Strategic Reflection Meeting on Women’s Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa region

March 27th 2013
Tunis- TUNISIA

Report
Presented by Urgent Action Fund and Mediterranean Women’s Fund
Introduction

The Strategic Meeting in Tunis was arranged by the Mediterranean Women’s Fund (MedWF) in collaboration with Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights (UAF). The one-day regional gathering was an opportunity to bring together feminist activists from across the MENA region to participate in discussions, exchange experiences and debate strategies. For UAF, it was a chance to conduct outreach and engage a number of issues pertinent to women’s human rights defenders (WHRDs) in the region. The meeting was a precursor to the World Social Forum held on March 26-30 to ensure additional WHRDs can integrate learning from the strategic meeting to the range of debates held at the Forum.

20 activists attended the convening, including representatives from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Tunisia and Algeria. The representative of Nazra, the Egyptian organization, was unable to obtain her visa in time to attend the meeting, and the young woman from Yemen had an emergency that didn’t allow her to travel.

Caroline Brac de la Perrière, director of the MedWF and a leading activist in the region, facilitated the workshop with UAF board member Anissa Hélie, an Algerian academic and feminist activist. Caroline presented the agenda, guided the discussion, and reformulated points raised to ensure that everybody’s contribution was taken into account. Anissa presented UAF’s history and mission and helped participants understand the ways in which they could assist with UAF’s outreach in the region and also apply for grants. All communication was in Arabic or French with English translation.

The discussions focused on the current state of women’s movements in the Middle East in the aftermath of the revolutions. Each participant introduced herself and her organization, and then delved into the current activities, concerns, priority issues, and the needs of women’s movements in each country. Overall, the participants expressed great satisfaction with the workshop as an important moment of solidarity, and as a forum of analysis for the prospects of women’s rights in the region.

Key Reflections and Analyses

i. Fundamentalism and Women’s Roles in Revolutionary Processes

During the post-revolutionary period in Algeria in the 1960s, women who had previously participated as active combatants were expected to return to their traditional roles of wife and mother. Although women were granted several political and social rights in the years following independence, the political ideology of secularism was soon swept aside to unify the nation under Islam. Indeed, the 1984 Family Code – which made women subordinate to men - might have felt like a betrayal for Algerian women. The 1990s saw the beginning of civil war, in which killings and disappearances were commonplace. Violence against women was also at its worst. Women who did not follow their traditional roles or were seen without the veil were brutally treated and usually killed. The political gains made by women during
the 1960s were partially lost in the decade of the 1990s. Though silenced due to social, cultural and personal circumstances, women have continued to express their frustrations.

More recently, during the revolutions that began in Tunisia in 2010, women across the Arab world took to the streets demanding change beyond the overthrow of despotic regimes. Yet from Tunisia to Bahrain, from Tahrir to Twitter, Arab women have struggled to make their voices heard amidst the enthusiastic din of perceived revolutionary success. Though we cannot yet foretell what may come of these revolutionary processes, all activists present at the Strategic Meeting recognized the need to take into account the lessons learned from post-civil war Algeria. For women to enjoy the fruits of revolution, they must mobilize to secure their rights before, during and after the transition itself. Gender parity is not given; at every stage, it must be asserted. Difficulties remain for women in the Arab world as they confront the gender disparity and marginalization that persist across the region, specifically within the context of the rise of religious fundamentalism in newly established post-revolutionary political systems.

A feminist from Tunisia described how women in the post-revolution period are struggling to “preserve dignity.” Rather than progressing, women in Tunisia are fighting to maintain the rights they had in the pre-revolutionary period. Although the rule of former dictator Ben Ali was a detriment to the full realization of political rights, he was also seen as a promoter of women’s rights. Currently, religious fundamentalist movements are becoming more influential, targeting women through the sanction of early marriage, honor crimes and spousal rape. In the days preceding the World Social Forum, a young Tunisian activist received numerous death threats after appearing in photos on Facebook with the words “My body belongs to me” scrawled on her bare chest. The young woman has since been forced to flee the country due to threats.

The question remains: Has the political space opened by the revolution served a progressive agenda, or has it become an opening for the fundamentalist right wing to take over?

Representatives from Syria also criticized the prevalence of honor crimes and domestic violence in their country, and the existence of personal status laws that marginalize women. Above all, the humanitarian crisis in Syria has hindered women’s activism, compounded by the inability of international organizations to bring aid across the border. Activists from the Syrian Women’s League expressed hope that religious extremism will not come to dominate post-revolutionary Syria, stating that the focus on Islamists and foreign fighters was media-driven and overblown. In response, a representative from Tunisia warned the Syrian activists that this hopeful rhetoric was also prevalent during their revolution, and yet political Islam and the eroding of women’s rights is currently the norm in the Tunisian Parliament.

Some activists held the view that a rise of Islamism is preferred to a tyrannical government that maintains the status quo. Others argued that a victory for fundamentalists represents the beginning of the end for women’s rights and freedoms.

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A woman from Kayan – an Arab feminist organization based in Israel - discussed the role of the feminist movement in the Palestinian communities in Israel. She pointed to the challenge of incorporating the feminist cause into all political struggles. Often times, leaders see the women’s agenda as an obstacle to the national struggle, and feminists are labeled as ‘unpatriotic.’ This theme can certainly be seen across the region and especially in the revolution and post revolution contexts.

As in Lebanon, the lives of Palestinian women in Israel are mandated under strong religious institutions, which make it difficult for women to opt for civil marriage or divorce. Activists from across the region cited the persistence of structural inequalities, in which the link between domestic violence and financial dependence hinder women’s mobility and independence.

In Algeria, the Family Code of Sharia Law legalizes polygamy and strengthens the legal prerogatives of husbands. An Algerian feminist activist spoke about the inaccessibility of public spaces to women: “No women are on the streets after 5:00 PM; Streets belong to men. After the [rise of] Islamism of the 90s, parents are overprotective. There is incredible harassment on the street. A woman must be accompanied by a man at all times.”

Finally, the Iraqi women spoke about their reality of having less political influence today than at any time since the American invasion. Iraq’s constitution requires that a quarter of the Members of Parliament be women. However, the inability of Iraqi women to increase their influence in parliament hasunderscored wider fears that women could lose standing in other facets of life too, amid an overall drift towards rising religious fundamentalism.

The rise in Islamism in post-revolutionary processes across the Arab world belies any belief that with revolution will come the automatic and earnest uprooting of entrenched gender hierarchies. Thus, the ‘Strategic Reflection Meeting’ served as a forum for women across the Arab world to come together in solidarity and reflect upon their current challenges, needs and strategies to overcome these obstacles as well as to learn lessons from countries in different stages of revolutionary contexts.

ii. LGBT Movements

Movements of political transformation in the Middle East have always challenged patterns of identity, normativity and authority. The Arab revolutions and the subsequent drafting of new constitutions have brought these issues to the forefront of national conversations. At the Strategic Meeting, representatives from Turkey introduced the need to include LGBT rights into the agenda of democratization. Turkey, a secular democracy that incorporates Islam, does not criminalize homosexuality. Yet Turkey’s anti-discrimination law still excludes sexual orientation and gender identity, and widespread homophobic discrimination in Turkey persists.

A representative of KAOS, the Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association in Turkey spoke about the ongoing hate crimes against LGBT people, and the need for more protective shelters. She advocated the inclusion of LGBT issues within all aspects of the women’s rights agenda. A Palestinian representative, went on to stress the need to
‘sexualize [the] revolution,’ stating: “National and sexual emancipation are [parallel] to each other.”

An Iraqi representative proposed that the struggle for women’s rights as a whole should come before that of sexual minorities. An activist from Algeria, called this flawed reasoning: “[This argument] is the same as saying, ‘Let’s wait for the revolution before focusing on women’s rights.”

A majority of the activists in the Strategic Meeting concluded that LGBT rights must go hand-in-hand with the women’s rights agenda, and safe shelters need to be accessible in places where LGBT people continue to face threats and harassment.

iii. Young Women’s Movements
According to UNICEF, young people between the ages of 15-24 comprise nearly one-fifth of the population of the Middle East and North Africa, representing the largest youth cohort in the history of the region.\(^2\) The youth sparked the Arab spring, wielding online tools to garner support, elude surveillance and cross class lines. Yet the young activists’ idealism has been challenged by the bitter reality of repression, and young people in the region continue to face diminishing opportunities to secure jobs, access housing, and achieve financial independence.

The participants of the Strategic Meeting in Tunis emphasized the need to involve young activists, specifically girls, in all aspects of post-revolutionary processes. A Palestinian activist spoke about the demand for youth empowerment trainings, and the need to bridge the gap between younger and older generations. She criticized the younger generation as being ‘clicktivists’ – digital activists who are increasingly removed from grassroots movements on the ground. At the same time, the older generation must listen to young people and address the substantive issues they are fighting against. Young activists from Tunisia and Syria echoed this concern and called for more resources to develop the young feminist movement in order to create sustainable change. A number of activists at the meeting suggested retreats and dialogue sessions that would include women of all ages.

Conclusion
For UAF, the Strategic Meeting was a chance to conduct outreach with activists from across the Middle East. In particular, it was an opportunity for UAF to invite a number of prominent activists to join the UAF advisory network – a group of feminist who have expertise in thematic or regional contexts and are able to provide guidance to the UAF staff and board as grant requests are considered. Trusted relationships with advisors around the world allow UAF to respond quickly to requests for support. The meeting in Tunis was a networking forum that promoted an exchange of information and collaboration between UAF and its

grantees, and allowed UAF to raise awareness of its rapid response grantmaking (RRG) program.

The convening preceded the World Social Forum (WSF), an open space that stimulates the decentralized debate, reflection, and alliances among movements and organizations engaged in concrete actions towards a more democratic and fair world. The activists at the Strategic Meeting participated in the WSF with a renewed sense of purpose, contributing their own perspectives on women’s rights and engaging with a vast array of global social movements.