

Chapter Six

The Arab Spring and Egypt's Open Season against Women

Emily Dyer

On January 25, 2011, the Egyptian revolution brought a dramatic end to President Hosni Mubarak's three decades in power. While this date is celebrated throughout Egypt as the first step towards achieving "bread, freedom and social justice," for millions of Egyptian women, it marks the day that their lives were thrown into turmoil.

What followed was an attack on women's rights and roles in society throughout various transitions of political power. Having faced years of discrimination and oppression under former President Hosni Mubarak's autocratic rule, women were further marginalised and abused under the four and a half month rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), followed by the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and now the military-led interim government.

The revolution's three-year anniversary marks the next phase of Egypt's political transition—parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014. Yet, Egypt's open season of appalling discrimination and violence against women has shown no signs of coming to an end. Several months ago, female activists were rounded up¹ off the streets, sexually abused by the police and dumped in the desert outside Cairo. A recent UN report² revealed that 99.3 percent of women in Egypt have been sexually harassed, and countless women attending large protests have been gang raped and tortured with sharp instruments. And, unsurprisingly, Egypt was named the worst place to live for women in the Arab

¹"Egyptian Police Beat Women and Abandon Them in Desert," *The Times*, November 28, 2013, available at: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3933844.ece>

²"Sexual Harassment in Egypt... The Causes and Confrontation Methods," *UN Women*, April 2013, available at <http://www.un.org/eg/Publications.aspx?pageID=43>

world in a recent poll.³ As many ask what lies ahead for Egypt in 2014, the women question should be at the forefront of our attention.

Women's Roles, Reversed

Regardless of the crucial role that women played in the revolution, they soon faced exclusion, discrimination, and violence in the years that followed. Women have broadly been excluded from political participation, both at high-level parliamentary representation (decreasing from 10 percent in 2010, to 3 percent in 2012) and through the ability of NGOs and activists to create change through civil society.⁴ Furthermore, the varied roles played by women in revolution and creating social change in broader society has been severely undermined.

Egyptian women have been and are still often portrayed as the supporters of men, rather than acting as political agents themselves. During and following the revolution, women were referred to as “the daughters, mothers, sisters and wives” of revolutionaries and their contribution to the uprising was described as “unconditionally supporting their other halves” in ousting Hosni Mubarak.⁵ Many Egyptian women felt as though they were being portrayed as “the sandwich-makers and the Florence Nightingales of the revolution; by which, all we did was we went and gave food to the male revolutionists and stitched them up when they were hurt.”⁶ In some cases, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to discourage women from taking part in protests all together, claiming that it is “more dignified for women to stay at home and let their brothers and fathers protest for them.”⁷

³“Egypt is worst Arab State for Women, Comoros Best: Survey,” *Reuters*, November 12, 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/12/us-arab-women-idU.S.BRE9AB00820131112>.

⁴Dyer, E., “Marginalising Egyptian Women,” The Henry Jackson Society (October 2013), available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Marginalising-Egyptian-Women.pdf>.

⁵“MB female activists [sic] demonstrate what won't kill you will make you stronger,” *IkhwanWeb*, April 4, 2011, available at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28338>.

⁶Interview with Mona Eltahawy, June 4, 2013.

⁷*Ibid.*

In fact, women played a central role in all aspects of the revolution: working in field hospitals and checkpoints in Tahrir Square and the more supportive roles were shared between men *and* women.⁸ According to eyewitnesses, women “were everywhere”: from looking after injured demonstrators, to standing “on the frontline” of the protests,⁹ “throwing stones with the men.”¹⁰ As a result, they were forced to pay the highest price for taking part in the revolution: “we got broken, we got sexually assaulted.”¹¹ The Brotherhood’s “revisionist version” of women having a purely supportive,¹² more “feminine” role in creating revolutionary change suggests an attempt to deny their political agency in creating social change.

As well as having their role as grassroots revolutionaries undermined, Egyptian women have long been excluded from the top levels of political power and influence. While the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) claimed to be working hard to consolidate “the right of women to [...] representation in important positions in the state,”¹³ it was actually heavily marginalising them from government institutions—including the lower and upper houses of parliament—the House of Representatives (formerly known as the People’s Assembly) and *Shura* Council respectively—and, the Constituent Assembly (the committee responsible for amending the constitution). In fact, female representation in high-level positions was lower under Egypt’s first elected government than under the previous regime, despite women showing an increased appetite for political participation following the 2011 revolution.¹⁴

⁸Ibid. See also: Interview with Dalia Abd el-Hameed, Gender and Women’s Rights Officer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, June 4, 2013.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Interview with Dr Nawla Darwiche, Director of the New Woman Foundation, June 5, 2013.

¹¹Interview with Mona Eltahawy, June 4, 2013.

¹²Ibid.

¹³“Dr. Omaima Kamel: New Constitution Will Safeguard Women’s Rights in Full,” *Ikhwan-Web*, July 27, 2012, available at: <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30211>.

¹⁴El-Naggar, T., “TNS: 43 Percent of Women Believe their Situation has Become Worse,” *Zawya*, March 26, 2013, available at: http://www.zawya.com/story/TNS_43_of_Women_Believe_their_Situation_has_Become_Worse-ZAWYA20130326101923/.

The Battle for Civil Society

The crackdown on women in the public sphere spread from the streets and the corridors of the Shura Council to women's rights NGOs and wider civil society. Immediately following the revolution, the state carried out a crackdown on human rights groups. In February 2011, the Hesham Mubarak Center for Law was raided, followed by a series of raids against Egyptian and international NGO offices, in December 2011. In early June 2013, the state convicted 43 NGO workers, giving them prison sentences of up to five years.¹⁵ The crackdown on NGOs continued and, in some cases, worsened under Muslim Brotherhood rule, from late June 2012.

Shortly before President Morsi was ousted from power in mid-2013, his government proposed a draft NGO law to further empower the authorities' ability to restrict the activities and funding of human-rights NGOs.¹⁶ Moreover, human-rights NGOs, particularly women's-rights groups, were heavily stigmatised by the Muslim Brotherhood; its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP); and wider society. Human-rights organisations were often branded as being "lackeys of the West,"¹⁷ due to their work in international forums.¹⁸

Likewise, groups supportive of international conventions were labeled as being part of an "international agenda" (and, therefore, unrepresentative of "the inherent pure values of the Egyptian people").¹⁹ The National Council for Women (NCW) was criticised and ignored for working with foreign organisations: accused of aligning itself too closely with the West, on the basis that this directly contradicts the "Islamic identity" of the Egyptian woman. For instance, the NCW's position regarding the UN declaration on the status of women

¹⁵"Egyptian Court Convicts 43 NGO Employees," *BBC News*, June 4, 2013, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22765161>.

¹⁶Morayef, H., "Why Egypt's New Law Regulating NGOs is Still Criminal," *Human Rights Watch*, June 11, 2013, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/11/why-egypts-new-law-regulating-ngos-still-criminal>.

¹⁷Interview with Dr Hania Sholkamy, June 6, 2013.

¹⁸Interview with Dalia Abd el-Hameed, Gender and Women's Rights Officer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, June 4, 2013.

¹⁹"Election Program: The Freedom and Justice Party," The Freedom and Justice Party, 2011, available at: <http://www.fjponline.com/view.php?pid=80>.

was censured by Essam al-Erian, head of the FJP's parliamentary committee.²⁰ Given the fact that the NCW acted as a buffer between the state and women's rights NGOs, this heavily undermined the ability of NGOs to have an influence on policies affecting women.²¹

Separate Yet Not Equal

Alongside political marginalization, the state played a key role in restricting women's roles in the public sphere, through segregation. Sexual segregation in public spaces increased following the 2011 revolution, particularly in February 2013, during the Muslim Brotherhood's time in power. Segregated train carriages were introduced on several popular transport routes, and segregation was introduced in several schools and hotels. While the state claimed that segregation was a solution to help prevent sexual harassment, it was widely viewed as part of the problem, rather than the solution, in widening the gap in understanding between men and women.²² Understanding and communication between men and women has weakened, to the extent that the narrators of the YouTube video joked about 90 percent of Egyptians having become "sexually illiterate." This, combined with the restrictions on sexual satisfaction has led to mass-sexual frustration and a toxic environment on the streets, whereby women dread having to use public transport or even walk down a busy street.

In the long term, those fighting for women's rights are likely to find it harder and harder to create change in a society that is increasingly divided by sex. Dr. Hania Sholkamy explained that the state-led segregation of women "casts a very dark shadow over gender relations in general [and] pervades every aspect of people's lives"—in that the state's control of women's bodies is likely to lead to similar power dynamics between men and women in the private domain, leading to "domestic-violence

²⁰Dakroury, N., "Shura Council Criticises the National Council for Women," *Daily News Egypt*, June 11, 2013, available at: <http://www.dailynewsegyp.com/2013/06/11/shura-council-criticises-the-national-council-for-women/>.

²¹Interview with Dr Hania Sholkamy, June 6, 2013.

²²Dyer, E., "Marginalising Egyptian Women," The Henry Jackson Society (October 2013), available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Marginalising-Egyptian-Women.pdf>.

transgressions.”²³ Therefore, while providing an instant and short-term solution to treating the symptoms of harassment, segregation does not cure the societal disease itself; it worsens it. As a result, Egypt’s new government would be best served targeting the root causes of sexual harassment, and undo previous steps towards public gendered segregation.

Sexual Violence

Though sexual harassment has long been a serious problem in Egypt, sexual attacks against women are widely thought to have increased in both severity and frequency following the revolution, including mob attacks (many with sharp instruments) during large-scale protests. By late 2013, 99.3 percent of women reported having experienced some form of sexual harassment.²⁴ Images of women being violently harassed and beaten (most iconically, the “blue bra” girl, who was beaten by the police) became commonplace online and in the Western media, throughout 2011 and 2012. Furthermore, while it is impossible to collect accurate information regarding the number of sexual-harassment and rape cases (due to the lack of women who go on a report the incident), the Interior Ministry claimed that reported rapes had increased from 119 in 2011, to 129 in 2012.²⁵ Given the restrictions on sexual freedom in Egypt, serious questions need to be asked about what impact they are having on the streets.

Women’s sexuality has not just been attempted to be shielded from men, but destroyed all together. While FGM in Egypt was officially made illegal in 2008, the problem has remained widespread following the revolution.^{26, 27} Despite the absence of recent statistics, the rate of

²³Interview with Dr Hania Sholkamy, June 6, 2013.

²⁴“Sexual Harassment in Egypt... The Causes and Confrontation Methods,” *UN Women*, April 2013, available at <http://www.un.org/Publications.aspx?pageID=43>

²⁵“Raped Egypt Women Wish Death Over Life as Crimes Ignored,” *Bloomberg*, March 7, 2013, available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-03-07/raped-egypt-women-wish-death-over-life-as-crimes-ignored.html>.

²⁶“Law No. 126 of 2008 Amending the Law on Children (No. 12 of 1996),” *The UN Secretary-General’s Database on Violence Against Women*, July 21, 2009, available at: <http://sgdatabase.unwomen.org/searchDetail.action?measureId=25149&baseHREF=country&baseHREFId=465>.

²⁷*Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Overview and Exploration of the Dynamics of Change*, UNICEF (2012), available at: http://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGCM_Lo_res.pdf.

operations carried out is thought—by women's rights activists—to have increased following the revolution.²⁸

The fact that approximately 90 percent of Egyptian women have suffered the torture of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a largely unknown fact—particularly in the West. FGM is a form of torture used to de-sexualise women by removing the clitoris and often mutilating other parts of the vagina (in part to ensure virginity before marriage). FGM is widely regarded to be a cultural practise whereby the external female genitalia are partially or totally removed “for non-medical reasons,”²⁹ as a way of “de-sexualizing women, and repressing sexual desire.”³⁰ Women and girls who experience FGM are put at serious risk of infection and death throughout and following the procedure, and are often left with life-long pain and suffering as a result of the physical and emotional damage inflicted.³¹

As a result of FGM, the sexual pleasure and equality within a relationship belongs to the man alone, whereas the woman is forced to endure crippling pain, infection, and depression (to name a few of the consequences of FGM) throughout her entire adult life. Nevertheless, the FJP, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other leading strands of Egypt's Islamist movement have repeatedly attempted to justify and legitimise FGM through various religious; medical; and legal channels. During its time in power, the FJP claimed that it was “working on [...] promulgating a law criminalizing all forms of violence against women and girls.”³²

However, despite often claiming to oppose FGM, the FJP attempted to lift state control over the practice by portraying FGM as

²⁸Khojji, Z., “A Crime Against Women,” *The Majalla*, July 16, 2013, available at: <http://www.majalla.com/eng/2013/07/article55243392>.

²⁹“Definition of Female Genital Mutilation—Female Genital Mutilation Legal Guidance,” The Crown Prosecution Service, available at: http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/d_to_g/female_genital_mutilation/#definition.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹*How Does FGM/FGC Affect Women's Health?—Promoting Gender Equality*, United Nations Population Fund, available at: <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/practices2.htm#15>.

³²Statement by H.E. Dr. Pakinam Al Sharkawi, Deputy Prime Minister & Special Assistant of the President for Political Affairs, Arab Republic of Egypt, Before the 57th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, The Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations New York, March 2013, available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/generaldiscussion/memberstates/egypt.pdf>.

a private family issue. Mohamed Morsi stated that FGM is a private issue between mothers and daughters, adding that families—not the state—should decide on whether to carry out the ritual.³³ However, the decision to undergo FGM is rarely one that the daughter is capable of making or consenting to, due to her young age; rather, it is solely decided upon by the mother or guardian of the child. Therefore, the Egyptian state’s attempt to portray FGM as a choice was both false and misleading.

By promoting and/or failing to prevent FGM, the Egyptian government has breached its legal obligation to protect the rights of women and, even more seriously, girls. Firstly, FGM must be treated as child abuse, due to its ability to harm one’s health and infringe upon one’s physical; mental; spiritual; and social growth.³⁴ Secondly, UNICEF’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)—ratified by Egypt—states in Article 19 that children have the right of protection from all forms of mental and physical violence.³⁵ The Article also indicates that the role of the government is to “ensure that children are properly cared for and protect[ed...] from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents, or anyone else who looks after them.”³⁶

Moreover, the fact that FGM may lead to death through blood loss and/or disease, means that the practice directly threatens the right of women and girls to live, as well as the right to a body free of disease or mutilation. Therefore, despite promising to criminalise all forms of violence against women, the FJP—through its opposition to, and in some cases promotion of, FGM—stood in direct violation of its legal obligation to “take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.”³⁷ In this case, the “traditional practice” is arguably the most

³³Allam, A., “Egypt: A Toxic Mix of Tradition and Religion,” *The Financial Times*, July 7, 2012, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8185dd5c-c5c0-11e1-a5d5-00144feabdc0.html>.

³⁴“Promoting Gender Equality,” United Nations Population Fund, available at: <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/practices2.htm>.

³⁵*Fact Sheet: A Summary of the Rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UNICEF, available at: http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

serious form of violence against women. FGM is (and was) therefore used by the state, to control what it regarded as its biggest threat: women's bodies and sexual freedom.³⁸

Conclusion

The 2011 revolution against 30 years of oppression under Mubarak's regime profoundly altered the fabric of Egyptian society. Many issues facing women that had previously gone undiscussed and ignored were brought out onto the street and spoken about in public space. Egypt is now a fundamentally revolutionary place, with weekly protests and paintings of the hundreds who lost their lives during the revolution lining the streets of Cairo. However, the significance of these arguably irreversible changes to society was hugely taken for granted by those who took power, who proceeded to attack the very electoral promises and democratic freedoms used to win office.

Women were one of the greatest forces within the 2011 revolution, yet proved to be the cheapest bargaining chip during the Muslim Brotherhood's year in power (from June 2012 to July 2013). Many of the long-standing issues facing women became worse, and women's rights and roles in society were undermined by the state in the name of reclaiming Islamic identity against the West and the *filul* (the former regime).

The ousting of the FJP, and the subsequent demise of the Muslim Brotherhood, was fundamentally due to its attempts to survive as a legitimate leading democratic party whilst imposing an Islamist ideology upon the Egyptian people. Despite minor improvements under the rule of Adly Mansour's interim government, women's rights groups have so far been left disappointed yet again. While it remains to be seen what will come of the planned parliamentary and presidential elections of early 2014, it is likely that—without fundamental and immediate changes—the plight of women in Egypt will continue.

³⁸Interview with Dr. Nawla Darwiche, Director of the New Woman Foundation, June 5, 2013.