

Women's Quests for Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Contestations, Complexities, Contradiction

Presentation Abstracts

PLENARY PANELS

“Sidi Bouzid Blues and the Green Wave: Journeys through the Arab Spring and Fall” by Karima Bennoune (University of California, Davis)

Professor Bennoune will read from a chapter of her forthcoming book (*Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here*), entitled “Sidi Bouzid Blues and the Green Wave: Journeys through the Arab Spring and Fall.” This chapter recounts the hopes and concerns of women’s rights defenders in Tunisia and Egypt after the revolutions of 2011. In particular, it focuses on the challenges to their work posed by the rise of fundamentalism in their countries, and the difficult strategic choices that this gives rise to in transition periods.

“Voices unveiled: “I Act, Therefore I Am”” by Minoo Derayeh (York University)

The cultural productions of Iranian women scholars, novelists, and those in the movie industry in Iran have not received sufficient attention from western scholars, more specifically from those in search of an Islamic feminism. The recent scholarship branded as Islamic feminism have homogenized Iranian women, and failed to provide a forum for those Iranian women wanting to express their defiance of gendered laws in a nonreligious and nonwestern oriented voice. Iranian women’s cultural production since 1998 offers a new voice concerning women’s status, rights, roles, as well as their social, political and economic contributions within the existing political, cultural and social spheres. Iranian women show in their novels and movies how the Islamic Republic of Iran approved and issued several important laws and regulations concerning women, however, the regime failed to provide gender equality and disregarded women’s own positions and demands. ” In this discussion I explore some Iranian women’s efforts in challenging the shariah based laws and the dominant patriarchal culture through their efforts theorized in the slogan of “I act, therefore, I am.” I have studied the connections and the relevance between the female paradigms of the fantasy realm, and the reality of life in a patriarchal domain fabricated by religious and cultural “norms” or laws.

“Women’s Solidarity in Post-Revolution Tunisia” by Amel Grami (University of Manouba/Tunisia)

This paper will explore solidarity among Tunisian women activists after the revolution and during the period of transition. It will analyze the importance of this bond in understanding the dynamic interaction of women as agents of change in the Tunisian political landscape. The paper will provide some examples of feminist practices. These include action and attitudes of women members of the Higher Council for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition in defending women’s rights, particularly in the adoption of the principle of parity; the role of members of Feminist NGOs, Facebook groups supporting

parity, as well as those of independent feminist activists in protesting against press coverage of the role of women in the revolution; violence against women and misogynous attitudes of some public figures. I will try to underline what generates and blocks feelings of solidarity and provide answers to a number of questions pertaining to this topic.

“Between Racialized Stereotypes and Ideological Pedestals: Egyptian Women following the Uprising”

by Nadia Habib (York University)

This paper offers a meditation on the situation of women in Egypt following the January, 2011 uprising. Between racialized stereotypes and ideological pedestals: Egyptian Women following the uprising speaks between and about these two parentheses, as it tells of the enormous challenges Egyptian women face at this time as they struggle to assert their basic human rights in an atmosphere that works to further limit women’s civic participation in the public sphere. Here, I emphasize the relationship between quotidian interdictions and regressive structural policies.

“A Shift in Consciousness and Practice is More Urgent than Ever: Women’s Rights in the Post-Revolutionary Arab Region”

by Zeina Zaatari (University of California, Davis)

The post-revolutionary events, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia, and the election results regionally have marked the rise and entry into government halls of Islamist parties and politicians and the stronghold of the backlash against women and women’s rights. Women’s rights activists have raised the slogan: “No democracy Without Women’s Rights/Equality.” Successes of the women’s rights movement in Morocco through the Constitutional Reform have been eclipsed by the election results and the proclamation of those in Government offices. Islamist parliamentarian women in Morocco and Egypt make regular proclamation denouncing women’s rights. Armed with weapons and a sense of ‘legitimacy’ Islamist factions in Lebanon, Iraq and elsewhere in the region take matters into their own hands, emboldened by their newfound resources, legitimacy, and weapons. In this paper, I take a closer look at the implications of such movements and the ‘crisis of patriarchy’ – to borrow from Deniz Kandiyoti’s term, on the political landscape and particularly for women’s rights. I argue that there is an urgent need to increase efforts, build stronger coalitions, and create newer strategies.

“Changes in Women’s Literature During the Arab Revolutions”

by Hanadi Zarka (Al Adiat Association)

Despite the political changes that have occurred in the Arab regimes in the past two years, the reality of women’s lives has not changed significantly. Women participated in demonstrations, they were kept in detention centers, like men, and have aspirations for their homeland free from tyranny. But we cannot talk about real tangible change. In addition, the dominance of the Islamist forces continues to play a negative role in women’s struggle for emancipation from the dictates of the community and religious frameworks. As for women’s literature during these two years, there have been minor changes to Arab women’s writings during the revolution. For instance, the barrier of fear in the language has been broken and women began to write more freely about their desires and wishes, and there are no red lines in writing. Female writers started to write about repression and violence they suffered by the entire community, whether male or

female, demanding freedom and democracy. Democracy is the only hope women have for obtaining full equality with men.

“Islamizing the Islamic Republic of Pakistan: The ‘Democratic’ Agenda of Islamists and its Consequences for Women”

by Afiya Zia (Feminist Activist and Researcher, Pakistan)

This paper will offer a gendered reading of the rule of the Islamists in Pakistan between 2002-2008, when for the first time, they came into power through the ‘controlled democracy’ electoral process initiated by coup-maker, General Pervez Musharraf. Celebrated by many scholars as symbolic of the successful marriage of Islam and democracy, the experience of the rule of the Mutahida Majlis e Amal (MMA, an alliance of 6 Islamist political parties) in fact, was a period when many layers of Pakistan’s constitution were subverted. Some argue that the Islamists’ rule of northern Pakistan opened the doors for the convincing sweep of Islamic militancy in the country. The societal leverage that the MMA provided was unsurprisingly, based largely on the constraints and reversal of women’s rights and the human rights discourse in general. This paper will discuss the specific consequences of when Islamists endorse local patriarchies as well as, the mistake of conflating women’s agency with feminist agency in the context of the Pakistani experience. The paper cautions the risky business of romanticizing the notion of ‘women’s agency’ under Islamist governance.

PANELS 1, 2 & 3

“(Re)Fashioning the Iranian Woman: Dress and Resistance in Iran”

by Shirin Abdmolaei (Concordia University)

Since 1980 the imposition of mandatory Islamic dress codes has been a central feature of the Iranian government’s policy towards women. Understood by many as a form of social control, the enforcement of the veil has been critical to the maintenance of patriarchal dominance over women’s bodies. As its imposition has been utilized as a tool to encourage women to internalize a prescribed set of gender expectations and behaviours, secular women in and outside of Iran have argued that the veil’s ideological imposition exemplifies a restrictive conception of women’s roles, their sexualities and their position in Iranian society. Increasingly, however, a significant number of secular women in Iran’s urban cities have begun adorning themselves in alternative fashions in public spaces, and in doing so, are posing a critical sociopolitical threat to the Islamic Regime’s authority. Accordingly, to examine the dressed body is to study the social and political context surrounding that body. Thus, this paper seeks to contextualize the role of ‘alternative dress’ in the broader context of women’s rights in Iran. It suggests that the adorning of alternative fashion is not simply a matter of clothing but an act of resistance against the state’s ideological control over women’s bodies, as women assert an aesthetically individualized body, separated from the Regime’s aim for a homogenous, docile Islamic whole. The act of refashioning the body politic is therefore a compelling testimony to political struggle for self formation.

“Bodily Formations of the ‘Secular’ and the ‘Religious’: A Case Study of Women in Turkish Military Families”

by Hulya Arik (York University)

My research focuses on female embodiment through the intersection of secularist and militarist discourses in Turkey. Since the foundation of Turkish Republic in 1923, the Turkish Military has been the self-proclaimed defender of principle of secularism and a significant political actor against “Islamist revivalism” for the past three decades. Institutionally, it has adopted and promoted a “secular” and modern lifestyle for its personnel and their families in its social spaces. Through entrance regulations and punitive mechanisms against the personnel who are identified as “fundamentalist” or “radical Islamist”, Turkish Military has aimed at creating, what I term as “secular bodyscapes”. In the construction of these spaces, women’s embodiment of a secular and modern identity with a European form of lifestyle and dress has been juxtaposed against the image of the “fundamentalist” headscarved woman. The ‘secular’ versus ‘religious’ dichotomy got materialized on women’s bodies through mobilizations of fear and anxiety, as well as pride and joy of belonging to these carefully crafted but still fluid identity categories. Through interviews with military wives and daughters, as well as ethnographic observations of military spaces in Istanbul and Mugla (Turkey), I explore women’s everyday experiences of inhabiting, remaking and challenging the ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ at the level of the visceral registers, sensibilities and affect.

“Political Transnational Engagements among the Iranian Diaspora and the Shifts in the Diasporic Identities of Iranians through Time”

by Bahar Hashemi (York University)

The events preceding and immediately following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran resulted in a mass exodus, leading to the formation of a large Iranian diaspora around the world. Many Iranians have continued to emigrate from the country for different social, economic, and political reasons since then. Iranian immigrants/exiles have been engaging in different political transnational activities and have been making cross-border connections with other Iranians inside Iran and in various diasporic locations. In this paper I examine the shifts in the collective political transnational engagements of the Iranian diaspora during the last three decades and the shifts in these engagements over time. Looking at different historical periods, I ask: How do diasporic Iranians engage in their homeland politics? Has their political and cultural transnational engagements changed over time since 1979? How have various social movements, notably the Reform Movement, women’s rights movements, and the pro-democracy *Green movement*, affected the pattern of political and cultural activities within the Iranian diaspora?

“Mixed Marriage and the Restricted Right of Iranian Mother to Pass the Iranian Nationality to her Child”

by Safinaz Jadali (UQAM University) and Farshi Farzin (Independent Scholar)

According to the Iranian civil law, the union between an Iranian woman and a foreign man is subject to certain conditions. Unlike Iranian men, Iranian women should obtain authorization (marriage permit) from the government prior to their union with foreign nationals. Not only the marriage of Iranian women with foreign nationals is restricted, but also their Iranian nationality is not automatically passed on to their children. Iranian legislation contains both principles of *jus sanguinis* and *jus solis*. However, children acquire at birth the Iranian nationality only through their fathers. Despite several attempts in Parliament, the transfer of Iranian nationality from an Iranian mother to her child remains subject to restrictions due to national security concerns. This particularly causes problems for children born from Iranian mothers and Afghan or Iraqi fathers. As Iran is the second country in the world in terms of hosting large and protracted refugee populations, marriages between Iranian women and refugees are quite frequent. Deprivation from Iranian nationality may affect children born from mixed marriages in different circumstances. They may face difficulties in enjoying social rights such as pursuing higher education. Non-attribution of Iranian nationality to these children may also have impacts on their identity documentation, a fact which can be led to statelessness.

“The Three Waves of Plato’s Republic: An Examination of the Role of Women Outlined by the New Egyptian Constitution”

by Jessica Jones (Carleton University)

My work draws from Book V of Plato’s *Republic* to address the controversy surrounding the role of women outlined in the new Egyptian constitution. Book V of the *Republic* outlines a political order free from political conventions. Here, men and women are given equal status, children are raised communally, and there is no private ownership of anything but one’s own body. However, in order for this ideal to be realized, we are told that everyone over the age of ten must be killed. Such an allegory is meant to deter from the radical and extreme reformation of political order; it is meant to show the depths to which conventions are

engrained in human beings and necessary for human existence. Traditions cannot be completely done away with, and any attempt to completely overcome convention will likely provoke unmitigated violence. The difficulty of reform is evident in the new Egyptian constitution. Indeed, Article 10 states that “the state shall provide free motherhood and childhood service and shall balance between a woman’s obligations toward the family and public work.” Women’s rights activists have responded critically to the use of the term ‘obligation’ since it implies that a woman is confined to the role of a caregiver, citing that a woman’s rights should be expounded beyond traditional obligations. I argue that considering the traditional obligations of woman in Egypt and working with them, opposed to against them, is the only way to achieve long-term stability and improvement for women in Egypt.

“Negotiating Social Geographies: A Visual Culture Analysis of Women’s Artist Graffiti During the Egyptian Spring”

by alma khasawnih (University of Washington)

The walls of the artery between El-Tahrir Square and the president’s main office are exhibition spaces of numerous artists’ creations. I focus on the works of two women artists in Cairo - Bahia Shehab and Mira Shehadeh, and examine the politics of graffiti as a male-dominated art form and how their art provides an alternative, critical vision to the Arab Spring on Cairo’s Mohamed Mahmoud Street. I focus on the walls as sites where artists negotiate their intersecting social geographies through conversations they have with the city, and each other, by leaving their marks on this public space. I argue that these women artists’ graffiti presents another archive of the revolution, one that narrates a gendered revolution, without which women’s contributions to the Spring would be marginalized. To do this, I juxtapose the artists’ work over the timeline of the Egyptian Spring and historicize their graffiti conversations with transitional moments in the revolution, such as December 17, 2011, when a veiled woman was dragged, stripped, and stomped on by soldiers while others looked on, or June 30, 2012, when Mohammed Mursi assumed the presidential office. This analysis addresses the following questions: What kind of public archive are these artists creating? How does it differ from other narratives and records of the Spring? How do these artists’ works gender the revolution? And how does their graffiti, as acts of historicizing and imagining the revolution, shape the social geography of Cairo at this moment of political transition?

“Silencing Women in Tahrir Square”

by Fidaa Shehada (Rutgers, State University of New Jersey)

Women’s rights campaigners in Egypt reported that more than 20 women were sexually assaulted by mobs in Tahrir Square on Friday, February 25, 2013, the second anniversary of the revolution. The women were of varied ages, religions, and dressed differently with some wearing veils. Victims suddenly found themselves surrounded by men who groped their bodies, undressed them using knives and blades, and dragged them for miles. Both the Muslim Brotherhood government and the leaders of the liberal opposition were silent and failed to address this phenomenon. However, some Salafi preachers dedicated episodes of their talk shows to comment on this type of violence and further encourage it by saying that these women “deserve it.” Sexual assault has always been a tool in violent conflicts. This paper seeks to address several questions raised by the incident at Tahrir Square. First, was this assault on women political, cultural, religious, or a combination of these factors? Second, will the Egyptian

revolution, with its tripartite motto “Bread, freedom, social equality,” exclude women? Finally, what are the implications of mob sexual assault on women’s activism and quest for rights in Egypt?

“Women in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia: Before and After the ‘Arab Spring’”

by Gunmeen Singh (Independent Scholar)

The occurrence of the ‘Arab Spring’ termed so due to the ripple effects created in the Middle Eastern region by the subsequent overthrow of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak after a series of protests by ordinary Egyptian citizens. The Tunisian and Egyptian incidents posed a threat to the historically deep rooted presence of autocratic regimes in majority of states in this particular region. The possible termination of such forceful power exerted by common citizens of the states of Gulf in particular was not acceptable to the ruling regimes. This power of assertion was depicted not alone by men but women citizens also. Women in these states became an equal political partner and possessed the same strength to protest as their male companions. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were two such affected states who both feared the consequences of such reactions. The ‘Arab Spring’ was yet another opportunity for the citizens of these states to express their discontent about the lack of democratic and representative powers. Prior to the ‘Arab Spring’, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia witnessed revolts in the form of various protests among which the ‘petition fever’ movement constituted an essential part. These particular petitions for the first time witnessed the inclusion of women’s demands as part of the protests. The aim of this paper will be to depict the role women have played in the concerned states of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia with the aim of promoting women’s rights and political representation in events that have occurred both prior to the ‘Arab Spring’ as well as with the developments brought in by this event particularly.