

Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha, Janina Hecht (eds.)

THE CRITICAL STAGE. YOUNG VOICES ON CRUCIAL TOPICS



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Francesca Caferrì

The Arab Spring as a Women's Revolution

The day a group of armed men jumped on a bus in a remote valley of Pakistan and shot a young female student in the head, they had no idea of the consequences of their actions.¹ They thought they were going to silence Malala Yousafzai forever; instead, they sparked a revolution, in Pakistan and elsewhere in the Islamic world. When Malala Yousafzai started her recovery in a safe house in Great Britain, her family and doctors said that the young girl wanted to go back, as soon as possible, to fighting for what she believes in: girls' education. Malala Yousafzai is a powerful symbol of a revolution that has been going on in Muslim countries for years, but one that we, in the West, only began to notice in 2011, during the Arab Spring:² a women's revolution.

The young Pakistani girl has become the symbol of a movement that has many powerful representatives throughout the broader Middle East. I have spent the last ten years following it, travelling across the region as a reporter for the Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica*. During my trips, I met some amazing people; many of them women – young women and old, following their own paths in the world, not the paths society would have them walk. Their way of doing things often does not fit into the accepted way of acting, and so society does not approve. I am talking about people like the daughter of the late Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, Nadia Yassine, now the head of the women's branch of *Al Adl Wal Ihsane* (Justice and Charity), the largest grassroots organisation in Morocco, banned as a political movement because of its Islamist stance and its critical attitude towards the monarchy.³ Nadia is the country's most popular female figure, much more popular than Princess Lalla Salma, wife of King Mohammed VI, who is idolised by the international media.

Then there are young, committed women like the Egyptian Asmaa Mahfouz, the veiled heroine of 25 January 2011, who at the age of 25 posted a video on YouTube urging Egyptians to join her in Tahrir Square.⁴ This helped spark the Egyptian Revolution, as it brought thousands of her compatriots out onto the streets to protest

1 In late 2008 Mullah Fazlullah, then Taliban leader in the Pakistani Swat Valley, warned that 'all female education had to cease [...], or schools would suffer consequences.' Undeterred by this, 11-year-old Malala Yousafzai kept going to school and spoke out publicly for girls' rights to education, for example in a blog for BBC Urdu. On 9 October 2012, Malala was shot in a school bus on her way home; cf. *Mishal Husain*: Malala: The Girl Who Was Shot for Going to School, in: BBC News, 07.10.2013; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24379018> [21.05.2014].

2 The Arab Spring, a term popularised by the Western media, refers to the diverse movement of uprisings, revolutions, and demonstrations across the Arab world in protest against authoritarian regimes, and with demands for greater social justice. The Arab Spring began on 18 December 2010 in Tunisia, where the revolution has more commonly become known as the 'Jasmine Revolution'. It was followed by the Egyptian Revolution, also dubbed the 'Lotus Revolution', which began on 25 January 2011.

3 Cf. *Carol Migdalovitz*: Morocco. Current Issues, in: Congressional Research Service, 04.12.2008; <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/154159.pdf> [21.05.2014].

4 Cf. *Iyad El-Baghdadi*: Meet Asmaa Mahfouz and the Vlog that Helped Spark the Revolution, YouTube video, 01.02.2011; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgijgMdsEuk> [21.05.2014].

against President Mubarak's regime. In Tahrir square she found herself standing side by side with the white-haired Nawal El Saadawi, the secular feminist psychiatrist and activist exiled for years for having dared to juxtapose words such as 'female' and 'sexuality' in her writings. Or finally, there are women like Tawakkul Karman, the Yemeni journalist who led the non-violent protests of 2011 in a country that has one of the highest weapons per capita ratios of anywhere in the world.⁵ Her role in the Sana'a Spring, the revolution in Yemen's capital, earned her the Nobel Peace Prize, making her the first Arab woman to receive this honour.

In the last ten years I have met women like Nadia, Asmaa, and Tawakkul in Pakistan and Yemen, and other women under *abayas*⁶ in Saudi Arabia and many other countries. They are at the forefront of a movement that has many faces, but one that is succeeding in changing the face of the Muslim world, and that will do so to an even greater extent in the future. They are at work in offices and universities, in squares where they demonstrate and in parliaments where they have managed to make laws more favourable to women; not all those laws are being enforced, but now they have at least been put down on paper. And compared to the past, this is already a big step forward.

This movement can lay claim to its own origins, its own traditions, its own religion, and does not merely mimic the Western world. In the *Sunnah* – the collection of *hadith*, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and episodes from his life – there is a story of a young man who went to see the Prophet to ask for advice before joining a military expedition.

“And his reply was: ‘Is your mother alive?’

‘Yes,’ said the young man.

‘Then stay with her, because paradise is at her feet.’”

Of the 359 million inhabitants of the 22 countries in the Arab world in 2010,⁷ more than 50% were women, the majority of them quite young.⁸ Compared to previous generations, today's young women have greater opportunities to study and work, marry later in life, and have a greater voice in the political and social institutions of their countries. They also – and this is a key factor – have fewer children, thereby giving themselves and the children they do bring into the world better educational opportunities and access to health care. Between 1970 and 2010, the fertility rate in the Arab world declined more quickly than in any other region of the world, from

5 Cf. *The Graduate Institute Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2007*; <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/yearbook/small-arms-survey-2007.html> [21.05.2014].

6 An *abaya* is a traditional, robe-like Islamic garment that covers the whole body except for the face, feet, and hands.

7 Cf. *Barry Mirkin: Population Levels, Trends and Policies in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities*, in: UNDP Arab Human Development Report, 2010; <http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdrps/paper01-en.pdf> [21.05.2014], p. 9.

8 Cf. *ibid.*

6.8 children per woman to 3.6.⁹ By 2050, experts believe that every family in the region will have an average of 2.1 children,¹⁰ a figure in line with the rest of the world, where there are currently 2.45 children per household.¹¹ This change has enormous consequences, which include an increase in the level of education for women, a narrowing of the education gap between the sexes, and greater female participation in the labour sector.

As the birth rate drops, the percentage of girls going to school is on the rise, particularly in the wealthier countries in the region: today, 90% of girls in the Arab world go to primary school; and in 12 Arab countries, 80% are enrolled in secondary school, where more than half of the best students are female.¹² A closed and conservative country like Saudi Arabia provides a good example here: 60% of the students currently attending Saudi universities are women,¹³ as are 21% of the 80,000 university students studying abroad on grants sponsored by King Abdullah.¹⁴ In recent years, the return of young women who studied in the United States and Europe has shaken up the country in ways that were previously unthinkable, a phenomenon that can only increase in intensity.

“How long do you think these young women will be happy to remain without work, without the possibility of expressing themselves or voting when they return home?” This is the question a representative of the United Nations asked me in her office in Riyadh in 2010. The UN official smiled with an air of complicity. She could not talk officially about the issue, given its sensitivity, but she was convinced that the country was sitting on a time bomb; and she was very pleased about it. She explained that, like her colleagues across the region, she believed that there would be a growing number of educated women calling for change in even the most conservative countries, such as Saudi Arabia itself. “It will take time and it won’t be easy, but they have started on the path,” she concluded. The number of women taking part in the ongoing Arab Spring demonstrations across the region indicates that she was right.

My point is relatively simple: Revolutions are taking place in the Muslim world, and we in the West are too busy fighting against mosques in our cities and the phantoms of extremism to notice them. We ignored the youth revolution, fuelled by social

9 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 13.

10 Cf. *ibid.*

11 Cf. *Central Intelligence Agency: The World Factbook*, 2013; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2127.html> [21.05.2014].

12 This data was collected during a field trip to Riyadh in 2010. The source I obtained the data from prefers to remain anonymous.

13 Cf. *Katy Watson: Winning the Case for Women in Work: Saudi Arabia's Steps to Reform*, in: BBC News, 13.12.2012; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-20697030> [21.05.2014].

14 Cf. *Carol Fleming: Saudi Arabia: Saudi Scholarship Students Abroad in the Spotlight*, in: American Bedu Blog, 03.12.2011; <http://americanbedu.com/2011/12/03/saudi-arabia-saudi-scholarship-students-abroad-in-the-spotlight> [21.05.2014].

media, until it exploded in our faces, in those days when the Tunisian 'Jasmine Revolution' affected the entire world. The women's revolution has been right under our noses for years, but we have not noticed that either.

Yet we *should* notice it: not because it is colourful or photogenic, but because it is a sign of a profound change taking place in countries that are close to us and that are vital for our future stability. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 to Tawakkul Karman shone a light on this phenomenon: the amazement and controversy that accompanied the announcement of the prize says much about the short-sightedness that the West often displays towards the Muslim world.

Some of you may say that my vision is too optimistic, that I am not taking into consideration the attacks on women's rights that took place in several countries after the revolutions. My reply is that every revolution is a long-term process, and cannot be judged in the short term. My experience is that women are at the helm of this movement, and that, despite how difficult the times are, those women are no longer willing to let others take away their rights. In fact, the movement called the 'Arab Spring' is not only a great opportunity for the countries involved, it is also a great opportunity for their women. If conservative forces prevail – and it will be years before this becomes clear – the condition of women will not improve. But if the reformers win, along with the women among them, it will signify an epochal change.

My words may seem exaggerated to some, but in my opinion they are not. The debate concerning the status of women is still an open question in many areas of the world, Italy included, but nowhere is it more important than in the Middle East. Women's rights are at the centre of debates in Islamic countries. Many of the battles being fought between reformers and conservatives are over this very issue, as we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt during the last few months. Over the long term, it will be the attitude towards women that will decide what kind of social and economic development the nations in question will embark on, and how they will relate to the outside world – because when the conditions of women change, all of society changes as well.

The broad movement – both positive and negative – that I have tried to describe here is never, or hardly ever, depicted in the press. Most of the Muslim women who interest the Western media are generally representatives of the 'strange but true' genre – converted zealots like Sandrine Moulères and Barbara Aisha Farina in France and Italy, who challenge the state for the right to wear the *niqab*.¹⁵ Or they are 'women in opposition' who loudly claim their sexual rights, denouncing Islam as the root of many, if not all, evils (such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji, to name just two). Or they are popular royalty and glamorous and fashionable first ladies, like Queen Rania of Jordan.

¹⁵ A *niqab* is a veil worn by Muslim women in parts of the Arab world that covers the hair and the face except for the eyes.

These are not the women I want to talk about. I want to talk about all the others: I want to describe the dozens of businesswomen in Qatar and in the other Emirates leading successful businesses, the thousands of young women crossing the thresholds of universities in Morocco and Egypt, or those determined to make a future for themselves by studying in schools like the one I visited in Kabul. These women are not strange, they are not exceptions: they are real and they live real lives, just like millions of other women in their countries. They are not famous. They do not throw their *burkas*¹⁶ in front of photographers' lenses or shout at TV cameras. But they are fighting daily battles that we in the West ignore, too busy discussing veils and how many centimetres of skin should be covered or uncovered.

Some are poor, others extremely rich. Some have an impressive knowledge of the Koran and the scriptures, others can barely read or write. And many others are just ordinary people who have found ways to be free in that sphere that in recent years has been the world's greatest bringer of openness and democracy: the Internet. Once again, there are tireless mobilisers, like the Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi; and others who do not even realise that they are part of a movement, like the Afghan policewoman I met and interviewed during a field trip in 2009, who was determined to work despite threats from her own colleagues. There are those who 'dance alone', like Haifa Wehbe, the sultry Lebanese pop star who, between one wink and another, proudly announces that she is a Shia Muslim just like the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah (whom she claims to admire).

Not all will emerge victorious: the newspapers are still full of stories about activists who have been killed, girls' schools that have been burned down, and demonstrators who have been beaten up. Before one forward step can be taken, it is sometimes necessary to take two steps back. It is depressing to know that in 2011 women in Saudi Arabia were once again barred from voting in local elections; however, in 2015, they too will be standing in line at the ballot box. And if we recall that women were not allowed to vote until 1920 in the United States, and not until 1948 in Italy, it may help us put the issue into perspective.

Egyptian women were manhandled and forced to undergo virginity tests during the days of Tahrir Square, but thousands came out into the streets to protest after pictures were published of a veiled girl being publicly beaten and stripped to her bra and jeans by a group of soldiers. This last example is representative of the many experiences that I have documented in my years as a reporter across the Islamic world: as they wait for their definitive victory, the women of the Muslim world continue to struggle, and have no intention of stopping.

16 A *burka* is a robe-like Islamic garment that covers the whole body, including the head and face, with a grill to hide the eyes.

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About the Author

Francesca Caferri, born in 1972, is a foreign correspondent for the Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica*. In her journalistic work, she has provided extensive international news coverage for the World Affairs section of *La Repubblica*, specialising in development issues and major international events, with an emphasis on the Middle East. From 1999 to 2001, she covered humanitarian and European Union issues at CNN Italia in Rome and Atlanta, USA. From 2002 to 2006, Caferri taught international relations and foreign affairs at the 'Istituto per la Formazione al Giornalismo' in Urbino, Italy. In 2007 she earned a Masters degree in Islamic studies from the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome. She has reported, among other locations, from Sri Lanka during the tsunami crisis, from Lebanon during that country's 2006 war with Israel, from Pakistan in the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's assassination, as well as from Iraq and Afghanistan. Caferri has travelled extensively in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, interviewing leading political and cultural figures, most recently Shimon Peres, Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama.

About the Editors

Prof. Dr. Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha, born in 1951, is director of the ZAK | Centre for Cultural and General Studies at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) in Germany, and professor of sociology and cultural studies. Her research focuses on cultural change and globalisation, internationalisation, integration, as well as theory and practice of public science. She is coordinator of the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation, member of the Culture Committee of the German UNESCO Commission, and chairwoman of the Academic Council for Culture and Foreign Policy (WIKa) at the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa). In addition, she is spokeswoman of the KIT competence area 'Technology, Culture, and Society', editor of three scientific book series, and scientific convenor of the Karlsruhe Dialogues, an annual international symposium dedicated to current cultural issues.

Janina Hecht, born in 1983, studied literature, German linguistics, and comparative religious studies in Stuttgart and Tübingen. She spent an internship semester in Tunisia, and is currently conducting research on religious seekers and converts in modern literature. Her research focuses on theories of transculturality; literature and globalisation; as well as modern-day religions. She is a scientific assistant at the ZAK and also works as a freelance editor.

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THE CRITICAL STAGE. YOUNG VOICES ON CRUCIAL TOPICS

Ever since the outbreak of the revolutionary movements that in Europe have come to be known as the “Arab Spring”, diverse forms of protest seem to be on the increase worldwide. At their core, these protests are driven by citizens’ calls for more social participation, more democracy, and – above all – more transparency in individual states. Young people in particular are at the forefront of these protests, as has been exemplified by the Occupy movements in New York, Frankfurt, and elsewhere. A further defining feature is that most of the protesters belong to a well-educated middle class – a middle class that refuses to accept the prevailing social imbalances and the resulting lack of opportunities, most notably with regard to employment.

The international series “The Critical Stage. Young Voices on Crucial Topics” deals with these developments and poses questions such as: Can this growing level of resistance be defined as a homogeneous global phenomenon? Or are these protest movements more regional in nature, and determined by the respective state systems within which they are located? What specific demands can be identified, and how could these demands be incorporated into political decision-making processes? Does the underlying reasoning extend beyond the political sphere to other areas as well?

Designed as an ongoing online publication, “The Critical Stage” aims to bring together the various standpoints of protest movements from around the world. The series gives a voice to representatives from a wide variety of individual movements. Young journalists, film directors, artists, researchers, and members of diverse protest groups share their views on the inequities in many of the world’s political systems, and on the various modes of resistance that are being formed in response to these conditions.