

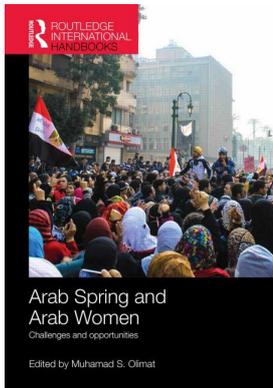
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Bahraini women and the Arab Spring

Meeting the challenges of empowerment and emancipation

Magdalena Karolak

Introduction: Bahraini Arab Spring and women

The year 2011 was marked by a series of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), commonly known as the ‘Arab Spring’. The extent of this massive and simultaneous explosion of popular discontent throughout the region is attributed to a new generation of young Arabs who, interconnected through satellite TV channels and social media, share a sense of a common destiny (Lynch 2012: 8). These generational changes combined with the effects of a ‘youth bulge’, unequal access to economic opportunity, education challenges, hyperurbanization and corruption, to name a few factors, are the dynamics driving the Arab Spring (Cordesman 2011). The changing role of women in MENA societies is another aspect of the Arab Spring uprisings to consider. Indeed, women participated alongside men in the Arab Spring movements, entering what is considered to be a male sphere. The impact of these revolutionary movements on the status of women in society, however, proves problematic. Despite the prominent role of women in the protests, ultimately the political transformations may increase men’s domination of the public sphere. The Egyptian experience is illustrative of this paradox. The military council annulled the parliamentary compulsory quota of 64 women MPs in the Egyptian parliament introduced under the deposed President Muhammad Hosni Mubarak. Consequently, the number of women members of parliament (MPs) dropped to nine as a result of the 2011–12 elections. Similarly in Iraq, the transitional phase to democracy increased the prevalence of gender inequality (Social Watch 2009). It is clear that the prodemocracy movements may not safeguard women’s rights but may instead reverse women’s empowerment reforms implemented under autocratic rulers.

This chapter aims to assess the outcomes of women’s empowerment and emancipation in the Bahraini Arab Spring. Bahraini women from all backgrounds took part in both the anti-government and pro-government rallies and sit-ins alongside men. Even though their participation was based on demands broader than particular gender issues, the Bahraini Arab Spring resulted in opportunities further to increase women’s roles in the public sphere. In order to analyse the link between the Arab Spring and women’s rights in Bahrain, it is necessary to make a distinction

between two concepts: emancipation and empowerment. Following Kabeer (2002: 19), empowerment will be defined as ‘the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them’. On the other hand, emancipation refers to ‘a process by which participants in a system which determines, distorts, and limits their potentialities come together actively to transform it, and in the process transform themselves’ (Ruane and Todd 2005: 238). The implications of this approach are as follows: from the point of view of an individual’s engagement, empowerment is a passive process, while emancipation is an active one.

This chapter opens with a brief overview of the situation of Bahraini women before the Arab Spring, and ultimately draws an analysis of the changes already executed and yet to be implemented, brought about by the uprising. While providing an assessment of the functions of female empowerment for the leadership of the country, it points out also new initiatives for women’s emancipation. Apart from a selected review of social scientific literature, data were collected from local newspapers and social media, alongside material provided by the Supreme Council for Women.

Women and the political liberalization reforms

Political liberalization reforms carried out by Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 2002 created new prospects for female participation in the public sphere in Bahrain by providing women with universal suffrage rights. Although the first isolated cases of female political activism in Bahrain date back to the 1950s, women were part of male-directed movements for political and social reforms. In turn, this arrangement limited their ability to stress female empowerment issues in particular. Such was the case in 1994, when women actively participated in widespread anti-government protests; however, a petition addressed to the government by protesters only vaguely alluded to ‘the role of women in these changes’ (Seikaly 1998: 170). It is important to underline that the majority of women were part of Islamist movements for reforms (Seikaly 1998). Thus, their gender-related aspirations were limited to begin with due to religious and societal factors. This limitation appeared clearly when the king’s decision to grant women suffrage met an opposition of 60% of Bahraini women (Janardhan 2005). Since 2001 Bahraini authorities have been actively promoting female empowerment in various areas of public life, and new opportunities provided a favourable environment for a growing grassroots movement.

Along with political liberalization reforms, women’s empowerment was proclaimed an important goal in the government’s agenda, stressed through the creation of the Supreme Council for Women (SCW), a quasi-governmental advisory body to the king, headed by the king’s first wife Sheikha Sabika bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa. Such an arrangement is not unusual in the Middle East, as wives of country leaders have often held functions of promotion, at least in theory, of women’s rights. The council dedicates its work to fostering the inclusion of women in decision-making positions, improving the skills of women, creating job opportunities, conducting studies and organizing awareness campaigns aimed at women. The SCW has also overseen the implementation of the provisions of the United Nations (UN) Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which, however, came with limitations attributed to Shari’a and social traditions.¹ Another important initiative is the National Strategy on the Empowerment of Bahraini Women, conducted with the support of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). It included programmes on enhancing economic and political empowerment of women that were carried out over the years 2009–12. Moreover, the SCW organized a strong campaign to support the unified personal status law and, subsequently, the implementation of the law for the Sunni branch of Islam.

In the past decade Bahraini authorities focused on promoting women's empowerment in three main areas—economy, politics and family—which are reflected in recent legislative reforms. Owing to economic and demographic changes, resorting to the social capital of women has become a necessary step for the future development of the country.

Economic empowerment

Economic empowerment of women is part of the 'Bahrain Economic Vision 2030', a broad initiative for the development of the country, unveiled in 2008. Oil depletion as well as soaring unemployment rates among Bahraini nationals demanded a shift in policies related to job market strategy. Sustainable development independent from oil resources and competitiveness are a must for future growth of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region overall. Given the fact that women account for 70% of all university graduates (Bahrain Economic Development Board 2009), Bahraini authorities saw women's rising education attainments as a resource for the country's development (Supreme Council for Women 2007). Indeed, international studies suggest that low participation of women in the workforce has a direct negative impact on the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Löfström 2009). Moreover, case studies assert that women's participation in business ownership has an even stronger correlation with GDP growth (Weeks and Seiler 2001). Tapping women's potential proves an important step towards economic sustainability and has been pushed for under a number of governmental programmes.

Tamkeen, an employment agency developed under the umbrella of the government, promotes greater inclusion of Bahrainis in the economy through multiple initiatives. It provides job training as well as employment programmes in co-operation with Bahraini-based companies, scholarships, funding for enterprises and skills improvement programmes. Tamkeen adopted in collaboration with the SCW a special approach to boost female employability, including increasing the number of women in male-dominated fields of the economy (Tamkeen 2009). This comes as an important step given that women constitute the majority of the unemployed in Bahrain; for instance, in 2009 and 2010 women constituted roughly 80% of the unemployed (Gharaibeh 2011). The joint co-operation between Tamkeen and the SCW awarded grants to women entrepreneurs in the fields of transportation, fashion design and photography. An all-female jobs and training exhibition for the unemployed took place in 2010, while the theme for Bahraini Women Day's for 2011 was 'The Bahraini Woman and her role in supporting the National Economy'. As a result of the co-operation between Tamkeen and the Bahrain Women's Union, a computer skills training programme for women was established. So far, 11,782 women have benefited from multiple programmes organized by Tamkeen (Trade Arabia 2011). New legislation also encourages the employment of Bahraini women allowing companies to achieve their Bahrainization, i.e. nationalization of the workforce, rates faster. Economic advances in Bahrain were strengthened also by growing female business activity. Eased procedures that allowed women to process all paperwork themselves instead of through male representatives boosted female entrepreneurship (Ahmed 2010). In 2008 more than one-third of Bahraini businesses were owned by women (*The Economist* 2008). Additionally, since 1997 the Micro Start project has aimed at economically empowering needy households. Developed jointly with the UNDP, it is addressed in particular at women who, so far, benefited 73% of all distributed loans in Bahrain. The programme allows them to become productive and independent from income earned by men.

Political empowerment

Women's participation in politics would not have been possible without the active support of the Bahraini authorities. Apart from obtaining suffrage rights as well as the right to stand for elections to the lower house of the Bahrain parliament in 2002, women were appointed to prominent public offices. Cabinets in 2002 and 2006 included women as ministers of health, of social affairs, and of culture and information. Female members were also appointed in the *Shura*, the upper chamber of the parliament. Moreover, women represented Bahrain on the international scene. In 2000 the first woman Sheikha Haya Rashid Al Khalifa became a Bahraini ambassador. She was subsequently elected a president of the UN General Assembly. In 2004 women were appointed to the GCC Consultative Corporation. However, these symbolic nominations would not be sufficient to promote participation of women in society overall. Thus, before the 2006 and the 2010 parliamentary elections the SCW conducted political empowerment programmes that trained women with the necessary skills, as well as funded their political campaigns. The goals of such initiatives included altering social attitudes and gender stereotypes and supporting the participation of women in the parliament and in the municipal councils (SCW and UNDP 2002). None the less, female candidates running in the elections were breaking an established social order, which initially caused tensions. In 2002 and 2006 many female candidates were pressured by male candidates to withdraw from the elections (Toumi 2006). Moreover, male candidates used the traditional division of gender roles to discredit their female opponents. Sunni Islamist candidate Ebrahim Bousandal addressed voters stating that women should not take part in politics because their place was at home (*Muslim Women News* 2010). In 2006 female candidates received phone messages threatening them to withdraw immediately from the race (Bille and Moroni 2006). During the electoral campaign of that year acts of vandalism were committed. For instance, Fawzia Zainal's campaign tent was set on fire. In addition, she claimed to have been targeted by derogatory gossip (Grewal 2010). Furthermore, women were unable to secure the support of major political associations in Bahrain that are Islamic in nature. None of the Islamic associations has so far endorsed female candidates in elections. Given these limitations, from 2002 till 2010, only one woman, Latifa al-Qaoud, was elected to the parliament first in 2006 and again in 2010. Although she was the first woman MP elected in the GCC, she ran both times unchallenged and represented scarcely populated and remote islands of al-Hawar. The example of politics represents an area where there is strong resistance to change. None the less, the participation of women in elections has had an effect on Bahraini society. In 2010 the level of social acceptance of women candidates increased. Women did not face criticism or intimidation, which proves that voters acknowledged their active role in the political process. Moreover, in 2010 Latifa Salman, a candidate in the municipal elections, became the first Bahraini woman to win a popular election while directly challenging a male candidate.

Empowerment within family

Bahraini activists since the 1980s have tried to exert pressure on the government to allow for the creation of a personal status law to replace the traditional application of religious laws in matters related to family. Since Shari'a is not codified, clergymen heading the religious courts apply their own interpretations of the rules, usually detrimental to women. The interpretations change from one judge to another, leading to a lack of consistency in jurisdiction. Since its establishment, the SCW has campaigned for a unified written law, i.e. one that would represent Sunni and Shi'a sects, and took on the task to prepare a draft. This created tensions with

conservative clergy. The firm opposition of Shi'a scholars caused the draft committee to abandon the idea of a unified law, in favour of a Sunni version only. Consequently, the first written law called the Family Provision Act (Law No. 19/2009), passed in May 2009, applies to the Sunni sect. The law brought important regulations to protect the rights of women related to marriage, divorce and child custody. Both wife and husband can specify in the marriage contract terms and conditions related to family expenditures, housing, employment and education. Furthermore, the new law lists circumstances when women are rightfully entitled to seek divorce, such as lengthy imprisonment of the husband, drug addiction, abandonment of the family and lack of financial support, as well as discord and harm between husband and wife. Moreover, judges are allowed to consult psychologists and social workers when ruling on the custody of children, keeping in mind the best interests of the child. The law grants women custody, to entail housing provided by the father of the children as well as to seek alimony. The court may also order DNA tests to establish parenthood (Ruiz-Almodóvar 2013). The SCW has undertaken a long-term study to analyse the impact of the new law on the lives of Bahraini women.

It is important to note, however, that the Family Provision Act does not establish equality between the genders. As a matter of fact, Bahraini family law regulations carry multiple reservations and their impact on women's empowerment is limited in comparison with the most progressive family laws in the MENA region, such as those adopted in Turkey, Tunisia and recently in Morocco (Moghadam and Roudi-Fahimi 2005). A Bahraini woman, for example, still requires the consent of a guardian to get married, even though there are amendments to the role of the guardian in the marriage process. Similarly, the law makes a difference between divorces initiated by men and by women, as women have to provide legal grounds to seek a divorce, while men do not. The effects of the new laws are also limited by the fact that they apply to the Sunni sect only. Shi'a Shari'a courts continue to exercise jurisdiction based on the traditional interpretation of the Islamic law.

Media campaigns

Women's achievements in breaking the gendered stereotypes are highlighted in the local media. Newspapers devote several articles to present female candidates in the national elections and closely follow their campaigns. Similarly, women who break into the traditionally male-dominated jobs, such as female judges or pilots, are highly praised and draw a lot of attention. Encouragement no doubt plays an important role in publicizing women's achievements in society; however, certain areas of the public sphere still remain heavily male dominated. Sectors of education and healthcare are feminized, but the number of men exceeds that of women in all other fields and is especially acute, for instance, in engineering (Ahmed 2010).

In patriarchal societies, national media campaigns can play a role in encouraging women to take leadership positions. Patriarchy, defined as 'a hierarchy of authority that is controlled and dominated by the males' (Krauss 1987: xii), originates in the family, which forms a basic institution of Arab societies. Families are headed by men and this patriarchal structure strictly separates female and male obligations and spheres (Giacaman *et al.* 1996). Women's fulfilment is sought in the area of home as mothers and wives (Sabbagh 2007). The family ought to create a safe zone within which women find protection. Women's subordinate position is justified in this way. Moreover, Sabbagh (2007) points out that 'women's daily lives and practices are reinforcing patriarchy'. Within this context it is easier to understand the resistance of the majority of Bahraini women to getting full political rights in 2002 and entering what is traditionally regarded to be a male sphere. The example of Bahrain shows, however, that social and cultural barriers may be ultimately overcome and women entering the male sphere are gradually accepted.

Limitations to female empowerment in Bahrain

Despite improvements, women's empowerment is still hindered by a number of limitations. Empowerment through the official channels follows clear rationale dictated by economic, political and social needs (Karolak 2013). As a result, the reforms undertaken aim to fulfil specific goals and their extent may not necessarily lead to full empowerment. On the other hand, the efforts at female emancipation through grassroots activism such as grassroots-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have not yielded significant legislative changes so far. These efforts stumble upon conservative attitudes in society, also among women, which prevent grassroots initiatives from gaining sufficient impetus to bring about legislative changes. The grassroots activism in the areas of spreading awareness is very valuable, yet grassroots movements are overshadowed by the primary role of the para-governmental institutions in setting the path for female empowerment. The limitations to women's rights are especially visible in four areas.

Nationality

Even though Bahrain has adopted progressive legislation that in theory guarantees equality of genders,² Bahraini women cannot pass citizenship on to their foreign husbands and their children born from such marriages. The battle by women's rights activists and the SCW to amend Article 4 of the 1963 nationality law has led to slight improvements. The latest legislation allowed Bahraini women to sponsor their husbands' and children's residence in Bahrain under certain conditions. Children can enjoy exemption from fees for government as well as healthcare and education benefits equal to Bahrainis if they reside in the kingdom; however, they are excluded from political, employment and housing benefits.

Labour market discrimination

The Labour Act (Decree No. 23 of 1976) guarantees equality of all employees but labour laws 'do not prohibit or provide protection against gender-based discrimination in the workplace' (Najjar 2009). As a result, women reporting discrimination in the labour market with regards to remuneration or promotion opportunities cannot question these practices owing to a lack of appropriate legislation. On average, Bahraini women earn 76% of the income of a male worker for a similar job (World Economic Forum 2010). Gender stereotyping also has a negative impact on promotion opportunities of women in the workplace.

Violence against women

Domestic violence has been widely reported by women's rights organizations and in the media, which has increased awareness of the problem in society. The calls for criminalization of violence against women have become more and more vocal. Women remain silent as they lack confidence in the legal system and fear negative consequences on their family. Indeed, the Penal Code stipulates that 'Nothing is considered a crime as long as it is the exercise of a right granted by law or custom' (Art. 16). Violence against women by male members of the family is accepted by conservative segments of society as a right to discipline the woman. Among the many types of abuse, in case of sexually motivated violence, Bahraini laws offer the lowest protection for women. A rapist can escape punishment if he marries the victim, while spousal rape is not considered abuse as a husband has the right to execute his conjugal privileges even against the wishes of his wife. Studies suggest that violence against women is a widespread

phenomenon as 88.4% of respondents perceive it in the workplace and public places as stated in the 'personal, family and legal status of Bahraini women' document (Bahrain Women's Union 2008). Bahraini laws continue to offer insufficient protection as legislation punishing acts of violence against women was ranked both in 2006 and 2010 at 0.75 on a scale from 0 to 1, where 1 means worst case scenario (World Economic Forum 2006, 2010). Legislation criminalizing domestic violence is currently being debated in the Bahraini parliament.

Inheritance

Islamic Shari'a law governs inheritance issues and treats both genders separately. Women may inherit from fathers, mothers, brothers, husbands and children; however, women's shares are significantly smaller than men's (Ahmed 2010: 9). The sectarian division complicates the matter, as the Sunni and Shi'a apply different sets of rules. Daughters, in the absence of a male child, can inherit the father's estate in full (Shi'a ruling), or are obliged to share it with other paternal relatives (Sunni ruling) (Nasir 1990: 225). Under Shi'a laws wives cannot inherit their husband's land but only movable assets, while under Sunni laws they can. In all cases, non-Muslim women cannot inherit from their Muslim husbands (Nasir 1990: 232). The reason for women's different treatment in inheritance is directed by a different perception of social obligations in Islam. Men are held financially responsible for families' needs (Coulson 1971: 1). Women are supposed to be provided for by their fathers, brothers or sons and can, at least in theory, retain their earned money if they choose to work. However, various sources suggest that working women contribute to the daily household expenses, while in extreme cases they are forced to give up their salaries to their husbands (Najjar 2009). The increase in numbers of working women who are married from 45% in 1981 to 60% in 1991 may indicate that women's contribution to the family is increasing as well (Wilkenson and Atti 1997). The expectations towards wives in Bahrain changed drastically as a number of respondents admitted that 'young men nowadays look for a wife that can help with family expenses' (Kelly 2009). Moreover, it is important to note that 10.84% of Bahraini families are supported by a woman.

General obstacles to empowerment

The processes that lead to women's empowerment reforms are usually incremental. In some areas, public debates and raising awareness among various stakeholders in society may culminate in legislative changes. This is the case, for instance, in the proposed laws protecting women against domestic violence that follow a decade of public debate and are currently being discussed in the parliament. In areas where stark resistance by conservative groups in society is encountered, however, the proposals of changes may be simply abandoned. The inability of joint efforts by the SCW and women activists to bring about the codification of a unified personal status law is an example of such limitations to women's empowerment. Codification of the Shi'a Shari'a was at that time risky from the point of view of the legitimacy of the political system. The SCW pulled out of the unified law initiative after calls for nation-wide unrest in the Shi'a community (Hamada 2009). Women activists did not succeed in conducting a successful emancipation campaign among Shi'a women, who also protested against the unified law. As a result, a demonstration organized by opposition groups against the introduction of the personal status law for Shi'as gathered 120,000 people, mostly women, while women's rights activists rallied only 500 people in support of the law (Ahmed 2010). Similarly, passing nationality through women may be seen as subversive to the patriarchal structures of society, in which:

[p]olitical identity comes through male genealogy. The Arab nation is seen as descending through a series of patrilineal kin groups. Citizens have to belong to a male-defined kin group to belong to a religious sect, to belong to the nation, and to acquire the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Children are assigned both the religious and political identities of their fathers. By not allowing women to pass citizenship on to their children (or their spouses), most Arab states cement the linkage between religious identity, political identity, patrilinearity, and patriarchy—that is, between religion, nation, state, and kinship.³

(*Hijab 2002: 6*)

Changes to this patriarchal structure may easily cause a rift among the loyal but conservative supporters of the monarchy, thus weakening its base undermined by the Arab Spring. As a result, the SCW pulled out of this initiative. The empowerment of women, a top-down process, may thus be limited given the particular circumstances and benefits of the political system. The political openness created by the Arab Spring uprisings changed the circumstances, providing new venues for women's empowerment and emancipation.

The Arab Spring: women in the opposition and pro-government movements

Although women's participation was considerable throughout the period of the Arab Spring uprising in Bahrain, it was marked by a growing sectarian split that divided society into supporters and opponents of the current political system. In order to assess fully the role of women, we shall discuss two types of women activists, namely those gathered around the opposition groups and those acting in support of the monarchy.

Women in the opposition movement

Women who supported the opposition movement were predominantly members of the Shi'a sect. They participated widely in the mixed gender demonstrations and sit-ins alongside men and addressed mixed audience crowds. As a result, when the crackdown on the movement became a reality, they bore the consequences of their actions. Although the facts are disputed, the opposition claims that so far 14 women died in the crackdown, mostly of tear gas suffocation.⁴ Furthermore, women activists were detained and incarcerated. Among imprisoned female protesters, the case of Ayat al-Qurmezi made headlines throughout the world. The poet was incarcerated and released after a forced confession aired on a Bahraini television channel. The daughter of the activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, Zainab al-Khawaja, has also been campaigning for the release of her father and other activists from jail. She faced prosecution in the Bahraini courts. The growing role of women in the anti-government movement culminated with the celebration of female martyrdom portrayed as a model to follow.

The main goals of the uprising included constitutional reforms, abdication of the king as well as deportation of naturalized citizens from Bahrain. Yet some women opposition activists aimed to take advantage of the upheaval to shift the attention to problems important to women, such as the personal status law for Shi'as as well as an electoral quota for female candidates (Bou Hamoud 2011). These voices were a minority in the male-led movement oriented primarily towards achieving political goals. In past years, the strong grip of male leadership proved to be detrimental to women's causes, such as obstructing the implementation of a personal status law for the Shi'a sect. Similarly, fielding female candidates by opposing political associations in the parliamentary elections proved problematic. Members of Al Wefaq, the largest opposition

political association, were divided over the issue of female candidates (Walid 2007), but no female candidates were ever appointed in the past in part due to political opportunism. Al Wefaq's leader Ali Salman stated that female candidates could cause Al Wefaq to lose seats (Hamada 2010). Judging from the experience of past years, opposition leaders may well have understood the importance of the number of supporters they draw to the streets and that women could significantly increase their ranks. The growing engagement and sacrifice of women in the opposition movement called ultimately for a more women-focused approach on the part of the male leadership. In 2012 women were included in Al Wefaq's secretariat and during his speech at Al Wefaq's 2012 General Conference Ali Salman confirmed the opportunity to list female candidates if women desired to stand for future elections. Despite being limited, these proclamations mark a change given that in the past women's participation in male-directed movements was hardly recognized. However, access to political structures in the opposition associations is not a guarantee of female emancipation, as 'women must themselves advocate for equal rights' (Social Watch 2009).

Women in the pro-government movement

Women activists who supported the pro-government movement participated in numerous sit-ins and rallies as well as shows of loyalty organized throughout the country (Qahtani 2011). They had no specific demands targeted at women's empowerment behind their participation but strongly believed in an 'Iran/Shi'a takeover' of Bahrain. The aims of the pro-government movement were centred on preservation of the monarchy and the Sunni identity of the country (Karolak 2012). Even though the pro-government groups never participated under women's empowerment slogans, the opportunity to discuss the needs of emancipation and empowerment was created by the National Dialogue.

Female empowerment after the 'day of rage'

National Dialogue debates as well as by-elections to the Bahraini parliament boosted prospects for women's empowerment. Some of the anticipated reforms were approved and are in the process of implementation. None the less, in both cases the outcomes of these opportunities have not yet fully materialized.

National Dialogue

The National Dialogue was a series of debates that took place in July 2011, initiated by the king after the Arab Spring uprising of February 2011. The dialogue aimed at forging a compromise on the most prominent political, economic, social and human rights issues among different groups in society. As the opposition groups received 35 out of 300 seats, with the major opposition party Al Wefaq holding five seats, ultimately they decided to pull out of the dialogue. However, the debates included a number of NGOs, including 12 women's associations. The results of the National Dialogue were formed into recommendations to be approved and implemented at a later stage. The participants acknowledged the importance of fostering women's rights. First, demands were made to guarantee greater protection for women against violence, equal rights in the workplace, and political and economic empowerment. Second, a recommendation was made to allow women to pass Bahraini nationality on to their children born from mixed marriages. Finally, a thorough review of salaries of women working in the private sector was urged. As of now, Equal Opportunities Units have been set up in governmental

organizations to promote equal opportunities between men and women. This concept is supposed to be extended to private companies in the future.⁵ Despite these important considerations given to women's rights, it is important to highlight that the recommendations put forward during the National Dialogue have to be approved by the king before being implemented. Thus, future reforms rely on the benevolence of the authorities. These emancipation demands have already fostered new incentives for women activists, such as a lobbying campaign for passing on Bahraini nationality through mothers (Torr 2011). The National Dialogue has no doubt heightened the expectations of women, yet if not fulfilled it could lead to a passive society over-reliant on governmental agencies. Bridging the gap between empowerment and emancipation remains a necessary step for a civil society to grow.

By-elections to the parliament

By-elections to the Bahraini parliament were conducted in October of 2011. They aimed to replace 18 Al Wefaq MPs who pulled out of the parliament after the crackdown on the uprising. In the process, four female candidates presented themselves for elections. Three female MPs were elected and joined an already serving MP, Latifa al-Qaoud. As a result, women make up 10% of the lower house of the parliament and 20% of both houses. The implications of greater female participation in the legislative body are yet to be assessed. None the less, their participation implies multiple levels of analysis.

To begin with, three elected MPs—Sawsan Taqawi, Somaya al-Jowder and Ebtisam Hijris—ran in constituencies dominated by opposition voters. The fact that they decided to participate in the elections makes them no doubt 'traitors' in the eyes of the opposition. It comes as no surprise that the electoral billboards of some of the candidates were vandalized, while the electoral turnout in all affected districts reached only 20% of those entitled to vote. None the less, the women's presence in the parliament may play an important role for the authorities on a local and international level. Indeed, filling in the empty seats shows that the parliament can function without the opposition MPs. In addition, greater female presence in the parliament satisfies the demands of quotas put forward by Bahraini women's activists, while improving the country's rankings in gender equality. On the international level, the election of the first woman Shi'a MP, Sawsan Taqawi,⁶ is a clear sign that the monarchy has broad support of various groups in society. In addition, governmental policies have so far taken important steps toward women's empowerment in Bahrain, while the opposition could be easily accused of stalling reforms that would improve the condition of Shi'a women. While some women who are part of the opposition movement reject any reforms simply because they come from the authorities, the opposition movement has hardly offered them any gender-specific support in return. Such discourse could be one of the strongest arguments of the government against the opposition in the international arena.

Future repercussions

The case of Bahrain provides an example of the ambiguity of women's empowerment in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Women backing the democratic movements may find themselves marginalized after the political changes have taken place. The Arab Spring movements failed to address issues related to women or to make substantial promises to their supporters. The presence of strong religious currents in the uprisings is yet another factor to consider. Islamist groups, whether Shi'a or Sunni, usually view politics as a male sphere and opt not to endorse female candidates. In Bahrain, none of the Islamic associations have fielded

female candidates in elections in the past. Sunni conservative Al Asalah had a firm stance against female participation, arguing that voters would not elect women parliamentarians because it was against their religious beliefs. A more moderate Sunni, Al Menbar, stated in accordance with Islamic principles that women should not be appointed as leaders of countries, but they should be allowed to participate in other areas of politics. However, the association refrained from endorsing any female candidates. The case of Al Wefaq was discussed earlier in this chapter.⁷ No matter the reasons, women's participation in the public sphere may be reduced when Islamist associations yield greater influence in the political arena. It is yet another paradox that non-elected governments, depending on their needs and agendas, may be more interested in supporting women. The case of the Kingdom of Bahrain is exemplary of this phenomenon.

Women world-wide face significant challenges in entering decision-making positions. These barriers are especially prevalent among societies in the MENA region. Sabbagh (2007) lists a number of inter-related factors that constitute key challenges to women's empowerment in politics. The analysis of private and public spheres reveals personal, family, societal and political factors, as well as factors that exist within the working environment that prevent full participation of women in society. The lessons of the Arab Spring show that the empowerment of women needs joint engagement of female and male activists. A lack of commitment towards women's rights is detrimental for pro-democracy movements in the Middle East as stable democracy should be based on equality of all citizens regardless of gender, class, ethnicity and religion. The awareness that 'sustainable development and democracy require the explicit integration of a gender perspective: women and men have to be mainstream of development' (Luciak 2001: xiii) should become a priority for pro-democracy movements. The success of women's suffrage in Kuwait confirms that emancipation, a sign of a healthy civil society, requires the co-operation of various stakeholders: political actors, grassroots activists, men and women.

Conclusion

The participation of women in the opposition and pro-government movements has been an important feature of the Arab Spring in Bahrain. However, it was marked by a growing sectarian split. Women NGO members gained the ability to express their concerns in the National Dialogue. It will be a matter of time to assess whether their voices will be heard and their recommendations implemented. The gap between the promotion of women's rights as an up-to-down process and emancipation efforts of NGOs and women activists in Bahrain should be bridged for a healthy civil society to grow. The division of society following the Arab Spring and unclear outcomes of the National Dialogue call the future of these processes into question. On the other hand, female opposition members are active in the ongoing protests and concentrate on pushing for political reforms, while keeping gender-related demands off their agenda. So far it is clear that the way ahead lies in the hands of the Bahraini authorities, whose role in women's empowerment is paramount. As a result, they are able to promote a pro-women image abroad, which sets them apart from the opposition that can be easily accused of stalling women's empowerment; yet this approach to women's rights will not provide an adequate solution if grassroots women's emancipation efforts are marginalized by the official channels.

Notes

- 1 Reservations to Arts 2, 9, 15, 16 and 29.
- 2 Art. 18 of the 2002 Constitution stipulates that 'people are equal in human dignity and they are equal before the law in regards to their public rights and duties. No discrimination on the grounds of gender, origin, language, religion or belief is tolerated'.

- 3 See, for example, the reservations in the new legislation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) allowing women to pass nationality on their children but only when they reach 18 years of age.
- 4 Updated lists of casualties are disseminated in the social media.
- 5 Interview with Ms Huda Salman, director of media and public relations, at the Supreme Council of Women, 25 January 2012.
- 6 The candidate ran unopposed.
- 7 It should be noted that Al Wefaq supported a female candidate fielded by another political association in the 2006 elections.

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