

# **The Role of Women's Movements in Democracy Building Processes in Egypt. The Grassroots Perspective.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The wind of change that arrived to the Middle East over a year ago and brought political transition is absolute extraordinary phenomena and marks a turning point in the history of the world. It is a special event also because for the very first time in the history of the Muslim world men and women stand together, arm by arm, fighting for what was right. The strong participation of women in the Egyptian revolution of January 25, which started to put an end to Mubarak's regime, gives a significant insight for studying women's social and political rights in the current transition. This thesis aimed to address the role of Egyptian women in the transition processes. It did so through the research that was be carried out at two levels. At a conceptual level, analytical work was based on a review of the relevant theoretical literature and analysis of UN Women (office in Cairo) reports on conducted projects. Critical reflection on relevant analytical approaches provided the basis for advancing thinking on women's engagement with democracy building processes in Egypt. At a policy level, the research looked at the context in which women are engaged in political change in Egypt.

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been over a year since a wave of political change set Egypt on a challenging but promising path to political and cultural reform. Pictures of women protesting at the Tahir square flashed around the world becoming a symbol of the January 25th revolution. For the very first time in Arab countries, women stood shoulder to shoulder with men, spoke to them, but also fed their infants and slept next to men on the streets. Women believed that overthrowing Mubarak would give them a chance for equality. "The corrupt regime used the religion, culture and tradition to justify strict gender divisions and pushed us to the side track" said one of the political female activists that I met in Cairo during my research. The activist of the Alliance for Arab Women, one of the feminist organization which was very active during the revolution days, believed that the wind of change will bring a better lives also to them, women. However, even though Egyptian women played a crucial role in bringing the transition about, many feel that they did not benefited much from it. Feeling of disappointment is more and more present nowadays.

What can be the reason of such a situation? Why the symbols of peaceful protests still feel discriminated and do not feel that the change they hoped it would come, eventually did not arrived? Across the ages the role of Egyptian women has been defined in the private sphere not the public one due to different historical and cultural biases. So far they were mother, daughters and sisters, not political leader and even the most enthusiastic uprising can not change it overnight. When it comes to the Muslim world, the role of women has varied and it cannot be generalized. The importance of approaching women in the Muslim world to promote democracy stems from the experiences of other societies, which demonstrated high

levels of development. Women's empowerment when isolated from political and economic contexts can only be limited.

The role of Muslim Women in democracy building is one of the most controversial topics since it is associated with historical, cultural, religious and political mistaken notions. My thesis addresses the different prospects of Muslim women in Egypt as agents of change and how to overcome the challenges that are imposed on them from domestic or international forces. Moreover, it aims to provide a new perspective of looking at how religion can play a role in pushing for an equal opportunity for men and women in Muslim societies that can contribute to the establishment of a democratic system that respects universal human rights.

There is a wide range of literature and research published on Egyptian women's activism for building the nation, development, and human/women's rights. A topic has been pretty well covered, mainly by sociologist, historicist and anthropologists, is that of women's struggles within Muslim states for the advancement of women's rights and interests. However, I have not found any literature which would describe the role of women in democracy building processes from their, grassroots perspective. The existing literature, especially on the post- revolution period, was issued by donor organizations supporting women activities which may cause a certain bias. This is the gap my research sought to fill.

This thesis aims to address the role of Egyptian women in democracy building. It did so through the research that was be carried out at two levels. At a conceptual level, analytical work was based on a review of the relevant theoretical literature on gender, political power, political and social rights, and Egyptian civil society as well as analysis of UN Women (office in Cairo) reports on conducted projects for a better understanding historical and cultural background of the country before leaving for the field research in Cairo. The thesis is based

on a wide range of literature about women's activism in Egypt before the revolution<sup>1</sup>, data gathered by the United Nations Women Egypt Cairo Office and 7 interviews with women activists representing 4 organizations: Alliance of Arab Women, Union for Progressive Women, Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance Foundation and UN Women Egypt Cairo Office, who contributed a lot by sharing the insights into the everyday life of Egyptian women as well as goals of their actions and priorities they fight for.

I spent 2 weeks at UN Women Cairo Office, analyzing documents as well as interviewing officers working directly with women's organizations. Critical reflection on relevant analytical approaches helped me to provide the basis for advancing thinking on women's engagement with democracy building processes in Egypt. At a policy level, the research looked at the context in which women are engaged in political change in Egypt. What is the role of women activism in democracy building processes in this country? What are existed women movements that have the potential and ability to change the social climate? How do they fight for democracy and women's rights? These questions point to the importance of the in-depth interview method in my study. A series of in-depth interviews was undertaken with 7 women activist representing 4 different organizations. Each of them was approximately two hours in duration. They provided for depth discussion in regard to the key research.

The thesis is designed as follows. In the first chapter I present the background of political, cultural and social position of women in Egypt. A short characteristic Egyptian feminism is also provided. The second chapter seeks to present motivations of women who joined the protests, the third try to find an answer to the question: what roles did Egyptian women play during the revolution period and what obstacles did they have to overcome? The paper is closed with a section concluding and summarizing the research as well as presenting

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant literature on the revolution period is still missing.

a short reflection about the present and future situation of women in Egypt.

# CHAPTER I: EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

## *1.1 Position of women in contemporary Egypt*

The gender position in a given society is always a starting point to the further analysis of women movements. It helps to understand the context of activism and pictures a background of the actions women take. In case of Egypt there is an extensive literature on women's position in the society (Afkhami 1995, Bodman 1998, Charrad, Esposito 2001, Hoffman-Ladd 1987, Joseph 2000, Keddie 1990, Shami 1990), which introduces the reader to the political and religious environment of the country. Researchers describing the situation of Egyptian women usually point out very similar problems which determine their position in the society. After analyzing existing literature, it is easy to observe that international scholars put a bigger emphasis on religion issues and the impact of Islam, while their colleagues from Egypt more often used as an explanation of the situation of Egyptian women, the economic situation and poverty level in the country in general.

In a ranking of 128 countries published by the World Economic Forum, which determines the degree of gender equality in social and political life (Global Gender Gap Report), Egypt was in the 120th position (El- Naggar 2010). According to the report, inequality between men and women is particularly evident in two areas: representation in political structures and economy. The situation of Egyptian women may in fact deteriorate.



Public sector employment used to be in favor of women. Since the economy balance shifts private enterprises, women have bigger and bigger troubles with finding a job. As one of my interviewees said, according to governmental data, an unemployment rate for women between 15 and 29 years old is about 32 percent. In the case of men belonging to the same age range, it is only 12 percent.

In the Egyptian parliament there are only 8 seats (out of 454) occupied by women. What is more, five of them gained a parliamentary seat from the president. Only three women are heads of ministerial departments, and among twenty-nine provincial governors one can not find even one. When women fought for the opportunity to sit on the Council of State - Egypt's highest administrative body - the General Assembly of the Council rejected the proposal in the vote. Then started an argument that women's emotional nature and responsibilities of motherhood did not predispose them to this type of work. Although this decision was revoked in March after Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif appeal to the supreme constitutional court, no woman was ever appointed as a member of the Council of State. Areas such as law or politics are almost inaccessible to women of modest social origins. As stated by one of the women I interviewed: "Only wealthy women can afford to have ambition." The percentage of illiteracy among women is still high - according to recent studies of the Egyptian labor market, it is around 47% illiterate women in rural areas and 23% in urban areas.

Because the situation of women in Egypt is much worse than in the Western World, they started to gather to protest against such an unjust treatment. The next sections will seek to picture the background of women activism in Egypt.

## ***1.2. What is Egyptian women's activism? Interviewed activists.***

Women's activism in Egypt is connected with both: feminist and religious movements. During my research in Cairo I interviewed ladies representing institutions which vote for separation between religion and state this is why the paper will deal basically with secular (but not anti- religious) activism, which can be interchangeably called feminist activism. Values and ideals they believe in are shaped by educational experiences, family life, political views, travels, literature and so on and so forth. However, unlike in most of Western societies, religion has also strong impact on them. Although interviewed ladies were not religious fanatics, they were women aware of the fact that religion is a part of culture and constitutes who they are. All the interviewed women were Muslim, between 24 and 38 years old. One was by Italian origins, married to Egyptian man and living in the country since years. Almost all of them asked me not to call them feminists since what they fight for is not a Western version of emancipation but just a respect to women's rights. They kept underlining the fact that whatever they do is not against men but against the regime and rules that created discrimination. They feel they live between two cultures: on the one hand they want to follow liberated consumer way of living, on the other hand Islamic world is extremely present. Yet there are women activists saying that the notion of cultural specificity is used as a tool by men to reinforce their power over them. Egyptian activists try to find their own, unique identity.

## ***1.3. Feminism in a Muslim world***

For the first time, feminist movement appeared in Egypt in the twenties of the

twentieth century under the name *nisa'ijja* (Arabic translation of the term feminism). Since then it is continuously present in the Muslim world. The intensity of feminist discourse in Muslim countries was in the eighties and nineties of the past century. It is the movement alternative to the growing feminist movement in the Western World, like other so-called feminist movements of the Third World highlighting the diversity of cultures in which women live, and thus, the diversity of their problems and solutions for them (Jayawardena 1986). Muslim feminists try to not to be treated as an object of study and discussion, but want to be active participants who in their actions take into account all aspects of reality in which they live. At the same time they reject popular among conservative Muslim thinkers statement that feminism is a product of the Western World and the element of "intellectual colonialism".

Feminism in the Muslim world, like the analogous phenomenon in the West has many faces. Basically, it can be divided into three categories: atheist (which treats religion as a reason for oppression towards women), secular (referring to religious indifference), and religious. The first two trends do not differ substantially from those in Europe or the United States. There are also two version of religious feminism: Muslim and Islamic and despite seemingly identical meaning of these terms, the differences are significant. Islamic Feminism was established later than the Muslim one, and seems to be more conservative and tradition oriented. It does not undermine the need to wear the veil and sees the dignity of women in its submission to all the commands of the religious law but at the same time women who identify themselves with this movement demand participation in public prayers and other religious ceremonies, and religious education for girls. Some its branches are part of the fundamentalist movements.

The essential feature of Islamic feminism is to conduct the discourse on women and their place in a society based on religious texts, especially the Qur'an, Hadith and the Islamic

law, but also talks about such issues like human rights and democracy. The basic thesis is that Islam is a religion of equality of all the people - and thus the equality of men and women - and justice can not be used as a basis for the oppression of women. Islamic law, which was developed principally in the ninth century was formed under the strong influence of contemporary patriarchal traditions and practices. There is not such a line in the Qur'an which would impose on women or force them to cover their faces. The situation of women in Islam, which we face today is the result of misinterpretation or even misuse of religion by men in order to maintain patriarchy. One of the most prominent Muslim feminist, Fatima Mernissi, a sociologist from Morocco, in her fundamental work "The Veil and The Male Elite", using the traditional methodology of Islamic theology (ijtihad), shows that hadiths, which are the most hostile to women, are interpreted out of context or are not authentic and were fabricated to consolidate pre- Muslim patriarchal structure of society.

#### ***1.4. Feminists in action.***

Every day in the square one could have met the most famous Egyptian feminist figure - a doctor and psychologist Nawal Al-Sadawi. The 80-year-old lady with gray dreadlocks was extremely happy to see that women dared to express their own opinions and went to the streets. This is why she did not give up even when to the Constituent Assembly, which was established after the fall of the Mubarak government) not even one woman was invited. The Egyptian Women's Union, which wants to have an impact on political change, was brought to life in her private apartment. In the organization, the participators of which are also men, they want to preserve the spirit of community and revolution.

### **1.4.1. Important figures of Egyptian feminism.**

Born in 1879 in the vast Egyptian family, Huda Szarawi is regarded as a precursor of Arab feminism. Although, in accordance to the tradition, she got married at the age of 13, her husband allowed her to grow to the role of wife in her parents' home, where she learned to read and write in Arabic, French and Turkish. The breakthrough were not so much her studies as a visit to Paris in 1908, where she met the Western suffragettes. After returning to Cairo Szarawi devoted her time to social and charitable activities for women, and in 1923 she founded the Egyptian Feminist Union, as an active member of which fought for opening universities to women and providing them with public functions. In the same year, after the death of her husband, as the first Egyptian uncovered her head in public. She was an active participant of feminist conferences and the main organizers of the first congress of Arab women in Cairo in 1944.

Everything that Huda, Szarawi achieved helped basically only wealthy women. However there were some exceptions - like the great Egyptian singer Umm Kulsum, who was born in a small village in the Nile delta. Father of girl - the imam and singer, was quick to note in her daughter's talent, and during holidays he let her sing in the guise of a boy. When she grew up, her father wanted to prohibit her public performances, but the girl's low voice of great power and amazing vibrato already started to be famous. Finally, he was persuaded and in 1923 he moved with his daughter to Cairo, where she began her, lasted until her death in 1975, career. Crowds from all over the Arab world arrived to listen to her ballads about love and suffering. Financially independent, liberated Umm Kulsum dressing like a European, was very often used by Nasser as an icon of socialist Egypt.

The loosening of moral, when Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein was a president of the country (as seen in movies of the time) helped another Egyptian star of feminism - Nawal Al-Sadawi- to finish a medical school in Cairo and New York and walk in the city without a burqa. But when, after his return in 1967 took up medical practice and gave the fight against infibulation, also called female circumcision, things became more complicated. Few years later she published a book titled "Women and sex," where she described the damage done to the psyche of women mutilating their genitals, thus becoming the first woman to undermine the centuries-old tradition. The book quickly got into the list of publications banned by the regime and she was put to the jail for a month in 1981. Since fundamentalists repeatedly threatened her with death, in 1992 Nawal Al-Sadawi went to the USA. She returned only in 2009, when in Egypt anti-regime moods were already noticeable.

And what about feminism think the women that I had to chance talk to in Cairo? I asked them whether they were not afraid that with the change of regime worse times for women will come. The answers were not clear. Women working for the UN believed that not, but they were not sure. "It is not even about laws", they said, "it is rather matter of customs, culture of life". "Sexual harassment on the street, subway, bus in Egypt is a norm. Now I drive a car, so I am not so much exposed. But for example now I receive every day very kind advices from male drivers saying that I should rather cook in the kitchen now than drive a car", said one of them. Hoda, member of the Alliance of Arab Women in this case is an optimist: she feels that harassment on the street is in retreat. "Demonstration against police brutality changed a lot. And sexual harassment and "virginity tests" were the flagships forms of repression of women. Now - I guess - a lot of men think twice before he hooks a stranger. On the wave of political Islam Islamic feminism, a movement of pious Muslim who tries to realize that Islam does not enslave women, but men falsely interpreting the rules, is rising as

well”. Hoda, who during the whole interview did not even mention the attitude to the religion, when asked at the end about the religion, said: “Of course, I am a Muslim. Practicing”. Such a confession from the mouth of Egyptian feminist is not obvious. It shows, however, that one can fight for women's rights and still be in line with Islamic principles.

My interlocutors also emphasized that some of the issues belonging to women's rights work in Egypt even better than in the Western World. For example, among academic teachers of many departments of the University of Cairo there are much more female than male staff. The same situation is with students. How to explain it? Women that I talked to said that the recruiting criteria are more objective and there is no job interview which sometimes leads to discrimination against women at universities in Europe. “Wages of men and women are equal in the public sector, and therefore also at public universities. This is the problem of the U.S. and Europe, not ours” said one of the activists.

There are other examples: a three-month paid maternity leave, and then two years of childcare period after which you can get back to work. “However, we do not live in black and white world”, said one of my interviewees, adding that many issues require further battle. For example, a woman in Egypt can not travel alone with her child without the consent of her husband. “Besides, sometimes is easier to change the law than what people have in their minds. In this case: in the male minds”, she added.

## **CHAPTER II: HOW DID IT START? WHY THE EGYPTIAN WOMEN JOINED THE REVOLUTION?**

The revolution that started over a year ago in the North Africa and Middle East surprised the world as much as the collapse of Soviet Union. Protests which began in Tunisia engaged thousands of civilians who over-throne governments in the countries which were ruled by stable authoritarian leaderships. When the first protests broke out it was almost certain that they would spread outside Tunisian borders but no one predicted collapse of perfectly established military Mubarak's regime in Egypt. Initially peaceful demonstrations against the regime sparked the real war which eventually led to the political change. Young generations of well- educated Egyptians protested not directly against the Mubarak's autocratic rules but first of all against the high unemployment rate and extremely high prices of food. Limited political rights and freedoms became an issue as well, but the real trouble spot was bad economic situation. Also in this case protests became a regular fight for freedom and a switch in political power which has been successful.

It has been a while since Egypt was liberated but political scene of the country still remains very unstable. It is not surprising- it has never experienced a real participatory democracy in the past. Particular cultural context and above all religion created a climate conducive to strong, authoritarian regime. Hosni Mubarak, was the longest serving president of Egypt and also did not think of handing over the power if it was not for the revolution. Since the county have no democratic traditions, people did not really feel a need of implementing human rights and equality. Under conditions where the only experience of the rebels is a conflict, development of “peaceful” model of power is very complicated. In the



face of an economic transformation that requires dialogue and agreement, the military experience of rebel may prove a curse<sup>2</sup>.

So far Egypt enjoyed a fairly loose (compared to other Muslim countries) approach to Islamic rules. Television was pretty liberal; there were talk- shows very similar to those which we can watch in European TVs, soap operas where ladies were dressed even more liberal than people on the streets in the Western World. However, in recent years in Egypt a moral thaw was not so intense anymore. It may be said that it has declined. “When I arrived to Cairo in the beginning of 90s, I met fully covered woman maybe once, twice a week. Now there are plenty of them”, one of my interlocutors said. “Today hijab is very common and even though young Muslim girls made a fashion of it, putting them in a different ways, this return to the tradition is a fact. One of my Egyptian friends did not even take it off for her own wedding, although her mother used to dress like a hippie some decades ago”.

Egyptian women blame for this decline a corrupted regime that led the country into poverty and stagnation. In their opinion, the only people who benefited from this were religious officials, who keep telling the poor that suffering on the Earth will guarantee happiness after death. their adherence to the teachings of the Qur'an and traditions. But not everything can be blamed on the regime. Intensive re- islamization began after the Gulf War, when the Egyptians brought radical Islamic ideas from there. “Mubarak rather fought with increasing fanaticism, than supported it – said Italian lady married to Egyptian man, who has lived in Cairo for 8 years now and has worked for the United Nations Women Cairo Office.

Statistics shows that reversion to the traditional forms of life is just shallow and superficial because the level of education among women is still slowly increasing. However, unemployment among well- educated Egyptian ladies is twice higher than among men, who

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<sup>2</sup> The fragment based on the CPI term paper

are culturally prevailed on the labor market. Dreams about equality and the lack of work made them to go to the Tahrir Square and an access to satellite television and the Internet boosted their courage. They started to take part in the public life and advocate their own rights. In 2006 the first silent march against aggression and sexual harassment towards women was organized. Two years later, on the 23rd of March, 2008, the strike against Mubarak initiated by a woman took place and all this happened thanks to social media. Two friends from Alexandria, planning the riots, started a Facebook group (April 6 Youth Movement) and sent invitations to almost 300 people. After a couple of days they had 77 000 fans and for the strike organized by them a couple of thousands people arrived. Abd Al-Fattah was the first Egyptian women arrested by political agitation.

The women protesting at the Tahrir Square were representatives of well educated women from the cities. Illiterate Egyptians living in the small villages (around 47% of the total number of women in Egypt) exist in a different world. “The revolution took place in the big cities. In the rest of the country not much was going on” said one of my interviewee, “because you must realize that Egypt is a cradle of modernism and emancipation movement but also of fundamentalism”. From the one hand we have emancipated women who studied at the American University in Cairo, from another- a large number of illiterate housewives living their lives in the rural areas for less than two dollars per day. 40% of Egyptians live in beggary and survive solely through charity so even though, according to the tradition, a husband or a father should be a bread winner, the economic situation makes women to look for a job outside a household. For women from the villages an early marriage is still the easiest way to have a better life. Despite the fact that from 2008 marriage below 18 has been forbidden, they know that youthfulness and beauty are still their most valuable capital.

Activists who I interviewed, fighting for women's rights, explained me that Qur'an

gives to women rights but men interpret them in the wrong way. But Sharia law still determines Muslim's women lives. Fiancé is obliged to prepare for the wife- to- be an accommodation and give her “mahr”- which is a wedding gift that is supposed to secure her future in case of divorce. After the wedding, which means also signing a detailed contract, a woman becomes to be dependent on her husband.

Permitted by the Qur'an male polygamy is no longer in fashion, but still about 5 percent of men have more than one wife. “The biggest difference between European women and Egyptian ones, even those who are educated, invariably concerns the sphere of male-female relations” says Nora, a member of the Egyptian Women's Union, “In order to be with a man, every fifth girl decides to have a less formal, temporary marriage contract, called “urfi”. Unfortunately, later to those who are not virgins anymore, it is harder to get married again”.

Islamic law is one problem, the second is a centuries-old tradition, whose symbol is the khul-khaal - heavy bracelet once worn by married women on the legs, which shows her status, wealth. It decorates an ankle and at the same time as the shackles limits a freedom of movement.

Nayra Atiya, a writer and artist of Egyptian origins titled this way her book, in which five Egyptian women from the lower class tell their stories about their lives: about public deflowerisation, infibulation, polygamy, secret jobs and troubles with wedding their daughters. “The book describes the situation before the Mubarak era, however most of the dilemmas is very up- to- date”, my interviewee said: “Even though public deflowerisation is not common nowadays, a virginity has still its high price. The blood must flow, it is a matter of dignity. This is why well situated girls undergo a hymen reconstruction surgery”. But the most interfering with a woman's intimate life is infibulation, which is surgical modification in female genitals. One of the interviewed activists said: “Fortunately, in Egypt, the most

common is the mild version of the circumcision and it is more like a surgery than a ritual. Unfortunately, statistics are still alarming. Studies conducted in 2005 showed that as many as 97 percent of Egyptian women went through this surgery. Now it is around 90 percent. Which is still a surprisingly high number if we take into consideration the fact that Nawal Al-Sadawi declared a war against infibulation 40 years ago, and for the past few years there was a media campaign of which the main face was Mubarak's wife". As the lady described, in the spot a Coptic priest and an imam explained that neither the Qur'an nor the Bible do not impose or even do not recommend circumcision. A doctor explained what could be its medical consequences. In 2008 the Egyptian parliament forbade infibulation. But even such a massive campaign was not enough to convince everyone. In the book "Khul-khaal" each of the five female recalled the ritual as a nightmare, but only one of them decided not to do it to his daughter.

The only way to escape the vicious circle of tradition tend to be money and education, so that women can advance to the higher class. However, it seems that it does not guarantee happiness to all of them. For the majority of Egyptian women a family and children have still the highest value and they can not be replaced by the professional career and wealth. The statistics from 2009 show that every year around 3 thousand of women try to commit suicide because of spinsterhood. It includes also those with university degrees.

Egypt has won already several cultural breakthroughs - women graduate from law schools and work as public servants (here, for the first time in the Islamic world, a woman became an officer who is authorized to solemnize marriage), but in terms of politics the situation is much worse than in other Arab countries. Even in Tunisia, Iraq or the United Arab Emirates women represent around 25% of all the members of parliament. In Egypt is only 2 percent.

As one of the interviewed ladies said: “After several days of demonstrations in Tahrir square, many women put on the same beige scarfs, what symbolized an union among us. Men did not put scarves as a sign of solidarity, and the women from the South of the country did not even take off their hijabs. The village and the province is slowly awaking, but the pursuit of gender equality is still an issue only for a relatively small group of women”. Revolution, as she said is a process, so the victory can not be announced.

## CHAPTER III: WOMEN OF THE REVOLUTION

### *3.1 Introduction*

The revolution that took place in Egypt in January and February of 2011 as a part of so called the Arab Spring was absolutely new experience for both sides- government and the people. There was no such an event in the history of the country where people of no matter sex, educational background, social class or age peacefully demonstrated in order to have better lives under democratic regime. All the people united to fight for their basic rights, for living in dignity in a more civilized country. Everyone who ever visited Cairo knows the chaos overwhelming the city. But those days Cairo was highly organized. Women and men, shoulder to shoulder chanted slogan: “Bread, freedom and human dignity”.

The role women played during the revolution was significant and no one can deny that. They showed how brave they are and they are not scared to be punished by the military regime for what they believe in. They were engaged with wide range of activities: from leading the demonstrations to nursing scars and wounds. The way they engaged into political activism changed diametrically. As my interviewees underlined, so far female activist used to show their political affiliation through charity activities or using social media. They did not dare to enter the streets. What happened over a year ago was absolutely unique and changed the perception of how the Western world looks at Muslim women.

Most of the women I talked to did not have any background in politics and never had

any professional training provided by the organizations like Youth Movement<sup>3</sup>. They felt from the depth of their hearts that this is simply right thing to do, and by political involvement they can help to make Egypt better place to live. One of my interlocutors said that for her it was a feeling from the depth of her heart and she started her activism from starting a group and events on Facebook. Another of the interviewees, before joined the organization she is still a member of, she had redistributed leaflets encouraging people to take actions about the importance and power of citizens' gatherings. In her messages she always tried to underline that only peaceful actions can lead into the right direction.

### ***3.2 The roles Egyptian women played during the revolution period. Role of social and traditional media.***

As one of the biggest female figure of the revolution, Marwa Farouk said, "A lot of people were saying Tahrir Square was the future of Egypt, men and women equal, fighting for freedom. And now we have to translate this into action and change... We were equal partners in this revolution, and we are respected as such. Now we have to use the moment effectively, to make sure women participate in daily political life, to make sure they are involved in the development of political parties and labor movements" (Lally 2011). Revolution was, indeed, the moment where gender boundaries were blurred and traditional division of gender roles which is strongly visible in the Arab culture was not so important anymore. It was not much surprising that next to female- dominated activities like nursing or checking another ladies documents in numerous checkpoints, they also came to the forefront of political games,

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<sup>3</sup> Organization which became the most important opposition power during the revolution. It is known by

leading the crowd and taking part in real battles. During so called the camel battle which took place on the 2nd of February, 2011, among 70 killed protesters, killed were also Egyptian women. As Nadiene Naber, one of the important Egyptian activists wrote in the article for “Against the Current”: “Professor Noha Radwan was attacked and beaten half to death by Mubarak thugs who ripped her shirt open. Women and men martyrs now number over 300: Amira, killed by a police officer; Liza Mohamed Hasan, hit by a police car.” (Naber, 2011). They proved that women deserve respect as much as men, and what they do is equally important. Mozn Hassan, one of the symbols of the revolution said, “Women in these protests are not doing only the traditional roles, like cooking or nursing. No. Women are key activists in this revolution. Women are creating slogans, women are shouting, women are at the front and defending protesters” (Hassan 2011).

What was also amazing about the women's activism during the revolution was the fact that the great majority of the ladies at Tahrir square was not a part of any formal organization. They fought against the authoritarian regime and to defend their own rights without being a member of well organized movement. Three out of seven ladies that I interviewed joined their organizations right after the revolution, when the situation on the streets changed and they realized that the peaceful protests is no longer an option.

As my interviewees said, ladies started to mobilize themselves long before the 25th January revolution started. When the first anti- regime protests broke out across Tunisia, more and more Facebook and Twitter accounts were open and the first activities were through social network platforms which played a great role in communication among protesters and sharing with people from around the world an insight of what is going on in Egypt. When people went to the streets virtual walls were full of tweets and status updates with information about field hospitals, ways people can contribute to the protest, drinking water points and the



actions on the square. Portal YouTube was also full of videos recorded by the people in the Tahrir Square about what is going on there.

One of the most famous female related on- line activity was a Facebook group called “Women of Egypt” established by Hadil El- Khouly, where she posted pictures of the women of the revolution: ladies completely covered by niqab, arm to arm with emancipated students without even covered hair, old ladies and teenagers, from all social groups and social classes. This is how she commented the pictures, “they are breaking many stereotypes of what it means to be Arab and means to be Muslim. Arab women are not victimized women waiting for the West or men to liberate them” (Banyard, 2011).

Unlike in social media, women were not really present in traditional channels. In the mainstream media, dominated by men, they basically did not exist. The full credit was given to men and the ladies were presented far less than them. Even international media somehow ignored their presence at the Tahrir square at the beginning. There are different theories explaining that phenomenon. The most probable one was presented by Sheila Gibbons who in the report “Crowd-sourcing and Social Media Deliver Images Absent from Mainstream Media Reports” suppose that for the reporters as well as video camera operators much more important than equal redistribution of the time between genders was to show blood and violence focusing people's eyes. Positive examples of underlining the role the Egyptian women played during the revolution by media was a story Nawara Negm, described to me by one of the activists I talked to, who was on the phone with Al Jazeera TV reporting the course of events during the Battle of the Camel. There were also a couple of more releases by BBC and Al Jazeera.

### ***3.3 Women and democracy***

But the social rights and gender equality were not the only priorities of the demonstrators. For years women tried also to become actors on a political scene. As my interlocutors said, the situation in which women are discriminated also in a political sphere of life is due to patriarchal regime present not only in Egypt but also in the neighbor Arab countries. Women have limited access to education (especially higher level).

No matter what reasons made women to skip active political life, now they try to enter it, on an equal basis with men. They showed that they can be perfect charismatic leaders and they are not afraid to sacrifice their lives for the sake of higher values. Most of the women that I interviewed spent at the square almost the whole revolution period. However, they were still very positively surprised that so many mothers, sisters, daughters showed their courage and did the same thing. They were impressed by young mothers with their infants persistently and with enormous hope waited for a change. They came there not only because they wanted protest against sexual harassment or male polygamy but also against authoritarian regime, aware of the fact that with democracy, the country will benefit culturally and economically and that such a revolt will simply pay back. Side by side to men, they took leading roles during the biggest protest.

During the interviews I was told that although women were not prepared long in advance to what happened, they were very quickly able to establish their own agenda and formulate their postulates.

The peaceful, democracy- oriented protests had also one more advantage. Even though ladies spend with men together a lot of time, they all kept saying that did not experience

sexual harassment or any other kind of violence during this period. One of the protesters said, "I've never felt safer in Egypt than when I was in the crowds. People are not just asking the regime to change. People are changing themselves" (Banyard, 2011).

Experts point out that in the history of the modern Egypt women were never so much engaged in public life and did not play such a huge role in the public and political events. One of the reasons may be their growing emancipation. This may be due to the impact of Western media in the era of the Internet. During the Tahrir Square protests that led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, female bloggers played a great role. They informed the world about what is happening on the streets of the city engulfed in chaos, and gathered Egyptians to participate in future demonstrations. One of my interviewees said: "Women in Egypt have always been a little bit more liberated and modern than in other Arab countries, such as the Gulf States. Are well educated and confident. No wonder that when the Revolution began, they immediately got involved". Unfortunately the contribution of Egyptian ladies in overthrowing existing social order does not mean that they will play a role in creating a new one.

### ***3.4. Obstacles to overcome***

As one can predict, not the whole society was enthusiastic about women's active attitude towards ongoing revolution. Opponents of women's participation in the revolution, were mainly representatives of the army and the Islamist far right. The ladies I interviewed mentioned a couple of times situations in which elderly ladies from the middle class kept saying that disobedient women who protest on the streets should be blamed for the brutal assault by the army. The argument is also the same: "if she has put some modest clothes, it

would never happen”.

Most Egyptians were skeptical from the beginning towards the revolutionary youth. This changed only for a moment, when in February 2011 Mubarak was overthrown and the whole world praised the Egyptian young people. At that time even conservative majority praised "their" heroes. But when activists began to criticize the military, support has ended. Conservatives missed stability, which was promised by military. Maintaining order within the family and the emancipation of women - those two things in the opinion of the conservatives can not be reconciled. What incensed the most was fact that the demonstrators spent nights at the Tahrir Square. In their opinion anything could have happened there.

On the ignorance of the conservative part of the society benefits mainly military. The current leader of Egypt, Marshal Mohammed Tantawi, does everything in his power to consolidate the legend of his immaculate soldiers. When the former U.S. President Jimmy Carter visited him asked what the soldiers did to the girl in a blue bra. His replied saying that videos of soldiers attacking demonstrators, including a girl in a blue bra, are all “fake”. He said that the soldiers really had helped this woman to get dressed. Such an absurd explanation helps distract attention from the touching shots in which police cars can be seen as deliberately misalign the demonstrators. Shots of soldiers hunting for Copts. Beating women with massive sticks and iron bars. Shooting indiscriminately into the crowd.

What the demonstrators tell to the public, does not match the legend created by the army. One of the ladies that I interviewed told me a story about two young women in headscarves who appeared at a press conference and reported what happened to them when they were arrested a few days earlier. Military medical gown put his finger into their vaginas to see if they are still virgins. At the beginning the army officers were still able to portray these women as lairs, but two months later, an officer told CNN reporter that such tests

actually took place. He tried to explain himself by saying that those girls are not as innocent as his daughters for example, because they spent nights at the Tahrir square next to men.

Many women are disappointed and feel frustration. One of the those who I interviewed, participant of the events during the revolution weeks said, "Women have taken an active role in the overthrow of Mubarak, spent cold nights in the square, and even fought against the thugs, sent by the government on protesters. I thought that we would be honored as women of the revolution, because we were present in those days in Tahrir. If women are not included now to the public and political life, we will lose our chance and we will continue to be persecuted. We are simply ignored and disrespected."

## CONCLUSIONS

One can say that women in Egypt lost the revolution long ago. Parliament is almost entirely dominated by men who in majority are ultra- right Islamists and streets are ruled by army and police whom brutally crack down on female protesters. International media every day report on humiliation and cruel treatment of women. Among my interlocutors controversial voices like this one were hearable, “In Egypt, there was no revolution at all. If there was one, such things would no longer be possible. I mean the video with a girl with a blue bra, brutally beaten by military officers. They used massive sticks and kicked her and stomped on the chest. Her abaya<sup>4</sup> was up and did not cover her body anymore. Her belly was naked and everybody saw her bra”. During the recent anti-government demonstration in Tahrir Square, such scenes were apparently more common. Also commonly happened that women were sexually harassed by military officers. It is an Egyptian method of intimidation of girls who want to publicly fight for their rights. It was also a common practice when Mubarak was in power. I first got to know about this practice from the Egyptian blogger, Wael Abbas, who is an opponent of the regime. And it is happening now, over a year after the overthrow of Mubarak which shows that the revolution was meaningless for women's rights, it was only a palace coup. Methods of fighting opponents remain the same. “The generals know that people are desperate and do not care about their own lives. They worry about their mothers, wives and sisters. By humiliating women, they want to humiliate and intimidate the entire Egyptian nation. They know that we are in a very sensitive issue”, said one of the

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<sup>4</sup> kind of a black robe- like dress wearing by Muslim women covering the whole body but face, hands and feet.

interviewees.

Video of "The Girl in Blue Bra" was more popular in the West than in Egypt itself, where fewer people have access to the Internet and independent media. However, it did not take long to the Egyptian society to react. Nora, working for the United Nations Women said: "This was just terrible what happened. Women are beaten and humiliated on the same streets where just a few months ago they risked their lives in the name of the revolution. We must have acted!" Few days after the events on Tahrir hundreds of women went to the streets again, this time defending themselves. This was the largest demonstration in defense of the rights of women in Egyptian history. Not only feminists and activists participated but also ordinary women, housewives, who had never protested before. And many men. Some of them did so in solidarity with their daughters. They felt the same thing that happened to the girl from the video could have happened to their beloved. Female and male demonstrators equally, next to each other, fought for protection of women's rights and wanted to make the government to leave.

The protest turned to be a great success. The world once again focused its sight on Egypt and the next day the Supreme Military Council issued a statement in which expressed that the perpetrators of these violations will be held accountable. Changing the tone of the message was clear- a few days earlier the military claimed that the girl deserved to be treated that way. However, this time at the end of the declaration was a suggestion that the real guilty, what happened is not a state and its officers and "provocateurs and secret agents wanting to harm the Egyptian revolution.

Until recently, the world admired the active role of women in Arab protests. Today we can see - at least in Egypt – that women did not get anything in return for their contributions to overthrow Mubarak. They are missing in all bodies set up after the change of government.

The position of women after the revolution has become worse. The feminist and democratic movements are now obliged to fight once more for the same rights which they have achieved along more than thirty years. Other major problems like poverty and unemployment still restricts the life of millions of women. Three in every four unemployed persons are women, more than 40% Egyptian families are headed by women, and they are mainly situated among the poorest strata of people with income less than two dollars a day. On the other side, the military council which controls the country now abolished the ministry of the family and population, and decreased the number of women ministers from three to one. To conclude, the position of women is still contradictory and more complicated.

Before and after the revolution of the 25th of January, the issue of emancipating women was and still is a matter of conflict and struggle which is deeply related to both the issues of secularism and social justice, and the right to unionize the interpretation of the holy text of the Qur'an in a modern and progressive way through hermeneutics is necessary for a new reading which considers women as citizens and human beings, not as dependent, helpless persons who should be hidden and controlled by the family males as "Aoura" shame.

The process of the new interpretation had started eight centuries ago with the Muslim philosopher of Andalusia, Ibn Rushd, and is still going on without a decisive victory because the reactionary and conservative social and intellectual forces are still powerful and supported by the hegemony of despotic regime, they are also empowered by the oil Sheikhs in the gulf.

As for the social justice, which became one of the main slogans of the 25th January revolution, it is deeply related to the process of the emancipation of the Egyptian women who are the poorest among the 40% of Egyptians who live under the poverty line.

The Muslim brothers and the fundamentalist organizations with their anti- feminist views and visions are very active in the poorest and marginalized areas. In these areas, the heavy veil



and the Burqa are widely spread as much as the influence of the integralist organizations, soufie, wahabi, gihadi...etc.

Along the 30 years of Mubarak's regime, and even before, the right to unionize had been one of the most critical issues in the social and political system. The syndicate movement was historically divided into two factions: one for the working class and the other for the professional people. There had been one working class union which is controlled but the ministry of labor in collaboration with the security forces. The union is composed of several syndicated for the different branches of industries, there were 24 major syndicated the workers are not allowed to organize themselves in other syndicates. The representation of the working women in these official syndicates was very few. The workers struggle against the privatization, deregulation and devaluation along tens of years and to maintain the free right to unionize. At the same time many of them were fined and others imprisoned.

A few years before the revolution, the workers attained the right to establish independent syndicates. The working and professional women were very active in the process. Although the revolutions of 25th of January toppled down Mubarak as a president, his regime is still fighting to survive.

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