LSE Middle East Centre

NEW TRENDS OF WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

REDEFINING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Dr Aitemad Muhanna-Matar

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About the Author

Aitemad Muhanna-Matar is a Research Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre. She is currently conducting a research project on salafist youth in Tunisia and the process of subjectification. In 2013, she managed a regional research project funded by Oxfam-GB and run by the LSE MEC in five Arab countries entitled *Women's political participation across the Arab region: Mapping of existing and new emerging forces in the region.* Prior to that, her research concentrated on the historical trajectory of Gazan women's religiosity, agency and subjectivity, drawing on different discourses of religion and secularism. Dr Muhanna-Matar's PhD thesis in 2010 examined the effects of the second Palestinian Intifada on women's agency and contributed to challenging mainstream liberal conceptions of women's empowerment. It was published in a book *Agency and Gender in Gaza: Masculinity, Femininity and Family during the Second Intifada*, by Ashgate in 2013. Since the mid-nineties, she has garnered substantive academic and development research experience with UNDP, UNIFEM, the World Bank, SIDA and the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University.

Abstract

This paper is based on empirical field-based research conducted in five Arab countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen and the occupied Palestinian territory) in 2013. Given the complex context of division in women's political participation in post-uprising countries, the research focuses on how emerging young female leaders – ordinary educated women with no specific feminist consciousness or previous political involvement – succeeded in shaping a new form of women's activism. The main argument of this research is that the newly emerged non-feminist women's leaders, especially those who represent Islamist parties and their conservative gender agenda, have the potential to re-signify their gender norms within the moral framework of Islamic tradition, as well as to transform their political leadership into a feminist leadership. This happens through women's discursive habituation of non-stereotypical gender roles and relations, regardless of ideological framework or references.

Key Findings

- The political, religious, sectarian and territorial divisions in the post-uprisings Arab context creates opportunities for young women activists to challenge stereotypical gender performance and to act autonomously and critically;

- Young female leaders with no feminist consciousness and knowledge develop their feminist approach through their experience of political and social activism by understanding the local context and its diversity and reflecting on their actual exercise of political agency;

- Feminist leadership is possibly achieved as an outcome of non-feminist women's activists' habituation or performance of non-stereotypical gender roles that are situationally encouraged and recognised by the public at certain times and in certain places;

- Although the performance of non-feminist leaders, particularly Islamist women activists, does not operate in resistance to patriarchy, it successfully contributes to redefining gender norms in an empowering manner;

- Women's power manoeuvring within patriarchal and tribal society institutions has succeeded in constructing new gender practices that challenge the social and political exclusion and marginalisation of women;

- Women's organisations across the spectrum (faith-based and secular) agree on the priority of working with and for poor, illiterate and rural women to end their socio-economic marginalisation. This consensus provides an important opportunity for re-framing the approach to women's empowerment;

- Focusing exclusively on women's rights in an isolated manner leads to decontextualising the process of women's empowerment and a failure to shape interventions that are responsive to local women's preferences and dynamics of action.

Introduction

Since the outset of the Arab uprisings, women have actively engaged in the changing politics of their countries. Women in Tunisia, Yemen, Morocco and Egypt, amongst others, have contributed significantly through protests, demonstrations, lobbying and advocacy. Yet, women activists, and their voices and networks, remain fragile and divided due to an ostensibly Islamic/secular divide. Political polarisation and the resulting division between Islamic women's organisations and secular feminist organisations characterise post-uprisings transitions.

This is illustrated in the mutual suspicions between the key Islamic and secular political actors and the persistent tension between the two groups with regard to their different ideological interpretation of women's rights (between *shari'a* and international law). Both Islamist women and feminist activists, particularly the elites, enhance the binary between Islamic culture and feminism. They assume there is no way to reconcile universal feminist principles based on international laws with local religious and cultural values and practices that have historically been distorted and misinterpreted by dominant male religious and political authorities (Badran 2009, Salim 2011).

However, the fragmented political context after the uprisings has allowed the emergence of a new trend of women's activism that may be seen as a new wave of feminism. This has challenged the Islamic/feminist binary and the elitist character of the Arab feminist movement (Sika and Khodary 2012). After the uprisings, Muslim women have become widely engaged in grassroots youth and women's activism, advocating not only for their civil and political rights, but also for the civil rights of all marginalised social groups. Both religious and non-religious young educated women have created a public space for communicating their ideas and beliefs and for debating with other generations, along with the older political and feminist leadership, to affirm their belonging to their community.

The new trend of mass women's activism and leadership has challenged the Western and national secular feminist assumption that women are major losers of the Arab uprisings because their political representation in formal politics has not met the international criteria of gender equality and because of the essentialist feminist view that an acquisition of power by Islamist political parties is a threat to women's equal rights.[1] This assumption is arguably mistaken when we look comprehensively at the new trends of women's and youth activism, beyond the singular normative liberal feminist view that restricts women's empowerment to their representation in formal politics in accordance with universal international laws and through gender quotas. However, a gender quota, although a facilitating mechanism for women's political empowerment, also entails the risk of serving patriarchal political agendas, as happened with previous Arab authoritarian regimes (Moghadam 2009, Goulding 2009, Al-Arasi 2012, Senigeur 2011, Sika and Khodary 2012).

Thus, the definition of women as winners or losers of the uprisings has to be understood not only on the basis of the immediate outcome of their political and civil engagement during transition periods, or of electoral results achieved through institutional alliances at formal political levels. It also has to be based on a nuanced understanding of the process and dynamics women develop and redevelop through experiencing political and social engagement and the reflection of these in the forms of power they gain.

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[1] See the article in *France News*, 'Women among the biggest losers in Arab Spring' http://www.france24.com/en/20131112-women-arab-uprising-violence-sexual-abuse-egypt-syria-saudi-arabia; also the article in Qantara.de, Commentary by Moha Ennaji 'Arab Women's Unfinished Revolution' http://en.qantara.de/content/commentary-by-moha-ennaji-arab-womens-unfinished-revolution (accessed 15/11/2013)

This paper aims to understand how the process of women's political participation during and after the uprisings created opportunities for the emergence of new forms of women's activism. It examines how women learn and experience their gendered-self differently. Through their involvement in the process of social and political change for different intersectional factors (religious, sectarian, territorial, socio-economic and others), women learn and develop new manoeuvring and leadership skills and become critical of the actuality of gender and gender relations in their society. The research also reflects on the new form of women's leadership and how it could contribute to redefining women's activism and empowerment towards longer-term social and gender change in Arab countries.

This paper draws on the analysis and findings of five empirical country-level studies conducted in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). While neither Morocco nor the oPt experienced an uprising, these provide case studies which complement the research by examining the effect of the Arab uprisings on the models of Moroccan and Palestinian women's activism and leadership. The country-based research adopted qualitative research methodology, generating in-depth diverse analysis using multiple methods, namely: workshops with policy- and law-makers; focus groups (FGs) with women's and human rights civil society organisations and Community Based Organisations (CBOs), as well as with poor women from urban and rural communities; individual key informant interviews with representatives of government and non-government feminist organisations to cross-check and triangulate data and analysis; and semi-structured individual interviews with women and men representing the different political and women's actors who influence women's political participation and empowerment.

In each country surveyed, fieldwork was conducted in two major sites, one rural and one urban. In total, the research team conducted FGs with: 474 women from poor urban and rural communities; 203 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and CBOs working on women's issues, development, human rights and youth matters – including CSOs working at either the national or local levels; and 117 individual interviews with government and civil society representatives (both men and women). Five workshops were also held with policy- and law-makers in the different countries.

The research was conducted as part of a project directed by Dr Aitemad Muhanna-Matar and managed by the LSE Middle East Centre. The research team consisted of five researchers, each focusing on a specific country: Aitemad Muhanna-Matar, Tunisia; Wameedh Shakir, Yemen; Hanan Darhour, Morocco; Maisa Shquir, oPt; and Amal Hamada, Egypt. The five researchers implemented the research in partnership with national and local women's organisations, each producing a country-specific report. These were then collected into a cross-national report, written by Dr Muhanna-Matar with assistance from Laura Mitchell. This paper forms a selected part of the cross-national report, focusing on the forms of women's activism and leadership that emerged during and after the uprisings. It will first discuss how the uprisings contributed to the emergence of new forms of women's and youth activism. Second, it will reconceptualise women's activism and leadership in the context of the studied countries and identify the opportunities and risks created by the new forms of women's activism. Third, it will discuss donor policies and women's CBOs' attitudes towards them. Fourth, it suggests a list of policy-oriented recommendations for international agencies working on women's empowerment and leadership.

Emerging Forms of Women's Activism and Leadership in Post-Uprisings Arab Countries

Multiple forms of women's activism and leadership have emerged during the Arab uprisings; some new, others older and more established. As a result of these engagements, many Arab women played a key role in the different political, youth, labour, development and religious societal entities that struggled together against authoritarian regimes and their oppressive economic policies and security systems. For scholar and activist Rabab El-Mahdi, the diversity of women's activism in post-uprisings Arab countries challenges the hegemonic essentialist understanding of liberal feminism that sees itself as 'the one way to women's progress and betterment'. For El-Mahdi, a women's movement 'is not only determined as such through the sex of its constituency and participants, but also through its goals and declared consciousness' (El-Mahdi 2011, 380). The diversity in women's activism also challenges the Middle Eastern liberal feminism that presents Islam as particularly sexist and anti-feminist (Shaikh 2003: 148).

This paper focuses on three newly emerged forms of women's activism that have not taken a specific feminist framework. The massive number of ordinary women, with no specific feminist knowledge and experience, who participated in the protests, provided the impetus for shaping a new form of women's, or feminist, consciousness and practice different from the old elitist model of feminism. The latter is perceived by a large number of Arab Muslim men and women as an imported concept from colonial times, which is mainly adopted by educated middle- and upper-class elite Arab women (Khan and Fournier 2012). Old elitist liberal and socialist feminists in the Middle East focused on challenging patriarchal culture and politics, explicitly identifying Arab and Islamic culture as the source of misogyny in the region (Bona 2013). They called for a cultural revolution, by changing personal status laws, and pushing the state to respect and comply with national and international obligations towards gender legislative reform (Pruzan-Jørgensen 2012: 31). However, traditional feminists have failed 'to reconcile universal feminist principles with local cultural values and practices' (Bona 2013:242).

Moreover, the new forms of women's activism in the Arab uprisings challenged ethnocentric feminist Western observers who have conflated women's agency in the Arab uprisings with feminist desires to be free from cultural and religious constraints, similar to the model of Western liberalism. This reductionist understanding of feminism obscures the multiple objectives and motivations of women's agency (Pratt 2013). It also raises a question: does feminism necessarily require a moral critique of patriarchal religious/traditional practices (Khader 2012)? Whether this is called feminism, a new wave of feminism, or non-feminism depends on how women define themselves in relation to the different theories of feminism, which requires further empirical and theoretical engagement that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The research presented here gives sufficient evidence that women exercise agency with no specific feminist labelling. Arab women, based on religious and non-religious values, participated in the uprisings with a diversity of interests. They exercised their agency beyond their gender identity, calling for equal rights, human dignity and justice for both men and women, particularly marginalised social groups, without necessarily calling for cultural revolution against patriarchal religious/traditional practices. Many women activists interviewed are critical of the old feminist movement in their own countries and reject calling themselves feminists to distinguish their new forms of activism from that model.

The Emergence of Young 'Ordinary' Women Leaders

Large numbers of young 'ordinary' women, defining themselves neither as 'Islamist' nor 'secularist and feminist' but as 'activists', have become conscious of and enthusiastic about the meaning and the practice of democracy and citizenship, becoming involved in civil society organisations and popular protests. 'Ordinary' women are defined here as those who had no prior knowledge or institutional experience of feminism and who had not been involved in politics prior to the uprisings. They are neither influenced by the discourses used by the established liberal and socialist feminist non-government organisations, nor by state-sponsored feminism, which is narrowly linked to serving the authoritarian regimes. By contrast, the 'ordinary' women interviewed, including educated, uneducated, rural, urban, poor and middle class, emphasised that the two groups excluded them.

'Ordinary' women include those who had suffered on a daily basis from their state's neoliberal economic policies and oppressive police and security sectors. From the early days of the uprisings, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, these women acted voluntarily as agents aiming to change the politics of their countries. They organised collective actions, but not necessarily on the basis of 'feminist' values or through advocating for women's rights. Their demands went beyond gender (albeit they may affect women and men differently) and included political reform, defence of human rights and freedoms, advocacy of religious and ethnic communal rights and demands for improving working conditions. According to Diane Singerman, ordinary people, particularly young women and men, revolted against neoliberalism and corruption 'that transcends national boundaries and links young people and other activists, cross-nationally' (Singerman, 2013: 4).

The Arab uprisings helped create public spaces where these 'ordinary' women had access to newer and wider audiences who welcomed their voices. In Yemen, a traditionally tribal society, one of the biggest surprises of the peaceful protests that swept the country in 2011 was the visibility and participation of women.[2] This project's research in Yemen found that women see their participation as part of a wider struggle against broader systems of oppression and in support of justice and equality for all Yemeni citizens. Issues of livelihood and insecurity emerged at the top of their agenda, along with the poor state of the economy, unemployment, inflation and the lack of basic social services, such as health care and education.

Wardah Al-Hashdi, a woman in her early thirties, is a typical example of how the Yemeni uprising has produced new women leaders. Al-Hashdi is from a tribal family and participated in the uprising by providing first aid to injured protestors. She said: 'I was a housewife before, but I had to go out and help the injured because it is safer for me, as a woman, in a Yemeni culture that respects the presence of women in conflict areas'.[3] Today, she is one of the leaders of the *Raqeeb* organisation for human rights and her life has completely changed. A reflection of the new model of women's activism and leadership was also illustrated in Hajja Governorate, a northern mountainous area near Sana'a, where a highly unusual incident occurred: a group of rural uneducated women decided to block the main road to protest against frequent fighting and the widespread availability of guns amongst the *Houthis* and *Islah* groups.

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[2] 'Strong Voices: Yemeni women's political participation from protest to transition', Saferworld, May 2012, available online http://www.gaps-uk.org/docs/Strong-Voices-Yemen.pdf, accessed 17 Nov 2013. Estimates suggest that of the protestors in Yemen, 30% were women. Hakim Almasmari and Mohammed Jamjoom (2011), 'Women march in Yemen's capital', CNN (17 October), available at http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/17/world/meast/yemen-unrest/index.html?iref=allsearch

[3] Interview conducted by Wameedh Shakir, Yemen country researcher, June 2013.

In Egypt, the blogger Asmaa Mahfouz became a key figure in the 6 April Youth Movement, which has played an important role in shaping recent Egyptian politics. She re-interpreted the culture of patriarchy – honour and manhood – to encourage Egyptian men to join her in protests against dictatorship. Defending her right to protest, she said: 'If you consider yourself a man, come with me on January 25. Instead of claiming that women should not be there because they will be beaten, let's show a bit of honour, be men, come with me on January 25'.[4] Mahfouz was also one of the founders of a group called 'Egypt's Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution', established in June 2012, which is one of many coalitions that were initiated and led by ordinary Egyptian women, religious and non-religious, who had no public profile before the uprisings.

In addition, women's collective actions against sexual harassment in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia and Morocco are good examples of how women contributed to awakening women's consciousness of their gender and sexuality, and their advocacy against exclusion from the public sphere. For example, '*Shoft Taharosh*' ('I saw harassment'), a coalition initiated by young women in Egypt, has organised several sit-ins protesting against sexual assault in Tahrir Square. Samira Ibrahim[5] is another good example of an 'ordinary' woman who resisted victimisation by the military dictatorship and acted as a publically recognised leader without labelling herself 'feminist'. Ibrahim raised a court case against the Virginity Test (VT) imposed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), not in the name of freedom of sexuality from a western feminist perspective (Cornell 1998), but as a refusal to be subjected to a test, which violates her authentic social norms and tradition and is imposed by dictators.

In Morocco, female teenagers, who had not been involved in feminist movements before the uprisings, have initiated an adapted Moroccan version of the Canadian slut-walk. The walk fights sexual harassment against women and draws attention to the daily hardships women experience in the Moroccan public space.[6] Women's activism crystallised on March 10, 2012 with the suicide of 16-year-old Amina Filali after she was forcibly married to her rapist. A Facebook page – 'We are all Amina Filali' – was created by young women activists, who called for public demonstrations and sit-ins to demand changes to the Penal Code. The protests following Amina's tragic death helped traditional women's structures to initiate a national debate on a subject long considered taboo.

Other examples of women's activism from Tunisia should also be cited. Five ordinary women participated in this project's focus groups in Douar Heisher, a poor neighbourhood in Tunis.[7] These women used to be inactive members of the main Tunisian General labour union, the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT). Since the Tunisian revolution, they assert that they have become widely engaged in the organised protests and demonstrations led by the UGTT, as well as being involved in organising and mobilising political and human rights campaigns through the union. Their participation in the protests allowed them to realise their influential role in changing the gender politics of society institutions. Women in the UGTT started to advocate for gender quotas within the union hierarchy. A woman teacher from Tunis and active union member for years noted: 'The Tunisian uprising has woken us up to our leadership position within the union. We are the ones who mobilise the workers and do everything on the ground, but when it comes to political decisions, we are ignored'. An unemployed woman from Douar Heisher, who became an active

[4] YouTube video of Asma Mahfouz available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk, accessed on 7/09/2014.

[5] Samira Ibrahim's story of her struggle against the virginity test, available at: http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/egypt/120731/samira-ibrahim-virginity-test-freedom-fighting

[6] Lahdidi, Mehdi (2012), 'Woman Choufouch, une marche contre le harcelement sexuel dans nos rues' http://www.maghress.com/fr/albayane/12258

[7] Focus group organised and facilitated by Dr Aitemad Muhanna-Matar in Douar Heisher, 17 April 2013.

member of the union after the uprising, added: 'I only registered in the union to find a job. Now that I have become so active, the union opened a door for me to be involved in other organisations and to create a great network with other activists in youth and women's groups'.

Through these different forms of public participation, Arab women learnt how to construct the meaning of citizenship and, as a result, to construct their gender identity and status. This cannot be fulfilled without the protection of their socio-economic and political rights (Meer and Sever, 2004). Through women's intensive participation in protests and demonstrations, ordinary women explored, discovered and experienced the power of their new voices and influence on their countries' politics. They enjoyed their influential role in everyday life encounters. According to the many young women interviewed for this project, through their participation in protests, they gained greater moral and social respect from their male partners, colleagues and family members, without publically advocating transgression of existing gender norms. These individual and collective actions undertaken by women with no prior normative feminist consciousness have encouraged them to question existing gender norms, whether by resisting, or by redefining them in a way that restores their sense of human dignity (Pratt, 2013).

Non-Feminist Female Leadership in Political Parties and the Dynamics of Power Manoeuvring

Arab women have also increased their role in political parties, particularly Islamist parties. The field research in the various countries shows that both moderate and radical Islamist parties have efficiently facilitated the political participation of their female members, especially in rural and poor communities. This is for several reasons. First, not unlike the previous secular ruling parties, moderate Islamist parties such as *Ennahda* in Tunisia, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco, and to a lesser extent, the *Islah* party in Yemen, Hamas in the oPt and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, were keen to gain international legitimacy for their moderate Islamist agendas, including their calls for equal citizenship and its constitutional foundations (Mustafa and Yousef, 2013).

Second, these parties have historically relied on women to mobilise local communities, to generate a public constituency and more recently, to mobilise voters during elections – all of which enabled them to come into political power (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2012). Third, the governing Islamist parties in Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen have encouraged women's political participation as a means to strategise their disputes with both secular and radical salafi opponents. Research in Yemen found that the conservative opposition Shi'a *Houthi* movement is more active in instrumentalising their women's participation in public protests than the leftist Yemen Socialist Party (YSP). That being said, this strategy used by both the *Houthis* and the *Islah* party in Yemen does not necessarily mean that they support equal rights for women. Rather, the two opposing Islamist groups recruit women to publicly advocate for their political agendas. In Tunisia, *Ennahda* has also encouraged many female members to work in local communities, teaching people about moderate interpretations of Islam and undermining the political power of radical Islamists.

With the acknowledgment that women were instrumentalised by the political parties in general, and by Islamist parties in particular (Kassem, 2012), this dynamic of women's engagements in political parties has offered the opportunity for some individual women activists to be critical of the conservatism of their political parties, especially with regard to women's rights. Nawal al-Kebsi, a *Houthi* supporter, noted that most of the *Houthi* leaders are socially conservative towards women's political participation and activism. A similar situation applies to *Islah* women representatives, who also confirmed that conservative views against women are due to certain religious leaders who affect the institutional decisions of the party.

Women's relative positions of power within the different Islamist political parties vary. Interviews with Islamist women's leaders in *Ennahda* and the PJD, and to a lesser extent in Hamas, reveal that they relied on their male political leaders to manoeuvre for power and to negotiate on gender- and non-gender-related issues. Although Islamist women interviewed refuse to call themselves feminists, many of them use women's rights discourses similar to their feminist counterparts. A woman leader in the PJD said: 'We avoid conflict by initiating dialogue. We agree on common things. We fight for women's rights and dignity. We call for their equal access to decision-making positions, and we combat all forms of violence and discrimination against women'.[8] Yemen's case differs slightly as female *Islah* members have prioritised their loyalty to the party over any other institution they are involved in. Nabila Saeed, *Islah*'s media officer, defends the importance of her party in achieving her political goals. She views her party as the only institution within the Yemeni political and tribal context that provides her with social security while also encouraging her to access power and political leadership. Islamist women leaders such as Saeed, living in a predominantly tribal and patriarchal society, bargain with patriarchal structures to achieve their goal of generating their public constituency and representation in local communities.

The trajectory of community-based women's activism in post-uprising countries has been largely influenced by the changing political context of the countries themselves and by shifting regional political alliances (Khatib and Lust 2014). Women leaders in political parties (both Islamist and secular) have tended to reshape their political and social alliances to remain in power. Examples include the Islamist women leaders representing the PJD alliance with the Monarchy in Morocco[9] and the alliance that some liberal feminists made with the military in Egypt (Abdel Kouddous, 2013; Traub, 2013). In most of the studied countries, these alliances have been enacted at the expense of consolidating an independent feminist agenda and raising voices based on building public constituency among the masses. The example of Egyptian liberal feminists' alliances with masculinised political forces raises a fundamental and critical question: On what political, economic and social basis should women shape their political alliances and strategise their struggle for the attainment of their rights?

Bargaining with patriarchy may be a necessary strategy during the process of women's empowerment in a certain context. However, the legitimacy of this strategy is only proven when women leaders, whether secular or Islamist, demonstrate their political willingness and capacity for power manoeuvring to dismantle such tribal and patriarchal structures, and to act as representatives of the masses of women rather than the political masculinised elites. Women's popular constituency is the major source of legitimacy for women's political participation and representation both at national and local levels; it is this constituency that gives women actual power for political manoeuvring with and within state institutions (Waylen, 2008). Otherwise, Arab women (whether Islamist or liberal) will remain hostage to masculinised political agendas and be at risk of being instrumentalised to serve the interests of the state's political elite.

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[8] Interview conducted with Aicha Kendsi (representative of the PJD) by the Morocco country researcher, Hanan Darhour, 22 April 2013.

[9] Lamia Zaki in 'Bilan 2012 – Montée des protestations sociales et politiques', Royaume du Maroc. Bilans annuels de 1983 à 2013. Paris: La Découverte. www-cairn-info.acces-distant.sciences-po.fr/article_p.php?ID.

Women's and Youth Community-Based Activism Challenging Traditional Feminism

Liberal feminists in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, the oPt and, to a lesser extent, Yemen have worked to influence and introduce gender equality through legislative change, with varying degrees of success. At the same time, however, based on both existing literature and empirical evidence, many Arab liberal feminist organisations shared three major characteristic shortcomings: elitism and failure to develop a public constituency; being misled by state feminism (Al-Ali 2002, Moghadam 2009, Sika and Khodary 2012, Bona 2013); and being driven by donor agencies' policies and agendas (Jad 2004, CARE International 2013)[10]. During the fieldwork for this research, newly emerged women's activists in local rural and urban communities criticised the style of work of old feminist organisations and emphasised the lack of influence these organisations have achieved to improve women's lives and their status in poor communities.

As the political sphere opened up for civil society during the Arab uprisings (Khatib and Lust 2014), middle-aged educated women and educated youth were among the first social groups to establish community-based organisations (CBOs) aimed at providing emergency material services, as well as awareness-raising for poor women and unemployed youth living in marginalised slums, neighbourhoods and rural areas. In contrast to some old feminist organisations working at the national level, the major concern of the newly emerged community-based organisations was to focus on and to represent the socio-economic problems and needs of poor women and families, while building the capacity of marginalised groups to manage their livelihood. Activists in these organisations rarely describe issues of legal reform and representation in macro-politics as priorities.

Another interesting finding related to the CBOs is that few of them are registered as women's organisations. They are led by educated middle-aged women, as well as by young men and women, and their major focus is poor families and unemployed youth. Two explanations for this can be offered: First, middle-aged religious and educated women were already involved in charity-based activities before the uprisings. They then exploited the civic freedom offered by the uprisings to establish their charity-based organisations, as witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. Second, new young leaders embraced the transferring of the collective sense of activism from the protests to local communities, where concrete forms of activism can be more effective and recognised.

Many youths in Tunisia, Egypt, the oPt and Yemen have managed to move beyond ideological, political and gender disparities to focus on issues of unemployment, poverty, insecurity and social disintegration. A young female representative of a CBO from the West Bank emphasised that women's CBOs are more cooperative with each other and are less influenced by political and ideological division between Hamas and Fatah than the bigger NGOs working at the national level. For her, CBOs' work requires field activities and daily interaction with poor women and their actual needs.

The majority of the newly emerged CBOs lack institutional and human capacity and work on an ad hoc basis, reflecting the desire and willingness to voluntarily serve their local community. Nevertheless, CBOs have not escaped the influence of key Islamist and secular political players, whether discursively or on their work. Therefore, CBOs are also polarised, reflecting the broader national political and ideological discrepancies. They may be grouped into two major categories: the majority are charitable, faith-based associations affiliated to Islamist political parties and/or movements; the others are development and youth CBOs that follow political parties, or traditional feminist and human rights organisations. However, the second group appears less concerned with ideological labelling than the first.

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[10] A Care International report argues that Arab women are often as critical as men of the donor policies and their politicisation to serve certain political actors at the expense of focusing on supporting the actual needs of women (2013: 20).

Despite their different political affiliations, the two groups of CBOs work in multiple development sectors such as education, environment, health, cultural activities, vocational training and job creation in addition to humanitarian assistance. A few of them, particularly those that have relationships with older well-established feminist organisations or leftist political parties, work on advocacy, lobbying or awareness-raising on women's rights. However, the majority of newly-emerged CBOs in the five countries surveyed are led by local men and women, who draw on their familial, tribal and political networks in local communities to generate resources to operate.

Due to the persistence of centralised models of local governance, CBOs, and particularly their young leaders, are excluded from decision- and policy-making processes and positions in both national and local governance institutions and political parties. They are also rarely consulted in policy development or planning processes. Some Yemeni and Tunisian women community activists intimated that the CBOs' lack of financial and institutional capacity has forced some community leaders to jeopardise their institutional autonomy by connecting with political or tribal community leaders to gain financial support for the continued operation of their small associations. One woman, who chaired a new CBO in Tunis, said: 'All CBOs that you find operating properly and providing material support to poor people, these are supported by political parties as mobilising arms in local communities'.[11]

Within the prolonged context of insecurity, particularly in the oPt and Yemen, for young women activists working in CBOs, being affiliated to political parties provides them with a source of legitimacy and security, although it undermines their effective participation, autonomy and empowerment. A female community activist from Gaza said: 'We can't avoid political party frameworks – anything we do should be done within a certain political system. If we start any initiative as non-partisan, it will end up under a political party in one way or another'.[12] In Yemen, the lack of access to influential institutional tools, social insecurity, political conflict, and the exclusive tribal culture of political parties have all had a devastating effect on women-focused CBOs. Because of this, these organisations have failed to remain independent and to establish their own civil institutions and professional careers.

Field research shows that some CBOs which managed to secure funding from donor agencies or large feminist and development NGOs, have become more concerned with professionalising their organisations, (i.e. searching for funding to recruit professional staff and develop institutional structures and networks with donor agencies), than working voluntarily in and with poor communities. This trend among newly-emerged CBOs in post-uprisings countries, similar to the history of CBOs in the oPt, entails the risk of NGOisation of CBOs (Jad 2004)[13], which undermines the voluntary and representational spirit of youth activists, and reproduces the elitist discourse of development and women's empowerment.

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[11] Interview conducted by Dr Aitemad Muhanna-Matar on 7 May 2013 with Dura, the director of Ma'an organisation based in Tunis.

[12] Quotation selected from a focus group with women's activists in Gaza and facilitated by Maisa Shquir, oPt country researcher in April 2013.

[13] NGOisation in the Palestinian context refers to focusing on professionalising women's institutions to meet the institutional requirements of donors, which limits their influence at the local level. Islah Jad (2004) argues that NGOisation limits the struggle for national causes at the expense of projects geared towards priorities established by international actors.

Despite the criticism by some Islamist women's community activists of their political parties, they still prefer to keep their CBOs connected to the Islamist parties in order to legitimise their social interventions in local communities. Abeer Abdulrahman, a member of the *Islah*'s *shura* council in Aden, claimed that: 'Women's CBOs are affected by the agendas of various political forces, either Islamist or secular'. Najla Al Houthi, a leading member of the *Houthi* group, admitted that *Houthi* CBOs are established to serve the political agenda of the movement itself. Nevertheless, these women argue that, for women community activists, being affiliated with political parties provides them with greater space to work in local communities, generating social recognition in return.

This is, however, a subtle strategy used by Islamist women to mobilise for the political agendas of their political parties. As stated by some of the interviewees in Yemen, this strategy gives women a wider space to challenge the societal patriarchal and tribal gender norms, to create an opportunity to help women improve their education, work and reproductive health, and to fight against domestic violence and early marriage. For example, Nabila Saeed of the *Islah* Party in Yemen, and president of a well-established women's CBO *Fikrah* ('Idea'), declared that after the 2011 revolution, tribal sheikhs contacted her and other women leaders to discuss political issues.

In the oPt, Tunisia and Egypt, some respondents indicated that their CBOs act merely as implementers of development projects and programmes for big women's NGOs that are neither designed by them, nor represent the prioritised needs and issues of their local communities. However, these larger national organisations, Islamist and feminist, are often the only available sources of funding for CBOs to operate in the local communities. Although CBOs in Morocco face the same institutional problems, the fieldwork shows that some of them have had a different experience. During a focus group discussion conducted with representatives of newly emerged CBOs in the Sidi Moumen neighborhood of Casablanca,[14] women leaders talked about the newly established coalition of women's associations of Sidi Moumen. One said: 'The coalition helps us a lot in this respect [securing funding and institutional management] because we are now able to plan training together and to learn from each other on many levels. This is how we keep our sisterly relations'.[15] Through this coalition, local CBO women activists plan to get the necessary support and training through sharing their experiences.

Unregistered Politically Independent Youth and Women's Community Initiatives

Beyond the formally-registered Islamist and non-Islamist CBOs affiliated to various national parties and institutions, a small number of youth and women's groups and initiatives emerged, opposed to the widespread political polarisation of society institutions. These groups and initiatives focus on the actual socio-economic problems of their local communities. The fieldwork found that these are attractive to many young men and women, who are frustrated with the Islamist/secular polarisation and its socially fragmenting effects.

This form of activism relies on the individual capacities, commitments and contributions of group members, as well as some donations from locals, purposely avoiding the reliance on actors and resources from beyond the community. Hence, activists think that this form of activism is the most sustainable because it relies on the community's existing financial, human and institutional capacities to organise collective actions. However, in extremely poor isolated neighbourhoods and communities, the resources that can be mobilised may be quite scarce, thus, the capacity to provide large-scale services to many people becomes severely limited.

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[14] Sidi Moumen, one of the research sites, is a suburb of north-east Casablanca.

[15] Focus Group conducted and facilitated by the Morocco country researcher, Hanan Darhour, in Sidi Mamoun-Casablanca, 26 April 2013.

These community-based initiatives tend to be grounded in a moderate Islamist, or moderate secular, mindset and they avoid factional Islamist and secular politics in their civic institutional work. Youth initiatives such as 'Young Leadership Entrepreneurs' in Tunisia and the '15 March: Youth against Division' movement in the oPt are important examples of young men and women exercising their agency in a critical and constructive manner by resisting the fragmentation, polarisation and elitism fuelled by traditional political parties and large feminist and human rights organisations.

These young activists are critical of sex-segregated forms of women's activism. They asserted during interviews that they prefer working with youth and development organisations, rather than women's organisations, where they have common issues of concern. These young men and women are also critical of the generational gap between traditional political and women's organisations and the youth and the centralised form of leadership in these organisations. Ahlam of the 'Young Leadership Entrepreneurs' in Tunisia noted:

> 'Traditional feminist organisations do not create a new generation of leaders who may threaten their power. These organisations are led by feminists who have a strong connections with the international community, but who still do not know how to give us, young men and women, space to learn and develop our skills of leadership'.[16]

A Palestinian female member of the '15 March' initiative said: 'We should have a youth quota… to guarantee our right to political participation'. Another Palestinian woman activist criticised political parties: 'Old political leaders are the ones who taught young people intolerance… in order for them to remain in power at the expense of our actual needs and problems'.[17]

Another unregistered community initiative led by middle-aged women comes from Egypt. Um Ziad belongs to a group of middle aged religious women activists who initiated a community-based project in Saft Laban, a poor neighbourhood in Cairo. She was motivated by her religiosity to serve her local community. She suggested collecting an Egyptian pound each day from small shops for repainting the school walls. Men were responsible for the distribution of plastic bags to households and gathering cans and plastics for recycling; the money generated from the sale of the recycled materials was used to rebuild local community infrastructure. Also, the level of sexual harassment against women has become increasingly worrying and disturbing in post-uprising Egypt. In the same area of Saft Laban, an initiative was developed by local women to fight sexual harassment through religious education. Middle-aged religious women talked to teenagers and educated them about how to use the moral virtues of Islam to confront such disrespectful practices.

As the field research in these five countries indicates, the traditional political parties and larger organisations, whether Islamist or secular, fail to provide a constructive, conducive atmosphere or leadership for aspiring men, women and youth who are interested in becoming more politically engaged and who are often tired of divisive identity politics that fragment their society. As a result, these activists seek out and create other, more constructive, spaces and initiatives within their own communities where their efforts can counter polarisation and exclusion. In doing so, they learn to mobilise local resources, work with others and develop, practise and shape more accountable and representative forms of leadership, while contributing to their own community's development.

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[16] Skype interview conducted between Dr Muhanna-Matar and Ahlam, 29 April 2013.

[17] These quotations are selected from a focus group conducted with youth activists in Gaza City on 7 April 2013 by oPt country researcher, Maisa Shquir.

Donor Policies and CBO Attitudes Towards Donors

Before 2011, the policies of bilateral and multilateral donors and their partners in international NGOs were criticised for funding programmes and projects controlled by authoritarian Arab regimes. Another criticism of international donors is that while they do not partner Islamist organisations, they have sometimes supported repressive and corrupt regimes and their elites (including in some instances, regime-affiliated civil society organisations). Because of the time and resources required to administer grants made to local organisations, donor agencies often prefer to fund a few larger, well-established organisations rather than small CBOs (Malmvig and Lassen, 2013).

According to the field research in the five countries, donors' efforts to support women's political participation and economic empowerment vary due to the security and socio-economic priorities in each country, with donors having limited impact on gender policies and women's political participation. For example, UN agencies have continued running programmes for women's empowerment and for the elimination of violence against women, although they have recently begun reorienting their focus towards women's economic development and empowerment in marginalised areas. Other donor representatives interviewed, such as USAID and DFID, stated that they have reassessed their funding policies and partnership criteria concerning poverty alleviation and good governance and are now targeting poor rural areas, particularly in Yemen.

Newer CBOs have little or no experience of working with foreign donors and have felt quite excluded by these agencies. Most Islamist women's CBOs interviewed, both independent and those affiliated to Islamist parties, considered some donors to be biased against them.[18] Apparently, donors have claimed that the work of Islamist women's CBOs is inconsistent with the gender commitments and framework adopted by international agencies (i.e. international norms and human rights conventions such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)). International donors are perceived by women leaders to be selective in supporting CBOs. They mostly support secular civil society women's organisations, and ones that have good institutional capacity, and ignore the new civil society organizations that have no institutional, human and financial capacity. Kawthar, who works at the general assembly of charity organisations in Tunisia, commented on the international agencies' policies and performance. She said:

> 'International donors need to look at us as equal civil society organisations aiming to develop women and the entire society without imposing their own perceptions and conditions. This is the democracy that secular women's organisations advocate for – don't judge us before we talk to each other and negotiate all issues'.[19]

In Yemen, many criticise donors' lack of transparency and failure to consult with local CBOs when developing funding policies and priorities. Ibtihaj Al-Khiba, a Yemeni activist and development consultant, is also critical of donors' funding policies and mechanisms, citing their top-down nature and unfriendly and time-consuming funding procedures, which result in local CBOs spending more time trying to secure funding than fulfilling the needs of women and communities.

In all five countries surveyed, the relationship between donors and CBOs was characterised by mistrust, ineffective coordination and poor communication. While donors are concerned with financial transparency, new CBOs have not yet developed the professional capacity to meet the complicated financial and institutional requirements of donors and grant mechanisms.

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[18] Some of this bias may stem from Islamist parties and movements such as Hamas being listed on the US and EU lists of terrorist organisations.

[19] Kawther participated in a focus group conducted in Tunis, 7 April 2013.

Rather than investing time, training and resources into assisting new CBOs with developing their programmes, many donors opt for the easy path by partnering with well-institutionalised women's organisations and leaving young CBOs to their own devices in mobilising much-needed resources. These donor policies and practices risk further widening the divide between well-established feminist organisations and CBOs and arguably send a clear message that more elitist feminist work and organisations are supported at the expense of grassroots and community-level initiatives with the poor.

Re-Defining Women's Leadership and Empowerment: Opportunities and Risks

The Arab uprisings' new forms of women's activism challenge the essentialist feminist argument that women's activism and leadership has to be framed within a common united goal of gender equitable social transformation (Batliwala 2011). Mobilising women's leadership in the specific context of post-uprisings Arab countries may need to go beyond the normative ideological framing of feminist leadership because there are large numbers of women activists who consciously and freely prefer to practise their leadership beyond the standardised criterion of feminism, that is confined to the goal of gender equality. Some Islamist women leaders rely on their religion as a source of reference to struggle against all forms of aggression and violence that dehumanise women.

Within the political, religious, sectarian and territorial divisions in the post-uprisings context, the process of women's political participation creates opportunities for women activists to challenge stereotypical gender performance. They learn and experience their gendered self differently, and as a result, they adapt the performance of their gender to respond to the changing context. Many young Muslim women activists in the countries studied have demonstrated a high capacity to create their own understanding and enactment, and to act autonomously and critically. Some young women leaders learn feminism through their experience of political and social activism. This involves understanding the local context and its diversity and reflecting on their actual exercise of political agency, where they can meet their interest in and desire for social and political recognition in the local community and/or at the national level. In this context, women leaders freely and willingly shape the gender goals behind their activism and leadership through their everyday experiences, whether they believe in gender equality as an ultimate goal of their exercise of agency or not.

The contextual understanding of women's leadership revealed in this empirical research appears inconsistent with the normative feminist understanding of leadership that draws upon a particular political standpoint which basically aims to challenge patriarchy. Feminist leadership is concerned with achieving gender equality and justice, and it requires leaders 'to undergo a process of personal transformation, consciousness-raising, and internalisation of feminism' (Antrobus, 2000: 52). Yet, in the context of post-uprisings countries, internalising feminism is not necessarily a condition for women's exercise of their agency and leadership, or for building their capacity to make social and political change.

However, feminist leadership is possibly achieved as an outcome of non-feminist women activists' habituation or performance of non-stereotypical gender roles that are situationally encouraged and recognised by the public at certain times and in certain places. Some other women leaders may also choose to freely exercise their leadership to advocate for 'authentic' gender symbolism (norms), which are morally defined against 'Western' gender norms (Pratt 2013). As revealed in this research, non-feminist leaders, such as Islamist women activists, practice non-stereotypical gender norms and act equally with men in several domains for the purpose of mobilising Islamist ideology that does not necessarily call for gender equality. According to Judith Butler (2004: 42), this is 'a dynamic used by agents to legitimise the authority of a certain ideology'.

Although the performance of non-feminist leaders does not operate within Butler's post-structural framing of resistance against patriarchy, it successfully contributes to redefining and re-signifying gender norms within the moral framework of Islamic tradition, as Islamist women consider religion the major source of their empowerment (McNay 2000).

Non-feminist Arab women leaders' potential to transform their political leadership has been proven. Women's practice of power manoeuvring within patriarchal and tribal society institutions has succeeded in constructing new gender practices (roles and relations) that challenge their social and political exclusion and marginalisation. By focusing exclusively on feminist leaders, and on more experienced feminist organisations, one risks missing the opportunity of working and building relations with these equally important non-feminist women leaders and fostering a better and more localised meaning of feminist leadership and empowerment.

Women's organisations, whether faith-based or secular, all agree that priority has to be given to working with and for poor, illiterate and rural women to end their socio-economic marginalisation. This consensus provides an important opportunity for re-framing the approach to women's empowerment. All women's organisations need to develop a holistic approach where women's individual socio-economic, civil and political rights are not perceived as separate from the rights of men, children and the elderly within households, local communities or at the national level. Focusing exclusively on women's rights in an isolated manner leads to decontextualising the process of women's empowerment and failing to shape interventions that are responsive to local women's needs and dynamics of action in their daily lives.

Conclusion

While the various post-uprisings Arab political contexts required women to change the regular performance of gender norms and to act differently (for specific contextual political reasons), the new performance of gender has the potential to transgress social and cultural norms within male-dominated political parties and other tribal and patriarchal societal institutions. This is illustrated in the repetition of non-stereotypical gender practices and the knowledge and capacity women acquire throughout their social and political engagement in the public sphere. Yet, it remains to be seen whether the new generation of youth and women activists will manage to continue their organising and mobilising efforts and build a genuine, organic women's movement which better responds to women's lived realities and their socio-economic problems and needs. The real danger remains that the new trend of women activism and leadership could be easily coopted and instrumentalised by the larger political actors and state elites.

In the specific context of post-uprisings Arab countries, in order to effectively recognise and build women's leadership capacity and an independent women's agenda, one needs to move beyond the normative measures of feminist leadership and to focus on the actual experiences and dynamics of activism undertaken by women to gain social and political recognition, both in formal and informal politics. This approach has the potential to provide a wider space for newly emerged women leaders to become critical of their individual gender histories and their ideological/political orientations. This approach also enables women to resist patriarchal gender norms from within tribal and male-dominated political institutions to meet their quest for power and desire to be socially and politically recognised in their local communities.

A focus on gender legislative and policy-change at a national macro-political level risks excluding the new women leaders and their community organisations and initiatives. These play a crucial role in reconfiguring gender relations in traditional local communities that are barely reached by elitist feminist organisations. It is the local constituency that new women activists and leaders generate, through working in and with their local communities, which gives them actual power for political manoeuvring with and within state institutions.

Recommendations for International Donors

- Support non-feminist leaders and encourage mutual learning between non-feminist and feminist leaders to widen the opportunity for developing a common ground for working on gender-specific issues;

- Support women to develop independently and to shape their political and social alliances not only for meeting international requirements of gender quota, but more importantly to strengthen the credibility of their representation amongst local people;

- Support women leaders to participate in local governance by developing their conceptual knowledge, understanding and skills of transparent and accountable governance;

- Partner women leaders in various non-feminist organisations, such as political parties, labour and student unions, and unregistered women's community initiatives that position women in power;

- Reassess the relevance of development and feminist discourses to the local context, and re-apply the intervention strategies and programmes to be more responsive to women;

- Encourage regular meetings between older feminist and human rights organisations and political parties, and young men and women leaders and activists working in various sectors and from diverse socio-economic and geographical backgrounds;

- Treat CBOs as equal partners based on participatory development, bottom-up approaches and transparent and accountable models of governance in which no actor is excluded due to either ideology, political orientation or religious conviction;

- Facilitate women's access to a range of local and municipal services, as well as the labour market. These services enable CBOs to organise activities that are responsive to the actual problems and needs of local people, and as a result create trust between CBOs and local communities;

- Develop flexible and accessible funding procedures to enable new CBOs and unregistered youth and women's initiatives to access these funding opportunities.

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Forthcoming Publications

Transboundary Climate Security: Climate Vulnerability and Rural Livelihoods in the Jordan River Basin
Dr Michael Mason, Dr Ziad Mimi

This paper presents the findings of the research project led by Dr Mason in collaboration with Birzeit University, addressing climate vulnerable rural communities within the national territories of the watershed of the Jordan River (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory) which is perhaps the most physically and polically stressed river basin in the world, critically applying a human security approach. The aim of the research is to develop improved policy responses for climate risk management within the Jordan River Basin through a better understanding of the linkages between climate change, adaptation and human security.

The Uprising of the Marginalised: A Socio-Economic Perspective of the Syrian Uprising
Dr Shamel Azmeh

More than three years into the Syrian uprising, the socio-economic roots of the protests movement, that later became one of the bloodiest conflicts in the history of the Middle East, are being observed. While it has been observed that the Syrian uprising, contrary to some 'Arab Spring' countries, has been an uprising of more marginalised social groups with a strong role of poorer segments in the society particularly rural and rural-to-urban migrants, the socio-economic explanation for this is still underdeveloped. In this paper, LSE Fellow Dr Shamel Azmeh examines the political and socio-economic compromise that underlined the rule of the Ba'ath party in Syria for four decades and unpacks how a combination of internal and external shifts that started in the 1990s and intensified in the 2000s led to the erosion of this compromise providing the background of the events that began in 2011.