

DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS

Women in the Arab Spring Uprisings: An Introduction

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Women have been primary agents of change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for decades. Most recently, they have been at the forefront of the uprisings since 2011 as protestors, organizers, and leaders. The Arab Spring witnessed women's rights groups and prominent activists mobilizing masses to call for democracy, freedom, and equal rights. Even after the initial wave of uprisings waned, women from all backgrounds worked with their male allies to push for progressive political transitions. When the Arab people revolted again in late 2018, against the regimes and systems in place, women once again took the lead in rallying the masses in many nations. They proved that women's fight for greater gender equity and social justice cannot be separated from the fight against authoritarianism, corruption, Islamist militancy, and poor economic conditions. This is the introductory article in a series of research that aims to reflect on the uprisings of both 2011 and 2018, and women's activism over the last decade.

This upcoming research series seeks to answer the role women played in the Arab Spring uprisings and how their participation in these movements impacted their gender role status. We will utilize case studies through an analysis of secondary resources on women's roles and the current debate on women's rights and status in the region. The case studies are from Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Tunisia, and Sudan. These cases involve high levels of women's participation in the protests, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of the proposed research questions. The cases have similarities as well as differences. Each case differs in terms of cultural, historical, and political variables and this will provide an opportunity for cross-case comparative analysis. All the cases show some level of democratic reform;

however, the struggle for democracy persists, and women continue to aim to be a part of the transitional processes.

2011: Arab Spring Kicking Off

The origins of the Arab Spring lie in the successful Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. In December 2010, [Mohammad Bouazizi](#) set himself on fire, protesting police seizing his vegetable stand. The event sparked a full-scale revolution, which led to massive political activism that pushed for democracy and cultural freedom. The revolution caught the international community's attention once the police clashed with the protesters killing dozens of them. Soon, it spread to the entire region including Egypt leading to January 25 Revolution, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Algeria, Sudan, and Iraq with country-wide protests.

Women's participation drove the revolutionary movements and challenged the patriarchal hegemony in societies. Thousands of women were picketing, protesting, organizing events, and running for political offices in several nations across the region. Libya showed an exceptional illustration of the unique role women played during the Arab Spring. [Libyan women](#) who traveled with men to the frontlines showed that women carved out a space for themselves in public places be it in forming makeshift kitchens, smuggling weapons, or transmitting information.

There has already been a strong tradition of women's activism in the region that can be traced back to the early twentieth century, particularly during the independence movements. The Arab Spring, in a sense, brought this activism to the foreground. Famous bloggers, such as Lina Ben Mheni, who was later [nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize](#) for her activism, reported from rural areas in Tunisia to bring the events to international attention. In Yemen, the leader of the "Women Journalists Without Chains" Tawakkol Karman, who was [awarded the Nobel Peace Prize](#), led rallies that ended the long-term Saleh rule. Iraqi women were vital players in socializing the protest movement beyond political and economic means by demanding rights as women.

However, due to their activism on the frontlines, women could not escape the human cost of the uprisings. They were often threatened, exiled, abused, and killed by security forces and

government-supported militia. Despite the brutal counterrevolutionary measures, women's presence in protests substantiated their role during and beyond the Arab Spring.

Developments Following the Arab Spring Up Until 2015

While several countries witnessed protests during the Arab Spring, [only Tunisia](#) experienced long-lasting change within the government. Egypt underwent governmental changes and developments following the Arab Spring only up until 2013 when the democratically-elected president Mohamed Morsi was [removed from power](#). Due to women's demands to join the government, the Tunisian government developed a gender equity law, requiring political parties to have equal numbers of men and women on electoral lists that are used to prepare for the election of a [constituent assembly](#). In Egypt, women's participation in the Arab Spring also caught the attention of Egyptian society and the government. Buthayna Kamel became the first woman to be allowed to run for [president](#) in Egypt in 2012; a significant milestone for women's rights in the country.

Although these significant developments occurred in Egypt and Tunisia, other countries did not experience similar regime changes. By tightening their grip on power, governments cemented their position in [authority](#) in numerous nations. Even though there was no regime change, women's rights still witnessed multiple developments. [Algerian](#) women were not as active in the protests as women in Egypt and Tunisia, yet they still enacted a number of changes. In 2012, the Algerian government implemented a new election law requiring one-third of the seats in parliament and local governments to be occupied by [women](#). This milestone brought the country to first place in the region on the ranking of women's political participation at the national and local [levels](#).

Likewise, women were mostly absent in the protests during the Arab Spring in Iran. However, they were still able to bring about change through other demonstrations. They demanded more freedom, which led the Iranian regime to create a permit that allowed Iranians to celebrate International Women's Day and an increase in jobs for women in the government and the [private sector](#).

The Second Wave in the Works

Major power vacuums emerged across the region after the initial wave of the Arab Spring. Islamists in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen drove these countries to political turmoil and civil wars. Rising sectarianism in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon led to totalitarian practices and violence. The power struggle in Tunisia, the sole success story of the uprising, has been threatening the gains of the 2011 revolution. The Arab Spring setback crushed the early hopes of democratic change and freedom of the people.

However, exhausted from rising youth unemployment, authoritarianism, and corruption, the Arab people revolted again in late 2018. In Sudan and Algeria, protests turned into civil disobedience, and later revolutions, that [ousted the regimes in 2019](#). Iraq observed the deadliest civil unrest since the fall of the Saddam regime, resulting in the prime minister's resignation after only two months of protests. Thousands took to the streets in Syria, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, and Tunisia, showing the revived spirit of the Arab people.

The second wave marked the rebirth of Arab women's activism, as their voices and contributions were once again needed. Women consisted of [up to 70% of the protestors](#). Their involvement rendered the protests to be non-violent. Street activism and grassroots efforts have persisted regardless of police brutality and the increased levels of public gender-based violence in many countries.

Past Trends and Trends Moving Forward

The 2018 uprisings, some of which are still ongoing, have similarities to the first wave; however, some differences emerge. The second wave appears to have gone beyond socio-economic grievances to develop [precise political demands](#). One major difference is that the protests that concentrated in a few cities in 2011 have turned into nationwide movements in many countries since 2018. A second major difference lies in the international support and attention the two waves received. There is less international support or attention for the second wave, relative to the first wave, which received considerable international support following the protests. A third important difference is the ideological bent of these two uprisings. Protestors in the second wave rejected [sectarian divisions](#) in many countries, compared to the first wave's achievements and failures that were not necessarily sectarian-

based.

The main issues at hand in both the 2011 and the 2018-present protests are the demands for democracy, an improved standard of living, a solution to youth unemployment, the freedom of the press, internet freedom, eradication of corruption, and women's empowerment. Women continue to protest these issues through grassroots organizations, street protests, cyber activism, and by being part of their respective governments. Women's empowerment has been a big push in the 2018-present uprisings since women still experience oppression and unequal rights in many Arab countries. The present representation of women in government positions is higher than in 2011, which has given them the opportunity to keep pushing for women's issues.

Overall, there were lessons learned from 2011, which led the second wave of protests to dominate more public spaces, including the use of graffiti in Algiers and Beirut. Since the 2011 protests, more social forces have been developed. That is, protests in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon have started with issue-focused intentions that have developed into longer-term uprisings. While the 2018 uprisings brought some changes, current protests continue to strive to go beyond superficial change to ensure that the changes are permanent.

Conclusion

Even though they often face a variety of challenges from physical and sexual abuse and brutal crackdowns by security forces, women's activism continues in Arab countries. The outstanding level of women's participation in the second wave of uprisings from 2018 to the present day demonstrates their resistance and persistence. Their struggle for securing women's place in politics and socio-economic life continues. The future of women's status in the region remains uncertain. However, women strive to safeguard the rights gained since 2011 and play a pivotal role in bridging the gender gap.