The role of Egyptian women in the 25th of January revolution

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Final Paper

Role of Egyptian women during the 25th of January revolution

Egypt passed though a critical period that changed its future completely. The 25th of January revolution made it possible for Egyptians to call for their rights, defend them and decide on their destiny. Egyptian women are not equally treated as men in the Egyptian society, however they were next to men in Tahrir square calling for freedom and democracy.

This revolution witnessed many unique situations, from the huge number of protesters coming out in the streets at the exact same time, to the continuous efforts for making the demonstrations “peaceful”, then the participation of all the nations into the protests no matter their sex, age or background. It was a real “genuine national” revolution, in the sense that every person holding the Egyptian nationality was involved to demand for his/her basic rights. They were trying to reach that in a civilized way, keeping their dignity. They had permission from the police citing the date and the area they want to protest in. They were also highly organized and were repeating slogans stressing that their demands, which were mainly “ freedom, dignity, bread, and social equality”. One of the most significant remarks during the revolution is the unexpected huge participation of women shoulder to shoulder to men; they had a very vital role that nobody could deny. They were demonstrating, leading, cleaning, scrutinizing in checkpoint, facing the police, nursing the wounds, sacrificing their lives, and running away from rocks, tear gas, and Molotov cocktails. Moreover, they were taking part in delivering food, blankets and medical tools for people staying in the square.
One couldn’t point out a thing that was done by men and not by women. Egyptian female protestors surpassed all expectations during this revolution.

**Role of women in starting the revolution:**

According to Daly, Egyptian young activists in contemporary Egypt start to engage politically in a different way other than the usual. Because the Egyptian culture is not a flexible one and it has many traditional guidelines, female young activists tend to participate politically through charity organization, taking it a relevant cause for their parents to be out of the house. They volunteer in activities for the welfare of their country through NGO’s, having subliminal political purposes of rejecting the present situation and working for the better. Daly’s expectations proved to be right when she mentioned the importance of the role of social networks in mobilizing people for a cause, having men and women side by side.

Beginning with the first spark of the revolution, many claim that it was done by an Egyptian young woman called Asmaa Mahfouz.

“I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square and I will stand alone.” (Newcomb, 2011)

“I am going down on January 25th and I will say No to corruption. No to this regime.”

(Naber, 2011)

These were the words used by Asmaa Mahouz, a 26-year-old Egyptian activist, to call people for the 25th of January protest. She broadcasted the first video, followed by others later, to help in mobilizing Egyptians of all ages and background. By saying “I am a girl”, she was addressing the nation challenging men’s masculinity pointing out that it would be a shame if men don’t participate and they are supposed to be strong and courageous enough even just to

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1 Nadine Naber is an assistant professor of American Studies at the University of Michigan, and an activist against gender-based violence.
be there to secure the girls and take care of them.

Mahouz, the Egyptian activist, started to be interested in politics once she joined the Youth Movement, which was known by organizing the famous 6th of April strike in 2008. It is also important to mention that another woman, Esraa Abdel Fattah Ahmed Rashid, who helped to form a Facebook group in order the assemble Egyptians to support the strike by Mahala textile workers protesting for their rights. (Newcomb, 2011)

Mahfouz said that by posting her video and distributing leaflet, she did not expect that amount of people to react and participate. According to her interview with Al Sharq El Awsat newspaper, she didn’t have any experience in politics, which made her attend the trainings that were offered by the Youth Movement Organization. She then started to print and distribute leaflets, talk to youth about their rights, and encourage them to take action stressing on the need and importance of their participation. She added that she decided to post her video when they tried to do a spontaneous demonstration and were stopped by the police, who worked on dispersing them. She firstly broadcasted it via facebook, then it started to circulate through mobile phones and websites, and this encouraged her to make four more videos before the date of the protest. So Asmaa Mahouz is just an example of a young women contributing positively in the protest, not only that, but, according to many sources, has a major role in encouraging thousands of people to join the demonstration.

Role of women during the revolution:

Egyptian women took several roles during the revolution. They served in the logistics such as the organization of the groups and assigning tasks. For security reasons, women took part of inspecting other women entering Tahrir square through checkpoints. They were checking the identity of female comers as well as searching their bags. On the other hand, men were scrutinizing men. Passed the checkpoints, men and women would merge again,
walking side by side, standing for their rights, repeating slogans, leading marches, challenging the government, joining battles against the police, facing the tear gases and even dying for their freedom without any gender distinction, objection or criticism from men. They installed their tents and slept in the cold. And this proves that women deserve respect and have an opinion and a voice that need to be heard and their role was not to be ignored during the protests.

According to the political activist Marwa Faroak, "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)

According to the article written by Nadine Naber and published in “Against the Current”, women in Tahrir square were sometimes taking the lead during demonstration, healing the wounded, participating in protecting state buildings, and both public and private properties like the Egyptian Museum and the headquarters of the Arab league. They were fighting against the regime without being led by a group or a political organization. They not only took part of the protest or the lead but also in the suffering, oppression and death. As Naber declares: “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)

In addition to that, many newspaper articles spoke about women role during the revolution, highlighting their positive and courageous contribution. An example of one of the many thousands of Egyptian female protesters is Mozn Hassan, 32-year-old director of a women's rights group. She is fluent in mobilizing people through digital networks. As her
updated tweet never stop reporting what is happening in the street of Cairo, especially Tahrir square, she announced, "We are girls of the revolution" and, on February 7, that "A girl around 15 years old is protecting a checkpoint & saying this is my responsibility". She added, "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.” (Banyard, 2011)

Another example of an Egyptian female protestor, Hadil El-Khouly, who was talking about the variety of women who contributed in the revolution in terms of age and religious, educational and economic background, and this was portrayed in a group on facebook called “Women of Egypt”, when they showed women with niqab and without even hijab, schoolgirls and grandmothers, all participating equally and freely. The 25-year-old activist said about these women, “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)

According to Banyard², Egypt suffers from a 125th ranking in the World Economic Forum's global gender gap, which scales countries according to economic, political, health and education-based gender gaps. He said, “Human Rights Watch reports that less than 10 percent of elected parliamentarians in the Middle East and North Africa are women - the lowest rates in the world. At 30 per cent, the region is at the bottom of female participation in the formal labor force; few countries have laws to protect women from domestic violence; and - in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon - there are reduced sentences for the killers of female family members who claim that the victim brought dishonor on them by being caught in an "illicit" sexual act.”

For decades, women have been trying to get their political as well as social rights, and

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² Kat Banyard is author of The Equality Illusion and founder of UK Feminista: ukfeminista.org.uk
they have reached considerable achievements, however Nawal El Saadawi, the leading well-known Egyptian activist, sees things differently. She says that the Egyptian family court is one of the worst courts as many laws give more freedom and authority to men than to women. According to Saadawi, this is due to the patriarchal and capitalist regime applied in most of the Arab countries. She says, “Under such dictatorship, whether political or religious, women suffer”, she added, "Women are forced to be veiled, forced not to complete their education, are beaten by their husbands. The family court in Egypt is one of the worst courts in the Arab world. My husband can marry four wives.”

Saadawi was in Tahrir square during the revolution, observing, leading and participating. Proud of what Egyptian women have done she said, “Young mothers were sleeping with their children under tents in Tahrir Square - on the ground, in the cold, in the rain. They were suckling their children and not leaving the square". She was surprised by how women represented an active factor in overthrowing the authoritarian regime of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak. Pleased by what she saw in the streets of Cairo during the revolution, Saadawi believes that there is a rising pro-democracy development moving across the area of the Middle East, where women and girls take a leading role, side by side to men.

It is true that democracy is not all what women call for, but they know that it has a pay back, that is why they want to guarantee that democracy will not ruin their rights. As a result, Egyptian women’s rights activists issued a petition for not including a single woman in the consortium of drafting a new constitution, although many respectable Egyptian lawyers could have been a good addition to the committee.

Iman Bibars, a prominent Egyptian activist, is confident about the status of women in Egypt after the revolution as she says that Egyptian women should fight for their rights and they should know that it requires a lot a effort but this is what democracy calls for.
While democracy results into more freedom for women, gender equality is expected to be one of the outcomes of the revolution. Fully aware of the consequences of applying democracy after the revolution, Egyptian female activists not only call for their demands but also have their own agenda. Moreover, women’s rights organizations have “political participation for women, as well as addressing sexual harassment and violence against women” on top of the list of their demands.

Yet to mention, although women were everywhere in Tahrir square during the revolution, spending the whole day and night protesting with men, it was remarkable how there was no sexual harassment, on the contrary, people were paying full respect and care for women. As El Khouly stated, "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)

Before the revolution, sexual harassment was a widespread problem. According to the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights in 2008, 83 percent of women were exposed to sexual harassment including physical and verbal abuse.

**Role of women after Mubarak resignation:**

After Mubarak resignation, Egyptians felt that they defeated the tyranny and, for the first time since thirty years, they realized that they are able to shape the future of their country. Since then, every sector, group, or segment gathered to speak out its needs and reject all the injustice and mistakes committed by the regime. Women were one of the groups who was keen to have their voices heard and have their place reserved in the society. They have been fighting for their rights for the past three decades and they want to have their place in the new parliament and in the council which will write the new constitution and formulate the new legislation.
International Women’s Day

Egyptian women decided to organize a “Million Women March”, on March 8th, 2011, as it is a global celebration for “International Women’s Day”. Concerned not to remain alienated citizens, Egyptian women wanted to make sure they would have a major role in building new Egypt. Yasmine Khalifa, a master's degree student in gender and women's studies at the American University in Cairo, helped in calling people for the demonstration of the ‘Million Women March’ through Facebook page. She said that before Mubarak’s resignation, women were protesting as citizens next to men, but after the fall of the regime it is time to voice out women’s demands, call for them and get heard.

Nehad Abu El Komsan, head of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, deplores the fact that the new ministry includes only one woman, she said, "If we're not involved in building the constitutional and legislative future of this country now, then when? Why do we see women, who were almost 50 percent of the protesters in Tahrir, not represented in decision-making rooms?” (Chick, 2011)

Komsan declares that since Mubarak’s resignation, women have been excluded from the political scene completely. Aside from ministry posts, the 8-member committee of drafting the constitutional amendments did not include a single woman, although Egypt have a lot of good female calibres who would have been a significant addition to the committee. Also, the proposed constitutional amendments suggest that the president would only be a man. Moreover, women had a quota of 64 parliamentary seats, which have been abolished. She adds that discrimination against women still remains especially in family laws, which she considers as treating “women as second-class citizens who need protection.” (Chick, 2011)

Komsan sees that the revolution gave women the courage to rebel and made it easier for them to fight in order to end all violations against women be it social, political or even
cultural. So for Komsan, Women’s Day demonstration was not a beginning but a continuation of women’s revolution.

Having said that, it was strange to find at the end only around 200 women gathering in Tahrir square, along with some men, voicing out their demands and deploring the fact that they have been denied by government. On another level, Tahrir square women’s protests witnessed some brutal reaction from the side of a group of men, who insulted women, and accosted women to go home, clean and watch the kids, claiming that these actions are against Islam. This adds to sexual harassment, which found its way back to Tahrir square. The next day, some sources, such as Amnesty International, argue that the army detained 18 female protesters. They were tortured and went through virginity tests. (Khan, 2011)

It is dramatic to see women calling for their rights without using any violence or menacing the security of the country or the safety of the people, and at the end being treated like that with humiliation and disgrace. Is the Army so strict and heartless that he did not have any alternatives to deal with these women? Is this the mentality of Egyptian men? Is it the culture? Would Egyptian women expect their needs to be fulfilled? I think they still have a long way to go!

On the other hand, what happened in March 8th was absurd. The few number of women attending the march was a shame, and so claim that there was other insecurity problems that were happening in other parts of the country concerning Muslims and Christians, that is why many were more concerned to know how it will develop and feared to go down in the streets. Others say that there were not enough announcements and organizing for it so they didn’t know about it in the first place. A third group said that they wouldn’t leave their work to protest and that work is more important for our country at the moment.

Women and The Media:
**Role of women in reporting to social media (Facebook/ Twitter) what was happening in Tahrir Square the revolution**

Social media had a tremendous continuous role in this revolution. Starting the spark was through social media, using Facebook posts, pages and groups, plus YouTube videos. People in Tahrir square were sending posts of updates to what is going on via their phones such as Blackberries, iPhones and others. Some other people were recording live videos of all what is happening there.

Ahdaf Souaif, the well-known Egyptian novelist, in her interview with Amy Goodman for Democracy Now!, declared that she is preparing for her new book called “Tweets from Tahrir Square”. She believes that social networks had a major role in the uprising, explaining that the rapid communication it offers served as a vital tool in mobilizing people and providing an insight of what is going on. She explicate how a group like “We Are All Khaled Said” was one of the most active groups on facebook that called for demonstrations.

Twitter was the ultimate tool for sending instant messages or links to the current situation. Many names of Egyptian women were on top of the list of the updaters such as Nawara Negm, journalist Dima Khatib, blogger Zenobia, Gigi Ibrahim, and many others. They were posting updates, expectations, opinions, reports and live videos.

Not only that, but for example, Nawara Negm was on air on a phone call to Al Jazeera during “The Battle of the Camel” on the “Bloody Wednesday” reporting minute by minute what was happening. Gigi Ibrahim have several videos reporting what was happening in Tahrir square, and had an episode on the Daily Show, as well as talking on air to BBC News and Al Jazeera.

**The presentation of Egyptian women’s participation in the media**
As was mentioned earlier how women were a great factor in blowing revolution and developing the enrollment of it, it is a shame to say that they were not given their full credit or even a part of it in the media. As TV channels were broadcasting 24/7 the progress of the situation, women were almost nonexistent in mainstream media reports, they were not frequently presented or at least they were shown far less than men.

And this led a couple of women, Leil-Zahra Mortada and Joelle Hatem, to create a facebook page compiling images of agitated women in both Egypt and Tunisia. Pictures were gathered from both journalists and people involved in the crowd. The album is available on http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=268523&id=586357675

Gibbons suggests that the weak existence of women’s contribution in the revolution in the media may be because media journalists tend to focus on covering violence, fights and images of conflict but not to the extent of ignoring women existence. He added, “While the risk to those engaged in news gathering may help explain some of the gender disparity in the images they were able to get, it doesn’t explain all of it.”

Not only the local TV channels, but even the U.S. media analysis didn’t give much attention to approve the spectacular presence of women in Tahrir square, but rather their coverage tended to underestimate Egyptian women’s challenge against post- Mubarak government. (Newcomb, 2011)

**Egyptian women revolting in 1919 and in 2011**

The 2011 revolution was not the first time for women to reject the current regime and go on the streets and call for their rights. In 1919 revolution and on March 16, 300 Egyptian women revolted against the British colonialism. They were led by the Egyptian activist Hoda Shaarawi, who was in the front line raising the crescent and the cross as a
symbol of national unity. That day also marked the death of Hameida Khalil, the first lady to sacrifice her life for that matter.

This demonstration was the spark on the foundation of the first Egyptian Women’s Union, four years later. This union called for demanding better conditions for the women and care for their education, health, social and political rights.

So what women did in 1919 was the building block for their future participation in the ministry, judicial board and parliament, and yet this is not enough. Women still demand full equality to men in all aspects of life. But some questions remain unanswered: have women reached what they have been demanding? Is there any development in their status? Is there any hope for total equality with men? Do women expect a change after the 2011 revolution regarding their rights and status in the society? Will they be given a chance for an appropriate political engagement?

It is amazing to see how women continue to develop in the society and take several tasks and role. Back in 1919, they went out in the street chanting slogans rejecting colonialism. Now in 2011, they used every possible way to speak out their demands. They were technologically updated using all needed tools. They were also mentally up to the level of knowledge, aware and even experts in political affairs. They were not only reporting but also analyzing, forming opinions and leading others.

**Conclusion**

Egypt is going through a vital period, and all the nations should gather and work hard to pass through it safely. Men and Women of all age, background, education, socio-economic level should work together and help the country rise up again. It was great how
men and women worked side by side during the revolution. And the role of women was
remarkable and could not be denied.

Women have been working hard for the past decades to get their rights and reach the
status they seek in the society. Their dream is not to be sidelined again in the society and
have full equality in rights as men have. They did a lot and they deserve a pay back.
During the revolution, in Tahrir square, they enjoyed security, care, respect that they never
experienced as such in real life. Even sexual harassment disappeared during the revolution.
They already tasted the freedom and respect they have been calling for for so long, and I
believe they will not give that up easily.

Unfortunately, a lot of what women experienced during the revolution vanished after
the resignation of the president. A lot of things were messed up, a lot of problems and
conflicts arose and women demands returned to the shelves. So I think women still have a
long way to go and they have to keep their strong will, and full understanding and faith of
their capabilities.

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3 Democracy Now! is a daily TV/radio news program, hosted by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, airing on over 900 stations, pioneering the largest community media collaboration in the United States.