

Original citation:

Nadje, Al-Ali and Pratt, Nicola Christine (2016) Gender, protest and political transition in the Middle East and North Africa. In: Steans, Jill and Tepe-Belfrage, Daniela, (eds.) Handbook on Gender in World Politics. International Handbooks on Gender series . Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 127-136.

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/82017>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

This chapter has been published by Edward Elgar Publishing in Handbook on Gender in World Politics edited by Steans, Jill and Tepe-Belfrage, Daniela published in 2016.

Published version: <http://www.e-elgar.com/shop/handbook-on-gender-in-world-politics>

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

Published in: *Handbook on Gender in World Politics*, edited by Jill Steans and Daniela Tepe-Belfrage, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016, pp. 127-136.

Gender, Protest and Political Transition in the Middle East and North Africa

Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt

Introduction

Since the end of 2010, when a wave of mass protests and uprisings swept across several Arab countries, there has been unprecedented media attention on Arab women and their role in regional political transformations. Yet, this large body of commentary and speculation has tended towards dichotomous positions, representing women either as the heroines of social media and street protests or as the victims of violent and conservative backlashes. A smaller number of scholars have addressed the gendered dimensions of the political and socio-economic processes unfolding since 2011, including the revolutionary struggles, counter-revolutionary backlashes, street protests, armed uprisings and civil war. They have highlighted the complex and varied picture emerging when applying a gendered lens to political transformations across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Al-Ali 2014; Hafez 2014; Kandiyoti 2013; Khalil 2014; Pratt 2013; Salime 2012; Skalli, 2013).

Disaggregating the “Arab Spring”

In this article, we avoid using the term “Arab Spring” as it tends to conflate the diversity of transitions and processes taking place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which range from political reform and protest movements in Jordan, Morocco, Algeria and Kuwait to regime change in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. These different situations across countries in the region have different implications for women’s situations and women’s rights there. In

general, the uprisings and mass rallies initially created new opportunities for women to participate in public life—as protesters, mobilizers, and volunteers in field hospitals, among other activities that contributed to successfully sustaining popular struggles. In Libya and Syria, where the uprisings turned violent, this has led to a prioritization of violent resistance over non-violent struggle, thereby marginalizing women. In Libya, despite women winning almost 17 per cent of seats in the first parliamentary elections after the fall of Gadhafi, nevertheless, women in public life face sustained efforts to silence them through intimidation and threats (Alnaas and Pratt, forthcoming). In the case of the Syrian conflict, women have been marginalized in peace talks, despite more than a decade since the passage of UNSCR 1325 calling for women’s participation in peace making and building. In Egypt and Tunisia, countries where regime change was largely peaceful, women have succeeded to different degrees to be part of the political process. In Tunisia, women made up 24 per cent of the constituent assembly and, in April 2014, the government withdrew all of its reservations on the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), thereby paving the way for gender equality to be enshrined in Tunisian law. However, in Egypt, women’s participation in post-Mubarak political institutions has been very low, both before and after the overthrow of former president Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, and despite the inclusion of an article in the 2014 constitution that obliges the state to guarantee women’s right to hold public office.

In addition to stressing diversity of political processes and outcomes across MENA countries, we would also like to emphasise that women (and men!) in the region are far from homogenous and their experiences of post-2011 developments differ. Women’s access to economic and political resources, as well as social support networks, vary according to social class, place of residence, citizenship status, ethnicity, generation, and political and religious affiliation. Generational shifts have become significant in all national contexts as younger

generations of women and men diverge in both method and content from previous generations of political activists and dissidents. While critical of simplistic notions of 'Facebook revolutions', we recognise that the use of social media and various forms of on-line activism has contributed to the emergence of new forms of activism amongst young men and women whose gender activism is often linked to wider struggles for wider citizenship and human rights (Skalli, 2013). Women and men are further differentiated by their national contexts and respective political economies, histories of protest and gender regimes. Therefore, it is difficult to speak about *the* impact of the socio-political transformations since the end of 2010 on women or women's rights, as though this was singular. Instead, we aim to discuss some of the gendered dimensions of these processes.

History matters

One of the pitfalls of debates about recent developments is the failure to historicise both women's rights activism as well as women's wider political participation in the MENA region. There exists a long history of women's involvement in political life and civil society in many countries of the region, particularly Egypt and Tunisia. The Egyptian Feminist Union, led by Huda Shaarawi, which emerged during the period of Egyptian resistance to British colonial rule at the beginning of the 20th century, was one of the first women's movements in the region. Over the past decades, Egyptian women activists have spearheaded struggles for civic rights, democracy and human rights alongside women's rights (Al-Ali 2000).

One of the challenges women's rights activists in the Middle East face has been to avoid co-option by their respective authoritarian regime's modernizing policies, of which a form of state feminism has been a key element. Authoritarian regimes have implemented measures to increase gender equality and social justice, as long as these did not challenge the

political status quo. We have seen this most conspicuously in Tunisia with Bourguiba's radical legal reform of the personal status code (governing marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance) and Ben Ali's politics of secular reformism to consolidate his political authoritarianism (Khalil, 2014: 191). In the contexts of the one-party dictatorships that have been prevalent in the region, it was difficult for women's rights activists to operate independently of state structures. In Egypt, some women's rights activists collaborated with Suzanne Mubarak's National Council for Women, which played a high profile role in promoting legal reforms for women. Despite the fact that women's groups on the ground had been working and lobbying for years for these changes, they came to be considered as 'Suzanne's Laws' and, in the post-Mubarak period, there have been attempts to reverse them to signal a break from the past (Elsadda 2011). In the Moroccan context, many feminist groups and activists have positioned themselves as allies of state agents and the King in complicated political negotiations with political parties and Islamist political players in order to achieve legal reforms (such as the high profile changes to family law, or Mudawanna) (Salime 2012: 107).

However, many women's rights activists, whether in Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, Iran or Tunisia, have historically been intersectional in their approach to gender-based rights. Egyptian women's rights activists, for example, have protested against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the US invasion of Iraq and the exploitation of factory workers in the decades prior to the ousting of President Mubarak as well as engaging in contestations with the state over gender policies and wider issues of citizenship and social justice (Al-Ali 2000). Whilst the majority of Egyptian women's rights activists have been urban-based and middle class, nevertheless, some groups and activists have engaged for a long time in grassroots activism, as well as aspiring to find non-hierarchical ways of organizing, thereby contributing to the process of democratization.

Embodying Political Transformations

In contexts of rapid political transformations and struggles over power and authority, women's bodies emerge as key sites of contestation and control, not only in the current period, but also historically and cross-nationally. Women's behaviour and appearance is considered to be symbolic of the national/religious/ethnic community (Kandiyoti 1991) and, therefore, women are often the target of legislative, legal or informal mechanisms or even physical violence with the aim of imposing dress codes, controlling sexual behaviour, and limiting access to the public sphere, all in the name of 'restoring authentic values' but operating to consolidate the authority of new political actors or attempting to 'break' the opposition.

Feminist scholars studying the various developments in the MENA region highlight that women's bodies are central to political transformations (Al-Ali, 2014; Hafez, 2014, Pratt, 2013). Several paradoxes have emerged: first, the high level of women's political participation in both on-line and off-line contexts has not translated into a high level of women present in institutionalised political transition processes (as evident in Egypt, Libya and Yemen, in particular). Second, democratization in the form of electoral politics brings to power conservative political actors with conservative gender agendas, who use their new power to promote more conservative gender norms (as happened under the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt (2012-2013)). Third, the increase in gender-based violence, particularly the widespread sexual harassment of women protesters, has been met with the unprecedented mobilization of young men side-by-side with women against such violence,.

The apparent increase in violence against women by agents of the state or hired thugs is often a counter-revolutionary strategy to 'break the will' of movements calling for political and social change. In Syria, government forces and pro-government militia have used rape as

a weapon to break the opposition and civilian support for it (Nasar 2013). Yet, in Egypt, women, and more specifically the female body has occupied centre stage in the struggle against patriarchal authority and the determination of the military to thwart the revolution and intimidate those who carry it out. In 2011, Alia Mahdi's controversial naked photo raised important questions about censorship and ownership of the body in post-Mubarak Egypt. But probably one of the most important acts of rebellion in Egypt was Samira Ibrahim's lawsuit against the army for subjecting her and six other women arrested in March 2011 to "virginity tests". Since 2011, sexual harassment and rape during protests has increased dramatically with no perpetrator having been brought to justice at the time of writing (Nadeem Centre et al 2013). However, unlike before 2011, women are willing to speak publicly about sexual harassment and rape and these issues have become important objectives for mobilizing women and men. What is also remarkable is how the issue of sexual harassment and women's ability to move safely in public spaces and participate in political activities is no longer perceived to be a diversion from the wider revolutionary struggle, but has been taken up as part of a wider battle for justice, dignity and human rights (Al-Ali 2014: 124).

Whilst the large presence of men in solidarity with women is clearly a sign of changing times, nevertheless, elements of the military, some political parties, the police and security services, deploy and make use of thuggish violent masculinities to (re-)assert their authority and intimidate women and men who resist the status quo (Al-Ali 2014: 126). While masculinities and femininities are always perpetually in flux, the level and intensity of contestation over masculinities and femininities has increased since 2011, as have the possibilities of reimagining and challenging hegemonic gender norms (Pratt 2013; Al-Ali 2014: 126).

Deniz Kandiyoti (2013) argues that we cannot simply explain away the targeting of women's dress codes, their mobility, their sexuality, their presence during protests and the

fact that they are political actors as manifestations of patriarchy and misogyny. Kandiyoti argues that patriarchy no longer functions 'as usual' and requires a higher level of coercion and the deployment of more varied ideological state apparatuses to ensure its reproduction. Therefore, the high levels of violence against women since 2011 are evidence of a logic of 'masculinist restoration' that seeks to restore patriarchy (Kandiyoti 2013). We agree that there is a need to think more deeply about contestations over masculinities at this particular historical juncture. However, it is also necessary to disaggregate 'men', who are differently positioned in terms of their class backgrounds and relationships to power, leading to different projects of 'masculine restoration'. In particular, there is a difference between the restoration projects of working-class and lower middle-class men who have struggled to provide for their families and fulfil social expectations of 'breadwinner masculinities' as a result of two decades of neoliberal economic reforms, as opposed to male political and military elites, whose restoration projects are intrinsically bound up with the consolidation of their power and authority (Pratt 2014).

Contesting the Secular/Islamic binary

Historically, most women's rights activists in the MENA region have been committed to secularism as a means of protecting and extending women's rights as well as freedom for religious minorities (Al-Ali 2000). Socio-political transformations since 2010 have challenged the construction of a secular/Islamic binary with regards to women's rights and gender agendas. In a context of debates over constitutions, rights and freedoms, increasing numbers of women across the region have challenged the dominant notion that secularism is a prerequisite to guarantee women's rights. To some degree, there is some continuity between pre and post-uprisings, with regards to what has been termed 'Islamic feminism', an intellectual trend that seeks to reinterpret the Quran in more gender-sensitive ways. However,

there is also a 'pragmatic' trend of women who seek to frame their women's rights activism with reference to religion (Muhanna, forthcoming) or at least to engage seriously in religious debates about women's rights.

Moreover, younger generations of women activists, who are not invested in the secular modernization projects of previous post-independence generations, no longer subscribe to the notion of the secular state as agent of modernization (and therefore a guarantor of women's rights). This is not a backlash against state feminism (as discussed above) but rather a refusal to compromise democracy and freedom for the sake of women's rights gains. In Egypt, both secular-oriented and Islamist activists have contested the increasing authoritarianism of the 'secular' Egyptian government since the military coup against Morsi in July 2013, and in Morocco, the February 20th Movement for political reform has been inclusive of secular-oriented and Islamist activists (Salime 2012).

Conclusions

The impact of socio-political transformations in the MENA region since the end of 2010 on women, women's rights and gender norms has been varied according to national context, respective histories of state feminism and gender activism, as well as differences among and between women (based on class, citizenship status and place of residence, amongst other social differences). In general, mass protests and uprisings created new openings for women's involvement in public, however, these were rapidly threatened by armed conflict, counter-revolutionary backlashes as well as the empowerment of Islamist political forces seeking to promote their conservative gender agendas as part of signalling a break from former regimes. In the struggle for political power, women's bodies have become the targets of violence and control by a range of actors seeking to 'break the will' of those seeking change as well as to consolidate their authority.

Despite what may appear to be a gloomy picture, there have been significant developments on the societal level. Women survivors of violence are speaking out publicly and breaking the taboo surrounding discussion of sexual abuse and harassment. Moreover, women and men, particularly amongst the youth, are mobilising to resist violence against women as an integral part of their demands for democracy and dignity. Meanwhile, many youth activists are challenging the notion that only secularism can guarantee women's rights, particularly where secular-oriented regimes are implicated in violations of rights and freedoms, and are engaging with religious texts as well as political religious actors in order to advance their claims for rights and freedoms.

Bibliography

Al-Ali, N. (2014), 'Reflections on (counter) revolutionary processes in Egypt', *Feminist Review*, Special issue: Revolutions, 106: 122-128.

Al-Ali, N. (2000). *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Alnaas, S. M. and N. Pratt. (Forthcoming). 'Women's Bodies in Post-Revolution Libya: Control and Resistance' in L. Meari, M. El Said and N. Pratt, eds. *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance: Lessons from the Arab World*, London: Zed.

Elsadda, H. (2011). 'Women's Rights Activism in post-Jan 25 Egypt: Combating the Shadow of the First Lady Syndrome,' *Middle East Law and Governance* 3: 84-93.

Hafez, S. (2014), 'The Revolution Shall Not Pass through Women's Bodies: Egypt, Uprising and Gender Politics', *The Journal of North African Studies*, **19** (2): 172-185.

Kandiyoti, D. (2013), 'Fear and fury: women and post-revolutionary violence', *Open Democracy*, 14 January, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/fear-and-fury-women-and-post-revolutionary-violence>, accessed 1 July 2014.

Kandiyoti, D. (1991). 'Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20: 3: 429-433.

Khalil, A. (2014), 'Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution', *The Journal of North African Studies*, **19** (2): 186-199.

Muhanna, A. (forthcoming), 'Islamist and Secular Women's Activism and Discourses in Post Uprising Tunisia' in L. Meari, M. El Said and N. Pratt, eds. *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance: Lessons from the Arab World*, London: Zed.

Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and Violence, Nazra for Feminist Studies and New Woman Foundation. (2013). *Sexual Assault and Rape in Tahrir Square and its Vicinity: A Compendium of Sources 2011-2013*. Cairo.

http://nazra.org/sites/nazra/files/attachments/compilation-_of_sexual-violence_-testimonies_between_2011_2013_en.pdf, accessed 1 July 2014.

Nasar, S. (2013). *Violence against Women: Bleeding Wound in the Syrian Conflict*.

Copenhagen: Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network,

<http://www.euromedrights.org/eng/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Doc-report-VAW-Syria.pdf>,

accessed 1 July 2014.

Pratt, N. (2014). 'Crises of Social Reproduction, the Gendered Political Economy of Neo-Liberal Authoritarianism and the Arab Uprisings', unpublished paper, presented to the workshop, 'Rethinking the "Woman Question" in the New Middle East', Amman Jordan, May.

Pratt, N. (2013). 'Egyptian Women: Between Revolution, Counter-Revolution, Orientalism and Authenticity'. May, Jadaliyya.com,

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11559/egyptian-women_between-revolution-counter-revoluti, accessed 1 July 2014.

Salime, Z. (2012), "A New Feminism? Gender Dynamics in Morocco's February 20th Movement", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, **5** (5): 101-114.

Skalli, L. H. (2014), 'Young Women and Social Media against Sexual Harassment in North Africa', *The Journal of North African Studies* **19** (2): 244-258.