

WHEN WOMEN WIN IN LIBYA



Democracy! The Podcast, Season 1 Episode 5, When Women Win, 2021.

Since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Libya has seen years of internal conflict, resulting in economic, political, and social instability. In October 2020, warring parties agreed to a historic ceasefire. The Government of National Unity was established as an interim government with support from the United Nations in March 2021.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI), a CEPPS core partner, has been working to support women's participation in Libya as the political landscape evolves. This includes the "Not Before 18" campaign which works with civil society organizations (CSOs) to change legal and cultural norms surrounding underage marriages. NDI also supports a 30% gender quota in government ministries and parliament.

Fathia Atig and John Maisner from CEPPS/NDI spoke with ***Democracy! The Podcast*** host, Adrienne Ross about their gender equality work in Libya.

AR: Can you briefly explain what the "Not Before 18" campaign is?

FA: "Not Before 18" is a campaign to reduce the marriage of young girls in different cities around Libya, especially in the south and southeast. It empowers these girls to continue their studies and plan for their future.

Worldwide, we have seen figures as high as seven hundred million girls who have been affected by marriage before their 18th birthday. Why is this such a problem in Libya? Can you tell us why this threatens a democracy?

FA: When girls marry early, they stop their education. This leads to a generation of women who are not educated and not prepared to participate in any election or civic society.

This means that they stop their studies. When girls are not allowed to continue their education or look after their own future, they do not participate in any civil and political life. There are also health consequences for getting married before 18.

JM: This has been part of our civil society support in Libya for quite some time. We focus on advocacy by forming coalitions of CSOs that can effectively advocate for these young girls. When this campaign was launched in 2019, this was a priority issue voiced by many of our partners. It is a priority because there has been a conflict for quite some time in the country which leads to a lot of poverty and displacement. As a result, families look to underage marriage for financial relief and alleviate their poverty. The focus of the campaign, therefore, is to explain the alternatives, but also to explain the harm early age marriage does to young girls.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



When we look at this issue, why do we consider marriages before 18 to be a burden or a threat to democracy?

FA: When girls marry early, they stop their education. This leads to a generation of women who are not educated and cannot fully participate in the political transition, which undermines its inclusiveness and ultimately the foundations for democracy.

It is important for the whole of society to be involved in a democracy. Can you give us some examples of the work you have done in this campaign?

AF: We work with 35 organizations around Libya. We support their activities, specifically the gathering of CSOs and decision-makers as well as young girls and their parents to educate them on the effects of early age marriage. Some families change their minds when they attend these sessions.

JM: Our partners noticed early on that there are a few root causes of this issue. One, as we said, is poverty. Additionally, our partners identified and are looking to close a loophole in the law that allows judges a lot of latitude in deciding when marriage is in the best interest of a young girl. There is also a gap in the awareness of early age marriage in the country, and the impacts it has on the girls, not only in terms of their education prospects, but their ability to participate in economic and political life.

Therefore, campaign is taking two directions. One focuses on working with the government to close the legal loophole, while the other is working with the Ministry of Education and its social workers embedded in schools to increase awareness.

Is there anything people outside of Libya can do to help a campaign like this?

FA: Yes, a public conversation about how underage marriages affect these young girls helps. Creating a cultural shift is the most helpful thing when trying to change the mind of mothers and fathers.

JM: This is an issue that is not commonly discussed. When it is brought up, it is passed over, and so the more attention that is brought to it internationally, the more likely that decision-makers in the country will do something.

Have you seen the program grow? Do you expect it to continue to grow as awareness grows?

JM: This campaign has gone on for a few years now. It is not widely considered to be a pressing issue in the country. There are all kinds of issues facing Libyans and this is not always at the top of people's minds. But what we have found is that building an understanding of this problem with our partners has helped advocates emerge. The Ministry of Education has been a key partner and as we look to a long-term solution, the social workers embedded in schools through the ministry are really well placed to take on aspects of this campaign. Our goal is to hand this program over to our local partners for this to continue into the future.

Your comment about this not being top of mind is generated by conflict and economic issues. Can you elaborate on that?

JM: There are a lot of issues in the country and there have been for a very long time.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



There was active conflict up until very recently when the ceasefire was signed. There is a lot of political turmoil in the country and lots of questions about the future of the government. There are major economic issues, particularly in the communities where underage marriage is most prevalent.

When people make a list of issues to focus on, this might not make the list. But our partners have found that this is extremely important to the communities and the girls affected. The nation is affected by not having these women part of political decision-making about the country's future.

Despite the Libyan women's hard work to achieve some advances in society, it hasn't always been easy. Both of you have partnered with Libya's 30% quota campaign. Can you tell us how that started?

FA: It was started in 2017 by a group of CSOs working on women's empowerment and inclusion in government. Currently, the team is composed of 6 organizations that worked on the gender quota for the draft Constitution.

As a result, this is the first time in Libya that we can see women's representation in government, such as the foreign ministry. It is the first time in the country's history that three ministries have been led by women.

Your work for CEPPS/NDI has been strategic and technical. Can you tell us a little about what you have been able to do? How have you been supporting the campaign?

FA: We support the team in building their capacity, we give them advice and guidance, we bring trainers and consultants, and offer logistic support.

JM: This campaign has evolved over the last 4 years because the country has changed over that period.

We have always had the goal of a quota and women's participation, but we have had different strategies over time. We have supported the teams to adjust their strategies over time. They started off focusing on a law in parliament, later they focused on the ministries and have great success there. The team had success in entering the quota into the new government's bylaws and are now working to have the same quota in election law. Plenty has been achieved, but there is still lots to do to see their vision come to fruition.



Members of the 30% Quota Campaign at CEPPS/NDI Training

And some of this has been recent? What is the future of the campaign?

JM: The government took power last winter and we did see the quota in their bylaws, their roadmap. The goal is to continue the campaign and see the same quota in election law so we can have a minimum of 30% representation in parliament. The campaign is also very forward-thinking, once they reach the quota, they know they need to address other aspects of society that still do not want to see women in leadership roles. It's an impressive group of activists and we have high hopes for the future.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

