

Empowering Marginalized Women :Case Study: Egypt 2011-2013⁽¹⁾

تمكين المرأة المهمشة:دراسة حالة مصر (٢٠١١-٢٠١٣)

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المستخلص:

كان لمشروع البحث ثلاثة أهداف: تحليل الأجندات والسياسات السياسية للحكومة المصرية بعد عام ٢٠١١ فيما يتعلق بحقوق المرأة ووضعها; لرسم خريطة لمجموعة متنوعة من المنظمات والحركات النسائية الناشئة حديثاً ، بما في ذلك رؤاهم وأجنداتهم وسياساتهم ، فضلاً عن روابطهم بالمنظمات النسائية القائمة ؛ لفهم الآليات المختلفة التي تستخدمها النساء غير المسيجات والمهمشات لتمكين أنفسهن.

تبحث هذه الدراسة البحثية في عملية الانتقال المصرية والديناميكيات الناشئة التي تستخدمها الجهات الحكومية وغير الحكومية لتعزيز ودعم / أو إعاقة / أو قمع حق المرأة في المشاركة في السياسة الرسمية وغير الرسمية. من ناحية أخرى ، تحاول هذه الورقة تحليل وفهم الآليات المختلفة التي يستخدمها المهمشون وغير المسيسون لتمكين أنفسهم. مكونات البحث الأربعة هي كما يلي:

١. السياق المؤثر في حقوق المرأة.
٢. الجهات الفاعلة الرئيسية التي تؤثر على المشاركة السياسية للمرأة ؛
٣. ديناميات السلطة والتأثيرات (تحليل أصحاب المصلحة) ؛ و
٤. النتائج والتوصيات للعمل.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

(النساء ، المهمشة ، المشاركة السياسية ، الدولة ، التمكين ، الديمقراطية)

Abstract:

The research project had three objectives: to analyze the political agendas and policies of the Egyptian government post 2011 with regard to women's rights and status; to map the diverse spectrum of newly emerging women's organizations and movements, including their visions, agendas and policies, as well as their linkages with existing women's organizations; to understand different mechanisms used by non-politicized and marginalized women to empower themselves.

This research study examines the Egyptian transition process and the emerging dynamics used by government and non-government actors to promote, support, hinder, and/or repress women's right to participate in formal and informal politics. On the other side, this paper tries to analyze and understand different mechanisms used by marginalized and non-politicized to empower themselves. The four research components are as follows:

1. the context influencing women's rights;
2. the key players influencing women's political participation;
3. the dynamics of power and influences (stakeholder analysis); and
4. findings and recommendations for action.

Abbreviations and acronyms

CBO	Community-based organization at the grassroots level
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil society organization

CSQS	Committee for Saving the Quran and Sunnah
FJP	Freedom and Justice Party
INGO	International non-governmental organization
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MP	Member of parliament
NDP	National Democratic Party
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
UN	United Nations

Key words:

Women, marginalized, political participation, state, empowerment, democracy

Introduction

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Originally, the fieldwork was planned for three research sites and was to include workshops, focus groups, in-depth interviews and the gathering of narratives at each site. However, due to growing tensions, conflict and polarization in Egypt in 2012–13, a number of changes had to be made to the proposed implementation and the distribution of research activities, as described below.

The political polarization between Islamists and secular liberals in Egypt affected the researcher's activities and ability to gather diverse groups of people for interviews, focus groups and workshops (with some exceptions at the national level). These political schisms often extended to the local level. As a result, separate meetings were often convened with people and groups of similar political affiliations and positions on women's and other issues. In Assiut, for example, separate workshops for more conservative Islamist NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) were organized. On being invited to a joint workshop, a Salafi CBO representative asked which other groups would participate, and when she learned that these included Christian organizations and INGOs, she expressed skepticism and even denied knowing any of these organizations or their members.

Research sites and site selection

The research was conducted in three sites that were selected to reflect Egypt's demographic and socioeconomic makeup and to be representative of the conditions and concerns around the country regarding women's rights and status. The three sites were Stable Antar in the Cairo governorate; Saft el-Laban in the

Giza governorate (part of greater Cairo, the capital); and Assiut, which is one of the poorest governorates in Upper Egypt.

Saft el-Laban

Originally a rural area, Saft el-Laban has gradually evolved into an unplanned urban area populated by newcomers. It is about one square kilometer in size and is situated approximately five kilometers from the Giza governorate premises and some four kilometers from Cairo University, making it very close to Giza and the heart of the greater Cairo area.

Its evolution can be largely attributed to increased migration to the region due to steep decreases in the price of agricultural land in the area. Despite this growth in its population, municipal and official entities neglected the area. As a result, both infrastructure and public services – ranging from paved roads, water and electricity grids to education and public health – were not provided.

The population of Saft el-Laban is estimated at between 350,000 and 450,000 people. The residents' economic activities are predominantly related to farming, public sector employment and private sector trading. The area has no industries, apart from farming and agricultural activities. Standards of living in the area are generally low.

The area's residents are socially conservative and tend to be Islamist in their political affiliations and views. Population growth in the 1980s was accompanied by the increasing presence and influence of the Salafi movement and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Both maintained low profiles during the Mubarak era and

focused on working through CBOs to provide much-needed social services to the area. President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) also had some presence in the area, but it largely vanished following the January 25th revolution.

Stable Antar

Stable Antar is the popular name for four districts: Ezbet Khair Allah (the largest area), Batn el-Baqara, Hagara and Stable Antar (it is the larger area that is discussed here). Located just south of Cairo, its population is estimated at 850,000. The topography of Stable Antar is challenging and its narrow streets make local transportation extremely difficult. The rest of the area is situated below the mountain slopes where the relatively well-off residents live. Massive immigration from the countryside in the 1980s led to the area's rapid growth. Living standards differ between the residents of Stable Antar and the surrounding areas. Most people living in the greater area are poor, but Stable Antar and Ezbet Khair Allah residents are the poorest of all and lack all forms of services, such as potable water, sewage and health services⁽²⁾.

The area's residents work mainly as produce vendors or cleaners if they are women. The area is portrayed as being a hotbed of social vice and crimes ranging from drug abuse and gun trafficking to thuggery and incest. Christians living in the area interact with Muslims in CBO- and NGO-organized activities. Local organizations that provide services like education for children work with Muslims and Christians alike. Some of the classes differentiating women are based on residency not religious conviction. Before the revolution, the then-ruling NDP party manipulated residents' political affiliation, although there was some presence of

Islamic tendencies. Following the revolution, support for the various political parties is more diverse. The MB and Salafis gained more popularity, yet they are not the dominant political force in the area, especially with CBOs and NGOs working there.

Assiut

The Assiut governorate is one of Egypt's oldest governorates belongs to the Middle Upper Egypt region. The latest population count estimates Assiut's population at more than four million people (51.3% males and 48.7% females) living in a 25,926 square kilometer area. Seventy-three per cent of the governorate is rural and 27% urban.

Assiut is also considered the trade and economic capital of Upper Egypt due to its agricultural production, industry and tourism. Assiut hosts many tourist attractions from different historical eras (including the Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic and modern periods). The governorate produces cotton, wheat, maize, corn, fava beans, citrus, pomegranates, mangoes, grapes and bananas. It has large industries specializing in fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, cement and petrol, as well as small artisanal industries such as kileem, carpets, inlaid wood creations and ivory products. Seven industrial zones have been established in the governorate.

In a statement by the governor in 2013, approximately 69% of the local population is poor (compared to the pre-revolution estimate of around 61%). Of Egypt's 1,000 poorest villages, Assiut hosts 200 (the total number of villages in the governorate is 265). The average monthly income in the governorate is around 176 Egyptian pounds (less than 20 U.S. dollars in 2016 exchange rate and about 25 U.S dollars in 2013 exchange rate).

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the city of Assiut, in the village of Beni Muhammad (50 kilometers outside the city) and in the village of Arab Alatawla (eight kilometers from the city). A field visit was also paid to the western part of the Assiut district, one of the poorest areas in the city.

A problem encountered during the research was the fact that statistics and data are partially missing since 2011; political instability hindered efforts to update and consolidate such data. There is a dire need for more detailed statistical information about Egypt's governorate, cities and villages. Shanty towns (*a'shwai'eat*) need particular attention in terms of mapping demographic, social, economic and political information before the planning of national and local programs for sustainable development.

Research and data collection methods

Mapping the current political, legal and economic situation in Egypt was the departure point in an attempt to ascertain whether the revolution in Egypt has resulted in a change and/or shift in women's issues and status. The direction of change remains unclear, although little, if any, legislation or policies from the Mubarak era were changed under President Morsi. Secondly, under the new military-led regime, it is too soon to comment on changes to women's status and rights. A key challenge throughout the fieldwork was the discursive polarization, and hence interviews with activists and NGOs frequently revealed differing and even contradictory opinions on the direction of women's rights.

Examining change and its directions required in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with three sets of stakeholders:

- ♣ NGOs and CBOs working in the selected research sites and at the national level;
- ♣ experts, government officials and activists working in development and women's organizations working with the government. Most of these meetings were informal due to the unstable situation in Egypt during the period of fieldwork (April-June 2013); and
- ♣ women in the three sites, which involved listening to their stories of their perceptions of and interactions with the state and civil society organizations (CSOs).

The following meetings were convened in the three selected research areas:

- three workshops (two in Cairo and one in Assiut);
- ten focus groups (seven in Cairo and three in Assiut);
- 12 in-depth interviews (seven in Cairo and five in Assiut); and
- five narratives (three in Cairo and two in Assiut).

In Cairo, three focus groups were hosted in Saft el-Laban area with CBO representatives and educated and uneducated local women. In Stable Antar three focus groups were held with representatives from CBOs, NGOs, and educated and uneducated local women. Two workshops with civil society representatives were convened at Cairo University, and eight interviews were conducted with representatives of national and international organizations working on women issues.

In Assiut, seven focus groups were hosted with educated and uneducated women, four focus groups were held with NGOs and CBOs working in Assiut governorate, and four in-depth interviews were held with activists and representatives of NGOs. Over 30 NGOs (mostly CBOs) participated in and contributed to this research, as did some 100 women in the three areas (both those with and without formal education). The fieldwork for this study also involved meeting with 22 women activists (secular feminists and Islamists), and representatives from five political parties and nine national and international NGOs. A final workshop involving representatives of INGOs, human rights activists, feminist organizations and the internal reviewer, Dr Heba Raouf Ezzat, was planned for late July/early August 2013. However, this workshop was not possible, given the political situation and escalation of violence in Cairo.

In the research sites, we considered workshops, focus groups and individual interviews and narratives as the key focus. The workshops and focus groups essentially reflected the same conclusions, while the grassroots-level group sessions were particularly influential because no hidden agendas fueled the discussion.

Egyptian women's status and rights before the revolution⁽³⁾

Women movements and organizations go back to the early years of the twentieth century; nevertheless, we will focus more on the developments and challenges facing them starting with the seventies. those years were fundamental in affecting women conditions both on legal and practical levels.

The 1971 constitution and the infitah (open-door policy)

Article 11 of the 1971 constitution stated:

"The State shall guarantee the coordination (*al-tawfiq*) between the duties of a woman toward her family and her work in society, considering her equal status with man in the fields of political, social, cultural, and economic life, without contravening the laws of Islamic sharia."

This was perhaps the first time in which the role of religion interfered with women's role in society by referencing the rule of Islamic law. This development marked the beginning of a new era of perceptions of women's role in Egyptian society in urban and rural areas and in the public and private spheres. In most cases this development only increased the restrictions on women's right as a result of the multitude of interpretations of women's rights under sharia (in contrast to what patriarchal society wished to perceive as their rights). Essentially, a clear distinction was established in the definition of the female and male public and private spheres based on religious rulings and cultural expectations.

President Sadat adopted what became known in the media as *infitah* (open-door policy). This policy changed the role of the state in the economy and opened the doors for the private sector (national and international) to play a major role in development and the provision of certain services. The neoliberal economic policies that were adopted and the resulting emphasis on individualism in the social structure did not help either the Egyptian economy to flourish or Egyptian women to gain any economic advantages. Shortly before the 2011 uprising the World Economic Forum's 2010 *Global Gender Gap Report* ranked Egypt in 125th place overall of the 134 countries surveyed. This multi factor ranking system also ranked

Egypt very low in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity (121st), political empowerment (125th) and educational attainment (110th).

The Mubarak era: misrepresentation of women's rights and the role of feminist groups:

In 1989 President Mubarak issued a decree establishing the National Council for Motherhood and Childhood, which purported to protect the socioeconomic and legal rights of mothers and children. However, the council failed to better integrate women's issues into government policies. Consequently, women's political participation remained minimal and marginal.

In 2000, as part of a package of decisions designed to make Egypt appear more democratic, Mubarak issued a decree establishing an additional council, the National Council for Women, with the aim of promoting women's status and participation in the development of Egyptian society. Then-first lady Suzan Mubarak was officially given the role of protector of Egyptian women. Most independent Egyptian feminist organizations in Egypt criticized this move and considered it as yet another attempt by the authoritarian state to take over civil society and its organizations. Since legal reforms granting women the right to divorce (*khol'a*) are attributed to the first lady by both Islamist and secular feminists, there is no evidence to support these beliefs.

The number of women members of parliament (MPs) has always been the minimum number, except for the 2010 parliament, which had 64 quota seats for women. Electoral quotas were and still are a highly debated issue for the Egyptian feminist movement. While affirmative action is necessary in conditions that work

against women, as in the public sphere, the counter-argument is that quotas do not empower the poor and marginalized, but benefit the closed circles of the ruling elite. Furthermore, only a few elected women MPs acted as strong defenders of women's rights. Most were connected to the ruling party and supported its policies towards women.

The women's movement before the 2011 revolution

During the second half of the 20th century the Egyptian women's movement comprised women of different political and ideological backgrounds. The mainstream was predominantly leftist and liberal in its orientation, but there were also representatives of religious conservatives who considered themselves to be Islamic feminists.

One of the most prominent sources of debate and controversy among Egyptian feminists related to the role of religious texts (i.e. whether and to what extent to engage with them). Notably, neither Islamist nor secular feminists could ignore religion and its ability to influence social realities. Leftist and liberal feminists also acknowledged that attacking religion would make them lose ground with both men and women. Therefore, engaging and interacting with religious texts was always the choice. However, a key difference was the extent of this engagement.

Despite consensus on the centrality of religious texts in understanding and addressing Egyptian women and society, Islamic feminist scholars and activists also differed among themselves on their understanding of the issue. Some accepted the texts with the usual interpretations and emphasized traditional understandings of women's socioeconomic and political roles, but did not approach

these texts with a view to seeking more progressive understandings of them. Others, however, were more progressive and differentiated between the sacredness of the texts and the human understanding of them. They thus attempted to understand the texts within the sharia framework, which is itself based on an understanding of both the texts and the context in which they are read.

Leftist and liberal feminists adopted a general position of respecting Islam as a religion, but never mastered this textual knowledge sufficiently to engage in serious debates about controversial issues such as the right of men to have four wives, or the issue of the veil and whether it is a tradition or religious obligation. They were hostile to political Islam, however, viewing it as a patriarchal intellectual and political challenge. As a result, these feminists rarely engaged in either intellectual debates or action-oriented coalitions with Islamist women activists.

This hostility is perhaps best seen in how Islamist movements, such as the MB or the Salafis (despite their differences), view matters of marriage and the legal age for marriage, women's right to work, and men's rights over their wives or female kin. Most importantly, however, are certainly the general explanations of Islamist preachers and leaders on these issues, but using a sexual discourse. One example is the so-called "girl in the blue bra", who was dragged on Tahrir Square, beaten up, sexually assaulted and stepped on. The main response by some Salafi preachers, and later MB leaders in the Morsi government, was "why was she there in the first place?" Others made mainly sexual comments and jokes about her, despite preaching purity. Of course, these examples highlight that the hostility

between Islamists, on the one hand, and leftist and liberal feminists, on the other, is very great.

Egyptian women's rights have often been disregarded and denied far more than those of men due to the complexity and fragility of their situation. Even before the January 25th revolution Egyptian women played important roles and suffered not so much from exclusion as from marginalization in some spheres. While women are present to a degree in formal politics, they are poorly represented in government and parliament.

In terms of this marginalized status, Egyptian women experience higher levels of illiteracy than men, for instance. They are also overrepresented when it comes to poverty – as evidenced by various studies on poverty, including in the years leading up to the revolution. According to national statistics, almost half of Egypt's poor work in the agricultural sector, where women are overrepresented, and experience high rates of infant mortality and illiteracy. A related 2012 report stated that 45% of agricultural labour is done by women. This figure is particularly striking given that the women's unemployment rate reached 22% in 2010.

Prior to the revolution, women representatives in the Egyptian parliament did not serve women's interests, because most of these 64 members (as per the women's quota) were affiliated with the ruling NDP, whose main concern was to adopt and justify government policies rather than represent the real demands of society or any particular constituent. Hence, women were not excluded from formal politics; however, women politicians did not represent the needs and concerns of Egyptian women prior to the revolution.

This lack of representation in formal politics was further compounded by some international development funding. United Nations (UN) financial aid is one such example. As part of the UN Development Assistance Framework for 2007–2011, financial aid flowed to the government to improve women’s rights in collaboration with Egyptian NGOs. However, the outcomes achieved were minimal, partly because the funds were disbursed to the wrong NGOs, i.e. those closely related to the then–first lady. In addition, this support created and strengthened mainstream women activists, who rather than examining and studying the reality of Egyptian women and society, tended to look at it rather superficially and from a Western perspective, ignoring the on–the–ground needs of Egyptian society, and women in particular. On the afternoon of January 25th 2011 thousands of people took to the streets in the first wave of the Egyptian revolution, calling for freedom, justice, bread and human dignity.

Egyptian women’s status and rights following the revolution

The early transitional period (January 2011–June 2012)

Pictures of the first days of the revolution revealed massive participation of women in sit–ins, demonstrations, strikes and marches. Sally Zahran, a young Egyptian woman, was among the first victims of police brutality in the early days of the revolution. Cairo’s Tahrir Square, as well as various other squares around Egypt, became safe places for women to be and participate, after years of living with sexual harassment and aggression. Sexual harassment of and violence against women were minimal, and women felt socially protected and safe being in the streets with hundreds of thousands of strangers as fellow citizens. Gender roles

were not as important as they used to be. The demonstrators demanded bread, freedom and human dignity and were shared by all regardless of their gender, age, religion and/or economic background.

Women's presence in the streets during the many Fridays that followed Mubarak's ousting remained almost the same with the shift in the political, social and economic composition of the demonstrators. On Tahrir Square and the many other spaces of public protest around Egypt, men and women of various political, social and economic backgrounds, views and beliefs came from different locations, but were initially able to accept these differences and focus on achieving their demands for freedom, justice, bread and human dignity. Gradually, however, with the injection of more Islamist influence into the streets in the months immediately following Mubarak's ousting, this sense of acceptance shifted towards more exclusionary positions. Secular men and women were excluded from Islamist marches, and vice versa.

Re-emergence of discourse on Sexual harassment

Early in March 2011, prior to the constitutional amendments referendum, a number of women demonstrators were held in the gardens of the Egyptian Museum near Tahrir Square by the military police. Army officers beat and humiliated them, and subjected them to virginity tests. Another attack on women took place during a rally celebrating International Women's Day on March 8th. Unidentified groups of men carried out these attacks. Despite various claims (i.e. that the men were Salafis or thugs), no investigation was ever conducted and no one has been tried or convicted. A crucial part of the psychological war against revolutionary forces

was to defame Tahrir Square in particular and protests in the public sphere generally. Attempts at defamation included tarnishing the reputation of the demonstrators and accusing them of using drugs and alcohol and participating in sexual relationships. More importantly, the public sphere was transformed into a dangerous space for women. The dramatic increase in the sexual harassment of and physical attacks on women in Tahrir Square and elsewhere indicates organized crimes and efforts to push women off the streets and isolate those intent on remaining there.

These attacks were reported and condemned by women's organizations. Both women without political affiliation and activists from different backgrounds organized and supported huge legal and political campaigns against these violations and demanded investigations to identify those responsible and put them on trial. However, nothing has happened and impunity continues. Days after the attack on Set al-Banat (lady of all ladies, the Egyptian name for the girl in the blue bra), thousands of women took to the streets of Cairo warning the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the ruling authority at that time, against attacking women and rejecting the apology it offered.

A new parliament

The election of the new parliament late 2011 brought new challenges to Egyptian women's representation in formal politics because the number of women parliamentarians decreased and the majority of those elected were Islamists. These women MPs have been perceived by those opposed to Morsi's government as

being opposed to women's rights and/or less interested in improving women's participation and representation in the public sphere.

Only seven women won parliamentary seats in 2012, with the following affiliations: four were members of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP, affiliated to the MB), two represented Wafd (a liberal party), and one the Social Democratic Party. Almost all elected women MPs claimed that women's issues came second on their list of priorities, while the nation's demands for more pressing issues to be resolved were of the utmost concern, namely reinvigorating the economy and restoring public security. Nevertheless, there was much discussion of attempts by FJP representatives to revise the family status code and to draft a new one with greater restrictions on women, yet no law has been repealed and no new laws have been approved.

Women's under-representation continued in the two constitutional committees responsible for drafting a new constitution (with women's representation being 6% and 7%, respectively), and the problem intensified even further with the withdrawal of many members affiliated to civil and non-religious entities. Most secular organizations criticized the new constitution, claiming it to be a setback for women and gender equality, especially in terms of women's social status and family law through the Personal Status Code.

Nevertheless, women continued with their struggle in the public sphere and participated in both rounds of the presidential elections. Reports covering long queues of women outside voting stations were all over the local and international media. The results of the second round reflected a cleavage in Egyptian society;

the FJP candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won with a small majority of 51% against Ahmed Shafiq, a representative of the previous regime. Analyzing the election result is not our concern here, yet women's roles on both sides are remarkable and reflect the need to maintain their participation in the public sphere. Many research participants shared stories about their participation in various election rounds. One woman told us how she managed to outmaneuver her husband's efforts to "convince" her to vote for a certain candidate and how she told her friends to do the same to allow them to vote for the candidate of their choice without fighting with their husbands.

Women and the first year of the second phase of the transitional period (June 2012–June 2013)⁽⁴⁾

President Morsi's rise to power brought both hopes and fears for Egyptian women. The hopes he inspired pertained to the sound establishment of new institutions on better grounds: for the first time in its modern history Egypt had a civilian ruler with a relatively large social support base. The first year of the Morsi presidency was both politically and economically unstable. The president started his term with some radical decisions to end the dual authority he shared with the SCAF, which were hailed by other political forces. Problems arose when Morsi broke his promises to appoint a woman and a Christian as vice presidents and reshape the constitutional committee to achieve more consensus, while these failures and his appointment of the new prime minister and cabinet resulted in animosity between him and the media and judges. Those decisions left society and state institutions fragmented, yet they did not affect women directly, because Morsi

barely addressed women's issues specifically. Attending to women issues was not a priority for the president and his cabinet, and apart from irrelevant, insignificant comments made by the prime minister about child care, nothing serious was addressed. Why was this? Is it because women's issues were delayed until more "important" issues were settled? How did women activists react to this?

The fears inspired by Morsi's presidency spread mainly among the middle class and elite and pertained to anxiety that women's gains in terms of legal reforms to family laws would be reversed. The debate about the new constitution intensified these fears. Article 10 of the new draft combined the duties of the state in terms of providing free services for women and children and the responsibility to help women coordinate their maternal duties and their role in the public sphere. The article ended by stating that the state should pay special attention to women supporting their families. Criticism of this article started with its wording, which, according to activists, did not impose obligations on the state and talked vaguely about "the authentic nature of the Egyptian family". Criticism was also directed at the gender insensitivity of the language of the constitution, which, according to feminist activists, failed to recognize women's special needs.

Yet at the level of society, a number of civil society initiatives emerged focusing on the challenges of the new phase. Baheya Ya Misr was one of those initiatives that were willing to maintain an open society network that attended to women's issues and concerns and was capable of bringing together activists from different backgrounds. Established a few months after January 25th 2011, the movement was a platform for activists to launch a number of events addressing

issues of violence against women, resulting in it developing positions against major political developments in Egypt. The impact of the movement is yet to be evaluated, nevertheless it is important to note the change in the composition and discourse of such initiatives. Most of the new initiatives that emerged after the revolution were not officially registered. Bureaucratic reasons were a constraint for some of them, while others preferred to remain more or less ad-hoc groupings and postpone registration until things cleared up. Different from the older feminist groups, Baheya Ya Misr encompasses youth (men and women) from different backgrounds willing and able to reach out to various segments of society. Recognizing the increasing importance of Islamic groups in power, Baheya members showed interest in listening to and debating with religious scholars about sharia and women's status and rights. If we follow the logic of Nadjé al-Ali in analyzing developments among feminist groups, Baheya Ya Masr represents new attempts to reach out to a new audience for feminist discourse other than the older urban middle-class one. Attempts made by groups such as this would definitely open up new horizons for including women from poor areas in programs focusing on education and economic improvements.

Sexual harassment and violent attacks against women in public spaces became a threatening issue in the aftermath of the revolution. Certainly, this is not the sole threat facing Egyptian women; however, special attention was focused on it, since most of the initiatives by young men and women working in both urban and rural areas focused on this issue. Also, sexual harassment was one of the prime problems faced by the women we interviewed. The scale, intensity and level

of this violence, and the number of registered complaints prove that it is not just an act of sexually deprived adolescents, but rather an organized crime.

Over a period of two-and-a-half years, different parties to the political conflict have accused each other of this crime, but with no substantiation. During the first phase of the transitional period the SCAF and NDP thugs were considered to be responsible for these crimes; the motive was, on the one hand, to defame the Tahrir Square demonstrators and, on the other hand, to drive women away from political events. However, the crime continued when the MB came to power and liberals formed the opposition. Nevertheless, the motives remained the same, and the government's responses remained one of vocal condemnation, but with no promises to implement a stricter law. Civil society and NGOs therefore stepped in to take action. Several initiatives were launched aiming to: (1) raise awareness of the phenomena and its implications for the lives of the victims and their families; (2) train women and girls how to fight an aggressor and deal with the aftermath of an attack; and (3) form teams of volunteers to be present at large events and operate as a rapid intervention force to prevent such attacks and/or catch the persons committing them. During the wave of mass demonstrations in Egypt during June–July 2013 hundreds of reports of sexual harassment and gang rapes were reported by the Nazra Organization for Feminist Studies. Nazra and other feminists groups have issued a joint statement about the phenomena and the lack of any government response, holding the state responsible for the security of all protestors.

Another controversy arose over the Egyptian delegation to the most recent UN summit on women, when Dr Pakinam el-Sharkawi's statements about the

"necessity of attending to cultural and religious sensitivities when addressing women issues" were considered a sign of the Morsi government's intentions to backtrack on women's rights and triggered a series of angry responses from women activists and human rights advocates. The presidency's reaction to these accusations was to launch the Presidential Initiative for Promoting the Rights of Women. The purpose of the initiative was to engage various stakeholders in a societal dialogue about the main concerns facing modern Egyptian women. Representatives from various backgrounds were invited to take part in this dialogue and work together to draft laws that would respond to outstanding issues such as sexual harassment and the social and economic rights of women. This included academics of different political orientations and members of local NGOs such as Mona Ezzat from the Organization of the New Woman. Although the initiative is still in progress with meetings and workshops, the magnitude of the problems caused some doubt as to its effectiveness in solving the real challenges on the ground. In fact, the initiative is being criticized for focusing only on institutions rather than what women on the streets are actually experiencing. The polarization of the Egyptian political scene has affected the progress of this initiative in the same way as it has affected all efforts to establish a national dialogue on issues of concern.

Poor women's perception of the state

Fieldwork in Assiut and visits to the poor areas in Arab Alatawla and west Assiut revealed a level of poverty that does not allow any form of independent political decisions among poor women. A woman in the area stated, "every time there is an election, Mr Hassan brings the car to take us there and tells us to vote

for this or that person; this is even before the revolution”. Mr Hassan can be considered an alternative to the state in Arab Alatawla village. He works with the local village CBO to provide basic services and support the villagers in terms of their various problems and endeavors. In west Assiut, walking down the streets of the area with Mrs Mona from the Sanabel Elkheir CBO was like walking with a representative of the government. Poor women and young girls perceived Mona as the solution to their daily problems. The state is thus Mr Hassan from the Arab Alatawla Organization for Community Development and Mrs Mona from Sanabel Elkheir. When the women were asked to imagine President Morsi coming to them and asking them what they want, the answers were astonishing: they resolutely denied the possibility of his coming to the area, and after persuading them to imagine that he actually came and that he would listen to them, they simply said, “Nothing, Allah will give us what we want”. One participant said simply that she wanted him “to leave and take his party with him”. However, when asked to imagine that he had one million pounds to give to them for their use and to imagine how they would distribute it, most of the women agreed that it was most important to generate jobs and build hospitals for men as a priority and that as women they would take second place.

The presence of the state in Stable Antar and Saft el-Laban was different. The relative vicinity of the areas to decision-making centres resulted in a stronger state hegemony. Women needed the state to provide official papers to obtain subsidies and government services, yet their perception of the government was

focused on the Ministry of the Interior only, without any reference to other ministries that were responsible for providing the services they sought. In Stable Antar specifically, due to the level of crime in the area, many women participating in the focus groups referred to security issues as a main concern and a responsibility of the state.

Some of them recalled the days of the revolution and how local thugs protected the area against criminals from neighboring areas. Although they complained about the police's inability to protect the area and accused them of collaborating with drug dealers, it was clear that these thugs and dealers abided by a social code of conduct in their relationship with residents of the area.

In Saft, active conservative women did not want to be part of the local administration. When asked whether she would run for municipal office, Um Khaled was very firm in saying "no". According to her, this would require too much interaction with males, which her religion does not permit. The conservative nature of local communities in Saft requires women to deal with the state through males and not directly. Conservatism as a culture colored the public sphere, while women's activism was welcome as long it is happened only in women's gatherings.

Poor women's perception of their political participation

Poor women prioritize political participation differently from urban middle-class women. Economic security and safety are the main concerns of women in poorer areas. They are under pressure to meet their families' needs, find jobs for themselves or family members (mostly their husbands, who in many cases stay at

home jobless and ask them for money), stay safe in the streets and avoid confrontation with state institutions. Practicing politics to them is a privilege that they do not have time for. Sanabel Elkheir provides financial aid, education programs, and Quran study sessions for children and women, as well as health-care services, etc. Islamic CBOs and charity organizations have the financial means to provide these services, while liberal and secular organizations often do not. Nevertheless, it is important to note that relief and charity do not empower women, but respond to their daily needs without providing them with the tools to become independent. In a conventional sense the state has no meaning for these women and is not relevant to them. One angry middle-aged woman refused to discuss the future of President Morsi, saying, "I don't care what happens in Cairo; I care about my daily problems, but I don't know who is responsible for solving them". Nevertheless, in Assiut it was clear that voting in elections was a common practice among poor women even before the revolution.

Various political forces were able to mobilize them. As we have seen, a woman said in a focus group said that she was taken to the polling station and told who to vote for, without knowing anything about the candidate. Based on interviews and fieldwork observations, for them it does not really matter who is in power; their experience proved to them that their daily lives would not change. Public affairs – with politics as a central feature – are considered a matter for men, and women do not understand that politics lies at the heart of their daily lives.

It is worth mentioning that the current polarization in Egypt and the tension among the different political factions pushes women's issues to the bottom of the

list. Yet these factors did not succeed in preventing women as a group from participating and being present in the political and social scene. Women of different political orientations and social status are a major component of the street movements among Islamists as much as among liberals; photos of demonstrations on both sides show the massive presence of women, young and old, rich and poor, traditionally dressed and modernized. This does not necessarily contradict the fact that for many of them politics is not significant. For many of the women we observed and spoke to, politics and societal change are just labels, but what really matters – for some of them at least – is the fact that they can express themselves. It has become clear to the various political factions that they cannot ignore women, yet both main parties (Islamists and secularists) seem to be using women for political gain without being willing to integrate them into the political process in terms of candidacy and decision-making roles. The intensification of the political conflict will therefore likely work against women, not in terms of reversing their gains, but of ignoring their demands for their greater integration into the political scene and decision-making process. This does not mean that women will give in easily in this battle: the recent wave of demonstrations shows a high level of resilience among women of both camps. Efforts should therefore be made by scholars, activists and NGOs to transform the presence of women into an integral part of the political process.

Mapping the key players influencing women's political participation

As previously stated, women's participation is mainly in the public sphere and political participation is one dimension of their presence in this sphere. The importance of active citizenship is appreciated by the vast majority of Egyptians, but turnout in the various post-revolution election rounds did not reflect the vitality of discussions in the streets. However, political participation remained confined to voting and participating in marches and sit-ins, as well as membership of NGOs and CBOs, especially those affiliated with Islamic trends (MB, Salafis and Gama'a Islamia). Membership of newly emerged political parties and running for elections remained remote options for women, limiting the potential of greater political socialization and more sustainable mobilization. No parallel intellectual options emerged, and participation in many cases was part of a wider temporal mobilization rather than an independent initiative by women or an indicator of a shift in the perspective of Islamists and secular groupings regarding women's equality and citizenship. In fact, most political forces – both Islamist and secular – did not engage in any serious intellectual debate about women's role in the political sphere, with most of them paying only lip service to the importance of women's participation. Salafis in particular were very firm in affirming the traditional conviction that women should not be allowed to fill higher positions in the state. After decades of authoritarian rule in Egypt, political forces in general had many challenges to face, among which building social support and networking with other political forces were more pressing than engaging in a new discourse about women's equality and citizenship.

The number of political parties in Egypt has reached more than 60 (most of them were established in the aftermath of the revolution), but most are inactive and do not have any presence or influence on average Egyptians. There were in actuality only ten active and influential parties spread across the range from Islamic radicals to liberal and leftist parties. Most of these parties from both sides of the political spectrum have low numbers in terms of women's membership and participation. Several of them did not have women candidates in either the parliamentary or the Shura elections of 2011 and 2012, and if they had any on the list, they were placed at the bottom of the list or in the lower half. Women MPs mostly represented the Islamic trend, along with a ceremonial representation of other secular parties appointed directly by President Morsi. The performance of the Islamist female MPs intensified the fear of secular and liberal observers and activists, who claimed that the agenda adopted by these MPs did not represent what they considered to be the real agenda of Egyptian women, but instead conformed to the discourse of Islamic parties, thus putting more social pressures on women in the public sphere. Participants from liberal and Islamic parties in one of our workshops complained that women are not represented in the higher committees of their respective parties, with the exception of the FJP (the political arm of the MB). Participants from the FJP justified this by referring to the heritage of the MB in the political sphere and the role played by women in the movement during times of political persecution. Long years of the imprisonment and persecution of their husbands and sons gave women a chance to be more politically

active. Compared to other new forces on the Egyptian political scene, MB women are more trained in both da'wa (the proselytizing of Islam) and political activism.

Women's political participation remains outside formal entities and specifically outside political parties. The institutionalization of the political process in Egypt remains new and women are not yet welcome in the political sphere, but their insistence on their presence and participation is remarkable. In the 2012 presidential election Bothaina Kamel, an activist and TV anchor, started a campaign to run for office. Her failure to secure the required signatures (30,000 signatures from 15 governorates) aborted the attempt. This failure is understandable in the framework of the patriarchal system that still controls the political and social domains, but the attempt was admirable because it tried to break through the male domination of the political scene that is a characteristic of Egyptian politics.

The political map in Egypt in the aftermath of the first wave of the revolution is highly diversified and rapidly changing in terms of coalitions and alliances. Drawing the lines between different political forces in ideological terms is possible. Yet activists on the ground tend to move beyond ideology and are more capable of engaging together in the public sphere, regardless of their ideological differences. For example, many initiatives have emerged to raise awareness, help newcomers to politics (e.g. female candidates in elections), and react to violence against women in the public sphere. Many of these initiatives involved people from different ideological backgrounds (Islamic, liberal and secular), but most remained informal to avoid bureaucracy and maintain their flexibility in terms of membership and activities. At the party level, committees for women allowed women activists to play

their roles in promoting and enhancing women's political participation and expanding their influence in party structures. Most Islamist NGOs providing services in poor areas actively campaigned for their party candidates and in some cases conducted political awareness sessions for their organizations' members.

Key players on the political map

It is important to note that during the fieldwork we discovered that large women's organizations are less influential than CBOs in affecting women's lives and political perceptions, as will be shown in the third component of this paper.

It is important to note that the Egyptian political map in the aftermath of July 3rd 2013 is completely different from the time the research was conducted. Before the ousting of President Morsi by the army on July 3rd the MB-Salafi alliance dominated the political scene, but the following months brought fresh changes in the power formation, ruling elite and alliances. The MB is out of the formal political scene and was accused by the interim government, and the new president of resorting to violence to protest Morsi's ousting. However, its influence remains in the streets and in the visible and invisible mobilization of people, including women. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the ability of Pro- Morsi supporters to mobilize supporters on the streets have diminished to a great extent due to several factors that are out of the scope of this paper.

Key players affecting women political participation in the aftermath of January 25th can be categorized into four groups: (1) the government, (2) the political opposition, (3) Islamic institutions, and (4) NGO initiatives. We will focus mainly on

the role played by NGOs initiatives as they are the key players with marginalized women.

NGO initiatives

The history of NGOs in Egypt goes back to the 1980s with the establishment of the Arab Organization for Human Rights, and the number of NGOs has mushroomed since that date. During the Mubarak era the law regulating NGOs, known as Law 84/2002, placed a number of restrictions on their work and funding, and gave the authorities the unrestricted right to monitor their work and close them down without resorting to the courts. Human rights organizations and advocacy groups were the main victims of this law. For example, the law placed a number of restrictions on receiving international funds. These funds were a major source of financing for the activities of these organizations, because local funding preferred to stay away from them and fund charitable activities instead.

The main activity of a large number of NGOs and CBOs prior to the January 25th revolution focused on providing social services and financial aid to poor families. Very few organizations promoted political rights and the participation of women, e.g. Nazra, ACT, New Woman Organization, and Forum for Women and Memory, suffered greatly from security force harassment and government restrictions on their work.

The period following Mubarak's removal came with new hopes, and many NGOs hoped for a better environment for their work. Many developed manuals and booklets that they distributed and published on line to promote the political participation of women in terms of candidacy and voting. However, these efforts

benefited particular strata of society (those with access to the internet). NGOs and CBOs working in poor areas depended heavily on direct physical contact with the target group of women through workshops and lectures to introduce the concept of elections, how to choose a candidate, what to do inside the polling station and even how to maintain communication with their representatives. The present researcher has been active with Legan Sha'bia (Saft) and Sohbet Kheir (Stable) in giving a number of these lectures and workshops. It is important to note that some of the aforementioned activities were neutral and educational with no affiliation or support for a specific political grouping, while others attempted to direct voters to choose a particular candidate and/or party.

At the national level, several initiatives emerged that did not pay direct attention to political participation, but fed into enhancing active citizenship for women. These new initiatives focused on dealing with challenges facing women in public space. Fouada Watch is an initiative led by group of young Egyptians, both men and women. It emerged after the Morsi's election as a way to follow up on the performance of the newly elected president regarding women rights and freedoms. The initiative's name is inspired by the famous novel *Something to Fear*. In cooperation with other NGOs, the initiative issued a number of reports on human rights and the government's performance and shed light on what it considered to be backsliding on women's gains.

The number of initiatives working on women issues has increased in the aftermath of the revolution, and they engage in number of activities ranging from political awareness and promoting volunteerism and community service to art

activities. Many focused on the increasing violence against women in the public sphere. Provoked by the amount of sexual harassments during large demonstrations, a number of young Egyptians formed groups such as Emsk Motaharsh (“catch an aggressor”) and Tahrir Bodyguards. These initiatives provided physical protection to demonstrators and victims of sexual harassment. They also networked to increase public awareness of the phenomenon and its implications for women. Two other examples are worth mentioning in this regard. The first is Women of Tahrir, a research group of young male and female academics and researchers from different political backgrounds working together to document the events and the spirit of Tahrir Square and enhance women rights and conditions via social science research. Their main activities are seminars, workshops and research projects. The second example is Masr el-Baheya, which was started by a group of young political science professors to introduce political terms to and simplify them for the average Egyptian. In the aftermath of Mubarak’s removal people started discussing terms such as liberalism, socialism, and parliamentary and presidential systems without knowing exactly what they meant. These young academics of different political backgrounds decided to go around Egypt explaining these terms in any type of gatherings except those convened by political parties. The impact of most of these initiatives is yet to be seen, especially after the new wave of instability in Egypt.

All these initiatives worked as forums for engaging women from different social, economic and even geographical backgrounds. In many cases it took an internet connection and a Facebook account to start an initiative, propagate the

cause and arrange events relevant to its purpose. With millions of Egyptians using the internet, it became easier to connect and network with people, especially women, from different parts of Egypt.

It is important to note that most of these initiatives did not turn into formal entities, and this informality gave them more flexibility in terms of reaching out to their targeted communities and garnering financial support from members and advocates while avoiding bureaucratic complexities. These initiatives included members from different political backgrounds, while the informal setting and loose structure allowed members to decide individually when to engage and on what issues, and when not to participate.

Women's key issues and concerns

This section will focus on the issues of women's representation and women's concerns, based on analysis and discussion of the research results.

Family discourse versus women's rights discourse

Asking women whether women or family comes first and how this is related to sharia and international human rights conventions and declarations such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was not an easy part of the project. By "family discourse" we mean the focus on family and a woman's position in the family. Supporters of this discourse see the family as the nuclear element in society and the most important societal unit. Women's roles in the family and their relationship to other family members are the most – if not the only – important roles for women. Critics point out that

this logic ignores women's individual needs and fails to see women outside the framework of the family. Thus, unmarried and widowed women, for example, have no place in this analysis. They are seen as dependent and are not treated as independent individuals with specific needs and aspirations. On the other hand, the "women's rights discourse" pays more attention to the individuality of women as human beings and their individual needs and aspirations. This discourse is not against the family, but treats women's familial roles as one of the multiple roles women play in society. Supporters of this logic draw their approach from international treaties concerning human rights and women, e.g. CEDAW. Egypt has signed CEDAW, but with reservations regarding some articles because they contradict sharia.

Opponents of the women's rights discourse perceive it as a "Westernized discourse" that goes against the values and traditions of Egyptian society. They blame this discourse and its adherents (mostly feminist organizations) for the deconstruction of the Egyptian family. Islamist women and organizations mostly adopt the family discourse and advocate against the women's rights discourse because they believe that it encourages women to separate themselves from the family and focus more on themselves, their needs and aspirations, regardless of the needs and aspirations of the family as a whole.

This opposition is discussed on two levels: the level where it does not exist or is not represented, and the level where it is widely discussed. In poor areas the women's rights discourse is not highlighted; it is notable that it was not referred to

by the women who were interviewed or representatives of CBOs and CSOs working in these areas. The daily demands made on them were more important to them. Education and work were the main issues in the areas investigated. This could be traced back to several reasons, the first being religious discourse, which was used to placate women's responses to their sources of complaints, i.e. husbands, economic hardships, life problems, etc., thus undercutting the women's rights discourse.

Another reason is that CSOs with stronger gender-based approaches know that placing gender and women's issues at the forefront of their work would mean their exclusion from the public domain, making them unable to deliver their services. Therefore women's or gender discourse was left to the upper-middle-class parts of Cairo, while the family discourse was dominant in the studied areas, where an increasing role was played by religious CBOs (both Islamic and Christians).

The media also played a role in marginalizing the women's rights discourse by labelling it as the discourse of the previous regime and Suzan Mubarak. But the feminist movement in Egypt is much older than Suzan Mubarak and has gone through many struggles to gain women's political, social and economic rights. Suzan Mubarak used women's causes and issues to sugar coat the regime in the eyes of the international community, eventually hijacking the movement and rendering it weak before the attacks of the media and others criticizing the Mubarak era.

Magdy Abdel Hamid, the head of the board of the Egyptian Association for Promoting Social Participation (a secular organization), said that before the revolution "we did not have a family discourse; it was women's discourse. Moreover, after the revolution this new discourse was used to reverse all the achievements of the feminist movement". This statement reflects the dichotomous nature of the family-versus-women's-rights discourses among older secular organizations.

Dina Wahba (a young feminist scholar) said that both discourses were used by the Mubarak regime to gain popularity. The family discourse is not actually a religious discourse. Rather, it is a conservative one: most conservative political forces defend the family against individuality. Nonetheless, she agreed with Abdel Hamid that the core of this discourse is a patriarchal system using religion whenever appropriate or useful.

Ahmed Tohamy, a political scientist with an Islamist affiliation at the National Centre for Social and Criminal Studies and Researches, had a different perspective on the issue. While he agreed that the family discourse might be used to cover up women's genuine issues and demands, he believed that the gender discourse is detached from reality and is more of an elitist perspective (this is also Dina Wahba's analysis of feminist discourse and its inability to reach the masses). Tohamy defended a rational and enlightened family discourse that does not ignore women as agents with special demands and needs, yet as a part of a larger social unit, i.e. the family. It is notable that during the opening session of the Presidential

Initiative for Promoting the Rights of Women a delegate proposed that the title of the initiative be changed to include women and family instead of women only. Dr Nadia Halim (a sociologist at the National Centre for Social and Criminal Studies and Researches) saw this as an attempt to shift attention away from women's issues and a tactic of the conservative religious discourse, a view that was shared by others.

In an interview with a representative of Misr Elkheir (one of the largest NGOs in Egypt, headed by the ex-mufti of Egypt), it was mentioned that the organization's work on women's issues was carried out by the "woman and family program". This reflects a tendency to address women's issues within the framework of the family, not in individual terms, in the belief that there is no contradiction between the two. It is interesting to notice that some Islamic parties did not have a single title for their women's committees. Some committees were for women and children and others were for women only.

Yousry Moustafa from the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) addressed the issue from the point of the family status laws. Although neither the dissolved parliament nor the Shura Council had addressed this issue, it was feared that all the gains made by women during the Mubarak era would be reversed. GIZ, in cooperation with local partners, has developed a draft family law that addresses the problems of the current law without undermining women's gains.

Mona Ezzat (a feminist leftist activist) tackled the issue from a more practical perspective. Her work with women in poor areas made her recognize the societal

pressure to adopt the family discourse in terms of acceptable work, the dress code, what can openly be said about violations of women-related conventions, and women's participation in the public sphere. She stated that women's empowerment would not be achieved without women themselves creating and expanding their own groups in order to maintain their gains. Sadly, it became clear during the research that women's dreams are not their own: in almost all the interviews women's dreams focused on others, i.e. family members. Their personal dreams are either for intangibles, i.e. *satr* and *rahat bal* (survival and peace of mind), or financial security for themselves in order to help their families. Formal politics seemed very remote, although they believed that they had a major role in building Egypt, but they saw this role in terms of bringing up good children to be useful and successful citizens.

Ultimately, the debate between gender equality discourse and family discourse (essentially CEDAW versus sharia) seems one of Cairo and the middle class, not of poor areas. Both women's NGOs and CBOs link their presence and ability to exert social and political influence to the family, and see themselves as a crucial part of the family and society. It is interesting to note that when they were asked about how much they thought women were responsible for the future of Egypt, all the women interviewed said a minimum of 70%. Some of the NGOs interviewed did not even relate to CEDAW as a point of reference, and interestingly enough, NGOs – especially those working in Assiut – who adopt the convention

tried to integrate this discourse with the discourse of the family/sharia. Some Cairo NGOs had agendas that were far from the aspirations of average Egyptians.

Violence and women's safety and security

Issues of safety on the streets were frequently mentioned, even in areas where we did not expect to find complaints about sexual harassment. In Assiut, a very conservative governorate, where women are socially protected against violence, verbal and or sexual harassment should be considered a shameful act. However unexpected stories about cases of sexual harassment were told in the discussions. Amal, an NGO worker in Assiut, complained that it was not safe for girls and women, whether veiled or unveiled, to walk on their own in the streets for fear of verbal harassment or worse. Christine, a teacher in Beni Mohamed village, who was preparing for her marriage, said that she had to be accompanied by someone to avoid harassment, which was never the case before. Villagers said that they would not send their daughters to work in the city, because they feared for their safety. Most participants shared the opinion that this was related to the increased level of social violence, lack of morality and lack of security in the streets.

In Cairo, harassment was even worse: the downtown area is currently a hotbed of violent attacks against girls and women. However, in local areas such as Saft and Stable there is what could be considered a social code of conduct: the males of the area would respect the neighborhood, while flirtation is not considered harassment and is implicitly not discussed. Abeer, a young volunteer for a national CBO, was not afraid to walk down the streets of her district, but she considered

Tahrir Square and other areas to be “unsafe”. It was believed that the increased level of violence, especially sexual violence, in the streets was deliberately designed to prevent women from participating in rallies and marches. There are hundreds of reports by human right activists, media, feminist organizations and legal aid associations about this phenomenon. The Presidential Initiative for Promoting the Rights of Women responded to it by including the issue on the agenda for the drafting of a law against sexual harassment. The societal debate on this issue is important: in most cases women are blamed either for their dress code (ignoring the fact that some victims are veiled), for going to dangerous areas or for what is considered to be loose social conduct. Males are hardly blamed for their actions and in most cases could not be identified due to the huge numbers of people attending demonstrations and rallies.

women perceptions on main concerns

As previously mentioned, the field visits encompassed three major circles of analysis: educated women, uneducated women and women NGO members. As noted in the project plan, common factors were asked about, depending on the area where the discussion took place, including:

- ♣ education, the awareness dilemma and family power relations;
- ♣ challenges faced by women since the January 25th revolution;
- ♣ possible mechanisms to overcome these problems developed by the women themselves; and
- ♣ the role of NGOs.

Education, awareness and family power relations

When comparing women's organizations in Stable Antar and Saft el-Laban, education and awareness seemed to be the prime concerns. In Saft el-Laban, feedback given by women representatives of the Committee for Saving the Quran and Sunnah (CSQS) was that attempts to understand the issue of education occurred at two levels of discussion. The first was the "woman-children" level. In this respect, it is a shared feeling that uneducated women face greater challenges in trying to understand their children and cope with how their minds develop as they grow older. The excessive exposure of children to aspects of modernity that was evident in greater Cairo and its suburbs was not an issue in Saft, which is a closed society. This in a sense reduces the scope of what uneducated women have to cope with in terms of their children. However, women are seeking to educate themselves in order to close the communication gap between them and their children. However, the research participants believed that although they have the right to attain education, this should only occur in terms of particular limitations and restrictions. They feared that otherwise women would "misuse their education and ... end up feeling higher and stronger or more empowered than their husbands", one of the CSQS women leaders said.

The perception of women interviewed in Saft was that the more they interacted with men from outside Saft, the more they would become aware of issues affecting men that women should not be exposed to. Another matter associated

with the level of women's awareness – or the lack of it – was how women were expected to deal with domestic violence. Women in these areas believed that the only approach is to tolerate violence from their husbands. The husband is the breadwinner and has the right to express his anger and frustration, which must be understood and accepted by the wife in silence. Her tolerance will grant her paradise in the hereafter. In addition, the notion of marriage and the societal construct that deals with marriage were seen to be closely related to women's level of awareness, and especially education, or at least this was what women from a Saft NGOs said.

This perception was not the case in Stable Antar, due to the different approach to religion. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the area is not dominated by one religious group or sect. In fact, Stable Antar seemed to be more tolerant than Saft, although it rigidly follows traditional gender norms. Throughout the discussions it was clear that there was a clear definition of woman and her place in the public sphere. While the women were very active and influential in their societies, they moved in a well-defined public sphere that minimized the chances of interaction with men. Almost every form of interaction took place through their husbands, sons, siblings and blood relative. Thus, when a question was raised about the possibility of running for municipal office, it was immediately excluded because of potential male-female mingling. The interviewed poor women (both homemakers and CBO activists) also considered paid jobs as infringing on male rights, especially in times of economic hardship. Gender roles are embedded in the

social structure of these areas: actively serving society is possible, yet working for money is the man's duty and right.

On the other hand, poor women were the core decision makers in managing family affairs. For example, women are responsible for certain social processes, i.e. marriage arrangements and expenses. Stories about extravagance in terms of things required for the new bride showed that marriage is becoming a social and economic burden. The limited private space puts significant societal pressure on families (the bride's trousseau has to be huge, for example). Outside Cairo there is less societal pressure, but it exists and takes various forms. For example, in Assiut the size of the bride's trousseau is not the issue, but rather the amount of gold jewelry bought for the bride by her father and husband-to-be.

Social roles also prevent men from seeking financial aid from CBOs; it is usually women who ask for it. Women justified this by saying that a woman is better able to put her case, while she can also create new sources of income or adapt to changing circumstances. In cases when women are the main breadwinner, men usually make their wives uncomfortable about the latter's successes. Discussing the issue further revealed two dynamics of resistance women tend to apply. Um Aly believed that it was better to manage her husband's negative attitude. According to her, "keeping a low profile is safer". On the other hand, Um Ahmed believed in peaceful divorce so that the woman could have a second chance to raise her kids and find her own path in life without having a man to suffocate her ambitions. Economic empowerment is helping women to adopt the latter attitude.

Um Gamal, with four children and married to a violent man who used to beat her, said that because she had nowhere to go and no job to rely on, she had to stay in this situation and pray to Allah for a solution to her problems.

On the matter of education and awareness, educated and uneducated women in Saft did not mirror the perceptions of NGO representatives in an earlier session that economic empowerment is the key to empowering women in general. In this respect, women stressed the need for a proper education from a much younger age. The sample that was chosen included a wide age range of women between the ages of 16 and 60. Education was seen to be fundamental and should start at a much earlier age; as one of the participants stated:

It is not easy to start an education now; today I am much older and I have four daughters to provide for. My husband has cancer and stopped working some months ago I know I needed an education, I know I can only provide a better living if I can properly read and write, but now it is too late ... we need to give space for the younger ones to make the most of education. For us it is already too late.

NGOs in the research sites complained that they experienced low attendance at and little interest in literacy classes. Some women suffered from family problems like domestic violence, being restricted by the authority of their husbands, and being forced to work and give all their earnings to their husbands. Nevertheless, when the women were sufficiently motivated they would find a way to go to classes behind their husbands' backs.

Furthermore, both women's groups in Saft stressed the apparent lack of awareness of issues like sexual relations, health, family relations and how to "raise children". The women believed that NGOs in Saft should play an important role in religious awareness. They mentioned that this role is certainly important and fundamental, "especially in a world" (mainly the outside world, outside of Saft, as I came to realize through clarifications provided by the guide/mediator who was present) "where religion is no longer practiced and there are many people out there who are against Islam". Such awareness sessions are not provided for women, but they desperately need them, according to what they said in the focus group. In this regard, we can see one of the gaps between the NGOs' vision, and the vision, feelings and needs of the women themselves. In addition, when asked who they believed should be given priority in education, the majority agreed that men and boys should be given priority if it came to a choice between males and females. This once again indicates the difference in perceptions between these women and the participants from NGOs mentioned previously, since the latter believed that both girls and boys should be given equal chances and there was in fact a high demand for education by families. This forced us to question whether NGOs are attempting to change these perceptions. Participants from NGOs recognized the need to try harder to convince mothers, yet they acknowledged that this process would take a long time.

In comparison, in Stable Antar women were seen to be more active than those in Saft. The women of Stable Antar believed strongly in the importance of

attaining a proper education no matter the cost. The reason was simply because, as one of the participants said (with substantial support from other participants):

Girls and women must be given the first priority of education over men ... a woman is the head of the household and its backbone at the same time ... without her having the upper hand in education and awareness, the whole household would topple down.

Saft is more conservative than Sable Antar. Women in Stable Antar were motivating one another to join educational classes; similarly, NGOs provided awareness programs in the area. The awareness sessions on health, marital relationships and mother-child relationship were obviously seen as useful and were enthusiastically attended. The participants claimed to have the upper hand at home, although they deferred to men when necessary.

Across the range, the main dilemma with respect to education was that women did not believe that the schooling system was providing an adequate education to their children; this applied to both the former and current governments. Lack of security in the aftermath of the revolution forced many families to remove their children from schools. Some families had to do this out of economic necessity: they needed their children to work and help in the house. This decision was reinforced by the perception of the school system's inadequacies. But for those still in school, both the NGOs and the church provided supplementary private lessons to encourage students to stay in school and provide them with what the teachers at school did not. To our knowledge, this service was not provided in Saft.

Generally, both educated and uneducated women agreed on some common points, and it is perhaps worth noting that the differences among them were not striking. Some of these points included the view that education is the main tool for empowering women, whether they are married or not. Education allows women to think outside the box and find alternatives that help them find a better job to support their families and children, whether or not their husbands have jobs. Through education women will be able to help their children and grandchildren. Participants indicated that the belief that children empower women is a misconception. According to them, women's education and work will give them security and stability. Children will grow up and leave the house, and with economic difficulties threatening everybody, it will be difficult for them to help their mothers, and thus women will be left helpless. Educated women felt they were in a better position to help themselves and even provide some financial assistance to their children if necessary.

Nevertheless, it was amazing how women developed a perception of the social roles of husbands and wives. According to them, men have become less active since the revolution on a general scale (with some minor differences – some women tended to defend their men and find excuses for them, which indicates how women perceive men). However, views that were commonly expressed included: men are less creative when it comes to dealing with daily problems and challenges, while they are less patient with their jobs and easily quit, and would not mind staying at home jobless.

On the contrary, women will take on any job simply because a woman looks at a job in a less egocentric way than a man. A woman's main aim is to fulfill the basic needs of her children and pay for their education. Women generally believed that men have lost the ability to control their families as they used to. Now women are mainly taking the lead in the household, working out solutions to emerging problems, and thus changing perceptions of the passivity of poor women.

Challenges facing poor women since the January 25th revolution

Women in the three locations differed in their evaluation of the revolution and how it affected their lives. Women in Saft and Stable have shared memories of the revolution. Because they are shanty towns and urbanized areas, police and security forces had a very strong presence; young men from these areas either participated in the demonstrations or were part of the people's committees defending their areas against thugs and thieves. The revolution brought hope for a different future, but subsequent events brought increasing frustration. Voting in elections was a new experience for some women, yet it did not directly change their lives: health, clean water and education problems remained the same. Even worse, things became harder on the economic level: many of their husbands lost their jobs and women were left to support their families. These economic hardships also affected CBOs and NGOs, which lost donations and were left with limited resources, thus life is becoming harder for everyone, especially women.

Assiut is part of the marginalized Upper Egypt that in general did not play a significant role in the revolution. This role became more important in consolidating

the new system of government: in all elections post-February 2011 Upper Egypt voted for pro-Islamic political forces (the MB, Salafis and Gama'a Islamiya). The impact of the revolution on the lives of women and their representation in the public sphere is two-fold: the first is that they have become more vocal in expressing their opinions in public and to strangers. For example, Um Ali, a 45-year-old widow from Assiut, was very harsh in her criticism of the performance – or, rather, the lack of performance – of the government in responding to the various crises. Samar, a 35-year-old engineer with a special needs child who works in the municipal administration, openly criticized the services provided for these children and engaged in a tensed conversation with the representative of the administration responsible for overseeing NGOs in Assiut for their lack of supervision and monitoring.

The second impact is that the revolution emphasized the feelings of marginalization and exclusion that characterized the people of the governorate. Imbalanced centre-periphery relations remained the dominant factor in analyzing the impact of the revolution on Upper Egypt. In the years before January 25th 2011 the relationship between the capital and Upper Egypt was at the expense of the latter; the result was increasing poverty and lack of basic services. With the eruption of the demonstrations there were rising expectations that this would change and that part of building a new Egypt was to balance this relationship, yet this did not happen. We have discussed in earlier parts of the report the unsuccessful efforts of feminist organizations to integrate women's issues into the political process.

Organizations in Upper Egypt had a two-fold agenda: on the one hand, they were fighting for women's social rights and social status, and were dealing with family matters, including high divorce rates and increasing numbers of families supported by women. On the other hand, they were fighting for better representation and a more balanced relationship between centre and periphery.

Women in the three locations stated that the main problems they were facing since the revolution were:

- higher levels of divorce and in some cases the disappearance of husbands, who simply opened the door and left;
- higher levels of unemployment. This issue caused financial problems and in most cases also caused direct problems between women and their husbands;
- sexual harassment, which was seen by some poor women to have increased in the aftermath of the revolution. The reasons for this are manifold. Some related it to the way women and girls dress in the streets. Others related it to the way boys and girls are brought up, economic hardships, and the inability of young men to get married and start a family. Notably, none of the women in the workshops (educated and un-educated) linked this to the political scene;
- a significant increase in drug use. In the research sites, local people could easily identify streets and areas where drugs were sold. Those responsible for selling drugs were mostly known by name, and drug addicts were easily spotted. Fears for their children made women try to keep them off the streets, yet there seem to be no response from the authorities to fight this crime; and a decrease in

school attendance and completion due to financial difficulties and insecurity (primarily for girls).

Mechanisms developed to overcome these problems by the women themselves

Women are increasingly developing their own ways of dealing with the problems they face. For example, Um Zeyad (an activist from Saft affiliated with the MB) suggested collecting a pound a day from small shops to pay for the FJP's repainting of the school's walls. Also, men would be responsible for distributing plastic bags to households and gathering the cans and plastic at the end of the week. The money from selling the waste items to recycling factories would be used to rebuild the area's infrastructure. The motivation behind an initiative like this would not only be striving to keep the community clean and thus improve health and living conditions, but also the religious reason of "doing it for the good of the people". According to Um Zeyad, local residents should step in and take responsibility for their neighbourhoods, because the government has other priorities to attend to. Other participants supported her view by confirming that if they needed external help, it should come from large NGOs like Resala and Misr EIKheir, which could train them or provide them with whatever resources they needed to develop their areas.

NGOs working in Assiut and Stable have adopted an intelligent solution to deal with the problem of dropouts – the community school or the one classroom school. In one of the workshops organized with the help of CARITAS, participants

representing NGOs from different locations in Assiut governorate stated that community schools are a very effective technique for overcoming education problems. Nevertheless, in areas such as Arab Alatawla and Saft, this project does not exist, and there are only the traditional literacy classes and study groups to help both boys and girls, but with a special emphasis on girls, to overcome learning problems. Most of the women we met outside the town of Assiut were either illiterate or had a high school diploma (with a very low quality of education), but they all agreed that educating their girls is a must to empower them in life.

Because sexual harassment seems to be an increasing concern for women, there is an initiative in Saft to fight this by educating men. Here religious teachings and practices as a means to stop harassment are important. Women in this group talk to teenagers and men using religious texts about virtue and being good to woman, as well as the religious commands of respecting public spaces and not gazing at women's bodies.

Further examples of initiatives were of women with no formal political affiliations coming together and dealing with commonly recognized problems on the streets. An example was bringing a common complaint against a broken cable on the street that harmed many children while playing. One of them was chosen to take the complaint to the relevant authority and the problem was eventually solved. Women also raised awareness about women's need to vote and not stay passively at home. They even shared ways of influencing their husbands' political views if these were not in accordance with their own. In Assiut, to address bread shortages,

a group of women living in the same street built an oven at the end of the street and took it in turns to bake instead of going to government bakeries and suffering from the crowds. Because education seemed to be the main concern of Assiut women, they established study groups for their children in which an educated mother would explain a subject to the children.

Role of NGOs

Given the number of CSOs in Egypt – estimated to be around 42,000 – it is very strange that poverty and structural problems still exist and poverty is increasing. Several factors play into this: the most important is government policies and programs that not only failed to tackle the problems, but actually added to them. Another important factor is the role of CSOs and how they formulate their relationship to government policies. With the gradual withdrawal of the Egyptian government from providing certain essential services such as education and healthcare, it has become harder and harder for CSOs in general to efficiently provide these services; they lack the necessary capacity and the resources, and the government is not helping. Yet what is most relevant to this report is the relationship between NGOs and CBOs and poor communities and people.

In many focus groups with NGOs, especially in Stable and Assiut, the common belief among workers and local women in these areas was that empowering women economically would help them to face and change their situations and those of their families. Teaching women a craft, helping them with small project, and/or giving them education and awareness classes had a direct

effect on women's ability to think creatively and find innovative solutions to their problems. For example, in Assiut, NGOs have developed a mechanism to provide small capital for small projects. Groups of 10–15 women are formed and each pays 5–10 pounds monthly. The money is collected in a trust run by a committee and is used to provide small loans. At the end of the year any profit is distributed among participants. For some women contributing five pounds a month is difficult, but recognizing the importance of the project, they find ways to participate.

In Stable the Sohbet Kheir organization gives financial aid in very limited amounts; the main project is to train women in sewing and carpet weaving. Young girls go to the community school for half a day and spend the other half learning how to make carpets, for which they are paid. The situation in Saft is different: most of the NGOs working there are CBOs and their main project is to provide financial aid to poor families and help girls to marry by providing goods and household equipment. This difference reflects two approaches to dealing with the problem of poverty in local communities. For some CBOs and NGOs, fighting poverty involves teaching people techniques to overcome it and empower themselves. The other approach perceives fighting poverty as the responsibility of the state, which seems incapable of doing so, thus CBOs and NGOs offer financial aid to the poor. The research team discussed this issue further with some organizations and noticed that there are many factors playing into adopting each of the approaches. For instance, the socioeconomic structure of the areas where CBOs and NGOs operated, the education levels of the local community, the

education and awareness levels of the personnel of the CBO and NGO, and local government development policies in the area. The most important factor is the level of education and awareness of the workers in CBOs and NGOs. The more they are trained and educated, the more they are inclined to adopt the approach of empowering local women and reducing direct financial aid to them.

A greater emphasis should thus be placed on enhancing the ability to think outside the box and exercise critical thinking and creativity. For example, in Assiut NGOs provide small loans for small businesses such as making soap and accessories, and/or selling goods to neighbors. This type of aid ignores the fact that too many people making soap and accessories would kill the market and increase the level of competition, which would work to disadvantage of these women. Additionally, selling goods to neighbors ignores the harsh economic reality of these neighborhoods where most households are poverty stricken and have little spare cash for such items. An alternative approach would be to empower these orphans and families to become independent and provide for themselves.

An analysis of the projects and work of NGOs and CBOs in the three locations thus reveals a huge problem that is not attended to, that of sustaining the cycle of poverty. By giving poor families monthly financial aid, NGOs and CBOs do not help them to overcome their economic difficulties, but instead turn them into helpless, dependent, inactive citizens. In one of the interviews with a CBO in Assiut, the representative stated that his CBO helped 3,000 families in Assiut every month. When asked why it did not replace the monthly financial aid with small loans to

empower these families, he said that the CBO's workers had tried to convince the donor to do so, but he insisted on maintaining this strategy.

Some NGOs and CBOs provide poor families with a female cow to breed. The problem with this strategy, though well intended, is that it is insensitive to the needs of the beneficiaries, while the stringent conditions accompanying them limit the number of potential beneficiaries. For example, cows are only provided to families with enough space to raise them. Also, the families have to be living in a mud house, there has to be a single parent (the father has to be dead or very ill, or the woman has to be divorced), the woman has to have children, and the family has to be able to afford to feed the cow. There are areas in West Assiut (a very poor area on the western side of Assiut city) where none of these conditions exists, so families are considered to be ineligible to receive such aids. The alternative in this case is either receiving monthly aid (*kafala*) or a small loan for a kiosk to sell goodies, which is inappropriate in an area where people barely secure their daily bread.

Also, helping families start small businesses without helping them to market their products does not solve the problem. Poor women, whether educated or uneducated, do not have the means, skills or connections to market their products. Unless the organization helps them to improve these skills and helps them with marketing in the early stage of the project, they end up with piles of unsold products. The experience of the Sohbet Kheir organization in Stable Antar in training young girls in carpet weaving is a good example of planning with a vision. Ghada Gabr,

the founder of the organization, arranged with a traditional carpet-weaving factory to provide training for the project and take the products to market and sell. This assured a high level of quality control for the project, quality outsourcing, and a solid and sustainable marketing strategy.

The question remains as to the role of the NGOs in promoting and enhancing the political participation of women. There is an assumption that many of the new NGOs and CBOs that emerged after the revolution have an Islamic affiliation. The Mubarak era was characterized by crackdowns on Islamic groups and religious activities; thus with the relative relaxation of this policy, it was expected that most of the underground charity activities related to Islamic groups would go public and become official. This materialized to some extent, while others preferred to remain informal, which gave them with more flexibility. With the perception that political participation only involves voting, NGOs sympathizing with Islamic parties mobilized women to participate in every election and referendum. Women have proven to be the critical mass that decides the winning party in any election. Just as Islamic parties tried to mobilize women and win their support, seculars and liberals tried to do the same thing, but with less success. Apart from sessions organized to develop the political awareness of women and training session on how to choose a candidate and what to do inside the polling station, seculars and liberals focused more on promoting women's issues on the legislative and media agendas.

Ultimately, the ruling FJP⁽⁵⁾, with its affiliations with other Islamic political forces, actually provided better grounds for new NGOs, especially CBOs with

Islamic backgrounds, to exist and work without harassment by the police. Older organizations with secular backgrounds had to work around security restraints before the revolution, but benefited from the relative relaxation of security control in the aftermath of the revolution while fighting against increasing radical religious discourse.

Conclusion

The impact of the revolution on women's issues, concerns and status is very controversial. On the one hand, the revolution opened up opportunities for civil society in terms of the formation of new organizations, decreased state security control, and women's participation in the public sphere. On the other hand, all NGOs and CBOs suffer from lack of resources due to decreased local contributions, the new restrictions on foreign funding and the inability of international aid agencies to deliver the funds required to implement projects. Women across the board also suffer from economic problems related to the deteriorating economic conditions in the aftermath of the revolution; there is also a fear that in the future women will be pushed violently out of the public sphere due to increased political polarization and the marginalization of women's issues by various political forces.

In general terms, several points should be highlighted.

1. Although women's organizations and the feminist movement in Egypt are relatively old, the gap between these organizations and local needs remains as wide as ever.

2. In Assiut geographical context plays a major role in understanding women's participation in the public sphere. Women's presence and representation in Upper Egypt cannot be understood in isolation from the region's problems of marginalization and exclusion. In addition, women's presence in the public sphere cannot be understood without understanding the societal makeup and social conservatism of the community.
3. Capacity building remains a major need for the majority of NGOs and CBOs, especially those formed after January 25th 2011, yet conventional methods and forms of capacity building would not respond to the needs of local communities. Education and economic empowerment remain the main concerns of most women and women's organizations across the political-identity spectrum. Yet these factors are presented as parallel rather than interactive paths. In other words, education is perceived as a different priority from, albeit sometimes a gateway to, economic empowerment and social mobility.
4. Formal political participation is a key missing factor: although Egyptian women have shown great interest in participating in informal politics, the forms of participation remain rather passive or reactive, i.e. voting in elections and referendums. Running for office remains a remote, undesirable option even for active local women. Participation in political parties is not an option for older women, and attracts only a small number of younger women due to lack of opportunities and/or social and political restrictions. It is also remarkable that renowned feminist activists do not run for political office, except for Jamila Ismail

and Bothaina Kamal. They seem to prefer to work outside the political arena and in the social setting that gives them more room to maneuver.

5. Secularism and the secular feminist movement have different meanings in Egypt to those in other countries. Most feminist groups in Egypt, although sharing some ideas and concepts with other secular feminist groups around the world, are aware of the Egyptian social and cultural context, which makes them more sensitive to and ready to engage with cultural and religious settings.

Therefore, we can conclude that the challenges facing women and NGOs working with them are manifested on two levels.

Civil society

One of the most important gains of the January 25th revolution is the relative decrease in police harassment of NGOs and the ability of all political factions to establish new NGOs and initiatives regardless of their ideological background. Yet political instability and the uncertain future of the democratization process could reverse these gains and new restrictions could be imposed. The latest court verdict against human rights activists working in INGOs strengthened these fears, resulting in a lack of confidence among local communities, NGOs and government agencies. On another level, the inability of the legislative body to issue the new law regulating the work of civil society adds to the legal challenges faced by these organizations. Apart from the debate about the democratic nature of the proposed draft, the inability to finalize it destabilizes the work of active CSOs and jeopardizes the process of establishing new ones.

Established organizations, especially new and small ones, suffer from numerous challenges related to their low institutional capacity (i.e. having sufficient resources and poorly qualified staff).

Marginalized women

Eagerness for education was the loudest cry of almost all women encountered in this project, whether activists, feminists, NGO and CBO employees, or local women. Illiteracy is the main challenge for them, and education is seen as the gateway to a more prosperous and empowered future for women. However, this argument is overshadowed by the low quality of education and the fact that some educated women are unable to improve their lives, which is a more complicated process than just acquiring a diploma.

The next problem was poverty: more than 45% of Egyptians live below the poverty line and women suffer more from poverty and the social problems related to it; thus, resolving poverty would mean improving their lives. It would give many young girls a better chance to seek education, because currently they have to drop out of school to look for a job to support their families or are forced out of school because their parents cannot afford education and therefore force them into marriage at a young age. How to fight poverty remains a legitimate question. Billions of dollars are spent every year by the government, development agencies and NGOs, yet the percentage of poverty-stricken people is rising, especially in the aftermath of the revolution. Eradicating poverty requires cooperation among government, NGOs and CSOs, and the private sector. It also requires a vision of

a society that is empowered to control its own destiny. The increase in the number of poor in Egypt and the complexity of their sufferings make us doubt the effectiveness of the policies adopted to eradicate poverty.

Despite this, poverty is not the real problem, as witnessed throughout the project: women tend to find ways to cope with economic difficulties and are very innovative in finding ways to fight poverty and/or live with it. Rather, they complained that society does not help them in their struggle to fight/cope with poverty, while limited private space puts pressure on their struggle to solve their problems. Many focus group participants said that they did not mind working at any job to provide for themselves and their families. Yet traditional religious discourse and societal norms limit their ability to move in the public space and find solutions to their problems. A woman living in Saft, Stable or Assiut would not dare to challenge social norms that do not accept women traveling away from home to find a job or staying out late at work. The belief that heaven awaits a woman if she obeys her husband no matter what is hard to challenge. Thus, it is more important to work on changing societal norms and the traditional religious discourse (Islamic and Christian alike).

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هوامش الدراسة:

- 1) the original project was done with a grant from London School of Economics and OXFAM on Mapping Women's political participation across the Arab world: mapping of existing and emerging forces. this paper is based on field work related to this project and presented to MPSA annual conference 2016
- 2) this was the case till 2013, nevertheless, there were number of infra-structure projects done in the area specially water supply projects.
- 3) special thanks to Ms. Sarra Moneir for collecting and contributing to writing the early drafts of this section.
- 4) we consider this period as part of the transitional period because the process of building the new institutions of the new regime was not concluded yet. Drafting the new constitution was still on going process and the parliament was dissolved based on the constitutional court verdict.
- 5) the party was outlawed by a court decree in the aftermath of Military coup in 2014.
