



PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE LA MEDITERRANEE
الجمعية البرلمانية للبحر الأبيض المتوسط

3rd Standing Committee on Dialogue among Civilizations and Human Rights

Special Task Force on Gender Issues and Equality

“The Role of Women in the Arab Spring”

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Report unanimously adopted during the 8th PAM Plenary Session in Marseille, 21 January 2014

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Women’s rights is an issue that long existed in the Arab world, particularly in the Southern shore of the Mediterranean. Women’s activism in this region can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century, and this is reflected in the works of many renowned writers like Kassim Amin (1865-1908), “the first feminist”, who called for the liberation of women in the Arab world in his book of the same title: *The Liberation of Women* (1899).

2. This report analyzes the role of women from the Southern Mediterranean in the Arab Spring revolutions, and put forward the main challenges facing those women aspiring for equal status and rights in society. The report also highlights the important initiatives taken, as well as those to be taken in this direction.

3. During the Arab Spring revolutions, women played a leading role driven by the fight against injustice and tyranny. These women also fought to recover their exploited rights, and unfortunately, in many of these countries, the revolutions also yielded undesired results. On many occasions, after the revolutions, women found themselves humiliated; they were turned into a commodity with no value, and their rights were violated. Women were stripped away from their right to participate in the decision-making processes, and as a result, lack of participation in political, economic and social life and development prevailed.

4. No efforts must be spared to establish, and to secure, women’s rights in society, as well as to restore their dignity through constitutional reforms. Newly established constitutions must guarantee full equality for women, and for people of all classes, as well as maintain the components of the civil and secular state. Despite their active participation in the revolutions, women have expressed their fear of exclusion from the political movement taking place in their

own countries, as well as from the electoral process. What happened in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, is a clear example of this deliberate exclusion, with no sufficient number of women candidates within the parties running for post revolution elections.

5. Therefore, decision-makers and the community as a whole must realize that revolutions call for real change and a new structure, of which women are a critical part. People are calling for building civil and democratic states, based on separation of religion from the state, and the adoption of laws that are enacted on the basis of respect for human rights in accordance with international laws, as well as adoption of laws which do not discriminate between race, gender or religion. People are striving to establish states which provide their citizens with equal rights, as well as afford them dignity and respect their right of freedom of expression.

6. In post revolution societies, justice must prevail during transitional phases, especially since many of the crimes committed under the former regimes, and during the revolution, were committed against women, such as sexual harassment, rape and torture in prisons. Such crimes and their perpetrators must be brought to justice.

7. Therefore women of the Arab Spring countries must bring forward, and highlight, all national public concerns and integrate gender issues, based on the principles of dignity, equality, equal citizenship and the right to protection and care, social justice, political participation and decision-making. They must also unite against abuses committed by some parties in power.

8. Reports indicate that the status of Arab women, after long decades of struggle, is currently experiencing a decline, compared to the past. Furthermore, women who fought in the revolutions, subsequently found themselves, in some countries, living in primitive ages of ignorance.

9. This is where the Arab Spring turned into a “dark autumn” in some countries, and went many steps backwards, so much so, that women have become afraid and concerned, in spite of their prominent presence and the role they played in these revolutions. Furthermore, women found themselves deliberately excluded from reaping the fruits of their strong involvement in many of these post-revolution countries.

10. Women of the so-called Arab Spring fear that the bright future which they aspired for, is turning into a grim present under the cover of religious extremism which spread in many of these countries, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In this context, one must not ignore the suffering of Palestinian women in the Gaza Strip, in the light of the coup carried out by the Hamas faction, and all the violations committed under the excuse of religion.

11. In Egypt, with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, women lost one of the most prominent achievements that they have been longing to for years. The parliamentary quota that had been earmarked for 64 seats was abolished, dropping women's representation in parliament

from 12 % to 2 % after the 'Freedom and Justice Party' of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the Salafis obtained the largest number of parliamentary seats.

12. After the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian women insist that the battle for their rights continues, especially since the Islamist party succeeded, during their short-lived rule, to control media and some of the vital institutions in the state, mainly those in the educational and religious sectors. This control aimed at distorting the image of women, and deemed any demand to liberate women from the authoritarian patriarchal society, as an infidel and libertine act.

13. The rights enjoyed by Egyptian women and which they seek to preserve and ameliorate are those related to the personal status, custody, education and divorce law.

14. Women in Libya, who suffered long years of injustice, took to the streets and held rallies calling for the fall of the regime and for freedom and dignity. In the first draft of the election law, despite strong opposition from women's rights organizations, women were rewarded by the cancellation of their 10% quota.

15. In Yemen, the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace to the activist Tawakkol Karman, represented an important achievement for the Yemeni women. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that Yemen is the worst country in relation to the status of women worldwide. In this country, women suffer from dire discrimination and marginalization, which are manifested in high rates of illiteracy amongst females, a low percentage of participation in economic and political life, and a weak representation in the House of Representatives and in decision-making positions in general. All these factors lead to discrimination when legislating laws related to women's rights, and undermine the demand for gender equality.

16. Despite the numerous and persistent calls for the achievement of women's rights in Arab societies, statistics and reports indicate that the progress made by women after decades of struggle, during which women paid a hefty price to be freed from behind walls of the so called «Haramlik»¹ has not only been hindered, but is currently also experiencing a decline compared to what has been achieved in the past. Women were concerned with how to make progress in achieving greater rights, while at present they are concerned with how to protect and preserve the rights that they already achieved.

17. Nevertheless, Arab women are able to take a stand and face the challenges despite the very difficult situation which they are currently facing. These women see in this critical situation an opportunity which gives a further impetus to change the course of these transitions. This is where the voice of women has a greater presence, and this is associated with improvement of civil and political rights in the region generally.

¹ Haramlik is an Ottomany Term referring to the family or *harim* area in the Ottoman house, where strangers were forbidden from entering, and women were not allowed beyond it.

18. Syria's civil war has had a devastating impact on women at home and in refugee camps across borders, where they are vulnerable to trafficking, forced and child marriage and sexual violence².

19. In Iraq for example, religious and sectarian parties robbed the freedom of women, who once were regarded as the most progressive amongst their peers but who, nevertheless, today live a terrible reality, under the influence of an authority which dragged women back to the centuries of darkness and the 'harem', where the role of women shifted from being 'effective and tradition-breaking' at times of stability, to "traditional roles like nursing and cooking".

20. It is true that the active participation of women in the Arab Spring has been astonishing and outstanding, but one may ask how, and will this active participation be translated into political rights and true leadership.

II. WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE POLITICAL TRANSITION

21. Women's rights are an intrinsic part of the universally acknowledged human rights, however on the ground, women's conditions remain far from ideal, and discrimination against them still exists in alarming levels. Based on this, it is imperative to deal with issues like women's rights as a priority in post-revolution societies. According to the first Arab Human Development Report of 2002³ the 'lack of political freedoms', 'poor education' but also the 'lack of women's rights' are the main reasons hampering progress in the Arab world.

22. For many women, the optimism of the Arab Spring has been followed by a disappointing autumn. The reality of Arab women today, in light of the Arab awakening, puts more than a question mark over their real participation and future role in shaping the transitional period to achieve the objectives and aspirations of the Arab Spring.

23. To date male practices in some of these countries, have disappointed women dreadfully, and have not given any tangible sign that they will engage women as partners and citizens with rights to participate in the formation of the future of their countries. In countries that have witnessed Arab Spring revolutions, women's presence in transitional councils, new governments, and parliaments is almost non-existent, especially when compared to their role during the revolutions. These actions have created disappointments and frustrations among women as their aspirations in building their societies based on the principles of social justice and equality have been hijacked.

²Thomson Reuters Foundation Poll 2013: <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/poll-womens-rights-in-the-arab-world/>

³ United Nations Development Program, Arab Fund for economic and social development, *Arab Human Development Report, 2002, creating opportunities for future generations*

24. Concerns among progressive women increased with the rise of political Islam and the arrival to power of Islamist parties in both Tunisia and Egypt. However, in January 2014, Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly voted to enshrine equality between men and women in article 20 of its adopted constitution.

25. A U.N. report on women, issued in April 2013 indicates that 99.3 percent of women and girls are subjected to sexual harassment in Egypt, which some analysts say reflects a general rise in violence in Egyptian society over the past half-decade. Female genital mutilation is still endemic in Egypt, where 91 percent of women and girls - 27.2 million in all - are subjected to cutting, according to UNICEF⁴.

26. The serious social problem of sexual harassment, has long existed in society way before any revolution, and it adds up to the challenges facing women that have to be addressed with urgency and must be approached with zero tolerance. On the issue of rape and sexual harassment during conflicts, in July 2013, the Italian Chamber of Deputies, in collaboration with the Ara Pacis Initiative and the Observatory for Gender in Crisis Rome organized the event "The Necessary Truth: Processes of Reconciliation in Countries of the Arab Spring", which brought to the fore the issue of rape as a weapon of war - a practice that continues in conflict and post-conflict countries, with a particular focus on Libya. The meeting gave voice to victims, abuse witnesses and experts in order to break the silence surrounding these crimes, which guarantees the impunity of perpetrators. A proposal to equal victims of sexual crimes during the war, and the Gaddafi regime era to war victims, with the same compensation and assistance rights in Libya was discussed.

III. HURDLES AFTER THE REVOLUTION

A- The rise of Political Islam

27. The main fear concerning women's rights is associated with the rise of Islamist parties. But it can also be true that the main issue facing women's rights is not only a matter of religion, but also a matter of a conservative and patriarchal culture.

28. Before going into more detail about the challenge of rising political Islam, the following must be made clear. Often, Islamists are perceived as an undemocratic, intolerant and militant movement with an antagonistic approach to their ideological rivals, such as the West or Israel. This perception of Islamists is rather simplified and questionable as there is no foundation for an assessment of political Islamic movements as a monolithic course. A distinction between moderate and radical Islamists should be applied.

⁴ Thomson Reuters Foundation Poll 2013: <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/poll-womens-rights-in-the-arab-world/>

29. Moderate Islamists are usually defined as pragmatists who seek gradual societal and political reforms within the existing system. Radicals aim to impose changes through revolutionary means, often implying the use of violence. It would be a mistake to think that the political struggle between regimes and oppositions in the Muslim world today is purely ideological. There is no justifiable reason to interpret Islamists' terms of reference, modes of expression or behavior as functioning within the framework of the Quran. They are products of a context, not of a universal Islamist principle⁵.

B- Former regimes and “Western” values

30. In some cases, under the former regimes in MENA countries, preserving women's rights was more of an attempt to create a better image of the regimes in the eyes of their Western allies. Former dictators often associated this process with members from their own families, usually their wives. Unfortunately, this can represent an excuse to remove such institutions which advocate for women's rights when a change of regime takes place, with the excuse of severing any reference to the old regime and its institutions. In this regard, positive outcomes of some laws enacted under old regimes, are achievements that should be maintained and safeguarded, especially those which have liberated women and enhanced their status, including prohibiting female genital mutilation and child marriage.

31. The countries swept by the Arab Spring are signatories to the 1981 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. According to the convention, women, for example, are not only protected from state discrimination before courts and in the labor market, but they also are protected from violence and human rights violations in the private sphere.

IV. WOMEN'S RIGHTS – CHALLENGES AND MEASURES

A- Education

32. The key for the modernization of a country is an equal education for men and women where both genders enjoy the same right to express their potentials, and are taught to deal with each other on the base of equality. It is the quality of education which matters. Therefore a complete change in the social and cultural mind set is needed.

33. Furthermore, legal and legislative reforms should be accompanied by educational ones in order to fight stereotypes, making the former an easy and an acceptable change. Equality between men and women should start at home, and must be taught at schools, where children spend most of their time.

⁵ Political Inclusion as a Key Factor to Moderate Islamists – Chapter 2 – Natasa Kubikova

34. In this regard, it is also recommended to develop education programs about human rights, especially women's rights according to the major UN conventions. Women should also have equal access to scholarships and fellowships. This is particularly important in countries like those of the Arab Spring going through democratic transitions, as PAM and the Universal Declaration on Democracy consider that it is important to recognize equality of opportunity between men and women, as an indicator of democracy. Equal opportunities start with equal access to education.

35. To this regard, one should refer to the UN Women's Political Empowerment Programme in Egypt, which launched the "Citizenship Initiative". This initiative received a portion of the €4 million EU grant to UN Women, and aims to issue two million ID cards for Egyptian women, particularly for those living in rural and marginalized areas. The main purpose of the grants and collaboration is to support women's rights and ensure, through the projects of UN Women, women's economic empowerment and political representation in decision-making as well as better access to opportunities and services. Such projects are needed with urgency to help empower women, especially in large poor countries where big numbers of women are not aware of their rights in society.

B- Economic empowerment for women in the post-Arab Spring countries

36. Economic discrimination is a universal issue, as 50% of working women in the world hold vulnerable jobs. As for the salary gap, it is still between 10 and 30%⁶. What is even more important to mention, is that the gap between men's employment and that of women is still huge. This issue is particularly important in the Southern Mediterranean. Not only it is the perfect opportunity to highlight it, but also because the numbers are more alarming in this region: in North Africa only 23.1% of women are employed while 72.6% are inactive, 4.3% being unemployed. For the Middle East, the statistics are almost the same, the numbers being respectively 21,6%, 74,6% and 3.8%. The Middle East and North Africa have the highest male-to-female labor force participation rates differential (almost 50%). Despite recent efforts to address gender inequality, female employment in Morocco and Lebanon is still significantly lower than that of men. In Lebanon, women make up less than 20% of the workforce and get paid substantially less than men for comparable work.

37. Economic empowerment for women is a very important factor linked to women's freedom and capability. This is again linked to education, where women should be prepared to take an active role in society. This depends on the state and civil organizations, which have the responsibility to eliminate discriminatory laws, to monitor the private sector in order to assure equality in wages, and to help women in their quest for jobs in general.

⁶ UN Women, *Annual report 2010-2011*

38. Not only does economic empowerment for women lead to social welfare and alleviation of poverty, but it also helps in the fight against domestic violence. Economic empowerment enables women, who are subjected to domestic violence, to free themselves from economic restrictions which may force them to endure such circumstances. Many domestic violence victims do not speak up against their abuse due to their total financial dependence on their partners.

39. On the issue of economic empowerment, reference should be made to a number of initiatives such as the “Union of Women's Action” which opened the Women & Youth info desk in Tangier in February 2011, with the goal to provide support to women and young job seekers and to those who want to start their own business.

40. Another very recent project is “Young Women as Job Creators”, which seeks to support young women in the Southern Mediterranean to starting up their own business. Promoted by the Association of Organizations of Mediterranean Businesswomen (AFAEMME), the project promotes self-employment and entrepreneurship among young female university students who are about to graduate and have an interest in starting their own enterprise.

C- Networking with civil society and international organizations

41. Different agencies and programs of the United Nations are playing a very important role in supporting women in Arab countries, and in the countries of the Arab Spring in particular. For example, UN Women was a chief actor among many NGOs in the establishment of the National Egyptian Women's Charter (2011), which managed to gather different groups of women who were introduced to the capacity of mobilization and communication.

42. In 2011, the Egyptian Women's Union was launched and helped in the mobilization of millions of women during the different elections and referenda. The Union's objectives include the revision of the political parties' agendas and to help women's networking in the region. Another major issue that must be addressed is stereotypes, and the responsibility of parliamentarians as well as the society as a whole to address it.

43. Women in power have the responsibility to promote women's rights and should aspire to acquiring higher positions that are not traditionally accorded to women. Women in parliaments should be included in the major committees and should not be restricted only to those related to women and child issues. The Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU), also proposed a Plan of Action to correct present imbalances in the participation of men and women in political life. This plan should be adopted and applied by PAM member states in order to promote a regional plan of action. North-South cooperation in the Mediterranean is also important to help the exchange of best practices and lessons learned.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO PAM NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

44. Much is at stake for women in Post-Revolution countries where the promise of sweeping political change has run up against the realities of conservative, deeply patriarchal societies. In some newly elected legislatures, religious pressure led to the axing of minimum quotas for women in parliaments. Fears grow over a roll-back of the moderate gains made by women's rights in the pre-revolution era, which, while repressive, tended to be secular.

45. Parliamentarians in PAM countries must ensure that a specific framework for the protection of women in the political, economic and social spheres is established in order to guarantee the enforcement of specific laws aimed at safeguarding women's rights in society. Proposals for solutions to shared challenges which affect the Mediterranean as a whole should also be made. It is of the utmost importance that the democratic reforms in the South of the Mediterranean are accompanied by women empowerment in all its aspects. PAM encourages the the establishment of democracies based on gender equality, and eradication of corruption and abuse of power.

46. In this context, in 2013, PAM women MPs attended a several international events dedicated to women and their role in parliaments, and in political life in general. These events included, among others, the OSCE Mediterranean Conference on the 'Role of women in the Public, Political and Economic Life' which was held in Monaco, and the first 'Women in Parliaments Global forum Annual Summit' which was organized by the European Parliament in Brussels. PAM was represented at both events by many MPs who actively participated and contributed to the debates.

47. Finally, it is suggested that in light of the blatant attacks on women's rights, the following steps must be taken in order to protect them:

- i.* Developing and promoting a clear dialogue on women's rights, aimed at clarifying some of the concepts that are directly related to the role and rights of women.
- ii.* Developing new mechanisms aimed at the young generation, both men and women, to rebuild confidence and establish the relationship with these women who were leaders at the forefront of these revolutions.
- iii.* Activating networking and coordination mechanisms at the national and regional levels in order to reinforce women's rights.

- iv. To document and identify the experiences of women in all stages of revolutions and to disseminate them.
- v. To document abuses suffered by women and take appropriate legal action at the national, regional and international level.
- vi. Developing mechanisms of solidarity among women in different Arab countries.
- vii. Ensuring effective participation of women in committees working on the constitutions and their amendments.

48. Furthermore, decision-makers must recognize the role played by Arab women in the Arab Spring revolutions, as well as their role in the democratic processes. The role of women during the revolutions represents an important opportunity in which to invest, through the political will of peoples and women in the region, to bring about the long awaited democratic change.

49. The release of political detainees, as well as support and solidarity to women who have been subjected to repression and abuse need urgent attention. Finally, solidarity must be expressed with women who fight these battles and play a prominent role in the restructuring of social, political and economic systems.

50. The effect of the Arab spring on women is a topic discussed to a great extent nowadays. Despite the fear which rose during the political transition and with the rise of political Islam, an optimistic approach should prevail. Maybe Arab women are among those less represented in the world, but they are deeply involved in all aspects of life in the Arab world and this was clear at the outset of the Arab spring. Women play an important role in keeping the fabric of society closely knit, laying firm grounds for a strong platform, from which society can evolve and develop for a better future for all.