

“THERE ARE MANY INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL BARRIERS THAT HINDER WOMEN’S

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND QUOTA SYSTEM CAN BE PART OF THE SOLUTION”¹

Interview with **Yuree Noh**²

Revista Malala (RM)

We can start asking about your work and trajectory. How you get involved with Middle East studies? What is your current research?

Yuree Noh (YN)

I was fascinated by Egyptian history and started studying Arabic because I wanted to visit some day. I was fortunate to do an 8-month study abroad in Egypt in 2009. As I went onto graduate school to get a PhD in political science, my fascination of the region continued – however, this time, in their politics. Due to the lack of data in the region, I was sometimes discouraged from pursuing the study of the region but was able to conduct fieldwork and surveys in Algeria and Kuwait.

My book project examines the levels of electoral fraud across authoritarian regimes with a focus on the MENA region, with case studies of Algeria, Kuwait, and Morocco (tentative). I am mainly interested in how social cohesion and international interaction affect the magnitude and types of fraudulent strategies. A second set of my research entails gender quotas: I investigate the causes and consequences of quotas as well as citizen support for gender egalitarian policies. I also have ongoing projects on citizen welfare in the MENA and Yemeni refugees in South Korea, where I am from.

RM

Which women’s movements in Middle East do you consider more relevant in terms of a real fight for emancipation and juridical protections for women’s?

YN

This is a difficult question. We simply cannot rank how “relevant” they are – perhaps due to the lack of research – because of such a wide range of scope the women’s movements

¹ Interview conducted by Ariel Finguerut via email in November 2019. Elaboration and revision by Cila Lima and Natália Nahas Calfat.

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in the MENA cover, not to mention the diverse strategic and locational factors. That said, I pay close attention to women's movements in the Gulf and especially those that strive to make legal changes. One movement that comes to mind is Abolish Article 153 of Kuwait. The campaign's goal is to abolish Article 153 that gives men a green light to engage in an "honor killing" and murder a female kin who engages in "unlawful sexual act" or zina, as well as the man involved in the act.

According to the law, such a crime is treated only as a misdemeanor punishable by a maximum 3-year prison term and fine roughly equivalent to mere 50 USD. They have built a network across the Gulf and the wider Arab world to abolish similar penal codes that grant men these power over women and to end gender-based violence. They have worked to raise awareness, advocate against the article, and to lobby the national assembly. To achieve their goals, they have adopted creative and engaging strategies such as creating videos, holding press conferences, involving foreign activists, and holding events.

RM

In terms of a general overview, what you can tell us about the current situation of the women's socio-political movement in Algeria?

YN

Women are actively involved in the rallies and protests in hirak, the ongoing Algerian protests. You may have seen images of a female ballerina standing in the middle of the street protests or women handing flowers to soldiers and police officers. There are female singers making popular music about peace, freedom and revolution. Adopting such tactics have contributed not only to calming the air but also to demonstrating that hirak in fact is a movement for all Algerians. Women's rights activists have also demanded for the repeal of the family code and strengthened gender equality.

Though these women faced some resentment and criticism, many men on the streets are supportive. I believe that possible advancement of women's movements is strongly linked to the rest of hirak. Conflicts and instability have an adverse effect on the advancement of women's rights. As history has shown us -- for instance, during Egypt's revolution, Algerian civil war, and Palestinian struggles -- women's rights deteriorate and often, such movements lose its priority. I sincerely hope this is not the case for today's Algeria.

RM

From your studies on women in politics and gender quotas in authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), do you see common grounds? Would you risk making comparative studies between countries of the region?

YN

Of course. I see many common grounds, in terms of women's rights movements that emerge in similar patterns, in demand of quotas, and in terms of citizen support to the quota adoption. There are also commonalities behind authoritarian incentives behind engineering or allowing gender quotas. I do strive to make comparative studies. For instance, in one working paper, I study how authoritarian interests in adopting quota laws may diverge in monarchies and non-monarchies in the MENA.

I argue that non-democratic leaders have ample incentives to use quotas to garner support and co-opt different groups in their favor. In another study (with Marwa Shalaby, U Wisconsin-Madison), we look at the patterns of citizen support for gender quotas in Tunisia and Morocco. We argue that the patterns are dependent on citizen perception of governments. In other words, for citizens in democracies (e.g. Tunisia) who have higher trust in democratic institutions are more in favor of gender-egalitarian policies; however, for others, they may put emphasis in government performance (e.g. in the economy) in relation to their approval of such gender-egalitarian laws. In the future, we hope to add Algeria and Kuwait, and perhaps Oman, to examine public responses to gender quota laws.

YN

Islamist parties have reacted differently in different countries in response to quota policies and other gender-egalitarian measures. They have often presented an obstacle to gender-egalitarian policies.

RM

In most MENA countries women remain underrepresented in parliament. Can you identify the causes of this? What have been the consequences? How do you see the Islamists parties' parliamentary participation, they represent for quota policies and for women's presence in parliaments- a force of progress or a throwback?

YN

I can identify some causes. Michael Ross has an elaborate argument that in sum contends it is oil wealth in the MENA that is linked to lower rates of women's labor participation that in turn leads to lower political participation for women. Additionally, there are many institutional and social barriers that hinder women's political representation – and of course the proponents of gender quotas argue that such institutional measures are needed to boost the number of female MPs in the MENA region.

Empirically, quotas have helped women gain political presence. For instance, Algeria, upon implementing quota in 2012, became top-ranked in terms of women's political representation in the Arab world (though other countries such as Tunisia had emerged on

■ entrevista

top since then; this development again coincides with the implementation of 2014 legislative quota laws). Islamist parties have reacted differently in different countries in response to quota policies and other gender-egalitarian measures. They have often presented an obstacle to gender-egalitarian policies.

RM

What do you think are the main methodological errors to be avoided when studying gender and feminism in Muslim countries?

YN

I would not call it an “error” per se, but I believe that including men in the study of gender and feminism is necessary. In the study of gender, we often overlook the role of men – often, those who dominate the policy making sphere, especially in the Muslim world. We need to take into account how male incentives play into various decision-making processes that affect women. I also think we need to better bridge the qualitative and quantitative literatures out there to draw a correct conclusion.

RM

Is it possible to say that the countries of the Arab world have advanced in terms of women’s protection laws? In your opinion, which Arab countries have mostly increased the political participation of women? (whether with quota system or not)

YN

Many countries in the Arab world have certainly advanced in terms of women’s protection laws over the last decade. In my opinion, Tunisia has increased the political participation of women the most, through its 2014 legislated quota that require parties to have 50% women on their lists. More importantly, Tunisia’s political opening has contributed to freedom of assembly and association that has played a key role in women’s activism, which in turn enabled Tunisia’s advancement.

Nominally, countries like Algeria have also benefited from the adoption of the gender quota law. In other words, quota laws have certainly helped boost the number of women in political office. In other countries in the Gulf – namely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – have also made some significant progress in terms of women’s rights and political representation. In these countries, note that it was the top-down initiatives from the leadership that contributed to this rapid change. I argue in my research that though many of these gender-egalitarian reforms were top-down, they will in the long-run benefit women (though they may see some societal backlashes in the short-term.)

RM

We haven't seen a true emancipation – in political terms or even in symbolic representation – for woman's in the post Arab Spring. Do you agree with this statement? What are the main effects of the Arab Spring for women in the countries that you researched and worked with?

YN

We haven't seen a true emancipation for women in the post-Arab Spring. However, this is true for most women in most places in the world. I believe the failure of the Arab Spring in many countries dampened many women's rights movements (for example, in places like Egypt). Conflict and instability always work negatively for women. It gives many the excuse to delay women's empowerment until after democratization is achieved (e.g. Egypt), after peace arrives (e.g. Syria and Yemen), after occupation ends (Palestine), etc. Economic hardship also has a similar effect; worrying daily about feeding one's family certainly hampers any activism left in oneself. However, what is currently happening in places like Algeria and Lebanon (and how women are actively part of mass protests in these places) sheds some light on how women can be active drivers of positive change in the world.

RM

Considering the current situation in Lebanon and Iraq, what can you tell on the women's movement? What is the situation of women vis a vis sectarian politics? How is their presence in Parliament?

YN

In terms of the presence in parliament, Lebanon has only a handful (under 5%). Iraq, however, has around 25%; the gender quota, in place since 2005, has helped increase women's representation in Iraq.

Women in both countries have played significant roles in both countries' mass protests this year. Women have been extremely active and visible in both countries' uprisings. This is evidence that in both countries, people from all parts of the society are involved regardless of age, gender, and sect. Especially in Iraq, where violent clashes between protesters and government forces/militias have escalated, this is meaningful and shows how brave Iraqis, both men and women, have been. I believe that if the uprisings are successful, women's heavy involvement now will translate into women's empowerment in both countries.

RM

Our last question. What has been the role of the UN among the countries and in between the women's movements that you studied? What's your take on women's quotas for the parliament? Has it been a step forward for the women's movement?

YN

UN has certainly played an active role in many countries (e.g. UN Women in Iraq) for women's economic and political empowerment. However, my research sheds light on how the gender quota adoptions are mostly shaped by domestic politics and domestic incentives rather than international factors (like international pressure from entities like the UN for countries to adopt gender quotas). Rather, I believe it is first, authoritarian incentives to appease the domestic audience and second, women's movements within each country that have played meaningful roles in the legislated gender quotas. It has certainly been a step forward for the women's movement, though some feminists in many countries argue that gender quotas have negative consequences for women.