

# Egyptian Women and the Revolution

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**DE FACTO:** THE spectacular and significant presence of Egyptian women among the rank and file as well as the leadership of the revolutionary movement since 2011 is a fact. This is in spite of the horrific and often gender-specific forms of repression, including harassment, assault and defamation hurled against them by all agents of the counterrevolution. Just a partial roster of female organizers and spokespeople, let alone participants includes Leila Soueif, Aida Seif al-Dawla, Mona Seif, Nawara Nigm, Mona Mina, Nazli Hussein, Mahinour El-Badrawi...

One only has to look at the pictures, articles, tweets and other documents to see this and to follow the remarkable ways in which organizations have developed, aimed at the protection of female participants against sexual harassment. The Egyptian revolutionary protests were an egalitarian space carved out during the events themselves. It remains to be seen whether these events can grow into processes with lasting results.

**DE JURE:** Egyptian laws remain discriminatory on numerous levels. Not only do the laws of personal status give women little control over such issues as marriage, divorce, child custody and freedom of movement and work for married women, but civil, criminal and labor laws also reinforce women's subordinate status.

This may explain why Egyptian women have been at the forefront of revolutionary efforts. It remains for some of them to understand that regimes that uphold the neoliberal model, with its insistence on the separation of the public and the private and its reification of all social relations, are not capable, let alone willing, to accord women the liberation and equal status they have been demanding.

**DE RIGUEUR:** "Defending" women's rights is a *de rigueur* (obligatory) aspect of all liberal discourse, especially when it declares itself the guardian of secularism against religiously tinted discourse and organizations. In Egypt, paternalism has been a common feature of both liberal and "Islamist" movements.

While the constitution of 2012 was more explicit in its outlook on women as primarily wives and mothers and defining their rights only within the context of the patriarchal family structure, it is unlikely that the changes made in 2013 will translate into anything meaningful. One only need remember that the discourse of "women belong at home" was strongest in Egypt during the Sadat and Mubarak eras, due to the rise in the privatization of the ownership of work places and in unemployment — two trends that will not be reversed in the absence of the revolution.

The painful irony of the Egyptian situation is that the proclaimed savior of women from the regressive Islamists should be none other than the General cum Field Marshall al-Sisi, who in 2011 defended SCAF's atrocious "virginity tests" to which female revolutionaries were subjected in custody.

**Noha Radwan**

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