Her Edit

FOR THE INDEPENDENTLY MINDED WOMAN

Issue Four
March/April 2014

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The Women and Power issue

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'Surveillance Photograph of Militant Suffragettes'
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Criminal Record Office ©National Portrait Gallery

Welcome to Her Edit

Some years ago my friend Stephen Benn took me into the bowels of the Palace of Westminster to show me the broom cupboard where the suffragette Emily Davidson had hidden in 1911, so she could give her address on census day as the House of Commons. Stephen's father, Labour MP Tony Benn, had placed a plaque and photograph there in tribute to Davidson and later described it as 'one of very few monuments to democracy in the whole building'.

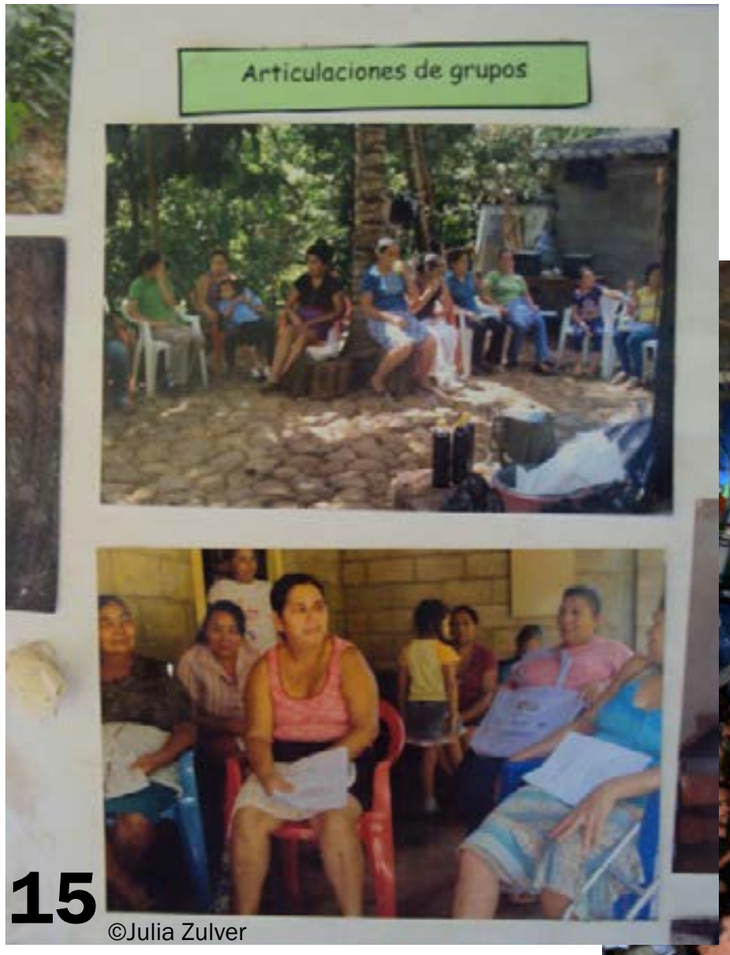
Davidson of course met an early death after throwing herself beneath the king's racehorse in the Derby to draw attention to the inequalities which denied women the right to vote. It's incredible that a century later, women have yet to achieve parity of representation in the UK Parliament - less than a quarter of our MPs are women.

To mark International Women's Day on 8 March, this issue is dedicated to the continuing struggle of women across the world to make their voices heard in their own governments. Sadly it makes for uncomfortable reading. Even in countries where there are quotas and gender equality embedded in constitutions, women are still denied political power.

However, we hope this issue will be informative and inspiring and remind us all that the struggle which Davidson and the women pictured on our front cover began, continues. Please tweet us what your vote means to you - #power4women - post your thoughts and comments on the Her Comment page on the website and please forward this issue to your friends and colleagues. If there is one message we can take from the articles which follow, it's that change can only happen if we all act together.

Jayne

Her Issue Four



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Two sisters ©Maria Golin

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Courtesy Casa Rosada (presidency)

Sue Christoforou

United Kingdom

Have you Hurd the news?

There is no political parity for women in the UK

Former Conservative cabinet member, Douglas Hurd, recently described the 'obsession' with ensuring equal political representation for women as 'ludicrous'. Following on from her riposte to Lord Hurd on our website, Her Edit co-founder Sue Christoforou asks why the UK is failing to achieve political parity for women leaving us lagging behind many developing countries and our European neighbours in the ranking for equal political representation for women.

We've cast our content generating net far and wide this issue, as you'll see in the following pages. How could we not, given that it's International Women's Day in a week's time? But, as we're London based, we couldn't have an issue about women and power without looking to the UK and making some kind of assessment of our gender power parity. I have to say, things aren't looking good.

Where the EU average proportion of senior ministers who are female is 27 per cent, we've got a measly 18 per cent. Female representation is poor too in the House of Commons – less than a quarter (23 per cent) of our MPs are women (the EU average is 27 per cent). What about in the realm of policy makers? We don't fare well there either. Again, the relevant proportion is less than a quarter – only 22 per cent of top civil servants posts are held by women. Even when we look at second tier civil servants – and so the top civil servants of the future – only 31 per cent of posts are occupied by women.[1]

Policy makers and political decision-makers are obviously pretty powerful, but power is also wielded by those in other fields. No one could doubt the power the media has in shaping our culture and society. Yet, less than a third (30 per cent) of senior media company managers are women.[2]

Banks, boards, bobbies and the beak? Not good: the proportion of Bank of England decision-makers who are women is microscopic – just six per cent. And on the boards of large listed companies? Less than a fifth (19 per cent) of board seats are taken by women. As for bobbies - there are three police forces in England and Wales where there are no - count them - there are zero women in the top cop jobs. Across all forces, no more than a fifth of posts at the rank of assistant chief constable or above are occupied by women.[3] The proportion of top female judges is also pitifully low at a mere eight per cent.

In not a single sphere where power over the populace is exercised and culture is shaped, do women make up more than a third of those in charge. How can this possibly be? And more importantly, what action can we all take to change it?

1 Women and men in leadership positions in the European Union, 2013

2 Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media
3 Police Workforce, England and Wales, 31 March 2013

Egypt

Young women protestors in Tahrir Square, 2012 ©Maria Golia

Women, authoritarianism and marginalisation:
the backlash against Egyptian women

Lola Aliaga is Egypt Project Officer within the Middle East and North Africa team of the international organisation Saferworld, which works to prevent violent conflict. She is a Global Politics graduate from the London School of Economics. Lola tells Her Edit about the backlash against women since the Arab uprisings and the use of sexual violence as a political weapon.

Although women played a key part in the Arab Spring, there has been a backlash against women's rights and political participation in the region since, particularly in Egypt. Rather than responsibility for this lying with the rise of Islamists or religious radicalisation, it is the persistence of authoritarianism which is ultimately to blame.

International Women's Day is a gloomy anniversary in Egypt, marking tragic violence against women protesters in Tahrir Square. Egyptian women were an integral part of the popular movement against President Mubarak, taking part in the revolution's call for "bread, freedom and social justice", which highlighted economic marginalisation, political repression and social inequalities. However, less than one month after Mubarak's resignation – on 8 March 2011 – they were attacked and sexually assaulted on a massive scale, in an attempt to scare them away from political activism.

Since then, mass sexual harassment and other violence against women has made regular international headlines. Often, the rise of Islamists to power and the radicalisation of religious groups were cited as responsible for this backlash against women's rights. Certainly, religious preachers have been promoting restrictive understandings of Sharia law, and many women's rights campaigners were deeply concerned by the electoral victories of political Islam. However, violence against women has long been used as a political tool, not only under Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi but also (less visibly) under President Hosni Mubarak, and under the current government.

Political violence against women was a strategy for confronting opposition under Mubarak. For example, Interior Ministry-led thugs sexually assaulted female protestors on 25 May 2005 during demonstrations against Mubarak's constitutional amendments. Similarly, sexual violence in detention during that period appears to have been widespread. These techniques were replicated by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the military council which ruled the country after Mubarak's resignation. For instance, SCAF used sexual torture against demonstrators in military prisons during the revolution. Under Muslim Brotherhood President Morsi sexual violence perpetuated by thugs intensified and became a common threat to female protesters in order to keep them off the streets. However, political violence against women did not cease with Morsi's removal. Rather, the October 2013 arrests and alleged subjection to virginity tests of pro-Morsi women protesters in Alexandria exemplifies the way violence against women continues to be used as a tool to attack political opposition.

As political violence against women is so deep-rooted, attempts to support women's rights need to go beyond superficial changes. While the new constitution provides significant advances in terms of women's rights enshrined by law, previous experience suggests that the impact of these positive changes will be lost because of the continuing concentration of power within an authoritarian system. Indeed, successive constitutions since the revolution have concentrated power in very similar ways. While Morsi's constitution granted him disproportionate powers and strongly restricted women's freedoms, the one approved in 2014 grants hegemonic power to the military and authorises military trials for civilians.

'sexual violence perpetuated by thugs intensified and became a common threat to female protestors'

In this context, support for women's rights and taking a stand against violence against women requires recognising the fact that the backlash against women's rights in the aftermath of the revolution in Egypt was not simply a brief interlude fed by political Islam. Violence against women was and continues to be part of a broader crackdown against political dissent, which is rooted in an authoritarian political system. Dedication to women's rights requires refocusing on the original demands of the revolution. Ultimately, this implies challenging the authoritarian system of power.

Read more about Saferworld's work at http://www.saferworld.org.uk/

Finding freedom

Born in the USA, Maria Golia is author of *Cairo City of Sand* and *Photography and Egypt* and has lived in downtown Cairo for several decades. Here she gives a very personal perspective on how Egyptian women are living with the denial of their political freedoms and human rights.


My neighbour Rabaa with her mother, 2007 ©Maria Golia

In Egypt I belong to 'the third sex': as a foreigner I am neither subject to the same limitations and expectations placed on Egyptian women nor am I considered on a par with Egyptian men. This has become particularly apparent to me in Upper Egypt where I spend a fair amount of time and where patriarchal traditions are stronger, in the sense of being generally accepted by women and men alike. I am an intimate stranger, privileged in a number of ways, including that of being a somewhat detached observer. But I am afraid my opinion regarding women's situation here is politically incorrect.

That Egypt ranks low on the Reuter's Poll of Women's Rights in the Arab World may seem a confirmation of something we already know, i.e. that in this male-dominated society, women have little chance to realize their talents and possibilities, little freedom of choice. But from where I sit, men are as disadvantaged by the prevailing norms, including educational and economic possibilities, as women. They too are undereducated, subject to strict hierarchies in family, the workplace and government; they too suffer poor health and injustice and their futures are circumscribed by a social and political context they have little power to change.

Human behaviours - whether kindness or treachery – have no gender. One's greater or lesser ability to negotiate the inconsistencies within oneself and in others in order to lead a constructive existence is the only measure of freedom I know. The odds of achieving this sort of independence in any society are always stacked against the weak. Yet I have seen countless Egyptians overcome them, many of them women.

They were subjected to restrictions that a westerner finds outrageous, even criminal. They married young, raised children, or spent their lives without a man because the males of their families failed to find 'an appropriate' match. They did not have the kind of schooling or jobs they might have wished.

'men are as disadvantaged by the prevailing norms... as women.'

But they were not conquered by resentment and self-pity. They learned to enrich their lives from within and in doing so, changed those around them in subtle but indelible ways, including their sons, brothers and husbands, and including me. They fought a thousand disappointments and won. What is winning? Winning is not fame or fortune or even gender equality, it is laughter and fearlessness in the face of both life and death.

These Egyptian women I have known possess a freedom that no law can grant or deny. At first I pitied them. Then I envied them. Now I learn from them. And with all my heart, I thank them.

Read more of Maria's writing on her website www.mariagolia.wordpress.com

Women can do it

Norway became the first independent country in the world to introduce universal suffrage when it granted women the right to vote 101 years ago. Author and journalist Nina Hanssen tells us about a country which seems to be an exemplar of gender equality.

As a woman who has lived in, and indeed likes, Britain very much, I do know that there are still big challenges for women in both countries.

When I was growing up in Norway, I used to think that only a woman could be a Prime Minister. I knew for sure a woman could be that because Gro Harlem Brundtland served as Prime Minister for three terms.

Our first female Prime Minister later served as Director General of the World Health Organization, after which she chaired the World Commission of Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission).

Gro Harlem Brundtland was my heroine and I was proud of growing up in a country with a government featuring a record number of women. Since then, no Norwegian Government has been formed with less than 40 per cent women. For me the link between gender equality and democracy is almost self-evident. Women account for over half of the population in most societies and if the majority of citizens do not have full political rights and ability to influence, the society is not democratic.

Today women hold the four most powerful jobs in Norway. Erna Solberg is Prime Minister, Siv Jensen is Finance Minister, Gerd Kristiansen is the head of Norway's trade union confederation (LO) and Kristin Skogen Lund is the head of the employers association (NHO).

I believe that the increased parity between women and men in decision-making in Norway is linked to education and employment opportunities for women. In our case, over a century ago all Norwegian women were granted the right to vote and Norway became the first independent country in the world to introduce universal suffrage. But there has been a long struggle to get where we are today.

In January 2004, a law was enacted in Norway stipulating that at least 40 per cent of the board members of publicly-owned businesses must be female, and at least 40 per cent must be male.

Other results from a long fight for more gender equality are:

1. Increased political participation of women in municipal councils, in parliament and in the cabinet

2. Increased participation from all women at all levels of society

3. A policy that reconciles work and family life by parental leave arrangements and well-developed early child care systems and sufficient care systems for the elderly

4. High employment rate among women

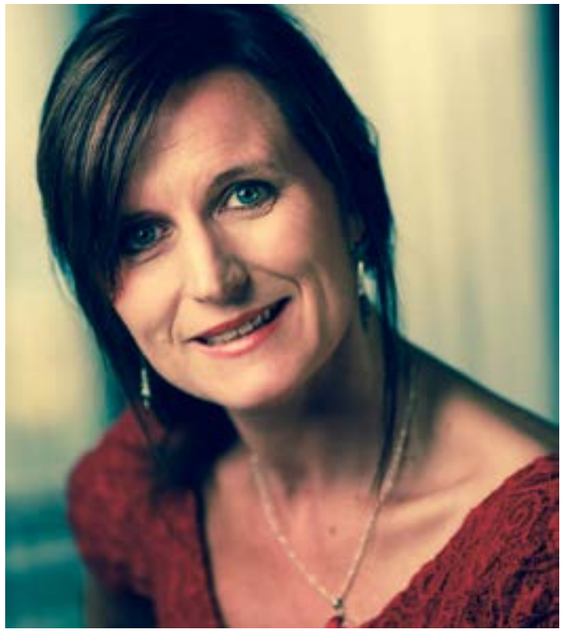
5. Norway must have a stronger focus on women of ethnic minorities.

Thanks to bold and visionary policies introduced by Gro Harlem Brundtland and other women front-soldiers and to a facilitating legal framework, Norway has one of Europe's highest percentages of working women, but also one of Europe's highest fertility rates.

Norway is a country considered the most gender-equal nation in the world. Equality policy includes a wide range of political tools in addition to laws and regulations, such as economic stimuli, information measures or other types of incentive schemes.

A political goal has been to help parents to become equal in terms of their role in work and family life. Having children is in general negatively related to women's hourly wages, while the relationship is positive for men.

When I had my first child in 1995, it was natural to share the parental leave with my husband. Sharing the statutory parental leave period provides an important basis for a further sharing of childcare responsibilities after the formal parental leave



period is over. In order to help parents back to work there have been a mass expansion of childcare centres.

In Norway today we have the right to access the kindergarten from the age of one year and at the same time we have paid parental leave for one year. The female workforce participation is 76 per cent. The emphasis on an equal society where women participate on an equal footing with men is an important explanation for this.

But we still have challenges in Norway. We have a gender wage gap and studies show that the gap between men and women increases when they have children. The gender wage gap is slowly decreasing in Norway from 14 per cent in 2002 to 13 per cent in 2011. When we compare men and women working in similar occupations and industry, the wage gap is seven per cent. I hope the Norwegian example can spur change and more gender-embracing policies in other countries.

Nina Hanssen is the entrepreneur behind the women's network fembiz.net

Upward mobility

Fighting pervasive violence against women in El Salvador

Julia Zulver is a graduate at the Latin American Centre, University of Oxford. Her forthcoming thesis focuses on women's mobilization in El Salvador. Here she tells Her Edit how Salvadoran women are finding autonomy in a country which has one of the worst rates of violent crime against women in the world.

After a long, dusty car ride across the country, we finally arrived in Ignacio Ellacuría – a tiny town near the border with Honduras, in the Department of Chalatenango. Two project leaders led us to different houses, where we met women involved in the Huertos Caseros project, an initiative that gives women the resources and training to plant kitchen gardens. One by one, they walked us through their plots, showing us crops and livestock with pride. The project was designed to promote food security, but I was more interested in the other effects the initiative seemed to be having on the women's lives. As part of the programme, women began to meet in small community groups to learn skills and to share tips related to their gardens. Inevitably, however, the act of meeting as a group of women had other empowering effects. Discussion strayed from topics relating to horticulture and moved toward sharing experiences and hardships related to being a woman in El Salvador. The women I interviewed were all impressed that the Huertos project had changed their lives – they could eat healthily, they could take pride in feeding their families, they were able to generate small personal incomes, but most importantly, they had gained strength from growing close as a community of women. Such strength was evident from the small, spray-painted signs I saw on the outside walls of many of the women's houses: 'hago mi casa un espacio libre de violencia contra las mujeres', I make my house a space free from violence against women.

In 2011, El Salvador was considered the second most dangerous country in the world, according to UNODC homicide

A spray-painted sign announces that this home is a space free from violence against women ©Julia Zulver

A woman from Ignacio Ellacuría proudly cuts us some sugar cane from her garden

©Julia Zulver

statistics. In a 2003 study about constructing the rule of law in El Salvador, Charles Call found citizens' primary sustained concern to be crime. Rather than military or economic crises, crime represented the biggest threat to democracy. El Salvador is the country with the most feminicides in the world, with a rate of 12 women murdered per 100,000. A 2012 ISDEMU (the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development) report shows that the number of feminicides has risen to a level that the Inter-American Commission of Women considers reflective of a pandemic.

Violence is a concept that extends beyond homicide statistics. Indeed, an integral part of the recently passed Special and Comprehensive Law for a Life Free from Violence for Women (which came into force in 2012) seeks to define the different manifestations of violence that impact upon women. It outlines that violence can take the form of economic violence, feminicide violence, physical violence, psychological and emotional violence, patrimonial violence, sexual violence, and symbolic violence, all of which can be evidenced at community, institutional, or workplace/labour levels. Such an articulation recognises that certain forms of violence are inherently gendered – that they impact upon women in a different way than they do on men.

'El Salvador is the country with the most feminicides in the world'

In light of such brutal statistics, I was not surprised that information from my interviews corroborates Charles Call's argument that citizens (in this case, mainly women), continue to be concerned with violent crime, especially in its manifestation of violence against women.

It would seem that the current Salvadoran Government - the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) - has created a programme for the advancement of women's issues. This programme aims to guarantee the fundamental rights of Salvadoran women, in accordance with the Special Law, through the provision of specialised services such as: sexual and reproductive health, comprehensive attention to gendered violence, economic empowerment, and the promotion of women's rights. The programme links a number of different state institutions, including ISDEMU and the National Police (PNC), the Attorney General's office, the District Attorney's office, and the Legal Medicine office. It further offers access to medical treatment, and skills-training workshops.

Women's organisation leaders I interviewed, however, were sceptical about the programme, given that it does not involve the promotion of community organising, nor any type of violence prevention project. Moreover, one of my interviewees' top concerns was the level of exclusion that women encounter at all levels of interaction with state institutions. From the police force to the judiciary, women are often told to 'solve their issues at home'. In some cases, male police officers will not even respond to emergency calls that involve situations of domestic violence. The Special Law, while passed unanimously in 2010, is still only applied in rare cases, with judges preferring to use the conservative Family Penal Code. El Salvador is a place in which violence against women is part of everyday life. The country is plagued with economic inequalities, a tradition of cultural machismo, perceived corruption (with a score of 38/100 in the 2013 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index) and brutal gang violence.

Interestingly, in a country of just 6.3 million people, there is also a plethora of women's organisations. The Concertación Feminista Prudencia Ayala is a collective umbrella organization that brings together 22 autonomous women's organisations, as well as more than 70 independent self-identified feminist activists. Interviews I conducted illustrate that the overarching strategy of these women leaders is to increase women's mobilisation at the local level. Serafina Rodriguez, a feminist leader with a history of participation in the civil war of the 1980s, told me:

'the laws now exist, women just need to act'

'The laws now exist, women just need to act. They need to sensitise themselves and inform themselves.'

This attitude reflects a broader strategy that seeks to encourage women to organise at a community level, creating a space in which they can learn about the legal protections guaranteed to them by the state, as well as empower themselves to make demands on the state when such protections are violated. Leaders of women's organisations believe that it will be through both state intervention and bottom-up women's mobilisation that the culture of violence – one that has real and direct impacts on the lives of women – will be ameliorated.

The trip to the Chalatenango region stayed in my mind throughout my entire fieldwork. The conversations I had with rural women was reflective of what I heard time and time again during interviews with leaders of women's organisations in San Salvador. The act of organising as women, of coming together to discuss issues relevant to their lives, is in itself an act of empowerment. The creation of space in which women feel safe to discuss, not only day-to-day issues like procuring food for their families, but also issues of different manifestations of violence, is vital in the process of beginning to create a society free from such violence.

As predicted by organisation leaders, the act of coming together as women seems to bring both personal empowerment and group strength to make demands on the state to comply with its legal obligations. As such, women's mobilisation in El Salvador is leading the way to call on society to comply with its legal – and moral – obligations to reduce violence against women.

Follow Julia on twitter @JZulver

Soledad Vega

The gender of power in Argentina

Soledad Vega

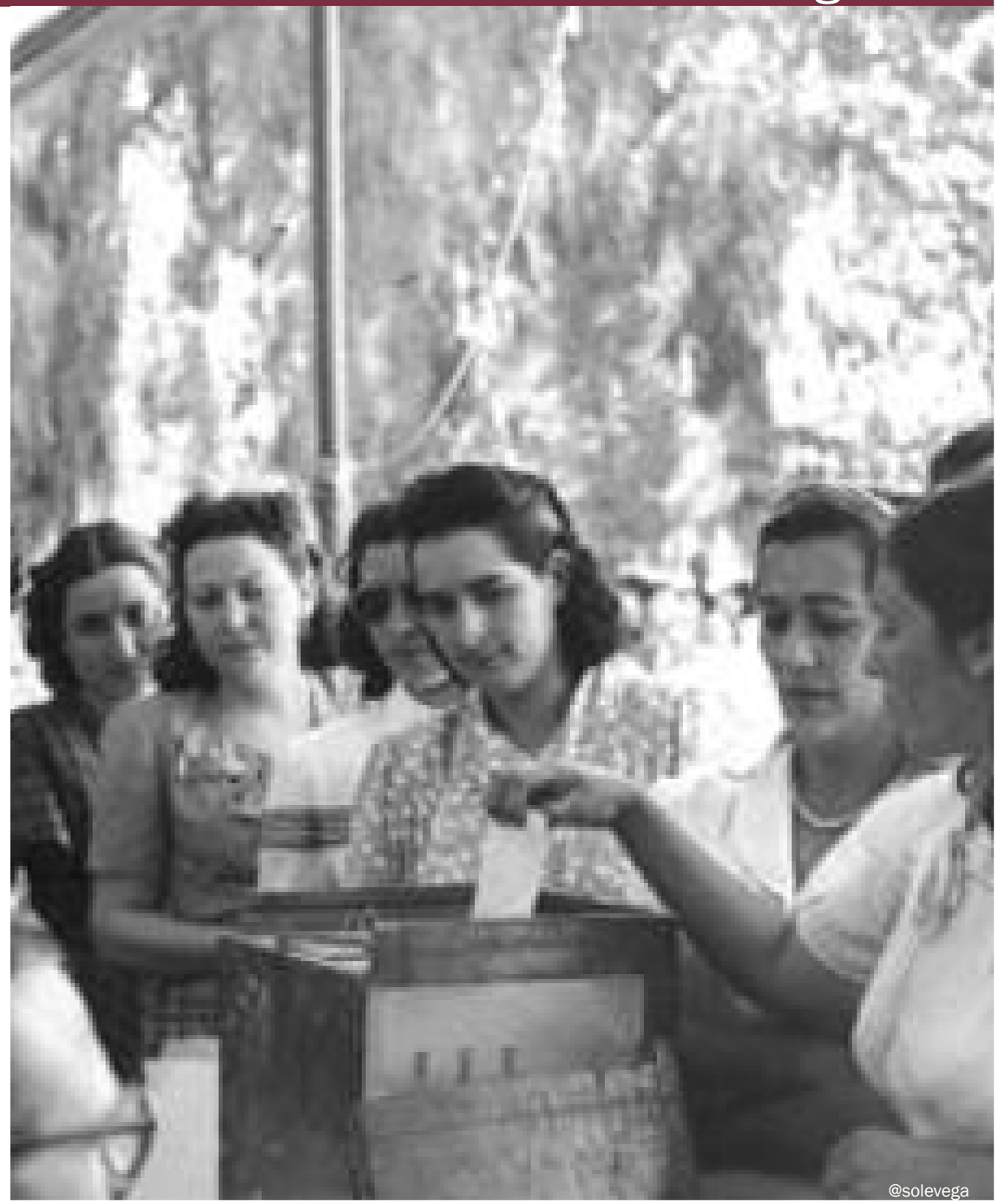
Argentina

Soledad Vega is a freelance journalist, born and brought up in Argentina and currently living in Toronto, Canada. Her work centres on humanitarian issues and women's rights with particular interest in Latin American affairs and the cultural idiosyncrasies of the region.

It is 2007. So far we have known her as the first lady, Nestor Kirchner's wife. Now she's running for president. The city is plastered with posters of her face, but we rarely see her giving speeches or making public appearances. She refuses to speak to the national press. During her entire campaign she only gave one interview on TV. In October 2007, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner became the first elected female president of Argentina.

Argentina has come a long way in terms of female representation in the public sphere since the first women suffragists. Although Argentine women have been able to vote since 1947, the systematic exclusion of women from real public power posed one of the most crucial challenges to the democratic system. Women suffragists believed that the conquest of the vote would imply an immediate transformation of society. They celebrated this triumph as an independent and defining achievement, but it took forever to find appropriate mechanisms to achieve the deserved recognition and representation. Women were at first content with being able to decide who to vote for, but they themselves were not running for positions of power, or exercising representation, or getting recognition.

During the democratic transition of the 80s, organised groups of activists understood the importance of fighting against gender discrimination in the context of democratic reconstruction. Women began



Soledad Vega

Argentina

in places of power. According to the World Economic Forum's 2013 Global Gender Gap Report, Argentina is 24th in female political empowerment ranking, out of a total of 136 countries. And this is despite women currently occupying more than a third of the seats in the National Congress. What lies behind these numbers?

According to a study released by ELA, a non-profit organisation promoting gender equality, women legislators have higher qualifications than men, but up to 2011, no woman had ever occupied the presidency of the chambers of the National Congress and they hardly ever led their parties. Among women legislators, there is a greater proportion of single, widowed or separated women and a lower percentage of married women, compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, women in politics have, on average, fewer children than their male peers. As in other areas, the responsibility for housework and childcare falls primarily on women, which appears to be to the detriment of their professional development.

And even when women do reach Congress, their gender still determines their role - the roles assigned to men and women in society are repeated in Congress. While men preside over committees mostly linked to production and the economy, such as the budget, public works, transportation, industry, and commerce women are often relegated to the areas linked to more 'feminine' concerns: children, family, health, education, culture, social policies.

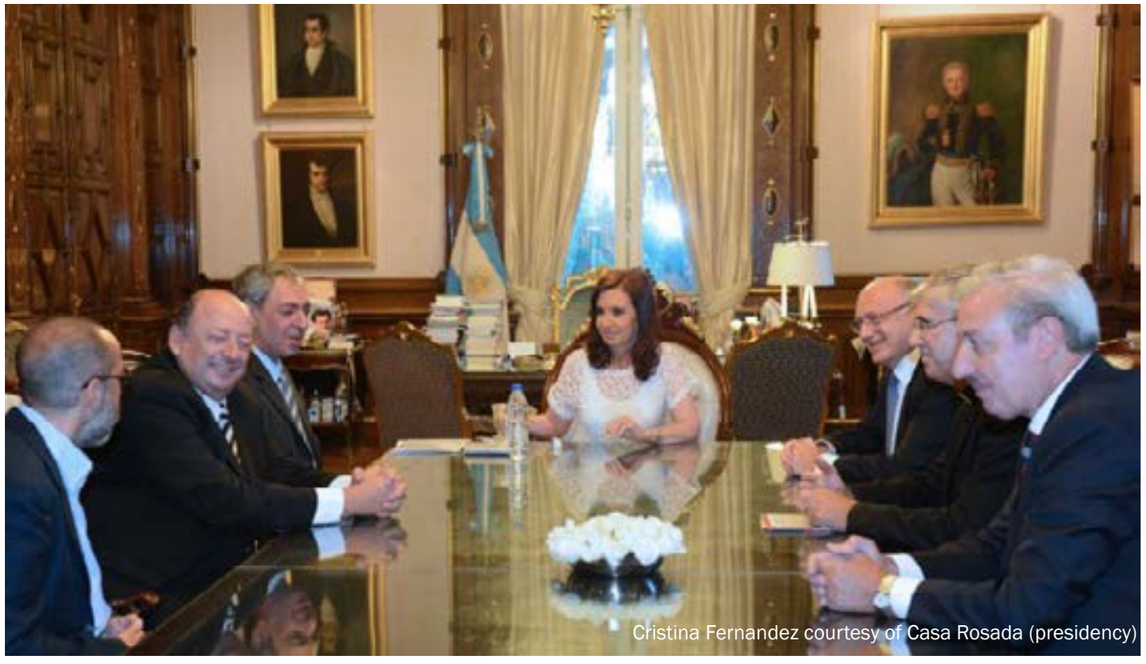
The ways in which men and women access Congress are also very different. While men follow the traditional sequential order of public offices, for women seats are almost like communal property. The wife is placed in the position that the husband, by rule of law, cannot occupy. These places are even considered a family asset through which daughters, sisters, and female friends run for a seat that a man felt he deserved. Even today, the political leadership keeps talking about 'paying the quota' and choosing, if they can, docile and obedient women to fill these places. If this happens in Congress, what happens in the other areas?

At the executive level, gender parity in the Argentine cabinet is at 21 per cent. At the municipal level, the participation of women in the highest positions of local power reaches only ten per cent.

'the mere existence of quotas for women...does not guarantee the overcoming of gender stereotypes'

the quest for an equal democracy by developing practices and strategies that could reach all women and promote a greater awareness of gender, with female claims and new insights on power. One of the mechanisms used to include women in the public sphere was the quota system. Argentina was the first Latin American country to adopt a quota for the participation of women in Congress. The quota law, enacted in 1991, says that the list of candidates proposed by political parties should have at least 30 per cent female candidates with proportional chances of being elected. This bare minimum increased the number of women in the Argentine Congress markedly and in 2002, Argentina was ranked ninth in the world for female representation in legislative bodies.

Yet today's reality shows that the mere existence of quotas for women in legislative positions does not guarantee the overcoming of gender stereotypes and prejudices towards women



Cristina Fernandez courtesy of Casa Rosada (presidency)

The judiciary is also a male-dominated field. In Argentina, the presence of women in the highest court is just 29 per cent. Despite having a quota law appealing to unions, only five per cent of their highest positions are occupied by women.

Argentina's experience has generated a series of lessons learned that are worth highlighting. The quota law has meant an actual increase in women in Congress that would not have happened otherwise.

But this law must be regarded simply as a means to enable the realisation of further goals and never as an end in itself. The simple fact of being a woman does not per se guarantee commitment and solidarity with the female gender.

Although in 2007, Cristina Fernández won the election decisively in the first round with 45 per cent of the vote, her role as the first lady was instrumental for her victory.

Despite undeniable progress, at the present rate Argentina is still many years away from women having full and equal access to the key roles that men overwhelmingly occupy today. In this context and despite the increased numbers in political participation and active influence in the political arena, Argentine women still face enormous gender equality challenges.

Follow Soledad on twitter @ Solevega

Anna Karamanou

Backlash: economic crisis and gender inequality in Greece

Anna Karamanou was a Member of the European Parliament from 1997 – 2004 during which time she was elected Chair of the European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. An active trade-unionist, she has served numerous women's associations and continues to campaign for gender equality, democracy and human rights.

It was not until 1952 that Greek women were able to vote, with the first woman being elected to parliament the following year. The recognition of women's political and social rights was followed by massive participation in education and in economic activities, changes in gender roles and in family structures. There is no doubt that over the years the change in women's situation and their conversion from a domestic to a significant economic entity has been extraordinary. Today the majority of university students are women, as well as 64 per cent of last year's university graduates. At the same time we can observe women's dynamic breakthrough in all scientific and vocational fields. However, the apparent increase in women's participation in educational, economic and cultural life has not been accompanied either by a redistribution of family care responsibilities, or by the representation of women in democratic institutions and the decision-making processes.

In the last parliamentary elections, in June 2012, of 300 seats, only 64 had women elected to them - a mere 21 per cent - and only two women were appointed ministers. At a local level the situation is even worse. Only men are governors of the thirteen regions of the country and there are only nine women mayors out of 325. The same phenomenon exists in the social partners. At the last congress of the General Confederation of Labour (March 2013), not one woman was elected to the [1]Presidium and only one to the executive committee of fifteen members and the situation is similar at employers' associations.

Greece remains a patriarchal country, resisting modernisation and the situation is becoming deplorable in the current financial crisis. Greece is undergoing the worst economic crisis of her recent history. Youth unemployment is rocketing - for young people aged between 15 and 25, unemployment is at 59 per cent, while for young women it stands at 66 per cent (October 2013). Youth unemployment in Greece is the highest in the EU. Total unemployment has reached 28 per cent, with the men's share at 25 per cent and women's at 32 per cent.

In conclusion, despite considerable progress, gender inequalities and discrimination against women still persist and in many cases, due to the economic crisis, are accelerating. The signs of a backlash are already visible: higher unemployment for women, discrimination against young women and more violence against them. My best hope for Greece, Europe and the world is to figure out a way to overcome systemic financial crisis, transform casino capitalism, achieve gender equality in all areas and global justice.See

See more about Anna's work at www.karamanou.gr

1The Presidium of Parliament is the group of individuals elected by the Hellenic Parliament to deal with the organizing and running of Parliament.

Anna Karamanou (left) and women MEPs on a week's mission to meet women in Afghanistan, one year after the fall of the Taliban in November 2002 ©Anna Karamanou

Talking about a new constitution

Gender strategist Sarah Williams is currently working in Kenya with the independent international development organisation Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO). She tells Her Edit about the impact of the country's new constitution on gender equality.

Having worked in various advocacy roles in the UK for a number of years, last November I decided to bundle up my skills, knowledge and expertise and take them on the road. Now I'm here in Nairobi, Kenya supporting MPs and colleagues with gender-focussed research and policy and through this I hope to take some things away to think about in the UK.

One of the biggest areas of political change in Kenya at the moment is the implementation of a new constitution. The creation of the constitution was part of a healing process for a country that had experienced widespread violence after contested elections in 2007. The constitution came into being in 2010 and, living here, you hear it referred to all the time. Kenyans are very proud of it and rightly so.

Among other changes, the constitution has led to an increase in the number of women in parliament. There are now political seats reserved for women candidates, and this has meant that now 19 per cent of the National Assembly are women, compared to just 10 per cent before the 2013 election. What effect has this had? In just under a year, the new female cohort has been critical in introducing and passing bills relating to family and marriage that will provide greater protection for women. They are pushing projects that will increase procurement of goods and services run by women, giving women far greater opportunities for economic independence.

Understandably, having seen the positive effects of having more women in political positions, there is a real desire to make further improvements. The next challenge is to make sure there are even more female politicians in the Senate and the National Assembly – in total, there should be at least a third. Because that was another great change for Kenya, not only will there be guaranteed seats for women in the parliaments, but, since the constitution, no public body can have more than two thirds of people of the same gender. Ten per cent is just not enough – more women are needed in the National Assembly or the whole parliamentary system will be unconstitutional. So, by the end of 2015, at least 33 per cent of the people sitting in the Kenyan Parliament will be women.

How does this compare to other countries? A third is better than average. Globally, women representatives average 21 per cent. In Kenya, they look to Rwanda and Uganda as their shining examples. In Uganda, women make up 35 per cent of the lower house, which is something to aspire to. Rwanda tops the world. Rwanda is the only country in the world where there are more female than male political representatives. I know I shouldn't be surprised that Rwanda is the only country in the world with that many women in positions of political power. Angry perhaps, but not surprised.

How does the UK compare? A fairly disappointing joint 59th out of 188 in the global ranking with 23 per cent female representation – that's a third of the way down the ranking. Yes. Less than a quarter of the people who make the decisions for and about the UK electorate in the House of Commons are women. Less than a quarter of the people who lobby for people in the UK and help to fight our corner when it comes to legislative priorities are women. And I don't think, for one second that is because there are not enough talented women who can compete for positions of political power.

I spoke recently to some of the female politicians in Kenya to ask for their thoughts on women's power and leadership. Some of these women are in their political seat solely because it is reserved for women's representation and they don't think they would be there otherwise. One told me that, as a woman in Kenya, you had to prove yourself every step of the way. You had to be smart, educated, beautiful, religious, married, and perfect to be taken seriously. For a man, he had proved himself at birth. And this is why Kenya has taken these constitutional steps.

'They look to Rwanda and Uganda as their shining examples'

Should the UK be doing something similar? I wonder why these discussions are not even taking place. The last time I remember discussing affirmative action in any detail was in 1994 when I took my politics A-level. 20 years ago. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm missing out on these conversations and this is what you were talking to your friends and colleagues about last Friday in the pub – in which case, I salute you. But if not, I think we need to re-open the debate. We should not be happy languishing in 59th place. We do better than that in most world football championships!

I am working with VSO to change this. VSO believes that one thing that can make a big difference to women across the world is to have more women in positions of political and public life. Right now they are working for new global goals that all countries can sign up to in 2015. They want to see countries, including the UK, sign up to a target to 'eliminate discrimination against, and increase the participation and influence of, women at all levels of public and political life'. It won't be the only way to redress the imbalance between women and men – but it could be a good boost.

At the vanguard: Tunisia and the Arab Spring

Zoe Petkanas is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge. She is currently based in Tunis researching the role of Tunisian women in the constitutional process following the revolution in 2011.

Tunisia, the vanguard of the Arab Spring, gained a new and hard-fought constitution on 26 January 2014, which notably includes a gender parity article. Article 46 stipulates that the state will "seek to achieve equal representation between men and women in elected councils", constitutionally codifying a 2011 Electoral Law Decree passed in advance of the first democratic elections after the Arab Spring.

In order to elect the Constituent Assembly, the body tasked with writing the new constitution, Tunisia implemented a closed-list proportional system. Every party submitted a ranked list of candidates for each electoral district. The proportion of votes received by each party in that district determined how many candidates, starting from the top of the list, would sit at the assembly. The gender parity law required that parties put forward an equal number of men and women on their lists and for them to be listed in a ‘zippered’ fashion, meaning alternating between genders.

Overall, women fared moderately well, taking about a quarter of the 217 seats, which is an impressive percentage given the global lack of female political representation. But equal representation was not achieved, despite the fact that 50 per cent of the candidates were women. The reason for this disparity lies in the space left for interpretation between the law as it is written and its implementation.

There were two conditions that parties had to satisfy in order to comply with the parity law: an equal number of women running as men and that they alternate on the list. The law did not explicitly specify, however, that there must be an equal number of lists headed by men and women and the vast majority of parties did not choose to interpret parity in that way. Thus, only eight per cent of lists were headed by women.

‘The law did not explicitly specify... that there must be an equal number of lists headed by men and women’

The proportional structure of voting magnified the preference for men at the top of the lists because of the system’s heavy emphasis on the order of the candidates. As many parties only won one seat per district, the Assembly came to be heavily dominated by men.

Other mitigating factors that female candidates faced that impede parity include marginalisation from the central party structures responsible for choosing the order of candidates and the allocation of campaign funding; a social stigma associated with women in politics; and the inability of women, particularly in rural areas, to comfortably enter male-dominated spaces for campaign purposes. All of these factors, both social and structural, must be addressed if total equality in political participation is to be achieved.

Most critically, however, is the process by which parity is defined vis-a-vis the heads of the lists, integral, as it is, to the law's success.

Article 46 is an important first step, but while the new constitution establishes the state's commitment to "seek to achieve" parity, its actual implementation will be through electoral law, which is currently being debated and written. Interpreting parity to unequivocally include the heads of the lists does not automatically guarantee equal representation in elected councils, but it is vital in closing the gap between the spirit of the gender parity law and its outcomes.

Walking the Arab street

Sophie McBain is a staff features writer at New Statesman. She lived in Libya from 2008 to 2011 and has a keen interest in the Middle East. Here she talks about the harsh reality for women since the Arab Spring.

In February 2011, when Libyans took to the streets demanding an end to the brutal dictatorship of Muammar Al Gaddafi, my friend Asma, then just 21 and a student, braved government bullets to protest in Libya's capital, Tripoli. Three years on, she still regularly attends human rights demonstrations, but now she's more likely to face the sound of catcalls and insults than gunfire.

Last year, she helped organise a protest calling for an investigation into the rape of an 18 year old girl while she lay in a coma in Tripoli hospital. Around forty people turned up - far fewer than had supported the cause on Facebook, as most were too scared - and the group was quickly surrounded by men shouting that the "sluts" should "go home". Women in Libya, and indeed across the Middle East, have plenty of cause to feel betrayed by the Arab Spring revolutions they helped bring about.

It is an astonishing thing, to risk your life in the hope of bringing about a better political future. But as well as dismantling huge political and psychological barriers, the women who demonstrated against their governments in 2011 were shaking off the heavy weight of social expectations. According to cultural traditions accepted by many across the region, the street is no place for a woman.

When I lived in Libya, from 2008 to 2011, it was unusual for me to see another woman walking on her own in the street. Any woman who could afford to drove, or else she sent her male relatives out to do the groceries. Tripoli's handful of upmarket cafés were considered OK for women to frequent, but most stuck to socialising at home and within their extended families. A woman who went to the wrong sorts of cafés, or spent too much time wandering the streets, risked damaging her reputation - and in Libya, a country of six million that is so close-knit it feels like a large village - reputation is everything.

But for a brief few months in 2011, women did away with convention, joining their male compatriots in the streets. If anyone had ever been in any doubt that women are as capable or as brave as men, 2011 offered hard proof. Some women took up arms against Gaddafi, others helped smuggle weapons, food and medical aid to rebel-controlled territories and some found ways to put their traditional skills to revolutionary use, cooking for thousands of anti-Gaddafi troops. After the revolution, Libyan women worked alongside men to take advantage of the new feeling of optimism, setting up and running the human rights organisations, charities and media outlets that made up Libya's first civil society.

And yet, as hope faded for Libya's new government to secure a meaningful peace in a country awash with weapons, or to guarantee individual freedom and prosperity, women have often found themselves the subject of anger and violence.

Last year, doctors and charity workers in Libya told me they were noticing an increase in the number of rape cases across the country, which had risen to numbers not even seen during the war. Female friends in Tripoli tell me they feel less safe walking in Tripoli than they did before the revolution, because of the increase in sexual harassment and abuse. Some women's rights activists have been forcibly silenced: last year I met Magdulien Abaida, a 26 year old Libyan who set up a women's rights organisation in 2011 and who claimed asylum in the UK later that year after being kidnapped and tortured by a pro-revolution militia group for "trying to destroy morals".

The picture is not dissimilar in Egypt, where women protesters have been raped or had their clothing ripped off them by the crowds, or been forced to undergo virginity tests. A UN report found that 99% of Egyptian women had experienced some form of sexual harassment. Human rights groups in Syria have reported that women are increasingly subject to rape and torture by both government and rebel troops. And even in Tunisia, widely held as an Arab Spring success story, street harassment is common for women. For any woman, sexual abuse is a deeply traumatic, painful experience, but women in the Middle East who are raped can face the additional threat of being murdered to preserve their family 'honour', asked to marry their rapist or become subject to lifelong stigmatisation.

> '...women protestors have been raped or had their clothing ripped off them by the crowds'

So what's happened? Historically, there's a well-documented link between societies becoming more militarised and an increase in gender-based violence. The Arab Spring demonstrations started peacefully, but Libya descended into civil war and the militia are refusing to disband, Egypt's first democratically elected government was overthrown by the military (backed by mass protests) last year, and hundreds have died in mass demonstrations since then. Over 100,000 people have died in Syria's conflict. This is bad news for both men and women, but a society brutalised by violence often affects women disproportionately.

At the same time, as well as empowering secular activists, the Arab Spring ushered in new opportunities and freedom for Islamist groups, including Salafists who take a hard-line, conservative stance on women. Egypt's Islamists are facing a government crack-down, but in Libya and Tunisia, conservative Islamists can still exert pressure on government policy and in Syria women face the worrying prospect of the military success of Al-Qaeda affiliates.

Three years after women first took to the streets, it can feel like women across the Arab world are being compelled, often with violence, to retreat from politics and 'return home'. It can be hard not to feel deeply pessimistic. And then I speak to Asma, and understand that she will always see the street as hers. Whatever happens, she'll never go home.

Follow Sophie @SEMcBain

Reconciliation and representation

Gender equality in the new South Africa

Esther Irving visited South Africa to research her post-graduate thesis on Women and International Politics. She tells Her Edit about the progress the country is making in establishing gender equality in its new political climate.

Cape Town is known for its fantastic views. Whilst working as an intern at the Commission for Gender Equality, my own view was of a cellar, as I sorted through legislation and research. This however turned out to be just as much of an eye opener. Despite preconceptions about the developing world, I think the developed world could learn something from the self-reflective journey countries such as South Africa have undertaken. From Apartheid to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through to the Commission for Gender Equality which reviews all acts to ensure they are not gender biased, South Africa is making an active effort to be inclusive of women.

Its political representation is the most visual and noteworthy demonstration of this dedication of all. Now women make up 42 per cent of the parliament: out of 400 elected representatives, 169 are women. South Africa ranks 8th in the world for female representation in parliament, compared to the UK which is 58th with only 146 women MPs out of a total of 650, just 23 per cent.[1] It is a widely held belief in Britain that a lack of parliamentary presence still allows a group to be accurately represented. Not so in South Africa. There, it is acknowledged that if you want to represent the people, you need to have proportional representation of them, to add their values, norms and local issues to the debate. Different voices make more robust and rounded legislation. As such the legislation always takes into account the vulnerable groups that need to be protected, such as disabled people and women. As a result, South African charities are coaching local individuals in gaining the necessary skills to be national leaders. People from all walks of life, in all different areas, are taking part.

I had the privilege of meeting one such individual, Auntie Alison, as she showed me around her area just outside of Cape Town. Having herself attended the aforementioned coaching sessions she had become a well respected leader in the community and was now better equipped to represent it through her knowledge of local issues. One such issue for which she had been raising awareness was the animosity towards refugees coming into the area. This fuelled acts of arson in the shanty towns targeting refugee settlements leading to whole areas being burnt down. She, with the help of various charities, was lobbying the government to acknowledge this issue and take action.

In reality South Africa has many obstacles in turning de jure into de facto, but it is individuals like Auntie Alison that give me hope for the future of their country. The UK can learn from this and represent its population more accurately in government. The lack of women and minority groups in parliament needs to be amended for a more resilient debate to take place.

1 www.ipu.org as at 1 November 2013

Agnieszka Nakielska

Female political voices in Poland

Agnieszka Nakielska is a sociologist and psychologist, and is currently studying towards her PhD in cross-cultural psychology at Brunel University in Uxbridge. Agnieszka examines how women's political influence is increasing despite the impact of the economic crisis on women's everyday lives.

Women in Poland obtained voting rights in 1918. Since then we've been able to actively participate in political life and be chosen as members of parliament, but the harsh reality of Polish political history has meant that it's taken over 70 years for Poland to become a democratic country. In the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking, Poland occupies the 55th position, with 24 per cent of women in the Lower House of Parliament and 13 per cent in the Senate (UK is in 59th position of the 188 countries listed).[1] In the 2011 Global Gender Gap Index, Poland occupied the 67th position out of 135 countries (the UK is 62nd).[2] Poland's weakest area was described as women's participation in parliament, the number of female ministers and other important political functions.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action states that every country should aspire to at least 30 per cent participation of women in its government. Poland is still far behind this goal.

Polish history shows that the numbers of women in governing bodies at any level has never been higher than 30 per cent. Only two women were ever candidates in presidential elections: the first being Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz in 1995 and second Henryka Bochniarz in 2005. Neither got to the second round.

Since 1989 and the transitioning of Poland to a democratic state, Polish women have campaigned hard for a gender parity law. This culminated in 2009 with a new women's movement called Kongres Kobiet (Women Congress) which organised events and conferences, sponsored research and reports to increase the numbers of women in politics and business. In June 2010 the second Congress took place and its main message was 'It's time for election! It's time for women! It's time for solidarity!'

The following year, the gender parity law came into effect, which required that the minimum number of women on election lists should be 35 per cent.

Kongres Kobiet still organises workshops and courses for women who would like to enter politics. The workshops cover public speaking, law, PR skills, gender budgeting and creating the perfect professional look. The workshops are very popular, suggesting women in Poland do have a strong determination to take action and participate in creating a new political reality. Although this has not yet resulted in a great change at the national level, there is a significant rise in numbers of women at the regional and local council levels and many women become city mayors and local politicians. This is notably since the new parity law was implemented in 2011. Now Polish women have immense drive and ambition to get involved in politics and change the country.

However the economic crisis from 2010-2011 has had a negative effect on the lives of women in Poland. The economic status of women has worsened as a result of job losses and there is a move towards more low-wage jobs in both the formal and informal sectors. Cuts in social welfare have affected younger and older women, as well as lone mothers. There has also been a decrease in access to health services and social support which has led to a considerable rise in poverty, specifically affecting women. And despite maternity leave being extended to 12 months in 2013, it is only available to women in full-employment. Therefore many women are still not entitled to it, due to lack of permanent employment.

But women's participation in shaping law and influencing politics has also brought positive changes. In 2008 the Government Representative for Equal Status of Men and Women was restored, the 2013 changes in maternity leave also established a fortnight's paternity leave and there is also an increased awareness of domestic violence. Female engagement in social and political life is increasing.

1 http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm
2 http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2011.pdf

Her Agenda

Glasgow

Shaping Scotland's future: women's equality and constitutional change

Academics, activists and women from all walks of life discuss the choices for women in the face of the independence referendum and beyond.

7 March
Visit http://www.engender.org.uk/2014/01/17/iwd-2014-shaping-scotlands-future-womens-equality-and-afterwards.

Manchester

Women's History gallery tour

A tour exploring the role of women in 18th century politics and the work of early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft.

7 March
http://www.phm.org.uk/whatson/womens-history-gallery-tour/

London

Walthamstow's Wonderful Women Walk

Join Stella Creasy MP in Walthamstow to replicate the march of the suffragettes who gatthered there in 1910 calling for votes for women.

7 March
Visit http://www.workingforwalthamstow.org.uk/international-womens-day-2014-walthamstows-wonderful-women-walk/

Cambridge

Women and writing: the life you save may be your own

Acclaimed novelist and poet Jill Dawson talks about her early struggles as a young writer in her 20s and the women writers who influenced and inspired her.

12 March
Visit http://www.cambridgeshire.net/event/women-and-writing-the-life-you-save-may-be-your-own--talk-and-qa/124518.aspx#.Uw-hDfl_uSo

Liverpool

North West region International Women's Day March

Join the CWU, Unison, UCU, IER and the NW TUC in celebrating the achievements of women and campaigning for a fairer society for women.

7 March

Visit http://www.cwu.org/north-west-region-international-women-s-day-march-amp-rally.html

Cardiff

Reclaim the Night Wales

Starting in Cardiff city centre the event will include placard making, a march, rally and after party.

7 March

Visit http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=506:reclaim-the-night-wales-2014&catid=35:news&Itemid=168&Itemid=53

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