

Women and the Egyptian Revolution

Nicola Pratt, 12 July 2011

From 25 January until 11 February, millions of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and other cities. The protesters were galvanized by the unexpected success of the Tunisian people in forcing their dictatorial president to flee on 14 January, following several weeks of street demonstrations there. Probably the most iconic images of the 25 January Revolution is the occupation of Tahrir Square by hundreds of thousands of protesters, who battled security forces and regime thugs, some riding horses and camels. The determination and resourcefulness of Egyptians demanding the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak was illustrated by the transformation of Tahrir Square from busy transport hub to epicentre of the Revolution.

The demands of the revolution were for freedom and justice and for an end to the 30 years of despotism and corruption under President Hosni Mubarak. But the revolution meant more than that. The placards and chants of the demonstrators were for something more than a political concept. People were demanding dignity as Egyptians. One placard in Tahrir Square read: 'Egyptian and proud'. One of the chants of the Revolution was: 'Hold your head up high: you're Egyptian'.

The uprisings were like a collective desire to rehabilitate the Egyptian nation. Egyptian flags have been ubiquitous—gigantic flags carried by hundreds of protesters, smaller flags in the

hands of protesters, face paint as well as head bands, wrist bands, and other memorabilia in the colours of the Egyptian flag. A group of young men were photographed holding a large Egyptian flag, upon which was written 'My country. I'm sorry it took me so long'.

This was not a revolution of a particular political party or ideology, or of a particular class. This was a revolution of all Egyptians: young and old, Muslim and Christian, different classes, and men and women. In particular, there has been quite a lot of media attention on the large presence of Egyptian women in the 25 January Revolution—young, old, middle-aged, Muslim, Christian, veiled and non-veiled.

An impassioned plea by a young Egyptian woman called Asmaa Mahfouz, which went viral on YouTube, arguably helped to persuade many Egyptians to go to demonstrate on 25 January.

Women have participated alongside men in mobilising people to demonstrate, in leading demonstrations, in treating wounded protesters, in speaking with the media, even in defending demonstrators from attacks by pro-regime thugs. Of the hundreds of Egyptians killed during the revolution, several were women, including Sally Zahran, 23 years old.

Women's demands in the uprisings, like those of men, have been for political freedoms and social justice, not for women's rights. The key slogan of the 25 January Revolution was,

'The people want the downfall of the regime'. In the current uprising, people are demanding the ruling military council hold to account those police that killed demonstrators, and ministers in the previous government that ordered the use of lethal force against unarmed civilians.

Like men, women have suffered from authoritarianism and economic injustices. However, they have often suffered in specific ways. For example, as mothers and wives, women have found it increasingly difficult to balance the family budget and make ends meet in a context where food prices have been rising since 2008 and incomes have been eroded by inflation. According to an article in Al-Ahram Weekly last year, 'the minimum wage in Egypt has remained the same for the past 26 years, and with the rise in the prices of food and other commodities nearly half of Egyptian wage-earners are finding it difficult to meet basic food needs. Even families with two wage- earners have been driven below the LE12 [just over £1] per day poverty line.' This has meant that even middle class families have had to cut back on eating meat and dairy food and even fresh fruits and vegetables. (Amany Abdel-Moneim, 'Food prices shooting up', Al Ahram Weekly Online, 14-20 October 2010).

In a context of neoliberal reforms and structural adjustment, where state spending on health, education and other social services has been cut back, women often have to step in to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of state welfare. Women are also present in significant numbers in the workplace. Historically, the largest employer of women is the public sector due to good conditions, including provisions on maternity leave. As a result of

neoliberal economic reforms, the public sector has experienced a loss of jobs, whilst wages have failed to keep up with the cost of living, thereby pushing many women out of this sector of the workforce. Simultaneously, the number of women working in the private sector has increased over the last few decades. Women now make up a significant percentage of those employed in factories in free trade zones, many working for less than minimum wages. In Egypt, women workers were at the forefront of a strike wave in 2007-2008, calling for better pay and conditions, which involved hundreds of thousands of workers around the country.

However, men, particularly working class men, also suffered under neoliberal authoritarianism. Male unemployment or underemployment, low wages and rising cost of living coupled with humiliating and brutal police practices was a deeply emasculating experience. Egyptian men sought to reclaim their dignity not only as Egyptians but also as men. The theme of bravery and courage was common amongst many placards portrayed in Tahrir Square. A man injured in the protests, carried a placard saying: ‘It is an honour for me’; another young man held up a placard saying, ‘I wish I die for Egypt’; another man wrote on his placard, ‘I used to be afraid; I became Egyptian’.

In effect, ‘traditional’ or ‘ideal’ roles for men and women were undermined by the neoliberal authoritarianism of Mubarak’s regime and this was experienced by many as humiliating and disempowering. By ideal roles for men and women, I mean the notion that men are the head of the family, the breadwinner and the site of authority, whilst women

are wives and mothers, caring for the family. I use the term ‘traditional’ or ‘ideal’ with caution. Historical and anthropological studies demonstrate that these ideal roles have rarely existed and there has always been a fair amount of negotiation and bargaining within the family over the nature of men’s and women’s roles. Nevertheless, neoliberal authoritarianism eroded men’s ability to be the main breadwinner and women’s ability to carry out their roles as carers. It increased the insecurity of the family.

This brings me to the challenges that women face after the overthrow of Mubarak. If neoliberal authoritarianism is associated with undermining ‘ideal’ roles for men and women, then, the hope for many is that the end of the Mubarak regime will mean the end of neoliberal authoritarianism and will enable the re-establishment of those ideal roles. It is not only Arab men and women that associate nostalgia for better times with ideal roles for men and women. In Egypt, since Hosni Mubarak stepped down, the military council has discussed cancelling the women’s quota in parliament (introduced in 2005) and discussed repealing the khula law (introduced in 2000), which allows women to ask for a divorce in return for relinquishing their financial rights in marriage. These two measures are greatly associated with Suzanne Mubarak, wife of the former president. She also headed the National Council for Women, which was directly accountable to the president and sought to monopolise the field of women and development activities, sometimes to the detriment of independent civil society action. In this context, women’s rights has been largely discredited and women activists face a significant challenge in improving the image and validity of women’s rights in Egypt.

The other challenge facing women activists, particularly in Egypt, is the entrance of Salafis into the public sphere since the fall of the regime. According to Hibaaq Osman, the chair of Karama, a coalition of women's organizations and activists in the Arab world campaigning against violence against women, Salafi groups took out a full-page newspaper ad describing how men's and women's dress should be regulated. They have also called for the repeal of laws on custody and divorce rights and introducing a ban on women traveling without permission.ⁱ

This sort of 'roll-back' and increasing conservatism towards women's rights was also experienced in Iraq following the fall of the Ba'th regime. It demonstrates how periods of political transition represent particular dangers with regards to women's rights and even more so when deposed and discredited regimes are associated with imposing women's rights whilst ignoring the basic rights of all citizens.

Unlike Iraq after the fall of the Ba'th regime, Egypt is not about to slide into civil war. Despite the challenges of achieving the aims of the Revolution, women and men have new opportunities to mobilise, to debate and to discuss the future of women's rights in their countries. Moreover, they have unprecedented opportunities to lobby and try to influence the new political parties that are being formed in time for elections later this year. Women and men will have to continue struggling to ensure that the issue of women's rights is not marginalised in post-authoritarian politics.

However, it is also important to note that women in the Arab world are not united in how they see women's rights and the best ways of guaranteeing them. Some women call for secular states and laws to protect the rights of all, including women. Some women call for a greater role for religion in public life as a guarantor against corruption and despotism. A large number of women do not regard legal rights as a priority but rather are calling for policies that improve social justice and standards of living as a means of improving women's situation. In this respect, there is no unified women's movement, defining the desires, needs and rights of all women. Rather, there are different conceptions of what women's rights and needs may look like. Therefore, it is essential that any political change in the Arab world supports democratic debate amongst women and men over the question of women's rights and position in society.

ⁱ Carolyn Barnett, Egypt: Fighting for Women's Rights in the Aftermath of the Revolution, WLML, June 2011, <http://www.wluml.org/node/7255> (accessed 26/6/11).