

Arab as well as Western societies have gender inequalities. What are some of the problems that women face in the Middle East and North Africa countries?

The first and major obstacle is the recognition that there is a gender inequality issue in the region. When we speak to the average person -and sometimes even to men who are politically aware- for them, there is no problem at all! They ask for sources, statistics, proofs and more explanations. Yet, the Global Gender Gap Report, issued each year by the World Economic Forum, shows that the MENA region is among the lowest ranking region since years in terms of gender inequalities. Plus, feminists and women groups exist in the MENA countries and work extensively; however, changing mentalities is too slow.

Another important obstacle is the authoritarian regimes in the region. Authoritarian regimes are patriarchal regimes, build on social and political hierarchies, including gender hierarchy. Also, these masculine regimes rely on male violence (military and masculine interpretations of religion and law) to maintain the social, economic and political status quo. Women's status is often an indicator of democracy. In this sense, there is no democracy without democratization of the private sphere.

Lack of decent standard of living and violations of economic rights: many men and women are concerned by their immediate survival -day to day. All this is exacerbated by the pandemic and post-COVID.

The roles of women in the Arab world have changed throughout history. Where do you think Arab women stand today?

Nowadays, it seems that women have access to education, to employment and to the public sphere. However, this access suffers from several limitations:

1. Most rural women and other socially marginalized women are excluded from education.
2. If girls tend to excel in school, this does not necessary translate in terms of access to paid and respected jobs. On the contrary, the more women are educated, the more they suffer from employment. In addition, women on the job market suffers from a horizontal and a vertical discrimination. Meaning that on one hand, jobs that are considered "female jobs", e.g. secretaries and teachers, are less paid than men's; on the other, decision-making positions and prestigious jobs are often offered to men. A last item worth mentioning is that in general, women's employment is welcome within the household as long as it does not destabilize the gender hierarchies. This explains that most working women do the household chores at home.
3. Legal discrimination is still there. In Saudi Arabia, women are legally under the guardianship of a man (father, spouse, closest male relative). In Morocco, legal inequalities are there, among which inheritance law, divorce procedure. In Egypt, marriage institution is discriminatory, such polygamy, nationality code, etc.
4. Violence against women, for instance domestic violence that is banalized (made ordinary), violence in the public sphere, symbolic violence, such as degrading remarks at work, etc.

5. Sexual violence, including marital rape, rape and sexual harassment. The #Me-too Movement revealed that in many countries, including Iran where women are veiled, women are harassed in the street and in buses. In Morocco, there were several scandals where University professors demand sex from young female students in exchange for good grades.
6. Women's reproductive rights are not recognized. Abortion is criminalized. This explains that there are many illegal abortions that are not safe for women and there are many abandoned children. Yet, there is a whole hypocrisy or a double discourse about women's bodies. The necessity for women to be virgin before marriage, etc.
7. All these discriminations are deeper for marginalized women: rural, poor, immigrants, single mothers, divorcees, widows, etc.

What are the main challenges that Arab women still have to face?

1. Lack of a political will to change the situation. This indicates that the gender hierarchy is a political issue: it is part of the masculine power structures, be it political, social or economic/financial.
2. Lack of awareness that there is a problem. Very few educational institutions have a Gender Studies Programs. As a result, the general knowledge about these issues dates back to the time of anticolonial struggles and to the emergence of Modern feminism in the MENA region between the 1920s and 1950s.
3. There are feminists and women groups working with limited resources and sometimes taking a personal risk. But unfortunately, given the lack of political will, their impact does not reach most of the population.
4. As a result, in addition to legal discriminations, women in MENA societies suffer from ordinary sexism in all spheres and all stages of their lives. Education, work, streets, mediocre representation of women in the arts and literature and text books, devaluation of their contributions to their societies, language, etc.

Many in the West lay the blame on Islam for the oppression of Arab women. Which role does religion play?

Considering how patriarchal world religions are, the question is: is religion responsible for patriarchy? Or did patriarchy create a masculine religion? (the story of the egg and the chicken, which one came first?)

Anyhow, the official interpretations of Islam in the MENA region are highly discriminatory, for instance marriage, divorce and inheritance laws. Some countries even imposed a dress code (veil, burka, hijab, ibaya) and implement flogging for adultery. In some cases, a victim of rape, if she cannot prove that it is a rape, then she is convicted of adultery and flogged (welcome to dark ages!). Also, keep in mind that some of authoritarian regimes in the MENA region use religion to legitimize their power. In Jordan, the king claims to be a descendant of the prophet. Moroccan king has the

title of “the Commander of the Faithfull”. We have an *Islamic* Republic in Iran etc. So, the official Islam is part of masculine power structures.

In this context, religion is an aggravating factor, in terms of resistance against women’s progress. Religion comes often as censorship. Some pretend that we cannot reform marriage institution and inheritance law, because it is divine law; thus, immutable. But then, the reading of the Coran is highly selective: Islamic law selects discriminatory verses, while omitting more favorable ones.

It has been 11 years since the Arab Spring. What has changed since then? Are you optimistic about the current situation in the Arab world?

What Arab revolts showed in 2011 is that when people mobilize, it is possible to put pressure on governments. Also, it showed that the fear can switch places: the repressive regimes became afraid of their population. Unfortunately, due to geopolitics and proxy wars in the region, Syria experienced a civil war. This was very frightening to other societies in the region.

Arab revolts in 2011 are just the first stage. There is no other choice but to obtain democracy, human rights and women rights in the region. The main concern is: can we make this transition peacefully, without violence? This is the issue of concern.

Do you think it is hypocritical for Westerners to talk about democracy and human rights in the Arab world? And if yes, why?

I will take a small detour to answer this question. Great Palestinian-American thinker and founder of postcolonial studies coined the term “Orientalism” for reductive images and representations of Non-Westerners, especially Muslims and Arabs. In a similar fashion, there are reductive representations of Westerners. The term is “Occidentalism”. Certainly, reductive images of Westerners do not translate in terms of discriminatory immigration policies or work and housing discriminations for Western immigrants in Arab lands. Nonetheless, reductive representations of Westerners exist.

So, to answer your questions, Westerners are not a monolithic group and cannot be reduced to one single actor. Yes, some actors in the West, and certainly those operating from within power structures, e.g. military industries, foreign ministries and mining companies, use the discourse of democracy, human rights, women’s rights and economic development to legitimate their military actions or appropriation of natural resources. To recall, Bush legitimated his attacks on Afghanistan in 2001, saying women needed to be saved. In 2003, he orchestrated a military aggression against Iraq, saying he will bring democracy and human rights to the Iraqi people. And let’s keep in mind, each time an aggressor attacks a country with the legitimization of democracy, human rights and women’s rights, this kind of dissonant discourse destroys any chance for the violated country to achieve democracy, human rights and women’s rights.

On the other hand, there are other actors, and certainly some impartial human rights and Women’s rights NGOs who work to promote democracy and human rights in the

Middle East. Most of the time, they work with local NGOs. They are then most effective when they demonstrate with facts to the public in the West the double discourse of their governments. For instance, during the so-called war of terror, Amnesty International showed how US, Canada and many liberal democracies were involved directly or indirectly in acts of torture in Jordan, Morocco and Syria for instance.

Similarly, there are Western journalists, researchers, intellectuals and artists who work hard to show to their public in the West how their government or companies are violating human rights abroad.

How will the protests in Iran end? Will the protesters manage to cause even a few cracks in the theocratic regime of Tehran?

It is difficult to predict the outcomes of the protests in Iran -more so for a historian who studies past events-; however, we can derive from these protests a few facts that can instruct us about the future:

1. These are the longest protests in Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In addition, these protests are taking place not only in big cities, but also in towns.
2. The protests are uniting people from different classes and social conditions, including the Kurdistan ethnic minority region (where Hafs Amini is from).
3. Women and the youth are leading the protests. And they are aware as to how the regime had been handling protests in the past, e.g. the *Green Movement* in 2009 and *The Girls of Enghelab protests* (movement against Compulsory Hijab) in 2017-2018.
4. Women and the youth are sick of their totalitarian regime. They feel stifled in all spheres of life (political, social, economic). In addition, they feel (rightly so) deprived of their basic rights and liberties.
5. There is a deep gap between the government and Iranians' daily aspirations.
6. Instead of listening to the protesters' demands, the Islamic Republic government responds with extreme brutality. In addition, as any totalitarian regime, the Iranian government tries to create a diversion, or rather an enemy, by stating that the West is behind these protests. However, state violence creates more anger within the population, and thus brings about more protests.

Another key point in the protests in Iran is the remarkable presence of women. The outstanding presence of women, which has drawn extensive international support, has led many to consider it a feminist movement. What is your assessment of the role and presence of women in these protests?

In a theocratic regime that has a misogynist and highly patriarchal interpretation and implementation of religion, the widespread presence of women in the protests is not surprising. The first thing a theocratic regime does when it accesses power is curtailing women's rights. We have seen this in Afghanistan, and with the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In terms of real-politics, it is much easier to send women back home than to rise

the standards of living of the population, by creating decent housing, building hospitals and schools, etc.

Anyhow, the current protests have a slogan: Women, life, freedom. In this sense, they are linking women's rights, living a life that is fulfilling and enjoyable and freedom, be it personal or political. So, the current protesters' demands go beyond the veil issue; thus, they including a regime change.

The head scarf known as the hijab is at the center of the protests. Why is it an especially inflammatory issue?

Theocratic regimes that have a misogynist and highly patriarchal interpretation and implementation of religion use the mandatory head scarf as their symbolic "flag". The social landscape where the veil is prevalent indicates right away that political Islam has power, and is in power. So, it is a demonstration of power by a totalitarian regime.

About the book

Why did you write a book about Morocco and at the same time about your family?

Yes, my book *Freedom for Morocco: A Family Tale* is historical and autobiographical. It weaves together two intertwined narratives. A personal account invites readers into my family's home, while a collective narrative reveals the shared struggles of Moroccan citizens for democracy and human rights.

The objective behind alternating between micro- and macro-histories is twofold. On one hand, the microhistory demonstrates how ordinary Moroccan families are engaged in the democratization struggles in the country. This is an important reminder, because social and popular movements for democratization have been systematically erased from the official history of contemporary Morocco. On the other hand, the macro-history offers a corrective re-examination of concepts and key events conveyed by official historical sources from 1921 to the present day, notably Morocco's anti-colonial uprisings, the emergence of neocolonialism under the guise of formal independence, the institutionalization of predatory capitalism, the establishment of a democratic façade, the Islamization politics of the governing elite and the emergence of Islamism.

Have you received any threats or negative criticism for writing about issues such as democracy and human rights?

No, I have not been a target of any political harassment in Morocco. Nowadays, writers, researchers and intellectuals are rarely harassed by the political police. However, this does not indicate that there is more freedom of speech in the country. Rather, it tells us that the governing elite has been successful in destroying education, culture and analytical thought in the country. Today, ordinary citizens are sent to up to 3 years of prison for a Facebook post.

What are the challenges facing Morocco today? What role can the country's women play on the road to a better future?

As many countries in the MENA region, Morocco is facing several challenges, to name a few:

1. Leadership: The governing elite does not pursue the development of the country and the progress of the population. Rather, it opts for policies and programs that maintain its power and its privileges.
2. Economic: the pandemic revealed that more than half of the population are surviving on precarious jobs in the informal sector of the economy. So, economic hardship is just a daily bitter reality for at least half of Moroccans.
3. Official religious propaganda permeates every aspect of life. A serious problem considering that latest knowledge in humanities and social sciences does not reach public schools, the youth and the general public.
4. Progressive actors have not managed so far to unite and to create a strong counter-power.

Human rights groups and women's groups are aware that they are divided and that they must unite, if they want to win the democratization battle. Plus, for some women's groups, feminism has a broader agenda that cannot be reduced to gender hierarchies only. It is a struggle for gender equality as much as it is a struggle for social justice, fair redistribution of wealth, international justice, and respect for the environment. In this sense, feminism is battling patriarchy, imperialism, neoliberalism and any form of oppression.