

The Report on Women's lives and agency in the MENAT Region – between political activism and realism

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Women's empowerment, which was identified specifically by the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) Arab Human Development Report of 2002 (Creating Opportunities for Future Generations) and the UNDP's Arab Human Development Report of 2003 (Building a Knowledge Society) as one of the deficits of the MENA region, poses serious threat to human development in the Arab world. According to this report, women of the MENA region have been playing a minor role in economic and political life. Some countries of the MENA still have some reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The Arab Spring in the region fuelled aspirations for democratization and the advancement of women's roles in society. However, subsequent events that resulted in civil wars, failed states, terrorism, and proxy wars left human rights development efforts and their proponents - activists in the region - fighting for more rights and a place in their countries alone.

Participants of two-days workshop organized by Kreisky Forum on "Women's lives and agency in the MENAT Region- between political activism and realism" emphasized the current challenges they face in their countries as well as their expectations for more involvement of women in negotiations, peace-building efforts in general.

The participants pointed the need for effective implementation of Universal Declaration of Human Rights by taking all necessary measures. They also expressed their dissatisfaction with Western countries' support for Israel. All participants condemned Israel's strikes on civilians ignoring Palestinians' rights to live since the Israeli-Hamas war. According to the participants, Israel is committing war crimes.

Some of the participants told that they felt abandoned and betrayed by the West. Since the Israeli-Hamas War, some participants residing in western nations have expressed feeling "out of place" as a result of the prohibition of pro-Palestine rallies in certain European countries. This prohibition is described as a restriction on freedom of expression.

They question universality of human rights due to double standardization of values. They reiterated that universal human rights should not be interpreted differently and should be applied to everyone.

Also, the war should be honourable when the war is unavoidable. The option to resume negotiations should always be available to put an end to hostilities. This is crucial for breaking the vicious cycle of endless wars in the region.

The Israeli-Hamas war, which took place recently, added to existing endless wars in the MENA region. This war has brought to light the inherent challenge in distinguishing between terrorists and freedom fighters, as a result of divergent perspectives on these conceptual frameworks. This war also demonstrated that without freedom and justice, there could be neither stability nor peace.

The participants expressed their concerns on the shortcomings of international institutions, particularly highlighting the United Nations Security Council's inability to pass a resolution aimed at resolving the war in Gaza and other ongoing wars of the region. This failure was attributed to the veto power held by some permanent member states of the Security Council.

The participants from the MENAT region also highlighted the challenges and difficulties women have experienced in private and public life. Participants emphasized how hard it is to be a journalist and an activist in polarized society in which social media targets women journalists and activists.

According to some participants, the UN Women strategy to resolving challenges in the MENA area by employing a single template for all does not produce the desired results. There is no "one size fits all model" that can be applied to each country in the region because each country has its own set of problems, conditions, and dynamics. In other words, each country has its own distinct characteristics.

Although UNSC Resolution 1325 addresses the impact of war on women and the importance of women's full and equal participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction, the participants from the region

highlights the underrepresentation of women at the negotiation table. Participants emphasized women should be heart of national dialogue.

Although each voice should have right to be heard, it is not possible to see women participation in social life and political life at the expected level that might have chance to impact on their region's future. Some participants emphasized that all political parties that disagree on everything agree on exclusion of women in political participation.

Despite differences in challenges they face, there are also commonalities that allow for cooperative approaches. The challenges faced by women activists in the MENAT are largely consistent with those encountered elsewhere, owing to patriarchal norms, structural obstacles, and security concerns.

Participants from certain MENA countries have difficulty obtaining visas. They have difficulty traveling internationally. Their funding issues affect their programs and initiatives pertaining to human rights.

Participants also mentioned the difficulty and challenges in to be incorporated to the initiatives and programs of UN Women and highlighted discrimination that exists in the funding of women-led initiatives originating from the MENA region. In this context, they mentioned the western countries' discriminatory treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. Due to the rise of xenophobia, women activists in exile in western countries face integration difficulties in the countries where they are hosted.

Depoliticizing women and excluding them from the negotiating table remain valid concerns in the MENA region. Following the Arab Spring's lack of success in implementing legal reforms to promote democracy in the region, activists in certain MENA countries found themselves marginalized, powerless, and totally lost. They are also seen as responsible of current economic crisis and problems in their respective countries.

The situation in the MENAT region has gotten worse as compared to the UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports from 2002 and 2003. The economic crisis and recession, which originated from the inability of neoliberal economic policies to meet demands, were further

intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, geopolitical tensions, the Ukraine War, and the consequential fluctuations in energy, food, and commodity prices.

The presence of economic stagnation has led to the emergence of economic nationalism, xenophobia, and polarization of societies. Democratic backsliding and illiberal democracy have become new trends in global politics. International organizations, such as the United Nations, have experienced a progressive decline in their effectiveness due to inherent structural deficiencies that impede its ability to make timely decisions aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts. The current transitional phase has arisen due to the erosion of norms and institutions within the framework of the rules-based liberal international order.

The current security landscape bears resemblance to the pre-World War II era. Antonio Gramsci described the world in transition before the World War II with these sentences: “the old war is dying, and the new world is struggling to be born; now is the time of monsters.” With these words, Gramsci was symbolizing the period of change, transition and uncertainties. The current rules based liberal international order that was established after the WWII is in decline, a new one is struggling to be born. We are facing with challenges that lead us to feel “collective helplessness” due to emergence of revisionist powers and inability an/or reluctance of present institutions and the leader of this rules-based liberal international order to resolve these challenges.

Recommendation

The European Union and the United States launched initiatives and projects to advance women’s rights and the role and status of women in MENA countries during the 2000s. Certain initiatives had an additional goal to the resolution of disputes between rival factions in the MENA region, in addition to the empowerment of women.

For instance, The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Project “Role of Women in Economic Life” between 2006-2008 aimed to enhance role of and involvement of public governmental and non-governmental institutions in the effort to expand opportunities for women’s economic participation in the Mediterranean Partner Countries, strengthened the capacity Israeli and Palestinian women entrepreneurs. The aim of this program was to build trust between Israelis and Arabs, strengthen the capacity for conflict resolution, empower marginalized parties and

increase regional cooperation in order to have a direct impact on peoples' every day lives including practical activities to promote communication and understanding.

The participation of women in political life is crucial for advancing democracy, good governance, transparency and equal citizenship. All initiatives launched prior to Arab Spring in the region contributed to change in laws in some MENA countries. Women of the region became the agents that shape the region.

Prior to the Arab Spring, Turkey actively assumed a role in Western projects and hosted several conferences related to women's rights. As a part of the EU-led Barcelona Process, the First Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on "Strengthening the Role of Women in Society" was held in Istanbul in November 2006 in order to make possible equal participation of women and men in all spheres of life, which is accepted as one of the essential elements of democracy. The expectation was to fully and effectively implementation of the CEDAW by the countries of the MENA.

Governments of Turkey, Italy and Yemen, in partnership with their civil society organizations -- namely, No Peace Without Justice, The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and the Human rights Information and Training Center became part of the Democracy Assistance Dialogue of the United States -led Broader Middle East and North Africa, which set up in order to support and encourage reform of democracy within the region by fostering constructive dialogue between governments and members of civil society. Turkey, as a co-sponsor of Democracy Assistance Dialogue, focused on advancing dialogue and reform in the areas of empowerment of women. Significant activities have taken place with the sponsorship of Turkish government of Turkey emphasizing women in public life. Themes, which were identified as priorities, were participation of women in public life and political pluralism and electoral processes for the first year of DAD activities. A civil society workshop with theme "the participation of women in public life" and a symposium with theme "empowering women in public life and democratic development in the BMENA" and "Gender Equality and Political Participation" were organized in Istanbul by TESEV in 2005 and 2006.

The BMENA Gender Institute, which facilitates and supports review of the full and effective implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in the countries of the region, was launched by Turkish NGOs, the Global Political

Trends and TESEV in 2009. The idea of the project was solidified within the framework of Forum for the Future a center piece of BMENA Partnership.

Within the framework of DAD, an intergovernmental Conference on “Empowering Women in Public Life” was held in Ankara in 2006 in order to review the situation in the MENA region and to share experiences on best practise achieved on national basis with a view to empowering women in public life.

As a part of its role with regards to women empowerment in the BMENA region, Turkey hosted the first Ministerial Conference of the Organization of the Islamic Conference on the Women’s Role in the development of OIC member states in Turkey in 2006.

In 2009, a Parliamentary Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women was established for the first time. Turkey became the first country to ratify the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (CAHVIO), the Istanbul Convention, in 2012.

It is uncertain how these projects and programs will be able to fulfill their promises given the current state of affairs in the region. The emerging environment that puts security above liberties following the Arab Spring cause the viability of various projects and programs pertaining to women's rights and empowerment to lag behind.

In Turkish case, the establishment of Turkish democracy was rooted in the improvement of women’s legal conditions. The prospect of EU membership accelerated already existing efforts of the women’s movements in Turkey with respect to improvement of women rights. In 2004, Article 10 of the Constitution was amended. Accordingly, the state was made responsible for ensuring that men and women are treated equally.

In line with Turkey’s possible EU membership process, Turkish women’s organizations considerably broadened their influence. They benefitted from the collaboration of other European feminist NGOs. Therefore, the Europeanization process has had considerable influence on the expansion of women’s rights through the Turkish legal system in its recent history.

When the EU membership prospect steadily vanished as a result of Turco-sceptic EU leaders proposing Turkey a privileged relationship rather than full EU membership, the EU lost political influence over Turkey's transition.

In light of Turkey's diminishing prospects for EU membership and the consequent limited impact of the EU on Turkey's political changes, particularly in relation to women's rights, Turkey has experienced a growing sense of estrangement from the EU. This has been further exacerbated by the EU's policy of excluding Turkey from projects under its leadership. Without a credible prospect of EU membership, the European Union will lack the necessary influence over Turkey to facilitate transformation and anticipate any meaningful reform process.

The disappointment experienced by Turkey in relation to its potential membership in the European Union has had a detrimental effect on the endeavours to enhance the position of women. Turkey, which was the initial signatory of the Istanbul Convention, formally referred to as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, signed in 2011, has become the first country to withdraw from the convention on March 20, 2021.

Despite slowing down in reforms process as a part of its Europeanization, Turkey's 11th National Development Plan 2019-2023 contains goals and measures to empower women, prevent discrimination against them and ensure that women have equal access to the rights, opportunities and facilities available to men.

However, de-Europeanization process occurred since then slowed down reform process and left reformist elite in Turkey without a cause to defend. Women's roles and status have always been a fundamental pillar for the construction of different political projects in Turkey. Revitalizing the relations between the EU and Turkey, with a specific emphasis on fostering cooperation in various areas such as modernizing the Customs Union agreement and promoting women's empowerment in the economic sphere, could potentially facilitate the pursuit of a credible EU membership for Turkey. This approach may serve as a catalyst for the reform process and offer a motivation for reform-minded individuals in Turkey to advocate for change.

The stability and expansion of women's rights remain a determining factor in assessing the consolidation of democracy. Thus, reviving Turkey-EU relationship has the potential to

generate a constructive transformation in the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey (MENAT) region, which is currently in dire need of such change. This might facilitate the implementation of women empowerment projects and, notably, enable the development of a distinct regional initiative within this region.

The new impetus might be provided establishing a Council of the Middle East and North Africa (CoMENA) similar to Council of Europe. The calls for human rights standards to protect citizens from abuses by their governments gained enormous importance after the WWII. The Council of Europe was established to provide reconciliation among the people of Europe that would prevent the re-emergence of a conflict, as well as to protect individuals in Europe by establishing common institutions, standards, and agreements.

The developments in the MENA region have already showed the necessity to provide human security in the region. More importantly, the negative impacts of developments on human security in the MENA and the increasing and unavoidable effect of these developments on the European continent make the establishment of such an organization vital. The MENA region needs urgent help and direction towards human rights rather than radicalization and extremism that has considerable impacts on Islamophobia and xenophobia in Europe.

The establishment of a CoMENA, might ease the path towards conciliatory approaches, which is urgently needed in the region. Maybe the next step that Turkey and the EU should take is to provide guidance the countries of the MENA to launch the establishment of a CoMENA. CoMENA can give the countries of the region a destination for both their governments, expected to meet human rights standards, and their citizens, to get a second chance to demand what they deserve as human beings.

UN Member States affirmed the universal value of human security in General Assembly resolution 66/290, adopted in 2012. Accordingly, they agree “that human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.”

The Council of Europe has helped European countries to provide human security in the European continent for years. Maybe it is time to consider to establish similar institution for the MENA region.