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Empowering Arab women
By Lawrence J. Haas

“I am with the Uprising of Women in the Arab World,” says a sign that Marwa (from Tunisia) holds in front of her, “because women’s sexuality is considered as a [sic] Taboo, while Sexism, Pedophilia, and Rape are seen as commonsense.”

“I am with the uprising of women in the arab [sic] world,” says a sign that Yara (from Egypt) uses to partially cover her face, “because I’m 16 and I’ve been sexually harassed since I was 12. I feel like I lost part of my innocence just because I’m a girl in the arab world.”

These and other women (and men as well) are part of a Facebook campaign that four Arab women launched on Oct. 1 to garner “freedom, independence and security” for Arab women – a campaign that’s attracted support (i.e., Facebook “likes”) from more than 67,000 people around the world to date, and that the Media East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) recently brought to light.

“The supporters,” MEMRI writes, “express protest over the patriarchal character of Arab society and the attitudes that objectify women and regard them as servants of their husbands and families; over the oppression of women and discrimination against them, and over such phenomena as child marriages, sexual abuse and harassment, and female circumcision. It should be mentioned that among the supporters who have uploaded pictures are many men, who cited the same reasons.”

Nobody knows what campaign, movement, or demonstration will trigger a revolution. Nobody can predict beforehand whether a peddler’s desperate act in Tunisia will incite an “Arab Spring,” or whether human rights provisions in the 1975 Helsinki Accords will help bring down the Soviet Union.

Here’s hoping, however, that this Facebook campaign becomes one of those galvanizing events, leading to fundamental change in the political, economic, and social status of women and girls across the Arab world. Nothing would prove more fruitful for the vitality and prosperity of the region and its people.

Books, studies, and articles have long documented the problem of gender inequality that plagues the Middle East and Northern Africa – legal systems that give men more rights than women, and patriarchal societies that treat women like slaves. All too often, females can’t read, work, drive, vote, or attend school, they must fully cover themselves, and they suffer harassment on city streets and genital mutilation at home; children are married off at absurdly young ages; men who beat their wives go free; and rape victims go to jail for putting themselves in the presence of men.

In late October, the World Economic Forum released the *Global Gender Gap Report 2012*, which ranked the world's nations on "their ability to close the gender gap in four key areas: access to health care, access to education, political participation, and economic equality." No Arab country made the top 100.

In fact, the highest ranking Arab country was the United Arab Emirates, at 107. Other rankings included Saudi Arabia at 131, Syria (based on data collected before its civil war) at 132, and Yemen at 135. As Egyptian human rights advocate Mona Eltahawy wrote recently about the region, "Rich or poor, we all hate our women."

The implications are obvious. A country can't maximize its socio-economic performance when half of its people can't participate fully in its socio-economic life. As Saadia Zahidi, the report's co-author, noted, "Six of the top 10 performing countries in this year's Global Competitiveness Index also feature in the top 20 of the Global Gender Gap Index – this shows the imperative for countries that have already invested in the health and education of women to address the economic and political realms, and for those that have not to do so before their economies fall further behind."

The Arab Spring brought the promise of freedom and opportunity for all of the region's people but, with Islamist forces filling the vacuums left by toppled dictators, its aftermath has set back women's rights in all too many places.

In Egypt, for instance, "a theocracy looms, and it is women who are paying the bitter price," Judith Woods wrote in London's *Daily Telegraph* this week. "Proposals have already been drafted to lower the marriage age for women to 14 and restrict their rights to leave abusive marriages. Vigilante mobs roam the streets to protect wives, mothers, sisters and daughters... [women] find themselves the object of fear and loathing, the renewed targets of subjugation and abuse."

That's a recipe for economic and social backwardness that will do neither that country nor the region any good over the long term. It's why we should give the Facebook campaign our full-throated support.

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