are steps in the right direction to break up these images, they must be followed by corresponding organic laws that facilitate their implementation.

In a closing panel, the participants pointed to the diversity of feminisms in the MENA region that have to be reconciled. Especially the competition between the (original) secular feminism and the following forms of Islamist feminism should open a new debate on the future status of women in the MENA region. There remains the risk that the achievements of the secular feminist movements are re-considered as ideas of an elitist Upper and Middle class movement. Basically, gender equality and women emancipation and empowerment mean giving every member of society a choice. There remains to be seen what results the negotiation between religious and secular concepts of society and women's rights will produce in the future.

Philipp Hirsch / Dr. Ellinor Zeino-Mahmalat