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BUILDING THE FUTURE TODAY: ENGENDERING SYRIA'S TRANSITION



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Colophon

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Cover photo: Women standing in solidarity with Syrian detainees and martyrs

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“For if women surrender their specific interests in the universal struggle for a different society, at what point are these interests rehabilitated, legitimated, and responded to by the revolutionary forces or by the new [revolutionary] state?” (The sociologist Maxine Molyneux quoted by Laleh Khalili in *Women in and after the Arab Uprisings*)

Introduction

Gender equality is missing from most of the studies on transition processes in Syria. This gender gap in transition planning prompted the publication of this policy brief by *IFE-EFI and Hivos*. The insights are based on more than two years of debate between Syrian women’s rights activists both inside and outside Syria and our common work bringing together researchers, activists and policymakers from Syria and internationally.

First, we elaborate on the role of women in Syria and the rest of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the current political transitions and the risks of the regression of rights. Second, we address the core theme of this publication – the engendering of transition planning. Third, we pay attention to the need to combine rights and social justice discourses.

Finally, we present a set of policy related recommendations for the international community to influence the transitional processes in Syria from the perspective of social justice, democracy and implementing human rights for women and men.

Highlights

- Syrian women have been organising and participating in mass demonstrations, acting for peace and democracy as spokespersons for various groups, participating in political discussions and decision making in their communities.

- Historic and recent lessons from MENA and around the world show that hard won gains can quickly disappear once a new regime is in place, despite of previous declarations.

- There is an urgent need for immediate planning aimed at engendering transition processes through enshrining women’s rights in the post-conflict constitution and legislation.

- For the engendering of transition processes to be grounded in society, sustainable and effective in the long run, there is a need to combine rights and justice discourses aimed at advancing women’s rights while at the same time linking them to the broader social struggle for social, economic and political justice.

Lessons from history: Gains and challenges

Women's proactive participation in the popular protests across the MENA region has been recognised internationally. From Tunis to Tripoli, Tahrir and Lulu Squares in Cairo and Manama, to Sana and Damascus, women played pivotal roles in mass demonstrations and social revolts, defying cultural and social taboos and shouldering responsibilities in political and civil activities. Women participated in the uprisings as citizens, on an equal footing with men, demanding social justice and democracy for their societies. In Syria, at the start of the uprising, women led peaceful protests alongside men. But the increased violence and the militarisation of the conflict diminished the visible field based political and civic activism of most activists. This is not to say that women are no longer active in the uprising; indeed, many remain active in civil society and as members of political parties or other formations. However, we are witnessing their diverse and changing roles. Some women have shifted their activism from the streets, organising sit-ins in houses and by using social media such as Facebook and blogs to speak out against injustice and to enhance networking among activists.

Despite the proactive participation of women in the popular protests, recent examples from the MENA region are indicative of what may lie ahead for Syria. In his first speech on 23 October 2011, following the fall of the Libyan dictator Kaddafi, the chairman of Libya's National Transitional Council, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, declared that *sharia* law would be 'the basic source of legislation, and that any law that contradicts Islamic principles is void.' The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood announced that they are in favour of women's rights as long as they do not contradict *sharia*. Tunisia's moderate Islamist Ennahda Movement has repeatedly clashed with liberal activists who aim to preserve and strengthen hard won women's rights. The Tunisian Salafists have used violence against liberal human rights and women's rights activists as well as against liberal and secular politicians.

In Syria the fear of a marginalisation of women's rights is real and serious. Despite attempts by activists to ensure equal and fair participation in the political process and transition planning, the results are not encouraging. The figures on political participation are not commensurate with their participation in the transition process.

So what are the root causes of this backlash against gender justice? Deniz Kandiyoti cautions us against attributing these backlashes *solely* to the ascendance of Islamist parties to power or to an unqualified notion of timeless misogyny. Certainly, as we elaborated above, the conservative discourse of Islamist parties is an important factor; but this is not the whole story.¹ First and foremost there is an apparent dilemma about priorities; that is to say, whether the focus should be on achieving national goals or meeting women's demands. In this regard, the Iranian and Egyptian cases are highly relevant for Syrian activists. Laleh Khalili clarifies this dilemma by referring to post-1979 Iran and post-25 January 2011 Egypt:

One of the more eloquent accounts of this dilemma during the Iranian revolution is recounted in Haide Moghiss' *Populism and Feminism* in Iran. Moghiss, who as a member of Fada'iyan –e-Khalq had been a Marxist *and* a feminist activist and revolutionary, argues that in the post-revolutionary period, when the Islamic Republic began to put into place policies that rolled back legal gains by women (in particular forced veiling and the rolling back of personal status gains), leftist groups remained quiet in the interest of a "united anti-imperialist front". In order to better legitimate their silence, they relegated concerns about personal status and the *hijab* to the domain of "bourgeois" or "reformist" politics.

Seeing an apparent historic similarity with Iran, she refers to post-25 January 2011 Egypt by saying:

In Cairo, feminist activists have spoken of the silence of many leftist organisations about the sexual assaults in public spaces and urged "all political and revolutionary forces to realise that women's issues are not a fleeting cause or simply a bargaining chip to be used against religiously-minded political opponents or others. Rather, they are a principal part of the revolution, of the current political ferment, and of the struggle for freedom in which women have played such a

¹ Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Disquiet and despair: The gender sub-texts of the "Arab spring"*, www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/disquiet-and-despair-gender-sub-texts-of-arab-spring, 26 June 2012. Accessed 25 September 2013.

vital role and for which they have sacrificed much.²

Another factor is the interconnectivity between patriarchy, militarism and violence against women, which limits and controls women's participation in decision making. The patriarchal ideology remains a dominant social structure everywhere and human relations are ruled by a general and structured pattern of power that puts men in a superior position to women, perpetrating gender inequalities that cross ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation and peace and war divisions. These inequalities are legitimised – and ultimately institutionalised – by cultural and religious gender norms and standards and by legislation. Thus, violence against women becomes a 'normal' way of systematically exercising dominance and control over women, and is legitimised when armed conflicts erupt. The fighting parties of conflicts use women's bodies and sexual violence to humiliate the enemy and in this way exercise control over the community as a whole.

Wherever it occurs, or when a conflict becomes militarised, it leads to a marginalisation of women's presence and prominence. In particular, fear of or sexual torture and rape gravely impact women's agency. This mutual reinforcement of patriarchal and militarist values in both private and public spheres justify the different actors' agendas, which are oppressive and controlling for women and make discrimination in the gender power relations invisible and silent. Thus, the structures of violence in a patriarchal society in 'peacetime', whose faces are insecurity, poverty, unemployment, economic instability, to name a few, are tightly interconnected with the structures of violence when armed conflict erupts and this explains why violence against women at home turns into rape on the battlefield during war and armed conflicts.

In Syria a patriarchal mentality has prevailed in both the Assad regime and newly emerging political opposition groups, preventing female members from being effective in their roles.³ Yet, despite increased militarisation, Syrian women remain active in all transitional processes, albeit in more subtle everyday

² Khalili, Laleh. *Women in and after the Arab Uprisings*, Sadighi Annual Lectures, published by Sadighi Research Fund and International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, May 2013.

³ Asad, Rula and Kawa Hassan. *Women's rights in Syria, A paradigm change?* in *Civic Activism in the Arab World*. Idee, Volume 6, no.6, December 2012, pages 37-40, Hans van Mierlo Stichting.

survival activism. They exercise advocacy and action for a non-violent transition and remain vigilant to the decision makers' agenda with regard to incorporating women's rights and gender equality.

Authoritarian regimes faced with a legitimacy crisis paved the way for and allowed religious conservative groups to flourish and provide social services and religious guidance for poor segments of society. This 'alliance' served to support the declining legitimacy of autocrats at the expense of, among other things, women's rights. The uprisings offered a golden window of opportunity to well organised and funded conservative religious groups to propagate and push for conservative laws and regulations against gender equality. This internal factor was exacerbated by an external factor; namely, the way women's rights were hijacked by 'first lady NGOs', for instance in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, and supported by some donors. While these interventions undoubtedly led to some improvements in women's rights, at the same time they provided a 'democratic' fig-leaf to autocrats and provided ammunition to conservative Islamist groups, for instance in Egypt, who label these achievements and rights as 'Sūzān Mubarak rights'. As Kandiyoti asserts, 'The opportunistic nature of engagements with gender equality platforms contributes to their derailment and demise'.⁴

Engendering transition

These historic and contemporary cases call for a proactive approach to engender the transition planning in Syria. The time for action and research is now. Immediate actions are needed to support Syrian women's rights activists who urge the international community to prioritise gender equality as a core component of transition planning. Immediate efforts should be made to raise awareness and sensitise all actors, future decision makers and civil society as well as the international community to gender mainstreaming. There should be an immediate inclusion of women's rights activists in all podia related to post-conflict planning; and there should be support for women's rights activists who are preparing draft constitutions from women's rights perspectives. This case for urgency is summarised succinctly by the sociologist Maxine Molyneux. Reflecting on the Nicaraguan revolution and the role

⁴ Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Disquiet and despair: The gender sub-texts of the "Arab spring"*, www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/disquiet-and-despair-gender-sub-texts-of-arab-spring, 26 June 2012. Accessed 25 September 2013.

of women in it, her analysis is relevant for Syria and MENA: 'For if women surrender their specific interests in the universal struggle for a different society, at what point are these interests rehabilitated, legitimated, and responded to by the revolutionary forces or by the new [revolutionary] state?'.⁵

An important step in transition processes is the preparation and writing of draft constitutions. Crucial to constitution writing is ensuring that the process is inclusive and that all social, religious and ethnic groups are represented when making a new constitution. The leading Egyptian women's rights activist Afaf Marie, who participated in debates with Syrian activists, aptly asserted, 'When in the drafting process there is no respect for women's rights, how can the constitution itself respect these rights.' Lessons learned and good practices from around the world show that an inclusive constitution-building process is both a tool and a goal to raise women's rights and gender equality and central to democracy building. Hence, the international community should seize all windows of opportunities and exercise pressure in all the spaces of power to support the efforts of Syrian women's rights activists that aim to produce a gender sensitive constitution and an inclusive constitution building process. The international community should support the demand by the Syrian women's movement for a quota of a minimum of 30 per cent women in the national assembly, all political bodies as well as in the constitutional committee, as a transitional phase towards parity and full equality.⁶

A delicate balance: Equality for women and justice for society

While we urgently call for the engendering of transition planning, we are mindful of the massive political, economic and social challenges ahead. Enshrining women's legal rights in the constitution is a crucial first step but, in and of itself, it is not sufficient to ensure sustainable socialisation of these rights. By this we mean the anchoring of these rights in society and not only at a state level (constitution and laws). This would be achieved if women's struggle for equality was connected to society's struggle for social justice; specifically, the redistribution of economic and political powers and

⁵Ibid.

⁶ STRATEGIC PAPER "Equality First: Looking for a Democratic Constitution" European Feminist Initiative IFE-EFI and the Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy, December 2012.

ensuring dignified living standards for all. In short, for the engendering of transition to be both effective and sustainable, there is a need to connect gender equality discourse – 'rights talk' – to justice discourse – 'justice talk'. This delicate balance of bringing together these two discourses is paramount to countering backlashes against gender justice. Despite its huge importance, rights discourse has the potential to reduce women's struggle for equality to legal changes alone, while justice discourse is based on mass mobilisation around political agendas, grounded in local languages of justice and injustice and often with an economic dimension. Given the extent of economic, social, human, physical and political destruction in Syria, transition and reconstruction will be a daunting task. In this process there is a need for a narrative that frames women's rights as part and parcel of the social justice and dignity discourse. Tying the women's rights struggle to all other struggles in society creates coalitions and allies for women's rights activists. As Laleh Khalili notes:

This means a constant and tireless building of popular support, networks, organisations, predicated on the concerns of broad swathes of women and their comrades in a number of struggles. This mobilisation calls for strategic alliances across class and ideological boundaries. Not much else works: neither international handouts, nor freedom at gunpoint, nor the state's instrumental munificence. Justice calls for vigilance.⁷

Conclusion and recommendations

The possibility of a backlash against gender justice and a regression of rights hard-won both before and during the uprising is real and serious. Therefore, we call on the international community to initiate an urgent and sustainable engendering of transition planning; something that is so far missing in the majority of transition studies and programmes relating to the Syrian conflict. The engendering of transition means the mainstreaming of gender equality and Syrian women's rights perspectives into research and projects related to transition planning and getting them onto the agendas of international actors and power players. A crucial step is providing opportunities to Syrian women's rights activists so

⁷ Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Disquiet and despair: The gender sub-texts of the "Arab spring"*, www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/disquiet-and-despair-gender-sub-texts-of-arab-spring, 26 June 2012. Accessed 25 September 2013.

that their voices are heard in international podiums and so that they can present their perspectives and influence international actors engaged in transition planning. However, for the engendering of transition to be grounded in society, sustainable and most effective in the long run, international actors must also support projects aimed at connecting rights discourse to justice discourse. This will support and strengthen women's rights activists to tie their struggle for full participation in the political process, for parity and for gender equality with the broader social struggle for social justice.

Invitation for further discussion

This policy brief deals with the urgent theme of engendering the Syria's transition planning. But given the complex and evolving context of the Syrian conflict, the extent of destruction in Syria, and the need for grounding gender equality in society, there is a need for more insights on this topic. Therefore it should be seen as an invitation for further discussion on the development of innovative research and for projects on both engendering transition planning and combining rights and justice discourses.

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Hivos and University of Amsterdam, Department of Political Science, initiated the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia in 2008. This academic activist initiative generated insights on the role of local civil society actors and Western donors in democratisation processes in Syria and Iran. Hivos currently co-produces policy papers, policy briefs, working papers, research papers, books and newsletters with think tanks and experts mainly in MENA, but also in the US and EU. These in-depth insights deal with dignity revolutions and transition challenges and how Western donors can accompany transitions through insider knowledge.

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