

# Engendering the Arab Spring: Where Do Egyptian Women's Rights Go From Here?

Written by Samantha Cooke

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/13/engendering-the-arab-spring-where-do-egyptian-womens-rights-go-from-here/>

SAMANTHA COOKE, MAY 13 2013

The events of January 2011 took the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region by storm, leaving the rest of the world shocked and surprised by the social uprisings which were taking place. The actions of Mohammed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in December 2010, proved to be the catalyst for the social movements which developed initially in Tunisia, quickly followed by Egypt, Libya, Syria and Bahrain, with more subtle rumblings of discontent appearing in other countries such as Algeria. Motivated by long-term discontent with rising unemployment, poverty levels, a decrease in living standards, as well as a lack of free speech and political freedom, citizens in these countries took to the streets in protest against their governments. With these social uprisings came renewed hope and optimism from observers, believing that this would essentially result in a Middle Eastern revolution where by authoritarian style regimes would be overthrown in favour of a more liberal and democratic mode of governance. Despite these numerous motivating factors which all contributed to the emergence of these social uprisings, the face of these movements, especially in Egypt, has been women. Observers hoping to see a more Westernised democratic model of governance being implemented following the fall of Ben Ali (Tunisia), and Mubarak (Egypt) equated democracy in the MENA region with the notion of gender equality; thus bringing women to the fore of the coverage of the events which were unravelling.

Despite the situations in Libya and Syria proving to constitute more of a civil war between two factions and dominating the media coverage since the demise of the two aforementioned leaders; the situations in Egypt and Tunisia are still problematic. Due to the broad cultural, political, and linguistic ranges of the MENA region, it is not possible to collectively refer to the Arab Spring and events which have occurred as one combined mass movement, nor should specific groups or classes across the region be reduced to one group. Rather each group, class, region and country should be understood in relation to their specific motivational issues and situational understandings of what is happening. For this purpose and due to the prominence of the somewhat contradictory messages being purported by the Muslim Brotherhood; the case of women in Egypt will be examined so as to understand how the Arab Spring affected them and what it means for their future.

### Engendering the Arab Spring:

Calls for human rights echoed throughout Egypt from men and women, with women playing a significant role in the protests and social movement. Reactions to protests saw violent retaliations from government forces, with the response to women's involvement being especially harsh. Before the social movements occurred in Egypt, [Western] travellers and tourists were known to comment on the invisibility of women within the public sphere, especially the political one. However, the protests in Tahrir Square quickly upended this notion, with women ensuring their visibility in seeking change within the Egyptian state.[1] There was no specificity with regard to the types of women who took to the street, women of all ages, with varying levels of education all protested against Mubarak's government for change. However, what could initially be regarded as a positive move for women quickly deteriorated as security forces took violent action against those participating in the movement for change.

Gender discrimination and exclusion are not new concepts for Egyptian women, with Amnesty International reporting that the 2010 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report placed Egypt as 125/134 countries with regard to

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gender equality.[2] In 2012, Egypt has seen a change of 0.004, placing it at 126/135 countries; however there has been virtually no change with regard to political empowerment between 2006 and 2012.[3] However, since the Arab Spring began in Egypt there have been an increasing number of reports of violence against women, including beatings and sexual abuse. Victims of this violence not only relates to female protestors, but also journalists covering the movement.

Despite Mubarak's resignation after 18 days of protest, the Egyptian public remained committed to seeing the process through. Unhappy with the drawn out military presence, protests once again began, highlighting that the demand for change ran deeper than simply changing their leader. 8 months after his resignation in December 2011, women's rights activists took to the streets in protest against the violence being inflicted on protestors by security forces, and carrying images of the violence being used against women.

Violence and harassment of women has not only impacted on their personal security, but also on other sectors such as healthcare. During the initial 18 days of the uprising, rumours, which turned out to be untrue, circulated about the need for women to stay at home due to the dangerous nature of the streets. This resulted in under staffed hospitals as female staff members followed this advice; there were also rumours regarding the occupation of and damage done to emergency rooms by thieves.[4]

## **Beyond the Arab Spring:**

Whilst many believe Egypt's movement to have ended, the replacement of leaders and quietening of politically motivated protests does not mean the process is complete. With the introduction of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood who assumed office in June 2012, women's rights have once again been brought to the fore of the ongoing changes in Egypt. Despite promises of bringing stability, security, and justice to a country which had experienced great upheavals in the last year, Morsi's response to the international focus on women appeared to contradict his initial stance.

As women's rights were discussed with regard to a U.N. declaration in early 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood spoke out, arguing that increasing recognition of women's rights could be detrimental to society, indicating a return to a more patriarchal structure of society where women would not be allowed to travel, work, use contraception without her husband's approval, or manage the family's finances. Outlining 10 reasons why Muslim countries should 'reject and condemn' the declaration, the newly elected Islamist party posed problems similar to those experienced during other negotiations regarding women's rights.[5] Fearing that the declaration would empower women with regard to other aspects such as rights in divorce, marrying non-Muslim men, and filing complaints of sexual harassment against husbands,[6] the Muslim Brotherhood suggested that the declaration be optional for countries where it would contravene religious, national or cultural laws or traditions. With the newly invigorated determination to bridge gaps between countries and provide women with recognised rights at a global level rather than providing loop holes for countries that fear the empowerment of women. This response by the Muslim Brotherhood can be viewed as contradicting the initial promises made during the election process, with citizen's voices and demands' being ignored as the possible implementation of a more traditional Islamic state is introduced to the post-Arab Spring environment in Egypt.

In January 2013, Thompson Reuters reported that clashes in Tahrir Square a week earlier had resulted in extreme violence, 25 women being sexually assaulted and 50 people dying in 5 days. In these clashes protestors have accused their current President of 'hijacking the revolution' after Mubarak was removed from power. This violence has also resulted in a state of emergency being declared in 3 cities along the Suez Canal, Ismalia, Port Said, and Suez. Due to the nature of the violence, the army was reportedly deployed to 2 of these cities with permission to arrest civilians. [7]

Reports of violence against women both during and after the initial events of the Arab Spring include beatings to all bodily areas, weapons being used to inflict injuries, isolating them and groping them whilst trying to rip off their clothing, and some women were forced to undergo invasive virginity tests. Despite Prime Minister Hisham Qandil announcing that his cabinet were developing a law focussing on quelling harassment, it is still a regular occurrence

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for women whether it be by other civilians or members of the security forces. It is also reported that prior to the Arab Spring, in 2008, approximately 83 per cent of Egypt's women had experienced sexual harassment, thus indicating a need for concern regarding the number that this has reached and is continuing to rise to in the aftermath of the initial events.[8] What is equally concerning is the shared opinion by some that the women affected should not have put themselves in dangerous situations where they were likely to be harassed or assaulted; as well as the apparent lack of punishment for the perpetrators of these crimes.

## Where To Go From Here?

Whilst observers have readily criticised the lack of democracy in the MENA region and have called for a more Western style model to be introduced, there is a strong argument against the implementation of such a model due to the varying cultural and historical trajectories of each of the countries in the region. Whilst this model is not necessarily suitable for countries such as Egypt where Sharia Law still has a prominent role, it is argued here that it is not impossible to develop a democratic model which accommodates the country's cultural and traditional traits. With this in mind, advances have been made historically with regard to women's rights, thus indicating that a specific model of democracy is not necessarily required, some have however been rescinded. What a more democratic structure would potentially mean is that achievements made with regard to gender equality would be more grounded and upheld.

With regard to women's rights during the Arab Spring, there have been clear violations with women reporting sexual harassment, beatings and sexual violations. The approach taken appears to have adopted a very traditional and patriarchal nature, by which it is meant that women's public presence and participation in the protests were considered to be unacceptable and a more oppressive and violent hand was dealt to them.

In the post-Arab Spring environment however there is still strong animosity between the people and the government. A sense of betrayal is becoming increasingly prominent, and there have been reports of violations of women's rights occurring over a year later. Whilst 28 months have elapsed since the initial protests in Tunisia, and 27 months since rumblings in Egypt spilt over into mass movement, uncertainty surrounding Egypt's future is still strong. The events of the Egyptian Arab Spring are still impacting on the country now and there is no clear understanding of what will happen next. Based on the approaches and opinions which have been purported thus far by the Egyptian government, it appears unlikely that gender equality in Egypt will improve any time soon. What must be noted however is that events such as those which were witnessed in the Arab Spring do not produce immediate change, and it is therefore too early to determine what the future of Egyptian women's rights will look like. The hope is that somehow they will be developed in a way which is compatible with Shari'a Law, thus allowing the country to maintain its religious political and social identity. All that can be done now is watch and wait.

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**Samantha Cooke** is a PhD researcher at the University of Surrey, UK, she is also a seminar leader and research assistant within the department. Having obtained her BA Politics from Surrey, she then went on to study for an MSc Middle East Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London where her interest in Islamic feminism and women's rights in the MENA region was developed. Her current research examines the role of religion and secularism with regard to women's marital rights in early twentieth century Egypt and Iran. You can follow her on twitter at @cooke\_samantha.

[1] Arsgad, S. The Arab Spring: What did it do for women? *Middle East Monitor* accessed 09/05/2013

[2] *Women's Human Rights in Egypt* accessed 09/05/2013

[3] Hausman, R., Tyson, L.D., Zahidi, S. The Global Gender Gap Report *World Economic Forum*, Switzerland, 2012: 168-169

[4] Hamdy, S. Strength and vulnerability after Egypt's Arab Spring uprisings *American Ethnologist* 39:1 (Feb.,

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[5] Nichols, M. Egypt warns giving women some rights could destroy society *Thompson Reuters* at accessed 09/05/2013

[6] For the original statement outlining the party's concerns see: <http://ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30731&ref=search.php> accessed 09/05/2013

[7] Caspiani, M. Women sexually assaulted in Cairo clashes *Thompson Reuters* at accessed 10/05/2013

[8] *ibid*