

ARE EGYPTIAN WOMEN EMPOWERED?

The Achievements and Challenges Ahead for Egyptian Women to Gain
More Political and Social Power

By Laila El Baradei

The year 2011—the year of the Egyptian uprising—was a turning point in the history of Egypt, for both men and women. At the time, aspirations for a societal gender transformation were high. Seven years on, Egyptians continue to discuss the challenges, hurdles, opportunities, and occasional progress made toward increasing the rights and the role of women in Egypt. What have Egyptian women achieved? What challenges have they faced? And what can be done to further empower them in governing Egypt?

Ever since 2011, the government has been celebrating Egyptian women's achievements and pointing out the prominent examples of empowered women in ministerial positions, in parliament, and as judges. Although this may be true for a handful of women who have managed to make it work, achieve an optimum life–work balance, and get their names mentioned in the newsreel often enough, it is not the case for the majority of women in Egypt. Women were active in the 2011 uprising—both out on the street, and later on as voters eager to have their voices heard—but have their aspirations been fully realized?

Rating the Indexes

Several international indexes and rankings exist that look into the degree of gender equality and inequality worldwide. In the Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) for 2017, an index prepared by the World Economic Forum to measure gender inequality gaps, we find that Egypt ranks 134 out of 144 countries worldwide.

▷ Women parliamentarians attend an inaugural parliament session, Cairo, Jan. 10, 2016. *Anadolu Ajans/Anadolu Agency*

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender (SIGI) 2014 index, that measures gender-based discrimination in social institutions, shows that Egypt was among the worst



countries for discrimination against women. The SIGI study classifies 108 countries into five categories; Egypt was within the 16 percent of countries that face a very high level of discrimination. Among the alarming features of this category was that that nearly one-third of girls were married before the age of nineteen, women had unfair inheritance rights, there was a high prevalence and acceptance of domestic violence, and women's access to public space was exceedingly limited.

The 2016 UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII) measured gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status. The GII ranked Egypt 135 out of 159 countries. What may improve Egypt's ranking is the current percentage of women occupying seats in parliament, which as of 2016 had risen to 15 percent from earlier levels of 2 percent.

The general message from the international rankings seems to be quite gloomy. There is much that still needs to be done. Are we getting the same message from the local responsible authorities? I think not. What we hear in the media and in the news seems contrary to what is reported in the international community. The Egyptian president declared the year 2017 as the "Year of the Egyptian Woman," and the Egyptian National Council of Women (NCW)—the only government body dedicated solely to addressing women's issues—has declared repeated achievements for women in Egypt. Examples of the latest achievements by the NCW include the "Taa Marboota" campaign which has reached roughly 60 million Egyptians and aims to raise awareness about the importance of women's participation in all spheres of life. Achievements also include the preparation of Egypt's National Women's Strategy 2030 to be in sync with Egypt's National Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) 2030. Although Egypt's SDS 2030 is currently being revised, the hope is that the National Women's Strategy recently adopted by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi will be implemented soon.

Toward Employment and Equality?

The Egyptian National Women's Strategy 2030 envisions that by 2030, "Egyptian women will become active contributors to the achievement of sustainable development in a nation that guarantees their constitutional rights, ensures their full protection, and provides—without discrimination—political, social, and economic opportunities that enable them to develop their capacities and achieve their full potential." This seems like a very optimistic vision statement that we all hope can be implemented one of these days for both men and women.

The published strategy available on the NCW website clearly identifies the four main pillars for women's empowerment and divides them into clear objectives. Each objective has matching clear key performance indicators, showing the current value

and the targeted value in 2030. Additionally, a list of needed interventions and strategies show how each of the NCW's overall goals can be achieved.

This all looks well and good. What is lacking, however, is the clear indication of what funding and resources are available to implement, or coordinate the implementation of those initiatives and strategies from now, until 2030. And unless the budgeting and the lobbying process has been planned for, the plan will go nowhere and will remain as it is currently: ink on paper, or PowerPoint slides on the internet!

The majority of the targets set by the NCW for 2030 are legitimate, and should be achieved soon, yet many of the goals are too optimistic. For example, the percentage of female illiteracy among Egyptian women aged 20 to 29 in 2014 was 12 percent, and the target of the NCW plan is zero percent in 2030. While it is an admirable goal, zero percent seems unlikely in twelve years—or even in twenty years. The percentage of employed women below the poverty line in 2015 was 36.3 percent, and the target for 2030 is 9 percent. Finally, the percentage of women parliamentarians in 2016 was 15 percent and the target in 2030 is an unlikely 35 percent. Again, these goals are to be lauded, however, in some ways, they may be difficult to achieve.

To be able to reach these targets, the Egyptian government needs to spend more intensively on education and literacy. If more money is spent, Egyptian women will attain higher levels of social equity, which will result in a reduction of poverty rates for both men and women. Unfortunately, the challenges are daunting. There has been an increase in poverty rates which according to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) reached 27.8 percent in 2015 compared to 25.2 percent in 2010/2011. To make matters worse, the Egyptian government was forced in November 2016 to devalue the Egyptian pound by over half. A weakened pound hurts women's and their family's spending power, leaving it considerably weaker than it was before the late 2016 devaluation.

According to World Bank figures, in 2017, the unemployment rate for Egyptian women stood at 25 percent, which was one of the highest women employment rates in the world. In parallel to the alarmingly high unemployment rate for Egyptian women was their low labor force participation rate that year. Women's participation in the labor force is currently only 22 percent, which is considerably lower than the world average of 49 percent, although somewhat above the 21 average for countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Many reasons are given for the relatively low official rates of Egyptian women's participation in the labor force, including the fact that many women work in the agricultural sector and in the informal sector and are not counted in official labor force statistics. Additionally, according to Egyptian economist Ragui Assaad, another contributing factor is the prevalent cultural norm that still considers the male to be the

main breadwinner and finds no problem with women staying at home, being responsible for the household chores, and taking care of the children and older family members.

Women in Government

There has been great progress for women in the upper echelons of state power. In 2013 there were three government ministers. Now, in 2018, there are six women leading the Ministries of Social Solidarity, Tourism, Culture, Investment and International Cooperation, Migration and Egyptian Expatriates, and finally, Planning, Monitoring and Administrative Reform. In parallel to the progress achieved on the national ministerial level by appointing six women ministers, President El-Sisi in February 2017 appointed for the first time a woman governor, Nadia Abdo for the governorate of Beheira. She is only one woman in a pool of twenty-seven governors, the majority of whom have police or military backgrounds.

A look at lower-level female government employees presents, in some ways, a positive picture. The percentage of Egyptian female government employees was nearly 50 in 2012; the more recent 2015 employment figures indicate that the large proportion of women in government may be declining. In the mid-2000s, only 35 percent of female applicants found jobs in the public/government sector.

Egyptian women have historically preferred working in the public sector for several reasons. The security and benefits available are better in the public sector than in Egypt's private and informal sectors. In the public sector, jobs are guaranteed for life and it is very difficult, and sometimes almost impossible, to be fired. Working in the Egyptian public sector, a woman can get up to six years of unpaid childcare leave, two years at a time, for up to three children. She is also entitled to three months' paid maternity leave and upon returning to work, she is permitted to leave one hour early to nurse her child for one year. If she wishes to accompany her spouse on travel to any place where he has a work contract, she may take an open-ended unpaid leave and still get promoted during that time. This does not happen in the private sector and certainly not in the informal sector.

Government jobs are also perceived to be safe and respected jobs for women, compared to most jobs in the private and informal sectors. Parents and husbands of working women are more likely to approve women's working in the public sector than in the private or informal sectors. In many poor and middle-class Egyptian families, there is a perception that women may be less prone to sexual harassment than in other sectors. This is based on the notion that in the private and informal sectors, there are usually fewer employees and women employees may need to spend time alone with male coworkers in closed work environments. This possible state of affairs certainly causes prejudice against private sector jobs for Egyptian women.

Women Parliamentarians

Since the uprising began on January 25, 2011, Egypt has gone through a very turbulent political period with several changes in presidents, prime ministers, and parliaments. Never before, over such a short period of time, have Egyptians been asked to go to the polls as frequently, for parliamentary elections, referenda, or presidential elections.

During the early days of the uprising, women were active politically, whether as vocal demonstrators or as voters making up nearly 50 percent of the voting population. They were less forthcoming in running for public office, however. This is not surprising as many Egyptian women have limited confidence in their abilities, as well as in the abilities of other women, to be effective parliamentarians. In an earlier study on Egyptian women's participation in the 2012 elections, among those who reported that there were women candidates in their districts, just 41 percent said they had voted for them. This means that women did not automatically vote for female candidates.

When asked to evaluate the performance of women parliamentarians before and after the uprising, more than 70 percent of Egyptian women stated that the performance of women members of parliament was ineffective. When women were asked to name the main challenges to women winning parliamentary seats, the most significant responses were: cultural barriers, lack of qualifications and experience, need for funding, corrupt and unfair elections, and lack of free time.

Historically, women have not had strong representation in the Egyptian parliament. Over the years, quotas to encourage their participation have been instituted, abolished, and reinstated. After the 2011 uprising, the quota was nullified for the 2012 parliament and women's representation was confined to 2 percent. However, in the 2015 parliament, a quota was once again reinstated, and in the 2015 parliamentary elections, women reached their historical high in terms of numerical representation, accounting for 14.9 percent of the total available seats. Reflecting the quota requirements, 75 women were elected out of 568 members. Fourteen more women were appointed by virtue of a presidential decree, thus bringing the total number of female members to 89, or 16 percent.

Women candidates found it much easier to run as candidates on party lists, than as individuals. They lacked the confidence, the resources, and the societal support to enable them to consider individual nomination for parliament.

In terms of numbers, female representation in parliament has currently improved and Egyptian women have achieved an unprecedented percentage of representation. The number of women representatives in parliament matters. While it is not the only factor, having more female parliamentarians is one way to ensure diversity and inclusivity and to be certain that women empower themselves through legal means. Also, the equal participation of men and women on matters of public concern is a main pillar of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against

Women (CEDAW). As such, equality of political representation is an issue of rights and justice before anything else.

The question remains, however, about the quality of Egyptian women's performance in parliament, which is connected to how well the female and the male parliamentarians work together in Egypt. In evaluating the work of parliamentarians in general and Egyptian women parliamentarians in particular, we must remember that voter turnout was quite low for the most recent parliamentary elections in 2015; not exceeding 26.5 percent in total. Since the 2015 elections the Egyptian parliament has passed some restrictive measures. Is there a connection then between voter apathy and state security-focused legislation? In general, following the 2015 election, political opposition and political parties have grown weaker as has the media sector.

Advocating for Civil Society

Before the 2011 uprising, advocacy for women's rights was mostly dominated by the first ladies of Egypt: Jehan Sadat (1970–81) or later Suzanne Mubarak (1981–2011). Sadat worked on several issues of importance to women. She was a strong advocate of a new family law, later referred to as "Jehan's Law," that gave women more rights including those related to alimony and custody of children in the event of divorce. Mubarak was known for her efforts in establishing two important government institutions, namely the NCW and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM). The NCCM was established in 1988 and the NCW in 2000, by presidential decree.

Starting in 2011 some non-state affiliated women's rights organizations became more vocal. Women's traditional organizations, plus new evolving movements and coalitions led by younger women, started using non-conventional means, including social media, to mobilize and rally support for women's rights. In June 2011, the Alliance for Arab Women and the Egyptian Women's Coalitions were reported by the UN Women to collect half a million women's signatures for a charter demanding that Egypt become more inclusive for women and that the Egyptian government support CEDAW.

Advocating for women's rights, however, is not easy. In a country where citizens' rights are many times violated, some argue that women's rights should not be considered separate from the larger struggle for human rights. Following the uprising, new public space was created and women used this new space to advocate for their rights. However, since 2015 this public space has been shrinking while advocacy for women's issues takes place mostly through state-affiliated or approved institutions and bodies. Meanwhile, most Egyptian political parties are in a state of "stagnation."

Amid the evolving political, economic, social, and cultural landscape, women have faced significant challenges in their pursuit of public engagement. Closing the gender gap is not going to be an easy task. Persistence in calling for women's rights is a key

prerequisite to success. Additionally, the more educated women become, the more capable they will be of participating in public service, finding better work opportunities, and taking on leadership positions. Women should also have more confidence in their abilities and not allow negative societal or cultural values to hold them back. We may concede that some progress has been achieved by Egyptian women in living and governing their country, but in terms of the quality of women's participation and impact, Egypt still has a long way to go.

This article is based on previously researched and/or published work by the author.