

**„We have no past, so the future is ours!“ – Women as change agents in transition states  
Country studies of: Bahrain, Indonesia, Malaysia, Oman and Qatar**

**Introduction to the project**

‘Women as change agents in transition states’ is the working title of a research project that has just begun to materialize. The initial motivation for this research on women’s contributions to political and societal change derived from a strongly felt uneasiness with the mainstream literature on transition, transformation, and democratisation – including indices such as *Bertelsmann Transformation Index*.

An engendered theory of transition has been a neglected field so far. Theories of transition and transformation accept women in transitional systems as change agents. They can act as veto players and they deserve empowerment, particularly on the grassroots level. But on the whole, civil society actors do not play a prominent role in these theories, because elites are regarded the prime force in bringing about systemic change. Development and governance theories have a different point of view: They award significant capacity to civil society actors and to women in particular, when change is to be achieved. Theories of democratisation treat gender (at least) as a social category, although the full inclusion of gender equity into the cluster of fundamental democratic values remains more often a lip service than a conviction or confirmedness. Georgina Waylen’s observation that ‘the majority of the mainstream democratization literature has remained gender-blind, with very little to say about the participation of women in transitions to democracy or the gendered nature of those processes’ still holds true to a considerable extent.<sup>1</sup> This leads to the fact that ‘[n]early all nations in the world could be considered “developing” or not yet developed if judged against full democratic standards both of women’s representation in decision-making positions and of responsiveness to women’s policy interests.’<sup>2</sup>

Against the background of these theoretical parameters, the paper applies a gender perspective on transition and change. Moreover, it treats transition and policies of democratisation critically, because they do not necessarily serve the betterment of women’s situation. As Donna Pankhurst and Jenny Pearce point out:

A general concern about the situation of women in countries in the South undergoing political change means that we have to look beyond the business of democracy and formal political rights. Even where formal political rights increase, social and economic rights can at the same time be removed.<sup>3</sup>

In trying to provide evidence for such findings, we look at five states which have achieved considerable economic and/or political change within their respective regions, and in which Islam plays a salient role in politics: Malaysia and Indonesia in Southeast Asia, and Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar in the Middle East. The governments of all five states have implemented noticeable liberalization policies since the late 1990s. These policies have given rise to hope for a gradual democratization. Among those most active in promoting liberalization are the women in these societies, i.e. organized women and the women’s movement, as it is commonly referred to. They

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<sup>1</sup> Georgina Waylen (2003), *Gender and Transitions: What do We Know?*, in: *Democratization*, 10(Spring), p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Staudt (2005), *Women and Gender*, in: Burnell, Peter/Vicky Randall (eds.), *Politics in the Developing World*, Oxford, pp. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Pankhurst/Jenny Pearce (1996), *Feminist perspectives on democratisation in the South*, in: Haleh Afshar (Ed.), 1996: *Women and Politics in the Third World*, London / New York, p. 46.

are active in many spaces of the social, academic, political and media world. Many of these women have already become role models for women in the neighbouring countries. Going along with the trend of liberalization, however, is a trend of fundamentalist Islamisation. The women who are hoping for more freedom and women's rights fear at the same time the rising power of Islamists in their societies. An almost paradoxical situation is emerging: While liberalization and democratization are appreciated at first glance, this 'new freedom' also opens corridors for those forces who intend to curb it again. In the project, we examine progressive women's organisations' activities and strategies to cope with this situation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The terms 'progressive', 'Islamist' and 'fundamentalist' require some lengthy explanation which I am not at liberty to expound here for reasons of space. I refer to the understanding and discussion of these terms as provided in Norani Othman (ed., 2005), *Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism*, Petaling Jaya, and in particular to chapter 9 by Hoda Rouhana, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) Network's Understanding of Religious Fundamentalisms and Its Response*, pp. 178-95.