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Arab Spring: Women's Empowerment in Algeria

By Sangeeta Sinha¹

Abstract

The Arab Spring brought turmoil, upheaval and regime change in its wake. But these winds of change barely touched Algeria, and when it did we did not hear or see any women. In order to answer the two questions, the paper explores the status of women in present-day Algeria within a historical social and political context. Understanding the status of women is done by delving into some of the historical processes that Algerian women have had to confront. In order to understand the empowerment process, the study uses the empowerment framework as outlined by the Beijing Platform of action and modified by Moghadum.

Keywords: Empowerment, Algerian women, Personal Law, Colonization Algeria

Introduction

A one-woman show, "Fatma" written by M'hamed Benguettaf, premiered May 23, 1990, at the El-Mouggar theater in Algiers. "Fatma" recounts a day in the life of an Algerian washerwoman who is a maid. Fatma recounts her days at work and outside:

Only on the roof terraces can I breathe, move freely, work freely, most of all speak freely," she tells the audience. "Down below I feel choked: same people, words, problems. Mornings I clean staircases at the ministry, evenings at the municipality. All that time no one sees me and no one speaks to me. Me and the floor-rag I squeeze speak to each other. I'm not crazy. I want administrators and secretaries to ask me about my health, my problems, to reply to my 'hello.' I never realized that a 'good morning' is valued according to its speaker. So now I talk to my parents when I visit their graves. In the cemetery I don't feel exiled, the sky is near to me, to the earth and to people. The sky is big, its spirits large. If we cover our ears, the sky opens its arms and lets you breathe and speak².

Fatma's "exile" is perhaps the story of millions of women across the region. According to [Susan Slyomovics \(MER 166\), the political background of the play deals with](#) the Islamist challenge to secular forces in the country and the corrupt practices of the ruling party, the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) and the state's role in disenfranchising its own citizens. The passage provokes us into thinking about the reasons behind Fatma's oppression, and why when some women have moved toward acquiring freedoms and rights, others are still in the shadows. This study is an attempt to answer this question, in the context of the Algerian woman. This

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² Middle East Report 166. "A Woman's life on an Algiers Stage"

paper also explores of the status of women in Algeria within the social and political context of the Arab Spring.

It is interesting that the tumult in the Middle East started in Algeria's neighborhood, Tunisia, but Algeria has shown very few signs of following the trend. It is as if the voices of the people have been muffled. As anger and protests spread across the region in January 2011, the Algerian government too, faced with food riots and protests repealed the 19-year state of emergency on February 12, and reduced food prices by cutting taxes. According to the Population Reference Bureau of the 67% of the urban population, 12% lives in slums³ This move quelled the riots and protests within the country. There were other positive effects of this move by the government. The Amnesty International 2012 reports that the repeal of the state of emergency produced a few positive effects, but the government also passed other laws restricting freedoms of expression. Under the guise of strengthening democracy, President Bouteflika strengthened the hand of authoritarianism.

Human rights organizations, opposition political parties and trade unions began holding weekly demonstrations, and protests by unemployed youth were held across the country. On 15 April, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced some reforms to "strengthen democracy", including the revision of electoral law and the appointment of a constitutional reform committee. A new law on information was also announced, to replace the provisions in the Penal Code under which journalists and others found guilty of "defaming" the President or other state institutions faced imprisonment for up to a year and fines. The President also announced changes to the law on civil society organizations, but fears were raised that the legislation would prove even more restrictive of their operation and funding⁴.

Interestingly, the Algerian Prime Minister, Mr. Ahmed Ouyahia, stated that the Arab Spring was merely a cover for western intervention⁵.

In the run-up to the election, Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia described the so-called Arab Spring as a "plague", which, he said, had resulted in "the colonisation of Iraq, the destruction of Libya, the partition of Sudan and the weakening of Egypt⁶."

The near absence of any support for the Arab Spring in Algeria has not gone unnoticed by anyone watching the events unfold in the region. The lack of support for Arab Spring is

³ <http://www.prb.org/DataFinder/Geography/Data.aspx>

⁴ Amnesty International (2012) "Year of Rebellion: The State on Human Rights in the Middle East" Accessed on August 15, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE01/001/2012/en/e2985922-558f-486d-8e68-ef54a7d25222/mde010012012en.pdf>

⁵ The Economist, May 12, 2012: "Algeria's Elections: Still waiting for real Democracy"

⁶ Al-Jazeera, May 15, 2012: Jeremy Keenan : "Algeria's elections was a fraud" [Jeremy Keenan is a professor of social anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/201251482813133513.html>

perhaps indicative of a nation uncertain about its own future (Entelis 2012)⁷. Although a deeply divided society, the ruling elite has remained indifferent to the demands of its people. In addition, he argues that the anti-state behavior in Algeria has yet to reach the levels witnessed in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt or Yemen. Some of the factors that limit political change in Algeria include an exceedingly strong military determined to maintain itself in power at any cost, and terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda “hangs over the national consciousness, serving as a brake to large-scale domestic rebellion” according to Entelis.

Others reasons attributed to the absence of support for the Arab Spring has been the inability by the activists to develop strong “meaningful social movements out of the economic unrest, to push forward a radical political agenda, different to that of government” (Joffe 2012:510). Still other argue that the presence of oil wealth, a diverse population living within a large boundary, the memory of the civil war of the 1990s when at least a 100,000 Algerians died are possible reasons for the lack of support to usher in reforms.

Even more glaring is the absence of the voice of the women in all of this disarray. While the world saw women from Tunisia and Egypt take to the streets, Algerian women appear to be silent and missing from the public arena. Their silence has been conspicuous in that the women who had once been active participants in the freedom struggle for their country against the French are now absent from the public eye. Marnia Lazreg in her “The Eloquence of Silence” (1994) analyses the silencing of the voices of the women, despite their contribution and participation in the liberation of their nation from French colonialism. Algerian women’s voices have been silenced due to social, cultural or personal circumstances, according to Lazreg. What began as a form of structural silence during the French colonization (when French was the required mode of communication) manifested in socio-cultural forms in the post-colonial years (1994).

Women across the world have struggled to overcome oppression and in some regions have made successful inroads into achieving their rightful in society due to support from government, non-government and international agencies. As citizens of a nation-state, all people living within its boundaries are entitled to rights and obligations. And it is the state that bestows those rights to all. But, often groups are deliberately disenfranchised to benefit more powerful elements of society.

Many of the new states established after becoming independent in the 20th century have had the onerous task of forging a modern nation-state. A modern nation state is one that provides rights and responsibilities to all its citizens, and not merely to a powerful few. The evolution of the modern state demands new loyalties and rules of citizenship. Kandiyoti (1991) argues that in order to analyze the position of women in Islamic nations, we have to study the “political projects of contemporary states and of their historical formations” (1991:2).

⁷ John Entelis: “The future of Democracy in the Maghreb: Algeria in a comparative perspective”. Lecture (transcript) on March 13, 2012 at CSID-Tunisia.

At the turn of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, reformers of women's condition in the Muslim world emerged from the ranks of an educated, nationalist, male elite. Their concern with women's rights, centering with a broader agenda of education, seclusion, veiling and polygyny, coincided with a broader agenda about "progress" and the compatibility between Islam and modernity (Kandiyoti 1991:3).

This paper explores the process of women's empowerment in Algerian society by examining the creation of state power and its search for identity. The second part of the paper analyzes women's empowerment using Moghadum's framework of analysis (2005).

Historical Antecedents

In order to explore the status of women in Algeria, I begin by examining women's roles in the historical context. Algeria became independent from the French in 1962, after a protracted national liberation struggle. The revolution led by the FLN included women as important participants. They participated as nurses, cooks, spies, and sometimes in combat roles. They paid a heavy price for their participation. At the end of the war, women were expected to back to their homes and assume their traditional roles. Like many newly independent nations in that period, Algerians too were faced with the question of their identity and how that identity should be reflected in the unity of their nation. Colonization had segregated the French from the Algerians, often on religious grounds. In the post-independence era, the political elites established Islam as the unifying principle.

Therefore, women did not reap any benefits of their participation in the war or for their sacrifices during the war of independence, once the nation became independent. The process of disenfranchising women had its seeds in the war of independence. The extended war of independence had led to the formation of factions based on regional differences (Charrad 2001). These "kin-based associations" had supported people from colonial domination, and after 1962 sought political power in the national-building process.

"In terms of social organization, the tribe or kin grouping is critical because it historically has constituted the basic community in the Maghrib. A feature shared by Maghribi and other Middle-Eastern societies is their origin in a tribal structure. Tribal origins do not belong to a forgotten past. There are entire regions where individuals continue to identify themselves as members of a tribe. Tribal solidarities may overlap with linguistic, ethnic or other identities. In the Maghrib as a whole, however, significant local solidarities have rested primarily upon tribal roots." (Charrad 2001:21)

This argument holds that the process of nation-building in post-independence Algeria was marked by tensions between regional and central powers due to reallocation of resources from local to national goals. Since this process results in the reduction of power at the local level, central governments have several choices when trying to resolve such conflicts. First, the central government may "confront kin-based corporate structures and try to reduce their power"; secondly, they may "tolerate these institutions, and gradually reduce their power"; or third, the government may "manipulate them in a divide and rule approach to politics". It is within this

framework that women's rights and status is examined in post-independent Algeria by Charrad (2001). In the midst of this tension of nation-building, Family Law was held hostage, since it revolved around the question of the future of Algerian society. The Algerian political elite, argues Charrad (2001) used the different tribal affiliations to get power for themselves. The army emerged as the most powerful entity in this struggle for power, and could also keep these tensions at bay. In the midst of all the power struggle, women's status remained undecided, and the issue of Family Law was kept at abeyance until 1984. When it was finally passed, women were ostensibly relegated to the status of a second class citizen, with none or very little voice.

But during President Ben Bella's regime (1962-1965) women had gained civil and political rights. The right to vote and right to stand for political office was granted during this time period (Benoune 1995). According to Article 39 of the constitution "Any discrimination based on sex, race or occupation is forbidden." And Article 42 states: "All political, economic, social and cultural rights of Algerian women are guaranteed by the constitution" (Lazarus 2010). Despite constitutional guarantees women did not make substantial progress, though school enrollment of women increased to 1.5 million between 1967 and 1977. In 1984, during the Presidency of Benjedid, the 1984 Family Law was promulgated.

During the presidency of Chadli Benjedid, Algeria's growing socioeconomic crisis worsened, fed by overpopulation, rising unemployment, a severe housing shortage in urban areas, and the presence of a large alienated, disgruntled population who despaired of finding work. Benjedid's policy of Arabization of schools exacerbated the crisis by creating a cleavage between French-educated youth who had access to lucrative international positions and Arabic-speaking youth who were frequently unemployed. In addition, the importation of Arabic teachers from Egypt meant that many teachers sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood spread this violent ideology in schools and mosques (Gera 2007:79 in Lazarus 2010).

The Family Code of 1984

One of the socio-cultural aspects of this silencing resides in the 1984 Family Law (Lazreg 1994, Moghadum 2001, Charrad 2001). Indeed, the 1984 Family Law might have felt like a betrayal for the Algerian women. The resolution to the impasse on what should the new Algerian society look like took 22 years, and it was based on a highly conservative version of the family law. The 1984 Code followed the traditional kinship structure by making women subordinate to men. Marriage was now less of a choice between adults and more of a group decision. Furthermore, for a marriage to be valid, a woman had to have the consent of her guardian, and could not merely act on her own preference. Polygamy continued to be legal. A husband could still use the privilege of repudiation to end a marriage, though now the process had to be registered by a judge. This implied that women could still lose all resources and be left penniless (Charrad 2001, Lazreg 1994, Moghadum 1994).

The 1984 code was part of the government strategy to appeal to the base of the Islamic fundamentalist forces by meeting some of the wishes of that base. In Algeria as

elsewhere in the Maghrib, a majority of the Islamic fundamentalist movement comprised members of the urban underprivileged- mostly young men and women alienated from their social environment, often of rural origin and usually unemployed (Charrad 2001:199).

According to Cheriet (1996) “the Algerian case demonstrates that state and kin are not necessarily at odds when it comes to limiting women’s legal status as domestic decision-makers”⁸. Algerian women have to “negotiate their access to the public sphere in a society torn between residual patriarchal reflexes of the modern state and Islamist revivalism” (Cheriet 1996:22). It is the state with the support of the Islamists that has relegated women to a minority status. Furthermore, the code has had disastrous effects on women’s rights, especially on divorced women, who have no recourse but to live on the streets.

In the 19 years since the Family Code came into force, Algeria has seen increasing levels of homelessness among women and children. Thousands of mothers wander the streets with their children; others sell their labour as domestic servants at very cheap rates. The streets of Algeria's major cities are the homes of many desperate divorced women. Some of them have found shelter in the slums; others have sought refuge in the hostels run by the organisation SOS Women in Distress. However, according to newspaper reports, this organisation is unable to cope with the large number of requests it receives every day, because of its lack of financial backing (Salhi 2003:30).

While the struggle for the repeal of the 1984 code continues, organizations like the Women Living Under Islamic Law (WLUML) has organized women across borders to provide support and aid to women struggling under the yoke of this strict code.

Activism and Algerian women

Yet, the notion that Algerian women were mute spectators of their destiny being carved out by the state, and took no action, is false. They have been active in the region, challenging the authoritarian regime at great risk (Moghadum 2011). Moghadum examines women’s organization and progress toward activism, and argues that there have been three waves of feminist activism in Algeria. Studies on social movements and collective action stress on the importance of resource mobilization as an important ingredient in ushering change in society. Within this framework the nature of the state plays an equally important role. Important in explaining the concept of resource mobilization theory is the ability to protest one’s grievances or discontent. In an authoritarian state, citizens have very little or no avenues to seek redress for their grievances. Furthermore, resources in the form of leadership or international support, while

⁸ Boutheina Cheriet (1996) “Gender, Civil Society and Citizenship in Algeria,” Middle East Report, January-March, p.23.

important, can make little inroads into changing the situation. It is remarkable that Algerian women, despite repression from government, formed the “Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalite” in collaboration with Morocco and Tunisia (Moghadam 2011). An important factor that has provided impetus to women’s rights globally, is the rise of “international regimes” (Donnelly 2007:79). According to Paris-based Algerian journalist, Samia Allalou, played an important part during the civil war and has continued to work on behalf of Algerian women even when violence was reduced, and the world was not looking at the events in Algeria⁹.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided the norms for the rise of “the global human rights regime”. The UN Commission of Human Rights as the main organ provides rules and implementation procedures for the monitoring of this regime. It is this and other international conferences that advocated for improvement in women’s rights that led to various governments adopting measures for improving women’s rights. Rights refer to what is right, as well as refer to “special entitlement”:

Both rights, in the sense of entitlement, and considerations of righteousness create relations between those who have a duty and those who are owed or benefit from that duty. Rights, however, involve a certain set of social institutions, rules or tactics...Rights empower, as well as benefit, their beholder (Donnelly 2007:22).

Donnelly’s discussion of rights places women’s rights squarely within the arena of human rights. Additionally, human rights are also moral rights, and are necessary, for often they are not guaranteed within a national legal process. Therefore, the importance of international declarations like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Human rights covenants. It is the presence of international moral authority that has helped women pursue their rights within national boundaries, sometimes great effectiveness. The WLUML has played an important role in this regard.

According to Moghadam (2011) this is the “political opportunity structure” that helped shape feminist activism in the Maghreb. The first wave of Algerian women’s movement emerged following President Boumediene’s death in 1978. When the ministry of Justice, in 1979, announced the creation of a commission on family code, women demanded to know the identity of the members of the commission. These women were mainly professionals, university women who wanted to express their concerns and demands. Later in 1980, when the Bendjedid government prohibited women from travelling alone without permission from a male guardian, women once again staged mass demonstrations on the streets of Algiers. The government order was cancelled. However, in 1984 the government passed the conservative family code.

⁹ Common Ground News Service: “Algerian Feminists Going Strong”, by Samia Allalou, April 29, 2009. <http://www.commongroundnews.org>

The only positive aspect of the new family code was that the minimum marriage age was raised for both women and men (to 18 and 21, respectively). Feminists objected the family code contravened the equality clauses of the Constitution, the Labor Code, and the international conventions to which Algeria was signatory. Protests were again organized, but given the fact that the bill had already passed, they had little impact (Moghadum 2011:186).

In the second wave, Algerian feminists took on the fundamentalists, who had been successful in passing the 1984 code. The 1988 riots took place in the backdrop of the market reforms being initiated by the government. This is also the time when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) started gaining popularity, which once again alarmed women. The FIS wanted to implement the Sharia law, and saw westernization as corrupting (Moghadum 2011). This phase also witnessed the formation of new organizations by women to challenge the new family code.

When the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) made significant political inroad in the 1991 elections, the government tried to annul the elections and ban FIS. During this period women also launched several protests against the FIS. The cancellation of elections led to violence between the Islamist extremists and the government, the 1990s witnessed escalation of violence against women. Despite the state ban on the FIS, they successfully formed the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The GIA attacked civilians, especially women who did not conform to the traditional roles of behavior. In April of 1993, the GIA shot to death a young woman, and “decapitated” a mother and grandmother in separate incidents in 1994. The GIA also issued a statement in March 1994, in which all unveiled women were classified as “military targets” (Bennoune 1995).

Women were denounced in mosques by imams, who pronounced fatwas that condemned activist or unveiled women to death. List of women to be killed were pinned up at the entrance to mosques. March 1995 saw an escalating number of deaths of women and girls (Moghadum 2003:25).

But as the *World Press Review* cited a local newspaper, “Al Vatan” the women have refused to be intimidated, and continue to protest against the government and its harsh laws. The Amnesty International also in its 2005 report, “highlighted the Algerian government's failure to protect women against rape, beatings and widespread legal and economic discrimination”, in a 38-page briefing to the United Nations. “The briefing also describes the consequences for women of the government's failure to investigate and bring to justice those responsible for thousands of 'disappearances' during Algeria's brutal internal conflict in the 1990's”.¹⁰ Despite the terror unleashed on the population through the decade, activists and women's organizations, continued their protests, while the state continued to accommodate the fundamentalists, giving further evidence to Charrad's thesis on kin-based solidarities. This is also the period (1989-1994)

¹⁰ Amnesty International Press Release, January 2005

when a number of feminist organizations called for the abolition of the Family Code amongst other demands.

The third wave of feminism began in 2001, when the “war on terror” took center stage, and women were promised better treatment, and several women were appointed to the cabinet. The third wave of the Algerian movement has been characterized by a demand for gender justice in the form of (1) opposition to referendum and amnesty, (2) a mobilization for an egalitarian family code, and (3) attention toward ending violence against women and sexual harassment at the workplace (Moghadum 2011:192). What is clear is that women were being used as pawns in an ever changing political scene, and that male guardianship over women is now being challenged by activists and feminists.

Assessing Gender Empowerment

In order to understand the changes that have taken place in the status of Algerian women, I use the framework outlined by Moghadum (2005). Moghadum’s framework is based on the Beijing Call for Action conference (1996), which provided an international forum for assessing and empowering women across the world. The Beijing forum outlined 12 main areas in this regard. These areas include, women’s poverty, educational attainment, reproductive health, employment, political participation, and violence against women. Even though this had no legal backing, it “has been signed by the great majority of countries and has helped to develop a global consensus on women’s rights” (Moghadum 2005:389). The analytical framework as developed in Moghadum’s study (2005) is a combination of social development goals, “rights- based indicators, starting with basic indicators and moving to more complex ones”. The framework assesses women’s participation, rights and capabilities as outlined in the UN study (2004)¹¹. This section looks at women’s participation in social and political spheres as a means of empowerment.

One of the main concepts is that of gender, which is more of a social category and includes properties of race and class. Thus gender refers to meaning and roles attributed to men and women by the society they live in (Moghadum 2005). In order to achieve gender equality, women need access to resources or be able to avail of opportunities provided by the government. I use Moghadum’s (2005) definition of women’s empowerment, “as a multidimensional process of civil, political, social, economic and cultural participation and rights”.

There are five main dimensions of gender indicators that this paper analyzes in order to understand the current status of women in Algeria. Moghadum argues that her framework is more about the “political will of a state or the fulfillment of the principle of non-discrimination” (Green 2001:1079). Therefore, the framework includes development, human development and rights-based indicators. While Moghadum outlines seven set of indicators, this study uses five. The choice of indicators has been dependent on availability of data. The five dimensions used are

¹¹United Nations Economic Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2004): “Concept Note on The Use of Gender Sensitive Qualitative Indicators for Monitoring Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action”.

- (a) Sociodemographic indicators – Life expectancy at birth, Sex ratio, Number of births, adolescent fertility rates, and total fertility rates.

This set of indicators is referred to as basic capabilities. These are necessary for women to be able to actively participate, preconditions for women's participation. An examination of Table 1 indicates that of the four indicators in this category, the number of births to 1000 women in the age range of 15-19 is high at 6.1% - an indication that women are getting married young and starting families, in the absence of other life options.

- (b) Bodily integrity and health indicators, Maternal Mortality ratio, Child mortality rate, Contraceptive prevalence, People infected with HIV.

This set of indicators is about woman's right to life, physical integrity and civil rights (Moghadum 2005). Except for the high rates on contraceptive prevalence (61%), (which is development or change in the right direction) we find that maternal mortality ratio and child mortality rates were not high- indicating a certain amount of physical security. Although due to the absence of data on other indicators under this category (e.g., sexual abuse and physical abuse), the physical well-being of the Algerian woman cannot be concluded with any certainty. As we know from other sources women have been subject to violence, despite the fact that Algeria has been a signatory to CEDAW, with reservations to the treaty.

Table 1: Gender indicators	
Sociodemographic Indicators	
Life expectancy at birth (yrs male/female),2011	72/75
Sex ratio (women/100 men), 2011	98
No. of births to 1000 women (15-19 age),2011-2015	6.1
Total Fertility rates (births/woman),2012	2.9
Bodily Integrity and health	
Maternal Mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births), 2008	120
Child Mortality rate under 5 (per 1,000 live births, male/female), 2011	27
Contraceptive prevalence (% of married women using any method),2000-2008	61
People HIV infected (%female among adults (15+), 2009	<0.1
Literacy and educational attainment	
Youth Literacy rates (% ages 15-24, female/male),2011	89/94
Estimated adult literacy rates (% ages 15+ and over, female. Male),2011	64/81
School life expectancy (expected no. of years of formal schooling (female/male) 2009	14/13
Tertiary enrolment rates, gross enrolment ratio, (%female/male) 2010	37/25

Economic Participation	
Labor force participation rates (%female/male, ages 15 and above),2009	37/80
unemployment rate (%female/male),2000-2008	18/13
Political participation and rights	
Share of women in parliament, 2011	7
Share of women in ministerial level (% female), 2010	4
Source: Population Reference Bureau,2012 http://UNstats.UN.org ; www.prb.org	

(c) Literacy and Educational attainment –Youth literacy rates, Adult literacy rates, School life expectancy, Tertiary enrolment.

These set of indicators have been considered to be important as they reflect the presence of opportunity structures for women, providing them with options. Women in Algeria have made tremendous inroads as the high rates of literacy for youth indicate (89%), school life expectancy rates (14 years), and tertiary enrolment rates (37%). What is clear is that women have been successful in educational attainment, but have not been able to use these skills to improve their lives in other spheres.

(d) Economic Participation indicators – Labor force participation rates, unemployment rates.

While the literacy and educational attainment indicators reflect an acquisition of skills made by women, female labor force participation at 37% and unemployment rates at 18% tell us a different story. Women despite their educational attainment have not had the opportunity to enter the work force and become contributing members of society. This is further borne out, in Table 2. As the International Labor organization data on female unemployment rates reveal a near constant unemployment of or around 20%, (increase from 17% in 1991) from 1991 -2010. We also notice that in 2000, these rates were at 29.7%, related to the ongoing violence against women. These numbers indicate what Lazreg and others have argued that it is perhaps the social and cultural factors that continue to restrict women’s entry in the public arena.

Year	Sex	Age	Unemployment rate (%)
1991	MF	16-60	20.6
1991	M	16-60	21.7
1991	F	16-60	17
2000	MF	15+	29.8

2000	M	15+	29.8
2000	F	15+	29.7
2010	MF	15+	11.4
2010	M	15+	10
2010	F	15+	20
Source: ILO			

It is not that women are economically active at all, the urban centers of the country have seen an increased number of women enter in professional areas – as teachers, doctors, lawyers, and similar other positions. The proportion of women judges in Algeria stands at 13%, higher than many other developing nations ¹², according a United Nations publication.

- (e) Political Participation and rights – share of women in parliament, share of women in ministerial seats. Feminists and activists have argued about the empowering quality of political participation. Unfortunately, Algerian politics (like many other national politics) has shown scant regard for female participation in politics. At 7% share in parliament and 4% share at the ministerial level, women have not been able to make substantial progress. But, as Moghadum makes the point that international datasets only account for participation at the national level, while most women are more active at the local or community level.

Conclusion

This study began with an observation about the lack of support for Arab spring in Algeria. Especially noticeable was the absence of women’s voices. I have attempted to understand and explore the likely reasons behind this silence. An examination of the political and social structures revealed that the injustices meted out to women in the post-independence years had actually begun in the pre-independence years, when the French through their policy of divide and rule had successfully divided the society into French-speaking elites and Arabic-speaking underlings. Women with hardly any French speaking abilities were immediately rendered voiceless. Despite the fact that they had participated in the war for independence, the political ideology of secularism was swept aside to unify the nation under Islam. In the years immediately following independence, women were granted several rights, political and social, during President Ben Bella’s years.

But, this was short-lived, since after 1966, Algeria witnessed a resurgence in traditionalism in the form of Family Law. The Family law based on the Sharia was in direct contradiction to the Constitution of the land, which provided equal rights to all. The Family Law

¹² Progress of the World’s Women. <http://progress.unwomen.org/pdfs/EN-Report-Progress.pdf>

was finally passed in 1984, relegating women to traditional roles once again with no recourse for redressal. The government in an effort to maintain power played off different group against each other, and tried to avert any open confrontation with the fundamentalist groups. The 1990s saw the beginning of civil war unleashed by the GIA on the civilian population. During this decade killings and disappearances were commonplace. Violence against women was also at its worst. Women, who did not follow the traditional role or were seen without the veil were brutally treated and usually killed. By the end of the century, it seemed women had been effectively silenced. The country instead of progressing toward economic well-being was now regressing, despite its oil reserves. The food riots of 2010 and early 2011 indicate the sad plight of the average citizen.

It is important to note that through the years it is not as if women had become passive onlookers. Algerian feminists continued to fight for their rights at great risk to their lives. In fact there have been waves of activism, where women fought for their rights against great odds. The non-profit organization, Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML) has been playing an important part in this struggle for justice by providing them with a platform to voice their frustration. Several other organizations and human rights groups have continued to support the Algerian women's struggle. It would not be an overstatement to say that the Algerian woman's life has been undeniably changed due to the wars of colonization and the post-independence struggles.

This paper has been an attempt to understand the struggle for justice by the Algerian women, and to understand their absence from the public sphere. Justice and empowerment are the dual aspects of this struggle. The empowerment model was used to assess the current status of women. The literacy indicators indeed substantiated what other studies had documented – that the Algerian woman has used state resources to become educationally progressive, which had unfortunately not translated into work force participation or in becoming an important voice in the public sphere. The political gains made by women during the 1960s were partially lost in the decade of the 1990s. Though silenced due to social, cultural and personal circumstances, women have continued to express their frustrations.

The power elites continue to fight to retain control over national resource, and discontented youth express their frustrations through anti-regime protests. Within this context of poverty and turmoil, it is not hard to see why women have not been visible in any aspect of public discourse. According to observers, the Arab Spring did not impact Algeria due to the fact that the nation was not yet ready to deal with regime change, for the memory of the civil war remains fresh. Additionally, activists were not ready with a radical agenda for change, and the continued struggle between the power elites and their tight control over the citizenry deflected the winds of change. Within this context of general frustration and discontent, and violence against women it is small wonder that Algerian woman is still struggling to be heard from within. Perhaps, this situation may not last long as women are coming together and demanding justice in an ever growing strong voice. Feminist in Algeria have continued their demands for implementation of their constitutional rights, in spite of the stringent fundamentalist Islamist forces of control.

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