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Bahraini Women in the 21st Century: Disputed Legacy of the Unfinished Revolution

By Magdalena Karolak¹

Abstract

The role of women in the Arab Spring uprisings requires special attention. Indeed, women participated alongside men in recent political movements and were actively involved in shaping the outcomes of these processes. The case of Bahrain is especially interesting. Even though the Bahraini "Day of Rage" movement was ultimately marginalized at large, it had unlikely consequences for Bahraini women. As female empowerment has been a high priority on the government's agenda, participation of women in the public sphere serves important functions and in the aftermath of Bahraini uprising it got an additional boost. The aim of this paper is to assess how the role of Bahraini women has been interwoven with political liberalization reforms in the first decade on the 21st century and assess its importance for the Bahraini authorities. Secondly, it aims at analyzing the outcomes of Arab Spring uprising for Bahraini women. It asserts that as the pro-government and anti-government movements took to the streets, social divisions of Bahrainis deepened and equally, affected female activists. Ultimately, the article ends with a discussion over the prospects of female empowerment by pro-democracy movements in the Middle East.

Key words: Bahrain, women, female emancipation, revolution.

Introduction: Bahraini Arab Spring and women

Year 2011 was marked by series of uprisings in the Middle East commonly known under the name of Arab Spring. The development of these events was unexpected to the local populations and to international observers alike (Balfour, 2011). Social mobilization led, in some cases, to deposition of long-term dictators; in others, opened conflicts whose outcomes are yet to be resolved. It is important however to stress the differences between the Bahraini "Day of Rage" and other upheavals of the Arab Spring. To begin with, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Syria the popular uprisings came unexpectedly. Usually they were preceded by years or even decades of almost complete submission to the ruling circles. On the contrary, in Bahrain upheavals are not a novelty. As a matter of fact, since the country's independence, Bahrain was sporadically shaken by waves of unrest as Bahraini opposition became more vocal in their quest for rights in 2000's. Thus, the 2011 uprising in Bahrain is part of a much longer and continuous series of unrest. Nonetheless, the Bahraini "Day of Rage" was inspired by the protest strategies applied in other Arab countries. Secondly, Bahraini "Day of Rage" received relatively little attention from international media compared with other protests. After the violent clampdown on the opposition, foreign correspondents were gradually expelled from the country and Bahrain disappeared from headlines of international newspapers. Furthermore, the Bahraini upheaval stands out since it was almost unavoidable not to analyze it in sectarian terms. Although the protesters strongly declined against identifying the upheaval specifically as a Shi'a protest and the protest was also supported by Sunni pro-reformers, the unfolding events led to a polarization of society that accentuated sectarian belongings.

Nonetheless, during the one month of greater political openness, involvement of women in these events was prominent, which breaks with the usual stereotype of a Muslim

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woman presented in the Western media. Women from all backgrounds participated in anti-government and in pro-government rallies and sit-ins alongside men.

This paper aims at assessing the outcomes of the Bahraini "Day of Rage" from the point of view of female emancipation. Even though women participated in the popular movements based on demands broader than particular gender issues, the Bahraini Arab Spring resulted in opportunities to further empower women in the public sphere. The link between these two factors is worth exploring in detail. This paper provides a brief overview of the situation of Bahraini women before the "Day of Rage" and ultimately, draws an analysis of the changes, already executed and yet to be implemented, brought about by the revolution. It concludes with an assessment of the functions of female empowerment for the leadership of the country. Apart from a selected review of social scientific literature, this research is ethnographic in nature. Data was collected from local newspapers, social media as well as materials provided by the Supreme Council for Women.

2. Women and the political liberalization

Political liberalization reforms carried out by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 2002 created new prospects for female participation in the public sphere in Bahrain by providing women with universal suffrage rights. Although first isolated cases of female political activism in Bahrain date back to the 1950's, subsequently women were part of male-directed movements for political and social reforms. This in turn limited their ability to stress female empowerment issues in particular. This was the case, in 1994 when women actively participated in widespread anti-government protests. However a petition addressed to the government by protesters only vaguely alluded to "the role of women in these changes" (Seikaly, 1998, p. 170). It is important to underline that majority of women were part of Islamist movements for reforms (Seikaly, 1998). Thus their aspirations were limited to begin with due to, religious and societal factors. This limitation was visible when the king's decision to grant women suffrage rights met with an opposition of 60% of Bahraini women (Janardhan, 2005). Since the creation of Supreme Council for Women (SCW) in 2001, Bahraini authorities have been actively promoting female emancipation in all areas of public life. On the other hand, new opportunities provided a favorable environment for emergence of a growing grassroots movement.

Since the beginning of political liberalization reforms female empowerment has been always proclaimed an important goal in the agenda of the government. It was stressed through the creation of the SCW, a quasi-governmental body advisory to the king, headed by the king's first wife Sheikha Sabika bint Ibrahim al-Khalifa. Such an arrangement is not unusual in the Middle East as wives of country leaders have often held functions of promotion, at least in theory, of women's rights. The council is dedicated to, among others, fostering inclusion of women in the decision making positions, improving skills of women, creating job opportunities, conducting studies, as well as organizing awareness campaigns aimed at women. Among the many tasks, SCW has been overseeing is the implementation of the provisions of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) agreement, within the limits of the sharia. The other important initiative is the National Strategy on the Empowerment of Bahraini Women, conducted with the support of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It includes programs on enhancing economic and political empowerment of women that are carried out over the years 2009-2012. Moreover, the SCW carried out a strong campaign to support the unified personal status law and subsequently, implementation of the law for the Sunni branch of Islam. The council promoted female empowerment in three main areas, namely, economic, political and within the family. Due to economic and demographic changes in the kingdom, resorting to the social capital of women has become a necessary step for future development.

2.1. Economic empowerment

Economic empowerment of women is part of the "Bahrain Economic Vision 2030", a broad initiative for development of the country unveiled in 2008. Oil depletion as well as soaring unemployment rates among Bahraini nationals demanded a shift in policies related to job market strategy. Sustainable development independent from oil resources and competitiveness are a must for future growth of the GCC region overall. Given the fact that women account for 70% of all university graduates (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2009), Bahraini authorities saw women's rising education attainments as a resource for the country's development (Supreme Council for Women, 2007). Indeed, international studies suggest that low participation of women in the workforce has a direct negative impact on the country's GDP (Löfström, 2009). Moreover, case studies assert that female participation in business ownership has an even stronger correlation with GDP growth (Weeks & Seiler, 2001).

Tamkeen, an employment agency developed under the umbrella of the government, promotes greater inclusion of Bahrainis in the economy through multiple initiatives. It provides job training as well as training and employment programs in cooperation with Bahraini-based companies, scholarships, funding for enterprises and skill improvement programs. Tamkeen adopted in collaboration with SCW a special approach to increase female employability, including increasing the number of women in male-dominated fields of economy (Tamkeen, 2009). This comes as an important step given that women constitute the majority of the unemployed. In 2009 and 2010 women constituted roughly 80% of the unemployed (Al Gharaibeh, 2011). The joint cooperation between Tamkeen and SCW awarded grants to women entrepreneurs in the fields of transportation, fashion design and photography. An all female job and training exhibition for the unemployed took place in 2010, while the theme for Bahraini Women Day's for 2011 was "The Bahraini Woman and her role in supporting the National Economy". As a result of cooperation between Tamkeen and Bahrain Women's Union, a computer skills training program for women was established. So far, 11,782 women have benefited from multiple programs organized by Tamkeen (Trade Arabia, 2011). New legislation encourages also the employment of Bahraini women, as in the process of nationalization of the workforce, each women counts as two local employees allowing companies to achieve their Bahrainization rates faster.

Economic advances in Bahrain were strengthened by female business activity. Eased procedures that allowed women to process all paperwork themselves instead of male representatives boosted female entrepreneurship (Ahmed, 2010). In 2008 more than one third of Bahraini businesses were owned by women (Gender Gulf, 2008). Additionally, since 1997 Micro Start project has aimed at economically empowering needy households. Developed jointly with the UNDP, it is addressed in particular to women who, so far, benefited 73% of all distributed loans in Bahrain. The program allows them to become productive and independent from income earned by men.

2.2. Political empowerment

Women's participation in politics would not have been possible without an active support of Bahraini authorities. Apart from obtaining suffrage rights as well as the right to stand for elections to the lower house of the Bahrain Parliament in 2002, women were appointed in prominent public offices. Cabinets in 2002 and 2006 included women as minister of health, minister of social affairs and minister of culture and information. Women were also appointed in the Shura Council, the upper chamber of the Parliament. Moreover, women represented Bahrain on an international scene. In 2000 first woman Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa became a Bahraini ambassador. She was subsequently elected a president

of the UN General Assembly. In 2004 women were appointed in the GCC Consultative Corporation. However, these symbolic nominations would not be sufficient to promote participation of women in society overall. Thus, before the 2006 and the 2010 parliamentary elections SCW conducted political empowerment programs providing women with training necessary skills as well as funding to support their political campaign. The goals of such initiatives included altering of social attitudes and stereotypes towards women as well as supporting participation of women in the Parliament and the Municipal Councils (Action Plan for Political Empowerment of Women, 2002). Nonetheless, female candidates running in the elections were breaking an established social order, which caused tensions.

In 2002 and in 2006 elections many female candidates were pressured by male candidates to withdraw (Toumi, 2006). Moreover male candidates used traditional division of gender roles to discredit their female opponents. Sunni Islamist candidate Ebrahim Bousandal addressed voters stating that women should not take part in politics because their place was at home (Muslim Women News, 2010). In 2006 female candidates received phone messages threatening them to withdraw immediately from the race (Bille & Moroni, 2006). During electoral campaign of that year acts of vandalism were committed. Fawzia Zainal's campaign tent was set on fire. She claimed as well to have been targeted by derogatory gossips (Grewal, 2010). Furthermore, women were unable to secure the support of major political associations that are Islamic in nature. None of the Islamic associations endorsed female candidates. So far, only one woman Latifa Al Qaoud has been elected to the parliament in general elections in 2006 and in 2010. Although she was the first woman MP elected in the GCC, she ran both times unchallenged and represented scarcely populated and remote islands of Al Hawar. The example of politics represents an area where there is strong resistance to change. Nonetheless, participation of women in elections had an important effect on Bahraini society. In 2010 the level of social acceptance of women candidates increased. Women did not face criticism or intimidation, which proves that voters acknowledged their active role in the political process. Moreover, in 2010 Latifa Salman a candidate in the municipal elections became the first Bahraini woman to win a popular election, while directly challenging a male candidate.

2.3. Empowerment within family

Bahraini activists since the 1980's have tried to exert pressure on the government to allow for creation of a Personal Status Law instead of the traditional application of sharia. Religious courts are headed by clergymen who apply their own interpretations of sharia detrimental to women. Since its establishment SCW campaigned for a unified written law and took on a task to prepare a draft. Drafting the law created tensions between female activists and conservative clergy. The firm opposition of Shiite scholars caused the draft committee to abandon the idea of a unified law in favor of a Sunni version only. Consequently, the first written law called Family Provision Act (Law 19/2009) passed in May 2009 applies to Sunni sect. The law brought important regulations to protect the rights of women related to marriage, divorce and child custody. Within the marriage contract women can stipulate that they would not allow their husbands to marry additional wives. Both parties can specify in the marriage contract terms and conditions related to family expenditures, housing as well as employment and education. Furthermore, the new law specified cases where women were rightfully entitled to seek divorce, such as lengthy imprisonment of the husband, drug addiction, abandonment of the family and lack of financial support as well as discord and harm between husband and wife. Moreover, judges are allowed to consult psychologists and social workers when ruling custody of children keeping in mind the best interest of child. The law entitles women granted custody to entail housing provided by the father of children as well as to seek alimony. The court may also order DNA tests to establish parenthood (Ruiz-

Almodóvar, 2013). The SCW has undertaken a long-term study to analyze the impact of the new law on lives of Bahraini women.

It is important to note however that the Family Provision Act does not establish equality between genders. A woman, for example, still requires the consent of a guardian to get married even though there are amendments to the role of the guardian in the marriage process. Similarly, the law makes a difference between divorces initiated by men and by women, since women have to provide legal grounds to ask for it. The effects of this law are also limited by the fact that it applies to Sunni sect only. Shi'a sharia courts continue exercising jurisdiction based on the traditional interpretation of the Islamic law.

2.4. Media campaigns

Women's achievements in breaking the gendered stereotypes are highlighted in the local media. Newspapers devote several articles to present female candidates in the national elections and closely follow their campaigns. Similarly, women who break into the traditionally male dominated jobs, such as female judges or female pilot are highly praised and draw a lot of attention². Encouragement plays no doubt an important role in publicizing women's achievements in the society however certain areas remain heavily male-dominated. Sectors of education and healthcare are feminized, but the number of men exceeds that of women in all other fields and is especially acute for example in engineering (Ahmed, 2010). In patriarchal societies, national media campaigns can play a role in encouraging women to take leadership positions. Patriarchy is defined as "a hierarchy of authority that is controlled and dominated by the males" (Krauss, 1987, p. xii). It originates in the family, which forms a basic institution of Arab societies. Families are headed by men and within this patriarchal structure female and male obligations and spheres are strictly separated (Giacaman, Jad, & Johnson, 1996). Traditional division of roles sees women's fulfillment in the area of home as mothers and wives (Sabbagh, 2007). Family ought to create a safe zone within which women find protection. Women's subordinate position is justified in this way. Moreover, Sabbagh (2007) points out that "women's daily lives and practices are reinforcing patriarchy". Within this context it is easier to understand the resistance of majority of Bahraini women in getting full political rights in 2002 and entering what is traditionally regarded to be a male sphere. The example of Bahrain shows however that social and cultural barrier may ultimately be overcome and women entering male sphere may be accepted over time.

3. Limitations to female empowerment in Bahrain

Despite improvements, empowerment of women is hindered by a number of obstacles, which stem mostly from long-standing traditions and gender stereotyping.

3.1. Nationality

Even though Bahrain has adopted progressive legislation that guarantees equality of genders, Bahraini women cannot pass citizenship on their foreign husbands and on their children born from such marriages. The battle by female rights activists and SCW to amend the Article 4 of the 1963 nationality law has led to slight improvements. The latest legislation allowed Bahraini women to sponsor their husbands' and children's residence in Bahrain under certain conditions. Children can enjoy exemptions from fees for government as well as healthcare and education benefits equal to Bahrainis if they reside in the kingdom, however they are excluded from political, employment and housing benefits.

² This newspaper article is a good example of using media to promote women in the workforce <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=269001>

3.2. Labor market discrimination

The Labor Act (Decree No. 23 of 1976) guarantees equality of all employees, however women tend to be discriminated in the labor market with regards to remuneration as well as promotion opportunities. Nonetheless, labor laws "do not prohibit or provide protections against gender-based discrimination in the workplace" (Al Najjar, 2009). On the average, Bahraini woman earns 76% of the income of a male worker for similar job (The Global Gender Report, 2010). Gender stereotyping has also a negative impact on promotion opportunities of women in the workplace.

3.3. Violence against women

Domestic violence has been widely reported by women's rights organizations, which led to a growing awareness of the problem. The calls for criminalization of violence against women have become vocal. Women remain silent since they lack confidence in the legal system and fear negative consequences on their family. Indeed, the Penal Code, stipulates that "Nothing is considered a crime as long as it is the exercise of a right granted by law or custom" [art. 16]. Violence against women by male members of the family is accepted by conservative segments of society as a right to discipline the woman.

Among the many types of abuse, in case of sexually motivated violence, Bahraini laws offer lowest protection for women. A rapist can escape punishment if he marries the victim, while spousal rape is not considered abuse since a husband has the right to execute his conjugal privileges even against the wishes of his wife. Studies suggest that violence against women is a widespread phenomenon as 88.4 % of respondents perceive it in the workplace and public places as stated in the Personal, Family and Legal Status of Bahraini Women document (Bahrain Women's Union, 2008). Bahraini laws continue to offer insufficient protection as legislation punishing acts of violence against women was ranked both, in 2006 and 2010, at 0.75 on a scale from 0 to 1, where 1 means worst case scenario (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2006 & 2010).

3.4. Inheritance

Islamic sharia law governs inheritance issues and treats both genders separately. Women may inherit from fathers, mothers, brothers, husbands and children; however women's shares are significantly smaller than men's (Ahmed, 2010, p. 9). The sectarian division complicates the matter since Sunni and Shi'a apply different set of rules. Daughters, in case of absence of a male child, can inherit full father's estate (Shi'a ruling) or they are obliged to share it with other paternal relatives (Sunni ruling) (Nasir, 1990, p. 225). Under Shi'a laws, wives cannot inherit their husband's land but only movable assets, while under Sunni laws they can. In all cases, non-Muslim women cannot inherit from their Muslim husbands (Nasir, 1990, p. 232). The reason for women's different treatment in inheritance is directed by a different perception of social obligations in Islam. Men are held financially responsible for families needs (Coulson, 1971, p. 1). Women are supposed to be provided for by their fathers, brothers or sons and can, at least in theory, retain their earned money if they choose to work. Various sources suggest however that working women contribute to the daily household expenses, while in extreme cases they are forced to give up their salaries to their husbands (Al Najjar, 2009). The increase in numbers of working women who are married from 45% in 1981 to 60% in 1991 may indicate that women's contribution to the family is increasing as well (Wilkenson & Atti, 1997). The expectations towards wives in Bahrain changed drastically as a number of respondents admitted that "young men nowadays look for a wife that can help with family expenses" (Kelly, 2009). Moreover, it is important to note that 10.84% of Bahraini families are supported by a woman.

4. The Arab Spring: Women in the opposition and women in the pro-government movement

Political liberalization experiment in the Kingdom of Bahrain reveals shortcomings in outcomes of this process. The promising achievement of the reforms, marked by the turn to constitutional monarchy on February 14, 2002, was undermined by a social upheaval on February 14, 2011. Monarchy has been able to gather strong support among the Sunnis in Bahrain, and ultimately, due to the sectarian split, is perceived as a shield against growing Shi'a political ambitions. The growing sectarian divide in the Bahraini society led to an almost clear-cut division among the supporters and the opposition to the new monarchy. Although female participation was considerable throughout the period of the uprising, it was marked by a growing sectarian split that divides the Bahraini society until today. In order to fully assess the role of women, we shall discuss two types of women activists, namely supporters of the opposition and supporters of the government.

4.1. Women in the opposition movement

Women who supported the opposition movement were predominantly from the Shi'a sect. They participated widely in the movement alongside men and as the crackdown of the movement became a reality, bore the consequences of their actions. Although the facts are disputed, the opposition claims that so far fourteen female protesters died in the crackdown, mostly of tear gas suffocation³. Furthermore, women were detained and incarcerated. Among imprisoned female protesters, the case of Ayat al Qurmezi, made headlines throughout the world. The female poet was incarcerated and released after a forced confession aired on Bahraini television channel. Daughter of the activist, Abdulahadi Al khawaja, Zainab Al Khawaja has been also campaigning for release of her father and other activists from jail. She faced prosecution in Bahraini courts.

The main goals of the revolution included constitutional reforms, abdication of the king as well as deportation of naturalized citizens from Bahrain. Yet, some female opposition activists aimed at taking advantage of the upheaval to shift the attention to problems important to women, such as the personal status law for Shiites as well as electoral quota for female candidates (Bou Hamoud, 2011). In spite of their efforts, it is questionable whether the outcome of the uprising could serve to advance empowerment of Shi'a women and women in general. Al Wefaq, which was one of the major protest groups, prevented in the past the implementation of personal status law for the Shi'a sect. The resistance to the law was based on the grounds that there should be no interference of laymen in the issues traditionally reserved for *sharia* scholars. In 2005, for instance, Al Wefaq organized a demonstration against the introduction of the personal status law for Shiites that included 120,000 people, while women's rights organizations gathered only 500 people in support of the law (Ahmed, 2010). Moreover, hardliners called for a nationwide unrest if such a law would be implemented for the Shi'a community (Hamada, 2009). On the other hand, members of Al Wefaq were divided over the issue of female candidates (Walid, 2007) but no female candidates were ever appointed in the past in part due to political opportunism. Al Wefaq's leader Ali Salman stated that female candidates could make Al Wefaq loose seats (Hamada, 2010). Judging from the experience of the past years, the opposition leaders may have well understood the importance of numbers of supporters they draw to the streets and women can significantly increase their ranks. However, they did not make any direct

³ An updated list of casualties of the uprising is maintained in the social media; for example at <http://www.crookedbough.com/?p=7804>

statements towards advancement of female rights as a goal of the political reform after the revolution.

On the other hand, female activist in the opposition often accuse governmental agencies of lack of progress in advancing political empowerment (Hameed, 2006). The criticisms include, lack of transparency and standards used in appointment of women to high offices and lack of a plan for consistent promotion of female leaders in other areas (Bahrain Women Union, 2008) as well as lack of the above mentioned personal status law. Leaving governmental policies aside, it is clear that "women must themselves advocate for equal rights" (Social Watch, 2009). However, only a minority of female activists in the opposition movement petitioned for women's rights.

4.2. Women in the pro-government movement

Women activists who supported the pro-government movement participated in numerous sit-ins and rallies as well as shows of loyalty organized throughout the country (Al Qahtani, 2011). They had no specific demands targeted at female empowerment behind their participation but strongly believed in an "Iran/Shi'a takeover" of Bahrain. The aims of the pro-government movement were centered on preservation of the monarchy and the Sunni identity of the country (Karolak, 2012). Even though the pro-government groups never participated under female empowerment slogans, the opportunity to discuss female empowerment was created by the National Dialogue.

5. Female empowerment after the "Day of Rage"

National Dialogue debates as well as bi-elections to the Bahraini Parliament boosted prospects for female empowerment. Some of the anticipated reforms have been approved and are being implemented. Nonetheless, in both cases the outcomes of these opportunities have not yet fully materialized.

5.1. National Dialogue

The National Dialogue was a series of debates, which took place in July 2011, initiated by the king after the uprising of February 2011. The aim of the dialogue was to forge a compromise on the most prominent political, economic, social and human rights issues among different groups in society. The role of the opposition was reduced to 35⁴ out of 300 seats, with the major opposition party Al Wefaq holding 5 seats. Subsequently, Al Wefaq pulled out of the dialogue. On the other hand, the debates included a number of NGOs. Twelve women associations were involved in the talks. The results of the National Dialogue were formed into recommendations to be approved and implemented at a later stage. The participants acknowledged the importance of fostering women's rights. Firstly, demands were made to guarantee greater protection for women against violence, equal rights in the workplace and political and economic empowerment. Secondly, a recommendation was made to allow women pass Bahraini nationality on their children born from mixed marriages. Finally, a thorough review of salaries of female workers in the private sector was urged. As of now, Equal Opportunities Units have been set up in governmental organizations to promote equal opportunities between men and women. This concept is supposed to be extended on private companies in the future⁵.

Despite these important considerations given to female empowerment, it is important to highlight the limitations of the National Dialogue. Recommendations put forward still have to be approved by the king before being implemented. Thus the National Dialogue has no

⁴ Opposition sources claim that some of the invited leaders were at that time in prison.

⁵ Interview at the Supreme Council of Women, January 25, 2012.

power to put requested reforms into effect. Moreover, the opposition groups felt left out in the process, which leaves open the possibility of growing instability.

5.2. Bi-elections to the Parliament

Bi-elections to the Bahraini Parliament were conducted in October 2011. They aimed at replacing 18 Al Wefaq MPs who pulled out of the Parliament after the crackdown of the uprising. In the process four female candidates presented themselves for elections. Three female MPs were elected and they joined an already serving MP Latifa Al Qaoud. As a result, women make up 10% of the lower house of the Parliament and 20% of both houses. The implications of greater female participation in the legislative body are yet to be assessed. Nonetheless, their participation implies multiple levels of analysis.

To begin with, three elected MPs Sawsan Taqawi, Somaya Al Jowder and Ebtisam Hijris run in constituencies dominated by the opposition voters. The fact that they decided to participate in the elections makes them no doubt "traitors" in the eyes of the opposition. It comes as no surprise that electoral billboards of some of the candidates were vandalized. Furthermore, the success of female candidates is somehow muted as Sawsan Taqawi ran unopposed, while electoral turnout in all affected districts reached only 20% of those entitled to vote. Nonetheless, female presence in the Parliament may play an important role for the authorities on a local and on an international level. Indeed, filling in the empty seats shows that the Parliament can function without the opposition. On the other hand, greater female presence in the Parliament satisfies demands of quotas put forward by Bahraini female activists. On the international level, participation of female Shi'a MPs is a clear sign that not all Shi'a support the opposition movement. In this particular context, female MPs represent modern women who support the governmental policies and implicitly, break away from the mainstream Shi'a community. Such show of support is important for the government on an international level. Indeed, governmental policies have so far brought important steps toward female empowerment in Bahrain, while the opposition can be easily accused of stalling reforms that would improve the condition of Shi'a women. While, women who are part of the opposition movement reject any reforms simply because they come from the authorities, the opposition movement does not offer them any gender-specific support in return. Such discourse could be one of the strongest arguments of the government against the opposition on the international arena⁶. On the other hand, it is clear that female empowerment can only occur through governmental policies as female activists are not able to generate enough pressure to implement reforms that can empower women.

6. Conclusion

Participation of women in the opposition and in the pro-government movements has been an important feature of the Arab Spring in Bahrain. It was however marked by a growing sectarian split of the society. Female supporters of the government have gained voice to express their concerns in the National Dialogue. It is still a matter of time to assess whether their voice will be heard and their recommendations will be implemented. On the contrary, female opposition members are active in the on-going protests and concentrate on pushing for political reforms, while keeping gender related demands absent from their agenda. All in all, despite improvements Bahraini women still face challenges to female empowerment. So far it is clear that the way ahead lies in the hands of the Bahraini authorities whose role in female empowerment is paramount. As a result, they are able to promote a pro-female image abroad, which sets them apart from the opposition that can be

⁶ According to some studies, Bahrain is a leader in female empowerment in the Gulf region
<http://www.arabianbusiness.com/bahraini-women-most-empowered-in-mideast-study-454564.html>

easily accused of stalling female empowerment.

The case of Bahrain provides an example of the ambiguity of female empowerment in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Women backing the democratic movements may find themselves marginalized after the political changes have taken place. Ultimately, revolutionary movements can result in greater influence of men in the public sphere. Female presence may get severely diminished. Even though women played important roles during the changes, they may be forced back into the shadows. The Egyptian experience is illustrative of this dilemma. The military council annulled the parliamentary quota of compulsory 64 women MPs in the Egyptian Parliament. Consequently, the number of female MPs dropped to 9 as a result of the 2011-2012 elections. It is thus paradoxical that the pro-democracy movements may not be able to secure women's rights but lead to a regression of female empowerment instead. Similarly in Iraq, the transitional phase to democracy increased, rather than decreased, the prevalence of gender inequality (Social Watch, 2009). The case of Bahrain also shows that pro-democracy movement failed to address any female-related issues or make promises to its female supporters.

Presence of strong religious currents in the Arab Spring is yet another factor to consider. Islamist political associations, whether Shi'a or Sunni, usually view politics as a male sphere and opt not to endorse any female candidates. In Bahrain, none of the Islamic associations have ever supported female candidates in elections. Sunni conservative Al Asalah had a firm stand against female participation arguing that voters would not elect women parliamentarians because it was against their religious beliefs. A more moderate Sunni Al Menbar stated in accordance with Islamic principles that women should not be appointed as leaders of countries; but they should be allowed to participate in other areas of politics. However the association refrained from endorsing female candidates. The case of Al Wefaq was discussed earlier in this paper. No matter the reasons, female participation in the public sphere may be reduced when Islamist associations yield greater influence in political processes. It is yet another paradox that non-elected governments may, depending on their needs and agendas, be more interested in supporting women. The case of the Kingdom of Bahrain is exemplary of this phenomenon.

Women worldwide face significant challenges in entering decision-making positions. However these barriers are especially prevalent among societies in the MENA region. Sabbagh (2007) lists a number of interrelated factors that constitute key challenges to female empowerment in politics. Analysis of private and public spheres reveals personal, family, societal and political factors as well as factors that exist within the working environment that prevent full empowerment of women. The lessons of the Arab Spring show that empowerment of women needs joint engagement of female and male activists. Lack of commitment towards women's rights is detrimental for pro-democracy movements in the Middle East as stable democracy should be based on equality of all citizens regardless of gender, class, ethnicity and religion. The awareness that "sustainable development and democracy require the explicit integration of a gender perspective: women and men have to be mainstream of development" (Luciak, 2001, p. xiii) should become a thus a priority for the pro-democracy movements.

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