Women, Civil Society and Policy Change in the Arab World

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Book review by **Frank ELBERS**

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This edited volume is one of the few in the literature on the Arab Uprisings to focus on women and their role in the revolutions that shook up the Middle East in 2011 and subsequent years. Although it is generally acknowledged that women were active participants in the revolts against the autocratic regimes of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and even Bahrain —the young Yemeni activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman became known as the "Mother of the Yemeni revolution"— research on how they took to the streets and in a later stage got involved it the transition negotiations and policy-making is scarce. *Women, Civil Society and Policy Change in the Arab World* tries to fill this void.

In the Arab world "civil society" has a long and rather complex history: "*al-mujtama' al-ahli*", civil society in the traditional sense, are organized forms and mobilization that are based on communal, kin or religious belonging. "*Al-mujtama' al-madani*", literally "society of the city", refers to a more recent conception of civil society that addresses the shift from rural/tribal to an urban society and corresponds more with the modern (and secular) notion of civil society organizations, NGOs and human rights organizations. Both conceptions of civil society can be found alongside in the Arab world but not always in sync or harmony. This tension may turn out to be crucial for the success of civil society in the region.

The volume's three empirical chapters on Lebanon, Morocco and Yemen examine if some theories of policy studies can explain how domestic violence, land ownership and child marriage make it to the political agenda and result in adoption of new laws and policies (or not). In the chapter on Lebanon ("Civil Society Advocacy and Policy Entrepreneurship: Examining the Making of the Law 293 to Criminalize Domestic Violence in Lebanon"), Fatima Moussawi and Nasser Yassin (both with American University of Beirut) apply John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework theory to explain how Lebanese Parliament ended up adopting a law that criminalized domestic violence despite major opposition from —divided— religious groups and parties. Civil society organizations led by the "policy entrepreneur" KAFA managed to use the window of opportunity in the "politics stream" after they were very active in both the problem and policy streams.

Mohamed Said Saadi (Institut Supérieur de Commerce et d'Administration, Casablanca) uses the Advocacy Coalition Framework theory, which considers the policy process as one of competition between coalitions of actors advocating for their views of policy problems and solutions. His research demonstrates that in the case of land policy in Morocco the women-led "Soulaliyate" Movement faced strong coalitions of land owners and government agencies but also "deep core belief systems" about the position of women in society — all detrimental to coalition of rural women and its allies to get land rights recognized.

In the third case study, Rasha Jarhum (Peace Track Initiative, University of Ottawa) and Robert Hoppe (American University Beirut) apply the same Advocacy Coalition Framework on efforts to introduce minimum marriage age legislation in Yemen during the period 2008-2014. They describe how a "safe marriage" advocacy coalition was created that addressed gender relations more generally and which was supported by foreign donors. The "devil shift", that is the

unproductive debate between anti- and pro-early marriage advocates was for short time "de-escalated and reframed in a new 'modern-Islamist' discourse expressive of both Islamist and women's rights positions" (p. 135). Yet the window of opportunity to adopt legislation closed when the national unity government turned out to be a failure and a civil war broke out in Yemen.

In the final chapter ("Is Sisyphus a Muslim Woman? Policymaking on Women Issues in Three Arab Countries"), Robert Hoppe reflects on the three empirical cases studies and policy-making on women's issues. He concludes that "[…] in Muslim countries, policymaking on women issues is subjected to religion-inspired political constraints to (from a secular perspective) an unusual degree. The public part of the patriarchal bargain turns policymaking into a task, not of the government, but for women NGO's; and the nature of policymaking becomes the art of timing and constraint-dodging" (p. 148). I take issue with this conclusion. To be sure, women's NGOs funded from abroad —representing *al-mujtama' al-madani*, the secular, urban notion of civil society— are often policy entrepreneurs that do not have sufficient rooting in society. And to be sure, patriarchy is a force to be reckoned with — reflected in deep core belief systems that are not conducive to gender equality and making politics the almost exclusive domain of men. Yet, the politics (and policies) in the region are much diverse to warrant generalization based on three countries (notably absent are Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia). Moreover, recent demographic studies show that most societies in the region are secularizing at a fast pace (and again, Islam may be the dominant religion but is not only religion in the region, e.g. Lebanon).

Nevertheless, this volume is an excellent contribution to the scholarly debate on women's roles in the Arab Uprisings and policy-making on women's human rights in the Middle East and North Africa. It provides both useful theoretical frameworks and rich detail on the countries and polities discussed. A must-read for academics and civil society activists alike.