Arab Spring puts women's rights in the spotlight
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(Reuters) - At a pre-wedding evening party in central Tripoli, a group of Libyan women sing traditional songs to the beat of a drum as they prepare to apply henna to the bride's hands and feet.

Clapping her hands to the music as she waited for the bride to appear, 23-year-old Sarah Burruin said she has just one wish for women in the new Libya.

"I want women to be equal," the engineering student said. "Whatever men do, I want women to be able to do it too. This is our time."

In post-revolution Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, women are exploring what the Arab Spring means for them.

Since long-time leaders were toppled in the three north African states, many -- not least in the West -- fret the power vacuum will leave the door open for Islamist groups to take power and force changes that will damage women's rights.

In Tunisia Islamists have already risen to power while in Egypt, they are leading staggered elections and have pledged to govern by Islamic laws.

In Libya, National Transitional Council (NTC) chief Mustafa Abdel Jalil alarmed many when he pledged to uphold Islamic law and ease polygamy rules in a speech to mark Libya's "liberation" from Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year rule, though he has since played down any suggestion of radical Islamist rule.

"I think where the Islamic laws will eventually bite is the rights of women. They already have declared (in Libya) that polygamy rules will be relaxed and who knows where that is going to go," said Laleh Khalili, senior lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of London.

TENSIONS IN TUNISIA

In Tunisia, where the Arab Spring was born when President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was forced to step down, "secular" women have mobilized to defend their western lifestyles after the Islamist Ennahda party swept to power in the country's first free election, including claiming almost all the seats won by women.

Women are lobbying the political parties to protect a pioneering 1956 law granting them full equality with men and to counter the pressure mounting from radical Muslims keen to push them back into traditional roles.
"I have never been so worried about women's freedom as I am now," said Saida Garrach, a lawyer and activist in the Tunisian Association of Democratic "omen.

"The threat is everywhere - on what women wear, how they think. If you are not with them (Islamists), they will insult you, harass you. I've been sworn at in the street because of things I have said on television."

While Ennahda has promised not to impose strict Muslim rules on society and to respect women's rights, many secularist women say they do not believe these promises.

"Ennahda cannot make any threats now because everyone will turn against them," said 30-year-old Houda Ben Zid, an insurance worker who wears the hijab. "But they could do something later. Our way of life could be threatened."

A small contingent of Salafists - hardline Islamists not associated with Ennahda - have sought to implement their purist interpretation of Islam and overturn secularist laws. Some have demanded segregated classes and the right for women to wear full face veils at university, spurring clashes with secular students.

In Egypt, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and the ultra-conservative Salafi party have claimed the most seats in the first two rounds of a parliamentary poll, the first free ballot in the Arab world's most populous nation since President Hosni Mubarak was ousted in February.

Both parties advocate a more Islamic society but tell voters although they want more morality in public life they won't impose Islamic moral codes and veils on women.

Campaigners say Egyptian women face some of the harshest treatment in the world: domestic violence, harassment and discrimination at work and in the law. Forced marriage of young girls is still common outside big cities.

Feminists say there is no better time to unite because the main factor that split the women's movement - its domination by former first lady Suzanne Mubarak - has disappeared.

"It is known that the former president's wife was the one behind any development on women rights and I fear that the new parliament seeking to gain popularity among the people will seek to eliminate those rules," said Egyptian analyst Negad Borie.

A ROLE, YES, BUT WHAT KIND?

Although there is no doubt that Islamists will play an important role in the three states rocked by the Arab Spring, how those roles evolve will be shaped by each country's unique social and cultural landscape.

Observers say Libyan society is more conservative than in Egypt and Tunisia.
"Egyptian women are strong, here is not like Libya. If they (Islamists) asked to pass stricter laws on women, the Egyptian society will not accept that," said Samah Ahmed, an employee in Egypt's Postal Service.

"We will not accept such thing and will go to the streets and make a big deal." Sitting in a Tripoli beauty salon waiting to get her hair cut, Jamila says she believes the majority of her countrymen practice moderate Islam.

"Libya is moderate but we fear extremists," she said.

The 60-year-old was disappointed by NTC head Abdel Jalil's comments on polygamy because they implied men would no longer need written permission from their wives to have another spouse.

"I like the fact that a man has to ask for permission to marry another woman, it protects women's dignity," she said.

Others considered the tone and timing of the speech and ceremony a slap in the face to women.

"I support Islamic values. I understand that in the Koran it says you can marry four women, no problem with that. I do not like when he said it, Liberation Day; there are more important issues than polygamy," said Alaa Murabit, a student doctor and co-founder of the Voice of Libyan Women organization.

"What made me angry was that a woman didn't speak on Liberation Day. Have her speak on that international stage that day - it would have sent a very different message."

Murabit last month organized post-war Libya's first international women's conference, which was attended by the country's new leaders, including Abdel Jalil.

When he took the stage this time, he took care to enumerate the many ways women had supported and led Libya’s revolution and promised women would play an important role rebuilding the country.

There are a few women in the new government, including the ministers for health and social affairs.

As the country rebuilds after eight months of war, Libyan women are laying out their vision for a new beginning. Numerous women's organizations have sprung up since Gaddafi’s overthrow, creating meeting centers and holding awareness lectures and workshops on social, political and business issues.
"For now we just want enough women to go to elections, this alone is a huge challenge," said Amira Alshokri, co-founder of Tripoli-based NGO Phoenix. She said Phoenix had recently sent out thousands of invitations to women for a free "Know your rights" lecture, but only 50 showed up.

"In this sensitive time you would think this topic would trigger women to come...(Women) became too lazy to act because they knew their voice would not be heard, make a difference. This is what we're working on right now, we want to raise awareness."

A change is already apparent, said Ines Miloud.

The 21-year-old student says there are more women out and about in her small town of Yifran in Libya's Western Mountains, as opposed to before the revolution when most women tended to stick to more traditional roles in the home.

"Before I would wake up, go to college and come back home. Now I am out all day," she said. "My mother says: 'You are like a boy'.'"

Miloud has co-founded an association in the Western Mountains to promote women's rights.

"We have a lot of talented women but they were just buried. They are still afraid from the Gaddafi era. We are trying to show them that they are free."

Activists say it's not just women who need to speak out, and not just on women's issues.

"I think it will take much more to change the mentality in Libya. Everybody's focusing on women's development and women's education ... and they're forgetting it's not just women. It's national development and national education," Murabit said.

"Every woman has a different aspiration. I think the overall aspiration is to respect each woman's individual choice."

(Additional reporting by Yasmine Saleh in Cairo and Tarek Amara in Tunis; Editing by Sonya Hepinstall)

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