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A Century of Egyptian Women's Demands: The Four Waves of the Egyptian Feminist Movement

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### **Article information:**

**To cite this document:** Hala Kamal . "A Century of Egyptian Women's Demands: The Four Waves of the Egyptian Feminist Movement" *In* Gender and Race Matter: Global Perspectives on Being a Woman. Published online: 25 Aug 2016; 3-22.

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S1529-212620160000021002>

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# A CENTURY OF EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S DEMANDS: THE FOUR WAVES OF THE EGYPTIAN FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Hala Kamal

## ABSTRACT

*Purpose – This chapter offers a critical outline of the Egyptian feminist movement. It traces the forms of feminist activism and the demands raised by Egyptian feminists throughout the twentieth century and into the new millennium.*

*Design/methodology/approach – The study uses the tools of feminist theory and women's history in charting a critical outline of the Egyptian women's movement and feminist activism throughout a century of Egyptian history. The study attempts to identify the main features of the movement in terms of the demands raised by women and the challenges and achievements involved within the socio-political national and international contexts.*

*Findings – The Egyptian feminist movement is divided here into four waves, highlighting the intersections between feminist demands and*

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**Gender and Race Matter: Global Perspectives on Being a Woman**

**Advances in Gender Research, Volume 21, 3–22**

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**ISSN: 1529-2126/doi:10.1108/S1529-212620160000021002**

*national demands, as well as Egyptian women's struggle for their rights. The first wave is seen as focusing on women's right to public education and political representation. The second wave is marked by women's achievement of constitutional and legal rights in the context of state feminism. The third wave is characterised by feminist activism in the context of civil society organising. The fourth wave has extended its struggle into the realm of women's bodies and sexuality.*

*Research implications/limitations – The study limits itself to forms of women's agency and feminist activism in the public sphere.*

*Originality/value – This chapter is an original attempt at outlining the Egyptian women's movement based on the demands raised and challenges faced. The chapter also suggests the existence of a sense of continuity in the Egyptian women's movement.*

**Keywords:** Egypt; feminism; women's movement; revolution

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the Egyptian women's movement can be seen as an extended struggle for equal opportunities in the public sphere and justice in the domestic sphere. It is a struggle that is marked by both visibility and vocality, particularly throughout the twentieth century and into the new millennium. When we speak of the women's movement, as a mobilised action taking place in public against authority, one is reminded of the Egyptian women's first demonstration organised on 16 March 1919 as part of the Egyptian people's fight against British occupation, embodied in the Revolution of 1919. It is a demonstration that has not only been engraved in the official history of the Egyptian nation, but was also documented by the press and even praised in a poem by the Egyptian Poet of the Nile, Hafiz Ibrahim, in which he described the Egyptian women's march and the police forces' violent dispersion of the demonstration – an act of public dissent which led to the death of a woman and many being injured. The violence with which women protesters were met did not bring an end to Egyptian women's organising; on the contrary, it only led to further mobilisation, more organisation and political strategizing – a process that has continued to ebb and flow throughout the years. This historical incident

still had reverberations in 2011, when Egyptian women joined the protesters in the streets of Egypt calling for bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity. The image of the demonstrators of 1919 has its contemporary equivalent in the masses of women whose dissent is violently confronted by the authorities – not only politically but socially as well. In addition to the typical methods of brutal assault, in the form of rubber bullets, tear-gas, and batons used by men in uniform, we have been witnessing additional forms of sexual assault, targeting women's bodies, not simply as human beings, but particularly as women. However, Egyptian women's struggle is, this time, being documented and illustrated through all forms of media, including social media, as well as by human rights and feminist non-government organisations. And again, as with the praise the women received in 1919 for their courageous act of protest, victims of physical violence and sexual assault today receive the support and admiration of many.

Although many acts of women's protests may not be directly feminist in terms of their demands, such as the demonstrations against the occupation or for social justice, any act of women's dissent, regardless of its demands, carries a feminist dimension. The process of women's mobilisation and public protest is in itself a struggle in the public sphere, an expression of women's visibility and agency. In spite of the fact that the women's demonstration in March 1919, as well as women's participation in the January 2011 protests, was not centred around feminist demands, the act of protest itself remains a feminist act. Nevertheless, since 1919 (and earlier) and up to the present, Egyptian feminists have been organising themselves, mobilising other women and protesting for women's rights. It is this struggle, and these demands, that I wish to explore here.<sup>1</sup> This essay, therefore, attempts to identify the main developments in the Egyptian feminist movement in the light of the demands it raised; and to organise the history of the movement within concrete phases based on the form and content of feminist activism in Egypt. I will identify the main features of the Egyptian feminist movement from the late 19th century to the present, with reference to the relationship between feminist activism and the state by tracing women's demands since 1910.

## **THE EGYPTIAN FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

One of the most common misrepresentations of the feminist movement is that of a group of prominent women figures demanding women's rights,

very often at the expense of the family and society as a whole. At the same time, those supportive of women's rights often believe that women's rights should not be given priority over socio-political agendas since they claim that women would obtain their rights once democracy, liberalism or socialism is achieved – depending on their political stance. In Egypt, feminists have been repeatedly asked by their comrades to postpone women's rights demands and unite all power and energy towards ending colonialism, in the past, and implementing social justice, in the present. This essay, however, is grounded in the steadfast conviction that the feminist movement is a political movement based on women's subjugation to multiple forms of oppression, marginalisation and exclusion. It is a movement that seeks to change women's conditions in line with social justice concerns.

The feminist movement is a political movement in the sense that it acknowledges the imbalance in the power structures and relations with respect to gender and in its intersection with other forms and categories of oppression. It places women at the centre and has struggled to empower women and improve their lives – a process which often involves confrontations with various forms and levels of authority: political, social, economic, religious and cultural, among many others. In all cases, a feminist movement is driven by its members' collective 'feminist consciousness' – the definition of which is perfectly articulated by feminist historian, Gerda Lerner:

I define feminist consciousness as the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but is societally determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally that they must and can provide an alternative vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination. (Lerner, 1993, p. 4)

Feminist awareness thus involves knowledge and activism through intellectual realisation, solidarity and resistance, and action towards social change. In this light, the feminist movement, grounded in a feminist consciousness, emerges as a political movement that is aware of the socio-gender power structures that subjugate and marginalise women, and is involved in exposing and changing them.

The history of the Egyptian feminist movement is usually considered to go back to the Egyptian women's participation in the Revolution of 1919 against the British occupation of Egypt. Of particular significance is women's involvement in the March 1919 demonstrations which followed the British authorities' banishment of the Egyptian nationalist leader Saad

Zaghlool and his companions to the Seashell Islands. Moreover, the rise of the women's rights movement has often been attributed to the *nahda* (renaissance) male intellectuals such as Al-Afghani, Al-Tahtawi, Mohamed Abdou and Qassem Amin. It is only since the 1990s that feminist activists and academics have started highlighting the active role of women in raising feminist consciousness. Furthermore, feminist approaches to Egyptian history have revealed the role of Egyptian women since ancient Egyptian times and throughout Egyptian history (Elsadda & Abu-Ghazi, 2001). Yet, the earliest manifestations of a rising feminist consciousness, according to Gerda Lerner, can be identified in the work of Egyptian women intellectuals who have called for a revision of social norms and women's rights within the Egyptian renaissance/awakening/*nahda* project.<sup>2</sup> The Egyptian feminist movement has a long history and, similarly to western feminism, is characterised by waves. The following sections are devoted to the development of the feminist movement and provide a basis from which to understand women's contemporary and often dangerous activism.

### **FIRST WAVE: EDUCATION AND SUFFRAGE (LATE 19TH CENTURY TO THE EARLY 1950s)**

Women played a visible and effective role in the 1919 Revolution, yet Egyptian women's participation in the demonstrations of March 1919 does not mark a historical starting point in women's activism. However, there are historical accounts of Egyptian women's protests starting with their participation in the anti-French campaign in Egypt when French forces reached Egyptian land in Alexandria in 1798 and women took to the streets across the country against the French invasion. This political engagement must have alerted women to the multiple levels of oppression to which they were subjected, leading in 1799 to the Rosetta Women's Conference in which women discussed their gendered roles within Egyptian society in comparison to French women's positions in their families (Elsadda & Abu-Ghazi, 2001, p. 26). There is also mention of women's protests during Ottoman rule in Egypt, and particular mention is made of the organised protests of women in the Bab al-Sha'riya and Boulak districts against taxation and the rising cost of living (Elsadda & Abu-Ghazi, 2001, pp. 27–28). Historians also mention women's contribution to the popular resistance movement in Alexandria against the British navy's bombardment of the city prior to the fall of Egypt to British occupation in July 1882. Historical

accounts refer to the Egyptian people's (men, women and children) resistance together with the role of the royal family's women in donating horses, medical supplies and money in support of the popular resistance movement against the British (Elsadda & Abu-Ghazi, 2001, pp. 39–41). Thus the earliest forms of women's political engagement documented by historians were directly related to the national cause, with the exception of the Rosetta Conference and its obvious gender dimension (Elsadda & Abu-Ghazi, 2001, pp. 81, 87; Sobki, 1986, pp. 26–27).

Although these early demonstrations did not carry feminist demands, it is worth noting that they still represent a stage in the development of feminist consciousness, perhaps not related to the content of these women's activism as much as to the form. Women organised themselves and took to the streets at a time when women were not even granted the right to education; this in itself is a political act with a feminist dimension. The feminism here does not lie in the slogans carried by these women, but in the fact that their act was an indirect rebellion against a general prevalent culture that kept middle class and upper class women confined within their homes and restricted to domestic concerns. Moreover, women's participation in the anti-colonial protests, led by the *Wafd* Party, consequently led to the formation of the The Wafd Women's Central Committee in December 1919. The party's initiative added to the liberal and national image of the *Wafd* Party as representing the nation, while at the same time it empowered women by allowing them a space for political activism within a powerful entity, whose leaders acknowledge women's rights.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is also interesting to note that Egyptian women's struggle for their rights came hand in hand with national demands for independence – both in direct confrontation to the British occupation. For instance, women's demands for access to education were not only rejected by Egyptian conservative powers, but by the British authorities in Egypt as well (Ahmed, 1992; Baron, 1994).

In her book, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*, Baron (1994) presents the role of Egyptian women's press (newspapers and magazines owned, established and edited by women), since the publication of the first women's newspaper *Al-Fatah (The Young Woman)* in 1892, followed by several others such as *Anis al-Jalees* in 1898, *Fatat al-Sharq* in 1906 and *Al-jins al-lateef* in 1908, among many others – all with the aim of defending women's rights and expressing their points of view. Baron points out that the rise of the national liberation movement encouraged reflections on the society and identity, leading to reconsiderations of socio-cultural and gender roles, as reflected in the press, which opened up the discussion of such issues as marriage, divorce, polygamy, custody, education and work,

in addition to the veil and domesticity (Baron, 1994, p. 14ff.). In addition to the press, upper class women held literary and cultural salons, such as Princess Nazli Fadel's Salon and May Ziyada's Salon. These offered space for direct intellectual exchanges between women and men about social, political, cultural and gender issues, and salons that were frequented by prominent figures at the time. In 1914 the Women's Educational Association was formed, offering public lectures for women about women's issues, in response to women being prevented from joining the Egyptian University established in 1908.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, women were penetrating the public sphere through involvement in charity organisations, established and run by upper middle class women and funded by women of the Egyptian aristocracy. These offered medical services to poor women and children and provided shelters to homeless women and orphaned children.

Although these activities were not restricted to feminist activism, they played an important role in women's involvement in the public sphere. First, they allowed women a degree of mobility across the gender-restricted lines separating the public sphere from the private sphere. Second, although most of the roles taken up by women seemed related to the domestic sphere of nurturing and caring for others, this also involved breaking out of the confines of the home, and getting involved with offering solutions to social problems. Third, running newspapers, establishing organisations and holding salons required a development of management skills beyond the confines of domestic life, and helped these women acquire political tools of representation and negotiation alongside developing the skills of argumentation. Fourth, these activities offered women the opportunity to develop their networks among like-minded women as well as with other Egyptian intellectuals and collective entities. Egyptian women's active engagement in social and political issues was reflected in their efforts to include women's rights in the 1923 Constitution. However, as Mervat Hatem points out, women were prevented from accessing their political rights in the Constitution, highlighting Article 23 which states that the nation is the source of authority, with the nation defined in terms of maleness (Hatem, 1992, p. 35). Although women were allowed to attend lectures at the university as of 1908, it was in 1928 that they obtained equal enrolment opportunities which led to the graduation of the first batch of Egyptian University women graduates in 1933. It was the first step that enabled women to access academia and the public sphere of work – beyond the fields of nursing and schooling.

The systematic increase in the numbers of educated working women led to their rising awareness concerning their rights in the workplace, and

mobilisation towards social change and legal reform. This is reflected in the establishment of the Egyptian Women's Party in 1942, which is the first entity that paid attention to gender equality in education, work, citizenship and political participation, with particular emphasis on working women's rights to paid maternity leave, in addition to its role in urging women workers to form unions in factories and other workplaces.<sup>5</sup> This trend was reinforced in 1946 by the establishment of the National Committee for Students and Workers, with women such as Latifa al-Zayyat and Inji Efflatoun elected to leading positions within the Committee, combining women's rights with national liberation demands (Abdel-Wahab, 1995, pp. 136–139). The 1940s also witnessed the establishment of the 'Daughter of the Nile Association', led by Doria Shafik, mobilising for women's political rights and leading the women's hunger strike in Cairo and Alexandria in 1954, demanding women's inclusion in the post 23 July Revolution constitutional process.<sup>6</sup>

## **SECOND WAVE: STATE FEMINISM AND THE WORKING WOMAN (1950s INTO THE 1970s)**

In her important study of Nasser's Egypt of the 1950s and 1960s from a gender perspective, Laura Bier highlights the connection between Nasser's national development project, Arab Socialism, and feminism in Egypt. In this respect, she states that Nasser's regime 'increasingly went from alternately ignoring and suppressing women's independent political initiatives to co-opting them into its own programme – a strategy it employed with other groups such as workers and peasants' (Bier, 2011, p. 55). It is this process that she, among other scholars, defines as a manifestation of state feminism. While the Egyptian legal system was on the whole secular, family law continued to abide by religious codes in the areas regulating marriage, divorce, custody, child support and inheritance. The paradoxical dimension of Egyptian state feminism highlighted the contradictions between the 'progressive framework' of women's rights in the public sphere stipulated in the constitution and labour laws and the 'conservative' personal status law governing women in the private sphere (Hatem, 1992, p. 232).

The state maintained its monopoly over the feminist realm in Egypt throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. The Egyptian feminist struggle at that time directly addressed the State, demanding legal reforms of the family and personal status law. The two main issues raised at the time were

those related to women's obedience (*al-ta'a*) and divorce laws. *Al-ta'a* refers to the husband's right to resort to legally proving his wife's 'disobedience' if she leaves home and having her forcibly brought back to the marital house, 'bayt al-ta'a' (obedience house). Feminist lawyers, academics, journalists and social reformers such as Aziza Hussein led the campaigns towards personal status law reforms, challenging bayt al-ta'a and the man's unilateral right to end the marriage by divorcing his wife. Women demanded that courts certify divorce, that child custody decisions be based on court rulings, that taking a second wife be conditioned by court permission, that divorced women receive fair compensation, and the abolition of obedience verdicts (abolished in 1967) (Bier, 2011, p. 112).

The 1956 Constitution and National Charter recognised women's equal status as citizens in building the new socialist nation, while Article 52 of the Constitution committed the state to providing work to all citizens. Compulsory primary education, the expansion in health services, nationalisation of industries and consolidation of state institutions required and encouraged female employment. Although women worked in education, health care and social services, the judicial, diplomatic and ministerial positions continued to exclude women (Bier, 2011, p. 66). At the same time, women's work in the public sphere was encouraged through family planning policies. Family planning became a national policy implemented nationwide as contraceptive methods were distributed free of charge in clinics, health centres and health units across the country. The nuclear family, composed of parents and a maximum of three children, became the model, and this was reflected in child-care laws. Similar to the case with legal reform of the family and personal status law, the campaigns propagating these reforms relied on secular discourses relying on modern values, while at the same time adopting modernised religious discourses based on reinterpretations of women's rights in Islam, in order to confront religious conservatism.

### **THIRD WAVE: CIVIL SOCIETY FEMINISM (1980s–2011)**

The state's grip on civil society began to loosen with the assassination of President Sadat and the coming to power of Mubarak in 1981. More importantly for women, Egypt continued seeking international support, and ratified CEDAW in 1981, thus committing itself to the elimination of

discrimination against women. At the same time, changes in the law of association opened the door for the establishment of human rights and feminist organisations – the earliest of which are the New Woman Foundation and the Alliance of Arab Women, in addition to law centres offering legal assistance to women, such as CEWLA (Center of Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance), among many others. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 was another milestone in placing women's rights on the national agenda, with Egypt hosting the conference and the Egyptian civil society organisations emerging as the most knowledgeable and concerned about women's rights. They campaigned for women's reproductive rights, including the formation of female genital mutilation (FGM) task forces, among many other issues directly related to women's bodies and sexualities. It was during the ICPD that the human rights movement and the rising feminist movement cooperated to create networks, pressure groups and campaigns nationally and internationally. The aim was to highlight continuing gender discrimination against women despite the enforcement of international women's rights and human rights conventions.<sup>7</sup>

During this phase in the history of the Egyptian feminist movement we can identify feminist activism within three general frameworks. First, the most obvious and formal was the formation of women's committees in political parties. Although these committees were concerned with women's issues, they were more interested in the role of the family than in women's rights as such. Moreover, their agendas were generally designed to fit within party agendas rather than promoting feminist goals. Second, these three decades witnessed the emergence of feminist concerns that manifested themselves as initiatives – both independent initiatives and others within human rights organisations which established women and gender programmes within their institutions. The most visible and vocal initiatives were the FGM Task Force and the Media Watch Group. The FGM Task Force focused on the eradication of female genital mutilation in Egypt, using tools garnered from UN efforts to improve women's lives within the framework of women's health and reproductive rights. Similarly, the Media Watch Group was formed of independent women researchers and activists with the purpose of exposing gender-stereotyping and highlighting its role in maintaining and reinforcing discriminatory images and representations of women in the media and school curricula. Third, similar to these initiatives, independent groups of women came together around various issues related to women's lives and rights. Yet, these groups decided to make use of the change in the government's attitude to freedom of

association, and to establish themselves as legal entities. It is within that framework that several women's organisations and centres were established from the late 1980s onwards, while the early years of the millennium witnessed the establishment of Nazra for Feminist Studies in 2005.<sup>8</sup>

With reference to political participation, the introduction of a quota system led to 64 seats reserved for women (518 total seats) in the parliament of 2010, the majority of whom were senior state figures, and members of the ruling party and the National Council of Women. It was this state manipulation of the women's quota in the 2010 parliamentary elections that developed skepticism of the system among Egyptian feminist activists. This was obvious immediately following the 2011 Revolution, when Egyptian feminist activists raised the issue of parity during the parliamentary elections of 2011 and the formation of the Constitution Assembly, but were more concerned about the presence of feminist representation in the constitution-writing process.

During this time CEDAW became a battle ground for the Egyptian feminist movement, where the non-government sector proved to be more knowledgeable and more involved in the struggle for the elimination of discrimination against women – as unequivocally manifested during the 1994 ICPD in Egypt. It was the international visibility and vocality of the Egyptian feminist movement at that time that led the state to revive its State Feminism policy by establishing the National Council for Women to counter civil society representation of Egyptian women's issues, and gain the support of the international agencies and organisations that were developing a serious interest in cooperation with Egyptian feminist legal non-government entities. Another area of joint campaigning went beyond feminist issues and was linked to the State's realisation of the growing power and credibility of those non-government organisations, legal assistance centres and human rights institutions proliferating throughout the 1990s. Thus the state introduced legal changes in the form of the Law of Association in 1999, which enforced legal frameworks restricting freedoms of association. An organised campaign proved this law unconstitutional, which led again to the State issuing the new Law of Association in 2002, and further restrictions are continually introduced. The most recent was implemented in 2014, forcing all civil society organisations, institutions and centres to register and gain governmental approval via the Ministry of Social Solidarity. This led several civil rights entities to either freeze their work or modify their statuses, among ongoing threats of the imposition of further restrictions through yet another Law of Association.

Since the 1990s, and into the first decade of the millennium, one notices a rise in the number of feminist groups and human rights NGOs including sexuality rights on their agendas and directing marked efforts towards confronting traditional practices such as honour killings and virginity tests in addition to FGM and reproductive rights. Moreover increasing attention was given to domestic violence, sexual harassment and the human rights of LGBTQ citizens. This can be seen as a development of the issues raised in Cairo during the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, 1994) when the term ‘sexual rights’ appeared on the agenda and the ICPD Program of Action included ‘several allusions to sexual rights’ (Ilkkaracan, 2008, p. 5). The issue of women’s bodies was ranking among the most important human rights concerns in Egypt, and has continued to be the main component of feminist and human rights activism.

#### **FOURTH WAVE: WOMEN’S BODIES AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS (2011 ONWARDS)**

It is perhaps too early to claim the ability to analyse the consequences of the 2011 Revolution on women’s rights in Egypt. However, one cannot deny that the past few years have witnessed major developments in Egyptian women’s relationships to the public sphere. As an Egyptian feminist, I will attempt in the following to identify what seem to me the most visible shifts in women’s agency, particularly in relation to the struggle for space in the public sphere. In this respect, I will be reflecting on the way in which the revolution empowered women, and the feminist struggle to insert women’s rights into the post-revolution society. Since 2011 two main issues have received the most attention: sexual violence against women and including women’s rights in the new constitution. Egyptian women’s participation in the revolution was spectacular but not at all exceptional. Women of all classes have managed to carve themselves various spaces across the past few decades, as peasants, street vendors and domestic workers, as well as teachers, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, academics and political activists, among many other women occupying the workplace and public space. This was the outcome of the struggles of several generations of women to enter and then maintain that space – a struggle that continues to the present day. Together with Egyptian women’s spectacular presence in the anti-Mubarak protests, confronting the police and army forces,

women journalists and activists were beginning to face an additional form of violence – sexual violence.

The earliest sexually violent targeting of women activists goes back to the anti-Mubarak demonstration on 25 May 2005, when for the first time women protesters were sexually attacked in public by men in civilian clothes standing next to the police. They were part of the civilian clothed thugs who have been regularly accompanying the police in the last decade, known among the protesters as 'the karate squads'. On that day in May, and for the first time, the demonstrators came face-to-face with an obviously new batch of police-supported thugs: the sexual harassment squad. This developed during the 2011 Revolution and onwards into organised squads, as well as sexual violence and gang rape groups targeting women activists and journalists during demonstrations. This direct targeting of women was not only restricted to women participants in political protests. Throughout the past decade, there has been a growing phenomenon of sexual harassment, violence and rape incidents during national holidays at crowded recreational city centre spots, such as in public parks and at cinemas.

For several years no action was taken by the government to confront these attacks against women. There have even been reports of women who feared reporting the incidents to the police because of the mistreatment received at police stations. Similarly, sexual violence against women activists was dismissed by the media and often blamed on the protesters, if not the women themselves. Consequently, the past few years witnessed the formation of various civil society independent anti-harassment groups which organised themselves, making sure they were present in key positions during protests and holidays. These include women and men who are trained to handle the sexual attack situation by rescuing the victim, then offering her medical, psychological and legal assistance.<sup>9</sup> This anti-sexual harassment movement has been developing and gaining much credibility throughout the past few years, to the extent that Cairo University has established a unit to combat sexual harassment and violence against women on campus.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior has established a unit within the ministry to combat violence against women, including sexual harassment. This issue of sexual harassment against women has been repeatedly addressed in the media, and several Egyptian feminist activists have written about it in the press.<sup>11</sup>

The other area of visible organised feminist activism took place during the constitution-writing process. A group of members of Egyptian feminist organisations got together as early as May 2011, forming the Women and

Constitution Group, which included feminists from feminist NGOs and human rights organisations as well as independent feminist activists and researchers. The group's involvement with the constitution-writing process was carried out in three consecutive stages and addressed several groups involved in the actual drafting of the Islamist constitution of 2012 and then the post 30 June 2013 constitution issued in 2014. These stages involved examining Egyptian constitutional history and exploring articles related to women, gender and the family in several international constitutions; drafting a list of women's demands to be included in the new constitution and phrasing them in constitutional language; and finally campaigning and mobilisation of political powers and constitution-writing committees to adopt these demands and include them in the body of the new constitution.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the final struggle was led and conducted by the feminist members of the constitution-writing 50-Committee, engaged in the negation process, particularly around Article 11, known as 'the women's article' in the 2014 Constitution (*Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 2014*).<sup>13</sup>

During the process of drafting the Egyptian post-revolution constitution feminist activism addressed two issues: women's representation on the constitution-writing committees and the demands that needed to be included in the process. The first constitution-writing assembly included very few women, and there was an unwillingness to fight for the preservation of Egyptian women's constitutional rights, not to mention raising the ceiling of these rights. Thus, the Constitution of 2012 came as a major blow to Egyptian women, threatening to deprive them of the rights they had obtained throughout the history of Egyptian feminist activism. When the Islamist president was removed from power in July 2013 following the massive demonstrations that started on 30 June and continued till 3 July, the new road map set included a revision of the constitution. A new process of constitutional amendments led to issuing the Constitution of 2014 that granted women rights in several of its articles. Although, the committee of 50 members that drafted the constitution included only five women, feminist activists did not undermine the committee due to its 10% women's representation. It was deemed important to acknowledge that these five women had a long history of involvement in the struggle for women's rights across at least the past two decades. Moreover, there were many male members on the constitution committee who were known for their support for women's rights. This was a concrete incident when feminist activists decided to work with the feminist and women's rights supporters within the committee, instead of demanding a greater representation of women who would not necessarily be supportive of women's rights.

Another important feature of the feminist struggle since January 2011 is the issue of political representation. This manifested itself at three main levels: parliamentary elections, membership of the constitution-writing bodies, and within the emerging post-revolution political parties. At the level of political parties, it is noticeable that most of the new political parties shared an interest in including women in top party positions, leading to the appointment of prominent figures such as Hoda Elsadda as vice-president of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, Hala Shukrallah as president of the Dustoor Party, and Karima El-Hefnawy as secretary general of the Egyptian Socialist Party, not to mention other visible women figures in various parties. Even the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party chose to place a few of its women members in the limelight, although their commitment to women's rights has completely failed during their year in power under the Islamist president Morsi. It is worth noting that while women are penetrating the public sphere of party politics, this phase in the history of the Egyptian women's movement is also witnessing a remarkable involvement of men in the movement.

We are currently witnessing the gradual realisation of gender-mainstreaming, not only within state, party, and bureaucracy politics and policies, but the younger generations of Egyptians are coming to age now in a post-revolutionary setup that acknowledges women's rights to the public sphere and tries to safeguard these through civil society initiatives as well as government policies and media discourses. We seem to be moving from the stage of women's rights to that of gender equality within the framework of social justice – one of the main slogans of the 2011 Revolution. We are still in this process of change, and the success or failure of this phenomenon still needs to stand the test of time.

## **CONCLUSION: A CENTURY OF EGYPTIAN FEMINIST DEMANDS**

The Egyptian feminist movement has a long history of its own that dates back to the end of the 19th century. This chapter has traced the development of the movement in the light of the demands it has raised throughout over a century of feminist activism in Egypt. Several features can be identified in this process. First, the Egyptian feminist movement has been constantly closely connected to its national political contexts, while at the same time being responsive to the international feminist agenda. Egyptian

women have attended international feminist conferences since 1923, with the Egyptian delegation participating in the Women's Congress in Rome in 1923. It is therefore noticeable that the Egyptian feminist agenda has always worked to enhance women's position from an international feminist perspective, while remaining deeply rooted in the national context with all its internal struggles. Second, Egyptian feminist activists have been aware of the importance of legal reform towards socio-cultural change in gender discrimination. Egyptian feminists have addressed parliaments, constitution-writing committees and legislators with their demands, and have, by and large, gradually succeeded in inserting their rights within the Egyptian constitutions. Feminists have mobilised for changes in labour law as well as the personal status and family law across the decades. Third, Egyptian feminists have been aware of the importance of political representation in enhancing women's condition in society. From the right to suffrage articulated as early as 1909 in the Egyptian feminist, Malak Hifni Nassef's demands to the parliament,<sup>14</sup> up to today's women's demands for quotas in parliament and party leadership as well as in judiciary and decision-making positions. Fourth, women have been addressing issues related to their bodies and sexuality, both directly and indirectly, since the early 20th century. Women's repeated demands to raise the age of marriage since the early 20th century are a manifestation of women's control of their bodies and reproductive rights. Women's campaigns against FGM, virginity tests, honour crimes, domestic and sexual violence mark a further development in women's struggle for sexual rights. Fifth, throughout the history of the Egyptian feminist movement, we notice an insistence on women's rights to education, higher education, work and independence. Even though women's right to education was a battlefield in the early 20th century and is currently taken for granted, feminists continue to push this right by maximising girls' access to school and university education. They have done this by legally raising the age of marriage to force parents to keep their daughters in schools rather than marry them off at an early age, and insisting on the protection of free higher education to provide young women with more access to national universities.

Finally, the Egyptian feminist movement has used the tools of political activism. Across the decades, they have implemented the tactics and strategies of national liberation and international solidarity as well as human rights activism to develop their own agendas and campaign to impose change. To achieve their goals, they have resorted to various forms of political protest, including issuing statements, marching in demonstrations, forming coalitions and organising occupational and hunger strikes, in

addition to using the media to create supportive public opinion. Feminists, having been involved in party politics and civil society organising throughout the history of the Egyptian feminist movement, have combined awareness with agency, deeply rooted in 'feminist consciousness'. Egyptian feminists have continually exposed and fought socio-economic and cultural forms of gender discrimination. They have worked together towards building national, regional and international networks and alliances among individual women and women's organisations. Their solidarity and cooperation has led to designing feminist agendas that seek to gain, ensure and maintain women's rights at various levels and in different contexts. Living in a post-revolution Egypt today, where we wish to think of the 2011 Revolution as an ongoing political, social, cultural and economic period of change, I can also see the Egyptian feminist movement as an ongoing process, an ongoing revolution.

## NOTES

1. The study of the Egyptian feminist movement can be approached from various perspectives through: the study of women's press (Baron, 1994); the study of Egyptian women and legal structures within the Islamic tradition (Ahmed, 1992; Mir-Hosseini, Larsen, Vogt, & Moe, 2013; Sonbol, 1996; Tucker, 1985); the study of particular periods (Bier, 2011; Khalifa, 1973; Sobki, 1986); the study of women's writing (Ashour, GHazoul & Reda-Mekdashy, 2008; Booth, 2001; Elsadda, 2012) and the study of prominent feminist figures and their auto/biographies (Lafranchi, 2012; Shaarawi, 1981, 1987; Nelson, 1996); while the two most prominent accounts of the movement itself focused on its organisational goals, activities and structures (Abdel-Wahab, 1995; Al-Ali, 2000).

2. For more on the role of Egyptian women in conceptualising and mobilising for women's rights and gender reforms, particularly during the early years of the twentieth century, in the context of the Egyptian national movement and socio-cultural enlightenment, see Baron (1994), Elsadda (2012) and Sobki (1986).

3. According to Makdisi (2001), the women's anti-colonisation movement was at its beginnings a popular movement that engaged women from all classes of the Egyptian society, but was later transformed into an elitist movement involved in party politics.

4. When the Egyptian university was opened in December 1908, women demanded access to university education. Some women joined the university and attended its lectures, while others from the upper and more conservative rungs of the society demanded the inclusion of lectures open to women only. These pressures led to the establishment of the Women's Section at the Egyptian University (1909–1912), with lectures restricted to women on Wednesdays and Fridays, given by prominent women figures. For more on the Women's Section, see Kamal (2001).

5. The agenda of the Egyptian Feminist Party, established by Fatma Ne'mat Rashed, can be found in Amal El Sobki's book on the women's movement in Egypt (1986, pp. 120–121).
6. The agenda of the Union can be found in Sobki (1986, pp. 122–123), while more on Doria Shafik's role in the Egyptian feminist movement can be found in Nelson's (1996) biography of Doria Shafik.
7. The Cairo ICPD 1994 Programme of Action can be found at the following link: [http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/event-pdf/PoA\\_en.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/event-pdf/PoA_en.pdf)
8. More information can be found via the following links: New Woman Foundation (<http://nwrcegypt.org/>), Alliance for Arab Women: AAW (<http://www.theallianceforarabwomen.org/>), Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance: CEWLA (<http://www.cewla.org/>), The Women and Memory Forum: WMF (<http://www.wmf.org.eg/>), and Nazra for Feminist Studies (<http://nazra.org/>).
9. For more information about Egyptian anti-harassment initiatives, visit the following links: HarassMap (<http://harassmap.org/ar/>), OpAntiSH (<http://www.gsrc-mena.org/successstories/SuccessStoryEgypt.pdf>), Shoft Ta7rosh (I Saw Harassment) ([https://www.facebook.com/Shoft.Ta7rosh/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/Shoft.Ta7rosh/info?tab=page_info)).
10. For more on the Cairo University Anti-Harassment Unit, see <http://cu.edu.eg/anti-harassment>
11. For example, Zaki and Abd Alhamid (2014), originally published in Arabic in two parts on 8 January 2014 and 10 January 2014.
12. For a detailed description of the process, see Kamal (2015).
13. Elsadda (2015) gives a detailed account of the negotiation process within the 50-Committee in her article entitled 'Article 11: feminists negotiating power in Egypt'.
14. The Egyptian feminist, Malak Hifni Nassef, submitted a list of 10 demands to the Egyptian parliament in 1909. She presented them within a public lecture which she gave at the *Umma* Liberal Party, and that was later published in *Al-Jareeda* newspaper, as well as in Nassef's book *Al-Nisa'iyat* (Women's Issues) (1998 [1910], p. 147).

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