



**TRANSFORMING SELF AND SOCIETY:
VOLUNTEERISM, GENDER AND GOVERNANCE IN THE ARAB REGION**



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The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is the UN organization that contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. Volunteerism is a powerful means of engaging people in tackling development challenges, and it can transform the pace and nature of development. Volunteerism benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation. UNV contributes to peace and development by advocating for recognition of volunteers, working with partners to integrate volunteerism into development programming, and mobilizing an increasing number and diversity of volunteers, including experienced UN Volunteers, throughout the world. UNV embraces volunteerism as universal and inclusive, and recognizes volunteerism in its diversity as well as the values that sustain it: free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity.

The difference UNV makes is by demonstrating peace and development results and impact through volunteerism. UNV's comparative advantage is the ability and knowledge to bring about transformational change through volunteerism, community voluntary action and civic engagement through active partnerships with civil society, volunteer involving organizations, UN agencies and Governments. This is inspiration in action.

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Cover photo: Young Jordanian volunteer presents the plan for a volunteer initiative during the Youth Volunteer Camp in Jordan, organized by UNV under the 'Arab Youth Volunteering for a better future' project. (Photo: WUp Y PS/UNV, 2013)

INTRODUCTION

Analysis on the continuous mobilization in the Arab Region has emphasized “transitions” as its quintessential feature. This transition toward democracy, social justice and equality has been the overarching lens through which academics, donors, multi-lateral and other stakeholders perceive and analyze various dimensions of the Arab awakening, while, at the same time, forming the basis of development strategies.¹ The widespread espousal of this discourse, however, has not led to progress. On the contrary, it appears to have resulted in a deadlock in transitions - at least with respect to development.

With a focus on the nexus between gender, governance and volunteerism, this paper will cast aside “transitions” in favor of exploring transformations - those that have been successful, are contested, or have been impeded in some way. The underlying rationale here is that a wave of transformations has been unleashed, with 2011 as a turning point; cultural, political and social, and there is a need to examine the entire trajectory via a *longue durée* approach rather than focus on short-term shifts and changes. The aim is to better understand how the shifting role of women volunteers have influenced or otherwise addressed inequities in political governance within the Arab Region across that trajectory.

Between 2011 and 2014, all three spheres have seen their fair share of both failure *and* success. Nevertheless, they intersect in ways that warrant further investigation.

The landscape of volunteerism, and arguably gender, in the Arab region has undergone a number of changes during the past three years² - both good and bad. Initially, revolutionary fervor brought with it a wave of volunteers: youth of both genders filled city squares, streets and other public meeting places demanding change: The cycle of “waithood”, it was thought, was broken.

At that time, the dominant discourse was rights-based and highly gender-neutral. This signaled a massive win for women and ignited hopes of the more equitable distribution of power between the two genders. Because of this, protestors and civil society did not articulate a gender-based agenda at the beginning of the uprisings. Nevertheless, as 2011 rolled into 2012 it became clear that the gains women made in 2010 were unraveling. The gendered discourse and debate came to the forefront when the fruits of women's participation in 2011 were threatened, and in instances even taken away, within a very heated political landscape.

¹ See Stepan, Alfred and Juan J. Linz. “Democratization Theory and the ‘Arab Spring’” *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 24(2). 2013, pp. 15-30. Hanau Santini, Ruth and Oz Hassan. “Transatlantic Democracy Promotion and the Arab Spring” *The International Spectator*. Vol. 47(3). 2012, pp. 65-82. Carnegie, Paul. “Trouble Ahead, Trouble Behind, Challenges of Transition for the Arab Spring” *Europolis, Journal of Political Science and Theory*. Issue6, 2012.

² On shifts in volunteerism and citizen engagement, see: UNV. “Arab Youth Volunteering for a Better Future: National Consultations Country Findings Report: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen (2012-2013).” December 2013. <http://www.unv.org/en/news-resources/resources/on-volunteerism/doc/report-on-unvs-national.html> and El Taraboulsi, Sherine and Ahmed Salah, “Libya.” *Giving in Transition and Transitions in Giving: Philanthropy in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia (2011-2013)*. Cairo: John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, the American University in Cairo. May 2013. On shifts in gender roles and presence of women in the public space, see: Arshad, Shazia. “The Arab Spring: What Did it Do to Women?” *Middle East Monitor*. March 2013. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/5584-the-arab-spring-what-did-it-do-for-women> and Tadros, Mariz. “Women’s Human Security Rights in the Arab World: On Nobody’s Agenda.” *Open Democracy*. December 2013. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mariz-tadros/women’s-human-security-rights-in-arab-world-on-nobodys-agenda>

While the point of departure is the same – a call for bread, freedom and social justice – what was called an “Arab Spring” has evolved into a polyphony of seasons. It is important to note that the region is not a single unit of analysis but that each country presents a different experience and provides a different model of understanding those shifts especially as they manifest themselves within the public space. What is certain is that the Arab region is currently in a situation of flux. This necessitates an unpacking of each country’s experience and its several dimensions in order to safeguard against regression and/or diffusion of energy.

Moreover, it is also necessary to point out the relative lack of literature with respect to volunteerism. While there is plenty of literature concerning gender mainstreaming within the context of development, research on how women translate their volunteerism experience and its values into governance is scarce.

The current historical juncture is instructive; how has the experience of women as volunteer/activists manifested itself within other spheres such as the workplace or the home?³ To what degree are the *values* inherent in volunteerism sustained? And how does this inform current development strategies to ensure not only a quantitative difference, but more importantly, a qualitative one?

But first some history: Gender mainstreaming first attracted the notice of the international development world after the Fourth United Nations Conference for Women in Beijing adopted it as an overall strategy in 1995. Since then, gender mainstreaming has evolved into two main categories: integration and transformation.

Integration ensures that “such concerns are integrated in the analysis of obstacles to development and that these concerns inform the formulation of policy, programmes and projects.” Transformation, on the other hand, “aims to move beyond integrating women’s concerns relating to the demands of their daily lives, to focus on improving women’s position (status), and thereby transforming the agenda”⁴. This paper will focus on transformation as opposed to integration. It will examine how or whether volunteerism as it pertains to governance facilitates transformation.

Finally, the relationship between volunteerism and gender within the context of a succession of sociopolitical change requires further analysis concerning the shifting role of women volunteers as they translate their experiences into the political realm. What are the values of volunteerism that they choose to keep? And how? A bottom-up approach that highlights personal narratives as well as charting the relationship between volunteerism and gender within the context of governance will be used.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

The guiding research question for the paper is: “Have women volunteers managed to influence governments to address inequity within the context of the Arab uprisings?” There are three layers to this query: the first relates to how modes of female volunteerism have shifted as compared to

³ There are several overlaps between volunteerism and activism such as sacrifice and expecting no material compensation and in several instances, the tools and methods used for each can be the same; Kleidman (1994: 264) argues for a “range of voluntariness”. See Klieberman, Robert. 1994. “Volunteer Activism and Professionalism in Social-Movement Organizations.” *Social Problems* 41(2): 257-276. Musick, Marc and John Wilson. 2008. *Volunteers: A Social Profile*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁴ See Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee. “Creating Citizens who Demand Just Governance: Gender and Development in the Twenty-First Century.” *Gender and Development* Vol. 11 (3). 2003. Pp. 45-55.

men; the second relates to how women manage to translate their experiences with volunteerism experience into other spaces such as career, education or politics. Did volunteering help or hinder the ability of women to participate in the political realm?

This paper is based on purposive non-probabilistic - otherwise known as non-random - sampling. For the purposes of this study, samples included women and men who took part in the popular uprisings; representatives of political parties, civil society organizations and development programmes. The researcher conducted ten interviews with eight women and two men between the ages of 21 and 30 who had volunteered for a minimum of three years and a maximum of ten.

The sample included interviews with men in order to determine to what extent they believed that women volunteers had either regressed or progressed with respect to their ability to participate in the public space. The researcher covered five countries - Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen - four of which have undergone major sociopolitical upheaval, and one that remains relatively stable but has nevertheless been indirectly influenced by the changes taking place in neighboring countries. This is to understand the wide range of influences that volunteerism had within the Arab Region within and beyond the context of major transitions.

A number of the respondents had volunteered in other - mostly Arab - countries. Interviews were semi-structured in order to allow respondents to tell their story and reflect on their past experiences as whether those have continued to inform the present.

The research explored the learning aspect of volunteerism. Respondents were asked if they had managed to sustain their values and how. Special attention was given to the particular challenges that women face and suggestions as to how to overcome them.

For obvious reasons this paper is not definitive but should nonetheless serve as a basis for further research while, at the same time, recognizing that within the Arab region the definition of "political" is quite fluid and includes the following:

- *Institutionalized entities* such as political parties in addition to civil society wherein most political issues are debated
- *Informal/non-institutionalized entities* such as tribal groups (Libya) and political religious parties (i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood followers and Salafis in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen)

The following section features key themes that emerged out of the study as related to how volunteerism can transform individuals and the communities and countries where they reside.

All respondents have had extensive experience as volunteers and it is in this capacity that they provide insight into the impact of volunteerism on the role of women in public life as well as the long-term impact of volunteerism in the Arab region. A more extensive longitudinal study could provide further insight into how to maximize the scale and influence of volunteerism throughout the region.

REALIZED TRANSFORMATIONS

Talent Identification and Opening New Spaces for Self Realization

"I have been volunteering with women's groups in Egypt since I was 17 to work with them on FGM campaigns. It was to the first time I learned how to organize my efforts and focus on what I

want and to make it happen. Also, the fact that volunteerism is based on the personal free will to do something with others who share the same cause and enthusiasm was key in sustaining my interest for as long as possible.” Civil society leader from Egypt

According to respondents living in all of the five countries covered within the research, volunteerism was a key determinant behind the realization of individual potential. According to one of the Libya respondents, volunteerism was an, “unleashing of talents”.

A respondent from Tunisia reiterated how volunteerism helps to open up “new spaces” to hone skills and identify talents that would not have been possible otherwise. Yet another explained how volunteerism allowed her to realize what she is capable of: “I knew I could step into leadership”. It helped her “evolve as a person” and become more confident. A respondent from Egypt described volunteering as an experience of “self-discovery” and “self-awareness”. More significantly, respondents also described volunteerism as malleable and dynamic: as both a manifestation and a reflection of self-awareness and discovery.

Another interesting insight that emerged from the study is how volunteerism assists individuals to bridge the disciplinary and specialization divide, i.e. a person educated in one profession can volunteer for a completely different one.

For example, as a volunteer, a pharmacist can engage in activities related to raising political awareness, while a political scientist can volunteer at a makeshift hospital. According to a respondent from Tunisia, because volunteerism is eclectic and less rigid with respect to disciplinary boundaries, it opened up new opportunities - not only in terms of her personal growth, but also her professional advancement.

Structural Consolidation: Sustaining and Institutionalizing Volunteerism

“After the ousting of [former president] Ben Ali, women continued to be active. They took part in elections as candidates. Moreover, women were very active in civil society and political parties too. However, we do see a few changes [in the post-Ben Ali period], especially an increasing number of attacks on our freedoms and on women’s rights.” Lina Ben Mhenni, Tunisia, Interview conducted in Fall 2012.⁵

In all five countries, volunteerism spawned a number of organizations that offered a variety of services that include but are not limited to human rights, democracy and negotiation skills.

In Yemen, a number of civil society organizations led by women emerged in the period following the Revolution. These can be divided into three main types: short-term initiatives (documentation of the revolution, etc.), service-oriented initiatives and finally, local associations that have an Islamist affiliation - especially with the Islah party. Although the people have largely driven the process of transforming the experience of volunteerism into a more sustained form, donor funding directs the specific agenda.

⁵ See Pedersen, Jennifer and Monalisa Salib. “Women of the Arab Spring.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:2. May 2013. pp. 256-266.

In Tunisia, the drafting of the constitution revealed the impact of female volunteerism on public life. One organization - Al Bawsala - was launched and led by a woman in order to act as a watchdog and monitor the constitutional drafting process. The organization's objectives are:⁶

- To reposition citizens by placing them at the centre of political action by offering them the means to stay updated with their elected representatives and by providing them with the opportunity to defend their fundamental rights.
- To build relationships with elected representatives and decision-makers in order to work towards the establishment of good governance practices and political ethics.
- To participate in defending concepts of social progress and citizen empowerment.

Not all consolidation efforts were successful or sustained. Nevertheless, research revealed that in all of the countries covered there were a number of successes. In Yemen for example, two women and two men launched #Support Yemen, an independent media collective that uses video to share stories that would otherwise remain untold and to chronicle the struggle for rights. They define themselves as follows:

“We are young Yemeni female and male organizers, activists, journalists, videographers, photographers, and bloggers who are passionate about using creative communication strategies as a tool for social change. Our work is guided by the collective vision and goals of our community to build a free and just world. “

New Strategic Directions: Bringing the Periphery to the Center

Volunteerism can transform according to changing needs as well as shifts in the public space.

In Tunisia, volunteerism fanned out from the urban centers to other parts of the country thereby facilitating greater communication between different parts of the Tunisian society post-Ben Ali. In Yemen, one respondent highlighted how civil society organizations have extended the geographic scope of volunteering activities. Some respondents transformed from being volunteers to managing them. One respondent from Egypt related her experience thus:

“My work in civil society is for the most part actually based on volunteerism. I think the thing I learned most from being a volunteer is that now I can manage fresh volunteers and guide them to achieving their professional goals.”

Retaining values inherent in volunteering

All respondents emphasized how they had retained the values acquired as volunteers even after the voluntary experience had ended. They also stated that they continue to engage in volunteering activities—including those who have since found employment. In response to the question regarding whether or not she has continued to volunteer despite being employed, one respondent from Egypt said:

“Yes, of course. All the time. My career (civil society) is basically based on this. The majority of the women I know, including my ‘traditional Egyptian’ mother, are volunteering for different work they are passionate about.”

⁶ More on al-Bawsala is available at <http://www.albawsala.com/en/presentation>

The key values they highlighted were:

- *Tolerance*: Volunteerism allows for meeting and communicating with people with different backgrounds and interests; often not from within one's own circle. This helps to defeat harmful stereotypes. Exposure to others is key. One Tunisian respondent related how, as a volunteer, she met with women who wore the niqab and that this helped alter her understanding and expectations of women who wear that attire. "Stereotypes are broken," she said.
- *Belonging*: According to two respondents, one of the key values acquired is the sense of belonging to a community that is a result of networking and exposure to fellow volunteers on a joint mission and/or interest.
- *Selflessness*: According to a respondent from Jordan, volunteerism makes you feel "appreciated; you touch someone else's life".
- *Empowerment*: Respondents from all five countries identified "confidence" and feeling "empowered" as one of the values that they took away from their experience as volunteers.

CONTESTED TRANSFORMATIONS

Contested Definitions: Volunteerism as Service, Volunteerism as Dissent

In Arab region the line that separates volunteerism from protest and dissent are difficult to gauge - especially given the sociopolitical upheavals that continue to characterize issues of governance. Respondents tended to define dissent and protest as political and volunteerism as service.

A number of respondents argued that volunteerism means providing community services in a long-term and sustained manner and that taking part in protests was reactive, short-term, and thus does not constitute volunteerism. A respondent from Tunisia described the experience of volunteerism as different from that of protest - that volunteerism is guided by a "vision" and is "sustainable" as opposed to demonstrating, which is "a form of engagement but to what extent? And how frequent?"

Still others contend that volunteerism is integral to taking part in public demonstrations, such as serving in make-shift hospitals and leveraging resources for food and shelter. Another respondent from Egypt noted that a sense of solidarity is inherent to both volunteerism and protest: e.g. the act of uniting for a common mission and cause.

Citizens First, Women Second: Citizenship and Gender

"At the beginning of the protests, women were participating and mobilizing others to join in - not only activist women but also housewives and young women who were not previously engaged in politics. They knew they were seeking dignity and freedom, not as women, but as citizens." Esraa Abdel Fattah, Egypt, Interview conducted in fall 2012.⁷

⁷ Interview conducted by Jennifer Pedersen and Monalisa Salib, See Pedersen, Jennifer and Monalisa Salib. "Women of the Arab Spring." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:2. May 2013. pp. 256-266.

In all of the four countries that experienced major sociopolitical and regime change, respondents emphasized that the women who participated in volunteer activities never identified themselves as “women” but primarily as “citizens”. According to a respondent from Yemen, when women volunteer they do so “as part of the people and for a universal cause...” and that women “struggle for mankind and not only for women” and therefore should not be undermined as being motivated only by self-interest.

During the more intense days of the uprising, the public discourse focused on the political change and not necessarily gender inequality. Women and men volunteered in the public space as equals: Women shouldered the same responsibility as men, toiling in make-shift hospitals and organizing the allocation and distribution of food, water and other necessities in order to maintain the protests.

According to respondents from Libya, the Revolution led to an increase in female volunteerism. During the Qaddafi regime any collective were forbidden. The government prohibited both women and men from volunteering. The Revolution “opened up a space for much change to take place”. This space, however, is shrinking. The needs for volunteerism have changed; from the need to deliver aid during the intense days of the uprisings to less urgent initiatives; and cultural norms that prevent women from participating in public have re-emerged.

From Volunteerism to the Corporate World

Although the public tends to perceive volunteerism as essentially a transient experience, this is not necessarily the perspective of volunteers who invest their time and energy.

According to one respondent from Tunisia, the transition from being a volunteer to a professional was not a linear process. For her, it was more of a transformation, both personal and professional, than a transition from one to the other. “I did not move from one point to another. It is less of a linear path; that path from volunteerism to becoming a professional.”

Another respondent from Tunisia linked volunteering to employment. Volunteerism, “increases your employability profile” she said, and added that it also allowed her to find the right job. It is “experience without money.” This link was particularly significant in Jordan where one respondent related that young people in particular acquire “experience” through volunteering and that it enhances their CVs.

Volunteerism as Entrepreneurship

For many women, participating in the 2011 uprising boosted their self-confidence and their willingness to take risks. A number of women went on to launch new enterprises. One of the respondents from Egypt, for example, transformed her considerable experience as a volunteer and is now leading a human rights organization and co-founded a political party. During the interview, she described women volunteers as “social entrepreneurs”. In response to a question concerning whether the role of women volunteers had shifted following the revolution, she replied:

“Dramatically! Before women usually kept out of social work and only volunteered for charity work that was related to their biological nature as mothers and caretakers. But now, women are not only volunteering for extreme and risky social and political action, they are also taking the initiative. They are becoming social entrepreneurs, not only volunteers.”

Politicized Volunteerism?

“I do not think that the women in the constituent assembly represent me: they are just toys in the hands of their male colleagues, and they are the kind of women who take their cue from their male colleagues before raising their hands to vote for an article or reject it.” Lina Ben Mhenni, Tunisia, Interview conducted in fall 2012.⁸

In the period immediately following the uprisings and the beginning of the democratic process, volunteerism became political. Men and women volunteered for political campaigns. Indeed, many of the candidates had been volunteers during the uprisings. Nevertheless, one respondent from Libya was critical and charged that it “contradicted” the very essence of volunteerism. “Volunteerism is now on billboards and used for political advancement not for the sincere desire to bring about change.”

Legacies of Volunteerism

Many respondents mentioned the historical and political roots of volunteerism; particularly those from Tunisia and Yemen. A respondent from the latter noted that the country’s past history as a socialist state helped create a legacy of volunteerism that has since become part of the social DNA. Tribal constituencies also helped expand these activities, making them, “by default, volunteers”. The historical memory of volunteerism has not been sufficiently analyzed, and is thus often misunderstood as not having existed before the uprisings. In both countries volunteerism is therefore not only rooted in cultural tradition but also relatively recent history.

IMPEDED TRANSFORMATIONS

Cultural Strictures

“The Arab Spring did not save Arab women.” Yemeni Activist

In all five countries, the major challenge is a culture that does not allow women to transform their experiences as volunteers into a more sustainable and institutionalized form of participation. Respondents mentioned patriarchy, violence against women who dare to transgress into the public space (i.e. forced virginity testing in Egypt) and deteriorating security in Libya as the main reasons why the rights of women were being systematically eroded.

According to a respondent from Libya: “Progress for women did happen but it is now stagnant because of the culture. Women need to fight to change the culture and not give in to it.” Another respondent described patriarchy as “not only sexist but downright misogynist.” Yet another responded from Libya cited tribalism as “pillaging the dreams of young people”.

In Yemen, the respondent described the situation as more complex; the struggle was “at home, in the street and in political parties”. Women were active participants in the social mobilization, but their public fight for social justice and freedom is also mirrored in home and subsequently in political parties.

Organizational Challenges: Creating a Vision for Volunteerism

⁸ See Pedersen, Jennifer and Monalisa Salib. “Women of the Arab Spring.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:2. May 2013. pp. 256-266.

In Tunisia, the challenge for women was to sustain their activities beyond a short time span and to have more autonomy over their volunteerism agenda, which relates to the need for a national vision for volunteerism. In Egypt, sexual harassment, beatings and rape mean that women require special security zones in order to engage in the public discourse. Deteriorating security has made it more difficult for women to move freely in within the public space.

Another challenge is the inability to absorb an increasing number of volunteers. Student unions represent what one respondent described as an expanding space for volunteers; more students are joining and their presence is getting heard. A number of respondents noted that the necessity of managing such large numbers of volunteers is vital to sustaining that space in the future. Regulating volunteerism is a challenge and an opportunity at the same time.

There were also personal challenges. One respondent from Egypt described her experience as follows: "I had personal difficulty dealing with certain types of people because I am an introvert by nature. But the good news is that volunteerism helped me change this. I now know how to manage my energy among others."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

This preliminary round of interviews has demonstrated that Arab countries are indeed undergoing a transformation and that women are retaining the values and skills that they have acquired through volunteerism. They are transformed from within.

Nevertheless, translating self-discovery and self-realization into the public realm is not always successful. Governments and related governance institutions within the Arab region are still overwhelmingly male dominated and highly patriarchal. The majority of the obstacles that women struggle to overcome are cultural as well as organizational. They vary according to country context.

Recommendations include the following:

1. Rethinking our approach to "volunteerism": The assumption that volunteer work is transient is flawed. To fully comprehend the kinds of effects that volunteering has on volunteers will require a study of much greater depth, reach and length. A longitudinal study could be an interesting place to start.
2. Bringing culture back into volunteering: The best and most sustainable volunteering institutions are those that are culturally entrenched. This is particularly critical for women: for example, tribal confederations in Libya and Jordan. An approach to volunteering that targets them as a sustainable vehicle for change would help expand both the activities and their impact.
3. Funding: One of the reasons why volunteering is so attractive is because it allows individuals to exercise autonomy and the freedom to pursue their passion outside of their particular discipline. Nevertheless, volunteers should not be expected to pay out of their own pockets. More funding should go into supporting volunteer activities.
4. Managing volunteers: In the Arab region, no regulations currently exist to manage and monitor volunteers. Quality volunteer management has significant effects on the quality and impact of the volunteer experience.

5. Preserve and expand public spaces: Given findings on shrinking spaces for volunteering and activism, especially for women, Governments and key stakeholders should consider how to ensure supportive environments for volunteerism and civic engagement.
6. Develop a gender-based agenda that is as inclusive as possible: It was clear that female respondents found their contributions as volunteers as inherently de-gendered, and largely about their roles as citizens. Some of the challenges they faced were indeed related to their gender. Nevertheless, their priorities are on agendas for inclusive governance for all.

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