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Yemen Uprising: Women From Many Walks Of Life Bind



Hamza Hendawi 11/ 5/11 12:14 PM ET

Sanaa, Yemen — Early in Yemen's uprising, about 20 women with banners demanding equal rights marched into the heart of the capital, joining the thousands who were calling for the ouster of the president. They were greeted with cheers.

The women settled into a spot below the stage in the middle of Change Square. But as the days passed, "the women's section" became off-limits to men. A fence went up around it. Then straw mats were slung over the fence to conceal the women. Policed by bearded males, Yemen's traditional gender segregation had insinuated itself into the center of the revolt.

Women are fighting to keep demands for their rights at the center of Yemen's uprising and resist efforts to sideline them. The main goal of the protests is an end to President Ali Abdullah Saleh

and his regime, in place for nearly 33 years. But the liberals who launched the campaign nine months ago have always had broader hopes for blanket social change in a country where tribe and religion dominate, no matter who is in power.

Women's role in the uprising was recognized globally when Tawakkul Karman, a female icon of the protest movement, won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. But here in Sanaa, the reality is that every woman who joins the rallies has to rebel against the heavy pressure of social codes.

They also face the growing influence of Islamic hard-liners at Change Square, as activists have named the intersection where they have set up their protest camp. Islamic movements are richer and better organized than the secular side. They dominate Change Square's organizational committee and have attacked tents where men and women were gathered, seeking to undo the gender mixing that has been fostered by the revolution.

"They are systematically excluding us women," said Wameedh Shaker, who wears the hallmarks of liberal Yemeni womanhood – jeans, knee-length coat and a scarf covering her hair.

She remembers the exhilarating welcome for that first march.

"We felt like everything we can dream of will come true," said Shaker, a 31-year-old mother of one. "Coming into the square was like going to a paradise of respect and compassion. It was like the best men and women of Yemen gathered at one place."

About a fifth of those taking to the streets every day in protests are women – a level of participation that in itself represents a revolution for Yemen, where women are discouraged from inserting themselves into the public eye, much less the public debate.

In a poor nation of mountains, desert and few resources, women have had the poorest lot: female illiteracy runs at 70 percent, an average of eight women die every day because of poor health services or total lack of them. Men across much of the country marry girls as young as 10, with no legal minimum age for marriage. Only 7 percent of Yemeni women earn a wage, though in most cases they raise the children, tend the land, graze sheep and cattle, cook and clean. Protest, or even participation in public debate, is rare.

Somaya al-Qawas embodies the change.

She used to wear the most conservative of women's attire in Yemen, the khymar – an all-black tent that covers the body and head and hides the eyes behind a semi-translucent piece of cloth. It was what God wants, she believed.

In her early 20s, she took a small step toward moderation: She switched to the niqab, in which the veil has a slit exposing the eyes. And last month, at age 30, she marched into the makeshift hospital at the Change Square protest camp in a head scarf that exposed her face and a broad smile to the world.

"I told you I would, didn't I? Maybe you didn't expect it so soon," the mother of two said. "Am I the same person still? Yes. But some look at me as if I have become morally loose."

It was a dramatic leap in a personal journey of disillusionment with the ultraconservative version of Islam her family ascribes to. Her sisters were married at ages 11, 13, 14 and 16. She was the rebel: She waited until she was 23.

She pushed the strict confines of her marriage arrangements. She spoke to her husband only twice before their wedding – both times by phone after they were engaged. In their second call, she nearly broke up with him, angry because he too easily bowed to her family's warnings not to phone her.

She joined the revolution, and the revolution accelerated the change in her.

Her sisters, she said, "don't oppose what I am doing at Change Square, but they are clearly dismayed by it." She writes for an online newspaper and occasionally does live commentary for a private, pro-revolution TV station.

She has also grown away from Islah, the Islamist group that is Yemen's largest party and was always her political compass. She says the party instilled her principles in her, for which she's grateful, but "our revolution is broader than just one ideology. I can no longer exclude anyone who has different beliefs."

She also wants Islah to explain why it was a key supporter of the regime for so long, even if now it has latched on to the protests.

Al-Qawas says her businessman husband, Hesham al-Hameiri, backed her decision to join the protests. But Yemeni men in general are her adversary. "The next revolution in Yemen is a revolution against men's oppression of women," she says.

If al-Qawas came to women's empowerment from the outside, Hooria Mashhour fought for it from within Saleh's government through the state-run National Committee for Women.

Mashhour knew the organization existed mainly as a ruling party tool to bring out the women's vote, but she believed change had to come through the system. The widow of a top security official, she has a comfortable lifestyle in a luxury high-rise apartment in Sanaa.

The government's turn to violence to crush the revolution was too much. In March, at age 56, she quit the organization and started giving speeches and workshops at Change Square.

Now she works with an independent women's group focused on two demands: setting a minimum marriage age of 17 and a 30-percent quota for women in parliament.

In past upheaval, she says, women's rights took a back seat to other nationalist goals, like ending British colonial rule and feudal monarchy in the 1960s and unification of the two separate countries of North and South Yemen in 1990.

Now, she insists women's time has come. The post-revolutionary state, she says, "will have to include women in numbers that mirror the magnitude of their role in the revolution."

Jihad al-Jafri grew up in the once-independent south, where a socialist government tried to instill a more secular, less tribal society.

When she moved to Sanaa for college, she had to come to terms with its much more conservative attitudes. Here, she says, women are viewed either as sex objects to be covered up in the street or slaves at home.

Now married and settled in the capital, the 41-year-old psychiatrist has learned to adapt. She wears the niqab, for example, though she insists it's by choice, not by pressure.

"As women in the south, we went out to socialize only after sundown. But in Sanaa, women are home by sundown," she said.

Saleh's regime sought to reverse liberalization in the south, sending militant clerics to preach there, introducing a less woman-friendly family law and promoting a stricter dress code.

For al-Jafri, the uprising is a chance to roll back those changes.

She and her husband, a physician, have both been suspended from their government jobs for joining the protests. Piece by piece, al-Jafri sells off her dowry of gold jewelry so the family can eat and pay rent.

During a protest in April, al-Jafri volunteered to be a human shield for male protesters when security forces opened fire with live ammunition.

"I ran to the area where the protesters were targeted hoping that my presence there as a woman would stop the firing," she recalled.

The men noticed, she says, and respected what she did. "I can walk alone at Change Square at 3 in the morning and no one will bother me, not one bit."

Still she knows there's a long way to go.

"It will take 40 years to create a clean society in Yemen," she said. "There may well be other revolutions to strike roots for change and build a new Yemen, really new."