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Women in Yemen's Protests

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What has been the traditional role of women in Yemeni politics?

Yemeni women are active participants in their country's political movement, yet they suffer great disadvantages relative to men. The "Global Gender Gap Report" measures the disparity in opportunities available for men and women for 130 countries in four critical areas: economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, educational attainment, and political empowerment. Yemen ranks 130th out of 130. There are only two women serving as the heads of government commissions, and there is only one female member of Parliament, out of a total of 301 members. Nevertheless, thanks to the current protests, women's roles in Yemeni society may be changing.

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What roles are women playing in the current political protests?

Tawakkol Karman -- a female journalist, human rights activist, and a leader in the political movement -- is widely considered to have started the movement in Yemen. She was arrested in January after she took part in a student demonstration of solidarity with the protests in Tunisia and calling on Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down.

Initially, only a handful of women students from Sana'a University participated in the protests. The students soon began bringing their sisters, cousins, and friends. Day by day, the numbers have increased, and they now include women from all walks of life and all segments of the society.

Although traditionally women in Yemen were to be neither seen nor heard in the public arena, they are among the most energetic participants in the political protests, sometimes front and center, shouting slogans and carrying signs. Others are supporting the demonstrators by bringing food and shelter and other necessities. Thus, although the protest movement is not explicitly about women's rights, it is creating space for women's participation in the public sphere. Through their participation they are also gaining civic education, advocacy experience, and confidence in their ability to affect change.

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How will women's roles likely to be affected by the current political upheavals?

There are reasons for cautious optimism. The women's movement has been growing steadily in Yemen over the past decade and a half. The 1997 women's protest around the family law, which brought together women from all classes and from all parts of the country, was a key event in building the movement. There are a growing number of civil society organizations, some of them headed by women. There are more social services targeting women's needs, including a number of shelters.

Halima Gellman, an expert on gender issues in Yemen, says that "there are also traditional spaces where women get together to study the Quran, called nadwas, which are one of the few places women have been able to go to get a religious education. And while some of these are alleged to be used by Islamist extremists to recruit women, others are fostering an Islamic feminist consciousness. This has been happening in other Muslim countries for some time, but it has been slow to come to Yemen."

There is a steadily growing consciousness among Yemeni women that they have an essential role to play in contributing to peace, development and democracy in their country. Afrah Nasser, a journalist at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, writes, "We are all coming to an awareness that we have to be a part of building this country. We are gaining in confidence and beginning to realize that we have a voice, a place in this new society -- something that has never happened before. It's a revolution not just against a political leader but also against a generation that long felt it was acceptable to repress women."

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What kind of support would Yemeni women like to have from the international community?

Some women are concerned that Yemen might enter into a period of prolonged violent conflict if it is unable to address the anger and resentment among young people. Nadia Abdulaziz Al-Sakkaf, editor of the Yemen Times, [told the NewsHour's Judy Woodruff](#) that the most effective way to prevent this is through supporting civil society and the media, and by getting young people involved in building their country.

The international community has learned that in situations of prolonged insecurity -- such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Afghanistan -- women are not only the primary victims of violence, they also lose ground in the public arena, as society becomes more militarized and less democratic. Therefore, it is in the interest of Yemeni women that the transition address both the political and economic causes of conflict in the country.

It is important that the international community support Yemeni women during the transition process. "We must avoid what occurred in Egypt, where although women were part of the revolution, they have been absent from the table during the constitutional and institutional reform processes," says Gellman.

Of course, not all women want the same things. Thus, while some support a quota system for parliamentary seats, others oppose it, saying that in light of women's present status in Yemen, such a system would merely give too much power to the political parties. Yemeni women will have to reach an agreement among themselves about this and many other legislative and policy issues. However, there are some issues on which there is broad-based agreement. One is the need for strong support to civil society, since women will likely continue to exercise most of their leadership in the nongovernmental sector for the foreseeable future.

At a United States Institute of Peace workshop in October 2010 with 34 Yemeni female activists, the most frequently made recommendation regarding the international community was that it provide sustained support for women's networks and coalitions. Workshop participants said that women are much more likely than men to be effective in building bridges across the cleavages that plague Yemen. The international community is well positioned to ensure that linkages are built and strengthened between women from all segments of society and from all geographical regions, urban and rural. This can best be done by supporting networks and coalitions that are truly inclusive and by creating the space for them to identify common goals and develop national, regional, and local strategies to achieve them. This will increase participation and enhance representation in the public arena for all Yemeni women, not just for the urban elite.

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