

Ordeal of Libyan Women amidst Decade of Chaos and Anarchy

By Rahman Fazzur

The violence against women has always been applied as a war tactic and rape, trafficking and forced prostitution are frequently used as a war strategy to humiliate the adversaries which is directly linked to issue of family honor and such practice is more common in traditional and tribal societies like Libya. The women are more exposed to violence in any sort of conflict because of its traditional linkage with a broader issue of gender inequality and discrimination and same hold true for women in Libya which has been swamped into a bloody civil war for more than a decade.

Though women were at the forefront at the early days of Libyan revolution but they had no clue that they would not only bear the real brunt of subsequent chaos and bloodshed but soon would be silenced and subdued once the peace and stability return. One cannot forget the memorable story of Inas Fathy from Tripoli who distributed anti-Qaddafi leaflets in her neighbors and raised money and smuggled ammunition past checkpoints. Her movement was tracked and later Inas was kidnapped and tortured by pro-Qaddafi police. Many women spied on Qaddafi's troops and passed on their movement by code to the rebel forces. Libyan revolution represents a gender paradox when women were once a powerful agent of revolution but soon turned out to be the victims of the same revolution.

More than a decade of Libyan civil war has left a generation of women as widow, traumatized, refugee, orphans, homeless and what not. They have lost their husband, sons, daughters, parents and have suffered all sort of violence ranging from sexual to physical to mental and their lives have been completely tormented. Women have not only lost their homes but they have faced collective rape at the hands of their abductors while fleeing and taking shelters here and there. Sometimes they have been sold in open market for money and are being forced into flesh trade to feed themselves and their dependents. There are several instances of their rape and killing under judicial custody.

Amidst escalation of conflict women are not only facing restriction of movement in different towns but they are most vulnerable at checkpoints erected by several terrorist outfits where women are exposed to sexual violence, kidnapping and forced disappearance and biggest victims are those women who have entered Libya in pursuit of their further journey. Majority of displaced Libyan women feel threatened most at city checkpoints and they recall many stories of their kidnapping, whipping and sexual assault and some time there are targeted kidnapping and some women are doped for their beauties alone.

One Libyan refugee woman reportedly said that they do not need water or food or money but they want security and that would not be possible without demilitarization and de-weaponization of male groups. She also said that a society free of violence is truly a human society. Another displaced woman said that Libya is full of weapons and even the wedding parties, hospitals and funerals are not spared of weapons and ammunition. Many times, women fled their homes fearing militant attacks and their vulnerability to crimes like rapes and displaced women from

Sabratha narrated the story of killing of his brother Ali at the hand of the ISIS saying that she would not have shared if she had not decided for exodus from her ancestral town.

Hannan Sala, a social activist said that ongoing violence has further empowered men and they in fear do not allow their women to travel alone which in long term would deprive women of their hard-earned freedom. Similar feeling was expressed by Ms. Majri when she said that one can hear bombs falling nearby anytime and the streets are empty but I still go to work, but I'm one of the few that does so.

Amidst ongoing conflict, April 2019 military operation in Tripoli by forces of Haftar a major blow to women and 51.5 % were women of total 90,500 who fled the town and the biggest challenge for them was to rescue themselves against the day-today harassment, sexual assault and beating in their shelters provided to them. People in the region are still haunted by horrible memories of Tarhuna (a town in Western Libya) massacres where many mass graves were found after Government of National Accord was able to retake the town from the control of Haftar's forces in June 2020. People in hundred eliminated in the city of Tarhuna even for the infraction of allegiance to the anti-Haftar's forces.

Libyan woman parliamentarian Siham Sergewa was kidnapped by Libyan Arab Armed Forces during Haftar Tripoli operation only when she condemned Haftar. Moreover, they do not have any assistance from outside in forms of centers for counseling which further deprive them of rebuilding their social network to socialize themselves. Women are more vulnerable when they belong to a weaker ethnic community and in such situation, they face all ordeals for their political participation. A woman associate with Women's Affairs Unit was kidnapped and it has also been seem that many such women do not seem comfortable talking about their detention and sexual violence they were subjected to.

Today around two lacks of women in their reproductive age are in need of humanitarian aid and around lack of women in the town of Tripoli has lost their only bread earners. Many of the women have suffered at the hand of terrorists as many have been assassinated and killed for daring to challenge the social taboo in search of livelihood. One such example is the killing of lawyer and human right activist Salwa Bugaigish who was shot dead while coming out of voting both in Feb 2014 election for challenging the terrorist group who want to see women merely as obedient slave of husband within four walls of the houses. Intisar Al-Hosari, a human right activist was another such victim who was killed in 2015 by the same terror outfits for raising voice of equality with men. The fate of politician and psychiatric, Sihma Segewa is still unknown who was kidnapped in town of Benghazi 2019 for condemning warlord Khalifa Haftar. Similarly in November 2020 amidst National Dialogue, a prominent lawyer and activist Hanan al-Barasi was assassinated in one of Benghazi's most crowded streets. A day before her killing she had condemned the family rule in Libya and accused Haftar's involvement in corruption and abuse of power. Her killing is evidence of the violence that Libyan women face for dissenting against their male counterpart.

Women in Libya have to pass through this ordeal more often because of entrenchment of traditional Bedouin culture and male-chauvinistic social structure. One such example is the case of Najla al-Manqoush, one time member in National Transitional Council and currently foreign

minister and many see her as future Prime Minister of Libya was condemned by Al-Sadiq Al-Ghariani, the former Mufti of Libya, for her modern political views who called for her expulsion from the capital, Tripoli.

This political instability and anarchy have deprived Libyan women of the political empowerment; educational stride and economic independence they had achieved in recent years and have pushed them once gain on the brick of social disaster. Colonel Qaddafi was the one who injected a martial sprit in the women and was always surrounded by women security guard. Girls above 15 were ordered to undergo military training. Numbers of women seeking education in universities was exceeding the number of men and girls had more prosperous carrier. Similarly number of women with a bachelor's degree is roughly the same as men and 77% of Libyan women below 25 are for higher education against 67 % of men.

What has aggravated the crisis further for women in chaotic Libya is delay in their marriage. They are not finding groom to marry because most of the youth today are jobless. Over the years, the number of Libyans who have postponed marriage has increased. Situation becomes more critical for a country like Libya where half of the population is reported to be under 30. Government is trying very hard to offer them marriage bonus and recently the government of national unity under Abdel Hamid Dbeibah has allocated a special economic package to overcome the crisis. There are many critics to this policy because they are of the view that that it is not a lasting solution and root of the crisis is far deeper and more structural. But there are others who see it as an opportunity to prevent the youth from joining the militia.

Amidst these stories of horror and fear, there are stories of such women as well who have not allowed the turmoil to deprive them of their traditional role as a peace maker and they have driven these roles from their traditional tribal and socio-cultural norms. One such hidden peace actor in Libya is Aisha al-Bakoush from an oasis city of Sebha, a nursing director who over the years has widened her healing mission from medical illness to armed conflict. In 2013 when some miscreants raided her hospital, she successfully chased them out and rescued many live in the hospital. Same Aisha al-Bakoush was invited by a tribal leader in Fezzan to mediate a talk with the opponents and she also mediated a truce between Tebu and Awlad Suleiman tribes.

She says that she has preserved the legacy of a Warfalla¹ tribal woman, Hajji Zohra, who was always approached by the warring parties and her decision would always be binding. It is a testimony to the fact that how the role of women in resolution is organic to Libyan culture. The story of role of women in conflict resolution is not a part of national written history but part of a oral history and women in Libya do not call it 'mediation' but for them it is 'working for community' and those women are known as *Sheikhah* who enjoy great respect. This legacy is still alive in form of several organizations run by women to establish peace in the country. One such body is Peace Making Network in southern Libya and their objective is to prevent children from joining extremist group and carrying guns.

¹ This is a tribe which is estimated dot be Libya's largest tribe and one of the strongest tribe as well. Their total number is one million out of total 6 million Libyan population and they inhabit the area around the town of Sirte and Benghazi.

Ms Rida Al-Tubuly, a co-founder of *Together We Build* was named among hundred most influential ladies in world in 2019. Her motto is to establish democracy and peace in Libya and her organization work for empowerment of women as well. For her the issue of women participation in political evolution of Libya is not merely a feminist issue but it is also reflection of national culture and tradition and for her there are masculinity and militarism that exclude women from the peace process. She says women must be the part of negotiation because they contain special negotiation skill which is well imbued with their culture and their involvement in political process would reduce the level of violence against women. At the height of the civil war between Libya Dawn and Dignity Operation forces in 2015, the *Nalut Municipality Partnership* organized a national level painting competition with the objective of uniting the Libyans and sending a message of peace throughout Libya.

Many women entered the Libyan parliament when the election was held in post-Uprising Libya and Fatima Baqy founded the Al Karamah party and won the women's seat in the Tripoli municipal elections. She won the local council elections in 2013 in Benghazi. In 2021 five women ministers were appointed in the UN-sponsored transitional government led by Abdelhamid al-Dabaiba for the first time in history of Libya. Despite these initiatives and appropriation of their traditional role amidst these crises, Libyan women have to go a long way to go to establish peace and stability and perhaps this would be achievable only with the cooperation of men who at the moment do not seem to pursue the path of sanity for the prosperity of generation-next.