

Review of “Double-Edged Politics on Women’s Rights in the MENA Region” Edited by Hanane Darhour and Drude Dahlerup¹

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The questions of feminism, gender equality and women’s rights have never been more important than in the 21st century. Although women in the Western world have been openly struggling for equality since the inception of the suffragette movement, they still have to face many difficulties to break through the glass ceiling. It is undoubtedly true that now they enjoy most of the rights they originally fought for, but the phenomenon of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination at the workplaces has not yet completely disappeared. Compared to Europe, the situation of women in the Middle East and North Africa is significantly different. It is a well-known negative stereotype that Arabs live in a patriarchal society where the women are oppressed by the men and their lives are complicated by several restrictions. Is this true or only a prejudiced Western narrative? The *Double-Edged Politics on Women’s Rights in the MENA Region* finds answer to this question by scrutinising how the position of women has changed in MENA³ countries since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. It discusses the forms of women’s activism in the area, highlights women’s political opportunities after 2011, and analyses the relationship between feminism and Islam. Moreover, it also endeavours to identify the factors that have a decisive impact on the development of women’s rights in the above-mentioned region.

This book was published as the part of the *Gender and Politics series* in 2019 and contains monographs by international, world class scholars who provide the reader with new and detailed empirical research on the topic. The range of authors is very multiple. Not only are they from different countries, but they represent a variety of disciplines, including Comparative Politics, Women’s Studies, Political Science, Linguistics, Arts and Human Sciences, Social and Cultural Studies, Sociology, and Arabic-Islamic Studies. This work was edited by Drude Dahlerup and Hanane Darhour. While Dahlerup is a professor in Denmark and Sweden, Darhour is a lecturer in Morocco, who organises workshops and conferences on gender and politics. In addition to cutting-edge scientific articles, this study also includes distinct tables and figures, which were created based on statistics and surveys. Furthermore, the end of the introduction offers a short summary of each chapter. According to the editors, the primary aim of *Double-Edged Politics on Women’s Rights in the MENA Region* is to examine the changes in women’s position in the public sphere from a global perspective before, during and after the Arab Uprisings.

Apart from the introduction, the content of this book could be divided into four main parts and eleven smaller sections. Chapter 2 makes a theoretical contribution by

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³ MENA: Middle East and North Africa.



representing the changes in the so-called “Center” before and after the Arab Spring. It argues that four ideological trends shaped the “Center” in the pre-Spring period: the conservative, the modernist, the secular, and the Islamist. Previously there had been a constant competition between the elite supporters of these ideas, but after the Arab Uprisings it became possible for new, young activists and women from slums to make their voice heard too. On the other hand, in Fatima Sadiqi’s⁴ opinion, the rise of extremist movements in the region could create obstacles that might hinder them from achieving their goals.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between feminism and Islam by scrutinising whether the two are compatible with each other. When it comes to feminism, most people think only of the European and American perceptions of this ideology, which is laden with Western values. Therefore, being a feminist and a devout Muslim at the same time, might be considered as an oxymoron by some scholars. However, other academics argue that this kind of double commitment is a legitimate path for feminism. In his article, Ilyass Bouzghaia⁵ categorises Islam feminist movements into three different types: Islamist (traditional), secular (liberal/left in orientation), and Islamic feminist (progressive). While secular feminists are afraid of that Islam is not sufficient to fulfil gender equality requirements, Islamic feminists are sceptical about the possible Western hegemonic consequences of the CEDAW.⁶ Instead of making a firm statement regarding the question of Islam and feminism, the distinguished scholar just objectively compares the two contradictory positions.

Chapter 4 demonstrates the variations in common attitudes towards women’s economic, social, and political empowerment in North African countries based on the results of World Values Survey data. Ginger Feather⁷ studies these variations over time, between genders and among generations. She infers that the Maghreb states (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) are the most progressive in women’s empowerment in socioeconomic and political spheres in MENA region, but the situation of women in Egypt and Libya also seems very promising. Besides, she concludes that according to the surveys, democracy is not a necessary condition for female political development. On the contrary, it might even have a negative impact on gender equality, if it is pursued prematurely in conservative countries.

In Chapter 5, Saskia Glas⁸ and Niels Spierings⁹ are searching for the reasons why support for feminism has increased considerably in some Arab countries after the

⁴ Fatima Sadiqi is Professor of Linguistics and Gender Studies at the University of Fes, Morocco.

⁵ Ilyass Bouzghaia is a Doctoral Researcher at Sidi Mohamed ben Abdellah University, whose research focuses on women’s rights, gender studies, feminism, Islamic feminism and decolonial studies.

⁶ CEDAW: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

⁷ Ginger Feather completed her master’s degree at the University of Kansas in Arabic/Islamic Studies and continued her PhD at the same institution in Political Science.

⁸ Saskia Glas is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Radboud Social and Cultural Research at Radboud University. Her main research interests include women’s equality, politics and religiosity in the Arab Middle East and North Africa.

⁹ Niels Spierings is Assistant Professor in Sociology at Radboud Social and Cultural Research at Radboud University. His current projects focus on Islam and social attitudes in the Middle East and North Africa.

uprisings, but not in others. Within the framework of a comparative study, they also examine whether the support for Muslim feminism or secularist feminism has evolved to the same extent. Furthermore, they research how the anti-Westernism influences the public's opinion about the feminist ideology. Chapter 6 explains the role of women's activism in the democratisation process from a broader socio-political perspective. In addition, it presents the changes in the women's rights in the three Maghreb countries before and after the Arab Spring. Based on Moha Ennaji's¹⁰ research shows these changes were very successful, because in North African countries they were conducive to a significant gender gaps reduction in education, health, and employment.

Chapter 7 analyses how political opportunity structures (POS) shape Islamist women's political participation in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (JDP), while also scrutinising how Islamist women can reshape their political opportunities by using different strategies. Moreover, it discusses the history and role of the Muslim Sisterhood in Egypt. Chapter 8 compares the situation of women in the Maghreb and the Middle East countries, regarding the question of gender equality, gender discrimination, political participation, and available career paths. It gives a reader an insight into the legal system of some Arabic states. While Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco are exceptional in the sense that their constitutions are one of those very few state documents in the world, which use both masculine and feminine pronouns, the constitution of Saudi Arabia does not make any reference to provisions on equality. Another problem is that in countries where equality rights appear in the constitution, women are often mentioned only alongside children, as if they too were minors, or second-class citizens.

Chapter 9 examines the structure of legislative committees in Jordan based on aspects of women's membership, and the horizontal and vertical segregation of women within governmental institutions. In their article Marwa Shalaby¹¹ and Laila Elimam¹² try to prove two hypotheses: First, that horizontal segregation has resulted in women legislators in the Jordanian parliament being underrepresented in committees dealing with general freedom - and human rights, investment, financial and economic issues - and concentrated in committees closer to traditional gender roles; and second, that vertical segregation has resulted in few women gaining access to leadership positions.

Chapter 10 provides in-depth research of the implementation and intersectional effects of the gender and youth quotas in Tunisia, and it endeavours to analyse whether these quotas have a positive or negative effect in the long-term. Finally, Chapter 11 presents the special reserved seats system in Morocco, which tries to ensure democratization and strengthening of women's rights. It examines the effectiveness of quota provision on women's empowerment and democratic development. It addresses

¹⁰ Moha Ennaji is Professor of Social and Cultural Studies at the University of Fes in Morocco, and he is the founding president of the International Institute for Languages and Cultures.

¹¹ Marwa Shalaby is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin.

¹² Laila Elimam is a Political Science Researcher.



the negative side effects of the quota system, the problem of proxy women and de-democratization process. Furthermore, it also discusses the marginalisation of women in the Moroccan parliament.

The *Double-Edged Politics on Women's Rights in the MENA Region* has many strengths. For instance, it includes several scientific high-quality articles from interdisciplinary scholars, which make the book very diverse and interesting. All studies are well-organised, and logically structured. Some chapters focus on specific countries, while others compare several MENA countries. The authors explain how the changes after the Arab Spring altered the opportunity structures and made it possible for women to increase their political representation and public activities. Nonetheless, at the same time they also show examples of how men still discriminate and marginalise women. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the politics in the MENA region on women's rights can be characterised as double-edged.

Among the few weaknesses of the book, it should be mentioned that the researchers sometimes write in a very complicated style, and they do not explain some events or expressions that are not necessarily evident for the wider audience. In addition, some chapters are less exciting than the others. In my opinion, a short general description of the antecedents and episodes of the Arab Uprisings could have greatly facilitated the historical contextualization of the case studies and allowed the readers to gain a better understanding of the reasons why feminism experienced a hitherto unparalleled flourishing after 2011 in the Arab world.

In conclusion, the biggest moral of this book is that, when assessing the situation of women in the Arab countries, we cannot treat the whole MENA region as a homogenous entity. These research papers dispel typical Western prejudices in many cases, but they also shed objective light on how women's rights can still be improved in the region. Even though I have found the book very interesting, I would rather recommend it to scholars and researchers of gender studies, sociology, or history, because of its difficult language style.