Where are the women? How involved have they been? Will they secure their rights? Are they demanding social change? Are their demands feminist? Will they be represented in parliament? Will they be marginalized after the transition?

These have been reverberating questions since the start of the "Arab spring". For many, the December 20 women's march marked a turning point, as women affirmed their agency. In unison, the headlines read: "Egyptian women march, decry abuse by military," "'Blue bra girl' rallies Egypt's women vs. oppression" and "Egyptian women protest abuse by military".

Despite the sincere, genuine concern for Egyptian (and Arab) women, both the resounding questions pertaining to women and the Arab spring and the response to this women's march risk being premised on misleading assumptions about Arab women and their societies. The first--and perhaps most disconcerting--is that Arab women as agents of change have somehow been absent from shaping the histories of their societies. The second is that there is a direct, linear relationship between women's involvement in democratic transitions and the rights and privileges they will secure thereafter. At this historic moment, it is necessary to wade through these issues with caution. To "ahistoricize" women, their movements, and their roles in these societies, and to address women as somehow tangential to these transitions, both in the Arab world and in democratic transitions the world over, may misconstrue women's political realities in these societies, potentially ushering in disempowering and faulty assistance.

December 20, 2011 did not mark a monumental episode in women's protest in the region. There has been no shortage of such protests in Arab history, though the media have been absent or simply did not care to watch. Palestinian women, for one, have taken to the streets by the thousands for decades; these events have escaped the attention of western mass media. Women's protest movements are not recent phenomena to any part of the Arab world. Many date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in the urban centers of Cairo, Beirut and Damascus.

Egypt's history in particular does not suffer from a dearth of such episodes. As early as 1923, in protest against the proclamation of an Egyptian constitution that limited suffrage to males, Hoda Shaarawi resigned from the Wafd Women's Central Committee to establish the Egyptian Feminist Union with the main objective of fighting for women's suffrage. True, the organization was elitist, and Shaarawi and others refused to open it up to women of more humble backgrounds. In protest against the elitism of the EFU, Doria Shafik established the Daughters of the Nile Union in 1944. In 1951, the DNU led a protest of 1,000 women into the parliament demanding female suffrage and disrupting the session for three hours. By 1952, they had established their own paramilitary unit in which women received military training. In 1954, following the evacuation of the British from Egypt, a new constitutional assembly was formed to adopt a new constitution for women. The assembly included no women. In protest, Shafik led a hunger strike, joined by 14 other women. Eventually, women were granted the right to vote. By
no means am I advocating that women should set up their own paramilitary units, but rather noting this plentiful, revolutionary history that underpins Arab women's protests today.

Women's involvement in these transitions, moreover, will not necessarily correspond to political gains thereafter. In cases ranging from Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Poland, to East Germany, the extent of women's mobilization during the transition had little impact on their political representation under civilian rule. In fact, despite the importance of women's mobilization under authoritarian rule in cases such as Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, there was no significant increase in women's political electoral representation in the immediate years after the return to civilian rule.

Similarly, in the Arab world, the relationship between Arab women's rights, their socio-economic status, and regime type has never been straightforward. As a number of scholars have illustrated (writing about Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere), the most significant advances of Arab women's economic and social rights and labor force participation took place under the Arab socialist regimes of the 1950s and 1960s. However, these marked advancements in women's rights, as well as increased female labor participation in formal markets, did not translate to stronger women's movements, greater female political influence or greater democratic openings in most cases. Moreover, the subsequent initial stirrings of political liberalization exercises did not result in greater female political participation; on the contrary, they perfected the state's political manipulation of women to better serve the regimes.

It is critical at this juncture to address women and the Arab spring with this background in mind. Recognition that is "exceptionalizing" and outside of history will quite certainly not advance the cause of Arab women.-Published 12/1/2012 © bitterlemons-international.org

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