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Bringing Gender Justice to the Egyptian Parliament

There is an urgent need to address gender politics in the Egyptian parliament. Women's representation in parliament fell from 13 per cent in 2010 to two per cent in 2011 despite the fact that the number of women who nominated themselves for office had doubled. Further, the majority of women within that minute two per cent comprise a bloc endorsing an anti-women's rights agenda, seeking to reverse gains made in family and child protection laws. A strategy of action for a more gender just parliament is of paramount importance. This briefing uses evidence from research on women's candidature in 2011/12 and draws lessons on how to promote gender justice in Egypt's parliament.

After decades of stalled political participation, the Egyptian revolution of 25 January 2011 generated an explosion of activism across the country, with women, men, children across all classes, religions and backgrounds taking part. Prior to, during and after the revolution, women played a pivotal role in mobilising citizens, organising and leading protests, co-ordinating activities behind the scenes, and treating the injured in make shift hospitals. Many women hoped that the public recognition of their role in the revolution would translate into greater opportunities for political leadership. The parliamentary elections of 2011/2012 represented the first litmus test of a liberated country yet with no form of affirmative action in place (unlike in 2010) the glass ceiling proved too strong to break through (see Table 1).

Table 1: Women's representation in Egyptian Parliament

Year	No. of women elected	No. of women appointed by president	Total % of women in parliament
1979 (11 Nov-21 April)	4	2	1.6%
1979 (23 June-20 March 1984)	33	2	9.7%
1984-1987	35	1	7.8%
1987-1990	14	4	3.9%
1990-1995	7	3	2.2%
1995-2000	9	4	2%
2000-2005	7	4	2.4%
2005-2010	4	5	2%
2010	65	1	13%
2011/2012	7	2	2.2%

Table compiled from data presented in Rabi'e 2012 and Tadros 2010

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Who are the women who nominated themselves and how did they engage politically?

Our research involved 40 in-depth interviews with women candidates. It is estimated that 984 women ran for elections. Purposive sampling was used to ensure those selected represented political, ideological, geographical and religious variations in Egypt. The 40 women interviewed included candidates for the Freedom and Justice Party (Muslim Brotherhood), Al Nour Party (Salafi), Egyptian Social Democratic Party, Wafd Party (liberal), Nasserite Party, Socialist Coalition Party, Conservative party, Equality and Development Party (Islamist), and Tagammu Party (leftist). Women running as independent candidates were also interviewed. Twenty-one were based in Cairo, 5 in Alexandria, 9 in Upper Egypt, and 5 in the Delta. From the sample, three had won (two Freedom and Justice Party and one Social Democratic Party) and 37 had lost. Ten were aged between 20 and 35, 19 were between 36 and 50, and 11 were over 51.

Over two thirds described themselves as working women, many held professions/public roles which involve extensive interaction with people such as NGO professionals, doctors, union syndicate activists, teachers and academics, media people, and public servants in senior roles. Thirty-seven held at least an undergraduate degree or more. Of the sample, only two ran independently, and 15 said they had previously nominated themselves for elections. Those with a leftist and leftist leaning political ideology often spoke of university as the place through which they became active through student movements. Others got involved through their professions (in particular those associated with public service such as teaching and medicine) and for members of the Freedom and Justice Party and Al Nour Party, through the Islamist movements to which they belong.

Almost all of the women interviewed spoke about engagement in politics through service provision, mostly through formal civil society associations, but also informally through distributing handouts to poor families. Through civil society organisations, women offered assistance for widows, orphans and divorcees, food and clothing handouts for the poor, assistance for young women who wished to get married and help with paperwork to access welfare entitlements. By and large, most of the activities can be considered charitable, although some included community awareness programmes and aid in accessing governmental services.

Welfare work is one of the main pathways through which women try to build a constituency, irrespective of whether they are from Islamist or leftist or right of centre political parties. It is important to note however, that as communities become increasingly exposed to welfare handouts from multiple sources, they are likely to become more aware of the 'price' of their vote and either take the assistance and choose another candidate or give their voice to the highest price, hence posing significant challenges for those who relied exclusively on welfare handouts for constituency building.

What are the enabling and constraining factors affecting women's accession to political power?

The enabling and constraining factors experienced by women nominating themselves varied according to their political

affiliation, economic situation, geographical location and the strength of their opponents.

However, there were a number of complaints common to women and men irrespective of their political affiliation, such as the huge size of the electoral district, the removal or tearing of their campaign flyers and posters by their opponents and the violation of the ceiling on campaign financing.

Religion politicised

The 2011/12 elections were dominated by the use of religion to categorise people as believers and infidels to the point where one candidate compared election irregularities witnessed in the 2011/2012 elections to the last election mounted under Mubarak in 2010. One electoral candidate reflected, 'In 2010 rigging was inside the ballot boxes, in 2011, outside. In 2010 the percentage of voting was low... In 2011, the ballot boxes are clear of forgery and the counting is correct, but the rigging is happening in the queues outside the voting stations where they [the Islamists] are trying to affect people's minds and emotions'.

Affirmative action

From the outset the rules were set against women's accession to political power, as the quota for women in parliament that was implemented in the previous election was removed without being replaced with any effective form of affirmative action. Political parties were free to place women wherever they wished on the party proportional list, a loophole that many took advantage of by placing women at the lower ranks of the list where they had very little chance of winning. In some cases women said they were not aware how their positioning in the party would affect their chances of winning. In others, women felt they were there just to fill spaces since the law required that there be at least one woman on the party list. Most women found the experience very disempowering and felt they had nothing to gain from mobilising for a party when they had no possibility of winning except the women belonging to the Islamist factions who argued that it is the success of their party that counts most. The women of the Salafi movement running for the Al Nour Party said they did not mind where they were placed on the list because what counts is for their party to succeed. For example, when one candidate who was number nine of ten on the Salafi's political party list, was asked what constrained her chances of winning, she answered, 'Who said I lost? My party won therefore I won'.

Family

One common factor cited by virtually all women interviewed was the support of family, in particular immediate male family members such as fathers, husbands and brothers. Many women came from political families, where there was an extensive repertoire of knowledge, experience, skills and networks that facilitated their campaigning. However, even those who didn't spoke of particular family members providing support in the form of sharing social capital and connections, technical assistance in managing the campaign, financial support and moral and emotional back-up.

Political party

Political parties were cited either in their capacity as creating an enabling or disabling environment for women candidates to win. Women belonging to the Freedom and Justice Party were most

likely to talk about the role of the party. One candidate who won a seat running for the Freedom and Justice Party attributed one of the main reasons for her success to the fact that 'the campaign was run in a synchronised and organised way. There was a media consultant, a technical consultant and a co-ordinator for every electoral district. Every one of us had a schedule which we followed'. In contrast, most women running for non-Islamist political parties did not have the same organisational and technical support to rely on, nor the same internal party cohesion and loyalty.

Policy Implications

Key messages for policy practitioners and social justice activists striving for a more gender just Egyptian parliament:

1. Agenda setting

Move from a policy of advocating for a quota to one of supporting gender just parliaments

It will take more than putting women in office to make parliament more gender sensitive. More women in parliament will mean fewer rights for the rest of Egyptian women if the women who rise to power endorse an anti-equality agenda. We need to address the constraints that prevent the emergence of a *bloc* that endorses women's equality, both in society and in politics

A parliament with an Islamist majority *bloc* will endorse an Islamist agenda on gender issues. As a political force, women MPs from the Freedom and Justice Party have been championing an anti-women's rights agenda that includes removing women's right to an arbitrary divorce (*khul*) and making it conditional upon spouse's approval, decriminalising the practice of female genital mutilation and lowering the age of marriage. A crucial step towards having a parliament that promotes women's rights is to create a *bloc* in parliament of women and men who endorse gender equality on the basis of citizenship rights and social justice. There should be lobbying for the institutionalisation of a zipper system in party lists (i.e. one male, one female throughout the list) in order to increase the chances of women's representation in leadership positions in political parties. However, there should be no illusions that increased women's representation will necessarily create a parliament more favourable to gender justice although it will create more gender representative political parties

Gender justice agenda advocates negotiating with ruling government need to carefully assess their bargaining power and take into account the power dynamics within the anti-women's rights movement and its relationship with dominant political forces

Dialogue within and between all political forces, whether Islamist or non-Islamist is strongly desired as a general principle since it creates opportunities for exchange of views and for building bridges on a personal and human level. However, there needs to be an awareness of how open the Islamist-led government in power is to negotiation on matters of gender equality.

Critical to influencing the Islamists' agenda is understanding one's own bargaining power and what forms of pressure can be exerted in order to convince them of the legitimacy of the demands. It would be condescending and naïve to assume that alerting Islamist women MPs to more progressive interpretations of the Shariah or the the injustices to women resulting from discriminatory legislation will lead to a reformed position. In some instances, the Freedom and Justice Party and Islamist women leaders have been at the forefront of counter-movements in defence of public morality, the family and religious values.

Actively challenge opponents' agendas, policies and practices, not be apologetic and defensive.

Gender equality advocates should change their strategy from being apologetic and defensive to actively challenging and exposing their opponent's agenda's policies and practices on account of their violation of people's rights to integrity, equality and justice.

Political parties and political coalitions, civil (non-religious though not necessarily anti-religious) movements, organisations and groups who advocate a citizens' rights agenda more broadly (and which includes women's rights) have often been accused of being against Islam, as being in favour of promiscuity, and serving as agents of Western imperialism. The main strategy has been to defend themselves as in favour of Islam, of being good Muslims and of being completely disassociated from any Western links.

However, this strategy of being constantly defensive and apologetic has often suggested to the public that they must be culpable of something – and thus require that they justify themselves. Adopting a strategy of counter-assault may now be politically opportune. This in no way suggests smearing or defaming opponents, it does however, mean active exposure of

- The use of religion for political ends.
- The disconnect between promises made and changes delivered.
- The discrepancies between proclaimed stances and personal practices.

2. Political empowerment programmes

Programmes need to complement their training modules with other forms of support and capacity building interventions

Programmes aimed at supporting women's political empowerment have mostly taken the form of training modules on public speaking, campaigning and media relations etc. While such training modules have provided women with useful skills, they can be complemented with other initiatives such as:

- A holding hands strategy, i.e. accompaniment of women during their campaigns in order to provide practical field support.
- A hotline to report violations and infringements prior to and during the election season and an ability to act on these reports.
- Support in understanding how to build constituencies, understand the different kind of constituencies needed to win (electoral, political etc.) and identify the appropriate entry points for mobilising support.

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Programme development must more be responsive to women's political pathways in their own contexts and less based on universal blueprints

Most political empowerment programmes focus their activities during elections, in the phase prior to the commencement of campaigning. However, a more long term approach is needed, with initiatives starting immediately after the loss of an election and in preparation for the next one.

Programmes need to also adopt a relational approach to supporting women, recognising that often immediate family members play an instrumental role in leading the campaign and that the focus of the intervention should not be exclusively on the woman candidate but also on the immediate circle of campaign organisers, those working in a formal and/or informal capacity.

It is also important to work with the 'losers' who have failed to gain political office. Some women, though they have lost have come a step closer to becoming public figures and it is worthwhile investing in deepening their activism, enhancing their visibility and nurturing their constituency in preparation for the next set of elections.

Programmes aimed at supporting women to access power need to be more explicit about supporting those whose agendas are not antithetical to women's equality, irrespective of their political affiliation or orientation and irrespective of whether they actively endorse women's rights or not.

Women leaders need access to, and skills for engaging with the media, in particular with television broadcast media, to increase their visibility and outreach with large audiences. Programmes need to support the development not only of technical skills such as communication and presentation, but also skills in political saviness, in terms of how to counter opponents and read the political situation correctly.

3. Building constituencies for inclusive gender politics

Constituencies should be built vertically from the ground up and horizontally through alliances and coalitions.

A strong women's movement advocating a gender justice agenda could be a great ally and support to women candidates. However, there is a need to urgently work towards building women's coalitions as a step towards building a movement since at the moment there is much diversity, but very little unity.

Champions of gender parity in political parties and civil society organisations should strive to identify potential women leaders at a very young age (in their late teens and early twenties) and provide them with political apprenticeship opportunities to prepare them for leadership.

In order to avoid gender equality being ghettoised within the party, extensive efforts should be invested in identifying male allies and sympathisers from within who can become strong advocates for equality.

There is a strong need to build strong coalitions and blocs between political parties, civil society organisations, think tanks and universities that have a common agenda on promoting gender equality. This will help to create a network through which resources and knowledge can circulate for the purpose of strengthening the voices of those who advocate gender justice in Egypt.

Further reading

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Credits

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* was written by **Dr Mariz Tadros**, Research Fellow in the Participation, Power and Social Change Team at the Institute of Development Studies. It was edited by **Carol Smithyes**. The briefing is based on a forthcoming (2014) edited book, *Women's Pathways of Political Empowerment*, by Dr Mariz Tadros, published by Zed books, London.

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