



“Women and the Arab Transition: Winning in Difficult Times”

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I. Introduction

The recent transition in the Arab world has imposed itself as a sticking point on the global agenda at the beginning of the 21st century, and it will remain so for decades to come. The transition actually derives its significance from longstanding stagnation in the region, despite its geopolitical and economic weight. It turns out that Arabs not only have dreams, ambitions and potential, but also possess a strong will to realize them.

Like any unforeseen event, the Arab transition revealed to us many previously unknown strengths and weaknesses of these societies. In respect to the plight of Arab women today, researchers face serious challenges in diagnosing the potential of women’s movements and figuring out ways for the outside world to help them achieve their goals.

Followers of social networks, newspapers, and the intellectual forum are baffled by the contradiction between perceptions and realities. Early enthusiasm for these social and political transformations in the Arab world has now been supplanted by apprehension and despair in many instances.

This invisibility of women’s voices can be attributed to many factors:

- 1) The prevalence of patriarchal cultures, and especially the male dominated worlds of politics and the media,



- 2) The media's preference for scenes of violence, which typically pit the police against "angry young men"
- 3) The focus on short-term results (generally meager) at the expense of the underlying process in which women tend to be extremely active.
- 4) The legacy of a shallow official "women's movement" typically headed by former first ladies, and devoid of substance.

The first section, of the paper will examine selected facts and trends regarding the gender dimension of the Arab transition. The point of departure is a view of Arab transition as an opportunity to expand freedoms equally for men and women. This "wish" is based on the premise that gender equality is fundamentally a development matter. This dimension will be the mirror that reflects the success of the Transition in opening a new era of justice and freedom. The second section tackles Arab women's contribution to the uprisings, as per available information, keeping in mind the biased media context mentioned above. The third section will present a real-life case, the experience of Imam Sadr Foundation, and thus address the role of Arab women in sustainable social change. This case illustrates the vision of a man who, took progressive positions on women's issues at a time when the status quo seemed deeply-entrenched.

2. Turbulent Background

- vii. 70% of the 1.3 billion impoverished people worldwide are women;
- viii. Two-thirds of the world's working hours are carried out by women;
- ix. While, they earn only 10% of the world's income;
- x. Women own less than 1% of the world's propertyⁱ

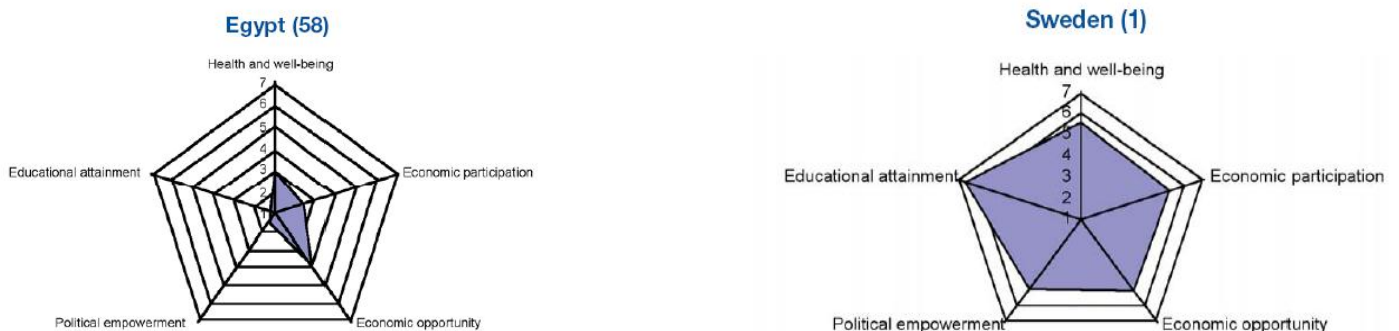
There is worldwide evidence of low levels of female participation in various spheres of our contemporary societies, despite an oft-cited positive correlation between female participation and human development. Active participation of women in



society has always been associated with positive outcomes such as prosperity, peace, justice and the realization of human potential.

Recent reportsⁱⁱ issued by international development agencies adopt a methodology that defines gender equality in relation to three key dimensions: the accumulation of **endowments** (initially, in terms of education and health; then accumulation of material assets including inheritance acquisitions), the use of those endowments to access **economic opportunities** and generate returns, and their application to **take actions**, or agency, affecting individual and household well-being.

In a model containing five dimensionsⁱⁱⁱ: *health and well-being*, *education attainment*, *economic participation*, *economic opportunity*, and *political empowerment*; and in which seven represents the maximum gender equality, Egypt ranked the lowest country (a total of 58 countries were surveyed and scored), with a score of 2.38.



Egypt ranked least, after turkey, Pakistan and Jordan; Sweden ranked first followed by Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Canada, UK and Germany.

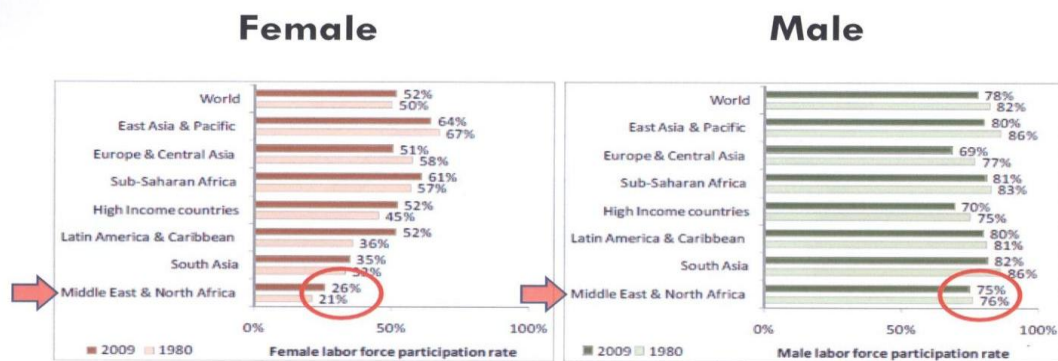
Egypt is selected herein as an example for its relative weight and representation among Arab countries. The MENA countries have invested impressively in women's education, increasing their productive potential and earning capacity. However, it is clear from the still-low ranks of these countries on labor force participation that the region is not benefiting from the potential returns on the investment. Most MENA countries lack a coherent strategy for empowering women, despite having ratified the agreements of CEDAW (the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women).



Although women's vulnerability to violence is the most obvious aspect that affects physical security and integrity of people, it is – in several countries- the least amenable to accurate statistics.

Women's participation in the labor force differs across the various regions of the world. This diagram^{iv} ranks the MENA region at the bottom where only 26% of women take part in the labor market against 75% of men. In East Asia and the Pacific those ratios are 64% and 80% respectively.

Labor force participation rates, by regions



Creating a system of peace and social justice is a never-ending struggle, and there is a clear correlation between increased gender equality and the level of peace, social justice and prosperity in a society. The Arab states failed during last century in the struggle to establish the foundation for sustained development and social justice. This failure included central political issues, gender equality and economic prosperity. Something had to occur; the Arab uprising was unavoidable.

3. Arab Women and the Arab Transition

Women's rights should not be separated from human rights and must become part of a wider movement among the general public. One must keep in mind, however, that in Arab countries existing laws for women pose serious complications for them. One should consider the following crucial questions: what will be the status of Arab



women in the post-revolution era? And, regardless of the effectiveness of women activists' role in the demonstrations, is there any guarantee that their engagement will turn into longer-term gains?

Women sparked many protests against the regime in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Libya, and were also very active in the social media. The participation of women proved that these were movements' representative of the broader population, and that these were not just young, angry male youths venting their frustrations. Many observers highlighted the fact that women had a pivotal role before, during, and after the uprisings. To mention a few examples:

Lina Ben Mhenni, the Tunisian activist who travelled around the country documenting protests; Tawakul Karman, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2011, has been a leading figure in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Yemen; Bothaina Kamel, announced that she would be the first woman in Egypt to run for the presidential elections. She proved at least that a woman could contest the presidency of the country even if the likelihood of her winning was slim. During the demonstrations of last year, women in Bahrain outnumbered men.. Lamais Dhaif, the winner of several journalistic awards, said to CNN on February 3, 2012: *"We are the women of the forgotten revolution. Women are punished doubly for speaking out- one time as a rebel, the other as turncoat. If you protest, you're called a prostitute"*.

Tracking personal testimonies, reporters highlighted many promising signs attributed to women's participation in demonstrations and in mobilizing people. We all know that in the depths of the human soul, people rely instinctively on women in order to keep life going. And when we see some women covered in blood, we know that tyranny has reached its worst. In practice, when it turned bloody with hundreds of men wounded in the squares, women were waiting in the wings, with medicine, first-aid, water and encouragement. Importantly, women's participation in demonstrations reduces risk of bloody scenes, and restores the nonviolent struggle.

Is there a risk of a setback?

Huge polemics now take place in the Arab streets concerning trivial issues (dress code, gender segregation in public spaces, etc.) while neglecting serious challenges



such as economic growth and adherence to human rights. No one has forgotten the famous declaration in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution, despite all of its pressing issues, to reinstate polygamy as an issue to be placed on the front burner.

To date, the revolutions have not resulted in any improvement in women's status. Priorities are elsewhere. Egypt is taken, once again, as an example since women's status in one large Arab country has implications for how women are perceived in other Arab countries. *"In Egypt, there are now voices saying that women should leave the revolution to men, and during a demonstration on International Women's Day in March, men jeered at the women marching, telling them to go home and feed their babies"*^v. Furthermore, there are no women on the committee that has been tasked with drafting the new constitution. The inspirational images of gender solidarity in the early days of the Egyptian revolution *quickly gave way to ugly episodes of targeted harassment*^{vi}.

Women seem to fare better in Tunisia, where they have long benefited from the most expansive legal rights in the region. This status was progressively gained during the thirty-year-presidency of Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987). However, women are struggling to preserve their rights instead of working to win new ones. They are worried about a possible backlash -- that discriminatory laws against them in the region will have a negative impact on the few rights they have already gained. They have become skeptical and deeply concerned about the intentions of Islamist parties who won the elections.

On one side, the current leaders in the Arabic peninsula are more willing to observe women's rights than the parliamentary and elected political figures. This divide is repeatedly manifested in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. On the other side, the current trend in the revolutionary process doesn't seem to align with the bottom-up model experienced in Turkey. While emphasizing economic growth, the tolerant Turkish approach to the practice of Islam prioritized women's participation in the labor force and public life. Their legislation process is relatively gender-sensitive, as well.

A structural support, like quotas, is another way to support women's participation in the formal public sphere. Committed leadership at the top and recruiting men to the women's rights agenda, are also important for long-term gains. Additionally, reliable



security and the rule of law are a crucial part of an agenda ensuring that women are able to participate in political and economic spheres in a meaningful way. However, the litmus test will be the behavior of public institutions and civil societies -- how they manage public resources, guarantees the realization of human rights and observe the rule of law.

The true manifestation of "good" governance is the degree to which it delivers on the promise of human rights in the civil, cultural, economic, political and social spheres. Good governance ensures that the governing institutions effectively guarantee the right to health, adequate housing, sufficient food, quality education, fair justice and personal security, irrespective of gender.

Gender is not a zero-sum game implying a loss for men. Rather, it refers to both, men and women, and their status relative to each other. To win their rights in a society dominated by the supremacy of men, women should begin by overthrowing dominance from within their own circle by working constantly with men. The empowerment process starts from within the woman herself, building self-confidence and self-esteem, then a sense of agency, which is the self within a wider context. It is the concept of "power-with" referring to the ability to associate with each other and realize the synergy.

Are there any promises for women's empowerment from the civil society? How will Arab organizations plan to induce change and sustain gains? The following section outlines the experience of a foundation committed to building peace among children in a region faced by ongoing violence, in a country that -itself- has witnessed violence for almost five decades. Equipped with knowledge, skills and opportunities, those children are likely the future makers of peace and prosperity; and the owners of some fundamental values such as freedom, dialogue, gender equality and diversity.



4. Building a culture of change

Political tyranny is the tip of an iceberg in a deep crisis. It is the socio-cultural system that risks generating a fragile and distorted democracy if it continues to be manipulated by an ideological hegemony that excludes the rights of minorities, the vulnerable and women.

Our case study is on Imam Sadr Foundation (ISF), whose core purpose is to consolidate the culture of openness, dialogue and reconciliation. Having built many initiatives with other NGOs to build bridge between different groups, the Foundation understands all too well the stakes of peace-building for Lebanon, its area and operation, and potentially for other countries since it may represent a model for replication.

According to the Foundation's philosophy, the empowerment umbrella covers comprehensive care of physical, psychological and social dimensions, builds cognitive, occupational and communication skills; and includes lobbying and advocacy campaigns to forge an enabling context for people to participate and act.

The Foundation aims to empower beneficiaries to create their own conditions and enhance their ability to organize themselves. In other words, beneficiaries are induced to control their lives, shape their own agendas, feel their internal powers, and trust themselves as well as their entourage. They can, accordingly, exercise their legitimate right to choose among alternatives and to influence the course of their societies and futures.

Case study: Imam Sadr Foundation (ISF)

The social entrepreneurship is manifested through a consistent postulate to empower women. While the ISF makes a wide range of contributions to Lebanese life, probably the single greatest value-added is its success in emphasizing the importance of women to providing direction and solutions to societal issues. In the conservative context of South Lebanon, a context in which women face challenges of equality, this focus on women is remarkable. Thousands of orphans and vulnerable girls have graduated from ISF programs and have subsequently found an enhanced role for themselves in society. This record reveals a clear commitment to address women's issues and



attend to their educational, health and career needs. It has thus gained an important reputation among women, especially the poor, due to its substantial interventions in the lives of women in South Lebanon.

In the 1960s, Imam Moussa Sadr summarized the major issues of that time: *“Despotism and claiming guardianship of the masses, accusing them of being ignorant and incapable of being in charge of themselves, are among the many forms of oppression that crush the energy of a people; as are the use of neglectful policies that reduce the people’s opportunities, thus denying them any chance of advancement and even depriving them of good health.”*

As early as 1961, and in an attempt to turn his vision into reality, Imam Sadr employed scientific methodology in social work. He:

- Carried out a comprehensive study of the social and economic situation (statistics, benchmarks, etc.);
- Communicated to the concerned authorities the consequences of deprivation, which affect the underserved as well as the wealthy classes;
- Focused on institutional capacity as a primary condition of the success of any action;
- Created the required conditions that allow women to participate in social and cultural change.

One of the activities he established was Imam Sadr Foundation, a non-profit, charitable, developmental, and social organisation. It launched its operations in 1962 and became a public utility organisation as per the Lebanese law. It gained the consultative status of the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations - ECOSOC (2002). The Foundation’s headquarters is located in Tyr, South Lebanon. It runs eight socio-medical centres, and has offices in Beirut, a representative in the USA, as well as a worldwide network of associates.



The characteristics of the region that the ISF serves are critical to understanding the work of the Foundation. South Lebanon has traditionally been neglected by governments as well as Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in spite of its geopolitical importance. The area has suffered numerous military conflicts involving international players and a variety of Lebanese factions. The waves of displacements of people of southern Lebanon have wreaked havoc not only among those directly affected, but also on the rest of the country, as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) cause social and economic pressures on urban centres. Villages that have been deserted, or live under the constant threat of violence, suffer environmental hazards and demographic distortions. In conditions such as these, traditional and cultural challenges also add to social instability and upheaval. It is this challenging and dynamic context in which the ISF carries out its exemplary humanitarian work.

Women make up about 80% of the working team at ISF. Additionally, every year hundreds of women participate in ISF programs and receive professional training and social empowerment. In a traditional culture, where disparities and discrimination against woman are prevalent, this venture is unprecedented. It is ISF's contention that fundamental social change happens as women are brought into the social change and entrepreneurial environment. The solid programs offered by ISF (education, integrated health, vocational training, economic empowerment, etc) are generally designed to facilitate such change.

A critical factor in serving others is the concept of equal opportunity for all, regardless of their race, color, sex, or social and ideological backgrounds. Any bias contradicts equality and undermines the main principles of human rights and development.

Nurturing the peace

Whereas victims of violence from children across the world have reached in the billions, this section is limited to the experience of ISF with specific groups of children in South Lebanon. To protect people from violence, or treat them from physical or psychological wounds caused by violence require a therapeutic approach.



Introducing children to a culture of peace is a future-oriented strategy meant to prevent conflicts.

It is worth mentioning that the current confrontations and uprisings in Arab cities would aggravate the situation, which was already stigmatized by a full spectrum of needs, including recurrent crisis and traumas. Aggression stems from the desire to inflict one's pain on others and from dramatic changes in the family such as: death, illness, separation, displacement, homelessness, severe poverty, child abuse and neglect.

Since its establishment 50 years ago, the Foundation has provided services to tens of thousands of beneficiaries, each of whom has endured some form of violence at one point in time, and many were subject to several types of violence including domestic, in the media, at school, on the street, bombings, murder and forced displacement. The ability of targeted individuals to come to terms with their situation remains tough, as these girls never committed a crime that justifies their painful punishment. Girls grow up to realize that they are in the wrong place (away from their families), which leads them to ask unanswerable questions such as “why me?”, “who brought me here?”, “where am I going?”

Comprehensive approaches are deployed to respond to the multi-faceted needs of the children in order to interrupt this cycle of poverty, childhood adversity, social exclusion and inequality. Many children endure such suffering as a result of the psychological effects after decades of war. ISF considers that achieving significant educational results is contingent upon a delicate formula that balances its vision as an educational institution seeking positive change with dynamic local and non-local demands. In fact, missions expand when local communities find their constituency in need of services and education without having the capacity to attend to these needs. This leaves schools with larger burdens in terms of playing multi-faceted roles in order to achieve the aspired results.

As they grow up, preparation strategies can be clustered under two main headers. The first addresses educational, economic, and psychological empowerment that aims to



reduce pressure, protect them from the profiteers' veracity, and help raise children well. This is realized through integrated projects: professional training, recruitment and placement; as well as empowerment, capacity building and awareness of women's rights projects.

The second header is related to psychological interventions that aim at personal stability and preparation for peaceful dialogue. This effort starts with a process that helps absorb the shock, confess grief, recognize identity and respect oneself. Moral and religious education plays a significant role at this level as it brings tranquility, tolerance, mercy and healing. In addition to the mentioned strategy, ISF adopts integration strategies. The policy is based on admitting students from well-off families in return for flexible fees in accordance with each household's capability. This yields various results, mainly social dialogue at an early stage in childhood, which contributes to filling the gap between well-off and poor children. Another accomplishment was expanding the circle of education-funding partners, which resulted in better equipment, greater capacities of the staff and thus better quality and outcomes.

Conclusion

The world recently celebrated International Women's Day. But the majority of Arab Women did not take part. They did not seem to feel it was theirs. It is an indicator that the Arab transition is still in a suspicious cage^{vii}.

The transition to cultural and social change is not a simple act of changing rulers or those who govern. The victorious Arab revolution should be a choice of nonviolence, a humanitarian choice deriving from a civilized system that allows participation of all citizens, and fosters dialogue as a value, and a manner of inducing change. New leadership and a new political order are surely to come, with the possibility to witness other types of oppression and challenges.

And I finish by quoting Imam Moussa Sadr depicting the desired future. He said:
“Lebanon of Tomorrow is a country of justice and equal opportunities, a unified Arab



country that carries the message of humanity, civilisation, a place where values and freedom dwell.” ...And the desired freedom: "There is no way one's freedom would conflict with others', if all would hold on to the principal values for a humane society".

The insight gained from the experience of Imam Sadr Foundation is that women's empowerment is a reliable approach for social change and a prerequisite to win the fight against misery and oppression. But most importantly, the work with women is promising because women in their own right are indispensable to win in difficult times while transiting to the “people spring”.

References:

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ⁱⁱ World Development Report 2012, the World Bank
ⁱⁱⁱ Women Empowerment: measuring the gender gap, 2005 World Economic Forum,
^{iv} World Development Report 2012, the World Bank
^v Najat Al-Saeid, Al Arabiya news, " No Arab Transition without women", 25 January 2012
^{vi} Isobel Coleman, Foreign Policy, "Is the Arab Transition Bad for Women"? December 20, 2011
^{vii} Sateh Noureddine, AS-SAFIR Arabic Daily, March, 10, 2012

The case study is based on the author's experience as a former board member at Imam Sadr Foundation. Its literature that was consulted for the purpose of this paper includes:

- www.imamsadrfoundation.org.lb;
- Forty Years Forward (1962-2002);
- The Arabic Glossary of Development Terms, 2004;
- Annual reports;
- Many conceptual and evaluation reports archived in (*Empowerment Pillar*).