

Food for Thought Speaking Series

Libyan Women Between Laws and Reality After the Revolution Khadija El Boaishi

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About the Speaker: *Khadija El Boaishi is an International Law instructor at Tripoli University in Libya, Human Rights Activist and Co-founder of Haki, a non-profit organization providing legal aid to women.*

The reality of women's lives in Libya remains mostly invisible to the international community and very little discussed by academics and activists around the world. In her efforts to raise awareness and promote the work that is being done to promote women's rights in her country, Mrs El Boaishi held a lecture at the Lebanese American University in Beirut in which she discussed the socio-political and legal constraints faced by Libyan women after the revolution that overthrew the Gaddafi regime. She also presented the work of *Haki*, an organization she co-founded to uphold women's rights and gender equality in the country.

Despite the high hopes of Libyan women after the end of the revolution for a more inclusive and gender equal system after the revolution, the situation seven years later remains critical. Before the revolution, the Gaddafi regime unconvincingly attempted to present itself as a defender of women's rights to the international community. On the 17 February 2011 women marched in Benghazi, shouting the "Benghazi wake up!" slogan alongside other protesters. During the civil war, women participated as active agents on all sides of the conflict. Some supported the revolutionaries by collecting clothes and money, female doctors and nurses put their skills at the service of the rebels, while others served the regime's military effort, including some who worked very closely with the government. The latter suffered grave human rights violation when the Gaddafi regime fell at the end of the civil war.

The disappointments felt by those who were hoping for the revolution to result in a more secular and egalitarian country were severe. Firstly, the new government was composed of forty five men and only one woman, who abandoned her position soon afterwards. Second, the new government passed anti-equality reforms supported by the constitutional court. Polygamy was legally re-introduced, allowing men to marry up to four wives, as per the principles of Shari'a. Women's ability to travel was also restricted, by a ban to be accompanied by a close male family member. Finally, while this didn't result in any legal reforms, a male lawyer argued against women working as judges and lawyers in the constitutional court. The pursuit of "terrorists" also exposed women activists to persecution. Because of this threat, many were forced to leave the country and continue working remotely. This includes Salwa Bugaighis, a prominent lawyer who returned to Libya despite the threat of violence for the 2014 elections,

determined to vote and use her voice for change. She was one of several activist women to be murdered for speaking out against the militias and for advocating in favour of secular reforms.

Among other things such as providing legal aid and promoting women's rights, *Haki's* projects include conducting research on violence against women. Surveys on men and women's perception of domestic violence reveal that men generally reject domestic violence when asked about it in a general way, but justify it when asked about concrete situations, such as their wife leaving the house without permission. Many individuals, including women, still perceive gender equality as incompatible with Shari'a law, which must be upheld.

Haki also organizes workshops on women's rights and citizenship, provides support for survivors of sexual and other kinds of violence, and run a rape hotline. The tackling of such controversial topics in Libyan society means that activists are face with many barriers that make access to the victims difficult. Survivors remain silent, and do not seek help due to the stigma attached to rape, and no statistics exist making it easy to deny the gravity and even the existence of the phenomenon.

According to Mrs El Boaishi, the 42 years of isolation under the Gaddafi regime contributed to limiting the flow of ideas between Libya and other countries, creating a climate of conservatism that makes progressive reforms difficult to implement. Little collaboration exists between local civil society organizations and international organizations, in part due to the unstable security situation in the country which prevents many from coming to work on the ground. Another barrier to the intervention of international organizations is the distrust that people share towards the "west" and international organizations such as the UN and ICRC. The lack of government centralization and the persisting existence of militias makes it difficult to receive support from the government in their promotion of women's rights and gender equality.