

Women have emerged as key players in the Arab spring

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Through protesting, organising, blogging and hunger-striking, women have taken a central role, but it remains to be seen whether their rights will improve.

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In a small room in Benghazi some young men and women are putting out a new opposition newspaper. "The role of the female in Libya," reads one headline. "She is the Muslim, the mother, the soldier, the protester, the journalist, the volunteer, the citizen", it adds.

Arab women can claim to have been all these things and more during the three months of tumult that have shaken the region. Some of the most striking images of this season of revolt have been of women: black-robed and angry, a sea of female faces in the capitals of north Africa, the Arabian peninsula, the Syrian hinterland, marching for regime change, an end to repression, the release of loved ones. Or else delivering speeches to the crowds, treating the injured, feeding the sit-ins of Cairo and Manama and the makeshift army of eastern Libya.

But as revolt turns into hiatus and stalemate from Yemen to Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Bahrain and Syria, one thing is clear: for all their organising, marching, rabble-rousing, blogging, hunger-striking, and, yes, dying, Arab women are barely one small step forwards on the road to greater equality with their menfolk. Women may have sustained the Arab spring, but it remains to be seen if the Arab spring will sustain women.

The first protests

From the earliest rumblings of discontent in Tunisia at the turn of the year, it was clear that old images of Arab women as deferential, subservient and generally indoors would have to be revised. From the highly-educated Tunisian female elite of doctors, barristers and university professors to the huge numbers of unemployed female graduates, women were key players in the uprising that launched the Arab spring.

In Cairo, they were instrumental not just in protests but in much of the nitty-gritty organisation that turned Tahrir Square from a moment into a movement. Women were involved in arranging food deliveries, blankets, the stage and medical help. In Yemen, it was a young woman, Tawakul Karman, who first led demonstrations on a university campus against the long rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Karman emerged as one of the leaders of a revolution still yet to run its course.

In Bahrain, women were among the first wave that descended on Pearl Square in the capital – some with their children – to demand change. And the Bahraini movement has latterly found a figurehead in Zainab al-Khawaja, the woman who went on hunger strike in protest at the beating and arrest of her father, husband and brother-in-law. “Women have played a hugely influential role this time and put themselves in danger,” said Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. “They treated the injured in the streets and nursed them in their homes when they were too afraid to go to hospital.”

In Libya, women were at the vanguard too, when mothers, sisters and widows of men killed in a prison massacre in 1996 protested outside a courthouse in Benghazi after their lawyer was arrested.

“Someone gave me a placard and I was not even sure what to do with it because we had never done anything like this before,” said Muna Sahli, a literature lecturer at Garyounis University in Benghazi, whose brother-in-law was killed in the prison slaughter. “I even forgot to cover my face so I wouldn’t be identified.”

In Syria and Yemen, more conservative societies, it took longer for women to join the movement en masse. In both countries, it took leadership blunders by the authorities to draw them in. In Syria, hundreds of women marched through the town of Beida to deplore the indiscriminate detention of many of their menfolk. In Yemen, when president Saleh said it was un-Islamic for male and female protesters to march side by side, thousands of women poured on to the streets just to prove him wrong. Women continue to support the demonstrations, working as nurses in makeshift hospitals and in ambulances, cooking food, delivering speeches and singing songs at the demonstrations. To the right of the main stage in Tagheer (meaning “change”) Square, there is a large cordoned-off area filled with hundreds of women, most of them wearing black abayas, and small children.

On the frontline

Women have not escaped the human cost of this uprising. During the police repression of the Tunisian revolution, they were beaten by security thugs, and in rural areas around Kasserine some were raped by police after demonstrations. There were several reports of rape in Egypt amid the hurly burly, and a South African reporter for the US network CBS was sexually assaulted. In a notorious case in Tripoli, a woman, Iman al-Obeidi said she was raped by about 15 pro-Gaddafi militia.

Scores of women across the region have also been detained or disappeared. A number of Bahraini women have been seized by the authorities, including at least nine doctors and four nurses. In Yemen, Karman was detained for 48 hours, though the outrage caused was largely a function of the “shame” of male soldiers seizing a woman from her car in the night.

But in some cases there was evidence that women were able to protest with relative impunity – and even used this to their advantage. “Since the beginning the riot police acted very brutally but the women stood their ground and waved their flags in their faces,” said the Bahraini human rights activist Maryam al-Khawaja. “They were targeting the men, so the women kept coming out. Women have always had a presence [in public demonstrations in Bahrain] but this time it was very strong.”

In Syria, the reverse was true: women retreated in the face of the violence. On 16 March, a peaceful protest at the ministry of the interior by the families of political prisoners in Damascus ended in the arrests and beatings of many, including women and children. “I was hit several times but managed to get away,” said the daughter of a prominent political prisoner who asked not to be named.

Another young woman in Damascus, who asked not to be named, said that men were afraid for the safety of their women. "Since the start there has been live fire and men are afraid their mothers and sisters may be injured, as well as some of the women fearing this themselves," she said. She added that a lot of protests came out of the mosques, which are still largely male preserves. "Many younger women are going out, like at the university protest, but I think some women don't yet realise how crucial their participation is."

Women of the regime

Not every woman is for regime change. Yemeni women have staged vocal protests in favour of Saleh. And in western Libya, while women were largely absent from initial street protests that were suppressed by the regime, they have been conspicuous in more recent displays of loyalty to the Brother Leader, as Muammar Gaddafi is known. They chant, sing and ululate their praise – usually segregated from male supporters.

At Gaddafi's Tripoli compound last week, hundreds of his female fans gathered late at night to act as human shields, many beautifully made up beneath their headscarves as if out for a night on the town. Which, in a way, it was.

When Aisha Gaddafi, the leader's 34-year-old daughter, appeared on the balcony of a shelled building to address the crowd, they went wild. Aisha is an icon among many young Libyan women: smart, savvy, blonde and with a penchant for designer clothes, she is known as Libya's Claudia Schiffer.

The only daughter among Gaddafi's seven children, Aisha is the most high-profile woman in Libya. There is also a minister for women's and children's affairs, but few others in the regime. Among the phalanx of government officials dealing with the foreign media, only one is female. Women serve in the Libyan army, but do not take part in fighting. Gaddafi himself is famous for favouring female guards in his personal protection team.

In common with many Arab countries, middle-class women in Libya tend to be highly-educated and prevalent in professions such as medicine and law. But their poorer sisters are confined largely to the home and the shadow of their menfolk.

Legality, sorority, equality

The Arab spring was not about gender equality. Women in all countries involved say that. But many are alarmed that their efforts risk going unrewarded, and that men who were keen to have them on the streets crying freedom may not be so happy to have them in parliament, government and business boardrooms. As one Egyptian protester told Catherine Ashton, the EU foreign policy supremo, during a recent visit to Tahrir Square: "The men were keen for me to be here when we were demanding that Mubarak should go. But now he has gone, they want me to go home."

Egyptian women express concern that when the dust settles on their revolution and a new parliament is elected in November, there may be just as few female MPs as there were in the Mubarak era. The gender gap is gaping in Egypt. There were no references to equality in the new Egyptian constitution passed last month. Rebecca Chiao, founder of a women's rights group called Harassmap, said that there was already a backlash against gender equality. "There's a propaganda campaign against us, saying now is not the time for women's rights. I'm concerned about that," she said.

"If you ask someone if they want gender equality, that's a loaded term here. Do you mean all women should be like men? Most would say no. If you mean women have choice and equal protection under the law, most would say yes."

Tunisia's feminist lobby argues that the real battle is only beginning now, post-revolution. Of the country's young, well-educated unemployed – whose grievances sparked the uprising – two thirds are women. There is still gross inequality in pay and in inheritance laws favouring sons. But the first battle is women in politics. Earlier this month, the commission reforming Tunisia's electoral landscape for the July elections voted that there must be 50% parity between men and women on electoral lists – and not just women on the bottom rung: they must alternate with male candidates from the top of each party selection and share the most important roles.

One of the biggest opposition parties, the leftwing PDP, already has a female leader, the feminist biologist Maya Jribi. Campaigners hope others will follow.

Leila Hamrouni, a secondary school teacher from a poor suburb of Tunis, is likely to run as a candidate for the party Ettajdid. She said: "We've got to really fight for 50% equality in the elections. I'm worried it won't be properly enforced. The smaller parties say it's great in principle but in practice there aren't enough 'competent' women. What rubbish! Even the rural areas have women lawyers, teachers and doctors."

Under Ben Ali, there were an awful lot of men who were far from brilliant, yet as soon as we talk of women in politics, everyone's asking about competence. Ben Ali used the issue of women's rights as propaganda for the west while stifling liberties and denying democracy. Some men might say to us now, 'Look what you've got. What more do you want?' It's difficult to explain that behind the orchestrated propaganda there is still so much to fight for."

Khadija Cherif, a sociologist and university professor, is a member of the influential Association of Women Democrats and sits on the commission currently drawing up political rules for the July elections. Around 20% of the commission is female.

"The women's role has been huge, not just in the revolution, but for years before it, from supporting the miners' strikes to staging sit-ins in textile factories. That role must now be recognised through gender equality on the political landscape.

"One concern on the secular left is that the return of Tunisia's Islamist parties could roll back the country's secular women's rights. The once outlawed Islamist party, Ennahda, denies it plans to limit women's rights, joining other parties in voting through the 50% gender equality rules for the election. Cherif said: « We're working with the Islamist parties. They supported us on parity. And they know we are staying vigilant. »

But elsewhere, women are adamant: this revolution was about regimes, not gender. « Men and women, we are all working for the same thing in this revolution, » said Mervet el-Zuki, a Benghazi resident. "We want to be able to speak our minds, to be ourselves, to be Libyans. We want freedom in all sectors: psychologically, socially, economically. We want a happy ending, to be rid of this maniac family that controlled everything we did. »

Bahraini Noor Jilal added: « Women are not calling for their own rights but those of everyone. »

But Faizah Sulimani, 29, a protest leader in Yemen, hints that even though they are not calling for equality, women in Yemen have found themselves being taken much more seriously by men because of the impressive way they have contributed to the protest movement.

« Our demands are somehow similar to men, starting with freedom, equal citizenship, and giving

women a greater role in society," she says. "Women smell freedom at Change Square where they feel more welcomed than ever before. Their fellow [male] freedom fighters are showing unconventional acceptance to their participation and they are actually for the first time letting women be, and say, what they really want. »

Xan Rice in Benghazi, **Katherine Marsh** in Damascus, **Tom Finn** in Sana'a, **Harriet Sherwood** in Tripoli, **Angelique Chrisafis** and **Robert Booth**

P.S.

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