

CARE Middle East Popular Uprisings and Women's Participation





The Reality....

“The removal of a big and repressive patriarch ruling over a country is much easier than the removal of patriarchy, that is, male supremacy and sexism in society”

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Significance of this initiative for CARE in the Region

- Recognizing and adapting to a **changing operating context (new civil society and trends, emerging actors, pressing issues)**;
- Asking ourselves about how social transformation happens, what is the change we would like to see for the benefit of its primary impact group
- What is **the role that an INGO like CARE** can play, given our **long term commitment to women** to achieve lasting impact at broad scale on underlying causes of poverty and social injustice;





Understanding the “Democratic Paradox”

- **trends in women’s participation** in civic and policy spheres during and after the Arab Spring, as well as their **subsequent efforts to influence policy processes**;
- **implications for national government policy and donor aid policy** drawing on both CARE’s experience and that of local civil society partners
- **implications for INGOs like CARE** in programming and advocacy





Outline

Context:

- A. Women's participation in the region before the uprisings (freedom of association, rights & participation, regional actors)
- B. Women in the uprisings

The new power balance: Political Islam

- A. Women and the new governments
- B. Women and society

Donor policies

Implications for CARE





I AM too positive to be doubtful
I AM too optimistic to be fearful
I AM too determined to be defeated.



I AM free!



Femme Tunisienne Ni Putes Ni Soumises

Country and Regional Research Methodology

- **Literature review –At Country and regional levels**
 - **Published & unpublished research**
 - **News outlets and articles**
 - **Facebook, blogs, Youtube searches**
 - **Organizational websites**
- **Qualitative in-depth structured interviews with individuals in regional positions**
 - **Bilaterals**
 - **Multilaterals**
 - **Civil society**
 - **Academia**
 - **CARE (Regional, UK, US & country offices)**





Some Comments on Methodology

- **Language**
- **Terms**
- **Anonymity vis a vis credibility**
- **Geographic scope**
- **Speed**
- **Expertise**
- **Capacity within**





Some reflections

- The status of women's participation had improved over past decade, but was still very limited before the uprisings;
- So-called progress on policy issues pre-uprisings had weak base in society: we remain a deeply patriarchal society;
- Women were equal partners in the uprisings;
- 'Political Islam' is the dominant power in the region, but it is a nebulous, evolving concept. The issue is not ideological, but rather one of power balance;
- The players have changed, new emerging actors are young, not always associated to 'structures' and are using innovative tools to connect and make demands;
- Donors play a large role in the region & were enthusiastic of the Arab Spring: commitments strengthened, but this, unfortunately, does not apply to women issues.

Context Pre-Uprising

Freedom of Association

- Region rated worst in 2012 Freedom House report (and lowest in 2011&2012 Gender Gap Report;
- Libya: No guarantee of right to association in constitution
- Tunisia: NGO registration difficult, 'human rights and democracy' not permissible categories
- Egypt: Govt extensive discretionary powers - uses against NGOs working on political issues or human rights. Situation even more difficult after uprisings.
- Yemen: NGOs not required to register, can receive funding from foreign donors without government permission, and are exempted from some taxes, custom duties and receive reductions on utility bills,



Women in the Uprisings

- Scale at which women were leading & participating in uprisings surpasses the specific names that have become synonymous with the struggle for democracy in the region
 - **Tawakul Karman** from Yemen, the Noble peace laureate who lead demonstrations from the first days of the revolution
 - **Samira Ibrahim** from Egypt for pursuing a legal case against the forced virginity tests conducted by the military on arrested protesters
 - **Bushra Belhadj Hamida** in Tunisia for her activism on women's rights
 - **Razan Zaitouneh** from Syria who reports online on the Syrian uprising.



Emerging Activists Movements/New Actors

- **Mostly youth** who may not have been engaged with the feminist movement before or part of the feminist elites.
- They **resist “ngo-ising”**;
- They have **limited allegiance** the ‘**older feminist elite**’ They are organizing in new ways and less linked to older structures and actors’
- Noticing the trend that **women activists**, rooted in women’s rights movements and CS **are now entering into the political** space and holding on to both roles.
- Some are concerned that the approach by donors and international actors to work with Islamic conservative forces is wrong approach and that it is the **role of CS to be the counter force to these conservative forces.**



Emerging Activists Movements/New Actors

- Risk of watering down the agenda, hijacking it **or making concessions that they would not have traditionally made**;
- Refusal of some women's rights activists to see women engage with conservative Islamic parties within the state (calling it **state feminism**);
- Concerns that by taking up both spaces there is **not enough space for new women's leadership with the women's rights movement** to actually help in the emergence of new leaders.



Key Regional Actors

- **Numerous funds** grant-making for women's organizations such as Mediterranean Women's Fund, African Women's Development Fund, Arab Women's Fund, and the Arab Human Rights Fund (AHRF).
- **Advocacy movements** and campaigns such as:
 - *Equality without Reservations* coalition focusing on the elimination of government reservations on CEDAW
 - *Karama*: network of women's organisations "to end violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa"
 - *Musawah* campaign is an international movement promoting women's rights in the context of Islamic teachings by developing and sharing alternate interpretations of Islamic concepts
- **Other regional networks** found, but mainly based outside the region and their level of impact and grass-roots support is unknown: E.g. Arab Women's Leadership Institute and Arab International Women's Forum



Islamist / Conservative actors

- Islamist and conservative actors **are not homogenous**. There are divides between 'youth' and 'older' cadres, manifest in terms of different perspectives and actions on women's participation;
- This may not simply be a matter of ideology, but influenced by the **prevailing national power balance**.
- Islamist **positions are often difficult to identify** on women's rights issues as they are (**Deliberately? Strategically?**) vague on these issues.
- **Women within the cadres of Islamist / conservative political parties, networks and NGOs but with little say?** Do their voices matter/matter less?
- **Unclear where their parties stand on women's rights** or how they view secular/moderate groups and their agendas on women's rights



Effect on funding women's issues?

- **Arab donors** generally viewed positively in the region & main funders in some contexts (e.g. WB), but few fund women participation and rights. Rarely address gender power imbalance (focus on family role, girls education, loans)
- Not much change to the way donors work on women's participation since uprisings. Despite donors' insistence that issue is vital still not listed as priority: **Catch-22?**
- Others criticised for not extending the same **weight to women's participation**
 - **UK House of Commons** report assessing UK response to Arab Spring: recommends prioritisation of "particular concerns of women" after Amnesty report
 - Oxfam: **EU response has "no clear reference to supporting women"** and "failing to refer to gender and women's rights" in its presentation of its vision for democracy in the region.



Some Implications for INGOs (CARE)

- Role of Arab and Islamic donors: KEY! Missing.
- Must go beyond Islamic-Secular thought: they have much more in common than perceived. Rather:
- Deep & meaningful change to women's participation will only be genuinely achieved by addressing the power balance: NGOs cannot continue to work apolitically
- Focus on strengthening newly emerged youth-led initiatives (not necessarily turn into an NGO)
- Advocacy and policy work on women's rights must be grounded in community-level action (Big gap in all countries: beyond capitals)
- Value of regional networking:
 - Situation in many countries generally similar
 - Solidarity
 - Opportunity for exchange of experience, research tools, advocacy approaches & programming information

