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Social Democratic Women of the Arab Spring

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Ten years ago, there was a wave of optimism known as the Arab Spring. Change was coming to the region following the tragic death in Tunisia of Mohammed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 which led to a wave of protests throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Women played a crucial role in the protests. We interviewed four social democratic women activists from some of the countries of the Arab Spring. Each of them describes how under the auspices of the Arab Spring they were able to put women's rights on top of the agenda. How much of the changes were these women activists able to sustain?

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Introduction

Ten years ago, there was a wave of optimism known as the Arab Spring. Change was coming to the region following the tragic death in Tunisia of Mohammed Bouazizi¹ on 17 December 2010 which led to a wave of protests throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Although the basis of these protests was similar such as corruption, authoritarianism, unemployment and poverty, each country took its own path and outcomes of the uprisings varied widely. For instance, in Tunisia demonstrations led to the ousting of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who had been Tunisia's President since 1987; this resulted in the first free elections in October 2011. Inspired by Tunisia, many Egyptians took to the streets in January 2011 calling for an end to President Hosni Mubarak's regime. Although Mubarak held on initially through repressive measures, the power of the protests led him to resign in February, handing over to a military council for a six-month period to organise free elections. These took place between November 2011 and January 2012. Morocco saw the formation of the 20 February Movement. Led by predominately young activists this called for democratic, constitutional and political reforms. On 9 March 2011 King Mohammed VI promised comprehensive constitutional reform and following continuous protests elections were held in November 2011. Protests also broke out in Lebanon. These mainly called for political reform especially against confessionalism.

With a revolutionary wave of protest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region there was hope, and the opportunity to push open the window for democratic change and free and fair elections. This fleeting window for change was grabbed enthusiastically by progressive forces. Activists rose to the occasion, openly organising peaceful protests and campaigns. This included women activists who were often at the forefront of the populist movements but who, following changes, found that their status was threatened or undermined. For instance, women were often insufficiently represented in transitional government arrangements and processes, politically marginalised in their civil society organisations and side-lined even in progressive political parties. The rise of Islamist parties in some countries led to more regressive social agendas.

This was the case for some women from Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon and Morocco. These women all worked closely together having been connected by the Labour Party through its Westminster Foundation for Democracy² (WFD) work to establish Tha'era³, a regional network to share experiences, address common challenges and importantly provide a safe space for conversations. This network came into being because there was a realisation early on that it was important to connect women, not only within the region, but also with women elsewhere who had been through similar transitions. The new network linked the CEE Gender Network⁴, especially the experience of Sonja Lokar, and experts from the Labour Women's Network⁵, including Nan Sloane⁶, who helped shape the formation of Tha'era. Together they spoke of the need for regional, European and global co-operation between women activists, as well as for allies and solidarity networks for women, for joint clear and focussed national and regional strategies to drive change, and, ultimately, for them to mobilise and deliver plans at the grassroots.

¹ [Mohamed Bouazizi: memories of a Tunisian martyr - BBC News](#)

² [The Labour Party's Westminster Foundation for Democracy Programme \(labourwfd.org.uk\)](#)

³ [Tha'era – The Arab Women's Network for Parity and Solidarity \(thaera.org\)](#)

⁴ [CEE Gender Network - The Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues](#)

⁵ [Labour Women's Network \(lwn.org.uk\)](#)

⁶ [About Me | NAN SLOANE](#)

Our previous experience meant there was immediate recognition that in times of tectonic political changes within a nation, or region, the opportunity to change the gender power balance opens. Every election would be an opening of the window of opportunity. Every change of constitutional or electoral code is such a window. Yet the window which opens suddenly can close down very quickly again, waiting perhaps for another decade for another opportunity. Yet, as longstanding democracy activists we know that a long-term vision is crucial. The Arab Spring was just the beginning of the democratic change but the creation of sustainable social democratic women's movements and of course political parties in the MENA region must be seen as a long-term project.

Now in the 10 years of the Arab Spring what do these women feel were the opportunities presented by the Arab Spring? How did they utilise them? What has happened for them/their network? How important for them was the possibility to directly exchange experiences with other women activists from the social democratic movement? Having opened, did the window close again for them? What are their stories? What are their learnings?

We interviewed four social democratic women activists from some of the countries of the Arab Spring – Tunisia, arguably where it all started (some people think the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon was when the seed was planted), Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco. Each of them describes how under the auspices of the Arab Spring they were able to put women's rights on top of the agenda and in some cases, like Tunisia, successfully enshrine equality for women in the new Constitution, and in others, like Egypt, for the first time organise without fear of persecution (although since then it has reversed to a repressive regime once more).

How much of the changes were these women activists able to sustain? We asked Fatemah Khafagy (Egypt), Lobna Jeribi (Tunisia), Khatoun Haidar (Lebanon) and Laila Amili (Morocco), each bringing their own unique experience of the Arab Spring. Each of these exceptional women have persevered under varied political seasons; from dictatorship, to transition, to a fragile democracy and back to repression, whilst for some any gains are now a distant memory as they struggle to survive.

Here are their stories in their words.

Egypt – Fatemah Khafagy

Chair, Tha'era



Egyptian women played a major role during the revolution side by side with men. They demonstrated in the main squares of Egypt, they spent the nights on streets to make sure that the revolution will not be hijacked or stopped, they nursed the wounded, lamented the dead, chanted and danced when they became victorious. They realized as a result of the revolution that they would have to be organized in civil society organizations, in coalitions, political parties, workers' unions and professional syndicates to act in solidarity and make sure that Egypt would be transiting into a democratic era. The number of women who participated in these organizations and forums greatly increased as a result of the 2011 revolution.

The Arab Spring in Egypt opened up several opportunities at the time of the revolution and for few years thereafter. More women and girls became aware of their rights especially their right to participate in public life. Many also started looking at the private domain and how their rights are violated when they have to surrender to a specific dress code that covers their bodies, to female genital mutilation and to their mobility restrictions. As a result of the spike in violence exercised against women and girls during the eighteen days of the revolution in Tahrir Square and other public places all over Egypt (including rape exercised to frighten and push away women and girls from the public space), strong movements including youth and women and men were organized to call for combating all forms of violence against women and girls.

In February, a month after the revolution, 13 active feminist civil society organisations (CSOs) in Egypt including my NGO⁷, the Alliance of Arab Women⁸, formed a coalition to make sure women shaped Egypt's transition along with men. We expressed our concern to both the Military Council and to the Prime Minister that women's participation in decision making processes and positions has been minimized. We wrote several statements, several of which criticized Egypt for having no official women's machinery to defend women's rights in participating in building a democratic Egypt. The National Council for Women, formerly headed by the wife of the ex-President, Hosni Mubarak, was frozen since the revolution and had no power. We as the coalition of feminist NGOs called for structural change of the National Council of Women considering it as illegitimate due to its links to the former President and his National Democratic Party. We asked that it be replaced by a transitional council of women's rights experts "to represent Egyptian women at the local, Arab and international levels and ensure women's participation in shaping the political life during that period". The coalition reiterated these demands in an open letter to Prime Minister Essam Sharif, adding calls for

⁷ Non-governmental organisation

⁸ <http://theallianceforarabwoman.org>

the dissolution of State Security, cleansing of police forces and a 30% quota for women in parliament.

In June, the Alliance for Arab Women, a feminist NGO established late in the 1980's which I am a founding member and sit on the board convened a conference of 3,000 women and men from all over Egypt to announce a charter which Egyptian women drafted to send to the Military Council and the Cabinet. The charter of Egyptian Women: Partners in the Revolution and in Building Democratic Egypt⁹ included women's demands concerning their political/civil, and social/economic rights. It called for free representation of women in public life, amendments of discriminatory legislations and the fair and positive image of women in Egyptian media.

In October 2011, a new women's federation was registered in Egypt representing hundreds of women's NGOs from all governorates. They put into practise their first plan of mobilizing four million women to vote in the parliamentary elections in November 2011.

During the 18 days of the revolution and during our discussions on the political future of Egypt, we, groups of women and men from different CSO's, established political parties, academics and individuals who cared about the future of Egypt decided to form a new political party. After many discussions the "People's Socialist Alliance"¹⁰ was formed. We had to get 6,000 signed applications from Cairo and 22 governorates of Egypt in order to be able to register the party legally. We succeeded and started working as a legal political party that had the objective of achieving the goals of the revolution which all Egyptian people had called for, Freedom, Justice, and Human Dignity.

What has happened since?

In early 2013, unfortunately the so called democratic procedural principle (results of elections when votes are bought) had brought the Muslim Brotherhood into office. In May 2013, some youth liberal groups launched a campaign called "Tamarod" (Rebellion)¹¹, which gathered signatures for a (constitutionally illegal) recall of the then President. Mass protests for and against the President followed, and on 3 July 2013, the Military removed the President from power¹². Once again, the Generals were in charge, and they started retaliating against both democracy activists and the members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Despite this we continued with the Coalition of Feminist CSOs to ensure that women's rights in all spheres were included in the new constitution of 2014. We managed to lobby and succeeded in having 5 women appointed alongside the 45 men in the committee assigned to write the new constitution. We managed to guarantee women's rights in the constitution and our political party grew stronger, attracting more members – men, women and young people. However, in 2014 the coalition was dissolved and each CSO started working alone. The Alliance for Arab Women, the CSO I belonged to, started implementing a programme to support women to run as candidates in parliamentary and local elections and to have collaboration with women parliamentarians in order to be able to change all gender discriminatory laws.

For the party, well it struggled to sustain in the midst of a political and security situation that works against all opposition parties. The new political parties¹³ law banned all new parties from securing funds from inside and outside Egypt in order to minimize their activities. Several

⁹ Charter [charteregyptianwomenenpdf.pdf \(unwomen.org\)](#)

¹⁰ People's Socialist Alliance [Socialist Popular Alliance - Political Parties - Elections 2011 - Ahram Online](#)

¹¹ Tamarod [movement to oust Morsi gains ground in Egypt - Index on Censorship Index on Censorship](#)

¹² President Morsi removed from power [Egypt's Mohammed Morsi: A turbulent presidency cut short - BBC News](#)

¹³ Political Parties Law [Egypt's New Parliamentary Election Law: Back to the Future | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](#)

youth members were also at risk of being imprisoned on false accusations of threatening national security.

Additionally, the new electoral law did not provide a level playing field for newly established political parties to have women heading their lists. Stipulating in the law that one woman should be put in every list without identifying where her position in the list should be, was unlikely to result in a considerable number of women in the parliament. The Arab Alliance for Women is still active having many programmes assisting women candidates to run into both parliamentary and local elections.

Shaimaa El Sabbagh¹⁴ an active party member of the People's Socialist Alliance and member of Tha'era was killed in January 2015 when she with a few party leaders were celebrating the Egyptian revolution by carrying flowers and heading to Tahrir Square. After several years and with the testimonies of many who were in Cairo near the place where Shaimaa was shot by a policeman, and videoed the scene, the policeman was sentenced to 7 years imprisonment on murder.¹⁵

How important was it for you to directly exchange experiences with other women activists?

When I was able as a founding member of the Popular Socialist Party to join a group of women political parties' members from socialist and social democratic parties, I was very happy to have a great opportunity to learn from each other and to build solidarity among us in order to play a greater role inside our parties and in our countries. We called our network 'Tha'era' because all of us came from countries that had revolutions or others who aspired to change their countries' regimes.

The CEE Network encouraged us to form this regional network, and this was possible with the support of the Labour Party, Westminster Foundation for Democracy which brought everyone together and provided the space for discussions. The Labour Party/WFD and the CEE Network for Gender Issues got it right about how to go about to facilitate the formation of a functional network like ours. It was a good example of how the Westminster Foundation was able to fund projects that emanate from the needs of the beneficiaries.

The exchange of experiences of other countries and groups which the Labour Party made possible to members of Tha'era was quite a learning experience. Tha'era established a strong working relationship with activists from the Western Balkans through the CEE Network for Gender Issues. Some of the countries of the CEE Network had already experienced people's revolutions which greatly benefited Tha'era members in learning many lessons; providing us with knowledge on how to motivate and sustain women's movements and their political and social participation in shaping our parties and our countries.

Having opened in 2011, did the door close again for you in the last 10 years?

The situation of human and civil rights in Egypt is dramatically poor and the situation of opposition political parties and CSO's is continuously threatened. As said by many "The Arab Spring in Egypt was short-lived". However, my party is still struggling to exist and have a voice. Under an emergency law, political parties are not allowed to hold any meetings outside

¹⁴ Shaimaa El Sabbagh [The Story Behind the Photo of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh's Dying Moments | Time](#)

¹⁵ Policeman jailed over death of activist [Egypt policeman jailed over death of activist Shaimaa al-Sabbagh - BBC News](#) and conviction overturned [Egyptian court overturns police officer's conviction for killing female protester | Egypt | The Guardian](#)

their premises which limit the activities of the parties and their interaction with the people. However, in view of the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic has made it possible to meet virtually and discuss more freely than in in-person meetings. The party issues statements which are widespread over the social media and holds regular webinars to discuss major issues concerning the country.

CSO's including women's rights organizations are strictly scrutinized by the government. However, other doors opened such as the ability to work as CSO's and members of political parties in regional networks. The link with what is happening globally to put a new global feminist agenda has encouraged the regional networks to work together and to arrive at a regional feminist agenda to be included in the global one.

The women's movement continues to grow stronger as a reaction to attempts to impose some discriminatory laws such as the Family Law. In response to this many women's groups have worked virtually together to object on a draft family law and managed to have the draft withdrawn from the Parliament.

Young women have managed to effectively utilize the social media and worked together to uncover sexual assault incidences and crimes happening to young women in Egypt, even those that happened several years ago. There are several groups now like #MeToo that encourage other young women who experienced sexual assault to bring their complaints into the open. The taboo of not discussing openly such crimes has been broken during the past few years.

What are your learnings?

The continued question that remains controversial concerning the January 2011 Egyptian Revolution is: was it a success or failure? It is almost impossible to decide something along the boundaries of 'success' and 'failure'. What can be ascertained, however, is the fact that a change has occurred with regards to knowledge about what are human rights and also attitudes towards gender roles and women's rights.

The January 2011 Egyptian Revolution brought with it a window of opportunity to promote both political and social change, coupled with the era of technology and the internet facilitating contacts, exchanges and experiences both among political activists and among feminist activists.

Whilst repression continues many Egyptians feel that the revolution has failed. However, when looking at history of other similar revolutions, revolutions take many years to achieve their goals. Revolutions, unlike coups d'état do not bring about equitable just political changes on the spot. It can change mindsets, but this takes years. Revolutions should be looked at as the beginning and not the end. The slogan of my party is true "The Revolution continues".

Tunisia – Lobna Jeribi

Chair, Solidar Tunisia



The Arab Spring represented a chance to participate in public and political life, which was not possible under a dictatorship. When I was elected in 2011, the Arab Spring represented a hope to respond not only to the aspirations of rights and freedoms but also to social and economic rights. The Arab Spring represented hope for all citizens to be able to actively be part of political and civic life.

The revolution enabled Tunisia to adopt a new constitution in 2014¹⁶, to hold democratic elections for the first time, and to enshrine genuine freedom of expression and association. However, whilst progress at the political level was clear, it had not been accompanied by similar progress at the economic and social welfare levels. On the contrary, the structural problems that young people raised during the 2011 revolution of dignity, unemployment, and regional disparities, have worsened over the past decade. This alongside the inequalities encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, makes the situation "dangerous" even according to the representatives of the current government, a danger that could even impair the democratic transition in Tunisia.

However, no one can deny that the Arab Spring has brought irreversible gains: freedom of expression and association, transparency, democracy and the political transition that has already taken place.

For example in Tunisia, the possibility of having the law of parity in the electoral law¹⁷ (the law of elections of local authorities) enabled parity after a long struggle by CSOs and women's associations. Now 26% (57 of 217) seats in the Assembly of People's Representatives are held by women and up to 47% of local council positions. Tunisia has also passed the Anti-Violence Act¹⁸, which is a pioneering law, but despite the fact that it is very advanced, it is not yet fully implemented.

For me personally it was thanks to the Parity Act in 2011 that I was elected to the Assembly of People's Representatives. However, the difficulty of implementing constitutional principles in the legislative process prompted me in 2014 to create and found the NGO, SolidarTunisia¹⁹, a think-tank, which supports the parliament in strengthening the constitutional principles of freedom, equality and dignity. It is a kind of continuity in ensuring that constitutional principles are implemented in law. Solidar has introduced a gender approach in the socio-economic law

¹⁶ [2014.01.26 - final constitution english idea final.pdf \(constitutionnet.org\)](#)

¹⁷ [Tunisia on Board with Women's Rights | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#)

¹⁸ [Tunisia passes historic law to end violence against women and girls | UN Women – Headquarters](#)

¹⁹ <https://www.solidar-tunisie.org/>

(advocacy for the application of the gender approach in financial law, budget and also development plans).

What has happened as a result?

I participated as a Vice-President in the Commission on the Preamble, the Fundamental Principles and the Revision of the Constitution²⁰, in which we worked together with civil society to achieve equality for women. Article 46 of the Constitution establishes equality and parity in elected bodies and positions the state as a guarantor of the fight against violence against women. This Commission won the Noble Peace prize²¹.

However, the party that I joined in 2011, the Forum for Liberty and Social Justice²² lost the election in 2014 and was the victim of the bipolarization of the political scene that almost repelled all the centralist parties. In 2015, I left all my political roles and responsibilities to engage with civil society and support the process of democratic transition through Solidar.

Today, Solidar has become an important player for policy makers in the policy analysis and advocacy for constitutional principles.

How important was it for you to directly exchange the experiences with other women activists?

When I was member of the party, I was head of the international department and representing the party at international level. I participated in international networks such as the Arab Social Democratic Forum²³, the Tha'era Forum and other women's forums and international women's networks.

I had the opportunity to participate in the CEE Gender Network and it was useful to exchange experiences and to build up synergy between these networks to reinforce advocacy for women's rights.

Having opened in 2011, did the door close again for you in the last 10 years?

Hopefully, the doors are always open for young people and women to engage and participate in the building of the democratic transition, whether from civil society or from the political position.

For me, I was honored in 2020 to be part of the government; having huge responsibility, enhancing national reform and national projects (I was Minister in charge of National Projects and Reforms).

What are your learnings?

The challenge of democracy in the Arab region is to make our institutions more efficient to improve public services and to improve regional development. In order to build up strong and resilient institution and state of law, we need to make deep transformation and structural reforms at all levels.

²⁰ [Lobna Jeribi \(abf.ba\)](http://abf.ba)

²¹ [The Nobel Peace Prize 2015 - Press release \(nobelprize.org\)](https://www.nobelprize.org/press-releases/2015/10/01/2015-nobel-peace-prize)

²² [Bloc \(ettakatol.org\)](http://ettakatol.org)

²³ [ABOUT | Arab Social Democratic Forum \(arabsocialdemocrats.org\)](http://arabsocialdemocrats.org)

When our democracies are able to improve the day-to-day lives of citizens and when confidence between citizens and the state is restored, then we can consider that we met our challenges. But for now, the road is still exceptionally long and, unfortunately, the crisis of confidence has become endemic. Yet, the response to COVID-19, despite its negative health and socio-economic aspects, can generate a turning point and a momentum for transformation to be seized, to build back better.

Lebanon – Khatoun Haidar

Founder of the Lebanese Association for Societal Synergy



The Arab Spring is a broad description. During the first stage which can be defined as the 'uprising' there is a certain unity of specifics that we see in all countries touched by what was later called the 'Arab Spring'. Women were among the first wave that took to the streets— some with their children – to demand change. They came from all social classes, they participated side-by-side with their fellow male protestors creating a feeling of equality and lessened the gender differences. They made their voice heard.

Women were an integral part of the revolutionary efforts. Yet women did not escape the human cost of this uprising. During police repression they were beaten, sometimes raped by police and pro-regime thugs after demonstrations. Scores of women across the region were abducted, detained, or just disappeared.

As events developed the narrative changed dramatically from one country to another. In some, change came with newly elected governments, in others it was civil war and mayhem. The role of women differed from one country to another. True they continued to be part of the process of change, yet their scope for participation did not seem to be a priority for revolutionary forces. Overall, we can say that the 'gains' for women in terms of gender roles was mostly lost in the post-revolutions period. Yet the Arab Spring empowered women to make better use of their capacity and their full potential to contribute to change. Longer-term, for this to be sustainable, the changes should develop alongside practical strategies to empower women and build their leadership capacity.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Arab countries are now experiencing different stages of transitional processes taking on different forms in each country. Generally, internationally sponsored dialogue is established, constitutions are drafted, elections are held, and interim governments are formed. The transitional process needs to be balanced on the gender level. It is a window of opportunity for women to challenge gender discrimination and gender stereotyping.

The media has been a major player in challenging entrenched gendered practices in deep-rooted structures that are not easily changed. For the last eight years, I personally and Synergy²⁴ have been engaged in action which reached hundreds of Syrian women and men journalists to sensitize them to gender justice. Some of them now proactively advocate and lobby for gender rights and in doing so are building their democratic and leadership skills.

²⁴ [Synergy-Takamol - Home | Facebook](#)

More than ten of the most read new Syrian media outlets are involved in this capacity building process at all levels.

The aim and vision are that women together with feminist men at all levels must collaborate and organize joint actions because this will secure more support from the community; it is the best way to secure the critical mass capable of influencing the decision-making processes of leaders and officials.

What has happened as a result?

Many argue that the 2005 Cedar Revolution²⁵ was a precursor to the Arab Spring. I will not argue whether that is true or not. Yet it is a fact that the structure, culture, and historic development of Lebanon differs from the Arab Spring countries. It has a long history and tradition of democracy and freedom of speech. The problems inherent to Lebanon are different in nature and scope to other Arab Spring countries. For example, the revolt in 2019²⁶ did not demand 'regime' change, rather it demanded early elections as a means to change the political class.

The Arab uprisings have put Lebanon under strain. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt caused limited reverberations, the war in Syria had crucial dramatic consequences. Over one million Syrian refugees, equal to one-quarter of Lebanon's population, came to Lebanon in that period. The country's economy and its already weak public infrastructure has been strongly impacted. Hezbollah's engagement in Syria has put Lebanon in the quagmire of the "game of nations". Terrorist attacks by ISIL²⁷ put the country at unease. However, Lebanon's political elites have vowed to shield the country from regional turbulences. For this reason, my and Synergy's²⁸ actions were directed towards Syria.

How important was it for you to directly exchange experiences with other women activists?

Very important, even crucial. It made clear the communality of women issues, the methodology and tools of change. But it also stressed the differences when stages of development are different rather than 'cultural' disparities.

Having opened in 2011, did the door close again for you in the last 10 years?

Why should it? It is not the first period of change, success, and defeat that I witnessed, in the region and around the world. Incremental changes will someday lead to structural and qualitative change. It is inevitable.

What are your learnings?

All the above!

²⁵ [BBC NEWS | World | Middle East | Lebanon finds unity in street rallies](#)

²⁶ [Lebanon's mass revolt against corruption and poverty continues | Lebanon | The Guardian](#)

²⁷ [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant | History & Facts | Britannica](#)

²⁸ [Synergy-Takamol - Home | Facebook](#)

Morocco – Laila Amili

Founding Member, Al-Joussour-Forum of Moroccan Women



The Arab Spring, over the past ten years, has been an opportunity for us to advocate women's human rights and the principle of equality; equal opportunities between men and women, and through our protests and advocacy, we have been able to achieve a number of achievements during this period.

In 2011, an advanced and distinctive Constitution²⁹ was published. In its preamble, equality and parity were emphasized and within some chapters of the constitution, such as Article 19, which bore the title of 'freedoms and fundamental rights', provided that men and women enjoy equal rights and civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights and freedoms.

It was in 2016 that a Commission for parity and combating all forms of discrimination was voted for in Parliament³⁰. This body, which we consider to be an important institution, will ensure the achievement of equality, and will have the power to address imbalances and disrespect in existing laws.

Following protests, the law on violence against women was first promulgated in Morocco in February 2018³¹. The quota of women in the House of Representatives was increased in the national list from 30 to 60, and the presence of women in city councils doubled from 3,224 to 6,324 thanks to additional regulations. Commissions have been created to reform further laws. These include the criminal law, in particular with regard to strengthening penalties for rapists or those who abuse women, whether physical, economic or psychological violence, as well as domestic violence and rape. The other is to modify the family code³² by urging the abolition of articles authorizing child marriage, as well as Article 49, in which the property is effectively divided between the spouses.

Our party, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces³³, as well as the networks in which we work with civil society, have played an important and essential role in the promotion and reform of several articles of specific laws which do not do justice to women. We also constantly advocate

²⁹ [Morocco 2011 Constitution - Constitute \(constituteproject.org\)](http://constituteproject.org)

³⁰ [the Authority for Parity - memorandum.pdf \(ceja.ch\)](http://ceja.ch)

³¹ [Morocco: New Violence Against Women Law | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](http://hrw.org)

³² [The Moroccan Family Code "Moudawana" - EuroMed Rights](http://euro-med-rights.org)

³³ [Socialist Union of Popular Forces \(usfp.ma\)](http://usfp.ma)

for the publication of Law 103.13³⁴ on violence against women, and we have worked within several networks in Morocco such as Rabih al-Karama³⁵ for fair laws for women, or a minimum coalition against child marriage.

How important was it for you to directly exchange experiences with other women activists?

We consider that the opportunity to exchange experiences directly with the Labour Party activists and Balkan activists of the CEE Gender Network played a fundamental and effective role in the progress we have made. It has been particularly beneficial to exchange experiences between us as Arab countries within the framework of Tha'era on equity and to benefit from the experience of those who have already made significant progress in establishing human rights for women, such as representatives of the British Labour Party or activists of the CEE Gender Network. It is through frequent meetings and exchanges of experiences, we have been able to benefit from the knowledge of the laws advanced in certain countries, and also to benefit from the path that certain countries have followed, which has been the opportunity to lobby and submit amendments to our own laws but also create awareness through campaigns.

What are your learnings?

After 2011, we were able in Morocco to achieve several gains despite the obstacles we faced, especially since the Prime Minister was conservative. We have encountered difficulties in defending our claims, but despite this, some progress has been made and we are still fighting for fair laws for women, such as the Family Code and Morocco has ratified international covenants. We continue to persevere and maximize the opportunities presented by the Arab Spring. In advance of our September 2021 general elections, progressive women NGOs formed a huge coalition to lobby political parties. They succeeded in getting some parties, including the Socialist Union of Popular Forces, to add in their electoral programs, requests for forming an efficient gender equality mechanism and to set up a blueprint for the achievement of parity in political decision making bodies by 2030. This was alluded to in the reformed Constitution at the beginning of the Arab Spring.

³⁴ [Text of Law No. 103.13 on combating violence against women as approved by the Parliament | Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family](#)

³⁵ [Karama \(elkara.ma\)](#)

Conclusion

In every big political and social change for the better in the history of any nation, women have always played an important role. In the past, often this role was seen mostly limited to supporting progressive men. Yet, in the dramatic events at the end of the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st century, active women understood for the first time, that this was not enough and that they need to formulate their own set of requests for a more democratic, equal and just society.

It was crucial to share best practise between the women of the Arab Spring with those from the Balkans. Through the CEE Gender Network women shared their challenges, admitting that their initial efforts in the Balkans were not successful. The window of opportunity which opened for them with the first free elections, was shut, closing for ten years. Balkan women activists were able to share lessons learnt and advise women from the Arab Spring to safeguard women's rights from the outset and to use regional networks, international solidarity and support to progress their rights.

The testimonies of the women activists from Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, demonstrate how they put their revolutionary requests for parity and for just family laws as part and parcel of the Arab Spring requests from day one. The four testimonies make clear that a key element for them was the opportunity they were given, to cooperate between themselves regionally and to look for the solutions, adapted not so much to their specific culture, but to their level of development and their specific geostrategic framework.

It is also clear that the Arab Spring was an opportunity - the start, the beginning, not the end - and they will continue to fight for a just and inclusive transition of their societies, challenging gender discrimination and social injustice through practical approaches to deliver change.

Biographies

FATEMA KHAFAGY, Egypt



Fatema Khafagy completed her graduate studies in the UK and obtained a PhD in Development Planning from the University of London.

She headed the gender program at UNICEF Egypt for fifteen years and established and headed the first Gender Equality Ombuds Office in Egypt.

She is a founder and member in national and regional feminist NGOs and networks such as the Egyptian Feminist Union, the Alliance for Arab Women and the co-ordinator of the Arab Women Network for Parity and Solidarity

“Tha’era”.

She is a member of the gender expert group of the North-South Center of the Council of Europe. She was selected in August 2019 as one of twenty world feminists in the civil society advisory group to the Core Group (Global CSAG) supporting UN Women, the Mexican and French governments in mobilizing and galvanizing the voice and participation of civil society in the Generation Equality Forums. She is also the convener of the Arab States Feminist CSOs Network. She is the author of a number of books and articles on women’s empowerment and gender equality issues.

KHATOUN HAIDER, Lebanon

Khatoun Haidar is a woman and human rights activist with several publications, as well as being an expert consultant.



Her areas of expertise are Gender, Development, Strategic Planning, and Community Engagement.

Her 40 years career has spanned work in Europe and the Middle East with public and private organizations.

Khatoun has an academic background (PhD) in Development Studies, an interdisciplinary doctoral program in economics, sociology and political science. She holds a doctorate degree in Women Studies with extensive field experience.

Khatoun is the President of the Lebanese NGO Synergy-Takamol, and a founding Board member of Tha’era -Arab women network for equity and parity (Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon).

LAILA AMILI, Morocco



Laila Amili is the Head of Department and Councillor in the House of Representatives of the Moroccan Parliament. Ms Amili is a member of the National Council of the Socialist Union of Popular Forces and between 2002-2016 was a member of the National Secretariat of Socialist Women. From 2002-2009 she was a councillor in Rabat.

Ms Amili has served on the board of directors of the Spring Coalition of Dignity since 2011 and in 2015 became President of the Hands-Free Association for women's and girls' rights. She is also Secretary General of the Moroccan Coalition for Climate Justice, a member of the Committee of the Dounia Collective following up against the marriage of girls; and member of the Preparatory Committee of the World Marches for Women (Morocco Section) and serves as Vice-President of Tha'era.

Ms Amili has contributed to newspaper and magazine articles as well as on television and radio channels, both regional and national, on topics related to Moroccan women and girls such as underage marriage, abortion, domestic workers and women's political participation.

LOBNA JERIBI, Tunisia

Born in 1973 in Tunis, Lobna Jeribi holds a doctorate in information systems and artificial intelligence from the National Institute of Applied Sciences (INSA) Lyon as well as an engineering degree in information systems from the same institution. She worked as a researcher and teacher for two years at the Sorbonne in Paris, before becoming a lecturer at the National School of Computer Sciences.



In 2015, Lobna Jeribi became President of Solidar, a think tank based in Tunisia which focuses mainly on issues of economic and social development with the objective of installing social justice as well as equality and equity in Tunisia.

Prior to this, Lobna was a member of the National Constituent Assembly between 2011-2014. She was Vice-President of the Commission of the Preamble, Fundamental Principles and Amendments to the Constitution, and then Rapporteur of the Commission of Finance, Planning and Development to 2014.

In February 2020 she was appointed Minister to the Head of Government for Major Projects in the government of Elyes Fakhfakh. Between July-September 2020 Lobna was appointed interim Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research.

SONJA LOKAR, Slovenia



Born in 1948 in Zagreb. Sociologist by profession, member of the socialist and first post socialist parliament, former organisational secretary of the Social Democrats and is still a member of its Presidency.

Sonja established the Social Democrats Women's Forum in 1990 and was President until 2000. She initiated a new Yugoslav women's peace movement, but this movement could not prevent the Balkans wars.

Executive Director of the CEE Network for Gender Issues (1998-2018) and Chair of the

Stability Gender Task Force (1999-2009). Initiator of and Executive member of the Women's Lobby of Slovenia. President of the European Women's Lobby in 2012. Consultant of the British Labour Party's Westminster Foundation for Democracy programme and many other social democratic political foundations, as well as the Council of Europe, UNDP, UN Women, OSCE and the ODIHR. Trainer of feminist activists and women politicians of all political colours, in more than 50 countries of the globe. Author of more than 400 articles and different training manuals translated in 15 foreign languages. She speaks and writes in Slovenian, Croatian, English and French.

Sonja has campaigned for peace, for a secular state, legal safe and free of charge abortion and contraception, against the denial of the right of single women to artificial insemination, for secular public child-care and schools, for universal child allowance, for universal public health care and recently for a new law on public long-term care and during all this time for equal representation and power of women in decision making in her party, in her country, in the region, but also in the EU and globally.

Her motto is "only cooperation and solidarity between women working together on concrete issues of common interest can create a social and political consensus which leads to sustainable progress in women's human rights".

NABILA SATTAR, United Kingdom



Nabila Sattar MBE has an MA in International Relations from the University of Kent.

She is the former International Projects Secretary for the Labour Party overseeing the Labour Party's Westminster Foundation for Democracy programme and has extensive knowledge of centre left and progressive political parties around the world.

Nabila has sat on the Steering Committee of the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, the co-ordination committee of the Party of European Socialists and has been involved in the development of centre-left global networks such as the Progressive Alliance.

She has promoted democratic development and contributed to the establishment of participatory, progressive and mass membership based political parties around the world. She has developed strategies for the Labour Party's international priorities, led training programmes and provided high level briefings for senior politicians and decision-makers.

Nabila has extensive experience of delivering targeted projects to political parties, individuals and organisations in preparation for a broad range of international elections. In the UK, Nabila has worked on a series of General Elections, numerous local elections and the EU Referendum campaign.

Nabila has mentored young people and continues to be involved in voluntary work. She was awarded an MBE in the 2018 Queens Birthday Honours.