

Women's rights during the Arab uprisings – losing battles but not the war.
By Kim Ghattas. March 6 2014
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--Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

Thank you all for being here—I want in particular to note the presence of Annie Romein Verschoor's granddaughter and friends, it's an honor to have you in the audience, thank you for coming.

Greta, thank you very much for your kind introduction and for inviting me and for all your support to help make it happen. .

Last night when we met, you remarked on how easy it was to get me to agree to come and do this, well it doesn't make much convincing me to drop everything else and hop on a plane to the Netherlands, my other home country, my motherland in essence. I still have family here, some of them are in the audience tonight, as are some of my wonderful Dutch friends.

But most of all, I didn't have to think twice when given the honor of presenting the annual Annie Romein-Verschoor lecture, focused this year on the timely and important topic of women's rights during the Arab uprising.... A subject that I speak about not from an academic perspective but very much from experience.

I've been a journalist for about fifteen years. I've spent time hanging out with bearded fighters from Hezbollah. I've traveled 12 hours by car in the desert from Amman to Baghdad. I've spent evenings in men-only political salons in Kuwait, called diwaniyyas, I've interviewed Saudi intelligence, I've covered assassinations in Beirut, protests in Damascus, the Iraq war...

The first time I was ever asked what it was like to be a **woman** journalist in the Arab world, was in the United States. I didn't have an answer. I had never really thought of it.

One day last year, I was visiting a British friend of mine who lives in the US, my book was about to be published, and she told me that I was a true inspiration to her, a role model for other women, she said it was amazing to see a woman do all that I was doing, without fear. I'm not telling you this so I can feel good about myself, believe me I have plenty of moments of doubt, I'm telling you this because again I was truly startled. She went on to tell me that she often doubted how far she could go as a woman. Her father had not thought it was essential that she finish high school, and he certainly did not think it was necessary at all that she go to university. Women belonged at home anyway (and there's nothing wrong with staying at home IF that is your CHOICE). But my friend did finish her education, because she wanted it and she fought for it, as did her mother.

But here I was an Arab woman, listening to a Western woman telling me her father had undermined her confidence in herself by telling her that this was a man's world.

That's when it occurred to me that I never quite appreciated the immense gift that MY father had given me. My father, a Lebanese man, an Arab man, of modest background, from the Bekaa valley, had married a Dutch woman, who worked by his side almost every day in the rough business of the food industry. He had three girls and he was in heaven. He defied all stereotypes. An Arab man delighted to have daughters. He pushed us to study hard, and HE worked hard to make sure he could pay for our studies at university.

Not once did I hear my father tell me I couldn't do something because I was a woman. Not once. He did try to dissuade me from becoming a journalist, not because it wasn't a job for a woman, but because he actually wanted me to go into business with him and run his factory, and 20 employees... all men.

I know I'm here to talk about the impact of the **Arab uprisings** on women's rights, but there are many reasons for this short detour.

Lebanon is of course a bit of an exception in the Arab world. As Lebanese we pride ourselves for being more emancipated, the Paris of the Orient, where women work, drive, and wear bikinis, if that's a measure of anything, and we would like to believe that we are ahead of all Arab countries when it comes to the status of women because we often present a mostly westernized face to the world.

Lebanon after all is home for Jackie Chamoun, the alpine skier who competed in the Sochi Olympics. A few years ago she posed half naked for an Austrian sports calendar. There was also a 'making of' video. It all resurfaced when she was in Sochi last month. The Lebanese minister for sports and youth at the time, decided it was a scandal, he said she was bringing disrepute to the country and tarnishing Lebanon's image.

Half the country erupted in unison and told him HE was the scandalous one, Lebanon's reputation was being tarnished by the corruption, the regular bomb attacks, armed gun men running amok. Jackie on the other, had been working hard to make it to the Olympics, had paid for her own training, and trip to Sochi to represent her country, one of the few Arabs actually competing in the Olympics.

SLIDE PICTURE A whole campaign started – stripping for Jackie... Not literally, but almost. It was a show of support.

SLIDE PICTURE Even Lebanese companies, like Almaza the local beer company, and al Rifai, a company that sells roasted nuts, showed support. With a bottle without a label and here a nut without a shell.

I'm not advocating nudity here, but pluralism, something sorely lacking in the region. Lebanon is a country where the sectarian make up, one third Shia Muslim, one third Sunni Muslim and one third Christian means no one can have the upper hand; no one can impose their lifestyle, at least not for long.

But when it comes to the law, what's actually written down, not how we live, not what we practice, Lebanon's laws are often still abysmal.

--Lebanese women can't give their nationality to their foreign husbands or their children; if they're married to a foreigner, their kids can't have the Lebanese nationality.

-- There is no law prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace and in general no laws against gender based violence.

-- KAFA, an NGO focusing on gender-based violence, estimates that one woman dies every month on average in Lebanon because of domestic violence.

The Sochi Olympics were taking place as a real drama unfolded in Lebanon. Christelle Abu Shaqra, was allegedly poisoned by her husband. Christelle's family said the husband had had a long history of abusing Christelle and she'd finally taken refuge back in the family home but her husband still managed to get to her. She's the third case to make big headlines in six months--- some die and remain anonymous, and it happens in all communities, Christelle was a Christian.

So after all the fun ads stripping for Jackie -- this happened—stripping for change...

SLIDE PICTURE as people started to try to raise awareness.

SLIDE PICTURE This poster was then put out by March an NGO that focuses on raising awareness about basic rights and civic duties, fighting back against censorship or in this case domestic abuse... What shocks you most, the nudity or the black eye

THAT is the role of civil society. That is how we make progress, when we can openly discuss and debate difficult issues, when dissent is allowed and we can strip for Jackie or don the veil because it is our free choice and society accepts and respects our opinions and embraces our differences.

And for the first time, what we have long been able to do in Lebanon, push for better laws, slowly but surely, and openly clamor for improvements in women's rights without always fearing for our lives, that is now within reach for others across the Arab world.

Because when you have no civil society, when dictators or clerics are the ones deciding what's best for you, laws get handed down from above, whether from the top of the government or the clergy, and they mean little to the people or they make little sense. When you live under an authoritarian system, whether by the government or the clergy, or both, like in Saudi Arabia, there is no debate, there is no civil society, there is no real change.

And that's why I believe that the revolutions in the Arab world are a huge moment of opportunity for women.

I know the headlines today are all about whether the Arab spring is the winter of women's rights. I try to avoid the using the word spring precisely because it conjures up that clichéd image of inevitable dark days. Uprisings are a long struggle and we are just at the beginning.

Before I go into the details of the opportunities we ARE facing, let me just remind you what life was like for women in the **Arab world before 2011**—there has been much said and written about this already, so I will only give you a brief, general overview....

The Arab world is still deeply conservative and patriarchal; a family's honor is upheld or destroyed by the reputation of its women.

Long held cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, or child brides, are coupled with the rise of religion, which is often an outlet for the frustration under oppression.

Authoritarian leaders even encouraged religion, including more puritanical interpretations of Islam, like Salafism, because it advocates total obedience to the ruler- how convenient!

This is what Hosni Mubarak did in Egypt, same for the rulers of Saudi Arabia, where the royal family has a historical alliance with the clerics.

I'll give you a few examples--

Let's take Egypt. A 2008 survey showed that 80 per cent of Egyptian women had experienced sexual harassment, 70 per cent of them were veiled. More than 60 per cent of men admitted to harassing women. Police brutality was already rampant. And it targeted women AND men.

In 2010, in the United Arab Emirates, a favorite tourist destination for summer sun in the winter, an 18-year-old Emirati woman reported that six men had gang-raped her. The court sentenced her to a year in prison for illicit sex.

In Yemen, child brides are a heart-wrenching story. Thirty per cent of girls in the country are married before the age of 18, 12 per cent before the age of 15....

These are some of the examples that made the headlines. There are of course more. But problems were often just kept neatly hidden away behind a façade, no one talked about it or no one dared. If a family's honor comes from its women, just think about the honor of a whole country...

Yes, dictators and their wives, often championed women's rights and passed some nice laws, but they did so mostly to please the West.

Social change doesn't come from above, the state can help, but change comes from within, from education and grassroots activism.

But rulers holding on to power saw activism and civil society, even on minor, non political issues, as the beginnings of dissent, a potential threat to their iron grip, even activism for women's rights, or perhaps especially so. And the room for maneuver was limited, though people certainly did try.

The revolutions didn't come out of nowhere, a handful of activists were working hard in every country across the region for several years, on a range of issues, I'd say at least since 2005 but their efforts were a drop in an ocean of oppression.

Like everybody else, the young unemployed, gays, minorities and just citizens in general, women too were striving for a better for a better life, for basic dignity, and human rights... Women's rights are part of the bigger battle for a brighter future for the whole Arab world.

And when the moment came to start that battle, **the women where there, on the front line.**

SLIDE PICTURE – Whether in Egypt

VIDEO - Or in Benghazi in Libya, in march 2011

Next I'm going to show you the video that is largely credited with spurring thousands to take to the streets. Young Asmaa Mahfouz, 26 years old, made this plea on January 25, on Youtube

VIDEO- Asmaa Mahfouz—

Activism was dead in Egypt, people felt like their souls had died- so she's trying to awaken that sense of civic duty... and she's appealing to men to do their part in support of women as they go out.

In Yemen, of course, activist Tawakkol Karman, was the co-recipient of the Nobel peace prize in 2011. She had been trying to raise her voice since 2005. I doubt many outside of Yemen had heard of her.

So what is happening now? Why all the alarming headlines about the Arab uprisings being bad for women's rights?

In some cases, laws that had been passed previously by pro-West regimes, are being rejected, because they are seen as imposition from outside.

Islamist parties were often co-opted by regimes but were also kept on a tight leash... so they now see an opportunity to push their agenda further...

And in we're in the throes of a counter-revolution. Everywhere, and on all levels and as is often the case, in war or chaos, women are often the first targets. Sexual harassment of women in Egypt, at 80 per cent in 2008, is now at 99 per cent.

But the counter-revolution doesn't just impact women's rights. Look at Egypt, where the deep state is back in full swing, arresting dozens of civil society activists, imprisoning journalists.

But just like Egyptian men are fighting back, so are women. There is simply NO going back.

Just like Tunisian society as a whole pushed back against Islamists groups trying to curtail acquired freedoms, so women pushed back specifically against efforts to roll back the rights they had held for so long and they worked even harder to gain some more.

Tunisia, is indeed leading the way.

It's just become the first Arab country to enshrine in the constitution parity between men and women in all elected institutions of the state.... Article 45 states that parity is now an objective of the state, so it's still a bit unclear how it will translate on the ground But article 45 is a groundbreaking step not just for Tunisia but for region.

Tunisia lit the fire of the revolutions and it continues to carry the torch.

Tunisia was to some extent the exception already in the region, because the advancement of women's rights was an effort that started fifty years ago, remained constant and was coupled with high levels of education across the country.

The civil code passed in 1956 enabled women to ask for a divorce, set a minimum age for marriage, and banned polygamy- though polygamy persists, a sign again that it is hard sometimes to fight cultural practices. Under the previous regime, women who wore the veil were often harassed by the police—that's not exactly ideal either...

But from January 2011 until January of this year, the future of women's rights in Tunisia was uncertain, the headlines dire, the noises made by those opposed to more women rights were loud, the women lost a few battles along the way, but in the end they won the war for a better constitution.

And the more we fight for our rights, the louder, the more radical the reaction will be. THAT'S what you're seeing being played out in the open. NOT a permanent setback.

What you are seeing is an explosion of activism, civil society finding its voice, women groups being created everywhere in ways and numbers that would have been unimaginable just three years ago.

No one in the Arab world is willing to be silenced by autocrats and dictators anymore, and women will no longer be silenced either, not by autocrats and not by the patriarchy.

And crucially, women now have tools at their disposal, to make their voices heard AND to effect real change.

--Remember the video of Asmaa Mahfouz? It was a powerful tool she deployed eloquently, at the right time. She made clear references to the other networking tools—texting, Facebook, phone calls, and of course, social ties. But she also drew attention to the downside of social media, when she said it's not enough to just like us on Facebook, you have to go out there. Social media is a tool, not the solution, but it's a powerful tool, along with technology in general, which is becoming more and more accessible, it's a real enabler.

--In Tunisia, Amira Yahyaoui is the co founder of Bawsala, the compass, an organization that monitors the parliament, and advocates for human rights, for all. Through one of the organisation's website, she publishes laws as they are drafted, so the public can be aware of what their legislators are doing and it tracks members of parliament, their positions and how they voted so they can be held accountable by the public.

--In Libya, the constitution will be drafted over the course of the next four months and women are worried about being left out, so they're getting organised. In the middle of February, they launched text messaging campaign to raise awareness with this slogan,

SLIDE- It was our revolution, It is our election. It will be our constitution.

50,000 text messages were sent out...can you imagine doing this under Libya's former leader Muammar Gaddafi?

And then you have entrepreneurship—there is nothing like economic empowerment to allow for self-determination, whether for women, or frankly anyone, everywhere.... And women entrepreneurs in the Middle East are rocking it... The average percentage of women entrepreneurs worldwide is thought to be at 10%. If you zoom in on the Middle East today women represent 35%, even Silicon Valley can't say that. From online stores, to stalls in shopping malls or shops, they're getting access to capital, to markets, and production sites, and to the online tools to connect the three, as well as to get training.

San Francisco-based Kiva.org, for instance, has loaned money to 7,000 women entrepreneurs in the Middle East since the beginning of 2011, for a total of \$9 million. That's just one organization. Entrepreneurship allows women to operate outside the formal patriarchal hierarchy if they want to, they can create their own jobs. In countries like Saudi Arabia, where they face so many restrictions on movement, it means they can work from home, and do big business.

Women are also having a debate amongst each other about what they want and how best to fight for their rights.

An early draft of the Tunisian constitution included an article which stated that a woman's role in the family was "complementary" to that of man, in other words women are defined in relation to men and somehow implies that it only recognizes married women. This infuriated liberal women but Islamist women, particularly from Ennahda party, were staunchly in support. In the end it was dropped.

We are also having the same discussion that you had decades ago: should there be quotas for women in parliament or not? There aren't in the US, and the level of participation for women is 17 %.... seventeen! The Netherlands ranks better of course at 38%. In Libya and Egypt some women support the quote system and some don't.

Across the region, on average, 80% of women AND men believe in the importance of education for all. THAT is a very hopeful statistic. Clearly my father is not an

exception in the Arab world, he is the rule on that front, even if he was perhaps ahead of his time.

But beyond schooling, enrollment rates and literacy levels, we need better education for everyone. People are going to school, but they're not learning. There's still too much reliance on rote learning, not enough space for critical thinking. We need education to promote pluralism, tolerance, education that helps people become citizens, not just subjects of their rulers.

I think you can tell by now that I like to find the ray of lights in the darkness. So when it comes to discussing the role men play in helping to promote women's rights I will give you two examples from Saudi Arabia.

Women in Saudi Arabia face the most restrictions in the Arab world- they're not the worse off, Egyptian and Iraqi women are, because Saudi women get better access to healthcare, education and reproductive rights- you can get birth control over the counter at any chemist.

But women's freedoms are severely curtailed in the kingdom- they need permission from their male guardian, to marry, to travel, or get a higher education. Until recently their access to jobs was very limited by law, and of course they can't drive. That is the focus of much of the West's attention; although, again you'd be surprised to hear it's not necessarily the number one challenge for most women. But it's certainly a symbol of the general attitude towards women in the kingdom and one man who thinks the ban on women driving is ridiculous, brought satire to the subject. Hisham Fageeh, 26 years old Saudi American comedian adapted Bob Marley's famous, no woman no cry to Saudi Arabia.

VIDEO-- Saudi no women no drive.

My second example is the recent appointment of Somyya Jabarti as editor in chief of the Saudi Gazette in Jeddah.

SLIDE PICTURE

Who appointed her? Her boss, Khaled el Maena had been an editor for thirty years, first at Arab news, then at Saudi Gazette. But he stepped aside and nominated the woman who had been working with him at the newspapers for some 13 years. Men have to do their part in making room for women, in the workplace and in government, they need to decry harassment and encourage education. We're not waiting for men to GIVE us our rights, but men need to be part of the solution too.

Secular societies are not necessarily the answer, at least in the short term and it's important to acknowledge and accept that. In the Arab world, most people still say that religious beliefs do and should guide politics. Only a very small minority says it's aiming for a secular model. That's just not where we are the moment.

What we need is a revolution from within, that allows the rise of more open clerics, that can promote a more moderate Islam.

But beyond religion, or religious legislation, the bigger threat for women is chaos, violence and economic problems. Which is why what women need to thrive and push for their rights, is what everybody needs in the Arab world-- a better economy, security and stability. And the answer is not to go back to the stability of dictatorship.

In 2005, a Gallup poll found that a majority of Muslim women said what they resented most in their lives was the political and economic corruption. The focus that the West puts on appearances, namely the veil, is often misplaced.

Women are often still more worried about how they will feed their children send them to school or care for them if they are sick, than about how many women are in parliament or in government or what the constitution says about their rights.

These revolutions were about basic freedoms, dignity and a better life for all, it wasn't a women's revolution, but women's rights are human rights, as Hillary Clinton said famously in Beijing, and human rights are women right's and it applies here too, and that's why our rights as women need to be part and parcel of the conversation everywhere and every time.

In Syria, a country dying a slow death, the conflict has become so dangerous and chaotic that even the UN has stopped keeping track of the number of dead. Women's rights or gender equality legislation are not necessarily the priority for people under fire. But in armed conflicts and at times of political transitions, gender based violence increases, so the women of Syria are demanding to be heard, because they face a disproportionate levels of violence. They need to be represented and included in negotiations, they are part of the answer, they are half of society, they raise the children of tomorrow, and they are often the best peacemakers. And whatever the instability, if there's a legislative process underway, women cannot afford to miss a single opportunity for advancements, when constitutions are being rewritten, like in Libya

Ladies and gentlemen, the time for change in the Arab world is now. The time for push for human rights is now. And the many battles for women's' rights start now. There will be many disappointments, and setbacks but we cannot afford to be discouraged and give up, and we will not.

The battle for ideas, for pluralism and dignity for women and men, is only just beginning in the Arab world. The battle started slowly, silently years ago and the struggle will go on loudly now for many years. It's important to take the long view, and to keep an eye on the trends, not just the headlines. Because there is NO going back.

Hillary Clinton always says, that women's rights and children rights are the unfinished business of the 21st century, that is true everywhere, even in the West, but it's true especially in the Arab world. We have work to do, but we're in business.

So Ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to have faith in Arab women, have faith in us, because I certainly do.

Thank you very much for listening.

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