



“Unveiling”: Women and protest movements in the Middle East

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Background

The past year has seen an increasing number of protests that has swept through the Middle East and North Africa, confronting several governments in the region such as Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq and Palestine to name a few. These protests occur almost a decade after the Arab Spring and has therefore, been referred to as the ‘New Arab Spring’ or ‘Arab Spring 2.0’. These protests share several social, economic and political features with its previous movements. Nevertheless, large number of women on its frontlines champions this new wave of protests.

Women in the Middle Eastern countries are facing the conundrum of being ‘doubly oppressed’. Women have to fight rampant corruption, sectarianism, economic recession, unemployment, poverty, lack of necessities, etc., which plague their countries. They also have to deal with the underlying evils of the society that specifically target them such as patriarchy, repressive religious laws and the dire underrepresentation of women both in politics as well as in the workforce.

Causes, Concerns and Fallouts

Lebanon is home to eighteen officially recognized religious sects that play a dominant role in its society. Therefore, the legal status of the Lebanese women varies in accordance to the sect to which she belongs despite gender equality and individual liberty guaranteed by the Lebanese constitution under Articles 7 and 8. The patriarchal society continue to offer men an unfair advantage over women in many aspects. The transfer of citizenship is paternal in Lebanon and prevents women from passing on their citizenship to their non-Lebanese husbands and children, unless the child is born illegitimately. The law is also partial to the mother who has acquired her nationality through marriage than a mother of Lebanese origin as the former can pass on her citizenship to her children, if she outlives her husband but the latter cannot if she married a foreigner.

The controversial Article 522 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which allowed for a man convicted of sexual assault, abduction and statutory rape to halt his prosecution or suspend his conviction if he has married the victim, was repealed only in 2017. Moreover, while threats within the marriages are punishable offences under Articles 573-578 of the Penal Code, marital rape itself is not criminalized.

Divorce is more easily attainable for men than women, as depending on the sect women can only apply for divorce under specific conditions. This also comes with great cost to women. Islamic women have two ways to seek divorce from her husband – the tafriq and the khul. The tafriq is granted by a qadi in certain cases such as when the husband abandons or abuses the wife. Once the marriage is dissolved, the husband is obligated to pay the mahr. The khul, on the other hand, is granted to the couple upon mutual consent to dissolve the marriage. As this practice of divorce requires the consent of the husband, he often denies this consent in order to not pay the mahr. In such cases, the wife often relinquishes the deferred mahr and is then granted the consent.

Guardianship of children during marriage and custody of children in case of divorce is granted to the father. The child is allowed to be in the mother's care during the maternal custody period that is determined by the child's age but the child continues to remain under the father's custody legally. This dissuades many women in abusive relationships from considering divorce due to the fear of losing their children

Lebanon was one of the first countries in the Middle East to gain suffrage for women in 1952.

However, Lebanon ranks very low in terms of female representation in the politics thereby facing a considerable lack of women in various decision-making processes. According to the 2020 Inter-Parliamentary Union's global data on the per cent age of women in national parliaments, Lebanon ranks 183rd with women's representation rate at 4.69 per cent, despite a record number of women contesting in the 2018 national elections.

The situation is not much different in Palestine where patriarchal traditions and Islamic and Christian laws largely dictate women's basic rights. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is also an important factor that handicap contemporary Palestinian women. Thousands of women lost their life, family and property, and have had to take up the role of breadwinners seemingly overnight. The numerous wars that has taken place between the states over the years have left many women homeless and displaced.

Domestic violence continues to plague Palestinian women. Violence against women in Palestine emanate from two different sources – Israel's security measures and abuse from family and community. Israel's security measures have both direct and indirect consequences on women's safety and liberty. The restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip deny the Palestinians access to healthcare and school admission for children if they lack a residential permit in Jerusalem. This has increased the number of home deliveries as well as stillbirths. The demolition of housed by the Israeli forces creates further burden on women who have to adapt to new conditions. In addition to the arrests and

harassment encountered in the process, women are subjected to domestic abuse. In a 2019 study published by the *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, of 517 ever married women from the Gaza Strip, 23 per cent reported that they are victims of Intimate partner violence (IPV). Women political detainees in Palestine have also increased over the years and held incommunicado without access to lawyers or social workers for extended periods. The political detainees once released have to deal with being ostracised by their community for fear of being sexually compromised. Such fears have been the basis of prioritizing early marriage of Palestinian girls over their education. Palestinian society also sees a great number of femicides due to honour killings. The killing of 21-year-old Israa Ghrayeb in 2019 sparked a nation-wide outrage, with thousands taking to the streets and called for stringent laws against gender violence and honour killings.

The theocratic nation of Iran has seen several instances of shutting down when it confronted with the possibility of leniency of women's rights over the past forty years. Islamic law requires women to wear compulsory hijab under Article 638, the defiance of which can result in imprisonment of up to two months or fine of up to 500,000 rials. The law was enforced under Ruhollah Khomeini following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Over the years, this repressive law has led to the arrests of several young women, who believe that the compulsory dress code is against a matter of their personal choice.

A brief note on the developments

The rise of the protest movements in these countries and the large participation of women in them have not been without developments. Lebanon's October Revolution has come with an outpouring of support for its female protestors, both within the MENA region as well as in the global community. The sheer popularity of the movement has brought in many lawyers to the protests who help these women who are facing relentless harassment, abuse and violence in the streets, who might otherwise find legal support expensive. Besides the demand for economic development and political reform, women have demanded equal rights not only for themselves but also for the LGBTQ+ community as well as the migrants. The female protestors say that they are representing those communities whose voices have been unheard or silenced. They stress that any demand that is being called for should also include the minorities and the marginalised peoples of the society, thereby prioritising solidarity and unity.

The fact that the revolution has been leaderless has helped many women across sectarian divisions to come to the frontlines and participate in the protest movements, helming roles such as discussing strategies and organising protests. Other protestors have understood the increasing significance of women in these movements and have made sur that there is substantial female representation during media briefings, meetings and

conferences. The protest movements have turned into a feminist platform, welcoming and supporting the cause that they fight for and the people who participate in it.

The October Revolution led to the resignation of the Lebanese forces who had four seats in the Cabinet. The stepping down of Prime Minister Saad Hariri soon followed. The former Lebanese Education Minister Hassan Diab was asked to form the government as directed by the President Michel Aoun and form the next government. He was nominated with the support of Hezbollah and its allies. His 20-member technocrat cabinet saw the absence of many major blocs such as the Sunni and the Druze. Among them six members are women, including the Minister of Defence who also serves as the Deputy Prime Minister, the first time the cabinet has seen a historical thirty per cent representation of women.

Palestine has linked its decade long struggle for an independent homeland with its growing problem of gender violence and femicides. Using the slogan 'Free Homeland, Free Women', Palestinian women have taken to the streets to protest against the mounting crimes particularly abuse and homicide of women. These women say that there is no point in attaining a free homeland without acknowledging the role of women and their position in the civil society. Many women from Beirut in Lebanon and Haifa in Israel took to the streets in solidarity with the Palestinian women demanding more freedom, basic rights and protection for women. The movement has also gained the support from Palestinians who are scattered across the Middle Eastern region. These women aimed to cripple the patriarchal structure of their society by calling out against these crimes. The participation of women has brought forth both men and women who support the cause and saw their movement reach across class and divisions.

Realising the importance of education for women there has also been a rise in the number of women who attend schools and universities. Educating women has led to better job opportunities as well as marriage alliances for the young Palestinian, which has helped reduce early marriages in the Palestinian communities. In an effort to decrease early marriages further, the Palestinian government raised the minimum legal age for marriage to 18 for both the genders. In March 2018, the government also repealed a law that prevented the rapist from conviction if he married his victim.

The Iranian government did not tolerate the removal of headscarves in its territory. Masih Alinejad, author of 'The Wind in My Hair', and who started the online campaign #MyStealthyFreedom, inspired by a photo of herself running through the London streets with her hair uncovered, is currently living in exile and has received severe online harassment, threats from the government and backlash from Iranian expatriates. This motivated another Iranian woman, Vida Mohaved, to wave her white headscarf as a flag in a busy street, but she was promptly arrested an hour later. More women were

encouraged to do the same and it is now known as the 'The Girls of Enghelab Street' movement on social media. Since then several women activists have been arrested or detained by the authorities.

In the 2018 International Women's Day, Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini addressed the public stressing that the western standards of women promoted exhibitionism and nudity while the hijab gave immunity and protected the modesty of the women wearing them. The same year Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's office released a four-year old public opinion survey, which revealed that nearly half of the country's men and women opined that the hijab should be a matter of personal choice and not be monitored by the government, though this majority opinion has been said to decline since then.

On April 2019, Vida Mohaved has been sentenced to a year in prison for encouraging public corruption despite having been pardoned by the Ayatollah. Nasrin Sotoudeh, an Iranian human rights lawyer who represented Mohaved in court was arrested herself on June 2018 is currently serving a prison sentence of 38 years and 148 lashes.

Major Trends

Certain key trends have been observed across the protests involving women. Women are addressing the discrimination against them through protests, demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, etc. They are captured on camera openly condemning the ruling government and their policies, and share personal experiences that many young women can relate. These opinions help realise the gravity of the issues and its influence on the society and its targeted impact on women. These videos have played an important role not only in educating the public about the depth of the issues at stake, but also inspire other women to break free from the confines of their household and take an active part in these movements.

It is widely noted that the participation of women has led to an increase in the number of peaceful protests in Middle Eastern countries. They are seen organizing candlelight vigils and silent marches. Women form human barriers between the armed forces and the protestors to protect their male counterparts from being attacked. Attacks against women and female journalists who cover the protest are also declining. This has significantly reduced the violence in protest movements, which has inadvertently seen a rise in the participants, as more people feel safer. Women also took upon themselves to treat the injuries of the protestors, provide them food and water, and address the mental, psychological trauma the protestors faced on the streets. In Lebanon, women hold constructive dialogues about their movement by setting up tents with signs that read, 'We welcome women and feminists'. More female protestors are taking part in debates, meetings, conferences and are given substantial coverage in mass media.

Women who were previously deterred by their families from taking part in the protests have managed to convince them otherwise citing the above reasons. According to Naomi Wolf, former political advisor to Al Gore and Bill Clinton, "Feminism is a logical extension to democracy". Achieving complete freedom is not possible if the rights of women are overlooked. Women are aware of their strength and believe that they bring a 'new energy', which will sustain the movement in their respective countries.

Political art has been another attribute of the protest movements. In Iran and Lebanon, men and women armed with spray cans and paints have turned to the walls to express their dissent against their ruling government through paintings and graffiti.

Another trend that is found in these protests is the growing importance of social media. Many women claim that social media has helped them overcome the barrier of censorship in their countries. Due to the global nature of the platform, women are able to receive and extend solidarity to people across the world who support their cause. Social media platforms also assist in mobilizing large groups of people at a short notice and at local levels due to the fast transmission of messages and other information. Many issues and struggles of people have become known because of the viral tendency of social media posts. An important feature of these posts is the use of catchy hashtags. Since the function of the hashtag is to find a variety of content pertinent to a theme under one umbrella, this media tag has enabled many protestors to update the progress of the protests at once through real-time messages, photographs and video clips. Protesters can also track the popularity and reach of their hashtag, which helps more social media users to tune in and become aware about the protests. Hashtags such as #MyStealthyFreedom, #GirlsofEngheLabStreet or GirlsofRevolutionStreet etc. started by Iranian activists received overwhelming response from people across the world.

The impulsive mass gatherings that form at the grassroots levels are leaderless in almost all the nations that currently witness protests. The socio-economic and political problems many people and not a singular group. As more people identify with the cause, we are able to see a diverse participation of peoples barring class, sects, gender etc., in the protest. They unite with a common goal in mind and therefore, might view a fellow protestor as an ally in achieving it, which results in the blurring of social divisions. Therefore, the protestors are able to define the concepts of 'us' and 'they' as the people versus the government, which reduces communal tensions within the group and provides for a much peaceful protest. The protests themselves have a great appeal to the common man as they as an entirety have been denied their rights by the government. The participation of citizens in the October Revolution across its eighteen sects in Lebanon or the solidarity of men and women globally for the Iranian and Palestinian cause are examples. Carne Ross, author of "The Leader Revolution: How Ordinary People Will Take Power and Change Politics in the 21st Century, notes that assigning particular individuals

as leaders helps the government to pinpoint that individual and repress, arrest or execute the person, thereby suppressing the movement quickly. On the other hand, leaderless protests are harder to subdue.

The protests have had their peaks and lows. In the Middle Eastern countries, the protests for women's rights have intertwined with the larger anti-governmental protests. The movements have received various responses from different tiers. In Lebanon, women from different sectarian divisions have joined hands in uplifting and empowering other women and men who participate in the movement, keeping in mind the true spirit of feminism. In an act of defiance, the women have altered the lyrics of the Lebanese national anthem so that it reads, 'the birthplace of women and men', instead of men alone. They have also revised the lyrics of a traditional wedding song that is now popularly sung at the protests and during candlelight vigils. The print, visual and social media throughout the MENA region, which greatly influenced the citizens in other countries who were going through similar turmoil, extensively covered the Lebanese protests. The protests in particular encouraged women to come out to the streets and spark feminist movements, making demands against laws that repress their fundamental rights and diminish their standard of living.

Forecast in 2020

Women of all ages from Islamic communities all over the world took part in the online campaigns #MyStealthyFreedom and #WhiteWednesdays were thousands of women posted pictures of themselves without their hijabs, wearing white attires, and holding white headscarves on Wednesdays supporting the anti- hijab movements in Iran on different social media platforms. Palestinian women organised 'women in black' candlelight vigils in honour of victims of gender violence. The Ta'lat movement, a woman-based group has helped redefine the Palestinian national struggle. They have helped several Palestinian women who have faced senseless persecution at the hands of government authorities or their families by mobilizing support and fighting for their causes.

Top politicians of the United States of America such as Mike Pompeo, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders supported the protests in Lebanon, calling for the government to reject violence and hold constructive dialogues with the public. Many countries and international organisations condemned the restrictions imposed on Iranian women. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch called for the release of human rights activists who were arrested unconditionally in 2018.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic or Covid-19 has dampened the momentum of the protests in the Middle Eastern countries. However according to Reuters, Lebanese protesters have covered their faces with masks, mostly using the

Lebanese flag and have returned to the street in convoys of cars amid the Covid-19 lockdown. They also waved the Lebanese flags and shouted 'revolution' while maintaining distance and keeping in mind the lockdown norms. The protestors claim that the poor state of the economy that has left the citizens with no salaries or employment has made them continue the protests despite the lockdown restrictions.

In Gaza, domestic abuse of women has increased by 30 per cent as documented by AISHA Association of Women and Child Protection. As the courts are closed and the police are occupied with the enforcement of the lockdown, women have not received their alimony and have been effectively kept away from their children. The restrictions have made the situation even more difficult for women to seek the necessary assistance.

Following the national and international pressure to release the prisoners from overcrowded prisons to prevent the spread of the pandemic, over 85,000 prisoners have been freed. However, the Iranian government has yet to release several women political prisoners and prisoners of conscience including notable human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who first alerted the international community regarding the condition of the prisons, despite pleas from over 20 human rights organisations

The governments at present seem to be using the Covid-19 to distract the citizens and sweep the root of the protest movements under the rug. However, the lockdown has only aggravated the situation and forced people to confront their government's liabilities at close quarters. The governments now need to address the source of the protests as soon as possible while simultaneously managing the pandemic. As the public grows restless due to poverty, shortages of food supply and violence within homes, they will take to the streets at a time when the governments are the least prepared for it.

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