



## **The Gender Paradox of Arab Democracy** **Assessing Women's Rights Five Years after the "Arab Spring"**

*Tamara Kharroub*

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On 17 December 2010, 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi was slapped across the face in front of a crowd and insulted by a municipal official, after he protested a fine and the confiscation of his goods for failing to pay the fine. Bouazizi's appeals to waive the fine and recover his property went unsuccessful. One hour later, the young man set himself on fire outside the government building in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, sparking nationwide protests that spread into neighboring countries and triggering what is now known as the "Arab Spring." Yet, one element of this event remains underexplored; Bouazizi was insulted by a *female* municipal officer.

Injustice, high unemployment rates, and the lack of economic opportunities are certainly dire conditions that lead to immense frustration, and elicit protests and activism. However, when considering the event that triggered the protests that swept the Arab world starting in early 2011, one cannot but wonder, had the young man been insulted by a male municipal official rather than a female, would his response have been this extreme? Would the "Arab Spring" have taken place at all?

This is not to disparage the sacrifice of the young man or diminish the struggles for freedom and equality across the Arab world, but to recognize the gendered dynamics of Arab politics. Faida Hamdi, the female municipal official who happened to be the face of state corruption in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, is a woman who insulted a man in public. In a context where state oppression and corruption are expected and therefore tolerated, being insulted by woman is too extreme to accept. While such sexist attitudes are not exclusive to the Arab world, we must address the ramifications of such attitudes towards women and their implications for achieving Arab democracy. How does gender play into Arab politics and why is sexism an acceptable form of oppression in the Arab world? Aren't gender equality and women's rights part of the quest for justice and equality? More specifically, how have state oppression, the organized opposition, and western powers taken advantage of women and women's movements in the Arab world for their own political interests?



## The Women of the “Arab Spring”

The wave of protests that has taken place across the Arab world starting in early 2011 included women as equal partners and citizens, protesting and joining the struggle against dictatorships, demanding justice and freedom, and taking risks along their male counterparts. For example, in Egypt’s Tahrir Square, the prominent Egyptian feminist, activist, and author, doctor Nawal El Saadawi, was seen protesting every day, giving hope that gender equality was finally on the public agenda. However, soon enough this hope was shattered, along with the garments of female protestors. The integral role that women played in the protests, their political participation and their increased visibility in the public sphere have yielded little progress –if any- for women’s rights. In fact, in many instances this has created more restrictions on women’s freedoms and greater abuse of women’s rights.

Among a series of protests that continue to rock the Arab world demanding political reform, dignity for citizens, freedom of regime control, and economic opportunities for youth, the abuse of women’s rights persists. Whereas the movements have been characterized by a general sense of demand for justice and equality, the rights of women seem to have been ignored and abused along the process. In Egypt, for example, in the same Tahrir Square that saw Nawal El Sadawi and the demands for justice and equality, women were beaten, stripped of their clothes, sexually harassed by the crowds, publicly shamed, and subjected to invasive so-called ‘virginity tests’ by the military. Violent attacks and sexual assaults on women by unknown groups of thugs also occurred during the International Women’s Day march in Egypt in March 2011. Other than minimal media coverage and activism by women organizations, there was no public outrage or mainstream denunciation in the Arab world over such horrific abuses.

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*Despite decades of activism and political engagement, women remain victimized and systematically excluded from public life in Arab countries across the board*

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Even when calling for democracy, equality, rights, opportunities, and representation, women are too often systematically excluded and alienated from both the goals and the process and abused along the way, and this abuse has become normalized in Arab societies. Multiple reports surfaced of cases of gang rape and harassment in Tahrir Square, sexual slavery of women and young girls by ISIL, and trafficking of young female Syrian refugees. The famous photograph of the woman in the blue bra stripped of her clothes and dragged by the military across Tahrir square went viral as a symbol of women power, while in fact it is the epitome of the oppression of women, with countless social media comments calling her a “whore.” When Lebanon rose against the neglect of their governments and flooded the streets in protest, the Arab cyberspace and social media



spheres flooded with comments and criticisms against, of all things, the clothing of Lebanese female protestors.

There is no question that Arab women have been proactive throughout history in social and political participation, and in the struggle for justice and democracy. However, women remain victimized and systematically excluded from public life in Arab countries across the board.

## The Gendering of Arab Revolutions

Given the alienation of women from public and political spheres in the Arab world, the other perspective of the Bouazizi story is herein considered. The revolutionary tale of an oppressive state agent (who happened to be a woman) abusing an honest hardworking young man from the working class, is the dominant perspective that accorded the revolutionary narrative. The alternative story of the female municipal officer Fadia Hamdi, is that of a woman who was sexually harassed by a male in the street while doing her job, and responded to the harassment.

After her arrests and releases, 45-year-old Faida Hamdi claims to have been doing her job as she was given orders to clear illegal street vendors from the area, when Bouazizi pushed her and touched her (he may have grabbed her breasts according to some reports) prompting her to call the police.<sup>1</sup> In this view, the narrative shifts from an attack on “masculine dignity” to an attack on “feminine modesty.”<sup>2</sup> Although Hamdi may seem to represent state oppression, she is herself a victim of both the repressive regime that hired her and the patriarchal norms that confine her career and life.

In social and political spheres, the dynamics of power and gender often intersect to demarcate acceptable behaviors for women and men. States and military regimes enforce and exploit patriarchal norms to assert and accredit their own authority. In a patriarchal system, the familial association of both men and women determines their status in society. For example, a woman is defined as a mother or otherwise a ‘whore’ while a man is the patriarch and protector or otherwise a criminal. Outside the boundaries of patriarchal affiliation, “any woman can be a whore, any man a terrorist.”<sup>3</sup>

Protestors who dare to demand justice and reform, and thereby threaten the regime, are defined and presented as being outside the boundaries of patriarchal norms and the state order, and therefore risk being labeled criminals. In the binary patriarchal context of whore vs. mother, women protestors are labeled whores and fittingly punished and identified as deserving of attacks and as ineligible for protection. One woman who was being attacked by a group of thugs in Tahrir

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<sup>1</sup> Totten, Michael J. “The woman who blew up the Arab world.” *World Affairs*. May 17, 2012.

<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/michael-j-totten/woman-who-blew-arab-world>

<sup>2</sup> Moruzzi, Norma Clair. “Gender and the Revolutions: Critique Interrupted.” *Middle East Research and Information Project*.

<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer268/gender-revolutions>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



Square even used this familial association and managed to turn one of her attackers into her protector by telling him “I am a mother” and that he is a “brave man” who can protect her.

In this patriarchal system, the state uses the familial positioning of men and women to criminalize individuals who oppose the regime. In Egypt, mass sexual assaults on women that took place in Tahrir Square were orchestrated by thugs who were hired and paid by the regime to intimidate female protestors.<sup>4</sup> These types of attacks can be traced back to the Mubarak regime since 2005, when male protestors were beaten up while female protestors were harassed and attacked by hired groups of thugs. Even after Mubarak was ousted, the Egyptian state security system (the ‘deep state’) continued the attacks on protestors, including assaults on women, by state-sponsored thugs. These practices are said to have continued by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sisi regime, as they have both been reported as using sexual violence as a political instrument to advance their agenda and exert pressure, fear and control.<sup>5</sup>

Even when the Egyptian military forces assaulted and beat the woman known as “the girl in the blue bra,” the state media manufactured narratives of immorality to discredit the protests. The woman in the blue bra was described as “wearing a bikini and not a bra” and blamed for wearing the *abaya* with nothing underneath and for wearing *abaya* with snaps instead of buttons. The military spokesman, Major General Adel Emara, described the protestors as thugs and drug addicts, and claimed that female protestors were sexually promiscuous, painting the protestors as immoral and therefore not deserving of respect and protection.<sup>6</sup> An army general (believed to be current Egyptian president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi) justified the practice of ‘virginity tests’ under the cover that female protestors are “whores” and these tests are necessary to protect the military from accusations of rape, claiming that the women who were detained “were not your daughters or mine” but “camped out in tents with male protestors.”<sup>7</sup>

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In an exemplification of these patriarchal boundaries, protests against sexual harassment and state violence were held under the banner “Egypt’s daughters are a red line.” This move to paint revolutionary women, who are fighting for justice, democracy, and reform, as “daughters” was

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<sup>4</sup> Quicksilver Media for Channel 4. “Unreported World: Egypt Sex Mobs and Revolution.” Documentary Film. Hosted by Ramita Navai and Directed by Dimitri Collingridge. 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBTS5bM42kI>

<sup>5</sup> “Exposing state hypocrisy: Sexual violence by security forces in Egypt.” FIDH. [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt\\_report.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_report.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Hafez, Sherine. “Bodies That Protest: The Girl in the Blue Bra, Sexuality, and State Violence in Revolutionary Egypt.” *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Autumn 2014), pp. 20-28. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676977?seq=1#fndtn-page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676977?seq=1#fndtn-page_scan_tab_contents)

<sup>7</sup> Pratt, Nicola. “Gendered paradoxes of Egypt’s transition.” *Open Democracy*. February 2, 2015. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/nicola-pratt/gendered-paradoxes-of-egypt%E2%80%99s-transition>



meant to counter the military's narrative of "whores" and bring female protestors back to the confines of patriarchy as "daughters," while male protestors encircled the women during the protests as their "protectors."<sup>8</sup> Even when liberating the female protestors from the 'whore' label, upholding the patriarchal norms remains vital as a way to validate the protests and discredit the military's accusations.

Women activists in the Arab world face the need to legitimize their public presence and validate their political participation through conforming to patriarchal values and abiding by social expectations. For example, by presenting themselves within the confines of the family system, Egyptian women engaged in a variety of patriarchal activities during the protest such as participating in prayers and protesting along their husbands and children.

In political contexts and conflicts, women's bodies become sites of social control and power. State control and military violence intersect with patriarchal norms to dictate, control and demarcate women's existence, as well as their rights and freedoms. Patriarchal gender norms and boundaries present women's participation in protests as temporary and a moral obligation, as mere mothers and daughters, and possibly only encouraged for numbers - women are after all half of society- to display the scale of discontent with the regime. These patriarchal definitions present risks for women's participation in protests and force them to withdraw from political engagements after the protests.

### **The US and Arab Women's Rights**

While women have been proactive in the struggle for not only women's rights in the Arab world but for freedom, justice, and democracy for more than a century, the West continues to reduce their struggle (in neo-orientalist fashion) to discussions of the veil and 'cultural and religious' oppression by men, completely discrediting the role of power relations and global geopolitics. In reality, the US and the West have not been progressive supporters of women's rights in the Arab world.

In order to assess the role of the US and western powers in advancing the Arab women's rights agenda, one must consider the history of western intervention and women's activism in the Arab world. The current political turmoil can be traced back to the 1967 defeat of Arab armies in the Arab-Israeli war, when the pan-Arab nationalist project (represented by then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser) plummeted and new leftist groups, particularly the student movement, arose. These nationalist opposition movements focused on social justice, anti-imperialism, and anti-authoritarianism. Although gender equality was not on their agenda, these groups supported and mobilized women's participation in public and political life and challenged existing gender norms

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<sup>8</sup> Hafez. Bodies That Protest.



and the status quo.

However, this revolutionary surge was soon countered by western powers who supported and financed the successor Egyptian president Anwar Al-Sadat after he signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1979. The US allies in the region, such as Sadat, countered the leftist and Nasserist political current by supporting Islamist movements and promoting social conservatism especially regarding women.<sup>9</sup> In order to undermine the political revolutionary movements and break away from Nasser's secular feminist regime, Sadat's policy included not only clamping down on activists but also providing incentives for women to stay at home and discouraging women from working.<sup>10</sup> These practices were encouraged by Islamists who abused female activists and disapproved of women's participation in the public sphere.<sup>11</sup>

This has resulted in the withdrawal of activists and leftists from political activism, leaving Islamist groups as the only organized opposition movements. In addition, women's rights activism in the 1980s and the 1990s was relegated to independent women's organizations and women's rights were subordinated within the public and political agendas.

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For reasons primarily related to regional and international alliances and the global geopolitical economy, two main political currents have dominated the Arab political arena; authoritarian regimes and Islamist movements, both of which have continuously undermined women's equal rights and freedoms and institutionalized patriarchal norms. The US and the west continue to support and enable autocratic regimes and governments that constantly suppress women's rights and agendas.

### **The Shortcomings of Top-Down State Feminism**

After independence from colonial powers and following the fall of socialist and leftist movements, authoritarian and corrupt Arab regimes (supported by the west) rose to power and remained in power until the events of the "Arab Spring." These regimes granted some juridical gender rights to women through a program of secular modernization. Through neo-liberal economic measures,

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<sup>9</sup> Pratt, Nicola. "How the west undermined women's rights in the Arab world." *Jadaliyya*. January 5, 2016.

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23693/how-the-west-undermined-women's-rights-in-the-arab>

<sup>10</sup> Hatem, Mervat F. "Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Vol. 24, No. 2 (May, 1992), pp. 231-251

<sup>11</sup> Pratt, How the west.





autocratic regimes in the Arab world promoted some degree of women's rights and public participation. While advancing women's rights is a step in the right direction, the limitations of this type of state feminism are detrimental to achieving real progress.

In Egypt, for example, several laws were passed during the Mubarak regime that granted women some rights. Those laws, known (and discredited) as "Suzanne's Laws" in reference to the former First Lady Suzanne Mubarak who championed them, criminalized FGM, granted women the right to divorce, gave divorced women custody of their children until age 15, allowed women to keep the family home to raise children, and instated parliamentary quotas for women participation. However, this top-down state feminism limited the progress of women's rights. For decades, the women's rights agenda in Egypt was monopolized by the National Council for Women, and Egyptian women were not equipped to take on the challenges that followed the fall of Mubarak. Moreover, these 'token' promotions of women's rights were constrained under the regime's control and women's participation was confined to women committees and charity organizations while governance and decision making positions were primarily occupied by men. This performance of apparent women's rights is used to polish the regime's image and as an alibi for western allies who question the regime's brutal responses to dissidents.

In Tunisia, following independence from France 60 years ago, the country adopted the most progressive women's rights legislation in the Arab world. The Tunisian Personal Status Code was introduced by the late President Habib Bourguiba in 1956, giving women the right to vote and be elected to parliament, equal pay and equal rights to employment as men, the right to divorce, abolishing polygamy, requiring a woman's consent for marriage, fixing the minimum age for marriage at 18, and in 1961 abortion became legal in Tunisia even as it was still taboo in Europe. However, these groundbreaking reforms for Tunisian women's rights were exploited by the regime of successor President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali to project the image of modernity and a seeming democracy as cover for oppression and human rights abuses.

The waves of top-down secular modernization constructed a model of the modern Arab woman as active and visible in public life. Women's public visibility, however, does not amount to equality nor participation. The dichotomous view of domestic spheres as tradition and public visibility as modernity undermines the complexity of women's roles and presents a misconception of public as being equal.<sup>12</sup>

Although it helped advance women's rights and incorporate some women in public office, this form of feminism was so ineffective that it coexisted with and under the patronage of patriarchal norms for decades. This limited promotion of women's rights by authoritarian Arab governments might be considered a step forward, however this top-down secular modernization contributed to the institutionalization of constraining women's activism to the limits granted and controlled by government. Moreover, the fact remains that no citizens (men or women) have rights and

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<sup>12</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila (Ed.). "Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East." Princeton University Press. 1998.



opportunities to participate in political representation and governance.

In addition, in countries where most citizens have few rights, the association between the corrupt elite oppressive regimes and women's rights are detrimental to the prospects of advancing further rights and freedoms for women. The conflation between the repressive regime and women's rights in the mind of Arab citizens present a major challenge with regard to women's rights activism in the aftermath of the revolutions. Women's rights are dismissed and even countered as remnants of the old corrupt oppressive regimes. This structure no doubt has shaped the progress (or lack thereof) and prospect for Arab women's rights and freedoms.

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Moreover, in the modern political history of Arab states, there exists a polarization between autocratic regimes and their associated top-down policies of claimed modernizations on one hand and organized oppositional movements restricted to Islamic political groups on the other. As Islamic movements gained further support and proliferation, authoritarian regimes competed by showing their commitment to religion and conservatism, and what more visible easier method than using women's issues. Women's issues are intertwined in the political ecosystem of Arab countries and are often the most readily sacrificed and exploited for power and control.

### **Women's Rights in the Aftermath of the "Arab Spring"**

Following the fall of regimes (or dictators) in some Arab states, threats to women's rights became more ingrained in the legal structure especially with the rise of Islamist political parties and new faces of dictatorships. In Egypt for example, no women were included in the committee created at the request of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) after the ousting of Mubarak to draft amendments to the constitutions before the elections. During the elections, pictures of female candidates from the Muslim Brotherhood's *Hizb El-Noor* were replaced by pictures of flowers or -worse yet- pictures of their husbands. Egypt's ruling military abandoned the quota of women participation (previously set at 10%), where in Egypt's first election women lost more than 50 seats. Following the ousting of Mubarak, politicians have called for repealing laws passed under the Mubarak regime that advanced women's rights in Egypt (also known as 'Suzanne's laws'), such as decriminalizing FGM, disallowing women to divorce husbands, and take child custody rights from mothers.<sup>13</sup> The Islamist parties proposed lowering marriage age for females to 9 and claimed that policies to eradicate violence against women and FGM clash with Islamic law.

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<sup>13</sup> Pratt. Gendered paradoxes.





With regard to elections, in 2012 women won only 2% of the votes in the Egyptian parliament. However, as of last elections in 2015, women make up 15% of the seats (75 elected and 14 appointed by President Sisi). According to Article 11 of the 2014 Constitution, "the state shall ensure the achievement of equality between women and men in all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution." The Law No. 46/2014 of the House of Representatives requires 56 women on the electoral lists in addition to 14 women as presidential appointees in order to ensure a total of 70 women in Parliament out of 596 seats. However, those numbers are only stipulated as members of party lists. In effect, the law disregards the allocation of individual seats for women, which is problematic because 80% of the Parliament seats are elected on individual basis and individual candidacy for women is financially and socially almost inaccessible outside the quote system.<sup>14</sup> While some progress has been made, women's rights remain marginal under the current regime.

The unconscious "girl in the blue bra" who was dragged, beaten, and stepped on by Egyptian soldiers, was accused by state media to have intentionally exposed herself in order to implicate the security forces.<sup>15</sup> Although the protests helped bring the epidemic of sexual harassment in Egypt into the media light, no legal action was taken to address this problem. In response, the elected Muslim Brotherhood government announced that a woman's place is at home and not in the streets, and encouraged women to cover up as much as possible. Although Islamist parties have not officially articulated their constitutional views on women's rights, they called for revising 'Suzanne's Laws' as they breach Islamic law. Today, patriarchal restrictions continue under the Sisi regime, even to the point where the National Security Council in Egypt announced that unmarried women constitute a major threat to Egyptian security.

Even in Tunisia, which was once a secular stronghold and a haven for women's rights in comparison to other countries in the region, Salafists and key political players were discussing the re-adoption of FGM. Tunisian women activists continue to fight to keep the rights they have achieved over the years. Despite rebranding of the *Ennahda* Islamist party (which won 37% of the votes of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly in 2011 and 32% of the seats in the parliamentary elections in 2014) to focus on education and the economy, women's issue remain contested in the party, such as quotas on female seats in the congress. *Ennahda* party's positions on women's rights have not been officially declared, with some members supporting polygamy as a fundamental principle of the party's ideology.

With regard to the Tunisian elections, the new Constitution adopted by the Tunisian Constituent Assembly in January 2014 guarantees in Article 34 "women's representation in elected councils" and in Article 46 "The state seeks to achieve equal representation for women and men in elected councils." In May 2014, the Assembly also adopted a new law providing for parity and alternation between women and men on parties' candidate lists. These laws allowed 5000 Tunisian women to

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<sup>14</sup> The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights. "Egyptian women in 2015 parliamentary elections." *Women's UN Report Network*. February 16, 2016. <http://www.wunrn.com/2016/02/egypt-women-in-2015-parliamentary-elections-overview-analysis/>

<sup>15</sup> Hafez. *Bodies That Protest*.



run in the elections and 68 women (31%) to be elected in 2014, which is an improvement from 57 women elected in 2011. However, the laws fail to require party lists to designate women as list leaders, resulting the majority of lists being headed by men. Due to the difficulty for each party list to win more than 1 seat per constituency, the laws fell short of ensuring equal representation of women. In Libya, the National Transitional Council announced that that it would annul laws that contradict *Shari'a* including legalizing polygamy, which has long been outlaws in Libyan. Today, women activists are being threatened, and women are being harassed by militias especially if traveling without male companions. Moreover, new laws made it easier to have child brides and allowing men to divorce their wives without a court approval.

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In Syria, women and children are often the biggest victims of conflicts subjected to further violence of a sexual nature. ISIL continues to commit horrific crimes of sexual slavery against women, in addition to enormous restrictions on women living under their control. With regard to refugees, young female Syrian refugees are being trafficked as sex workers and sold as brides across the Arab world and beyond.

While women's rights and roles in Arab societies continue to be negotiated within the different systems of patriarchal norms and states, one thing is clear: women's rights are not on the public agenda.

Although some countries have women representatives in government and some countries (e.g., Tunisia and Morocco) have removed their reservations to CEDAW, real progress for women's rights has not occurred. Arab women's participation in public life went from marginalization under dictatorships to rejection under new governance and Islamist parties and exclusion from the principles of equality, social justice, human dignity, and political pluralism advocated by protestors.

Five years after the "Arab Spring," it is time to re-consider the 'gender paradox' in the Arab world, and the intricate multi-layered dynamics that contribute to this systematic and regular exclusion of women's rights from Arab public and political agendas.

### **Recommendations: Women's Rights are Human Rights**

Although Arab women have long been an integral and vital catalyst in the struggle for equality and human rights in the Arab world, the rights of women are often neglected and readily violated



throughout the process and outcomes. The glorious call for democracy, equality, inclusion, and human rights across the Arab world often stops short of women

For decades, Arab women's rights have been relegated and subordinated to the issues of liberation, democratization, economic reform, and political participation. In order to achieve equality and reform in Arab societies, women's issues need to be elevated to the mainstream public agenda as basic human rights.

Although many historical examples show that revolutions and democratic transitions are lengthy, chaotic, and often bloody and oppressive of certain social groups, this does not provide a justification for abusing and neglecting women's rights in the process. Time is a necessary factor, but not sufficient as it takes work and efforts to actively change the power relations that enforce patriarchal social and political norms in Arab societies.

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Women's issues are intertwined in the political ecosystem of Arab countries. The issue of women's rights cannot be detached and separated from the structure of power relations and the larger struggle for democratization in the Arab world, and gender equality must therefore be formally integrated in any political process.

Democracy is not merely a system of governance where citizens have some contributions to the process of electing officials, but an ideology of pluralism and representation of all. There cannot be democracy when one group conceives itself as exclusively entitled to governance and political participation and rights; half a democracy is not a democracy. Therefore, the normalization of a patriarchal social order is contradictory to the very concept of democracy.

As a key global leader, the United States needs to take a proactive approach and use its leverage to require Arab countries to fully engage women and other groups in the political process and guarantee full equal rights for women in all aspects of society. The broader concept of democracy as a pluralistic society built on the principles of human rights and equality for all peoples regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, etc., must be promoted and enforced through US programs in the region.