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## **“Every knot has someone to undo it.” Using the Capabilities Approach as a lens to view the status of women leading up to the Arab Spring in Syria**

By Lorraine Charles and Kate Denman<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The status of women in Syria has undergone great change in the last century and particularly in the decade leading up to the Syrian Arab Spring. Despite this advancement, many women are still not permitted the freedom to convert their capabilities into chosen valued activities and achievements. This has resulted in a lack of agency to decide, act and bring change in Syria. Most women do not partake in political and public life and, due to the nature of the regime and the socio-cultural landscape, their freedom to make decisions affecting their status within the public and private sphere is restricted. Women have achieved the capability of being educated, yet many have not converted this into the functioning of employment. The conversion of a capability is restricted by the social conversion factors that a patriarchal society influences. However, there are many Syrian women whose freedoms are less restricted. It was found that social class and geographic location have a significant impact in women's ability to achieve their capabilities and functionings. Women born into the middle and upper-classes in urban areas have far more opportunities than those born into lower class families and in rural areas. The Syrian Arab Spring has seen women using their agency and challenging traditional gendered roles within the society, though it remains to be seen what the future holds for women. Nonetheless, women are demanding a more equal society that is inclusive of all women's freedoms.

*Keywords:* Syria, capabilities, women

### **Introduction**

The inequalities that women face in the Middle East have been a subject of debate for decades. Despite the growth in the economies and the improvement in the living standards of many Arab states, many women still face discrimination similar to that faced centuries ago. The uprisings that began in Tunisia and spread throughout the rest of the Arab World held promise that women's plight would be improved. In Syria, though the status of some women has improved during Bashar al-Assad rule, the rights of many are still restricted within the context of a patriarchal society. This paper's main aim is to discuss the position of women in Syrian society and how their freedoms were marginalised in the period leading up to March 2011, with a particular focus on the four decades of the Assad regime. This leads to an understanding of why women want greater participation in decision-making and in the choosing of their valued activities, and that the lack of opportunities and agency diminishes a woman's ability to lead a fulfilled life. Syrian women's freedoms are analysed through the lens of the capabilities approach, thereby examining reasons why women's true freedom to achieve valued activities and agency were not fully realised under the Assad regime.

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However, before the status of women is examined, a brief overview and analysis of the uprising against the Assad regime is provided to give context to the current political landscape in Syria and to give an understanding of the new challenges which women will be facing. This is followed by the methodology used in this paper and a justification of the capabilities approach to assess the status of Syrian women.

### **Assad's Syria and the uprisings- Contextualising the current situation faced by Syrian women**

The Assad family has ruled Syria for the last forty years, under a state of emergency that has severely restricted and punished any dissent, enforced due to the official state of war with Israel. The current Syrian leader, Bashar al-Assad was perceived as open-minded, intelligent, with a Western outlook and courted by many Western leaders. He was viewed as someone who recognized the need for a real change in Syria. As leader, Bashar Al-Assad sought to reform Syria economically by building the private sector and creating more jobs. His social reform meant the attenuation of sectarian identities and thus protection of the different religious groups. Assad comes from a minority religious group (the Alawites<sup>2</sup>), an offshoot of Shia Islam, and under his rule minority groups were protected and allowed to express their religion without fear of persecution. Economic and social reform was a prelude to political reform, which he felt should happen slowly (Leverette 2005). Thus, under Bashar's rule, regulations became slightly more relaxed than under his father and Syria became a more "open" secular state where many minority groups, including women, were given more of a voice<sup>3</sup>. However, the initial desire for political reform was short-lived. In 2001, Bashar led a counter-attack against supporters of the reform, going so far as to label the reformists as agents of the West and enemies of the state, resulting in the abandoning of many of the reforms and the imprisonment of some prominent critics (Zisser 2003).

The end of 2010 saw the uprising and overthrowing of the governments of Tunisia and Egypt. Yet in early 2011, according to Bashar, Syria was immune from the uprisings that were affecting the rest of the Arab world. In mid-March, a group of fifteen young boys, between the ages of nine and fifteen were arrested and tortured by the political security, a branch of Syria's *mukhabarat* or security services, in the city of Daraa. The boys were accused of painting graffiti slogans calling for the downfall of the Assad regime. On March 18, following Friday prayer, a peaceful procession consisting of several thousands marched from the Omari Mosque in Daraa calling for the release of the children, greater political freedom, and accusing government officials of corruption. The security forces reacted to these protests initially by using water cannons and teargas against the protesters. Later, they opened live fire, killing at least four. The release of the children, obviously tortured while in detention, ignited the anger of the protesters. Within days, protests grew throughout the country, attracting thousands of people calling for political change and an end to the regime. The growing protests met with more aggressive response from the government forces.

In reaction to the violence against mostly unarmed protestors, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a group of army defectors, initially sought to protect peaceful demonstrators. However, as circumstances became more violent, the FSA changed its direction and pronounced their new objective as toppling the government by force (el-Abd, 2012). They

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<sup>2</sup>The Alawites are the largest religious minority group in Syria comprising approximately 12% of the population, with the Christian and Druze comprising each 10%.

<sup>3</sup>The quasi-secular Syrian regime has championed itself as a defender of gender equality citing female literacy rates, education attainment, the proportion of females in parliament, as well as achievement of high-level government positions as proof of their commitment.

launched attacks against the Assad's security forces in the province of Idleb, around the central cities of Homs and Hama, and even on the outskirts of Damascus. They possessed guns and rocket propelled launchers but lacked sophisticated weapons, tanks and air power. The Free Syrian Army eventually gained the support of many Arab States, allegedly armed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The other major opposition group was the Syrian National Council (SNC). This was a united group consisting of various opposition parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood, whose major objective is regime change and the establishment of a democratic, multi-party government and civil state. The SNC carried out these objectives through diplomatic negotiations with the Arab League, the United Nations, the European Union and other states.

Initially, the protestors were mainly rural, poor and Sunni. The opposition groups had failed to gain the majority support from the Christians and Alawites, who each comprise approximately 10% of the population. In fact, many Christians and Alawites<sup>4</sup>, who tend to constitute the middle and upper classes, feared what would happen if the Assad regime fell. They remained disengaged, possibly because they were desperate to retain the stability that they felt the Assad regime provided. Under Assad, these groups were somewhat protected by the quasi-secular nature of the government. These minorities believed that they would face a perilous future if the government were brought down. They feared the collapse of the regime would result in sectarian clashes or even a civil war, with reprisals against these minority groups. Nevertheless, opposition groups denied all accusations of sectarianism and claimed that they sought a multi-ethnic, multi-national and religiously tolerant society. The government argued that "its downfall would spell the end of a unified Syrian state, which would break down according to cultural divides" (Al-Azm, 2011). This situation could place minority groups in a very perilous situation and could produce sectarian violence. Slogans of "*The Alawites to the grave and the Christians to Beirut*" had been seen amongst the posters calling for freedom and democracy. This could reflect the long history of tension between minority religious groups and the majority Sunni population. This history of tension resulted in anger and fear among the various religious groups, sects and ethnicities in Syria, a motivation for them to align themselves with the Assad regime. The alternative, they feared would be deportation, persecution or death. However, amongst the demonstrators there had been a continuous insistence that Syrian people are in solidarity and that ethnic based violence has not occurred. In fact, the June 2012 massacre in the town of Houla was alleged to have been carried out by government militia drawn from the Alawi sect.

Women had been largely absent from the news headlines, however they played a prominent part in the uprisings. They have been active at the forefront of demonstrations of and high profile protests to free detained prisoners and have played a major role via social media reporting. They have created many secret circles to coordinate relief aid, including money collection, providing medical attention and medical kits, food and basic items (Roman, 2012). Their role in the uprising has been indispensable and their variety of undertakings significant. Many prominent women have spoken out against the regime, including actors, bloggers, artists and doctors. Thousands have been killed, jailed, forced to flee the country or go into hiding. One of the most prominent female activists, but by no means the only, has been Razan Zaitouneh, a lawyer and co-founder of the Syrian Human Rights Groups. Her outspoken reporting on police and military brutality has forced her into hiding throughout the past year (Khoury, 2012). International recognition of her

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<sup>4</sup> The secular Sunni middle class from the cities who benefited from the Baath party government license contracts also showed support for regime.

accomplishments came when she won the 2011 Anna Politkovskaya Award, an annual for exceptional woman defending victims in conflict zones. Another woman who tried to ensure vital dialogue between religious groups by arranging interfaith dialogue order to ease mutual fears between Christians, Alawites and Sunnis was psychologist Rafah Nached. Her work against the regime continued until her arrest in September 2011. (Brooke, 2012).

Reports in the media, blogs and YouTube (as well as other social media) provided evidence of the continuous assault by government forces against anti-government protesters and the bombardment of cities by the Syrian military. As protests grew from their origins in Daraa to other parts of the country with the epicenter of the unrest occurring in Homs and throughout the province of Idled so did the government response to the unrest. At the time of writing the focal point was beginning to shift to Damascus, with a significant blow to the Assad regime as three key inner-circle Ministers, including Bashar's brother-in-law were killed on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2012. The Syrian army was accused of atrocities against innocent civilians. Evidence obtained by Human Rights Watch suggested that government security forces participated in the operations against the protesters had received, at least in a number of cases, "shoot-to-kill" orders from their commanders (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Homs was the scene of the most violent government response to the unrest, with deaths numbering into the thousands. Numerous reports have shown violent clashes between the Syrian army and the opposition, as well as attacks on innocent civilians, including women and children, by the government forces. There is convincing evidence of the use of torture, often leading to death, and deliberate attacks against unarmed protesters. In 2012 evidence grew over the use of torture by the regime in a network of detention facilities. Information was gathered from 200 former detainees, including women and children, giving first-hand accounts of the severity of the abuse suffered (Human Rights Watch, 2012). While there is no doubt that the government forces have committed atrocities, the implementation of violence was not one-sided. The Free Syrian Army was also responsible for many deaths. There has also been evidence that the Free Syrian Army was guilty of the deaths of soldiers captured from the Syrian army and of government supporters. The Syrian government has also reported that there have been thousands of deaths within their forces. Although this may be an exaggeration, there is little doubt that the Free Syrian army may be responsible for a percentage of these. The regime further claimed that groups of armed terrorists, namely the Shabiha were acting independently and were not the government forces. The Shabiha have been accused of most of the attacks on civilians. Whilst there is no definite evidence of this, the violence against civilians does not appear to come from one particular group.

There are those that believed that media reports of violence had been exaggerated and was used as a propaganda weapon by the leaders of Western countries and the Arab League states to force regime change in Syria. According an opinion poll commissioned by the Doha Debates in late 2011, 55% of Syrians did not want their president to resign. On the contrary, 81% of Arabs from other states felt that Assad should step down (The Doha Debates, 2012). This provided some indication that opinion against the Assad regime was stronger among Syria's neighbours than within its borders. Further, the Arab League observers who toured Syria from December 2011 to January 2012 did not report the grave violations seen in the media. They further reported that the violence was not confined to the government's forces and that, contrary to reports in the press, the media was allowed access into the country (Arab League, 2012). Interestingly, the head of the Arab league observers that were appointed was Sudanese General Mohammed Ahmed al-Dabi, who is a high level official for the Sudanese government with possible linkages to war crimes. The observing team have been heavily accused of being pro-Assad and therefore producing a bias report whilst International

Committee of the Red Cross reported the same month that the humanitarian situation was in dire straits (Responsibility to Protect, 2012). Therefore, the report from the Arab League reporters was questioned for its impartiality. From a different perspective, the idea that the leaders the Arab League states, particularly those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), would have had any sympathy with Assad's opponents, who were calling for human rights and democracy, is questionable. These same leaders had done everything in their power to squash movement for democracy and freedom of speech their own countries. The Sunni leaders of the Arab world would benefit from a Syrian state without Shia leadership. If Assad was removed and replaced by a Sunni government, the other states of the Arab League, particularly Saudi Arabia, could more easily meddle in Syrian politics, resulting in Shia Iran losing its influence in Syria and footing in the Middle East.

At the time of writing, resolution of the crisis seemed remote. However, various possible scenarios have been put forward. If Assad manages to defeat the opposition and ignore international pressure to step down, over what sort of Syria would he rule? Maintenance of the regime and political status quo would mean that Assad would need to govern with a much stronger fist than he has in the past. The alleged disappearances and torture, which occurred before the protests, would continue with even greater vigour. He would need to make an example of those who opposed him to prevent similar protests from reoccurring. Alternatively, if Assad steps down or is removed (which at the moment seems the only way the violence would end, as many now believe that a truly tolerant, open and secular Syria is only possible without Assad), who would replace him and over what kind of Syria would they rule? What would become of those who currently support Assad? Bearing in mind that this may be as much as 30% of the population, this is a sizeable minority. The fear of the Christian and Alawite minority against retribution if Assad loses control is justified. These groups believe they will not be asked whether or not they had supported Assad but will be persecuted for the fact of whom they are. This could lead to an outbreak of sectarian violence. Any new Syrian leader would need to assure the Christian and Shia population that there would be no retribution against them. But, how can this be guaranteed? Is a post-Assad Syria, rife with sectarian violence leading to Civil War, preferable to a Syria with Assad remaining at the helm? This could easily result in the same path. If Assad steps down, what role should and could the International Community, and particularly the Arab League, play to ensure that Syria does not become a failed state, plagued by civil war along religious lines? The answers to these questions are beyond the remit of this research. Nevertheless, they are important because the fate of Syria's women, the subject of this paper, depends very much on the final outcome to the Syrian Arab Spring.

### **Methodology and limitations**

Examination of the status of Syrian women was conducted using the capabilities approach as the theoretical framework. This analysis was predominantly conducted via desktop research on women's status. In addition, a panel of five Syrian women, knowledgeable about the issues facing women, was consulted to support the analysis. The women were questioned about their education and employment opportunities, their political involvement and decision-making opportunities and the extent of their involvement in society as well as how, and if, this varies with social class and geographic location. They were also asked about what future changes they hoped would occur for women in their society. The women were all from middle-class, well-educated backgrounds, and are more likely to exercise their valued functionings and agency.

This paper is restricted to measuring the lack of capabilities and functionings of Syrian women due to the Assad rule and the reasons why support for political change could improve their capabilities and functionings. It is important to recognize that the capabilities of men were also confined during the Assad rule as they encountered similar conditions. However this paper focuses on women as they face additional social and cultural constraints due in part to a patriarchal society. It is also unable to assess exactly if a new government would improve women's capabilities as there is no guarantee that whoever leads Syria next would establish and sustain equal conditions for every individual in Syria, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion, or regional location in order to achieve the valued outcomes recommended by the capability approach. At the time of writing, the protests were ongoing and showing little sign of abating. Therefore, this paper holds limited scope to discuss resolution and the role of women in post-revolutionary reconstruction of Syria. Furthermore, this paper is constrained by the limited access of women who felt confident to respond to the questionnaires without fear of reprisal due to the insecurity in Syria. It is also recognized that a bias is present from the personal involvement of the researchers in Syria.

### **Why view the status of women in Syria through the capabilities approach?**

The capabilities approach assesses freedom by focusing on what people are able to do and be. It focuses on the quality of, and on the ability to remove obstacles from, their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life they have reason to value. Essentially, it is about living a life one has reason to live. Sen (1999) defines capabilities as the opportunities, or freedoms, someone has to achieve valued activities. These activities are referred to as functionings (Sen, 1999). What makes the capabilities approach so versatile is that it not only assesses an individual's well-being and social arrangements, but it can also be used to evaluate proposals about social change in society. Agency is essentially the ability to pursue goals the individual has reason to value (Sen, 1999). Individual well-being and existence is said to be influenced by what are known as conversion factors. This can be personal, environmental or social. Personal conversion factors, such as physical health, reading skills and intelligence influence how a person can convert a capability into a functioning. Social conversion factors like public policies, social norms, discriminating practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies and power relations also exist. Environmental conversion factors, such as climate and geographical location also play a role in the conversion from characteristics of the good to the individual functioning. Hence, knowing the goods a person owns or can use is not sufficient to know which functionings can be achieved. Therefore, it is necessary to know much more about the person and the circumstances in which she lives (Robeyns, 2005).

According to Sen (1999), all capabilities combine to create conditions for an individual to have a fulfilling life. As a result, it lends itself to discussion about varying aspects of the lives of women and the adverse effect of a lack of these capabilities. Furthermore, the use of the capabilities approach allows for assessment, which is not based exclusively on commodities, income or material possession. It acknowledges that, while resources improve women's well being, the priority should be placed on capabilities and functionings. This focus does not deny the important connection that a lack of resources can result in a lack of capabilities. Thus, a shortage of money can lead to inequalities in access to education, with preference being given to the males of the family. However, the capabilities approach allows for a complete analysis of the situation. It will not simply evaluate the lack of capabilities and functions in inequality in access to education, but will analyze which inequalities in resources result in these gender disparities.

The hypothesis for this paper states that women's freedom to choose their functionings has been limited in a patriarchal society with many of the rights and freedoms granted to Syrian women not truly reaching the vast majority who live with limited means to achieve functionings.

### **The development of women's capabilities in Syria**

This section summarises the developments and limitations that women in Syria have experienced in recent history until March 2011, viewed through the lens of Sen's capabilities approach and will include reflections on women's capabilities through the eyes of Syrian women today. According to this paradigm, the more capabilities women have the more freedom they have to convert those into chosen functionings or achievements, resulting in more agency to decide, act and, if they desired, bring change in Syria. In other words, if women in Syria are not constrained within the social and political context, a more equal and just society may result. However, being denied capabilities will consequentially affect functionings and agency (Deneulin & Shahani, 2009). Women's access to capabilities in Syria has changed considerably over the last century and is still very dependent on region, social class and religion. Overall, their capabilities and valued functionings have improved social justice for women in Syria. Nevertheless, the question remains have they improved enough? Or have they improved to the point where women were able to use their agency to demand change in the Syrian regime, to organize, facilitate and take part in the uprisings that are alleged to be demanding human rights for all men and women?

Syria gained independence in 1946, and by 1949 women were given the right to vote. Syria was the second Arab country to allow this right, preceded only by Iraq. However, this vote contained restrictions, and it was only in 1953 that women were given the unrestricted right to vote and to be nominated in legislative elections. Yet given the past 40 years of the Assad regime, the "right" to vote may be merely rhetoric, as actually being able to use the vote for true democratic change was denied during Assad's rule. Under the pretence of democracy, the Assad regime prohibited opposition parties, meaning there was only one party to vote for, the Ba'ath party. This predestined that genuine political participation was not guaranteed. The Assad regime had no motivation to grant people's participation as without public criticism there was no need to seek support for re-election. The Ba'ath party had no political incentives to grant freedoms and as a result were able to rule absolutely, denying their citizens basic rights. If rulers face criticism and need popular support from citizens in order to win elections, there is incentive to listen to the people. The lack of incentives meant there was a denial of "public choice" due to the lack of ability to "exercise public reason" (Rawls in Sen, 2010). Viewed through the capability approach, this lack of political participation is an impoverishment of human life. The denial of true democracy can be considered one of the conversion factors of capabilities, as capabilities are not isolated but are affected by internal ability and by opportunities made feasible by society.

In Syria, not being able to effectively use the right to vote or participate in the political sphere is due to the social conversion factor, which in this case can be considered a result of public policies and discriminating practices on the part of the regime. This limits ones freedom to derive the functioning from the capability. Viewed through the capabilities approach, political participation is one of the capabilities necessary to lead a fulfilled life. Sen (2000) contends that "in order to express effectively what we value and to demand that attention be paid to it, we need free speech and democratic choice. Exclusion from the process of governance and political participation is indeed an impoverishment of human lives..." (Sen, 2000: 38). Prior to the uprisings in March 2011, Syria was ruled under a state

of emergency that severely punished any dissent and where political freedom was severely limited. Genuine political participation and free speech was not an automatic guarantee in Syria. In general, when governments respect the rights of and provide materially for their people, even in the absence of genuine political participation, the absence of democracy may not be such an issue. However, the political incentives that come along with democratic governance acquire much greater significance when the government begins to act against its people. In other words, the protective role of democracy is most strongly missed when it is most needed (Sen, 2000).

The male dominated and patriarchal society in Syria acted as a deterrent for women to become active in many aspects of life, with politics being a particularly male dominated sphere. Syria ranks at 110 out of 135 countries for Political Empowerment in the Global Gender Gap, scoring 0.0603<sup>5</sup>, fractionally better than Egypt with a score of 0.0311 ranking 126. Possible contribution factors for the lack of female involvement in politics could be low self-esteem and self-confidence, which is endorsed by certain cultural patterns or family upbringing, which discriminates between the male and female in matters of freedoms, responsibilities and rights (Al Maaitah et al, 2011:15). In patriarchal societies, women are often hindered from entering public life by a combination of conservative religious interpretations and cultural stereotyping. The concept that a woman's natural predisposition is in the home is a widely accepted gender role. However, it could be argued that some women have formed adaptive preferences. Thus, female participation in politics has continued to remain nominal, as women were unable to use their valued functionings in society.

The 2011 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap report ranked Syria at 124 out of 135 countries in terms of gender equality (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2011), below that of all its neighbouring countries. When analysed in the sub categories, one of Syria's main areas of inequality was *Opportunity and Political Empowerment*. There is no doubt that women have had access to some capabilities through their limited political involvement and the breaking down of personal conversion factors. Some, albeit very few, were then able to convert their capabilities into functionings. Policy changes made way for women's voices to begin to enter the political sphere in 1960 when two Syrian women gained the first seats in the National Assembly. Since then, apart from a short period in 1961, there has never been a time without female representation in the legislative council (Jabbour, 2006). Women became deputies in the Syrian Parliament in 1971, holding four seats. However, this number has only marginally increased since, and today women still constitute only 12% of the Syrian Parliament with only 5% representation in Syria ministerial positions. Despite women's representation at government institutions, their degree of influence may be questionable. This is not only due to low representation but also to how they are supported within their positions. One Syrian respondent to the questionnaire conducted as part of this research, noted that women were usually assigned non-sensitive ministerial positions and hardly ever in the more prominent ministries. When further questioned about the limitations placed on women from partaking in the political sphere, respondents agreed that there are no restrictions to women holding political office, being allowed to vote, and as noted above holding political office. However, one noted that, "more than 90 per cent of the female members of parliament are very well connected and have associations with the Ba'ath ruling party." She goes on to elaborate that "it is prestigious for the regime to be perceived as one which encourages women's engagement and supports women's rights". She believes that parliament is not a cohesive or effective tool but merely a mouthpiece for the regime and a

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<sup>5</sup> The scoring rates countries from 0 to 1, where 0 is inequality and 1 is equality

“cheering team that would deepen the roots of totalitarianism, nepotism, dependency, and reliance.” Comments like this give credence to the inability for women to genuinely achieve their capabilities in a society where true political freedom is not possible.

The social norms in Syria enabled social conversion factors, in this case discriminating practices against women, gender roles and societal hierarchies which placed women at the bottom of society, forming barriers to women’s freedoms. Culturally, women were still expected to be subservient to men. Their role in the home was their predominant function. However, although it was the capabilities of the few that enabled political and social representation, their agency did not reflect the agency of the majority of women who still did not have the valued functioning of freedom as opportunity or process. This meant that they lacked opportunities to pursue their objectives within society and also lacked the process of choice, as women were forced into a state of subservience due to societal constraints (Sen A. , 2010). The very fact that the majority of women were not able to partake in political, social or economic life meant that they were hindered from making decisions that affected them. Women’s participation in decision-making in the social realm was one of the issues addressed to the women questioned. Whilst there was acknowledgement that the majority of women lacked capabilities and functionings for genuine participation in society, there was general consensus that participation depended greatly on the family situation and the geographical location in which women live. All respondents agreed that in urban areas there is much more freedom to make decisions. According to the women questioned, the ability to make decisions depends upon the context under which women live, the family and the community, along with the patriarchal culture of Syrian society that shapes ideas and prejudices about the role of women. They further elaborated that women’s participation, freedom, decision-making abilities, and opportunities hugely expand in the urban areas and within the middle and upper classes. In the more rural and poorer areas, women’s roles are more traditional as the priorities and societal interests differ. One respondent claimed the ‘pick and choose’ approach by families to mainstream traditions further makes it problematic to recognize when women are genuinely making decisions themselves or when these are driven by societal norms. Another prominent response was the effect that finances had on decision-making. It was felt that women’s increased financial independence over the last twenty years has corresponded with greater ability and opportunity to make decisions. However, one respondent noted that traditional norms could still constrain women’s true ability to make decisions regardless of the wealth of her family. Thus, traditional societal norms and the constraints of patriarchal families seem to have greater effect on rural and poor women than on the urban middle and upper classes, affecting women’s ability to achieve capabilities and the resultant functionings of genuine decision-making.

Syria’s constitution “guarantees” gender equality. In fact, women have won several rights not available to women in other Arab countries. One crucial right is the custody of children until the age of 15 years in case of marital disputes. However, the personal status laws of Syria and the penal code contain certain provisions that still discriminate against women and girls, particularly in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Further, the nationality law of 1969 prevented Syrian women married to foreigners the right to pass on their citizenship to their children (Human Rights Watch, 2012). However, in 2011 a new law was drafted that would allow Syrian mothers to pass on their nationality to their children. The implementation of this law has yet to be consummated (UNHCR, 2012). In addition, further limitations are placed on women’s capabilities through the legal system. Syrian law does not recognise the concept of spousal rape (SIGI). Furthermore, honour killings are not uncommon in Syria, and until 2004 the media was not allowed to report such crimes.

However, under Bashar's rule this has changed. The law, however, allows for judges to give reduced sentences for killings with "honourable" intent. Even though the penal code criminalises violence against women, loopholes exist (Human Rights Watch, 2012). For example, the marriage contract is only signed by the groom and the male guardian of the bride. This is due to the Personal Status Code, which considers women as legal dependents of their fathers or husbands and not independent citizens. One respondent highlighted two of the areas where mal-treatment is still observed regardless of the actual law. These are marriage and inheritance rights. "Some families will force women to marry their cousins so family money will remain in the family. Or brothers will prevent sisters from their due inheritance when their fathers die." She continued to add that in spite of the modern lifestyle frequently observed in Damascus, some men still prefer to marry younger girls due to the concept that younger girls can be more easily moulded and taught to obey their husbands. These factors prevent women from achieving certain capabilities and citizenship rights, and the resultant functionings. Social conversion factors, in this case the discrimination against women in the legal system and in socio-cultural areas, act to perpetuate inequality and discriminatory attitudes in society which suppress women's functionings and maintain a status quo of a patriarchal society.

The right to education is one capability that Syrian women seem to have achieved. In Syria there is a very small gender gap with regards to educational attainment, with similar figures to Egypt. There is a 92% female primary enrolment compared with 97% for males, equal secondary enrolment for both genders (70%) and a 12% enrolment in tertiary education compared to 17% for males. It boasts an 86% literacy rate, with women's literacy levels going up from 33% in 1980 to 79% in 1999. The UNDP reports that in 2010, 24% of females (and males) aged of 25 and over had a secondary school education. Currently, primary education is free and compulsory in Syria and over 51% of university graduates in Syria are women. The majority of respondents noted that the social or physical restrictions on women and girls capabilities to gain education also depend heavily on geographical location and family traditions. Respondents recognised that poorer rural families will prioritise a boy's education at secondary and tertiary level, whereas in large cities, especially Damascus, women tend to enjoy full access to education. In addition, middle and upper class families of all religions consider university completion extremely prestigious for women and men, making university more available and flexible for women to pursue. It was also commented that some minority religions such as the Christians and Alawites place a higher significance on women's education at university level regardless of geographical location. This may be attributed to the fact that economic status is generally better in the minority religions, although one Christian respondent credits this to religious values, where there is a more open and liberal attitude towards women when compared to Muslim beliefs.

Conversely, one rationale why women's education is not necessarily converted to employment is that in many communities, education converts to a functioning of being more educated and a more desirable housewife. This results in being able to marry a man with a higher social and economic status, but not necessarily in the opportunity for, or desirability of professional development. As mentioned by respondents, many women value their choice of not going into paid employment and choose their valued functioning in a more traditional family role. It is therefore important to note that education does not necessarily equate to the functioning of an active role in private or public decision-making in society's economic and political sphere. Whether this is due to a cultural value, an adaptive preference or a social conversion factor blocking the freedom to execute certain functionings is unclear. Unterhalter (2009) highlights that in a male dominant society, such of that in Syria, girls may adjust their

preferences to the expectations of the society. One activist who supports the uprising as a form of social change for gender equality mentioned that limitations are “associated with the patriarchal communities, lack of job opportunities, lack of available jobs close to the family home, and the early age of marriage in some areas.” These socio-cultural gendered roles were also mentioned by another respondent who commented that a woman does not want to be seen or associated with performing jobs that entail masculine attributes. “They [the general public] perceive this kind of work to reduce femininity.” Interestingly, four out of five of the panel of women questioned noted that there were no limitations for women to use their education in paid employment. In fact, two remarked that women are becoming the preferable gender to employ in many jobs. They attributed this to the gendered characteristics associated with women, such as being hard working and loyal, and to the belief that they possess more diverse skills. They identified that some men now feel they are suffering from gender discrimination in employment.

Cultural norms are powerful in repressing people and can produce inequalities and restrict the capabilities of others; these cultural norms can be played out in forms of exclusion. Social exclusion can be active or passive. Passive exclusion comes from exclusion that is not deliberate but achieved through social processes (Sen, 2000). Women in Syria have continued to experience passive social exclusion in areas of work and decision-making. This has restricted their capabilities to choose functionings and limited their development of freedom. Such exclusion can perpetuate adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999), which are moulded when achievement and failure are internalised. If exclusion from paid employment has been internalised, this would account for the discrepancy between the perceived opinion of limitless opportunities at work for women and the actual figures observed in the UNDP gender gap reports. This report highlights that men sustain 80% of the labour force in Syria (UNDP, 2011). Another point to consider, as one respondent noted, is the very fact that “some men have attempted to ask for their rights as females have reduced their chances of finding work.” This implies that men feel threatened by the rise of women in professional employment. They are accustomed to a male dominated field where conservative traditions keep women in the home. In a country where unemployment is high, competition for jobs becomes inflamed when a new distinct group of people, in this case women, enter a workforce. As a result, tensions arise. The risk of an increase in the attitude that women are taking the jobs and opportunities away from men who account for the majority of the workforce may prevail. This could be due to the notion that a rise in women’s employment destabilises men’s traditional position in society and challenges what was once perceived as their identifiable rightful place within their cultural ranks. As women choose more varied functionings in their lives, there is a risk that an oppressive conservative movement will begin to challenge women’s rights and freedoms. This risk is heightened even more as the prospect of change of control grows, not just within the regime, but also within the shifting gender roles. As Syria moves forward, there must be tenacious effort to keep women’s rights and capabilities at the forefront, ensuring that there is mutuality to eliminate the risk of more conservative groups from repressing women and from raising more conversion barriers for women to choose their valued functionings in society.

The succession of Bashar Al-Assad to President of Syria had promises for a change in the lives of Syrian women for the better. This notion was reinforced by his marriage to Asma Fawaz al-Akhras in 2000. Asma was known to have Western liberal values and was heralded as a voice of secularism and modernisation. She was seen as an agent for social change in Syria, encouraging active citizenship and attempting to involve Syrians in fostering a spirit of openness. She set an example for many Syrian women that they need not live in the shadows

of their husbands. They could be educated, outspoken and glamorous, yet still believe in their values and faith. This allowed new affiliations with women's identity to form, which in turn enabled a wider range of functionings for women. When asked specifically about the Syrian First Lady, one respondent felt that she was greatly admired by many and perceived as role model for young women<sup>6</sup>. Asma challenged the mainstream gendered identity of women in Syria, confronting the limitations that many women experienced which was commonly coupled with a religious identity that placed further expectations of a gendered role in society. The lack of self-confidence and gendered role that had restricted many young Syrian women from using their capabilities to enter male dominated areas of work and politics was beginning to disperse. In the first decade of the century, attitudes towards women's social roles were opening, especially in major cities such as Damascus, Homs and Latakia, which saw a rise in women positions outside the home. This allowed some women to achieve their valued functionings.

When asked to comment on the future of Syria, numerous points were mentioned. Some women emphasised that the Al Assad regime had brought about many benefits for women's rights however there was still large scope for improvement. The overriding sentiment with regards to women's freedoms and activities was the need for "legitimate and real participation by women from all societal classes and geographical locations". Regarding the future for women in decision-making capacity, respondents noted that there should be consolidated effort to gain higher female representation in the parliament, municipalities and the judiciary. One warned that representation must be "effective, influential, and tangible to achieve the ultimate goal of genuine female participation" in decision-making. It was mentioned that there was a need for women to have amplified financial independence in order to have greater opportunity to make decisions in the home and at national levels. They remarked that it was crucial for society to have less expectation on women to take on a dual role in the home and at work should they choose employment. This would allow women to feasibly contribute to the workforce rather than trying to balance both areas. If patriarchal gendered roles were deconstructed, women would begin to break down conversion factors that are limiting their real choice of functionings. For these changes to occur it was referenced that education must foster greater dialogue between cultures in order for people to fully understand women's roles in all aspects of society, including business, politics and education. Another respondent stressed her concern of separating female elites from working-class women, commenting on the detrimental effects it would have to women's empowerment. She highlighted that research analysis is urgently required in order to design practical follow up plans that will focus on rural poor women and a broader scope for empowerment.

In March 2011 men and women used their agency to document, protest and speak out regarding their situation. The uprisings have given women a unique opportunity to emerge as leaders in the families as well as in society. It has provided an opportunity for many women to take the helm in decision making within the family as male members of families have either been arrested or killed, leaving the women as the sole bread-winner and decision-maker. Women have also participated in peaceful protests, often jeopardizing their own

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the positive example set for Syrian women and image the Syrian First Lady portrayed to the international community, her image was tarnished by her actions, or lack of, in the context of the Arab Spring. When a campaign launched by the wives of the British and US ambassadors to the United Nations calling on her to speak out against the brutality of her husband's regime was met by silence, the international community realised that Asma Al-Assad lacked either the ability or desire, or both, to act in defence of the Syrian people.

safety and have documented the crimes against humanity committed by the regime. There are some prominent Syrian women writing for international news agencies, blogging and using other forms of social media to recount the atrocities that occur daily in Syria. They have also established relief committees and established charity drives, forming groups and committees to provide food and non-food items to the injured families in affected areas. Additionally, they have conducted activities to provide psychological and social support for the children who have suffered through the protests.

Although present in the protests, women have been less visible than men. However their presence has been felt throughout the uprisings. Syrian women have organized protests to show solidarity with those killed or detained by the security forces by staging day and night protests and marches. They have not escaped the brutality of the Syrian. Reports abound of women being killed as indiscriminately as men. There seems to be no apparent distinction in the treatment of women by the Syrian army. A United Nations Human Rights Council report stated that women were threatened during house raids by the military and security forces. Defectors from the military and the security forces indicated that they had been present in places of detention where women were sexually assaulted whilst the threat of sexual violence against the wives and daughters of many detained by the authorities was also reported (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011) Furthermore, a Human Rights Watch report on Syria gives accounts of several women who were detained by the authorities (Human Rights Watch 2012a). This gives an indication of the extent of the female participation. Although the uprisings have not improved women's capabilities, it has provided opportunities for women to emerge from the cultural and social constraints that had previously bound them. They have taken on new roles and are challenging socio-cultural constraints. As the opportunity for change arises so does the opportunity for a more equal society that is inclusive of all women's freedoms. During political change, it is imperative that women's capabilities and freedoms be kept at the front of political and social movements to reduce the risk of a recoiling of oppression.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the capabilities of Syrian women have improved in Syria in the forty years of the Assad regime, and particularly in the last ten years of Bashar's rule prior to the beginning of the protests. Women have made progress in domains that were previously only accessible to men. There is stronger female political representation and, as a result, positive changes have been made toward improving the opportunities or capabilities available to women. Women have begun to take a greater role in the decision making process within the political context. They also have equal access to educational opportunities allowing many to achieve the functionings of gainful employment, resulting in greater economic independence. Further, Syrian women have begun to break the traditional gendered stereotypes that have long been ingrained in the patriarchal society and have begun to play a more active role in the community.

The original premise of this paper, that women's freedom to choose their functionings has been limited in a patriarchal society, has been demonstrated through the discussion, as the capabilities and available functionings are not inclusive but substantially rest upon the geographic and social-class of the woman, with urban middle and upper-class women experiencing the greatest freedoms. This paper shows that despite the evident improvement in capabilities and its conversion to functionings, the agency of Syrian women is limited due to the political and cultural landscape in which they live. Social conversion factors still significantly constrain genuine political and economic participation and adaptive preferences

have formed through internalised narrow gender roles. The fact remains that whilst a few are able to achieve their desired functionings, the vast majority of Syrian women are not equally as fortunate.

The Syrian Arab Spring has not improved the capabilities of women in Syria, but has given them the opportunity to show their strength and to emerge as leaders in a society that has previously sought to repress them. What remains to be seen is whether women in post-revolutionary Syria will be allowed full participation in all aspects of society. At this critical time it is vital for the international community to recognise the importance of the rights of women as resounded in the words of the Nobel Prize for Peace committee 2011,: “We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society (Nobel Peace Prize , 2011).”

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