Introduction

The revolution was planned, executed, and supported by both men and women. Gender was not a factor that influenced the decisions to revolt or to protest. That is at least the impression that prevails when contemplating the Egyptian Revolution that erupted on the streets of various Egyptian cities on 25 January 2011 and is still ongoing. With hindsight it is now clear that the protest movements that had been taking place for a decade, and that were initiated by rights activists belonging to workers’ and civil liberty groups and other social movements, became the revolutionary agglomeration that toppled the elite echelons of the regime. The eruption of people onto the streets and into the squares demanding the end of the Mubarak era was an unexpected expression of social, gender, and generational inequality. Men and women, old and young, rural and urban, rich and poor were on the streets voicing their demands for change. This chapter ponders the relevance of gender to post-revolutionary political and social transformations by presenting a brief history of women’s rights in Egypt and the structures and agents representing the politics of these rights, as they are re-evaluated through the revolutionary prism.

Publicly and privately, women young and old gave different reasons for their participation in the public protests that became the revolution. “I am here to support these youth”; “I want to help because of the brutality of
the regime’s attack on the protesters”; “My friend died and I will not have his death go in vain”; “I hate this regime because it is corrupt”; “I want a dignified future for my kids”; “I am here because this is the best place to be”; and “I have never before been in a crowd and not been harassed” are some of the responses that women gave when asked why they continued to stand in Tahrir Square. These and other women were protesting in their capacity as citizens, not in their sex roles. They were not protesting in the name of gender equality, women’s empowerment, or right to political participation. These are the buzzwords of gender work that probably make no sense outside the narrow confines of gender politics. In fact, these protests have discredited formal politics and therefore have implications for a revised understanding of women’s political empowerment.

The images from Tahrir Square defined international and local perceptions of the revolution. They were images of jovial, tenacious, carefree solidarity against autocracy. There were always enough people in this and other squares all over Egypt to keep the spirits of Egyptians alive and optimistic. There were always women beside men, chanting, listening, making speeches, distributing food, making banners, tending the wounded, and maintaining this popular stand of defiance. There were hundreds if not thousands of women involved in organizing supplies, medications, banners, marches, international contacts, and general mobilization for this movement. There were no distinctions between women who were veiled, face-veiled, not veiled, women alone and with children, very young and elderly.

Such moments of solidarity, equality, hope, and popular mobilization are also ‘liminal’ moments in which hierarchies and structures of distinction are temporarily suspended (Turner 1969; 1974); they are also moments that are impossible to sustain as they are temporally and spatially bounded. Turner developed further the interpretation of ritual provided by Van Gennep in which the process of moving from one cultural stage to another (in other words, a rite of passage) is a three-stage process of separation, transition, and reintegration (Van Gennep 1960). The liminal phase is the middle one in which, as Turner puts it, “anything is possible!” (Turner 1969, 97). Although both Van Gennep and Turner were describing rituals, in particular those developed to mark and celebrate rites of passage such as coming-of-age ceremonies or religious rituals such as pilgrimage, the Egyptian Revolution lends itself to this analytical framework.

Liminal moments are wedged between two states of normalcy as they mark the disruption of one order and clear away the debris of what used
to be the norms of this order to permit the creation of a new set of norms. The social actors/participants in this symbolic space/time are suspended between structures as they separate from one social order but are yet to become part of another. While thus suspended they are equal in all ways and are free from strictures and structures that had defined their personhood, a condition that Turner refers to as one of “communitas.” This is the necessary condition from which a transformed order emerges and into which the initiates are reintegrated.

During the eighteen days of protest, a condition of near-communitas prevailed on the streets and squares where people had congregated. Sharing sleeping space and food, men and women bracketed their old gender norms, as evinced, for example, by the total absence of sexual harassment and the acceptance of women as equals in the face of the autocracy that was about to be ruptured and decimated. A better illustration of this communal spirit is the merging of a vast array of political ideologies—left, right, and center—who organized the rank and file to stand together with few, if any, marks of difference or distinction. The best proof of the prevailing communitas is the continued rejection of figureheads and leadership in the squares. It was only toward the end of the protests, when a new order seemed to be emerging, that a nascent structure developed in which some names and faces became prominent. But during the surge of protests, there were no leaders, just some organizers, champions, and communicators.

Soon after the presidential exit and the entrance of an interim leadership, the square was transformed into a space of contention and one in which distinctions and politics appeared. The liminal moment ended and a semblance of structure and hierarchy returned. This chapter looks at one particular hierarchy and the significance of its suspension and interruption: the structure that dictates gender differences and imbalances. The chapter discusses the condition of gender politics before the revolution, ponders the revolutionary moment itself, and wonders whether a new norm of gender justice has emerged since the presidential exit. In so doing the chapter attempts to gauge the extent to which transformations in the narrative of gender politics have occurred or are yet to take place in a new Egypt. It may be premature to define this new narrative, if indeed it emerges as new. This chapter will, however, identify the direction of change and the forces that will (or that could) most influence a new gender regime.
In its first chapter, this collection posed an argument about contentious politics as an alternative (or additional) paradigm to explain the Middle East. The social movements that have been influential, although external, to the way formal politics are framed are the prime example of how contestations voiced through social and or economic idioms can influence political structures. The examples of gay/lesbian struggles, environmental radicalism, and racial liberation movements illustrate the process whereby contestation upends the normative to create a political force with which formal politics must contend.

Feminism is one of the early precursors of social forces challenging the official structures of power. Women (and some men) challenged patriarchy not only as a social dogma but also as a political hegemony that excluded women from public domains where power, wealth, and privilege are transacted. Excluding the role of feminists in the framing of politics from below would not only be a historical oversight, but also an epistemological shortcoming in our understanding of contestation and protest.

The persistence of gender injustices before and after, if not during, the Egyptian Revolution is the focus of this analysis. The framing of women’s rights to equality and freedom as a dimension of liberation was a challenge before the revolution and continues to be one in the subsequent transition period. The exegesis of this omission (of women) is quite different for each of these phases. Before 25 January the quest for gender equality was identified as a pet project of the regime, and was alien to the population at large precisely because of this association. The landscape of gender politics was defined by the tug of war between state and civil society on one hand and, on the other, by the confrontation between conservatism and liberal values. These debates rotated around axes of power and religiosity. The multiple frontlines along which gender justice was contested and asserted created uncomfortable alliances between unusual partners. So state-sponsored feminism at times became the defender of liberal values and thus won the backing and support of civil society activists who would otherwise not be amenable to cooperation with the state and its self-imposed elites. This situation meant that demands for gender justice were transacted in a contest-free environment. For example, in 2009–10 a decision was taken by the Ministry of Justice to break a long-held taboo and allow women to accede to the bench of administrative courts. On the one hand, this decision was greeted by women’s rights advocates as one that rectified a longstanding wrong. On the other hand, however, the
fact that this decision complied with the wishes of the state elites, particularly Suzanne Mubarak, soured the victory for activists: this right was won through the state-sponsored gender lobby, and not by the activism of civil society feminists. Although these state-sanctioned initiatives and institutions included some well-regarded feminists, the latter were overwhelmed by the pomp and circumstance that was an important aspect of their affiliation with the president. The minister and his minions were just trying to please powerful elites and were not transforming the judiciary. This has become most evident in the very quick and relentless backlash against these legal reforms. This backlash was spearheaded by members of the judiciary, specifically some who presided over family courts.

Despite the perceived strength of the former first lady and her entourage, hard-line conservatives among judges and commentators viewed this innovation as the scandalous slaughter of a sacred cow. Judges can only be men, they argued, as women lack the ability to judge. One judge was quoted as saying that a woman cannot be pregnant and sit on the bench! Another said that women lack rationality at “certain times of the month.” A third noted that women have chores and social responsibilities that distract them from their professional lives and that can detract from their ability to reflect on complicated cases and make hard decisions (Sholkamy 2010).

Such anecdotal and sadly eccentric points of view were considered merely to be the iterations of hard-headed ‘outliers’ until the three hundred or so highest and most senior judges and members of the state council general assembly vetoed the appointment of women in their revered institution.

Feminists took to the streets in modest protest and forced the National Council of Women (NCW) to make public statements denouncing this U-turn. But these feminists found themselves siding with the powerful against the conservatives. The contestation was muted by the nature of the contest.

These elisions between gender inequality as a feature of the pre-revolutionary order and gender equality as a social justice demand that should fit comfortably in the post-revolution world continues to confound any analysis of women and the revolution.

The first part of this chapter presents a brief account of the landscape of gender and politics before the revolution. The focus of this account is on formal political representation and influence, whether it was connected to the state, to a para-state, or to civil society. The issues espoused by these forces and the international processes that legitimated
their agency and activities will be discussed. The second part presents the immediate post-revolution stage in which questions about women and gender justice are asked and answered. These tumultuous times are not easy to interpret or summarize. The chapter will focus on media and documented initiatives and positions. Needless to say, there are hundreds of meetings, plans, projects, and policies that are not included in this account since they have yet to make a public appearance. The conclusion will address the articulation of gender and national politics by tracing this troubled relationship and suggesting a framework in which the struggle to protect women’s rights to freedom, equality, and citizenship can inspire the transformation toward a liberated Egypt.

Separation!
There are no avenues to women’s political empowerment that do not traverse the landscape of politics as a whole. Quotas in a rigged election, access to high office in the absence of transparency and accountability, local council representation without good governance, or voice without freedom—all of which have been practiced in Egypt—do not deliver gender justice. There has been a disconnect between the components of the gender narrative on politics, voice, and representation and the macro-social and political landscape in Egypt. The agendas of gender politics fade when faced with genuine will and radical transformation. “An autocratic regime cannot deliver justice to any of its citizens,” activists and analysts argued after the revolution. Women in Egypt are now coming to terms with this nugget of wisdom. But what are the lessons of the recent protests for the study of women’s empowerment? To answer this question we need to describe the institutional and formal arrangements in which decisions on women’s empowerment and gender were transacted.

The Eurocentricity of the narrative of gender may be put down to this association between women’s rights and the liberal political philosophy of the nineteenth century. The early liberal thinkers extended the debate on individual rights to encompass women and argued for their right to education and public participation. Later on, their work would inform the movement to grant women full political rights, including the right to vote and to run in elections. A quick succession of ideas favoring equality and questioning the basis for discrimination and subjugation laid the foundations for both a feminist movement and an analytical project in the social sciences that sought to understand how and why women were less active in
public life, had fewer political rights, less access to jobs, more burdens and responsibilities, specific health burdens, restricted mobility, fewer assets, little control over decisions, and a litany of other observable markers of difference (see Wollstonecraft 1792; Mill 1869; Amin 1899).

The ladies of the suffragette movement in Britain took to the streets to contest patriarchy from below. They eventually forged a broad enough alliance with formal political actors and won the right to vote early in the twentieth century. Similarly, activists like Margaret Sanger and Mary Stopes fought for women's rights to control their bodies and their fertility. The legalization of abortion in non-Catholic western countries was slow in coming, but that right was also won at the cost of personal sacrifice and persecution. These rights were then framed as constitutive of what we now think of as human rights and liberal values (de Beauvoir 1949; Freidan 1963; Greer 1970).

Since the work of radical early feminists appeared and proliferated in the minds and hearts of women and men, several waves of feminism and strands of critical philosophy have contested the subjugation of women. Marxists have posited patriarchy as a mode of production that reproduces inequalities (Kabeer 2004; Pateman 1988). Black American and third-world feminists have contested the supremacy of the white woman and the Eurocentricity of the gender discourse (Mohanty 2003; De Veaux 2004, 174).

Postmodernist feminists like Butler and Kristeva have questioned the substantive meaning of sex and sexuality and posited language as the vehicle of gendering (Butler 1997; Kristeva 1995). The diversification and complexity of feminist reflection and analysis established the feminist point of view as an analytical lens that can explain and change oppressions based on gendered experiences and assumptions.

This potted history of feminist thinking serves to remind us that there are genuine intellectual and political issues that point to the existence of a social injustice that pervades many societies and that has to do with women. We cannot dismiss this reasoning or trivialize it. There are good grounds for engaging with the narrative of gender injustice, but not for falling under the sway of its western hegemonic influence. In this sense, we can read the efforts to internationalize the policies of gender justice as a means to counter the use of cultural relativism as grounds to enable injustice. Feminists and women's groups have been active in shaping this international agenda and have fought against the culturalist
orientations of groups and authorities who wish to avoid the whole issue of women and their rights.

Gita Sen, a renowned Indian activist, feminist, and advocate of the poor, noted in her speech at the 2009 Organization of Arab Women conference in Abu Dhabi that the covenants on human and women’s rights cannot possibly be western, as it is not the white man who was enslaved or the white woman who was the victim of genocide and impoverishment.3

The contestations of feminism have filtered into the formal international politics of development and aid. The principle of gender equality was enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is the benchmark used to gauge the situation of women and was used at the OAW conference to report on the progress of women at Beijing. Egypt signed CEDAW on 16 July 1980 and ratified it on 18 September 1981, reserving the right not to implement certain points if they counter Islamic shari’a law.

The Beijing Platform for Action also adopted the notion of human security to promote the rights of women and called for concrete developments that would improve women’s health and their social, economic, and political security, thus boosting the calls for gender equity that were heard in Cairo in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development.

Soon after the 1994 conference, the United Nations led the international community in approving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a tool for holding the world accountable for its efforts to realize development for all. The third MDG is to promote gender equality and empower women. Its target is to end the disparity between boys and girls in primary and secondary education by 2005, and at all levels of education by 2015. Thus women’s progress, rights, and empowerment were established by the end of the 1990s as a global priority for development.

The agency of women and their representation in public forums and in private decisions is a broad subject. Women’s representation in national, regional, and local politics is one part of it. Another is the representation of women in culture and the media. A third is women’s citizenship and legal equality. A fourth is women’s mobility, freedom, and right to express public opinions, engage in public protest, and make public choices. The first area is one on which there has been by far the most action, mainly because it is the most measurable rendition of voice. Global actors such as the United Nations and its Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, now part of UN Women), the United States through its aid and foreign
policy, and the European Union, most significantly through its Gender and Development (GAD) program, have identified benchmarks that measure progress on expanding women's voice. Access and presence in public offices, quotas in legislative bodies, and universal suffrage are some of these benchmarks. This focus is problematic because it ignores context and its own exposure to subversion.

This journey from radicalism to dogma has had a profound influence on how gender is perceived in a country such as Egypt. Somehow a denial developed that shrouded the fact of gender inequality in a veil of exceptionalism. The cause of gender justice was not a field of protest but rather a boon given by royal or presidential fiat. The 1952 revolution in Egypt set the tone, when universal suffrage was granted to women by President Nasser in 1956 and when the constitution adopted the demands of the women who had been fighting for equality since the turn of the century. The state remains to this day the champion of women's equality. First the 1952 revolution, then the socialist state, followed by the seemingly liberal (and female) face of the increasingly autocratic Egypt of the 1980s onward became the guarantors of women's rights.

The past decades have seen the development of a critique of this manipulation by autocrats of the principles of gender equality espoused by the international narrative of gender and development.

Recently attention has been drawn to Iraq and Afghanistan, where women's quotas in parliament, set by invasion-appointed legislators, have become a tool for tribal and family forces to maintain their own hold on power. This and other experiences have raised questions about the virtue of involving women in 'less than virtuous' political processes. What is the point of being appointed to a parliament that is not representative of society? Moreover, the focus on the outcome of the political process is less important than the process itself. Goetz and Cornwall have argued that women's participation in politics and political parties and the inclusion and prioritization of women's issues and demands is a more significant indicator of gender justice and voice than are the numbers of women in elected or, even worse, appointed bodies (Goetz 2008).

Islamist feminists have expressed their own critique of a feminist interpretation of voice and agency that accuses this religion in particular of oppressing women through the imposition of the veil, the segregation of women, the emphasis on women's reproductive and family roles, and the constraints it places on women’s ability to arbitrate and lead. Islamist
scholars questioned the universality of feminist definitions of power and agency, taking the position that agency and voice are about the ability to realize goals and roles and not subscription of roles chosen by western women. It follows therefore that the rights of Muslim women to acquire the kind of agency and voice that they want and that is religiously sanctioned should not be ignored or subverted. Most Muslim women prize their religiously sanctioned gender roles and will agitate to realize that which Islam provides and which they have been denied by secularist and despotic regimes (Hafez 2011; Mahmoud 2004; Mir-Hosseini 2006).

This critique of the limited paradigm of gender and development has echoed in other circles. This approach to gender justice has become the focus of a critical narrative that espouses women’s empowerment (Kabeer 2004; Sholkamy 2009). Gender and development ignores the possibility of transforming gender relations in favor of a recipe that seeks to mitigate injustices rather than negating the institutions that enable it.

**Institutional arrangements in Egypt**
The suspended Egyptian constitution of 1971 states in Article 11 that the state will enable women to fulfill their public and private roles and ensure equality in all walks of life. The constitution thus permits and indeed guarantees gender justice. The state has been the fairest employer and the most gender-blind arbitrator and champion of women’s economic and legal rights since the revolution of 1952. This large state presence, however, somehow stalled the creation of a strong feminist movement or consciousness. Moreover, the impact of a strong religious movement partly created and fully promoted by the state has thwarted the modernist discourse of gender rights. The labor migrations into Egyptian cities from the south and north and out of Egypt to the Arab Gulf also had an impact on how gender roles and rights came to be constructed and enacted. Meanwhile, the international movement toward gender equality infiltrated the UN bureaucracy, and successive international conferences were held in Mexico in the 1970s, Kenya in the 1980s, and then in China in the mid-1990s—so as to forge an international agenda or roadmap to guide all member states toward gender equality. The agenda agreed in the 1990s is known as the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). One important item on this roadmap is the creation of national women’s machineries as part of the state apparatus to ensure that women’s rights are recognized and realized at the highest possible levels of executive and legislative power.
In response to the BPFA, a National Council for Women (NCW) was established in Egypt by Presidential Decree no. 90/2000. The NCW is comprised of thirty persons, or rather public figures, selected for their expertise in women's issues and appointed for a three-year term. It reports directly to the president. The thirty founding members included the president’s wife, who was immediately elected by the other members to chair the council. She retained this ‘elected office’ until the regime fell in 2011. This national machinery is dedicated to promoting women’s issues and ensuring that state bodies and policies realize the goals of gender justice.

The NCW was given a broad mandate to promote women's rights. At the national level, this mandate included proposing a national action plan to improve the status of women, feeding into national legislation to ensure it was sensitive to women’s needs and concerns, and proposing public policies whereby the government could integrate women into Egypt’s development in a way that was empowering and allowed women to fulfill their economic and social potential. The council also had a monitoring function that would allow it to measure the implementation of women-friendly policies and programs. It was tasked with both collecting information and statistics about women and educating policymakers and the public about women’s needs, women’s rights, and the situation of women in Egypt.

The NCW was backed by strong political will and directly supported by Suzanne Mubarak, which gave it teeth enough to have an impact. This was probably the most significant institutional rearrangement in the two decades that preceded the revolution as far as women in Egypt are concerned.

The council succeeded in mobilizing both the executive and the legislative to effect significant legal reforms that favor women. Through its concerted work, rights and legal mechanisms that had previously been denied to women became available to them. Article 20 of Personal Status Law no. 1 of 2000 gave women the right to obtain divorce through *khul*’ in exchange for forfeiting their rights to the dowry and the three-month post-divorce spousal maintenance (*idda*). Article 17 gave women who have entered into an unregistered marriage the right to file for divorce, thereby recognizing—for the first time in Egypt—the rights of women in these illicit unions. In 2004, Personal Status Law no. 10 introduced new family courts. Law 11 of the same year established a family fund administered by the government, which collects alimony payments from ex-husbands and transfers these to divorced women. In 2005, a law extended women’s rights to keep custody of both male and female children up to the age of fifteen.
And in 2004, a presidential decree enabled Egyptian women married to men of foreign nationality to pass their citizenship to their children.

More recently, Egyptian women finally gained the right to be judges and prosecutors. This was a truly stubborn frontier for professional women, and one that met significant resistance due to the prevalent misinterpretation of religious texts, both Qur’anic and Prophetic (see research papers issued by the NCW of Egypt). Despite that resistance, thirty women judges were appointed to the administrative courts in 2007, opening the door for others to follow. But, as noted earlier, the best efforts of the NCW to open the judiciary to women were met with vocal opposition and successful resistance from judges.

The NCW was also instrumental in ensuring that women had the right to freedom of movement by successfully advocating for the repeal of the administrative decree that required a husband’s approval for his wife to be issued a passport. In effect, the NCW set about implementing the recommendations of CEDAW and the BPFA by undoing some of the persistent and anachronistic legal and administrative arrangements that had legalized the subjugation of women and institutionalized gender injustice.

Even with the passing of the parliamentary quota in 2010, the NCW has had less success in enabling women’s political participation. Most women in legislative bodies and in both houses of parliament are appointed, not elected. A very limited number of women have contested and won local elections. These women are mostly supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of which are donor-funded and are part of a program to open village and local councils to women in line with good governance initiatives. There is even one female village head (‘umda) in Asyut in Upper Egypt.

Despite this impressive record, one assessment notes that the NCW suffered from three main limitations (see Konsouah 2006, 28): a top-down approach to policy and engagement with the affairs and rights of women that resembles that of a centralized bureaucracy; an uneven relationship with civil society, which sees the NCW sometimes squandering its political capital and building only limited alliances as a result of micromanagement; and a lack of popular legitimacy.

Thus, under the authoritarian regime there were advances in women’s rights to freedom of movement, political representation as a fixed quota, and unilateral divorce. These gains were perhaps the most that could be accomplished within the strictures of a restrictive and elitist system. But genuine equality and solidarity of men and women could only exist if the
system was challenged as a whole because of socioeconomic and political inequities in the determination of voice. Gender is one factor in these inequities, but class, family, and power are even more important. In other words, elite women may surface as parliamentarians or judges, but poor women still lack the power to express their collective predicaments universally. Poor women suffer from unequal relationships within the family, from the tyranny of state security forces, from the indignities of poverty, and from marginalization in local politics and public spaces.

In other parts of the so-called global South, women’s voices and their impact on national and local politics were amplified by the strong popular base enjoyed by activists seeking to change politics and balance the distribution of power in society. For example, in India the Panachiyat movement worked to include women in all local village and regional councils. Over a million women were thus inducted into local politics with varying degrees of efficacy, but with a certain success in engendering local-level issues and decisions. Placing women in positions of power at the village level placed women at the forefront of real politics (Goetz 2008). They were given the power to make decisions that affected daily life and countered local despots. Not all women appointed have been effective or just, but the process has changed the reality on the ground, broken political constraints, and become an illustrative model of the level at which women need to engage in order to avoid simply becoming a part of patriarchal political elites. The contrast with Egypt is stark: the power enjoyed by Egyptian women derived from the power of the elites who comprised the national women’s machinery, and not from civil society or from the grassroots (or grassroots organizations such as unions, syndicates, or associations).

Another important means by which voice can be acquired and heard is through collective action and representation. For example the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India has strengthened the leverage of poor women and enabled them to realize the power that unions have enjoyed for a century. This is another example of how poor women can make their voices heard and gain the influence that accrues to those who can act collectively (Bhatt 2006). In Egypt, poor women benefited from the legal changes or social services implemented by the national women’s machinery, but they were never members of or activists within this machinery; rather, they were its passive clients (Sholkamy 2008).

The problem in Egypt was the disarticulation between classes and generations of women. The NCW ‘imposed’ a progressive agenda on an
unwilling population. In other words, the message (a progressive one) and the messenger (a propped-up elite with no popular base of rank-and-file supporters) were in conflict, because the NCW could not communicate with the constituency whose circumstances they were trying to transform, and therefore could not encourage collective action.

Civil society has always been present in gender politics in Egypt. Donors and analysts have noted the hard and distinctive work of civil society activists in fields such as reproductive, economic, personal, and political rights (al-Ali 2000; Abdel Rahman 2004). The history of state–society partnerships and enmities in the context of gender politics is not covered in this chapter; suffice it to say that while this relationship has at times been complementary, it has more often been a competitive one in which the might of the state often supersedes the self-perceived rights of civil society. There is, however, a credible bevy of organizations that have acquired international recognition and whose work has had an impact on the status of women. The Alliance of Arab Women, the Women and Memory Forum, the New Woman Association and Research Centre, the Legal Research and Resource Center for Human Rights, and the Egyptian Women Association are some of the acknowledged players in this field.

Like the NCW, many of these organizations were donor-dependent and therefore committed to working on projects rather than enacting programs. Jad has described the impact of this model as the “NGO-ization” of women’s activism (Jad 2007). She describes a shift whereby women’s NGOs ceased to be coalitions of women who built political alliances and will through solidarity and became implementers of development policies and intervention. The result is that these groups no longer strive toward the creation of a critical, radical, or political agency but rather are enmeshed in a bureaucratized development industry (Mostafa 2011).

The decade that preceded the revolution witnessed high levels of female participation in industrial action and workers’ strikes. Women unionists and workers were at the forefront of what are now acknowledged to have been the first flutters of a popular rebellion. The workers of Mahalla (textiles and yarns) and of the tobacco industry took to the streets and spent a month in picket lines, protesting management practices, privatizations, and low wages. Unionists struggling for freedom of association and the right to collective action included women such as Fatma Ramadan, who has spent more than a decade in courts fighting for the right to membership in unions and workers’ committees—a right that is still denied to women.
The landscape of political action on gender was rich, but fragmented and fractured. The co-optation of gender justice by government and para-governmental elites was contested by other elites located in civil society. Meanwhile, women workers were independently voicing their protest at economic injustices and locating their struggle within that of the workers’ movement.

The elections of 2010—now acknowledged as ‘the last straw’ and the tipping point at which the anger of both young and old at policies and at the police came to a head—was also unfortunately the election that shepherded sixty-four women into parliament. For the first time in history women were ‘fairly’ represented in a legislative body, but this came about only as a result of rigged elections and thus did not reflect an authentic expansion of women’s political rights or representation. This discouraging association between autocracy and women’s right to political participation as enacted in the worst elections ever seen in Egypt (by some accounts) has remained to haunt women’s rights advocates and has cast a long shadow over the immediate post-revolutionary future.

It is important to note, however, that the clear fragmentations in the women’s movements between state-sponsored pseudo-feminists, civil society researchers, feminist activists, and women active in protest and politics but not self-identified as feminists have greatly damaged the cause of gender justice in Egypt. There is also a schism that results from the conflicts between women who cite religion as the foundation of their feminism and those who do not (Sholkamy 2010). This fault line lingers in the current climate of dissent in which religion has become a pivot of future social and political arrangements.

The Liminal Phase
Esraa Abdel Fattah, Nawara Negm, Noha Atef, and many others who use real or fictitious names are some of the women bloggers who have been publishing their political reflections and rejection of hegemonic norms for many years. Women bloggers have contested the conventions that have governed sexuality, privileged chastity, and permitted sexual harassment since the beginning of this century. Previously, there existed a level of segregation that facilitated women’s participation in critical forums because they were viewed as a safe space, which may have empowered and cultivated the female voice. However on 25 January the call made online
was to take to the streets and leave the comforts of home and seclusion. Abdel Fattah reiterated calls previously made by bloggers and Internet activists and asked men to join her on the streets in an almost flirtatious request for male protection. If a woman was going to risk her safety to protest police brutality and government, then the least men could do was to come to the streets and protect her. Indeed, Asmaa Mahfouz, another woman blogger, in her own accounts claims the credit for inviting people to take to the streets.

The eighteen days of protest were days of class, religious, and gender parity and solidarity. But after the ecstasy of victory came some sobering events. A few weeks after Mubarak left power, protesters who remained in Tahrir Square were attacked and some of the women among them were subjected to ‘virginity tests’ by the army. One of these women, Samira Ibrahim, took her case to court, but tragically lost her case against the doctor who allegedly performed the test; the judge pronounced the physician innocent on 12 March 2012. The explanation offered by the army was that the army officer in charge wanted to prove that they were ‘good girls,’ not prostitutes! Even if this explanation made any sense, the humiliation that these women endured is undeniable. But that was not the first crack to appear in the gender solidarity of Tahrir Square.

The demonstrations by women commemorating International Women’s Day on 8 March 2011 were attacked, and the two hundred or so women and men participating were harassed, ridiculed, shouted down, and ultimately chased out of the square. No other demonstrators in the square since the revolution had been heckled, told that their demands were unjustified, unnecessary; a threat to the gains of the revolution, out of time, out of place, and/or the product of a ‘foreign agenda.’ No other demonstrators were told to ‘go back home and to the kitchen.’ No others were heckled for how they looked or what they were wearing. In unison, hecklers were saying “batil” (illegitimate) to the demands for gender equity and “’awra” (ignominy) to women demonstrating with their frankly innocent and almost idealistic demands. “Back to the kitchen” and “Off the square” were also among the chants. One elderly gentleman stood in the midst of the protesters on the pavement and said that the posters they held were an offense to the good women who are “mothers of the martyrs” and who deserve respect and rights, not like these women who deserve nothing. Then young men, fired up by the imagery he was invoking, started snatching the placards and bits of paper from women in
the square, tearing them up, and throwing them at the silenced, baffled, dejected, astounded men and women.⁶

This reaction shows the paradox of people supporting women as revolutionaries but not as activists asking for women's rights. It challenges us to answer some important questions. How do we reconcile the wide acceptance of women as activists and instigators of the revolution with the denial that women are entitled to demand their rights within the context of wider revolutionary change? How do we sustain gender justice and women's rights? How do we support the broad values of the revolution in the face of the neglect or animosity of some revolutionaries? There is a fear that by demanding their rights during this delicate transitional moment, women will become a fifth column or fracture an edifice that is still under construction. Why were they ridiculed and attacked on 8 March? Why was their demonstration singled out, from among the five others taking place at the same time and in the same vicinity, to be attacked and dispersed? These are questions that need an honest answer.

Under the influence of optimism and immersed in Internet-fueled naiveté, hundreds of women and men sought to go to the square and actually say what they had not dared speak in the past. The demonstrators dropped the veil of caution and voiced demands for equality and for civil rights and equal rights of citizenship. Perhaps their protest was badly presented or wrongly timed, but what remains is the fact of differences among Egyptians who are now building a new Egypt. Evidently the space of protest is not a neutral one when it comes to questions of gender. But there are more important lessons with which we need to contend.

Reintegration:

Popular sentiments and stereotypes prevailing in the new order

What is thirst but fear of thirst itself? (Omar Khayyam)

There is either a backlash against women's rights or a fear of a backlash. But as the poet Khayyam says, the difference between the actual event and fear of that event is slight. There are rumblings of a rebellion against women. The laws that expanded and protected women's rights and that were enacted under the aegis of the NCW with Suzanne Mubarak at the helm are now discredited as her laws. The council itself has been swept under a mat of silence. It has not, however, been dissolved, although a new council was appointed in February 2012 and a new secretary general was elected from among its members. According to the UN Women
representative in Egypt, calls by gender activists to dissolve the NCW because of its ties to the old regime were silenced by fears that if it were dissolved, future governments and parliaments would not reconstitute it. This dilemma succinctly illustrates the fear that women have of rejecting the old only to find that the new is worse. Could women actually lose out in a democratic order?

The press is replete with calls to repeal progressive personal status laws, cancel women’s quotas, disband family courts, and reinstitute patriarchal laws and practices. According to Mulki Sharmani, the personal status laws were imposed by presidential fiat and are therefore inherently unjust or anti-democratic. This argument ignores the substantive impacts of these laws on gender justice. Moreover, it ignores the tremendous influence and sustained actions of women’s rights groups and of civil society, which were somewhat stifled by the NCW but continued to work. Another argument is that these laws do not conform to Islamic codes and principles. These protestations not only ignore the difference between *fiqh* (the interpretation by scholars of the laws of God), *shari’a* (the will of God and what it signifies in terms of moral action), and *maqasid* (objectives, intentions), but also the fact that scholarly interpretations are by definition historical and variable. Rejection of the new personal status laws based on historical precedent is unjustifiable (Sharmani 2011).

There are also demands to change Law 10 of 2004, which created family courts, and Law 4 of 2005, which extended the legal age of guardianship and thereby permitted women to be legal guardians of their children up to the age of fifteen, for sons, or until marriage, for daughters. A new NGO called the Family Protection Association, created by retired judges from the family courts, is spearheading this challenge. The argument is that these laws, along with the *khul* law, which granted women the right to unilateral divorce, have disempowered men to the extent that they empower women. There have been problems with visitation rights, which many Egyptians find too restrictive from the father’s point of view, but could that be a reason to permit fathers automatic guardianship for children as young as seven?

The call to reintroduce patriarchal institutions such as spousal obedience (*bayt al-ta’a*) and repeal *khul* is made under the pretext that freedom and rights have enabled women to undermine the institution of marriage. There are claims that divorce rates have gone up, child destitution has increased, and morality has crashed because women have the option
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to divorce. As Sharmani (2011) points out, this is a typical condition of
denial. The increase in divorce rates, if real, may reflect a problem in the
institution of marriage itself. Can there really be an argument against
rights based on the protection of common wrongs? Can keeping women
in relationships despite their desire to leave be better for the relation-
ship or its offspring?

There are other signs of a confused post-revolutionary discourse of
gender. The question of women's quotas, for example, is an interesting
one. Women appeared on all party lists for the parliamentary elections,
even those of the ultra-conservative Salafis. This was mandated in the
new election law. The women may be veiled, face-veiled, or so 'covered'
that their images are absent from party posters altogether. But they are
almost all in the bottom half of the lists, if not at the very end. Only the
Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Freedom Party can claim that they have
seriously fielded women candidates, since they may expect to win larger
percentages of the vote, and thus allow candidates lower on the list to gain
a seat in parliament. There is only one woman heading a party list, who is
running on behalf of the Egyptian Social Democratic party. The fact that
parties have failed to use the party-list quota as it was intended—to give
women a real opportunity to be elected to political office—suggests that
there was real comfort with the original quota system. The change did not
challenge politics as usual, but only confirmed each party's ability to pay
lip service to women's political participation.

There are, however, a number of women contesting parliamentary
seats as independents, and even one running for president. Those in urban
areas stand a good chance of winning a seat (but not the presidency).

There are concerns among elites, observers, and activists about the
implications of a new constitution for gender justice and alarm at the
exclusion of women from the process. But the most serious issue is the
denial of the very notion of gender as a facet of a democratic order. There
is a clear nostalgia for an older political discourse—now discredited by
world experience and by global standards—that sought to subsume gender
rights in a larger discourse of citizenship. There are many historical les-
sons that illustrate the importance of a conscious pursuit of gender justice
rather than a naive assumption that we will all go to the ballot box and
happily accept the outcome, whatever it may be.

Besides these new concerns, some old problems persist that reflect
gender gaps and imbalances. Gender gaps are the distinctions and
inequalities between females and males that disempower women and girls and restrict their options and choices. Education, work, health, and security are four aspects of life that affect an individual’s freedom and agency, much of which is also determined by class as well as gender. Some activists and revolutionaries may deny the existence of such a thing as a ‘gender gap,’ but meanwhile the gaps and differential burdens persist. Although girls have overtaken boys in the formal education stream, it should be noted that only 24.9 percent of students are enrolled in this stream; the other three-quarters of the student body are enrolled in the al-Azhar secondary education stream or in technical secondary education (Sholkamy 2010). In these other two streams a gender gap persists. The ratio of girls to boys in technical and vocational training overall is 8:10. However, disaggregating this figure shows that the enrollment ratio of girls to boys in the more industrial and agricultural concentrations in technical education falls to 1:2. In other words, the sections that give a more competitive advantage in the job market are the ones where there is a large gender gap. Girls are enrolled in the Azhar stream, but in far lower numbers than boys, and those numbers are falling: there were 59.8 girls for every hundred boys in 2000–2001, but only 54.4 in 2005–2006 (UNDP 2010, 21–22).

Gender bias is still a pervasive practice even if it is clouded by vast differences between the urban and well-to-do, who seem to have achieved some form of gender parity, and the rural and poor, who have not.

Conclusion
Audiences and activists can draw two lessons relating to gender from the unfolding events in Egypt. The first is that democracy may not deliver equal rights for women. Democracy can become a tyranny of the masses if not tempered by a commitment to basic principles and freedoms. Despite the regeneration of politics and participation, there is no guarantee that the political process will be a fair one to women. It was easy to get millions to agree to jettison Mubarak. It will be hard to get them to agree on what comes next. Whatever the politics of our future governments and legislatures may be, some basic principles of rights and freedoms must be clearly stated and not left to the vagaries of elections. All free nations have imposed limits on the ability of people to harm or undermine their compatriots. This is a position Egyptians need to realize and cement into our national psyche.
The second lesson is that women should focus on demanding democratic processes that enable us to have voice and realize achievements. We should perhaps have demonstrated to dissolve the national machinery known as the National Council for Women and create a new body formed of civil society organizations with an elected board that is accountable to its constituents. We should insist on quotas for women within every new and old political party so as to insure that all politics are gendered, as the existing quotas are insufficient. We should lobby for participatory policy councils that oversee the services we require from the state. These local councils would consult their citizens when planning health, social protection, education, policing, and housing policy through a legally binding process. Perhaps women can realize citizenship-focused democracy by demanding the mechanisms that deliver justice to all.

How can commitment to greater fairness to women be built among voters, policymakers, and public- and private-sector institutions? What does it take to successfully build constituencies for a commitment to equality and justice, and to hold those who make these commitments to account?

Of course it will take time, and there are five factors that will make it a difficult process. The first might be called the ‘generation factor.’ There are differences in the ways that the young and the old identify and perceive the gender roles and disparities. The second is the ‘globalization factor,’ which prioritized international standards and demands over national ones. There is the ‘domain factor,’ whereby women are torn between the recognition that they enjoy in the public domain and the private burdens that they experience as women. The fourth is the ‘consciousness factor,’ the absence in Egypt of feminism as a widespread political ideology. Finally, there is the challenge of structures of representation for women and lingering questions concerning the reinstatement of formal female representation in legislative and political bodies.

It will take time to rebuild a platform for gender equality in Egypt. But if this platform emerges from the participatory politics of the revolution, it will be a solid foundation built on a basis of integrity, dignity, debate, and action. It is therefore worth building, as it will not be a frail edifice as vulnerable to disintegration as the pre-revolutionary formal structure.

In conclusion, and with reference to the new paradigm of politics structured by the Arab transformations, there are two points that pertain to women. The first is that the women’s movement in Egypt was orphaned at the moment when the state assumed the mantle of champion for women.
This was when the call for gender justice ceased to be a grassroots, street-evident movement that crafted a feminist conscience through collective action and became a formal politic that was a feature of government and a set of individual rights transacted through a discourse on citizenship. The second is that this genesis may explain why the protesters of Egypt have chosen to deny the gendered domains in which injustices occur and therefore continue to frame women’s rights in apolitical terms.

Notes
1. Tahrir bystander.
2. Informal interviews conducted by the author, mainly in Tahrir Square, during the first ten days of protests.
4. For women’s anti-harassment blogs and radio, see “Nermeena” (nerro.wordpress.com), “Nazra” (Nazra.org), “Banat we bas” (banatwebas.mam9.com), and “Teet” (www.facebook.com/...203915789659795/بيت).
5. “Gabhet el-tahyis el-shaabeya” (blog), tahyyes.blogspot.com
6. All of these comments come from the author’s own observations.
7. In the case of the al-Noor party the women’s pictures are replaced by a red rose!
8. Party lists were yet to be finalized at the time of writing.
9. The outcome of the elections was announced on 21 January 2012. Only eight women won seats on party lists. Two independents won seats, and two women were subsequently appointed. The new Egyptian parliament has one of the lowest rates of representation for women in legislative bodies, at only 1.5 percent. The world average is 19 percent, and the Arab-world average is 13 percent.