

# Women and the Arab Spring : Taking their place?

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On 18 January 2011, in Cairo, Asma Mahfouz, a 26-year-old blogger, posted a video on Facebook, calling for a demonstration in Tahrir Square to protest against the Mubarak regime.

The next day, in Sana'a, Tawakkol Karman, a 32-year-old activist and journalist, demonstrating in solidarity with the Tunisian people, called on Yemenis to rise up against their corrupt leaders.

On 15 February, in Benghazi, mothers, sisters, daughters and widows of men killed in Tripoli's Abu Salim prison took to the streets to express their rejection of an oppressive regime.

From Tunisia to Bahrain, from Egypt to Syria, women from all backgrounds came out in force to demand the right to democracy, social justice, freedom, dignity and equality. Women activists, bloggers and journalists, mobilised and informed the world what was happening. These uprisings, through the demands they generated, reasserted the universality of human rights.

Across the region, women occupied public spaces despite different degrees of freedom. In Tunisia, Morocco and Tahrir Square women demonstrated shoulder to shoulder with men. In Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen the segregation of women in public has not prevented women participating as demonstrators, organisers and leaders. In each country women, as well as men, have been arrested, detained, killed and tortured by regimes clinging to power. But women have been targets of additional forms of violence including rape, "virginity tests" and abduction.

While women played leading roles in the long years of resistance to dictatorships, the movements of the Arab Spring have given them unprecedented visibility, shattering stereotypes. Images like those of a young Tunisian woman shouting and brandishing a banner proclaiming "Ben Ali, get out!" have been etched into people's consciousness around the world.

And yet the risk is all too real that this burgeoning participation will be taken away.

We must remember the lessons of history. Hard won advances towards equal rights for women face persisting opposition and are all too easily swept away. The story of Algeria epitomises the tragedy of women in revolutions: women fought for freedom from colonialism, but when independence was won they were deprived of their rights. In Yemen, in the 1960s women fought tyranny alongside men, but the change of regime reduced respect for their rights.

Women's rights are the first to be sacrificed by politicians seeking to hold on to power and to appease the most conservative factions. In Libya, in October 2011, as the President of the National Transitional Council declared that the country had been "liberated" from Gaddafi's dictatorship, he announced that discrimination against half the population would be reinforced: any legal provision that contradicted Sharia law would henceforth be null and void, including laws limiting polygamy and authorising divorce. In Egypt, although women were massively involved in the revolutionary movement, there was not a single woman appointed to the Constitutional Committee or the Civil Consultation Committee, referred to as the "Council of Wise Men". And following parliamentary

elections, women represent only 2% of seats.

In Tunisia, the reform of the election law requiring parity on electoral lists represents a great victory, a first in the region and beyond. Yet, in elections in October 2011, few parties fully respected the rules and the vast majority put men at the top of the lists, thereby depriving the Assembly established to draw up the new Constitution of equal representation of men and women. As elected representatives publicly challenge existing protections for women's rights, vigilance must be strengthened.

This period in the political upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa is decisive for women's rights. Now more than ever we must mobilise alongside women in the region. FIDH, as part of the Coalition for Equality Without Reservation, will continue to struggle for equal rights, as the very foundation of democracy. As states in the region are being rebuilt, women must take their place in decision-making bodies.

This report pays homage to the women who struggle for freedom, equality and dignity. It takes a country-by-country look at the role played by women in the uprisings and underlines the obstacles that prevent them from playing their full part in the political and public life of their countries. It emphasises the importance of placing women's rights at the heart of the political process, in countries where dictators have been toppled and in those where people are still struggling to change regimes. We share the reactions, proposals, strategies and hopes of activists in the region, women and men, who continue tirelessly to fight discrimination. The 20 measures for equality which conclude our report reflect the demands formulated by human rights and women's rights organisations throughout the region.

This report is a resource for action for all those involved in the struggle for women's rights. Equality between men and women is key to the success of transition processes under-way in the region. We must not allow anyone to question the universality of human rights.

**FIDH**

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\* <http://arabwomenspring.fidh.net/index.php?title=Foreword>