

Rise up and be heard, Arab sisters

Raghida Dergham, *The Independent*, Friday 30 December 2011

The Year of Revolution: Women have sometimes been left on the sidelines of the Arab Spring. But there is now a rare opportunity to seize the moment and change the region for good.



Egyptian women in Cairo protest against the army's use of violence against female protesters
EPA

For a sense of how the Arab Spring could play out for the region's women, consider what happened in Iran after Khomeini's revolution in 1979. Before that extraordinary upheaval, the role of women in Iranian public life was growing rapidly; the hijab was not compulsory, and the large-scale participation of women was a significant part of the Shah's overthrow. But after that, change was dramatic. Women ended up being marginalised, leading feminists discredited and smeared. The legal age of marriage for girls was reduced to nine, and many public places were segregated. The women of Iran hesitated, they were patient, and they dreamed. And when they awoke to their bitter reality, it was too late.

Their situation today is tragic. It stands as a warning to Arab women: beware of committing the same mistakes. If you do not rise up now, the moment will be lost.

For it isn't impossible to imagine a similar scenario unfolding in countries like Egypt and Libya. Too often politics is considered to be "men's work". But if Arab women stand up for themselves, they could represent an extraordinary instrument of change. If they were to organize themselves with the aim of causing political, economic and social change, they could pose a powerful challenge to the attempts of Islamists to hijack the idea of the secular state.

Sadly, there are few regional examples that are likely to inspire that process. Even in supposedly enlightened countries like Lebanon, women are absent from political decision-making institutions: the men in power have not "found" any women qualified enough to fill even a single ministerial position under the current prime minister, while there were only two female ministers under the previous one. In fact, the country of freedom and democracy, as it boasts, has failed to adopt a decision to outlaw violence against women in compliance with

the desires of religious institutions. The women of Egypt, or most of them, are digging their own graves as long as their burkas are blinding them to the possibility of such a fate.

Here, the women of Lebanon, a country not reached by the Arab Spring, have one thing in common with the women of Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, where change has arrived, as well as with the women of the Syrian opposition, who have played striking political roles and whose fate remains unknown under the alternative forces that would come to power. To engineer change they need to form feminist political parties – not unions or associations – with clear programs and goals, and a clear focus on the roles played by women in decision-making. They need parties that are bold and courageous in calling themselves feminist, then run in elections and demand a 30 per cent quota of posts for women, as adopted by the United Nations 35 years ago.

Women were troublingly invisible in some of the protests that consumed the public square. But the younger generation did play its part. If those young women have truly reached political maturity, they should take the initiative now – before the Islamists finish hijacking their revolution – to raise Arab women as a slogan, an instrument and a feature for the democratic road to reform and freedom.

If that happens, a confrontation could arise between the women of modernity and the women of tradition – especially religious tradition – in view of their different aspirations. Well, so be it. Just as there is an acceptance of the struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists for power, or between Leftists and Islamists, let the difference between the women of modernity and the women of tradition be accepted and dealt with democratically.

There are some encouraging signs. Libya's women activists are characterized by a great deal of courage, as they enter into a fateful battle against the Islamist revolutionaries, and even against the leaders in power who have rushed to degrade women by reinstating men's "right" to marry four of them. But these women may fall victim to the alliance between the North Atlantic Alliance (Nato) and the revolutionaries if the western sponsors do not exercise their influence – as they can when they want to – instead of merely speaking empty words about women's rights. Libyan women have taken part in getting rid of Muammar Gaddafi's regime – and some of them have been active for 40 years – but they are now alone in a fateful battle against the men of the revolution, who are determined to monopolize power, exclude women and impose their own narrow-minded version of Sharia rule.

The United Nations has a role it must now play through its Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who spoke boldly against Gaddafi, and must now speak with the same boldness for the rights of Libyan women. The UN's record is mixed. In Afghanistan, where it played a key role in shaping the new political regime after the fall of the Taliban, then-UN Envoy Ambassador Al-Akhdar Al-Ibrahimi made sure to include the participation of women in decision-making and a clear quota for them according to the constitution, giving women 25 per cent of seats in parliament. But it failed to do the same in Iraq – although it would have been able to if it had tried. Before it today is the opportunity of a Security Council term for the Secretariat, as well as that of the presence of a dedicated entity, UN Women. This entity must prove itself courageous and bold by supporting and providing all assistance to Arab women. If it does not, it will not be fulfilling its mission.

The male Arab youths, who are waging the battle for change in their respective countries, have not yet risen to recognizing the rights of young women to freedom, liberalism and self-

expression. Most of them fell between chivalry and tradition, as they watched the Islamists in Tahrir Square in Egypt expelling young women by "pushing" them and pulling their hair, to punish them for violating tradition. Some of them have overlooked harassment, and even rape. As long as they keep this mentality, they will not rise to the level of being able to cause the required radical change in Arab societies, not just because this is a fundamental part of freedom and liberalism, but also because it will not be possible to develop Arab societies without women.

If the young men stay in the Tahrir-style Squares of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco and Syria in such a state of want, their battle for power against the Islamists will be a losing one. They will surely fail without the participation of young Arab women, who have truly begun work that is organized, bold and qualitatively new. They are active in all of those countries as well.

The young men are not the only ones who need to decide if they are willing to stand up. So must the women of the Muslim Brotherhood. We know that Salafist – ultraconservative – women have neither a say nor a role, but only exclusion and submission, as admitted and clearly declared by the Salafists themselves. We know that the worst thing that could happen to Arab women would be for the Salafists to come to power. They have made this unequivocally clear. What is unclear is the women's program within Muslim Brotherhood organizations, which pay lip service to modernity as a tactic, so as to reach power then monopolize it.

Turkey, perhaps in partnership with Qatar, has promoted so-called moderate Islam to circumvent extremism. Now it has to take a clear stance towards the role of women in particular. The wives of all high-ranking officials in Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, including the President and the Foreign Minister, wear the hijab as a political statement, and not just as a religious choice. Turkey has the ability to stop the descent, because secularism there is strong, and because its geography prevents it from such a descent. Things are not so elsewhere in the Middle East. Turkey must speak publicly of the situation of Arab women, especially as it is a partner in the drive to bring the Islamists to power.

Most importantly, while Arab women begin to work for local change, they also have to start communicating with their campaigners in other countries. It won't be easy to found the new political identity, but it's an urgent task. If the serious work doesn't start now, the Arab Awakening could end up as a slumber that leaves the region in the dark ages.

Raghida Dergham is a columnist for the London-based Arabic daily 'Al Hayat'