

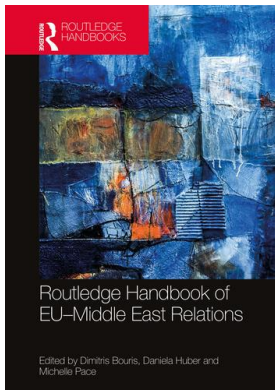
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WINDS OF CHANGE?

Negotiating gender relations in the Middle East and North Africa¹

Annette Jünemann

Introduction

The Arab Spring of 2010–2011 may have failed for now, but its spirit has not. Today, the region is again experiencing unrest and with it the outcry for bread, justice, equality and dignity (Grimm, 2019). Once again, its women are particularly active in organising and executing the new protests. This is noteworthy because women had been among the biggest losers of the Arab Spring. Even in Tunisia, the only country that successfully freed itself from dictatorship, women rights' achievements of the past were challenged when the new constitution was drafted (Schmidt, 2019). Against this background, the following contribution will take a closer look at the dynamics of gender relations in the MENA region. Despite increasing regional heterogeneity, gender discourses in all countries have a common ground.

The starting point of this contribution is a reflection on the Arab-Muslim women's movement from a postcolonial perspective: indeed, my hypothesis is that only historical context can explain why liberalisation and democratisation processes have hardly ever correlated with the development of gender democracy in the MENA region. These reflections are followed by an analysis of the binary positions of secular and religious representatives of the MENA women's movement. At the same time, however, I will illustrate that the gulf dividing this movement does not only run along the religious conflict line. In fact, generational conflicts and, if nothing else, the enormous socio-economic discrepancy between active, urban middle- and upper-class feminists and their underprivileged female counterparts (especially in rural regions) contribute to the segregation of society and thus of the movement. Against this background, compatibilities and antagonisms among the political positions of these groups, segregated in a variety of ways, will be addressed. The last section will summarise the findings and discuss future chances of a united Arab women's movement. Despite current setbacks, this is based on the assumption that the revolutionary spirit of the Arab Spring in the minds of the people, and especially the younger women, cannot be erased.

Tradition and modernity in orientalist narratives

Since colonial times, the gender discourse in the MENA region has been characterised by a thoroughly "Orientalist" (Said, 1978) narrative that considers Islam to be archaic and backward,

and contrasts it with a modern and enlightened Europe. Both British and French colonial powers had considered the supposedly inferior culture of the Arabs to be founded on the lower status of women, whose suppression was symbolised by the headscarf. The debate surrounding the headscarf thus became the scene of power-political conflicts, which were, however, only ostensibly about the social position of women, and in reality about the legitimacy of claims to power over society as a whole. This strategy manifested itself in a brutal way when the French colonial power had Algerian women carted from their villages to the cities and had their scarves removed by force in public (Wettig, 2013: 18). “By taking the scarves from the Algerian women, their ‘liberation’ from the Arab-Muslim patriarchy was declared the goal of colonialism and civilisation” (Ali, 2013: 28). It was only in the context of liberation wars and decolonisation that the headscarf became the symbol of dissociation from the West; a nationalist symbol of anti-colonialist resistance.

After independence, the new rulers quickly took up the topic and instrumentalised the question of women’s rights in order to enforce their claim to power, in particular with regard to traditional religious and tribal elites. Tunisia’s first President, Habib Bourguiba, went furthest on this by introducing the most progressive marital law (Code of Personal Status) in the entire region shortly after independence had been achieved in 1956. It included a ban on polygamy and gave men and women equal status regarding divorce, inheritance and custody laws. Egypt’s President Nasser did not go quite as far when he granted women active and passive electoral rights in 1956 but failed to establish a marital law reform based on Tunisia’s example, owing to severe protests by the Islamist opposition (Johannson-Nogués, 2013: 397). His successor, Hosni Mubarak, continued this strategy of gender politics by at least partly reforming marital law and introducing a fixed proportion of women in parliament (Prasch, 2013: 83). But to him, too, gender policy was only a strategy of power politics: “Mubarak would also champion women’s rights off and on as a way to divide and rule the Islamist and secular opposition, as well as to secure good will from foreign donors” (Johannson-Nogués, 2013: 398). In Libya, Revolutionary Chairman Gaddafi’s foremost intention was to use the question of women’s rights to weaken the traditional family structures of the clans, which were challenging his claim to absolute power. What was common to these efforts was always their anti-Islamist direction, which the European colonial powers – in particular the French as part of their *mission civilisatrice* – had also followed.

From the time Tunisia was a French protectorate (1882–1956) to first post-colonial president Habib Bourguiba, who was succeeded in a bloodless coup by Zine el Aibidine Ben Ali in 1987, this part of the Maghreb has experienced more than 100 years of anti-Islamic indoctrination.

(Gray, 2012: 286)

Given this historical background, it is difficult to assess to what extent Islam is responsible for the current deficits in gender democracy in the MENA region which are thoroughly mapped in an EU-funded report. The biggest problem are legal inequalities due to extremely conservative family laws as well as limitations on women’s participation in politics (Dalacoura, 2019). According to Bronwyn Winter, neither Islam, nor religions as such are the problem, but their respective fundamentalisms, which Winter *without exception* categorises and criticises as backward-looking ideologies:

To return to the question: Is Islam harmful for women? My answer is yes, but not to the same extent in all circumstances and not intrinsically more so than other religions,

given similar political contexts and uses (or not) of religion by the community or state. Does Islam necessarily carry the seeds of Islamism? Yes, just as Christianity and Judaism carry the seeds of their own fundamentalisms.

(Winter, 2001: 14)

Thus, instead of re-producing Orientalist narratives that essentialise “Islam” as the root cause for all problems, the following analysis will include *all* factors that are relevant to explain persistence and change of gender relations in the MENA region:

The countries of the MENA region share women-linked commonalities that are strong, deep, and pervasive: a space-based patriarchy, a culturally strong sense of religion, a smooth co-existence of tradition and modernity, a transitional stage in development, and multilingualism/ multiculturalism – hence the importance of understanding the historical, socio-cultural, political, economic, and legal issues in the region.

(Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2011: 1)

Constellations of players – constellations of power

Whilst women had contributed considerably to the Arab Spring, the fact they played almost no role in the reorganisation of political structures in the Arab transition countries (Agapiou-Josephides and Benoit-Rohmer, 2012) was initially not much of a surprise. Similar developments were observed elsewhere, for instance following the end of apartheid in South Africa or following the political turnaround in Central and Eastern Europe. In these countries and despite their commitment to political change, women were also relegated to the back benches in the subsequent transformation process. This can be explained by the fact that in the wake of phases of revolutionary unrest often comes an increased desire for calm and the restoration of security and order. This means that, even elsewhere, post-revolutionary transformation processes leave little room for a fundamental reorganisation of gender relations which go to the heart of any new social order (Harders, 2011: 149). It was precisely this development that Colm Regan anticipated when he listed not only the opportunities, but in particular the risks posed by the Arab Spring from the perspective of gender politics:

While the Arab Spring is not about gender equality per se, it is clear that it presents an opportunity to advance the position and rights of women while, at the same time, representing the danger that old traditions and discriminations will remain in place and could be reinforced if some of the most conservative Islamist parties and candidates consolidate their position in the coming months and years.

(Regan, 2012)

This, indeed, happened in most MENA countries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, explaining the extreme polarisation of the current gender policy discourse between religious and secular women, because while the former may position themselves as the winners of the uprisings, the latter are being discredited as (supposed) partisans of the old regimes. All too often, secular women’s rights activists in Egypt “are being stigmatised as ‘Western clones’, and feminists in general as man-hating, homosexual, and immodest enemies of the institution of family, (. . .) disregarding the actual interests of Egyptian women” (Block, 2013: 23). But the other side does not treat female Islamists with kid gloves either when it comes to discrediting their participation in the political discourse, as I experienced at an international conference in Mersin in 2013

where female members of parliament were denounced as “fat, lazy, and scruffy”. Less insulting yet clear in the message is a joint statement of several secular NGOs: “As long as religions interfere in the political and public sphere, the word ‘moderate’ to describe them is deprived of meaning” (RDFL/IFE, 2011). Despite singular joint actions between religious and secular women rights activists in the past—such as the campaign in Egypt in the year 2000 for a new divorce law that is less discriminatory against women (Block, 2012: 59) – the dichotomy seems to prevail. It’s a major obstacle for the formation of a united and strong Arab women’s right movement.

Between opposition and co-optation: the secular women’s rights movement

For women’s rights groups with a secular orientation, a strict separation of the spheres of state and religion is the most important precondition for the realisation of gender democracy. For them, religion is part of their private, not their political identity. Their policy focus lies mainly on the participation rights of women and on marital law, which in most Arab countries subjects women to massive discrimination, for instance regarding matters of divorce, maintenance law or rights regarding one’s own child (Mashhour, 2005). It is usually women with higher education levels who are active in secular organisations, particularly from the legal professions. Many have studied in Europe, mostly in France, and have experienced Western socialisation. It would, however, be too simple to conclude that an unfiltered “Westernisation” has taken place. The accusation of “Westernisation” is already part of the binary discourse between secular and religious women rights groups whose problems are being expounded in this contribution. For just as there is not “one” Western feminism, there is not “one” Arab feminism. At the same time, a certain influence on the ideas of how gender relations in a democratic society could be organised can be assumed in activists who have lived in Europe; this being only one among many influencing factors, however. It is noteworthy that European cooperation among secular women’s rights movements is efficiently used in a joint and transnational political struggle for women-rights, yet often with an anti-Islamist bias (Jünemann, 2013).

It is the antagonism against political Islam which also explains the strategic alliance that many secular women’s rights groups have struck up with the authoritarian regimes of their respective countries – not always entirely voluntarily. Both sides’ interest in pushing back tendencies towards the Islamisation of society has prompted authoritarian regimes to make concessions to women, although never enough to challenge state authoritarianism as such. Cooperation with the regime in Egypt, for instance, was not quite voluntary, as Gamal Abdel Nasser, following his assumption of power in 1956, forcibly subjected the independent and secular women’s rights movement, which had been active since the 1920s, to his state feminism. While some quite progressive legislation was adopted as part of this state feminism, for instance in the area of school education and childcare, autonomous feminists who refused to align or subordinate themselves to the system suffered political persecution. Among the most well-known of these was Doria Shafik, who had co-organised a hunger strike to fight for electoral rights in the mid-1950s and would later, demoralised by house arrest, commit suicide (Salah, 2013: 23). The concept of “state feminism” was continued by Nasser’s successors, most successfully by President Hosni Mubarak. Women’s rights groups were sometimes co-opted by the state, sometimes founded by the state itself and consequently often ridiculed by representatives of civil society as Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs). A typical GONGO was the National Council for Women (NCW), founded by decree in the year 2000 and chaired by the First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak. Pro-women legislation adopted by the regime primarily to

legitimise itself towards the outside were henceforward referred to as *Suzanne Laws* (Sholkamy, 2012: 164f). After Mubarak's downfall, the NCW was completely discredited as the flagship of the old regime in the eyes of the governing Islamists, even though the Supreme Council appointed 40 new members and, most importantly, replaced its chairwoman (Prasch, 2013: 83). Regarding representatives of secular feminism, neither the NCW nor Doria Shafik were deemed acceptable by the Islamists, although she was demonstrably a victim of the old regime (Salah, 2013: 23). Tunisia's state feminism followed the same pattern. The high degree of gender democracy compared to all other Arab nations (Kelly, 2010), was accompanied by the uncompromising repression of autonomous feminists that challenged the claim to power of the regime. This is illustrated by the fate of women's rights activist Sihem Bensedrine, a figurehead of the resistance against the dictatorship of Ben Ali. In the 1990s, she was imprisoned and tortured several times, had to leave the country and only returned to Tunisia in January 2011, on the day that President Ben Ali fled the country. Khadija Arfaoui and Radhia Nasraoui should also be mentioned, "[they] were either jailed or sentenced in absentia after speaking out against human rights abuses in their country" (Gray, 2012: 288). A particularly close strategic alliance between an authoritarian regime and a secular women's movement existed in Algeria during the civil war of the 1990s. In this civil war, the entire democratic civil society was caught between and worn down by an authoritarian regime and an especially militant Islamism. Since the pressure of the regime was "only" repressive, that of the militant Islamists was however literally deadly, almost all secular women's rights groups sided with the regime and supported its tough line in the fight against Islamism (Jünemann, 1997: 129).

Regarding the entire MENA region, it can be subsumed that the majority of the secular women's rights movement entered into a strategic alliance with the authoritarian regimes, letting themselves be instrumentalised as the flagship of a supposed readiness for reform to impress Western donors; donors that they usually maintained close contacts with themselves. Owing to this strategic alliance, their achievements are now being discredited by Islamist opponents (including women) as a result of the state feminism of the old systems and of ideological complicity with the West. Considering the little leeway given to civil society engagement in authoritarian regimes, this criticism is altogether unreasonable as it cannot be justified to disparage all secular women's rights activists as partisans of the old regimes. Many of them are rightly proud of the achievements that they have wrestled from their regimes, sometimes at high risk. Nevertheless, there is a kernel of truth in the criticism raised by Islamist activists: "Today, secular women's rights activists are at pains to explain their lack of solidarity with Tunisian Islamist women who were unjustly imprisoned under the previous regimes" (Gray, 2012: 288). This undeniable failure, which results from the enormous dichotomy existing between the secular and the Islamist camps, places a heavy burden on any chance of reconciliation and is still waiting to be dealt with historically and politically.

Islamism and gender policy: a contradiction in terms?

The interpretation of gender policy activities of women whose identity is primarily defined in terms of religion and who are organised in Islamist parties or movements is more difficult. The difficulty begins with the fact that members of Islamist movements are far less homogeneous than the secular spectrum of society.

They represent various social strata and classes, generations and socio-cultural milieus as well as intellectual traditions. (. . .) None of the large sections of the political

spectrum in the Arabian world is currently characterised by higher dynamics of development and inner heterogeneity than the Islamist movement(s).

(Lübben, 2013: 283)

Noteworthy in this regard are attempts from female scientists to reinterpret the Quran from a feminist perspective. Moroccan professor of sociology Fatema Mernissi, UNESCO adviser and member of the World Bank's team of advisers on the Middle East and North Africa, may have been the most well-known representative of an "Islamic feminism", organised, among others, in the *International Congress on Islamic Feminism* and based on the conviction that the Quran does not justify patriarchy if interpreted from a modern and female perspective. Islamic feminists who take the liberty of redefining the ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women (Hassan, 1997: 217) belong to the liberal spectrum of political Islam. They see themselves as part of the global women's movement and are open to the diversity of gender discourses, including European ones. Nevertheless, they are met with criticism from decidedly secular women's rights activists who find the term "Islamic feminism" to be a contradiction in terms. Fathia Hizem of the secular *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates*, for instance, cannot help laughing when she is asked about the role of so-called Islamic feminists: "This is what the Westerners and Americans would like to talk us into. We think it is hypocrisy. Because if 'Islamic feminism' does not treat women's rights as an integral part of human rights, it is not feminism" (Hizem, cited in Dietrich, 2013: 25). It is interesting that when criticising Islamic feminists, the same arguments are used in criticising secular feminism; in this case it is the accusation of being too close to the West. Distancing oneself from a Westernisation of the Arab gender discourse could thus become a potential point of rapprochement between these very different movements of Arab feminism. The accusation of being elitist and out of touch with reality, usually directed towards secular feminists, can also be found in the criticism of Islamist feminism, for instance by political scientist Hoda Salah, who is in principle open towards this movement:

This is an intellectual movement at the University of Cairo which does not count many members, however. (. . .) Unfortunately, the movement is quite abstract and oriented towards the past. The women do not actively take to the streets and do not invoke the revolution.

(Salah, 2013: 23)

While she concedes that Islamic feminists have given positive impetus to the promotion of women's rights, such as the right to become a Mufti or a judge, she finds there is an alarming risk of an Islamisation of the debate, which may lead to an inadvertent strengthening of fundamentalism and an Islamisation of women's rights (Salah, 2012: 8).

The increased presence of female Islamists who have found their way into politics at the communal or the national levels, in ministries or parliaments, for instance in Egypt with the *Freedom and Justice Party*, the *El Wasat Party* or the *El Noor Party*, likely also contributes to this. As for the members of the Muslim Sisterhood who were voted into the Egyptian parliament in 2011/12, their programme is a provocation from the perspective of secular women's rights activists:

most of the few women in parliament are devout Muslims. They often aggressively oppose the establishment of women's rights. Female parliamentarians of the Muslim

Brotherhood for example want to revoke the ratification of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, or CEDAW.

(*Salah, 2012*)

Against this background, Hoda Salah criticises liberal feminism, which is only interested in quotas: "The question is not one of woman or man, but of whether someone has an awareness of human rights" (Salah, 2013: 23). Indeed, countries where quotas exist, such as Algeria with 40% of the candidate list, Tunisia with 50% and Morocco with 15% of reserved seats, the representation of women in national parliaments is systematically higher than in countries without quotas, such as Syria or Lebanon (Dalacoura, 2019: 18). The same holds true for the local level. As a result, Islamist parties profoundly shape the conservative and reactionary tenure of gender debates in the whole MENA region.

The conflict between the religious and the secular "camp" is at its most bitter when it is about the central question of whether the relationship between genders should be "equal" or "complementary" (Schmidt, 2019: 192ff). The latter is the Islamist interpretation, which places women's rights in an overriding context of family rights and obligations, thus disqualifying them at the same time (Muhammad Al-Beltagy, in Prash, 2013: 84). In Tunisia, the issue was at the centre of severe clashes over the new constitution in 2014. Charrad and Mania Zarrugh shed light on the positive aspects in this struggle:

The election results and the Islamist women's leadership call our attention to the diversity of women's organisations, efforts, and affiliations. They should lead us to question the religion/secular binary as a lens by which to understand women's interests and movements in Tunisia.

(*Charrad and Zarrugh, 2013*)

The top-down state-feminism of the past has been replaced by a controversial yet inclusive public debate on gender relations, inside but also outside the political institutions, where enraged women organised impressive mass-protests. As an outcome of this very open debate, the "complementary clause" was finally omitted in the new constitution.

Last but not least, *all* women holding political office are a manifestation of women's demands for political participation by virtue of their mere existence. What is more, their presence in the political sphere creates a new normalcy. Social norms such as the spatial separation of genders into public (male) and private (female) spaces are thus being shifted and every female politician always serves as an example to young women who need female role models to encourage them to imagine a possible future in politics. Through politically active women, female perspectives may, but do not have to, enter the political decision-making process. In Europe, representatives of conservative parties also often represent rather conservative positions on gender policy. In this context, it is noteworthy that young female Islamists increasingly question traditional gender roles which are usually promoted by older male and female representatives of Islamist parties. Young female Islamists share the quest for more political participation and material betterment of women, including better access to the education and health systems. This calls to mind the non-negligible fact that the Arab Spring was also based on a generational conflict which manifested itself in all segments of society and transverse all other conflict lines. The revolt against authoritarianism was not only directed against the authoritarian state, but also against the rigid structures of a traditional social order based on seniority, which excessively limited the room for evolution of the younger generation.

Impacts of a growing wealth gap and social inequality

Alongside with the religious-secular binary, socio-economic divides are just as decisive to understand the heterogeneities in Arab women's movements. What complicates the analysis is the fact that at least in discourse, both division lines correlate with each other. Secular women's rights activists are mostly educated, upper middle-class women who have little contact with the masses of much less privileged women. Therefore, they are rarely perceived as role models, and often as strange and divorced from reality. At the same time, the common interpretation that equates the secular gender discourse with "middle and upper classes" and the Islamist with "lower class", oversimplifies matters. For one thing, on the Islamist spectrum of society there are also well-educated women who work in corresponding professions, as *En-Nahda* executive council member Mouina Brahim emphasised to shed light on the broad spectrum her party represents (cited in Charrad and Zarrugh, 2013). And for another thing, religious institutions provide poor and uneducated women from mostly traditional milieus with professional opportunities outside their homes which has a high, although presumably unintended effect on gender relations in society and within families.

A growing number of women also find work in the export-oriented sectors of the textile and electronics industries because the gender-ideological idea of the man as the family's provider makes it possible to hire women for low wages. After all, the gender pay gap in the MENA region is one of the world's highest at roughly 40% (Dalacoura, 2019: 14). Women are thus "cheaper" than men who compete for the same jobs (Kreile, 2009: 261). Their growing financial independence, however, results in subtle power-shifts within families, especially if the woman (instead of the man) is the main or only bread winner. These shifts might start as hair-line-cracks, but they set in motion dynamics which are difficult to reverse. Demands of working women for more political and social participation are supported by established women's rights groups, such as, for example, the *Association démocratique des femmes du Maroc* (Berriane, 2011). However commendable these activities by individual NGOs may be, the trend in society in most Arab countries is in the opposite direction, i.e. towards a hierarchisation among women owing to social inequality. "Gender is one factor in these inequities, but class, family, and power are more important" (Sholkamy, 2012: 165). The growing wealth gap in Arab societies is not irrelevant in terms of gender policy, as the dichotomy between secular and religious women's groups is complemented by a second dichotomy between social milieus. Since many poor and therefore uneducated women live in rural regions, a third dichotomy to be listed could be the one between urban and rural spaces. On the whole, severe social segregation hampers the emergence of a large and powerful women's movement spanning all segments of society. Again, Tunisia provides a positive example in this context, since the already mentioned campaign for the protection of women's rights in the constitution was supported by large parts of the population and for the first time gave rise to a citizens' movement, encompassing all social classes as well as women in rural regions (Soudani, 2015).

Conclusions

"Women's political empowerment has received a boost as a result of women's activism triggered by the Arab uprisings" (Dalacoura, 2019: 19). Since then, women have been making their voices increasingly heard, thereby shattering many taboos that used to be essential to stabilise patriarchy. In Egypt, to give an example, a non-profit NGO put up a "HarassMap" to enable women (and men) to report and locate any incident of sexual harassment with the

effect that shame is not on the side of the victim anymore, but transferred to the perpetrator (<https://harassmap.org/en> 2019). To give a second example from Palestine in September 2019, 10,000 predominantly young women went to the streets to protest against femicide (Sojref, 2019), thereby breaking two taboos: They refuse to subordinate the issue to the fight for independence from Israel, and they shift the issue from the private to the political sphere. Whereas these are two examples of autonomous women's empowerment, state-feminism is also still part of the picture. In Morocco in 2017, a Murshidat (female religious preacher) was invited to the king's court to give a sermon during the holy month of Ramadan for the first time, something unprecedented in the Muslim world. "In this case there was a clear overlap between the royal family's interests and the desire to advance the status of women in the North African country" (Svetlova, 2019).

However, against the background of ongoing repression, restoration, state failure and (civil) wars in the MENA region, conditions to turn the multitude of singular progressive events into a long-term institutionalisation of gender equality couldn't be worse. Even in Tunisia, progressive gender politics constituted a major battleground in the struggle for hegemony during transition, sidelining feminist civil society (Schmidt, 2019: V). The empowerment of Islamists in politics and society also has a negative impact in this regard. This brings us back to the initial question regarding the significance of Islam for gender-policy deficits in the MENA region. This article should by now have made clear that the problem lies not in the religion itself, but in its fundamentalist interpretation as represented by various Islamist parties and groups. Islamism is not an alien element within Arab society, but the institutional expression of a mass consciousness (Lübben, 2013: 283), means that its exclusion from gender discourse is neither useful nor possible. Why do backward-looking interpretations of Islam with all their negative implications for a woman's place in society have majority appeal in Arab societies? Why is conservative Islamism today met with greater approval than ever before?

This phenomenon can be understood as a reflex against feelings of foreignness and loss of identity (Winter, 2001: 20). Just like colonialism was once fended off as an attack on one's own identity, nowadays it is processes of globalisation and Western dominance. Modernisation processes on the one hand and the increasing impoverishment of large parts of the population on the other are weakening traditional power relations, based, as they are, on the extended family and family networks, and are challenging the gender-political social contract anchored in them. Men are most affected by this, as in a changing social and economic context they are often no longer able to fulfil their traditional roles as protectors and providers for their families. Political Islam, in its emphasis on the traditional role of women in a collectively oriented social system offers an alternative to Western modernity with a religious legitimation, which helps fend off the fear of foreignness and stabilises one's own troubled identity, especially in the case of men (Kreile, 2009: 259). Against this background, patriarchal concepts of order, today more than ever, play a crucial role in constructing a personal identity that is felt to be authentic.

At the same time, the traditional order built on these concepts was shattered by the Arab Spring, and since then it has been permanently questioned, especially by the younger generations. Thus, the political and socio-economic struggle for power continues and is being fought, once more, on the battlefield of gender relations.

Note

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