

Gender, activism and backlash: women and social mobilisation in Egypt*Hania Sholkamy**May 2013*

The revolutions of 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were brought about by an accumulation of unresolved tensions, unbridled autocracy and many injustices. In Egypt as elsewhere, the demonstrations that filled the squares and streets with millions of women and men were not organised by formal political parties or sustained by political structures. The millions who ended the thirty-year rule of Hosni Mubarak were collections of individuals who had long waited for a chance to mobilise and effect real political change. Women were equal partners in the organisation and enactment of this social struggle. When we look back at images of these uprisings, a clearly gender balanced image is revealed. Public spaces were occupied by equal numbers of men and women. Public protests were instigated by women bloggers as well as by young women and men who had long been engaged in organising protests amongst workers, youth and victims of gross injustices and brutal transgressions.

The legacy of January 2011 persists in so far as levels of protest, awareness and engagements with politics and rights remain high. Women and men people the landscapes of protest, and the gender balance struck by the revolution remains. However the formal structures that have emerged since the beginnings of this ongoing process on political transformation are less balanced as women's representation in the executive and the legislature are now lower than they ever were.

Women's activism and the revolution

Esraa Abdel Fattah, Nawara Negm, Noha Atef, and many others who use real or fictitious names, are some of the women bloggers who have been publishing their political reflections and rejection of oppressive norms for many years. Women bloggers have contested the conventions that have governed sexuality, privileged chastity, and permitted sexual harassment since the beginning of this century. Previously, there existed a level of segregation that facilitated women's participation in critical forums because they were viewed as a safe space, which may have empowered and cultivated the female voice. However on 25th January 2011, the call was made online to take to the streets and leave the comforts of home and seclusion. Abdel Fattah reiterated calls previously made by bloggers and internet activists and asked men to join her on the streets in an almost flirtatious request for

male protection. If a woman was going to risk her safety to protest police brutality and government, then the least men could do was to come to the streets and protect her. Indeed, Asmaa Mahfouz, another woman blogger, in her own accounts claims the credit for inviting people to take to the streets.

Women organised sustenance committees to provide food and shelter for protestors camping in the street. They organised security check-points around the square during the 18 days of revolt, and have done so since then, every time there has been a major demonstration, so as to insure that thugs do not infiltrate the crowds. Women have been lobbying for and helping support the injured and all victims of police and security force violence. Political parties have had to recognise the importance of gender; whether by demonising the proponents of gender equality as the Salafists have done, or by mainstreaming gender issues in their programs and structures as all other parties have done.

The eighteen days of protest were days of class, religious, and gender parity and solidarity. But after the ecstasy of victory came some sobering events. On 11th of February 2011, Mubarak was unable to appease the masses who would settle for nothing less than the end of his rule; he stepped down. He left the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to rule in his place and to chart a course for Egypt that would deliver a democratically elected, civilian president.

The 18 months of transition that followed were bitter sweet. On the one hand, euphoria at the quick success of the revolution sustained the public mood. On the other, protestors and activists were being killed and injured on the streets, recalling the brutal practices of the security apparatuses of past times. SCAF however kept their word and a new civilian president was fairly elected by just over half of the electorate. President Morsi from the Freedom and Justice Party of the Muslim Brotherhood became Egypt's new president.¹

Cracks appear in the gender solidarity of the revolution

A few weeks after Mubarak left power, protestors who remained in Tahrir Square were attacked and some of the women among them were subjected to 'virginity tests' by the army. One of these women, Samira Ibrahim, took her case to court, but tragically lost her case against the doctor who allegedly performed the test; the judge pronounced the physician innocent on 12th March 2012. The explanation offered by the army was that the army officer in charge wanted to prove that they were 'good girls,' not prostitutes! Even if this explanation made any sense, the humiliation that these women endured is undeniable. But that was not the first crack to appear in the gender solidarity of Tahrir Square.

¹ This case study predates the events of July 2013 which saw the fall of this elected President, Mohammed Morsi, and a new wave of violence.

The demonstrations by women in Tahrir Square commemorating International Women's Day on 8th March 2011 were attacked by passers by and by other demonstrators, and the two hundred or so women and men participating were harassed, ridiculed, shouted down, and ultimately chased out of the square. No other demonstrators in the square since the revolution had been heckled, told that their demands were unjustified, unnecessary, a threat to the gains of the revolution, out of time, out of place, and/or the product of a 'foreign agenda.' No other demonstrators were told to "go back home and to the kitchen". No others were heckled for how they looked or what they were wearing. In unison, hecklers were saying "*batil*" (illegitimate) to the demands for gender equity and "*awra*" (ignominy) to women demonstrating with their frankly innocent and almost idealistic demands. "Back to the kitchen" and "Off the square" were also among the chants.

Then there were the protests of November and December 2011 when security forces dragged and undressed a young woman who subsequently came to be known as the 'blue bra girl' by national and international media. These had been protests against military prosecutions of civilians by groups of men and women who were also demanding retribution for the injured and killed during demonstrations that led up to the fall of Mubarak and beyond. This use of physical force by the army security forces against peaceful protestors sparked not only a massive demonstration of women from the full political spectrum but even elicited an apology to 'the great women of Egypt' by the then ruling military council. The culmination of these transgressions against women happened on the 25th January 2013 in Tahrir Square when 19 separate incidents of sexual violence and harassment took place. One 19 year old girl was raped with a paper cutter. Others were molested, knocked about or undressed.

Women's rights and gender within the post-revolution political arena

The schism between formal politics and policies on the one hand, and people-led protests, initiatives and campaigns on the other, are most apparent in the case of gender rights. Women voted in the parliamentary elections of November-December 2011 in record numbers. According to some estimates, over 70% of females eligible to vote did so in this landmark election. But the rate of female participation in the elected parliament was one of the lowest in the world. Barely 2% of parliamentarians were women.

The constitutional assembly responsible for writing Egypt's constitution was elected by parliamentarians. This was proscribed by the 'road-map to democracy' drawn up by a committee of judges selected by SCAF. The assembly had only six women in its 100 person membership; one of these women subsequently resigned in protest over the way she had been ignored. The process of constituting this assembly was fraught with political struggle and contentions. Women and other civil society organisations, some women's groups from progressive parties, and youth movement members staged numerous protests and marches to demand 50% representation for

women in this committee. An alliance called Bahia, a coalition of women's groups and individuals who have come together to act as a feminist lobby, compiled a list, via a process of consultation, of 100 women whom they wished to nominate as candidates for membership in the committee. The National Council for Women came up with their own 30 nominees. In the end the result was a dismal 5% representation that excludes, bar one or two exceptions, all of the women nominated by social movements and civil society organisations. One of these exceptions is a Nubian activist called Manal el-Tibby and the other is a professor of political science called Manar Manar el Chorbagy. The rest of the members are overwhelmingly from the Muslim Brotherhood Freedom and Justice party (three of the sixteen members are women) and eight from the Salfist el Nour party.

On the 21st of November 2012 the President issued a constitutional amendment that gave him sweeping powers and rights including exempting all of his decrees and decisions from judicial oversight. A week later the new constitution was completed despite the withdrawal of all committee members who are not affiliated with Islamic parties. This constitution fails women in that it provides no rights to women beyond those already provided in the old constitution of 1971. The new constitution was voted in by 67% of Egyptians who participated in a referendum held in December 2012.

Continuing activism for women's rights and gender justice

The dismal gender imbalances of formal politics in post-revolution Egypt should not distract from the reality of women's activism elsewhere. There have been many initiatives and campaigns that have had a critical gender justice agenda and which have had made a mark in the physical and digital world. The Voice of Egyptian Women is a movement that organises women and voices their demands for equality and freedoms. They became much more vocal as claimants of rights once it became apparent that the parliament of 2011-2012 was debating a repeal of laws that guarantee rights for women such as a minimum age of marriage, visitation rights for divorced women and the right to unilateral divorce for those stuck in bad marriages. Voice of Egyptian Women members has cooperated with other rights organisations such as Omhat Hadinat (Women with Custody) who lobby on behalf of divorced and widowed women, with women's groups in political parties, and have mounted their own media campaigns.

Public awareness of these issues turned a tide and made the dismantling of these progressive laws more difficult than otherwise. Parliament was dissolved on 14th June 2011 by SCAF and a constitutional court decision ruled on the structural problems of the election law passed after the revolution, so no actual changes in laws have been enacted. The great impact of these women's rights organisations and coalitions was that they raised public awareness, established the 'reality' of women's rights activists as political agents and banished the notion that the voice of women was elitist or alien.

Women have also protested against the epidemic of sexual harassment since the revolution, posting videos online of youth attacking young women on the streets and encouraging pooling of information on transgressions against women. There are tens of groups who are fighting sexual harassment; these include women's groups within progressive parties and feminist NGOs who have long been engaged in making the streets safe for women and in calling for a law that criminalises sexual harassment. It is unfortunate that some women parliamentarians had voiced the opinion that victims of harassment were to blame for their own suffering because they are out where they should not be. The case of a young girl in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Assiut who was murdered by the man who had been harassing her came to light thanks to these online campaigns. She confronted the man who then panicked and shot her in the throat.

Feminist organisations like Nazra for Feminist Studies and the New Woman Research Centre have been working on raising awareness on women's political and economic rights. They too have worked with others to reach a wider public and to change perceptions and policies. They and others were brave in combating harassment of women political activists and participants in public protests.

The future for gender within social justice activism in Egypt

The failure of formal processes that champion women's empowerment and rights is real. But so are the tremendous energies that have feminised the arena of public debates and of protests in Egypt. There are myriad groups online and in physical form, which are active in espousing rights and freedoms for women. These groups are working together, despite their different identities as political parties, voluntary associations, civil society organisations or as individual and independent activists. They can have a louder voice and more effective role if they succeed in making native the cause of gender equality. One of the main obstacles to creating gender awareness amongst political agents and activists has been the false assumption that women's rights are alien to our culture. It is as if we live in a world where oppression carries a premium and is a sign of authenticity and even of national sovereignty and independence. Since the revolution, this dark misperception has been repeatedly questioned.

For example, a group of young women and men who are members of the progressive Islamist Party "Strong Egypt" have founded a group called "The Egyptian Woman" (el Sett elMasrya) that seeks to pursue progressive policies and programmes that realise gender justice from within an Islamicist idiom. They reject the duality of east/west and of tradition versus modernity and have been exploring initiatives that rely on Islamic feminist principles, asserting that Shari'a must be just and cannot be an excuse for oppression.

Another example concerns the progressive, so called secular parties in Egypt and the questioning of imported notions of gender equality and of imposed quotas. The

Egyptian Social Democratic Party (ESDP) has a dynamic women's committee which failed to impose a 30% quota for women in all party structures when first founded, but went on to work for a year in preparation for party elections, succeeding in winning 30% of all seats contested to serve on the party governing body. Moreover, the three candidates with the highest number of votes were not only women but also feminists. A woman (Elham Aidarous) is running for the post of secretary general and party leader of the socialist alliance party. Margret Azzir, a parliamentarian in the now dissolved people's assembly and a member of the National Council for Women also holds a senior position in the Free Egyptians liberal party.

Women will be able to bring about a change in politics and in social change the more they are immersed in contests around power and rights. The new draft constitution of Egypt has failed to assert the right to equality for women and men. While the disappointment is great, the backlash and rejection of this moral and political injustice is even greater. The revolution revealed the anger and activism of women. Formal political structures that have risen to power may not express the wish and will for gender equality, but their audiences and opposition certainly do.

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