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“Women are half the population and they raise the other half on their lap”

This is one of my cherished quotes from the Muslim Women Leaders on the Frontlines of Change, a fabulous conference in Istanbul a couple of weeks ago and which I was fortunate to attend. 180 Muslim women leaders, activists, scholars and NGO leaders from 45 countries congregated. We immersed ourselves in understanding the state, status and potential of Muslim women as change agents in their local communities around the world. The conference was organized by the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA) by Daisy Khan for the Women’s Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality (WISE). Kudos to Daisy for this timely and stimulating conference.

Front and center: Muslim women who participated on the frontiers of the Arab revolutions face challenges - both intense and palpable. Women engaged in their country’s revolutions with heart, head and soul - often risking their lives. But now some women are disconcerted. They are uncertain about their place at the new head table. The key question is: *Will women’s’ contributions to the revolution be acknowledged? Will women be given meaningful positions and power as the old dictatorships collapse?*

Three Egyptian activists- conspicuous by their absence - were denied exit by their government. Why? What’s brewing in Egypt that we are not supposed to be privy to? What is the military government afraid of?



Amel Azzouz, Member of the Women’s Office of Ennadha, the Islamic Party in **Tunisia**, has better news. *“Women transformed their suffering into effective activism and positive political action. At least 50 new women’s organizations were created and the revolution liberated the creativity of women.”* Azzouz describes a key turning point: *“We went from viewing women from an Islamic perspective as a wife, representing good and*

In **Libya**, “The revolution was led by women. Women were at the forefront and they worked hard. But finally, women were pushed aside, silenced and men took control,” says Dr. Laila Bugaighis, a passionate and articulate ob-gyn. Breaking into sobs, she said, *“Unarmed, our men, the rebels pinned down armed loyalists with their bare bodies. They risked their lives for their female brethren and enabled us to get to the border unharmed and in time to escape to freedom.”* Specifically, she continued: *“Libyan women activists were alert to the Islamists alarm, calling to restrict women to the home front. They have proposed legislation curtailing the rights of a woman to run for president.”* Dr Bugaighis urged her audience to make sure that Libyan women’s rights, constitutional rights and leadership access to key roles in media and government are assured.



Afra Jalabi, a young woman of **Syrian origin** now based in Toronto, spoke about her two close friends, brothers ages 27 and 25 who participated in the Syrian revolution. Afra explained the brothers’ commitment to a peaceful, non-violent revolution even as death tolls were escalating while being wildly misrepresented. The official toll was understated at 3,000, while in reality the number of dead is somewhere between ten and thirteen thousand. The anguished Afra explained how the younger brother, her dear friend was killed, and she said, “ He was not only courageous but ever so optimistic.” Known for his lightness of being, Afra told the horrifying truth: *“He was tortured, his organs and throat were removed, and his sexual organs cut off.”* Afra is young, has wisdom beyond her years, and raised the bar for her audience: *“We chose non-violence not out of weakness but out of belief and appreciation of its values. The movement has a great moral responsibility and yes, we can do it, we can disarm the world.”* She touched every heart in the room as she ended with a quote from the Dalai Lama: *“It is our home. And it can fit us all.”* Afra wants to honor the death of her friend and his commitment to non-violence. She said to me after the session, “He was a true Gandhian.” I immediately offered to connect Afra with my Gandhian friend, Elaben Bhatt, founder of SEWA, a labor union of women workers in the informal sector and a protégé of Mahatma Gandhi in Ahmedabad, India. This way Afra can take her friends’ struggle for freedom and democracy to the next level.



Nimah Nawaab, author of a book, *“The Unfurling”* is a young Saudi poet, activist and photographer. She participated on the panel on the Arab revolutions and said: *“The untapped voices of youth and women need to rise.”* She refreshed us on the recent decree passed by Saudi Arabia’s king Abdullah, granting women voting rights - which will not be enacted for three years. *“Given a right, there’s hope, but what’s the reality?”* asks Nawaab as she explains further: “There is a lot of resistance to having equality between men and women in Saudi Arabia.” Nawaab poses a provocative question about the Arab Spring, which, she explains, is a term coined by the Western media: *“Is there another name that might be more befitting- an Arab fall, an Arab winter or maybe something altogether different?”*

Tunisia’s elections offer a ray of hope given the country’s proximity to Europe. Its long traditions of women’s rights and a vibrant NGO sector are a plus. At first blush the Ennadha party is focused on key priorities for nation building: economic development, equal opportunity for women, internal security and freedom of choice in dress, such as the headscarf, rather than tackling religious issues. It is a special moment in the history of Tunisia and may all be granted equality – but only time will tell how the Tunisian experiment in democracy evolves.

Stay tuned for more voices of Muslim women scholars, social and business entrepreneurs, NGO leaders and activists who challenge the old order and aspire to an equitable new society – with parity between men and women, democracy, religious freedom and equity for people of all faiths. If my wish were granted, Muslim women would be the winners as agents of change, peacemakers and moral guardians of our families, communities and countries.

Two stories on the WISE gathering in Istanbul:

http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/pdfs/2011conf/allafrica_thefaceandchallengeofmuslimwomen.pdf

http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/pdfs/2011conf/huffingtonpost_thewisewomenofislam.pdf

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