

Did Egyptian Women Win or Lose by Overthrowing the Regime of Hosni Mubarak?

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Abstract

Egypt is a place with a long tradition of female participation in revolutions. After years of Mubarak's despotism, women joined the revolution once again. As a result, they had to deal with the violation of women's rights. When Morsi was removed, women were again at the top of political topics. The new constitution was described as the most progressive for women. Sisi has been a president for short time but he is already called the president of women. However women still face problems. They defended themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood's rules by supporting Sisi, but did they really win by overthrowing the regime of Mubarak?

Keywords: Arab Spring, Women's rights, Egypt, Mubarak, Sisi, Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood, Muslim Sisterhood

Egypt is the motherland of Arab and Muslim feminism, where Qasim Amin published such crucial works as *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Woman*, and where Hoda Sha'arawi created Mubarrat Muhammad Ali and the Union of Egyptian Women Education. Women have advocated for their rights under the Egyptian Feminist Union banner since 1920. In 1952, the Egyptian revolution took place under slogans about social egalitarianism, and in 1962, the National Congress promised gender equality (Rogowska). After 30 years of despotism and corruption under Hosni Mubarak, women joined the revolution as regular citizens with similar hopes: a better Egypt for everyone including, of course, them. In the post-revolutionary reality they have had to deal with rising social conservatism, violations of women's rights and at the same time their huge inheritance of feminism. Did Egyptian women win or lose by overthrowing the regime of Hosni Mubarak?

The last years of Mubarak's presidency could be seen as a continuous erosion of gender inequality. Since 2000, the government had been submitting changes to national law. Women received the right to get married to foreign men, and to pass on their nationality to children. The law started to support the security of children whose mothers did not have Egyptian husbands. The regulation which stated that women needed their husband's permission to travel was abolished (Dawoud). In 2008, the Supreme Judicial Council agreed that women could become judges and sit on the bench, the minimum age of marriage was raised to 18 and female genital mutilation (FGM) became a crime (Tadros). In 2009, Mubarak's last decision pertaining to women's rights was the adoption of a women's parliamentary quota (Dawoud). According to many these changes weren't effective and new regulations were only theories and did not reflect what went on in practice. FGM has been openly practiced, sexual harassment has been a real plague, and the penal code has given lenient sentences for committing honor killings.

Women were present on Tahrir Square during the 2011 revolution. It is estimated that women made up 40–50% of the protestors in the days leading to the fall of the president. Many charismatic female revolutionary leaders became acknowledged even outside Egypt, topping global rankings of influential women such as *Newsweek's* list of *Women Who Shake the World* (March 2012) or *Guardian's Top 100 Women: Activists and Campaigners* list (March 2011) (Moushira). Pictures of Arab women who were fighting for freedom and democracy started to become popular in Western media. Women from different social, political and religious backgrounds who actively participated in the revolution refuted the common stereotypes that Muslim women were passive and submissive. "Tahrir Square became a utopia where respect and unity prevail" (Wael 483).

Parliamentary elections brought the victory of the long banned Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood, which reduced hopes for gender equality. The Research Center claimed that in May 2012, one year after the revolution, 40% of the respondents thought that women would have more rights under the Freedom and Justice

Party-led government than they had in Mubarak's time and 27% had the opinion that they would have fewer rights (Faiqa). There were opinions that many legal rights which women had received under Hosni Mubarak, were threatened because the Muslim Brotherhood would almost certainly be seeking for solutions based on an extreme interpretation of *shariah* law. Others pointed out the long history of the Muslim Brotherhood and their ability to survive under dictatorship, which in their supporters' eyes proved that the Brotherhood were mature enough to take care of the entire society (Faiqa).

Even before the revolution, the growing role of Islam and conservatism in women's movements could be seen. Many secular NGOs had worked with Islamic principles (Abdellatif and Ottaway) and we can't forget that Egypt is the homeland of Muslim feminism – a movement whose principles of gender justice are taken from the *Quran*. In these circumstances, the concepts of religious ideas mixed with women's rights could be seen as quite logical. Many enthusiastic pro-female slogans were sung by people from the Brotherhood (Gehad).

The topic of women's rights divided people, including women. We can talk about opinions represented by secular activists, and by Muslim feminists and Islamic activists as members of the Muslim Sisterhood who reject any similarities with Western feminism. Secular activists wanted to make women's lives easier by reducing the influence of religion on society. However, Muslim feminists and Islamic activists believed that the solution was to promote the *right* Islam. At this time, NGOs with a secular attitude had been run by educated women who had limited influence. The majority of the conservative society saw them as part of a Western agenda. The Sisterhood has proved to have many followers (Rosefsky). They mobilized significant numbers of women during the revolution and with the Brotherhood's victory gave hope that their female voices would finally be heard.

Today, criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood is mainly because of the place women occupy in their ideology. Many figures from the organization, including President Morsi, believed that women aren't made to have *the great leadership role* (Bohn). The Muslim Brotherhood had always needed women who did *dawah* mission, running charity projects, and mobilizing groups of people. They also needed women because women were voters. According to Fatma al-Zomor (a member of the Sisterhood), brothers didn't allow women to be active under Mubarak, using the argument that they were afraid about their security and wanted to protect them from National Security agents. When Morsi came into the power this argument became redundant. In October 2012, the Freedom and Justice Party organized a series of workshops for future women leaders (Moushira).

On December 25, 2012 a new Egyptian constitution came into force. However, it did not receive a warm welcome from many secularists, and liberals. The main problem was *Article 2* which stated that "Islam is the religion of the state (...). The principles of Islamic *shariah* are the principal source of legislation" (Cesari 337).

The mass protests which were a reaction to the draft constitution caused many to lose trust in the *skills* of the Brotherhood to lead a multi-ethnic society. However, we will never know how this experiment of Islamic party with the support of some women could have played out. Still, it was interesting how some female intellectuals described Brotherhood. Mona al-Ghobashy said “Over the past quarter century, the [Brotherhood] has morphed from a highly secretive, hierarchical, antidemocratic organization led by anointed elders into a modern, multi-vocal political organization steered by educated, savvy professionals not unlike activists of the same age in rival Egyptian political parties” (El Ghobashy 373).

When Morsi won the presidential election he said “Muslims and Christians, women and men, young and old – You are all my family,” but when he was asked about women’s conditions, he answered ambiguously, “An Egyptian woman has the same equal rights as men; there are even some men who ask to be guaranteed the same rights as women” (*Mursi: Chcę być prezydentem wszystkich Egipcjan*). By those words he confirmed that he couldn’t see any inequality in Egyptian society. His election program barely included any women’s issues. He concentrated on the *social empowerment* which he understood as *the fast rescue for the family*, without any clarification what kind of rescue a family needed. The constitution didn’t mention the word “woman” with the exception of one article (No. 10) which describes a woman in the perspective of being a mother: “The state guarantees motherhood and childhood services for free, and fulfills the balance between a woman’s duties towards her family and towards her public work. The state gives special care and protection to the divorced, widowed and those who are breadwinners” (*Report on Egyptian women conditions in 2012*).

With the beginning of transformation, the social status of women could be seen as receding, some hard won laws of the last two decades had been undermined. According to Moushira Khattab, women in the Brotherhood’s narration and actions had only instrumental roles. Between friendly gestures and words towards women, we heard parliamentarians who were criticizing the law criminalizing FGM on national TV (Moushira). Islamists’ parliament were critical of several draft laws such as the right of women to get an uncontested divorce (Arabic: *khul*), the prohibition of child marriage and the criminalization of FGM (Moushira). There were objections to some women’s rights which were viewed as western ideas, which in some quarters were seen as disconnecting women from their culture, religion, family and negating the revolutionary struggles for national liberation.

Paradoxically, in a country where political changes were made because of female presence on the Tahrir Square, there was a clear absence of women in key decision making positions. There were no women on the constitutional committee and only one in the interim cabinet. Women were present but still poorly represented in the People’s Assembly with a mere 2% of the seats. It’s good to remember that the quota for women in parliament existed under ex-President Mubarak.

In 2010, the quota system gave women 12% of parliamentary seats. This provision was removed following the 2011 revolution. The first parliament after Mubarak's expulsion, had a large majority of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist MPs, with only 10 female deputies (Shah).

Post-revolutionary Egypt has seen a growing number of women who wanted to be part of the political scene and have become more politically engaged with an increasing numbers of female voters and candidates. A survey conducted by El Baradei and Wafa found that before the revolution only 19% of women had participated in elections as voters compared to 79% who had participated post-revolution. What is interesting is that female respondents tended to emphasise their national identity, describing themselves as proud and concerned with public life (El Baradei and Wafa). However, under the Muslim Brotherhood's time in office, Egypt experienced deteriorations in the level of political rights of women dropping to 125 out of 133 countries, according to a report compiled by the World Economic Forum in 2012. Indeed, Egypt was a lowly 128 out of 131 countries regarding women's representation in parliament as the percentage of female parliamentarians in Egypt decreased to 2% in 2011 parliament, having been 12.5% in 2010. Dr. Hassan, the general secretary of the National Council of Women (NCW) in 2011, said that the underrepresentation of women in parliament set Egypt at *large a dozen steps back* (El Baradei and Wafa).

What was even worse, women who were members of parliament didn't fulfill the role of representing all women, especially in the opinion of secularists. In the analysis of speeches in the 2012 parliament, we see that women's participation in discussions didn't exceed 3% of the total allotted time and they didn't try to influence legislation connected with women's issues. However, one woman from the Freedom and Justice Party, Oum Ayman, was reported to have called for the abolition or change to seven laws which were linked to women rights. She called for the abolition of the *khulu* law, the ban on women to travel alone and not requiring a man to inform his wife when he decides to take a second wife (El Baradei and Wafa).

The other example was sexual harassment. According to the 2013 United Nations study 99.3% of respondents had been victims of sexual harassment, across all ages, education backgrounds, and religions (El-Dabh). After Afghanistan, Egypt was ranked the second worst country for sexual harassment in 2013 (*Report on Egyptian women conditions in 2012*). These frightening results were commented on by Al-Garf, one of the women elected to the parliament with the words: "harassment happens because of the nudity of women, and therefore harassers are not wrong" (*Report on Egyptian women conditions in 2012*, 5). These kind of statements were one of the many reasons for protests against Morsi in 2013. In February of that year, women organized a march against sexual harassment where anti-presidential slogans prominently featured in their event.

In February 2011, feminist organizations expressed concern to the Prime Minister and the Military Council about the lack of women's participation in decision making processes and the dearth of official provisions in protecting women's rights in building a democratic system. The National Council for Women (NCW) was established in 2000 as the government entity responsible for promoting women's rights (*Decree of the Establishment of the National Council for Women*), but when after the revolution the Council was still formerly headed by the wife of Mubarak, technically the NCW was too weak to speak up for women. Many female NGOs had connections with the former president and his National Democratic Party. Almost overnight, women had no respected organization to represent them except those which sympathized with the Brotherhood.

In October 2011, a new federation which represented hundreds of female NGO's was registered in Egypt. Their first goal was to mobilize women to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Many women joined newly established political formations. According to regulations, at least one woman should be on every election list, however it wasn't said which position on the list the woman should take. As a result women weren't on tops of lists, giving them little chance of winning especially with the districts being so large.

In February 2012, a new plan was formulated and approved by the Prime Minister. The NCW was supposed to work on the progress of the social and economic conditions of women and increase female participation in local communities. The Council wasn't only the executive of the Prime Minister's will but also the voice against some arguments which were discussed in parliament. At the same time, they organized a conference *Egyptian Women and the President – the Future of Women in Post Revolution Egypt* to confirm their readiness to cooperate with the new political powers.

2012 saw a number of actions against female activists who represented views on women's rights that differed from those held by the Brotherhood. There were attacks on Dr. Nossir, a professor of religion at the University of Al-Azhar, because of her confronting the aggression on gender equality in the name of religion, an accusation against Geehan Mansour of being a foreign agent, criticism of Lamees Al-Hadidi because of her position on the *terror campaign* against media, and an investigation into Manal Omar because of her analysis of Morsi's personality during a TV show.

The Egyptian economy largely reliant upon the tourist industry faced huge problems. A country which is politically unstable is not a dream holiday destination. After the overthrow of Mubarak's regime there was an increase in female unemployment. What is interesting is that the most educated women were more likely to fall into the unemployment category (El Mallakh et al.). The economic deterioration seriously impacted women who worked in private sector. Official figures on unemployment for 2011 showed that unemployment among women hit 23% compared

to 9% for men (Moushira). According to *The Economist*, analyzing the economic opportunities for women in 2012, Egypt was ranked 80th out of 128 countries. Providing good job prospects and economic opportunities for women is especially important in Egypt with around 22% of all Egyptian households having a matriarchal head of the family. However, women had huge potential. Directly after the 2011 revolution, women owned about 20% of all Egyptian firms and women-owned companies were more technologically modern and likely to export. Egyptians have always been present on *Forbes' Middle East's Top 100 Most Powerful Arab Business Women in Listed Companies* list. The Brotherhood's belief that a woman's place should mainly be at home was understood by many as a wish to distract people's attention from the reality of Egyptian women's economic strength (Moushira).

The lack of importance given to the role of women as decision makers after the prominent role they played in the national upheaval isn't surprising. In every post-revolution case there are plenty of political and economic problems to be fixed, and in comparison, gender issues don't look as important (Wael 483). To ask women to wait until political stabilization has been achieved is a normal tactic used to delay women's demands. The priority is the national interest. In the opinion of Ranchod-Nilsson, women are warmly welcomed to a revolutionary movement as their participation is needed, but they are "discarded or pushed to the margins during later periods of state consolidation." Women's presence gave Egypt a much larger number of participants which had an impact on the pressure exerted by the movement, emphasized national unity and "validated the movement particularly in the eyes of the international community" (Wael 483-485).

Times of revolutionary changes fueled by nationalistic slogans is usually used to trigger collective action by accenting "the need to make a sacrifice for the nation" but at the same time feminist desires are used as a pretext to mobilize the female part of society to fight in the revolution. This has happened many times in history. In the Indian fight against colonialism, Nehru persuaded women to participate in the national struggle by promoting gender causes. In 1931 he said: "In a national war, there is no question of either sex or community. Whoever is born in this country ought to be a soldier." He convinced women that they were fighting against gender oppression. Ghandi advised women to use their strategies against gender discrimination in the passive resistance movement. He showed an understanding of their personal struggles against gender injustice and to subtly resist it (Wael).

History shows that when people put aside their differences to unite in one national movement, this unity is not necessarily warranted after. Sometimes these differences remerge as soon as the main aspiration is accomplished (Wael). A whole movement which called for freedom can split into groups which have differing goals and all of whom are hungry for power. As a consequence, the unity of women as an interest group can prove difficult to maintain with gender issues becoming more difficult to highlight.

On July 3, 2013 as a result of the anti-presidential protests Abdel Fattah as-Sisi, general of Egyptian Army led the coalition to remove Morsi and suspended the constitution. According to military sources on 30th of June, 14 millions protesters demonstrated against the president and the Brotherhood, accusing them of betraying the revolutionary values, monopolizing power and imposing strict religious laws (Ohlheiser). If the statistics published by the Egyptian Armed Forces are true this protest would be one of the biggest in world history.

Protests continued until July 3rd. Women were members of the movement and the gender issue was again at the top of political discourse. The chaos which Egypt experienced during this time saw a series of unpleasant events. According to Human Rights Watch, over 100 women were sexually assaulted or even raped between June 28th and July 4th (*Rape and sexual assault: the hidden side of Egypt's protests*). The army which was in control of the country after the overthrow of Morsi, was accused of many acts of violence against protesting women. The media reported that Security Forces arrested, beat and sexually assaulted over a dozen women who were protesting and then left them in the desert outside of Cairo. The most serious case was the imprisonment of 21 female protesters, including seven girls, because of their participation in pro-Morsi demonstrations in Alexandria. The Sidi-Gaber Misdemeanour court sentenced 14 of them to 11 years and one month in prison and sentenced the young girls to juvenile detention until they turned 21 (*Egypt must immediately and unconditionally release women protesters*).

On January 18th 2014, 98.1% of voters showed support for the new constitution established by the interim authorities. According to the constitution, Egyptian nationality "is a right to anyone born to an Egyptian father or an Egyptian mother, and legal recognition through official papers proving his/her personal data, is a right guaranteed and regulated by the law" (Megahed). The previous constitution merely mentioned that nationality is a right regulated by law. In the opinions of many experts, the new rules provide better protection for women and children. The constitution defines a child as a person who is younger than 18 years old, so child marriage is prohibited not only by law, but also by the constitution. The Egyptian constitution includes: gender equality, protection from discrimination, political, civil, economic, social, culture rights, and the protection of motherhood (Megahed). The authorities didn't establish any types of quota at the national level, not only for women but even for workers or farmers who used to have 50% quota in the representative councils since 1956. Some women's rights organizations expressed disappointment that their quest for explicit quotas for women was ignored (Mahmoud). However, many commentators described this new constitution as the most progressive for women. Sisi was aware of the power of women's votes, so making women's rights a strong point of the constitution was not only fair but also very much a tactical decision. Women showed their attitude to the Brotherhood by voting for the new constitution, which some Muslim Brotherhood and

Salafist preachers called “the constitution of the adulterous women” (Abu Chehab). On the day of the referendum many women were dancing and singing national songs in the streets. Many of them were carrying pictures of Sisi who has become a national and women’s hero (Khattab).

On March 26, 2014 Sisi resigned from the military to become a candidate in the 2014 presidential election (*Egypt’s El-Sisi bids military farewell, says he will run for presidency*). He was sworn into presidential office on June 8, 2014. He won with 23.78 million votes (96.91% of voters). This was the first foreign-monitored election in Egypt’s history (*El-Sisi wins Egypt’s presidential race with 96.91%*; Watanabe). The man who won the election was known for defending forced *virginity tests* against female protesters in his previous role as head of military intelligence, but at the same time he was the man who had led Egypt to a new progressive constitution.

His election campaign was clearly aimed at women. He even organized the women’s conference as part of his campaign, in which he met with women from different sectors from across Egypt’s governorates. “Chivalry, love, generosity and benevolence mean that no one is frightened, especially Egyptian women” – he told them during the meeting (Rabie).

Sisi, recently reelected, has now been president for four years now. Although this may still not be enough time to judge him, he is being called the *president of women*. He characterizes his feelings about women with warm affection. He said: “I personally love the Egyptian women, (...) All the women in Egypt would be my daughters” (McTighe). His narration about women is always full of respect. “The women of Egypt have always taken part in writing the history of our nation. They have shown their ability, responsibility and strength in building our country” – he said (*Circles of hell. Domestic, public and state violence against women in Egypt*). One of the first things he did as president was to apologize to women who were sexually assaulted during his inauguration.

The NCW announced its plan to develop which aligns with government policy (*Circles of hell. Domestic, public and state violence against women in Egypt*). However, the authorities delayed implementation of reforms under the pretext that currently there is no parliament in Egypt. In December 2014, the NWC had started a program called *Egyptian Women... Step towards Parliament in 2015* to support women who wish to nominate themselves for election, by explaining the election process (Hanna and Foster). A government institution paid the election fees for every female candidate between 25 and 35 years old (*Government institution to pay fees for female candidates in parliamentary election*). The Elections Committee said that in February 2015, only 949 women were among the 7,416 candidates running for election (El-Behary). The elections were delayed because the Supreme Constitutional Court decided that the law on electoral constituencies was unconstitutional. Parliamentary elections were planned for after Ramadan in 2015, which finished on July, 17th 2015.

Did Egyptian women, citizens of the country with a long feminist tradition win or lose by overthrowing the regime of Hosni Mubarak? For sure they defended themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood's post-revolution action. "Women's rights under the rule of President Sisi have improved when compared to their situation during the reign of President Muhammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood" – said the Ambassador of the NCW (Abdelatty). Her opinion is shared by the head of the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (Abdelatty). In many aspects, Egyptian women's situation is even better than under Mubarak. Women won by overthrowing the regime of Mubarak but their victory required huge sacrifices, risk and wasn't a spectacular triumph. The new law seems to be better but it doesn't mean this law can fix all of Egyptian women's problems. Al-Khawaja from Cairo University said: "The status of women under Sisi's era has improved without any objective signs" (Abdelatty).

Amnesty International published its report, *Circles of Hell: Domestic, Public and State Violence Against Women in Egypt*, which confirmed that Egyptian women still face many problems including state violence, domestic violence, sexual assault. The authors of the report stated that efforts to eliminate violence against women are too little. However, many of those who still judge Egyptian women's situation as very bad and describe the new constitution as not effective, seem to understand that applying new rights stipulated by the constitution takes time and is especially so in such a large country.

Egypt needs not only a good legal framework, but also long term programs to address women's problems such as sexual harassment, health care and employment. What is more none of these problems will be solved until the mentality of the nation will be changed. It's not something that can happen through a good law or pro-feminine president, but at the same time, it is difficult to achieve without them. Egyptian women won by overthrowing the regime of Hosni Mubarak. The current situation, dates and statistics, unsolved problems and the size of this victory shows us that they won a very tough battle but not yet the war.

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