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Arab revolutions

Aspects of the involvement of women in the Arab revolutions

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Of course women have been part of the revolutionary processes in the region. They have been strikers (in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain); they have participated in general assemblies (in Oman); everywhere, they have demonstrated, marched, occupied squares and camps (in Bahrain, Oman and Yemen). Whatever the kind of demonstration, with mixed (as in Morocco) or separated (as in Libya and Oman) contingents, women have taken to the streets and continue to do so every day. And in some countries, their specific mobilizations have played a remarkable role (students in Saudi Arabia and Sudan). Only the processes of militarization of revolutions (in Libya and Syria) have kept them in the background. And even then, women soldiers in Gaddafi's army were part of the armed insurrection when the regular army changed sides.

At first, women did not demarcate themselves from the movement as a whole, demanding, like men and all the other minorities, the "fall" or the "reform" of the regime. And they suffered from repression: like their male peers, they were arrested, tortured and imprisoned (in Syria and Sudan), or killed. But they were also dealt with specifically, with rape being committed on a mass scale (in Libya, Egypt and Syria), the term rape including "virginity tests." In Sudan, women were publicly whipped, because corporal punishment is prescribed by law, such as public flogging for "moral or indecent attire" and "prostitution", whose definitions are so broad that the authorities can use them to repress women. And women have already disappeared from history, not ten years or a hundred years later, but in real time. Syrians pay homage every day to dozens of "martyrs" who fall every day for the revolution. The expression "Glory to the martyrs" followed by a reminder of the name, the date of birth and date of death, and sometimes even more details, which are rightly mentioned in the communication media of the Syrian revolution, is intended only for men; women are excluded, because you do not pay tribute to a woman who has been raped. She disappears immediately from the collective memory.

In a second phase, women expressed their own demands, either through existing movements (as in Morocco and Tunisia) or by creating new structures (in Yemen, Syria and Libya) or by a third attitude, implying transgression. Among the women's movements created from nothing, we must obviously include all the women's structures established in the liberated territories in Syria; their newspapers, their radios, their structures to assist the wounded and displaced persons, etc. The same thing goes for the women's movement in Libya, which has won a victory that is historic, not only for Libyan and Arab women, but for women all over the world. In fact, on 19 February 2014, the Minister of Justice adopted by decree a bill recognizing the victims of sexual violence committed during and before the revolution as war victims; this victory is not only symbolic, but accompanied by compensation and a rehabilitation programme for the thousands of women involved, and for the children born from these rapes. This is a measure for which many women who have been raped in conflict zones around the world are still waiting ... in Bosnia, Congo and Darfur, to name only a few cases.

Alongside the old or new women's movements, there is a third attitude, which is certainly very much in a minority, but which has emerged in the wake of these revolutions; instead of demanding rights, you exercise them! This was the case of the "kiss of Nadhor" (in Morocco), when following the arrest and imprisonment of a couple of teenagers who had kissed in public, girls and young people decided to kiss in public, in the street. At the funeral of Choukri Belaïd in Tunisia, his widow Basma launched an appeal to women and invited them to participate in the funeral, even though that day is in principle reserved for men. Women responded massively and went to the cemetery. In Syria, the women of Salamiyeh declared on social networks that from now on they would bury the dead. A woman took off her top in public (in Tunisia) and another removed her lower garments (in Egypt). In Sudan women defy the government and march bareheaded. And in Saudi Arabia, women take the wheel of a car at regular intervals and are starting to win small victories. It remains to be seen whether these attitudes are the result of a moment of revolutionary euphoria, a spur of the moment decision, or whether they represent a more general pattern of behaviour. It is,

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however, hard to imagine Saudi women giving up the driving seat. It is up to us not to give up on them.