

Lifting the veil in the Middle East

Sylvia Maier International Herald Tribune
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ATLANTA Amid the images of death, destruction and mayhem in Iraq, some piece of good news from the Middle East has gone virtually unnoticed. Women's rights are progressing in many Middle Eastern countries, and numerous small but important victories have been won.

Over the past several years, women in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Morocco, Bahrain and Qatar have won political and legal reforms unthinkable a decade ago. While some developments may appear minor to those who take these freedoms for granted, they are revolutionary in conservative Muslim societies.

Take Saudi Arabia. In this intensely traditional country that enforces strict gender segregation in all aspects of public life, women were allowed to run, campaign and vote in elections for the board of the Jidda Chamber of Commerce and Industry for the first time last November.

Two successful businesswomen were elected overwhelmingly with the votes of men. In addition, women finally won the right to their own identity cards and, just this year, a Saudi woman appeared unveiled for the first time ever in a Saudi feature film.

In neighboring Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait, all tiny oil-rich Arab Gulf states, the ruling emirs extended voting rights to women over the past few years. Several women now hold high government offices.

In Morocco, Islamists were forced to accept a reformed personal-status code, the Moudawana, which gives women more rights in marriage and divorce, as well as the appointment of 50 women preachers for mosques, schools, hospitals and prisons. King Mohammed VI of Morocco himself married a computer engineer who does not wear a veil and who has become a role model for many Moroccan women.

In Afghanistan, the constitution now enshrines the equality of the sexes, and Afghan women constitute a third of the elected representatives in the lower house and a quarter in the upper house of parliament.

Despite these signs of progress, the political, legal and social position of women in the Middle East leaves much room for improvement.

"Honor murders" - killing a woman for allegedly sullyng her family's honor by refusing an arranged marriage or trying to escape an abusive one - still claim the lives of more than 6,000 women per year, with the murderers - most often their brothers, fathers or husbands - going free as a matter of course.

Child marriage is widespread; family laws in all Muslim countries still disproportionately favor men, and literacy rates of women, on average, are half those of males.

Finally, most reforms were imposed by royal fiat over fierce opposition from conservative Islamic parties. Thus they do not necessarily reflect a fundamental societal shift and can be reversed by a change in government or if it proves politically necessary to win the support of the clergy.

What made these developments possible? First and foremost, a generational shift brought to power young, reform-minded, Western-educated royals with some philosophical commitment to democracy and human rights, who also realized, quite pragmatically, that further economic development was contingent upon increased female participation in the public sphere.

Second, indigenous women's-rights groups took advantage of this political opening and waged well-organized campaigns, neutralizing charges of being Western agents by basing their demands on a modern interpretation of the

Koran.

This "Islamic feminism" has become for many Muslim women an effective way to reconcile faith with feminism.

The question now is how these achievements can be sustained and expanded.

First, Western countries should support progressive Arab monarchs, such as King Mohammed VI of Morocco, King Abdullah of Jordan and the emirs of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar in their reform efforts. The European Union's Neighborhood Policy, which offers preferred access to the European market in return for political and social reforms, is one example.

Second, the West should provide moral, political and logistical support to women's groups in the region, taking its cue from local activists about their priorities and needs. For example, Rana Husseini, the Jordanian journalist who has been fighting against honor killings for years, deserves full backing. Conferring the Nobel Peace Prize on Iranian lawyer and human rights activist Shirin Ebadi was of great symbolic value.

Finally, there must be awareness-raising campaigns in the United States and Europe about human rights violations committed against women. Ultimately, the realization of women's rights in the Middle East will require a multigenerational, cross- societal commitment to social change; the political will of Western and Arab leaders, and the continued bravery of women who have fought, argued, lobbied, schemed, pushed, and badgered for women to enjoy life with dignity.

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