

# **From Exploitation to Polarization: Egyptian Women Mapping their Space and Discourse**

**Shereen Abouelnaga**  
Cairo University, Egypt  
shereens66@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

*How far the multiple gendered identities have contributed to the socio-political chasm and the state of polarization is one of the concerns of this paper. The main purpose is to seek an understanding of what happened between 2011 and 2014. While 2011 witnessed all forms of violations of women's rights by the military and their supporters; and 2012 & 2013 witnessed the poignant attempts at 'islamizing' the concept of gender, 2014 was the year of ululations and dancing in celebration of a new constitution and of the ousting of Islamists by the military. The three years then seem like a closed circuit, that which was shunned in 2011 is now hailed, and those who were elected are now ousted. In all that, one can safely say that women have been, and still are, among one of the major players on the scene. Their powerful presence in the Squares, marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, and participation in the elections cannot be overlooked. The stamina and persistence with which they carried out their socio-political choices and the awareness of their different positional ties is a striking fact that forces one to re-evaluate. Women's conspicuous presence that augmented polarization at some point is the second concern of this paper.*

**Keywords:** Women; Resistance; polarization; body politics; identity politics; space; player; gender; Egypt.

## الملخص

### من الاستثمار إلى الاستقطاب: النساء المصريات يرسمن الفضاء والخطاب

#### شيرين أبو النجا

تتساءل هذه الورقة عن الحد الذي ساهمت به الهويات القائمة على أساس الجندر في تعميق الشرخ السياسي والاجتماعي في المجتمع، بالإضافة إلى حالة الاستقطاب. وبالتالي سيكون تتبع ما حدث بين 2011 و2014 هو المدخل الرئيسي للفهم. ففي حين شهد عام 2011 كافة أشكال الانتهاكات لحقوق النساء من قبل الطغمة العسكرية ومؤيديها، فقد شهد عام 2012 و2013 محاولات مضمّنية لأسلمة مفهوم الجندر وهي محاولة لم توقف الانتهاكات. أما عام 2014 فقد كان عام الزغاريد والرقص احتفالاً بالدستور الجديد وقيام الطغمة العسكرية بخلع النظام الإسلامي الحاكم آنذاك. في كل هذا المسار يمكن القول أن النساء كن لاعب رئيسي في المشهد، إذ لا يمكن تجاهل حضورهن البارز في الميادين والمسيرات والاعتصامات والمظاهرات، ومشاركتهن الكثيفة في الانتخابات. إن المثابرة والدأب اللذين ميزا إعلان النساء عن اختياراتهن السياسية والاجتماعية ووعيهن بمواقعهن المختلفة، ومن ثم حضورهن البارز الذي أجج الاستقطاب في لحظة ما، لهي كلها من العوامل التي تدفعنا إلى إعادة تقييم الوضع كاملاً، مع التركيز على الكيفية التي تشكلت بها هوية الجندر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مقاومة؛ الجندر؛ الاستقطاب؛ سياسات الجسد؛ سياسات

الهوية؛ المكان؛ مصر

## Introduction

Any attempt at analyzing the transformation and reconstruction of gender in the context of the Egyptian Revolution might seem like mission impossible. The successive events, truncated aspirations, horrendous violations, and the huge reservoir of details are likely to confuse anyone who is trying to understand the complex and multi-faceted role women have played, and still are, in this Revolution. Because of that, one wonders at the readiness of some international conferences to send a call for papers entitled, for example, 'role of women in the uprisings of the Arab world.' Apparently, many hasty readings of gender do not encompass the fact that the transformation of gender in post-revolution Egypt has been from the very beginning, i.e., 2011, tied to and governed by the path of political transformation. The close interconnection between gender, identity politics and religion is what renders the location of gender much more complicated; and, therefore, we cannot talk about gendered identity in the singular. The multiple gender identities<sup>(1)</sup> that displayed themselves in different roles emerged on contesting grounds right immediately after the famous 18 days<sup>(2)</sup>. That which seemed to be a fulfilled dream for one functioned as a crushed aspiration for another.

## Purpose of the study and methodology

How far the multiple gendered identities have contributed to the socio-political chasm and the state of polarization is one of the concerns of this paper. The main purpose is to seek an understanding of what happened between 2011 and 2014. While 2011 witnessed all forms of violations of women's rights by

- 
- (1) Gender identity is a person's private sense and experience of their own gender. The term cuts across social theory, gender studies, psychology, and cultural studies.
  - (2) On January 25, 2011 Millions of Egyptians took to the streets in a mass protest to the excessive physical torture in police stations and prisons. However, the situation escalated on January 28, commonly known as "Friday of Anger", protesters were unified under one demand, i.e., "leave", in reference to Mubarak. Therefore, protesters organized a sit-in in Midan al-Tahrir that lasted till February 11, 2011, the day of Mubarak's departure. Hence, the big sit-in.

the military and their supporters; and 2012 & 2013 witnessed the poignant attempts at ‘islamizing’ the concept of gender, 2014 was the year of ululations and dancing in celebration of a new constitution and of the ousting of Islamists by the military. The three years then seem like a closed circuit, that which was shunned in 2011 is now hailed, and those who were elected are now ousted. In all that, one can safely say that women have been, and still are, among one of the major players on the scene. Their powerful presence in the Squares, marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, and participation in the elections cannot be overlooked. The stamina and persistence with which they carried out their socio-political choices and the awareness of their different positional ties is a striking fact that forces one to re-evaluate. This ‘power of presence’, to quote the Iranian Sociologist Asef Bayat (2010, 97), that augmented polarization at some point, is the second concern of this paper.

### **‘Promise and Peril’<sup>(3)</sup>**

One of the crushed aspirations in truncated transitions has been women’s rights where the wrangling looming over the question of gender equality has never stopped. The conflict over power that ensued post the ousting of Mubarak was marked by the discursive centrality of gender issues. Gender became the defining factor of every political group, and it was turned into a medium through which ideological identities were channeled. The greatest disappointment lies in offering up women’s rights as an issue of populist compromise that justified the horrendous abuses that took place since 2011. Conflicting political discourses took control of the scene; and, many powers- though not in agreement- have pushed the mute button of women’s demands. Sadly enough, the appearance of women’s rights on the program of any political party- even the new ones- turned out to be decorative not functional. Some scholars have seen that the so called ‘Arab Spring’ presents a ‘democratic paradox’ (Kandiyoti 2012) in relation to women’s rights. I do not fully agree with this. We should never forget that the fusion of mobilized citizenry into one bloc chanting for freedom will remain an overwhelming image that led to the overthrow of Mubarak’s

(3) Prominent Turkish scholar Deniz Kandiyoti has written three successive articles in Open Democracy since 2011 about the trajectory of women’s rights in the Arab Spring. In this paper, I am using the title of her first article (March 2011) “Promise and Peril”.

regime, or to be more accurate, the overthrow of Mubarak only. The regime turned out to be deeply rooted in both the state institutions and the mentality of the people. And so, ‘the revolution continues’<sup>(4)</sup> to topple multiple faces of patriarchy.

Apparently, the ‘promise’ of 2011 has rapidly faded only to give its place to peril and despair. The comparative lens through which Deniz Kandiyoti reads the situation renders a complete panoramic picture that spots the complexities of women’s rights in the scene of the revolt. Kandiyoti’s reading of the situation takes into consideration the multiple powers in play, and so breaching women’s rights is a result, since these powers were contradictory in their discourse which led to crushing or ignoring women’s rights. In other words, violating women’s rights is the necessary manifestation of the dynamics of power. The alleged rise of democracy and the concomitant fall of women’s rights have formed a paradox, much talked about in the plethora of pieces written about Egypt and Tunisia. Scholars and observers have tended to document the atrocities women have suffered from, and have always concluded with the ascription of these to a strongly patriarchal society that stood adamantly in the face of the demands for liberty and equality. I believe that such an interpretation overlooks the role of the State- whether an oppressive or a national machinery- and women themselves in perpetrating discursive and physical violence against women, and how some ‘against the grain’ voices resisted this trajectory.

It is highly misleading to blame ‘patriarchy’ across the board since this is a simplistic interpretation of the power dynamics. As an abstract concept, ‘patriarchy’ does not provide a space for responsibility or accountability. It is unrealistic to treat patriarchy as a coherent project that stands on its own devoid of other factors. A close look at the program of the ousted Islamic President, for example, proves that neo-liberalism was to be revived and that women, as has always been the case in the third world, were bound to pay the dear price. Therefore, patriarchy as the sole factor of analysis does not mirror reality whereas the factor of power relations guarantees women’s struggle to be fruitful not debilitating. Kandiyoti believes that in order to understand the multiple faces of patriarchy we must:

---

(4) This chant, considered the leitmotif of the Revolution, rhymes in Arabic, and nothing of it has been achieved till now. That is why the slogan of ‘the revolution continues’.

Turn our attention to the holders of political power and ask how, when and why they choose to become accessories to misogynistic atrocities and/or collude with individuals, groups or movements that perpetrate them. That is why people are on the streets. Their target is no longer just women and their bodies but the body politic itself (2013).

To understand the situation at depth, we need to think of the holders of political power in 2011- the military in this case- who were bent on silencing all opposing voices in order to restore an ambiguous and ambivalent problematic concept of ‘stability. Women were, certainly, the first target of the military junta and their Islamist allies. They had to be sent back home.

However, the use of the word ‘women’ is not accurate. If some women were really the target of power, other women blessed the strategies of silencing all rising voices. In this case, the word ‘women’ is similar to the word ‘patriarchy’ in that it refers to a coherent and monolithic body. The only assumption we can make is that all women, coming from different political currents, were reduced into a single body. It is the female body that was targeted, and no political power is exempt from the blame. The political holders of power have abided by this rule; the only differentiating criterion was alterity. That is to say, women whose position is different from or opposed to the hegemonic power are always the target of aggression and atrocities. The element of gender has been the driving force of alterity; therefore, gender is foregrounded and accentuated as a basic element of identity politics only in highly conflicting moments and struggle over power. Women, unfortunately, fell into the trap of polarization. Two contrasting examples will explain how this happened.

A binary logic generated the image of self and other which was reflected in gender politics. However, during the 18 days, the identity politics ‘within’ Midan al-Tahrir were trying to combat the deformation ‘without’. Gender, in al Midan, was employed as an asset for the protesters, whereas it was used as a means of deformation by the outsiders. How has gender functioned as an asset in al Midan, a geopolitical location in itself? A personal anecdote might help answering this question. Exactly on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February in 2011, I was participating in the million man/woman protest in al Midan. Much to my surprise, the overcrowded place was not suffocating, as people were very careful to respect the private space of each other, not to mention the exaggerated apologies one used to hear if a sleeve was

ruffled. Due to the long hours spent there, I started conversing with the woman standing next to me. I cannot deny that it was mere curiosity that pushed me to speak with her because she was face veiled. She confided in me that her husband refused to join al-Tahrir protest and so she disobeyed him and came on her own since she “could not stay home and not participate in this miraculous event”. She also said that she had to take a long complicated route to arrive to al Midan since most of the roads leading to it were blocked. At the end of our talk, I noticed that the dress of that woman was almost woven into the private space of the French journalist sitting on the asphalt and completely immersed in his work. Neither of them minded this metaphorical fusion and perhaps they never noticed it. In other circumstances, a similar scene would have been unthinkable. Outside al Midan, this woman would have never stood in the vicinity of a ‘foreigner’, and she would have never talked to me in that friendly way. Yet, in that particular geo-political situation, her gendered ideology was not a factor in the equation at all. It goes without saying that such situations were repeated daily, where gender was never in the foreground. Different codes of dress and behavior interacted positively (probably that was the only time), and learnt a good deal about each other without a single trace of condemnation. Where had the gender gone?

It is not news to say that identity resists fixity; what is novel is that Midan al-Tahrir had its own rhetoric of space where gender was lurking in the background not obstructing the democratic path. The woman’s husband reluctance to participate motivated her to push gender to the background and to bring her political will to the foreground. Once in the location, she assumed a discourse of positionality that Susan Friedman calls “situational”:

So while the person’s identity is the product of multiple subject positions, these axes of identity are not equally foregrounded in every situation. Change the scene, and the most relevant constituents of identity come into play. The other axes of identity do not disappear; they are just not as salient in this particular scene (1998, 23).

Once she found her place in mapping the struggle and became part of the collective subjectivity, this woman went beyond gender without abandoning it, and other constituents of her identity were highlighted, like social class or education or ideology.

The significance of space as a situational marker of identity underlined the narrative of Midan al-Tahrir in the 18 days<sup>(5)</sup> sit-in. The politics of this locational situation erased the mere possibility of any physical violation, and the female body lost its mythic identity whereas the female subject found her agency. Hence, the disentanglement of sex and gender. This explains, for example, the complete absence of any incident of sexual assault or harassment during this period. However, we cannot say that Midan al-Tahrir as a location was de-gendered, since the very existence of gender as a discursive concept allowed for the situational discourse of positionality, as explained above by Friedman. What Teresa de Lauretis viewed in 1986 as a shift in the feminist understanding of female subjectivity was reflected in the dynamics of power and gender relations in Midan al-Tahrir Square. It was a shift from the reductive view of women defined purely and straightforwardly by sexual difference to the “complex notion that the female subject is a site of differences ... that are not only sexual or only racial, economic, or (sub) cultural, but all of these together, and often enough at odds with one another” (1986, 14). In sum, Midan al-Tahrir as a geopolitical location, and a moment of crisis, facilitated going ‘beyond gender’ and established the female subject as a full agent.

Because of such a Utopian experience in Midan al-Tahrir, it was heart breaking to witness the polarization that took place right after Mubarak was deposed on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2011, the female body immediately became a site of contest. Let me explain how this happened. In March 2011, a huge women’s march celebrating the international women’s day turned ugly, and women were heckled and abused by a counter mob<sup>(6)</sup>. The next day, a few hundreds took to Midan al-Tahrir again to protest to the excessive use of force by the military and to the military trials of civilians, and they were arrested. While men and women were tortured and jailed in the military prison, women had to bear a bigger share of humiliation. In full view of several offices, were forced to go through a series of virginity tests. That was a defining moment. Body disciplining, as a means

(5) See note n. 2.

(6) Jumanah Younis, “Egypt’s revolution means nothing if its women are not free,” **The Guardian**, March 9, 2011. If you google “international women’s day in Egypt 2011” you will get hundreds of entries that narrate and, of course, condemn what happened on that day. I am citing this entry because the writer was one of the protesters who participated in the march.



of socio-political control, started to be a systematic practice against women protesters. While physical abuse and torture of men was interpreted socially to be political, all forms of abuse practiced on women's bodies were taken wrongly by society in its entirety, including many activists, to be cultural. Foucault explains that the purpose of employing the body as a means of discipline and punishment is that:

It defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies' (1979, 138).

However, Foucault treats the experiences of the human body as if there is no difference between men and women. One should ask how the disciplinary practices engender the bodies of women. Since the analysis aims at explaining how the genders violence was transformed by women into a means of resistance and a route to agency, we should try to capture the point of irreversibility to fathom how the transformation of meaning started to take place, slowly but surely. While the crowded Midan was devoid of any polarization, and while post Mubarak's departure should have eliminated any possibility for such extreme polarized grouping and positioning, what happened was exactly the opposite as the example of the happenings of International Women's Day has showed.

Nonetheless, the female activists and protesters never gave in to this huge socio-political pressure. Conditions that were constraining and enslaving turned to be experienced as liberating and transforming. Put differently, what was disciplined as a docile body turned into a body in revolt. However, the reactions to and interactions with the gendered disciplinary practices were not monolithic. The vicissitudes of reception form the process of gender transformation. These varieties of reception are what I will examine closer.

### **Different constructs of femininity**

Several women who had to go through the shameful experience of the 'virginity tests' chose to resort to silence, and one only, Samira Ibrahim, decided

to file a lawsuit against the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF)<sup>(7)</sup>. The courage this girl exhibited was shockingly subversive of a ‘docile’ society that has learnt not to break silence over the question of sexual harassment or rape (both acts entail a subtle questioning of the woman’s ‘honor’). Throughout a long tedious process, Samira I. came out victorious and yet defeated. Her decision to break the silence surely positions her as the precursor of the transformation process. On the occasion of the second anniversary of the Revolution, Jaddaliya launched a series of articles, amongst which Sherine Seikaly wrote an article entitled “The Meaning of Revolution: On Samira Ibrahim,” where she concluded that Ibrahim’s courage is based on the fact that she “did not claim the category of the Virgin as a sacred space of refuge” (2013).<sup>(8)</sup> When an interview with Samira I. was uploaded on YouTube, the comments were mostly accusative and vilifying. The discourse that Samira I. and her supporters adopted and promoted in face of what Sharon Marcus calls “a gendered grammar of violence” (1992, 392) managed to shake the dominant discourse, even if mildly. By smashing the myth of the female body as a symbol of personal and collective national honor, and as a site of docility Samira I. and her generation shifted all forms of violence and abuse practiced on the female body to the political terrain.

However, the extreme socio-cultural resistance to the endorsement of such a discursive shift led to another conflict over the concept of identity. The vilification of Samira I. sprang from a fixed discourse of identity that viewed women’s subjectivity from within an orthodox paradigm of values and roles, very similar to the Bourgeois Victorian paradigm. On the other hand, Samira I.’s generation was developing a new discourse of identity that was a corollary of the revolution itself within a context of political fluidity, and even polarization. Put differently, this incident with all its repercussions was employed by the rising generation to revolutionize a hegemonic cultural discourse that plays on the position of the subject. Samira I.’s position deserves a closer look. She is a young single woman

(7) Elizabeth Flock, Samira Ibrahim is the woman behind Egypt’s ban of virginity tests. **The Washington Post**, December 27, 2011. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/post/samira-ibrahim-is-the-woman-behind-egypts-ban-of-virginity-tests/2011/12/27/gIQACKNgKP\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/post/samira-ibrahim-is-the-woman-behind-egypts-ban-of-virginity-tests/2011/12/27/gIQACKNgKP_blog.html)

(8) Sherine Seikaly, “The Meaning of Revolution: On Samira Ibrahim,” in **Jaddaliya**, January 28 2013. [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9814/the-meaning-of-revolution\\_on-samira-ibrahim#](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9814/the-meaning-of-revolution_on-samira-ibrahim#)

in her 20s, she is upper Egyptian (the South), an activist, veiled, and her family has Islamic leanings. Thus Samira I. is oppressed by her gender and upbringing, privileged by her veil and thus more blamed by religious rules, privileged by her revolutionary spirit and thus used as a living proof of the immorality of the rising generation. This concept of contradictory subject positions was shown clearly in the reception of Ibrahim's public testimony of the brutality she experienced. Some accused her of betraying her religion, while others expressed their respect towards her attitude. On the other hand, she was considered a liar by many, whereas others believed her and acted accordingly.

The staunch networks of resistance and solidarity formed around the crisis declared the female body as a site of conflicting interpretations and ideological inscriptions and polarization. As women managed to demolish ideological barriers in Midan Al-Tahrir, they re-erected them to accentuate their ideologies. Gender became, unfortunately, the essential element in defining the conflicting camps, who were themselves in struggle over definite constructs of femininity.

The girl stripped to her blue bra towards the end of 2012 critically problematized the female body even more<sup>(9)</sup>. It is worth mentioning here that the controversy over this horrendous violation marked one of the main points of gender polarization in post-revolution Egypt. On the 20th December, 2011, a huge women's march took place to condemn this violation.<sup>(10)</sup> Although the march was huge, where several thousands women marched through down town Cairo in expression of anger, the Islamic voice, in all its factions, vilified the girl and the march equally<sup>(11)</sup>. Interestingly enough, and in a mode of role exchange,

(9) In mid December 2011, that woman was stripped to her 'blue bra' and jeans by the police. In solidarity with her, the revolutionaries called her 'Sit al-banat' (lady of the ladies) as a mark of honor. Her photograph was front page in all local and several international papers and magazines, as a proof of the brutality of the regime, the Military Junta then. It is noteworthy here to mention that the infamous question 'why did she ever go there?' started with this incident in an attempt to condemn the girl. For a panoramic view of how the female body turned into a site of conflict see, for example, Vickie Langohr, "This is our Square": Fighting Sexual Assault at Cairo Protests. *MERIP*, Vol. 43, Fall 2013. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer268/our-square>

(10) David D. Kirkpatrick, "Mass March by Cairo Women in Protest Over Abuse by Soldiers", in *The New York Times*, Dec. 20, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/21/world/middleeast/violence-enters-5th-day-as-egyptian-general-blames-protesters.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/21/world/middleeast/violence-enters-5th-day-as-egyptian-general-blames-protesters.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

(11) Manal Abou El Hasan, who was the secretary of Women Committee in Cairo of the Freedom

in 2013 an Islamic women's march was attacked by the security forces and Islamists resorted to the same technique of protesting they had already vilified and condemned earlier. It was too late for the gap between two camps to be redressed, and women were bent on increasing the conflict by reproducing the ideologies at war.

### **More polarization and increasing presence**

The rule that replaced the military fared even worse. Under the military women knew that there is a future to anticipate. Yet, the future that finally arrived with the cloak of 'Islam' was perhaps the same. Ironically speaking, women queued for hours to vote for the Islamist candidate, under the belief that democracy was at hand. The women who practiced their power of presence in long queues in front of the poll stations in May 2012 had to face another blow. The moment Mohamed Morsi was elected President his supporters took to the streets to celebrate. Part of this celebration was basically to harass verbally any unveiled woman by shouting "your kind is to disappear soon"<sup>(12)</sup>. That was alarming and frightening; yet, it was also a sign that women were to be the bargaining terrain again, and the key to holding political control. It is important that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) never hesitated to declare their ambivalent position towards women's rights, which was oscillating between indifference and apathy or contempt. For example, The National Council for Women (NCW) came under severe attack, the Brotherhood's female MPs supported the female genital mutilation (FGM), commonly known as 'circumcision'<sup>(13)</sup>, strongly to the extent

---

and the Justice party (FJP), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, vilified the women who participated in the march in an interview in *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, on January 14, 2012. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12100&article=658885>

- (12) The collection of stories from eye witnesses is huge. Unveiled women were stopped at the street to be lectured about the importance of donning the veil; veiled women were equally harassed on the basis that their dress was not proper. Unfortunately, I was exposed to one of those 'lectures' where my reaction was highly aggressive and belligerent.
- (13) The procedure is usually performed on girls between the ages of 9 to 12 years, prior to the onset of puberty. In the past, the procedure -involving removal of the clitoris, together with the excision of all or part of the labia minora – was generally carried out by traditional birth attendants (dayas) and "health barbers" (who also perform circumcision of boys). The operation was frequently done without an anesthetic, using knives or razors. In recent years, however, more than 60 percent of circumcisions have been performed by physicians and nurses. A variety of reasons are cited for FGM/C's perpetuation. The principal justification

that Omaila Kamel, a member of the former drafting Constitution assembly, and later appointed as the President's adviser, declared in an interview that "the faith of any uncircumcised woman is incomplete<sup>(14)</sup>." I see this position as a gendered formation (or rather re-formation) of identity. Members of the predominantly Islamist Shura Council blamed sexual harassment on women for the way they dressed and mingled with men, sparking anger among various women's groups in Egypt and abroad<sup>(15)</sup>. When the Rector of Mansoura University could easily enforce the segregation of men and women in classes, he was hailed by Islamists as a courageous man<sup>(16)</sup>. Polarization shifted from the discursive to the material where the binary opposition of 'we' and 'they' increased the tension. I hasten to add that the Civilian camp, which comprises all non Islamist parties and public figures, was not exempt from reproducing the same discourse. It became very common to hear such shameful expressions as 'our women' and 'their women'.

The last battle of polarization, which was a means of announcing a 'new' identity, was played up on the UN Commission on the Status of Women draft Agreed Conclusions on violence against women (CWS). The document was severely attacked by MB members and their online site before it was even declared. It was accused by all Islamic factions of spreading promiscuity and homosexuality<sup>(17)</sup>. In a thorough analysis of the MB's response to the document, Hoda El Sadda concludes that, "The rhetoric is painfully familiar and the aim continues to be the same: using scare tactics to silence your opponents and divert attention from the real issues at stake" (2013).

I contend, therefore, that the position on women's rights and agency was the

---

lies in the belief that the procedure reduces the sexual desire of a female, thereby helping maintain a girl's virginity prior to marriage and her fidelity thereafter. [http://www.unicef.org/egypt/protection\\_148.html](http://www.unicef.org/egypt/protection_148.html)

(14) For a full story of the ambivalence of the 'Muslim Sisters' towards women's rights see: 'Egypt's Muslim 'Sisters' rise with conservative vision, in **USA Today**, Nov.10, 2012. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/10/egypt-muslim-women-politics/1696291/>

(15) Dina Guirguis, "Sexual Assault and the Fall of Morsi", **Middle East Institute**, July 8, 2013. <http://www.mei.edu/content/sexual-assault-and-fall-morsi>

(16) <http://www1.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=790575&SecID=97&IssueID=168>

(17) The National Council for Women, which represented Egypt in the conference, criticized the unwarranted attacks, particularly the Islamist belief that they have a monopoly over religion, emphasizing that comments should not be made without "reference to facts."

spark that ignited the extreme polarized political discourse, and women became the political and cultural markers of identity. However, we must remember that the Mubarak regime has always considered women the markers of the nation's 'image' as well. It only managed to play this tone down by jumping on the bandwagon of 'women's rights' and hijacking all the efforts of civil society. Hence, State feminism. That is, the co-option of women's rights movement by the State, or rather by the First Lady- Suzanne Mubarak in this case. Similarly, as part of the 'democratic paradox' that has been governing the position of women's rights in post-revolution Egypt, political actors and players continued to use gender and women's rights as a sub-text that could be foregrounded at any moment. With the heavy-handed enforcement of the battle over 'identity,' women's rights returned to occupy the front. Each camp employed the discourse about women to score populist points off their rivals.

With the horrific rise of sexual harassment and abuse of female protesters heavily commented on and documented, protesters, men and women, realized that the Islamic junta- even if elected- is not different from the military junta that preceded it and ruled the transitional period. It was a mere conflict over power where women have been used then abused and their rights were compromised. That the Islamic government, Islamic satellite channels<sup>(18)</sup>, and the presidency blamed female protesters for taking to the streets is reminiscent of the military's position in 2011. When women activists realized they had lost their space physically, politically and discursively, they decided to lobby more and to augment the power of their presence.

One should ask how activists managed to turn successive defeats into small victories. In order for the new reverse discourse, that which is promoted by the rising revolutionary generation, to have a socio-political effect, women activists started by circulating it through different forms. Thus, the public transversality of all forms of protests against disciplinary practices was a point of strength. In his article "The Subject and Power" Foucault explains that transversal protests "are not exactly for or against the 'individual' but rather they are struggles

(18) Report by Nina Burleigh quotes Egyptian Salafi preacher Ahmad Mahmoud Abdullah, who said 'women protesting in Tahrir Square have no shame and want to be raped.' See "Gang rape, the dark side of Egypt's protests" CNN. 3 July 2013.

against the ‘government of individualization’” (1982, 781)<sup>(19)</sup>. Therefore, in their marches, forms of solidarity, artistic expression, and all forms of coalitions, even if temporary, women shattered the discursive, social and cultural barriers, erected by the former regime(s). Collectives such as Fouada Watch and OpAnti Sexual Harrasment<sup>(20)</sup>, for example, were the outcome of the outrage over sexual abuse and rape. The rallies, marches, brochures, posters, and graffiti lobbied the hitherto fragmented women’s movement, and revived hard-line activism. These forms of protest, expressed aesthetically as well, supported a new discourse of subjectivity since they reflected- in form and content- the new mapping of territories and the dialectic play between margin and center. The more the female body was abused the stronger and more solid activism is practiced. That this activist discourse basically stems from different positionalities - locked for a long time in the margins as a monolithic entity - endows it with power.

Since silence was what power expected from the assaulted women, activists countered by publishing personal testimonies<sup>(21)</sup>. Gradually, documenting the experience of harassment became part of documenting the revolution; politics of the body became part and parcel of the body politic. The testimonies, some of which were of really frightening experiences, circulated virally on the social media, gained wide readership and increased resistance. These testimonies, from my point of view among the strongest techniques of resistance where women broke the absolutely sanctioned silence on questions of ‘gendered grammar of violence’ by changing their epistemic vision. The campaigns of testimonial literature were aware of the risks lurking in their project, that the essential drawback of documenting experience is that it “precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms” (Scott 1992, 25). That is why the testimonies were not posted and circulated in isolation from the necessary analysis. In all the statements, articles and interviews activists exposed the workings of power in parallel with employing the testimonies as primary

(19) There is also a whole part entitled ‘transversality’ in Guattari’s book **Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics**, (trans. Rosemary Sheed), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984.

(20) Collectives that were established to combat sexual harassment: <https://www.facebook.com/FouadaWatch>  
[http://www.facebook.com/OpAnti-Sexual Harrasment/Assault](http://www.facebook.com/OpAnti-Sexual-Harrasment/Assault)

(21) On the website of the feminist NGO, Nazra, all testimonies are available. <http://nazra.org/sexual/harrasment/terms>

sources.

Yet, women made their power of presence in other arenas as well of which the most important was that of identity. In their attempt to combat the enforced reformation of gender, women, unawares, resorted again to the discourse of polarization. Post June 30<sup>th</sup> 2013<sup>(22)</sup>, the conflict over political power swamped women and the talk about rights became a luxury. On the other hand, in his final speech on the 2nd of July, Morsi could not but reproduce the role of women as mothers<sup>(23)</sup>. The non Islamist camp retaliated post June 30<sup>th</sup>. The face-veil (niqab) came back to the foreground as the marker of Islamic ideology. Ridicule and harsh verbal abuse of women wearing al-niqab got widespread and many had to give up the streets. It was, simply, a proportional relation: the rising polarization meant increasing presence of women.

Yet, one cannot deny that there was a wide spectrum of voices and not all were reproducing polarization. Without the formation of a movement *per se*, the incessant presence of women in the public sphere and the media led to the creation of another space, not as Utopian as Midan al-Tahrir of the famous eighteen days ; it is a space of resistance filled with revolutionary consciousness. Paradoxically, it was the abuse and the realization that all governments were equally bent on curbing women's rights that set the point of departure of the process of self-consciousness. As early as 1991, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has contended that the history of revolutionary movements has shown that consciousness is not the result but it is the process where consciousness of self, including feminist and class consciousness, "is a particular configuration of subjectivity, or subjective limits, produced at the intersection of meaning and experience" (8). Having taken to the streets for three years women strengthened their own resistance through the form of "collective action by non collective actors" (Bayat, 97). Women made their presence highly visible through resorting to 'ordinary' activities and the practices of everyday life. It is in the daily micropolitics and extreme

(22) Hani Shukrallah, A People's History of the Egyptian Revolution. **Ahram Online**. Friday 20 Sep 2013. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/82064/Opinion/A-people%E2%80%99s-history-of-the-Egyptian-revolution-.aspx>

(23) With demonstrations storming Egypt on June 30th, the presidency held a conference press where the spokesperson spent not less than five minutes speaking about sexual harassment in Midan al-Tahrir as a proof of the thuggery dominating the scene of opposition. This in itself was another sign of polarization.



ordinariness that women were capable of asserting their vision by bringing the personal into the political. In other words, women could restore their lost space albeit in a different form; they managed to consolidate this space discursively and physically.

In his thorough reading of Iranian women resistance to the authoritarian theocratic rule since 1979, Asef Bayat concluded that this strategy of resorting to ordinary activities- the day-to-day struggles- was highly fruitful since it is “the power of presence” (98) that subverted the dominant power discourse eventually. Similarly, in addition to their protests against sexual harassment and their demands for inclusive democracy, Egyptian women were claiming their individuality in daily life, in public transport, in demonstrations and marches, in sit-ins, schools, in universities, in courts, in work, in sports, in their clothing, in the jewels they wear, in public office, in cinema, in art, in music, in literature; in short, in their presence everywhere. The power of these activities, where presence forces power to reconsider ‘space’, is a tool of resistance no less important than the power of a ‘movement’. Likewise, Mohanty has stated that the power of feminism lies in the skill of being “attentive to the micropolitics of everyday life as well as the larger processes that recolonize the culture and identities of the people across the globe” (2003, 225). Bayat developed the idea of presence more, and gave it more substance when he says that “the effective power of these practices lies precisely in their ordinariness, since as irrepressible actions they encroach incrementally to capture trenches from the power base of patriarchal structure, while erecting springboards to move on” (98). Whether this could be considered as a non movement is still under investigation; yet, that it is a presence that evolved into a contentious challenge is definite.

In short, from the 8th March 2011, the first International Women’s Day post the departure of Mubarak, till very recent women and their rights have been involved in a battle field for power, and the arena where certain ideologies make their appearance. Binary oppositions were displayed publicly between veiled/unveiled, and Islamist/non-Islamist. It is understood then how those binary powers flagrantly breach women’s rights while racing to consolidate their control. Surely, dividing society politically through promoting and even glorifying a polarized engendered discourse that came close to becoming the dominant paradigm of thinking is one of the ugliest faces of patriarchy. This is clear by now in 2014 in

the two camps that occupy enlarged space in the political scene: women “anti-coup,” largely Islamists, vs. all the other women, who are actually supporting the ex-Marshal Field Abdel Fattah El Sisi, now elected president<sup>(24)</sup>. Both have their power of presence in a way slightly different from what Asef Bayat meant. While the former condemns, the latter ululates. This is mere exchange of roles enmeshed in the battle over identity where women have become the major players. Some women who were disillusioned in Morsi’s Islamic discursive practice, are now the ones supporting General Sisi, and have decided to show their support through ululating and dancing while voting for the referendum on the road map launched by General Abdel Fattah El Sisi in January 2014. I would, confidently, call this another gender paradox incurred by the essential players in the revolutionary process.

## Conclusion

The ambivalent record over women’s rights since March 2011 broke the promises and wasted the aspirations to inclusive democracy. Nonetheless, women continued to be among the main players in the political arena in terms of: posing demands, demonstrating for justice, protesting against violations, or even in terms of mirroring the conflict over power. The loss of the space of appearance, carved during the famous 18 days of 2011, might seem less catastrophic if we remember that women never left the street from 2011 till the election of Al Sisi as president and his inauguration on June 8, 2014. In spite of the efforts power relations have exerted over women to either resort to silence or to go back home, women did not give in to pressure. The challenge will always remain the same. Any power’s dream and ambition is to pull women back to the role of being ideological and cultural markers. Women, on the other hand, should keep their role as players intact.

If women’s role in augmenting the process of polarization is perceived as

---

(24) General Abdel Fattah Sisi who ousted Morsi on July 3<sup>rd</sup> has become a national hero especially from the point of view of women. What is alarming is that his act, labeled as a ‘coup’ by Islamists, turned him into an iconic masculine figure. Hence, the ululation on the streets and in front of the poll stations. See, for example: Kristen McTighe, ‘I love him like my own dad’: El Sisi wins the hearts of Egyptian women. **The National**, May 25, 2014. <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/i-love-him-like-my-own-dad-el-sisi-wins-the-hearts-of-egyptian-women>

a loss of agency (and surely it is), there are definitely some gains. Most fixed and monolithic perceptions of the female body as sacred or shameful are being revised, and subverted. Also, it is an oversimplification to say that this re-vision has stemmed only from the feeling of anger and humiliation. As much as anger is important for any revolt, it was the persistence of women to revolutionize gender by setting a new paradigm that does not fix gender for the benefit of power relations. While acts of sexual harassment have been co-opted by the Islamic regime to consolidate polarization, women have taken them to be the route to subjectivity and agency. Put differently, all forms of ‘gendered’ violence have helped the process of discourse reversal, and the message was clear: “Stop using crimes of violence against women in your political bargaining; you are part of the reason why this continues to happen.” (Kirolos 2013). One of the positive results that women enjoyed post June 30, 2013 is the issuing of a law that criminalizes sexual harassment<sup>(25)</sup>. Emptying the space of appearance never aborted the aspirations towards revolutionizing gender and subverting the paradigm of the body. While it all started with a wiped bosom in a painting published in the most official paper<sup>(26)</sup> it ended with performing ballet on the streets. The empty space is populated by voices and discourses that refuse to give in; they are defiant voices that do not seek any ambivalent tone: “I deplore the continued exploitation of women’s bodies as political battlefields” (El Satta 2013). Collective struggle, individual testimonies, revolutionary aesthetics, and incessant discursive and physical violations helped shape a discourse that yields an opposite reading of the empty space. It is transformed into a sign of possibility and a democracy not yet realized. This empty space is being filled gradually with new intersections of gender, politics and resistance in preparation for a new ‘space of appearance,’ even if sexual harassment continues. The radical discursive shift is what counts as a clear marker that women, and their bodies, are one of the main political players. Apparently, gender was in a dire need of the wild spirit of autumn’s West Wind, so that we might find an answer to Shelley’s question: ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?’

(25) Egypt’s interim President Adly Mansour has approved a new anti-sexual harassment law by adding it as an amendment to the Egyptian penal code. **Ahram Online**, June 5, 2014.

(26) In June 2012, **al-Ahram**, the Egyptian State newspaper, published “the Popular Chorus” by Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, painted in 1948, with the naked woman in it covered. **Egypt Independent**, June 23, 2012. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/intellectuals-slam-al-ahram-covering-naked-woman-painting>

## References

- Bayat, Asef. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. ISIM Series on Contemporary Muslim Societies. Amsterdam: University Press, 2010.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts. In *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- El Sada, Hoda. 'A War Against Women: The CSW Declaration and the Muslim Brotherhood Riposte.' *Open Democracy*. April 3. 2013. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/hoda-elsadda/war-against-women-csw-declaration-and-muslim-brotherhood-riposte>
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographics of Encounter*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Guattari, Felix. *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, (trans. Rosemary Sheed), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punishment*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Subject and Power. *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (Summer 1982). 777-795.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Promise and Peril: Women and the 'Arab Spring,'* 2011. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/58411>
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Disquiet and Despair: the Gender Sub-texts of the 'Arab Spring,'* 2012 <http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/66458>
- Kirollos, Mariam. Sexual Harassment in Tahrir: A Message from Mariam Kirollos. *Tahrir Squared*, July 1<sup>st</sup> 1998. <http://www.tahrirsquared.com/node/5131>.
- Marcus, Sharon. Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention. In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Scott, Joan. Experience. In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Seikaly, Sherene. "The Meaning of Revolution: On Samira Ibrahim." In *Jadaliyya*, January 28, 2013. [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9814/the-meaning-of-revolution\\_on-samira-ibrahim#](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9814/the-meaning-of-revolution_on-samira-ibrahim#)