

## Gender and Demographic Aspects of the Arab Spring Protests: Youth Bulges, Women's Participation and the Role of Internet

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**Abstract.** This article is aimed at studying the inclusion of women in the processes of political participation using the example of the Arab Spring protests. New information technologies and, in particular, social media allowed women to participate in the Arab Spring demonstrations as organizers, activists and journalists. Due to the fact that men in the region in question tend to dominate the traditional media space, cyber activism has allowed women to express themselves both within a specific country and on an international scale.

The author comes to the conclusion that the inclusion of women in protest mobilization is reasonable to consider in the context of general demographic trends in the countries under consideration. In this case, we are talking primarily about the phenomenon of youth bulges in some Arab countries, a noticeable proportion of unmarried men, which may be one of the causes of increased destabilization in Arab countries, as well as the intensive spread of Internet communication tools which became the hallmark of the Arab Spring cohort.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, women's participation, "youth bulge", demographic factors, protests

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## Гендерные и демографические аспекты протестов «арабской весны»: «молодежные бугры», женское участие и роль Интернет-технологий

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**Резюме.** Цель статьи – изучение включения женщин в процессы политического участия на примере протестов «арабской весны». Автор полагает, что включение женщин в протестную мобилизацию разумно анализировать в контексте общих демографических тенденций в рассматриваемых странах. В данном случае речь идет прежде всего о феномене «молодежного бугра» в некоторых арабских странах, заметной доле неженатых мужчин, что может быть одной из причин усиления тенденций дестабилизации в арабских странах.

**Ключевые слова:** «арабская весна», женское участие, «молодежный бугор», демографические факторы, протесты

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### INTRODUCTION

A series of mass protests in Arab countries started in 2011 drew attention to the role of civil society and social movements in the processes of democratic transition. Generally, the discussion and study of these process-

es, the role of the minority is not paid too much attention, while the events of the Arab Spring demonstrated the transformation in the position of some groups, and, in particular, women as minorities in the political arena of Arab countries [1]. Women's participation in the protests of the Arab Spring was not limited to the direct access to the demonstrations; they were included in the process of preparation of protest actions and cyber-activism [2].

It should also be noted that new technologies and, in particular, social media allowed women to participate in the demonstrations of the Arab Spring as organizers, activists and journalists [3]. Since male population of the region tends to dominate in the space of traditional media, cyberactivism allow women to express themselves, both within a particular country and internationally. Social media thus become a tool for women's participation in revolutionary actions, blurring the distinction between social and political networks.

At the same time, women were able to neutralize the aggressiveness inherent to community groups consisting mostly of men. For example, women are usually working in textile factories, but in a factory in al-Mahalla al-Kubra where mostly men worked, a strike began the revolutionary events in Egypt in 2011. Presumably, the presence of women would reduce the level of activity and the desire to go out into the streets.

Currently, the so-called Third World countries with the active participation of the representatives of "women" movements have made some progress in the area of women's rights – in particular, the right of women to higher education was confirmed.

According to the World Bank, in some Arab countries, especially those that were covered by the protest wave in 2011–2012, the literacy rate has increased compared to 1990. Some researchers also note that eliminating the educational gender gap is a relatively recent phenomenon. For many girls, education is the only mechanism of socialization outside the family, and in some countries the level of women's education is closer to the male figure, or even has exceeded it.

However, in many regions of the world, women are still people of the "second-class" experiencing difficulties in exercising the right to employment, the possession of property, participation in political life. Indeed, despite the improvement in access to higher education, the employment of women is a great problem, there are paradoxically few women in politics and their level of employment is low.

The situation is aggravated by durable rooting of the traditional practices in the minds of women themselves. For example, wearing a headscarf in many countries is not perceived as a social constraint or oppression. Moreover, woman's perception of the world of Arab countries quite constructively includes fairly extensive regulations of life inherent in the Islamic tradition which traditionally sees a higher purpose of women in creating comfort and education of children.

Despite the fact that in the Koran there are no direct instructions to what women should be engaged, the references to established practices are used. In particular, the early marriage is traditionally common in the Arab countries. Sometimes the real age of a girl is hidden by her family for the purpose of early marriage. This behavior is primarily due to religious beliefs noted above, according to which family is a sacred duty. In addition, the important role is played by the growing desire to have children, both of men and women, as well as the desire to save the family's honor, preventing extramarital sexual relations by early marriage.

Thus, there is in some sense a paradoxical situation in which women of the Arab world, on the one hand, continue to remain in the traditional dimension that does not encourage their social and political activity, but, on the other hand, those women and girls who have been educated, show extraordinary activism and are involved in various social and political processes, including protest ones. Such activism is largely fueled by discontent of the young educated people with their social position and inability to obtain the status corresponding to their education and ambitions.

As is well known, unemployed young people with higher education concentrated mainly in the big cities become the main driving force of the Arab Spring protests. This phenomenon is known as "youth bulge".

In relation to the Arab Spring protests, potentially destabilizing factors often include the significant involvement of women in protest movements compared to previous periods [1]. The destabilizing potential of this indicator manifested itself quite clearly during the events of the Arab Spring, especially against the backdrop of the growing popularity and accessibility of the latest media and communications. The participation of women in protest movements is discussed in the works of Dutch political scientist M. Glasius and British histo-

rian G.Pleyers [4], American women's studies researcher S.Khamis [5], Russian sociologists L.Grinin and A.Korotayev [6], and others.

The French sociologist M.Duverger wrote back in 1955 that real political change would be possible only when society had succeeded in changing the dominant political discourse and destroy the deeply rooted belief in the natural inferiority of women [7].

Almost 50 years later, American political scientists R.Inglehart and P.Norris found that a gender gap exists in almost all societies and at all levels of political participation, with women being less active than men in both traditional forms of activism (debating, voting, membership in parties, etc.) and in non-traditional ones (protests, demonstrations and boycotts). This gap can be explained by various factors – structural, religious, cultural, as well as traditional, however, when studying protest activity, the authors came to the conclusion that, in post-industrial societies, this kind of gap was significantly reduced in the presence of social differences in such indicators as education or religiosity.

In addition, R.Inglehart and P.Norris note that the gender gap in political participation is narrowing when it comes to protest activity, more so than in other forms of political participation, and that modernization of society, secularization and generational change are helping to close gender gaps in political participation field [8].

Despite the fact that women's participation has become a fairly important part of the realization of the protest potential in the countries of the Arab Spring, it has not yet been sufficiently studied, as it is often perceived as part of the feminist movement [5]. At the same time, the participation of Arab women in protests is practically unrelated to feminist movements and even feminist thought, which, in turn, played an important role in a kind of equalization of different-sex participants in protests, who in this case were united by the common goals of the revolutionary wave.

Thus, we can state that this phenomenon is rooted to a greater extent not in achieving gender equality (among the slogans of the Arab Spring in the squares and in the virtual space there were no purely “feminine” demands; all of them were aimed either at solving abstract social problems or, subsequently, pursued political goals in the form of overthrowing the current regime), but in the pursuit of political participation. M.Glasius and J.Pleyers write about it this way: “This simultaneous demand and practice of deep participatory democracy goes far beyond the traditional demands for civil and political rights associated with liberal democracy” [4].

It is likely that one of the reasons that brought Arab women into the political arena during the Arab Spring protests was the fairly high level of education in the countries analyzed, as well as the introduction of significant masses of the population to the latest technical advances in the information sphere, which allowed women to participate in protest actions not only directly, “in the streets” (which, given the specifics of Arab countries, in some cases presents serious difficulties due to security), but also in a relatively “protected” virtual space.

The fairly high level of education among urban youth, including girls, also quite likely contributed to overcoming the restrictions imposed by the Islamic tradition on the active involvement of women in work and public life [9], since some researchers, in particular American demographers M.Hoffman and A.Jamal, note that the Arab Spring generation is less religious compared to other cohorts [10].

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB SPRING PROTESTS

Quite active (compared to previous periods) participation of women in protest movements can serve as a striking example of inclusion in protest activity, based on a growing level of national identification: people acted not only in defense of their own interests, but were ready to take responsibility for socially vulnerable segments of society.

Social media has become a tool for women to engage in revolutionary action, blurring the distinction between social and political networks. Thus, women's participation in the Arab Spring protests was not limited to direct participation in demonstrations; they were involved in the processes of preparing protest actions and the space of cyberactivism. Internet platforms have become loci of accumulation of popular discontent, especially inspired by female images. There are many examples of virtual communities created and successfully developed by women in each country.

It is noteworthy that the study of women's perception of the political situation in a crisis and their vision of revolutionary activity helps to better understand the transformation of protest sentiments and the degree of frustration inherent in the post-revolutionary period after the overthrow of the previous regime.

Let us turn to the consideration of women's participation in protest actions in Arab countries. Data on women's participation in the Arab Spring can be accessed from Arab Social Media Report<sup>1</sup>, The World Bank<sup>2</sup>, American sociologists J.Retta [11], L.Lengel [12] and S.Stephan [13]. Due to the unavailability of sufficient statistical data on the number of women participants in protest movements in the countries of the Arab Spring, this indicator was assessed on the basis of analytical materials, reports of the Arab Media Group based in the UAE, as well as research literature on relevant topics.

To track this indicator, the countries were selected that faced the most pronounced manifestations of socio-political instability (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria), as well as those Arab countries in which protests were observed, but there was no noticeable change in the political situation (Bahrain, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, Lebanon). Thus, we can see that an increased level of women's involvement in protest actions was recorded in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Lebanon. So, women's participation in political processes may be a common sign of the wave of socio-political destabilization of the Arab Spring.

### GENERAL DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN ARAB SPRING COUNTRIES

For a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under consideration, it is advisable to consider the factor of women's participation in conjunction with the general demographic situation in the countries of the Arab Spring.

The driving force behind the Arab Spring protests were young people, most of whom had higher education and were dissatisfied with the possibilities for their social fulfillment [14, 15]. The number of young people in the Arab world is constantly growing. Thus, 30% of the population of North African countries is young people aged 14 to 25 years<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the Middle East has one of the highest "youth bulges" (a sharp increase in the proportion of youth in the total population and in the adult population in particular [16]) in the world, second only to sub-Saharan African countries [17].

The conceptual basis of this article lies at the intersection of the areas of youth sociology (which considers youth as a social community, its value orientations and mobility, but does not take into account the cultural, political and psychological aspects of this population group) and juvenology (which, in relation to the study of youth, covers such areas as politics, history, culture, education, religion, etc., but in most cases based on psychoanalytic constructs [18; 19]). The sociology of youth, the foundations of which were laid by Hungarian sociologist K.Mannheim in 1923, states that people are largely influenced by the socio-historical environment and, in particular, by notable events in which they are actively involved [20]. This is most typical for young people, whose representatives, based on their experience, become agents of change and events that shape future generations [21].

It is worth noting that currently there is no generally accepted definition of adolescence and young adulthood. For example, according to United Nations statistics, youth are defined as persons aged 15–24 years (in some cases 15–32 years)<sup>4</sup>. This definition is relevant for this study, since the group being studied includes university students or graduates.

The most appropriate concept for this study is a generation, defined as a group of people of the same age whose members experienced an important historical event during a certain period of time [20].

According to the theory of demographic transition, which describes a radical change in the types of population reproduction [22, 23], a decrease in mortality and the transformation of its causes in the future are accompanied by a decrease in the birth rate and stabilization of population growth rates. However, this does not hap-

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<sup>1</sup> Arab Social Media report. 2011. Dubai School of Government. <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan044212.pdf> (accessed 18.11.2023)

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank. 2011. World Development Indicators Online. Washington DC: World Bank. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/> (accessed 24.02.2024)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.usaid.gov/press/releases/2011/pr111114.html> (accessed 14.07.2023)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf> (accessed 17.11.2023)

pen immediately, resulting in a “population explosion”. An important factor in reducing mortality in Middle Eastern countries was the development of healthcare systems, as a result of which the number of qualified doctors per capita has increased significantly over the past 50 years, fairly developed networks of medical centers have emerged, full vaccination of the population has been introduced, etc.

Based on the assumption that since the Arab countries, on the eve of the destabilization processes of the Arab Spring, were experiencing the stage of “a trap at the very exit from the trap”<sup>5</sup>, we can conclude that a significant decrease in mortality, including infant mortality, led to the formation of a “youth bulge”. As a result, as noted by A.Korotaev et al., “there was a sharp increase in the proportion of that very part of the population that is most prone to violence, aggression and radicalism, which itself acted as a powerful factor of political destabilization” [6]. Thus, we can consider the number of young people in the countries under consideration as one of the potentially destabilizing factors, focusing on their achieving the phenomenon of a “youth bulge”.

Norwegian historian H.Urdal notes that large youth clusters increase the susceptibility of countries to political violence [16]. Thus, analyzing empirical data on armed conflicts in the period from 1950 to 2000, he concludes that youth bulges provide ample opportunities for violence, as they are accompanied by an increase in the proportion of young people who do not have a wide range of social alternatives in society, which is partly appears to be associated with unemployment.

World Bank data demonstrates the dynamics of population growth in Arab countries in recent decades<sup>6</sup>.

For a more visual examination of the generational structure of society in some countries of the Arab Spring, let us turn to the so-called age-sex pyramids, a method showing the distribution of different age groups, as well as the ratio between the number of female and male populations in a specified period of time [22].

The age-sex pyramids of the Arab Spring show that there was practically no significant numerical difference in the gender structure of Arab societies at the beginning of the Arab Spring. However, we can see that in the demographic structure of society in Arab countries that have experienced a wave of anti-government protests, a significant part is made up of young people aged 20–30 years. At the same time, again, both parts of the age-sex pyramid are symmetrical, that is, there are practically no differences between the male and female populations. Next, consider the youth population in some Middle Eastern countries. Thus, according to the data of US Bureau of the Census, in 2011 youth account for between 50 and 73% of the total population in most Middle Eastern countries, with the largest being people aged 25–30, followed by the 15–25 year old group, and the smallest group of youth is under 15 years old<sup>7</sup>.

An important aspect to consider when analyzing the gender and demographic characteristics of Arab Spring countries is the level of urbanization, or the proportion of the population that is urban<sup>8</sup>. Thus, A.Korotaev et al. note that migration from the village to the city occurs mainly among young people, and thus, intensive urbanization and the “youth bulge” factor act together making the destabilizing effect especially powerful: “The number of young people, most radically minded part of the urban population, is growing especially rapidly, while such youth are concentrated in the largest cities/political centers” [6].

Russian sociologist S.Tsirel, in the article “Conditions for the emergence of revolutionary situations in Arab countries”, identifies a set of variables that characterize the intensity of revolutionary actions, among which, for the purposes of this work, it is especially worth noting such indicators as higher education and youth unemployment [25].

Thus, the next characteristic of the Arab Spring generation was the presence of higher education among a very high proportion of its representatives, which was simultaneously associated with increased unemployment and the discrepancy of social conditions with the expectations of young people studying at universities or re-

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<sup>5</sup> We are talking about a Malthusian trap, a situation describing pre-industrial societies and connected with the increase in the production of means of subsistence and overtaking demographic growth, while at the same time lagging growth in per capita production in the long term, as well as the lack of improvement in the living conditions of a significant part of the population. See [24].

<sup>6</sup> Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa. 2013. The World Bank. Washington D.C.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/world.html> (accessed 29.01.2024)

<sup>8</sup> In this case, it would be appropriate to talk about high rates of urbanization, but their indicator is a combination of a relatively high level of urbanization and high youth unemployment. For the purposes of this work, these indicators are analyzed separately, as this allows us to assess the intensity of the impact of each of them on the processes of socio-political destabilization (*author's notice*).



cently graduating from them. The participation of educated youth in anti-government protests is ambiguous: on the one hand, it was this fact, according to some researchers, that reduced the degree of aggressiveness and, as a result, determined the minimum number of victims at the hands of the protesters themselves compared to other shocks of this kind [26].

On the other hand, it was the participation of educated young people in large cities that became the mobilization potential of protests. Moreover, according to surveys conducted by M.Hoffman and A.Jamal, young people in Arab countries really have a serious chance of remaining unemployed: their chances are twice as high compared, for example, with the average age group [10]. A demographic situation in which a significant number of people feel frustrated by their inability to convert their education into productive employment can actually exacerbate existing problems in society.

In the research literature devoted to the causes of the Arab Spring, one can also find mention of such a factor as the increase in the proportion of unmarried men in recent years [27; 28; 29]. This increase is associated with the presence of strict prohibitions on extramarital sexual relations in Arab societies and the existence of a whole complex of marriage and family customs (such as, for example, a substantial "bride price" (kalym), which not all young people can afford, lavish celebrations of weddings, etc.), which, in the context of modernization, rising prices and stimulation of consumer interest, led to the financial inability of young people to get married, thereby increasing the average age of marriage. According to UN Population Division<sup>9</sup> and A.Korotayev [30], the average age at first marriage among Arab men has increased significantly in recent decades.

The combination of such components as the late age of marriage which becomes a cause of disappointment for young people, strict prohibitions on extramarital affairs, etc., led to the formation of a certain level of radicalism, which can manifest itself, including in the political sphere, and can cause increased destabilization in Arab countries. Thus, unmarried men in this situation are more prone to extremist political actions compared to married men of the same age [27] (both due to a depressed psychological state and sexual dissatisfaction, and due to a lack of responsibility to the family and, accordingly, a fear of leaving outside in conditions of possible danger). All this allows us to indicate the factor of the presence of an increased number of unmarried men as a potentially destabilizing factor during the events of the Arab Spring.

## CONCLUSION

This article showed that one of the distinctive characteristics of the Arab Spring was the increased participation of women in protest activity compared to previous historical periods. At the same time, an important observation in this case is that women's participation as such, even coupled with other prerequisites for socio-political destabilization, has become not a reason, but one of the distinctive characteristics of the demographic situation in Arab countries.

It is noteworthy that, if we are talking about the broader context of socio-political destabilization in the Afrasian macrozone of instability as a whole, which includes Central Asia (including Afghanistan and Pakistan), the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel region, then for example A.Korotayev [30] argue that in this zone certain patterns of increased socio-political instability are observed and at the same time a very low female labor force participation rate is recorded there. According to them, in this case, the functional relationship with the socio-political instability is clear.

Thus, we can talk about a combination of factors, the combined effect of which led to a more active inclusion of women in protest mobilization. In this case, we are talking about a global trend towards an increase in the share of the urbanized population, as well as an increase in the proportion of youth in some of the Arab countries.

In addition, we can talk about the growth of educational opportunities and accessibility of education for women, but, at the same time, significant frustration among young people due to the impossibility of their social realization, unemployment, etc.

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division Database. 2011. UN Population Division. United Nations. <http://www.un.org/esa/population> (accessed 03.02.2024)

Also, an important parameter is the active use of new media, which, in the case of such a political minority as women, made it possible for them to safely participate in protest mobilization compared to previous periods and the risks of physical presence on the streets during revolutionary events.

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