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Jordan

Women's rights are now on the table

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Interview with Leila Hammarneh, Projects Director, Arab Women Organization, Jordan, member of the Coalition Equality without reservation. Interview conducted by Shawna Carroll of the International Federation on Human Rights, published on March 7.

What is your perspective on the ongoing events throughout the region? What do you think are the potential implications for women's rights?

I consider what happened in Tunisia then in Egypt, and the impact these events have had on other Arab countries, as a step forward for women's rights. I think that especially in Egypt the revolution clarified that women and men stand side by side. They stood together in protest for 18 days in Tahrir square in Cairo. They were calling for freedom and social justice. And these are the same demands that women have; gender freedom and social justice. It is very important to note that these were peaceful protests. And that the people called for a civil state and a secular state. All of this in my opinion means that this is a new dawn for women in the movement.

Especially after several tragic years of backlash, during which women's achievements were overshadowed by the dominating attitudes toward women, particularly under the influence of Islamist fundamentalists. In Jordan the tribal lords were aligning against women's rights. But now things have taken a new turn. Women's rights are being put on the table, and we hope that they will emerge as a priority. I feel that there can be no going back to that time in history, that there will be no more backlashes and those who would like to pull the wheel backwards will not succeed. I hope not.

It is our perception, that during the events in Egypt, men and women, particularly the youth were working together. We saw evidence in interviews that we watched over the satellites and on the cable news that young men were supporting women's rights. We want these attitudes and mentalities to prevail and we would like this to be the future of our countries. However, there remains a danger that old mentalities will persist. But, this we feel is our battle and we shall fight it. We will not allow for calls to restrict women's rights to pass.

On 1 February, following widespread popular protests throughout Jordan, King Abdullah II dismissed Prime Minister Samir Rifai and his cabinet and pledged to begin a programme of democratic reform. Marouf Bakhit was appointed Prime Minister and a new cabinet is to be formed.

Are protests continuing in Jordan? What actions has your organisation taken?

Women in Jordan feel a sense of solidarity with the revolution in Egypt and Tunisia. They have also participated in demonstrations here in Jordan, in Amman. First to express their solidarity with those who have been struggling in Egypt and in Tunisia, and with those who are now struggling in Libya, in Yemen and in Bahrain. Additionally, women have taken to the streets in Amman in order to call for reforms, and in particular legal and political reforms affecting women's rights. Because in Jordan as most of the Arab countries there have been delays in the implementation of women's rights according to international standards. There have been a lot of conventions, policies and public statements for women's rights, but in fact, their implementation has been delayed because of fear of the influence of fundamentalists. Now there is no excuse for delay.

We have expressed this sentiment throughout the past eight weeks during which we have participated in demonstrations calling for quick reforms and a national dialogue for improvement of the situation of women. The Arab

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Women Organisation has organised large meetings with the governors in three provinces: Karak, Irbid and Amman in order to trigger national dialogue to discuss women's issues. Because usually during large protests, when people are calling for general reforms, demands for equality and women's rights are overshadowed, and neglected. We will no longer accept for women's issues to be neglected or overshadowed by the big events and big reforms. With the reforms that the people are asking for in Jordan, we are also calling for reforms pertaining to women's rights.

What are your views on the challenges to women's political participation in the post-revolution transitions?

This is a serious concern for us, because we don't want to go back to the era where women were excluded. In Algeria for example, women were active in the liberation movement, they were at the forefront of the revolution, fighting together with men (1954-1962). When the war was over women were sent back to their homes and were not given their rights. This didn't just happen in Algeria, it happened everywhere. We have learned our lesson!

Women's issues have been neglected for the last 50 years. Now we are more alert and aware that we must insist that women are included in the process, whether we are discussing the writing of a new constitution in Egypt or the new Cabinet in Tunisia or a new government in Jordan. We want women's issues to be considered. When we met with the leaders in Karat, Irbid and Amman in order to stress that women be included in the national dialogue in Jordan we put forward two main demands: 30 percent quota for women's participation in the decision making process, there can be no compromises on this demand, and that all international conventions be implemented, and incorporated into the national laws. In Jordan these are our specific demands relating to women's rights.

And all over the Arab world now women and women NGOs are networking in order to affect their governments. In Egypt and in Tunisia they have done so through petitions, statements and declarations stressing that women must not be excluded. We must not repeat the harm done in the past to the progress of societies by neglecting women.